

Four faces, wobbly mirror

A NOVEL

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FOUR FACES, WOBBLY MIRROR

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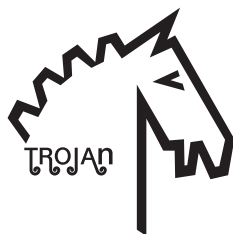
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FOUR FACES, WOBBLY MIRROR

Chester Eagle



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NOTE

A small number of footballers and politicians—Des Tuddenham, Geoff Blethyn, Peter McKenna, Wayne Richardson, John Nicholls and Neil Mann: Mr E. G. Whitlam, Mr B. M. Snedden, Mr Doug Anthony—are mentioned by name in this story. All other characters are entirely fictitious and no reference is intended to any living person.

1

Vic and Anna Rogers were giving a birthday party for their seven year old. Anna had planned to have the children play treasure hunts or hidey in the garden, but they were gathering scraps of timber to build a cubby, and John, the birthday boy, was pestering his father for nails.

It was a suburban Sunday. Parents of John's friends were in the kitchen, and there were a few drop-ins, mostly people who taught with Anna, to whom she'd mentioned that grog would be flowing at her place on Sunday—'if you can stand the kids'.

The Banners—Bob and Frances—were the exceptions. So were Frances' sister Nell, and her boyfriend John Moore, known to the footballing world as 'Carcase'—a big man with broad thighs and a spare tyre around his middle, despite which he was helping himself liberally to the beer.

Bob Banner observed his friend. 'Keep that tummy down son, or they'll have you doing a few extra laps.'

Carcase said, 'I'll be right when I get back into training, won't I, Nell?' but it was Frances who answered for her sister. 'Not if you eat like you cleaned up that potato salad last night.' The gathering was still at the stage where everyone had to be included, so Frances explained: 'Honestly, I asked if everyone had finished and they all said they had. Then the telephone rang and by the time I came back, he'd cleaned up the lot. There must have been half a bowl left!'

'Your fault for making it so nice,' was the best Carcase could manage. 'Anyway, it's about all I got.'

Frances, smiling coldly, said, 'If you hadn't been an hour and a half late ...'

An accusation from Frances could hardly go undefended. Carcase said, 'Blame your sister, I was ready at half past six ...'

Nell, it seemed, disputed this account, but the children gave her the chance to break out of the futile argument.

'Dad, can we use your hammer?'

Vic told his son, 'Yes, so long's you're the only one to use it. John? Right?'

'Yes Dad.'

'And which nails are you using? You're only to use those little flat-heads. I'm not having you waste the others.'

The boy grumbled. 'Yes, I know, what do you think?'—and ran off. Frances, no children yet, smiled on Vic in his daddy role. Something in her glance made him over-explain: 'They get the bullet head nails, they can't hit them in, nails go everywhere.' And still feeling awkward, he picked up a glass. 'What are we drinking?'

This was addressed to Bob, the natural barman in a party situation.

'Well, there's beer,' said Bob, 'or vermouth, with rather flat lemonade, unless you want it straight, the kids seem to have used up all the ice blocks ...'

Anna pointed out to Vic that he used to have a dozen Queltaler riesling in the laundry. He fetched one of these and was a little surprised to find others wanting to change from beer to the white:

'Oh well, if you're offering the good stuff ...'

Somewhat ungraciously he went out to get more riesling; Anna challenged him on his return: 'What are you making a face for? How many are left?'

'Five.'

'Well,' Anna started ...

... but the children intervened with the latest crisis. Craig was in the tree on the nature strip and couldn't get down, and he reckoned he was going to fall...

Sure enough, the sound of a wail came through the open front door. Vic rushed to the nature strip in time to see Craig slipping and clutching on a branch perhaps three metres from the ground. The bricks, wire, pipes and junk for the cubby were strewn under the tree. Vic scrambled up and supported him by the leg till he could be calmed sufficiently to transfer his grip to Vic for the climb down.

And then he was safe, though trembling and still crying, unable to appreciate that his danger had lain not so much in the short fall as in the jags, nails and spikes at the base of the tree. Vic roared, 'Come here all you kids! Come on, all of you! Here. I want you.'

But the kids were at the other side of the house by now, getting other boards and junk; their theme was, 'We're building it here now, that tree's no good.' Vic compelled them to the nature strip and lectured them on what had happened. If two of them had supported Craig, and one had gone for the adults, and the rest had had the brains to get all the corrugated iron and whatnot out of the way in case Craig did fall, it would have been a lot better. They ought to think! They ought to use their brains a bit ...

When the children had been ticked off and banished, Vic found Frances watching from the middle of the front garden. Tall, slightly ungainly in movement, she yet had the assurance of someone used to being considered beautiful, though it was hard to define where the reputed beauty lay. Fastidiously clean, from a patrician Catholic family, she seemed to remain still for long periods, moving only for a specific reason. Vic, conscious that he was standing on concrete and she on lawn, wanted, absurdly, to make her dance: if one could set her whirling instead of standing quietly in observation and—was it?—judgement ...

Why should he fear judgement? Her judgement, her observation? There were wide gaps between he and Anna, as between all couples; since he hardly knew Frances outside the dinner parties of the circles they mixed in, how could she stand between them? Yet there she was, dead still beside a blue atlas cedar, dark hair pulled high from an elegant neck, holding her head as if about to puncture some point at a confer-

ence table. Something stiff about her, some set of undefined and rarely tested inhibitions, gave him the feeling that if he reacted to her, she would not understand, perhaps not be able to control, her response to him.

Anna came out. 'What was it?'

Vic explained.

'Send Craig in to me, I'll give him something. I don't know what though, they're all crammed by now.' Vic, too strongly aware of Frances, started to make a foolish suggestion: 'Is there a present John doesn't want, something he's already got, er, I mean ...'

'Do you want to start another row?' And she was gone.

From the tree at the side of the house came kids' voices.

'Pass it up, pass it up, giss it here.' Craig's voice, shrill and excited, rose above the others: 'I'll bring it up. Mind out, here I come!' The terror of five minutes before had vanished completely. Frances raised a slow eyebrow and said, 'We-ell.' It seemed faintly to apply to Anna. Vic considered her, but Frances moved: 'I suppose we'd better go inside.'

The gathering was noisier by now; it had spread into the dining room with its long table made messy by the kids. Anna began cleaning up, wondering why she did it, since people seemed to be quite happy to rest elbows and glasses amid the debris of the party. She put the paper plates, smeared with jelly and cream, into a box for the incinerator, and the crockery on the sink in the precarious piles that niggled Vic, whose fussiness and precision irked her. Bob said, 'Anna. Sit down and relax. Here, come and tell Carcase he should stop worrying and start living.'

Carcase moved heavily to stub a cigarette. 'Stop eating and start training, you mean. They're going to really take it out on me when they get hold of me.' Bob grinned in the way of someone who'd been through it, but was now exempt. 'You're lucky you're not with Tuddy, he's going to be the fanatical coach!'

'Oh yes, Tuddy; going to be very interesting when we meet them.'

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said Bob, ‘you won’t be meeting Tuddy the way you’re going. I don’t think you could catch him if he had hobbles on, the way you are.’

Anna considered the two men. Carcase’s other girlfriend, Patricia, used to say sourly of them, ‘Four university subjects between the two of them. An average of one subject per person per year.’ Patricia, who was needle-sharp, seemed so much more rewarding than Nell. Anna wondered if she was being unfair; was it irritation with Frances which she transferred to the sister? A constant round of dinners with overlapping people made one rather political in one’s judgements. But Bob and Carcase were two men she could take or leave. The big footballer was endearing enough; she had seen him on television replays, and something stupid, stubborn, but rather magnificent came out of his clumsy out-of-form play. Bob told her he was too good to be left out of the side but he’d never really lived up to Collingwood’s expectations.

Collingwood’s expectations! Anna laughed to herself; some test of a man! The irritating thing with Bob was that he actually believed in the Collingwood test. It was natural enough; he’d played with them, might have played for years except for his knee ... though come to think of it, Carcase had had the same trouble and got over it ... Oh yes, it was all very natural, but why did these men who chased a ball around an oval think their game was central to society? They seemed to think they were heroes more than entertainers. But what annoyed Anna most, she realized, was that half the teachers at the college seemed to accept footballers at the value the media gave them.

But how should one value them, or anybody, for that matter? Bob plainly looked up to Carcase; she could tell by the lift of his head when he was asked: ‘How’s things in the office, Bobby?’

Bob answered seriously, as if being interviewed. ‘Oh, we’ll survive, I guess.’

That was the other side to him, there was something bruised to take account of. Having set himself the football test when young—and then the knee, or cartilage, or whatever it was, had gone—he’d never

made it in his own eyes. For a moment Anna felt sympathy for Frances, who surely deserved an upright, perhaps self-important but essentially demanding and dignified man. An energetic man, someone severe and yet compassionate, perhaps a barrister destined for the bench: Bob must seem too common, too decent, maybe too democratic, for Frances. How did she marry him? Why?

Gwennie, Anna's second child, broke in on Anna's thoughts. She entered the room calling over her shoulder, 'I'm going to tell on you, John, ha ha ha!' Then to her mother she said, 'Mum! Mum, John's taken my basket and won't give it back. Make him give it back, Mum. Mum. Mum!' Anna's temper was obviously not up to it, but Bob saved with: 'What's that over there, Gwennie? Who owns that little footy?'

'John. It's plastic and I can kick it very good.'

Bob said, 'You come and show me. And Carcase, he's a good footballer. We'll go outside and you show us how you kick.'

Gwennie said, 'All right, if you carry me,' and Bob bent for her, but she said, 'No, him,' and went to Carcase. 'Oooooohh, you want Carcase,' said Bob, and looked for the mother. Anna was watching her daughter without indulgence, her expression said good riddance. Bob asked Anna to come out with them. She said no, but looked at the house—messy, groups unsettled, children making pretexts to come inside—and she felt that her restlessness was worse than having to watch Carcase, Gwennie and Bob. So she went.

Carcase in action was more graceful than Anna had realized. Was he not very bright, as Nell obviously thought, or brilliant but incredibly lazy, as Patricia said? His coördination was first class. Gwennie wanted to play walking jais, which meant that Carcase had to touch hands and feet on the ground, with straight legs, and move to keep above her without actually grabbing her. He did it with ease, whichever way she wriggled. The little girl complained, 'Oh, how do you know which way I'm going to go,' which made Anna smile, and then, 'Is your name really Carkiss?'

Bob said, 'He's probably done a fair bit of it in his time,' and looked again to Anna. If it was an approach, or an attempt to find a common ground of humour, it was pretty inadequate; she looked coolly at him.

And he at her. In her face he saw dissatisfaction, though he would scarcely have guessed the cause. It stemmed—as far as a mood had a single cause—from the too-smooth progress of the day. Children had celebrated; now a party was brewing of its own accord, and she'd contributed nothing besides household organization. She felt pent-up, unrecognized; and behind this lay Vic's inaccurate, too-bland treatment of her as someone without an aura except the one he invested her with, seeing in her only what he wanted to see.

She in turn studied Bob; she saw in him a man whom—if Frances could live with him—she must be undervaluing. There must be more to him, yet all he seemed to do was act like a compère, dropping genial remarks in the middle of any dissension, using his wit and observation to jolly things along. She could remember no occasion when he could be said to have brought something to a head. Why not, what was the guts of him? How could he be forced to show it? For that matter, what was he scared of?

Bob sensed her keen intelligence working on him, yet felt no threat. It operated, he felt, in the over-logical way teachers were prone to use as a means of simplifying complex subject matter. Too many years of that sort of thing stifled people, or made them irascible; she was plainly neither, so where did logic give way to impulse? There were, he saw, moral lines not quite integrated in her. For him, Catholic morality was like a set of bruises which he avoided sitting on, if he could: how her liberated, arts-graduate mind coped with a puritanical upbringing, he couldn't know. It was odd: she was womanly enough, she was staring at him and plainly thinking about him, yet was managing to convey Not for you. Bob said, 'You've been buying books, I see, Anna. What's that big dictionary of opera I see in there? It looks a good production.'

The commercial aspect, she noticed; he'd have seen the colour plates as costs, not as the Don, the Barber, Tannhauser and the rest. Trying to outfox him, she said, 'Oh, that's my make-believe world.'

But he: 'We've all got them.'

'Oh, what's yours?'

Bob said, 'I think Carcase is mine. Collingwood, all that.'

'And what about your wife?'

'She doesn't make believe.'

Frances had worked as a parliamentarian's secretary, and had gone on to be a fulltime organizer for the Country Party. Anna was dying to know why, with her background, she had preferred the rural party to the narrower, right wing Democratic Labor Party. The only time she had raised the question Frances had told her solemnly, 'If you ever come up home and meet Tom O'Connell, you'll know.' This notion of Frances'—it was almost a basic characteristic—that there were inner secrets, and that if you were allowed in the know, you would 'understand', was another thing that made Anna wary of the woman. To be with Frances made her feel carelessly, thoughtlessly, left wing; Frances still believed in

Truth. She stated the Country Party's policies with a papal gleam and—to Anna's frustration, again—could argue them with skill. She would present each of Anna's social ideals with the most immediate practical difficulties they would raise. And she knew her facts. Even Vic would sometimes come in on Anna's side and say he didn't know much about such matters, but didn't Frances think it would be in the general good of society if such and such were done? And she would counter, with that cool gleam, that it could hardly be in the general good to do a particular harm, and that if the interests of some group—dairy farmers, say—were to be damaged, some alternative arrangement would have to be made for them, and if your idea didn't make such provision, well, it was simply social theorizing ... which was useful, perhaps necessary, but simply wasn't practical. The practical had to be hammered out by committees who really knew their stuff.

How could a Bob cope with this ? What could he offer such a woman? If Frances' strength was a bastion strength, how did he become the man she needed? Sheer persistence? Wily as he might be, he could hardly have bested her in any significant encounter. The only time Anna had seen her back out of a dispute was when she differed with Vic over cattle leases on alpine plains; sensing his expert knowledge, she defended—she understood a committee of all interested parties was looking at the matter—and dropped the subject.

Anna was at a loss to know how to get more from Bob. She turned to Carcase: 'And what's your make-believe, John?' Carcase said, 'I think I'm too thick to have one.' Bob—typically, thought Anna—put in, 'Might be the best way to be,' but her attention was caught by an exodus of children and parents: 'Thanks Anna'; waves from her friends; 'thanks for the party'; 'see you tomorrow'; 'say thanks to Mrs Rogers, Christine'; 'bye!' She had to see them off, remind them of cardigans, find sandals, see them down the drive. She was at the front gate, about to go back, when a car pulled up.

It was Patricia, with a man; Patricia driving her red Monaro. Patricia was in the habit of calling, to measure—as Anna felt it—her more acrid nature against Anna's squareness; but she hadn't brought a man before, unless it was Carcase. Anna went to the car to greet her. 'Nice timing!' Patricia said, 'You mean they're all going.'

She was imputing to Anna a wish to segregate her from her other friends, but Anna, saying 'Only some of them', waved at the cars in the street. Patricia would surely recognize Carcase's black-top white Holden. She did.

'Who's he with?'

'Nell.'

'Nelly the belly.'

It was true, Nell's strange posture pushed her stomach forward, giving her chest a concave line with two bumps, whereas Patricia's clothes gathered to the shoulder, billowed at the wrist, flared at the ankle; they were made to sit about her, or sweep. She despised Nell, prob-

ably Carcase, certainly herself. Anna's centrality was a source of irritation and attraction to her. She flung her companion's name—Robert McPherson—at Anna, said, 'What room are they in?' ... 'They've just moved into the dining room, by the look of things.' ... and led the way.

Carcase flinched at her entry: Carcase, who set himself to take running charges on the football field, and let impetuous assailants roll off his back, moved his head out of her line of sight. And noticed that Nell, who was bringing back their refilled glasses, stopped in her tracks: was she scared, or waiting to see his reaction?

But Patricia aimed for Vic. Staring at Frances, who was standing against him, she said, 'Here's an unholy alliance!' Frances, for whom manners were paramount, seethed, as could be seen by the paling of her face. The remark made Vic uncomfortable, it was prophetic, it seemed to broadcast feelings he was not admitting. His discomfort was not lost on Anna, but she called to the roomful of people, 'How can you bear all this dog's breakfast? Why don't we go outside?'

Patricia said, 'There's nowhere to hide, out there'; it was angled at Nell, standing just outside the door; and then: 'Are you coming to enjoy my conversation, John?'

Red-faced, he grunted, 'I might be out in a while'. Patricia picked it up straight away. 'Not we might be out?'

She smiled maliciously at Vic. 'Not very chivalrous, is he.'

Frances said, 'Would you know what chivalry was? Or decency?'

Patricia said, 'Decency doesn't interest me. And chivalry is just a denial of sex, as you'll find, if you bother ...'

Vic quailed before the implications of this remark, but Frances' expression showed she was ready to fight. It might have pleased Anna to see the two women scar each other but Vic, she felt, needed protecting; she looked coolly at her visitor, who said, 'All right. Put me in the back yard. Send them out in relays.'

Anna's line of retreat, however, took them past Nell, standing by the kitchen sideboard, a turn-of-the-century oak piece Anna had bought at a country auction. Pat's glance implied that Nell had found her rightful

place. Nell pretended to be interested in Anna's crockery; she began to finger a Spode cup and saucer. Patricia stabbed, 'Even if you had the taste, dear, John would break them.'

And at that moment Carcase appeared in the doorway. Following Pat? Or making sure she'd gone? It was enough for Nell. She said, 'You bloody bitch. And you, you bloody fool ... ' and fled back to the dining room.

Where Frances' anger seemed somehow to condemn her, and Vic was too concerned with his own turmoil to be any use. It was Bob who patted the arm of the chair beside him and signalled to someone to throw him his cigarettes. He lit the match for her, retrieved her glass, and said, referring to Patricia: 'Apparently she feels she's got to.'

He spoke as if Patricia was simply a behavioural problem which she herself couldn't solve. Nell, staring at her sister, knew better. There was something severe in Frances, as against Nell's pastels; Frances' doctrinal statement of opinions, and her intellect, represented authority for Nell, who was scared by people she didn't relate to. And of course she had not the success of her sister, who met important men, conferred, rang experts to draw on their knowledge, whereas she merely typed and did simple accounts in the Forests Commission office with Vic.

Who never pulled rank, she had to give him that. He really did believe that the humblest man burning off in the forest had to be considered as much as the Commissioners themselves. If Vic brought her work, or took what she'd done, it made her feel she was a contributor, not an underling. So she'd asked him to bring his wife to her flat when she knew Bob and Frances would be there; to meet her sister was her compliment to him.

And they'd got on well enough. They had friends in common, they started seeing each other at dinner tables, but it would never have established itself as a relationship except for Vic and Frances, who appeared to have located in each other something missing in themselves. For Vic, it was some potential of passion, a violent subjectivism held in rigid control: for Frances, the feeling that someone 'out there', living outside

the confines that gave her her strength and her limitations, would understand her, would see why she was as she was, perhaps even tell her all was well. Through Vic her closed mental world might become conterminous with the larger world hers was set in—she hoped, though she could not have expressed it; and for Vic, to have this hope set on him by someone whom he would never have thought himself able to attract, was flattering and disturbing. He found himself enjoying conversations with Frances which would have been commonplace with another woman, boring with a man. There was so much to do for Frances, yet plainly one didn't do things for her in any ordinary sense; she was perfectly capable of asking, or ringing up, for any need she admitted. Whatever else she wanted, she had no way of saying—yet the emanations were there; she knew she was limited, she allowed it to be seen by Vic.

Perhaps because his incapacity was a matching one, he was unlikely to damage her. She was strong, yet brittle, and something more underneath. Vic felt she wanted him to release this undersurge, yet knew he could be trusted not to; he'd never expose an inner force she couldn't handle. It was typical of Vic to accept such an ambivalent position. It was the sort of thing he naturally fell into, he'd bottled up his own inner life for so long that it was almost a habit to frustrate any new stirring of passion.

Anna felt that she, and to a lesser extent the children, had become a duty for Vic, part of his daily burden. She felt she was trapped by a circular argument: his early love for her had been naive and romantic; he needed to develop but each time something stirred in him he clung more tightly to his marriage. He was scared of passion because it would show the lie in his present state, and this, because it was based on his own conception of himself, he was unwilling to admit. The annoying thing was that he could be spontaneous, lively, and even exciting to live with when he was natural, it was only when he felt he had to close the shutters that he became insufferable. This was when he tried to be, to her, what he felt he was supposed to be, not what he was. This was the

'good boy' in Vic; Anna saw no need for it, but if she tried to stir him out of it, he clammed up or stiffened.

And here he was now, coming to bring Carcase, who was sulking in the lounge, a message from Patricia. He could have told her to get stuffed, or simply ignored her, but no, he'd gone outside to try and sort it out with her, and smoothe it all over, and the deferential way he entered the house made it plain she was using him. Anna said to her husband, 'You're the messenger boy, are you?' He merely shrugged his shoulders, she got angry, she said, 'Oh well, please yourself. I suppose it's his business what he does.'

If she expected Carcase to be less malleable than her husband, she was wrong. Putting down his glass, he rolled his shoulders out the door as if going to cop a blast from the coach. Bob said to Nell, who had observed the comings and goings, 'Looks like the back lawn's where the action is.'

Nell marched out. Bob gave a rueful look at Anna and followed. Anna felt she'd better be there ... the gathering gravitated to the garden. Watching them come, Patricia said loudly, 'My court is increasing. Go on, Robert, don't simplify your ideas for John, it's surprising how much he understands.'

Carcase stood by Robert McPherson, who was spread on a rug, holding forth, and watched him for a moment: 'If his ideas are as twisty as the way he wiggles his hands, they're going to be pretty hard to follow.'

Only before Patricia could he have made such a remark. She said, 'At least he won't be getting me pregnant.'

Anna glanced at Frances, who had joined the group, but she showed no reaction to the remark. Robert, however, stopped his discourse to protest, with more of the hand twirls Carcase found mincing: 'Oh look, Patricia, you know that's not the least part of my relation with you.'

But she wasn't interested: 'Don't talk about that, go on with your little theory.'

Robert—fat-faced, thinly bearded—was saying that people make their own situations, that almost everything that happens to them is something they’ve willed. ‘We’ve got inbuilt warning systems,’ he said, ‘telling us that Street A is where we might get raped, or Road B is where an accident is likely to happen. If we ignore these warnings, it’s because something deep inside us chooses to ignore them. We wish our own downfall. We want to be involved in whatever catastrophe comes upon us. I even believe,’ he continued, ‘that some catastrophes can have a healing power, so long as we survive them. I believe we seek them out to make them happen so we’ll destroy the thing in us that wants to destroy us.’

Carcase said, ‘If I get a broken leg because John Nicholls falls on me, I wanted it to happen, is that what you’re saying?’

‘Not quite, it’s not that simple. I don’t rule out an element of chance, especially in sport. And I don’t rule out the ignorance factor. I mean, for instance, that one chap may walk onto a fairway when someone’s going to hit a golf ball because he just doesn’t realize that a thing like a bullet could come over that lovely grass and hit him on the head. Whereas another chap, who knows what might happen and still walks on the fairway, is courting that accident. I think that’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?’

Carcase couldn’t have it. ‘What you don’t seem to realize ...’ He was still being unusually aggressive ‘... is that I’m not acting on my own. If John Nicholls comes through with the ball, well, I’m part of the side, and the side’s got to block him. There’s a coach and seventeen other blokes’ll think I’m shit if I jump out of his way. And there’s forty thousand spectators going to let me know what they think. You ought to hear ‘em, especially when you know it’s you they’re going crook at. Some bloke’s going to shoot for goal and you fall on your face when you should’ve grabbed him. The whole stand gives it to you. You bloody mug, Moore. You don’t do that on purpose.’

Robert—lecturer written all over him—was plainly surprised: ‘You’re a footballer, I take it?’

Bob, at the edge of the group, grinned: ‘Who is this bloke, do you know?’ Anna didn’t know, Nell didn’t know, but the unlikely clash of philosophies held their attention.

Robert said to Carcase, ‘You see, what you’re trying to do is make yourself an instrument of the popular will. Like the Nazis who got hauled before the Nuremberg trials. Remember? Their defence was that they were simply taking orders, just doing what society told them. Well, that didn’t wash. They got strung up, or locked away. It’s right against our tradition to let anyone get away with that one. After all, if you’re in John Nicholls’ road—who’s John Nicholls, by the way?—it’s because you’ve put yourself there. If the club, or the crowd, has expectations of you, it’s because you’ve put yourself in the position of satisfying their expectations. You run on the field, they all sing out Play a good game, Kick the ball straight ...’

Carcase twisted his thick lips.

‘... you’ve put yourself out there to entertain them ...’

Hearing this from the weak-faced Robert, and in the presence of Carcase, Anna felt ashamed of her scorn of football. And Carcase, it was obvious, was making himself hear the argument through ...

‘So whatever befalls you, and I admit that dozens of things might, from running hard into the fence to getting a cuff on the ear ...’

Bob was obviously memorizing it, and would tell it for years. Anna compared her thin wrists, which might cuff her children on occasions, with John Moore’s powerful forearms; Bob, too, had kept his figure ...

‘... it’s because you have put yourself in the way of it. I mean, you could be one of those little men running out with a wet towel, but you chose to be a player, with all that that entails.’

Carcase was at a loss, for the moment.

‘So you see, you chose to be on the same field as John Nicholls—it does sound like a bullfight, doesn’t it!—you chose to do what the club and the crowd want, and they want you to block him. Now, let’s take it a bit further. Aren’t there times when you think to yourself: I’m just about exhausted, it’d be very nice to get carried off now and have a hot

bath and let the other chaps finish the game? Are you sure there aren't moments when you really want to get knocked over?'

Perhaps Carcase was better at debate than Robert would have guessed. He said, 'Of course there are. That's when you get up again, and get back into it. Sure, it'd be nice to have a bath when you're feeling bugged, but a man's got to live with himself, you know.'

Robert twirled his hands again. 'Oh well, of course, if you want to make it sound more heroic than it is ...'

Carcase called out, more loudly than he meant to: 'Anyone's a hero if they stick at it. Everything you said was about failure. Isn't there such a thing as success any more?'

There was something defiant about his cry, which challenged Patricia more than Robert. It stirred the gathering, first to the educated fiddling of definition—'Well, it all depends on how you measure success'—and then to some real dialogue. Carcase threw it at the lecturer, still lying sprawled on the rug: 'When did you last do something you were pleased with, you knew it was good?'

Some minor triumph in a tutorial appeared to be all that Robert could muster at short notice. Bob smiled at his rejoinder but Anna said to him, 'We're the only ones who can say when we've had an important success because only we know the traps and pitfalls our personality can fall into.'

Bob's reply showed something of why he kept up that bland exterior: 'Don't you think it's a matter of keeping on an even keel as far as work and those things go, and then working on the inner things?'

The inner things: of course he had them, but it was the first time he'd showed concern, before Anna, for the way his life was going. She looked at Frances: Bob the accountant was capable enough, she supposed, but could Bob the inner man trust all he felt to that stern judgement? She would surely despise as weakness those traits in him which she denied in herself? Living by a code, she simply couldn't allow for a more easy-going, diffuse and flexible personality? Bob, Anna suspected, would only win approval from his wife when he came up to scratch; she

wondered if Frances ‘let him’ make love to her, or whether, in the depths of a bed and the dark of a room, she threw it all off and gave naturally. To a Bob who offered ... what? He would be tender, he would sense the flickerings of personality; and the need, so obvious in him, would be appealing if you let yourself soothe it. And last, if you looked to him, he would be fun.

Further down the garden, Frances was talking to Glenn Bateman, a young forester who worked with Vic. She was telling him, ‘Politics is the balance of groups and forces. The big thing is to see that the groups you represent are given the best presentation you can manage. It’s like hiring a QC instead of a junior. Decisions are being made all the time, and if you let anything go uncontested, you’re mad.’ To which he replied, ‘So what’s success, then? It’s not an absolute of any sort?’ Frances’ voice was firm, almost as if she was still dealing with Patricia: ‘It’s in maintaining absolutely everything that’s yours, and slowly expanding your grip into weaker areas, where poor organization by the others has left an opening.’ Glenn Bateman said, ‘That sort of success needs a lot of patience, doesn’t it? Patience and tenacity ...’

Yes, and a bloody iron will, thought Anna, and wished Vic was interested in someone shallower and better balanced. If he really got involved with Frances it would explode two marriages, leaving her to console herself with Bob, which was hardly what she’d want ... or, more likely, if it came to a crisis, Vic would show up as weak and incapable. He wouldn’t be ruthless enough to make a clean break. He’d agonize and there’d be messy half and half situations ... and Frances would tear herself to pieces with guilt, remorse, a sense of sin, and all that ...

I don’t want to be around if that sort of thing starts up, thought Anna; I’d have to bail out and make a fresh start— but would it be possible?

The children reappeared, but the afternoon party had steam up by now: the overcast day was darkening, and conversation rolled over the under-storey of kids. Vic’s trees threw a gloom on the group. Anna often said, ‘It’s not a garden, it’s a forest research project,’ but since she wasn’t

interested in gardening, that was the way it was. Vic came out with more wine, and caught her eye: food? Anna annoyed herself by feeling resigned; she knew she'd have to get them all something to eat, but it would only be obeying expectations, not doing something she wanted. She spoke up: 'All right, fried rice. Who feels like some chopping up?'

Frances said, 'I'll help you, Anna,' and beat off the other offers.

The two women went inside; Vic gravitated to Bob.

Robert McPherson was developing his theory. 'There's a magnetism about what must happen to us; we're drawn to it whether we want it or not.'

There was a young woman lying on the rug near him, playing with her baby. She decided to feed it, she unbuttoned herself and hung over the child so it could reach her breast. Patricia stood. Her eye gave Carcase his command: he moved her folding chair to the other side of the group.

Nell stood by a West Australian eucalypt, picking its scaly bark; its glaucous, pointed leaves seemed to scratch at her shining hair. John Carcase Moore stood heavily by Patricia's chair, still looking defiant; Pat raised her eyebrows and made what might have been a smile; it said, Go away now, I don't want to talk to you. He went inside, with a chattering Gwennie following him, like a mocking imitation of the adulation he was used to.

The social theorizing went on; wine flowed; traffic in Heidelberg Road kept up its hum. Streaks of light, as the sun got lower, fell on the terracotta, throwing an orange light back into the garden. The breakthrough of sun, abetted by a shiver of breeze, gave Vic's trees that broken, million-faceted light of the eucalypt forest. Bob looked up, and said he liked it: Vic told him it was nothing compared to the alpine forests, he'd have to come up into the mountains one weekend if he wanted to see how beautiful bush could be.

Bob said, 'Nature means a lot to you, I can see.' It seemed to trouble Vic as much as anything else, he said: 'Yes, nature's marvellous, but when I think of it I don't think of man. Man's a part of nature, we all know

that, but I don't actually feel it that way. The animals in the bush are part of nature—I feel that all right—but man—he's separate altogether.'

Bob said, 'Is that a problem?'—Anna would have asked, 'Why is that a problem for you?'

There was something very generous in Bob, Vic felt; he wanted to give him something, parts of himself. He said, 'There's no basis in nature for most of our thinking, or even our feelings; have you ever thought of that? Animals have a herd loyalty; there's mother love, and the reproductive urges are there, but there's just no equivalent for standing here in a group like this and talking our heads off ... Robert's theories, all that.'

Bob said, 'This worries you?'

'I keep going back to nature, but I can't get inside it.'

'Maybe we weren't meant to.'

Vic caught a Catholic leftover in the way Bob put it, and downvalued it as a weakness; but then, he felt, there was also a tolerance in Bob, an unwillingness to get caught by logic. If ideas led him into difficulties, he would put those ideas down and pick up some that suited him better; inconsistency wouldn't matter. Bob could be bruised, but he wouldn't get hung up on something, Vic decided, and suddenly he loved this man beside him who could walk past difficulties that might snare a Vic or an Anna. 'You really must come up into the mountains. I'll take you out to Mount Howitt, it's part of the Divide. It's really fabulous country. The start or the end of the snow season's when I like it best, but any time you can make it.'

Bob said, 'We'll make a weekend of it!' Vic chuckled at the way this new friend, who wouldn't know an alpine ash from a snowgum, could, by his tone of voice, suggest that they'd dine, dance and drink the whole two days. Vic said, 'There won't be many comforts, but we'll enjoy it. Do you think we'd better help inside?'

Anna was telling Frances about Pat. 'She had a baby about a year ago. She claimed John Moore was the father, but he was sure he wasn't. I don't know the full story, but apparently he said she'd been sleeping with others. I think he said he'd try to arrange an abortion but he wasn't

going to pay for it and the rest was all up to her. Anyhow, she wouldn't have an abortion, but it didn't make any difference to him. When the baby came she had it adopted straight away. It's made her very bitter.'

Frances said, 'Well, if that happened to ... if I ... well, I think she should make sure she never sees him again. She's got to make a fresh start, hasn't she?'

But Anna said, 'But can you? I mean, could she?' She remembered Frances mentioning with distaste how an acquaintance had displeased her by talking about side effects of the pill in front of some of Frances' friends who obeyed the papal ruling about contraceptives. To Frances, it was unbelievably tactless, but it made Anna wonder how much Frances wanted children, if at all. She led such a busy, public, ordered life, it would be hard to imagine her with a child—and yet it might be the makings of her. Frances was using a chopping board with a warp in it; with a few deft folds she made a brown paper bag fit the space under the board, and it was stable. Anna said, 'I never thought of doing that, I just put up with it. It's a slab of something Vic brought home. They'd been doing research on it. Shining gum, I think he said.'

Amid the slicing and the chopping, Frances said, 'I'd like to see some of the places he goes to, but first you must see up our way.' Anna felt sure she'd already suggested it to Vic, and made a mental note to check. She had no real wish to visit the area Frances came from, it would probably bore her stiff; but then again, Frances was offering to take her—or rather, Vic—inside that bastion. She knew she would put it unpleasantly to her husband—'We've been invited to the Vatican'—but with Frances looking seriously at her, and her reaction so important to this woman, so confident in her own world, so unsure outside it, she said simply, 'We'll come.'

As if there were no complexities in the situation, Frances said, 'You'll love it.'

2

Anna taught halftime, five mornings a week. She gave Gwennie to a neighbour who took her to kinder, she dropped John at his school, and swung into the college carpark, a few seconds before nine.

Asked why she went to work, she threw off stock answers: get out of the house, keep in touch, the money's handy—yet the question was important because Preston, the suburb where she worked, had a strong effect on her. It was more than depressing, it seemed to negate everything she brought to it.

To the eye, it was only a well-kept sort of Limbo; people gardened with paint, concrete, and a four-square approach, tidying their shrubs but not bothering to plant the big trees that would shade, hide, or mellow their undistinguished, respectable houses. It was all so defenceless in summer, so uncovered in winter; it seemed ready to lie down and accept, as if all its options had been taken from it years ago.

Yet the students had an uncouth confidence which presented another type of challenge. Products of an affluent working class which believed it had risen to the middle strata of society, they were suspicious of any assumption of cultural supremacy. This led to ambivalent situations in class. They seemed to demand that Anna and her Humanities colleagues should give them what they needed for a pass (a qualification, a means to social rise) but shouldn't expect them to alter their thinking or attitudes in any significant way. They presented a wall of reserve against anyone trying to draw them out of their class and regional attitudes into any sort of mainstream—unless it was the pop/commercial one with which they were familiar. Anna often felt that she and her colleagues had been forced out of the role of teachers into becoming

advocates for whatever it was they were asking their students to consider. They felt that they themselves, and not their subject matter, were on trial, and that the shutters were up against them until they had proved themselves as human beings. Then the after-class talks, and the direct, confessional essays, were like a transfusion. They were also the cause of much self-questioning by Anna. Was her own cultural stream real? Relevant? She could hardly say she lived by it. Was it too a mask? If her values were only an accident of being brought up on the other side of the river dividing Melbourne, how deep were they? Could they hold? Did she have anything to offer but her own vitality? Was there anything there at all?

She drove to work every morning, feeling more foreign with every block she travelled west; dressed usually in denim suit and headscarf—car clothes, she often thought, anything that made her feel she was passing through the place, not settling in it. Yet Bob had started at Preston, and had stirred himself out of it in his meandering, ambiguous way. He'd flopped at the university, passed a few accountancy subjects, got himself a job up-country at Kerang, starred in football, got himself invited to train with Collingwood, came back, finished off the accountancy ...

Back to Collingwood! Yet Bob, in his flour mill office, would be considered a success by the Prestonites she taught and therefore, presumably, by their parents whom she saw driving trucks in Bell Street, pushing shopping trolleys in Northland ... Collingwood, success ?

The whole thing called her into question. She liked Maeterlinck, Monet, Debussy, Schubert, Moussorgsky, Camus ... Her fifth form girls would ask 'What sort of books do you read, Mrs Rogers?', and she would tell them, and they would say, 'Never heard of 'im'. It was the same with music. Once she played them *Die Winterreise*, and they said it was too stiff, and sad, and they couldn't follow the story—despite Anna's laborious preparations—and they didn't see why anyone should get in such a funny state about his girl throwing him over; he ought to find someone else. Bra-less girls with too-short skivvies and sparkling azure eye shadow turned to each other, nodded knowingly, and said, 'No use walkin'

off in the snow, there'd be someone if he only looked.' Anna pressed them to look into their reactions more deeply, and an Italian girl tried: 'The reason I don't like it, Miss Rogers, is that the singer's all solemn, and the piano keeps on and on—boom boom boom, it really gets at you. I know I don't want to be involved in anything like that. It gave me the shudders. There wasn't any life in it.'

Die Winterreise! What did they want? So she talked about her own teenage years, and her friends, and what had happened to them all, until her classes, she felt, were turning into gossip sessions. Then she would say, 'Now look, we really must get some work done', but the girls would answer 'This is better than work'. And Anna would remember dreary essays and dreary, affected tutorials at the university, with people pretending scholarship they had no intention of acquiring, and she wondered if perhaps her discussions weren't a lot more healthy and a lot more use. Sometimes, though, she would insist on them writing. One day a girl called Pam came up with this:

Chimneys belching
POLLUTION
Trains crammed with
SLAVES GOING TO WORK
Cars trying to pick you up
SCUM
Cars rushing straight through you at the lights
SCUM
Cops in cars
ALSO SCUM
At the intersections
BROKEN GLASS
Old ladies with shopping boxes
VERY TIRED
The canteen serving chicken rolls
GREASY
Someone get me out!
Men at the monument talking gossip
FIFTY YEARS STALE
Pansies at the library

NOTHING ELSE TO DO

Women leaving their kids at the nursery

ALSO SLAVES TO WORK

Teachers raving at their classes

‘ONLY DOING THEIR BEST’ (Sorry Mrs Rogers)

Kids mucking about

BEST THEY CAN THINK OF

Bikies at the dance

SCUM AGAIN

There was a gap, then Pam had written again, ‘Someone get me out!’ She told Anna, ‘I didn’t know how to finish it. Is it all right Mrs Rogers?’ Anna told her, ‘Well, it’s pretty damning, is it really as bad as all that?’ Pam nodded: ‘That’s just how it is.’

Whereas confidence abounded at the mill, and Bob had the knack of simulating his surroundings, though if he were more senior it might have been noticed that he reflected the bright air of certainty more than he created it. Anna called him a semi-lapsed Catholic because of this same readiness to go through the forms whenever required, and Vic called him a very private man; he seemed always to be cruising, delivering what was required to him but never pressing the world for more than a good night out, a day at the races, an interesting game at Victoria Park. He told Anna once, ‘About a month after I started at the mill, I found these Group Certificates on my desk, it was June the thirtieth. Well, I thought we didn’t have to have them done till next payday, the third. The head accountant wasn’t there to ask, he’d gone out, so I didn’t do them. I was in bed asleep when the phone rang. It was the accountant and he was sloshed out of his mind, he must have been on it all day. He wanted to know why I hadn’t done them; apparently he prided himself on giving the staff their Group Certificates before any other firm in the area—get their returns in, get their refund—and he claimed I’d let him down. Wouldn’t listen. So I went back to the office and did them, the whole hundred and fifty of them, and I put them on his desk. Then I staggered home for about two hours sleep, and then I staggered back to the office. He was there all right, but he never said a word about it. I never found

out if he was so sloshed when he rang that he'd forgotten all about it, or felt embarrassed about it, or what. He's gone now so I'll never know.'

Vic's comment on this had been, 'That's right! He'll never know! You know why? Because there's no one to tell him. He's used to authority telling him. The church I mean. Now he doesn't believe in it any more so he literally doesn't know. He feels things, but he doesn't have an opinion, except the one he can see you want him to have.' To which Anna had replied, 'Then he does know. How else do you know but by your feeling? Your opinion is something you form later.' And Vic: 'You'd have to be very close to know what his feelings were: Frances would know ...' And she: 'I doubt it.'

So there was the mystery about him. Anna watched him keenly for signs that he was an interloper in his Parkville terrace. That they had no Victorian furniture could be put down to Frances as much as Bob; she had a gaudy taste which followed the trends in Melbourne's more exclusive stores so that one found their patterned Italian bedspread lit by a gilded imitation colonial bedlamp, or their lounge curtains of pale olive brocade falling behind the orange shade of another lamp, this time a knobby, ceramic chunk. Only peasant, craft and cottage styles were missing from Frances' aesthetic pastiche. Bob? There was yesterday's Australian on a kitchen chair, TV Week or Sporting Globe stuffed under his armchair in the lounge, and the National Times or Financial Review poking out of the magazine rack. Frances, when she read at all, read heavily, in politics; Trengove's biography of John Gorton was probably her lightest contribution to the bookshelf, apart from her school and university texts, without which the library would have been slight indeed. Bob read less, picked up paperbacks and put them down, dipped, occasionally became engrossed and read with surprising perception and enjoyment. He had a couple of team photos from Kerang in the hall, hanging near the arch which marked its midpoint and shaded the frames. Apart from these, his football connection showed itself, not in the house, but by his arranging his Tuesday and Thursday supervision schedules so that if no problems cropped up he could leave his last call at

about half past four, and slip down Johnston Street to see Collingwood train.

He jokingly referred to his circuit as ‘my rails’, and stock approaches to firms whose credit he controlled were ‘Dead on time today’ or ‘bit late today, I got derailed at Trubake’. The first time the two couples had dined together Anna asked him, ‘Which are your most important stations, then?’ It was one of those verbal ploys which, in serving as conversation openers, often shape vital first impressions. Frances had butted in: ‘Four main stations. Dad’s in Lavender Street, the office, the footy club and home. Creature of habit, aren’t you, Bobby?’ And Bob had smiled in that inward way, ‘Not always. Not always.’

None of this applied to Vic, with his desk high above one end of the city, and Victoria’s forests as his field of operation. Vic preferred to keep his eyes on the things he could reverence, and work with—the growth cycles of nature, the habits and complex ecology of the forest. Out in the field (the foresters’ term for the bush, head office being known as ‘the castle’) he could keep his mind away from his own inner springs and motivation. Emotional frankness disconcerted him, the more so when an answering honesty was demanded of him. It came back to an unwillingness to face the consequences of any action, any commitment. He half hoped his inner life would remain static, to let him focus more clearly on the things he understood and handled well. He was an accurate observer, he knew his forests; sitting in the castle, he had an uncanny sense of the temperatures, the seasons, the regeneration rates of ironbark near Bendigo, alpine ash at Mount Howitt. It was as if he felt them growing. His scientific training and his capacity for love could link in his attention to the details of his work—seed collection, thinning operations, aerial seeding, persuading younger foresters to burn for regeneration. He was compassionate. When certain areas were mismanaged, he was prepared to see the pressures that led foresters to burn too early, or let the loggers into too many scattered sites; this compassion was supported by his faith in nature. With a little care, and in the timespan nature needed, even terrible mistakes could be rectified.

It was in the human sphere that he weakened. Riding the lift at head office, he was glad he wasn't stepping out for Social Welfare or Prisons; the thought of coping with the desperate emotions of people whose lives were tangled made him uncomfortable. What would you say? 'Silly bastard, don't do it again?' 'Here's a few dollars, don't spend it all at once'? Given training and experience, he supposed he'd cope, but he was never comfortable sharing a lift with some of the sad, shoddily clad cases he saw coming in for interview on the floors below him. Anna's friend Sandra, who worked with her at Preston, said it was an emotional immaturity common in scientific fields. Anna found this idea hard to fight off because it was right, if you only considered him as a problem. The problem, which Anna would talk about at Sandra's, or with others on the staff, did look like immaturity, but the problem wasn't all-pervading. Vic hosting a dinner party was capable enough; Vic with his children, fooling about in the garden, was all they wanted of him; Vic helping his friends, or listening to people's outpourings, was better than he realized. It all came back to a distrust of what might be stirring in him, of where some flood of new feeling might lead him.

This was a disparity. Visually acute, and observant of tiny detail in the forest, he felt himself indelicate in dealing with people when there was no clear role to play. His mental compartments, he knew, were too large and cumbersome; the fine distinctions and shadings of mood which revealed the complex lives of some of his and Anna's friends made him feel inadequate and sometimes impatient. At thirty-five, he believed he was still gauche in his relations with people, inclined to hop around the embarrassing; and above all, inclined to be wary of the undisciplined power he felt in himself. Nature was all very well, but it didn't explain man, and man—his sort of man, anyway—had to show himself completely before he could know himself. To do less was to be inhibited, as Vic saw it, and it says much about him that he would think, in a youthful way, of people being inhibited or uninhibited, whereas Anna would think people wise or unwise in their handling of themselves. Troubles and difficulties, for Vic, were to be avoided, perhaps by some inward self-

mutilation of considerable cost, whereas for Anna they were inevitably there and had to be coped with. It made things difficult for her that Vic couldn't always be frank, it would be so much easier if he too could put his cards on the table.

Three weeks after the children's party, Frances contacted the Rogers. Anna, she knew, had been doing some work with one of her classes on alienation, isolation, crime rates and other urban problems; would Anna and Vic like to come to a lecture by a sociologist from the A.N.U. called 'The urban problem: is there any solution?' It was to be given at a large private home and there would be drinks and supper after question time.

When they got there, Vic said to Bob, 'What's the Country Party doing running this sort of show?' Bob suggested they might be doing a little job of brand identification. He was something of a collector of advertising jargon, it was his way of subverting the world he worked in, and, Vic suspected, his wife's more dominant role. To be with Bob was to see the world lose a little of its intensity. 'Quite a place', he said, waving at the panelling, the black marble and bronze statuettes, the photos and ink drawings of political dignitaries from the fifteen years either side of Federation. Casting an eye about, Bob seemed to itemize, as an auctioneer would; pursuing what he took to be Bob's thought, Vic said, 'A lot of this stuff would never go in your place, or mine', but Bob merely uttered a breathy 'Ah'.

Frances the organizer was approaching them and the elusive beauty was very much in evidence: hair drawn back and held by a complexly patterned comb; long dress of simply cut, undecorated satin; dress, comb and hair all black; face pale but eyes beading at the sight of her friends becoming a part of her world. Anna tugged at her flowing Pakistani gear to straighten it, and, as Frances conferred herself on the group, the lustre of the satin seemed to overpower the vegetable dyes of the cotton garment. Frances said, 'There's been a bit of a change. Our man couldn't come, at the last minute. He's sent us one of his Ph.D. students instead; he's supposed to be very bright.'

The young man was nervous when introduced to the senior members of his audience. He seemed altogether too lightweight to make any contribution to their thinking. But he was confident enough, even arrogant, when he told the gathering that he had titled his talk 'The urban problem: problem of an outdated space/time continuum'. The gathering, which appeared, in the main, to have come for some well-tried verities stylishly delivered, was disconcerted. They found difficulty in following his ideas and plainly didn't like his tutorial manner of breaking off mid-way through some point obvious to him with a curt 'But of course you know about that'.

He began by attacking conventional notions of town planning. The grid pattern, or any other highly fragmented system of land ownership, was precisely what the name implied, a restrictive grid laid right across one of the two major dimensions man inhabited—space. Fragmented land ownership, he claimed, separated every man from his neighbour and created a division between private and public which might once have been workable, even necessary, but was now ruinous.

The other great weakness of modern urban society, he said, was the disparity between man's diurnal habit and the fact that the economy depended on flow—flow of money, people, and goods. He instanced traffic as the prime example of his thesis. Every vehicle in the modern city, he said, is moving through space, and moving through time. Space is valuable, time is valuable, the fuel they burn is valuable; but the whole system is so self-contradictory that they can scarcely advance five hundred metres without a hold-up—a red light, or a two-lane intersection with one car waiting to turn left and another waiting to turn right, and no gap for the cars behind to sneak through, even though they had the green light.

Here, he said, was the great contradiction: we could not achieve the very thing we set out to achieve—maximum flow—because we were forced to wriggle through two overlapping grids, the grid of fragmented land ownership and the time grid, by which man was deemed of value to society only in the forty hours he worked: these hours had to be planned

almost to the second to allow the synchronization and coordination demanded by an advanced society.

This led him to discuss the ‘valueless’ position of housewives, after which he predicted a future society in which all resources would be publicly owned, and the value of goods would relate to their places in ecological cycles we were only now starting to discover. In a final blaze of speculation he tried to predict the space/time continuum of such a society. To Vic, it sounded rather like the aborigines’ dream time; to Anna, it was a cunning argument to devalue a sense of history and replace it with a notion of society which only the sociologist could properly understand.

Question time ended quickly, since the young man used the first two questions as springboards for further philosophical speculation. The gathering divided quickly, into the Urban Studies students, the Country Party organizers, whose reaction to the talk seemed to be that the young man had no concept of any relationship between man and land at all, the middle-aged educated, who debated his terminology with vigour, and a few aged and sombre friends of the family who owned the house. These last could have stepped out of the photos on the wall, and seemed happy to be surrounded by the noise of discussion, however irrelevant to their lives. Frances was polished in ushering them within reach of the supper, and handing them drinks. When Vic asked her what she thought of the talk, she said seriously, ‘I don’t think we’ll be approaching Dr Bartholomew again, after him sending us that:

Anna wouldn’t have it. She said, ‘I know he was a bit incoherent at times, but there’s no doubt about it, technological change has made a lot of our thinking out of date. The most obvious example’s ...’

She was going to say the contraceptive pill, but remembered too late, or was it just in time? Frances stared at Anna as if conducting an oral examination of a slightly unsteady student, before damning the speaker: ‘He just ignored the whole question of the type of land use. There’s a very big difference between using land for agriculture and using up office space for some tertiary or service occupation. To listen to that fel-

low, you'd think any occupation could be carried on anywhere at all, any time you felt like it.' She chuckled, and looked at Vic. 'He might believe all that, but if any of it was based on research, I don't know what the A.N.U.'s coming to.'

Bob said, 'Oh I don't know, he seemed to know a lot about the history of town planning. And I enjoyed his stuff about traffic. What did he call a traffic jam? Maximum mental frustration with the minimum of physical release. Mm, I liked that.'

Frances' look made it plain that any humour in the talk was put in for people like Bob.

From perversity as much as anything else, Anna took it up again: 'But surely you'd agree that the position in the cities is as he described it, even if you didn't go along with all his theories at the end?'

Frances said, 'Oh, everyone knows that, but if that's the only contribution he can make, he'd better start another thesis.'

The smugness angered Anna; it was a crossover point in the relationship of the quartet. Till then, Anna, the most balanced and most central of the four, had gone along with this friendship by circumstance because it was what one did; people slid in and out of your life, you seemed to see them everywhere for a few weeks, then someone moved away, the circles no longer overlapped, and it was only when someone talked about last New Year's Eve that you remembered that half a dozen people high on the list of invitations had slipped out of your life. The chance for this to happen was now gone; the four of them were locked together, though the men may not have realized it. Anna, competitive and inviting disloyalty, said, 'What do you think, Bob?'

Bob said, 'I didn't follow a lot of what he said when he was gazing into the future ...'

Stern major-generals stared out from walls; heroic bronze Anzacs rolled a gun up a beach ...

'... but I think he did show a lot of contradictions in the way we organize ourselves. I mean, the traffic really is fantastic. The city layout just doesn't suit modern traffic, that's obvious. The trouble is, you try

and reorganize roads and you're knocking down someone's house and a scream goes up. I think we're trying to have our cake and eat it too.'

It was moderate enough, but Frances was on the attack. 'Well, we need better organization, don't we? Do you think all that waffle's going to get us anywhere?'

Bob duck-shoved, yet there was fight in his voice as he pointed to the young speaker: 'Ask him.'

The young man caught the words and came over, a Robert McPherson in the making. Frances said to him, 'Would you mind translating all that into something practical? If the cities were handed over to your control, what'd be the first thing you'd do?'

But he'd met this sort of attack before. He said, 'I'd look for a new theoretical model of urban society. I'd be looking for a new basis on which to start.'

Frances merely stared, with set lips.

He said, 'You see, there's no consensus. We all live in different cities—or rather, different concepts of the same city. Now, the old widow pensioner in Brunswick sees the city as her habitual surroundings, take away the houses around her and ...'

But Frances: 'Look. Tell me how you would make decentralization happen.'

The young man: 'Well, I think that central and decentralized are states of mind as much as anything else, I mean ...'

But the stately friends of the family were circulating, and moved through the group. Frances fell into small talk with them, Bob and Anna started laughing about a traffic incident on the way to the talk, and Vic was left with the speaker. There was something annoying about the young man; since he himself needed a rationale for a set of actions he assumed that everyone else—politicians, planners—must meet him on his chosen ground of argument. Not to do so proved they were unfit to tackle the problem.

In Vic's experience, however, organizations rarely had a theoretical basis, only day-to-day practice and past experience. He tried to make

this point in regard to fire prevention. He said, 'Look, the bush is no more fire-prone now than it was in 1939, but people know the danger now, whereas they didn't realize it before the Black Friday fires. Those fires changed people's ideas about lighting fires in summer, not only in Victoria but throughout the country. Every second publication the Commission puts out starts off talking about the '39 fires. Call them a traumatic experience. Or you can say they were the birth of our present-day caution, because we know now what a fire can do. Theoretically, the Commission was always aware of it, but it took the disaster to get it into the heads of the public. We didn't teach them, the fire did. So where's all your theory now?'

Though still talking to the old people, Frances, Vic realized, was listening.

The young man couldn't unbend. 'Just a minute! Why do you say it needed a disaster? It was surely up to the Commission ...'

There was a fire burning in the open fireplace, with its marble mantel supporting a marble ashtray, a plaque of Britannia, and more stern portraits in leather folders. Vic felt unable to cope with the young man's arrogance. Though sure in his own mind of what he was saying, he found himself pointing lamely to the fire, as if to a superior authority. He stood still, mouth open, submitting to what he felt was a blinkered, two-dimensional argument ...

Then Frances flicked him, flicked him hard on the leg.

What would the major-generals have done, or the stately old people, who didn't notice the low right-hand movement? Vic gulped, flushed, took courage; she was goading him, inciting him, as Bob had flung the speaker at her inflexibility. And she was listening, the old people would surely be aware of the gap she'd made in their conversation? He touched his leg, rubbed slowly and deliberately over the contact, as he said, 'I don't deny your right to theorize. But where you fall down is in expecting your logic, if that's what it is ...'

Did Frances touch him again, or was it a touch on the finger that still rubbed the spot, or the contact that came from sensing that she wanted to ?

‘... to be everyone else’s criterion of what’s right. That’s where you’re wrong ...’

He was speaking with uncharacteristic vehemence; Bob and Anna had stopped to listen.

‘Your theories get tested against the common experience. You and your ideas will never break out of your little academic circle until something happens to the ordinary man that makes him interested to listen to you. So! If traffic just can’t get through Swanston Street, or Princes Bridge starts to crack ...’

Frances, behind her mask, was jubilant, unnaturally excited. Anna said to Bob, ‘Let’s go and see through the house.’ And Vic was left with the lecturer.

3

After the usual rush to get to work, and a mediocre morning, Anna was home. Gwennie preferred to play across the road; she was alone when the phone rang.

When she reached it, it stopped.

She stared at the black bakelite object, sitting like a juju, having a life of its own and a power to disturb. It carried a menace to her peace of mind, it might command her again. Through it, she might be called to make some decision contrary to her mood, which was passive, timid, uncertain. She headed for the garden, and had reached the back door when it rang again.

When she reached it, it stopped.

She went quickly to the garden, to the gungurru in flower. It had grown too fast, its spindly branches fell everywhere, but the colouring was exquisite: blues aspiring to silver, cloudy sky colours, and the long-stalked gumnuts of last year's flowering mingling with the powdered buds and the pink-red flowers; it was Vic's favorite tree and one point where their tastes met. She gripped it, transmitting a quiver to the branches.

She stopped to listen, but the house said nothing.

She was going to ring Vic and tell him about the calls, but the wish weakened; what if it was ...

... someone?

She went inside and took the phone off the hook—outdated expression. She picked up the coffee pot, then put it down. For a moment she thought of unplugging the phone, but there was little sense in that.

The coffee pot was a dark, heavy piece of earthenware, crudely fingermarked around the handle and spout; she had found it at a potters' coöperative in dusty hill country north of Melbourne. There was a beer barrel, haybales to sit on, and a row of trestles covered with hessian to display the pots. If you bought a mug you could fill it at the barrel; many people were borrowing a mug, having a beer or two, then wiping them, or not wiping them, and putting them back on display. The whole thing had lacked refinement, but she felt she had to obey the situation, she had bought the coffee pot.

She didn't like obeying a situation, but she felt it was what she would do. What else was there? You could leap out of it in some abrupt way, you could obey it, or you could fight it, wrestle it onto your own terms.

On the bookshelf by the telephone was a Chinese vase, she went in to move it. It was a celadon, a slightly glutinous glaze, not a really cool crisp one, but certain flowers, especially the guelder rose, looked well in it.

Out the window, she saw some tall grass twitching. It frightened her, till she realized that the cat was moving in it.

Why not replace the phone? It could scarcely harm her. But no, she moved into the lounge and sat on the sofa. The sun struck through the curtains, a spotlight for some terpsichorean motes doing their thing in the shaft of filtered light. In the darker part of the room behind this beam of activity was another Chinese vase, blue and white with a hexagonal neck; it had cost her a hundred and seventy dollars, but she had told Vic it cost ninety, which was just as well, because he made a great huff and puff of being reasonable: it was her money, after all, and if it gave her pleasure, why not? — that sort of thing.

The room was very still; she felt she was eavesdropping on her house, peeping at its inner life as she wanted no one to look on hers. Why not replace the phone? Because it could conjure her into existence again when momentarily she was at one with her room—her bits and pieces, as Vic called them: she wanted no one to pry, she herself was afraid to look.

Gwennie recalled her, coming down the drive singing out that she wanted a biccy. The little girl did a quick tour of the house, complaining that some of her things had been moved; naturally she noticed the phone.

‘Why’s the phone here, Mum, did the man come to fix it?’

‘What man?’

‘The man who’s going to come because he’ll have to come if it’s not working.’

‘What makes you think it’s not working?’

‘It won’t work unless this bit’s sitting on here, you told me, Mum.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well I’ll put it on and then we won’t have to have the man come to fix it. Will we, Mum?’

Children’s chop-logic! But Gwennie put the phone back before racing off with her biccy to find the cat. Anna watched a moment through the window to see if she would put the biscuit in the cat’s mouth and then her own ... but Gwennie was out of sight.

She rang Bob at his office. ‘Were you trying to ring me before?’

‘Ah, no, no ...’

Surely not true.

‘Why, did someone ring?’

She felt foolish, humiliated, ashamed.

‘Someone tried.’

The celadon lacked a rose, stood grey and empty.

‘As a matter of fact,’ he said, ‘I did want to contact you people ...’

He had been ringing; she hadn’t rung him without pretext, she’d simply ... given him encouragement? Forced his hand? Made the thing she wanted happen? She searched for an interpretation that did her self-esteem least damage: it was so confusing that every step one took had to be reconciled with one’s self-image. Hers, she knew, was full of gaps, through which she might leap, given the wish; gaps through which she was vulnerable. What was Bob’s and how would he show it?

They talked. Anna invited ‘the Banners’ to dinner. She said, ‘I think we’ll have just the four of us at dinner, and ask others to drop in after.’ Bob liked this, he’d have gone along with anything. Finally he said, ‘I’m glad you rang. It’s going to be good, I’m looking forward to it.’

Then came the furtive part. ‘Perhaps it’d be better if you told Frances that I tried to ring her first but I couldn’t get through at her office.’

‘Oh, she’s up-country today, some do they’re having at Shepparton.’

So she needn’t have made the extra commitment of a lie; but what did it matter, having gone thus far? And bugger Frances, in Shepparton or anywhere else, she’d be looking out for herself.

Or Vic, he was often away. Well ...

Bugger Bob too, if he had to be helped.

When Anna rang Frances the next day, thinking she might call it off, she was surprised by Frances’ enthusiasm for the dinner party. Frances discussed the value of friends, and how much she needed some of Anna’s literary/artistic knowledge. She said she felt she amounted to a philistine; she didn’t want to be, it was simply the narrowness of her interests till then. Anna sensed that Frances didn’t know what was happening to her or where she was leading them, insofar as any of them led the others. That unblinking gaze and calm judgement with which she appraised the public world had behind it a chaotic inner life for which she had no terms of reference beyond those her background had given her. For the second time Anna felt protective of Frances and wondered if she should analyse all this with Vic.

But no, Vic would pretend nothing was happening until something came out in the open; then would be time to act— if she chose to.

Frances made one remark about her husband. She said he had taken up going on long training runs with John Moore, early in the morning or late at night. Frances was ‘worried’. These runs sometimes ended up at her sister Nell’s flat ... she found it impossible to say that the big footballer was sleeping at the flat most nights. Again, her anxious questions about John Moore and Patricia made it plain that she wanted to offer

her sister something better than moral precepts which she was plainly ignoring—but what? Frances didn't know, and her unwitting display of helplessness made Anna feel that she should make some loyal gesture for Frances.

'I'll invite John Moore for Saturday night', Anna offered. 'I'll tell him to bring someone and I won't tell him who else'll be here. You might get some indication.' It was treachery to Patricia, whom she rated far above Nell, but then Frances, who was nothing if not loyal, could inspire a loyalty which brought one right to her, standing almost on her ground, wanting her to come out of things well when reason said she had no right to.

And it was no use talking to Vic; she simply told him who she'd invited and asked if he wanted anyone else.

4

Bob and Carcase went for their training run.

‘You people going to Vic and Anna’s on Saturday night?’

‘We’ll be there.’

‘Think I’ve been set up.’

They were running down Johnston Street, a too-narrow street with used car yards and Victorian facades, a street exploiting the exploited, running to a boulevard on the more desirable side of the river, and back to the university’s Redmond Barry tower.

‘They’ve got me at centre half forward, on Johnson.’

‘That’ll give you match practice.’

‘Johnson’ll kill me. I’m no good in a fixed position. Think they’re trying to get rid of me.’

‘Show ‘em, Carcase.’

‘Don’t know what the hell I’ll show ‘em.’

Puff puff.

‘Up here?’

‘Go past the scene of the crime.’

They ran through factories and the densely crammed, jerry-built cottages erected when Collingwood was a cess-and drain-drenched river flat, a locale in which the football ground, the largest open space in the suburb, was a triumph of reclamation.

Bob said, ‘Be better now they’ve got the new pipes in?’

‘Better than that paddock at Essendon.’

‘Tuddy might stir ‘em into doing something.’

Tuddy was the former captain who had gone to coach Essendon for a nice contract; it was no secret that he hoped to lead his team to victory over his old club.

Carcase said, 'Hope I'm in the side when we play 'em. Might restore a bit of faith.'

The two men had a shared understanding of prestige; and of the pressures on a champion player from the wealthiest supporters right down to the ground staff.

'member Pat Whittaker? He's got Richmond up on the scoreboard already.'

Puff.

'Three weeks isn't it, yet?'

Puff.

'I heard 'im telling Father Duffy—Just to remind the boys what they're up against.'

'He's getting in nice and early.'

'Bloody oath.'

The Town Hall clock showed eleven.

'Man should be in bed. Get the old eight hours, they're always telling us.'

'Ah, we'll see it out now.'

Puff puff.

Loyalty can be deadening. The impulses to love, possess, destroy, are very basic. Nature's drives are neither moral nor civilized; to be loyal to wife, friend, or one's own past, can dampen down the quickening process by which dead emotion renews itself—if one's nature is such that one must do new things. As they padded on mechanically, Bob wondered if, in five years time—ten, or twenty—he would still be thudding down the pavements of Collingwood with Carcase, or some other champion of the day he'd befriended. In his late twenties, childless, finished as anything but a social-tennis sportsman, he was in a cul-de-sac; he could run forever, and the cul-de-sac extend itself to an infinite length, but was there a way out?

One was offering, but it scared him. If Frances' moral superiority was broken by an entanglement with Vic ...

... it would still be frightening.

He wouldn't know how to cope with a Frances whose superb exterior had been overwhelmed, and exactly what Anna was offering him, he could hardly say. He was determined to find out, yet he wanted to engineer events so that no destruction took place; if all that was to happen could be made to take place in some tent of lies, behind a gauze, so that no audience, or onlooker, or interested party could comment until the experience was over and digested ...

... he would be lucky.

'How many more seasons, Carcase?'

'If I go all right this year I might keep on ...'

Puff puff.

'... otherwise I'll give it away.'

'You'd get a coaching job easy enough.'

'Not interested.'

Bob said, 'Stop and walk a minute!'

'Eh?'

The houses around them were no longer filled with the extended families born and bred in the place, men who crossed the road from their front door to the ground, did their training and went home for tea. These, Bob knew, had moved 'up' to the dreary suburbs on the northern perimeter of Melbourne; migrants were in, a different sort of poor, and a few designers, architects and executives fleeing from, or determined to ignore, restrictive notions of social class. There were very few lineal descendants of those bone-hard Aussies, with thick mats of oiled hair parted in the middle and coarse cotton 'shorts' reaching to their knees, who stared out of the premiership photos of the twenties. Collingwood was a persisting idea, not a social entity; it was an attitude, a tradition which would surely be as restrictive as it was successful. Bob said, 'Just what do we think we're doing, Carcase?'

'Eh? What're you getting at?'

Puff puff.

‘Listen. Saturday night. Bring Patricia, don’t bring Nell.’

‘You’ve got to be joking.’

‘No, bring Pat!’

The sad thing was that the smaller man needed Carcase to lead the revolt, to be the catalyst, to crack things open. The beefy sportsman stared at his friend. ‘That all?’

‘That’s all. You think about it.’

Puff.

‘I never stop thinking about it. I worry off more weight than I run off, I tell you.’

They started again, down crescents of factories on the ruined side of the river, past the devastation of freeway works, the sterility of railway yards, and the outdoor temple itself, with its eight white posts and the scoreboard showing, according to Carcase, the club’s first enemies as Richmond. They ran through patchy Fitzroy, forgotten North Carlton, skirting the cemetery to circle Princes Park, where an old man with a bottle had flopped against the outer gate. ‘Goodonyer boys’, he called, ‘I’ll tell John Nicholls I seenyer training.’ At College Crescent, with the Ormond clock showing almost twelve, they parted, Carcase to go back to Nell’s flat, if that was the way his decision fell, and Bob to the terrace he’d never expected to own, in National Trust territory. A boyhood in the bungalow belt taken up in the decade of those premierships photos had made him a first-class survivalist, but was that enough ?

5

Savouring the quiet before their guests arrived, Vic poured himself a vermouth, and checked: table set, furniture polished, fresh flowers. He put on a record of Debussy's Nocturnes. He especially liked *Nuages*; it was another of those points where his temperament and Anna's taste crossed each other. But she had left dressing till the Banners were due to arrive, and was busy in the bedroom.

Nuages gave way to *Fêtes*, and *Fêtes* to *Sirènes*, before the Banners came to the door, Bob smacking of sport and commerce but transcending them, in Italian straw shoes, white slacks and red and white tee-shirt; Frances in a pale blue, flared trouser suit, almost a garment for an afternoon wedding.

Sirènes faded out. Vic got them vermouths, and put on the other side—*La Mer*. Dawn was breaking on the sea when Anna joined them in a loose ankle length cotton dress of dry leaf colour, patterned in quavering russet embroidery with the Egyptian unwinding rope motif. Her hair was loose, and her feet were bare.

Bob told her she looked fine, and Vic, too, was impressed, having no idea that she owned such a dress. He asked her when she'd bought it. She smiled, and smiled again, more thinly, when he spoke over a passage for muted brass: 'This is the part that made the chap say to Debussy after the first performance, I liked that little bit about half past eleven!'

But the joke had to be explained for Bob and Frances.

For a time it seemed that no connection would take place, but Frances asked to be taken around the garden before it got dark.

To the last of Debussy, Anna asked about the training runs. Bob said he probably wouldn't go on any more. She inquired why; he explained, 'That'll be Carcase's battle now, not mine.'

In the garden, Vic pointed to some bushes: 'When they're all fully grown, you'll hardly see the house.' Had Frances realized it, it was the equivalent of Bob's tent of lies. He told her he had a trip to the Glenelg area coming up; she said she had to arrange a meeting at Hamilton.

'When!'

But the dates didn't overlap, though they tried to make them. Frances maintained her business manner throughout the comparing of dates, the reasons for his trip, and hers, but she lowered her voice to ask: 'Where will you stay?'

'Heywood.'

'It's about fifty kilometres from Hamilton, isn't it?'

'Pretty close to that.'

She nodded. In the most naked approach he'd made since his marriage, he said, 'There'll be more trips.' There seemed no need to add 'Won't there?' because pleading, or looking for reassurance, were out of place now as they fell back from each other, Frances in that state of motionless calm which meant turmoil inside, and Vic's heart pumping. So there was regret and disappointment between them before there had been a chance for anything more than expectations. They shared nothing but awkwardness and guilt as they moved from tree to tree in the 'research project'.

Anna said to Bob, 'Perhaps you've dropped too much out of your life already.' She meant his religion. 'You mightn't find it easy to give up your make-believe world as well. It's the other big part of your past, after all.'

'And Frances.'

'No', she said, 'she's your present problem.' And rubbed her bare feet together.

He stood up. 'Do you want to go out and join them?'

‘No’, she said, ‘but tell me why you do?’

Vic spoke of possibility. He said, ‘Conservationists get stuck into us because we change the forests with our activities. If they only knew how many factors have had an influence on the environmental balance as we’ve inherited it; if they only knew how many might-have-beens there are, they wouldn’t take the present as anything particularly sacred ...’

Frances looked quite agonized. It was the sacred nature of marriage, the restraint on man/woman relationships before it, and the confinement of them to the lawful, hushed-up area within its bounds, that was damaging her now. How ironical that it should be for Vic, who, despite his sniping at conservationists, held nature sacred, as she knew: their sexual beings, improperly accounted for in their philosophies, were bursting in on them. Looking at her, and facing the implications of what he saw, he led her a few steps to where they could see the lemon-scented gum, shaded lower down by a swirl of wattles, rising elegantly for the last rays of light. These—dusty, suburban-tinted—caught the ripples of wood flesh where the tree changed direction or produced a branch. Sculptural, elegant, with the tight skin of youth, a thoughtless improvisation on an arboreal theme, the tree displayed its light open canopy as an unnecessary apology for its being, its beauty. As the light faded from it, Vic, admiring and regretful, said, ‘Till the day it falls, it won’t hurt a thing.’

Bob, dented by Anna’s questioning, was quiet over dinner. He more than the others, was in the state where one must act before knowing; no amount of thinking will get it out. Something in Anna demanded a rational analysis of what was intended, plans to cover the possible eventualities—and something impulsive was jumping to break out of confinement. The blanket of censorship over the worry now shared among them was both most, and least, troubling to her; if she wanted to act, she would anyhow, but, having the clearest view of their confusion, she knew that the lack of frankness which afflicted the other three would make them pay heavily in suffering and misunderstanding. Yet she

merely said, 'I'll clear all this away and put the cheese and salad down there; the others'll be coming soon.'

Their lounge had two levels: an upper brick-paved area where they ate, and sometimes danced, and a lower, parquet-floored section, further from the stereo, where they talked and drank. The four moved heavily, waiting for the arrivals. Perhaps amid noise, dancing, mingling and breaking apart, there would be room for something to develop.

Cars arrived. People brought bottles and flagons and introduced the strays and the new partners. Vic put Debussy away, and was yielding to the offer of a tape recorder—'Two hours of terrific dance music, non stop'—when Anna intervened. Nothing was going to happen non-stop. It was her night, and things were going to have a bit of shape, there were going to be pauses and a semblance of order.

For a highly structured civilization, we are oddly loose with our primitivism. Most of the gathering were used to parties where grog, loud music and a crowd of people were thrown into a semi-darkened room so that 'something' could happen. The 'something' can only be a return to basic impulse, a stripping away of superficial truth so that deeper attractions and dislikes can show themselves—and be forgotten the next day if necessary. This method, like any other, has its moments—when a whole party takes off together in a mad whirl of excitement, or when late-teen, early-twenties people find each other, take each other home. But if bodies know what they want, thought can barely survive in an atmosphere where conversation has to be shouted and making the simplest point is an achievement. Exactly how this sort of party rejuvenates and re-energizes our society is not clear, but Anna would have none of it. As she herself would have put it, 'If I can't make meaning, then I lose meaning' ... and yet she danced with Bob when she wasn't flitting in and out of the kitchen, and she took him with her to put things on trays, to make coffee, to dig out all their spare cups and wipe them. When John Moore came in with Nell—Nell—she kissed Nell, and offered John her cheek when he moved clumsily to put his arms around her, before banishing Bob to

handle his friend, and summoning Frances to be her help. If there was going to be contest or confusion, let it at least be not too sordid.

And Frances was grateful for the imposition of order—the pause for coffee, the pause for supper, the suggestion to a bemused Vic that he might get everyone port or liqueurs. When Anna called out, at one o'clock, that she was bringing in some more coffee, 'and after that, we've run out', something meek in Frances went close to loving her; as long as there was decorum, she could survive. A free-for-all of noise and impulse would have found her retreating, and, scared, she might have shown a nastiness she dreaded revealing to Vic.

As she dreaded much that might exist inside her; it was as if she pressed herself against the front window of her being; it gave her a peculiar power of decision and concentration - and a terror of self-questioning. That Anna should understand this, and help her, when she could hardly be said even to like her, made Frances both grateful and vulnerable to the other woman, who seemed so much more confident in her handling of the world, because she moved in it as one who accepted that it was the only one she'd ever get, as opposed to Frances' more deliberative manipulation of events, politics and people to make them resemble the things she wanted, the things she felt safe with.

Watching Frances carefully, polishing port and liqueur glasses for a crowd who wouldn't notice, Anna momentarily hoped that Vic could give this woman what she wanted—a sense of acceptance, physical love, or the means to change her personality without admitting to herself that she had done so. This generous wish, not expressed, but sensed, brought Frances to the point of repeating the invitation to come 'up home', but fortunately she realized in time that this would be a foolish thing to say. Instead, watching Vic tactfully sort out a quarrel between an over-excited Jewish lawyer and Sandra, Anna's friend from work, she said, 'You're very lucky'. That she could so simply express, in the one breath, her longing for the man and a polite tribute which her parents, Tom O'Connell, Father Callaghan and the rest of them would have

approved, showed Anna how thin was the line between Frances broken and Frances strong; she hoped Vic knew what he was about.

Along another line of the party's development, Bob had Carcase to cope with. Johnson *had* killed him for three quarters, and the coach wouldn't give him a run on the ball. So Carcase had left Johnson and had gone off as a self-appointed permanent ruck. Marking everywhere, stirring his practice side with abuse and his own brand of humorous roaring, he had lifted their play to come from well behind and overrun the other side in the last few minutes. Carcase said, 'A couple of the committee blokes had a bit to say. But they got the message. They got the message!'

And Nell, too, was happy. Carcase had told her he didn't want her to watch the practice match; he said he'd ring her when it was over. She'd been anxious all afternoon. Then he'd rung, they were going out, he was taking her to Vic and Anna's. She half suspected he'd broken another arrangement to ask her, there was some determination in his voice which she took for a new commitment.

Carcase was still riding high. 'You should've been there, Bobby. We were the impossibles. Half our side were cast-offs and young-uns. We still beat 'em, though!'

Bob was loyal enough to add, 'Once Carcase got moving!' but his main reaction was to feel, not only irrelevant to John Moore's jubilation, but superior to it. It had occurred to him that he'd spent his life among people who were on the way to somewhere—business success, football premierships, a win at the polling booths. Judging these activities subjectively in the light of his new mood, there seemed to be a common factor of self-proving, of ego-boosting; it seemed to him that in the last two years—years in which from the point of view of a Frances he had achieved little, may indeed have gone into decline—he had put far too much effort into hiding from himself and from others a deep dissatisfaction with any sort of Get Up And Go. He saw as false all his rigmarole of polishing up his voice, his adroit manipulation of conversational exchanges with accountants and company secretaries to reflect the aura

of confidence, perfection in detail and clear-eyed perception of every least opportunity which they liked to think they had about them. The irreverent humour he exchanged with Carcase was beginning to look like a coward's outlet for his true perception of the world. Carcase would have to grow up, or there'd be no more of it; Bob had ...

... someone with whom he could be direct.

Frances was more than politely interested in John Moore's footballing triumph; questioning him in an attempt to find where and why her sister was brought into his mood, she sensed a belligerence of the sort that says I-could-have-you-too-if-I-wanted-to. It was so wrong, so wide of the mark, that Frances indulged in a little rare humour at John's expense: if Carcase kept leaving his position to do his own thing, the firm that he worked for would have to get someone to mind his telephones ...

Carcase had a do-nothing job with a wealthy supporter; he had a desk with three telephones, arrived late, drank morning tea, slipped out to get his dry-cleaning, read the paper, lunched, answered a few enquiries, 'liaised' with various people, went to training. Too proud to admit he did nothing, he snapped at Frances: 'What have you ever done that's so valuable?'

The moral condemnation thing rose in Frances; looking the big man up and down with a back-tilted head, she said, 'What have *you* ever done, apart from play games? With people?'

This put Nell's value up for reckoning; it was a move that could have been disastrous, if his anger with Frances had spread to her sister. But he put his arm around Nell; pulling her in to his ribs, her sprayed blonde hair was pushed out of shape by his big shoulder. He said, 'I know the value of people. What about you?'

To her sister, though, Frances offered a smile full of family warmth which extended to the man clutching her: 'Don't worry, I know the value of people too.'

Bob, after living with Frances for three years, could still be amazed by the strength of her Family First feeling. John Moore's entanglement

with Patricia, Patricia's given-away child—if it had been his—his high-handed treatment of Nell, his nights at her flat ... all could be pushed out of mind, and the fondest welcome brought out for him, if it could be seen that he was going to enter the fold—inside which, for Frances more than most of her family, the code and the religious faith which supported it would always prevail. She looked on her sister's man with love and acceptance which had no connection with the bristling of a moment before. For Bob, this Prodigal Son, if-you-join-us-we're-with-you sort of love that could well up so freely was a scarcely explicable phenomenon in Frances. He himself had been welcomed by her family in this way; their tenderness for him, their hints, suggestions, the things made easy, the things not spoken of, had been their grooming of a coarse-fibred but attractive young man for a daughter for whom nothing was too good. Bob had had all the world in front of him, business and sporting success seemed to be his for the taking. Yet Frances had not responded to him at once; it was only after he returned to Melbourne—to Preston, the mill and Collingwood—but still rang, wrote, and drove up to see ... her, the family ... that she knew she would marry him. He combined, then, the desirability which the family saw in him with the allure of a temptation to step into some world of different values in the metropolis. She married him hot, virgin, and found, as three years went past, that he had declined in importance for her. He had not forced some vital change in her. She was a family-wife more than a woman-wife. It was his failing that, for her, he was only what he was supposed to be—'my husband'—not quite that male who would force her to centre herself around her impulses instead of her code.

Do we lovingly force our blinkers on those nearest to us? Do we lovingly persuade those on whom we can make an impress to follow us into our own errors and ignorance? Perhaps, to have any good influence at all, we must; and perhaps, if we are aware of our own failings, then the confidence we give our lovers, children, siblings, can amount to a little more than the blindness we force on them if they accept our terms of thinking. It was Frances' strangeness, her singularity, that when she

spoke with the same voice as authority, she entertained no consideration of error and ignorance; a warm love such as the church has always promised as the endlessly available bounty of Christ flowed from her to those whom she believed were seeing with the same eyes. John Moore who held Nell became the John Moore who would marry her sister, and from Frances poured a sweetness and welcome to that sometimes-errant John Moore which made the lustful look of a moment ago more trifling than boorish.

But Bob, like Anna, thought Carcase should stick to Patricia. Nell didn't have much, if you took away the glow Frances cast about her, she was just a pretty typist of average IQ and competence; she was decorative and nice to have about, but not much more than that. Bob said, 'Yeah, well, excuse me', and went to the kitchen. Anna, in her loose cotton and bare feet, seemed unpromised, unspoken for, as if eight years of marriage and two children had never been. She turned, saw him, started to speak: 'Bob ... I think ...' But he waved his hand; she looked at him, waiting ...

Is love a drug, or a necessary disturbance of the psyche? Societies more wily than ours have dodged it as a basis for the stability factors of marriage and the family, but does that make them right? Treacherous, incalculable, a capricious Cupid in its choice of victims, it has still to be accounted for however we explode, expand, or reorganize the family. The Christian marriage vows—that the partners will cleave to each other, having and holding no other, through sorrow, pain, sickness or any other adversity until death parts them in the end—take their moving sweetness from the fact that they are unlikely to be kept, that today's truth is likely to become next year's lie, however well intentioned the votaries. The laughing tone implied in 'I don't know what they see in each other!' is surely a defence mechanism; do only the hallucinated see truly?

Anna saw ...

Bob saw ...

... each other?

... themselves reflected?

... a willingness to answer every call despatched in their direction?

... the drugged eyes of another victim?

While dance music poured from the next room they embraced, kissed, she pushed hard against him, he squeezed her buttocks as if they were already joined in intercourse. She bumped pelvis to his in the throes of sex, he thrust against her, she rubbed herself against him, and again, and again, they began to move outside ...

‘Not now!’

She said, ‘Ring me on Monday!’

When he did ring, on Monday, she had people with her, there was no hope of talking, she said, ‘I’m sorry, I think you must have the wrong number, you’ll have to try again.’

He laughed! He’d try again all right, tomorrow if they got the chance. They often kept him waiting at McCloskey’s, he could ring from there, Jim McCloskey liked a long counter lunch, he could time his arrival for a bit after one and say to the girl, ‘Mind if I use Jim’s phone?’

Vic danced solemnly with Frances. He said, ‘Why, what’s the bother at Hamilton?’ She said, ‘Oh there’s a fellow in the branch up there. He’s terribly enthusiastic but he’s always putting his foot in it over something.’

‘What’s he done this time?’

‘He’s mad keen to increase membership. There’s a number of local grower organizations, and sort of progress movements ... he’s even had his friends start a couple of them ... and then he moves in on them. He tries to make them work through the party. The trouble is, there’s quite a few men who almost certainly vote for us who’re very annoyed at him trying to take over their organizations, particularly because he isn’t doing any good for them. I don’t think he ever gets any actual results for anyone. The trouble is, he’s willing to do a lot of the donkey work no one else wants to do.’ She smiled; even the bungler had a place in her hierarchy. ‘When we’ve got it damped down again we’ll hold a rally up

there. We'll get one of the federal men - it might be Doug Anthony—to provide a focus.'

'When will you be doing that?'

'Five or six weeks.'

'In Hamilton?'

'It'd have to be there.'

'It' was both the political meeting and the meeting with Vic. To the right person, if the pressure was enough, she had the ability to convey something of that inner state through bland or blameless dialogue. Vic, in a turmoil again, said nothing. For a few seconds they shared Tristanesque glances: he lowered his eyes, he raised them again: she was staring at him still.

Driving to Hamilton, Vic felt limp. The tension drained him, he seemed to have no energy, he drove by habit. Road signs flashed past him as he swept down the four-lane bypass sections; he pulled out to pass trucks, commercial travellers rushed past him well above the speed limit. His vehicle obeyed the camber of the curving road, his eyes took in the signs, his mind seemed empty. Defining nothing of what he wanted from Frances, trying desperately to kill anticipations, he was a mask behind the wheel, he was that abstraction of the road manuals, 'driver'.

Masking herself in Hamilton as she masked herself everywhere, Frances interviewed farmers, stock agents, news and radio men. She drove her Falcon with light-fingered assurance, the bungling president and withdrawn secretary of the local branch beside her. She assured dissident landholders that it was not the Party's wish to swallow other organizations and she invited them to put on paper the grievances they felt the state branch should act to redress. As for federal matters, she hoped the leader would be down in a few weeks; she felt that the occasion could be turned into a type of forum for the airing of their views, with the leader to sum up, perhaps, what he felt could be done ...

All day, the knowledge that Vic would arrive at the New Crown Hotel Motel between half past eight and nine lurked in the rear of her

mind. She felt like an ambassador talking peace while her countrymen planned war. Anna sometimes thought of her as a potential schizoid but this was the first time Frances had allowed the unknown co-habitant of her mind to take the initiative. The icy calm, the sober judgement, were never more in evidence than when she spoke to the local newspaper editor. In a few brief sentences she turned the blunder deplored by headquarters into part of a plan to get more dialogue between Melbourne and the branches. Looking the editor solemnly in the eye she said, 'If you've got no grass roots, you've got nothing.' He asked her to give him a longer interview that night, when he would be freer to talk, but she refused. 'No, I'm afraid that's not possible tonight. I've got a number of reports that must be written.'

The editor, attracted to the idea of talking with this strong-fronted, enigmatic woman, and surprised at her refusing easy publicity, said, 'Perhaps I'll ring you at the motel after tea to see how you're getting on. You might feel like it then.'

But Frances, imperturbable, said, 'No. Don't do that. I'll be ringing my husband then.' The rightness, indeed righteousness, of her tone caused the newspaper man to ask, 'Do you always do that when you're away from home?'

'Always.'

Strangely enough, she did ring that night, as always in the past. On the verge of the unthinkable, she could admit no change. Was she acting to herself? Or leaving that unknown co-inhabitant no lebensraum in a life which proceeded according to the plan of a highly organized organizer?

But the unknown one had the laugh when Bob was not at home at the Parkville number. She considered her watch, disturbed: eight fifteen was the habitual time for her to make these calls. She decided to try again in five minutes.

Bob was getting the car into the lane when he thought he heard the phone ring. Limbs like lead, he moved back to the house, but it stopped

ringing as he got the back door open, stopped as he stood there with car, house and office keys in his hand. He lumbered to the living room and fell—there could be no other word—into a chair by the phone. It was as if he had been flung fully clothed into a river of guilt; only his response to her voice if she rang again—if—would tell him whether he had in fact pulled himself out, or was merely clinging to something as sodden as himself.

The phone. His words tumbled out, he explained that he'd been down the street getting some bread, he'd heard her ringing as he pulled up. He said, 'And how did things go down there today?'

She told him, simply and clearly, the events of the day.

He looked at his watch.

She said, 'Oh well, I think that's all. How are you?'

'I'm okay. What time'll you be back?'

'Before tea tomorrow.'

She might reasonably have said, in half an hour or never. Trembling, she went to the lounge of the hotel, bought a brandy, lime and soda, and sat outside in a trellis and vine-covered beer garden where she could see cars driving into the motel section.

And this was where Vic saw her, alone, like a sacrificial victim. Seeing her, he felt his greeting inhibited; he wondered what she'd been going through the last two hours. She said, 'I should have bought you one too', so he went from her to the lounge bar, leaving her still motionless in the cane chair.

Bob had hardly set off, his engine was still cold, when he tried to slip across Royal Parade's four lanes on a yellow light. A huge semi-trailer, anxious to turn in the same second of grace, almost cleaned him up. And then, next thing he knew, he was being dogged by a green Valiant, same colour as Vic's, same model. He hurried to get away from it but it seemed to be drawn to him. It followed him when he rushed across Lygon Street in the face of another amber light, the green Valiant had to squirm around cars trying to press their right to turn.

Another kilometre and there was an accident blocking the road. Two cars had hit and one of them had cannoned into a centre-parked car, pushing it onto the roadway. One side of the road was blocked and half the other. A police blue light was flashing, and a whole galaxy of towtrucks; the operators were clustered around an angry little Yugoslav, waving pads of authorization forms. White sheets, pink sheets, blue sheets and carbon sheets were flicking about his nose but he wanted only 'justice'. Voluble, excited, hampered by language, he was gesticulating furiously, trying to explain what had happened and why he was in the right. They only wanted to get the tow job. One policeman had given up trying to get a story from him and was interviewing the other driver, while a second cop directed traffic and shouted orders at a group trying to move the driverless car back between the trees in the middle of the road. But it was locked, and one of its front wheels was damaged.

Bob looked at his watch.

Anna tried to read but couldn't maintain her concentration. Gwennie, she knew, was asleep. She could still hear John scrabbling around with his things, though his light was off. She was torn between an urge to go and lie with him and the wish to have him asleep. She picked over the bookshelves. The Bloomsbury group failed to excite even a flicker of interest; she pulled out *Troilus and Cressida*.

Shakespeare appeared to be teasing her; he fell open of his own accord at:

I am giddy; expectation whirls me round,
Th' imaginary relish is so sweet,
That it enchants my sense: what will it be
When that the watery palates taste indeed
Love's thrice repured nectar?

The next speech belonged to Pandarus:

She's making her ready, she'll come straight; you must be witty now,
she does so blush, and fetches her wind so short, as if she were frayed
with a sprite.

Uncomfortable, but reassured in that someone had had words for what she was feeling, she read on. The preparations for the lovemaking of Troilus and Cressida had more relevance to herself and Vic than to the forthcoming arrival of Bob Banner. The chivalric notions of Troilus were as bad as marriage vows, it was constancy he was crying for, and Cressida, over the urgings of Pandarus to hop into bed, swore fidelity in a way that showed she would be false.

What was reality? she wondered, in a line of thought that eased the pain of her anticipation by counterpointing it. The truth about Troilus, Cressida and Pandarus lay in what each of these three characters had to say, and lay also in that amalgam of their meanings which was the reader's, or the audience's, understanding. What then was reality, or truth, in her case? Her Vic's romanticism was only a blindness by means of which he rushed past those things in human nature—in woman—that he hadn't the temperament to understand. The trouble was that he was noble, was generous; he was one of the few men she had known that she felt could be trusted with power or influence in the lives of others. He could be disinterested because he, stupid boy, was chivalrous, was pure; believing the best about people, he often drew their best out of them. It was the paradoxical case of ignorance being wiser than wisdom, because it could achieve more.

And Shakespeare, all-knowing as he was generally credited to be ... Anna wondered how he had absorbed in one lifetime all he'd expressed. He could hardly have lived through it all, and that, she felt, was the only way she'd ever learn. She looked at her watch, at the phone. She listened to the traffic buzzing or rumbling in Heidelberg Road. It was not a busy time, but the traffic was never still; there were always brakes screeching somewhere in earshot, or the ee/aw of ambulances and firetrucks, or the wailing sirens of police. On nights of quiet, when Vic was at a meeting, or up-country inspecting forests, she had often sat thinking herself the still centre of a world in crisis; but tonight the crisis was inside her too. Ee/aw, ee/aw, ee/aw ... what if it were Vic that were hurt, or Bob Banner driving out to see her, to make love? Pandarus said;

And Cupid grant all tongue-tied maidens here
Bed, chamber, and Pandar, to provide this gear.

She was her own Pandar, and the dirty-minded enthusiasm of the man displeased her. But then again, why not? Life was too short to let things be spoilt by keeping up pretences ... she could argue her misgivings away, but the feeling they created refused to vanish; nor would it, she knew, till Bob arrived. And why did Shakespeare talk about watery palates? Her mouth was dry as a desert. But that wasn't all, quivers of anticipation ran through her, she looked at her watch, she looked at the phone.

Deep in the house there was a scurrying sound, like a rat in the roof, but heavier; it was John scampering out of bed to get something. He seemed to think that if he was back in bed when his parents came, they wouldn't be able to prove he'd got out of bed. She smiled, and tried to divert more of her mind to his antics and tiny, transparent deceits, but without success; the heaviness of physical desire oppressed her, she let Troilus and Cressida fall, and simply listened.

There was another screech of brakes, somewhere in the night. Each morning, as she hurried John into the car to go to school, he forgot his schoolbag, and had to dash back to get it. He always turned on the light when he went to his bedroom; coming home at lunchtime she turned it off, but never without a mini-struggle between opposing sensations—disquiet with the light burning on a room that lacked her son, and an emptiness that foreshadowed the terrible emptiness of death when she turned the light off, creating a darkness that would last another three hours till he was home. She crept to his door to look; he was asleep now, his nose tickled by a bunch of plastic keys from the packets of Rice Bubbles he insisted on the family eating. Her mind played on keys, doors, locks, barriers; she would, of course, have them all open for her son, as soon she would open the front door when she heard Bob's Volkswagen growling in the drive. Gwennie, too, was asleep, cuddling a rag doll; *Troilus and Cressida*, as she walked about the house, still lay on the floor.

He sat next to Frances, it seemed necessary on a rendezvous such as this. Through the cold exterior permeated a sensation that he was welcome close beside her, though she would be hard put to show it. She asked what sort of drive he'd had. He had no wish to lapse into a lame 'Not bad, thanks' on an occasion like this, but it would be hard to explain that his sensations of driving were his anticipations of her; it had been hard work - though he'd made no mistakes on the road - ploughing into a headwind. He didn't believe in omens, it was only a headwind, but it had its effect; it tore at the car, it howled around the quarter-window, it made the radio aerial whip and wobble. The car had all the power he needed, he'd kept to schedule, but something extra had been drained from him. His hands were shaking when he stopped.

And still shaking, he noticed; he rested his hand on Frances' arm, to test her. She accepted it passively. It was strange for Vic to see his hand ignored when he was feeling for a response from that inner, invisible one whose muted, desperate cries had brought him to this meeting.

Cold she might be, but he would thaw her out, she trusted him more than anyone else he was aware of, they would talk. He told her about the forests in the far south-west, and why they were so fire-prone, and the silvicultural problems this created. She listened, and questioned him carefully; it could have been a meeting with a councillor. When their drinks were finished, he took her with him to the lounge bar; he held her hand, she did it blamelessly, as if they were one of two couples at a picnic together. He looked around the lounge, but it failed to appeal; once stuck here they mightn't budge all night. But, returning to the table and seats where they had been before, Frances said plaintively, 'It's getting cold.'

Vic said, 'Let's go back to your room.'

Motel rooms are impersonal, they were still in public territory, acting their public selves. The bed was not 'hers' since she'd never used it. She turned on two strip lights behind wooden pelmets, he turned off the ceiling light from the switch by the door. Putting down the glasses, he said to her, 'Anyhow, what have you been up to today?'

It was difficult to imagine Frances ‘up to’ anything— certainly not with the newspaper man who showed an interest in her—but the phrase was Vic’s lame attempt to find an equivalent for her facility of allowing her desires to show through commonplace words.

The question brought an unexpected response. She said, ‘An insect stung me.’

He raised his eyebrows, she touched her upper arm.

‘Here. I’ll show you.’

She began to roll up the sleeve of her cardigan. A simple act, it highlighted their difficulty. They had hidden their intended meeting—they thought—by hiding it from themselves. Now that they had to step out of the roles that had brought them to the town, they reinforced each other’s inhibitions.

Frances stopped rolling the sleeve. The sting was still too high to be seen. Vic made the effort to continue.

‘Is it bad?’

She rolled the sleeve down again and took the cardigan off. This act of stripping—though at dinners or evening functions she commonly wore bare-armed, high-necked gowns to display her shapely, slender arms and long, fine boned hands—was like a declaration of intent. He moved close, still not able to take hold of her as he wanted: as, surely, she wanted him to? Ludicrous, incapable, he said:

‘What did it?’

It was inflamed, and the skin was bright red around it. The tension between them was almost unbearable, yet she said only:

‘I don’t know.’ Then made her supreme, ridiculous, effort:

‘You can touch it if you want to.’

Desire rising in him, he took her arm in his left hand and touched the upper arm with his right, stroking softly. Expecting an answering, sexual, reaction in Frances, he was surprised to feel her head drop heavily, hopelessly, on his shoulder.

Her husband, despite his impatience with the accident that was delaying him, found himself chuckling at the Yugoslav. If Carcase had been there, Bob would have observed, 'He must be the only man in Melbourne to toss those blokes.'

The towtruck men were like vultures at a corpse. They waved their books and biros at the victim of the accident, whose temperament was on full display. Bob considered him; he had no qualms about holding up everything. When the policeman came back he simply directed his speech at him. The heavy-chinned young copper took it for a moment, then grabbed one of the authorization books and slammed it on the Yugoslav's bonnet: 'Here. Sign this. If the traffic's not moving through here in half a minute I'm gonna really do you, I'll do you like a dinner.' The Yugoslav snatched a different driver's biro, signed with a flourish and produced his first and only burst of English: 'I'm signing away my rights!' But the cop said merely, 'Now get moving, the lotofya!' and waved Bob around them. The green Valiant, à la Vic, crawled through behind him.

At the next lights the Valiant pulled up next to Bob and the driver shouted at him. Bob, who had been keeping his head rigidly straight, meaning to let the Valiant get ahead while he studied the driver, unwillingly looked. It was another Yugoslav, or migrant of some sort, and he was leaning across to wind down his passenger side window.

'Did you get his number?' he shouted at Bob. 'That blutty copper, did you get his number? He ought to be reported!' Bob's rejoinder was more of a gulp than the 'Eh?' he intended. The angry Valiant-man continued, 'You saw 'im. He made 'im sign that book. He took away his freedom of choice! It's supposed to be a democratic country. The pleece are like Hitler!'

The lights turned green. Bob slipped into first gear, but the Valiant-man shouted again, and the Volks stalled. Bob roared, 'What?' not wanting an answer, but reaching for the ignition key to get the starter moving. The car behind them tooted, then another. The Volks started awkwardly, engine flooded; then, as Bob pressed the accelerator, it roared harshly.

In the din he heard the Valiant-man shouting, 'We should go back and get his number, we're all in this together, we're all connected in the struggle!'

Christ, thought Bob, Nuts I Have Met! But the encounter had its effect, he decided to get out of Heidelberg Road, he dared not pull up to buy cigarettes or something in case the fellow stopped for another burst. So he swung around the boulevard, but got lost in a tangle of side streets, and stopped to study the street directory.

And to calm his nerves. All connected? Who, him and the green Valiant man? He had to be joking. Bob would have been the first to admit that he still had a lot of growing up to do, it was only a few weeks since he'd renounced the training runs with Carcase—who was always in the paper these days, he was having his best season in years. The street directory fell open at the Collingwood section, more or less from habit.

There was the Yarra Bend national park, the infectious diseases hospital, the women's jail. The golf course, the asylum, the Good Shepherd convent, the guide dog training centre, the Magpies' footy ground, with its premiership flags flying for days after a big victory, then laid to rest in special cupboards, like altar cloths, till they were needed as morale-boosters again. And around these 'features', if that was what they were, was the endless grid of streets, and somewhere among them, somewhere indiscernible in this pattern of reality, was Anna waiting, and at some other equally microscopic point in the vast design which was no design, really, but only the form Topsy took when she grew, was Bob Banner, lost, over-excited and shaken.

Anna's lips, dry, pleaded 'Let him come'. In a gross subjectivism, she said she would count to a hundred and if he hadn't come by then she would get Craig's mother to mind the children, and she would go out. Where? She could only think of the Banners' terrace, the streets that led to it, the brass doorknocker, the orange lightshade in the hall. Tearing her mind from those settings, she passed into a peculiar state whereby the room seemed to be empty of her and she, though looking at it, was unable to re-enter it from the endless dark outside. In puberty

she had had a number of such apprehensions wherein she was unable to separate herself from her wider surroundings, yet couldn't relate properly to things close to her. To be forced back to this fruitless, quasi-mystical state by anxiety was, she felt, demeaning. Not for the first time she cursed the interruption of love to an orderly life; it was so pointless to be projected into any state of heightened feeling or awareness if the world was going to be the same when you came down, so dangerous to pass into such states if, when normal restraints were not operating, you wrought changes in yourself and those close to you that were destructive.

But then the mood changed; the darkness at the window became a thing pressing against her which she could only keep out with spasms of strength called from far back: she sensed her habits deserting her—the habit of delay, the habit of counterbalancing one force with another, the habit of the red-herring question, the habit, of confronting an assailant with an unflattering distortion of his own self-estimate. Gone, too, through the escape hatches of a mind beginning to founder, were the other props—the shyness which demanded a long cautious approach from anyone wanting to claim anything of her, the self-dismissal as unattractive in the instant of seeing attraction in another's eyes, the wry humour, the admiration of Sandra's unselfconscious luring of men to trail her, respect for Patricia's perception of the bitter edge to anything less than perfect (and how often did that arrive?)—all her perspectives were gone into that pressing dark which threatened now to swallow her awareness of a self able to give, to answer the man ...

... who was coming up the drive: in the flat hard hammering of an engine that sounded like the voice of an adolescent male. In an instant she was at the door. She turned the light on, and felt at once a foolish guilt, as if the outside light were a spotlight on her intentions; she turned it off on Bob gesturing towards the green Valiant in the drive (Vic had taken a government car), and his voice, not in control of itself, with an edge of worry: 'That thing's been dogging me!'

Then they were in her bedroom, and the spasms were for him, and they came far too quickly; together, but before they could assess anything of each other. It was as if great coils had loosened themselves in a sudden spring of undirected energy, and then lay inert with no one to wind them up again. He said, 'Too fast, I'm sorry, I was just too worked up.' She said, 'No, it's all right. It was good. Do you want to get up, or lie here?' He said, 'Lie here a minute, I think. I hardly know you yet.' He rubbed a hand across her flat stomach: 'And you tell me you've had children?' She was pleased, but: 'You wouldn't say that if they woke up. They always come in here.'

That nakedness which was like an ultimate honesty when pressed against Anna became an embarrassment. 'They don't ... what time ... how often do they wake up?'

She laughed at him. His hair was curly, she pushed her fingers through it, she pulled his head under her arm. To her breast and armpit he mumbled, 'You could tell 'em I was your teddy.'

It was best for the rueful, embarrassed strain in Bob to come out thus early, it was a thing she was able to exorcise. 'My bear, you mean', and reached across the back of his leg to stroke him. He said, 'We could have a shower now', it was what Bob would have thought a sophisticated thing to do. She said, 'Hang on, I'll get a hanky, I'm dripping.' He felt pride, triumph and an awkwardness which dissolved when she said, 'Where's Frances?'

Facing each other, naked, eyes taking in the revelations of stance—Anna high-shouldered in her turn to him, head high, eyes dark and darkly lashed, black hair fallen: Bob Banner broad chest straight on, resting his weight on flexed thighs in the ready-to-move stance of his playing days—there was no danger in the mention of the name. Bob said simply, as if buying a ticket, 'Hamilton.'

'Where's that? In the Western District, isn't it?'

He nodded. 'Where's Vic?'

'Heywood, he's supposed to be.'

'Why, where's that?'

The passage light caught the whites of her eyes as she looked at him, her teeth as she smiled. ‘Somewhere close to Hamilton, I think. I’m sure it is!’

In breathy laughter they considered what parliamentarians would call ‘events in another place’; it was the seal of success on their love-making, hasty as it had been, and almost a non-event except that they were willing it to lead them to much more, that they found comical the thought of the other two coupling, and wished them joy of it. ‘Any towels,’ he asked: she said ‘Hang on, I’ll get you one’. He remembered that he still had his watch on. She walked along the passage, he could hear her at the cupboard, she was moving into the bathroom as he came around the corner, her back and bottom stirred him momentarily ... she dropped his towel at the bathroom door without looking back. Walking to it, he heard his feet thumping heavily; she heard it too, it was unnerving, it was like a threat, temporarily tamed, coming down the passage behind her.

Why did she drop the towel? Bob sensed there was a challenge in it, it was like an aspect of Patricia glinting from the married woman. But no, she put her arm around him and they stepped into the shower together. Water splashed from his upraised hand onto her hair; he moved to flick it off, but she said, ‘It doesn’t matter’.

‘But you don’t want to get it wet.’

She said, ‘Let’s do it properly while we’re at it’, and put her head under the pelting water. The touch of abandon was all he needed. He felt there would be no embarrassment for them in anything they talked about or considered: he could talk about Frances, he could tell Anna everything of himself and ask her any and every secret act or ambition, every desire and/or foible of her life, because she wanted to laugh, and in that laughter there was safety. She was out to enjoy it and not to tear him about; that, if it came from anyone, would come from Frances ...

... and she was in Hamilton. Or Heywood, but no doubt Vic was too much the gentleman to make her drive to him. Silly fellow, Bob could have advised him better—be stern, more serious than she is herself. If

you want her to do something, tell her she must. She'll hate it at first, she knows how to resent, but there's a dutiful thing in her which is, dear Victor, your only means of control ...

Or so Bob thought.

Frances, dejected, deep in the incompatible miseries of someone losing both ways, told Vic: 'You can go if you want to.'

He said no, he'd stay a while yet. She said—but it was only the practical Frances speaking, she was grateful for whatever loyalty or love made him stay—"The people at the motel'll go to bed and you won't be able to get into your room.' He told her, 'That's all right. I fixed it that they'd give the key to John Tolhurst at the office. He'll put it under a flowerpot he's got growing by the back door.' She said sadly, 'You're very well organized, aren't you?'

Looking into her eyes, he hated all barriers, all fine distinctions. His sexual love was part only, now, of a flood of compassion he felt for her. Would she confess this meeting as a sin before going next to mass? Or, no sin having taken place, technically, would she write it off as 'impure thoughts'? Or say that no such thoughts existed because they were never acted on, therefore they didn't exist? Hopeless as the whole thing had been, he still wanted to make love to her. In his kindness, and inexperience, was a willingness to restrict the powerful drives of sex to an act of mercy performed to relieve the strain of a friend in need. It was a silly, dishonest wish, quite unsuited to the power of Frances' personality; that dark twin locked inside her would scorn compassion and if there was to be any peace for Frances the dark twin had to be appeased in some way; Frances the public organizer had paid a heavy price for her victory over desire. Vic said, 'Not organized; I just like to think of all the things that could happen.'

Moving past the bed where nothing had happened, she said, 'I'll make you some coffee now.'

6

Anna drove to work in a ferment. Why Bob Banner? Why was it affecting her with such unusual intensity? Surely it would never have happened if Vic and Frances ...

Would Vic, this time, notice the difference in her when he came home?

Would he be different, would it show more clearly to her?

She thought of another dinner party, she wanted to study Frances. She rejected the idea, it was herself she must study. Driving west, she felt she was lowering herself into a trap. The red lights stopped her, she found herself looking at a row of silk-screened faces at a used car yard: FRIENDS OF THE FAMILY, the hard-bitten salesmen were declared to be.

Friends of the family—how false—would be how Frances would have introduced them if she'd had her way and taken them up north to stay. It was all they'd been a month ago; even Anna's experience in discreetly conducted affairs had left her unprepared for a four-sided turmoil. At the college she put scarf and dark glasses on her office table; Sandra, thank God, was late, and didn't have to be faced. Being greeted in the corridor by the girls in her first class was like walking into yesterday. 'Morning, Miss Rogers.' 'What're we doing today, Miss Rogers?'

There was a meaning in their inaccurate address. Spinsterish women of any age were addressed as 'Miss'. Anything settled or self-indulgent drew 'Mrs'. Women who conveyed a feeling that things were still happening to them were also and invariably addressed as 'Miss', regardless of wedding rings or occasional sightings of husbands. Anna had been asking them about their goals in life. They were only superficially

marked by Women's Lib, they tossed around slogans like burn the bra or male chauvinist pig but had little or no professional aspirations. Anna was often surprised at the strong mother-daughter links they displayed, it was not only a matter of affection but of outlook, attitudes and taste. She had asked them, after an earlier discussion, to think about an essay she wanted them to write. Now, standing, she found a clean section of board and wrote 'The Life I Would Like To Have'. From the front row a German girl called Zerlina addressed her, 'Do you want us to write about that, Miss Rogers?'

But Anna was waiting till the whole room was aware. Zerlina said, 'You washed your hair last night, I can tell.'

Her friend said, 'Zerlina! You shouldn't say that to Miss Rogers; she's our teacher!'

But the smile meant she was interested too. 'I wish you'd let it right out Miss Rogers. I bet it'd look really terrific'.

Between sixteen and thirty opened a terrifying gap. Two only of the girls before her seemed to know already what would happen to them; Hella Drobny, with her broad brow and heavy responsibilities, and Tracey Thomas. Hella's mother had died, and she was housekeeping for her father and the other four children, with a little help from an unwell grandmother who minded the youngest while Hella was at school. When Hella belittled the note-passing and the gossip sessions on the library steps, the other girls said, 'She's too serious, she's like a mother already'; it was their way of pigeon-holing her. Tracey Thomas, with her black Irish hair a mass of curls, and her suede coat bought from drink-waiting wages, was too clever to comment; she seemed to plan a rise to the social limit of her style. Withdrawn, mostly silent, knowing, her observation of Anna offered no easy acceptance. The two girls, in fact, inhibited her; their lives, she felt, would encompass more than hers; the simple authority and easy demonstration of verbal and mental skills which were a satisfactory teaching role in front of the other twenty-odd students just wouldn't wash with Tracey and Hella in the room. It tended to throw Anna, if she wasn't communicating something of value to the two who

knew themselves best she felt she was appearing in a foolish role, presenting a 'her' which they could only despise.

Pam's essay was about riding her horse to Central Australia and getting to know the outback. Hella's was heavily reflective: in a style which distantly reminded Anna of Herman Hesse and Thomas Mann, she broached all of her problems at once—her father's mental health, her young brother's development, her own isolation from her peers, the cultural poverty of the area she lived in, her fear that she might become too solemn to enjoy herself. She related these problems to a lack of religious faith and finished with a paragraph saying that when her mother died she felt that God had abandoned her family; now, a year later, she 'realized' that the modern world had abandoned God. She agreed with its reasons, but wished it had never thought of these reasons; with faith, however foolish, the world would be a happier place.

There was a heaviness, a solidity, about her essay which made Anna feel that her relationship with Bob would only be a thin adventure; Hella in love would be something to see. And Tracey had done a send-up of an article in a housewives' weekly. The girls sitting near her thought it was witty, and 'true', but Anna, watching Tracey's unsmiling eyes, felt that she'd been outwitted. Tracey's clichés made light of the cliché topic offered the class, showed that these classroom encounters were not significant in her life. She responded to the disappointment on Anna's brow with, 'I'll be leaving soon, Mrs Rogers.'

Correcting the essays at home that afternoon, Anna was disturbed by a knock at the door. It was Bob. He said—though the words did nothing but provide time for surprise to give way to a prickling sensation, and then a flush of desire—'I had to call on Pipers in Fairfield, but they were closed. Notice on the door said death in the family. It would have been the old boy, he was about ninety not out ...'

She was drawing him in, responding to him ...

Holding him she said, 'Do you want to go to bed?'

Undressing in daylight, they were conscious of the comedy of shoes, tie, and a difficult zip; Vic's romanticism in the same scene would have

cooled a degree or two but Bob and Anna shared a type of realism. She said, as he sat, shirtless, pulling his socks off, 'They rub you down with oil to play football, don't they?' He nodded. 'Did they rub you all over?' Getting the rest off, he said, 'That was up to you'. She laughed, pulled the sheet back and said, 'Oooohh it's cold!' He said, 'But you're not', and they started.

If this second lovemaking, scarcely less hasty than the first, had a meaning, it was in the confirmatory nature of second time round experience. They were both direct and excitable, preliminaries had little value for Anna; stimulated by the presence of the man she wanted, her body brought up its answer to him almost over-willingly. It was so much easier for Bob than the haunting sensation Frances emanated that she had far, far more to give. The well-being that spread through Anna when they had finished was something she shared easily with him. He was surprised at the warmth of her nature, she had seemed so rational and controlled in those early dinner-party meetings. Used to the tension of Frances calming slowly after lovemaking, he was surprised at the immediacy of the effect on Anna. It was nearer his own nature, he saw, but he'd grown used to another habit; with Anna he was put to no test, or so it seemed in these early stages, and yet he wondered whether, for all the physical urgency she brought to bed with him, that realism of judgement with which she regarded him would ever be overwhelmed. He felt she needed him but made him, in her own mind, nothing more than he was. He wondered, lying beside her, how this would develop. Could he ever cause her to relate wholly to him ?

If he did, how would they get out of the mess?

Or would it all end up with him finally facing Frances?

Drinking tea, she said, 'We'll have to get together again soon, the four of us. But it's going to be a bit dicey.'

He said, 'There's a big match coming up in two weeks. The 'pies are playing Essendon. Tuddy's got Essendon on top. It'll be a real blood match, it should be really worth watching. You never go to the football do you?'

From Anna, who had scorned it, the simple 'No' was a compliment.

'We'll all go together. I'll get seats in the stand. I think I can manage it, I know a couple of blokes who'll be away that week.'

She looked at him; realistic she might be, but this was a prosaic aftermath ...

But he had his share of cunning too. 'I'll take Vic down to the rooms; might be a good introduction. And, as you say, things could be sticky ... I think it'll be easier with a big crowd around us. Sort of throw us together whether we want to or not.'

He paused; how perceptive was he?

'It'll be a pretty tense atmosphere; a lot of little things mightn't get noticed.'

7

Bob parked the Volkswagen, under a leaden sky which would be a blue pall by five-fifteen. The narrow streets were jammed, alleys and drive-ways filled, No Parking signs ignored.

‘Parking boys’ll reap a harvest today.’

Bob was best at playing normality; Frances’ silence could mean anything. Anna had been afraid to question Vic about his trip in case the bitterness or jubilation of the encounter she imagined him having might make him unusually bold in his questioning of her. If Frances suspected anything about her husband she would not have told Vic, then or since, except in some extreme of distress which she showed no sign of having undergone. Lie low, Anna had decided; bring nothing into the open at this stage.

They had to park a long way from the ground, though it was only midday. Overcoated figures slipped between the cars, intent on their destination, talking little. The rivulets of people came together in broad streams swirling around the perimeter of the ground, and halted at the queues. These stretched across roads, cars trying to crawl in or out of Collingwood found themselves nosing against lines of people who could move neither forward nor back. Drivers and footy-goers stared at each other, helpless as cattle. Boys in red coats and hats thronged at the mouth of the rivulets, shouting ‘Footy Record!’, fumbling for change with their stack of Records squeezed between their knees. Teen and pre-teen children trailed over their shoulders the limp besoms of black and white streamers known as ‘floggers’. Short-trousered boys wore Coles special price footy jumpers—the vertical black and white of Collingwood, the black with red sash of Essendon. The crowd con-

tained thousands of knitted jumpers, berets and knee-length scarves in club colours, and others, not so far equipped in this fashion, were patronizing the rosette-, ribbon-, badge- and footy doll-merchants who lined the street by the railway station. From which poured an endless stream of barrackers as train after train pulled up. Buses from up-country lumbered to turn rather than back away from the ground amid such dense crowds. It was the sort of show on which Melbourne preens itself—orderly crowds edging forward, every half step holding promise of getting in before the Health Department closes the gates. Poor slummy Collingwood was alive, held centre stage, was ready to tackle the league leaders on its own terms of setting and emotion. Something in the air said that Essendon's success was unjust; led by a turncoat, they would get their hubris-fall today.

The crowds were undistinguished looking people; faces looked meaty, bony, blue-jowled. Youth might be exuberant, but its flesh lacked bloom. Tension in the air outside was screwed up by the: roars of those inside, watching the reserves battle it out. Bob said, 'I don't know what this mob's going to do when they close the gates. Honestly, I think they'll go berserk.' Vic said naively, 'Won't the ground hold them? I thought they had crowds of a hundred thousand sometimes.' Bob told him, 'At the MCG, yes, but this ground won't hold anything like that. Now. You two stay in that queue, and we'll meet you inside the turnstiles.'

Anna said, 'Hey ...'

Bob's explanation was terse: this wasn't a woman's world, and the urgency in the air was infecting them, as if an attack were impending: 'I go in here. Frances too. I bought her an associate membership'—and he touched his Magpie medallion. Frances continued with an annoying smugness that left the Rogers on their own unprivileged resources: 'Even though I didn't want, it, it's handy sometimes.'

Anna felt doubly strange as they pushed through the clicking turnstiles; it was as if with one snatch Frances had reclaimed her husband and disowned Vic. It showed Anna that there had been no significant congress between them in Hamilton, Heywood, or wherever, and it

showed Frances, in her swift assumption of minority rights, as a formidable user of advantage. Anna looked at her husband, a man of high sensitivity and pride entering a world where there was no role for him but guest and dependent of Bob Banner—and his wife.

The Banners, man and wife, were inside, waiting. Bob explained that they had four seats in the stand. He would show the women where they were sitting, then he'd take Vic down to the rooms. People rushed past the quartet, released from dumb helplessness because they were inside the ground, intent on their pie, beer, piss, seat. The concrete stand was dark; faces and black and white scarves caught the light but the rest was a cavern, a limitless depth of hostility to visiting teams and unfavourable umpires. Leading them to a ramp, Bob ushered the women past the white-coated attendant, pointed out where they were to sit, then took Vic's arm and led him through the social club area, and past the low stand with its forecourt half-filled, it seemed to Vic, with steely-eyed priests—flushed or pale, spectacled, bald or swarthy, but to a man bigots for the black and white club and zealots for the bitter, determined masculine behavior they exacted from their sportsmen. Vic began to feel sorry for the Essendon side in this hotbed. Seeing some men walk past with kitbags he wondered if they could be players, and if so, how they could stand the pressure already being exerted by the crowd. COLL'WOOD and ESS'NDON said the scoreboard; the apostrophe where there should have been an E seemed a gratuitous insult to the visitors; why shouldn't they have their name in full, except that the board couldn't accommodate the home side's name ?

A voice by Vic said, 'That's Clarkey, isn't it?' indicating a small dark man in a smartly cut suit. Bob said, as they moved away, 'It was, too. He was a hard man to beat.' The implication was that Collingwood, nonetheless, beat him more than most.

Under the stand was concrete, brick, dark wood, it was something a railways architect might have built. The man checking passes at the door said to them, 'Going to be a great day!' There was no fear of defeat in his voice, perhaps because he was so close to the bars and dressing rooms

crowded with cartoons, premiership photos, interstate representatives, champions, Dick Lee's famous mark, flags, banners, silver bowls, honour boards topped by Victorian pediments and a painting of long-trousered Edwardians in hats playing in the kick for kick style of the day. The static figures in the painting contrasted strongly with the rumble of expectation in the carpeted dressing room, the overwhelming male monotone of the bar rooms and the hurrying of supporters to see their men.

Who were an unforgettable swirl of black and white as the physical training instructor put them through their warm-up; flailing their black and white arms, running on the spot, jogging, bending, pressing their trunks about their abdomens, they looked appallingly, dangerously fit. It was hard to believe that somewhere, buried under another stand, were twenty men just as fit. The warm-up over, the players flicked a football around, contested knockouts and shot stab passes about the room with the muscular case of young tigers playing. Bob watched them shrewdly, caught the eye of Carcase sprawled on a rubbing down bench, and smiled at him. Carcase let an attendant in white overalls and black cap tie up his boots under close supervision, then came to the supporters held behind a line on the carpet by another overcoated attendant. It was like a royal condescension as he eased himself through the first rows of supporters to shake hands with them. Vic found himself quite awed by the big man, so much at home in this scene of power, so obviously strong enough to release for the full game the energy these men were both dissipating and husbanding in these pre-game frolics. Then the coach called his players around him, Carcase left them through the parted Red Sea of spectators, and a hush fell on the room.

For a tirade of unutterable stupidity: Vic, almost overwhelmed into believing these men invincible, convinced that the red and black men under the stand where Frances and Anna were sitting had no hope at all, suddenly saw that verbally, mentally, these gods had feet of clay. Bob caught him rolling his eyes, giving himself away as a non-initiate, and said, in a way that sized him up as much as it answered his unspoken

criticism, 'He gives 'em the tactics in the other room. This is just for our benefit.'

Vic was going to say, 'Well, he must have a low opinion of us', but, hemmed in by dark-hatted and overcoated men whose passions lay with the players around their coach, he dared nothing. He knew, though, that in some desperate way that he would have been ashamed to admit, he wanted those red and black men to beat these terrors in front of him. They were an enclave army, that was it, and his wish to see them beaten was a sort of revenge against Frances for her failure to come out to him when, he had felt, she promised him so much. It was, too, an expression of hatred for something in his new friend Bob Banner that he could sense but not articulate. Bob thought he had something over Vic; this ground, these footballers, were an expression of it; it would be impossible in this swamping crowd and in the excitement of the game to separate out the personal strands of enmity that lay between them but he knew they were there.

Where had they come from ? His dislike of the Irishness of many of the players, priests and supporters? Was it simply his reaction against men of the footballing type, and would he feel just as hostile to the red and black men if he were in their rooms? No, he decided; at the top of the league they might be, but they were the underdogs in this fierce milieu; they couldn't possibly have in themselves the bitter faith these Collingwood men were going to carry onto the field. From the stands above there were roars, waves of roaring; something was going on even before the game to stir the mob. There was a long pause, and then a concentrated hooting pushed through the concrete roof of the Magpies' rooms. Magpie supporters lifted their heads as if God's own gates had opened, and smiled jubilantly at the hostile bedlam pressing down from above them. Bob almost shouted, 'That'll be for Tuddy!' and then he called, 'Go on, Carcase!' The big man waved, and then his team disappeared through the door; their studded boots could be heard clattering away, There was another pause while they found the entry to the race, and finally another roar, this time of approval, such as Vic hoped he

would never hear a second time in his life, for Collingwood's entry to the arena. Emerging from the rooms, and struggling back to the stand behind the goals, Vic felt himself to be in enemy territory, with only a treacherous guide to get him though. There was something about Bob Banner he wanted to get, and his anger could only be expressed through the red and black men who were circling the field in a tight group, occasionally sprinting and slowing back to a jog. Tuddy himself, number eight, joined the home captain and ran into the barrage to get the coin thrown out to them. Collingwood tossed, visitor called; Collingwood won, and Richardson, the Collingwood leader, waved to the outer goal. It was like an omen to a Roman army. The Collingwood stands roared at this sign of heaven's approval, the umpire blew his whistle and the players jogged into their places, shaking hands on the move and calling to their nearest team mates.

At the siren Anna felt terribly isolated; it was like a blast of judgement separating her from her past; whatever she was involved in would have to be gone through, now, until a resolution was reached. Poker-faced Frances was neither hostile nor the reverse; she too appeared to feel deserted. The empty seats for the men were on either side of them, and there was another vacancy just in front. Then a priest hurried up the steps and sidled his way in. He nodded to Frances by way of apologizing for blocking her view. He was, in fact, more in Anna's line, but that he had chosen to acknowledge his fellow-Catholic seemed, to Anna, to be evidence of that unspoken line of communication Frances had with some people and not with others. Her comprehension stopped with the people she intuitively knew were with her; others were simply 'others'. There had been an incident before the game when a youth from the outer ran across the field to a huge banner held in front of the Collingwood race by a group of supporters; it read, 'DON'T JUST BEAT THEM, ANNIHILATE THEM!' The youth from the outer tore a long gash in it, then ran for the outer again. The advantage of surprise gave him a fifty metre start, but the vengeful mob at his heels almost caught him. Watching the chase, the ground's comment became that roar Bob and

Vic had heard in the Collingwood bunker. The youth leapt the fence into a welcoming wave of red and black streamers, leaving the swarm of frustrated small fry abusing him from the fence as he hid in the depths of the crowd. The small fry avenged the insult by tearing to shreds a red and black banner held in front of the stand where Frances and Anna were huddling: it read, simply, TUDDY, and when the Essendon supporters held the remnants aloft in something like the right order, it reminded Anna of smokestained pennons at the end of some Crimean or Napoleonic battle. But no such historical perspective redeemed Frances' reaction: 'It would have served him right if they'd got him. Anyhow, they paid them back.'

Confrontation breeds confrontation, as negotiation breeds flexibility; Anna saw that Frances, for all her intelligence, would react simply to the match which was to follow, and would feel that the banner-tearing incidents they had just watched lent some moral imperative to her support. Frances said, 'There's Carcase, just down there: number eleven.' The figures continued the black stripes on his jumper, and Anna couldn't pick him, Frances commented, 'Don't tell me you can't recognize Carcase.'

But sure enough, there he was; twisting and turning, doubling back and nudging the forward he was minding. That Carcase, whom she thought of as a friend, should now appear before her in the colours of this ... team? club? ethos? ... which was oppressing the beleaguered Anna, was the final step in the simplification of her own attitudes. She, like Vic a few minutes before, knew that something deep in her was identifying with the visitors' cause. The footballing confrontation, which two weeks ago she would have considered either mindless or trifling, was latching onto a conflict in her being which she could by no means gloss over. She had a mind to drag Bob, her lover, out of this narrow, hostile world to make a real man of him, and a conflicting wish to ally herself with Vic against the opposition of Frances and her ex-footballing husband. Against Carcase, too, and Nell, and for the embattled, struggling Patricia. Suddenly there were shouts at the side of the stand, smoke drifted up, a smell of burnt fish and chips came up in stenching waves.

A Collingwood man was having first shot for goal. Anna stood up, not wanting to see him succeed. People called to her to sit down. She pushed out of the row to look over the side, and saw that a stall near the stand was on fire. People were already at it with hand extinguishers, but the day seemed to have a self-induced sense of crisis: two firetrucks swept up to the ground in a wail of ee/aw, ee/aw, and, of course, red lights flashing. The firemen shoved through the mob left outside the ground, dragging hoses. Suddenly Anna saw a figure she knew watching this squalid drama: it was Patricia, wearing a cape with its hood down, her face drawn and her hair wind-tossed; she looked like a grown up child lost in a witch's forest. Anna raised her hand. Patricia's haunted eyes caught the movement, and she looked up; recognizing Anna she parted her lips but said nothing. Slowly she shook her head from side to side, refusing not merely the possibility of Anna coming down to her, but pleading with some distressing vision to stay out of her life. Anna looked more closely at the scene below: there was wet straw, the paint on the stall had bubbled, there were saveloys lying on the ground like fish on a bank: the Greek who ran the stall seemed amused at something, the firemen were comic strip figures with nothing to do, people who had been waiting for service had simply gone elsewhere.

Collingwood got their goal. A roar still full of nervous tension rose from the stands around her, the cheer squads thrashed their floggers in waves of black and white, and a few youths turned to the stand above them, trying to start, even this early in the game, their rhythmic applause:

Colling-WOOD, *clap clap clap!*

Colling-WOOD, *clap clap clap!*

The stand was not yet ready for that type of response, but a trio of boys kept it up, their yearning eyes appealing to the stand to feel their overwhelming tension too, and release it with them in a ritual of unity. In this tumult the blackened, dripping food stall seemed less than unimportant, seemed barely to exist; it might have vanished, and the Greek, the firemen, and Patricia too, for all the supporters cared. For a moment

Anna had the feeling that she alone sustained Patricia's existence; if she went back to her seat, Patricia would be gone forever. But this was plainly not Patricia's worry; her expression of despair suggested that something dangerous but tiny within her had swollen and burst on the outer world; the crudity of the scene supported the belief that her mood was an accurate viewing of all about her. Stressed more than she could bear, Anna pushed back to her seat, Frances said, 'What was it?' but she was spared an answer by the return of the men.

Frances had seen Anna's hand upraised, but it was her habit to respect others' privacy as much as she claimed cover for herself. If there was a reason why something, presumably a fire of some sort, could not be discussed, then it would not be discussed. Experienced in negotiation, the outer Frances was, in this respect, someone it was easy to deal with; forming judgements of you only insofar as you impinged on her worlds, she made no attempt to destroy what politicians would call 'your base'. Anna could see, now, that Frances had dealings with you rather than related to you; but could she be unaware of changes in her husband? Engrossed in Vic she might be, in the darker recesses of her being, but those clear eyes must still see, that careful unremitting attention must sense, that Bob was hers no longer?

Frances squeezing up for Vic so obviously wanted him beside her, but then she smiled, too, on Bob sitting on the other side of Anna; it was a foursome she wanted, two couples who were friends, and if a link could be found between such opposites as the two couples represented, so much the better. In the quartet seated in a row on a bench she appeared to find security where Anna sensed a high degree of tension.

Much of it she read from Vic. She knew when his bonhomie was hollow; his dislike of the home side atmosphere, and their friends' participation in it, was readily accessible to her. She determined not to barrack or show any support, but to see the game as a visual experience.

Which was made to some extent easier by Bob's analyses of tactics. Sitting beside her he commented quietly on the work of both sides—'He'll put it out of bounds'; 'Yes, I thought they'd have to move

him?—which showed her that the game could be seen as a type of living chess as well as the physical conflict she half expected when the teams entered the arena in an oppressive tension generated by the banner incidents and the crowd's sense of occasion.

Struggling to lift his perception of this conflict onto a philosophical level where it could be seen as an activity of Man, and considered as such, Vic found himself amazed to have Frances turn to him. It happened when McKenna flung himself to mark: lining up the shot, and sending the ball far above the red and black floggers waved to put him off, he looked every bit the champion. Frances said, 'They'll have a hard time keeping him quiet today', and, he noticed, the smile she turned upon him was accompanied by touches of pink. She was drawing him to her view of the spectacle, a simple excitement based solely on winning and losing. She was assuming that because she was drawn to him he would naturally follow her in her admiration and dislikes. This combination of naivety and a complex, perhaps duplicitous, personality, set him wondering why he wanted her; was her nature good material for a saint?

Essendon were back in the game now, achieving the apparently impossible by merely playing football instead of capitulating to the pressure put on them. They too could move the ball with handpasses, or stab it in a flash of white shorts to a red and black chest. Twice they got the ball to Bates, the man Carcase Moore was supposed to be minding, and twice he was too fast for Carcase, who lumbered up in time to stand, hands on hips, on the mark, before giving the obligatory waves at the ball on its way to goal. Twice, at the far end of the ground, the red and black floggers thrashed and streamers were flung above the goal posts as if to a departing liner. When Carcase was beckoned onto the ball, after his second clumsy error, Bob said a heavy and significant 'Hmm'. It was Frances who said it: 'He's got to do something now, to redeem himself.'

Carcase quickly made himself felt with a goal, and then, dropping back into defence, twice saved with those peculiar, toppling marks that

happen when a man in the air too soon is supported by a rising pack behind him. The huge man almost lying on air and twisting his wrists to take the ball side on before returning to earth on a crush of opponents and team mates was an act of brutal grace. ‘Carcase!’ the crowd shouted at their champion, restored to favour; Vic said, ‘He saved the day, didn’t he?’ Anna, noted the verbal link of saving and redemption in the remarks of Frances and her husband, but had to admit that prodigious energies were being expended for fleeting use of the ball, and that the struggle was heroic if you thought it worth the winning. Unwilling to involve herself in the excitement of Essendon battling for the ball within ten yards of goal, and Collingwood struggling to clear, she lifted her eyes beyond the ground, hoping to find evidence that the tension she felt was fortuitous, not representative of anything but one footy ground on one day of the week. ‘Keep Blethyn out! Shepherd him out! Good boy!’ she heard Bob beside her whispering intently, as he had whispered to her a fortnight before, ‘Now? Now? Oh yes, now!’ If he wasn’t the same man then as now, where was the rift? If he was whole and entire both times—and when was it more likely?—how did he excite her? He sensed her softening to him and put his arm behind her—the others intent on the goalsquare struggle—to squeeze her hip as he had done twice or a dozen times before, she hardly knew. Yet she fought down the love rising in her for that viewpoint, that perspective, she felt she needed for release.

Factories ringed the far end of the oval, and beyond them the parklands across the Yarra. Above the outer stand, where boys dangled their legs from precarious perches on the roof, were two-storey terrace facades, chimneys and Housing Commission towers, though these were far outnumbered by the single-fronted single-storey workers’ cottages packed between the traffic arteries mercilessly dissecting Collingwood. Above all hung the gloomy sky of a city subject to the Southern Ocean. The cityscape was strangely calm; it was as if all its tensions had been poured into the arena to sort themselves out in a hurly burly that would leave the city unharmed. And today’s battle was fought where those with a grievance made the rules, it was like those once a year Roman ban-

quets where the masters waited on the slaves. Among the Collingwood players' names Anna recognized several she'd heard the girls at Preston discussing. Crammed in this stand, involved as she was with the man beside her, she could no longer think of her workplace with that (heavily disguised) mixture of charity and despair which was her habit. The crowd was roaring 'Carcase! Carcase! Carcase!' as the big man battled his way into the open for a shot at goal; but he was tackled, and as he regained the ball, the siren blew, the umpire raised his hands aloft, and the huge crowd relaxed by a few decibels into noisy talk, lighting cigarettes, cracking cans. Bob said, 'Liking it? Or you think there's better things to do?' She smiled ambiguously; would she share a bed with this man again?

The second quarter was Essendon's. Neatly, prettily, they began playing their clean, stylish football; playing, as Vic found to his surprise, as he would have the game played. Though the game was no less tough, their superiority was almost intellectual; the ball moved down and across the ground with logic and precision; spaces appeared, and then men filled them, snatched a mark, turned and ran backwards, ball in one hand, before leaning in the direction of their attack, considering where to kick. Always it was wide of Carcase, who seemed to be running everywhere and arriving too late. Bob said, 'He's making a mistake; he should make them chase him', but the priest in front of them snapped over his shoulder: 'And who's going to get the ball to Johnny Moore if he doesn't go and get it himself?'

And this crystallized the day for Vic. Skill used in a pure form he could identify with, but struggle, he felt, was demeaning, and these black and white players, though slowly going under, shirked nothing of the struggle. They spent most of the second quarter crowding the game, frustrating their more gifted opponents, trying to rattle them, making the game a wrestle every chance they got. A haughtiness in him objected to the black and whites having a chance of winning; the red and blacks should be far ahead, but their halftime lead was small, and it was a question of whether they could last under this frustrating pressure. Vic

wanted to go home; he said as much to Frances. She laughed at him—his display of weakness seemed to make him hers to play with—and said seriously, as if predicting the outcome of an election, ‘I think the next quarter’s going to be very interesting.’

It was, in a way, Frances’ quarter. It was dream football, transcendental football. Collingwood dashed to the lead, took away the confidence of their visitors, then did as they liked. The stylish players of the second quarter, so consciously superior, had nothing but a desperation they were unpractised in directing. Seeing their betters flounder, the black and white men performed prodigies and miracles; the ball travelled enormous distances to the straining fingers of players from nowhere. Everything found McKenna; he seemed unable to miss. Men racing past in full flight found the ball knocked in their path. Every McKenna mark took the crowd’s shouting up a tone:

McKENNaaaa!

Colling-WOOD, *clap clap clap!*

Colling-WOOD, *clap clap clap!*

The streamers were an endless undulation of black and white beneath the stand where every Collingwood goal set the crowd stamping their feet. The stands roared at their players to go on with it, to rise to further heights, and the result on the field was as if the home crowd was exerting a hypnotic power on events, making them happen as they chose. When Essendon laboured forward, Carcase marked; one long kick, and Collingwood swarmed into attack again. Their opponents seemed immobile, incapable of constructive play, while the home team brought off the most daring moves with an effortless flair, as if outwitting ghosts. When the siren finally blew on this slaughter, the crowd clapped their men, and then fell almost silent, as if life had nothing more to offer. Frances, quivering, said to Vic, ‘Honestly, I would never have dreamed it could be done.’ Vic, humbled and ashamed by the turn in events, and by the fact that it had mattered to him, stared at her: she was transported; the evidence of a rapacious nature satisfied showed him her sexual power, and, most surprising of all, her blindness. She had no idea that he

was upset by 'his' team going under. To Frances, he was still what he'd told her before the game—a man who'd seen about two and a half games of country football in his life. Believing him to be on the same plane of pleasure she now inhabited, she was wide open to him; inner and outer Frances gazed possessively upon him and he longed to possess her, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, but first, last and foremost, in the flesh. She was beautiful, a lump rose in his throat, her strong gaze fell on him in unquestioned acceptance; the fine, irregularly-boned face drew itself to a calm, and then flushed in a look of utter satisfaction. Something in Vic writhed, though whether in a struggle of attainment or a death throes he had not the faintest idea; he felt ennobled, sanctified, and utterly lustful, all three at once in a knightly mixture causing him to believe that any action which returned that now-fading expression to her face—so close to his, yet not to be kissed, here in the stand today, with wife, priest, husband and a thousand other witnesses—could and must be justified. She was his; she'd shown it, her intention was clear, it was only a matter of recreating that willingness in some other circumstance. And for himself, what? Here, in this woman who, three months ago, had seemed an impossible partner, he felt an answer to the self-questioning and hidden dishonesties of years. To her sexuality he would bring his own unexplored momentum; the struggles which would be part of such a relationship would be far from demeaning, they could be expected to produce moments of high awareness, and of that beauty which he saw commonly in green, {lowering nature, rarely in fleshbound men and women. All the more amazing, then, all the more surprising, inexplicable, exasperating and deflating, was the fact that when they stood up to leave, Frances drew back to allow Anna past, so that she stood between husband and lover, blissfully unaware.

The stand had one more noise. Tuddy, leaving the field amid hoots and catcalls, acknowledged the crowd's fickleness—surely as great as his own—with an upraised thumb. 'Up you' he gestured, lowering his head for the players' race. 'That'll larn you, Tuddy!' called the priest. Bob, wiser than Anna knew, stayed silent; Vic nodded coldly at his wife, the

only reward of a bitter day, and she, aware of that transported gaze which Frances had turned on her husband, and of its aftermath, the changing of places, took up a stance which she recognized by some empathy as borrowed from the unhappy Patricia. Gazing over the field swarming with the flagwaving youth of Collingwood, she said, 'Bitterness is so irrelevant, don't you think?'

Both transparent and socially acceptable, it was a remark that might have come from Frances' mould, but it had a power to declare, what in Frances would only have been a pleading, that relations between the four of them would stay on this level of inner truth, outward lie, and if that should hurt Vic most and Frances next, so much the worse for them.

8

Conflict in the conceptual arena is more subtle and more insidious than the highly dramatized clashes of sport. The popular mind contains, at any one time, a host of ideas, many of them contradictory. Two in particular are sharply polarized.

One is the sociologist's concept of society as a kind of flow chart, a fluid, organic thing, alive in all its parts but predictable in its general movement. In this rather deterministic view, the individual, acting in accord with current goals and trends, is a sort of social ant, his personality at least partly definable as a shadow cast by the external world.

Set against this is our concept of self, an elusive something as indefinable as 'soul'—and yet it must be maintained satisfactorily if the individual is to survive. What is it? From the nineteenth century comes the classic non-definition—Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* peeling away the onion, layer by layer, looking for the solid core.

We say there is no core, only interaction between inner drives and outer world; our image might be of a fragile shell maintained by an equilibrium of inner and outer pressures. But how do we understand these forces? When society is stable, ideas of personality can be stable, but the last two centuries have unleashed shock after shock on our notions of personality. There is no stability any more ...

... only interaction. This is where the press, the media, education and the arts come in. The common man, searching the world around him for meaning, finds the vista quivering. It fails, every day, to give back the expected signals. Those entrusted with the task of verbalizing society's processes—journalists, teachers, advertising writers, the spielers of public relations—have wheelbarrows of their own to push. Caught between

expediency and truth (if anybody knew it) they opt for tomorrow's deadline.

They have to. The forces are too big, village communities have been replaced by urban agglomerations of two, three, four, eight million, until a new social law comes into being:—

Break down community and you get communication. Anyone expecting the external world to explain to him what he is and why he acts as he does, is looking in a mirror that distorts.

Who can he look to ? His parents, friends, lovers ? His background, his family, his origins in life? This sounds a more hopeful way of defining one's self, but does it really work? Aren't parents, friends, etc, as inaccurate as all the rest?

Take Bob.

He could trace his earliest apprehensions of Catholicism to two childhood incidents which, he gathered from questioning his mother, must have happened between his third and fourth birthdays. In one, he was standing by the front fence watching a group of boys from the Marist Brothers College. They were going home from school in a line of descending size with two very fat boys bringing up the rear like geese. In a mixture of sing-song declension and mock-Gregorian, they were intoning:

Farto, fartarse, fartat!

Fartamus, fartatis, fartant!

The two geese at the rear made vulgar noises throughout, joined, at *fartant!* by the rest of the line-up. All wore grey suits and caps with a brown and green band, and two were smoking.

In the other incident, the children from across the road were playing with his older brother's toys, ignoring him. He pestered them; they pushed him away. He cried, saying he had a tummy ache. They used it in their game: 'He's sick; he's dead; we'll have to bury him.' They got the baby's basket and put him in it, carrying him through the house moaning, 'The lamb is dead; our lamb is dead; we've got to bury him!' When he cried they mocked his tears with mock-tears. They rocked the basket

for a while, then put it down, pantomimed grief, cried ‘Our dear little Bobby’s dead, God rest his soul’, threw all the toys on top of him and went home. As he remembered it, he was quite amused. He didn’t mind them going; it seemed to restore order again. But as his mother remembered it, she came back from the shop at the corner to find him crying. Bob’s theory was, ‘I bet I was trying to get them back for some more.’

With childhood memories, as with dreams, the truest thing we can say is that they are quite accidental; there is no meaning to them at all. Any meaning we impose is an expression of our later selves. Bob regarded the two incidents as an inoculation; in his lime-green suit and white, navy and emerald tie, going the rounds of his flour mill’s customers, he felt secure from excess. He liaised with them, he eased, by his personality, any stringencies in his company’s credit policies, and felt, in his go-between role, that he was no one’s man but his own. The company didn’t own him; he could go along with them just as he occasionally went to mass with Frances; if appearances required it, it was no skin off his nose.

But Anna had marked out areas he’d never entered, demands he’d never satisfied. There was a tram he often passed, driving to work; he used to laugh at the advertisement on the side, I FOUND LOVE IN A SUPERMARKET: now it disturbed him. And a sandwich shop near the mill had another sign outside, advertising a lemonade in an ugly green bottle: the lemonade was called LIFE.

He had gained the idea from somewhere that LOVE was a brand of soap, but the telephonist at the office told him it was a cheap line in panty-hose; she even hitched her skirt a little to let him see them. Bob said, ‘Is that what LOVE’s like, Jenny?’ but something caught in his throat, it didn’t seem funny, it was coarse and commercialized. Jenny the telephonist said back to him, ‘I think it’s what you make it, Mr Banner.’ The fact that she called him mister instead of the usual Bob signalled something to him, warned him that the disturbance he was going through was altering him. If he was altering, he mustn’t regress. It would be important to skirt the assumptions of a boyhood shared between

catholic and secular schools; he was already aware that the football visit with Anna and the others had been a disaster in every way except the rigorous self-definition it was imposing on them.

LIFE, LOVE: Bob was not a man practised in concepts or generalities; these two key words in the language therefore had an extra power for him, as from a secular litany. They were all he had never bothered to define, except narrowly, in the terms of the sub-cultures he'd moved among. Anna, far more problematical than his Frances, had access to a wider frame of reference, and was therefore more open and troubled, yet more secure than his wife. He compared Anna's porcelain with the electric clock at Frances' parents' house; whether or not the rims and numbers were brass he would never know, because a polyester seal prevented any patina forming. And it had two useless weights dangling beneath it on a chain. He had priced a similar one in Carmody's of Kerang for sixty-two dollars. On the phone one day to Anna, he said he wanted her to take him shopping, it was time he acquired some taste. She said, 'It'll have to be a crash course! What do you want to get?'

'I'd like to start with you.'

'I thought we were talking about something for the house! You can't do much on the phone, can you.'

'We could do better, I've got a spare hour.'

'Where are you?'

'Actually I'm only in Rosanna ...'

'Can you come round? (her pulse quickening) Gwennie's on a bus ride with the kinder, I've got to pick her up in an hour.'

'An hour's enough, isn't it?'

'It seems to be enough for some people.'

He liked her saying that, it was a shared enjoyment of their love-making, they were so apt for each other, quickly rising to a high excitement ...

... as they did a few minutes later: 'Was that good, for you?'

She said, 'Mmm. I'm glad you came. I was feeling a bit like it, actually. But you said you'd be in the office all this week.'

‘We had a call from Pipers, something I had to sort out.’

If they’d planned it beforehand Anna would have been tense; she felt Bob knew this and caught her by surprise to let her be more spontaneous.

‘Do you make little difficulties so these people have to call you out to see them?’

He said, ‘Oh no. They’d soon get onto me if I started doing that.’

She wondered, but the falsehood, if it was one, was never explored; the warmth of their shared orgasm still joined them, but, as with her dropping the towel at the bathroom door that first time, there was a reserved consideration still watching him from behind those eyes closed in content. He said, ‘Can we talk about shopping? I’d like to go with you.’

‘When!’

She wanted to, those flushes of enthusiasm were a delight to him, but: ‘You can’t buy me anything, you know. It’s hard enough coping with two men without having something of yours sitting up on the mantelpiece. I’d feel funny every time I went near it.’

‘Well, something for me.’

‘For your place?’

He nodded, but a gap opened between the lovers; her hesitation meant that it would be an invasion, and while she was prepared to carry it out if Bob became what she wanted, he didn’t have that value yet. She looked at her watch.

‘I’ll have to go, the bus’ll be back by now.’

‘Yes, they’ll be looking for me in the office pretty soon.’

‘Don’t lose your job, whatever you do.’

It was only a tenderness, she knew he could cover. He rubbed her trouser thigh: ‘You’re a working wife, you could keep me.’ She said, ‘You’ve got a working wife, she could keep you.’ Yet there was enjoyment in the joust, she said, ‘Come on, kiss me, I’ve really got to go.’ It was a sated kiss, he squeezed her bottom, she pinched his arm.

The children had been arguing. Gwennie wanted to know what would happen if the bus ran over you: Susie said that because the tyres were full of air, like a balloon, the bus'd just bounce over you without hurting you. And nasty Mark - a boy, of course - said the bus would squash your guts all over the road. Anna explained, but that night when she retold it to Vic, it led her to mention something that had been discussed in the staffroom that morning. The headmaster at the nearby primary school had retired. He'd been farewelled, given his watch, clapped, and photographed. He had been a widower, living on his own, and during the night he had a heart attack. When day dawned on what should have been his retirement, he was cold in bed, and his milk and paper lay uncollected at the gate. She said, 'The funny thing was, there was a photo of him in the paper. His daughter called round about five o'clock and she found him.' She said, 'It really squashed a few of them; you could see they thought it was fate's ultimate blow. But a couple of the old carpentry men thought it might have been a good thing, I think they're scared of retirement. I don't think they lead very interesting lives, apart from work.'

A wary Vic wanted to know, 'Just what do you call an interesting life?'

Such was her guilt, and her concern for him, that he might well have asked, Do you want to leave me? He pressed his advantage: 'I don't think you believe in my work. I think you think it's rather dreary, just bashing around the bush.' His voice was full of hurt, some of it hypocritical.

Afraid that he might blunder into a showdown she was in no way ready for, she temporized: 'Just what makes you say that?'

'There's something peculiar about the people you work with, and all your liberal-intellectual friends. They've got everything to say about the way things ought to go, and they're not the ones who're carrying the load. I mean, for example, they'll show you their blackwood table or their mountain ash stereo cupboard and feel very pleased with themselves. But when they go bushwalking, or driving around the roads we've put in, they have a bit of a look, then they come back and write letters

to the paper about how we shouldn't allow logging in their favourite areas.'

'So?'

'It's just irresponsible. I mean, they could even be right, sometimes, but it's not up to them to do anything about it. They want to have their cake and eat it too.'

It was substantially the attitude Frances took, on political affairs; Anna, who had been, a moment before, ashamed of her human advantage over her husband, now felt as if her standpoint was being eroded beneath her.

'But surely there's a place for informed comment, and criticism?'

He said, 'There's armies of informed critics. They're ringing us up every day. We've got a bloke whose job it is to talk to them. I'm not saying they don't make some good points. We don't claim to know everything. But these fellows have all got nice cushy jobs ...' he was becoming more impassioned, less coherent '... they tell us we're exploiting nature. We're not, we're working with it. They're the ones who're exploiting it, they line up and demand their rubber, and petrol, and timber, and all the rest of it. There's something weak about them. They're not linked with nature; they're just loose, bumping egos. I sometimes think they've got no base in reality.'

There was no way to avoid it.

'I suppose this includes me?'

Hurt and desperate, he said, 'I don't know where your base is.'

For personalities in accord, every trait, every opinion exchanged, strengthens agreement; in discord, every observation accuses. She had married a problem, seeing it as promise. In her first year out, teaching in Sale, she found the place melancholy and windblown. A chance meeting with Vic, and things had started to happen. He took her about, they went to Melbourne together for concerts and theatre; which she chose. He asked her to camp for the weekend in the mountains; his mountains. She put this off, without refusing; the younger Vic was measured, capable, thoughtful, but had trouble displaying his feelings, she didn't know how

committed he felt. Then there was a party in Melbourne when he went to sleep on a couch, when she woke him up he put his arms around her in a drowsy affection that apparently had no limit; it convinced her that he was opening. This seemed to be confirmed as they drove back after the weekend; in the strange suspension of time and place which can occur in a car at night, he spoke very frankly. He was, perhaps, addressing the night as much as Anna, but he showed an openness she'd thought beyond his range. She said she would go camping with him, it was like expressing a willingness to ascend to the plane where his most serious thoughts lived out their lives.

The drive reinforced this impression. After the writhing of the Licola road, and the endless recrossings of the Wellington River, there came the big lift, seven miles which were like an ascension. The road clung to sides, then ducked through deep cuttings in ever-tightening curves which should have been impossible for the long timberjinkers to negotiate, except that they hurtled through as if meaning to crush intruders. Their dust settled in a pall over the bush by the road. The views grew wider, the rain-shadow country to the east was a sombre spatter of eucalypt forest on a ruddy gravel. Geological strata made spectacular gashes down slopes and around the shoulders of mountains. Hoping, perhaps, to put a more human, feminine, aspect to the view, Vic had pointed: 'See that one with all the lines around it? That one's called the Crinoline.' 'The Crinoline', she echoed. 'No. No. They're like those initiation weals the aborigines have.' That she should put it in the present tense swelled Vic's pride; time past, present and future were much of a muchness to him, he saw himself as something very transitory on the earth's surface, ego was best sublimated into something vaster ...

Anna suddenly realized that Vic was out of the room. When he came back, he was holding their box of photos. He opened it, spread a few around, handed a pile to her. It was the unanswerable appeal.

'This was our camp, remember?'

She murmured, 'Te ne rammenti?'

'Mmm?'

She corrected. 'Yes, I won't ever forget it.'

In the back of her head she could hear Renata Tebaldi's pure soprano ...

Mio supecrbo guerrier! Quanti tormenti,
Quanti mesti sospiri e quanta speme
Ci condusse ai soavi abbracciamenti!
Oh, come'e dolce il mormorare insieme:
Te ne rammenti?*

... and the wry observation that she could show Desdemona a few points on handling husbands. That these were the thoughts in her mind meant that Vic had already lost his plea; yet there was much to remember. No superb warrior, Vic, but so passionately attached to his mountains that something of their majesty invested him; there was some interchange between Vic and his surroundings which she felt would help complete her, as she'd hoped to work changes in him. There was a hot day when they were camping with a couple from Melbourne, Mike and Margo ...

'Good job Margo had Mike on a string, I think you had an appeal for him ...'

She could smile at that, there was no danger there. Vic in those days was guileless, she'd had a brief affair with an older man on the staff in the early days of their courtship; he never knew of it. Richard, the man in question, was in Melbourne now, she had no wish to see him, ever; yet if she were seeing him, she knew she could keep it from Vic. From Bob? Perhaps, perhaps not ...

'The fuss they made about the march flies!'

*My noble warrior! How much suffering,
how many mournful sighs and how much hope
have led us to these sweet embracings.
Oh! How sweet it is to murmur together:
do you remember?

She had hated them too, it had been a hot day, the Melbourne couple were bored; 'interesting' old huts were so few and far between, there was nothing for their sort to do. But Vic insisted they should not go for another drive; he made them walk through a moss bed where a high plain decanted into a gully. He studied the damage of cattle tracks carefully, comparing it with earlier visits; he explained the complex interdependence of the plant systems, and how they would change in the steep fall between their camp and the river; he pointed across the grey-blue ramparts running endlessly to the east, and the crumpled velvet ranges where no sun was striking, and he told them, 'You think it's hot, just wait a few minutes, it'll ease off.' Back in the camp, Mike and Margo found beer the only easing thing, but Vic said he would wait; he built up the fire as the sun's last rays touched the battered snowgums above them, and he brought out a bottle of riesling, but left it unopened. He seemed to be waiting for an answer to something unsaid. Finally the answer came. As dark gathered, coolness welled out of the valley; the wind, which had been warm, and from the north-west all day long, was given its answer in a soft drift from the valley between their plateau and the first of those great dark ramparts. Vic said, 'This is the moment', and opened his wine. Their firelight touched branches, leaves, they heard the last movements of birds; they drank their wine in silence, watching the flames flicker to the valley air; finally they were aware of a vast dark around them, breathing on them, calling an end to day. Anna slept with Vic that night for the first time, though Mike and Margo split up long ago, God only knew where they were now.

Vic said, 'There's no going back, is there.' It was a conversational rock, it needed no answering: Anna reflected that Vic, though no Othello, had called the tune in much of their courtship; there was another time when they had been camped in the mountains, in a Forests Commission hut, and again, at the end of the day, there was a movement of air, spectacular this time. Black rags of cloud took sundown as a signal to race low over their camp; through breaks in this retreat they could see a layer of strato-cirrus, serenely filtering the earliest stars; the

low black tatters were like smoke from a fire, like a panic of refugees - yet in the morning there was no sky, only a cloud-mist sitting damply on the camp. And then, descending, they ran into sleet. The windscreen wipers could barely cope, and Anna had been scared; what if they lost their vision? But Vic, driving no slower than usual, passed it off as, 'just a cold blow past Mount Tamboritha'; and sure enough, once they passed the Tamboritha saddle, the wind abated, and soon they were on the spur again, exposed to the drop; yet Wellington, Spion Kop and the Gable End were capped by cloud, it was like coming down in an aeroplane to break out of the blanket of mist shrouding all that country which was Vic's spiritual home.

Anna said, 'I didn't have time to clean up today. Just move those things. Spread them out so we can see them.' It was the closest she could come to an apology, but Vic felt it was an offer to share. He spread the photos around, pulled his chair closer to hers. He was sitting where Bob had sat that afternoon; it was an agony to listen.

And no easier to study the photos, though some of them were humorous.

Vic picked out: one; his favourite: Anna sitting on the bonnet of his car, it was taken three months before their wedding. For Vic it was the halcyon time, a light that would never shine again burned the edges of her long dark hair, she looked at the camera as if there was nothing else in the world to look at. He saw her as a new-created woman, with the bloom of twenty-two, and a wisdom that would serve him. He said, "The week after that you cut your hair.' She said, 'I don't think, you've ever forgiven me. Ah well, dear, I let it grow again.' He looked at it, wanting to fondle it; she recalled the quarrel they'd had. She'd missed a period, he took up an anti-prurient stance, rather dated: who cared if she was pregnant, it was nobody else's business, they could all go to hell as far as he was concerned. He'd be glad of it!

But she had no wish to be pregnant then, they quarrelled, she managed to make him see her point in the end, but it had jolted him to realize that his reaction was irrelevant. It had been a false alarm, and they

made up, the night before the photo was taken, in fact, but it was the first thin wedge ...

Vic murmured, ‘Mmmmm’; it was their first house, in Heyfield, near the state school. This had displeased her when they first moved into it because; she was still teaching and being close to another school was a bore. Then, when John was born, and she was home all day, the sound of children playing was a dimension to which she gave an ambiguous welcome. Each morning she looked forward to the shrill noises in the minutes before nine o’clock. Later on, though, the bell became an ominous intrusion, knelling the infancy of her baby; the drum to which the children marched in seemed to boom from inside her, it almost scared her, she used to pick up her child, checking, as it were, that his toes and fingers, the features of his unformed face, were still tiny, still miniatures as they were when he issued from her body in a moment of stress and relief she could remember clearly, despite the nurses’ drugs; Vic had not been there. He said to her, pushing the photo her way, ‘What was that you said before? In Italian?’

‘Te ne rammenti?’

‘What’s it mean?’

‘It means ... ‘ she felt her eyes starting to moisten’ ... It means, Do you not remember?’

‘Che n’rammenti?’

‘Te ne rammenti.’

He said, ‘Do you remember Tricky Crane? He’s in here somewhere. It ought to be easy to find, it’s got deckle edges.’

Tricky Crane was her first post-marital affair, he was a carpenter they had building some cupboards. Vic had been very amused by someone working for the Commission telling him, ‘You’ve got the amorist in your house’. It was so much of a cliché, the housewife and the iceman sort of thing, that he laughed at the joke, and was very friendly with Tricky, who was, after all, full of stories and a very good tradesman. He said to Anna one night, in bed, ‘Apparently he’s got some notable conquests’, quite amused by the idea. Tricky was then dismissed from

his mind for the ardent stroking, the enraptured idealistic addresses he poured in her car until the height of their lovemaking; she responded, as she always responded, with warmth, and enjoyment, and a compassion that satisfied him. Satisfied he might be to express all he had for her, but in his ardour he was unaware of the comparison she made between Tricky and her husband: Tricky, she might have said, was not half the man, but, in his shallower appeal he was so much easier to deal with. Bodies were to be enjoyed, in Tricky's style, it was just for the hell of it and twice the fun. Tricky kept clear of the burdens of personality, the onerous weight of love: beside him—and there were days, over the two months he was in and out of the house, when she couldn't help comparing the two men—Vic's heavily committed love was almost lugubrious; Vic needed so much reassurance that he was unique in her world.

As he was. Not only because of his seriousness, his ardour, and his grasp of many things that were a closed book to most, but because she had absorbed him fully when she fell in love with him. Assessment came before, and came again later, many times, when she was interested in someone else, or simply when he annoyed her; loyalty and fidelity were not the same thing in Anna. Vic's fidelity was closer to the rigid, almost doctrinaire loyalty of Frances, whose wish it was—whatever her eyes showed her, whatever those unaccountable desires offered secretly—that relationships should be stable. Insecurity, or the fear of standing alone, were not things that worried Anna: she could merge with people, with a lover, and separate again with relative ease, and each time a little was added to her half humorous sense of the variety of life. It was the realism Frances brought to politics applied to personal relationships, and it was a realism—Vic could never understand this—that took account of Vic's nature, Tricky Crane's, anybody's.

‘Here it is, the deckle edge.’

Anna said, ‘Oh God!’ It was taken by flashlight at a cabaret ball. Beer stained the tablecloth, the remnants of food were sploidy, cocktail sausages and tomato sauce had been spilt from their bowl. Vic glared from under drooping eyelids, like a cartoon gangster, and Tricky Crane,

with his arm around his wife - who was half out of the picture - offered the camera a parody of a lecherous leer. Vic said, 'At least you're looking away.' Anna said, 'Yes, and my hair looks like a dirty old paint brush. Let's burn it, Vic.' But a wry Vic thought it should be kept, it reminded them of other things about that time.

'What about this?'

It was his Elysian Fields picture; Anna and John sitting in a riot of wildflowers on one of those alpine plains Vic loved so dearly.

'God's own country.' He managed a smile. 'You're worth a place.'

'What about your son?'

He shrugged, said, 'Well ...' He meant that one chooses a wife, children simply arrive; there being no choice, one can't speak of mistakes. And he'd been a good father, he hadn't shirked the demands of a baby. Which of course had required a more complete involvement on her part, and dependence on Vic. This had lasted ten months, till the day Richard called in. He'd been miserable, his wife was angry with him, on the point of leaving; an affair had ended bitterly; he'd come back to the last point in his life where he felt secure. Anna heard it all come out, when he'd wanted to make love, she let him; for Richard, even those wide eyes were a comfort, it was better to be seen through than disliked ...

When he was leaving, they talked; walking down the drive he said, 'I'm sorry about that, I won't do it again, it was just that I was desperate. Sorry you copped it.' She said, with that warmth of hers, and a shrug to say that giving as little as that wasn't hard, 'Why shouldn't I? If I can't do that, hell, what's it all about?' She meant life, it was that larger perspective always operating ...

But reaching the gate, they realized that an old woman was behind the abelia, and had heard them. She was tanned, and wrinkled, with silver hair, teeth missing, and a most pressing need to snip her tufts of facial hair; rising over the bush like the Witch of Endor, she said to Anna: 'Fine goings on. You'll be getting a great reputation for yourself, young lady!'

It was a crushing blow; Anna felt her heart constricting. She didn't watch Richard drive away; looking into the old gossip's hardened face, she realized that life in a small town was going to be like living in a shop window, she must either harden herself not to care, or she must get out. She began to work on Vic to apply for headquarters, or Ballarat or Bcndigo at the least.

'Remember this? You dropped the coffee set.'

'*You* did!'

'I gave it to you, you said you'd got it.'

'How was I to know the bottom was going to fall out of the box?'

'You always hold a cardboard box underneath. If you've got any sense.'

It was taken the day they'd moved. Vic was in the back of the van; the driver and Anna were rolling the piano on a trolley. Anna picked up the photo: 'Notice who's doing the work?'

'I remember who didn't kick the trolley out of the way, and we bloody nearly dropped it.'

'Well I didn't know he meant me to kick it.'

'Who else was supposed to kick it if he didn't mean you?'

'I thought he meant Richard.'

'What, when he had the camera up to his eye?'

'Oh well, I didn't know that.'

'Didn't look to find out, either.'

He resented that move, made before he wanted it, resented it because he didn't understand it; he knew he was giving in to something she didn't want to express. Yes, a small town could be restrictive, but the code of living was, for him, as good as any other; moving furniture from house to van, he'd scarcely been aware of Richard taking photos of Anna, that he too needed something to remember. It was typical of Vic that though he sensed something strained in Richard's presence, he preferred to focus his mind on the older man's offer to help with the heavy stuff: this was normality, the town around them upheld normality in its own destructive way, what had he, Vic, to fear? Promotion would be fine, it

had to come some day, but there was no ripeness in the time of their move; uprooted when he was still content, he found pain in the photos from those days, as well as haunting reminders of all he felt he'd lost.

'Where's that one with you taking John for a swim?'

'First time I ever put him in water, apart from a basin.'

'Lake Glenmaggie.'

Anna was carrying John out of the water, she was in two-piece bathers.

'Figure hasn't changed, love.'

It was still the body he'd loved when they travelled, day and night, through that elevated, shrouded, cold, clean plateau of snow gums and grassy plains dishing concavely or convexly to a rim of moving cloud; Vic adored his son and daughter, but they were rising, emerging people; he was victim of the idea that his own best days were past.

'Why can't you be as you were?'

There was only one answer, though it attacked the basis of their relationship:

'Was I ever what you thought I was?'

'I didn't have doubts, those days.'

'Perhaps you should have.'

'What do you mean?'

She shook her head.

'Don't just make me suffer, say something.'

She paused, she said, 'Oh, I don't know ...' She pushed photos this way and that; wedding photos, Vic leaning on the fence at a cricket match, a group outside a mountain hut; Anna, Vic and John on the day they moved, flanked by old Councillor Clemens and his wife, President of the Shire of Rosedale.

'You've always made friends easily, Vic'

'So have you.'

Vic, she saw, was dying to have it out with her, and yet, if he did, if they brought out everything wrong between them, and if they then managed to heal these differences, to set up some *modus vivendi*, it would

mean the death of the romantic in Vic. He feared this, especially when he felt he was on the verge of obtaining from Frances the response he most deeply wanted. Inexperienced as he was in handling such affairs, some personal sense of danger, not one of danger to his marriage, restrained the forester. He might grumble and bitch, but he had to put up with the situation because he was in it, and not yet satisfied. It grated on him that he, it seemed, had to go overboard in love while his wife's cycle seemed to be one of assessment, commitment, enjoyment and withdrawal. This, he saw, had been her experience with him, and, he could see, it could therefore be repeated over and over, to her benefit and his chagrin. It was, to a man of his temperament, an intolerable situation; plucking up his courage, he said to her, 'What's going to happen to us, Anna?' Urgent, impassioned, it was his call to the fates to deliver a blow, to make some decisive pronouncement; if the world was going wrong, there had to be an alternative to mute acceptance. Anna began piling the pictures back in the box. She said, 'What's going to happen? I suppose we'll undress and go to bed. And sleep.' It was no less a proclamation than the one Vic wanted; defeated, spurred, he checked to see the children were covered, and went to bed, thinking of Frances.

9

When Frances came to the back door, she heard a strange voice in the kitchen: ‘... so we rang this masseur and asked if he’d do it at the client’s place. He said yes so we made an appointment, then Gerda and I got busy. We lit a fire and put these horny looking African carvings around the room. We brought the kitchen table in for the rubbing down table, and put the other table in the corner with a big drape over it, right down to the floor, so he wouldn’t see Gerda with the tape recorder. We set it all up with low lights and soft music ...’

Then Anna’s voice: ‘Did he make a pass at you?’

The stranger: ‘No, he didn’t, in the end. I think he woke up. Actually he wasn’t a very sexy-looking guy anyway. He had a couple of drinks and then he asked me to take off my dressing gown and lie on the table ...’

Vic: ‘And all he did was give you a rub down?’

‘Yes, he ...’

Vic said, ‘Pity’.

Knowing that her entry would inhibit the group, and disliking herself for it, Frances refrained from knocking.

‘... I put my glass on the table in the corner so Gerda could have a drink. I had him facing the other way, but where I was lying I could see in the mirror, and it was funny, I could see this slinky hand reach up and grab the whisky ...’

Frances walked among Vic’s trees, trying to interpret his ‘Pity’. Was he, then, more permissive than she believed, or was he merely giving the story the response it needed? Wasn’t it futile to pin hopes on anyone in this house when some stranger’s anecdote could freeze her from entering? And lastly, how could she measure Anna, and gauge the hold she

had on her husband, if Anna's life included worlds closed to Frances? Like her sister, four months before, she touched a young tree, shaking it slightly; she looked to see if any of Vic's trees were ones she recognized from home.

Then Sandra came out, with Vic and Anna in the doorway. Feeling like an apparition, Frances came over for the introductions, staying with Vic while Anna saw off the visitor. Vic told her, 'She works with Anna. Takes some course in the media. She'd do anything for a story. Anyhow, what brings you out our way today?'

He was the reason, he hoped, though there had to be a facade. But no, Frances had seen some bowls in a Saint Kilda antique shop, she thought they were just the sort of thing Anna would like, she'd rung Anna to arrange a trip to see them. Moving towards the drive she added, 'But there's plenty of room in the car ...'

If Anna had chosen not to put her off, then Anna had decided to go with Frances alone, Vic decided. Besides, the innuendo and understatement of a Frances/Vic approach would be impossible with Anna there. He said he'd mind the kids, who wouldn't want to be dragged across the city to be chivvied through a shop under a steely proprietorial eye and a spate of warnings not to touch.

Anna was still amused when she came back. 'You've got to give it to her, a flop doesn't worry her. The latest thing is, she and Gerda are doing a thing on the sex lives of Asian students. They've got themselves organized as blind dates for two Malaysian boys at some weekend conference at Macedon.' Political Vic said, 'They'll have fun', but Frances wanted to know, 'Why do they do it?'

Anna's 'Just for kicks, I suppose', opened the first cleavage of the day between the two women. Even at her university college Frances had done little, if anything, for kicks: her university years attenuated her, the girls she roomed with said she was like a piece of stretched out chewing gum; she'd have to break soon—but breaking was never in Frances' nature. She could paralyse, she could come to a full stop, as with Vic in the motel at Hamilton, but she couldn't and wouldn't collapse. Her

university years were like a novitiate; more and more learning, more subjects passed each year, and all this work like a bridge built out from one bank of a river to reach the other, each successive stage accompanied by more hope, faith and prayer. Once she'd graduated, her ineed for religion passed, but the habit was ingrained; it would take a decade to broaden that habit into an understanding of life incorporating the principles of her faith rather than dominated by them. And it would take motherhood, and here Anna had the call. Anna offered to drive, but Frances said no, she would; they'd have to go back to Parkville anyway because she'd forgotten her chequebook and she might want to buy something herself.

It is the nature of journeys to change people; watching the car swoosh down the road, Vic felt some small portion of destiny encapsulating the passengers. Turning the corner, reflecting the sun off its dark blue panels, the car seemed to function of its own accord. One could imagine the women freed, as by servants, for their dialogue. Vic waved to the disappearing car, and went inside, both relieved and burdened: events were, for a time, out of his hands, and conversely, things could hardly be the same when they returned. He was not aware yet of his greatest failing in love—that he wanted people or events outside himself to make his decisions for him, to force him to positions he might never have taken, but could willingly defend. Suspended time, time when no decision lay within his power, was therefore peculiarly comfortable for him. He set about making some impromptu musical instruments for his children - a pipe from a piece of garden hose, and a stringed instrument with nylon thread and a plastic container as a sounding box. Experimenting with these ideas taken from a library book, fiddling with them, adapting them as he made variations for the neighbours' children who, of course, wanted to be in the motley band blowing and twanging away in the back yard, Vic was out of time and happy. He started ratting through the shed to see if he could find materials to add percussion and brass to the tweets, pings, clunks and tootling filling the backyard, scaring the cats and sending the birds high away to other gardens. Vic was happy. Then

the children put down their instruments for other games, still in the back yard, and Vic sat by the kitchen window, so he could catch the winter sun and oversee the children. He got himself a cup of coffee and was settling back with the paper when someone else approached the door.

It was Patricia.

She stared glumly at the children while Vic made her coffee. A ball flew in the air, she sighed: 'I'm going through my .Saturday morning crisis. Sorry to inflict it on you. Just talk to me, I'll weather it. Anything you like.' Vic said, 'Anna told me you were at a football match we went to, we went with ...'

'Except that.'

Vic said, 'You're not the only one with a burden you know; I'm going through something myself.'

'Brave boy.'

She smiled thinly at him: 'Okay, you talk first. It'll be a change from Anna.'

It occurred to Vic that he knew very little of the Anna revealed to Patricia, and Sandra, and no doubt others. He said, 'You're probably the only person I could tell, and maybe the only person who would understand, because you know the people involved ...'

'Steer clear of Frances.'

'Why don't you steer clear of John Moore?'

'Touché. Clever boy.'

He said, 'I wouldn't care what Anna got up to, I wouldn't even ask, if I thought that when it was over, we'd be back as we were before.'

'That never happens.'

'Well, where's that leave me?'

'You're up Shit Creek, Vic, only you think it's a nice clear stream.'

He managed a grin, and stared momentarily at the children climbing the blue gum, which was thrashing with all the activity in its foliage. It took courage to talk to Patricia, she picked off one's stupidities so easily, he wondered what she was like when she recognized you in some other way.

‘Why can’t you give him up?’

She said, ‘You don’t understand me, do you. I am the sort person who needs to be snapped. Or plain simple thrown out. There has got to be a break. I don’t have the courage to make breaks, I just talk. Talk like a snake. I am the original bitch. No one feels like helping me, but someone has to. John Carcase Moore is such a puny person inside that mighty frame that he’s not game to touch me. He wants me much more than he wants Nelly the Belly, but he’s not game. And he doesn’t know how to throw me out. If he’d just tell me to go to buggery, once and for all, and make me believe it, it’d be okay. But he can’t. I make scenes with everyone else because I can’t have a scene with him. He simply folds up in a blubbering heap. You ought to see him. His fucking football coach ought to see him. The fucking stand full of barrackers ought to see him; they’d be amazed, I can tell you!’

‘Well, you’re not always like a snake.’

‘Oh shut up. Lover boy.’

‘What’s all this “boy” business?’

‘Well?’

Bitter, unpleasant, it was also provocative; did she want gentleness, or contempt? if he hauled her about in a sexual attack, and screwed her—word he hated—would it expunge everything, or merely confirm her in her self-detestation ?

She said, ‘That great hulk wouldn’t know what a relationship was.’

With her thoughts back on Carcase, Vic felt he was in the clear; yet he had felt, for a moment, at the height of her desperation, that if she could be released at all from her predicament, then anyone, almost anyone at all, could do it for her. She scorned attempts to rebuild her self-esteem; was abasement, then, the only way out? And, if so, who would take her into abasement, and share it with her?

The children had flung a rope from the blue gum to a coastal mahogany; they were apparently intending to make a tightrope six feet above the ground. Vic pushed open the window and yelled, ‘Hey, no! Hey, you’ll break your necks.’

‘Oooooooooohh, Daaad!’

‘It’s all right Mister Rogers, we’ve got this old bike with no tyres, we saw ‘em do it in the circus!’

Vic roared at them, ‘Don’t be silly! No you don’t! Walter! Glen! Get out of there. John, put that thing down on the ground. I don’t mind you climbing, but you’d never get across there!’

‘Oooooooooohh, Daaad!’

‘No! Send each other messages. Rig up a flying fox or something. Play monkeys, I don’t care what you do, but you don’t have to kill yourselves!’

Behind him he heard Patricia murmur, ‘Why not?’

He looked at her. ‘What?’ But she was serious. He tried to defuse the situation: ‘Because their parents’d get upset.’

She tested him. ‘If you haven’t got parents to get upset?’

He said, ‘There’s always a way out.’

‘Find it, and you won’t be a boy any more. And let me know when you find it, I could be interested.’

For a moment he felt the way out lay through her. It was a complication he momentarily welcomed, then dismissed.

‘What’ll we talk about?’

She said, ‘I think I’ll go now. They play in Geelong today, I’d better be moving.’

He showed his disgust.

She said, ‘Vic, boy, I’m no worse than you. Seeya. No, be the gentleman, show me out the front door.’

‘Throw you out.’

‘I wish you would. You can kiss me if you like. On the cheek.’ She pointed, the bareness of her hand surprised him, it seemed to need a glove. She said, ‘I once played in one of those Greek tragedies, did I ever tell you?’

‘No.’

‘*Medea*. They said the best part was when I wailed, off stage, right at the start. It was the peak of my performance which I never approached again.’

‘Is that supposed to tell me something?’

‘It tells *me* something. Seeya. Love to Anna, if you get a turn.’

Felled, dismal, he crept back to the kitchen. The backyard circus had reached the stage where the children were hopping like lions from one box or garden seat to another under the direction of Walter, who wielded a length of bamboo. Woof! Whoooo! and Rrraaaaarrgh! were the sound effects. Vic considered ringing Bob Banner, but he remembered Frances saying something about picking him up at his father’s place; and it was no good anyway, he had no weapons, no grounds, no bargaining power. He was at rock-bottom. With no hold on Anna but their daily habits of living, unpossessed of Frances, his romanticism an empty shell, his inadequacies exposed on every hand, he cast about and found himself wanting Patricia to come back. Her barbs, her salt-in-the-wounds style of conversation would be more confirmatory than the deadness overcoming him. He lay down on his daughter’s bed and, for the first time in years, considered the nature of adult life. Into his mind came Edgar’s epigram ‘Ripeness is all’: he was, at thirty-five, exactly at the midpoint in life, and it galled him that much ripeness was lacking. With the children, he had it; in the forest, even at the office, he felt a fair measure of it, and yet a nagging condemnation lurked in his mind—that such ripeness as he did possess had been cheated out of life. Study, qualifications, satisfactory work in his junior years, had given him the right to administer the human contribution to nature’s powers of regeneration. Such a position might, in civil service terms, be no more than his due, yet he felt that no special merit or personal achievement had earned him what he had; he had merely flowed with the social tide and it had brought him to a well-paid desk.

As for the children, they were too young yet to question his relationship with Anna, or to judge him by other criteria than the daddy they enjoyed; here he was safe, for a time, and yet he felt the ground

was shaky, it must one day give way. And as for Anna, he felt that she had deceived him, and yet he knew that her only crime was not to alert him to the inaccurate subjectivism of his love for her. Seeing her now with relative clarity for the first time, he was disappointed, yet he knew she could defend herself well enough by telling him that if he had been disillusioned eight years ago he would have been unhappy eight years earlier. The heady love he had had for her was, after all, something he had had, and it could never be taken away. Anna would know that, and in no way betray it; whatever she had going with Bob Banner, he knew that her memory was long, new experience would add to old, but never obliterate it. He was of great value to her, but instead of completely filling the foreground of her emotional life, he was one of many she saw clearly and with affection.

It was not enough. If he had crept to the mid-point of life by foolishness, self-deception and subterfuge, he would hold his ground by something better. He looked in the phone book for Mr Banner senior, and rang; Bob answered. Vic said:

‘Bob. The women have gone off shopping ...’

‘Looking for bowls, I believe ...’

Vic swept on. ‘Yes. Now, before they get back, you and I have got something to organize.’

‘Sounds promising.’

‘We’re going on a holiday. The four of us. In fact the six of us. What’re you like at camping?’

There was a chuckle at the other end. ‘Remind me to tell you how I got lost in a swamp, one duckshooting season.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Do you still have to dig a trench around the tent in case it rains?’

‘If you’re on a slope it might be a bit of use. Never mind that. Are you going to be in it?’

‘Have to see if we can organize some holidays. Or did you mean just a weekend?’

‘Holidays. Okay? We’d start up there where you and Frances came from, then go on north for a way.’

‘Could be good.’

Bob’s blandness was the very thing Vic wanted to get behind; but there would be time enough for that when they were away together, it didn’t anger him now. ‘All right. When the women get back ... I heard them say they had to pick you up ... we’ll sort it all out then.’ It was typical of Vic’s naiveté to believe that if the four of them - or six - were encapsulated for a given length of time then some resolution would emerge. If he had been in the car with Anna and Frances he might have thought otherwise, the contesting wives were enveloped in bitter traffic. Anna said, ‘Gee, is there a tram strike on?’ But Frances knew better: ‘No, They’ve got detour signs up ahead; they’re working in the middle of the road.’

Frances said, ‘It might as well be a weekday, there’s still only one or two people in each car.’ Coming from Frances, whom one could by no means imagine using public transport, or offering rides to any but those closest to her, this was irritating; the illogic, Frances seemed to imply, belonged to city life, not to her own use of a car. In fact, Anna felt, Frances’ whole attitude to the city she lived in was high-handed; two incomes and no children allowed her to live in a terrace fashionable enough to daunt half the people voting for her Party’s candidates. At her city desk, or moving up and down the country, she was like any other business executive, and yet she still wore that assumption, common among well-to-do country people, of knowing a superior way of life. Anna couldn’t resist it, she asked: ‘Does your Party see city life as some sort of aberration?’

As soon as she spoke, she felt she had been too bold; yet Frances, too, was scared, and almost failed to notice the car on her right converging for the one lane open past the workmen’s pit. By the time she braked, and moved forward again, the lights had changed, and she was caught in the middle of the intersection, protected by the workmen’s barriers from the cross traffic rushing behind and before. A man with a Gas & Fuel

emblem on his overalls smiled at her: 'Any port in a storm, eh?' then a baretop youth with a crowbar called from down in the hole, 'If they're comin' atya, lady, you can hop down here!' The first man saw Frances' reaction, and said softly, resting his hand on the top of her car, 'Can't always choose your company, can you?'

Meeker than Anna would have dreamed, Frances said 'No'. It barely got out, the little croak, Anna was amused: so she hated to be in other people's hands!

As the car moved on, Anna picked up her point: 'After all, the majority of people in developed countries are living in cities, and this is a trend that's going to continue. Doesn't that make your Party a sort of rearguard?'

Frances, driving stylishly through Carlton, was galled, but Anna went on: 'I mean, if the leaders and the other organizers are up-to-date people like you, well, you must feel pretty funny about some of the back-blocks people who vote for you?'

'Wouldn't that be true of the other parties too?'

Although Frances had her answers, she was surprised at Anna's aggression; if the attack broke through her shell of reticence and the conventions of polite exchange, would she be defenceless? Or far too tough?

'I suppose it would. But how do you square it all up?'

Annoyed, Frances refrained from passing, and fell in behind a moving van which blocked their view ahead; when the van checked, Frances nosed up to the broad, black arse of the truck.

'Careful!'

Frances tightened her pale lips.

'Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything.'

'We won't have any accidents Anna, you needn't worry.'

But they had already had one. Her anxieties had been stirred, yet a realistic exchange was no closer. Had she brought Anna on this trip merely to confer something, to assert ownership of Bob and pretend there was nothing with Vic? She was more possessive than self-pos-

sessed, Anna decided; she had to be shown there were limits to the good of that. 'Look, you get about a fair bit on your own. People must make approaches to you.'

'You can imagine what sort of men they are.'

Shit, thought Anna. She decided to be more brutal. 'Vic often goes away too; he's all over the state. If he wants opportunities, he's got them. I sometimes think it'd bring a bit more reality into our relationship if he broke out occasionally. He's fine, but he's narrow ...'

Frances caught the double edge, she was peremptory in saying: 'Do you think you should discuss him like this?'

'Yes, Frances, I do. If I don't discuss him with you, there's no point in discussing him with anyone'

It amounted to an accusation of involvement, Frances had enough sense not to protest too much, she stayed silent; then the van lurched out to avoid a cyclist, who almost rode in their path. Anna snapped out the window, 'Mind what you're doing!' The cyclist dropped back, but a red light between the colleges and the cemetery allowed him to catch up; insolently he rested his right foot on the running board of the Volkswagen, and answered the stares of the two women with, 'If you had a pack rack, I could get a ride with you.' 'Full marks for trying, Charlie', Anna told him as the car moved off; Frances grumbled, 'Cheek!' but, as the car veered right to cross Sydney Road, the cyclist changed his mind and followed them. Pedalling furiously, and waving impulsively with a dramatic upraising of his right hand, he came abreast of them again just as Frances moved away. Anna looked over her shoulder: 'I think he's chasing us!' Frances preserved a stony silence, but Anna laughed: 'He'd be too puffed by the time he caught us anyway'; deliberately vulgar, it challenged Frances to declare herself, or show herself as ... stiff? Inhibited? A pill? Frances said, 'Well, we'll give him the thrill of the chase, if that's what he wants', and speeded up; two youths in a sports car spurred alongside, then dropped in behind them. Anna laughed: 'We're really gathering a following!' Then a battered Mini sporting Carlton football banners roared up to the sports car, whose driver indi-

cated the Volkswagen with the women. The Mini accelerated, inspected them, then took first place in the line. As Frances pulled up outside the terrace, the cyclist came distantly into view, pursued by a galumphing Labrador and two minor dogs barking at the big one passing through their territory. All this, and Anna's laughter, sent Frances scurrying inside; the two cars did tight circles in the street and called out, 'Hi love, coming to the footy with us?' but there was enough humour in Anna's easy wave to send them off in a tumult of sound.

Returning with the cheque book, Frances peeped through the door; her relief on seeing no cars was a delicious morsel for Anna. At the sight of the cyclist dismounting to shake his head admiringly, longingly, at them, Frances checked, nearly went back in, but gathered her resolve, and strode to her car as if the Prime Minister had summoned her to Canberra. Yet a couple of blocks away she smiled ruefully and said, 'Robert McPherson says we all make our own situations, which of us made all that?' She was enjoying it in retrospect; Anna wished she could be natural more often, and if it took Vic to unstiffen her, to bring her out, let it be Vic, why not? But then, how to tell her this without her freezing up? How to make her feel her own approval? And could Frances ever cope with a Bob set temporarily aside for a man giving her what she needed?

They found their way through North Melbourne to King Street. Frances tried to describe the bowls. She'd forgotten the name of the shop, but she knew where it was. Anna said it sounded like Dreizler and Deller, but Frances thought that wasn't the name. Anna felt it had to be, from the description, but didn't want to argue; besides, the bowls sounded heavy and sombre, Victorian in the complacent and respectable sense. There were also, it seemed, a set of tureens which could be bought separately.

Somewhere at the north end of the city the balance changed between them. Frances pointed to a building and said, 'That's where Bob worked when he first got back from Kerang. Holyman & Langford. But he's gone ahead since then.' It was a faceless forties construction, which

would have gone unnoticed, but another traffic hold-up occurred right in front of them; a truck removing rubbish from a building site came out too quickly for a petrol tanker, they locked bumpers, the petrol tanker skidded and might have gone right over but for the concrete surround of a tree in the centre of the road. This steadied the tanker's trailer and prevented a disaster, but the southbound traffic was blocked until the trucks could be parted. The two drivers were having a good deal to say, and the spectators were gathering.

The stillness was awkward, especially outside Holyman & Langford; no worse thing could have happened from Anna's point of view.

Two towtrucks arrived, toplights flashing, and a second dispute began: who was to get the job? But it seemed that both were needed, the petrol truck had to be lifted and the rubbish truck dragged, simultaneously, if they were to be parted.

Anna said, 'Do you realize that if that thing had gone over, and caught alight, we wouldn't be here? We'd have gone sky high!' It had not occurred to Frances: startled, she turned to stare Anna full in the eye.

Much has been imputed to the exchange of glances as a means to truth; in this case it was Anna's inability to break away that tipped the scales. Frances, believing in authority, had authority: Anna, quite able to act amorally on impulse, was plagued, in reflection, with a protestant conscience. For some basic reason far beyond analysis, the prospect of being incinerated weakened her more than it did Frances; or was it simply that Frances had, as yet, nothing positive to feel guilty about, only an intent, and that didn't count? Frances said, with considerable severity, 'Well, it would have been quick. And there wouldn't have been much left to worry about, would there?' A fearful condemnation pervaded her words, before which Anna quailed. The implication was that such a brutal ending would have been, for some of those involved, a rough and ready justice; for others, the martyrdom of having chosen their friends unwisely. It occurred to Anna that Frances was in no way shirking the situation, and that she, Anna, would have given much to be elsewhere.

This was an accident of morality. Anna's late father, himself a for-ester, had left a deep impress on his daughter. Her mother, living now in a darkly panelled house in Malvern, had bequeathed to her daughter her shell of a way of life, and something of her sense of situation. For Anna, always, rooms should be fully treated, as Edwardian/Art Nouveau rooms were; that this was an unfashionable concept unlikely to be revived was a nuisance to her—no more—though she struggled always, often without conviction, to fill up space with things. Her father's asceticism, puritan and ungenerous in matters of sex, had also left its mark; no one's claims transcended judgement, Anna was by temperament unable to pay homage to any gods - political, sporting, religious or whatever. Even the most extreme acts of human history were measured against her sense of personality, which she cultivated as a corrective to anything that might sweep her off her feet. But there was a negative paternal influence, too; the things he shut out were all the more alluring. If the chief expression of human personality was sexual, she meant to enjoy it: and the weaknesses and irresponsibilities her father would have condemned were things she cheerfully condoned. But Anna had also learned watchfulness and caution, and some ringing dread of her father's command still lingered. The voice of moral denunciation might: be—was—ridiculous, fusty; but it took a gathering of forces—and hence time—to throw off its influence.

Frances had this other advantage, that she was at home in this part of the city. Finance had a legitimacy for her which liberal intellectuals were inclined to deny, it provided investment opportunities for a countryside of Jack Moroneys. The same logic - they believed - applied in their operations as in these high-rise business towers. Anna's attitude—that they made a dehumanized environment, that man would soon have to turn back from his present line of development, that he was being small-scaled by his own creations—had the weakness of a negative stance, it was trying to hold at bay a force too big for it.

Able to make most people quail before her confidence, Frances was nonetheless insatiably curious to have Anna explain the apparent offer of

her husband. Staggered by Anna's bluntness, and unable to know how the thought was conceived, let alone expressed, she could see it only as some sort of trap, the inner Frances was being tempted into the open. For what purpose? Hoping to explore the situation without showing her hand, she said primly, 'Do you let your husband choose any of the things you have in the house?' Linked, as it was, to the bowls at the end of their journey, and the tempting offer made two miles back, it was a typical Frances stratagem, but the traffic spoiled it. Urged by tooting from the intersection behind them, by now in chaos, Frances edged her car into one of the northbound lanes at a time when traffic lights held up the oncoming traffic, and she passed the accident. She was scarcely back in the southbound lanes when a Mazda swept noisily by them, crowded with young people, having done the same trick just in time to avoid the oncoming cars. The Mazda swayed and swerved as it slowed down; Frances said, 'Look at that!' Anna commented, 'He wasn't as cunning as you.'

Believing herself caught out, Frances held her tongue, then, finding the silence too much, burst out, 'Look at them, you'd think they were drunk already.' Anna was cautious: 'Hmm. What's that sign on their car?' but it was too far ahead to read. Frances said, 'That's another thing, these people making declarations about themselves on their cars; they really get me. It's so ineffectual, I think it's puerile.'

The habit, Anna observed, was largely confined to protestors and Labor voters, no wonder it didn't appeal to Frances; then they came close to the Mazda and saw two hairy youths grinning at them over the top of a yellow sign with black printing which declared:

I'M A LOVER, I'M A FIGHTER, I'M A KAWASAKI RIDER.

There were girls on their knees, the whole carload was talking and laughing boisterously. The little grunt which was Frances' only comment was a blend of contempt, amusement and perplexity at the way the journey was bombarding her with signals. And the car next to the Mazda, when they pulled up at the lights, had a Labor Party sign IT'S TIME! displayed in the rear window. Anna said, 'Who's going to win the elec-

tion?’ but Frances put this aside with something close to good humour: ‘Oh gosh, don’t let’s talk about that!’

Politics, sex and religion, thought Anna. What will she talk about? But the next move came from Frances, she said, ‘I’ll tell you why I don’t like those signs. You can be the weakest person in the world and you can put up a sign without being tested in any way at all.’ Anna would have disputed this, but Frances went on, ‘You don’t have to stand or fall by it. You can wash it off next week if you change your mind. Or you can leave it on your car and tell yourself you’re doing your bit.’

Anna said, ‘I think you’re seeing it the wrong way. We’re surrounded by strangers, we don’t know who they are or what they are. This is their declaration, they’re sending out a message, I think it’s good.’

Frances said, ‘Yes, well, that’s my real quarrel with city life, everyone’s anonymous. Up home, people don’t have those things all over themselves. Up home, you know who they are, you know what they believe, you know them through and through.’

She was red. But Anna attacked: ‘That’s a myth, Frances. You don’t know yourself through and through; you hardly know yourself at all. It’s why you’re so firm, you’re scared of what might be there that you don’t know about.’

This blasphemy against their notional friendship coincided with their car’s ascent: onto Kings Way bridge; with exhilarating ease the car suspended their dialogue and threw them, lifesize, into a working model of a city. Ships loaded through giant jaws, a helicopter settled on a pontoon-supported pad, a lone sculler dipped oars in the filthy Yarra; warehouse roofs ran everywhere in corrugated lines, chimneys puffed, electric bulbs flashed contradictory time signals, PAN AM skited, trains rumbled behind and beneath; the Governor’s Valhalla, flag extended, caught a shaft of sunlight denied the seagulls circling without formation, like rubbish in a whirlwind. As they lowered in South Melbourne, Frances replied with a courage that compelled Anna’s admiration: ‘No, Anna, you’re wrong. I think I know most of what’s inside me. I’m scared

because I don't know where I'd end up if I broke away from my upbringing.'

Underestimating the strength of her own attack, Anna was surprised by Frances' confession, and humbled; as a self-assessment, it lacked little, yet, strong as Frances had revealed herself within her limits, Anna felt she must advise. She started to say, 'If you do ...' but Frances, too, was talking; taking her eye from the road, she asked, 'How did you do it?'

'I took a deep breath, and plunged in.'

'How old were you?'

'Seventeen.'

'Why did you?'

That Frances should ask the question revealed that she believed in – wanted – a world without dichotomies. If there were contradictions in the universe, let them be resolved at the level of supreme authority, let a clear steady light bathe the lives of lesser, obedient folk. Used to thinking in this way, she was able to slip through inconsistent and contradictory attitudes without selfconsciousness, so long as the feeling of being onside with virtue remained undamaged. For Anna, it was self-evident that every stage in life represented a break of some sort, it was self-destructive to remain within a framework when it was outgrown; if people couldn't see this, they were deluding themselves. Yet to answer the question brought her method of life into the open, and since her method was her, she found it hard. Looking uncomfortably at the rivers of traffic, Anna said, 'I don't know, I think it was inevitable. I knew I had to some day. I think I used the old method of learning to swim—jump in and see if you float!'

'And did you float, or did you feel you were going under?'

Anna had had enough of direct questioning, and didn't catch the drift of Frances' question; cheerful, frank, she chuckled: 'Been swimming strongly ever since!'

Frances took the laughter badly. Pale again, and tight, she said, 'All right, I went to dances up home, I could have gone off with boys in cars, but I felt if I did I'd be losing something.'

Anna was enjoying herself, it was easy to score: 'I'll bet that's what they had in mind!'

But Frances stuck to it doggedly. 'I wanted sex but I didn't want juvenile sex. If they had to do it in cars and round the back of dance halls, I didn't want them doing it to me. I didn't want to go home feeling ashamed, or feeling that the next dance I went to ...'

She was speaking, Anna thought, as if to a carload of Catholics, she simply couldn't discuss her personal apprehension of sex.

'... when I was in third form I started to look at all the people who came to our place. The women, and their husbands. I was fascinated by the link between them. But they had families, it was all somehow in order. I think sex is exploited these days, it's blown way out of all proportion ...'

'I think that too, till I want to go to bed with someone.'

The traffic lights turned red. They stopped, unable to extricate themselves, wondering how much further to go. The pain and animosity of their situation began to surface. Frances longed to discuss Bob, but dared not. Anna could see the inevitability of such discussion, and no way to avoid it, except ...

'How did you come across this shop we're going to?'

'I saw it on my way down to Channel 2, and I stopped. I thought I might get you something, but the prices were rather frightening ...'

Could Anna believe her ears? Get her something? Frances must have been impelled by an urge to make off with Vic, an urge which she could only obliterate by the idea of a generous gesture giving the lie to her real thoughts, the intensity of her desire could only be guessed at by the extravagance of her counter proposal. Anna felt tremendous impatience rising with the whole tangled, duplicitous deal, she longed to say to Frances, Look, Bob and I are making love, work something out for yourself! There was pity as well as anger in her response, what

hope did Frances have if she kept retreating to the well-tried verities of a catholic home and family? In fact she was bloody well talking about them now ...

‘There was this wonderful vase, I knew an old lady in our street ...’

‘Up home’, supplied Anna, growing reckless.

‘... and she had two of them, one each end of the mantelpiece. If I could think of some excuse to make it a very special day, she used to take them down and let me look at the pictures painted on them.’

If only Frances would be bitchy, would have it out! Would declare herself, would show what she was up to! Anna’s mood grew wilder, she called across the front seat: ‘Were they proper for a child?’

‘Very chaste’, said Frances. ‘Mrs Menhennitt wouldn’t have had anything else in the house.’ It was the start of her condemnation; Anna, hearing the tone of voice, said, ‘I take it she was a dear old widow lady?’ Frances ploughed on, ‘She was a fine-looking woman, and very bitter. Her husband had cleared off and left her with four children to bring up. I don’t know how she managed.’

If, as it seemed, this was Frances’ oblique way of making her point, Anna could go along, though somewhat impatiently: ‘So, what happened? Her husband ran off to Queensland?’

‘No, he moved in with his new woman, on the other side of town, but the same street, the very same street.’

‘You think he was a bit of a bastard, obviously.’

‘She never forgave him. She hated him like poison.’

Anna fell in. ‘Well, I’m glad you didn’t go buying that vase.’

Nothing in Frances inhibited the wish to savour victory. She must have driven half a block, smiling quietly, before delivering her reply: ‘No. It was too dear. It wouldn’t have been worth it.’

Were the bowls, and the trip, only an excuse for that moment? Had Frances planned to say it, set it up in her mind beforehand? And was there more to come? As they pulled up at the shop, Anna fought back: ‘Yes, I thought you meant Dreizler and Deller. It couldn’t have been

anything else from the way you described it.' But Frances was only interested in her bag, the strap was caught in the seat belt.

The woman among the glass cases remembered Frances. 'Oh, you've brought your friend back. It was the bowls you were interested in, wasn't it. Go down and have a look. The tureens are separate.' Her skill in unobtrusive direction was all too apparent; Anna diverted to another showcase.

'Oh, you're interested in Meissen ware?'

'Interested in looking.'

'It's so expensive now. And it's so difficult to import really good pieces, Mrs Morley's just come back from England, we should have a shipment coming through in two or three weeks, would you like me to let you know?'

Frances, for whom a visit to such a place was a rarity, moved serenely from German silver to Chinese perfume bottles while Anna staved off the attendant: 'Those are three satyrs supporting that bowl, aren't they?'

'Yes, it's an early Meissen piece. The woodlands wild. They wouldn't want to let them loose, would they? Ahuh!'

Anna rather wished the ceramic satyrs would get off on a rampage, it might let some sanity into a day turning bad; Frances, she saw, was gazing at her with sober respect, standing next to a cabinet of Chinese vases; a blue and white piece, though much grander, resembled the one she had at home. Frances appeared to be back on her give-a-gift theme, she asked: 'These wooden stands, do you ever get a spare one?'

'We-ell, we do pick one up occasionally. *Just* a moment, I think there could be one out the back.'

The woman disappeared, Frances pointed to the carved ebony stand, 'Your vase would look better on a stand, don't you think?' And then, without waiting for an answer: 'The bowls arc over here.'

Anna, in Frances' power by now, followed dutifully, though determined not to buy.

An auctioneer would have described them as ‘fit for a baronial table’, or hearkened after ‘a more spacious age’. There were nine bowls, and three tureens in a row like Father, Mother, Baby Bear. A fourth, much larger tureen stood on a nearby cabinet, it could have filled the bowls twice over.

She was back. ‘I’ve no idea what they put in that one! Anyhow, we did have a stand, it’s just a tiny bit chipped, you’d have to turn that side away.’

Frances came, in with the pressure: ‘It’d just fit your vase, Anna’, and looked at the lady, who said, ‘I’ll have to ask Mr or Mrs Morley for a price, I don’t think they’d want very much for it. Hang on, I’ll ring, I know Mrs Morley’s at home.’

Anna felt like breaking vases, Frances’ neck, and for that matter, everything handed down from the past. The past was a boring albatross with price tag discreetly hidden. To the shopwoman she managed a mere nod, to Frances a beam of hostility aimed at those steady eyes. Light struck through the glass cases, Anna shuffled about; to Frances she called, ‘Are you interested in pictures?’ She meant the dreariness of portraits, English cathedrals, yachting scenes and foxhunts to make their own sarcastic comment. But Frances said no. Hostility mounting, Anna called, ‘Oh, here’s one. And another!’ The first was a pallid watercolour Madonna by some sub/pseudo Raphael, the second a lithograph, palely tinted, entitled ‘Les délices de la maternité’.

‘You should get something, your walls are bare.’ She felt like adding, ‘You’ll want to do better than travel posters, but the urge to score off Frances was waning, it was herself she was starting to question; in a shop where she should have felt more at home than Frances, how come she felt so alien? What was it bugged her about the bowls? And the fucking tureens?’

Frances was coming over.

She studied the pictures, Anna slunk back to the bowls.

Which were heavy, white, with deep blue swags festooning the rim in a too-regular pattern. In a way they explained why Anna had no wish

to go 'up home', they were the embodiment of a moral residue she felt caught in, even in Melbourne. Frances' wish to take the Rogers north was like a proposal to rebaptise them in the tenets bandied hypocritically in the previous century; the bowls weren't grand, they were only upper-bourgeois; if modern bourgeois life required one to be a little more flexible and perhaps garish than was possible in 1880, if space, light and time were no longer organized in such heavily reassuring orders, why bother with such things? Why go back? Why let the farmers who supported Frances' party, and the business-respectable people who supported their Liberal Party allies, dictate the terms of society? Anna found herself, as at the football, anxious for the defeat of Frances and all she stood for, she wanted the Labor Party to win the coming election, she wanted to break out of the mouldy old ethos represented, to her, by the Victoriana so popular among her age-group. She realized she was letting aesthetics go overboard, it was all quite irrational, but she'd had no enjoyment from the silver, ceramics and furniture which normally delighted her; even the inanimate bowls were part of a contest and she had to admit that the contest was not so much for her - her private life was free enough - but for the soul of Frances' husband. Which way was Bob going to go? As well as the sex, there was a strong active component in her love for Bob, she wanted him free of bowls, terrace houses and the stern wisdom of poker-faced farmers and city businessmen. He was already loose inside the systems of thought she despised, it was only a matter of getting him out. Which wouldn't be easy.

The shopwoman returned. Mrs Morley thought eight dollars would be a fair price for the stand, it was slightly damaged, after all. Frances closed in, reaching into her bag, there was no doubt about it, she had her hand on her purse, she was getting it out; since her chequebook was already in evidence for the bowls, there was no mistaking her intention. 'No, no', said Anna, 'not unless you want me to get you a picture'—she almost sniggered. But Frances shook her head, shook her hair gravely; Anna whipped out eight dollars and pressed them on the shopwoman, who busied herself with tissue paper while Frances, putting the cheque-

book on the counter, began reaching into the cabinet for bowls and tureens.

10

Just as Vic was pleased to see the women drive away, Bob felt safe at Lavender Street. He was a man who hated choices, policies, definition. He couldn't see that any good ever came of too-close analysis, too-great accuracy.

As a youth, troubled by his virginity, he had drifted into the company of Donny Tyler and Tiger Diderot, two cop-hating workmen at a carpet factory. They were men of tremendous vigour and a brazen pursuit of status symbols, such as their succession of powerful cars, none of them ever paid for. The exciting sex lives of which they boasted centred mostly on Saturday night pick-ups in the city or girls foolish enough to hang around billiard rooms in High Street, yet it sounded, to Bob, like a season on the Venusberg. Amid shouts of laughter Tiger explained that they 'did it' on a mound of carpets in a city warehouse to which their factory delivered: they'd stolen the key for an hour to get a duplicate cut. 'Shag-pile carpets, son!' was Donny's boast; at seventeen Bob's father let him go out, and he sat in the back of the Mini-Cooper, belittled by Donny's, 'I don't know why we brought you, you little rat, this won't fit six, you'll have to miss out', but Bob, nerves screwed up, punched the back of the seat and said no, and Tiger softened: 'That's the spirit, kid, you'll be right, one of the sheilas'll have to double up.'

The sheilas were very young, staring at the rings in Catanach's; naive Bob classified them as marrying types, but they came willingly enough, and fortunately there were three: Tiger seemed to think that the situation, six in a circle on a pile of carpets, demanded *crème de menthe*, but instead each drank a can of beer before they moved further into the warehouse. Tiger showed them the office, claimed it contained a safe

and he knew how to blow it, but this was merely for its frisson effect, by now they had felt through the pairing off. Bob's girl said, 'Well, if I'm having him, at least I'm having the soft pile'; to Bob's surprise the other men agreed, but perhaps it was because there was some light from the street outside falling on the pile, he thought he heard amusement and some comment during his initiation. When they were together again on the pile, Bob's girl said she would have to go, her father was a solicitor and he didn't know she came into the city like this, he picked her up in Kew when the Town Hall dance was over. Tiger and Donny merely told her to 'Hop off, then', but Bob felt he had to go with her, they mocked his chivalry with poorly-applied upper-crust accents; but take her home he did, and felt flattered beyond measure when she got off several stops before the Town Hall to take him on a walk.

When he got home that night, sore-footed, he realized that there was a Marie in his life for whom he had a street address but no surname, and no house number. He took to avoiding Donny and Tiger, and often walked in the Kew Junction area, striding above a sea of lights to the north where he knew he belonged. She was never at the Town Hall dances, and he never encountered her in the city. Yet he made his preparations: he lifted Donny's key-case in the billiard room and took the warehouse key; when he replaced it the following night he had a duplicate. He prowled the street she lived in, and patrolled near Catanach's. One night he saw her, she had a friend called Julie, she didn't want to separate, she really wanted someone with a car, there was a dance at Elwood she wanted to get to.

But the key intrigued her, she wanted Bob to give it to her, he said he would if she'd come to the warehouse with him. She tacked a 'Julie comes too' clause on the agreement, and they started walking.

The Julie girl was willing to try out the carpet bed, but Bob wanted something from Marie first, a double something: the secret of her superior status and her reason to betray it in a sordid adventure. But she said, 'I'm bored, we've got to do something', so they explored the warehouse,

they were halfway up the stairs when the door opened, and there was a torch.

They froze; the torch found Marie's bag on the shag-pile, the night-watchman grunted and moved to pick it up. He started to go through it, Marie whispered to Bob with the urgency of terror: 'Get it back! There's things in there with my name on. Get it back!' Bob rose to the occasion like an actor in a bad movie, he fumbled in his pockets for something to throw, found nothing, and whipped off a shoe. He flung it at the far wall, glass broke, the night-watchman turned in that direction: Bob urged the girls to run for the back door, while he waited; when the watchman turned to pursue the girls, Bob sprang down beside him, snatched the bag and shouldered his way past. The three intruders had reached the lane when they heard the watchman call, 'Stop or I'll shoot!' Disbelieving, but uncertain, they froze in a bricked-in archway while the torch played over their faces; the watchman, a scared little man, felt he had the ascendancy, he began to lecture them on their filthy sex habits, it was a demented recital of the perils of backyard abortions, VD and abandoned babies. Bob said, 'I'm not listening to your hang-ups, you haven't got a gun, I'm off.' The girls clutched him and he led them away, walking with as much dignity as one shoe would allow. The watchman yelled, 'You won't get away with your harlots, boy, I'll be ringing the cops, a kid with one shoe won't be hard to find!' Bob felt strangely strong, he felt he was the girls' protector, he dug in his pocket for the warehouse key and dropped it on the bluestones, he said, 'There's the key, there's nothing missing, I won't be coming back', and he led Julie and Marie into the city's movement. Julie started to get scared again and wanted to get home but Marie said no, they must have a drink first; so Bob stuffed socks and his other shoe in a rubbish bin and strode barefoot into a coffee lounge. Stared at, but admitted, he felt a high pride which in some self-explanatory way obliterated the wish to walk again on that hill above the city lights, the hill where this Marie with no surname apparently lived, a hill of homes set back in long-established gardens. Bob felt himself justified, he had guided the girls through a situation they could

never have handled, he had given them the adventure they must have been looking for, they could go back now to the well-regulated dance at the Town Hall, and grow older to a round of parties and social circles he expected never to rise to.

Yet he had thrown away the key; he, too, would not be going back, there was more than a warehouse closed to him now. When Donny and Tiger, three weeks later, reported that the locks on the carpet warehouse had been changed, Bob heard his own voice, with not a trace of deference or inferiority, throw back to them, 'Well, you better get yourselves a flat, boys, it was a pretty sordid little hole.'

When his football club—pre-Collingwood—made a mess of the Birchip hotel in their end of season booze-up, it was Bob who wrote the apologetic letter accompanying the cheque; in his Kerang years he sometimes went back there, all was forgiven, he was the cleanskin who'd tried to restrain the others—or that was how the publican remembered it.

At the university he teamed up with John Moore, it was Carcase who got him invited to train at Collingwood; Bob played in the reserves, but felt he wasn't ready yet; he lacked the hard-driven motivation of the top sportsman, though he had the skill. Some sort of pampering was necessary, some build-up of ego, some sympathetic expectations to live up to which he knew he could fulfil.

Much of what he needed came from the Moroneys, Frances' parents, and her uncle, Tom O'Connell. More came from the Kerang footy club and the management of Carmody's; it was a make-work job, called Credit Adviser and Assistant Accountant, Bob's success came from doing far more than the fictitious job demanded, and organizing the staff picnic at Lake Charm; Bob cuddling children on the motorboat rides was a complete success, he had this skill of acting as a projection of others' ideals, of being as others would have him. Mr and Mrs Moroney urged him to finish his commerce degree, they meant Frances to get one, in pressing him to be her academic equal they were tendering their willingness to have him as their son. But Bob said he'd do accountancy, and they wondered, but he picked up subjects by correspondence and trips

to town for classes he declared were not to be missed. He failed nothing in his two years in Kerang, and when he said he wanted to go back to the city, the club cleared him without demur; it was typical of Bob in those years that he promised them that when his career with Collingwood was over, he'd come back to the country side that had put him on his feet.

It was a peculiar talent Bob had, to appear as others wanted him, he could build up goodwill, and sense where people wanted to push him, and then show them the direction he wanted; but he knew he would never get Frances unless he was prepared to use a little more steel than he cared to show her parents, and Kerang.

Bob went back to Collingwood, and Frances to the university. His courtship was like a longdrawn soothing, it centred on driving her up home for weekends, or holiday visits to her parents; he took her out rarely in Melbourne, there was always the pretence that she was busy, and had plenty of university males to bother with, and that he, on his side, did what he did as a friend of the family. Sex was a frenzy in Frances' university years, she could have been foolish—or was it natural?—with half a dozen men; but each crisis weathered made her more grateful for Bob's careful attention, when he offered it; by identifying himself with all she respected he made it inevitable that when her first, spontaneous, outgoing urges had exhausted themselves, he would be all that was left: it was a sort of last-man-standing technique; he wanted to build himself up so that when she married him, it was inevitable.

He had his way, it was cleverly engineered. On a trip to Kerang, they had dinner at a hotel in Kilmore, he could see she wanted to make love, he put his hand on her leg. She trembled, but said nothing, made no acknowledgement, but something in her glances left it up to him. He said, 'The car's not running well, I don't think we'd make it, you'll have to ring your parents, we're going back to Melbourne.'

After dinner, Frances rang her father, using the lines Bob had put in her mouth. Her father offered to come down for them, but Frances said no, it was better to go back. She said she had a lot in front of her, her father was sympathetic, she shouldn't work so hard at the university;

but Bob was smirking, even Frances went within an ace of laughing at herself. They drove on to Bendigo and stayed at a hotel, Bob booked them in; he led her upstairs like a statue, he undressed her in the dark and made her undo some of his buttons; she obeyed, stiff, unresisting. In bed, she wouldn't make love, but her shaking, her kisses and her response to his caressing was a confession of all she'd suppressed. In the morning she walked downstairs with a rather lively certainty that Bob found amusing, for a moment he thought she was going to query the tariff. They breakfasted in calm; frustration hung about them, but that was nothing new for Frances, it was only the extra intensity this time—transfigured by Bob's question, 'Do you think your parents'd mind if you married before you finished your course?' To which Frances answered with parental certainty: 'We'll marry after all our exams are over, and there won't be any question then, will there?' He said, 'I don't really want to wait that long', but she said, 'I think my father would like to invest in some inner city I property. I think if we wait just that long and live in an area he's interested in, he might help us.'

Two weeks later, Bob's cartilage went. His Collingwood career had lasted eight games, of which Frances had seen one. Her parents came down to see Bob in hospital; smiling on him as on their own son, they suggested that, as soon as he was up and about he would be busy, Frances was keen to start househunting, they could have a loan and pay it back at their own convenience, no interest. The only other mention of Bob's future could be glanced at in Mr Moroney's remarks about a Kerang footballer who'd given the game away, he'd never recovered his confidence after a cartilage operation, keen as he was to play again.

Bob could take a hint; if the Moroneys said it, Frances thought it, he knew she'd be buying in a better area than Pascoe Vale or Preston, it'd mean another up-grading of his ever malleable responses. And he lacked, as he knew, the staying power and the hard-bitten determination of the champion; perhaps it was better to bow out while he still gave promise than to stay on and be relegated permanently to the reserves, or be invited to ask for a clearance. He knew, lying in bed with the Moroneys

gazing fondly on him, that he would train again, do his exercises, even ask for a game or two in the reserves; that he would play well enough for the coach to urge him on, but that one day, in vigorous match practice his confidence would appear to fail, would be shown to fail, as he knew it had failed already.

Why? Already Bob sensed that there was something circular in his movements in life; he never broke through a situation, but turned aside when he saw a barrier. As a player he had always kept out of fights, laughed about them, described them as ‘not my scene’; but where, he wondered, was his scene? In love with Anna, he hardly knew what he wanted, the turmoil and excitement were so heady that he failed to see it as yet another attempt to step across a line surrounding him; the simple male to female attraction was so absorbing, he was so occupied in finding opportunities to be alone with Anna that he hadn’t realized yet that a failure to achieve something new with her would mean that the last man standing was laid low, perhaps forever, unless there was something new offered to him by his partner Frances. Bob was, in fact, deeply involved in ‘his scene’ without realizing it; the blandness shown to Vic and Frances was so much a habit, and so useful in this current intrigue, that he scarcely knew he’d gone out of his depth.

He’d not done so before. In Kerang he took out girls, but kept a weather eye on the Moroneys. He missed none of the social life with Collingwood, but rarely brought Frances into it, until the cartilage brought him low, and then he was as cheerfully faithful to her as he had previously been a warm and friendly lover with anyone who appreciated him. At all costs he avoided crisis, not because he was scared of what he couldn’t handle—the warehouse incident gave him confidence in that regard—but because his own coolness and indifference under pressure worried him.

An incident in his Kerang years which had repercussions later in Preston showed this. Driving home from Pyramid Hill late one night he stopped for two girl hitchhikers who had been attacked; a truckdriver had threatened them with a knife and attempted to rape them. One,

running into the night, tried to stop a passing car, but the driver, seeing her distraught face and wild gesticulations, preferred to pass on. The other girl, battered, managed to break free when Bob's lights appeared; the truck drove off.

Bob said the first thing to do was to find the attacker, and the other was to get them a bed for the night. The bed would be easy, he knew Jim Kelleher at the Crown, but the truck might be miles away. But, coming into Kerang, the girls saw a truck stopped at an all-night service station with its bonnet propped up; they felt it was the attacker, though they weren't sure, and they were too scared, even accompanied by Bob, to confront the driver. So Bob left them parked in a dark spot and entered the roadhouse, asking to use the telephone. When he said loudly, 'Police?' a ghoulish man in overalls looked up, startled: Bob told the police the story and finished, 'He won't get far, I've stuffed a load of sugar in his tank.' The man left his steak and rushed out.

He was found an hour later trying to steal a car, the magistrate praised Bob for his actions, and referred to the strong presumption of guilt to be drawn from the man's actions, it made up for the girls' rather uncertain identification of their attacker.

Two years later Bob's father opened the door at Lavender Street to face the harsh inquiry: 'Does Bob Banger live here, used to live in Kerang?' Mr Banner, no fool, said no one of that name lived anywhere round about.

Then ensued a crude little drama: the man walked away, but checked, and heard Mr Banner speaking clown the passage, 'C'm'ere Bob, you know this feller? Just look through the curtain.' Half an hour later a van parked across the road, the driver was apparently reading the paper.

Bob, swallowing some pride, rang Tiger Diderot, he cruised past a few minutes later, then rang back: 'I know that bastard. Used to call himself Digby. He's wanted. Gonna turn 'im in? Don't bring me into it if you do.'

The van disappeared, Bob rang the number he'd noticed on the side, and asked for Mr Digby; the voice said, 'What're you gettin' at, no Digby here.' Bob said, 'Sorry, must be the wrong number, I saw your van parked in Lavender Street,' and hung up.

By this stage his plans with Frances were far advanced, but he didn't tell her about the incident; it would frighten her on the brink of marriage, he was quite prepared to give Digby's new name and address to the police, and if he did, he realized, it would not be out of fear for his own safety, which would be understandable, but because he was ruthless. Uncertain, undecided he might be as to his role in life, but what he had he would hold. The jailing of a Digby wouldn't cost him a minute's sleep.

So this was Bob's realism, a certain separateness from other people; it fitted easily enough with his gregariousness. Gay times were good, but if anyone got hurt it was their own lookout. He took no pride in this attitude and preferred to keep it hidden from Anna, whose wide-ranging compassion, feminine and generous, softened her sense of reality. He told her once about Donny Tyler and Tiger Diderot, she said, 'I know, I teach boys who're going to grow up like that, I think they're rather marvellous in a way.' Bob, on the other hand, could use Tiger or anyone else according to the rules of the game, there was give and take; but never the dispassionate, objective kindness that Anna could bring to everything except the things most deeply touching her.

How deeply was Bob committed? He hardly knew. His surreptitious visits to the Heidelberg house were always within a whisker of comedy—taking fright at a door slammed by the wind: walking past like a stranger when he saw Anna talking to a neighbour at the gate—yet some of the things murmured intimately were a surprise, almost a shock, when he recalled them later.

Musing on these, her willingness, her parted legs pressed tensely on the bed, but warmly receiving him, that tender smile, mostly to herself, as she closed the curtains, her whispered 'Oh that's nice', he felt himself stir, wanting her ... and she would be with him in a few minutes,

but—damnation!—accompanied by Frances, Vic, no doubt her kids, the whole catastrophe, as Zorba would have put it.

Bob leapt up, asked his father if there was anything he wanted at the corner shop, scarcely waited for the no before he walked outside and down the all too familiar footpath of Lavender Street, Preston. The whole paraphernalia of suburbia pressed on his choked-up emotions. Timber homes with features derived from Victorian and Edwardian stylings sat calmly about, trim and recently painted, like happy, toothless, senior citizens. The twenties bungalow crew took up most of the spaces, unless the demolition-for-flats process had been set in train, in which case their swollen verandah pillars and thickly coped front fences and gateposts seemed positively miniature beside the sheer walls, two or three storeys high, of brick set about by concrete. Washing lines drooped wet underwear, youths indifferent to the visual crime of their suburb polished their cars, the Tigers and Donnys of the next decade. The distant Marie came to his mind, he wondered who she'd married, how many times she'd been overseas. He regretted, absurdly, the never-taken Julie, felt a remote approval of his younger self punching the back of Donny's seat ...

Behind a car, a concrete driveway and a trellis, a scene was enacting itself: a teenage girl, whose headscarf concealed curlers, was the focus of a playful brawl between two youths; while a transistor bathed them in pop, they flung each other about and around her, her father swept the drive irritably for a time, then thrust the broom at his daughter and grumbled, 'I thought you said you were going to clean the car out?' She said, 'With this?' and swayed out of the way of the boys, not looking at her father, thinking perhaps of the drive-in.

Tonight was going to be one more hell for Bob, they'd probably drum up some sort of party, anything rather than be alone as two or four. He'd half-promised Carcase he'd watch the match that afternoon, but Geelong was too far to go, and in the circumstances it would only be a time-filler between lunch and darkness, why was darkness the signal for so much of truth? Why draw the curtains, didn't the Polynesian

girls laugh at the sailors wanting to go off in the forest? But didn't the Tahitians have human sacrifices? Bob scratched at the nature of man, able to do some; things in one society, not in others; he had a wariness of impulse, but, having rejected the papal sway, he refused to disown the drives he found in himself. That much he'd learned from Preston, where everyone got the hell out at night; if reality was a thing to escape from, at least you could escape, even if it meant hitchhiking, all-night trams or sore feet. The night he threw away his socks and second shoe, another youth on a tram had trodden firmly on his toe, deliberately provocative. Bob told him, 'You will regret that, my boy!' The mode of speaking— Bob still acting to Marie from the hill of Kew— so surprised the youth that he said he was sorry, it was a stupid thing to do.

Most things were stupid: those individuals who knew exactly who they were and what they wanted were rare indeed; but there was an awful weakness about defining yourself by the things you rejected, which, Bob thought, was about all he'd done. He must be positive with Anna, it'd probably mean the break up of two marriages. Something positive had thrown him at her—or was it another running away effort? Another lame attempt at escape?

Buying cigarettes at the corner store, he found himself asking for Peter Stuyvesant. Why? Anna smoked them. A bitter complicated 'smile' bared his teeth: he felt spotlight under heaven's beam, the foolish elect. How did the Tahitians choose their sacrifices? Were they prisoners, so-called enemies of the people, or unfortunates so unstable as to believe the gods had need of their death? Bob moved his shoulder blades and arms, as in a training exercise, he had a wish to push down the suburb that had reared him: half way home, a rise in the terrain gave him a view of the city's rectangle towers, rising in five-storey increments like bar graphs of the gross national product: vulgar, commercial, capitalist it might be - Anna's thoughts more than his ... here he was again, rejecting rather than defining - but something metropolitan and urbane about it called him. It was the zenith of all he knew, it was undeniable, it held sway over the lowly suburbs sprawled about it. Short of identifying

with Vic's rather quaint - to him - ideas of nature's supremacy, it was all there was in the offing. The arrogant, Brobdingnagian towers made his approach to adult life via the carpet factory look piffling: there was strength in him, as an act of contrition he would like to strike low the suburbs between him and the monumental skyline visible from afar, but the suburbs were him, he had never really escaped, only dodged. Very well, he thought, let's have no more cowardice, let's have honesty. He looked at his watch and hurried to Lavender Street, heart beating hard; the Volkswagen was out the front, and Vic's green Valiant, so much the better.

But when, full of resolve and firmness, he strode into the kitchen, there was no one there, they were all out the back; on the table, however, spread out to be admired, were the nine bowls and three tureens. Defiant Bob barely looked at them, he went to the group outside: 'Beautiful, Anna. I think they're great. I wish Frances'd get a bit of stuff like that.'

Anna considered him sadly, and shook her head. Vic caught the aggression too, the wish for a decision, since it was so close to his own mood, and could not restrain, 'You fool, Bob': Frances, conscious of her power to make him look foolish, managed an affectionate restraint. 'If you'd like to give them a wash now Bobby, we needn't do it when we get home.'

So what did he want? His male pride satisfied? A sexual outlet, just for variety, something on the side? Could he only see Anna as an alternative to things he wanted to reject, or was he able to find in her—and hence any other human in the universe—an intrinsic value, an intrinsic reason to cherish as he wished someone would cherish him. Looking wrinkled, ruddy, face fallen as when he bought the cigarettes, but worse, he said to Vic, to them all, 'I am a fool, it's pretty hard to avoid ...' He wanted to say that someone like Frances might lack the humility to know when she was foolish, might substitute self-righteousness instead, but was that fair? Frances wasn't making love with Vic, though she wanted to, she knew all about the low-minded state of being inadequate, which

was all you could pin on the so-called fool in any situation. He mustered a wan smile for his wife, who was watching him fondly, he realized, wanting to see how broken he was, and wanting to heal: he said, 'Well, dear, when are we going to christen them?' Frances, well able, as ever, to anticipate, said, 'We've just been talking about that.' The four became conscious of themselves, the children moved between them and then away again, leaving them like posts around a hole; their independence, standing within two steps of each other, was absurd, someone had to say something, act, break the tension, but no one had the ghost of an idea, all were trapped. Mrs Banner called from the sun verandah, 'Shall I put some soup on, Frances? We needn't use the new bowls, I've got plenty ...'

Frances, still without moving, answered, 'Yes, Iley, we'll have some soup, we'll christen the bowls right now.' But christening was for children, and now was like no-time at all, the four of them felt suspended, merged, incorporeal; that physical desire was the heart of the trouble seemed beyond all belief or explanation, the spasms of sexual intercourse were a function not to be considered attachable to the four lonely posts defining a rectangle of well-mown lawn. Bob had no wish to be there, would have welcomed flotation, levitation, invisibility: Anna really wanted Frances removed from the equation but the fact was she was the immovable object, ungetatable in her strength, except by inner forces she conquered every day; Vic rethought his holiday-together project, there wasn't any future in the four of them freezing each other to inaction; and Frances, to the surprise and release of the others, said, 'If we could only change places, I don't think there'd be wars, or divorces, or anything'.

Anna gathered her pride: 'You know what I offered.'

Frances said, 'But we can't, we're all locked up in ourselves.' Vic burst in. 'People let each other out, I'll tell you what I think love is, it's like getting out of prison!' Bob grunted, or his throat indicated something, his words recovered a little of the habitual blandness, but the sombre turn: made no claims of escape: he jerked his finger in the direction

of Pentridge, he said, 'You want to ask those fellers over there, how far do you think they get?' Then the four stood silent again, Iley banged a saucepan with a spoon ... there was nothing to do but walk in, endure Bob's recovered cheeriness, Vic's brooding silences, Mr Banner's Saddy arvo predictions, Frances being dutiful with Iley, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

11

Early in their phoning they discovered that Sandra had the same idea; why didn't they bring their party round to her place? It was better to be mixed up with strangers than to be at home together, so they agreed.

Sandra rented the top floor of a Fitzroy terrace, a group of teachers (male) had the bottom floor and they too had a party going when Anna and Vic arrived, a minute ahead of the Banners. And it was Bob, reading the situation faster than anyone else, who observed that the terrace was just around the crescent from Nell's, and that one of the blokes downstairs was sure to have got onto her by now and invited her ... with, presumably, John Moore ... and that since Patricia had been at the Rogers' that morning, they'd invited her, and now she was bidden for Sandra's: 'What you might call', said Bob to the other three, before they split and re-paired, 'a pregnant situation'.

They broke up while they were getting drinks. Vic and Frances moved to the fire, Anna went away with Bob. In a corner, in a flood of Shirley Bassey, they sat against each other; clothing heightened the contact. People Anna knew from work broke in, one took Bob for the husband. Anna said, 'I wish she was right,' as they got rid of her; Bob said, 'Well, can it be done? Let's decide if we want to do it.'

Are decisions already made by the time they're discussed? If the couple in the corner were in fact going to break nothing for a rearrangement; if the affair was to remain an affair and not a swap, divorce, or whatever, then did they realize the nature of their trial, the tendency of their pain? Anna murmured (their foreheads pressing) 'It's not worth it, I don't think it's worth it'. Bob said, 'Where do we stand then? Do you want to break it off completely? You can't mean that?'

She didn't think she meant that, she said, 'It's as if new leads keep appearing all the time, and I don't want to take any of them. I can handle the situation as it is—just—but I don't think I want it to go anywhere. If that seems to devalue you, I'm sorry, I don't mean it that way, it's just that I get scared.'

Cat Stevens was in town, Sandra had to have *Tea for the Tillerman* on the stereo, then Suzi Quatro, then ... The energetic little machine belted music through the party without pause or the flagging of live musicians. The room heated up as the briquettes caught alight, a group perched themselves on and about Sandra's table, and Anna and Bob were left behind this wall, hidden, like Gerda and the tape-recorder the night the masseur was set up, but disappointed. They had no wish to break out, it was their capsule: if nobody broke in, and dawn never broke, they would be happy. In facing their decision, and backing off, their spirits embraced each other more closely than before, their involvement was closer to a total one, even as they accepted that the surge in their love would have to be disowned. Nothing was to change, therefore their love must change; it was as if they sat near a crumbling cliff, and moved backwards, always close to the cliff-edge, but always moving backwards. If Anna had taught boys like Tiger and Donny Tyler, presumably she saw young Bob Banners every day; if those raucous northern suburbs threw up the most important lover of her life and there was no charity or despair, this time, in her involvement, then something important was happening to her, something true about herself was coming out clearly for the first time. She said, 'I think I live a falsehood, I think we all do. We spend so much of our time papering over the cracks that we don't properly enjoy what we have.'

But Bob was more practical: 'When's Vic going to be away next?'

'End of next week, I think, he's got to go up to the Barmah forest pretty soon.'

'Good. She ...' he called her "she" ...' she's going up home round about then, her mother's been a bit off with something, Frances'll want

Vic to stay with them, probably put him out at Tom O'Connell's, if Mum's still crook.'

'You can't stay the night. The kids.'

'All right, all right, I'll go when the milkman comes, how's that for romance?'

'If you really wanted to be romantic you'd come on a horse ...'

'And I'd tie him up in a copse ...'

'In Heidelberg?'

'And he'd twitch and snuffle and stamp his feet ...'

'While you were in your lady's chamber.'

'Talking about chambers, do you know I saw a great shelf full of them in an antique shop the other day. Big prices, too.'

'What?'

'Bedroom china, you silly woman!'

'What? Oh, pisspots ... do you know what we did once, when we were kids?'

'Something that was twice as nice because you weren't supposed to.'

'No, we weren't up to that then.'

A bawdy laugh was deeply comforting, it was true enough to cover the real truth, they had slipped through a crisis without examining it. Why? Because each was too busy salvaging the vital aspect of the love from the impossibility of its regularization, its more open continuance. For Anna, Bob had to be changed; for Bob, the something that she had and he had not, had to be plucked from her and added to himself. Embedded as he was in his male style, he couldn't even be sure if she was offering it or not; was there, or was there not, an element of contest? There had to be, each, as it were, bargained into bed, even as they hurried down the passage, hurled bedclothes aside and over them again, ran arms around each other and kissed. Bob, perplexed, was first out of the laughing mood: 'Would you be happy if we had a child?'

'Arc you telling me Frances is pregnant?'

'No, I mean us.'

This question took her back, to the early Vic, to her adolescent fears, to Tricky Crane, Richard, and the rest of them: ‘Having children is something you want at a certain time of your life. Or someone else’s baby gets you all stirred up ... I don’t think I ever thought of an affair in the way of wanting it to lead to a child.’

‘You wouldn’t then?’

‘I don’t know, you’re a bit different from the others.’

‘How’s that?’

It was no use trying to dress Bob up as a business success, although that was a front he put on. Nor had he escaped from the things that formed him; if you wanted to appreciate Bob you had to concede that under the dome of socially acceptable truth was a subterranean dish that stated the converse. People believed in hard work—people didn’t. People respected you—in fact you gave them the shits, or they envied you, or wanted to use you up. Bob enjoyed playing one view against the other, he was a joker travelling incognito, and Anna, despite her love for the high-minded Vic, was too broad in her sympathies, too much of a rebel herself, to shut out her renegade lover. He was fast becoming the other half of her thinking ...

She looked at him. ‘All right, you win. You mean more. You’re starting to mean too much. If I go much further I’ll lose the thing I think you want from me. You could strip me of everything, you couldn’t do that to Frances, she’s probably better for you.’

‘Frances! Why, why’s she better?’

‘You’re living with her, you ought to know what she’s got over me. I think she’s just about the most passionate person I know - potentially that is, if she ever got stirred up ...’

The bland Bob smiled, started to nod his head knowingly.

‘... which you haven’t done, or you wouldn’t be coming to me, or if you were it’d be different. Frances has conviction, what’s more she’s got to have conviction or she can’t exist. I feel most convictions are pretty foolish, and yet I’m scared of being empty, I’m scared of looking into myself and finding a great big hollow. So I don’t like to get too deeply

involved, when I fall in love I like to get the first rush of it, then stand back and take a look. You'd really be better off with your wife, if you only knew ...'

Bob clutched: 'You know that's rubbish, Anna!'

People perched on the table looked down at the commotion, looked tactfully away. Sandra called out for Anna, someone signalled with a thumb, Sandra looked over the wall of backs and shoulders. 'Oho! What's this? Respectable teacher in love nest!' Anna's look said not to broadcast it, there was no joke in the situation for her. Sandra said, 'I think we're going to need some of the famous Rogers tact, there's a bit of a situation downstairs.' Bob said, 'Oh oh, Pat and Nell'; Sandra said, 'I don't know their names but there's two females and a big guy, it's getting nasty.' Wriggling through the group at the table Anna asked, 'Where's Vic, it would've been better to get him, Pat listens to him more than she does me' but Sandra told her: 'He seemed to be pretty engrossed in that female you introduced me to this morning. I didn't like to bust in on them.'

Physician, heal thyself! Sandra liked gossip; the deeper, really hurtful ironies of the situation probably passed her by, or perhaps it was her form of tact to make noisy journalistic comments on events, highlighting them for a moment, but only for a moment, before drawing the room's attention to something else. Anna, as bidden, rushed downstairs. It was as predicted. Patricia had come through the open door and walked into the wrong party. Nell was there with John Moore. Bob, too, came down; he took one look and said to Carcase, 'You're in the shit now, son.'

If we describe our situations, do we describe, ourselves? Can a situation which has been developed over any length of time be taken as a true reflection of the participants? And if we say yes to that question, where do we stop? The whole world is something more than an expression of any one person's muddle, yet society, which shapes us, is, by the process of socialization, taken inside us to be us: until we leap, make a jump in the dark or fall in love, and find, then, that the tangle of our new commitment is also and inescapably us. Give or take a little inconsistency,

our situations are ourselves, and need to be expressed, or fought over, as such. Carcase wanted to run away, there was no room in the wrangle for the heroism he displayed so easily on the field, because there was no simple US v THEM to be fought out. He had to look inside himself, and make a choice, or let Nell and Patricia scarify each other and themselves.

Robert McPherson was there too, the pallid lecturer, pleading, by gesture and insipid voice, with Patricia to be reasonable. But she couldn't, it was a time for passion and frustration. Carcase, she said, had distorted her life as pregnancy had distorted - the word she used - her body: but whereas pregnancy had an end, however bitter in her case, the mess he'd made of her life was inexpungeable, he'd damaged her forever, and for what compensation? 'What do I get?' she shouted: 'What do you give me? The trembles when you say you'll come and talk to me, agony when I watch you, and worst of all, you've got me imprisoned, if I make love with someone else it isn't any good anyway, you're still hovering over the other fellow, I have to pretend it's you to get anything out of it.' Patricia knew none of the people in the downstairs party, nothing held her back, she only glanced at Anna. 'The only men it doesn't hurt me to be with are pale little people like this', indicating Robert McPherson, who'd given up by now: then, to Anna, 'Where's Vic?' Anna said she'd get him, but Sandra snatched at the opening, and ran upstairs; Frances stayed cautiously where she was, Vic came down and, to his own surprise, found himself marching into the situation and putting his arms around Patricia. 'Steady down a bit, Pat,' he said, and to his surprise, again, she did; she put her head on his chest, though whether in respite for another outburst or for release, he could not tell. Yet the actress in her couldn't let the situation live entirely without her; she pointed, merely pointed, at Nell, the silence was as bitter as her condemnation of John Moore. Nell, fair hair sprayed, nose thin and beaky in the lurid light, teeth set and lips pulled back, was determined to even up. 'You', she said, and the word was like the first shell in a salvo, 'are lower than I thought anyone could be. He's been trying to get you out of his life, I thought tonight

he'd just about made it, then you walked in. You bitch, you've had your little say. Some people will never be the same again because of your little effort.' And she walked out of the room, a moment later the iron gate squeaked: 'It doesn't shut properly, the hinges are gone,' said one of the teachers who flatted there, as if apologizing for not being able to provide a dramatic, definitive clang!

'Run along Johnny, catch her up, kiss and make up', said Patricia to John, leaving; but his car started, and roared down the crescent, away from Nell's.

'What was the ring?' Vic asked, but Anna hadn't noticed. 'Ah yes', said Bob, 'ah yes, a very dicey matter indeed. Not good. Not good.' Anna wanted to know what they were talking about, Vic explained that Nell was wearing what could only have been a very conventional engagement ring, Bob said, 'Ah yes, yes, I think the only way you could explain it, would be to say she was trying it out, just seeing how it agreed with her ... in the situation,' and Vic agreed: 'That's the only interpretation I could put on it.'

Anna, concerned, told Vic to go after Nell and see she was all right, but he felt she'd be better on her own for the next few minutes, and Bob, to whom Anna looked next, agreed. Then Patricia announced, 'Well, Robert, we've shaken up this party a bit, let's see what's upstairs.'

The downstairs party wanted to know what it was all about, Anna tried lamely to explain. Then came the tactics. Frances was to be brought down without encountering Patricia, Vic and Frances would go down the road to Nell's and stay with her for a while, Anna would try to talk to Patricia, and Bob would ring around places he knew where Carcase might have gone ...

So Vic and Frances went on their errand, Vic took Frances' hand; but when they got there, the doorbell rang to no answer. They nosed about, but. there were no lights on: and still no answer to the doorbell. Frances said, 'Actually, I've got a key, but she's obviously gone off. I wonder if she knows anyone around about, or do you think she's just walking?'

And so they walked through Saturday night, ‘keeping an eye out’, but seeing nothing, until a small street brought them back to the crescent. One of the downstairs men said no, Nell hadn’t been back, they hadn’t seen her since ...

Without discussion of going upstairs, Vic and Frances turned into the night again, smiling at the squeaky gate as if it were a secret entrusted to safe hands. They passed Nell’s, since there were still no lights, and walked ...

Cars roared past them, and they were superior. Frances felt wise in being older than her sister, and Vic was the only person in her life who knew Nell both at work and socially, who was therefore warm to her as a member of the family would be, but with a detachment which meant his warmth was neither a duty nor natural, but something freely offered. Through his concern for Nell he belonged to Frances.

Who rarely tried to define a-political moods. Swirled now in the sexuality of Saturday night, she was happy to find herself part of it, and balanced because she felt comfortable with the man whose elbow pressed her side, as hers, too, squeezed between his arm and ribs. They considered what Nell might have done. Frances said that at sixteen ‘something’ had happened to upset her, and they’d found her, three hours later, after dark, sitting in the tangled roots of a big tree by the river; her father had demanded of Nell what she thought she was doing there, and she had answered, ‘Waiting for a flood!’ The Moroneys sometimes laughed about it, though not if Nell was in earshot, and Vic’s amusement shook him as they walked, and sent reverberations into Frances’ body. They asked themselves where Nell was now, they meant in the emotional geography of a human life. Frances was concerned, but not surprised to hear about the ring, she said, ‘John Moore’s not all that stupid, he’d know she wanted to get engaged. But he wouldn’t be able to make up his mind if he wanted it. So—I can just see him doing it— he’d say something half-baked like, Wear this, let’s see if it’s right. He’s an empty sort of man you know, she’s well rid of him. But she’ll never be the same now, even when she gets over it.’

She wanted for her sister what she thought she'd had herself—an uninterrupted, continuous line running from first awareness of sex to its proper apotheosis in marriage. Traumas in her own life comparable to Nell's present suffering had not so much damaged her capacity to feel as closed off options, until now she could only love someone who fitted easily with all she valued. Vic was aware that this entailed some dissembling on his part, but if she wished to dress him a little differently in order to love him as she wanted to, then he could accept what she was doing to him; in some ways it was more natural to his temperament than to accept the knowing smile Anna often turned on him before putting her arms around his neck.

So there they were, and Vic said, 'Do you think we should look inside the flat?' and Frances said they might as well, there might be some evidence that Nell had been back and gone out again. They climbed the stairs of the thirties flats, and stood on the balcony, with its low fence of wrought iron echoing the bulbous curves replacing the corners of the building. It seemed tawdry, they drew in by the doorway, Vic wished Frances not to take out her key to the flat until he made it known to her that by suggesting they should go inside he meant that they should break the restraints that had operated on them in Hamilton, or rather, that they should not: attempt to break out but that what they did with each other should be within an accepted circle; if this meant that the lovemaking he intended was almost incestuous in feeling, it meant that it could at least take place.

Frances sensed what was intended, and made no move to find the key in her bag. Vic took the bag from her and put it on a ledge, it was like the start of undressing. Frances watched the action, grateful that events were being made to proceed without any protest forced out of her. *That* she could not have stood at this stage; new feeling could be allowed to well up inside her, but if it came at her as from some outside source in a foreign world, it would have to be rejected, that much was her habit and could never break.

Vic said, 'If she were inside, would she hear us now?' But Frances said no, Nell slept down the back, it was the lounge just inside the door. This seemed to decide them, Vic reached out his hand to stroke her neck, Frances inclined her head, accepting.

Elevated, withdrawn, on a dark balcony separated by a circle of park and trees from the nearest noisy tram route, they had made what each desired, a capsule which contradicted nothing of what surrounded them. Practised at dissembling, preferring to suppress tenderness and desire rather than let them be confronted and examined by a world-order that might find them subversive, they had happened upon their hour. Their absence from the social order was with leave, they were where people thought they were, yet in a transfigured state which would exist unobserved. The tenderness of Frances was a trembling joy to Vic, his calm, his vibrant approaches to her were all received with a wise dedication to an order in loving which neither had experienced before. Neither hurried. Tenderly he stroked her neck, the nape, the under-ear, the cheek, the shoulder. Frances moved her head with his hand, lifted her head up, but eyes still lowered, then lifted also her gaze to this long-desired man. Desire unified Frances, the steady gaze which met the eyes of Vic looked with unquestioning confidence on their shared intention. She blinked, as the human eye must blink, she knew as she did it that it was different from the blinks of duplicity, disbelief, reserved opinion or consideration of alternative courses which were part and parcel of her working life—and, she realized, her emotional life till now. Her eyes stayed open, fixed on him, until a muscle chose to blink. Then they continued their looking at, their looking to, their looking for. What she sought was in front of her; physically, in this proud, restrained man, half his emotions still as virginal as hers—but unspoilt, that was the point that gave rise to great joy. And great calm. Trouble, disturbing swirls of contrary thought, absented themselves from their brains: hand still on the neck he was learning - and teaching - to love, Vic drew Frances forward for what might have been the most important kiss of her life.

A faint 'ah' fell from her, and with it a strand of tension they had not noticed. What could be the continuation of their love, apart from the sexual release which lay some minutes ahead? Vic and Frances were members of widely variant groups, the demands of forestry and farmers were often opposed. Vic, emotionally something of an elitist, was in practice a thorough-going democrat; he had once wrung from Frances the concession—something she would never have said to Anna—that many of her supporters were 'too consciously the salt of the earth'. This admission was as close as she could come to admitting that her actions were in part a chosen role in life, not a necessary and inseparable extension of her personality. She was too rational and modern-thinking to be caught among the more extreme views in her sector of society; Vic had heard her put the case for abortion, which she opposed, better than he could have put it himself, but there was a central sticking-point in Frances, a frame of reference reduced to something tiny, like a heart-pacer, deep inside her: this left her strongly developed sense of logic large areas of freedom: she was therefore formidable, yet hard to grasp. She plainly admired strength in men; that Bob appeared, to her, to have only a show of it, was the weakness in their marriage which brought her to stand in Vic's arms on the balcony of her sister's flat.

Bob was not weak, but he had not been taught to value what he had, and here the people become inseparable from the cultural argument. It could be put down to a weakness in his background that he felt he was bound to please or fit in, and that had he been given wealth or authority he would have been unequal to the challenge of using them. His home suburb, like most others, was interspersed with main roads rushing from somewhere to somewhere else, and stopping nowhere. So close an expression of the economic system meant that a local cultural accretion could be of little more significance than the rust in a waterpipe. Bob had lived the whole of his twenty-eight years with the feeling of being open on all flanks: his existence, therefore, was an involvement with a process, a taking on the colour of his surroundings while maintaining his spiritual reserve. There was no creed, industry or plot of earth he would defend,

no cause to make him fight, only a reserve, a final lack of commitment to employer, club, or whatever, that amounted to the preparedness which, surrounded the heart of him. This preparedness, this readiness to fold up his tents and move on, was his mode of life; it meant that he was never enslaved and could therefore feel an enjoyment and a lack of tension denied a more active, committed person.

Anna began to see that in the so-called weakness was a strength. Chinese porcelain! The more committed you were to the gods of the past, the more your cultural bloodstream depended on vicarious sources for transfusions, the less you saw of life, the less you experienced it as it happened to you. To live life well, you had to be fully involved with each moment, and then you had to have periods when you stood back and made something of it. In bed one afternoon, during one of their stolen hours, she and Bob listened to a gust of wind vanguarding rain. The sky was already dark when they went down the gloomy passage and undressed, then for a while they were unaware of the outside; then trees began to swirl and some boards stacked against the garage fell over with a crash, dislodging two drums, which rolled in spurts and dashes down the drive and into the street. The sound of car brakes, and an engine going into lower gear, coming to them through the sound of rain against their window caused Anna to say, 'That was better than the sex'; somewhere out in the street were two drums, still wobbling about with no plan or intention, mindless rumbling things that would probably end up in Lower Heidelberg Road making traffic dodge until someone unwittingly serving the humour of the situation pulled up and stood them on the nature strip—if they hadn't already been bashed by a truck.

Bob and Anna liked to be naked: lying there that day, Bob said, 'What'll happen to us Anna?' It was Vic's question in almost the very words, but from Bob it asked if they would ever hurt each other, Bob couldn't believe that anything so important to them both could be transacted without a heavy bill of damage. Aware of how shallowly he related to Frances, he felt sure that Anna must be holding much of her psyche in reserve; deep wounding would at least prove that he'd struck more

fire in her than the bland and pleasant exterior could provoke. Aware that Bob wanted some proof that he too was 'deep', Anna stumbled. The cultural things to which she instinctively reached—history, theatre, ceramics—were too easily acknowledged by Bob as 'senior' to his own low level stratum of pop/commercial/sport; he felt, when he tendered something of his own world, that he was being vulgar; it was another failure of confidence. They talked these things out, it was the most elaborate dialogue his life had ever been granted; to lay out a life before another person appeared to give it meaning, which may have been illusory, but it stimulated Anna to tell him all she'd done, all she'd been through: sometimes in these conversations Bob felt his soul was a kitten put in Anna's hands for her to play with or fondle.

For Anna, the world was as fascinating as it was holy for Vic; but whereas her husband preferred his reverence to emerge in stately response to nature vast or tiny, for Anna it was all a question of male and female. Vic shared with Frances the wish for this 'holy' aspect of himself to rule hierarchically the rest; since this was impossible in a secular world of which he was an active and capable member, he mostly kept it out of sight; hence the secrecy, and vulnerability, of his ordered yet disordered passion for Frances. But, the way Anna saw things, conflict, humour, instability, greed, bitchiness—the lot—all had to be accounted for. Her mind, ranging far, rarely stood up proudly, she preferred to live with what the politicians term a low profile, though she acknowledged those who could, like Frances, gather to a monolith, or, like Vic, be blinkered yet far-sighted. In Bob she had a lover as flexible as herself, a man who felt, saw and experienced not according to an interpretation imposed by some ruling trait of personality, but as it came to him through his nerve-ends. It was this unstructured thing about Bob that disappointed Frances and gave hope to Anna. She, Anna, dissatisfied with her own attempts to impose a hierarchy of cultural values on her students, wanted to learn from Bob, to be Bob, briefly but actually to live inside the core of his life.

If there was one, this was the paradox. Bob, tickled by fads and crazes, amused her by telling her about his morning tea proposal at the mill, that there should be an award for the person to make the first authenticated sighting of a streaker inside the mill premises. Bob gravely considering rules of authentication, and amendments to cover trickery on the part of collusionists, was typical, screamingly funny, and highly self-descriptive: Bob himself, Anna thought, was something of a streaker, one who flashed briefly in a situation; what was revealing of him was not what he said or did, which was always calculated to amuse, but the timing, the effect. He was harmless, he seemed to check people; Anna suspected that he was wise, but it was not the weighty wisdom of the western, legalistic mind, it was nearer the silly little jokes of the Sufis, making fun of logic itself. Anna wanted this faculty he had, she felt she was going to need it, now, as she began her journey across the plateau of the thirties, her children established, her marriage settled, her working life recommenced after the years of being home with the kids. Turmoil like the Nell/Carcase/Pat thing moved her not only to feel for the three of them but to realize that she could no longer act with the desperate energy of people struggling to establish themselves. Poor Bob had no children, though apparently he wanted them; if that part of his life had been over, they could have established a lengthy, quiet, intimate relationship instead of the hurried snatching at moments which was now their lot. But there was no avoiding the way they were acting, they had to get what they could from each other before it all blew up in their faces. If Frances became pregnant, Anna had decided, that, there and then, would be the end. A mixture of reasons brought Anna to this resolve: she knew she would feel a sense of duty for Bob, even if he didn't feel it for himself; she knew that even if he was no more than coolly attentive to Frances during the pregnancy, he would be looking forward to the child, and that would make Frances' belly more important, ultimately, than her vagina; and lastly, she knew she herself would believe that Frances' child in the making was more important than her love.

She was not grasping, though she would take what she could till things closed in on them, because her varied sense of life made her take her deeper passions lightly; she could feel frustration, rage, bitterness, but when it came to action, she couldn't act bitterly or meanly, it wasn't in her to set these emotions at the head of her life. Sometimes she felt she could, but it just so happened that the extreme motivation - the instability? - of the Pat/Nell/Carcase trio was absent from her life: life, like a delayed-release capsule, burns itself out in coping with the emotional and psychical adaptations forced on one every day, and she was at the early thirties stage ...

All of which she said to Bob, he seemed to understand; finding his way into her personality, he found her mostly tender, sometimes inconsiderate, he joked with her, he said she killed off the beetle in him, she wanted to know what he meant. He said, 'Have you ever thought how big a room must look to a beetle in the woodwork, or a silverfish? Do you know what love does, it shrinks the room!' She laughed, it was such an unlikely metaphor for love, apparently she was enough of a romantic to find the comparison unsuitable; but then, the world was a mental as well as a geographical space, and the separateness of people was terrifying, it led to most of the world's troubles ... she realized that Bob was a hard nut to crack, she wondered if she would ever understand him as she thought she knew her husband.

But did she? Another man, another woman: change one half of the equation and the resultant answer changes. Anna, making love with Vic, or simply relating to him domestically, saw past her man, saw round him, saw through much of him, though acknowledging his strengths: Frances looked on him with a direct, simple desire; those eyes looked down, looked up, looked at him in satisfied appraisal. The political Isolde, so wise and wily, so inexperienced, had her Tristan. And the stiffness and honour, which amused Anna as much as she respected it, were, when faced by Frances, a means to exaltation. Two high-serious people gazed on each other: found, discovered and ... not adored, they were too practical for that. They kissed, embraced, tongue-kissed, and kissed ... for

a time they stood away from each other, letting their eyes play on each other, supremely confident, with only the touch of Vic's hand on her neck to give Frances the assurance that in a vote-trading age some royal loving was possible; she rested her hands on the forearms of his coat, a padding warmer than the night.

Frances, though a career woman mobile up and down the country, was not so liberated as to renounce male sources of authority, male-made centres to the activities of life. Opposed by her party leader at a high-level conference, she quailed as if approached by an embarrassing admirer: awareness of his tactics was awareness of the man; the meeting going his way on the votes was like being vanquished by him. Frances told Vic about the incident, how people came up after the meeting and said they'd agreed with her - but they hadn't felt up to speaking for her at the conference table. Vic knew there was a sexual strand in this, he knew Frances meant him to see it, her motion had been taken as a challenge, male supremacy had to be reasserted, and they liked to see a strong-headed woman blush when she knew what was going on.

The church, too, filled out its rituals and equipped its plenipotentiaries with a male type of self-importance, but Frances was less awed by this. Looking out her Parkville window one afternoon she saw the priest getting out of his car, she said, 'Oh bugger, it's Father Rendle. Bugger him, oh ... bugger him!' She had people in the lounge but she made him welcome, vermouth and savouries with everyone else.

Whereas a weakly-tinted Anglican solution had been applied to Vic for some years of his schooling; it was not enough to make him a Christian except by negative inoculation, but it promoted in him a regard for scholarship, leather, science and discipline, and a scorn of self pity, abject pleading, spurious argument and laziness. Vic was reinforced in his natural tendency to be an upright man from the Enlightenment mould. He disliked astrology and unscientific surmise about the occult, he detested the negroid's openness to voodoo, yet he found, when he read to his children, that he would have liked to think there were such

things as fairies; some magic, he knew, had been banished from the world by his anglo-saxon inheritance.

It was the very lightness in the way Vic wore such mainstream culture as he had which made Frances tax herself with a philistine's disability; and to share with Vic would be like stealing from Anna, since much of it he took from her; this was an added attraction. In the dialectic of social forces, Vic represented much that she needed to give her a release over and above the one she'd made for herself. As a girl, she found numerous patterns offered to her: she should teach, she should be a nun. She should go into catering like her Uncle Brendan, or marry young and get her family started. There were plenty of eligible farmers; if she married one she would never want for money or a settled way of life. She felt she must make a break from these too-standard patterns, and yet it would have to be one that met with approval. She said she would go into politics, it was assumed she meant standing for parliament, this desire was treated as the whimsy of a girl too young to know the way the world worked. By seventeen she knew all the electorates in the Commonwealth, by nineteen she was pleading with Tom O'Connell, her uncle, to use his Country Party connections in finding her political work of some sort. When it was understood that her ambition lay with the service of a widely-accepted cause, she regained the approval of family, town, community. Her name was mentioned, her university career watched, her steady build-up of reserve and judgment were observed with knowing nods. Tom, her parents, people in the party up home felt they 'had something here'; on graduation she worked with a senator as his private secretary, she impressed, she was soon a full-time organizer. But Frances was too intelligent to stay altogether in the mould; even though fully committed to a party sharing government, she realized that much of what occupied her was mundane and centred squarely on the self-interests of people inclined to equate their own good with the general good. Manipulation, organization, which breed cynicism in some politically active people, bred disquiet in Frances; she had the feeling that civilization was being sold a little short in Australian politics, the

political carve-up was a little too grossly done, there were people with more finesse to their lives than party slogans would allow. Philosophy, the arts, the nature of man and his place in the universe were subjects Frances had heard endlessly discussed at her university college and in the cafeteria, if she bothered to go there; she preferred to concentrate on her subjects but was too honest to deny what she was ignoring; she knew she must one day broaden to bring all that these topics implied into her view of life. She assumed this would be when her children came; then, though busy, she would have an enforced leisure ... and there was this other aspect to the problem, too: once she was a mother she'd have broken free from feeling possessed by parents, party and society; she would at last be herself and able to have a say which might offend her earlier supporters and backers. She felt, taking on her political work, that she was answerable, as her party's politicians were supposed to be answerable, to the society at large. She wanted to be pregnant, she'd seen two doctors who'd assured her everything was normal, they didn't want to fiddle with any treatments yet, conception would surely happen soon. On Vic she gazed with an admiration for a man who appeared not to have been narrowed in his thinking as she felt she had; his rapport with nature was something she could idealize into an awareness like Caliban's of a thousand twangling instruments: instinct, which nobody in her life so far had told her to obey, drove her to Vic, the forester, as a man who would release her, take her forward a stage, and yet cause her to betray ... Bob her husband was nowhere in her thoughts ... to betray ... the intercourse of Bob and Anna, so long-suspected, was nowhere in her thoughts ... to betray ... the labour and fuss of a white wedding gown, the photos in the garden that might never have been taken ... to betray ... nothing significant in her being. She clasped Vic, he reacted to her more strongly than he had ever felt with a woman before. She began to squeeze against him but he took her bag off the ledge and gave it to her; it was like asking her to make the decision. She unzipped the bag, the key was there in a fold of the purse, she took it with two fingers.

Then offered it to Vic, it was like an exchange of rings. He pushed it into the keyhole, a rasping sound, and they entered bridally the darkened lounge. Vic closed the door, they began to walk hand in hand down the darkened passage to Nell's bedroom at the end, when they heard a voice ...

... a voice in the darkness, tremulous and broken:

'Jo-ohnny?'

'Is that you Jo-ohnny?'

Frances said, 'We'll have to turn on the light', but Vic whispered, 'No'. They kept on down the passage, Frances calling, 'Coming Nell', like a nurse, or a mother, and then they lay, one on either side of her, and held her while she cried and told them ...

In the morning, Vic's son showed him his proud collection of footy cards, he wanted to know: 'Dad, why's Carcase on these cards?'

Vic said, 'He's a very good footballer.'

'Well, Dad, if he's so good they put him on these cards, why does he sometimes come to our place?'

Vic gave up.

12

It was early summer before one of Vic's visits to the Barmah forest coincided with Frances going north. After preliminary tests, Mrs Moroney had gone into hospital for an operation, Frances was keeping house for a few days, she travelled by train, telling Bob it gave her more time to think: he didn't enquire.

When Vic drove to the Moroney's house, Frances' father was at the Town Club, of which he was president and acting manager while the manager took his holiday. Any ideas Vic may have had about a quick resumption of intimacy with Frances were quickly dispelled by the cool formality of her cheek offered, and the ritual drinking of tea on white, cast-iron lawn, chairs. She was her parents' daughter, keeping house ...

... taking refuge: she was simply happy; busy, with housekeeping, and cuttings from Hansard spread over the table, and she said, 'We'll have a cup of tea, and then I'll have to get you to drive me up the street. Father's got the car.' The street was close, but it was plain the Moroneys always drove. When she appeared in the chemist's shop with its cuddly toys and array of gifts for tourists, the chemist himself, white-coated, greying, mid-thirties, came scuttling from behind the glass to enact a welcome; how was she, it was good to see her back, how was her mother? And he asked, 'Campaign all set for a victory?'

Frances evaded: 'Well, we haven't got any worries up here, anyway'; the chemist's smile included Vic, anyone with Frances must be loyal beyond questioning. Yet Vic dearly wanted change; the long rule by conservative parties was a dead hand he wanted the country to lift. The isolation and entrenched attitudes of Australia, the frozen radicalism which was too stubborn to look at itself any more, the comfortable

suburbanism of Australian life, were things he wanted broken; he felt unwilling to descend from his heights of withdrawal when all that was offering made him uncomfortable; the media prodded you day and night with pokers of dissatisfaction, buy buy buy, think this, think that, get stirred up about such and such. It seemed to Vic that the terms in which one thought about oneself and society were being narrowly dictated by vested interests, by journalists, by educators, by people who simply had to have a job when there wasn't really one for them. When he tried to expound this sort of thing to Frances, she belittled him insofar as she was a political organizer, and yet - insofar as she was restless for change in herself - she urged him to say more of what worried him. In the shopping street of the country town was a comfort and an order which precluded him talking to her about these nagging thoughts. Over a glass of wine at home tonight or at Tom O'Connell's, if Father was at the Club—they would not be going to bed, even separately, in an unchaperoned house—she would search him out, and it would be a means to intimacy, yet in the street ...

They came upon the candidate, the sitting member in fact; suavely giving out what his constituents wanted; arguing with a young school-teacher in dishonest terms. The long-haired young man was trying to make the MP admit there was something wrong with a national health scheme that excluded perhaps an eighth of the population, and the most disadvantaged section at that. The member was coldly jovial: 'You radicals ... when you've got a bit more idea of how government really works, if the people are ever foolish enough to give you the opportunity ... you're out to break down the medical profession because you know they won't have a bar of your schemes ...' The young man said we could surely devise a health scheme incorporating all that had been learned in other countries; the MP fixed him with the eye of one giving a bit of fatherly advice, for his own good of course, and said, 'Well Dennis (he smiled here at some older onlookers) I've been to England and you haven't, and I can tell you that if you want here what they've got there,

you're talking through ... well, you haven't got a hat, you're talking through that shaggy mop of yours!

Yet Frances asked, 'How's it going?' and the member said, 'Good response everywhere. But listen ...' he lowered his voice without changing his manner '... we don't want any Federal Liberals coming through here, they won't do me any good at all.' Frances murmured, 'I think that idea's been dropped,' to the still-smiling member, and introduced Vic.

Vic was affected by cunning much as he had been by Collingwood. As the conversation developed he found himself saying, 'Of course, we're talking about what is probably the optimum development of redgum forest in the whole of Australia ...' and the member cutting in: 'Oh, don't you worry, when I was in England, people'd find out where I was from, and they'd say to me, Is the Barmah Forest still there? Still full of waterbirds? Oh yes, it's a national asset we've got to preserve ...' Vic was explaining that constant use of the Murray as an irrigation channel was likely to cause severe damage to the Barmah Forest, when two other men walked up: fiftyish, wearing Rotary badges, greeting the member as 'You old son of a gun.' Frances caught Vic's change of mood, and moved away, saying, 'We won't get much sense out of him now with those two there ...'

Does she always make special exceptions for the people inside her mental walls, Vic wondered, but, then Frances said, 'He's a very good-hearted man, you know, he adopted two children though he already had three of his own. One was white and the other was black, there they are now, in the car.' And sure enough, two gorgeous boys, with eyes shining like black olives, were playing at driving the member's car; one of the Rotarians reached in to ruffle their hair, all smiles for the pair of them, prepared, no doubt, to make opportunities for the black as for the white; it was the sort of thing an information bureau could photograph—no racial prejudice here. Vic looked about him; the street—sunny, comfortable—was without tension, nothing was challenged, everything was in its appointed place. They seem to think they're living before the Fall, he thought, and was glad when Frances asked him to drop her off at

the hospital with some things for her mother, he said he'd have a look around the town and be back in a quarter of an hour.

But he was delayed in an unexpected fashion. Down near the river he noticed, as he cruised about, a wooden pub with a double line of beer barrels down one side. What startled him were two aborigines leaning on the barrels. He turned the car around and cruised past to look at them again. Though the; younger was dressed in tee-shirt and jeans, like any white youth, the men looked like fixtures, they could have been there for days. The older wore hand-me-down pants, so wide at the thighs they bulged like jodhpurs; but his suitcoat, his navy shirt buttoned, tieless, to the top, and his squarely placed hat shading rimless spectacles and bristly greying hair, gave him great dignity. Vic stopped fifty metres up the road, something had seized him, presumably it was in the understanding but it caused a grip in the; stomach; the old man would know, Vic felt, the old man would *know!*

Vic closed the door and walked, his feet scuffing in the gravel; the two black men watched him with composure. Vic felt absurd as he kept on with the approach, it was as if cameras were on him and he'd been given no direction. The old man's face was squarer than most aborigines', though the nose was wide; he looked faintly Prussian but no Bismarck ever leaned with the same tensionless awareness. When Vic stood in front of him, he realized he had nothing to say to the men, he had merely been drawn to them, felt he had to look at them. Between whites the silence would have been unbearable, but the aborigines were used to silence, it was like an historical hiatus, all were waiting for an event, or was it a season?

With immense foolishness, as if he were a character out of Rider Haggard, Vic said, for something to say, which, he hoped, would allow him a little of the dignity inherent in the young man and the old: 'I've come to save your trees!'

The old man's eyes indicated the river redgums: 'They gonna chop them down?'

Vic said no, and explained that he was a forester, and he was concerned about flood damage to the Barmah Forest trees. The old man nodded: 'Floods're no good, bring the mosquitoes.'

In the clear air, five blocks away, the town's water tower stood where it had been sited, fifty-six years before, in the middle of the main intersection; it had been an act of progress. Vic found himself guilty of the error he saw clearly in conservationist arguments; against all his training, all his knowledge, he wanted to believe in an Arcadian past free of the Western concept of time, Western needs. With the redgums a few metres away, overhanging the river—or rather, the broken chain of waterholcs which was all it was at that moment—and the old man before him, it was easy to imagine that one could step out of the confines of Western civilization, which had bequeathed few of its glories to Australia, and be ...

What? It was unthinkable: one could never know what lay beyond one's limits, it was like the old argument of the universe being finite or infinite—if there's an end to it, what lies beyond the end?

The old man said, 'If you like, I'll show you something.' Servile, Vic followed, with the younger black smiling as he took up the rear. The old man led the way to a bend in the watercourse and pointed to the water; a white swan moved serenely over the brown surface. The old man nodded: 'Nice and fat'; Vic said, 'I think they're protected, aren't they?' It was both prim, and a hint, presumably the police would be no easier with aborigines here than anywhere else. The old man chuckled tolerantly.

'Not after dark, eh?'

The younger one, too, was smiling, and received his due:

'Johnny's a good cook.'

Vic found himself wondering if Johnny put a stuffing in a bird, or did it, traditional style, in the ashes, yet something inhibited him from asking; instead he pointed to a blue crane moving downstream with, as Vic thought, incredible grace, and said, 'What do you think of that fellow?' The young man spoke for the first time: 'Got a belly full of yabbies by the look of him.'

Vic remembered Frances, some tension must have been noticeable because the young man said, 'You think maybe your missus is out looking for you?' Vic said, 'Well, not my missus, a friend ... oh hell!' With an apology he started to hurry away, but this was indecent; he slowed to walk with the two black men, but some innate humour made them lag, they weren't letting him get away without realizing what he was doing. Poker-faced, they escorted him, though trailing, to his government car; the old man said, 'You got a good job, feller'; it neatly turned Vic's superior status against him, the two men headed for the pub again, Vic checked in the rear vision mirror and saw them resume their station at the barrels.

The encounter shaded his mood; when, outside the hospital, he asked after Mrs Moroney, Frances saw his tone as subdued and sympathetic when it was merely abstracted. It was important to Frances that people should act according to the forms; she said that her mother would have a number of friends visiting her that afternoon - 'of her own age', as Frances put it - but that Vic could meet her in visiting hours after tea. Meanwhile, he must see the Club.

She meant he must admire it, she shared her father's local pride. That the Club should have rubber plants in anodised green tubs and acres of mottled purple carpet was no offence against Frances' aesthetics; what mattered was that it was clean, fresh, bright, modern and could cater for every need expressed by its members. Mr Moroney explained how the layout allowed one kitchen and two bars to serve half a dozen lounges, how the walls could fold out or fold away, even be dismantled to allow dining and dancing areas to be connected or secluded. Laminex gleamed. Outside, a second bowling rink was being constructed, though the shrubs intended to hedge the first rink were still small and attached to sticks. Mr Moroney said, 'The Golf Club's laying out another nine holes out here, adjoining us. We're negotiating with them to see if we can bring in a joint membership of both clubs. I think we'll get it, but there's a few things we've got to iron out yet.'

A sure common sense pervaded all he said. Reasonable men in a progressive town would find a natural agreement; the main thing was to keep unstable people, people with bees in their bonnets, off the relevant committees. Then all would be well. He knew a lot of politicians; Vic expected a partial judgment of them, but Mr Moroney judged them all, regardless of party, by one standard—'You can talk to him'; 'He's got his head screwed on'; 'He knows what he's doing'; 'Oh I think he's a pretty reasonable sort of bloke'—by which they stood or fell in his estimation. That there were assumptions and attitudes implied in all his activities was something he seemed not to consider, he acted like a man who mixed always with those who thought the same way. Over lunch—'You like a glass of wine, we've got anything you like here'—he introduced Vic to a number of townsmen; some of them knew people in the Forests Commission, he was easily inducted into the club friendship as a sound man, they asked him what he thought of the possibility of some government or private softwood plantations in the area ...

Through it all sat Frances, proud of him; he felt he was cheating her because something in him was holding back. What it was, he scarcely knew; it could hardly be the commercialism of their sense of affairs, for he found himself saying, 'Look, the forests are not ends in themselves; certainly we have to preserve what we've got, but we believe it's very hard to justify not supplying the community with something it needs'—and this drew their evident approval. In the context of this stylized, overt group behaviour, it was hard for him to imagine what Frances would be like, with these externals removed, yet he had stood on the verge of the discovery the night they solaced Nell, and, for all he knew, might do so again that afternoon ...

But did she know herself? In her acceptance of a man, where did the approval of 'sound' people end, and where did instinct begin? Frances sat absorbing these men-of-affairs exchanges, absorbing the attitudes, missing nothing with her conference-table attention. It was a habit of self-discipline which earned her high respect; she had gained so much by remaining as the mould made her that it would be hard for her to

make her family understand that there were things in her unaccounted for, she'd have to break all they'd given her. Mr Moroney turned to her and said, 'Isn't that so, Frances?' She answered, 'You couldn't be wrong about that, Father.' Ironic, affectionate, it drew smiles from the group at the table, cemented her among them, she raised an eye for Vic meaning it to be the same raising of an eye she'd given him on the balcony of Nell's flat; trifling gesture, it suggested a rebellion might be possible.

Leaving the Club, Frances enjoyed parting from the group and walking to the car with Vic, the situation looking blameless, her manner irreproachable, her feelings hidden. Mr Moroney said, 'You'll go out to Tom's I suppose?' and when she nodded, he added, 'Better take him on and show him the old place.'

This was the former Moroney home, now sold, with the property it stood on, to Tom O'Connell: a double line of sugar gums, which Frances still called 'the avenue' followed the road in to a house surrounded by barley, and a machinery track wound through the deserted sheds to the paddocks at the back. The suggestion that they should visit it was something conferred on Vic by Mr Moroney, and the warm smile he turned on his daughter was taken by her as more than a mark of trust; something like a blessing.

At their first call, Tom wanted to talk about windbreaks, he had a problem area ... he started to explain, then drew in the dirt, then said, 'Hang on, I'll take you there.' Tom and Vic, with Frances squeezed in the middle, drove through paddocks of dry grass to the spot; there was a depression here that sometimes filled with water, and he had to have access here, and the salt table was high along there, and the winds came from there ... 'What would you do?' Tom asked Vic.

Tom, million dollar farmer, profits ploughed back into sheds, machinery, equipment, trucks, *asked* Vic! He had never asked Bob anything more than how he felt, what he was doing these days, who was going to win some sporting contest, or how he liked city life ... politeness, warmth, yes, but not the respect of equals. Frances' notions of a man began to converge in Vic, he was going down so well with the people

she respected most: Frances thought of divorce, her mind flicked spitefully on the affair with Anna, did the forester care? 'Pity' he had said, about the masseur not trying something with Sandra, Anna's friend; why 'Pity?' Did the forester have courage, would he pull her through the ordeal? Divorces could be had quietly these days, they would be living in the city, her parents would never excuse Bob's infidelity with Anna but would surely accept her own remarriage?

Remarriage? Was there such a thing? If you were married once, wasn't that the end of it? She was forced to consider marriage, how much of her had married Bob? It was the most outrageously secular thought of her life, the first really brave exploration of her own personality as something able to diverge from the face it had grown used to wearing. Her outward person had gone through the ceremony, but how much more of her had acquiesced? How much more of herself was she discovering now, and how much more again if other men came after Vic? It was, in a way, Frances' entry to the modern world, her first consciously admitted desire to live within its terms rather than stand outside and manipulate for personal or political advantage. For a while she listened solemnly to Vic talking windbreaks, then she wandered past the utility to a stump, a hundred metres away in the grass.

It was smooth, but she felt she could not sit, she must stand and wait the outcome. Something had to be resolved today; she considered Vic's children, she felt she could love them if custody went to Vic, but she would want more of her own; would he? If it all broke down, would he put pressure on Anna to force Bob back to her, would he be worth having anyway? She knew she was not used to swallowing pride, an impenitent Bob as father of her children was a great deal too much ...

Frances, who never broke, broke. It was all impossible, there was no way to go but back. She lost her will. She would lose herself in the associations of everything they saw, everything they visited; if he could find her in her maze of moods, he could have her, if he chose to drag her out. If not, she must suffer, until something happened to change her, or restore her will to act. She thought of resigning her job, of going

away. She fully expected the Liberal-Country Party coalition to go out of government at the coming election, it was a judgement not to be averted, she knew that the impending political defeat, coinciding with her personal crisis, would be perhaps the greatest storm centre of her life, she knew that she would have to jettison.

Or increase. If something is taken away, something will be given in return; this was the lesson of her disciplined upbringing, and her main conflict with the hedonism of the modern world. In the surge of modern technology, people felt they could have everything, felt they need knuckle down to nobody, wanted to break down external authority and set up as their own judges. For Frances the whole process was a long slow creeping in of what she called ultimate, atheistical protestantism. She had kept it out of her life except when it could be rationalized as 'bringing a higher standard of living to country people, they've worked hard enough for it.'

Hard work; it was supposed to be the anodyne for everything, but she had rejected it. She should be flat out now, doing this and that for the elections, but the campaign was set, she'd done as much as she felt was meaningful; the personal crisis would be a little easier if she distanced herself from the inevitable result. Her mother's operation was a welcome excuse to take leave; no one dreamed of questioning her; if Frances Banner took leave at a time when she was most wanted, it must be pretty serious with her mother ...

Vic sensed her disturbance and began to walk to her; she was grateful, but at once began to walk back. She would have liked to stand still and experience his approach in a heart released from control, but that would be to invite Tom's inquiry; she could hardly answer that it was the beginning of morning sickness when she didn't know whether she hoped it was or not, and when it was, besides, a quarter past two in the afternoon.

And it passed; in a moment she was normal and could return to them, the two men standing in front of the utility as if posing for an Agriculture Department photographer; but the unified, restored emo-

tion of her return to the vehicle would have been shattered if the men had moved apart; then she would have had to veer towards one or the other, she felt heavy in the belly and leaden in the legs, she was walking with great determination. In the melodrama that the day had become every move and gesture must be made to reveal, if only to herself, the truth about herself which was no longer, she knew, the self imposed by others and willingly accepted in the past. Tom O'Connell, watching her, said to Vic, 'She's been an ideal girl, Frances. All her life she's never gone off the straight and narrow ... and it brings rewards, whatever they say.'

The approval in his words, if not the sense of them, conveyed itself to Frances; walking to the men, she committed the treason of wishing Tom would disappear, and the approval remain; she could disrobe and her sexuality be invested with that holy sense of life which was one aspect of her religion she would never lose. But holiness, to most of her faith, came with denial, and she felt that if she could have Vic it would be part of everything their minds and bodies did in merging. Holy desire! The church could never apply that name to her adulterous wish, but that was how she felt. On the way to the old Moroney property, ten kilometres west, she said to Vic, driving: 'I don't believe in sin and evil any more, but I still believe in disaster.' Vic was startled by the remark, which sprang out of a silence, but mainly because it was voiced without any prompting; he became apprehensive; much as he desired to enter with Frances that promising, mysterious region opening between them, he feared the effects on her, Frances, however overwhelmed today, would eventually acknowledge her habitual judges—mother, father, family, church, community. Husband? She would demand of herself more virtue than she would expect of Bob, otherwise how would she retain the sense of superiority over him that made her marriage acceptable? Vic, longing for her more than ever before, felt he could not touch, could not do the damage it would entail. Frances spoke again: 'I'm going to have to be a lot stronger yet ...'; if she wanted to go on, she could not; Vic turned the words into a diversion which Frances, he knew, would willingly take: 'Is it serious with your mother, then?'

‘It was an exploratory operation, to find out. She should get a report tomorrow or Monday.’

‘How was she this morning?’

‘She was cheerful, but she wasn’t saying much.’

‘Mm.’

‘I’ll take you to see her tonight.’

Illness, perhaps death, hung in the air. It is hard to believe in one’s own death when one’s parents are still alive, an outer defence against mortality. The sense that her mother’s term might be about to have limits set to it forced Frances back on the continuity of life; she was a daughter, she wanted ... a daughter, a son. Was one or the other starting to grow inside her now, or was it the readiness creating the wish? Vic could do no wrong in her eyes. When he parked the car, it was under a sprawling old pepper tree, she said, ‘Father always parked under this tree, you can see how he cut the branches to make a shady spot for his car.’

Now heart and back troubles had forced Mr Moroney to sell up, move into town, invest, be a director of the feed mill, the butter factory and an occasional consultant for Brosnan’s Northern Engineering Works ... as well as the Club; he was an elder of the town, with all that that implied, and Vic was parked in the shade he’d trained the tree to throw. She said, ‘I’ll take you through the house.’

Since the Moroneys left it had been used intermittently as workmen’s quarters. Ashes had spilled out of the fireplace, the oddments of furniture were scratched and dirty. There was a kittens-in-basket calendar pinned on the kitchen cupboard, and newspapers everywhere. There were some initials charcoaled on the wall, not even graffiti, but Frances quailed; Vic said, ‘Where did you sleep?’ Frances answered, ‘I don’t think I want to look in case they’ve been in there too.’ But when Vic asked again, she said, ‘Up the passage, on the right.’

There was at least some carpet in this room, and it was relatively clean; Vic noticed something between the fender and the wall, and would have moved to pick it up, but something in Frances’ silence stopped him. She inspected the curtains, then moved to open the win-

dow, but checked herself, and looked out at an angle to catch something Vic couldn't see.

'No one's pruned the rose bush, it hasn't been touched.'

Vic said, 'How long is it, since ...'

'Seven years.'

She said, 'I used to get dressed in this corner, I had my chair here by the wardrobe and I could get dressed without getting near the window. I had a real thing about modesty then.' She smiled at the foolishness. 'I could just reach in the wardrobe here ...'

It was a built-in affair next to the fireplace; she opened it, there were daddy long legs, and fluff.

'Oh.'

It was an ear ring, a silver-plated claw clutching a piece of ruby glass. A threaded spike pierced the ear and a tiny circle of metal screwed up against the lobe. Frances said, 'I bought those the first time I went to a ball. I got my ears specially pierced. I only wore them once, I didn't like them. Mother used to ask me why I didn't wear them, I said I'd lost them. I hadn't. I hid them so she wouldn't make me wear them.' But she clutched the ear ring now, and opened the drawers one after the other. Vic said, 'Hang on', and knelt by the fireplace. The other ear ring was there, but it had been jammed by the fender between the skirting board and floor.

'I'll get it out, I'll get a screwdriver from the car.'

'There was a fork in the other room.'

'That'd probably do.'

She took the ear ring with her; but the other, when they got it out, was missing the piece that screwed along the spike.

'You could probably still wear it, it wouldn't fall out, would it?'

'I don't think I want to wear it, I just want to have it.'

'I suppose it looks a bit out of fashion by now, if you wait a few years it might be the real in thing.'

But he had mistaken her; she said plaintively, 'I wish I had it.'

It was like a mating dance by people who knew no steps. He took out the drawers, one by one, and they examined them. Then he looked in the space, but it was dirty, and his jacket was white, so he took it off, and hung it over the doorknob, though she offered to hold it. On his knees, he could see nothing, he sent her off to find some matches, when she came back he knelt again, put his head in the wardrobe and lit a match.

Frances craned down to look.

Her voice sounded close to his ear, she said, 'Can you find anything?' He said, 'A penny, a halfpenny, a lot of fluff. A Lifesaver, a couple of safety pins ...'

Aroused by her nearness he would have expressed his nerves with a joking offer of the Lifesaver, but Frances leaned a little closer and rested her breasts on his back. He dropped the match, it singed some fluff and went out. She moved over him, he felt the nipples move; he moved slowly from side to side, it seemed they grew firmer. He edged back to press her breasts, he heard her breath puff as he pressed a fraction too hard.

The house was filthy, it was no place to make love. He felt it was the ill-fated zenith of their love, she felt it was the start; she was no longer beset by desire as a male thing trying to penetrate, nor yet a visitation of an urge she disliked coping with. She loved Vic, she was able to initiate and express, she trailed her breasts across his back again, he was cowardly and inadequate when he murmured to her, 'I still want to find that thing for you.' Yet, interrupted in this first flow of love bestowed, she was obedient, or was it patient, still. She handed him the matches.

And this time, he found it. She stood, they were excited, it was a trifling find but it allowed a consummation of sorts; she held the claw, with its glass jewel, so the threaded spike stood out, he asked her to move near the window, it was a bit like threading a needle, he said. She moved inside the curtains, right against the window, dirty and fly-specked as it was, and Vic moved there too. A bright light struck off the verandah into their eyes; as they moved, the curtains rustled like a veil; they were between glass and cloth, they seemed to have no bodies, their

hammering hearts grew quieter, Vic said, 'Hold it out, Frances', and he screwed the tiny piece of metal, mill-edged like a coin, onto the ear-spike. 'Complete', he whispered to Frances, and she, dark, grave, took his hand: 'I've waited for years. I never thought it would come.'

They sensed, the danger of trying to maintain their exaltation, they drove back to Tom's; Tom and a workman called Greg were just going to round up some cattle to have them in the yard when the truck came first thing in the morning. To give the cattle a clear run in, Tom opened the gates, they swung on oiled hinges. Vic said, 'Well, this is no cocky's establishment, I can see that.'

'We like to do a bit better than that.'

'Most of them, you have to lift the gate up, or else it drags in the dirt.'

Tom said, 'They think they save money, you know. You don't save money with bad equipment.'

But Vic, looking at the cattle, challenged: 'And yet it's only a superior death cell, for all that.'

Tom clapped his hand on an iron rail. 'We're all going to die. Do you think they're any the worse because they don't know when it's coming?'

Vic thought of Mrs Moroney. How bad was she, did any of them know? He could hardly ask Tom O'Connell when death was the subject. And now Frances was walking into the paddock by herself, across Tom's well-irrigated pasture. Tom said, 'I thought she was looking a bit pale when you drove up. She's very attached to her mother, you know. She ought to be down there running the campaign, it's probably the most important election in our history—but she's chosen to be up here with mum. I think that proves something, don't you feel?'

Vic could only nod.

Tom and Vic set off in the utility to get the cattle, with Greg leaping in the tray of the moving vehicle like a well trained dog. When Tom cruised up to Frances she shook her head: 'No, I'll just walk and watch you.'

Tom said, 'She is pale, she's worried.' Vic expected further remark, but the old farmer was obviously used to having a lot on his mind at once, and none of it discussed till he was ready. With no change of voice he turned his attention to the animals: 'Show you how we get 'em in'. He drove at scattered animals until they were a compact herd, then he drove at the herd's flank to string them out a little, then he drove at the trailing beasts so they hurried forward into those in the lead; it was all carried out at a distance of fifty metres or more, the animals never running more than a few steps at a time. But approaching a channel, the mob broke; Greg jumped out and Vic said he too should help.

Greg was like a dog; dawdling along behind the animals, he pitched his voice into the air: 'Oy, oy, biddy biddy biddy, oy oy, biddy biddy biddy ...' or he actually said dog-like things: 'Wuf, wuf, foof foof, sh sh sh sh shushoof!' Vic dropped back to watch it all; Tom's ute made its loops across the paddock, urging the flanks of the mob, and Greg shuffled behind, occasionally waving his hat or taking a blade of grass out of his mouth to call: 'Oy, oy, biddy biddy biddy! oof foof, sh sh sh sh shushoof!'

Frances put a hand to her stomach, and dropped back a little so as not to impede the death-bent cattle. Across the fertile field came Greg's call, a noise in no way connected with the little silhouette of man with hat, a noise in the air:

'Shooshooshooshooshooshooshoof!'

'Oy, oy, biddy biddy biddy.'

'Foof! Hoy hoy hoy. Foof foof, hoy hoy hoy, foof hoy hoy hoy.'

'Rrrsssssssssswwwwww!!' Tom let out a whistle and honked the utility's horn.

Bairp!

Maw! cried the cattle, Mmmmmmaaaaawww!

The baby, indigestion, or attack of nerves sent Frances back to the fence, she held a post, a barbed wire line ran away from her like a long squiggle etched on the plate of sky. Which was huge; if it touched the earth anywhere it must be beyond the blur of eucalypts in the neigh-

bour's paddocks. And Vic, far in the rear of the cattle, was close enough to be the father of her child ... From this silly, paradoxical thought, Frances took another start to her life. The barbs went wiggling to a point so far away it might have been infinity, the disembodied sounds urged cattle who had never known human consciousness to a death they could not conceive of: 'Oy oy oy, biddy biddy biddy!'

'Shooshshooshhooshhooshhooshhoof!'

Bairp!

Mmaaawww!

Frances began to hurry. She would have run towards Vic, but years of farm training prevented her interrupting the driven beasts; she should have run to Uncle Tom, but she was grown out of that, now; she began to move hurriedly down the fence ...

Bairp!

Maw!

... suddenly incomplete! Things were not right, things were not well: mother, child, mother child, the continuity was there, but continuity was only a concept that threaded together all the interruptions, all the damages to body and soul ... until flesh recreated itself in the body of a child. Which she had forming inside her.

She hoped: and the desperation of that hope was itself it measure of all that was wrong: Bob, Mother, Vic; a land that didn't sing.

'Oy oy oy, biddy biddy biddy.'

Maw!

'Oy oy oy.'

Vic saw her finding her way to nowhere, he turned to walk in her direction; she would normally have adjusted her face and moved out to meet him ...

Bairp!

... but this time she could not; she saw him, as he approached, as the rc-presentation of a cherished idea; she said, 'You forgot your coat. It's still out at the old place.'

Was she referring to his lacks, his shortcomings? If so, she gave him another chance:

‘It doesn’t matter, it won’t take long to get it.’

‘All right, as soon as they’ve yarded these animals ...’

‘They’re used to doing it on their own.’

She let him go in the house by himself, she had no wish to revisit her past a second time; she was already walking away when he came out, straight into the barley sown right up to the boobyalla hedge on the western side of the house. He called, ‘Frances, Frances!’ but she continued to walk, though slowly; he could catch her, but only if he wanted to.

He wanted to, he hurried, but when he came up to her, and she turned, what did he have for her? At first, nothing, so she turned again and they walked together into the tossing barley, with a fresh breeze beginning to spring up in their faces, an incitement of nature they might perhaps have done without, and yet it was necessary, there needed to be something active they could watch while their thoughts reached out for one another. He said, ‘Why do you walk away? Each time I look at you today, you’re walking somewhere. What is it?’ She hung her head, she shook her head, she couldn’t articulate; he should have realized he was not her husband: her mother, she feared, was stricken, there was nothing but ‘out there’ to turn to. Unless she poured it all out to her father or Uncle Tom, but the habit of confession was something else she was outgrowing, God was more or less abandoned now, for all practical purposes. So was the Country Party, for the time being, there was only the country itself, which she loved, which had always coexisted with the one thin strand of her being now emerging in triumph. She said to Vic, ‘I could lose everything’, but something in her voice told him she was winning. Now again he was exultant; he felt that the loosening process had been started by him, it was a source of great pride to a man who had been so preoccupied with his own quantity of love to give that he had not realized the effects he could produce. She said, still looking west and wading in the grain, ‘You’ll always have Anna, anyway’; it downgraded Bob Banner to a station far below Vic. Who said, ‘I suppose I will, if I

want her. She needs a central figure to hop away from, and hop back to, it seems to be part of her make-up.' But Frances, deeper-voiced: 'She doesn't hop, she never hops, that's not part of her nature.' Both assumed Bob would have been with Anna the night before, and would be again tonight; the consideration had little relevance to what was working up between them. They walked further into the barley, and the breeze; Vic pointed out the selective nature of the wind, how it stirred the leaves of an old yellow box tree and left the barley; or it flattened the barley heads while the tree stayed motionless. And even on the barley, the wind was capricious; little imps and djins twisted and chased each other across the heads, flattening the dark heads to show their necks of straw in momentary anti-bruises which stood straight up again. Parrots darted, and galahs, the tree offered itself as host; Vic said, 'He'd have to be eighty years old, that fellow, he could be a hundred', and Frances smiled: 'It'd be no good to live for ever anyway. There wouldn't be any need for babies.' Vic said, 'Do you think you're going to have one?'; it was the two and two he needed to add if the day was to be comprehended. She said, 'I don't know, but I've been feeling funny', and touched her belly again.

Heaven could have opened without them noticing, the flesh was where the universe resided. All philosophy boiled down to the fact that the cosmos had a centre, creation was in the two of them; it was the deep sadness of this moment of intense attachment that it was the last such one they would share. Events, inner logic, had brought them together, and would now proceed regardless. Generous to the species, cruel to the individual, Vic often said of nature; now he knew he was not a willing exemplum of such axioms. He rubbed her belly, she rubbed his trousers, he said, 'No, it'd be pointless'. But she hadn't meant it that way, it was her sympathy for the male, who was a rather useless figure at this stage if all he offered was sex. Now it was Vic's turn to drop his head on her shoulders, she put her hands on his hips, but he slipped through them, knelt, beckoned her down.

Regardless of shoes, stockings, or the parentage of her child, she came down to him, and they clutched each other in exalted sadness; she wanted Vic for her baby's father, but since—there was no doubt about it, it was never in question—she would live as she had lived in the past, it could not be. Romance was dying, more serious matters beginning. For Vic, romance was dying, he hardly knew what lay beyond, this was the weakness in him that made Patricia call him 'boy'. He felt wounded in that corner of the heart that had most cried for attention; and it was not the fault of Frances, who clung to him now in greatest need, and whom he comforted with his shell of warmth, his dying fire, He started to say, 'If only ...' but she shook her head, he could feel it against his own; her voice, deep in his neck, said gravely, like the conclusion to a folk tale, 'No. If we had what we wanted, we'd only be after something else.' He had it in his mouth to say 'Never', but already she was far beyond him in wisdom. She said, 'We'd better go back', but he said, 'One moment', she was glad he asked. They stood, but he knelt again; the knees of her stockings were dusty and laddered where she'd knelt on the dry earth, and the toes of her shoes had a crust of dirt which he wiped off with his hanky, while Frances smiled on his chivalry with a smile as far removed from Anna's as north pole from south.

They stood; the djins and imps rushed through the barley, played with their hair; they stood still as old trees, parrots darted, galahs dipped low over the grain; the powerful sunlight restrained itself with a passing edge of cloud. Frances, whose habit it was to wait, waited, as she would wait eight months more; Vic, who characteristically sought to take part in nature about him, stayed anchored. He said, 'I'm back. I'm back on earth'; she said, 'Let's make the best of it', then they walked to the car.

Mrs Moroney, even abed, managed a conversation in firmly graded stages. When she had welcomed Vic - and it seemed that she presided over no mere hospital ward, but the feminine affairs of the district - answered his inquiries and asked after the former Moroney house - Yes, that's why I don't go there any more. I used to, but I just can't bear it now' - she turned blandly to inform her daughter: 'Dr Griffin called

in this afternoon. On his way home from bowls, if you please. Pretty casual.'

As was she, but it took strength; Frances asked, 'Did he have any report?'

'Yes, they're going to move me to Bendigo Base Hospital next week, they'll probably do the job next Friday if it's all right with the surgeon.'

Vic dropped an 'Oh!' and looked at Frances, but Mrs Moroney turned a forceful smile on him. 'It looks like they're going to carve me up.' Frances shuddered, how much surgery? Ovaries, glands, Mime of the stomach, what?

Like a news report Mrs Moroney gave out, 'They think they can suppress it for a few years anyway, but they say they've got to reduce the female hormone components in my body, apparently they encourage the growth while they're still there'. From habit she turned the appearance of a smile on Vic, but her attention was on her daughter, who said, apparently irrelevantly, but it was plainly what her mother wanted to hear: 'I felt carsick out at Uncle Tom's. I couldn't get in the ute when they were rounding up.'

Mrs Moroney said, 'You never used to get carsick that I can remember. You look after yourself now!' Frances nodded. Vic felt he should leave the room. Under the guise of looking at flowers he sidled towards the door, then out. A nurse walking past asked him, 'Anyone with Mrs Moroney?' Vic found himself saying, 'Yes, two people.' He felt proud of the knowledge, proud to be a bystander admitted thus close. It was the beginning, perhaps, of his own recovery.

Mrs Moroney said, 'Before I had you on the way I had to listen to your father going on about how he simply couldn't miss out on the Test Match in Melbourne. It was the first series after the war and Bradman was going to play again. I don't think he thought about anything else for three months. Well, then I realized you were coming but I decided not to tell him straight away. My goodness, that drive to Melbourne! He drove like a demon and I felt sick as a dog. I kept telling him to slow down and all he'd say was, the faster I go the sooner we get there!' She

dropped on Frances the grave attention that was Frances' specialty, but wrinkled, and loose about the chin. 'It was only a draw anyway. I thought to myself, I'm not going back at that speed, so I told him.'

Frances took her hand; Mrs Moroney said, 'Bob know yet?' Frances shook her head.

'Your friend knows, though.'

Frances nodded.

'When's he going back?'

'In the morning.'

'He staying at Tom's tonight?'

Frances nodded.

Mrs Moroney said, 'He'll give you a ride back to town. I've got plenty of people to visit me, too many half the time. Your father can eat at the Club.'

In a low murmur Frances told her mother, 'I'll stay here till Bob comes to get me.'

There was one more thing to ask, but shock tactics were needed.

'Call it Robert if it's a boy?'

Serious, grateful, Frances answered gravely in a drawl which was her way of stressing the unsayable: 'It wouldn't be a bad name to give a boy.'

With the brutality, or is it realism, of pragmatic people, the affairs of the young were taking precedence; Mrs Moroney, though wounded, found she could still preside, she wanted her daughter to make a further offering; this would help re-establish her. Frances, glancing out the door to where Vic was reading a plaque set in the wall, told her mother, 'I don't suppose any stage of your life is perfect.' Mrs Moroney said, 'You could never have got this far without Bob.' She said, 'If you listen to the church, you'd be virtuous all the time. I don't think anything exists without its opposite. You've got to fall from grace sometimes to know what grace is. What's more, if you're never tempted, I don't think you're human. I don't know that it's what you do that matters so much as how you go on afterwards.'

But Frances shook her head to that.

‘Well, perhaps you should’ve.’

Frances stared at Mother.

‘I wouldn’t have said that when you were growing girls, I know. But a thing like this makes you reconsider.’

Frances looked again at Vic, only pretending to read, now.

Mother said, ‘It’ll be up to you now. Bob’ll be what you make him. But don’t be too superior, let him rule the roost sometimes.’

Frances began to laugh, there were tears trying to surface; Mrs Moroney said, ‘Now now. Take your friend home and have a few drinks. You’ll be all right. As long as he believes it’s a special relationship he’ll keep it up. So you keep it special, you might need him sometimes. Simple things that Bob wouldn’t care about would cheapen that man.’

In this current of appreciation, Frances played the cheeky daughter she had never been: ‘How come you know so much about men?’ The unnaturalness of her voice—forced, nowhere near that even drawl—and the strain on her face made her mother laugh: ‘I’ve watched a lot of people. Now they can watch me.’ Frances wanted to say what the dutiful side of her nature threw up as politic—that no surgeon could maim her mother’s standing—but her mother’s smile, or shell of one, compelled her to be honest. And silent. Mrs Moroney said, ‘Go on, take your friend home, you’ll have a lot to do, after today.’

After today. Even her mother’s indulgence would not extend after today. Bob would have to be brought back into the picture, parental judgement would be stern, and fully operative; Mrs Moroney’s frankness and flexibility were part of her means of keeping her family inside the habit of faith. Frances knew this, and Vic knew, when he walked her out to the car, and drove her back to the empty Moroney house for the drinks Frances’ mother had suggested, that the resolution, the healing that was taking place, had been completed not by his own embrace in the golden fields and swirling breezes at the old Moroney property, but by the mother’s absolution. Frances smiling, Frances happy, Frances warm, offering him tokay, putting logs on the fire, was really Frances

hopeful; she wanted to resume the life she knew before he came as an interruption. And the remarkable thing about the loyalty-compelling Frances was that the ex-almost lover was now to be her friend, support and sometimes confidant.

Driving home, Vic thought maliciously of the upheavals facing Bob. He would have to grow in stature and understanding if he was to be a match for Frances, if he was to avoid the heaviness of the Moroneys' silent judgement, 'And I don't think he'll be getting what he needs from Anna', the forester thought, driving down the road a younger Mr Moroney covered at speed to see a test match: 'I don't think she's got it to give him.'

Vic considered his marriage and the emptiness of all he knew.

13

Bob said to Anna, 'You know, she didn't ring me up last night, or tonight.'

She said, 'Oh well, I hope they're getting somewhere.'

He said, 'So do I!' and the vehemence with which he said it was a measure of his wish to have the whole of her.

They were always discussing Frances and Vic. The conversations were like tunnels dug deeper than their normal life; maintaining a surface of normality, they crept regularly to the intimate position they shared; it was the only way they could make their love work. Anna had twice told Bob they must break it off, but though he concurred, he could no more inwardly accept than she could next time he came close to her. It was as if there was a quantity of fuel to be burned, and burn it must, either in a fierce destructive blaze, or in carefully measured, secret ignitions. Anna said they must not make situations; none of them were by temperament self-dramatists; if ugly scenes flared between them they might, in their inexperience, do damage to each other they could never heal; this must be avoided. Bob might have realized that this attitude of hers implied that the affair must one day end, but he did not; not knowing where his own limits lay, he could not imagine where they would be when they had been expanded by the inclusion of Anna in his understanding. For him, it was all a matter of plundering the riches; it didn't occur to him that the most deeply loved body, conversation, responses, could stale; this was because he had not gone overboard before. He was like a blind man swimming; whether in a pond or an ocean he couldn't know. And the circumstances were new, too, for Anna; Bob, she was finding, could not be held separate, like earlier lovers, he was eating into her regard

for Vic, replacing him in her world of habit as well as the forefront of her emotional life. It was not a light affair, there was a meaning working itself out, she was not in control, she could find no sequence in the things they said and did in their meetings.

When they could have them; there was circus a-plenty in their efforts to get together. The earliest of such scenes ran thus: Vic rang home to say he would be required at the evening session of a conference he was attending; the phone gave an engaged signal. Ten minutes later it still gave an engaged signal, and again, twenty minutes after that. So Vic rang Mrs Davis, the neighbour across the road, and asked her to give Anna the message.

Anna and Bob were in bed when they heard the knock. Anna sat up, Bob said, 'Just stay where you are, don't answer it'. Anna said, 'I think it might be Joan Davis, it sounds like her knock. Oh shit.' Bob said, 'Well, put your dressing gown on. You were just going to have a shower, you got up late this morning.'

'But I didn't, I was up early, and she'd know.'

'Perhaps it's not her.'

Another knock and a call that would take no denying:
'Annaaaaaaaa!'

'Oh gosh.'

'You're having a shower.'

'But what about your car?'

'It's parked outside that brown house. Anyway, she wouldn't know my car.'

'Don't you bet on that.'

'Well, go on!'

'She's probably heard our voices.'

But it was only the message, and a raised eyebrow at the shower.

'I think she knew!'

'Oh rubbish.'

'Well, I suppose I just imagined she knew, but I did imagine it, so it makes me feel just as bad as if she did. Do you understand me?'

'I'm trying.'

'Just as well she didn't come in the middle!' And they laughed, they were conspirators, they knew something no one else knew.

'But why did he ring her, why didn't he ring here?'

'I took the phone off the hook so we couldn't be interrupted. He kept getting an engaged signal.'

'Well, you *were* engaged.'

They laughed again, but: 'Suppose she had walked in, and Vic found out, would you tell Frances?'

'Hell, no!'

'Why not?'

'Same reason I don't tell her now.'

'Do you think she knows?'

'She feels threatened, and when she feels threatened, she doesn't admit it, she gets sort of turbulent deep down.'

'Does it ever surface?'

'Listen, no more questions, I'm due in Eltham ten minutes ago.'

'Leaving me to think what to tell Vic tonight.'

'Make it a good one.'

'You're a lot of help.'

Another danger was Anna's mother, who liked to stay with her daughter when Vic was up country; she said she didn't feel safe in Malvern, there were too many old widows robbed and murdered there, she made it sound like a local pastime. Bob said once, 'Let her mind the kids and you come over to my place', but Anna said, 'No, because she'll want to know where I'm going. I can tell her a lie to put her off coming but I can't tell her a lie, flat to her face, because I know that she'll repeat it in front of Vic, and that's too much for his pride. I can lie to him because I think he knows, now, that sometimes I've got to, but he couldn't stand it if he had to act up to it for my mother's benefit.'

So the old lady had to be coped with in their strategy; as did Bob's office, if he risked an afternoon call. He was fortunate that he had acquaintances who could cover for him at two or three points of call—

Paddy Flintoft at McCubbins, in Brunswick, or Lyle Coad, who ran a bakery in Greensborough; if the office rang and he hadn't turned up, they could be relied on for some message like: 'Yes, he's been, he's just gone down to the road to the service station, some trouble with the car. He shouldn't be long, I'll get him to ring you straight back.'

Bob could tap this sort of loyalty, he had a way of knowing the undercover life of an organization. He could read asides, and the knowing little observations of minor employees. He said social importance could be measured by the Waiting Scale; doctors made you wait, but judges could make you wait longer, and you couldn't walk away and go somewhere else. He said there was also the Accessibility Scale which measured the number of switchboards, secretaries, extensions and 'One moment please' delays which separated you from the outer world, the higher you were, the more you had. He sometimes said the world was a joke which forced him to take it seriously; his idea of heaven, he once proposed, would be to head a firm employing nothing but ex-managing directors, and to slip out one day leaving them all trying to get through to him.

So he shunned self-importance, yet the self-respect Anna built in him was vital; he would say to her, 'I had no future till this started with you.' She said, 'Let's face it. Has this got a future? It's good while it lasts, but has it got a future? I don't ask because I know what the answer is.'

'Why hasn't it got a future?'

'If we were going to break up and swap, we'd have done it already.'

'How do you know that? Maybe we're just getting rolling?'

She thought it was obvious, she was surprised he didn't read it her way. Impulsive herself, she knew that if she were to break her marriage, it would be a clean snap occurring in the first few days of an affair; regretted later, perhaps, but irretrievably made, quickly and early. If Bob had to gather his strength for a decision, it would be the decision to return his allegiance to Frances. Which he was plainly afraid of doing, because he couldn't see any future in that for himself.

'What if you had a child, you two?'

'I'd rather it was us.'

'No such luck, mate. Go on, what if you did?'

'I know it'd be the makings of Frances.'

'I think you should include yourself in that.'

'What do I need, Anna?'

It was his weakness as a male that he had to ask, that he felt she would know. What he meant was: is it enough to be me? Can I be accepted? Can you love me? I'm nothing special, I don't have high aims or purposes ...

'Do you want to go to bed?' (Anna)

'You're in a hurry.' (Bob)

'I notice you're feeling like it.'

'I *am* getting a bit that way.'

'Come on.'

Can love be seen as a gesture towards understanding? In their embraces they were simple - if that is the word - male and female, but in agreeing to share them they were taking on opposing truths. Anna saw society as heir to a tradition, however much it was short-changed or fiddled with; for Bob, it was a set of opportunities, it was his good or bad fortune that he wasn't particularly tempted to take them. Except with women; and yet he had been faithful to Frances in fact and generally in thought for the three years of their marriage. Now Anna was breaking apart his concept of a male formed in those hard-bitten suburbs of the north.

First to go was the hard shell.

'Reach down and hold me.'

'Men. The same the world over.'

This took him aback, but: 'Go on, honey', putting his hand on the narrow of her thigh. She tickled him momentarily.

'Are you thinking about something?'

'You don't have to impress me. Come on top.'

Then the idea of woman as object:

'It wasn't very good today.'

'I'm sorry, what was wrong?'

'I've been a bit depressed lately, I've had a cold.'

He wondered, but: 'Next time'll be better.'

'It might. Don't think about it now.'

Then the male logic:

'Carcase wants me to go on his training runs again. He says he doesn't do 'em if he hasn't got someone to be his conscience.'

'Don't they do exercises at the club?'

'Oh yes, but you still need the roadwork.'

'Nell should move away.'

'Eh?'

'He might grow up.'

Sometimes he felt she could love anybody as readily as she loved him.

'Do you love me?'

'I suppose I do.'

Rubbing up against her: 'Well I love you anyway.'

'Oh all right, I must love you a bit or I wouldn't be here.'

There were also the different preoccupations:

'John's had two fights with the boys at the corner, there's a little nest of them go to the catholic school.'

'Oh God, that's about all they learn at those places. That and Hail Mary.'

'I don't want it.'

'I suppose he's got to learn to look after himself.'

'Yes but there's a little streak of malice in him, I don't want it brought out till he's got more self-control.'

Could Bob control a love affair, or was he working towards something which, once achieved, would cause him to break out? That, and the effect on Frances if Bob allowed the deep disturbance to surface by some careless provocation, were their shared preoccupations; Vic was Anna's alone.

'How can we organize it to have the whole night together?'

'We can't.'

'I think I'm a bit jealous.'

'Do you ever compare yourself with Vic?'

'No, no... '

'Well, don't. You're too different. There's no comparison.'

'There's no comparison?'

'There's no comparison.'

'That could be taken many ways.'

'Well be careful how you take it because if I feel you're trying to rival him, I think I'll burst.'

Sometimes they met for Saturday morning shopping, Anna drove into Carlton, Bob offered to let Frances 'have the morning off'. These were among their best times, being nearest to normal.

'Have you done everything? Ready for coffee?'

'Yes, are you?'

And they could walk the block or so to Sabatini's, or drive to the city, park near the Flagstaff Gardens and walk, arms around each other, to a bistro near the ABC. The city blaring around them was a comfort, jamming out their doubts and conscience. Driving past the counter-culture graffiti which had replaced the political slogans of twenty years earlier, they felt reassured:

CAN YOU LOVE?

PEOPLE ARE EMOTIONALLY CRIPPLED

They were not crippled, they knew how to love, the warmth of arms was there to prove it, he bumped her hip if she said something silly, she pretended to pull away so he'd hold her harder. In a stolid, sprawling, cumbersome city they were souls released. Trams lumbered along their lines, blocked at intersections by cars turning right ... and they could trigger each other's happiness with a touch! Nothing moved but by the self-defeating criss-cross of the traffic grid, and they were laughing like hell! Once he rang her when he had nothing to say; he said, 'I *love* you' and she said, 'I love *you*' so quickly - and then they both hung up - that the complicated telephone, with its red PMG vans and its concrete junc-

tion boxes squatting in nature strips, its crewmen in blue overalls and its little tents sheltering underground repair jobs, was like an extra-sensory connection! The great system of the world, which demanded you be here at nine o'clock and drive not above sixty kilometres an hour in this road—but seventy-five is permitted in that one—was like a pair of plastic handcuffs that could be struck off by a touch of the other's hand.

GAY IS GOOD!

FIGHT FOREIGN DOMINATION!

But if their souls had been colonized it was by the willing acceptance of all that institutionalized their feelings; now the love-guerrillas in their time-caves were waging their campaign, always hopeful, as long as there was one more feeling to escape to, one more love-burst to loose on the organized world.

'Oh I'm *glowing!* It makes me tingle all over.' (Anna)

Bob: 'Mmmm' ... (smile).

Or he: 'I've no hope of coming next Thursday.'

She: '*Bugger!*'

'What about now?'

She, breathing hard: 'All right. When?'

He: 'Half an hour.'

'I'll send Gwen round to her friend's. I hope they're home.'

The disturbance was moving them to accept much that they'd disregarded before. Anna, ignorant of the commercial world, braved it in Bob's anecdotes, told irreverently; he felt he was being admitted to a higher stage of society's mystique. Deliberately a-political, he began to study the forthcoming elections. He grew hostile to Frances' party, and hoped Labor would oust them; the fortunes of the political battle—as with the football match—were, for him, the enactment of a conflict he felt he shared. There was no way out for Bob, it was only an admission of his quality he wanted, but this was hidden from him; the strongest love of his life was too engrossing to let him question the processes at work.

'These things you buy for your house, Anna, how do you know which ones you want?'

He meant he could tell when things were bad, but lacked a response to quality in art, furniture, design. She told him his eyes were seeing with a class habit, instead of aesthetically; if a thing stemmed from a nation or class outside his understanding, he was rejecting it. She would say, 'What people buy out of all the stuff in a shop is a sort of self-definition. But don't define yourself by your background, define your taste. Refine it. If you're attracted to something, start asking yourself questions about it.'

'Well now!'

'What?'

'It's bare. It lands on a bed with its knees and it snuggles down, before I've got a chance to identify it. But I love its back.

(chuckle) 'You don't want to know what it's up to?'

'I think I do. But I don't want its husband to.'

(thoughtful) 'Yes. Quite. I don't think it knows itself.'

He thought desire would never end, it renewed itself so easily. Her intimate phone voice, or one touch of her body if he brushed past her at a party, talking to someone else, were enough to stir him; yet once or twice, when their eyes met, and there was no spark, he felt infirm, shaken, their love was like a candle in a breeze. He discussed this with her.

'Yes, I know the time you mean. I didn't think you'd want me any more.'

'Well I do, believe me. But it was odd, wasn't it?'

'I suppose it was. Perhaps we've had the best of each other.'

'No! No!'

'You can't always tell.'

How to define the times, one's love, self, feelings? What's happening to us? What's it all about? His mind was simpler than Anna's, he was less advanced in life's stages; loving what was happening to him, he felt he must pursue it more intensely; perhaps it was intensity he was pursuing, but what would he do when he found it?

'I don't think you see me clearly, Bob.'

‘If I could, it’d mean I was standing back, detached. Who wants that?’

‘Sometimes it’s best to stand back a bit.’

Won’t someone tell us? With historians looking at the past, and the future left to planners, charlatans and scientists, what’s to be made of the present? The intensity of the moment is all of life we have in hand, the thing most worth having, and the hardest to understand. There are no guidebooks, higher authorities or scientific studies to interpret. There are only selves trying to make meaning of each other, reaching in to handle each other. The trust that love involves is the most precarious, precious thing in human emotion and it is too easily breached by lack of understanding. Understanding, a luxury commodity to the view – commonly propounded at Bob’s mill – that commerce is the lifeblood of society, and that the movement of capital and goods is the key social function ... understanding, once we take regard of the precious and easily extinguished human spirit, becomes, if not the highest virtue, at least the key to it.

And it is so hardly come by ...

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know you didn’t want me to dig into that.’

‘Well, you might have thought. I’ve been married to him eight years. You can’t pull out the roots that easily, you know.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Yes. Well. Go on with what you were telling me.’ They were only anecdotes, or his glancing comments on them, Bob had no completeness in his view of life, only attitudes, stock or personal.

‘Poor old Jenny. She’d left the PA system on and the whole place was getting a broadcast of what she was doing. You could hear her typewriter all over the mill, and Jenny cursing if she made a mistake. It was a scream, you couldn’t hear yourself think. Over in the truck depot I heard Jenny say “*Yes Mr Fox, I’d love to do that for you*”. She really simpers over that man. Well, you can imagine all the boys were roaring at this!’

‘Did anyone tell her?’

‘Would you believe?’

'You did?'

'Our Bob! After a while I thought it could get embarrassing for the poor girl, so I went to switch it off. Well, Jenny won't let anyone near her switchboard, and she saw red. She snaps at me, "Bob Banner! Don't touch! Get out of it!" Right through the mill it goes!'

'They'd love that!'

'So what do I say? "Jenny, *please* let me" ... oh God!'

'You'll never hear the end of it.'

'They're really rubbing it into me out there, I can tell you.'

'Poor thing.'

'She apologized later, actually.'

'No, you. Poor thing.'

He loved her; the mill laughed at him, he didn't much care for it: he invited her to laugh at him, she caressed him. Under her fingers playing in his hair, he moved to look at her.

'Poor Jenny really.'

'Do you like her?'

'Yes, I do as a matter of fact. She's a sweetie.'

'You're getting ideas.'

'I am not.'

'I don't mind if you are, but just wait a while.'

'I can imagine a reunion of your lovers, it'd need a good-sized room.'

'*Shut up!* '

'Oh go on ... '

(reflective) 'There haven't been all that many, actually.'

'Have they all meant something different?'

'I guess they have. Some of them have just been sex.'

'What about the others?'

'Good question ...'

Anna gave herself impulsively, yet withheld much; it was in the manner of her giving. An affair, for her, was a fling, fun, a quick drop-off of everything. She was one of the most stable people; the stability was

maintained, not by reining herself in, but by blowing off her anger or taking up a man's approach, it was a way of avoiding intense pressure. It allowed her to explore sex without being too much at its mercy. She would say, 'It's a bit dangerous but not half as dangerous as bottling it up. And anyway, I'm not a grand passion sort of person, I just don't take myself that seriously.' The men in her life had all made up for Vic in some way, and yet he was the central one; in satisfying his sense of importance, and intensity, she had obscured her infidelities. Which had not been allowed to take over too much of her; attracted to men unlike her husband, she could go spontaneously to them without lasting break in the strands of her relationship with Vic.

As long as he didn't know for certain, and now he knew; and even then she felt she could pull things together; it was Vic stricken by a failure in love that worried her as much as Vic exultant with Frances. It was Frances, even more, that she feared; Frances satisfied would be Frances broken from the mould, and therefore unpredictable; this crossover of affections was a situation more dangerous than her affairs kept well in the shade. Something in her was preparing to jettison her marriage if Vic made it happen that way; there was more at risk than she'd ever put out before. Vic at the Barmah Forest, Vic staying with the Moroneys, was Vic in the valley of decision; she rang Bob and told him, 'I'll be coming round to your place, I'm getting one of my cousins to baby-sit, I told her the college was sending a group to the theatre. I've already seen it so it's okay if she asks me about it, but I won't be able to stay late. Any word from Frances? From up there?'

Bob said, 'There was one thing. I'll tell you when you're here.'

But it fell out differently; cousin Betty couldn't baby-sit on the Friday night, but she offered for the Saturday ... and Anna rang Bob ... and when she was getting lunch, the phone rang, it was her mother ... she'd been on the phone to Bett ... apparently Vic was away ... she'd come over to see the little ones and keep Anna company ...

'I put her off till tomorrow night, I said people from work were coming here for a conference of our department!'

‘Good work!’

But perhaps their expectations had been building for the following night, and they were unprepared; as love-making it seemed a little too ordinary, too matter-of-fact. Anna said, lying flatly next to her lover, ‘I guess I’m just a suburban housewife having an affair’. There was a basket of clothes near the bed, waiting to be put away, and Bob, when he got into bed, found himself kneeling on one of Gwen’s dolls ...

‘That’ll take some explaining.’

‘Tell her you did it.’

‘I don’t usually bounce in when I’m on my own.’

‘You weren’t very bouncy tonight’.

‘Tell me about Frances.’

‘You know, she didn’t ring me tonight, or last night.’

‘Oh well, I hope they’re getting somewhere.’

‘So do I!’

‘You really want ... if she gets crazy on Vic, heaven knows what’ll happen.’

‘I know who I’d like to end up with.’

‘Yes ... perhaps ...’

‘You often go off in the distance like that. Let’s talk the whole thing out.’

‘You don’t really want to. Tell me about Frances.’

Bob had come home from work to find Frances in the dining room, on a chair not far from the phone. She had been crying. Their book of addresses and phone numbers was open. When asked what was wrong, she had shaken her head. She didn’t want to say anything. Bob went through to the kitchen to put down some groceries he was carrying, when he came back the address book was shut. Was she trying to ring someone? She didn’t want to say. Did someone ring her? She didn’t want to say. Was there something she wanted to tell someone? She didn’t want to say.

Later, she told Bob about the exploratory operation to be performed on her mother; he was meant to believe it was the reason for her being

as he had found her, but he knew it was only a contributory factor; there was something else and it was stronger.

‘Has she been sick? Is she pregnant?’

‘No. Don’t think so.’

‘You don’t know. Is it something with Vic?’

‘Not that I know of. Do you?’

‘No I don’t. You know what? I think we’re running out of time, somehow.’

And the next night, with her mother in the house and the children acting up to grandma, she felt lower still. It was going to be one long, boring, Saturday night, when ...

... the phone rang. Grandma, pragmatic and tactless, was nearest, and picked it up.

‘Oh yes ... yes ... I’ll make a note ... I’ll tell her.’

Half-considering a swift smack, while Grandma was occupied, to bring John into line, Anna inspected the casserole.

‘That was Mr Banner, your head of department. He said the sub-committee you’re on is meeting at his place tonight, he wants you to get along if you can. He said he didn’t think you knew his address, so I wrote it down, here it is.’

An impish delight, rose in Anna; the address was unknown to her: Mr Banner, her head of department!

‘But what about you, mother?’

‘Oh, don’t be silly, you go to your meeting, I’ll read the little ones a story. He sounded very nice.’

Bob’s car was parked at the address.

‘She said you sounded very nice.’

‘How old’s this lady?’

‘Get out. Where are we?’

‘Come and see.’

Carcase lived in a terrace near the Exhibition; it had been broken into three flats, the last one created from almost nothing by extending the two back rooms upstairs with a mezzanine and skylights; detached in

feeling, even from the rest of the house, it was an observation post above the backyards and behind the facades of Fitzroy.

‘What a marvellous little retreat! How’d he get onto it?’

‘You’d be amazed the people Carcase knows.’

The other occupants were theatrical people, the hall and stairs were full of paintings, abstract or nude, messages pinned on baize or lipsticked on walls, and posters dangling like parchment banners, there were furs clinging to the Edwardian hatstand.

‘That thing’s out of period.’

‘Does anyone care?’

‘Actually, what Carcase has done is rather brave.’

Carcase’s nude was a featherless bird, someone’s cartoon of a defeated Maggie, and there were others. Ranged around the cartoon were a number of male nude centrespreads from *Cleo*, all facing away from a voluptuous *Playboy* bunny. In the whole flat were only two books, on a bench under this display: sitting up stiffly between two pink elephant book-ends, they declared themselves to be:

EROTIC ART OF THE EAST

HOW TO MAKE GOOD CURRIES

It was an elaborate send-up of someone’s estimation of him—probably Patricia’s.

‘This guy’s got a sense of humour!’

‘Don’t underestimate the old Carcase.’

‘Does he know we’re here? What are we here for?’

‘Ah ... I thought we could clean out his grog cupboard.’

(laughing): ‘No, after.’

Naked in ... Melbourne they lay: a warm night.

‘Summer’s starting.’

‘Come on.’

‘Just hold each other a moment.’

The skylight curtains billowed, and slacked.

‘How does he manage those curtains?’

‘Cord over there.’

‘You’ve been here before.’

‘No darling, never.’

They kissed.

‘Mmmm.’

‘You’re a good man.’

Nightsounds crept about them, lights lay under them.

They breathed, the bedding rustled as they moved arms around each other. Fluttering black shapes frightened Anna.

‘What’s that?’

‘They’re his Collingwood banners. Sometimes he lowers them into the stairwell, he calls it his gesture for opening nights.’

‘How do they take it?’

‘They think it’s a bit of a laugh, having a footballer in the house. Like having a farmer for your cousin.’

‘Farmers’ remained a type, there was no mention of the Moroneys.

‘Better put that blanket off, we’ll get hot.’

Tenderness deepened; aloft, on the mezzanine bed, they might have been floating on the stream of northern air warming the city. Somewhere, a child cried.

‘Not one of mine, thank God.’

Now they were released; she spread for him:

‘Are you comfortable?’

‘Mm.’

‘Put your hand here, you’ll hurt it there.’

‘I like it there, if it doesn’t hurt you.’

‘No, I like it, it was just if you ...’

They moved, he to go into her, she to receive him.

‘Ah.’

‘Darling, I’m sorry, did that hurt?’

‘No, it was rather good, actually.’

They were used to each other by now, they moved quietly: slow at first; then, as his semen rose in him, she:

‘Aaaah!’

Creating more questions than it answers, sex, in action, overrides everything, is simple; you come together, or you don't.

'Oh, that's nice!'

Like climbers reaching the same peak from two sides, their bodies impelled them:

'Oh, my darling! ! !'

'Oh, I wish it could go on forever!'

'That's the best we've had, darling.'

'Sssssh.'

They lay, a little sweaty, wet where they joined. His hand, underneath her, felt wet, he wiped it. She said, I suppose Carcase changes his sheets sometimes.'

'Pretty often, I'd guess. I hope so.'

Carcase's troubles were a muddle they looked down on; Nell, Patricia ... they seemed so far away. They slept, the milkman woke them.

'Oh my God!'

'Meeting's just finished, has it?'

'Went a bit late, didn't it?'

'Better get dressed.'

14

Labor won the elections, Bob went north for Frances. The new government, in a flurry of edicts, seemed, for a few weeks, to be changing everything; Frances, though she consented to return to Parkville, did it as a matter of form, there was no commitment in her return, Bob knew she would go north again to see her mother.

Who came through the operation well. The doctors told her the cancer was not as advanced as they'd feared, she still had years of life. The family rejoiced in this, but for Frances the cloud over her mother was part and parcel of the shadow over her pregnancy. She made no resistance to returning, but her very passivity made the trip to Parkville meaningless, empty; Bob could have the benefit of her going through the wife and husband motions, for a while, but at some point not yet specified he would have to measure up, or quit.

The new government quickly brought the old era to an end; and Frances broke the news to her husband, driving to Melbourne in the car.

They recognized China, put the pill on the National Health list. They abolished conscription and let the conscientious objectors out of jail.

It was no real surprise to Bob, he'd been apprehensive for many weeks; now the crisis was on him. Drinking tea with Frances and her news, at a Golden Fleece roadhouse, he was bitter; despite the ups and downs of the relationship, he felt he was on the verge of possessing Anna. Saturday had been a height of unrestrained intimacy they hadn't reached before.

The Prime Minister went to China, met Mao in private session, Chou En Lai in the Great Hall of the Revolution.

Before Bob saw any joy in the news at all, before he thought of it as something for Frances' sake, he wondered when and how he would tell Anna; Frances saw the hesitant reaction, and understood.

The last Australian soldiers came home from Vietnam, Australia recognized the North Vietnamese government in Hanoi. Recognized also North Korea, East Germany, and Cambodia. The manager of Bob's mill made snide remarks about 'palling up with all the people we used to be fighting' and 'betraying our friends'. Intemperate remarks by Cabinet Ministers on American bombing set him speechless; the newspapers left in the office foyer for people waiting for an appointment were constantly referred to, after handshakes, 'You see what they're up to now? They won't last long.'

The managerial slogan at the mill was 'Let's get back to sense', or, 'Everybody doesn't need to go overboard'.

It was a time of trial for Bob, strain showed itself in mistakes, oversights, things not done on time. He had to rush into the secretary's office one morning and alter a column of figures, just before a directors' meeting; the secretary studied him coldly and said, 'Give us time to retype it next time'; it meant, What's wrong with you these days, you'd better pull your finger out.

The nation turned over slowly. Labor voters were excited with their new government, rural areas polarized against it. A hastily prepared abortion bill was brought before parliament and lost by a huge majority - on a so-called conscience vote.

SAY NO TO ABORTION ON DEMAND
A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE
ABORTION A RIGHT, CONTRACEPTION A
RESPONSIBILITY

Campaigns were fought on the bumpers and back windows of cars. The urban anonymity livened a little, the countryside slept, or stirred only to grumble. Anna felt herself wide open, exposed on all sides, as

close to ashamed as she could come. Bob still rang, but no opportunity to see him presented itself; she wondered if this was an accident, or the expression of some hiatus.

She feared and suspected the latter.

She wanted to close it all off, to pass Bob back to Frances, avoid seeing the Banners for six months, and try to restore Vic's fallen morale. He seemed to be living by habit. He moved, thought, and commented—but as if represented by an actor while something in him was away.

Or dead. He felt pitifully grateful when Patricia rang him one day, the women's journal she worked for wanted some facts checked, she asked him if he knew ...

The article was more about wildlife than flora, but he said he'd look things up for her. He rang a friend at Fisheries & Wildlife, he could easily have put her onto him but preferred to be acting on her behalf, it provided a motive and importance for his actions which he could not find in himself. In the mountains, the trees seemed lifeless. He estimated, inspected, wrote reports. Made calculations, considered when areas might be ready for second logging. He brooded, a la Kipling, on the dust and mud from which nature reared herself. Flesh displeased him, newspapers annoyed him with their sportsmen and bikini girls. If he made love with Anna, it eased none of the heaviness, the hollow space in him couldn't fill itself.

Frances resigned from her work. She said it was the pregnancy, and her need to be with her mother regularly. Everyone 'understood', but the real reason was a falling off in her belief. She said she might return to political work when her children were old enough to give her some freedom of movement; she meant she needed some time out; much of the social change being effected by the new rulers seemed only common-sense, and though she conceded that rural people had permanent interests which should be represented, she wanted to work out new terms on which she could serve them, and their party. Moves to link the party with the right-wing DLP struck her as fatal; similar moves to try to create for the party some sort of urban appeal appeared self-evidently neces-

sary—yet how this should be done she found herself unable to consider, she was too preoccupied with her own situation to think creatively.

She wanted Bob to love her with a love that was more than Vic's. She told him, 'We're a one-income family now, Bobby, and it's yours'. She wanted to shelter behind him, she wanted him as the sun in whose warmth she could be comfortable, but he, though tender and attentive, kept passing decisions to her.

He felt inadequate, he was only a low-ranking accountant held in not particularly high regard. He felt he was living in someone else's house; he was used to a second car parked out the front, when Frances wasn't at a meeting up-country, or about the city on business; now there was only the Volkswagen he could afford to run, he felt poorer, stripped. Sometimes he stood where she used to park the other car, staring at the street, knowing she was inside wanting him to be all he should be, and he was thinking of Anna.

Weeks passed, then came the time—Vic away, Frances up north. Bob agonized, backed away from going, he knew he'd have to tell her—if she hadn't guessed.

He arrived at Heidelberg about ten, Anna came to the door in a dressing gown.

'Surprise, surprise!'

'Pleasant, I hope'; but he sounded awful.

'Has there been a row?'

'No, she's in Kerang.'

'What's up?'

'It seems we're starting a family.'

'I thought you might be. Well, I'm glad you're honest.'

'I suppose it's the end of the road, but I don't feel it's finished yet.'

'It's finished all right.'

'I mean if we stop now I'll feel I've been robbed of something.'

'We've had a good run, pretty lucky really.'

It was that ability to rule off and cut her losses which annoyed him, it was surely a defence and he wanted to step behind it.

‘Take off your coat, I’ll put some coffee on.’

When he heard her clattering in the kitchen, he said, ‘It really kills me. That fellow who fiddled while Rome burned ... oh well, at least he had some music ...’

The broken voice brought Anna to the door of the dining room, and she saw her lover clearly, she was on the verge of getting her release from him.

She loved him more than ever.

For a moment the passion to give herself to Bob Banner reappeared; it lingered long enough to overlap the new feeling for him, a compassionate understanding of a man embattled at last. He sensed something of this, stood up, pointed to the kitchen.

‘Turn it off, Anna. For a minute’

Concerned for him, she accepted his kisses, his hands behind her pulling her against him; she said, as many times before:

‘Come on.’

Pride failing, he too accepted.

‘You beat me getting undressed.’

‘Didn’t have much to take off.’

As they lay there, before they made love, she sighed, ‘I shouldn’t be doing this. Oh well.’

This matter-of-fact thing in Anna enraged him. He rolled his head off the pillow and groaned. It was an animal cry, it was squeezed from him like wind from a bellows; she reached for him, pulled him to her, she said, ‘I’m not deserting you, it’s just the facts we’ve got to face’. His head still rolling, he said, ‘People don’t believe in fate any more. If it’s not fate, what hit me? What’s hit me, Anna?’

A little touch of Anna’s humour flickered around her answer. ‘It could be you’re turning into a man at last. You’re going to stand on one square and be counted.’ He said feebly:

‘Check, mate.’

He lay limply, like a derelict, in her bed, Vic’s bed, anguished by his fate, inexplicable emotions pouring one way, like a flood; the official cur-

rent of his life, like a gutter, concrete and rectilinear, pointing in some other direction. A desperate longing possessed him, defiant and obtuse, yet she still rubbed healing fingers on his chest, on his bottom, on his back. The longing astounded the world with no other than some fluttered breathing, his fingers clawing at her sheets, Vic's sheets, it came out as a gasp, a mere gasp ...

Which to Anna was no more than posturing, yet posturing demonstrated something, was a signal of some sort; and besides, Bob was no self-pitying claimant; as he fell from her he asked for something to support him in the void ...

Moving her hand to caress his features, never cherished more than now, she caught with her hand a corner of Vic's pyjama coat, it flicked across his eyes; he asked, 'What are you doing?' She laughed ...

... and laughed:

'Oh, oh oh oh oh dear!'

He said, 'Fuck you, what's so funny?'

She couldn't stop her laughing, though she answered him:

'Vic's a bastard. He always takes clean pyjamas when he goes away. And he never puts his old ones in the wash. I always tell him to take the old ones, or put them in the wash ... oh, ha ha ha ha!'

She shook, shook, quivered and shook, he said, 'Ha fucking ha'. She slapped him on the chest, she said, 'This is what I tell him. Take the dirty ones or put them in the wash!' Her laughter wavered near the line of tears ... 'That's what I tell him!' He said, trying to be sarcastic, but the bitterness refused to come:

'And he never does it!'

'Exactly!'

'Silly man!'

'Exactly!'

'Silly fucking Vic!'

'Right!'

'Stupid fucking Anna!'

'Exactly! And stupid fucking Bobby! Stupid fucking Bobby!'

He managed to keep up the refrain:

‘Exactly.’

He heard the downbeat in his voice, he tried to maintain the humour:

‘Egg-zack-lee.’

A man with two women, a woman with two men, they rested again each other, loose, dejected. Sex would have been a good drug, then, but it refused to come. He said sadly, ‘It looks like it’s going to be business as usual’.

‘Fraid so. Everyone back to his own bed.’

‘Actually’, he said, ‘things’ve got to be different for me. I’ve got to get a new job. I don’t make enough at the mill to support us.’

Anna considered the tactics of Frances’ resignation.

‘What do you get?’

‘Seven and a half thousand. Can’t keep a family on that. Not the way we’ve been used to.’

‘What’ll you do?’

‘Don’t know. Might start a business.’

It sounded vague, she said, ‘Could you get a job through your football club, they seem to have plenty of influence?’

He said bluntly, ‘I’ve grown out of that’.

He added, ‘Thanks to you’.

He wanted to put a value on her, the years apart were going to outnumber the hours they’d spent together; something had happened in his life that needed to be recorded. The only thing he could remember from his schooling, and that only because he hadn’t understood it despite half a dozen explanations by their master, was Romeo’s: ‘It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night/As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear’. It hardly suited Anna, who wore next to no jewellery and preferred to slop about, dressing up only when she had something to achieve: he put a hand between her breasts and pressed her breast-bone, he said, as if identifying, ‘Anna’. He put a hand to her bottom, and then between her legs to

rubble her bottom, and then he pulled his hand back and felt through pubic hairs to have dumb converse with her vaginal lips.

‘It’s Anna, you’re Anna, you’ve ...’

He wanted to say an immortal thing but could only produce the inarticulate:

‘You’ve ... what? You’re, oh, you’ve ...’

It was his sheer incapacity that moved her, she knew he had no words for the value of a person. They’d kept the world out, they could by no means proclaim each other except in metaphors and comparisons that were old-fashioned, irrelevant or corny. But they had been inside each other, through each other, they’d had moments of complete openness: that Bob, excluded now from what he most desired, couldn’t, in his anguish, utter a falsehood or a triteness, stirred Anna: she reached to hold his penis while he stroked her, she called to her receding, toppling lover, ‘I love you Bobby. I love you. I think you’re marvellous and you’re getting better.’ It was not the words, it was the cracked whisper that projected them, she had no control of herself, the balance and detachment had given way to a pair of hands, pulling him on top.

It came with their sexual climax, his ‘Have more men after me’ and her ‘Look after yourself, you’re going to be very vulnerable, the next few years’. As their breathing eased, he asked, ‘Why did we say those things—that we just said?’ She answered, ‘Because we couldn’t stop ourselves’.

‘Is that why we’ve done all we’ve done?’

She nodded. ‘I guess so.’

He said, ‘What makes us do things? What’s in us?’

She said, ‘Babies and men’s stuff. Would you get me a hanky out of that drawer? Oh, it doesn’t matter, I’ll use Vic’s pyjamas.’

He was saying, ‘No, but what makes us ...’ when:

‘Hey, you’re not going to use those ... you’re a bit ... you’re not very sentimental, are you?’

She said, ‘Well, they’re going in the wash. No, well... I don’t attach sentiment to things. I’ve tried, the living room’s full of stuff. But it just

doesn't work for me. You could clean the whole place out and I don't think I'd care, now.'

He said, 'You doing that made me think whose bed I'm in, that it's not just yours.'

She said, dismissing him: 'We know that, don't we!'

He said, 'Oh hell ...'

She: 'If we're going to quarrel, it's a funny thing to quarrel over.'

He: 'It makes me feel a bit funny, that's all.'

'Now you're taking Vic's side. We really have split up, haven't we?'

They were miles apart, it was her utter truthfulness to a situation that got him. She could say contradictory things, and all of them true. He said, disappointed with their final sentiments, 'Well, you'd better pack me off.' She said, 'Hang on a minute, we haven't had that coffee yet.'

Drinking in the kitchen, he felt the scene demanded more: he moved to the living room without watching to see if she was following: she did follow, but with an air of making one last concession.

She said, 'It's a thin line in me, between any man and one man. You got dangerous, you were getting across the line too often. I had to shut you out, I've got to preserve myself.'

'Do you shut out Vic, and everyone?'

'Most don't get near the line, they don't trouble me. Vic's out at the moment because he wants to be.'

'Will he ever come back in?'

'I don't know. That's my problem.'

And so they left it. And the nation went on its imperturbable, phlegmatic way. The government cut out imperial titles and honours, but the conservative states still made honours lists for New Year and the Queen's Birthday. The Queen, disregarded for some years, became a symbol again. Socialites and returned servicemen wanted the old anthem, the government expected a new one to spring from the national brow. The states pleaded to retain access to Her Majesty's Privy Council,

the federal men wanted to chop it out, it was feared they might declare Australia a republic.

A whole cluster of social and economic interests had grown around the notion of Proper Authority; British-derived, it was yet another example of the colony being more royalist than the king. The native tradition—slangy, anti-authority, broadly vernacular—was obviously unequal to dislodging the figures at the bottom of the flagpole; it needed a new class of educated, independent white collar wearers to decide that there was a middle way. Bob, Anna, Vic and Frances were all, in their way, members of this group, unmarked by war service or depression. And it was Frances who, once she began to think independently, thought more swiftly than the others; she began in the classic way of fearing what sort of world her child would enter. She hated the French for their nuclear tests in the Pacific, she approved the government taking the ease to the International Court at The Hague. Of a summer afternoon she lay in the back bedroom, upstairs; she thought of abortion, rejected it, but wondered if she'd welcome a miscarriage, or if that would make things worse. Vic rang one day to offer her a basket and a high chair, he apologized for not being able to offer a pram, they'd given theirs away. She said, 'You won't be needing them, then?' He said, 'No thanks!' so emphatically she knew it was more than children he was rejecting, yet she couldn't bring herself to question him, her own misery might come out, and she preferred to hide it. Yet when she asked him when he'd bring the things over, she hoped he'd hear her unspoken urging to bring them during the day. But Vic, tactful rather than perceptive, said merely that he'd bring them when he got a moment. Frances wanted to keep him talking, would have preferred to have his arms around her again, but he hung up, and she lay down in the back bedroom again. It became her unofficial bed, the double bed was her duty place, she was glad when she could go north to see her parents. Each time Bob drove up and picked her up, she came back dutifully, but it was always in the air that she was returning as a matter of form; he must make her want to come back, or their marriage was spoiled for ever.

Frances feared this, feared Anna; yet when Vic delivered the basket and high chair, the basket contained a bundle of baby clothes, nappies and a sleeping bag which Anna had dug out of a wardrobe, and Frances was pleased, it was the beginnings of a reconciliation, she felt. Yet Vic had been unhappy about taking them. He wanted to say to Anna—This is too ironical, it's saying bad luck girl, you're carrying the baby, I've got the man. Yet he didn't, such frankness was not in Vic's way either; he merely said, with aggressive terseness, 'You feel it's all right to give these, do you?' to which she answered, 'You like to know you're not on your own, when you're pregnant. And you like to get ready.' So she answered Vic on his level of superficiality, and he took the things as bidden.

Entering the terrace, he felt the house as an aura round Frances. She had been painting walls, moving furniture, making curtains and cushion covers. She had bought pictures, Vic noticed that they were serious, or formal: there was a battle scene and a sombre English landscape, the lightest was a Chagall-like Arthur Rackham of the cat and the fiddle. She led him down the passage, and up the staircase, gripping his hand tightly; at the top of the stairs she let go, but stayed close. Vic said, 'You're not letting Bob make much of a mark on the house?' She said, 'He doesn't seem to have much energy for the house. But he says he's going to get a new job, or he might start his own business, he's not making enough money at the mill.'

'What sort of business?'

'He doesn't know.'

The implication was that Bob was confused on most things, and Frances had no means of sorting him out, nor indeed did she wish to try unless he showed ...

It was by his negativism that Bob pervaded the house, the fact that his presence wasn't felt where it should be. She told Vic, 'I'm going up home next weekend. I'll take these things with me.'

Vic was horrified. 'Are you going to have the baby up there?'

'I'll get some support up there, won't I?'

Wrung by this, Vic pleaded with her to abandon this idea, it was surely nothing but an expression of dejection, Bob would come into his own when the time came closer ...

‘He might, he might not.’

‘Look Frances ... I think ... I think Anna’s packed him off. I can sort of feel it in the way she treats me. I feel she’s making little overtures ... sending you these things, I’m sure she wants to say it’s over.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘I’m not sure either, but I think so.’

‘I need more guarantee than that.’

He put his hands around her belly, the baby wasn’t showing yet. ‘I wish I was the father.’

‘Yes. Hm. However.’

But it pleased her, and she stroked his hand, and took him downstairs for a drink. Standing by the stove, she fell silent, abstracted ...

‘Frances?’

Frances said, ‘Even if it’s over, the trouble is, I’m changed by it. We’re all changed by it. I’ve always lived my life in a certain way. I felt secure in that way. Now it’s been broken into, I don’t know how I’ll ever feel secure again.’

‘Do you regret what happened with me?’

She shook her head, putting tea in the teapot.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘there’s all sorts of truth. A different sort of truth came into our lives for a while. I know you’ll manage now, whatever happens.’

She murmured ‘Truth ... ’ and made the tea.

‘You’ll feel different when you’ve got a child, it changed Anna.’

She nodded; her immense capacity was indicated by the simple gesture, and reservoirs of love for the coming child. They moved to the front room downstairs, it was flooded with light, it made the conversation desultory.

‘Do you think you’ll go back to work again?’

‘I suppose so. But not in politics.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m changing. And I’ve made up my mind about something. I’m not going back to anything just because I used to do it. I’m going to act by what I think when the time comes. The trouble is, it’s going to take courage.’

It was general, it might have been interpreted in many ways; but when Vic went to leave, he referred back to it. He put his arms quietly around her, and said, ‘You’ve got plenty of courage’.

She said, ‘I’m not so sure’, and dropped her head on his shoulders, again. With a love, an empathy transcending sex, he drew his arms a little more tightly about her, ran his fingers on her elegant neck. She was warm, the pane of glass in the door was a timeless blaze of light, but she stirred to say, ‘Thanks for the things. And thanks for calling’.

He said, ‘I’ll come again’; he didn’t know if he would, but the moment demanded he say it.

She nodded, he left, he should have driven away, but he went for a walk; and Frances, not hearing the car start, looked out of the upstairs window, and watched him as he crossed the sunlit street.

Humans might as well be robots when seen from afar. Behind glass, curtains at her shoulder, Frances wished she had said more about her political work, to Vic she could have expressed it. If politics is the art of uniting people in a concensus, then it has largely to be done by .slogans, appeals and arguments which were ... if not spurious, then at least they couldn’t touch a Frances staring out at the world. She felt she had not related to anyone except her family and the people she’d grown up with, and she could not be sure, now, that she had related properly to them; she felt she had merely seen them according to the description of their own and local estimate. How to judge a person, how to formulate him in one’s mind? Bob had slipped inside her guard by a well-intentioned pretence; the only man she felt she related to was disappearing from view, now, in the ornate formality of a row of Victorian facades.

On which he gazed with cool appraisal. Australia was acquiring for itself a past, and in his home city these florid hybrids, with their orna-

mentation either stone-Grecian or iron-age lacework, were thought to be from the primal period. Why don't people question their birth, Vic wondered, unaware that Frances, watching him, was doing so. He thought of her, in her expensive series of cells, moving from room to room, setting up a nursery for the child, wishing she had a garden. He resolved that next time he visited, he would bring her flowers. She would put them, he knew, in the sunlight at the front window, where they would extend the moment of their closeness, holding each other lightly in the light at the front door. But they would die eventually. Vic conceded to himself that he had a false view of human emotion, he preferred it static, once a high point was reached he wanted it maintained or bettered. To pass over a zenith was to admit that the force lifting you had a limited duration; like a middle-sized sort of wave, it rolled in nicely for a while, crested and went splosh, it finished up a lot of froth around a fisherman's ankles.

This made him sorry, he got it in his head that other people did not know this, that he was discovering. And Frances too was on similar lines, except that she was still enough of a politician to calculate how long the new government would last, what combination of forces had brought it in, and when the numbers would roll the other way. At twenty-six, she had no wish to be permanently out-dated. Much of what was going on in government was in the air she breathed, people all round her approved of it; the suburb they lived in, so solid-seeming when they moved into it, was filling up with trendier lives, they seemed natural enough when you saw them in their chosen setting; when she recalled herself discussing divorce laws with tight-lipped Mallee farmers she realised the impossibility of forever trying to straddle two worlds; having the baby was going to put her firmly in the one she dwelt in ...

... if Bob ...

... whether or not Bob ...

... when her child ...

She wanted Vic to come back, but the street was empty. The window and curtains reminded her of Vic finding the ear ring at the old Moroney house ...

She distrusted Anna but couldn't maintain her dislike. Anna must have her reasons, if Vic was unhappy; Frances supposed she must need something too, it was just her luck it had to be garnered from her husband, such as he was ...

All men lie in greatest need, according to a Mahler song; it was hardly a slogan to win votes, but it was all Frances could subscribe to as truth, as she stared out the window awaiting the return of the spare figure who, in not pushing her over the brink, had made her aware of what love meant. Watching for him, she wished they were lovers, it was only a daydream, when he came in view again he was as remote as the man at the corner shop, carrying a crate of bottles to his truck. Was the corner shop Italian happy? Frances had no idea. Her incapacity cloaked her like a shame, she stood away from the curtains in case Vic looked up, but she followed his progress by the squeak of his car door, the slam, the engine starting, the car moving away. Then she went to the back bedroom, destined to be the nursery, to look on the basket and high chair, and she lay on the single bed which was still part of the furnishing. Considering the walls, which had no pictures yet, she supposed she would go through the ducks and Mickey Mouse routine, but felt she should do better by her child. The strength in Frances which could have coped with tragedy if need be, rose on behalf of her child; she wondered if baby talk and coddling, which she knew she would go on with, were more of the mother's need than the child's; whether the child was born more realistic than the parents wanted it to be; whether natural protectiveness of the child was natural protection of the parental half-truths; whether her working life thus far had anything worthwhile in it at all. It was so funny to think of a fat little milk-sucking baby containing the seeds of greatness, evil, pettiness or ignorant, well-meaning charity, yet Hitler, Mozart, Stalin and the rest of them had once been babies. Frances lay on her back bedroom single bed racked by the conceit that the birth pains she would have to endure would be like a squeezing, cramming up of human history so it could pass through her and represent itself in the body of a child.

'Oh my child!'

She sat up, bolt upright, shaking, it would have been easy to cry, but nothing came.

Then she heard Bob's key in the door, his feet on the stairs.

'In here, Bobby.'

He sat on the end of the single bed, took in the basket, clothes and high chair.

'We got a present?'

'Vic brought them.'

He nodded. She took courage, said it:

'Anna.'

He nodded, rubbed her ankle.

'Funny to think of him sitting up there, yelling out he won't eat his porridge.'

'You're sure it'll be a boy, aren't you?'

'Oh. No, I mean . . . you say "he", you mean he or she ...'

'No you don't, you think it'll be a boy, you haven't even got a name ready if it's a girl.'

Bob said, 'Why, what're we calling him if it's a boy?'

She said, 'What do you think?'

He said, 'Keep it plain, anyway. No Bretts or Craigs so the poor little bugger feels dated when he grows up.'

Something in Frances softened:

'Bobby?'

He said, 'No, a kid doesn't want to be called by his father's name. John. Plain honest John.'

She said, 'John Banner. A bit too plain, isn't it?'

'Give him a second name. John Victor Banner, how about that?'

It was unexpectedly generous, and somewhere in it was a plea for understanding, perhaps one day he would want forgiveness, a foolish rush of tears came in her eyes. He rubbed her ankles, then her legs:

'Legs are all right so far, anyway.'

'You don't get fluid retention till much later than this.'

Bob said, 'Causes a lot of trouble, doesn't he?'

She said, 'You really are sure it's a boy, aren't you?' But she smiled, and let Bob lead her into their bedroom. He said, 'I'll get you a vermouth, it'll be nice up here in the sun. Go out on the balcony.'

She said, 'No, I get scared on the balcony now, even the stairs sometimes. Sorry I'm so silly, Bobby.' He called out as he moved off for the drinks: 'Don't get too silly now, I need your business head. I've got a lot of thinking to do.'

She called down: 'What about?'

'Banner Enterprises, Proprietary Limited.'

'What do they do?'

He yelled up to her, 'Don't know yet!'

When he came back, she sat near him:

'You could make flags, with a name like that.'

'If bloody old Gough'd change the flag instead of mucking about with anthems, there might be a bit in it.'

She said, 'Banner Enterprises. How many directors will you have?'

'Got your eye on the chairman's job, have you?'

Humbly, head inclined, she said, 'No'. In it he might have heard the readiness to forgive, and some of that world-underlying need she had brooded on.

'Never mind. Drink up. We'll work it out.'

15

Two of Anna's students gave a talk on archaeology, they seemed quite excited by the idea of reconstructing a way of life from the artefacts it left behind. Discussion moved to the lack of such material in Australia; apart from a few native middens there was nothing but rusty mining equipment in the hills or the odd cache of bottles at the site of some vanished hotel. This lack of a pre-history seemed significant to a number of the students; Anna suggested, as an exercise, that they should imagine themselves stocking a room with the printed matter and artefacts which would give some future age a representative idea of the technology, habits, fashions, morals and concepts of our time. It caused the usual hubbub: 'Oh, that's crazy Miss Rogers, how're we gonna do that?' and 'How're you gonna put an atom bomb in the thing, you can't represent the twentieth century without an atom bomb?'

Irrelevant argument raged: 'They're not all that big, you're thinking about the explosion, not the bomb'. Or, 'It's impossible, you'd need a whole museum and even then it wouldn't be big enough'.

But the problem started to refine itself: 'Listen! You don't have to fill the room with a car. You can have a picture of a car, and a scale model of an engine, and a test tube full of petrol ...'

'And a driving licence!'

'And a cop!'

'And a boob!'

'Whose boobs?' (laughter) 'You say something, Glenda?' (more laughter)

But they enjoyed it, it could have gone on for hours; the discussion, childish as some of it was, haunted Anna for days; a boy called Stephen

Scarlett had said, 'A thing's not real unless you feel you're part of it. They showed us this film about the Chinese building a dam. They might as well have been ants. I was just staring at little creatures. I don't think you can make a representation which makes anyone know what it's like to be part of a thing if they're never been part of that thing.' Pressed by other arguments, the boy concluded, 'Reality's something you supply yourself.

It clicked with Anna, she thought of those many times she had stood outside her own experience and gazed coolly at it; it was a childhood fear that she might one day be trapped outside herself, unable to get back. And now, with Bob banished as a lover—two or three times, when the phone had rung, she had chosen not to answer it—she was in trouble. Vic was cool; at bottom unyielding. Her children treated her as herself, she wondered what she would be like if she lost them. Thirty-one and her children killed in an accident, say; would she want to replace them, or what new direction would she take? It was no good looking to Vic for answers, he not only didn't have them, he wasn't disposed to look; he needed a consolation she couldn't give him.

Or the real thing: Anna felt that her policy of damping down the situation they'd found themselves in had been misplaced wisdom. A straight swap, Vic to Frances, Bob for her, though far more painful, might have been the better thing. It made her look at her habits, what had she been protecting? While her understanding surrounded Vic's as a sort of outer perimeter, she could manage him and satisfy him. Now he was aware, and unhappy, and she ...

... was desolate.

She had little wish to entertain, the dinner-parties of the last few years were things of the past, she'd lost the urge to socialize; apart from work, where she felt she was operating by habit, she had nothing to show publicly. Twice she started letters to newspapers, but they were too resentful, and she burned them. She found some letters Vic had written her years ago, she stuffed them away without rereading them. She saw a couple of revivals, she had no interest in new films, she felt she'd failed

somewhere; only the children's grumbling, or excitement, at breakfast time, made her aware that the day about to begin was as good as any other. She felt she was setting, growing firm, not from any doctrinaire habit of thought, but because she had exhausted her capacity to renew. She had her children, love seemed to be burnt right out, people didn't excite her any more.

Should she travel, get a new job? Vic said they might travel in a few more years, when the children would remember more of what they saw, he was only putting it off.

She began to nurse the wish to—as she put it—pull out the plug of society. There could hardly be, she felt, a nation better balanced and buffered to resist change. The national smugness became the enemy she tilted at; Labor Party meetings confirmed her view as much as anything else; every social process was so tortuous that no torrent could ever sweep through society, it was more likely to peter out in a string of committees. The opposition parties' catch cry of Free Enterprise struck her as so out-dated as to be almost fashionable again, but it was not the slogans of economic freedom she wanted society to embrace, rather some sign of public recognition that the much vaunted Australian way of life could be as restrictive as any other. Reality felt oppressive, she wanted to define it so she could throw it off; the idea of a public struggle appealed to her at a time when her personal life seemed beyond resuscitation.

She had loved Bob in a way that tore her; not heedlessly, though the impulse that swept her into it was like the beginning of earlier affairs. Not as compensation for Vic's stillness and lack of sensuality, not the blithe kicking over the traces that left her somehow more faithful than before, but as a direct exploration of her own meaning. And meaning, she decided, was a zero once you'd pinned it, analysis killed it, it was a feeling that you and life around you were one and the same thing, and you rejoiced in it. Vic sometimes had it, she knew, in the bush; when she was in love, or unthinking, she either had it or it didn't trouble her, but now, now, she ...

... was desolate.

She felt she was a victim, but couldn't fix the blame on anyone. Life was poor, she thought of working fulltime and burying herself in that, but no ...

If Vic was still cold, was there anyone else around?

No, the transition had to be accepted. The real test of her marriage had been withstood. But she couldn't settle back as before with Vic, he had been neither satisfied nor defeated in his encounter with Frances; his idea of love, sublimated and ennobled, still rode like a cloud above the workaday world. He had not been brought to face himself as she had been. She wished she could pack him off with Sandra and Gerda for a week or two to get some of the stuffing pulled out of him. She even joked about it with Sandra, but Sandra's look made her feel ashamed; Sandra might be as loose as an old lock in her talk, but marriage still lay ahead of her, she took it seriously.

And so it fell to Patricia. Vic came back from an away trip changed, Anna noticed he was striving for reconciliation, not with her, with himself. And he was tolerant. She heard him on the phone to Bob one night, enquiring after Frances; he finished, 'Look after her, now'; it was warm, it was as if everything was in the open and no longer worth bothering about.

But Anna kept her distance; Vic, if he was healing—and she didn't know quite what had happened—might yet exclude her, go in another direction, and Anna was too proud to plead with someone whose position she didn't know.

It was six weeks before she found out. Taking John to the doctor's one day, riffling through the magazines, she came on a *Women's Weekly* article on the town of Yallourn being dismantled for the brown coal that lay underneath it. Some acid remarks on industrial pollution in the Latrobe Valley set her wondering if the 'Special Correspondent' might be Patricia, then she came on a section contrasting the smoke-filled valley with the pure air in the mountains to the north, some of the phrases might have some straight from Vic's mouth.

She felt intensely jealous.

‘... broken wood bleached white, like sacrifices to the wind and light, there being no hostile gods to appease ...’

‘... brown-olive tussocks on the ground, like pincushions, and the snowgums, their foliage a related colour, huddling against each other to form a bumpy, quilted fur against the freezing winds that sweep ...’

‘... a composition in blue and white; white drifts on distant ranges, deep, jowly blue in the valleys; valleys filled with glaciers of cloud, like an enormous bubble bath under a clear blue sky ...’

‘... something Biblical about this country ... as if the cold winds dictating its appearance were the sleeve of a divine arm, carelessly brushing ...’

She felt intensely jealous; Vic’s pride, unharmed and untampered with, had been offered to someone else.

Accepted?

She thought not, he was struggling for reconciliation, there was something tearful about him, wandering round his garden, taking hammer and nails to fix the treehouse.

Why Patricia? How? Was that someone else to be avoided, now, or would there be a painful Bring It Out In The Open session with Vic or Pat? She decided Pat would probably stay away, feeling just a little more shut out than before. She thought of the Flying Dutchman, and wondered if anyone was redeemable by love; lives began in the womb and ended in the grave, she felt there was a Shakespearean phrase that covered it, but it wouldn’t come. One night she was brooding over a sink full of dishes when Gwen came in.

‘When I was in your tummy Mum, Mum, how did I get there?’

‘Well, your dad put you there.’

‘Did I come out of his penis Mum?’

‘Sort of, yes.’

She could hear Vic rustling the paper, listening.

‘Why did you let him, Mum?’

‘Well, it’s fun.’

‘Well, if it’s fun, he might put hundreds of babies in you. Don’t let him, Mum, because if you do that me and John won’t be special any more. I don’t want hundreds of babies in the house. Yuk!’

Anna began to sort it out ...

‘Will I have to take those pills when I’m a grown up lady Mum?’

‘Yes. Unless they’ve got something else by then.’

‘To stop you having babies?’

‘Mm.’

‘Frances is going to have a baby isn’t she Mum?’

‘Mm.’

‘Didn’t she take those pills Mum?’

‘No, she wasn’t taking them.’

‘Did she want to have a baby Mum?’

‘Yes, I think she did, or even if she didn’t, I think she’ll be glad now that she is having one.’

‘Why don’t people know, Mum, if they want to have a baby or not?’

‘Good question. I don’t think anyone’s too clear about what they want.’

‘Silly!’ said the child.

Anna couldn’t resist it:

‘Ask your father, then.’

But Gwen was tired of that topic, apparently. She wriggled in front of Vic’s paper.

‘Dad, why do you always read the paper?’

‘To find out what’s going on.’

‘John and me could tell you stories.’

‘Yes, but stories ...’

‘I like stories. Mum just told me one.’

‘What was that?’

The child fixed him:

‘You know, you were listening.’

‘Oh yes, that.’

‘Do you put babies in people, Dad, when you go away?’

Anna smiled into the sink, the plates poking out of the suds were like the jubilant sails of the opera house, she provided a little fanfare by twirling the eggbeater in the soapy water. And waited.

‘Do you Dad?’

Vic tried to cover: ‘It’d be fun if I could’.

‘But you’re not allowed to bring them all home. I only want one baby, we could have one more baby couldn’t we, Mum?’

No answer.

‘Why not, Mum?’

‘I don’t think it’s the time, my dear.’

Gwen noticed the serious silence and wandered off to annoy John building with his Lego, the dispute was a welcome relief for Vic, but Anna decided to seize the opportunity. She came out.

‘I worked out it was Patricia. And, you know, now I’ve thought about it, I don’t mind.’

Vic sat slumped, he hated his guard removed.

‘Tell her to drop in like she used to ... oh well, it’s no good telling her, she won’t unless she feels like it.’

Vic still wasn’t saying anything, so:

‘You’d do her some good, Vic. She trusts you, she doesn’t often get snaky with you.’

Vic said despondently, ‘It would have been better without the sex. Having her drive with me was the good part.’

‘I read the article she wrote in the *Women’s Weekly*.’

‘I didn’t think about that. You don’t read that rag.’

‘I picked it up in the doctor’s surgery.’

‘Well, why did you bring it up? I suppose now you want to know all about it.’

He sat there, pulling hard away from his wife, whose charity began to run out.

‘I don’t actually. I’m not asking you anything. I can see she’d be a handful. In a way it’s a pity you had to start with her.’

Start? Where did you end once you broke out of your pattern? Desperation took over the forester, here was his wife shoving the mirror before his eyes. He shouted, 'Hell!' thought of the children, then whispered, croaked:

'I have got so much love to give. So has she. We see it in each other, it's like ministering to each other. It's like being soothed for your fever, it doesn't stop the fever, it just cools you a bit. The sex was a mismatch, we were ...' his tongue lurched without the words, he said, '... we're just at different stages, that's all. Different stages. I thought love was interchangeable with fondness, it's NOT! Love's a madness. She's mad about that man, she was thinking of him even when we ...'

The mystery, central fact, and confusion of human feeling had engulfed them long enough to allow this much frankness between people not used to speaking openly to each other. There was a moment's self-consciousness, then he burst out again:

'And I don't think he gives a stuff about her, you know? She told me a lot about him, I don't think there was anything in all she said that showed he cared a damn about her. She's just struck on him.'

His wife said, 'You know what Thurber says? "Love is blind, but desire doesn't give a good goddam".' It was cool, it was teasing, she really wasn't very interested in what he had to say about Pat, she didn't much mind how he reached his present state, she wanted to know whether the old Vic would reappear, though disappointed, or whether something more mature, and ruthless, would emerge. He burst out again:

'And as for you and Bob, I don't care about that. It's not a matter of forgiving, it never was a thing that had to be forgiven. It was your business, and you know why? Because it bloody well wasn't MINE!'

He walked out to the garage, and she thought she heard him going down the side of the house and onto the street, she realized there was a feeling of inferiority in the outburst. She noticed Vic's assumption, an inexperienced one, that all had gone smoothly between herself and Bob, and had come smoothly to an end, like an engine turned off when running at optimum temperature. She decided Vic was a burden till she

could untangle with him the experience they'd been through in the last few months; if they were going to sit coolly at table not discussing these things, it was like travelling in separate compartments, not free, not properly linked; who wanted that?

And the children had made a house out of Lego, with a crane dangling its hook off the roof, and a ramp for the matchbox car, and:

'Look Mum, it's even got lights in the window! That work! Look, watch, and I'll turn it on. Now it's off, see?'

Yes, she thought, Isolde tried that trick once, it didn't work too well. She'd just got nicely settled in with her lover, if the music told you anything, when the hunt returned. And Tristan spread his mantle to hide her from their eyes. She loved opera, it was what she called her world of beautiful lies, she lacked the self-importance to be like these figures, and took care to puncture or deflate when those near her tried to aggrandize their emotions; she would say, even of her favorite operas, 'I have to let my sense of the ridiculous go if I want to enjoy them, and I can't do it for too long'. Now Vic was out walking the streets in a temper, or disturbed, and she knew she had no remedies for him; he'd been blissfully ignorant and now must find some wisdom for himself, she hoped he wouldn't withdraw too far.

When he came back, she had the children in bed, his footsteps made her heart thump with apprehension. She said, 'Look, honey, I think you're the last of us to pull through, but you will. Don't worry too much, you will.'

He said, 'That's all right for you. I don't know how to compromise. I think it's a disgrace.'

'What is it you can't swallow?'

'I'd like to be springing along, and I'm dragging myself.'

They talked, she noticed he didn't ask what she got out of love, he didn't want to know because he didn't want to adapt, he was still selfish and childish in thinking other people existed to trigger him off, or to line up and take what he had to give. So he was still a burden, she wished she had Bob back, he was far wiler than her husband. He had a

lot of front about him, presumably he needed it in business, but the well-beaten surface covered a far more knowing, receptive set of responses; Bob, in his own veiled way, had something for everybody, it was a thing she loved in him, and it had been formed in circumstances her work set her looking down on.

‘Cultural attaché to the Northern Suburbs’—this was a sign Sandra pinned on the door of the office they shared, Anna didn’t like it, she was glad when the students replaced it:

‘Squares rounded. Pegs made to fit holes. Deviants especially welcome.’

Sandra liked that one, but the administration remarked on it, a cleaner took it down. Sandra told Anna, ‘That’s the story of my life, having things taken down. Did I tell you about when we were in Paris, we had this nosy old landlady, she was always trying to get a look at the stuff we had up on the wall. We went off to Amsterdam for a couple of weeks. When we came back, it’d all gone. She’d burned the lot.’

‘What sort of stuff was it?’

‘Oh, a little bit broader than the Australian Customs likes you to bring in. Anyhow, we had plenty of stuff we’d bought in Amsterdam, we put that around the walls, the old thing nearly had a fit. She got this priest around one day, I think she wanted him to talk to us, so we got in our bikinis and frightened him off.’

‘Was it summer?’

‘No, it was the middle of winter, we nearly died. But he buzzed off.’

Sandra liked to make a legend of herself; Anna felt the professions, especially her own, set out to do the same thing. Teachers were the new moralists in an irreligious age; had she escaped the domination of her father’s thinking just to propound some newer faiths to people not her own? Attachée, or missionary? And how genuine was she prepared to be? Sometimes the girls talked to her about their boyfriends, she wanted to say to them, Sleep with them and find out, but was wary of being quoted back to the administration by parents who got to hear, and she

knew it wasn't the right advice anyway, if they didn't have their independence they probably couldn't handle sex either. Then again, some were handling it too easily and others were having trouble; there was a girl saddled with the name Loretta Barrow who had a pregnancy scare, she described to Anna how she met her boy; a few weeks later Anna passed the place, a lane beside the picture theatre, it seemed a squalid rendezvous, it set Anna reflecting that maybe sex was best left to the adults, at least they could afford a room. And it recalled one of her theories, doing sociology at the university—that the visible world of streets, houses, roads et cetera is not so much a representation of social values as the dress of people's emotions. Years ago she had entertained this idea in a simple form—poor area, poor taste; broken fence, broken hopes, sort of thing: now it re-presented itself thus—that the walls, newspaper billboards and magazine covers, even Sandra's door, were the pointers to an inner struggle as a new morality was being born. Social institutions, maintaining continuity, held views of man, woman, and their rights, which stretched back hundreds of years. It was probably as it had to be but it meant that society was a heavy blanket under which the individual struggled for air. Vic, she knew, wanted more freedom, but would need much stronger social encouragement to overcome his timidity: she had always taken all the freedom she could snatch, but wondered if the cunning employed in winning it had made her shallower than she should be: Frances was scared of it, to Bob the argument was probably irrelevant.

Why? She felt that his emotional life had developed in a sector of society that accepted its position, he could therefore mature without the restlessness besetting her.

Yet in his idea of himself as a man there had been something missing; she felt she'd given it to him, he could go on, now, from strength to strength. He rang one day—and this time she answered the phone—to talk about his idea for a new business, he said he was going to go into insurance broking ...

'What's that?'

‘It happens when you see one bloke giving another bloke a lot of money. You pop in the middle and you say, Hey, you’re giving it to the wrong bloke. Give me a cut and I’ll tell you who to give it to.’

‘It can’t be that easy.’

‘It isn’t. You’ve got to give the bloke good reasons for handing the cash to you.’

‘Are you going to become a con man?’ She felt demeaned by his idea, that he had been her lover.

‘Oh no, it’s a relatively useful form of making sure you get a bite at the cherry. The big boys often get lazy, don’t try very hard. Your ordinary firm will over-insure on some things and under-insure on others, and they don’t have time to shop around. They could often do with a little disinterested advice.’

She heard him chuckle. ‘And they pay you for it?’

‘If you save a bloke three dollars he usually doesn’t mind if you give him two and take one for yourself

‘I still think it sounds a rogue’s game.’

That’s because you still think it’s everybody’s job to produce good solid objects. Not now. Never no more. It’s the nature of the beast called money that it moves. You have to snatch a few feathers while it’s on the wing ...’

‘Oh look, Bob ...’

‘Now don’t get stuck into me about it, I just wanted to keep in touch.’

‘Frances happy with it?’

‘So long as it brings in the groceries. Anyhow, it’s something she can leave to me. Because she’s got to. She wants to feel dependent just now. So long as it wasn’t downright immoral or illegal she wouldn’t mind. It puts her nearer how she wants to be with me.’

She could see that that much was true. People had to take their bearings off the part of society they could see, the circumstances they were in. Frances had a need, it had to be satisfied ...

She hoped he wouldn't ring again, he'd made his mark on her, it was up to her from now on, she had so much to sort out about herself and the society on which she had so confidently pronounced. She had a marriage to repair, and children, and some peace to be made with herself ...

And the nation lumbered forward, not so very different despite the flurry of legislation. Conservative forces dug in in local councils and state governments, people obeyed the national habit of rejecting referendum proposals; they wanted government and they didn't, it was the old old paradox; a nation born in the springtime of European capitalism, a child of the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment, was inclined to see government as a restrictive hand, a pest, a nuisance, a robber calling himself the taxman. It was also, and conversely, the extension of people's desires, the 'they' who ought to be putting this or that to rights, it was supposed to be benevolent but whenever it did anything it hurt someone's self-esteem—or pocket. It was hailed as reformist because it promised to make cities better places to live in, it was howled at when a credit squeeze and high interest rates threatened to slow down home building. Young people who voted the government in were disappointed if they couldn't add their new house to the never-ending urban sprawl. Timber, once the mark of a second-class house, began to be precious; the forests couldn't renew themselves fast enough for the demands made on them. Vic sometimes came, home grumbling: 'It's a pity trees don't have votes, we might get some decent allocations. Our blokes could manage the forests far better if they had more men, but they can't afford to employ them. So half our forest management comes through trying to push logging contractors into doing things in ways that suit us, not them. They just want to get in and get out. You can't blame them, but it's not the best way.' When the credit squeeze caused unemployment, Vic considered the issue wryly: 'They'll sling a bit of money our way, soon, to mop up all these blokes. If we had them permanently, we could plan. But. we just start to use them on something useful and the economy changes, they all hop off again, it was only rural relief.'

‘The Economy’ became the most discussed subject in the land. Was the government managing it properly? Well-paid economists gravely considered, in newspaper articles, if unemployment would have to rise, and for how long, to break the inflationary spiral. It was as if a sickness in one part of the social organism caused a remote limb to wither and drop off. At Bob’s mill, the revalued dollar brought the export division into stiffer competition with American exporters, two men were retired early, two others not replaced when they left. Bob’s superior, the finance manager, wanted to know: ‘What do we do? Get rid of this government and get a worse one?’ He called in his section heads to say: ‘We’re having a five per cent cut in allocations. Against a fifteen per cent inflation, that means a twenty per cent cut. I’d prefer you, at this stage, not to let go any worthwhile people, I’m not prepared to assume, yet, that this situation’s going to last. But I can tell you—and this is fair warning—that if it does, we’ll have to reshuffle. Probably drop export as a separate division and put it in the bits and pieces parcel.’ For Bob, this was the writing on the wall, the men in export were all senior and more highly thought of than he was. He sounded out Barry Martin and Bill Lanning, two tax consultants, about setting up an insurance broking agency with them: as he said, ‘You’ve got the office facilities, you’ve got the contacts, you could probably push a lot of work through the agency. I think I could get quite a few of the people I’m dealing with now to do their business through us.’ His friends were interested, Bob said, ‘Just give me a couple of months to see how the wind blows out at the mill.’ It was the older Banner caution, not burning one boat till the next one was known to float.

More personal issues occupied Frances. Apart from the pregnancy, there was the night Nell rang; she said she’d told Carcase she didn’t want to see him any more, but one night he’d come round and smashed the glass in the front door when she wouldn’t let him in; he went away when she started to ring the police, but she didn’t want to sleep in the flat till the door was fixed. So Frances sent Bob around to get her; while the

two sisters were making up the bed in what was going to be the nursery, Bob excused himself:

‘I just want to tell Vic something.’

Protector of Nell, it was a peculiar delicacy of Bob’s, or perhaps he had sensed what was happening, that he rang Vic to handle the warning to Patricia that Carcase seemed to be running amok. Bob said, ‘He’s often a bit ratty out of season. Not enough cold showers or something. Could you pass the word through to Pat?’ ‘Pass the word through’: this was a typical Bob usage, it implied his view that the most important things were always going on unofficially, that society - or its senior spokesmen - were best left ignorant of what was happening at lower levels, if the top men were kept happy those lower down the scale could get some peace. Vic heard it that way, and appreciated: he wasn’t anxious to have the connection with Pat further explored by Anna, it would be embarrassing to ring her with the phone in the lounge, but then again he could hardly pass the job back to Bob.

So he had to front the situation.

‘Carcase Moore tried to smash his way into Nell’s flat. She said she’d ring the police and he buzzed off. She’s over with Frances. Bob wants me to warn Pat.’

Enjoying the ironies, Anna said,

‘Of course you should. Ring her now.’

... and busied herself in the kitchen.

But Pat was out. She was out at nine, and ten, and half past ten. Vic found it an effort to ring, and listen, and put the phone down with Anna around, even though his wife kept tactfully out of the way. At eleven, he tried a last time, Pat answered:

‘I’d rather lock him in than out.’

That shook Vic, though he might have known.

‘But he won’t come though. He’ll go off and find some trollop. Poor stupid man. Boy.’

Anna was out of earshot, so Vic asked, 'What would you say if someone called you girl?' He wanted to repress her somehow, she was too aggressive for him.

'I've had a child, I suppose that settles it. It's just my bad luck that I'm still caught up in this.'

Vic said, 'I think you're wrong Pat. There is such a thing as bad luck, it comes like a flash of lightning. But if bad luck hangs around permanently, it's because it's part of yourself. You've made it.'

'You give Anna lectures at this time of night?'

Vic smarted: 'I doubt if she'd listen.'

'Bad luck, isn't it.'

What sort of luck, and what was she getting at? There was an attraction for him in her urge to hurt, Vic felt he could as easily get tangled up with Pat as with anyone, this must surely mean - according to his own theory - that he was in decline. The noble love he could share - at least imaginatively - with Frances, was come to this? The fact was, he wanted to be naked with Pat again, to push her about, to break her urge to be broken. He wanted to general her, by a combination of love and toughness, into taking down her aggressive defences and letting softness rule her. He wanted to see her happy and of course he wasn't the man to do it for her, she would only be happy with John footballing Moore, and only then if he imposed a regime of mental pain. Perhaps she was born to be lonely and could only accept a man as central to her life if she could maintain at least the disguise of despising him. Did she really despise John Moore, did she, then, despise Victor Rogers?

'I'd like to be over there, to talk it out with you.'

'No you don't, you stay where you are. You must realize your bad news is good news. If he wants to get rough I'm happy. I'm scared, but there's promise in it for me, are you too stupid to see that? No, you're not too stupid, I couldn't say that about you, Vic. I know you're trying to help, but ... really, do you know? If he just burst in here it'd be far better than me sitting around getting prepared and unprepared. I'm in for a shit of a night whichever way it goes.'

Anna listened quietly to Vic's account of the phone call. 'She's right I suppose. What a mess. You know what, Vic? You shouldn't muck around in people's affairs. You're not made for that. You let people come to you.'

'That sounds as if I'm not human like everyone else.'

She said thoughtfully, 'Being human isn't a general thing. It's a very special, specific thing for each of us. We could probably handle it, too, except for the one really general thing that mucks it up, sex.'

He said, 'That shows your preoccupations pretty clearly. There's lots of general things, I'd call them common things. What about fear? Ambition, modesty, being a show-off? What about pride, and needing prestige of some sort? All these things are in everybody, it's just that they work in a special way for each person, they're stuck together in a peculiar combination for each person.'

She said, and it was quite oracular, it was rarely she pronounced as if ex cathedra, especially when there was an unmade bed between them, the sheets needing to be changed: she said, 'The glue, or whatever it is that sticks these things together, is also special for each person. That's the funny thing about us.' It was Anna's version of spirituality, not a consideration of things lofty or remote, like Vic's, but a consideration of everything an intimacy could reveal. Intimacy, however, was not easily come by; once you had it with someone, once something of their mystery was given to you, you were burdened with their secret. It was as much an explanation of Anna's apparently light-hearted approach to loving as would ever be given. People had to be handled a little too lightly, loved and left; if you responded deeply to what you saw of everybody—when your sympathies were as broad as Anna's—you simply had too much to carry, it was burdensome, there was no joy in contact, social or physical. Vic could see his wife was wise to balance herself in this way, and that she could act as if his infidelity was entirely his own business, though it mattered to her. He was too prone to be monolithic, she knew that it would take other women, other intimacies of one sort or another, to broaden him to the point where he could naturally encounter her on all

fronts. She always seemed to have the advantage, he reflected, she always seemed to have more moves open to her than he did, it was bloody well unfair, he'd have to go through the pain of learning, he was going through it now.

‘What say you make this bed. I might sleep up on the sofa.’

‘Twit!’

‘I’m not going to sneak out to Pat’s, or anything.’

‘No. Twit!’

He looked glumly at her, she said, ‘Stop taking yourself so seriously. There’s no limit to the importance you can give yourself, is there?’ She wanted to laugh, throw him on the bed and kick him. He said, ‘Oh all right. You make the bed while I think,’ and went to the kitchen. He stared at the night, he left the light off, only the dining room light illuminated his fussing with the coffee pot and stove. Anna got fresh sheets. Very vestal, she thought, flinging the dirty ones down the passage. How uptight people could get about sheets, in some countries the mothers and mothers-in-law came scratching around after the wedding night to inspect the blood - if there was any. Sex, she thought, had as many meanings as art, you could attach anything to it—violence, tenderness, brutality, sentimentality, pride of possession, fear, superstition, anything you liked, it could even be fun. She thought about Gwen’s questions about how mothers got pregnant, she burst out laughing. Gwen had asked her, when she was going to bed, how big a baby was when it was born. Having been told, she wanted to know how a baby could possibly come out of the father’s penis. Mischievously, being a little sick of the line of questioning in view of the situation it had caused, Anna had told her, ‘Oh, a man’s penis gets big when he wants to make love.’ Gwen, four, said, ‘Gee, Mum, big as a drainpipe, cause I can only just crawl through those drainpipes up at the flats!’ Anna had restrained herself to explain, now the humour broke out in her. Big as a drainpipe! She shook with laughter. Serious bloody Vic! Sex! How the moralists, all the heavies of the human race, liked to cluster round it, they really were a bore. Sure, sex was contradictory; most people wanted a nice, clearly defined

monogamous situation, most people also wanted to make love with anyone that attracted them: with a fair bit of shrewdness, and covering of tracks, and a certain amount of self-deception, you could have the best of both. For a moment, tucking in the blankets, she felt smug.

Vic, in the kitchen, stared down at the traffic, they could see Heidelberg Road at the end of their street. It was a river of cars that never stopped flowing; day or night you had to hurry across it, cars came over bumps with their headlights bearing down upon you, if you wanted to launch your car into the stream, you had to take a risk that nothing was coming, plant your foot, swirl the wheel and hope for the best. Life and death, he felt, had become mechanical. Machines killed you; and if you stood above the flux, as he was doing, nursing his grudges against his wife and others, then the life of the city seemed nothing more than the hard glare of streetlights and the noisy movement of metal conveyances. Man was too small for his world, nothing gave him importance, if he wasn't busy somewhere in the buying and selling process for which it had all been set up, he was nobody. Vic heard Anna coming to get him.

Standing under the light, she said, 'You matter to me, you know. But I'm not an extension of you. You've got to give me my full scope.' He looked at her, with the light pouring down on her black hair, her denim shirt, and he looked out the window again.

'I don't relate to anybody, Anna. People are just my dreams, my desires, the fantasies I have.'

She said, 'You relate to plenty of people, you're just depressed because things haven't gone your way. You ought to be able to learn from that. Frances didn't have much of a time of it, either, did she? But she's going to be happy.'

'Bob's gone back to her?'

'Mmm.'

She said, 'People can't stay wrapped up in each other for very long. Or if they do, they're blind to everything else, they're bigoted and stupid.' He thought of Patricia's thighs, desperate and demanding, altogether too hard for his tenderness; the tumultuous excitement of her

orgasm using him as a means while her mind held fast to Carcase ... Carcase ... he didn't know what to say to Anna. She was there for him, forgiving, understanding, wanting to resume whatever they had, and he was troubled, his spirit happier to look at the headlights rushing side-on through the darkness at the end of the street than to look at her, bare-footed and holding two sheets for the washing machine. Which she could not reach unless she passed him, he knew he was a barrier, a hostile Gibraltar, and he wished he knew how to soften.

He said, for want of better, 'What's Bob going to do?'

'He says he's going to start insurance broking. Give up the mill.'

He condemned her lover. 'Completely unproductive.'

'I told him that. I think he was just sounding me out, to see what I thought of it. He might do it. I think he'll move on to something else though. When the child's born.'

He said, 'Frances and I never made love.'

She wished they had, if it could be inserted in the past without disturbing this delicate negotiation in the present.

She said, 'He's got a marvellous sense of humour, once you get to know it. And he could really be an outstanding ideas man if he gave himself the chance.'

Vic said, 'Good luck to him'.

'We'll still keep seeing them Vic.' She still had control.

'Good.' He was thinking of Frances.

'If he develops the way he could, he might really surprise you.' She meant that if they were going to find any answers, it wouldn't come from making clean, sharp breaks.

'Good luck to him.' It was a shade more charitable.

'What are you looking at?'

'Just the night, the traffic.' She moved close to him.

'Give's the sheets, I'll put them in the thing.'

'No, I'll do it.' She clung onto them, stale cloths. An ambulance rushed past the mouth of their street, red light flashing; a moment later, presumably encountering traffic, its siren wailed in the night:

Ee/aw, ee/aw, ee/aw ...

Vic mumbled, 'Someone's in strife'.

She said simply, 'Come on. You'll get cold.'

16

Months passed, John Victor Banner entered the world. His father left the mill, went insurance broking with his friends, it meant his orbit was a city office, instead of the northern suburbs circuit he was used to. Yet he visited many of his former calls, got insurance business from some of them. More often he rang, he began to feel he was a voice buried in an economic machine. He realized he had been essentially irresponsible, working for the mill, it was so much easier to be genial when you were dealing with other people's money. He felt he was hardening, on the one hand, and softening on the other. The baby did much to heal the breach with Frances. She was smitten with the wonder of it, and yet, to her surprise, she was an unflustered, capable mother. Their love flowed around the baby, they touched each other through him, he was the catalyst and the liaison. Bob said to Frances one night, as he carried John in for a two o'clock feed, 'Here's the best thing that ever happened to us'. She said, suckling the child, 'I notice he doesn't stop you going back to sleep', but a minute later, when the child settled, she ran her free hand through Bob's hair; it was less exciting than when Anna did it, but more reassuring. He fell asleep again, but not before realizing that the fingers resting on his neck were a mark of Frances' completeness: baby, breast, holding her husband as he lay inert but she would wake him to make love—Frances was fluid, unchecked, satisfied. She was living in and through her body, she was asking other mothers how long it was best to wait before the second child.

Her interest in politics slackened, she often didn't read the paper till tea time, then a recession threatened to check Bob's expanding business. Considering the economy as a dependant, and a mother, she wondered

if there had to be unemployment, perhaps the previous government had been unimaginative with their credit squeezes. Yet again, if high wage demands were causing inflation, how were you going to fix a person's value? She saw inflation as a new form of class warfare, but had lost her sense of dominance; the migrants in the corner shop, the migrants shopping where she did, in Carlton or the market, were embattled people too. She realized that being part of a political party had given her too much of the administrator's ruthlessness; decisions had to be made, but now she felt the hurt of them, not the necessity to have them made. Stray bands of kids found their way down her street, she realized that they, or their equivalents, would be John's company and friends as he got older. She studied them. Their coarseness, their wit, their shoes. Their hair ribbons, their billycarts, their swopcards, dolls and footies. Their talk of teachers. Their parents, when they came past, looking. She felt that to be a mother was to be the most powerful thing in the world, and the most powerless. When she rang the City Council about the garbage men's haphazard treatment of bins and rubbish, she got the answer, 'All right Mrs Banner, we've noted that complaint'. She flushed with anger; if it had been two years ago, and something at top level, she could have pulled any number of strings; now, dealing every day with the minor things that surrounded her, she realized the untidiness of life. Only a certain amount of society, and life, could be well operated at any one time; she felt that her confidence and her knowing, capable manner of two years ago had been hers only because she'd attached herself to political strength. Now she was on her own, Bob was in a personal business, she had little more defence than the man in the corner shop.

Whom she grew to like. One day when the briquette man called, and she was out, the Italian paid for the briquettes, he even declined to mention it till the next time Bob was in the shop. The Frances of two years before would have approached him to say that she handled the money too; but now she stood at a respectful distance, Carlo had his tact, she must develop hers. She must, she felt, relearn herself from

the bottom up, she had no power except the everything she offered her firstborn child.

John Victor Banner. Vic was flattered by the name, the more so because Frances let him know it was Bob's choice; Vic felt something in him had matured when the name could be aired between the four of them in the maternity ward. High above the city, tenth floor, moving out to check Gwen and John's noise, Vic felt lofty and remote as never in his own city office; it was Frances as a mother, he knew, that had affected him; loftiness and remoteness, now, were a spiritual state not alien to the world but connected with it. He appreciated and understood Frances' motherhood better than he had Anna's; this shook the barriers of reserve he'd built. And Anna talking with Frances about the birth, and the early feeding, left Bob and Vic as mere males; they talked about business and trips up country but it was only corridor chatter beside what the women had to say. Central, and uppermost in their attention, was the baby; they approached the observation glass to see it wheeled forward, sleeping, labelled Banner; they were sent off by the nurse, when, it seemed, the baby was due for feeding. 'Makes you know who's boss, doesn't it?' said Bob; 'we think we're important!' And he went on with statistics of American company shares owned by aged widows. 'Women's Lib be buggered', he said, 'they rule the world already! They outlast men, they inherit the big estates, they've got all the say!' It was meant as a tease for Anna, she only smiled; she had noted that Frances' baby hadn't made her feel she wanted another of her own, she was in fact rather glad to be through that stage of her life.

And yet the next stage was undefined. Work ran on too normally, Vic seemed to have relented a little, she felt she had nothing to focus on, the whole scope of reality was too much challenge to be taken in at once.

In another area of society, one much frequented by the media, it appeared that John Moore was a fierier player than ever before, meaner and more formidable: Nell wasn't having anything to do with him, she told Vic she was going out with a young forester in the office, he was

a nice lad, Vic thought, but not above the charge of being considered dense.

Pat maintained her love/hate with the footballer, she sometimes lunched with Vic, he heard her out, he was a source of tenderness she needed.

Bob felt his business was making him too hard-headed, he began looking for something more genial, more human; he decided that, whatever the ups and downs in the economy, people still bought their children toys, but what toys! Half of them were plastic and most left nothing for the imagination to achieve, you simply wound them up and they went whiz with flashing lights. Or they were famous fighter planes, and warships, or guns, or they were dress-up suits for Superman and Batman: 'You can't tell me kids' minds only run on those rails', he said. It was, in its way, a signal of revolt, and he started considering areas, and empty shops, he started searching for people who would make him what he wanted.

This pleased Frances; she felt that this new enterprise, if it got started, would grow with their child; their children would teach them, everything she learned about human development would help their business, they would be a solid unit in a fragmented world. Politics paled beside Bob's new idea, it was a noisy disputatious world compared to the self-forming and delight of children. She knew that children must inevitably grow up; she must, therefore, even thinking of herself purely as a mother, return one day to the questions of society which had once been her daily work, but she would reapproach them by the wandering, circuitous route her children took, when she got back to them again she would be mature and ready, not a product of the mould. She looked forward to this eventual state of strength; baby asleep, sewing basket beside her, a hand-me-down nightie with biro marks to guide the smocking which would make it fit for her boy, she felt that two rich decades stretched in front of her. And Bob was hers, now, there was no doubting it; forgetting the angularity and frequent acerbity which had been hers two years ago, she sometimes wondered why Bob had gone to Anna. She

rarely considered, though, what he might have gained from her, she took the new Bob Banner as her natural possession. Bob's wry humour flickered over her assumptions, but he conceded them when he was with her; she was a tower of strength to someone reaching into yet another field of business while the insurance broking made its unsteady way. And she respected Bob's decision to use no capital borrowed from the Moroney family, it was an assertion of independence that she shared, though every envelope addressed in her mother's writing made her anxious.

Even Vic had his special project: the Commission wanted to set up a research unit to find better ways of regenerating the foothill timbers, and the box/ironbark forests; Vic had to collate existing knowledge on these subjects, existing methods, growth rates, estimated demand, and formulate the guidelines on which the unit would work. He found it invigorating, he said, 'We've been preoccupied with the alpine areas for years, we had to face this problem eventually. And it raises some nice little questions about conservation and land use.'

Anna felt she had nothing.

Even Sandra was saving like mad to go to Europe at Xmas, she'd been urging Gerda to save too, and it looked as if they'd manage to have enough for the cheap seven-week excursion fare to England. Then it'd be a hop step and jump to Amsterdam or Paris, one or the other, it was really a matter of the weather, Sandra didn't have many clothes for an icy winter ...

Anna considered her own late twenties, when she'd felt she had to go back to work. It was as if life had got out of control, it was too big, it went too fast, it was much more comfortable if, like Sandra, you didn't worry about other stages than your own.

And the city of Melbourne lay about them like a smell too conservative, too brick-built, ever to blow away. Churches peaked on hill tops, town halls were severe grey Victorian, or thirties ice-cream classical. Outer villages merged in an unreceding tide of building till suburbs were most easily distinguished by the specialist shops they supported—disposals and speed gear in Bob's native Preston, coffee in

Carlton, antiques in Anna's Malvern. National brands advertised everywhere—Coca Cola, Tarax, Marlboro—while Edwardian trains clattered into platforms deserted after dark. Farm earth gave way to bitumen, new rich migrants showed their wealth with thigh-thick balustrades and front gardens of pebble and concrete. The car dominated, movement was everything, free flow became the traffic ideal just as the liquidity notion ruled in finance. Five and six way junctions had their acute angled buildings bashed down for wider roads, more traffic lights, more bitumen, white lines, turn indicators, tell-tale sprinklings of headlight glass or dirt from dented mudguards. Horrific skidmarks were discreeter reminders of even worse accidents; 'accident' became a word needing frequent replacement—smack-up, bingle, prang. Trees on the nature strip were smashed down to sprout at the butt, confusion clouded the give-way-to-the-right rule, it was a matter of motoring pride to know all the deviations avoiding hold-ups, residential streets had to absorb the politicking of cars avoiding certain junctions, fast acceleration and savage braking became a way of life. Power was the selling word, the advertising hyenas equated engines, glamour and sex via festooning models, wild horses and elegant, cruel young men.

Anna's John put his first fallen baby tooth in a glass of water for the fairies, he knew they didn't exist but adults seemed to think a tooth was worth ten cents.

Bob Banner's John was establishing himself: Bob dropped a key at the top of the stairs, he was groping under a cabinet when his wife came out of the bedroom, she touched his back with her fingers and went down. Bob straightened up, there was a smell of lavender; had she been changing the sheets, or was it perfume? It struck him that the house had been dominated by the smells associated with their child—baby's milk, baby sick, baby shit—and now there was lavender in the air. He went to the landing, Frances had opened the door for Nell, the blonde sister had news but was shy; Frances said, 'I can see you've got something to tell me'; Bob missed the answer, but he caught a reference to 'Douggy', then

Frances was embracing Nell, and looking at her ring, a rather square-faced young man was ushered in.

At the frontiers of tolerated eroticism, as defined by film ads, and book and magazine covers, men were urged to be lethal and potent, women to dare men with their breasts. As fewer and fewer men did rugged things, tough-jawed outdoor males were held up as ideal; focus fell on models undoing pants: this was an ad for jeans.

CAN YOU LOVE?

PEOPLE ARE EMOTIONALLY CRIPPLED

It was only an adult fairyland but it occupied the ground rightly belonging to the arts, which needed to be strident to be heard. Lives were lived under a cloud of propaganda as palling and scum-laden as the city's smog.

I'M A LOVER, I'M A FIGHTER, I'M A KAWASAKI RIDER

Vic found his prurience needled; he felt he could extract something he needed from the younger Patricia, it was an incitement when she told him over lunch, 'I think I'm getting over that man at last. You know? First it was exciting, then it was agony, then it drained me, now it's a bore. If I can't do better than him, I might as well be dead.' But there was nothing self-destructive in it, she said, 'I want to marry, you know? It's a simple thing I want very much. I am actually ready at last.' She said she was bored by a string of lovers who lasted three weeks, or three nights ... 'I don't include you in those, Vic ...'

... because they used her for their reasons and she wanted to use someone for hers.

'And you're the only man I could say that to.'

Vic kissed her momentarily at table, there was warmth in their mutual problem, they could reveal themselves more honestly to each other than to the people they were more urgently involved with; Vic said, 'Do you want to come away on another trip?' She said, 'It'd be nice, but where does it get me? We're just marking time with each other instead of fighting for what we want. I don't know, Vic. When you're going, just ring me, I'll jump one way or the other. It's all I seem to do these days.

Hop about. Jump. I can't stay home and read, I can hardly sit still in a film. Music soothes me a bit. And I can dance!

She was proud of it as an accomplishment, she meant it as a mark of value; the old pride was there, men were fools if they couldn't see how much she had to offer.

SALE SPECIAL BARGANZA AS ADVERTISED ON TV

Vic realized that her quietness, when she'd been with him in the hills, was something few people saw. He thought of Anna wandering around their camp, years before, in her briefs; stretching her arms, shaking her hair, smiling at him because he was fully dressed; she was a pagan, he thought, but her sensuousness was more eastern than mediterranean, there were none of those superstitious race memories of the European in his Anna, she easily dismissed beliefs as such, or legends, it was her own inner nature with which she tried to be in accord.

I DID IT MY WAY—ON 7 TONIGHT—INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GREY GORTON

The tax consultants took on a junior, Bob started to phase himself out of the insurance broking, leaving most of it to the new man while he developed his idea. He got onto a firm in Richmond that cut, stamped and moulded thin metal plate, it was run by an old man on the verge of retirement, he said he'd be pleased to support a new toy-making venture; he said he'd got enough out of society, it was time to put something back; he'd do the work at cost if Bob would put five per cent of profits into certain church charities the old man named.

Bob next rented a warehouse in Carlton, he offered part time employment to students in painting and assembling the stuff he was having made; he told them that if they wanted to take out some of their wages in toys to give poor kids or orphanages, he'd match them dollar for dollar, he rang Anna one afternoon to tell her about this. She felt that something in him was trying to start up their affair again, she said, 'Aren't you exploiting their idealism to get your stuff known?'

He said, 'I suppose I am, but I'm matching them, don't forget that.'

‘Yes. It’s still exploitation though, because you hope to get something out of it.’

He said, ‘All right, all right, but the whole world runs on exploitation, aren’t we facing facts any more?’

It was a short call, it left a taste in her mouth; if Vic was more circumscribed, he had a purity she rather liked.

GET UP AND GO

TRY SHELL’S ANTI-STALL WINTER FORMULA

She felt restless in the house, her daughter seemed to be following her everywhere, she couldn’t settle. The house across the road had a For Sale sign up.

RENOVATOR’S OPPORTUNITY

To the surface of her mind came something vicious; next school holiday she’d let Vic or her mother worry about the kids, she’d go to Sydney, or the Gold Coast, she’d throw herself on the scene and see what happened. She twisted, as if to get away from the idea; something was paying her back for what she’d done to Vic. She felt inextricably bound to the man, whatever he was doing with Pat. She thought of Siamese twins she’d read, about, each feeling the other’s pain; it wasn’t a bad symbol of marriage, despite the detachment she’d cultivated.

TENANTS’ CARS ONLY

It would be even nicer to go with Sandra, but there was no escaping one’s self, one’s past.

PC IN LOVE NEST

HAWKE RAPS PM

WAGE CASE SHOCK

DEMON FOR MOORABBIN

One Sunday Carcase came to the house at Heidelberg, Vic was out.

GO WELL, GO SHELL

Their affair lasted five weeks, Anna called it her orgy, she wouldn’t let Carcase take her to his flat; this was some special allegiance to Bob Banner and the night with him. Carcase seemed to know other places, Anna stopped it when she felt too discredited, she said, ‘I’m sorry John,

I'm starting to know myself too well, it's got to stop.' He appeared to be used to this treatment, he was both stupid and endearing as he took her calm dismissal. At first she had feared he might take it out on her for Vic's intimacy with Pat, but she decided his rage was with the world, he said one day, 'They'll soon be forgetting "Carcase", they'll be calling me Dinosaur next'; he appeared to think of himself as irrelevant, and trapped. And she dismissed him; the last thing he said was, 'If you ever want to waste an afternoon at the game, just let me know, I'll get you in. Or I can get most things cheap, if you want something for the house.' It was a pitiful envoy, it cheapened them, except that his low self-estimate made him an object of her compassion. And then he said, 'Goodbye Anna. Actually I'm glad you never saw me play.' 'Wrong,' she thought, 'but still ...'

PRIEST QUILTS OVER WIFE

The political scene deteriorated, the opposition's senate majority forced an election; Labor got back to power, but still didn't control the Senate, the progressive/conservative struggle was deadlocked; laws were hard to make outside the areas of concensus.

Carcase grew heavier, more darkly jowled; years of gym work had developed him, he would have trouble holding his figure once he finished.

BURN THE BRA

KICK THE MALE HABIT

Mr Moroney had a heart attack, Frances hurried north; he recovered quickly, mind unimpaired, speech only slightly slurred, but she felt, as the oldest, that she was the main support of her parents. She asked them if they would retire to Melbourne but they said no, she rather wished the extended family could live together, or close, she was strong enough to be the heartbeat. But Mrs Moroney said, 'We've got a telephone dear, if we need you'; it reminded Frances of the journey by darkness when Bob Banner was taking her home to see her parents, of the night, only just held chaste, which she had spent with the man not yet her fiancé. Dad drove less often now, and Mum asked her about Nell's engagement,

unsure of an attachment which she hadn't watch develop. Frances, foot in both worlds, felt wise. She told her mother, 'Mr Anthony's talking about another election, there'll be a backlash if they force one now, they'd lose for sure,' and Mrs Moroney, agreed that the time was not yet ripe to throw out the government. Frances felt like telling her mother that she believed the government would pull through its crisis, that there would be many more changes yet, but she chose to defer, and asked about their neighbours.

BUY BACK AUSTRALIA

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF CHRIST CAME TO HAWTHORN?

(Play Peter Hudson at centre half forward!)

The city was a chorus in an age that knew no harmony.

CHIKI (Tchaik) EIGHTEEN TWELVE

LENNY BERNSTEIN AND THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

Even excellence became a saleable commodity.

WANTED! AUSTRALIAN OILS, HEIDELBERG SCHOOL, COLONIAL PERIOD, PRIMITIVES IN DEMAND

Bob Banner told his wife that the more he saw of toyshop people, their clients, charity people, orphanage people, church people and businessmen, the more he became convinced that his background was an advantage. People, he said, who approached their work with a preconception of who they were and why they mattered misread situations, they fluttered when they should be making decisions, they couldn't make up their minds. The system, he said, might be a cruel one, but at least the rules were clear and if you played by the rules you'd do all right. If you played well you could even afford to be generous. Bob broadened, he read books on child development, he went to a psychology seminar, he scoured libraries and galleries for ideas. Sculpture fascinated him, the act of making something with your hands, he began to grow interested in furniture and building. His own lack of skill frustrated him, he went to night classes in woodwork and metalwork but they didn't give him much of what he wanted, he was still thinking, he said, in terms of ideas for

someone else to make instead of thinking in and through wood, metal, paint. Frances said, 'You're a manufacturer, you don't have to make everything single-handed yourself'

A manufacturer! It was true, and he'd hardly noticed, he'd been acting as a combination of entrepreneur, rep, book-keeper, delivery boy, and of course, his old role of credit manager. And the stuff was selling. More remarkable, it was being made; Bob realized how much he depended on Frances when he came home, if he'd been involved with the remnants of his insurance broking venture, to read the half dozen notes beside the telephone, set out in order of importance or urgency; a single asterisk was the only emphasis Frances allowed herself over and above an underlining with her severe black pen. If she was upstairs she would usually stay there till he'd made the necessary calls, then she would come down.

Or call him up to see what John could do, the way he grasped, the things he saw. Bob would say, 'I can hardly wait till he's playing with our stuff,' and she would answer, 'He'll probably prefer some plastic rubbish he can see through the hole in the fence. Kids are unpredictable.'

'Kids!' Bob said, 'It's the parents that buy it. You show me any big-selling item and I'll show you a promotion success. If you want to be rich, you've got to be an expert in mob madness'; Frances wanted to know of him, 'Do you want to be rich, Bobby?'

If he had been demonstrative, he would have squeezed up next to her, but she could feel the emanations right enough, as he looked across their child to where she sat; he told her, 'I want consistency, every day to add a little to the one before. And every now and then, if we're getting stiff, we'll have a break out.' Regarding him gravely, she asked, 'What kind of break out?'

Leaning to rub his cheek on hers, he answered, 'We'll travel, won't we? You can't tell me there's everything to be seen, out here. We might get some ideas while we're overseas.'

'Is that all we're going for?' She was scared, waiting for his answer.

‘Mmm? We’d be going because I felt good and ready. You know what? I used to wonder how I’d look to a lot of French and Germans, but not now. Because I’m not conned by the big boys any more. All these fellows like Van Gogh and Beethoven, they’re just another big promotion success. Mind you, as men, they might have been fine: if you can get through all the bullshit around them, and the adulation, I suppose they were pretty marvellous, but they were just men doing what they had to do, like I’m doing now. You know what, darling? I’ve arrived, we’ve arrived together, the three of us!’

Frances smiled tenderly on him before dropping her eyes to her child, and taking courage to say: ‘Did Anna teach you that?’

He said, ‘Not exactly. She’s probably known that sort of thing for donkey’s years. But she put me in the position that I could see it. So in a way, yes.’

Frances said, and it was a healing averment: ‘She did something wonderful to you, then?’

The question in her voice made him come closer to her; he picked up John and slid along the sofa: ‘I think Vic did as much for you.’

She nodded. ‘But he’s only a friend.’

Vic and Anna occupied their thoughts, staring across their lounge, as people superior but less fortunate.

‘What’ll we be like when we’re older, Frances?’

‘I never think about that.’

But she did; Bob’s mother Iley, his leather-faced father, and her own parents were often in her mind, she wondered if there were compensations for the loss of health and vigour: she said, ‘if we hadn’t met Vic and Anna, we still wouldn’t know each other very well.’ He said, ‘But something would have turned up, or somebody. I suspect it always does.’

Frances took the child from him. ‘The world’s not very moral, is it.’ He answered his wife, ‘Some people need morals like lines on a writing pad’, and he smiled.

‘Bobby?’

He said, ‘Others just don’t write letters, that’s all.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

He said, ‘You might need those lines when you’re a child, but if you’re still worried by ‘em when you get to our stage, boy, you’ve had it.’

Frances wanted to know about Anna, but decided it didn’t matter: she gave the child to Bob and stood up: ‘He can go in his cot now. Ah. Hm.’ Bob looked at her, Frances put a hand to his neck in a gesture she might have admitted learning from Vic. The frankness was something that had come since the birth of her son. Bob, taken a little by surprise, was inclined to tease: ‘Isn’t there any tea in the house?’ but Frances:

‘Hurry up and put him in his cot.’

LESBIANS ARE LOVELY

HOMOSEXUAL SWIMMING - ENJOY THE THRILL YOU'VE MISSED
SEXIST

CHRIST CHUNDERS AT CONGRESS

STOP SNEDDEN, GO GOUGH

SNEDDEN PM? YOU'VE GOT TO BE JOKING

The building industry was the nation's barometer, its pastime, its sacred cow. A pragmatic people, distrustful of theory, revealed their assumptions in what they constructed. Negative aspirations were enshrined in building regulations designed to prevent the squalid, smelly, unhygienic or tumbledown. To be above these defects of older nations was taken as a positive virtue; the imaginative poverty it implied and reinforced was barely noticed by successive generations of home-builders adding their growth ring to already intolerable cities.

TV reached into the home, it saved you going out.

Anna, red scarf, blue polo neck and the inevitable slacks, went to work. Sandra's chatter annoyed her, she was glad to go to class. But there was an argument going on when she arrived, it was typical of the area. Stephen Scarlett was being attacked by the girls over an incident on the weekend. Two girls from the college had seen him in the city on Saturday night, with two youths in a car; they asked him for a ride home, they said they were scared to go on the train. The youths weren't interested, they drove off with Stephen, the girls were interfered with by boys who got on at Rushall, they had to get off at Croxton and run to the police station, the gang of boys chased them to within sight of the blue light.

Stephen, the girls said, could have prevented all this if he'd stood up to his two companions. He defended himself: 'How much notice do you think they take of me? I'm only a kid to them. I just don't have that much influence.'

It could have been Bob all over again, she felt a pang for Stephen the boy, some of the girls obviously liked him, but he was guilty by association with the car-youths and the train-gang. He appealed to her, 'What do you say, Mrs Rogers?'

So it was 'Mrs' this morning, he needed her as a mother-woman. She said to the attackers, 'I think it's as hard for a boy as it is for a girl. I sometimes think you people grow up in a bit of a jungle ...'

'Wasn't it like that when you were a girl, Miss Rogers?'

'I suppose I grew up in the jungle too. My father died, I got about a bit.'

'Were you scared, Miss Rogers, going out?'

'Sometimes. But never for a long period. I guess I found it rather enjoyable ...'

There was hubbub: 'Gee, I don't know how you can say that/So do I/You couldn't have run into some of the guys I know/What's so hard about it?' And then: 'What did you find enjoyable, Miss Rogers?'

They were looking at her now. Anna faltered, she was spilling too much, but they had high expectations of her honesty, she said:

'The sex, I guess. And running a bit wild for a while. It was a stage I'd have to admit I enjoyed.'

A girl called Diana said, 'You couldn't have been one of the casualties, Miss Rogers.'

'I'm not so sure about that.'

Someone else: 'How long did that period last, Miss Rogers?'

They so much wanted to know what would happen to them, there was nothing to do but be frank.

'Until the other day, I guess.'

It was more than they could cope with, the old argument could never restart to cover the embarrassment, Stephen Scarlett said, 'Maybe we'd better do some work. What're we doing today, Miss Rogers?'

Anna felt she was going to break down. The first time you talked about something was when the tears came out, she'd really been stupid to talk so personally. And no matter how much she valued her students, it was like handling a scale model of the real world, she wanted Bob to walk in, she felt his life, laid out before them, would tell them more than anything she could offer. He was more compact in his outlook, more compressed, harder, she felt, and yet he was winning through. Vic was still in turmoil but Bob could close his options and move on.

When she got home she stayed inside, she felt the phone was going to ring.

He rang that night, Vic wasn't about, Bob said he'd got a lot of new stuff through, he'd soon be sending it around getting Xmas orders, would she like to see it all before it was split up? She might find things there for Gwen and John, he thought he'd got hold of some interesting stuff.

She said she could come over most afternoons, he suggested Saturday because there wouldn't be people in the way. She knew he wanted to see her once more. She said, 'Okay, Saturday. Vic's going away but he'll be back by then.' He said, and it was a clue to nothing, 'Everything at cost, of course.'

Everything at cost. Of course. He was proud of his achievement but he had been taught, too young ever to recover, to put the world's value on things before his own.

Well, that was in part her failing too.

The next day an odd thing happened. She heard a shout of laughter from the backyard, it was Vic. He called, 'Come and look, Anna, quickly!'

She'd lit the incinerator a few minutes before, now it supported an example of John's wit, or anti-reason: the lid was on, the thing was smoking furiously for want of air. On the lid sat a birdcage, in the birdcage

was a mirror. Looking at itself in the rather dirty mirror was, not a bird, but a very battered kettle. Anna, too, laughed; she called to her son, 'What's this supposed to be?' John, looking around a bush, said, 'He can watch himself while he boils', and went away with a determined walk and secretive smile. She looked at her husband, she was going to say that Magritte might have painted a thing like that but for a moment art seemed unnecessary, the world could be a statement of itself. She said, 'That thing makes me accept'; he nodded, he appeared to know what she meant if he could only go halfway to agreeing, she put her head on his chest, he didn't really want it, it seemed, yet he was glad she'd made the gesture.

And the thing kept smoking, she came out later to get washing, it was putting on its own show and she was a bit part, walk on, walk off.

She wanted to make soup, she got a saucepan, she felt like a modern peasant.

She half decided to give up work; she hated the area, yet it reminded her of the man she'd loved.

Vic was pleased with John, he'd given him an old saw, he was showing him how to stand when he used it. And as for Anna, she had Gwen pestering her with a cake-mix packet: 'Mum, can I make a cake please Mum, or some biscuits?' To get out of it, Anna promised they'd do it on Friday afternoon, she could take what she made to grandma.

According to the youth culture, the question of sex before marriage had given way to the more real question of sex after marriage, was there anything worthwhile?

She felt there was a quarrel impending, she tried to keep out of Vic's way. She knew he feared rows, she got angry with herself for her wariness, it was a bad effect he'd had on her, an influence she ought to throw off.

It was better to have things out and let them heal, you recovered from wounds unless they were horribly deep.

UPDATE!

It was the fashion to be photographed with a microphone, instead of a cigarette.

The quarrel burst when Vic said he was going away on Friday morning and wouldn't be back till teatime Saturday. She demanded to know why he'd be away Saturday, surely Pat would want to be back to see John Moore play? The way she said his name made him suspicious. He said he was just giving her a nice clear run, two free days, wasn't that what she wanted?

She shouted that he wasn't going away for her benefit, why couldn't he be honest with himself? Could he ever be open and honest or had he been closed over so long that he didn't know what was going on inside him?

Vic said the only reason she was annoyed was that she'd have to get her mother to mind the kids, her mother would be wondering why Anna was never home; if it was so easy to lie to him (Vic), how come she found it so hard to spin her mother a story?

Et cetera.

At work, Vic rang Pat, she agreed to go. He said it'd be a bit tricky at Ballarat, because he had to spend some hours at the Creswick training college; if she liked, she could drive back and he'd come back on the train, she could meet him at North Melbourne with the car.

No, she said, she knew people in Ballarat, she'd make a call, then get them to take her to the train. It was so smooth, so comfortable, he wondered how long it could last, how it would develop; but Patricia said she couldn't let it go on long, she'd be getting jealous of Anna and the children, she felt she'd almost absorbed all Vic could give her without a full commitment.

The quarrel shook Vic and Anna, they slept badly, but hardly spoke; he was awake long before the alarm and out of the house before the others got up.

Anna noticed that his pyjamas, which he'd only slept in twice, were on the washing machine; she felt the impetus of her anger checked, all she had was a dull misery and two more days till their whatever-it-was

could be resumed. It wasn't Vic's habit to ring while he was away. When they first moved to Melbourne he did, but she told him there wasn't any need.

When Bob came home from shopping on Saturday morning ... and it had not escaped Frances' notice that he was far less keen to do the shopping than he was a year ago, it was an uncomfortable hindsight on his relationship with Anna ... Frances was showing out a visitor. She was practically snorting before she closed the door, it appeared that he was an executive member of the almost-defunct Democratic Labor Party; they'd heard from 'various sources' that she was no longer active with the Country Party; what he wanted to know, though it was never quite said, was whether she would be willing to use her knowledge of rural politics to help rebuild and reconstruct the DLP? Frances rarely considered how she might appear to others, she was incensed at the assumption that she must, if she'd given up her previous work, be moving further to the right.

'Just what on earth could make them think I'd join a dead-letter organization like that?'

Bob asked if she hadn't considered the DLP years ago, she was annoyed, she thought he was jeering at her, she said, 'You'll have the Liberals chasing you for donations—if you ever live up to your own estimate of yourself!'

And there was the matter of him going to the warehouse that afternoon, if he went he'd have to take little John with him because she was going to a film with Nell.

He said he would, but there was something grudging in his agreement, she wanted to know if he was supposed to be meeting someone, was that why he didn't want to take the child?

He told her a blank, bare-faced No.

And pondered on the way guilt worked, even on ex-catholics; presumably she only meant some person in business, if she thought he was seeing Anna there'd have been a scene to remember.

So why was he going? It was, he felt, to find out what he'd lost, and if he'd ever had it. No success was gained without a severance somewhere as the pay-off; Bob had always known this.

UPDATE!

CAN YOU LOVE?

The film was a revival of Jacques Tati's *Traffic*, it was showing in Brighton, Nell had seen it before but Frances hadn't.

But had the severance been worthwhile? Frances could be haughty when she felt sure of you; now that he was rising in the world she was treating him with the respect commanded by the senior men in her life.- her family's life, the party's life - but her perception of him wasn't developing quite accurately. His business, which she saw as a business, was becoming an expression of himself. The use of politically conscious students as part-time workers, with whom he talked. The choice of an inner-suburban venue, the polyglot people he commissioned to carve, paint, build, or stamp out materials. The ideas for new games, the irreverence of some of his toys and dress-up costumes. He felt he was capitalizing on his past and, despite the presence in his stock of many conventional toys, building up a stock that told the world what he thought of it. Frances saw the success but not the sly humour. He was measuring up, she didn't notice his tongue-in-cheek. Had Anna seen him better? He'd never really wrung out of her how she saw him, she'd said unforgettable things in their lovemaking but they could almost be put down as love speaking for itself; what he wanted was almost like a post-mortem on a party—now we're sober, what did we do last night?

And there was the nagging thought that he might have gone the wrong way in not forcing a split with Frances; if he could bring Anna, when he called her, to see him again, it would show he still had power to change his mind.

It wasn't true, but it was a sop to his mood.

She took her mother's car—Vic having taken the Valiant—for the drive to Carlton: an exercise in decision, indecision, agonizing, or nostalgia? Encased in the unfamiliar car, her mother's car, she felt as if she

had lied to her mother when she had not. If her mother had asked who owned the warehouse she was going to inspect she knew she could not name Mr Banner, her 'head of department'; she'd been ready to give the first name that came into her head. But her mother hadn't bothered to ask. The gears were awkward and when she trod too hard on the brakes, her bag fell off the empty seat beside her. She stooped to pick it up, someone honked.

'Oh shut up, fuck you', she cursed, while Frances and Nell shrieked at Tati's equivalent situations—people picking their noses while they waited for the lights, windscreen wipers getting a mind of their own, wiping out of phase with each other, bumping each other, getting tangled up. And Nell, though laughing, told her sister, 'Hold onto yourself, it gets better yet.'

Vic and Pat tried again, it wasn't any better. Vic came and she didn't, the next time she had an orgasm and he wasn't ready.

BLOOD DONORS LOVE LIFE

BUTTER EATERS MAKE BETTER LOVERS

I FOUND LOVE IN A SUPERMARKET

LIFE!—IN THE BIG GREEN BOTTLE

Truth began to dawn on Vic as an idea long suppressed. His separation of intent from the results it might effect had once been innocent and romantic; now it was wilful and obtuse. Even his tenderness for Patricia, which flowed in him like a river, was a letout from solving his problems. He indulged himself, she did too, both of them had growing up to do. Pat liked situations, when you were dealing with her you were dealing with an audience too; her passion for John Moore was no longer vital, she used it to put a tragic cast on something that was up to her to fix. She dramatized her situation instead of stepping out of it.

But can we step out of situations we've made if they truly represent ourselves?

She said, 'You were altogether too quick, you rushed me too much,' he said, 'It's being used to Anna, she's quick'; the second time, he said it to her, she laughed. So they were friends, and she liked her body to

be handled by a man who appreciated that it was pregnancy (again) and motherhood (healing, this time) she was after, but they knew they were not the answer to each other's problems. They could stay friends, but mustn't misuse each other any more; in showing this to each other they were peculiarly intimate: Vic saw at last he was a coward if showing the problems in himself rather than acting to fix them was what brought him most satisfaction.

He felt, though he showed nothing of it to Pat, that he had to get home.

He understood that Anna was going out looking at toys, he presumed it meant seeing Bob.

The discussions at Creswick seemed to take hours, finally he got back on the highway.

Pat was somewhere ahead of him on the train, probably home: their concluding arrangement was to lunch together, one day the following week. It couldn't be left as bare as it was.

In distant Kerang Mr Moroney had a second heart attack; Mrs Moroney couldn't raise Frances, or Bob. She got Information to give her the warehouse number, but Bob let it ring. Anna said, 'What if it's Frances? You'd better answer it'; Bob said, 'No, she's at the pictures with Nell.' But Anna said, 'What if she's had an accident? You'd better answer it, hadn't you?' Grudgingly Bob went to the phone; the ringing stopped. Like old times, Anna thought, but the call had disturbed her; someone, somewhere, was groping through the electronic maze to reach them, and they had been unwilling, and now they were isolated by their own decision. It was as if someone knew, and was watching.

Anna watched herself for the least flicker, the least indication ...

Bob exerted himself, offered himself as he had before, she marched up and down the stacks.

'What's this? These are all dress-ups, are they?'

'This season's wardrobe, by Carlo Moleta. Direct from his Footscray studio. Sorry, atelier.'

'They're terrific.'

Carlo's dress-ups included a savage bear, a kangaroo and a dragon. There was a range of hats and cloaks, rather Renaissance, and, as Bob pointed out, he'd also made ribbons, cords and pennons to go with the straight-through trumpets and other musical instruments.

'Gee, it's stylish stuff.'

'See this? Chap in South Melbourne worked this out for me. It's called a sound box.'

'How's it work?' She was watching for the flicker, the tell-tale indication.

'You blow this. Or suck it. And you press a couple of those buttons there. And you push one of those levers, and you see what comes out.'

'Doesn't seem to work for me.'

'Here, look.'

It was like an aural kaleidoscope, sounds jingled, swelled, ended in a boom.

'You try it now. Not too hard.'

She could hardly wipe the mouthpiece, though it was like kissing him at second hand. She said, 'They're rather pure sounds.' He said, 'I'm not having any plastic rubbish, everything's got to be a real idea. Here, look at this one. Two people play this. You try and make the boat go up the river.'

The boat was a slender thing, modelled on the Yangtze River craft; the pigtailed figures towing it were operated by one player, the other had a control that could make one figure fall over, but never both, and he could move a rock into three positions. The game centred on the fact that the controls were indirect, they operated through a tumbler, and if you could anticipate the other player's move, and if the tumbling device favoured you, you could make the boat slip back. Or it rushed forward an inch or two.

'Try yourself out.'

'No.'

'Why not? Your kids might like it.'

If she denied the challenge, she'd made an admission already. 'All right I'll take the boat.'

'You won't get through, I'll tell you now.'

ARE YOU REALLY SURE YOU'RE IN THE RIGHT POSITION?

PEOPLE ARE EMOTIONALLY CRIPPLED

MARLBORO COUNTRY

LIGHT UP A VISCOUNT, A VISCOUNT, A VISCOUNT, LIGHT UP A VISCOUNT, THE BEST SMOKE OF ALL!

A diesel roared down the street outside, two Italians could be heard arguing. She thought of the child crying, the night they were in Carcase's mezzanine bed.

Vic swept past a stationary car, at the last moment he saw a child and swerved.

Jacques Tati stumbled across a road, trucks and buses beset him, the audience's bellies quivered. Nell told her sister, 'There's a fantastic scene in a minute', Frances was happy in the crowded dark, with Tati mooching off the edge of the screen, popping back, then disappearing again. It was her sort of humour, you could laugh at the world as a thing for which the blame—if you wanted to blame it—could be attached to no particular individual. The madness was common, a general idiocy held the human race like a shaking fit; the humour didn't get at you, it let you laugh yourself free, it didn't change you, it cleared you for another run at life.

'Don't put pressure on me.'

'It's only a game, it's you that's making it into something else.'

PISS OFF YANK! WORKERS FIGHT FOREIGN CONTROL

He was trying to make her struggle with him, he was beating her easily, he'd probably played with the thing dozens of times. Or perhaps it was simply the sportsman's anticipation ...

'Isn't that your baby crying?'

Bob asked her to get him up, he had to fill a bottle from a thermos, he'd left it in the car. She picked up the child from a makeshift bed in

the office where he'd been sleeping, there were some cots down the back of the warehouse, she wondered why Bob didn't use one.

Make them secondhand so he couldn't sell them? Surely not. Keeping his child separate from the business he was creating? She didn't know. The little boy was curious about her; it was hard to relate to him because when she tickled him and said 'Ooh you do stare at me, don't you', he simply stared.

And then the phone rang again.

GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK—PAN AM
UP, UP AND AWAY! SOOOOOPERMANN!
THE BIG MEN FLY—WITH AN ADAMS PIE!

Anna picked up the phone, John Victor Banner didn't like the movement, he cried.

A strong troubled woman said, 'Is Bob Banner there, please? Is that little John? Who is it, who's that?' Anna explained that she was a friend of Bob's, Bob was getting the bottle ...

'Get Bob please, it's urgent.'

Vic, rushing homeward, saw a transport plane lumbering high above him; hampered by a headwind, it hung in the sky like a fly on the ceiling. Giant jets, he knew, were bursting from the ground at Tullamarine; other aircraft, like homing bees, were circling and settling far ahead of him, beyond the horizon which lay like honesty as a future he'd have to enter. He turned on the car radio.

At *Traffic*, Tati's immortal crossing scene was playing itself through the projector; the Citroën came rearing up on its front wheels, the drunken Morris swerved and wandered its way down and off the road; Frances, never happier, took Nell's hand, then let it go in another gale of laughter.

Anna said, 'I think it's your mother in law.'

Bob said, 'Hello Mother?' It was Frances' form of address, Anna noted. 'Is there something wrong?'

Mrs Moroney's voice came crackling out of the handpiece. 'I tried to ring you before, weren't you there? Who's that with little John, she isn't

doing much of a job.’ It was true, the child had decided not to like Anna, and besides, he was hungry. Mrs Moroney’s voice went on, ‘He sounds like he’s just woken up, how long’s he been asleep? Where do you put him in that place?’

Fate creeps out of the woodwork more commonly than it strikes with thunder. Bob realized that the situation—or as much of it as was apparent to Mrs Moroney—would be clearly and firmly outlined to Frances, he had a crisis on his hands apart from the news that was coming. The matriarch said, ‘It’s Jack’s heart. He’s in hospital. The doctor says he could have a follow-up attack. If it’s serious, it could finish him. Where’s Frances?’

Bob said, ‘At the pictures’, it sounded like a sin. He added, to improve it, ‘She went with Nell.’

And still the telephone voice commanded: ‘How long before she’ll be home?’

Foolhardy Bob changed his form of address. ‘Well, Mrs Moroney’, he said—and Anna was stunned by his courage—‘I expect her about half past five. I also expect she’ll want to get on the road straight away, we’ll possibly eat something on the way ...’

The powerful crackle had missed none of the overtones: ‘What time’ll you be here?’, condemning anyone who fell down when a crisis was declared.

Bob said, ‘Aaaah ...’ He balanced the receiver on the palm of his hand for a moment, angry with the old lady, looking curiously at Anna. Who held John in her arms, he was happy now he had his bottle, it was rolling loosely in his mouth while he tried to look at his father. Anna turned him so he could see and he started to suck. Something in Bob reared heroically before it fell and broke; he said ironically to Anna, ‘Oh dear, next he’ll want his nappy changed’, and could easily have laughed, but Anna felt withered by Mrs Moroney emanating from the talk machine. ‘What time will you be home?’

Bob told his mother in law, ‘I should think we’d get to Kerang...’

You’ll pay for this, thought Anna.

‘... about half past nine, barring anything unexpected. If Frances can pack quickly.’

‘You could help her’, said the black machine.

‘I will’, said Bob, ‘I’ll be home very shortly.’

‘That was your true battle, wasn’t it?’ said Anna to the man she used to love. ‘Actually, you were pretty brutal.’

‘You don’t suppose it was necessary?’ said the man whose body ...

‘It very likely was’, said Anna Rogers, nursing Frances’ child.

‘Necessary things are rarely nice.’

18

He said, 'You can't say that. You were necessary to me.'

And went on: 'Was I to you?'

DON'T RUBBISH AUSTRALIA

YOUR BEER—CARLTON DRAUGHT

KEEP AUSTRALIA BEAUTIFUL

TAKE COURAGE!

Nell and Frances stood in the foyer, glowing. The traffic outside clattered vulgarly, less acceptable than art. Frances said, 'Back to the real world, I suppose. Do you remember where we parked the car, I forget!'

WHELAN THE WRECKER WAS HERE

FOO WAS HERE

Anna said ...

ANYHOW, HAVE A WINFIELD

DRIVE IN—EAT HARTEE

'... People are like submarines. Ever see those war pictures where you're looking at a fleet and a dark shape noses out of the water? That's what we're like. And in the dark shape are all sorts of people, you can't even begin to imagine who they are or how they came to be there. The tragic thing is, you'll never know who they are, or ...'

Bob protested, interrupted ...

SEX CHARGE—SPADE KILLER WAS ON PROBATION

'... What are you talking about? What are you driving at? I'm asking about you and me, I don't want to hear about submarines!'

She said, 'You'll never know yourself, will you. You're moving further and further away from knowing yourself, you're into action now, you've

got this place as your expression, you're going to go off and start fighting your battles with the Moroneys ...'

'Just because you overheard a bit of conversation!'

'You brought me here today. In some deepdown way you wanted it to happen.'

'Oh now you're really raving!'

'That game, you were trying to make me get involved with you again.'

'No!!!'

'Oh yes, yes, yes. Come off it Bob! Bobby!'

'I've never called myself Bobby in my life, don't you start.'

'You've let yourself be called Bobby. That was your weakness. You expected to be Bobby. You thought if you could have me again you'd be over that hurdle. Maybe. Man, you're in for a real fight when you get Frances up there with the old man sick and Mrs Moroney rampaging around with half her ovaries missing. Believe me, the fur's really going to fly!'

'You're hating me now, aren't you. Why?'

'I'm not hating you. You've just got so many battles in front of you, that's all.'

'What about you? Have you got it so easy, then?'

'No, probably not. But Vic's not truculent. He wants to be shown. He wants to be led. Pat can't lead him ...'

'Pat!?'

'Let the cat out of the bag, didn't I. Oh well, yes. Yes, Pat.'

They discussed this ...

Frances and Nell, unaware of their father's condition, churned up the Nepean Highway, through the widening of High Street, into Saint Kilda Road. Development laid waste mansions, weeds grew by fountains, pseudo-Brasilia murals adorned the front of office blocks. The synagogue loomed, grey and Victorian, over a Melbourne whose response was gardening. Planes, poplars and elms lined the streets of the confident areas; border shrubs, azaleas and annuals did their tricks in

more nervous gardens. Show was the keynote of humble houses, mock-orange began to put on leaves, prunus began to deck himself. Blossom blossomed. Petals fell, lay on lawns like melting hail. Sparrows darted about as if one hemisphere were another. Wattlebirds shrieked, grevilleas called them. Willy wagtails twirled about in arabesques of flight recalling grace notes and flourishes. Nature, confused, mixed, with two types of season to cope with, did her best. The natives, knowing her true mind, thrust showers of wattle flowers before her nose, budded eucalypts and counted at nothing the cost of grevillea, hakea, sarsaparilla and heath. Pigeons, magpies, crows and Indian mynahs used a common airspace scented by jasmine, cut lawns, roses and wattle. Vic, bursting homeward across basalt plains bereft of trees, apart from useless windbreaks of sugar gum and Italianate lines of cypress, found himself looking for features and finding none but the War of the Worlds line of transmission towers brilliantly lit by a declining sun. Home, he thought, is where one's chiefest truth resides, and hated himself for what he took to be a sentimentality, not considering that sentimentality, in Somerset Maugham's words, is only sentiment that rubs you up the wrong way: nervous, unable to face his own emotional life, he reached for any visual, any pressing task in the world around him; home lay, not as the thing long desired and soon to be reached, but as the thing he dreaded.

'Vic', Anna said, 'hates a row, or we'd have sorted these things out long ago.'

'If he's such a good man', said Bob, 'how come you can't have things out with him? You were never very inhibited about chucking my faults at me.'

'You', she said, 'were my lover.'

'I thought for a while', said Bobby/Bob, 'I was going to be more.'

She said, 'Yes, I think I did too. You never know when you go into something. The only meaning is in what actually happens. If you think hard there's sure to be a moment when you knew you wouldn't. You mightn't have realized at the time but you took one turn and not the other. When was it, for you?'

He said, 'I suppose it was really the very first night. I wanted us to go outside, you said not now, ring me on Monday. I think it was decided then. When I was a kid, when I was starting to go to parties, if you went outside with someone, that was a declaration. Everyone knew. When we didn't, when we started the double game and the intrigue, it meant we weren't going to break the marriage pattern. What about you?'

So he could never break out of his mould, only enhance it. She thought a while. She said, 'I think it was your hands. It took me a while to work out what it was. You used your hands to stir me. When Vic and I were first married, he used to put his hands on my cheeks—like this—and look at me. He didn't see me very clearly, I was never what he thought I was, but he wanted the whole person. I think that's how I knew.'

'That must have come pretty early.'

'Fairly early.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'I was enjoying myself. And you couldn't have changed anyway. What you did showed what you wanted. I often think it's the only way you can know about people.'

'Don't you believe the things people tell you?'

'It's a guide.'

They were together, but could never reanimate each other; it would have been better to walk out separate doors, but there was the matter of Bob's challenge to the Moroneys. And the toys.

'See anything you like?'

'Yes. But just a minute. When you get up there with Frances' people and this comes out, don't describe me. Don't explain me. Don't tell them anything about me. Treat me as a fact, but make sure they know that all the reasons, as far as they're concerned, lie in you. I don't want to be opened up to those people. I don't want to be passed in front of their judgement. Whatever happens, Bob—Bob!—you're not to put me in their dock. If I thought that had happened it'd make the whole thing stink, for me. Sorry, but it's true.'

‘Proud, aren’t you.’

‘Yes.’

‘I think it was that pride I wanted. I wanted to be inside it.’

‘You were, plenty of times.’

He nodded, she said, ‘Happy?’

He nodded. She said, ‘Nothing much to say then. Better get me a few toys.’

‘Pick out what you want.’

She took the savage bear dress-up, and a heraldic-looking trumpet, and the Yangtze River game. He smiled ruefully at that, her smile had so much consideration he almost wished she was his again, but there was a huge steel shelving construction between them, it seemed symptomatic of something. Next she chose a boxing toy: one wooden fighter swung his fist in wild haymakers, the other, in the red and white colours of Preston, she noticed, could be made to collapse and bob up again; if he was hit, a bell rang. She said, ‘You know so much more about these things than me.’ Then there was a horserace game, but the jockeys’ silks and caps, and their saddle blankets, could all be interchanged ...

‘Gwen’ll love that.’

And there was another box which contained two sets of figures slotting into a shaking belt which made them appear to dance. The players could either match or mismatch them—lion and unicorn, Cinderella and Prince, pop star and teenybopper, gangster and cop ... a tinkling waltz sounded throughout their gyrations.

‘A lot of your games are for two players.’

‘That must say something about me.’

She would have kissed him, but the steel shelf was there.

‘And I suppose I’d better have this. And this. Add it up, I’d better let you go.’

He said, ‘No, I want to give them to you.’

‘No Bob, no truly ...’ It was getting farcical, they were stumbling now ‘... Vic’ll want to know how much they were.’

‘All right, I’ll write you an account. But you needn’t pay it. On my part I’ll write “Promotion, free sample”. That’s in case Frances ever looks at the books. And on this part ...’

He listed each item in quick, practised hand, and wrote, on her docket:

‘Paid in full.’

She shook her head, her eyes began to fill with tears.

‘I can’t show that to Vic’

She was nursing his child again, he took the boy from her, it wrenched her, the child had begun to like her, or at least he didn’t object.

She said, brokenly, ‘No. No. That’s too much.’

Bob had learned something from her, it was no reference to dollars and cents. Then, clumsily, Bob said, ‘You take John again, I’ll carry the things out for you.’ But she shook her head, and stomped, as it seemed to her, between the racks to get a box. The whole thing was agonizing, she shoved the toys in the box, the trumpet poked in her armpit when she picked it up, she swore:

‘Oh bugger!’

Bob said, ‘Quite, but, ah ...’

And there was nothing to do but carry the stuff through the opening in the roller door, and down the bluestone lane, and try not to drop it heavily when she had to fumble for her key.

She started the car, she revved it, she let it stall.

Down the lane she heard the metal door set in the roller door banging shut. He’d waited till her car started before he let the horrible sound happen, but she’d heard it anyway. ‘Good try, Bobby’, she said, ‘and thanks anyway.’

LEAGUE STAR IN PATERNITY SUIT

TV STAR’S BABY—SHOCK

ACTRESS RAPED

MY GOD IS NOT DEAD (Sorry about yours)

Bob clutched his child, squirming as he went past the office where the phone sat blackly on his desk. John didn't like being held so hard, he arched his back, his head went back, Bob had to support him.

'Sorry feller.'

SEIZE THE TIME—SMASH THE HOUSING COMMISSION

SAVE CARLTON

SAVE THE EARTH

HOUSES FOR WORKERS! UNIVERSITY PISS OFF!

Anna felt emptied out. The box of toys sat mysteriously unrelated to the back seat of her mother's car, as if the fairies or Santa Claus had left them without explanation. There was little traffic, but red lights, yellow lights, green lights all obeyed their inbuilt mechanisms. Stop go, stop go, steady caution. Stop go, stop go, stop stop stop. There is no such thing as progress, she told herself, only self-discovery. Every self-discovery meant tearing down an idea you had of yourself. This hurt, and was doubly troubling because you'd sold the idea to everyone else as you; once you found yourself out, you had to live a lie, or subtly adapt, or have it out. The first two required more patience than she could normally muster, the third was hateful and quarrelsome. She drove like someone stunned, a couple of taxi drivers gave her querying looks. Somewhere ahead of her was home, she felt she'd be lucky to make it.

Home, thought Bob, they can stick Kerang up their arse until we're there on my terms; he held his child, but loosely this time, and locked the warehouse. The click of the Yale lock was not as harsh as that brutal back exit, but just as definite. 'Life', he thought, 'is getting rather finite', and settled the child in his basket under a web of straps that stopped it sliding. He felt sorry for Jack Moroney, and Mrs Moroney too, for that matter; they ringed things around with rules, to try and keep life in order, and they expected revenge of some sort or other when things got out of line.

Oh fuck them, he thought, I'll tell them it was Jenny from the mill. She's got a baby now, I think. Frances'll swallow that. Yes, she just dropped in with her husband, they happened to be cruising past ...

At once he saw the danger; he could con others, but wasn't fooling himself; it was already a habit with him, it was going to be his way of life unless he could get things onto a plane of truth with Frances. They had been good with each other lately, the baby bound them together, she was proud of the way he was succeeding, she was less dogmatic in this stage when her views, political and otherwise, were undergoing changes. But the episode this afternoon would have to be brought out, or else it would remain buried but discoverable, like a land mine on some battlefield reverting to grass. Would he tell her the truth later on, after deceiving Mrs Moroney? Fuck the truth, something shouted in his head, people manoeuvred and manipulated each other; people who got moralistic were usually people who didn't realize what they themselves were up to. The Mrs Moroneys of this world saw through others but lacked an inner perspective on themselves ...

And Frances, it struck him, would be just the same, unless he wrought the change: as her mother got older she would prepare herself to take over, she was already a matriarch in the offing for simple, pretty Nell.

But then again, perhaps Nell would change, when that belly swelled up and she too had a child, and Duggy started to assert himself. Change, change ... it was like a singing in his ears; he looked at the Housing Commission's high rise flats, and the office towers in his rear-vision mirror, they were built to last and would presumably be wondered at some day like the pyramids, but only death could bring stability to the lives being led inside them. Death poisoned his mood like a stench of diesel fumes, he was a man made by temperament to capitalize on instability and it was his bad luck to be cast in with a family for whom truths had a lasting foundation. The church of Christ, the rock of Rome, holy bloody Jesus! Here he was worrying himself sick on a point of truth and the people he was worrying about could steep themselves in bullshit.

The radio in Vic's car was carrying on a footy post-mortem. 'Yairs', said an ex-footballer's voice with unshakeable certitude, 'there's one thing we can say about Collingwood's defeat today, and that is it was

no fault of Johnny Moore. The old Carcase was a man inspired today, he was everywhere, marking all round the ground, putting his weight in where it was wanted, making opportunities for his team mates.'

'Tireless! Tireless in the ruck all day', put in another man who knew.

'Indeed he was tireless', said the first expert. 'Even in that hectic time-on in the last quarter when, believe me, nobody was sparing anybody, he ...'

Vic switched it off: oh shit, he thought, Carcase the hero: he remembered Pat's opinion of Carcase as an emotional pygmy, which was probably wrong anyhow, Anna seemed to see something in him, and Bob Banner used to maintain ...

Far ahead of him the city's towers gleamed ...

SMASH THE HOUSING COMMISSION

UPDATE!

CAN YOU LOVE?

The westering sun was intent on setting; having lit the world all day for anybody and everybody's purposes, he was issuing a last statement of his own, and the tall glass boxes, packed together like filing cabinets, glared balefully back, Argus-eyed a thousand times over. Man, and Nature, was the separation in Vic's mind, he felt he was driving at anti-nature and cursed himself that he belonged, not even in the heart of the beast, but in one of its spread-out limbs; it had a snake-like allure, he drove faster.

Anna realized she hadn't answered Bob's question: 'Was I to you?'

LOVER DEAD—FOOTY STAR TRAGEDY—only 12c

FAB WHITE! LEMON FRESH! FAB!—LEMON CHARGED
FLOWER POWER

CLEAN FRESH NATURAL GAS

PAUL HOGAN SUED

All problems were real, he realized, but if you indulged yourself too long in considering one, you were a coward about others. He wanted to be holding Anna.

She had a focus to her thinking now, it set her free, she began to react, her depression lightened.

The empty house frightened Frances, she had a presentiment. At the warehouse, no one answered, she thought Bob was in an accident, she thought of ringing hospitals, but decided to give him ten minutes more.

And if he had, what about little John? An awareness of aloneness settled on her—of herself as a widow, of the child crying in a smashed up car, of Iley and Mr Banner plugging along with their kids grown up ...

She thought also of Anna, and wondered how she reconciled the sides of her nature without a framework given from outside. Or did she create one for herself?

Metal birds swept dramatically overhead as Vic came down the free-way. One loner, far above, was slipping side-on through a cross-wind. Packaged souls, he thought; I've got to unburden mine.

The habit of prayer was stirring itself in the mind of Frances when Bob opened the front door. Intensely relieved, Frances took her boy, and let her head fall on Bob's shoulder. Again, she might have remembered Vic, but she said, 'Oh thank heavens. I thought there was something wrong.' 'There is', he told her. 'Hang on, steady down a bit and I'll tell you.'

Two children on bikes rode boldly onto a pedestrian crossing; a huge lowloader bearing a bulldozer rushed down on them, with WIDE LOAD sign up and red flaglets flapping at the extremities of its crash-grid. With a sudden swerve which sent Anna dodging into a right turn lane, the driver managed to avoid them. There was a hiss of airbrakes, he blasted his siren, cursed them, engaged a lower gear and growled off. Someone came up behind Anna, she had to turn, she found herself going the wrong way. Shaken, she stopped: sitting there, trying to calm down, she saw an academic-looking man of perhaps thirty on the footpath, carrying a transistor. Hoping it would be Mozart or someone to restore order, she wound down her passenger window a few inches, and watched his approach. As he came closer he stared at her, heavy rock assailed her

ears, she wound up the window, disappointed. Songs of slavery, she told herself, a heedless primitivism irrelevant to the modern world, where you needed fine tuning if you were to survive. At least her mother kept the kids off the road, much to their annoyance, they liked to draw with chalk on the bitumen, and write 'rude words' about each other; they spent ages quarrelling and crossing out each other's writings.

She realized she'd never seen Bob's writing until today. 'Paid in full' was her only love letter, she'd written him nothing either.

'Don't keep me waiting', said Frances. 'I'm all right, what is it?'

Bob packed, she fed John his tea; he thought of giving her both barrels but decided the news about dad was bad enough, he wasn't sure if it was cowardice or consideration; he suspected that the inability to draw a line between the two led to a good half the intra-marital lies people got entangled in. He made up his mind to tell her when they got back from Kerang—and wondered if he'd do it.

Frances rang Kerang, she said, 'We're coming straight up. We're leaving now.' Her mother warned her against driving too fast, she said, 'Stop worrying mother, we know we've got a child.' Bob wondered how important a man was in the life of Frances—or her mother. Necessary, yes; part of the scheme, yes; but he made a note to observe Mrs Moroney closely if she was widowed; her post-marital behaviour would tell him much, he knew. He said, 'Well, dearest, let's hit the road'.

About Kyneton, Frances said, 'What's making you so sour tonight? You just about snapped my head off, then.' He said, 'Do you expect me to sing songs when your dad's had a heart attack?' The habit of lying, of cloaking, he saw, was ingrained now, he'd never be able to tell her about Anna at the warehouse ... But what if Frances called at the Rogers', and saw the things Anna had got from him, she'd know straight away? Hm, problems, he thought, problems, problems ... it might be best to word up Anna ... no, he could never do that, he'd written Paid In Full. Integrity and loyalties struggled in him, once you got involved with a second human being you were in turmoil and there was no getting out of it, ever.

PEOPLE ARE EMOTIONALLY CRIPPLED
LIFE!—IN THE BIG GREEN BOTTLE

There was less retail clamour in country towns, they took in what they could of the modern world, then resisted. Bob thought he should be able to get some orders in Bendigo. Anna had never made him ashamed, even when she called him mercenary. ‘If people pay out money’, he used to tell her, ‘you’ve done something for them.’ ‘They believe you’ve done something’, was her correction, ‘but it’s possible to sell people short. That’s exploitation, it’s singling out one aspect of a person and tricking it, instead of dealing with the whole person.’

‘Society’—this was his culminating view—‘operates by separating each aspect of a person. Would you like the road-mender bloke drilling your teeth?’ It was the argument he used to catch the moral remnant in her, she could easily be angered if he told her society could only take a certain amount of her viewpoint, its real business was getting on with the job. From Bob, coasting through his mill work, this was a laugh, and it had no sting, except to amuse her; but once he’d started out for himself, it became a creed, or smokescreen that he was wont to put up seriously. It contributed to their split.

EVENSONG—SPECIAL YOUTH SERVICE—GET WITH IT
MY GOD IS NOT DEAD (Sorry about yours)
COOK IS BAD NEWS FOR ABORIGINES

Vic’s Valiant surged out of the freeway into Coburg. Dreary place. It was getting dark. The solid half of the city settled in their lounges. Parties prepared themselves. Lowered Holdens and wide wheels sat cold, waiting. Bottle shops loaded up the roisterers. Vic turned on his headlights. The Pentridge tower stood heavy as a tombstone, colleges nestled around the jail. The cemetery looked eerie in the fading light, he rushed past it, into Preston. Against his will, Vic tightened, he wanted his wife out of it. He made up his mind to suggest a return to his mountains: not to Heyfield again, they could never go back, but Benalla, perhaps. With the mountains behind them, Hotham, Bogong ...

Anna thanked her mother, the old lady headed off ‘before it gets too late, I don’t like driving after dark’. The toys went away in the Morris, to be hidden till Xmas, and she faced her children empty-handed.

‘Didn’t you even buy us a Violet Crumble, Mum? Mum?’

Her John asked, ‘Where’d you go, Mum?’

He knew Bob Banner was making toys these days, she couldn’t mention the name, she made up something else. Somehow the lie smarted, something in her was still with Bob, trying to smoothe his way into Moroney territory; there were things about his future she didn’t like, but she wanted it assured. She looked at the clock, the next thing would be Vic.

Gwen whined, ‘I told you you had to buy me a Violet Crumble, Mum. Remember? Why didn’t you remember?’

The first opera Vic ever saw with Anna was *Don Giovanni*; he could still hear ‘Fin ch’an dal vino!’ and the Don’s last Aaaaaaahh! as he’d heard them that night. That there should be a Donna Anna in the drama had disturbed him, it was a case of art intruding on life. His own feelings for his girl were well summed up in ‘Dalla sua pace’ but the Anna to whom this aria was addressed was nothing like the one he was falling in love with. The performance had thrilled her but the evening had shown him that Mozart’s conclusions might not be his own; great artists were supposed to be like beacons illuminating life, but the trouble was there were so many of them it was rather confusing. Life was confusing, you had to see it right through before you knew what you’d made of it, and it of you.

He felt, nosing up the drive, as if his journey was half over. Anna came out, he turned off his headlights, she was a silhouette under the carport. ‘Home’, she said, it was half a question, ‘Home’, he said.

‘I’m glad.’

He said, ‘I feel as if I’ve been halfway round the world, today.’ She said, as if all facts were matter-of-fact, ‘Did you drop Pat off?’

‘She came back on the train.’

‘Uh huh.’

She seemed to be accepting, but to try her out:

'I turned on the radio, coming home. I gather Collingwood got beaten, but John Moore was best on the ground.'

She said, 'Who cares?'

John Banner woke up, he wanted to be nursed. Frances held him in the front seat, tickling him while he got accustomed to driving in the dark. 'This little pig went to market', she said, feeling his smallest toe through his sleeping bag, and, '...wee wee wee, all the way home!' The child gurgled, she told her husband, 'He's trying to say "more".' Bullshit, Bob thought, he's just saying his 'mum' sound, but if it makes her happy ...

Home. Mrs Moroney met them with Dr Griffin's report. Jack was no worse, there was no paralysis. He was breathing fairly easily, if he pulled through the next couple of days he 'would have a new lease on life'. 'Thank heaven for that', said the daughter, and, 'Yes, thank heaven indeed; we've got to keep thanking heaven and make ourselves heard', said the mother. Bob hid his antagonism. His resentment was irrelevant to their needs, he wanted to kill it but it refused to be denied.

Anna said, 'Have you got something for the kids?'

'Yes.'

'Well give it to them. And read 'em a story while I go for a walk. We need some bread.'

Vic thought it odd to lose his wife in the moment of regaining her, but if she needed peace to think, she could have it. He said, 'Off you go! No! I mean, don't be long, will you?'

A battered sort of hopefulness took charge of Anna. 'Thanks Vic, I won't be long. Just down to Doherty's.' He said, 'Mind that dog at the Italians', it can get its head through the fence'.

She looked at him.

He explained, 'There's a board missing'.

She wanted to love him, she thought it was coming.

He added, 'I've been thinking of nailing on a new paling myself, but I was waiting till they were away.'

Silly, silly man, always irrelevant, always shy. The first time they'd ever made love she was undressed while he was still fumbling with his shoelaces. She said, she pitched it as a sort of sprechgesang: 'Te ne rammenti?'

He didn't get it, she was going to fall back on irony, something like 'Whoever heard of all the Italians being away at once?' but that way led to further separation, presumably forever. Then again, it was no good trying to love someone, it came or it didn't.

'I'll get the bread.'

Mrs Moroney was somewhat mollified to hear that Nell would come up the next day with her Douggy, Bob could see there was only one way to stall off her examination of her marriage, he began to question his mother-in-law about Jack's affairs; were they 'in order'? This was common ground for the three of them; with little John peeping over his basket—'He doesn't want to go to bed yet, he slept a lot of the time on the way up'—they discussed the will, holdings, shares and directorships of Jack. Who lay in hospital; Bob knew he was cutting a good figure in Frances' eyes, Mrs Moroney was grudgingly impressed by his grasp, his suggestions. Tired, or satisfied, the old lady's mind moved to John; interrupting Bob she said, 'He's the first of my grandchildren; he'll always be the special one, won't you Johnny Johnnyoooooooo ...'

Then she switched from baby talk; in a second she was the matriarch, but stricken:

'Call him Jack?'

Frances said, 'It'd probably be a good idea, Vic and Anna's boy is John, there won't be any confusion if we do.'

Bob said, 'I think it'd be a good move'; the old lady could hear him negotiating, she looked at him from the corner of her eye, she wanted something more. Bob offered, 'After all, he'll succeed the lot of us, one day'. Mrs Moroney seemed to approve, Bob felt he was on the right lines for a deal, a bargain of silence. He said:

‘Talking of Jacks, remember Jenny at the mill? She called in at the warehouse this afternoon. Saw my car outside. With this bloke Jack Waterhouse, she’s Mrs Waterhouse now ...’

Frances said something like, ‘Yes? Did she. Now young fellow my lad, it’s time we (puff) tucked you in and put you away for the night. I’ll have him in our room, Mother, in case he wakes up. I don’t think he will, but ...’

Something treacherous showed in the old lady when her daughter left. Husband failing, she wanted power, she said, ‘I wish you’d move your business up here. Your overheads must be high in the city.’ Bob told her with bland near-honesty, ‘I was thinking about Bendigo on the way up, as a matter of fact. Melbourne’s getting impossible. You can’t move. Deliveries and getting orders ... you’ve got no idea. Hmm, I’ll have a scout round Bendigo, it ought to be possible.’

The old lady said, ‘You see that you do’.

Bluff, he thought, bluff, she knows it wasn’t Jenny. He said, ‘I will, Mother, and now I think I might turn in. It sounds like there won’t be anything else from the hospital tonight.’

‘I’ll wake you if there is.’

But please don’t wake Frances! Bob trembled, he rather wished he could send Vic in to lie beside his wife, it might have been the easiest, most honest thing to do, at the start, but they’d chosen the tricky way, and had to live with the results. Only by forcing Frances to look at herself, to see herself composed of the same deceits as everyone else, could he ever equalize their burdens of unease. But to do that was to destroy her strength, and without that advantage over him she couldn’t love him or live out her woman’s life. Neatly done, old lady, Bob admitted, and neatly done the young one, learning unconsciously the ways of mum ...

Frances said she was frightened, she wanted him to hurry up and get into bed. Dad, she said, made this chest of drawers, and her hand was shaking.

Wake Frances! It took death or a crisis; he’d never forced her and he’d never be able to do it now. As with Anna, the chance had been

rejected the very first night, their barely-chaste night in the hotel bedroom. If he'd forced her then to sin, if he'd kept her with him for days and didn't let her near a priest to confess, if he'd pushed her hard in unsanctified sex ...

If Vic had done it ...

She undressed, her breasts hung low, she turned away. 'Don't be so bloody modest', he said. 'I can't help it', she said, 'it's a habit now, and I just do it. I'm afraid you've got to take me as I am, now, Bobby.'

19

In the night, Frances woke.

‘Was that someone in the passage?’

‘Mmm?’

‘Turn on the light.’

But he wouldn’t. Frances insisted her mother must have gone down the passage, did Bobby hear the phone ring?

‘No.’

She still insisted she’d heard someone in the passage, she made Bob get up, he went to the door, listened and reported: ‘Your mum’s still in bed.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I can hear her snoring.’ And he lay beside a nervous Frances, who said:

‘What if it was father?’

It was waking him up, it’d take him an hour to get back to sleep.

‘You think they sent him out for a midnight stroll?’

She almost screamed. ‘No! You know what I mean. What if he’s just ... passed through the house ... once more ...’

Bob felt it was now or never.

Anna had to go beyond Doherty’s, they didn’t have any bread left. The Greeks had a store, three blocks on, though, oddly enough, it was in an area where Italians were numerous. She carried her empty basket dolefully, there wasn’t much to cheer her. An Italian family whose drive was full of gravel trucks had their light on; their front garden was given over to concrete, pebble, plastic, and rose bushes that were scarcely more than sticks. She shuddered, she felt something in her inner life was dying,

she'd cheapened herself with affairs, sex had cheapened her, it would have been better to live with it in a more costly, selective, high-strung state of tension. But she hadn't, she'd gone her characteristic way. One of the Italians turned on a bedroom light, it lit up a camellia bush laden with red and white flowers; more flowers, limp, brown and squasy, lay under it. It was the only thing in the garden allowed to luxuriate, it repelled her, it was a menstrual sort of growth, like a pomegranate. By contrast, the McLartys next door, with their cypress growing bonsai-ed in the back of a concrete swan which swam in a concrete-edged lozenge of lawn, seemed positively restrained and tasteful. Without hope, she despaired.

The Greek woman, always pregnant, padded about the shop in slippers, or slithered through the plastic strips between shop and telly-dominated lounge. The shop was busy, no one was listening, a footy post-mortem was chattering away. 'Well, Johnny, it was your hundred and fiftieth game today and I'd say it was one of your best ever. And now, before you give us your opinion, I'd like, on behalf of Pelaco shirts, to present you with this ...'

Anna bought bread, she took it from the Greek man before he could put it on the pile of Sporting Globes, Heralds, Nation Reviews and girly magazines near the pie-warmer.

CAN YOU LOVE?

PEOPLE ARE EMOTIONALLY CRIPPLED

LIFE—IN THE BIG GREEN BOTTLE

She remembered Carcase in the garden, many months before, and his remarks on heroism—everyone's a hero if they stick at it. Oh yes? How was it heroic just to plug along, when all that that made you was a slave to time, your work situation, social values or worn out ideas? Heroes had to fight something ... but who wanted to be heroic, it was enough to find your own song to sing in slavery, in the depths of depression.

Vic, intensely gentle, got the kids some tea, and he began boiling rice to go with the stew in the pot, he supposed that was what Anna meant.

Bob said, 'Sweetheart, I don't care if it's your father's ghost wandering around the house, he can listen if he wants to, I want to talk to you.'

She was more stressed than angry, with that chest of drawers next to their bed: 'You don't care?'

Bob said, 'I don't care if every ghost in heaven's listening, and to tell you the truth I don't care if your father's among them. What I've got to say is more important.'

Anna felt it was the whole world she had to accept; it was a bit much to ask of anybody, she wondered if Vic saw the problem in that all-inclusive way.

He didn't, she was still Woman to him, as much or more than mere Anna; he set the rice in a colander over a boiling saucepan, she'd surely soon be home? He screwed the cap off a flagon.

Bob's mood was such that he could have held his wife by the throat; but he kept his distance.

Even her feet, her hand swinging the basket, seemed like slaves, mere extremities doing what the central nervous system told them: until told otherwise they had to clop along a boring footpath, clutch the handle of a bread-carrier.

Bob said, 'You and your family have used me as a requirement. Once upon a time that was what I wanted. Then I broke out, with Anna.'

'Don't talk about her. How dare you talk about her when ...'

'Now that's finished. For a while I was starting to be really happy with you. But I'm starting to feel the old pressure. You and your mum are using me as a requirement again. As an instrument. I'm not going to be in it. If you keep it up, I'll sure as hell break out again. Don't know who with, but it's bound to happen.'

'You'd better get out of the house if that's how you feel!'

'Shut up. I'm telling you things. Before we got married, and for a while after, I thought I was letting you use me up so I could use you up. I thought that's what people did. I've grown up a bit. That's not on any

more. There's not going to be any more conning. Next thing. It wasn't Jenny at the warehouse this afternoon, it was Anna.'

'That's the end Bobby. I don't want to know why. That's the end. Go on. Get out! Get your stuff and get going.'

But he shouted her down. 'You get stuffed. Just shut up and listen.'

Along with everything else in her reaction, she was curious:

'Don't wake mother, she's got to sleep. My father's dying. And don't wake John, you'll have him crying in a minute.'

He nearly laughed, it was going his way. 'There wasn't anything between us today, don't worry about that, she just got a few toys for Xmas. That was nothing. No. I had to see her to find out just what the hell she'd done to me. Well, I found out. She did this to me, she made me carry on like this, I don't care if you're hating it, there's going to be a lot more of it until you sort out your ideas a bit.'

'Why are you carrying on like this?' She started to get out of the bed, he pulled her back. She hit his chest, he slapped her hand; she scratched his wrist, he grabbed her arm and bit her.

'Aaaahh!'

'Yes', he said, 'Bobby's got teeth, don't underestimate him, he might hurt you. You've got a lot to learn yet, darling, some things can't be sorted out with a little horsetrade for a couple of votes. We're not having Scratch My Back And I'll Scratch Yours any more in this house.'

'It's not your house. It's mother's. And daddy's.'

POWER TO THE WORKERS

SMASH FOREIGN CONTROL

COME TO WHERE THE FLAVOUR IS—MARLBORO
COUNTRY

It was a crisis of outlook, Anna saw. There had to be consistency in a relationship, but nature didn't build consistency into the human body, nor the mind, unless you managed to tell yourself some whopping lies about your urges. With wry humour for a crutch one could maybe get along, but Vic, for all that he tried to see things her way, couldn't bear ambiguity as the backbone of his life. He was still in that stage of actually

expecting his wants to be satisfied. He was confused, and full of regrets, but he'd come back so they could find ground common to them both. Trouble was, he expected her to show the way.

FUCK ALL POOFTERS!

SHIT

R H LOVES J D (true)

Through Venetian blinds she saw a telly; blue, synthetic, people talking brightly, the animated camera swinging from face to face. She passed a bus shelter.

GEORGINA LOVE ROBERT LISTER TRUE

GEORGINA LOVE ROBERT TRUE

POST NO BILLS

GEORGINA LOVE ROBERT LISTER TRUE

She sat down. If she was ever going to leave Vic, she realized, it would not be for another man, but because she couldn't face him. Why not now?

There was more writing:

GEORGINA LOVE BOYS TRUE

ROBERT LOVE GIRLS TRUE

GEORGINA IS A PROS

She didn't know where she'd go. Her mother would help Vic with the kids, she'd see them pretty often once they got used to her not living with them.

She could probably flat with Sandra for a while, and try to rebuild. The trouble was, she didn't have much that she wasn't ashamed of, or suspect.

COLONIAL STYLE HOMES/INSPECTION INVITED/NOT A PSEUDO REPLICIA BUT A FAITHFUL RE-CREATION

Words bombarded the urban night—Hamburger, Milk Bar, Pizza Now Open, Take Away Food, Carlton Draught. Blue tellies applied themselves in a hundred thousand rooms. 'And what about the big game next Saturday, John, who's it going to be?'

SMILE! JESUS LOVES YOU

DRAYTON MOTORS, FOOTSCRAY

KANGAS!!! HAWKS DOWN, 'ROOS TO MEET TIGERS

In the country, darkness shrouded the hospital where Jack Moroney lay unconscious, sedated, unaware of his intermittent heart, unaware of his daughter struggling to maintain some vestige of her virginity, was it, or her tradition?

Bob said, 'You don't want to risk anything. The moment something happens you want to show it to mum, or have it christened, or get the priest to put it on the altar. The sort of person you are ... if you got in a boat you wouldn't go a foot from shore. You're shit scared if anything gets out of place in the hierarchy. At all costs everything has to be made to look right. Well, I'll tell you, things are not going to go that way any more, because I'm not going to let them. Get it!'

Apparently crushed, she still had him: 'What are you going to do then?' The phone rang in the darkened lounge.

Frances knew what it was, she was strong enough to answer it, but she had an argument to win: 'Will you answer it, or will I?'

He had to do it, or cast himself off for good. 'Get your dressing gown on. I'll answer it.' He scuffled off down the passage, something made him leave the light off, a voice reached him in the dark:

'Mrs Moroney, please.'

'I'm her son-in-law, I'll take the message.'

Frances was a silhouette in the passage door; the measure of her anxiety and approval was invisible.

'Mr Moroney's had another turn. I think if you want to see him, or make any arrangements ...'

'Could you ring Father Callaghan? We'll be there in two minutes.'

The old lady's voice came down the passage, weak and grey:

'What is it Frances? Is it Jack?'

'Yes Mother. We've got to get dressed, quickly.'

A bus pulled up near Anna, she stared at the passengers. They seemed to be going somewhere. The bus driver, she realized, was waiting for her; was her face showing, then, her wish to go on a journey, go

away, escape? Feeling hunted, she shook her head, the bus growled away, doing its business with gears until the engine was contributing to the city's hum. A sports car rushed by, its tyre must have tipped an orange lying on the road, the orange bumped to the gutter by her feet, she picked it up, poor, bruised, lop-sided thing. She felt it was her responsibility, it would be crass to drop it back in the gutter or throw it away.

‘What are you doing with the orange, Mum?’

She looked up, it was Vic's Valiant, and the kids staring out the back window, and Vic reaching across to open the passenger door, and wanting to know:

‘What on earth are you doing with that orange?’

She said, ‘I was on the verge of throwing it away, but somehow I couldn't.’ The heaviness, the emotionalism of her statement registered with Vic, he said, ‘I think you can drop it now. You won't be wanting it any more.’

He also said, ‘You were a long time, I started to worry.’

RHODES MOTORS/HOLDEN

HONK IF YOU'RE HORNY

SOLD

LIST BROTHERS ARE PAINTING THE TOWN

She got in. The kids said, ‘Did you buy us something, Mum?’ Vic told them to be quiet, they'd have ice cream if they ate the rest of their tea.

Bob was impeccable with the priest, and Mrs Moroney. He nodded when the old lady told Father Callaghan that Jack had always said a priest was to be called if anything serious happened to him, the priest said, ‘I think that indicates a readiness to ask forgiveness,’ and gave the absolution. Then, eyeing the child in its basket, and questioning them about their trip up, he displayed his professional tact: the young people, he said, should go home and try to rest, he'd stay with the ailing man, and his wife, and if there were no further developments, he'd see Mrs Moroney safely home.

So the three Banners went back to the bedroom.

Frances said, 'Can we have John in here with us, Bobby, for a minute?'

Bob said, 'Yes, but we mustn't go to sleep with him there, kids get smothered like that.'

He was not disputing, it was a completion of what she would have said herself.

It took Anna days to recover her spirits.

PED XING

DON'T TURN YET

ROAD NARROWS

Vic asked her to plant a seedling, she did it humbly, he didn't usually ask her to do anything in the garden, she didn't usually want to. She said, 'You don't want any more children, do you?' He didn't.

'Neither do I. It's up to us, isn't it.'

She asked what sort it was, she thought she knew.

'Snow gum. Of course.'

'Why haven't we planted one before?'

'Perhaps we haven't needed to.'

So it was starting to come right from his side, the re-twining was beginning in as much of his generous heart as he could control. Then Anna asked her John what he wanted to do in the school holidays, he said he wanted Dad to take them to the mountains. It hurt her grievously that the answer lay with Vic, not her, she felt she'd been shoving the children off too much.

UPDATE!

REG HUNT—WHERE THE ACTION IS

BRADDOCK—NOT MILD

She took comfort in the spring. She found herself, at work, being as gentle with her students as Vic was with her. She saw that their relationship had overturned, she only wanted it levelled, she didn't want to be wiser any more.

IF YOU CAN READ THIS, YOU'RE TOO CLOSE

There were boring subject conferences one day, she decided not to go to work; for the first time in ages, she walked the kids to school. It was the practice to go up a lane, and make a shortcut through ‘the’ old lady’s yard. Anna felt nervous of this, but the kids assured her everyone did it:

‘You’re allowed.’

The laundry was a fibro shed, the brick path had puddles where feet had worn it down; geraniums climbed on the back fence and the gate latch clicked neatly into place—and out again. The owner was swishing with a broom at the mat-sized block of concrete which was her back step. She looked up and smiled at Anna.

JANINE AND JULIE WERE HERE

The woman would no doubt have said she had all she wanted. The house, with its coloured plastic window shades, was still functioning, it was true, but it was unlikely to see out another three generation family. When the old lady died, her most likely successors would be a string of footloose tenants. Perhaps some of the woman’s family were like that anyway, there were car panels strewn behind the garage. Yet she smiled on Anna.

IONA

DUNWURKYN

AVANUTHA

The old woman was strong, and would see it through; Anna felt she had been comprehended by the smile, and included. It was like a secular remission, she thought of Frances.

Whose metabolism refused to let her run down, shaken as she was by the events of the night. Bob said to his wife:

‘That was a cowardly attack. People like me are pretty despicable. Trying to have a fight with you when your dad was crook in hospital ... I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for that nasty little effort.’

She wanted to put it off till morning, but it wouldn’t be any better then, and sleeping was going to be impossible:

‘Perhaps you needed to.’ She was sounding like her mother already, he accepted it, wanting to be forgiven. ‘You knew the situation. If you had to try and hurt me at the worst possible time, there must be something in me you wanted to break.’

He murmured, it meant yes.

‘What was it? What is it?’

She wasn’t broken, he realized, he’d done his worst and hadn’t shaken her.

‘Your superiority.’

She said, ‘You’re wrong Bobby. You’re superior to me in just about every way. You know more, you’re more adaptable. You know more about women than I do about men. The only place where you’re inferior is in your own idea of yourself.’

‘How come that’s so crucial?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘How come you’re so sure of yourself?’

‘I’ve never questioned.’

He said, ‘This is what drives me mad about you. Sometimes Anna used to get me the same way.’

She said, ‘You won’t get out of it that way. Why don’t you take what I give you?’

‘Do you still want me, or will I get out?’

Steamrolling the problem rather than solving it, she said, ‘There’s no need to answer that.’

And then the Father brought Mrs Moroney home. Dr Bradbury, a protestant, said Jack had only had a couple more tremors, the night sister shouldn’t have rung wife, priest and the rest of them, it was silly and unnecessary he said. Bob and Frances, leaving their child asleep in the big bed, went to the door when they heard Father Callaghan’s car, they took Mrs Moroney in while the priest, in his two tone Holden, drove into what Lampedusa calls the plebeian light of dawn.

‘Mother, you’re icy cold!’

‘I’ll have a drop of brandy.’

‘You will not!’

‘Don’t argue with me Frances, I’ve been with a dying man.’

But Frances was in the ascendant. ‘You will not. You’re going straight into our bed, where it’s warm.’

The old lady took her orders, the only thing was:

‘Put a pillow between us, so I can’t roll on the darling boy.’

Bob said to his wife, ‘She wouldn’t roll if you pushed her down a hill. She’s going to go out like a light.’ His wife, who had apparently postponed sleep indefinitely, said, ‘Isn’t that the best thing that could happen? Would you light the woodstove, and also the fireplace, while I have a shower?’

Anna took the long way home, she felt the path through the lady’s yard belonged to children, adults should enter only if they held a child’s hand. But outside the lady’s house she stopped; the nature strip was worn to earth by children’s feet, in fact it was hollowed out lower than the kerbing. The little brown patch seemed almost blithe, it hadn’t heard of private property. As Anna stood wondering why she let everyone traipse through her garden, the old lady appeared on the front verandah, this time, with her uneven broom, and smiled:

‘It’s just something I can do.’

Tears came close, and the wish to sing, exult if that were possible. She thought of the prisoner’s chorus in *Fidelio*, and ‘Viva la Liberta!’ And of her namesake’s ‘Non mi dir ...

... bell’idol mio,

Che son io crudel con te:

Tu ben sai—quant’io t’amai:

Tu conosci la mia fe.’*

Any one more unlike herself would be hard to imagine: and the next line:

*Don’t say to me, my beloved, that I am cruel to you. You know how much I love you, you recognize how true I am to you.

Calma, calma, il tuo tormento

Calm yourself, calm yourself, and don't doubt me any more: well, Vic could hardly be expected to see much sense in that song, on her showing in the past. No, there would be no more exulting, not this year, not for a long time yet. She looked about her. Dog turds. Flat 12, said a rubbish bin. Yet still the music sang in her head:

Non mi dir, bell'idol mio ...

She rang Vic at work:

'Rogers.'

She found it hard to speak, he said, 'Who's speaking please?'

'Rogers.' They started to laugh, it was almost a giggle by the time he said:

'House on fire?'

'No, I wish you were here, I'm home by myself.'

'Get out the maps, we'll organize a trip tonight.'

TO LET—PETER P. PETERS & CO P/L 119 HIGH STREET
THOMASTOWN.

TOOMUC

HSEXC

AUSESEY

ESTRAIN

Bob said he had to get back to the city by Monday morning. There were orders, and people to see, and he just wasn't organized to be away. He said he'd ring up every night, Frances said she'd have to stay with her mother for a few days, she hoped it wouldn't throw out John's routine. She meant she hoped she could stand her mother.

Vic lunched with Pat, he told Anna he was going to. They talked about romanticism most of the time, they agreed it was an exaggeration born of personal inexperience, on the one hand, and a decadent social order, on the other. Vic said, 'As we become more environmentally conscious and capitalism moves out of its present stage, and as sex becomes more talked about and less mysterious, I think we'll see an end to romanticism.' Pat thought he was talking nonsense, but he was

a kind man, and full of tenderness, even if he had to spell out his ideas with the wine and whiting; she would miss him, she said; he asked her to ring him up.

‘At work, sometimes, I want to know how you are. Actually there’s no reason why you can’t call in at home, I know Anna wants you to.’

Pat promised she would, conveying that she wouldn’t, or not for a long time yet.

‘And you, Pat?’

‘I could buy the house I’m renting. Or I could spend it on a year overseas. Or there’s a job I’ve been offered on the Canberra Times.’

‘What’s he like?’

She smiled. ‘I don’t think I like him all that much, but I’m not sure yet.’

Vic asked his wife if he’d ever let her down.

‘I don’t think so. I don’t think it’s a real question. Did I ever give you what you wanted?’

He murmured.

‘When?’

‘When I believed in you.’

‘Well, believe in me again, but all of me this time. I think we’ll be all right.’

‘All of you? What’s that involve?’

‘We don’t know yet, do we.’

He asked her, ‘Do you still feel empty sometimes? That void you used to tell me about?’

She nodded.

‘When?’

‘Whenever I insist on my right to be separate.’

‘That’s a good omen my darling.’

‘It’s a good omen.’

As he pulled her in against him he thought he caught the start of a smile; whether at herself, or him, he didn’t care.

A blocked downpipe caused water to flood in one part of the warehouse, the two Greek women were plainly incapable, so Bob had to put on his new overcoat and climb up to clear it. The postie, wrapped in plastic against the wet southerly, called out to him, 'You want to let the manager do that'.

Bob acknowledged the tribute with a threatening flourish of his piece of wire. The postie went in with the mail, and came out. 'How areya Bob? Anything new?'

Probing in the downpipe with his loop of wire, Bob thought of the postman's work, he should be able to make a game out of it. Kids liked opening letters, liked putting them in slots, liked getting something personal that didn't belong to anyone else ... it must be possible to work up something out of that ... a letter was a mystery until you opened it ...

It occurred to him that neither Frances nor Anna had ever written to him; people didn't, except on business, they were warm with him to his face but that, apparently, was as far as it went. When he came down, Mrs Nikarkis asked him why he had been crying, he said he hadn't, it was just the rain on his face, that was all. But his voice gave it away. Tactful Mrs Banitsiotis said it was no wonder he was upset, his beautiful new coat was dirty and would have to go at once to the drycleaners, and he was worried about his warehouse, so many beautiful toys had nearly been spoiled ... He said to them, 'Ladies, at lunch time today, let's close up, we'll go to one of those little places in Lygon Street ...'

The Greek ladies said no, he must ring up his wife, or a friend, they must stay where they were, there was so much packing to do, and mopping up out the back ...

Bob said he had no one to ring. With wide, liquid eyes they looked at him.

He said his wife was up country.

'I don't have anyone else. I don't think I ever will have.'

They shook their heads severely.

He disappeared into his office: 'It's rather frightening, isn't it.'

As Anna recovered from her remorse, she saw that Vic was now a plainer man. The events of the previous two years had humanized him, broadened him, but somehow reduced him. Unless you thought that filling out was what should happen to everybody. It was not what Anna wanted for herself. She wanted to centre herself again, establish a new basis for truth in her life. Or re-establish the old, if that was all there was to do. One afternoon she decided to put flowers round the house. She wiped down the furniture, and the mantelpieces, then took her scissors into the garden. The snow gum, she saw, had two new shoots.

IT'S THE REAL THING—COKE!

She felt herself trembling, she took some flowers and powdered stems from Vic's gungurru and put them in the celadon near the telephone. No go, didn't suit, should have realized the ends could never be made to meet in the same way as before. She dug out a blue glass vase her mother had foisted on her years ago, the silvery eucalypt looked at home at once. She moved around the empty house—Gwen going to school now, in the preps—shifting things in the guise of tidying. Finally she gave up, and sat watching a shaft of light cutting through the mote-laden air where she'd been fussing with ... things. The stand Frances had made her buy, and a Chinese vase sitting serenely on it. Letter for Vic propped against an inlay writing box which generally housed the children's marbles, biros, bits of chalk and stray jigsaw pieces picked up off the floor. And her scissors—she'd only brought in one lot of flowers. She smiled at herself. The sofa had a few more stains on it than it used to, one cushion let out a little puff of fluffy bits if you flopped on it ... now. I am now, she said, I am this moment. She stared at the phone, its silence pleased her. She trusted it would behave itself while her reverie took shape.

I have never been a daydreamer, she thought, nor am I now, unless life is a dream dreamt wide awake, a literary concoction that she dismissed at once: the four of them had affected each other too much for that. Each had striven to ride the wave that had caught them, each had swum in his own way, and now they were in—not shallows, but relatively

still water. She said to herself, I will not act, I will be. Enmeshed in an ocean of gates and fences, each a symbolic statement of separateness, she accepted that other people must, apparently, sit in other rooms thinking other thoughts, or striving to reach people whom they needed to affect. I saw Vic too clearly too soon, she thought; he found me out too late. They were complementary mistakes; now they must reciprocate. If they didn't twine themselves together now they would hurt each other as long as they lived, because they would not split up, the time for that had slipped out of reach. Or would it take more stages, more affairs yet, was the goodwill there but not the organic necessity? Were they already as close as they could come? There was no knowing yet, she got out the maps Vic mentioned on the phone. The names were familiar but they were only as real as Leporello and the Don. Mt Howitt. The Lost Plain. Scene—a churchyard, isn't that the old man's statue? Read me a bit of the inscription. A barren scree Vic had shown her, shaded by his alpine trees. Vic himself she remembered walking over a grassy plain to an airstrip the Commission had made, he walked along it, she'd watched his feet and then his knees disappear behind the curve of the hill. Then he was de-sexed, then the earth swallowed his chest, then he was a head on a hill. Then he disappeared, and what did you have? A dynamism remembered, like the memory of a dead man. She disciplined herself against defining her husband; that way separateness lay. She couldn't explore her separateness any more, she was one half of a field of force that didn't work without the other. That, she guessed, was what marriage was supposed to be like, no wonder the institution was falling apart. Once you defined people separately and made them struggle to work out what they were, you made it hard for them to join except in answer to forces that were as destructive as they were anything else. Creating and destroying went together; once you realized this and tried to moderate the damage you might do to someone else, you put a strain on yourself. You kicked against this strain, and you were cruel, or you accepted it as part of the daily load ...

Oh statua gentilissima, dell' Gran Commendatore ...

The foolish Don invited the supernatural to supper; most people had enough trouble with the natural operating through them. The phone rang, it was Frances, there was something enigmatic in her voice, or was it triumph concealed?

‘... all those things you gave us for John ... well, I might be having to keep them a bit longer than I expected ...’

‘You’re having another baby? Oh Frances, wonderful! How long’ve you known?’

‘Only a few days. I haven’t had a test, I’m not really sure yet.’

‘Is Bob pleased?’

‘He said he was, but I was a bit doubtful, but then he said he wouldn’t have it otherwise. That’s what he said, it’s a funny way to put it, I don’t know how else he thinks you can have them ...’

So Frances hadn’t read her husband’s mood of acceptance; Anna considered the other woman’s strength. Frances could accept, or she would learn to; but whereas she, Anna—and Bob—accepted things by letting them in and living with them, Frances accepted by changing as little as possible; she closed her gates and let things run against her, pour on her like rain and run off. The effect this had on her was something she could accept, but events and influences would always, essentially, be kept outside herself. Self—a fortress early made strong; Vic, Anna realized, was one of the very few who’d been inside. She considered her husband fondly. Like her, he had little vocabulary of tenderness beyond the romantic, the ideas he’d learned in the urgency of post-adolescence ...

CANYOU LOVE?

... but to love was larger and more tender than the popular concepts allowed. On strata far beneath her people raped and killed: for all the courts knew, they too may have wanted to love, and been frustrated. The unity of life was this—that society could name as love the more acceptable surfacings of basic instinct, but others were, apparently, deplorable or perversions. Yet the same source, deeper than social philosophy or morals, gave rise to both. Or was this true? If you traced the stream back to its source, did you find one jet of instinct, or a bundle of fibres, any

one of which might operate a nerve? Was cruelty something parallel to sex, or a perversion of it? These questions were unanswerable because they could only be examined on the slide which was society's current thinking and that was too changeable to be bothered with. Hence you were left with a self inexplicable to itself and you had to line yourself up in a debate conducted on terms you'd never have chosen.

PEOPLE ARE EMOTIONALLY CRIPPLED

She realized she hadn't asked after Frances' father: but just as well: she only knew about the heart attack because she was at the warehouse when the phone rang, and she didn't know whether that fact had come out in the open between the Banners. Perhaps it had, and Frances had somehow understood, perhaps the phone call was a re-establishing of friendship: if it was, Frances was bigger and more tolerant than she'd realized. Or had Frances had some victory she wanted to display? She wouldn't know unless she asked them to dinner, or they went out together, or something, and it didn't feel like the right time for that yet. Why not? Only because of the doubt, and the doubt was the thing she wanted to resolve ... it was a vicious circle, it would need courage to break out of it.

Well, why not ?

She rang Frances back and asked the Banners to come over for dinner that night. 'It'll only be a scratch meal, but we haven't seen you for a while ...'

But Frances said no, being Friday they couldn't; Bob was taking her up to Kerang again that night, they'd stay the weekend and come back Sunday night. If she wasn't too tired next week, she'd ring Anna and they'd make an arrangement...

Have it your own way, thought Anna, it's all the same to me. Life ...

—IN THE BIG GREEN BOTTLE IS JUST A BOWL OF CHERRIES

... was simple really, was having her husband home for tea, and the kids grumbling because they wanted something else to eat, even though

you'd given them the thing they said, last night, was their favourite food. Gwen came home, her dress was dirty, she'd been crawling, she said, through the big drainpipes at the flats. 'Oh yes', said Anna, 'I suppose it'll wash off. I feel as if I've been doing that myself.'

'Why, Mummy?'

'That I couldn't tell you, dearest.'

'I wanted to see how a baby felt when it was going to be born, Mum. It was really quite easy.'

'Easy for the baby, love.'

'But, Mum, you told me they always yell! Why do they yell if it's easy, Mum?'

'Maybe they think the easy bit's over, and it's going to be hard from then on.'

'Is it Mum?'

'Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. I guess you'd better wait and see.'

