

Grassy Hill



a novel by
CHESTER EAGLE

Grassy
Hill

Books by Chester Eagle

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Grassy Hill

Chester Eagle



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The Laughter of Her Heart (reflection, 2017)

1

It was Friday afternoon. The boys' minds had already moved on to their dancing class that evening at the girls' school, or the following day's sport, but Rhonda Mathieson had decided to freshen their understanding of how history was made, and written. She had a book under the lamp of a projector: Captain Cook's *Journals*. On the screen before them, the boys could see:

Mr Gore being out in the Country shott one of the Animals before spoke of, it was a small one of the sort weighing only 28 pound clear of the entrails. The head neck and shoulders of this Animal was very small in proportion to the other parts; the tail was nearly as long as the body, thick next the rump and tapering towards the end; the fore legs were 8 Inch long and the hind 22, its progression is by hopping or jumping 7 or 8 feet at each hop upon its hind legs only, for in this it makes no use of the fore, which seems to be only design'd for scratching in the ground &c. The skin is cover'd with a short hairy fur of a dark Mouse or Grey Colour. Excepting the head and ears which I thought was something like a Hare's, it bears no sort of resemblance to any European Animal I ever saw ...

Their teacher looked at them. 'Well? You're unusually quiet. Neville? Alan? Robyn? Nothing from you, Noel? That's strange, I have to say.' Noel scratched his red hair. 'Don't ask me Miss.' Then he thought of something. 'Where'd you say this was, Miss?'

'Cooktown.'

'Where's that?'

'Oh heavens! On the coast of far north Queensland.'

'Never been there Miss.'

'What do you think he's talking about?'

'Something he saw.'

'What did he see, do you think? Do you know?'

'Am I allowed to guess, Miss?'

'Try.'

Noel McGraw said slyly, 'I reckon he saw a kangaroo.' A couple of boys laughed, a couple squinted at the screen, as if to see where he got that from, and others showed no interest. Their teacher looked on them sourly. 'This is the first time in human history that a white man has looked at a kangaroo, and written down what he saw.' Robyn Briggs said, 'Is that something special, Miss?' Rhonda Mathieson wondered what they'd done to kill off their imaginations. 'Something's happening for the first time. It's a special moment. It's worth thinking about.'

Neville Long, a boarder from Wangaratta, said, 'Where I come from, Miss, they're pretty common. They're a pest, a lot of the time. Fellows my age go out shooting them.' Rhonda Mathieson said, 'I hope you don't shoot animals, Long?'

'I don't like guns, Miss.' The teacher accepted this. 'Let's have a closer look at what he says. Then we'll read some other extracts from his journals and see what we can find.'

Stubborn as they were, she wore them down. She'd chosen things they couldn't ignore. 'Cook caused a sensation when he got back to England. The government was fascinated to learn that there was a habitable place on the other side of the earth. They had lots of convicts and they wanted to get rid of them. So, eighteen years later, they sent a small fleet, under Governor Phillip this time, to set up a prison colony at what we call Sydney. New South Wales. They did it because of what Cook told them. If he hadn't got home, they probably wouldn't, and our country would have been left as it is!'

'Not forever, Miss, surely? Someone would have found it eventually. Weren't the French ...' This was Ken Jarman.

'Quite possibly. But listen to this.' She read them a piece about the boat being driven by waves back towards the coral reef they'd managed to find a way through; it was within a few minutes of destruction when a breeze allowed them to get into deeper water, after which fortune favoured them again by the sighting of a passage through the reef which would let them back into the protected waters inside the coral. 'If the Endeavour had sunk, some of them would have drowned and some of them would have got to shore in their pinnace, as they called it, but, either way, they'd never have got home again. They'd have

gone missing somewhere in the South Seas and the Admiralty would have put New Holland out of their minds for a generation or two.’

‘But the French ...’

‘Yes Ken, but the time when Phillip and his convicts settled Australia was the time when revolution broke out in France. 1788 and 1789. There was chaos in France for years, until the time of Napoleon. He was a soldier, not a sailor, I don’t think he would have been interested in settling Sydney.’

When the period ended, a few stayed behind to talk to Miss Mathieson. Ken Jarman wanted to know more about French explorers and found himself given names to look up in the library; Neville Long wanted to know how animals were classified, who did it, and what the difference was between a kangaroo and a wallaby, and Miss Mathieson was rather less sure on these matters, though she kept up a strong front; ignorance defending an illusion of knowledge. Noel McGraw hung around the conversation, then picked up the *Journal* they’d been invited to consider. Flipping the pages, he came across something that pleased him:

About this time 5 of the natives came over and stay’d with us all the forenoon, there were 7 in the whole, 5 Men a woman and a boy, these two last stay’d on the point of sand on the other side of the River about 200 Yards from us, we could very clearly see with our glasses that the woman was as naked as ever she was born, even those parts which I always before now thought nature would have taught a woman to conceal were uncover’d.

Noel closed the book, then moved in sight of their teacher to say, ‘Very interesting Miss. I think we learned a lot today.’ Rhonda considered him suspiciously. Praise from McGraw? Something was going on in his mind but she’d never know what, not for many years to come, if ever. A strange fellow, she thought, a rebel hiding mutinous thoughts behind a mask which was yet, in some way, as real as the rebellion it disguised. ‘Thank you McGraw,’ she said, and almost meant it.

The hall at the girls’ school was sparse. There was an old-fashioned gramophone on a table near the stage. The instructors, brother and

sister, were sorting out discs as the young people came in. They greeted the boarders who'd come straight to the dancing class after their dinner in another hall, lined with photos of victorious teams. Success equalled heroism in the male mind? There were no photos in the girls' hall, nothing on show. Alan Downer told the boys with him, 'This place gets me. There's nothing to tell you what you're supposed to do. They can spring any surprise on you and you won't know it's coming. Bastards, or should I say bitches! We only think we make the rules. Most of the time they do!'

The boys with him, more inclined to take whatever came their way, sat down. Politely enough, they greeted the dancing master, one of their teachers, with 'Good evening sir', and his sister 'Good evening Miss Janet', as she'd asked them to do. Their school had steps and stairs of rank, while age, and womanhood too, received respect. Girls began to enter the hall from wherever it was that they came, causing Alan Downer to say to whoever was nearest, 'I never know what they've been doing. How long's it take them to get dressed up? What're they thinking of when they look in the mirror?'

Nobody knew, even those who had sisters. They were being trained to be men. Mothers would sort out the girls, or so they supposed. It was someone's job, surely? The boys were friendly enough, their parents could afford their school's considerable fees, it was clear to them that so long as they followed the rules of their group they should do well. The school captain had a car; they were on the verge of a favoured manhood. The girls came from homes like their own, it couldn't be too hard. They talked freely to their dancing partners and much that they couldn't say to other boys was said to the unknown beings who swirled around the dance floor with them. They even thought it amusing when Pansy, as they called the male teacher, said that the next dance was to be a ladies' choice, meaning that the boys had to sit patiently on their chairs, offering themselves to the girls who took their time about choosing a partner. If the numbers were uneven, the last boy found himself partnered by Miss Janet, a superb dancer whose technique overpowered even the best of the boys. When or if Miss Janet partnered one of the boys, they knew that she and her brother would show them how things should be done by a

demonstration of perfection, man and woman clinging to each other in a closeness impossible for the sexually inexperienced, for whom the proximity of the other – boy, girl – was unnerving, however desirable. Janet and Pansy moved among the dancers, pushing them against each other, separating those clinging too hard. They clearly found this amusing. For the boys, especially, and the girls too, no doubt, the happy mean between all the way and standing back was hard to find. It was best to keep moving, and keep away from the instructors' arms. Pansy and Janet also got it in their heads at times that the boys should concede what the culture gave them – the guiding power – and make them move backwards so the girls could lead. This was worse, and harder, than waiting to be picked. A sense of humour and a bit of patience would see a boy through the first of these trials, but the girl taking the lead worked against the basic training of the male which assumed his superior role. Noel McGraw, who didn't mind laughing at himself, chose Ruby Lyle for the back-to-front dance, and for a turn or two of the hall's floor seemed quite at home in the female role, but then he took the lead with his backwards movement, veering diagonally backwards until he bumped the table where the gramophone sat, causing the needle to rasp across many grooves and bring the music to a harsh end. Janet lifted the needle back to the beginning and boys who'd hoped to be released from their female role had to stick it out for another four minutes. (The days of 78s!) 'It's hard to keep your direction,' the young man said when Janet glared at him, and Pansy told him sternly, 'If you're banned from these classes, your mother won't be getting her money back!'

The boys who heard this threat were aware that McGraw's mother lived in South Yarra, yet had put her son in the boarding house, presumably to discipline him, or perhaps to get rid of him, and understood Pansy's threat to be well-directed. Everyone was vulnerable from some angle, whether they knew it or not.

The evening wore on, then wore out. Pansy said goodnight with his microphone, Janet smiled at the girls leaving the hall and assisted a boy who thought it was going to be cold outside to put on an overcoat. Ruby Lyle went to the room she shared with Nancy Miller and sat on her bed. Nancy knew Ruby wanted to talk but chose to be quiet.

Ruby tried to bottle up her thoughts but couldn't stop herself. 'It's not going to get any better. It's only practice, but it's making us ready for the real thing!'

'What are you talking about?'

'You know very well.'

Nancy did know, of course. They all did. They were learning to manage boys, and manage themselves in the presence of boys. They all had to marry, or stay single, and that was worse. The in-between position was to be a teacher, and stay single while you trained younger girls. Some of their teachers thought it was better than anything else to be able to choose, and advise. 'Did you hear what happened to Julie?'

Nancy knew. They'd all heard. On the Saturday morning before, Julie Wade had gone into Myers, in the city, and had been looking at a line-up of little men, in the bright shirts of jockeys, while a man with tripod and camera directed them into positions, watched by an older, heavily superior man with grey hair – an executive, or perhaps the general manager – when the camera-man caught sight of her. 'Stand here, beside the roses,' he commanded, and Julie had done so, causing the camera man to look at the older man, who was beaming. 'Perfect!' he pronounced; and the camera man said, 'Just so!' Then he asked Julie, 'Ever done any modelling?' Julie shook her head, causing him to touch her hair where she'd displaced it. 'I'll give you my card,' he told her, fumbling in his coat pocket; Julie found herself appraising the jockey-men while they, very clearly, were appraising her. They found her beautiful, and knew that was the one area where women mastered men. They watched, these male models – or were they really jockeys? Julie didn't know - as the camera man gave her his card with the approval, the support, of the manager, if that was what he was. Julie brought the card back to school, and talked about it. Miss Nilsson, the house mistress, heard, and summoned Julie to tell her what had happened. The men had told Julie to get her parents to make contact with them if she wanted to do some modelling, so it had been proper enough, nothing sleazy, Miss Nilsson knew, and would talk to Julie's parents, as would Julie herself, but Miss Nilsson was careful not to offer any advice: simply, that she'd explain to the parents how the offer had come about.

In her study that night, however, Margaret Nilsson told Rhonda Mathieson, her friend who taught at the boys' school, what had happened, observing that 'the nearer your life is to a cliché, the easier it is to lead.' Rhonda, knowing how perceptive her friend was, and penetrating, fell silent, causing Margaret to get out two glasses and a bottle of sherry. 'They tell us we should drink this before dinner,' she said to her friend, 'but I prefer it afterwards. When the men have port!' Rhonda smiled; it was when Margaret was at her sharpest that she let her friends be close. 'Julie's an interesting girl,' she said: 'or she comes from an interesting family. Her father comes from one of the earliest families in the western district. He inherited a property with a garden designed by William Guilfoyle, and it's been maintained. He's got heaps of money. His wife's an Irish beauty, but she's got no class. Impetuous and angry. Inferiority pretending to be superior, but falling down badly. Hair black, face starting to get puffy. Very demanding mother, I would think. Julie will be able to save herself by following in her father's footsteps, except that he's unfaithful. Gets himself down to the city where he thinks he's out of sight. Except he isn't, apart from his wife, who suspects but doesn't know. Julie's going to be like him. That photographer picked her at first glance. Modelling! Hah!' Margaret was smiling, a complex smile with a strand of bitterness inside it. 'She'll need someone close beside her to guide her ... and unfortunately, that's exactly what she'll have.'

Rhonda sipped, and put down her glass. 'The boys I teach mean well. Most of them have had the best of everything. They're very polite. When you speak to them individually, they're very nice boys. But when they come together as a class – a class to teach, or a social class – other things creep in, and they're...'

The friends looked at each other, sharing the problem. What *did* creep into the boys when they gave up their individuality, and merged? Whatever it was, and it was many things, it was a hurdle, a stumbling block, an enemy, for Margaret and Rhonda. Margaret's girls had to cope with it, though they could to some extent when they were a group, as at the dancing class, though even there ...

The two of them, single in their thirties, had jibbed at marriage, the problem that every woman had to solve, yet they hesitated to bring

the problem into the open because each of them sensed, in her own way, that to be aware of their position meant *owning* the position, after which it would be next to impossible to marry even if they wanted to. Both suspected that all women were ambivalent about marriage, if not alarmed by it, but that the majority managed to deceive themselves about what it involved and implied, in order to go ahead and do it. If you thought too lucidly about marriage you disqualified yourself. So what to do? Nothing but to move on day by day, functioning as teachers, waiting to see what would happen next.

Neville Long's father was Norman Long, a chemist, or pharmacist as he chose to call himself, in Wangaratta, in the state's north-east, a sprawling town, prone to getting flooded, on the highway to Sydney named after Hamilton Hume, an early explorer. Norman was a restrictive man, something he disguised with Rotarian joviality. He had already purchased a pharmacy in Benalla, a town some way to the south, but part of the same region, for his son to take over when he graduated. Neville knew it was there, something never talked about, but waiting. He'd done well at school, and had only to complete the pharmacy course, work elsewhere for two or three years to gain experience, and then he would take over the Benalla business, his father assuming that he would marry at much the same time, his life completed until children came along.

The pattern would then have to be repeated, with Norman and Marcie, his wife, becoming benevolent grandparents and Neville, with his yet-to-be-acquired partner managing the fortunes of the family. So it was set out in Norman's mind, with no sign of dispute or rebellion in Neville, who was, largely unconsciously, avoiding any thought about his future, until events, which have a mind of their own, took a turn. Neville's exam marks, as announced in the newspaper, were better than his family had expected, and he changed his university application: he would study medicine, the first in his family to do so at the University of Melbourne. He would reside, like one or two of his schoolboy friends, at Trinity College, an Anglican place of residence. He did. He had a room of his own, tiny, but it was the first he'd ever had to himself. He was surrounded by other students, always lively,

always doing things, even studying. He thrived on the life, and found himself looking around for new experiences ... and one walked in the door.

He was sitting at his desk with a textbook in front of him when the door was pushed open by a stately young woman who wanted to know what he was doing in Simon's room? 'Simon's next door,' he said, 'but I don't think he's there at the moment. I think he's across the road at Naughtin's.' She looked at him scornfully. 'His room is number thirteen.' Neville, polite as ever, said, 'Yes, but this is fifteen.' She looked, it was, but she didn't move. It was clear that she moved only when she chose to. 'Come in anyway,' Neville said, 'and I'll make a cup of tea.'

She stayed for an hour, and he learned that her name was Nigella Lacey, her father was English, military, and held a position at Government House, her mother was in England for a time, she was studying Arts, more or less for something to do, and she was ...

... available. This became clear when they sat on the lawn in front of the State Library on the following Saturday, Nigella having declared that the paintings which the State of Victoria called its art collection were altogether boring, and she wouldn't be bothered walking around them, as Neville had proposed. She sat on a seat with him, overlooking the street, and they began to kiss. This was most enjoyable, initially, but it was soon clear that Nigella had little or no awareness of people moving past: he suggested they should, perhaps, return to his college, or at the least, take themselves to a cinema where they could sit together in the dark. Nigella, looking at him coldly, said she would go back to Government House, and he would come back with her. 'Father will be busy somewhere. You won't have to meet him.'

When Neville got back to his college that evening he was still a virgin, but only just. Nigella was impassioned, and without inhibition. They'd arranged that she would visit him the following Thursday, when he had the afternoon free of lectures. She visited, and his first experience of sexual love left him more confused than anything else. When she left she demanded to see his timetable, so they could arrange another time, and he realised, to his shame, that he didn't want to be

part of something he couldn't control. 'Let's take it quietly,' he said, 'let's work out what it is we're doing.' But she said, 'You act like you're scared. What's wrong with you? What sort of man does that?'

He wanted to say he wasn't a man yet, that she'd conferred manhood before he was ready, and he didn't know how to manage a situation of this sort. She was too used to having her own way. Why couldn't her mother be there to manage things? For that matter, what else went on at Government House that he didn't know about? He met her on two more Thursdays, and he even made an afternoon visit to Government House before his uncertainty – his moral weakness, we might say - conveyed itself to her, and she told him he wasn't what she wanted. 'What do you want?' he said, and she was ready for that too. 'I want a man who'll fight for me, and take me places. I want a man who can open doors, and I don't just mean politely, but social doors, doors that get me to places where I want to go!' He knew he wasn't that, and she saw it on his face. He saw that she was playing for bigger stakes than he was. She wasn't committed to Australia. She could go back where she came from. If he'd been bolder, he might have given her an adventure, but he was committed to passing his year, and the years that followed. He didn't want anyone in Wangaratta to hear about his intimacy with Nigella, but it got back to them somehow, and they treated it as they might the accidental unleashing of a dog, easily forgiven once the leash had been reattached and it was safely back on its chain.

The chemist running the shop in Benalla heard about it too, and felt safer. Norman Long's boy Neville was a long way from pushing him out. He bought a shop not far from the shop he was renting, and he leased it to an ambitious young woman called Mirella McMahon who specialised in ladies wear, From Seventeen To Seventy her slogan. He gave Mirella cheap rental because he kept her on a three month lease, promising to help her move if he needed the shop, close as it was to the shop he was leasing from the Longs. If the boy failed medicine, dropped back to pharmacy and then pushed him out, he'd set up in competition. He got himself into Rotary when his predecessor died suddenly, a heart attack at the age of fifty-six, and he considered himself ready to defend. He had the same status as Norman Long, albeit in another town.

Other young men from Neville's school year were at Trinity with him, though only two from the history class we have already met – Bob Enright and Robyn Briggs. Bob was doing Agricultural Science, and not working very hard because he'd heard it was easy to pass, and Robyn was doing Commerce for much the same reason. Other factors were the number of young women in the faculty, and Robyn's intention to move into real estate upon graduation, preferably in Melbourne's wealthiest areas of Toorak and South Yarra. He was planning to focus, as far as an agency could, on historic homes, and architect homes built for the wealthy: a university degree would set him apart as appropriately qualified for the field he worked in. He'd need connections, and the university, coming on top of his prestigious schooling, should give him those. When the college held a Common Room Dance, he was one of the organisers, as he was for the annual, brick-carrying race of the freshmen around the college lawn, and the Melbourne Cup sweep. When the women's college next door wanted men for a debate, a dance, a suitable partner for one of their number at a function, they asked Robyn to get someone for them. He knew who was shy and needed to be pushed, and who held back. In later years, no less than three inter-college marriages developed out of arrangements initiated by Robyn, yet he, though popular, was non-committal about relationships; always with someone but never out of his depth. 'I party in the shallows,' he liked to say. 'It suits me. I'll change when I need to. *If* I need to!' No more would he give but that.

A change came over the mood of the college at about this time: the college, the country, the world. America, having destroyed the Japanese war machine with the two greatest hammer-blows in history, no longer saw the USSR as an ally, but a threat. Communism became the devil, the anti-Christ, needed by the American mind. Ideas that might once have been considered were shoved into basements and attics of the brain. Lives and careers were destroyed by investigators seeking out the enemy within, as they were called; while in the land 'discovered' by James Cook, communism was seen as disloyal, and challenged with quasi-American hysteria by that other overriding dispenser of faith, the Catholic Church. Moscow became the counter-pole to the Vatican, and public opinion, by and large, felt the

Christian capital should win. This argument imprisoned the world for years, ending only, if end it did, when Richard Nixon, most devious of presidents, did a rare good deed and flew to Beijing.

But Nixon's visit, and the opera made out of it, lie ahead of the events we are dealing with - the aftermath of the second world war, even more destructive than the first. Once again, in Australia, there was a soldier settlement scheme, a little more calibrated than the schemes after world war one. Mirella McMahon, of Benalla, was in her shop one morning when she saw a group of local wives outside her door; curious to know what they were talking about, she took herself to the window to rearrange things in order to listen to Betty Rutherford talking about the returned serviceman who'd been apportioned to her husband's farm to gain experience before taking up a block of his own. 'Ian says he's good with stock but I can tell you he's got a lot to learn about keeping a house clean. He's so untidy! We were told by the government that he had to be part of the family, we couldn't just put up a tent in the shed as we would for a labourer. Oh no, he's a veteran! Well, I'll tell you what, none of my family ever smoked in bed. And they didn't make holes in the blankets with cigarettes. New blankets, which I bought for his bed! My boys think he's marvellous because he can kick a football further than they can. Well, look at the size of him ...'

Someone broke into her diatribe to tell the others that his name was Graham Longford and he was a fine looking man, but then, she didn't have to live with him ...

'You'd know all about him if you did,' raged Betty Rutherford. 'Or rather, you wouldn't. He doesn't talk. Won't tell us anything. I know nothing about his family. Why isn't he doing his training with them? We don't know. Brothers and sisters? We don't know. Yet he's supposed to be one of the family. Ian asked him one day about New Guinea. The Kokoda Trail, we've all heard of that. He said he couldn't talk about it. Yet we're supposed to be his family! All he's good for is burning holes in my blankets ...'

Mirella, moving away from the window, wished she hadn't heard Betty Rutherford. She'd heard other women, years younger, say nice things about Graham Longford. But burning holes in blankets? Oh dear. War had made him impossible. With ever so many men, that's

what war did. Yet they had to be settled back into normal life, they had to be made acceptable to women ... She wondered who she'd marry, because of course she'd marry: that was what everyone did. Days later, she heard that Graham Longford was interested in Tina Berry. Tina was the daughter of a local bee-keeper, and the most obviously attractive young woman in town. Her father had taught her the honey business and she was to be seen, if you drove on remote roads, with her father, a hat on her head and a net to keep the bees away from her face. He said she knew the bush as well as he did, could identify the trees and knew when they were likely to flower. Mirella had known Tina since they were girls at school, and, taking her for granted, had thought little about how she seemed to men. This returned serviceman was interested in her? He could hardly smoke cigarettes in bed if they married! Mirella was amused. The next time she saw Tina was at a dance in the Benalla Hall, and Graham Longford – someone pointed him out – was smoking outside with the men, but not too often because he was trying to dance with Tina and she was popular. Even friends of her father danced with her, and she was charming to them, a daughter to them as well. Boys just out of school wanted to dance with her, and she sweetly turned them away until Longford was nervous about asking her to take the floor. But he found a moment over supper and asked for the last dance, half-hoping she would go home with him ...

Home? He couldn't take her to the Rutherfords'! He'd have to wait for his chance some other time. He must dance to please her, and he did. 'That was lovely', he said as their circling drew to a close. 'Have you got someone to take you home?' She pointed. 'My parents are over there.' He was gracious. 'You're in good hands.' Then he added, 'I hope we'll dance again before too long.'

This attraction (on one side at least) did not go unobserved, towns being what they are – or were, in those days. People notice, and everybody knows. Signals of attraction are seen for what they are. Graham worked very hard in the days that followed, slept deeply, didn't smoke in bed. But neither did he make his bed when he left it in the morning. Betty Rutherford had been critical of his way of roughly pulling up sheet and blankets, but now he didn't even do that. Betty

took him to task one morning and he made so bold as to suggest that as he was supposed to be treated like one of the family then she should make the bed if she wasn't satisfied with the way he left it.

This gave Betty an opening. Her grown-up sons – one was in Wangaratta to the north and the other in Melbourne, far away – had made their own beds from the age of twelve and had never complained. She had standards and being 'part of the family' as he called it, required him to fit in with the family's ways, and this included maintaining a tidy house. A house with standards! Longford was furious. He didn't give a stuff about whether her house was tidy. 'The Kokoda Track wasn't very tidy,' he told her, suppressing at least a little of his rage. 'You're not on the Kokoda Track now,' she reminded him, to which he replied, 'I did what I did up there to keep this country safe!' There was no stopping Betty. 'Then we must thank you for that! But I want the country to be more than safe. I want it to be the way it's supposed to be!' He went into the paddocks, seething.

Neville graduated, did a year's internship in a Melbourne hospital, then moved to Swan Hill. His parents had hoped he might be closer, but could hardly over-ride him at this stage. There was no township on the opposite side of the river so the hospital serviced a large area of New South Wales. Doing his rounds one morning, Neville found himself looking at a familiar face. 'Good lord,' he said, 'Alan Downer! What are you doing here?'

The young man in the bed said, 'You're supposed to tell me that! Gooday mate, how are you? Long time no see.' Alan had had a fall from a horse, riding when he was drunk. That was the beginning of his story but Neville, finding time to talk to his friend over the days that followed, began to realise that the fall was only one feature of a life very different from his own. Alan, on leaving school, had picked up a job on a sheep station on the other side of the river, had found it boring, and with a few like-minded young men on nearby stations he drank, drove wildly, and looked for entertainment. They danced wherever they found music. They stole a Deniliquin police car and pushed it under a shearing shed, surrounded it with sheep, and slipped away. They drank at isolated pubs and blasted road signs with rifles.

Et cetera. ‘Don’t you want to get married?’ Neville asked. ‘Not ready mate,’ was Alan’s reply. Neville, who thought he had been slow in marrying, wanted to know how Alan would know when he was ready. The young man’s answer was quick. ‘I’ll wake up one morning with a hangover and a need to get away. I’ll go to the boss and ask for my pay. I’ll head for Sydney – Why? Because I don’t know it – and I’ll buy a suit.’ That made him laugh. ‘Remember when we wore a suit every day? At school? What happened to all those fellas. You ever see any of them, now?’

Neville shook his head, then thought of a name or two. ‘Hector Bathurst. Daryl Thomas. Daryl stayed on when we left. Became house captain, but after a term he decided he’d made a mistake. Left school and got a job.’

‘What’s he doing?’

‘Don’t know. Never heard that.’

‘I always thought he’d go a long way. Sounds like he made a mistake.’

Neville began to see something. He was bonded to Daryl Thomas, and to Alan too. They’d been made part of each other by their school and there was no undoing it now. Neville was married now, to Donna Ziebell, whom we have yet to meet, but he still felt a connection to Nigella Lacey, from that first year at college. What would he do if he saw her? Ask after her, her husband, children, he felt sure she’d have some. Ask her if she’d finished her studies in England, ask after her father ... The simplest and most accidental facts seemed solid, once they’d slipped into the past. Something crossed Neville’s mind. ‘There were some young fellas charged last year with burning a haystack at Moulamein. You weren’t part of that mob, by any chance?’ Alan’s face firmed. ‘No way, mate. I keep away from that sort of thing.’ Something told Neville he’d touched a nerve ending. Laughing to himself, he went on. ‘Whoever did it didn’t hang around to put it out. It burned a couple of paddocks before they got it out. Or that’s what I hear.’

Alan knew Neville didn’t believe him. ‘Could you imagine me doing a thing like that? A boy in a blue suit?’ The two of them burst into laughter. Neville looked at the boy he’d grown up with, years before. He felt something sentimental emerging inside him, felt also

helplessness, and confusion. ‘I don’t know what I think about that,’ he said. ‘They were pretty good at giving us answers at school, but right now I don’t know what to say.’

They looked at each other. Alan changed the subject. ‘How long’re you going to keep me in here?’

‘A few days yet. I think you’re pretty right by now, but we want you where you can’t put any strain on a few places. Like in a bed, and keeping still.’ Alan said, ‘I knew you were going to say that. Bastard. Ah well ...’

Alan’s parents didn’t hear about his accident until he was out of hospital, and then only by chance. Someone told them they’d seen their son on a train, crossing the Harbour Bridge. Alan’s mother was amazed. ‘In Sydney? What on earth would he be doing there?’ Their informant had no idea, but allowed himself to say, ‘I can’t tell you that, but he looked very smart. He was wearing a black suit, and he looked quite solemn.’

In London, Nigella Lacey amazed her husband by telling him that she’d like to take him, and their daughters, on a tour through the Australian outback. ‘Half the people in that country,’ he said, ‘think the best thing they could possibly do with themselves is visit London. See where they came from, and all that.’ Nigella was not surprised. ‘I know,’ she said. ‘I scorned the place when I was there. I didn’t realise what was good about it. I could only see the shortcomings.’ ‘Of which there were many,’ her husband reminded her. ‘You’ve made that very clear to me. But, if you want to go back for a look, don’t you think we should wait till the girls are older?’

Small children are not easy to travel with, so she had little choice, but Nigella, in accepting her husband’s decision knew that she was losing something in accepting the delay.

Ken Jarman had taken a different path through those after-school years. His cousin, Simon Peel, also at the school, but not in the same house, because house membership was allocated by where you lived and Mrs Peel and Mrs Jarman, sisters, lived in areas that suited their

husbands, not together, had taken up a position with George's, the city's smartest store. Simon worked in the purchasing department, which involved a great deal of travel, mostly to England but also to France and Italy, selecting stock and identifying trends, so that the store could offer its customers things in fashion, or about to be, in Europe. For Ken, this, though certainly a desirable job, was a little too close to the fickleness of taste, and he preferred something more distant, more austere. His mother used her influence with the husband of another sister to place her son in the research section of the National Bank; it was only a few years since a Labor government, headed by an engine driver from Bathurst, had tried – and failed – to nationalise the banks. The bank kept a close watch over the internal affairs of the companies it financed; this position of superiority suited Ken, a former prefect who took his position of authority seriously, certain that he was fit to hold it. He had become engaged, in the fourth and final year of his commerce degree, to Suzanne Winton, daughter of a Supreme Court judge, they had married shortly after his graduation and were living in an apartment block in Washington Road, Toorak, owned by a colleague of Suzanne's father. They had a base, and Ken's investigative role with the bank made him respected, sometimes even feared, by people in the business world whose positions were insecure. It suited him, he was discreet, incisive in his judgements but respected for his fairness; 'a young man on the way up', people said of him. Suzanne had a carefully chosen coterie of friends and a wide circle of acquaintances, none of them further than a phone call away. She read widely, was a committee member of the city's film society and put together parties of cultivated people to attend plays, musicals and operas brought to the city by touring groups.

Ken approved. It was what women should be doing, if they had the judgement, and taste. Men of his sort were responsible for business, law, and good governance, while women took advantage of the base their menfolk provided to create a way of life that could be enjoyed by all, even, and often enough in a tolerant society, those classes who wouldn't be admitted to the homes of those who provided the society with its top. Or perhaps – this was something Ken and Suzanne discussed – there were two societies, both of them sharing

an interest in horse racing and breeding, but parting ways after that. The spring racing carnival brought the two societies together, while for the rest of the year they were largely separate. Ken thought this a good thing, while Suzanne, with her clear separation of close friends and more casual acquaintances, could have handled membership of the two groups, or layers, easily enough. Her social skill was the thing Ken loved best about her. She put together evening or matinee theatre groups with ease, and enjoyed shopping ‘sprees’ as she called them with her closer friends. She seized on the reviews of a pantomime she read, sensing that the presentation, inviting the audience to mock the sentimental action on the stage, would be ‘lots of fun’, and gathered a group which included Stella Murphy, the only woman of Irish descent in her circle. Suzanne’s group was conventional enough but Stella appeared to be fearful of her husband and his side of the family: every second thing she did was, she feared, likely to bring misfortune on them for which she’d be blamed. None of this was mentioned when the party gathered in the foyer for the panto, a sophisticated group rather different from the slightly older women with the children they’d brought along to see poverty laughed at. (Australia was more prosperous at the time than it had been for years.) The play had been written a century before in London as a protest against poverty, malnutrition, the indifference of the upper classes, and so on. A child died on an icy street in the arms of its sobbing mother, aristocrats crossed to the other side of the street, and this wretchedness was brought to a climax when two filthy little cockneys sang plaintively, ‘Please give me a penny sir, pennies for bread.’

This was a signal to the prosperous audience and their children to hurl coins – pennies in those pre-decimal days – at the actors, who pretended to duck, though pleased with the reaction they’d provoked. Stella was the most vigorous member of Suzanne’s group, digging into her handbag for coins to throw at the stage, but her mood changed at the interval when she searched her bag for something which she hoped she hadn’t thrown. The rest of the party, noticing her anxiety, asked her what she was looking for, and she told them that she feared she’d thrown a five shilling piece at the beggars, a coin which had

belonged to her husband's grandfather and which, upon his death, had been passed on to her to mind by her husband. 'He'll kill me if he finds out what I've done!'

Some of the women suggested going backstage and asking for the coin, but Suzanne told Stella not to worry. 'There are dealers in the city who could easily replace the coin you threw away.' She failed to see that Stella feared that the coin might be more costly to replace than the miserly sums her family allowed Stella for spending on herself. 'You're worried about them finding out,' Suzanne said. 'We'll do it at the start of next week.'

The coin was purchased the following Monday, and Stella relaxed a little, though her relief was obvious. What could Suzanne do for her? What was she dealing with? It took her six weeks to find out. Their next theatre trip was to the Princess, a Victorian escape-house built with goldfields money, housing a variety troupe put together by ex-service men and women who preferred a life of touring to settling down as most of their type had done. They were on the verge of breaking up and Suzanne thought they deserved support, so she rang around and put a party together to sit in the front row of the dress circle in the last week before the show closed. It was a sentimental occasion, and as the group gathered for the finale, some of Suzanne's friends were in tears. The party sang their farewell song, and as they broke into its final chorus, they began flicking playing cards to their audience, who clapped and cried out, clutching at the air as the cards whizzed over their heads and occasionally into their hands. Stella grew excited by the whizzing cards and called at the chorus on stage, 'Here! Here! Up here, high, high, high!' Someone flicked a card at her and she caught it with a cry of joy, and she was still clinging to it as the curtain came down and rose again, clinging to it even as Suzanne's party made their way downstairs to the bar in the foyer where Suzanne suggested they might have a drink. They gathered, chattering, and someone asked Stella about the card she'd snatched from the air. Stella looked guilty, as if she'd been subjected to some form of interrogation, but she opened the hand that clutched the card against her palm. 'Show us, Stell,' Suzanne said, and the Irish woman opened her hand, shrieking when she saw that the card she held was the Ace of Hearts. Much

noise and speculation. What did that mean? Stella's face was frozen, her eyes full of mystical speculation. 'I've been chosen,' she said, and nothing they said to her could make her say what she meant.

A few weeks later, Stella's friends noticed a change. She was bolder and her eyes shone. She talked more. She took a lead when they were discussing what to do. Her friends started to ask questions.

'What's come over you?'

'What's going on?'

'If I didn't know better, I'd say you were in love.'

'Who is it?'

'What's he like?'

Stella denied these insinuations. She wasn't any different. Nothing had changed. Perhaps they simply hadn't understood her before. The Chickadees, as the group's husbands and boyfriends had come to call them, weren't convinced. Something was going on, of that they were sure. They would have said that some things can't be hidden, except that Stella had baffled them. They could detect no sign of anything clandestine. Nobody had seen her with anybody but Bob, her husband, a man they suspected of being insensitive and possibly even violent. Word spread, eventually, and some of the women mentioned it to their partners. Ken Jarman thought it was only gossip, but he listened because he was curious to know what Suzanne thought about infidelity. 'What's Bob think about all this?' Suzanne had no idea. Nobody had talked about it with him, and Ken wasn't happy about that. 'If that's what you think, don't you have a duty to tell him?'

Suzanne wasn't easily caught. She'd already noticed that every one of the chickadees she heard mention the matter had taken an ambivalent position: fidelity to one's partner was of the greatest importance, but each and every one of them was curious about Stella and their sympathies followed their curiosity. They began to call her husband *Five Bob*, a reference to the coin she'd thrown away at the pantomime, and the fear she'd displayed when she'd realised what she'd done. Who cared about Bob Murphy? He listened too hard to the priests that ran the church he belonged to. Men tried to run the world, they gave themselves all the positions of control, and still they weren't satisfied. The moment something came up that threatened

them, they rushed to erect a new barrier, a new control, to pass a new law ... and so on. It was ridiculous, and the best way to handle it was to create a separate world that looked so innocuous that they didn't want to control it, and then to keep them out. Most of the chickadees were skilled at this, but that didn't stop them being curious about Stella: what, or who, had brought about the change that was so obvious to them?

It was Ken who found out. Normally he worked at the western end of the city, but he was walking near the parliament on its eastern hill one afternoon when he noticed Stella on the opposite side of the road, and outside the Princess Theatre where she'd plucked the ace of hearts from the air. He looked again, and yes, it was Stella, in a doorway of the theatre, a man beside her. Ken had a feeling that he wasn't supposed to be seeing what he saw, but there was nowhere he could take cover. Besides, he was interested. The man gave Stella's hand a squeeze, kissed her hastily on the cheek, and disappeared in the darkness of an open theatre. Stella turned to look where he'd gone, and Ken started to walk quickly. So! The chickadees and their men folk didn't know what he knew ... but what would he do with his knowledge? He, Ken, worked for a bank, it traded in pounds, shillings and pence, but the knowledge that he'd stumbled on might be valuable in some other way. He doubled back, and caught a tram, secretly excited. None of them, chickadees or their men, knew what she was doing, and he did. What could he do with that?

Days passed and Ken's thoughts took him down a variety of paths. Women were different. Men ruled the world, certainly the worlds of property and finance, because women hardly mattered to banks, but here was his chance to find his way into that wayward, outside world they created for themselves. He felt unusually, strangely, powerful, and he scented danger. He started driving to work, telling Suzanne he needed the car to go out during the day, and he made it his business to travel past the theatre whenever he could. Twice in one month he saw Stella with the man who must have worked inside the theatre; they must, he sensed, have some way of arranging the days and times

of their meetings. And what could it be like inside? The outside was a delightful toy-box, with angels blowing trumpets, an unreal building, but then, he realised – a thought that would never have come to him at the bank! – the imagination gave freedom. When people followed the ideas that came to them from secret parts of the mind they were mysteriously free, and endangered because nobody would spare someone who flouted the rules.

The rules! He'd grown up with them, obeyed them and enforced them as a boy at school and as a young man; now, ambitious at the bank, he sought opportunity but knew he must be *sound*: it was the bankers' primary rule. You were handling other people's money. They expected you to have skill, they expected you to have more. It dawned on him that what he wanted was to be very sound indeed, while slipping through a secret door into another world where he could be something else, yet have a way – that door! – to get back. That was what he wanted. Stella was both the prize, and the lure. He spotted her a third time, and a fourth, always of a late morning. He knew enough about her habits now. If he needed to visit a client, as he did occasionally, he took a tram to the eastern end of the city and walked past the theatre topped with its angels painted gold. It took a month before he ran into her; she appeared almost pleased to have been discovered because it meant that her knowledge had been shared by someone from the world she knew. 'How did you find out?' she said to him, over coffee, but didn't react to his story except by asking, 'What will you do?'

He smiled, saying only, 'I'm curious too.'

He didn't rush the next step, neither did she. Neither quite knew what they were doing, nor where it might lead. But the third time they met, she told him that Ernie – the theatre man – was at a workshop in Richmond, supervising the building of a set, so she could show Ken where they went to be alone. Each knew that that meant intimacy, the forbidden, the step that Ken was urgent to take.

Ernie had cleared a space at one side of the theatre by the simple means of stacking sets so they hid the place he'd made. It was lit by a splendid old standard lamp, contained a huge sofa and some cushions, and there was a jug on the floor, a teapot and two filthy cups. 'Don't

look too hard,' Stella said; 'Do you want the lamp on or off?' Ken was surprised, and looked around. What a weird and wonderful place for what they were going to do. Something hysterical rose in him, and he managed to say, 'I think I'd be afraid of the dark.' Stella's eyes glinted. 'We can imagine we're anywhere. Where would you like to be?'

Ken had never thought in this way. 'Somewhere ... ah ...'

She was urgent. 'Where?'

He knew it was stupid, but he said, 'In the House of Lords, in London.'

She said, 'Clothes off, then. We're spirits. We can go anywhere. We're free!'

And they were. Watched only by the old lamp and the backs of the theatre sets, they fondled each other, then, feeling impelled by an urgency that Ken at least had never known before, they rushed to a peak of excitement, before sprawling on the sofa, still clinging to each other. Ken said, putting a hand to his eyes, 'Is there a rug, or something?' And there was. Stella dragged it out from behind the sofa and they wrapped themselves in it. 'Hold me tight!' she urged, and he did. This – this realisation that they'd freed themselves from everything, even their selves, was ever so exciting ...

Twenty minutes later they dressed, and left, resuming their roles in a world that, it seemed to them, was only acting the part that had been written for it!

Suzanne Jarman had almost grown used to Ken taking the car to work when he told her there was no longer a parking spot for him and he'd revert to the number 8 tram. And did. She sensed some change in him, but found it hard to define; he was more interested in her, more curious. Not normally an introspective person, she began to think about herself, and what had caused the change. The best she could do was to feel that she was no longer 'a woman', she had become Suzanne to him: now what did that mean? A few days later he got a letter from the Old Boys Association of his school; he read it, then put it aside. What did *that* mean? He took more notice when she told him what her friends were doing, where they'd stayed on their holidays, even what they were saying about their husbands. Much of this he

found amusing; it was certainly a relief to find that he took himself both more and less seriously. That was quite beyond her, but she liked it and hoped for more.

Then the development, whatever it was, stopped, and he was a serious banker again, hungry enough but not very interested in what they were having for dinner. 'We're busy at the moment,' he told her, 'it's the end of the financial year.' This meant no more than the end of the middle ages to Suzanne, who took money for granted. If people had it, they spent it, because more came along. All you had to do was be in the right place when society turned its mills, and that's where any smart person would be, hands extended. 'Ken,' she told him, after wondering whether to say anything or not, 'you got nicer to live with for a while, and now it's stopped. Is anything ... wrong?'

She saw that he looked very thoughtful, and felt that she'd done well to ask. He had in fact gone right back inside himself, and she changed her mind. 'Ken? You're not your usual self.' He knew he had to say something, to share a little of what he'd become recently. He spoke. 'I used to think I was a great success, and I deserved any good things that I got. But something's made me realise that I was just lucky, and now I feel ...'

He looked around, rather than into her eyes, as she expected.

'Now I feel that if I'm to get any more good things, I'll have to earn them.'

Earn them? What a mystery! She was going to break in, but he went on.

'The days of something for nothing are over. If I want more, I have to give more.'

She'd started something she didn't know how to finish, or even to continue. It was worrying. 'You've always been generous. What more are you going to give?'

It was clear he didn't know. 'Have I been hard to live with? I don't think I know myself very well. That's to say, I know what it's like to *be* me, but not what it's like to live with me. If you see what I mean?'

She had a feeling that he didn't really know what he was saying, and thought it best to stop her questioning. 'You had a letter from the Old Boys. What did they want you to do?'

This was safe ground. ‘A donation, as usual. I’ll have to put in something pretty decent. And there was a note on the bottom, written by Tony Harvey ...’

‘What did Tony have to say?’

‘Am I going to play on next year? My plans.’

‘Are you going to?’ It was one of the places where she caught up with the other chickadees.

He said firmly, ‘Yes. I think I’ve got another season in me.’

Old Melburnians were playing Old Scotch, watched by sixty or seventy people, most of them sheltered from the wind. Ken was on the half back flank, watched by his wife, some chickadees and their men. He took the ball downfield in a bold clearing dash and his friends applauded. He marked a clearing kick and landed the ball in the goal square, where the OMs’ full forward grabbed the ball in a scrimmage and kicked a goal. ‘What’s the difference now?’ someone said, and Suzanne told him Old Scotch were only three goals in front. Five Bob said the gap was four goals and the OMs weren’t going to catch them. He said it was time to go to the Domain for a whisky, nudging his wife. Stella said they should wait till half time before moving on. Others didn’t feel like hanging around. The Williamsons said they should be getting on the road because they were having dinner at Portsea, and staying overnight. Will and Teena Andrews said they were going to Ballarat and they should get moving before the road iced up, as it was prone to do. Someone suggested a coffee in South Yarra and then coming back for the last quarter but nobody was keen on that. One by one and couple by couple they moved away, leaving Suzanne, Stella and Bob, some umpires and some footballers, including Ken.

Ken was in form. He roamed across the half-back line, intercepting attacks and moving the ball back. Once or twice he dropped back into the goal square, defending. Old Scotch did most of the attacking but couldn’t increase their lead. When the half time bell sounded, the game was neither lost nor won. Ken gave a wave to his supporters as he trooped into the pavilion. Five Bob said, ‘They should move him into the centre, to give them a bit more drive.’ Since neither of the women responded, he added, ‘It’s a small ground, he could probably

kick a few goals, they haven't got much up forward.' Neither Suzanne nor Stella knew what to say to that. 'Let's get out of the wind,' Bob said. 'That, or go up to the Domain.' This was so clearly what he wanted to do that Stella had to agree. 'Suzanne? What do you say?' Ken's wife was no more interested in drinking than she was in football. 'I'll stay. He'll be disappointed if I don't.' Football pavilions were dreary places, but if that was where Ken was, she should be there, supporting.

It was a prosperous time for Australia. The Korean war created a demand for wool. Products of the land sold well. Manufacturing revived. The nation produced its first motor cars ... with a little help from General Motors ... and began to trade with Japan. Full employment was the cry. The assumptions of the prewar world – so restricting – had slipped away. There was a future to be made. The world was full of possibility, but American culture, super confident, didn't deal with many questions lurking in the Australian mind. Virtues, courtesies and honours remained as British as ever. The country had learned to depend on American military might, without noticing – not yet – the shortcomings of the superpower. These were easy to overlook because the US was still in the stage of accepting responsibility for the power that made it dominant. It believed in its ideals, and Australia, knowing its dependence, believed in them too. The darkness of depression and war was fading in the memories of those who'd lived through them. The motor car brought freedom. New suburbs boomed. Films showed life in countries that had been ignored. Science would improve the world, and Australians were good at it, their confidence untested as yet. The boys in the history lesson that began our book were still reaching out, nowhere near their limits yet.

Noel McGraw worked for a while in the suburban electrical goods shop his mother had taken over when her husband died, picked apples in Tasmania and fruit in the Goulburn Valley, then took a job cooking in the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme, before making a half-hearted attempt to justify his mother's expenses in educating him by passing a few subjects at the University of Melbourne: a waste of time he said, though he hung around the theatre and enjoyed a

few geology excursions before drifting north and getting a job on a prawn trawler on the Queensland coast. He met a woman called Lola Moon in Townsville, they subsisted in Mount Isa for a while before returning to the boats. There came a time when their boat pulled in to Cooktown for some repairs and to have the radio checked. Screwy, their skipper, wanted to get back to trawling as quickly as possible, but his crew outnumbered him, Lola siding with Noel when he said, 'There's something I want to check out here, it's been on my mind for years.'

So the three of them walked from the wharf to Grassy Hill, a name, as a sign told them, which had been given the place by the party which included James Cook and Joseph Banks in 1770, not forgetting the sailors of *The Endeavour*. Puffing, they reached the top, grasped the rail, and looked about.

Lola was impressed. 'We should've come here before!' Noel said, 'Worth waiting for!' and even Screwy agreed, though he didn't like the look of the coral which had trapped the *Endeavour*, all those years before. 'Bastard of a place for a boat! How could you expect to get through that?' He meant the coral reefs visible from their vantage point, high above the sea, the horizon, the vast Pacific. The river, named by the Englishmen after their ship, had expanded into a huge but sheltered inlet before cutting a way to the ocean. Coastal ranges stretched north and south, cattle country to the west. Birds should have been soaring, but there were none. Signboards quoted the journals of Cook and Banks, two gentlemen alarmed at being in danger far from home: in the sea, coral, on the land, the black peoples' fires. Almost directly beneath the lookout there was a tiny beach. 'That's where they pulled their ship ashore,' Noel said, 'to check the damage. Then they took it in to where our boat is at the moment, to work on it.' He wiped his forehead with his hand and made an unexpected sound. Lola said, 'What's got into you?'

Noel said, 'Something has. I'm not too sure. I ought to be okay, but I'm ...'

He didn't finish. Lola looked at him, concerned, and so did Screwy. 'Ya look like ya had a fright!'

'That's how I feel. Except I haven't. Everything's okay.'

Lola wasn't impressed. 'You don't sound right, to me.'

Noel put his hand on the rail. 'They were scared. They didn't know if they were going to get home.'

Screwy was a man of little imagination. 'Fresh water down there to fill their tanks. Barrels, or whatever they had. Fresh meat if they shot a kangaroo. They shoulda been right.' He wanted to get back to work on his boat, yet Noel, knowing this, was reluctant to leave. 'It's a historic place.' Lola wasn't impressed. 'It's a great place, sure, but we've seen it. Let's go.' She and Screwy were watching Noel, assessing him in the way of people who didn't bother much with words. Noel, however, was reaching for something to say. 'Our teacher was ... wait a minute ... Rhonda Mathieson ... this place meant something to her ... she never really said what it was ...' He stopped.

He liked to make fun of people so Lola made fun of him. 'What do you think she should've said?'

Noel sighed before offering the only thought he could find. 'She should've said, be ready for it when you get there. Don't let it catch you unawares.' Screwy's patience had run out. He was moving away and expecting them to follow. Lola was willing, but she was watching her man, concerned but without understanding.

'I should've said *unprepared*.' Screwy was already walking, Lola had turned. Noel took her hand and let her lead him away.

Screwy, who'd been keen to get back to sea, met a woman in a pub and his wishes changed direction. Noel, getting impatient, told him, 'Ask her to come to sea with us.' To his surprise, she accepted. The trawler, roomy enough when three people were working, was restricted for space. Nancybelle, as she insisted on them calling her, felt that the cabin belonged to her man – the Captain, as she called him – and her alone. 'Youse can make yaselves comfortable on the deck,' she told Lola. 'No you don't,' Lola told her. 'We're sleeping where we've slept the last couple of months. That bunk's ours, not yours.' Screwy, dangling from the cross-arm while he tried to unscramble a rope, heard the sound of quarrelling and shouted at the silly bitches that he'd put them ashore on a sixpenny-sized island and sail away until they had a bit of sense. Noel, looking for something to give him

release, spotted a pair of friendly, inquisitive dolphins looking up at him. ‘Don’t blame me,’ he told them. ‘I’m a man of peace. Or I was.’ Then he yelled at Screwy: ‘Back to Cooktown! Then we draw straws. There’s only room on this boat for three. Whoever draws the short straw leaves the boat!’ Screwy seemed to think that being the skipper gave him authority. ‘Pig’s arse to that! It’s the women that’s making all the noise! One of them’s gotta leave, and it’s not gonna be mine!’

Lola said she wasn’t getting off the boat because she was a distant cousin of the owner and she was the most reliable sailor of them all. ‘It wasn’t me that ran the boat on a sandbar, it was somebody else,’ she said, meaning Screwy, who’d been careless a few days before. Noel saw self-sacrifice as the only way out. ‘Let’s do a trawl,’ he shouted at the man who’d brought a stranger aboard, ‘and when we’ve finished, Cooktown! I want to get off!’

Screwy tried to calm Noel. He couldn’t quit now, he wasn’t the problem. It was the women causing the trouble, they could both get off and they’d get another man to work with them, and that way, there’d be a bit of sense on board. Women were impossible! Always and forever! He was working himself up to a rage when he spotted a fin cruising nearby. ‘Fuckin shark! White pointer. Fuckin deadly. Let’s get out of here.’ Nancybelle agreed. She’d never dreamed, when she got on the boat, that she’d be having sharks for companions. She wanted dry land, thank you very much. Good old terra firma! She sulked in the cabin while they did a trawling run, then took herself to the bow of the boat while Lola fried some fish. They took it in turns to sleep, and the next day they entered the mouth of the Endeavour River and tied up at the wharf a hundred and eighty-odd years after Cook and Bligh. Lola watched Nancybelle walk away. Screwy didn’t even say goodbye. Noel waited till she was a hundred yards from the trawler, then he grabbed his bag and stepped onto the wharf. ‘I’m heading south,’ he announced. ‘Civilisation, such as it is. Anyone coming with me?’

Lola had no wish to partner Screwy and anyone else he might pick up, so she too stepped onto the wharf. ‘Have you got money to stay at the pub tonight?’

Noel wasn’t sure what he was leaving and what he was accepting into his life as he said to her, ‘I think there’s a bus gets in about two this

afternoon. Not sure what time it gets back to Cairns, but I'm going to be on it.' He looked at her coldly. She could do what she liked. She put her bag next to his. 'Me too.'

Sally McGraw was about to open her shop when she noticed the man outside. He was looking at his watch! What a cheek, she thought, I'm always punctual; then it occurred to her that she knew him. It was her son. She wrenched the door open and called, 'Noel! Where have you been? Where have you come from? Come here at once and hold me!'

The smiling Noel crossed the footpath and put his arms around his mother, lightly, as if he'd just got back from Ballarat. 'How's it going, mum? Everything okay?'

'You wretch,' his mother said. 'It's been two years since I saw you last. Come inside and give account of yourself.' She shut the shop door behind him and swung a little sign on a hook – BACK IN 10 MINUTES, causing her son to say, 'How can you be back when you haven't been away?'

She said sharply to the young man, 'I ought to ask you for a sign on your bedroom door. Two years! Where were you? What mischief have you been up to?'

He had the advantage of her because he'd prepared for his return, while she could only clamour anything that came to her head. 'Tea!' he announced solemnly. 'I haven't had a decent cup since I left. They grow the stuff in Queensland but they can't make it.' He pressed the button to make the kettle boil, and emptied the pot in the sink, before picking up the tea packet and giving it a sniff. 'I've got a lot to tell you. I suppose you've got a bit to tell me?'

The cheek of him. The presumption. The cruelty of going away and then coming back unannounced, two years later. She wanted to cry but refused to show him tears. 'Your father would never have done what you did!'

This only made him thoughtful. 'That's true. He never came back, did he?' As usual, as ever, she had to think about what he'd said; it was the trick he played without end. And of course it added to her wish to cry. Then he seized the initiative. 'Okay, here's my report. I

got bored so I went to Queensland. Townsville. I got myself onto a prawn trawler. Three of us. One was my friend Lola.'

His mother wanted to know where Lola was now. Was she hiding somewhere, getting ready to spring out?

'She's still in the tropics. People get so they can't leave, up there. It's odd. It's rather nice, but it didn't affect me that way.'

'You left her behind?'

He studied her, as a way of saying, why don't you understand? 'People do. You're with someone for a while, then one or the other needs to move on. Or one wants to move and one wants to stay. No getting around that.' He was so sure that his way was right. Savagely she said, 'Oh you drive me mad!' He put some tea in the pot with a dainty little spoon that pleased him. An apostle spoon, causing him to smile. 'I loved these when I was a kid. When I came home from school I always wanted to know that these were still here.' He waved the spoon at his mother, waving their permanent connection, really, as if to remind her. She sat down. 'Make the tea son, and tell me as much as I'm going to be allowed to know.'

The Enrights had worked a property on a bend in the Murray River for generations. Bob Enright's grandfather had started to build an extensive home, had run out of money, and stopped. Charlie Enright, Bob's father, had built a modern cream brick home in the 1940s, not long before sending Bob away to school. When he came home, halfway through a science degree that he couldn't be bothered finishing, and made it clear he wanted to play a part in the family's operations, Charlie told him that the old house was his, he could do it up, extend it, or whatever else he fancied – he could knock it down and start again, if he liked – and he ought to get married before he went too far with it because, Charlie said, 'Men are no good on their own.' He meant it. In his lifetime, men that weren't married were as helpless, socially, as the women known as old maids. Bob wasted no time. He courted and married Gloria Tallon and the pair of them planned the completion of his grandfather's legacy. It had a two storey section, a single storey extension to the left, and then it stopped, apart from a simple stone building some way further on which had been built to

store carriages, and, more recently, farm machinery. Gloria would have pulled this down because it blocked the view of the river, but Bob had a better idea. 'We'll extend the house till it takes in the shed, and we'll rebuild the shed so it's a viewing room for anyone who comes to stay with us'. Gloria thought this idea would make the house look lop-sided, but Bob said no. 'When we extend, we'll build another two storey section to balance the one that granpa built, and the old shed will be an addition on one side of it. That way, the fact that it's built out of different bricks will look like it was intended. It'll look fine, just take it from me!'

He was right, though it took six years from the time they started extending till the time when they invited friends and their children to an afternoon gathering which was a great success, because the river was so high that it covered the roots of the red gums lining the banks. People talked about the old paddle steamers, with piles of red gum firewood stacked on the riverbanks to be taken on board as fuel. Stories of the steamer days were pulled out. 'You know how that place got its name? This captain was edging his boat along, close to the bank one night, because he knew there were logs in the middle of the stream, and he heard this voice, practically over his shoulder, say "Goodnight"! It was some feller camped on the bank of the river, he'd've heard the boat before he saw it. Just being polite, probably, so Goodnight became the name of the place, even today, though there's nobody there any more.'

Bob loved these stories of settlement, and Gloria saw what they meant to him. If you loved Bob, you had to accept where he came from. Gloria did this, although she needed to get away to the city occasionally, and later in life to travel. All of this might suggest that she was the junior partner in the marriage, but the opposite was the case. Bob realised quite early on that marriage had brought him something special. He'd never encountered a woman like Gloria before. She was consistently, endlessly, *there*. She wasn't a demanding person, wasn't acquisitive, nor was she opinionated. But her consciousness, and that included her conscience, was never turned off. She'd come from a Catholic family and she'd said, very early in their acquaintance, that he mustn't ask her to give up her religion, to which he'd replied that

he was quite indifferent to religions – this one, that one – and, as a longtime non-believer, he had no reason to pull down anybody’s religion, so she was welcome to stay with hers: it wouldn’t trouble him.

But her religion, her faith in God, was as ever-present as every other part of her, and there was no avoiding it, so he simply accepted it. When she prayed, he sat beside her, sharing silently. Occasionally he reminded her that it was time for this or that religious office and they fell silent together. In later years, after Julie and Tim had been born, Bob altered the house so that the kitchen was next to the viewing room, as they had come to call the former shed that now overlooked the river. That way, they could pray, have a cup of tea, and link these activities to watching the river, the bringer of life, and the multitudinous birds that it attracted. If visitors were present, Gloria spared them her prayers, knowing, as did Bob, that the simple acts of sharing tea with their visitors and chatting about the neighbourhood and the river that sustained it, were in themselves acts of prayer. This knowledge, this simple but endless ritual of prayer and life, was more sustaining than anything Bob had experienced before, and, miracle of miracles – that it should have happened to him! – it somehow removed all grounds for conflict or disagreement inside their family.

Which grew, as the years went on, for Gloria was a practising Catholic in bed as elsewhere, to six children, all of them devout by family practice. People who’d known Bob before his marriage were amazed, while those who hadn’t known the earlier man took him for granted. Bob and Gloria were rarely far apart, the viewing room became the dining room, and in truth the sacred family room. On the rare occasions when Bob ran into one of the men, once boys, that he’d known at school, they felt that he’d changed, but, unless they’d previously met Gloria, they were unsure about what had happened. The uncertainties, the inconsistency, of the boy had disappeared. He seemed in some way invulnerable, and they found it puzzling, because he hadn’t been like that when they’d been young.

There are numerous boys from that history class who haven’t appeared in our pages, too many for a novelist to deal with. Let us introduce a last, though contrasting, quartet, and after that, we must rely on twists

and turns of our narrative to determine people's appearances in the story. Imagine first, two young men about as different as could be: Sandy Clarkson, a lean, wiry fellow, with sandy hair poking up, and a certain dearth of patience; and Kim Berg, almost effeminate in build, temperamentally akin to his most unusual mother, whom we shall meet a little later, and hesitant in his ways of dealing with a school built on certainty, while able, in personal relations, to offer an intimacy rare in such an institution. Sandy's blazer carried the symbols which proclaimed him a sporting champion, while Kim, though no mean oarsman and a sprinter of commendable speed, had earned few of the awards the school conferred. Both Kim and Sandy expected to pass their matriculation (year 12) thus qualifying for entrance to a university which neither wished to attend. Completion of schooling was enough for most young people at that time. Kim's mother thought that the more people were educated the more they were enslaved; you had to have enough of it to be comprehensible by others, but an excess restricted you, cutting off the things you might do spontaneously and turning your life into a series of clichés. Why spend money on that? Follow your whims. See what the painters were doing, the actors, poets and comedians: they had more fun than anyone else, they lived more intensely, they were the ones to follow.

This is to put her thoughts clearly, something she didn't always bother to do herself. Rupert Clarkson, Sandy's father, was a parent of another sort. He too had had a private school education, at a second-string school, and it had made him aware of the symbols of success. His achievement was a menswear shop in a south-eastern suburb, and his burden was that it wasn't enough; hence his decision to send his son to the most advantageous of schools, in a city where that counted. He was proud of his son's much-adorned blazer because somewhere in his thirties he'd seen that his own social rise would go no further. The next step would be taken by his son, through schooling, or his daughter, through marriage. He put his mind to these things. Ariadne Berg, on the other hand, had been given confidence by her wealthy parents, good connections by her marriage, and could see the farcical aspects of human desire for advancement, while unwilling to take any step that led down. So Kim Berg pulled on the oars of his school's

racing eight, and mouthed his way through lessons in Latin and French, and Sandy Clarkson bowled a good length at batsmen as if they were freely shaping their lives when each had the weight of parental expectations burdening their minds. We may not be bound to repeat our parents' mistakes, or even successes, but escaping their expectations is harder to achieve.

The school set out to make a mark, and its goals were easily identified: academic or social success – honours, even exhibitions, at exams; notable careers; positions of power held gracefully yet with skill – or a taking of the lead in any field that brought credit and distinction to those who worked in it. Virtue needed to be recognised to become honour, the quality that was sought. In this sense it was able to satisfy a wide variety of parents. Something, somewhere, could bring honour to their sons. This was what most parents were searching for, but only a handful knew how to find. The school was rarely questioned, so its students rarely questioned themselves. A certain sense of superior rightness was incorporated in their position: in themselves. This sense of superiority was vital to the school. It held it by claiming it, very simply, in everything it did. It could be said that the school's flag, fluttering in the breeze, and the chiming of its clock, sounding the hours and quarters over its fields, was an endless assertion that its pupils often found hard to maintain. Yet the urge to maintain it was pressed, with considerable success, upon them. This did not come easily, to some. Two more characters from the history class, and we have done.

Antinous Knight was the first of these, a name so ridiculous that boys who had to deal with him called him 'Endless' instead. Something in his sombre personality accepted this so that he made no attempt to check their jibes; acceptance is gained easily by those who don't try to disburden themselves of others' opinions. Scarcely separable from Endless in their school years was JB (Brian) C Claringbold, always asking Rhonda Mathieson to rule on matters of historical method, and troubled, he told the class, by her telling them that the name of their subject derived from an Italian word, *istoria*, which meant both history and story, two concepts which Anglo-Saxons preferred to separate. 'How can they be the same thing in one language, but

distinct in another?’ he wanted to know, and nothing that Rhonda could think of in answer, or get from Margaret Nilsson, her house mistress friend at the nearby girls’ school, could satisfy him. History and story, the first so restrained and scholarly, the second so likely to get out of control, or get pulled around for effect, or for films! *Istoria* the Italians said; how could they put these beasts of different breeding in the same paddock? JBCC, as he was known among the boys, a nickname usually shortened to CC, couldn’t resolve this matter, for all the intellectual grasp that made him superior to his class mates in so many ways, so he clung to the more staid, conservative, *safe* boy Antinous Endless Knight. Young men are good at setting far-flung boundaries to their thinking in the names they bestow on each other. Endless night! Yet they sensed that he, quiet and conventional as he was, had some superior ability, some cast of mind that hadn’t been brought out yet by the schooling they shared, which would one day make him something special.

And they were right. Thirty years after he left the school, Antinous Endless Knight, nearing the age of fifty, was elected by his party as their leader and thence, a few months and one election later, Premier of the state, an appointment, a victory, occasioning no surprise. He’d even, in his last year at school, acted the role of state premier in the Parliamentary Society, an activity indulged in by a small coterie who foresaw that their life’s direction was into politics, so they learned the rules and ropes early on. It’s not only the scouts who live by the motto Be Prepared! Looking back from his fiftieth birthday, Antinous could fairly say that he’d hardly wasted a day. Politicians are engines that may be allowed to idle from time to time but must never be turned off, for fear that the impulse that drives them may not restart. Antinous understood very early that those who are most scornful of politicians are normally most in need of them. The politician, therefore, cultivates the affability that will relax those who approach them and plays down his or her other side – that a favour done is a favour that must be returned.

If Antinous the schoolboy knew this he didn’t show it.

JBCC was sure of his path as early as his friend, but much more ambivalent about it. Why not make history rather than write it?

Historians stood aside, watching the action rather than contributing to it, did they not? This, surely, exempted them from the rewards – and the pains, the losses, the defeats – of an active life? If historians were watchers, didn't that mean they lacked the courage to *live* a life? People made fortunes, discovered things, used power in their own interests or those of other people, and were loved or hated for it: writing about what they'd done, recording or researching it, seemed a poor substitute for a life of action, and Brian Claringbold reached his early forties before he overcame this disability, and had the confidence to say that the historian, by enlarging people's awareness of what they were doing, was contributing perhaps the most valuable of things, that of mature consideration, reflection's fruits, above all, wisdom. There could be no higher calling.

At the end of the year in which our book starts, Brian Claringbold (CC, if you listened to the boys) got first class honours in British History, and the statewide exhibition in Australian History. His teacher was delighted. When she got to Margaret Nilsson's room at the girls' school, her friend was ready with a bottle to celebrate: champagne! 'Rhonda! How marvellous!' she said, and began to prise the cork out of the bottle, frightened, a little, of the thing flying out of control. She filled two glasses. 'Here's to CC!' she cried, and added generously, 'And his teacher!'

They sipped. They looked at each other. Rhonda said, 'It takes something like this to make me feel that the effort's really worthwhile. Day after day, one period after another, it drags on sometimes, and you wonder if it's worth it ...'

'... and then something like this comes along.' They sat, trying to relax. It occurred to Margaret to ask, 'Have you spoken to the boy? Or his parents? They must be feeling proud?' Rhonda said she hadn't, but she'd ring them tomorrow. She paused. 'If they don't ring me first.' Had Margaret not been a very close friend she'd have suppressed this give-away statement. Any thanks or congratulations should flow in her direction. Then she thought better of what she'd said. 'He's a remarkable boy. He'll go a long way. I should ring the people at the university, but they'll know about him by now. They'll look after him, I'm sure.'

They sipped. Margaret said, ‘What field do you think he’ll want to work in, when he’s established himself?’ She was being professional, now, and the glow, the moment of glory, was slipping away.

A controversy erupted in the Malvern area, next door to Toorak, and the city wasn’t ready for it. Glenn McDougall died, a rich, somewhat prim and withdrawn Scot, who owned a generous share in one of the country’s leading wool brokers, and his widow, Pamela McDougall, sold Besma, the family home, telling the Toorak Times that she couldn’t bear to live, and sleep, in a building which housed so much of her husband’s spirit. The new owner announced, some weeks later, that he planned to pull down the noble but unrenovated building, divide the land it stood on, and build modern flats. The National Trust organisation, at that time in its infancy, objected, Pamela McDougall was distraught, and public opinion divided.

The division was keenly felt at Scott Biggins, the estate agents that Robyn Briggs was working for. Teddy Biggins, the firm’s principal, had no time for the Save Besma people, though he told his staff to be careful what they said in public because he didn’t want to offend people with homes of standing that they might wish to put on the market one day. ‘We’re here to do business,’ he told his staff, ‘but that doesn’t mean we want to lose the respect of our friends!’ This put his office in an ambivalent position, felt most keenly by Robyn, who had been given carriage of a number of heritage home sales because of his sympathy for people who’d built something lasting from their fortunes, however they might have been made. ‘Tony Brewer,’ Teddy told Robyn, referring to the new owner of Besma, ‘can’t help putting people offside. He’s very clear about what he wants, and he never softens anything he says. He shoots from the hip, as our American friends say. Try to keep him away from the press. When he’s got a plan for the property, and that shouldn’t be long, knowing Tony, get someone to present it to the papers, and get a good talker to present it on radio. You could do that yourself. No! An architect from the university, you’ll know someone. We want people to see this as a big step forward. Progress! Tell’em the cost of repairs at Besma would be astronomical!’

So Robyn had his instructions, and he also had the job of talking to Pamela McDougall and her backers at the National Trust, and others in the area that they'd recruited. When Robyn visited the widow, in a friend's home in East Melbourne, he found that she had an attractive spokeswoman with her called Nicole Serisier. 'Your name means a cherry tree,' he told her boldly: she smiled obligingly, and he sensed that she was expert in causing others to show their hand while concealing hers. Touché! She said that at that early stage, the Trust didn't yet know who had designed Besma; some people had suggested that it was possibly JAB Koch, the designer of Caulfield's Labassa, but expert opinion had ruled that out. There was some evidence that Besma had been designed and built with the example of Labassa in mind, but that too was uncertain because of doubts about the date when Besma was built, or was it that an earlier dwelling had been upgraded? The McDougalls, for all their pride in the place, weren't sure. The late Glenn McDougall hadn't passed on what he knew – if anything. Nicole Serisier made it clear that she expected Robyn to assist in making the public aware of the new owner's intentions, and to stop him by any legal means. Mrs McDougall's beautiful young assistant was going to stir up public opinion to save the house; nothing, she said, that might be built to replace it would ever match what was going to be destroyed. Listening to her, Robyn could hear Teddy Biggins' word in his ear, forcefully repeated: 'Progress!' It was a catchcry of the country in those days of forgetting world war two ... and much else. In business circles, as Robyn well knew, you were either for progress or you were clinging to values that belonged to the period they were coming out of. Progress was the key that released you from a past that everyone knew had been rotten. The country had nearly been invaded! Only the Yanks had saved us. Now they were saving themselves from people who thought they saw something in communism, crazy fools!

It was no time for fence-sitting. Which side were you on?

Robyn did his best to look convinced while Nicole outlined her plans, and Pamela McDougall alternately shed tears or nodded with hope and vigour. There must be a way! 'Come back when we're having a meeting,' she told Robyn. 'We'll hold the early meetings here, until we've got more people committed to our demands. I would never have

sold that man the property if I'd had any idea what he was going to do with it!

The inevitable happened. Tony Brewer expected Scott Biggins, as agents for the sale, to be on his side of any dispute, and Teddy Biggins told Robyn to give Tony all the assistance he could: Scott Biggins expected to be the agents for leasing the apartments Tony would build on the site, and they'd be much sought after if he had the sense to make them as luxurious as they should be, in that area, and as a replacement for Besma. Bloody Besma, he'd be pleased to see the joint pulled down! So Robyn found himself working with the Tony Brewer camp and he was personable enough to attract the attention of Tony's daughter Louise, who told him that her father was intending to endow her with one wing of the apartment building he had in mind. She wanted to see it built, let, and providing an income, after which she was going to travel. England because everybody needed to see the home country, then the rest of the British Isles, then France, the Scandinavian countries, America ... then she'd think of settling back in Melbourne before she took a second run at the world ...

Tony Brewer liked the young agent that Teddy Biggins had put on his development; he was quietly spoken and had a way of knowing what you had in mind before you said it. He couldn't help noticing that Louise listened to him, and sometimes altered her plans after hearing Robyn's reaction. This was unusual for her, and Tony was first to notice the attraction the young agent had for his daughter. He noticed, also, that Robyn was cautious, not a man for headlong leaps; he doesn't yet know how strong she is, Tony thought, and resumed his watching. They started to do things together, and Louise was forever quoting him on matters to do with houses, sales, and particularly Besma. She was going to own some of what would replace it and was keen for things to get underway.

There were challenges, however, and the Save Besma people were both active, and influential. Robyn didn't breathe a word about his activities to the Brewers, or to Teddy Biggins, but he used his home phone to let the Besma people, notably Nicole Serisier, know what the Brewers were planning to do. This kept the Save Besma campaign one step ahead of their opponents most of the time. Biggins noticed

this. 'They always seem to know what we're doing next. They've got someone pretty smart working for them, I have to give them that.' Robyn was divided, and knew he'd be forced to choose, something he kept putting off, or so he thought. Louise liked him first, trusted him next, then fell in love with him. Robyn was flattered, but felt swamped. Till then, he'd chosen his partners but Louise had chosen him. She started to talk about travelling together, and for a conventional girl, that meant marriage had entered her thoughts. They became lovers, she was spontaneous, he wasn't always ready with the contraceptives of the day, and a morning came when he called to pick her up at her father's home. 'Sit down,' she said. 'I've got some news.' He sat. 'What have you got to tell me?'

She was serious, yet amused. 'Guess.'

'Most of the time,' he said, 'you're bursting with things to tell me. What's different today?'

She was at her loveliest. 'I'm not bursting today. Not yet.'

He had an awful feeling. 'You're not ... ah ... is it something ... er ... surprising?'

She felt she had him. 'Not so very surprising. If you think about it.' She was waiting for him to put his arms around her, and he knew it.

He was on the brink. They were on the brink. No, she'd passed that point, and was waiting for him. He began to realise that he had to let her know that he knew. 'I think it must be something very important, then?'

She was smiling, and in her eyes was an unmistakable trust. He said, 'Well ...' and she said the same word.

'Well?'

It was up to him and he couldn't let her down. 'How long have you known?'

'Just a day or two, and I haven't told anyone else yet.'

It meant marriage, it meant living in a different way from the way he'd lived to that point, and these things, before which he was hesitant, if not alarmed, were the causes of her happiness. She was already, he felt he knew, the woman that she knew she was going to be. She was happy with herself and with him because he'd made the transition for her, with her, and now she was waiting for him to say that they'd

joined for life. What could he do? He could whisper in her ear every word she wanted to hear, or he could spoil her life by going away. He couldn't do that. He couldn't tell her the truth, that he was alarmed, that he was as deeply committed to the Save Besma people as he was to her side of the fight, that the people she thought were old-fashioned road blocks to the future, had engaged his sympathies and his years of interest in the city's best buildings, that he thought it would be a crime, or at the least an act of vandalism to pull down the noble building that her father had every intention of pulling down ...

He said to Louise, 'This is the most ...' he reached for a suitable word '... extraordinary moment of my life.' She put her arms around him. 'Do you love me Robyn?' It may have been put as a question but no shadow of doubt attended her. He answered.

'I love you Louise, I'm yours.'

On the same evening of the following week, he attended a Save Besma meeting. The movement had grown and it was held in a church hall not far from the by now famous building. Nicole Serisier, coming down the aisle to address the gathering, saw Robyn sitting next the aisle, curious to hear what she would say. She had notes in a folder she was holding with her right hand, notes made by reference to many of the things about Besma which he'd said to her in earlier conversations. She touched his right shoulder with the fingers of her left hand: an ally, he gave her strength. A few minutes later, she was telling those in front of her why Besma had to be saved. 'It's a building,' she said, 'which not only wouldn't, but couldn't be built today. To live properly in that house, you need servants, and very few people have servants today. They're part of a world that's vanished. Some of you will know of the work of the French architect Le Corbusier, who famously said, "A house is a machine to live in." The trouble with that is that if you think of the place you live in as a machine, you're very close to becoming a machine yourself. Machines ...' She paused, smiling, her point ready to be delivered. '... may function well enough, but they're never remembered for having spirit, or soul.' She raised her voice. 'Has everyone got the floor-plan of the house?' A few people had missed picking up the plan, and copies were given out. Nicole said,

‘There’s a few things marked on the floor-plan, and I’m going to talk about them now, explaining how each of them embodies features of the house that will be lost forever from this city’s memory, if Besma’s pulled down. And first I want to talk about the stained glass windows above the landing on the stairs.’

Someone put beside her a large photo of these windows. Nicole waited till her listeners were ready, then began again. ‘These are not the only stained glass windows in the house, but they’re the main ones. They look down on the hallway, and the stairs, because they are the most public parts of the house and the architect wanted them to have something of the feeling of a cathedral, or at least a church. The architect was making a statement that no architect thinks of making today, namely, that the house – the *home* – is a Christian place. This is no machine to live in, it’s a home that expresses certain values and expects those who live in it to live by those values. What values? Christianity, yes. But there’s more. Let’s look at the workmanship of the staircase ...’

She won them over quickly enough. Pamela McDougall was in tears, again. Robyn felt wretched. When she finished, he clapped as loudly as anyone, then slipped away as quickly as he could.

Neville Long was the first of what had once been a class to hear. He was on the verge of resigning from the hospital and setting up in private practice when he took a call. ‘From the police,’ the nursing assistant told him. They were after the medical records of Alan Downer: ‘We’ve reason to believe he was once a patient at the hospital for a few days,’ said the voice on the phone. Neville was amazed. ‘He was. I looked after him myself. He wasn’t here very long. What do you want his records for?’

‘We want to find his parents. They don’t know yet, as far as we know.’

‘What? Know what? What’s happened?’

A body had been found in a lane in Parramatta. ‘Well dressed, black suit. Some alcohol in his blood system, not much. A photo in his wallet ...’

Neville suddenly felt sick.

‘... of the dead man, with a sign SWAN HILL HOSPITAL behind him, and a man who might have been a doctor standing with him, both smiling ...’

‘The man is me,’ Neville told the voice. ‘That’s interesting,’ said the other man. ‘Could be very helpful. Would you mind going to your local station sir?’

‘Where are you ringing from?’

‘Parramatta. We’ll ring all the details through to Swan Hill. We don’t know much about him yet. All we know is things we found in his wallet ...’

Neville went to the station. ‘Morning doctor. We don’t know very much yet. Bad line. We’ll have another try in a few minutes. See if we can do a bit better.’

He went home. Donna was on the floor with the children. ‘You’re early darling! I haven’t even thought about lunch yet.’ He told her the little he knew. ‘Things happen at the hospital every day, but this seems to have got to me.’ Donna urged him to sit down. She’d make him a cup of tea. ‘Did you say he was in your history class?’ Neville nodded. ‘Was.’ He saw significance in the word which was lost on his wife. She put a cup beside him. ‘Won’t be long.’ Neville knew something was broken, but didn’t know what it was. *Was*. People died. Alan Downer’s turn had come without anyone expecting. What about Alan himself? Had he had any intuition, any moment of fear, or warning?

‘I ought to tell everyone. Everyone that knew him.’

‘Did you say the police haven’t found his parents yet?’

He nodded. The parents had to be first to know. Well, he was the first, as it turned out, but the parents had to be found. He had no idea where they’d lived in the days when Alan was a boarder. He thought. Dromana came into his mind. He had a feeling that was where the ... boy ... dead man ... had come from. ‘Dromana,’ he said to Donna, ‘that’s where I think his parents lived. I’d better tell the police. They’ve got to start looking somewhere.’ He nearly added, ‘Haven’t they?’ but stopped himself. He needed to be decisive, but all the decisions, so far, had been made by ...

Who? Then a vital, an important cliché appeared in his mind: ‘... persons unknown.’ He slumped. ‘There are words for everything,’ he said sourly, and added, ‘and they’re no bloody use at all!’

He rarely swore, and never at home. Donna studied him. ‘Jug’s boiled,’ she said, and filled the teapot. ‘Just a minute to let it draw.’ He was sitting on the sofa, his favourite spot, knees apart. She was on the verge of saying, ‘It feels so everyday,’ but kept her peace, knowing it would upset him if she said something trivial. She gave the pot a minute. The children claimed her attention. Neville stared at nothing. ‘I’ll have to go back to the police station later. Nothing had come through when I was there. Bad line they said.’ Sourly he added, ‘When is there ever a good line for news you don’t want to hear?’ He looked at Donna and she felt his need, pulling on her, hoping, demanding, knowing that he couldn’t have what he wanted.

A peaceful mind.

The parents were found, and told about their son’s death. They were horrified. The Parramatta police said they were working on what must have happened. And what was that? They didn’t know. They offered the thought that he ‘might have fallen in with a bad crowd’: the parents believed that was impossible. Parents often think such things. ‘He took a path of his own, but he was always a good son,’ they said. The NSW police didn’t offer any response. The parents preferred to think of him when he was happiest, as they thought, and contacted the school. They were going to conduct a memorial service, and they wanted names and addresses of those who’d known him when he was ...

... what they’d wanted him to be. The school was not comfortable with this idea, but accepted a generous donation to its library, and letters went out to the young men, some of them with families, some of them not, who’d sat with, played sport with, or distantly known their son. Neville Long’s heart sank when he read the letter that came to him, signed by both of Alan’s parents, and his sister. ‘I’ll have to go to this,’ he told Donna. ‘I gave the police their lead to find them, and they’ll know that. Anyone else can make up an excuse to stay away,

but I can't avoid it.' He read the details of the gathering. 'Trip to Melbourne. Do you want to come, darling? It means taking the kids, of course. It's okay if you don't want to go ...'

'You'll want me to do some of the driving,' she said. 'I'm coming.' She looked at him as if to remind him that marriage involves sharing. 'You'll need to talk.'

They drove to Melbourne together, but Neville went on to Dromana on his own. The first reassuring thing he saw was Noel McGraw's red hair. When he approached him, McGraw, grasping his arm, called him 'Long'; they laughed. 'Hard to escape, isn't it!' McGraw said, 'We've got that bloody bluestone in our boots, we can't run away. I ought to know, I tried.' He told Neville about his time in Queensland, and his return. 'I've taken over the shop for a while so mum can travel. Trouble is, she doesn't really want to. She's got friends who like to take trips, and she tags along with them, but her heart's not in it.' Neville asked him what he thought was the answer, to which he said, 'People ought to be like motor cars, and have a complete rebore. Start again. If you don't like certain bits of yourself, you replace them, and lead a different life.' Neville scoffed. 'That's a form of surgery we haven't developed yet.' Red-haired Noel said, 'I was forgetting. You turned into a doctor. Is that right?' They looked around at the rest of the gathering. 'Anyone else we know?'

There were seven in all, three from the class they'd once shared: Kim Berg, Robyn Briggs, and Endless – as they called him – Knight. 'Our first reunion,' said the future politician: 'Surprising what brings people together!' Each wanted to tell the others how they'd heard the news about Alan, then they moved on to summing up what they knew of his life. Neville told them a couple of the stories Alan had shared with him about his days as a stockman, and nobody was impressed. 'You can't keep living like that for very long,' Kim said. 'You've got to do something with your life.' Then they went into the church for their friend's funeral service, a brief affair, with a soprano singing 'Abide With Me', before the hearse set off for the cemetery, followed by some, but only some, of the mourners. The Old Boys shook hands as they separated. 'We ought to be able to do something better than this,' Kim said to them all, then delegated. 'What about it, Endless? You've

got the contacts. What about a reunion some time? A good idea, don't you think?'

Endless smiled. He was used to having things pushed in his direction, and rather welcomed it. People handed him things they didn't want to do for themselves, and he accepted. As he developed his political career he'd have to use more discernment, but these were early days, and he was still finding the techniques that would take him further.

Kim didn't go back to Melbourne after the funeral, he drove to his mother's house at Portsea. She knew he was coming, and had a gin and tonic ready for him. 'A bit early in the day,' he commented. 'I might leave it till later, if you don't mind.' But this was nonsense to Ariadne Berg. 'You do things when you want to do them, it's the only way. Your friend's in the ground. This time next year he'll be mouldy, nothing left but bone. Drink to him now, if he has just a few of his wits left he'll know you're thinking of him and that will give him life for another minute or two.' Kim found his mother very hard to stop and he rarely tried because he longed for the moments when some flash of her mind would startle him into thinking there was a dimension of love swirling through the universe and the purpose of life was to find it if you could and stay in it as long as you could before you were left in the trailing dark. 'There were a few people there I knew,' he told her. 'I put it on Endless Knight to organise a reunion some time. To see how the others are getting on.'

'Which others?'

She never ceased to amaze him. Hadn't she been listening? 'The ones that weren't there today. The ones I won't see unless someone pulls us all together.' That was clear enough, but she was wandering ...

'What did they say about him?'

'The usual things. He was a fine young fellow, adventurous, had a heart of gold, mixed with all sorts, knew the humanity of people that others looked down on ...'

Ariadne Berg wrinkled her nose. 'You do need a drink. Down it goes, Kim. Wash away the nonsense.' He did as he was told, and it pleased him. She said, 'Mother knows best,' and gave out something

between a scoffing sound and a laugh. 'I think I'll join you. We're starting to make sense to each other.' She poured a second gin and tonic, and put it on the bench. 'Fish,' she announced. 'Garfish, they're my favourites. Quick and easy. You'll have to clean them, my son. You're the one who's been dragged back to fundamentals like being born and dying. There's a knife in that drawer.'

Suddenly she was busy, and he was gutting the garfish. 'The minister who ran the service said something odd. It was as if he knew it meant something, but not what it meant.' She said nothing. 'The body they found, Alan that is, was wearing a black suit.' His mother was smiling now. 'The minister told us that twice. And a third moment, I thought he was going to say it again, but he didn't.'

He'd said it, now his mind was on the fish.

'Perhaps he knew.'

'Wearing it deliberately to die?' That seemed far-fetched.

'We know things. Messages come to our minds, but we won't let them in. But they wriggle in somehow and make us do funny things. How do you think music gets written?'

He sensed a trap and moved away. 'I have no idea how music gets written. How do you think it does?'

She took a big sip of the G & T. 'It slips into our minds and takes us over. Clever people are open to it all the time.' She was ready to affirm. 'Whatever music you hear in your mind ... and I don't mean the stuff they play at funerals ... did they sing 'Abide with me' today? ...

He nodded. She took another sip, pretending it was poison. '... that's the music you need at this moment. You have to listen to that music because if you don't, you're killing the moment. Our greatest crime!'

'Killing the moment? We have to do it sometimes. What if you're bored and you want to get the hell out of where you are, but you can't? You've got moments to kill, so ...'

It was obvious to Kim, not to his mother.

'Off you go into daydreams. It's no use listening if people are spoiling the moment ...'

He said, 'Is that the G & T talking?'

‘Why not? G & T’s got more to say than lots of people I know. And avoid.’ She was radiant now. ‘How many can you eat? Three? I’m good for four!’

‘I’ll have the same number you’re having. Four for me.’

‘Clean them up then. I’m going to steam them. No I’m not, I’m going to fry them in very hot oil. They’re so thin, you only need to cook them for a moment. Count ten and they’re done.’

‘Mother! Count thirty. No, forty, that might get them cooked right through.’ She wasn’t having that. ‘You do yours and I’ll do mine.’ She was making a sort of challenge, not that he knew why. It was just something she did. ‘Ten seconds, don’t be silly. They’ll hardly get warm and you’ll be putting them on a plate!’

She conceded as if a battery of lawyers had attacked some point she’d been making. ‘Alright, two minutes then. I don’t argue when other people think they’re right.’ She sipped her drink again, and told him to hurry up with his. Grabbing the bottle, she sloshed the gin. ‘You’re almost over that funeral already. How old was he, your friend?’

‘My age exactly. We sat together in Australian History.’

‘Did you learn anything?’

That stopped him. ‘I must have picked up something. I’m still interested in history.’

She was unimpressed. ‘That’s how they get you. They dangle little goodies in front of you, and when you nibble, they’re smiling. Next thing, you’re caught.’ He said, ‘Are these fish ready? Two minutes altogether, or two minutes each side?’

He stayed the night because his mother reminded him that the next day was Flower Day. That meant the day, once every year, when she would unlock her late husband’s desk, push back the roll-top, and put a Chinese bowl full of flowers on the place where he wrote: letters to friends, his diary, business letters. ‘He was superstitious,’ his widow used to say. ‘He hated to sign cheques anywhere but at that desk. I used to laugh at him, and he laughed at himself, but he wouldn’t break the habit.’ Then a secret smile came into her eyes, and she repeated

the word 'habit'. Kim looked at his mother. 'I'll get the key,' she said, and put the bowl on a side table. 'Habit, you see,' as if that explained everything. She went away, and he knew he wasn't meant to know where the key was kept. When she came back she rolled back the desk cover and put the empty bowl in its place. 'You can fill it, darling, while I get the flowers.' She looked through the glass of the sun-room, as they called it; it ran the length of the back of the house, overlooking the long garden that ran down to what had once been a creek, but was now somewhere between bush and neighbourhood tip. 'What a glorious morning for my man!'

It was. Mid-November, with summer just around the corner. 'I must make myself ready.' Ten minutes later she was wearing the quaintest trousers, an old shirt of her husband's, and a pair of gardening gloves, several sizes too big, another remnant of the man whose life, or was it death, they were celebrating. She picked up a basket, exited the sun room, got a piece of old canvas from a shed, and went to examine the flowers, of which there were a great many and a great variety. 'He loved to do this,' she told her son, 'and I loved to do it with him. Watch carefully, darling, you might catch a glimpse of him. This is when he's closest,' she added. 'Off I go!'

Kim never knew whether she believed these things, or not. Catch a glimpse! That'd be the day! He looked around him. The sun-room turned the corner of the house and clung to the first six feet of the kitchen, and that was where his father had placed his desk. Kim filled the bowl with water, glancing idly, not for the first time and not for the last, at the pigeon-holes stuffed with letters, bills, receipts and whatnot else. His father had kept himself up to date with bills, and writing to friends, but he'd never been tidy. Envelopes were poking out here and there. Kim went to push one in, then realised that it had his mother's writing on the front. He pulled it out and read, 'Michael Berg, HEAVEN.' Good lord! Feeling most uneasy, he turned. She was at the bottom of the garden, staring at the sky. 'This is when he's closest'? Close indeed! What was in the envelope? He checked, and by now she was kneeling to appraise the flowers. Which ones would she cut for him? She made such a ceremony of it that it wasn't as ridiculous as it seemed ...

Or did it only seem so to him? Would her friends, of whom there were still plenty, think what she was doing was only natural, even appropriate? He thought they would. But the letter. He checked again, she was still kneeling, and he pulled the writing paper from its envelope. Heaven! Was that where he was supposed to be! This is *my* father and *my* mother, he told himself. She's writing to him. There were more of these letters, each addressed in the same way. He looked a little more closely. The stamps were different. She must have written every year since he died. She posted them to him via the desk where he'd read and written. Kim looked again at his mother, and then it struck him that according to the address on the envelopes, he was standing in it. Heaven! That was where his father was, and had been since he, Kim, was ten. Heaven. So this was it? Home, the here and now, the everyday – that was heaven? Apparently, or so his mother thought.

She was snipping flowers by now, in her ritual way. First they lay on the old canvas she'd spread across the lawn, then, when there a few of them, or she moved on to another bush, she gathered them into the basket. In a minute, she'd bring them to the desk, for the dead man, the man who'd never died in her imagination. Mother was mad! Mother was the sanest woman alive! He didn't know which. What had she said to her husband? He checked again, and she was still on her knees. He read.

... still in the time of the ripening corn tomatos turning carnelian to ruddy a glow of young beans ready to pluck, while a Grey Thrush sings serene, content in its sub-song as the westering sun goes low, starting my dream again, into our old sweet life with you – the strong, the gentle one – and so the essence of that beauty spills down through my days and thus I fear not, fail not, subtle and fresh-distilled awakening ...

My mother! It struck him like ... He didn't know what. My mother! She was still on her knees, and there were flowers in the basket by now, as well as flowers on the canvas covering the grass. She'd be back in a minute, if she could tear herself out of the garden with the flowers she'd planted, some of them after he'd died, some of the

bigger bushes when he was alive, possibly helping her? After all the gloves were still his, always had been. Kim looked at his hand. It was clutching the Chinese bowl; so hard that it was almost white. Her bowl, his bowl, their bowl, that was what a marriage was. Two became one. Each was an addition to the other. They enlarged each other. A cynical thought crossed his mind. He knew plenty of couples that didn't work that way. They tore at each other, unable to blend, to mix, to join ...

The bowl was his. He was part of it. Yet he was not entirely the bowl, he was only part of it and it was only part of him. He hadn't given himself yet, he hadn't become more than one. He looked through the sun-room glass. What a glorious day! Ariadne Berg was standing now, putting the last batch of flowers in the basket, and on top of them she was putting the gloves she'd taken off. Then she looked at the house, saw him through the glass, and smiled. He raised his hands, the most prayerful thing he could think to do, but she didn't see the gesture, she was walking back to the house, carrying her flowers, and thinking, Kim had no doubt, about how she'd arrange them in the bowl. He pushed her letters to her husband back where they'd been, and stood by the desk, hands on the Chinese bowl, ready to help with what she was going to do.

After lunch she let him go back to the city, and dressed to go shopping. The local shops were still small, and everyone knew their customers. Locality had yet to be overpowered. She'd enjoyed the garfish so much she thought she'd get some more, and did. Mrs Brewer was behind the counter, as ever: nothing new about her! Ariadne Berg knew that Mrs Brewer hated her, and didn't care. She was always excessively polite in the fish shop, Mrs Brewer reacted to what she called condescension, and Ariadne enjoyed outsmarting the other one, as she thought of her. Other what? Enemy? Example of a pedestrian mind? Pathetic little shopkeeper? Whatever you liked!

'I had some for lunch with my son,' she said. 'They were excellent. I'll get some more.'

'How many?'

'Eight of course. No. My son's gone back to Melbourne. Four!'

Mrs Brewer had eight on the bench in front of her. 'I've got eight here, as you said. They'll do you for two meals.' She was waiting to be crossed.

Ariadne knew how to play. 'You've got eight when I said four? I can always have two meals of fish. Or I can throw them out. Wrap them up.' She made it sound like the command it was, and it left Mrs Brewer floundering. 'You did say eight. I'll give them to you at a good price. After all, they're yesterday's catch.'

She thought she'd delivered a winning blow, but Ariadne Berg said, 'Yesterday's fish! Good heavens!' and left the shop. Three paces on, she encountered Barbara Bishop, whom she'd met at Sorrento Flower Society meetings. They greeted each other joyfully. How were they? How were their boys? Mrs Brewer strode to the conversation, put the wrapped garfish in Ariadne's basket, and demanded a sum of money. Ariadne, without looking at her, tilted the basket so the parcel fell on the footpath. Barbara Bishop chatted on. Mrs Brewer repeated the quantity of money she felt she was entitled to. Her dissatisfied customer said to her friend, 'Why don't we go down to the Williamsons for a cup of tea? Don't you think? There's always a nice atmosphere in their shop.'

They left the fish shop and its proprietor in favour of the Williamsons, where the tea and cakes were reliable, and they sat. Geordie Williamson took their order in his affable manner, and told them his wife wouldn't be long. Barbara didn't waste time. 'How's Kim getting on? Any sign of a bride crossing the horizon?' Ariadne said no, then recalled how thoughtful he'd been over the garfish. 'He's got something on his mind.' They smiled. Each knew the other's moves. 'Something on his mind,' said Barbara: 'The question is, will he let himself know, or will he push it away?' They thought about this, and didn't know. 'Yours?' Ariadne asked, knowing that there were three little Bishops, and they were younger than her son. Entering the difficult period, she would have said. 'One boy and two girls,' Barbara said. 'Problems.' Ariadne guessed. 'Andrew wants his son to go away to school, but he hasn't got enough money to do it for the girls?'

Barbara nodded. ‘He doesn’t mean to be unfair, he loves the girls, but he can’t help it. They never can.’

‘What’s the answer?’

‘We should stop changing our names when we marry.’

Ariadne considered this. She’d been thrilled to become a Berg. It meant a holy mountain to her, but Barbara had become a Bishop when she joined with Andrew. ‘You used to be a Brown.’

‘It was a name I associated with the earth, and I was happy to change.’

‘Aha! But?’

‘But I saw what men don’t want us to see and don’t let themselves see. It’s a trick, and it only works if the audience doesn’t know how it’s done.’

‘I’ve never thought of Andrew as a trickster.’

‘He doesn’t think of himself that way. That’s how they get away with it.’

Ariadne’s marriage hadn’t led her to this conclusion. ‘Show me the cards.’

Barbara’s face tightened. ‘The trick is to split the trick into two parts and not let them join.’

‘Two parts?’

‘The first part is to get the woman to change her name when she marries. She takes on her husband’s name. That means she’s ready to have his children. Continue *his* family line. The second part comes when the children arrive and the mother’s attention moves to them. The husband – the father – wants to retain priority. He insists. She should be looking after him. First. Second, the kids. Third and last, herself.’ She had her own family under control, but she was still quietly angry.

‘It didn’t happen that way with Michael.’

‘There are always exceptions. Some men see it, and they make the adjustment.’

‘Andrew?’ This was the question that mattered.

‘Intellectually he sees it, and he’s performing pretty well, but he can’t stop himself wanting his son to go to Grammar, and the girls ... He knows they should get equal treatment, but we can’t afford all

three away at school, and he doesn't want to move because we love it down here and he's got a good job ... except it doesn't pay enough.'

'To send the girls away?'

'That's it.' They looked at each other. Ariadne felt disloyal because she indulged her son and felt sure she could make him resemble his father, given half a chance, and a willingness on the part of the woman he would marry, but it wasn't the same for Barbara. 'What needs to happen,' Ariadne said, 'is for the girls, preferably the two of them, but one would do, to save his life. Then he couldn't fail to admit their value.' She looked at her friend.

Barbara was thinking. 'I wonder how he'd take it if one of them saved mine?'

Barbara was still thinking about this when she got home. The house was warm in both senses of the word – temperature, and receiving atmosphere. Billy had pieces of some Meccano construction on the table. The girls had left books. She sat in her chair, facing the head of the table: Andrew, judging him in his absence. He was a conventional man, an engineer with the local council. She'd chosen him because he made her feel safe. No, more than that: because he *was* safe. *She* was safe, their children were safe. They had inquiring minds, they were well-mannered, they were good to live with. She was a good mother, then. Nothing to complain about there!

So why was there, as she looked up the table, a strand of resentment about her situation? A feeling that she'd lost more than she'd been given? It was silly. Most of the sprawling city's population would agree that she was to be envied: so what, therefore, was wrong? Missing? That was what she needed to know.

Andrew was at work, and the children at school. She had the house, and the problem, to herself, as she'd arranged. Then she'd bumped into Ariadne. She smiled at the presumptuous name. She always said she was going to ask her who'd given it to her, and why, but she didn't want to know. To know would be to break down her friend's mystery, and she didn't want that to happen. If you knew, you would have succeeded in getting on top, and that would never do. You'd have gained knowledge and lost mystery, and you'd be worse off ...

Suddenly it struck her that what she was thinking about was close to the problem she'd sat down to consider. How was that? She grappled with her thoughts. Close to the problem? What was? The words came back to her. You'd have gained knowledge and lost mystery, that was it! You needed knowledge to make you safe, and if you were surrounded by mystery, you were afraid. Of course you were! It was a mother's job to create security, and that began with a secure love for her family. If you were a mother you were surrounded by mystery, but it had to be kept at bay, so that your children could read books and build things out of Meccano, with their father sitting serenely at the table, bringing in everything they needed to get a good start in life. Everyone knew that, she was doing it well, so what was the concern?

Her heart felt like a hollow drum. She'd succeeded, and that meant she'd lost the thing she valued most. And what was that? She put her head down, to think. What was it she wanted? Insecurity? Uncertainty? Surely not? What was it then?

Whatever it was, Ariadne had it. She was sure of that. She said incomprehensible things, she was rude to Mrs Brewer – that was good! – she was always in a dither and yet, in some amazing way, she was better organised than almost anyone Barbara knew: how could that be? Barbara was puzzled still. All she could do, all she could remember, was an evening when she was very small – about four or five – and her parents had taken her to some friends' property in the countryside. It was a warm evening and lots of adults were sitting in a circle, sipping beer, while their children scurried all over the place. She remembered wondering how the adults could be happy in their chairs, chattering away, and commenting on the fading of the light, while the kids – who hadn't lost the wonder of childhood – were ever so busy, hiding, chasing each other through the adults' chairs, endlessly excited. And yet, eventually, as darkness overpowered them all, the adults gathered up their kids and took them inside, or took them home. She'd known it was happening, at the time. The calm, settled state overcame the energy. The energy was dissipated, lost, and the kids were turned back into children and persuaded - carried, some of them – to their beds or the cars which would take them home. All that wonderful, exciting energy came to an end, was exhausted, and the end was bed.

Just as, she realised, the end of life was death. It was always hovering, waiting its chance, sure it would win in the end. And it always won. All you could do was fight it ...

No, you could also accept it calmly, go about your business for as many years as you were lucky enough to get, and then, when it came for you, you could give in gracefully, already beaten because you understood. That was what sensible, well-adjusted people did, and it was what she was doing as she raised her family. Mothers could be defiant and defend their children, nurse them when they got sick, but any sensible mother knew that some forces couldn't be beaten, and that one of them was ageing, and the other was the coming down of the curtain: every performance had an end.

What to do about that? Read books, make things out of Meccano? That was only wasting time, surely? But what else was there to do with time but use it, and tell yourself you were spending it wisely and well? She stood up from the table. All I've done is make myself unhappy, she decided. What can I do about that? She unpacked the things she'd bought down the street, and put them away. The cupboards, the fridge, some flowers in a vase which she put in the centre of the table. When Andrew came home he'd admire the flowers and ask their names, and she'd tell him, and he'd say, 'Are they in flower again? Goodness me, the seasons come around so fast. We'll all be getting old before we know it.'

And she would smile ...

The answer to her problem, when it came, was so simple, so obvious, that she was amazed that it hadn't occurred to her before. How blind could you be? It began with their house, an undistinguished cottage halfway between the prize locations – overlooking Port Phillip Bay, and overlooking the sea. Andrew hadn't been able to afford anything better, so that was what they lived in. Unlike Ariadne, Barbara wasn't a gardener, so the surroundings didn't improve the home. It was left to declare itself all too plainly. One of these days I'll get an expert in, Barbara told herself, but it never happened. They couldn't afford it. Money! People facing the bay had it, and a handful of those close to the ocean had it too, lucky people. Then it came to her; she wasn't stuck in the middle, she was where she could have it both ways!

Both ways! The surging wild ocean, which settled occasionally when the tide was turning, was close: all she had to do was stroll there, clamber through the tea-tree, and the dunes, and it was hers, an element to suit the wildness of her soul. And on another day, and in another mood, she could stroll down to the flat and flawless water that stretched away to the city where her children's ambitions lay. Melbourne was still a pre-war city, a Victorian city in its highlights, but it was starting to change, and that was happening at the other end of a vast and peaceful water. Wild water and peaceful, sunlit water, and she lived in the middle. She could have the one when it suited her, the other when it fitted her mood. The best of both worlds: she smiled. The smile meant balance, and victory, and it didn't come often, but this time, on this occasion, it had. How could she have been so dense as not to see? She lived exactly where she wanted to live, with the two sides of her being in ... not so much *harmony* as a state of conjunction, living between alternatives. Next time I run into Ariadne in the village, she thought, I'll be able to tell her, make her aware, of what I've realised about myself, and she heard Ariadne's reply at the moment she thought of her. 'Like Proust', Ariadne would say, 'with his Two Ways; you remember?' Barbara knew she would answer dutifully, 'I remember', and somehow the word would wriggle around and change its meaning in the air, the way words did when used in the endless examination of the Frenchman's prose. Those river-delta sentences flowing endlessly to some sea that he and only he could imagine as he sat, writing, in his cork-lined room. I'll walk everyday, Barbara decided, or rather, every time my mind's unsettled and I need to walk. I'll stand at the front door, then I'll walk to the gate, and between the two I'll make up my mind. Or I won't. I'll walk to the front gate and let something hidden and mysterious inside myself make the decision to turn left, or right, the choice between the wild and the calm, the tame and the uproarious, the ocean or its substitute inside the bay.

She wanted to tell Andrew, and she knew that not only would he be pleased but by an effort he'd also understand, truly understand. But she thought she'd enjoy it more if she revealed it to him slowly. She'd establish the habit first, then her way of telling him what she'd seen,

and felt, and thought, on her walks, until he noticed the difference in pattern between the ocean-way and the way of the gigantic lake on which their city sat. He'd perceive it eventually, and when he did, and it was out in the open between them, he, she knew, would slowly realise that he'd known this new truth about his wife for ages. That will be a moment to remember, she thought, and she smiled again.

There was still the problem of Andrew's wish to send his son to the famous school he'd attended himself. But what about the girls? They couldn't miss out. Be short-changed! Barbara took her problem to the front gate, and swung towards the ocean beach. It was windy and she knew the waves would be roaring on the rocks and sand, the sort of day when the beach was frightening yet exhilarating. Humanity felt feeble in the face of it. She walked briskly, hearing the ocean before she saw it. What a roar! Through the tea-tree, over the dune, and there it was, in all its invincible anonymity. She huddled down on the sheltered side of the dune, asking the waves her question: 'What am I going to do?'

She waited. She told herself to stand. She stood, though a sudden gust nearly blew her over. The three of them are going to university, she announced to herself, in her mind. I did, their father did, they've got to do it too. How, though? There wasn't enough money to pay fees and board for three young people far from home ...

Then it came to her. They'd take it in turns. They'd send their son to the famous school, and after that he'd have to support himself. They'd send the first girl to Frankston High, it couldn't be all that bad, then they'd support her through her degree. She could live at the Women's College, or Janet Clarke Hall, she had to have scholars around her to help the forming of her mind. Then the third one, the last, would have to work her way through, possibly part time, but when she graduated, they'd send her to England for a year of travel, or post-graduate study in a famous university in the old country... there! That was it! She had a plan. It might be possible to vary it: her first could work to raise money for his sisters, and when they were all away she could work too, doing who knows what to raise some money for their futures. It could be done! She looked at the ocean with triumph

in her eyes. It hadn't beaten her and it never could! When someone strong made up their mind ...

She sat down behind the dune. The sand was dry, she lay down and let the wind roar over her. Nature was powerful but so was she! Her boy and her girls would take things in turn, they'd advance and then they'd stand aside for the others to advance, but they'd all get through. They had good minds, they'd have them opened wide as the wind! How it roared and how she exulted underneath it, with it, inside it almost, for all that she was sheltered. She thought of the bay she'd chosen to put at her back. It too would be rough on a day like this, but nothing like the ocean roaring on the shore. She peeped over the dune and the waves were swirling, thrashing white. How far down did waves go into the sea? Did fish stay deep on a day like this? She realised she knew nothing about the element that was battering her mind. How defiant it was in the face of human resolve to conquer. Conquer the sea? You couldn't, you could only glide across its surface if it let you. She looked at it in all its foreignness. Strangely, she realised, she felt at home. She wanted to sit, to live, behind her sheltering dune until the three of them had studied, learned, made new people of themselves, and graduated with due ceremony. Then it struck her, in her exultation, that a day would come when they wouldn't need her any more; she'd still be their mother but in a sort of retirement-figure way. That, she thought, would be a day of doom! Well, let it come when it would, she'd come back to the dune where she was sheltering and ask another question: what next, what now, oh mighty world?

Suddenly she was humble, and small. She wanted to be home. She walked quickly, pushed by the wind. She pushed the gate aside without pulling it shut. She went to Andrew's study and turned on a heater. She lifted the lid of their box of family photos, and turned them over, pictures on the front and writing on the back. There they were as they'd been; she held them, in her mind, as they were now. The ocean, the wind, the roaring, swirling water, and their future, would take care of themselves, now: she'd made her plans!

Kim returned to his city job unsettled by those letters to his father in heaven. Heaven! The world kept humans on their toes. What problems

would you run into if you entered heaven? On his first morning back from Portsea, he had to deal with a letter from a widow who claimed that the company was robbing her. Kim checked; the husband had changed his occupation without letting them know, the policy hadn't been adjusted, and, according to clause 15B of the contract, the agreement with the company was null and void. All the same, he thought, we're being a bit hard ...

He took the letter to Stuart Williams, manager of the company, and its statistician, who glanced at the letter and stared into Kim Berg's eyes. 'She's got no case. None at all.' Kim knew he was a man who liked never to lose. 'Make sure you mention 15B in your reply. And keep it brief. No expressions of regret. Her husband was out to diddle us. Trouble is, we caught him out.' He smiled. 'Start your second paragraph with "Unfortunately"'. The matter was ended, in his mind. Kim was cautious. 'She does have a point though, doesn't she, when she says ...' He quoted a line or two from the letter.

'No point at all. The man we insured described himself as manager of a timber mill. There's a warning there, in bold type, about giving us accurate information. He was killed by a falling branch. He was one of the men cutting trees down. Managers sit in offices and manage. Timber-cutters fall trees. He told us a lie. Clause 17D covers that. No case at all.' Noticing a frown on Kim's brow he smiled. 'Yes yes, she'll write back and call us the most heartless people she's ever known, and she'll go on about taking us to court.' He was positively amused. 'Let her! Let her! They never win cases like these. They call us robbers. What about the lawyers they employ, who know quite well there's no case to argue, but they see a chance to pull a nice fat fee out of someone's pocket. They're the people who are truly immoral, not people like us who are simply doing a job!'

Kim thought of his mother's letter to her husband in heaven. 'How would you describe our job, Mr Williams?' The manager was pleased to be asked. 'People don't like to be caught out by misfortune, so they take out a policy. To insure themselves. It might be better to say "to ensure" themselves, or to "reassure" themselves. What we do is operate a scheme that gives them a little of what they want. Not everything they want, not all they want, but something. And the

scheme's in balance. Incomings equal outgoings. That's my job, to balance them up. We're not the government, not the mint, we can't create money. Instead, we create a scheme. They pay in, we manage the money, and when something triggers the policy, we pay out. So long as it's according to the policy.'

Kim said wryly, 'Which we wrote.'

Unperturbed, the manager said, 'Of course we wrote it. Or our lawyers did. Heaven only knows what would happen if our clients wrote it! There'd be pay-outs twice a day!' He was smiling now. 'We had a case a couple of years ago. This man said he was a chef. We asked him where, and he gave us the name of a city hotel. Not long after, his family told us he'd died. It turned out he'd drowned on a wretched little ship somewhere off Malaya! He'd been the ship's cook and the ship sank in a storm, and they wanted us to pay. They took us to court and they had costs awarded against them. The judge gave them quite a wiggling and I had a feeling he was laughing at them for the fools they were.' Then the manager considered Kim again. 'The world's hard, boy. If people think you've got money, they think of schemes to get it off you. They never stop. The most amusing thing in my job – and yours, if you've got a sense of humour – is to wait for the new schemes they dream up to get money that doesn't belong to them into their pockets.'

Kim was sullen by now, thinking of his mother trying to deal with this man. 'We get paid. We don't miss out. If they play a trick on us, they lose all the money they've paid in.'

'And so they should! An insurance company is a house of mutuality. We promise certain benefits. They promise to pay in regularly so they can draw out eventually. It's as simple as that. It's all a matter of probabilities. How old were they when they started? That means, how many years have they been paying in when, on the law of averages, they're going to die. The law of averages. They *must* be honest with us about that. Why? Because the scheme only works if there are many thousands of people in it, to provide the money. If someone gets away with a trick, they're cheating the others. It's our job to stop them cheating the honest people who pay in, and expect a benefit for their survivors when they die.'

Kim could see no way around him, and yet he knew that Williams had a comfortable home in Toorak and a luxurious car that he drove to the office every day. The scheme certainly benefited Williams and, he realised, it benefited him as well. ‘Thank you Mr Williams,’ he said. ‘I see it more clearly now.’ The manager nodded, courteously enough, and picked up a calculator he had beside him on the desk. He held it up to his junior, expecting him to realise that the thing he held was the summary of all he’d said. Kim nodded respectfully and went back to his desk, knowing he wouldn’t feel any better until he’d found another job.

He looked. He used the Old Boys network, they had influence all over the place. In particular, he called on Antinous Knight, who should have been a Liberal but had joined the Labor Party, nobody knew why. ‘Just say it’s the way my sympathies flow,’ he told anyone who questioned him. ‘Someone’s got to look after the common people.’ He listened to Kim, then announced, ‘Brooklands Freight need someone to manage their local branch. You’re a bit young but we can tell them you’ve got the contacts.’ This troubled Kim, who produced an awkward ‘Aaahh’, which didn’t cause Endless to falter. ‘A fortnight in the job and you’ll know all you need to know. After that, it’s only a matter of keeping the connections well oiled. Ships, trucks, trains, you’re bringing them work. They need it, they need you. Or the people you give the jobs to. You’ve got to keep them onside. Never argue with anybody, just hand out the work, that’s what they’re looking for. Make them earn it, though. If anybody lets you down, wipe them off your list. Also, you’ll have to put up with them talking about Teddy Kray, who was famous for his Christmas parties. You know the old song, Free beer for all the wharfies? He spent up big at Christmas time. Hired a hall in Port Melbourne ...’

Kim gagged on this. ‘Port Melbourne? I’ve never been near the place, except when a ship gets in from England!’

‘Well, you’re going to find it’s as good as anywhere else to pick up the money you need. Money’s interesting you know. You can make it in one place and spend it in another.’ He was amused. ‘You can spend it wherever you choose, but you’ve got to make it first. Eh?’

Kim got the job. He was naturally courteous, was smart enough to realise that the business practically ran itself, so long as he didn't interfere, and it was plain that all the people he dealt with needed to stay in his favour. There was work to be handed out, work meant money, and nobody asked questions about how or where it was spent. It dawned on him in the second week that a lot of racehorses and prostitutes were dependent on his goodwill, as well as those who maintained them. He wondered who this Teddy Kray had been, and what had happened to him? Something told him to ask no questions, but wait: the Christmas party would be when they'd tell him, and then he decided to have an Under New Management party, with catering by the people Kray had always used. He rang them. 'I want something to cheer us up in the cold season. A mid-winter do! You know the people better than I do, I'd be interested to hear any suggestions you'd care to make.'

This was the right approach. The people Teddy Kray had drawn to Brooklands Freight were skilled at keeping money on the move. They sensed that Kim was a man of a different class, and that made it easier because it would take him a while to get to know their ways – a period of advantage! They also noticed, when the mid-winter party was held, that Antinous Knight, well-known Labor Party figure, was by their boss's side, talking quietly in his ear. Kim mightn't know much but Endless knew a great deal; he was like those important figures that are led in front of soldiers to 'inspect the guard'! He had only to point out a defect in one of the soldiers and the man was in strife, because if you were going to convince people then the show had to be good. Kim sensed all this about his new position, but had nobody, apart from Endless, to discuss it with.

He wasn't married. He'd been trained by a school that taught young men how good they were, how important, by giving them an idea of quality, but there was one humble-making thing that young men had to do and that was to find a partner to share their lives. 'Will you marry me?' They mightn't sound like hard words to say but proud people know very well what they mean as the basis of a life's agreement. Again he thought of his mother, Ariadne Berg. She adored the man who'd been his father. She wrote letters to him addressed to the post office, if there was one, in heaven! He'd always found his

mother amazing, puzzling, reassuring, and now, he realised, he had to be to someone else what his father had been to her. That letter came back to him:

The two of us together yes in the softest time of the day – to this most tranquil place our calm oasis set in dense tea-tree bush, fenced in our ‘hide’ of utter peace where only bunnies and birds abide ... starts my dream again into our old sweet life ...

What was my father like, he asked himself, and then he asked himself if this was the first time he’d wondered. No, of course it wasn’t, you couldn’t lose a father at an early age and not wonder what you’d missed. His mother missed him too, but she had all those memories to draw on, and he, Kim, had few. He wanted to make up the father he should have had, as, he suspected, his mother was making up the man she’d once been married to, but, whether or not that was true, the problem was his to solve. What sort of man was he going to be? What he could see was that there was no one, single, objective answer to this question. He would know what sort of man he was by the quality of the love that came back to him from a woman he hadn’t yet met. Didn’t know. The woman would be real, but would be his creation too. And when he found her, the love she bore him would recreate him, change him, turn him into the man she wanted him to be. It sounded rather frightening to this inexperienced young man, but Ariadne Berg, his mother, was there to show him that it could be done.

Let us pause, dear reader, to look at what we’ve done, and what we have to do. We began with a group of boys in a school that thought itself elite, learning how to learn about the history of their country. Remember Rhonda Mathieson’s class? They are young men now, some of them are married, one of them is dead. Those still living have a long way to go, much terrain to cross, before they too must leave the world. What will they achieve? Who will be next to fall? We don’t know. We can only go on as they must go on, finding out a little with every passing day.

Now a word about our method; that was Rhonda’s subject as much as the history to which she was asking them to apply what she was

teaching. James Cook's journals told us little of what the black people were thinking about those intruding on their place. The white men didn't know, the black people didn't understand. They looked upon each other with an incomprehension that still exists today. None of us know more than a particle of the history of our time because we are acting in it, perhaps in some peripheral place from which we cannot see the centre – if we know where it is. This ignorance forces us to do what we can't help doing, and that's to think of ourselves as central when we aren't. None of us are, however much importance we ascribe to ourselves. Human life can be seen as an endless series of claims and counter-claims from groups demanding that we turn our eyes on them. This book tries to look everywhere at once, which, as we know, is impossible. Hence the confusion built into what I am trying to do. My project forces me to simplify when complexity is what I want to show. I ask your patience as I try to show you a great deal when only a little is possible. What I am trying to do is what all of us do every day – understanding a little, forgetting much, never quite knowing, but grasping certain moments of passion or insight, believing – or is it only hoping – that they can give us the clues we need to find out where we are.

Sandy Clarkson was a forceful sportsman, and at his famous school that meant his blazer pocket was displayed in full colour – the coat of arms and the symbols for sporting colours in football, cricket and athletics. In the tiny world of the school, this meant greatness. A suitable time for us to join him would be an afternoon, late in his final year, when he'd heard his headmaster, addressing the school, tell the assembled pupils something that he, Sandy, had told the head the day before. The cricketers had gone to Brisbane to play against a grammar school up there, and they'd been walking through the city when a derelict had accosted him, asking for money which it was plain would be spent on alcohol. 'Why'd you pick me?' Sandy had said to the drunk. To his considerable surprise, the hobo touched his blazer pocket, symbol of status, and named the school. 'I wore a pocket like that once,' the man had said. The headmaster warned the school against over-confidence. Solemnly he connected pride with fall. The school was impressed, if not downright fearful. 'It was me he was telling them about,' Sandy

told his father. 'When the assembly finished, everyone was looking at me!' He was seething, and fearful. 'It's not going to happen to me!' he shouted.

Rupert Clarkson tried to soothe his young man. 'It wasn't aimed at you, son.'

'It was! He was trying ...' But his sentence was never finished, because Sandy was raging against the headmaster, the drunk in Brisbane and his own bad luck in choosing that street to walk along in a city he didn't know. 'It's like being struck by lightning,' he said. 'There isn't anywhere that's safe.'

His mother came in from another room: Patricia Clarkson, known as Pat. 'What's making you boys so noisy? I was counting my stitches and you made me lose my count!'

Sandy spoke more quietly. 'Sorry to put it this way, but it was a kick in the guts.'

'What was?'

Sandy told his mother, and his father for the second time, what had happened, in Brisbane and at the school. Pat Clarkson saw his problem straight away. It was his father's problem repeating itself, all over again. It was why he'd sent Sandy to the famous school. Little people can only come up with little achievements, so they need people built on a grander scale to set goals for them and give them status which will save them from sickening self-examination showing that they don't matter. That was why Rupert had sent his son to the place with debilitating fees. It, surely, would be safe.

But no; the rot had entered Sandy's soul in an unexpected way. Rupert saw that he was powerless, for all the money he'd spent and the hopes he'd entertained that his son would be safe. 'It's got to be worthwhile,' he told his son. 'It's costing me the earth.' Father and son glared at each other, recognising each other at last. Pat, the eternal mother, said, 'You gave this man some money?'

'A couple of bob.'

'Did he thank you?'

'Sort of. I suppose he did.'

'Do you think you would have liked him, when he was a boy at your school?'

‘He’d have been all right I suppose. Must have been. Once!’

‘Why do you think he picked on you, to ask for money?’

‘Like I said. The blazer.’

‘Are you proud of your blazer?’

‘I suppose I am.’

‘Your school?’

‘I suppose so.’

That annoyed Rupert, who demanded that the boy show more respect ... Pat struggled to regain the upper hand. ‘If this man, up in Brisbane ... if he failed ...’

‘You should have seen him, mum. And smelt him!’ Sandy wiped his hand across his nose.

‘Was it bad?’

Sandy began to see some humour in what had happened. He pinched his nostrils shut and cried, ‘Phoooooooooh!’ Rupert laughed, the boy was something of a mimic. Pat kept on. ‘You should have bought him some soap!’ Sandy remembered something. ‘Actually, there was a tap there, no! A fire hydrant, on the corner of the street where he got hold of me ...’ ‘A perfect place for washing him. Brisbane’s pretty warm, he’d have dried out again.’

‘And pestered someone else!’

‘You’d have been out of the way by then.’

Sandy’s good humour faded. ‘I don’t think I’ll ever get away from that man. He’ll be haunting me.’

So what was he going to do when the year ended? He glanced at the handbook and saw nothing at the university. He’d play football for the OMs, cricket for somebody, but what about a job? It was so silly. He was worried about falling from the heights but couldn’t even see a bump in the ground that he wanted to stand on. Yes, he was good at sport but that wouldn’t last forever. He was on a tram taking him to the Exhibition Buildings for his first exam when he noticed the Windsor Hotel, across the road from the parliament building, both embodiments of goldfields money. They knew what to do with their cash in those days, he thought, and then it came to him: there was money still. All he had to do was put himself where it flowed past!

Good one! He entered the exam and wrote boldly, earning, though it was some weeks before he knew this, a second class honour for Expression, when all he'd dreamed of doing was pass!

He asked Antinous Knight who owned the hotel and he said he'd find out. They were both Old Boys by the time the politician-to-be got back to him. Famous hotels, he told Sandy, have mega-rich owners who leave the running to managers who have to be ultra-smart because everyone who works in hotels is out for themselves and it's out of these unlikely crews that great managers create an appearance of polish and perfection. 'Nice if you can do it!' was what Endless said. 'The good manager has everyone terrified of not pleasing him because it means losing their job. Not for me!' said Endless, but Sandy rather liked the idea, though he could see – and was soon to learn – that the only way to know what the manager needed to know was to have done all the meanest jobs yourself. Only then could you know what underlings would get up to if the manager wasn't watching. 'Okay, I start at the bottom,' Sandy told himself. 'I give myself three years. I don't tell a soul what I'm doing, I tell them I'm a management trainee. That sounds good enough. And I don't tell anybody where I came from. I volunteer to do the jobs that nobody wants to do and I do them well. I get a reputation for doing things, and another for knowing who everybody is who comes to stay there.' This pleased him. All he had to do was start.

The place for that was at the bottom. Washing dishes. Then they moved him to unloading deliveries of food for the kitchen, which led to cutting up and preparing – as well as scrubbing out all the biggest pots, pans and tubs when the meals had been served. The dining room had to be set up, flowers arranged on tables, sideboards and speakers' podiums. Guest lists had to be checked and seating allocated. Tables had to be discreetly rearranged when people didn't want others near them – or did. Certain guests had to be farewelled at one door and let back in at another so that liaisons could develop. Messages had to be slipped under doors or left on bedside tables. Knowledge had to be concealed and concealment hidden. Sandy learned to whisper without moving his lips. It was all so different from charging out of the back line and yelling 'Where's a lead?' or shouting 'Howzat?' at

an inattentive umpire. Sandy learned to exchange violent motion for motionless observation. What you had to do if you worked for an hotel was to read minds, whether subtle or simple, and be one step in advance ... all the time! And he was good at it. The father about whom he'd been ambivalent for so long, Rupert Clarkson, had been a good model after all, except that he'd never taught himself subservience with the skill and hypocrisy required of the manager of a grand hotel. The next step, Sandy told himself, was to learn how and when to take the lead, to pull others after him while managing to let them convince themselves that they were still in charge.

I'm not up to that yet, he realised: I need some masterly tutoring. Then he realised that what he needed was in fact the opposite. The world of deceptive appearances which he was on the verge of mastering was, at this stage of development, a man's world, which meant there was another half-globe to conquer. Another three years, he told himself.

These were much harder. His first passion went close to breaking his heart. A rich businessman called Goldberg had set his heart on marrying the beautiful Anita Silbermann, and his places of courting were the lounge and dining room of the stately hotel. There was also the matter of the connecting rooms upstairs, numbered 11 and 17, their doors giving onto separate passages but with a back door in one room which was a side door in the other; the passage turned a corner a little way from the lift. Goldberg could have guests in his room if he chose, could say goodnight to Anita, and rejoin her after his guests had left, with nobody except the hotel staff any the wiser. Any arrangements of this sort were left to the Maître D, one Gustav Kleinert, a man of fifty who claimed to be Swiss. He was Sandy's main tormentor, which meant that he'd chosen his successor and was training him thoroughly. He wanted no cracks in the young man's armoury of control and as far as he could see, there weren't any. Then Gustav went to hospital to have his appendix removed, but complications followed and he had to anoint the young man as his replacement, for the time being at least. Sandy took over to the manner born, trained to perfection.

Anita Silbermann noticed the young man, but didn't show it. Goldberg had no reason to be aware that the woman he'd chosen to be his wife, though twenty years younger, was taking two paths at once: one towards a richly endowed marriage, and another, secretly, towards an exploration of the territory she'd be leaving behind if she married the older, wealthy man. Just how it is that two people become aware of each other at the same time as they are aware of the other's awareness is one of life's mysteries but Sandy Clarkson and Anita Silbermann knew, and rejoiced in, their connection. Watching the beautiful, black-haired Anita, only a little older than himself, Sandy knew that she was going through the form of a relationship in order to set herself up for the rest of her life. Goldberg had money. She'd never want for anything, except passion. The lack of it left her hollowed out, the form of a woman, not the real thing. Sandy could see how passionate she was. If she married Goldberg she'd cripple herself, and he knew she knew it. With his eyes he made his offer. With her eyes she showed she'd noticed. Thus were their first signals sent and received. What was still to come? Sandy got a copy made of the key to room 17, the one that Goldberg used when he stayed at the hotel. He put it in his wallet and prayed that he'd get his chance to use it.

One evening Goldberg ate a quick dinner, then had a taxi take him to the station. He had, he told Sandy, a sleeping car on the train to Sydney. Night flights were not common at the time. Sandy saw him off then reported his departure to Anita in the dining room. 'His room will be cleaned in the morning but I'll check it later to make sure he didn't leave anything behind.' Anita studied him. 'You'll be checking his room?' Sandy nodded, hardly able to speak. 'Let me know if you find anything,' Anita added, and Sandy heard her acceptance in her voice. It was another two hours before he unlocked the door of room 17. There was a silken dressing gown on the floor. He knocked on the connecting door.

'Come in.'

He stepped into her room, knowing full well what he wanted to happen, having no idea how it would affect him. She said coolly, 'I knew he'd leave something. He usually does.' She added, 'It might fit you.' He said, 'It might fit you.' A moment later they were rubbing

against each other, desire having taken over. Then they sat on the sofa for a time, preparing for what they were about to do. And what was that? For Sandy, it was like having an overpowering dream, an experience that surrounded him and left no way of escape. For Anita it was control, no hindrance to her use of another person. Her future husband was clumsy, not concentrating on her instead of himself. He gave little because he wasn't used to giving. With Sandy, Anita was in charge. Touching her body, rubbing it and kissing, was no more than encouragement. It was in his mind that he felt her presence, inside him, demanding, stirring him, giving, demanding, giving, making a presentation of herself as she took him in. He gasped, she seethed with satisfaction. Stillness, when it came to them, was like a trick to let them find more energy. Each gave. They murmured, sighed. They looked in each other's eyes and saw themselves. They knew, they were in touch, they were taking in and giving out, all at the same moment. Each was discovering how grand, how huge, another person could be. Impulses rushed from every part of their psyches, yet they managed to stay in alignment with themselves and with each other. Doors to new dimensions opened inside their minds. Their bodies, in-turned to grasp each other, had an open-ness they'd never known. Their bodies surprised them. They were surprised at being overtaken to such high degree. It was new, it was old, even customary, but different. Finally, it was central, and as they lay back, exhausted, they knew that they would never be the same again.

Sandy murmured to Anita, 'What have we done?'

Anita said to her lover, 'We've taken what we wanted. We'll never lose it now.'

That meant they were rich, but it was hard, as they lay there breathing, to feel anything other than changed. New, however tired. Soon to be ready for more, even as they lay in each other's arms, loose, at ease, cloud-high. 'I want to see you in his dressing gown,' Anita said. 'I know it'll fit.' Sandy put it on. It fitted perfectly. 'What are you going to wear?' he asked. 'Your shirt,' she said, and they laughed, so loudly that they realised where they were.

'Shooosh!' And they were silent again. Anita stood. 'He's got a bottle of champagne in there. I'll replace it tomorrow.' Sandy resumed

his hotel position for a moment. 'I'll do that.' He thought. 'It's hard to think that there is going to be a tomorrow, isn't it?' Anita went through the door, and came back with the bottle. 'Open this. Glasses are over there, I'll get those.' The bottle was opened. They drank. He said, 'Nothing's ever tasted like this before.' He stared at her, wearing his white shirt, she stroked the cuff of the silken gown. 'I knew it would come some day,' she said. 'I had it in me and I only had to wait.'

Sandy said, 'It was a miracle. I know it's happened to people before us, but I can't get it in my mind that there was ever a day before today, or people before us. It's as if the world became new again, just for us.' He watched her to see if she thought the same. He couldn't tell. He thought she was planning, though what, he didn't know. This didn't trouble him. She was close, she was his, they were sipping the same wine. He'd have to slip away eventually but for now they were together, they'd made something the world didn't know about, and they could come back to it whenever they pleased, because only they, the two of them, knew the way to this secret place.

They touched glasses, looked into each other's eyes, and drank the other man's wine.

When Goldberg got back from Sydney, he found nothing changed. Anita told him things she'd done while he was away. She had in fact slept. Sandy worked his normal hours, energy pouring into him as it poured out. He remembered the champagne bottle, and turned it on the shelf to the same angle as the first they'd drunk; there had been two more since then. He and Anita had made no new arrangement. She'd let him know when they had another chance. Sandy didn't think of it as deception. They were maintaining another level of reality, more precious than others had. Anita didn't think of deception either. She'd taken control of her life, and didn't intend to let go. She'd keep Sandy close to her as long as she could, then, after she was married, she'd make other arrangements. She didn't tell this to herself, she simply readied herself for whatever action was required. This would mean overlapping existences, but that wasn't hard. It was what she was doing now. Women are often divided, as are men, but men don't manage it as well. Perhaps women and men succeed and fail in

different ways. This means that perfect accord between them is rare, valuable, priceless. A good working arrangement is not to be looked down on. This will normally involve two people presenting a suitable face to each other, with each accepting what the other has given. The danger of such arrangements is that one will discover that the face they've been given is false, and will demand to know what lies behind it, when, for the most part, they would be better not to know.

This was clearer to Anita than it was to Sandy, who was, to a large extent, an innocent. The day after Goldberg got back from Sydney, Sandy took himself to a nearby bookshop; after he'd caught up on some sleep, he'd do some reading to divert his mind until he got another call. To his surprise, he saw Kim Berg in the shop, and greeted him. Kim suggested they go to the Italian coffee shop a couple of doors down, where they could talk. Stepping outside the bookshop, they saw a face they knew: Bob Enright was looking at them, amazed to see two familiar faces. He suggested a drink at the Windsor, but Sandy said he wouldn't relax if they went where he was known in another capacity, so they went to the Mitchell, on the right hand corner as you looked down the steps of parliament, with the Windsor on the left, Bob paying for the first round. 'Three's my limit, boys,' he told them. 'Gloria's in Myers, getting a few things. She's getting big,' he added, touching his tummy. 'Can't keep her waiting. It wouldn't do.' He announced this proudly. 'What are you fellas up to these days? Got families yet?'

Sandy and Kim had always known that Bob came from a bush town on the Murray, and neither could have told you its name. Yet here was a simple question from someone they'd always thought simple, and it floored them. Did they have families yet? He'd already told them he was about to become a father while they ...

Did they have families yet?

They shook their heads. 'Time you started,' Bob announced, and raised his glass. 'Cheers!'

They drank, and looked at each other, all three. 'How long have you been married?' That was Kim. Bob gave them a grin. 'Just under a year. It seems a long time.' Sandy thought it was a long time since he'd lain with Anita, and it was only a few days. Kim murmured

‘How long’s a piece of string?’ which was about the best answer he could give to the deeper question burrowing under his life – his mother’s crazy perfection. Tomatos turning carnelian to ruddy ... while a Grey Thrush sings serene. How had she done it? How could she love him when he didn’t know how to love himself? For want of anything better to say, he turned to Sandy: ‘Did you say you worked across the road? Have you ever been in here before?’ Sandy shook his head. ‘Not that I recall.’ They looked at the lounge bar of the Imperial, empty at that time of day. ‘I suppose it’s all right but I doubt if I’ll come in here again.’ He was wondering where Anita would take him and he had a feeling that, marvellous as they were together, she wouldn’t be having his child. Perfection had been too easily achieved. Where was there to go once you’d reached it? He didn’t know, he felt lost.

Bob was standing outside Myers, waiting for Gloria to emerge, idly inspecting the window dummies – men’s suits, women’s dresses - when he saw, through two panes of glass, a figure, a face, that he felt certain he knew. He stared at a man his own age who didn’t seem to be noticing him. Endless! He moved out to get a direct look. It was. Three glasses of beer and he’d run into three of his history class! Things were happening today. ‘Endless!’ he called. ‘Didn’t you see me, through the glass?’

Endless handled situations with skill. ‘I didn’t, to be honest, but it’s wonderful to see you!’ He sounded sincere. He was reaching for the name. ‘What’s brought you down to town? Wool sales? Shopping?’ He was shaking hands warmly, then the touch brought back the name. ‘Bob Enright. I thought once you got back in the bush I’d never see you again!’

‘We get down once in a while,’ Bob said. ‘I don’t know that I enjoy it but you have to stay in touch.’ Endless noticed the pronoun. ‘We? You’re married then?’

Bob nodded. ‘What about you?’

‘I’ll certainly marry one of these days, but I’m not quite ready yet.’

‘Not quite? That sounds like you’ve been close?’

Endless touched him on the hand politically. ‘I try to stay close all the time!’ They laughed. ‘So what are you doing these days?’

They talked till Gloria came out. ‘No parcels?’ Bob said. ‘Didn’t find anything good?’ Gloria told him, and the stranger he was talking to, that she’d bought quite a lot, but had directed the people in the shop to post her purchases so she didn’t have to carry them. ‘It’ll cost you a bit,’ was the comment from Endless, ‘but it means you don’t have to carry a pile of stuff.’ Bob introduced him. Gloria was interested. She met such men only rarely. She’d heard about drunken Old Boys raising all sorts of troubles – pregnancies mainly – but the ones she’d met had all been nice enough. She gave Bob the credit for this. He didn’t attract the other sort. She started out to ask the stranger what he did but stopped short of calling him by the name that came so easily to her husband. ‘Call me Antinous,’ the other said. ‘It’s what my mother called me and that’s good enough for me!’ Bob asked him about his political ambitions and was amazed to hear that he wasn’t a member of the Liberals, as he’d expect of anyone who’d been to his old school. ‘I haven’t committed yet,’ Endless told them. ‘But the split in the Labor Party means they’ve got gaps to fill. Opportunities could be better on their side than on ours.’

The last word puzzled Gloria. How could you be thinking of joining one party while you thought the other was the one you belonged to? Politics! It was such a deceitful business. ‘But you wouldn’t take those opportunities, would you?’

Endless spoke simply, and they knew it was honest. ‘It’s no good being in politics unless you get to do things. Achieve. There’s hundreds of politicians who are forgotten because they never did anything. There’s only a handful who leave any sort of legacy. I don’t want to leave politics, when my time comes, with a pure heart and nothing on the record. I know it’s egotistical, but I want to be able to point to something that’s a lasting benefit, and say – you wouldn’t have had that but for me.’

Neither Bob nor Gloria had heard anyone say this before. It sounded ruthless, cynical, but impressive. Gloria told him, ‘I’ll keep watching for your name whenever I read the papers, Antinous ...’ she got the name right, though it was awkward: ‘how long will I have to wait?’

At a time far in the future, Antinous, better known to the public as Endless, became Premier of the state, and when he retired had a list of things he called his legacies. Members on both sides of the House spoke well of him. He, in his turn, spoke humbly of his years of service to the people. He'd haggled with Canberra, he'd visited fire- and flood-stricken areas, he'd chatted to children in their schools. He'd insisted on his ministers listening to the public servants they preferred to think they controlled. He corrected journalists when they predicted decisions they thought he was going to make. He urged those with money to make donations to galleries, or scholarships to schools. He embodied the principle of everything working better in an atmosphere of good will, yet voters also suspected – he leaked things carefully – that he was working on long-term goals, like equalising the sides of the city which had separated itself on lines of class, meaning wealth and all the advantages which his schooling had given him. He had a gift for being close to the popular without actually endorsing it, so that he was ready to move when opinion shifted ... as it did all the time. If he spoke well of something, one sensed that he sensed that its time had come.

He was a Labor Premier for the reasons he'd suggested to the Enright outside Myers: hostility between the wings of the Labor Party had split the party, leaving openings to be exploited and passions to be manipulated. He calculated that the Communist influence would be dead before long and the Catholics would find affluence soon enough; that, or fade away, swamped by the secular society being built by business. His mind endlessly – a joke he loved to iterate – probed the future, looking for the next moves that groups in his state would make, so that he could be ready for them, or, preferably, get in first. 'If you want to win people's hearts,' he said in private, 'you give them something a little while before it occurs to them to ask for it. That, or you give it to them the moment they ask.' Was he merely clever, then? Only smart? There were those who thought that the endless thing about him was his luck, but those who are always lucky are people with skill. It is frequently, and regularly, said that politicians react to whatever's happening but good ones get in early enough to shape events, create moods of acceptance or withdrawal so that their public only asks for what's good for it. This is not easy

to do, but Endless was famous for it, and, most important of all, he knew when he should step down. But that's too far ahead to talk about now. Let's leave Endless studying the population of his state to see which ethnic groups (in a time of high migration) were politically inclined and which were not, and asking the Enrights, as they left him, which was the nearest Victorian town to where they lived, so that if he found himself in that part of the state he'd know to cross the river and see them. 'It's been a pleasure meeting you,' he told Gloria; 'Bob is a lucky man.'

As their train took them north to New South Wales, Gloria asked Bob if they were going to spend their whole lives beside the Murray, or would they feel the need for change at some stage? Bob didn't need to look out the window. 'Where we are is fine. I've never seen any place I liked more. Whenever we go away, I'm always happy to get back. Aren't you?' Gloria said they'd been lucky, their luck might run out one day, and they might sense the need for change. Bob accepted, then said that if they needed a change, they'd deal with the matter at the time. It was plain that he saw no rocks in the path they'd chosen. 'When people come up home on the train,' he commented, 'they tell me how boring the country is once they pass Bendigo. I reckon that's our safeguard.' He pointed out the window. 'There's nobody there. We're cut off. That's a good way to be.' She knew what he meant. No wars, no crime, no crazy people endangering everybody else. The world of brutal headlines was far away and a river ran past their home, cleansing night and day. 'Did you get to see that man about the pump?'

Bob shook his head. 'Didn't bother. Robbo knows enough about them for me.' They travelled twenty minutes in silence, then Bob asked, 'How's that thermos love?'

'You want tea?'

He nodded. 'I'll get the basket down.' It occurred to him to say, 'There's one fella I didn't run into and I wish I had.'

'Who's that?'

'CC.'

'Is that the one you call Brian?'

‘That’s him. J Brian C Claringbold. CC to most of us. He used to do things with Endless. He was the only one in the same league I always thought.’

‘Politics?’

‘No, not much. Very brainy. Got a scholarship to study history at uni. After he topped the state!’

‘Was he in college with you?’

Bob nodded. ‘I’ve lost touch with him now. I’d like to hear what he’s doing. I reckon it would be something interesting.’

Gloria smiled at her man. ‘You’re always telling me that scholars are wasting their time. They put you to sleep!’

Bob loved the way she picked him up and made him think about what he said. ‘CC was different in some way. I was always curious to know what he’d come up with next.’ Seeing him look out the window, she said, ‘He wouldn’t find much out here. He’d have to go back to the city.’

Bob wasn’t so sure. ‘That’s the funny thing about him. He would find something. Something you’d always taken for granted, and suddenly he’d make you see it in a new way.’

She said respectfully, ‘The Old Boys you ran into, would one of them be able to put you in touch with him?’

It occurred to him that Endless Knight would know what CC was doing. He knew everything that was going on, in some mysterious way. He nodded. ‘I’ll ask Endless one of these days. Next time I see him. He’ll be able to put me onto him.’

That closed the matter. Gloria poured tea from their thermos. They drank; the countryside rumbled past.

CC was clear that one day he’d write a history of his country, from settlement to the present day, too big an undertaking for a youngster to lay claim to. He’d have to earn the right to do it, and he didn’t know where to start. At a conference one day he heard two writers disagree over the date of the first use of wire for fencing, and it made him think of boundaries, if there had been any, before fences. Those early squatters pushing onto the plains of inland New South Wales couldn’t have had fences. They must therefore have thought about land differently. What

did they think? How? It struck him as a more substantial question than the much discussed topic of how the early settlers *saw* Australia, and the related question of how the early painters *painted* it. Where would he find answers? Who would he talk to, because he knew his first ideas would need refining. Ideas always did. He felt like a carpenter, told to build a Town Hall but given no tools to do it. You couldn't build without tools and to make them you had to know what you wanted them to do: it was a circular position he found himself in, and doubly frustrating.

He had enough sense to be passive in the face of his problem; his thinking at an early stage, with other stages to follow. He had enough sense, also, to write a diary about his thoughts. What he wrote in his diary would, one day, far in the future, give him the basis of his first chapter. This pleased him. None of his thinking would be wasted. Even the problems that caused him to agonise would bring him a benefit one day. One fine day! He thought of *Madam Butterfly* of Puccini, and smiled at himself. There'd be no tragedy in his history, no treacherous betrayals, no expostulations at full voice ...

And then it struck him that there might be. Why not? If he wrote a history of his country one day, far in the future, what was it going to say? Phillip did this, Macquarie did that, Hume and Hovell discovered such and such, Leichhardt disappeared so nobody knew what he'd discovered? Was that all? Was he going to repeat things everybody already knew? Surely he could do better than that.

His next thought was that his problem might be his long-term project. Finding the question might be his answer. Was that possible? Why not? Who could stop him if he developed his ideas to the point where others recognised that they too had had the same doubts, anxieties, and fruitful moments? He felt he was getting close. What had those early settlers done? Some of them had been surveyors, mapping the land as they went, just as ship captains drew charts of the waters they'd explored. Others had been hungry for land because they hadn't had much of it where they came from and to be a large landholder, back in England, was to be dominant in a place where the dispossessed got pushed to the bottom. By taking land they were establishing themselves, defining themselves, and they did it with lines, straight lines that they turned into fences ...

It wasn't yet an idea that he could build a book on, a history on, but it was developing, and he felt he would make something of it eventually, if only ...

If only what?

If only he could solve another problem, that of the nature of history. Story, history. *Istoria*, as the Italians said. Could you have it both ways, using scholarship to build evidence-based walls that couldn't be tumbled down, using stories to catch the feelings and the imaginative levels that evidence couldn't provide? Could you do those two things at once?

You had to if you wanted to write a history worth reading. He smiled again. If a history was worth reading it must have been worth writing. Again he had this insistent idea that the problem and the solution were much the same thing, if only you could see them both properly. He wasn't ready to start yet, but he knew he'd come some way in defining the terms of what he was hoping to do, one fine day when the sun was shining and his mind was clear!

On the day they were to graduate, Endless and CC had a beer in town. 'Just one,' the would-be historian said. 'We've got to be sober when they give us our degree!' Endless reminded him that he'd be staying on to do his masters, and then a doctorate no doubt, and then a job in the history department, at Melbourne or somewhere else, and that when he'd written thirty books and conked it, they'd carry him out in a box! CC asked him what he was going to do, and Endless became thoughtful. 'The day we die, we'll remember this conversation. We'll know at the end that we knew at the beginning ...' He looked confused.

'What'll we know, Endless?'

'We'll know that there's an end, and we've reached it.'

'And we know that now.'

'We do.'

'So why don't we stay still? Stay where we are?'

'Bugged if I know. They won't let us!'

'Who's *they*?'

Endless, who hated not to have answers, was clueless. 'If I knew who was running this world we've been dropped in, I'd have a word to them.'

'What would you say?'

Endless paused, playing with time. 'I'd say the joint's a shambles. Whoever made the mess should clean it up!' They were laughing now. CC said, 'You know what? I think that's our job. Someone's got to make sense of it all, and guess what: it's *us*.' They looked at each other, truth having blundered into their talk. 'I think we need another one.' Endless touched his almost empty glass. CC shook his head. 'Better stay sober. That way we'll see the silly side of things!'

When the phone rang at nine o'clock at night, Neville thought he was being called out, but it was a case of another sort. His mother was calling to tell him that his father was in hospital. 'The doctor says it's probably just a heart murmur, but they're keeping him under observation for a few hours. He might be home tomorrow, they say.' Neville asked a few questions but his mother didn't know: 'They were very reassuring, that's all I can tell you. But I've got the doctor's number, so you can ring him tomorrow.' His mother was worried, so he too did some reassuring before he put the phone down, then he sat facing Donna, his wife. She looked at him, observing, noticing, searching for the effects on her husband of what she'd heard.

'She needs you Neville. You'll have to go, for a day or two at least.'

'I know. It's a bugger of a time, I'm busy.'

'You'll have to get that locum chap, from Bendigo. He'll hold the fort for you.'

'For how long? You know what mother's like.'

A certain grave amusement could be heard in her voice. 'I do. She wouldn't admit it, but she resents me for taking away her son.'

'That's the next problem. She's going to say dad needs me to be closer, so why don't we move back ...' he paused, thinking '... they call it home.'

'Home's here.'

He needed a cliché. 'Home is where the heart is.'

‘Exactly. Here.’ If his mother could do a little manipulating, so could she. A lot.

The word gave him what he needed. ‘Yes. You stay here. Don’t come with me, even though she’ll want to know why you aren’t with me.’

‘You’ll have to think of something to say.’

‘I’ll think of something. I’m just dashing over to check up. See how he is. He’ll be all right. He’ll be back at work next week.’

‘She’ll try to make him take a break.’

‘And I’ll tell her work’s the best medicine, most of the time. When people aren’t busy, they worry, and it gets to them.’

She was amused by this. ‘You must be very healthy, darling?’

He was almost through the problem. ‘I’ll ring that locum. What was his name? Braddon, I’ve got his number in my book.’ He looked at Donna, ready for further instruction, but there was none. ‘I’ll ring him now.’

Neville Long visited his father in hospital and told him the Wangaratta doctors were right: he should go home and get on with things as usual. ‘We can’t tell you what caused the irregularity in your heart beat. It could be any one of a dozen things. What to do about it? The answer is, live normally, but avoid any extreme exertion. Take it easy, watch for any signs of the thing repeating, but don’t let it worry you. Worry’s a killer, worse than things people think are more dangerous.’ Norman Long went home. His wife wanted Neville to stay but he mentioned his own wife, and his practice. It was clear that his mother felt he could move himself, wife and practice back to Wangaratta but he said he was only a telephone call away. People said such things, even when they knew they were dodging something deeper and more urgent. His mother knew the times were changing and feared getting out of date. There were people in the district who didn’t look up to Rotary, with its public-improvement projects, and ranking of practitioners as civic-minded or otherwise. Norman had long been a civic leader, but his time was passing, and both he and his wife felt a need for someone to stabilise them, to prevent them moving into decline or at the least, that benign withdrawal accepted by people letting go their sense of importance because they were losing power

in body, psychology and belief. Neville had long been their means of continuing themselves, respected even when they were less active than they'd been ...

Neville had been aware of this. It numbed him to be with his parents as their demands grew. He needed to be away. Somewhere else, out of their disrupting, twisting reach. The heart murmur, which they insisted on talking about as if it was an urgent, daily problem, was their shorthand for trying to pull him back into a process whereby he, the junior, would become senior to them in a reassuring exchange of responsibility. Donna saw this in his eyes, and his mood, when he returned. She asked a few simple questions, then she waited. Neville had taken the trouble inside himself. He had never been good at dealing with situations that involved reflection. In this he trusted Donna to lead. It was why he'd married her, though he hadn't known it at the time. One morning, arriving early at his practice and checking through the list of appointments facing him that day, a name on the list reminded him of Nigella Lacey, his first experience of the powerful demands of women. Whatever happened to her? What would have happened to him if he'd got tangled up with her? The thought, casual and incidental as it was – or was it? – shook him. Made him unsteady. He looked at the list again. Routine stuff. He knew all these people, knew what they had wrong with them, and what they needed, some of it medical and much of it not. He was a good doctor. He wasted no time. He permitted himself advice as well as prescriptions. It occurred to him that if you gave people advice you were assuming that they were capable of taking it. Yet he couldn't advise his own parents. Why not? Because they wanted him to remain a part of themselves. They couldn't, or wouldn't ... or something! ... let him go. He had a feeling that children had to defeat their parents in some way, possibly very subtle, probably half- or more-hidden, in order to get ... not so much their freedom as their detachment. This made him very uncomfortable indeed.

It was at this moment that his secretary/receptionist/nurse, Mabel Langley came through the door. 'Neville! What brought you in so early? I thought I'd get here a good twenty minutes before you and have everything ready before the day started!' With a charm that

came easily to him when he felt helpless, he said, 'Sorry Mabel. I think I needed to do it myself this morning.'

She was used to him. 'What brought that on? Nothing I did wrong, I hope?'

'Heavens no! Being with one's parents can be a little upsetting, that's all. I felt a need to be sure that I knew who or what was going to walk through the door today.' Mabel understood this well enough. 'What people need and what they want are two different things. What they need is to be told what to do, and what they want is a piece of someone else to have around them, to give them a feeling that they're safe.' This amused her. 'Safe! Show me a place on earth where everybody's safe! If there's such a place I haven't found it. I haven't been there and I don't expect ever to get there!' Neville felt safe when Mabel Langley was close to him. She ran the practice, that's to say she was sufficiently daunting to stop patients trying any tricks on him. She made it clear to patients that they had to listen, do what he advised, pay promptly for their consultations, and recommend him to others. That way, the practice could do what a good practice should. Neville had a feeling that the times were changing around him, that he needed Mabel beside him at work, Donna beside him at home, and an awareness that unless he understood himself better, and adapted to movements in the society that he hadn't listened to, or taken notice of, that he would let himself become out of date, a young man old before his time. No! He didn't want that!

Another young doctor arrived in the town, with his wife: Ken Carver and Gillian. The people of Swan Hill associated the name with surgery, and were amused. Neville was affected differently. Gillian's voice – the sound of it, not the pronunciation – reminded him of Nigella, from years ago when he was, he would have said, immature. Gillian made it clear that they were staying only long enough to get experience of Australian practice. The place was too remote for anything else. 'People tell me I should drive to Mildura! How long does that take? And when you get there, what's there to see?' Donna and Neville were the only people in town she thought worth talking to. The rest of them were like ... South African Bushmen she was

thinking, but felt it might be dangerous to say so. So for the most part she was silent, but let her thoughts – dissatisfactions – explode when she was with Donna and/or Neville. ‘Your medical board says Ken’s got to have experience and they suggested this place. They called it a city!’ The unacceptable word showed what she thought of the country. Their plane had landed them in Sydney, which they thought a fair sort of city, then they’d moved to Melbourne (barely acceptable) and thence, via Bendigo (a village) to where they were. How quickly could they get out?

Donna listened patiently to the English woman, saying only things like, ‘It’s hard, isn’t it,’ or, ‘Pick one thing you think they do well around here, and watch them. When one thing makes sense, others might.’ Gillian didn’t even bother to reply. She took more notice of Neville, who told her that the town was a very late arrival on the scene, and so, strange as it might seem, was the river. ‘Thousands of years ago, this was all an inland sea, this land around here. You can see traces of it out at Lake Mungo.’ Ken wanted to know how far away that was, and showed interest when told a trip out there might take a couple of hours, depending on stops along the way, which brought Gillian in with, ‘Where would we stop? Who’s there to look after you?’ Neville was amused. ‘Nobody much, unless you take a picnic. That’s something we can do. What do you think? Next weekend?’

They took the Longs’ Range Rover out next Saturday, after a dinner at the Longs’ on Friday night. Neville drove, talking more freely than he’d done for ages. Donna saw that he wanted to convince Gillian that it was worth staying, and she thought he was wasting his time until the newcomer said, ‘Where’s all the people? Isn’t there anybody to meet? Anybody to impress, or be impressed by?’ It came out impatiently, a complaint directed at Neville, as if he was pointing to a population of ghosts, as, Donna had to concede, he was. She broke in: ‘The aboriginal people think they’re surrounded by creation spirits. By which they mean that the people and things that created the earth are all around us. Still. All the time. We’re not as alone as we think.’

Gillian wasn’t impressed. ‘Where’s their churches then? Didn’t they ever pray?’ and then, giving Donna a feeling of seeing into the

English woman, a feeling of danger from someone who was free with demands and lacking in control, she added 'You must miss the sort of people you want beside you in all this emptiness?' Neville drove as if he hadn't heard, but a mile or so later he said, 'I don't think I've ever expected to have any control over the people around me. I was sent off to boarding school at the age of twelve. You don't get any choice of who'll be in your dorm, or your class, or sitting at your table in the dining room.' He turned his eyes on Gillian for a moment. 'Or who's going to push in next to you under the shower.'

Donna drew a breath. Ken Carver noticed this and looked at her as if he hadn't quite heard what had been said. He said noisily, and as if he was doing no more than joking, 'Showering together? We weren't talking about that last night!' A new Gillian, one with plots and schemes in her mind, said, 'That was because we hadn't got to the point of being open with each other.' Donna gasped again. Neville's silence told her he was not averse to what was being proposed. It was up to her.

The long-abandoned shearing shed at Lake Mungo struck Donna as being like a stage set. It reminded visitors of what had once been real, while presenting that former reality as no longer real: if it's a stage set, Donna thought, then we're the actors. This made her cautious. When Neville managed to get a door open, and Gillian went in, Donna drew back. 'You explore in there. I'll have a look around outside.' Ken Carver said he'd stay outside too, but she moved away before he could place himself beside her. She walked. A hundred yards from the shed she turned. I ought to take a photo, she thought, then replaced the idea with another. They were four personalities, four makers of decisions and they were moving into a new alliance, a new arrangement. Two couples at various points along the way to making a swap. She, she knew, was the key. If she clung onto her partner, the other two, the English couple, would have to obey. Limit themselves. Gillian, Donna thought, is vulgar, grasping, passionate, and selfish. What she wants is to prove that she can get what she wants. Hurting her husband isn't any restriction on her because she knows him well enough to know that he'll take advantage of anything she does. So much for them:

Neville? He was successful in his country town because it suited him. He'd come from a country town, gone to medical school and come back, qualified but not much changed. Except.

She thought. Inside the darkened shed, Gillian was with Neville. Ken Carver was on the opposite side of the shed to Donna, having realised that she wanted to be alone. That meant he was alone with the history of what had once been a sheep station, an aboriginal camp, an inland sea, and his wife was in the darkness where the shearing had been done. What would she be like when she came out? Ken knew how impulsive she was, and how calculating. She was bored, frustrated too. He'd brought her to an awful place, and needed to be punished. Sexual love, for Gillian, was an eruption, and one was starting now. He hoped the lady Donna would be accommodating, but wasn't sure. She was slower to move than his wife. He wanted to be beside her but knew to stay away until she decided. Patience was required, and restraint. Women, Ken was fond of saying, hated to be rushed, but were good at rushing their men. He couldn't stop himself mouthing generalities about women, but knew that such statements were rarely valid. People were too unsteady to make any general observation true. You had to play everything by the way that things were happening at the time ...

Except what? Donna was thinking hard. In the time since their marriage Neville had talked about a couple of women he'd once been involved with, but she'd always sensed that there had been something or someone else beyond the things he'd talked about. What was he hiding? He was normally quite jovial so it was something he'd been hiding from himself. This had always displeased her but she'd chosen to leave it alone. Marriages are like corporations merging. The best way to make things work is to concentrate on the present and say no more than necessary about the past, but that, she realised, was a mechanism for stability, not for the great change that came when young women turned, as she wanted to turn one day, into mothers. It was a change, she realised, that he didn't want to cause in her. He was still, she saw, his parents' son. His wife was his sexual companion, invaluable for managing any of life's areas where he fell short. The necessity of children hadn't reached him yet. If she stayed with Neville

she'd be staying wherever he stayed. It was her job to make him complete. Bigger him! She was suddenly angry. There was a man on the other side of the shed who wanted to try her out. Be with her. Like any man he'd be asking 'what have you got to give me?' More than you realise, was the certainty that rose in her mind. More than you've ever experienced with that ...

She began to move back to the shed. Ken came around the corner, waiting to say, 'Did you get a good picture?' As she came closer he did say something but she took no notice. Pointing at the ancient shed - battered and humble as it was, it also felt friendly, or at least accommodating - she said, 'They've started already, as you see.' This was a more direct approach than Ken Carver was used to taking. 'Do you want me to get them out?' He clearly didn't want to do that. In fact, it suited him, if he was to succeed with Donna, to let his wife and her husband go further. It was a moment, a fraction of time, when Donna had the levers of control in her hand. 'Let them have each other,' she told him. 'We can all have what we want so long as we keep ourselves under control.' Ken Carver thought this nonsense. 'You don't know Gillian. You must try yourself out some time and see if you can control her. I'm here to tell you you can't.' Firm, and sure. Yet Donna, nodding at the shed, told him, 'She won't control me. I'm in charge and I'm going to stay that way.' He couldn't see what she was talking about. 'I want to be close to you,' he offered. She regarded him with what he saw as a steely eye, though he couldn't know how close she was to turning to water. 'Whatever happens will happen on my terms.' He was amazed.

'And they are?'

It was her turn to be amazed. However had she been prepared for this?

'Whatever happens between us will remain between us. No whispering to people outside. No appeals for sympathy to anyone else. It lasts as long as it suits us, and when one person pulls out, the other three pull back. It's over. We go back as decently as we can to what we were.'

Ken was thinking as well as listening. 'What we are now?'

She nodded.

‘It’s impossible, but we can try. It sounds like a good rule, to me.’

She said, ‘It’s my rule.’ He said, ‘I think it’s your habit to rule.’ There was so much tension between them; she couldn’t relax, or even accept. He said, ‘Let’s take a few pictures. We’ll be trying to remember this place, one of these days.’

Kim Berg asked himself if he was marriageable. He must be, because plenty of his contemporaries were married, or going to be. He couldn’t be any different, but then, his mother was very different. Had it come down to him? He didn’t know. How would you know how you looked to another person? You might be attractive to someone that you, in your turn, were not attracted to. This sounded awful, until he realised that it happened all the time – to women, mostly, though not always. Sometimes the love of a woman made a man uncomfortable ...

Kim’s thoughts weren’t getting him anywhere. The next time he visited his mother he stopped on the way for a walk in the cemetery where his father was buried. The grave was quite close to the gate; his mother had always told him that this was in case the dead man got it in his head to escape. To go for a walk one night! Kim had an idea that his mother didn’t know whether this was a joke or not. Maybe there was a fragment of belief in what she was hoping, expecting, might happen? You could never tell with Ariadne Berg. He found the grave. There was nothing remarkable about the words chiselled in stone. Michael Anderson Berg, dearly beloved, gone to God on (date), forever remembered: it didn’t tell him anything he didn’t know. It occurred to Kim that he was looking not only at his own destination but everybody’s destination. Gone to God? That was a pretty wretched hope, he thought. If any gods existed they must get bored with the dead their only company. For that matter, who wanted gods for company, in this life or any other? Why wasn’t he married? He hadn’t found anybody that he wanted to live with, as his mother had.

Yet!

The moment that this word came into his mind he began to walk towards the gate, towards his car, towards, he realised, his life. He opened the door of his car, got in, started the engine. He wanted to

sing. But what? All sorts of things came into his mind, but the one that stood out was Madame Butterfly's 'One fine day', and he couldn't sing that. It was written for a woman, and he was a man. What a song! One fine day he'll find me ... The man she was missing would come over the brow of the hill ... Kim thought of this opera, which he'd never seen. The husband did come back, with an American woman he'd married in the country which was his home. Cio-Cio (another CC, Kim realised, in a momentary, quirkily humorous movement of his mind) had killed herself. Audiences cried. Tragedy, the thinkers said, and tried to analyse it. It's all a matter of fortune, Kim told himself, and there's no way of controlling that. Fortune? Millions of people played with this roguish influence on human life, and how pathetically they did it! Gambling, taking plunges, risking more than they could afford to lose ... giving up, really, and letting things beyond control take hold of the only life they'd ever get. I don't know what this is going to cost me, he told himself, as he put the car in gear and caused it to move forward, but I'm not leaving it to chance ...

What am I doing, he asked himself as the car moved onto the road taking him south, towards the place of two waters where one of his mother's friends lived: what am I doing? He examined himself, hands controlling the steering wheel. I'm taking control of my life, though I know that's not possible. So what am I doing, then? He drove, waiting for his answer to arrive. All he could think of was his mother's house, but as he imagined it, the doors and windows were open wide to any force, any agent of chance, that entertained the idea of coming in. I'm dreaming and I'm wide awake, he said, aloud, to the open window of his car, and this is how I'm going to live. If they come to take me away, they'll find me ready and not unwilling, however sad it makes me feel. Then a thought broke in. I'm going to die but I want to go after my mother. It's only natural for a person to lose their partner; it happens to everybody one (not fine!) day or another, but nobody should see their son or daughter carried out before them. That's not how things should be!

How *should* things be?

He thought of playing cards, of people taking whatever the casino handed them, and he pushed them out of mind. Drive straight, he

told himself, gripping the wheel now, stick to the road, take whatever comes! Don't try to make things happen, let them arrive ...

He was ready for love.

It wasn't long in coming. A young woman walked into Brooklands Freight one morning to see if they could arrange rapid delivery of fish to hotels and restaurants in a wide arc in the northern part of the state and southern New South Wales. Kim commented that women walking through the door at Brooklands Freight were rare, and the stranger replied that she was doing what had been her brother's job. Kim, assuming that this was only filling in for a few days, inquired, 'What's up with your brother?'

Her reply came from a calm and distant place: 'He won't be coming back.'

Kim, feeling himself challenged, said, 'I'm sorry to be hearing that.' He felt he should say more. 'You can depend on us. We'll get the job done for you. All you've got to do is tell us what you want. We'll take it from there.'

What had happened to her brother? It was none of his business but he felt he had to ask. 'What was your brother's name?'

'Kim.'

Kim Berg felt shaken. 'Kim?'

She nodded, and he could see how uncomfortable she was, distress not far away. 'Guess what. That's my name. Kim Berg.'

She studied him. 'You're a Kim?'

'I am.' He felt daring, and a need to be that way. 'Have been all my life.'

She stifled something between a sob and relief, and said, 'This is amazing.' He wanted her to say more, but she was studying him. 'Much the same age.' As her brother, he realised. 'I'm twenty-four. I tell everyone that I deal with here that I'm twenty-seven. They don't believe me, but it helps.'

'They're older than you?'

'And tougher. They're School of Hard Knocks people and I've had it easy. Till now. I have to keep my wits about me in this place. Stuff goes missing. Stuff ends up in the wrong hands unless you're on

top of everything. Everything's got to be checked, but that won't help you unless the right people do the checking.'

She was interested by now. 'How did you get the job? You sound like you're not in your right place.'

This amused him. 'I suppose I'm not. But I left my last job because it didn't suit me. I got this one through a friend of mine who's good at arranging things. Making things happen. I think they gave it to me because they thought I'd be easy to fool. Well I'm not. And the place, believe it or not, is running fairly honestly right now. How long can we keep it that way? I don't know. Let's wait and see.'

He'd shown his vulnerability. She liked him for this. 'I'm sorry I can't stay. I'd like to continue this conversation, but I've got to rush away.'

He couldn't let it end like that. 'When can I see you then?' They made an arrangement for a drink in South Yarra, not so far away, on the Friday night, two nights ahead. But she hadn't said her name.

'If I get there before you, and they ask me who I'm looking for, what will I say to them?'

'Sophie Villeneuve.'

He wanted to say 'Wow!' Instead he said, 'A French name?' She nodded. He thought. 'Meaning old town.' Some attention, some trust, or willingness left her eyes. 'No! No no no! That's wrong! *New* town, that's what it means!' Something lavish, something excitable entered his soul. 'How new? Who built it? I want to know all about it! I hope you're going to tell me?'

It was going well. 'Friday night, then. What time?' It was soon arranged, and she was gone. Gone from the office but not, Kim hoped, his life.

They had leisurely drinks at a South Yarra hotel, then they walked a hundred yards down the road to a French restaurant. 'I hope it's as good as they say it is,' Kim said, and she, Sophie answered. 'We'll make it good! When they see us they'll do something special!' He felt confident too. It would be their first dinner together, it had to be good.

She chose fricassée de dinde, and he, though he studied the menu closely, couldn't see anything he wanted more. 'I'll have the same.'

She suggested getting different dishes but he wanted the same as her. 'It feels right to me.' The waiter suggested a soup before the main dish but Sophie said no, then explained to Kim that the soup would be too filling, and would spoil what came after. So they called for a bottle of wine, and she chose, after studying the list, a German riesling. 'Not a French wine? You're crossing the border tonight?'

'I'm invading!'

They laughed at this as they would have laughed at anything. They were happy. They were in tune, in touch, with each other. They harmonised. Everything they said was new to each other, so they said the oldest things in the world. Men and women are born incomplete. We have to become. This means listening to each other. Words are a current of meaning and it travels both ways. Talking to someone – talking love to someone – is an opening of the self, the mind to the listening mind, which surges back through the words to the best and most inward places of the other, and – miracle – the other is no longer different. It's the same. Joined. Two are one. The turkey was delicious, the sauce delicious too. They didn't want it to end, but it was gone eventually, and their waiter brought back the menus. Sweets? Sophie said they would be fattening. The waiter suggested a fruit dish. They were tempted, but Kim had an idea. 'Let's go for a drive, or sit on the beach.'

It was a warm night, the beach sounded good. He said he had a rug in the car, they drove, got out and walked across the sand. They took off their shoes. 'I can feel sand in my socks. You'll get it in your stockings.' She moved, but didn't touch her feet. 'Possibly. I don't think so.' She was, he felt, miraculously sure. He would borrow that from her to fill his spaces. What could he give in return? She said, 'We cannot own the night. We must give ourselves to it. That is the only way we can own it – to be owned by it.' She sat silently a moment, then added, 'That is a law of the night.'

He felt it was the wisest thing he'd ever heard. He wanted to say something too, but no words came. He looked into the darkness, a wave or two rippling not far away. 'It's so quiet. I think the tide must be turning.' It was. She said, 'Is it going to come in and make us wet, or is it going out and leaving us dry?'

Neither of them knew and neither cared. If the tide came in, it brought them fortune. If it was going out, they could go with it to whatever the future held. They knew this without any need to say. Kim said to Sophie, 'If we listen hard to what the water's saying, we ought to be able to tell.' They listened, and they had no idea. He laughed. 'Guess, Sophie, guess!' She turned to look into his eyes. 'The water isn't talking. It's listening to us. What do we have to say?' It was her question, and he had to answer. The water was listening! He thought, then an impulse took him over from somewhere deep inside. 'Sometimes it's wild, and frightening. It washes things away and they're never seen again. Sometimes it's quiet because it wants to be inviting, but it's always there, surrounding us. We call it the sea, the ocean, the waves, but it's really our fortune, calling us to collect! To join. Not to hide from what it's got in store for us. That's what I think it is, and we're ...' His words had overpowered him, and he couldn't go on. Sophie clutched his hand with a strength he didn't know had been stored in her body. No, it wasn't stored, it was pouring out, gripping him, testing, holding. Then she let him go.

'Well, my friend? We are what?'

When he gathered himself to answer, he could hear the passion in his voice, and it surprised him. 'We're together now, and whatever it brings, we'll share.' When she didn't grip his hand again, he realised that that was what he'd been expecting her to do, but she was more strongly committed than that. He was sitting on the beach with a statue that lived and breathed, but the statue wasn't speaking, it was exuding certainty. A decision had been made.

They partied, they danced, they sang. They introduced each other to everyone they knew. Sophie's parents were delighted by the young man she'd chosen; they themselves were devoted and their immersion in a new land had pushed them together. Guy ('ghee') Villeneuve, a botanist, had been recruited by the CSIRO to work on the development of crops and fruit trees suitable for Australian climates, and Sophie's mother Cecile had extended her husband's fields into a hobby (at first) and then an occupation of her own: a native plant nursery. It amused Kim to hear her speaking in

accented English about species growing in areas that no longer suited them, relics, barely hanging on, of an earlier climate. ‘It was once a rain forest area,’ she would say, ‘but now there’s only this little valley and the one over the hill, and the rest is all schlerophyll’ – a word barely recognisable as she pronounced it. If Kim admired Cecile Villeneuve, Sophie adored his mother Ariadne, not least for her organic awareness of forces not normally discernible by the human brain. Ariadne might say to Sophie, ‘I followed you home last time you were here and I could sense no danger, not even a badly driven car. If anything had happened to you – if anything had *nearly* happened to you, I would have known!’ Sophie accepted this. She was under Ariadne’s protection; Ariadne was aware of the winds, the light, the moods of each and every day; she seemed sure that she would scent any danger, any threat, before it crossed the horizon. Her own mother, Cecile, would say to her, ‘Europe is full of old and terrible curses, memories, influences you cannot shake off, but here is better, there are not so many. On the other hand, I don’t know what to do about them, they are a mystery to me.’

Getting to know the new country’s plants, its habitats and habits, was the best way she could counter these influences she couldn’t see and therefore predict. ‘Rocky places, and swampy places, that cannot be cultivated, they are the best places to look for plants because people have mostly left them alone. Things grow among the rocks, or in the marshes, that no longer grow anywhere else because farmers have turned over the soil and planted crops. Sheep and cattle have eaten everything, or trampled it. It might be good farming but it’s very sad.’ Kim loved her when she was reflecting on things she’d learned since adopting his country. ‘I learn so much from your mother,’ he would say to Sophie: ‘You’ve been ever so lucky!’

They partied, they danced, they sang. What did they sing? Hit parade songs, songs they’d learned at school. Once, they rushed at the last minute to a hall named after Nellie Melba because Hans Hotter was to sing *Die Winterreise*. There were no tickets left. They pleaded. They’d sit in a corner, they didn’t need a chair. The lady said she’d *see*. She came back to tell them that in response to public demand, some chairs were to be put on stage, close to the singer and the piano.

‘It won’t be in proper balance but at least you’ll hear him sing.’ They bought a copy of the program to follow the famous words and they rushed to the stage. Five steps and they were among the chairs. The tall German bowed to his audience before turning to his partner’s piano and setting out on the unhappy lover’s journey so unlike the pathway Kim and Sophie saw before them. Their happiness was overwhelming and some of the songs were happy too, then sadness separated them from the young man who ends up in the snow with an organ grinder. As the last song died away, the couple felt their souls open for those denied the happiness that had come to them. Hotter bowed in his solemn way and Sophie became aware of what her parents had left behind when they chose their new country as the place to lead, and end, their lives. She was young. Kim had only a scrappy idea of the musical tradition that had produced the singing they’d heard, but felt that getting in, and being so close to the musicians, had changed him in some way he couldn’t describe. Sophie was, in a way she couldn’t really understand, a part, an off-shoot of that tradition, and it would be a blessing on them whenever they needed it, and called for it to come to them, explaining what human life could be when it was lived with understanding.

They partied, they danced, they sang. One warm day they decided to visit Ariadne. It was to be a surprise, but she wasn’t home, so they took themselves to the ocean side of the peninsula and lay among the dunes. Kim told Sophie he had a feeling that he’d been there before, though he knew he hadn’t. She looked around. ‘What makes you feel that way?’ He didn’t know. They were in fact within a few paces of the spot where Barbara Bishop had thought of her plan to get all three of her children to university, though neither of them knew that. Sophie ran her fingers over the rug they were lying on: ‘This rug knows us well, by now.’ It did and it didn’t. They hadn’t made love on it, nor anywhere else for that matter. Sophie felt it was time. ‘The sea is noisy today. Nobody will notice us.’ He was waiting. ‘Come closer Kim. Hold me.’ Each felt the other’s readiness. They became engrossed in each other, yielding, taking, giving, accepting more deeply than they’d done before. ‘Brush the sand away,’ she told him. ‘I don’t want it getting into what we are doing.’ He managed this. People making love can be an awkward sight,

but their relief is that they can't see themselves. They are responding to things surging inside them, and in the other. Kim and Sophie had the sound of the ocean, sometimes a roar of wind, to drive them into the sanctuary which was the space they were sharing and establishing. Lovers should never be without such spaces. It's a measure of their love, however fleeting, that they can make them. They did. They felt an outburst of that energy which takes life forward. As they lay beside each other, after, she said, 'That was quite an explosion!' He could tell she was happy with what they'd done. He opened one eye; hers were closed. The waves were still crashing, but they were out of sight. She said, 'If someone came upon us now, would you mind?' He was quick. 'No. I would say, this is how I want to be. If you don't like it, move quietly away.' She giggled. 'I thought you were going to say "quickly", not quietly.' After a moment, he said, 'Both!'

It struck him that thinking of some *other* person had brought an end to their first ever love-making. This might have been sad, *was* sad, except that they were still alone, and could give more love if the impulse ran through them again, as it might. 'I'm dry,' he said. 'Excuse me, but I need a drink.' He picked up a water bottle, offered it to her, then drank. 'I don't seem to need it,' she said. 'I don't feel I need anything now. I am complete.' He asked her to hold him again, and she wriggled nearer. 'This is good. I want to be close to you. I *need* to be close to you. We are joined now. Permanently. We have done something that we cannot undo.' She paused for so long that he felt she'd chosen to be silent, then she added, 'I think we have further to go, but we have started.' Suddenly she sat up, putting her hand on him to stop him rising too. 'I have longed for this moment. I have wondered what it would be like. Now I am here, and all I can think of is ...' she lifted a hand, and pointed at nothing in particular '... how pleased I am that I waited all that time.'

'Does it seem long, to you?' He was curious.

Her answer came: 'Yes, no, it doesn't matter any more!'

Happiness affected them differently. She set a date for their wedding, he agreed. 'Put it in your diary,' she told him. He touched his head. 'It's there already.' She knew he wouldn't write anything down, but

didn't really mind: he wouldn't forget! She had the wedding organised weeks before it happened, while he drifted and floated, smiling when people asked him for the date and place of the ceremony. He wanted their wedding to be held in the chapel of Saint Peter, the holy place of his school, where scores of his contemporaries or recent old boys had had their weddings. 'All the boarders stand and watch the bride and groom come out, and they wish they were grown up too! They stand in a line and I always think it's a line of envy. I know how lucky they're going to make me feel!'

He talked about his job, though his ideas were vague. 'It's not much more than a house full of rackets, but someone's got to create a semblance of order, and that's me,' he said. 'Someone's got to hand out the jobs, collect the money and bank it.' It was all he could do to stop himself laughing. 'I'll get a real job one day. When we have kids, I'll want them to be proud of me.' She pouted. 'Will you train them to be proud of me? As well?' He said, 'I'd like to be a busy little bird, whistling songs and flitting about whenever I felt the mood. And I'd feed our little chicks!' This was for her, then he went on, 'I think I should build a real career of some sort, but I don't know what it would be built on. It hasn't come to me yet. I'm looking for opportunities, let's say.' This was what he was like in the weeks before their wedding. Entertaining plans, noticing the bubbles of thought that floated into his mind. He was as fixed on the wedding – or Sophie, really – as she was. Nothing would happen until the two were one. She knew this and approved, but one night she told him that he'd changed since she knew him. 'How's that?' he wanted to know, in the way of someone who says, can you explain this dream I've had? 'You've become like your mother,' she told him.

That pulled him up short. 'Like my mother? Really? What do I do that's ...' He couldn't finish. His mother had always amazed him, he loved being loved by her, she wasn't like any other woman he knew, certainly not like Sophie, whom he was going to marry ...

What did she mean?

He looked at his love, a question in his eyes. Sophie was alarmed. It had slipped out, she hadn't meant any harm, she wasn't thinking of anything in particular: now that he was pressing her to say more,

she didn't really know what she'd meant, and yet she must have had some insight, intuition, some reason to say what she'd said. She tried. Tried hard.

'Your mother's so detached, and yet she's always there. She comes in from unexpected angles. I never know what she's going to say. I can't guess. Probably you can because you've known her all your life. I'm still getting to know her.' She felt a need to try harder. 'It was something that suddenly came into my mind. It wasn't meant as a criticism ...' She might have gone on for ages, but it occurred to Kim that she might be right. 'Perhaps I am. It would be good if I was. Nobody's ever said that to me before. I'll have to think about it.'

She was clear about this. 'No Kim, no. Don't think about it. Just forget it. I don't know why I said it. It slipped out. I want you to stay as you are. Be natural. Don't think, just do what you want. Do things promptly, the moment you get an idea. Act on it.' He heard the desperation in her voice and embraced her, letting love solve the problem, whatever it was. 'I don't want to know,' he said. 'I don't care.' She drew lines of love on his cheek, his forehead, she kissed his eyes. 'I want you just the way you are.'

Order was restored. They went on as they were, but the thing had been said. Observations sometimes have no effect, but they leave room, a mark, a scar, for later observations to gather at the very same place. The early observation is a marker for other, later, ones to follow. A point where they can gather. Was Kim like his mother? He'd never put words around her, sketched her with words, used words to answer questions about her. He'd taken her as a natural event, like a cloud shadowing a patch of earth for a time before it moved. Clouds are most certainly there, in the skies above, they shade us, they give us rain, they go away and their relatives come the next day or the next minute, evanescent, but real. Aeroplanes can fly through them, storms can form in them, lightning flash! Clouds are certainly something, but they change shape all the time, resembling one thing this minute, resembling nothing the next. They're not unfriendly, they're part of nature, forever there, going away, reconstituting themselves ...

The more he thought about it, in the days that followed, the more he saw that she was right. Sophie had grasped the ineffable thing

about his mother, and she'd told him he was like her. Was that good, or frightening? It must be good, he thought, because it was a thought that made him proud. He couldn't, surely, be that good? Did it mean that he was senior, superior to, or more experienced than the young woman he was going to marry? Certainly not. He was only a junior, inexperienced cloud. He didn't know what the earth was like, not yet. He'd find out by marrying. Sophie would teach him. He laughed uproariously when the thought occurred to him.

She'd bring him down to earth!

Sally McGraw said to her son, 'There's one good thing about you turning up. I can go to England.'

'Who with?'

'Would you believe, there's a group of mothers from your old school. More money than I've got, most of them. And older than I am, too. They've never been overseas, they want to go before it's too late.'

'Do they think there's going to be another war?'

He was so dense. 'People get old. Have you not noticed?'

Rebukes amused him. 'I've been wondering why people fall over. Is that the reason?'

She looked at him shrewdly. 'If I keep the shop open, I'll almost be able to afford it.'

He saw the plan. 'I should have stayed away another year!'

This meant he'd agreed. He'd run the shop, while she strolled around Mayfair, watched the changing of the guard, read all the stones in Westminster Abbey, took tours, inspected poets' houses, saw Shakespeare's plays (one or two at least, to talk about when she got home), sat in the House of Commons for a couple of minutes ...

She had an idea that Mr Churchill had died, though; what a pity she wouldn't hear one of his famous speeches ...

He was suddenly practical. 'How long will you be away? We'll have to order everything before you go. Everything has to be delivered at the right time. I'm hopeless at preparing things in advance, you know that. If we fix things up so that all I've got to do is keep things running day by day, I'll be okay.' Suddenly he felt a need to be gracious, if only a little. 'You deserve this, mum. You're going to England? Bless you

mother, I never thought you would.’ And practical too. ‘They have fancy dress parties on the ship. You’ll have to take things to wear. But first you’ll have to decide who you’re going to be!’ Pleasant fantasies ran through his mind. ‘Lady Macbeth!’ This idea pleased him, but she was glaring. ‘Only teasing. Not your style, mother. She was more ruthless than you’ve ever been!’ He put his arms around her. ‘Off you go mum. I’ll run the shop.’ Then a bit of bargaining. ‘I’ll write to you if you write to me!’ Eyes full of tears, she said to her son, ‘I never thought you’d do it. I wasn’t going to ask. I thought I’d never get there. All those women with dull husbands who’ve got plenty of money and no curiosity about what they don’t know, they were all going to go to London and I was going to be stuck here, not even knowing where my son was ...’

She broke down. He heard her sobs as stabs of pain, but were they hers or his? ‘We’ll get a map,’ he said, ‘and mark all the places where you’re going. We’ll get the train timetables and then I’ll know where you’re travelling. You’ll have to go on the Flying Scotsman, mother. The Flying Scotsman to take you to Edinburgh, and then you can visit the castle on the hill.’ He had an idea. ‘The Loch Ness monster! Take your binoculars and when you see him, call out, “Hello there, I thought you were back home running the shop!”’

She laughed through her tears. He was so good to her, this wayward bastard of a son. All she had. He knew how difficult he’d been, and he was making up for it. She said, ‘It’s the opportunity of a lifetime. I didn’t want to let it go, but I thought ...’

‘You thought I’d be what I’ve always been, but I’ve turned myself inside out. Or I’m going to. While you’re away the shop will be open from nine to five as if some pious little prick was behind the counter. And there will be, and it will be me!’ He was triumphant, yet she knew how vulnerable he was. It would be good for him to be responsible for a while, steady, careful, cautious, polite to everybody that came in looking, asking, needing help. She wanted to tease him as he teased her, all the time: ‘You’ll grow into the routine. When I get back, I’ll have to throw you out of the shop, you’ll be so used to it you won’t want to give it up!’

Some warning signal began to flash in his mind. ‘That’s no joke you’re talking about there. You might find you’ve got a very needy,

nervous, wretched little fellow who's starting to grow up. You might have to send me back to Queensland to go on the trawlers again.' She knew to take this seriously. He wasn't joking. 'Was it good on the trawlers, or the opposite?'

'It was okay. I enjoyed it, actually. But I'm not going down that path again. I've got to get somewhere but I don't know where it is, not yet.'

'Life doesn't last long, son. You don't want to still be lost, when you die. That'd be a bad outcome ...' She couldn't finish; she didn't need to.

'I won't be lost when I die, mother. I'll find myself before then.'

She went, and he was on the wharf, throwing streamers. Remember them? England was so far away. People came back, but many partings were forever. Strange that ships, so much more cumbersome than planes, called out deeper feelings. Planes were more casual, despite the drama of crashes, a field in which they were outdone by ships. Remember lighthouses, and murderous reefs not marked on any chart? People tumbling into lifeboats, and heading, hoping, for a welcoming shore? We change the world with our inventions, there are people planning trips in space. What would you do on the moon, or Mars, if you got there? Say you wanted to go home?

Why do we travel? To find another home? Or homes? Or to know the home we come from because we've seen everything else, and find our own place good? Why do we travel? To see what we haven't seen? This sounds like a good answer until we accept the fact that once seen the destination, revered as it may be – the *Taj Mahal*, the Empire State – is now a part of us, tucked away in our mind, no longer a destination because we've brought it back inside, where our weaknesses and problems are stored. Sally travelled well, and she defied her son by planting a vicious looking knife in her luggage and a bottle of red ink so she could be Lady Macbeth at the shipboard party; she took a copy of the play so she'd have lines to pronounce in a deafening shriek that made the passengers laugh, just as her son made people laugh at his tricks. He was the one who'd interfered with the school clock so that it rang one hundred and eighteen chimes to celebrate the hour of six – dinnertime for boarders.

She'd put him in the boarding house so that he'd be sorted out but it made him worse. Tales drifted back to her occasionally, exaggerated no doubt, to form a catalogue of his exploits in Queensland, Tasmania and wherever else he'd been. He'd never had enough money in those wandering years to go overseas and she was glad. They'd be less tolerant over there. In India they'd lock him up, in Iran ... heaven only knew! She'd read about men called Burton, and Lawrence, who'd learned foreign languages, dressed as they did in dangerous places, and infiltrated to see what they were like from the inside. What was the good of that? Answer: danger was the place where they needed to live, and why? Because it was one slip, one mis-step from death. These mad and brilliant men loved to dance on the edge of the cliff, loved to see the fear in others' eyes as they performed their tricks. They stepped forward when others went back. He'd had military training, her son, like the others of his time, and he'd come back from it pleased to tell her one of the things they'd been trained to do. 'They'd line us up,' he told his mother, still wearing his khaki on the day they let him home, 'and they'd sing out "Open Order March!"' He bellowed the words, slipping into falsetto at the end. 'And the next bit was interesting. The front line took a step forward, the back line took a step back, and the mob in the middle stayed where they were.'

'So?' she'd said to her son, dressed as a soldier, on the day they'd handed him back.

'It struck me,' he said, 'that for once they were being realistic. If you notice, mother dear, whenever there's a decision that's got to be made, some want to get stuck into it straight away, some don't know what to do so they stand still, and there's another lot, which I don't belong to, that take a step back. Have you noticed?'

She had. She had her son to teach her that. 'So?' He smiled at this. She'd always be his to torment, he'd thought, but now she wasn't. She was on a ship, going to the other side of the world, and he was going to run the shop. He could see her, as close to the railing as she could get on the crowded ship, and she could see him on the wharf, a bright red rose on his lapel. 'So you can see me as the ship pulls away,' he'd told her, and the rose had done its job, for fifty or sixty yards and then, without him noticing, she felt sure, she'd slipped

away from the crowd – she’d taken that fateful pace backwards – and gone down to her cabin to separate on her own, waiting to feel whatever she was going to feel about handing responsibility for her son to the man himself, as she’d never really done before. He was on his own ...

No he wasn’t. It struck her that she’d made him responsible for the shop, and it was a form of herself that she’d handed him. Surely – wouldn’t it – it would be easier for him to manage than having a mother who wanted the world for her son when he didn’t want it.

But he did! He wanted the bit that wasn’t hers, if only he could find it. He could get on those Queensland prawn trawlers but the trouble was he had to get off eventually and come back to land, to be owned all over again. The problem was insoluble.

Except that it wasn’t. A madman, a criminal, trying to escape the London police, pushed through a crowd on the Piccadilly tube platform, saw a door open in the leading carriage, and shoved her off the platform in his struggle to get away from his pursuers. The train had stopped by then, she wasn’t crushed, but she hit her head on the steel rail, and couldn’t be revived when they got her back on the platform. An ambulance driven at speed got her to hospital but it was too late. The damage had been done.

The London police were thorough. Word reached Melbourne. A Victoria policeman came to Sally McGraw’s Home Wares of South Yarra with the news. ‘I’m looking for the son of Sally McGraw.’

‘That’s me,’ the once-young Noel replied. ‘What’s up?’

The policeman looked around. Nobody else in the shop, thank god. ‘I’m afraid I’ve got bad news for you.’ He paused, lowering his head before he went on.

She was buried in British soil. An undertaker’s letter, written with British courtesy, arrived, and with it a bill. He organised the payment. Letters came from customers once word got out, and he was surprised at the respect his mother had commanded; good things she’d done for people. She had a life apart from me, he saw, and he’d never bothered himself with it. Too self-centred, he told himself, and resolved to change.

This took the form, for the next three years, of making the shop more profitable than it had ever been. When he'd doubled its takings by stunts, advertising and amazing one-day-only bargains, he stepped back. That's enough, he told himself. I've shown (her) that I can do it. Now it's my turn to look after myself. I've got to be something different from what I've ever been. What have I been, he asked himself, and the answers that came to him were dismal.

So what was he going to do now?

The only thing he could think of was acting. He liked playing parts. He could be something other than himself. There was the Melbourne Theatre Company, but he had no experience. And there were little amateur groups here and there, doing all the uncommercial things. Finally he found one doing *As You Like It*, read the play at home and decided to give it a go. He auditioned, and got the minor part of Silvius, but when the daughter of one of the actors fell seriously ill, he was upgraded to Jacques, which gave him one of the Bard's most famous speeches:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women, merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

The first time he said the famous lines the rest of the company was amazed, and applauded him. He'd done something with every word! But when he got home and studied the part, he decided to do the opposite. The thing had to hang together as one considered statement. That was how it was written. That meant finding the moments that needed to be emphasised to give the speech its overwhelming eloquence. He used a mirror, and a stop-watch, until he had it right. Then he began to study the rest of the play, looking for ways to make each part resonate against his own central statement. He found he couldn't do it because everything that mattered took place in the forest, and songs burst out whenever the playwright felt like it:

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,

That o'er the green corn-field did pass,
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, Ding:
Sweet lovers love the spring.

Why had he been so cynical so long? Shakespeare knew the worst of mankind, but he knew its better sides too. Noel, a shopkeeper now, knew that he hadn't accepted his own humanity. Never had. All that time on the water, trawling for prawns, he'd been running away. Then he'd come back to his mother's shop to have a look before he ran away again, and her presence had challenged him, he'd released her and taken himself into business, and good heavens, he'd found he was good at it. Why? Because he could second-guess what the public wanted. It occurred to him that he could start a second shop, and a third, a whole chain perhaps, making himself rich ...

What would he do with his money, if he had it? Something told him this was the wrong question: what would he do with himself? Sick at heart, he faced his problem at last.

Societies change. This means people change, but which comes first? Where, when and how does the move begin? Wheels rumble far out of sight before anything happens at the top. All sorts of considerations weigh on people's minds before they make a move. J Brian C Claringbold was asked by a senior lecturer to 'play a role' in that gentleman's research for a book on the land selection acts of the 1860s; CC knew it meant many hours of drudge, turning the pages of ancient reports, looking for reasons why selectors left their holdings to be taken back by squatters who'd previously held the same land. The pay-off would be that he'd be regarded as 'steady' by those who distributed funding for research. The drawback would be that he'd be bored, and known to be subservient. He looked around, hoping there might be funding from some other source, though in general you were more likely to get it from the place where you were known. He wanted to break new ground. He talked about his problem with Endless, who had already perfected his way of saying 'That's an interesting one. Let me have time to think about that.'

A fortnight later the rising young politico rang him to say, 'I've been talking to Lady Whitmore. You may not know it but her late husband largely controlled the White Star Line. All those ships. The best of them take the well-to-do on trips home to England, the rough and tumble boats bring migrants out here to settle. All those class differences neatly contained in two lots of ships, painted in different ways according to who's on board. You'd have to be able to make something out of that.' CC was excited. Society was best described when seen from a range of angles. What about government policy? There'd have to be something there? He said to Endless, 'Could you get me an introduction? Something personal would be best, but a letter might do.' He was hoping for something personal, and Endless obliged. After another week, he rang CC to say, 'I've had a word with Lady Whitmore and she's happy for you to call and discuss what you want to do. Be careful what you say. Both lines will need to come out looking good. There's no need to paint lilies with gold but no nasty smelly incidents either. You'll know what to do. You should be able to get most of what you need. She's still got a lot of pull with the people running the ships. If any of the history people try to block your way, tell the professor that she might, if she's pleased with your work, make a donation. Maybe even fund a chair up there in Parkville. But only dangle that in front of him if you need to.'

CC met Lady Whitmore and was at his most charming. She, in a fine old home in Toorak, put him at ease. She'd love to assist with a really *worthy* cause. A nation as far away as Australia couldn't get along without ships. They were central to the nation's history. CC enjoyed her use of the word 'nation', so much more dignified, more flag-worthy, than *country*. Farmers talked about country. Even blackfellas talked about country. A nation was something else! People lived and died for nations, people enshrined their love of country in the idea of a *nation*! CC listened respectfully. 'Tell your professor, or whoever you report to, that your project has my backing. I'll write to your professorial board if need be. But,' the good lady said decisively, 'there should be no need!' She meant that if these people had any knowledge of the way the world worked, her support was enough.

It was. CC was soon working on ships, not the struggles of selectors. This amused him because in a way the two projects were two sides of, two angles on, the same project: after all, it was the squatter families that were likely to be taking trips back to England, and as for the selectors struggling to survive on holdings that were mostly too small and quite without amenity, they were the same underprivileged types who migrated from England in the hope of finding something better on the other side of the world.

Hope springs eternal, CC told himself, and knew that, at this early stage of his career at least, his sympathies lay with those who were struggling ... but to get to work on any facet of this struggle, this conflict, you needed the help of the other side. When they played each other at cricket, these two *nations*, you had no hope of getting on the field unless you could play the game well!

The day he began work on his project, CC dropped a note of thanks to Endless. His help had been vital.

He loved reading about the ships, but the passengers were even more interesting. There were wealthy people in several coastal cities who had a feeling that they really belonged in England, that's to say they were truly at home there, while others, landed people from the western district of his state, had established a way of life that was distinctively Australian, yet they too travelled to England, staying at times for long periods. Historians, he came to believe, could easily handle disputes or controversies where the sides were clearly separated, but it was rather harder to identify people's positions when there was a continuity from one extreme – if that was the right word, and he felt it probably wasn't – to the other. Australian-ness and English-ness were apparently easy to locate if you examined the test cricket series between the two countries, but the closer you looked the harder it was to be sure which end of the continuum you were looking at.

There was also the question of how you identified the start – and that *could* be easy – and the end of a movement, or period. The nation was bringing in migrants from countries where the language was other than English; if this went on indefinitely there would come a time when the connection with England would have become so diluted that

it would have lost its significance; the Union Jack in the corner of the flag would be of historical interest only. This would mean that its meaning – what it represented – would have changed. He mused on this, then returned to the question of a period ending. Why did it matter? Because he hoped to graduate, at some stage, from dealing with ‘enclosed’ topics to a general history of his land, and that would require him to have anticipated the difficulties of doing so and to have clarified his ideas to the extent that he could work on a far-reaching project without having his underlying plans, his structural ideas, collapse under the weight being put on them. How did you know when a period had ended? You sensed it, somehow, in something you saw, read about, or listened to, and you felt you knew. Something certain loomed out of uncertainty, or, to put it another way, a new certainty replaced one you had clung to before.

At about the same time he went to a performance in the city’s Catholic cathedral of the *Officium Defunctorum* of Tomas Luis de Victoria, written for the funeral of a Spanish royal in 1603, and it seemed to him, though he searched his feelings closely, that the music was written not only for the end of an individual but of a historical period. How could this be? Did Victoria know he was doing this, or did the feeling creep into the music without the composer realising? CC had no idea. Perhaps he was reading this feeling into the music from his knowledge, such as it was, of the rise and eventual fall of Spain’s imperial power? This seemed likely. If so, did this mean that you couldn’t separate the historian from the subject that he wrote about? Yes or no? If you couldn’t, what did that mean for the historian trying to write an objective history of something dear to him, like his own country – nation, if you preferred that word? It was commonly said that Australia had passed from a mining age to a pastoral age: if this was so, where was the line? Was a line needed, or was it artificial, and therefore unnecessary?

CC told himself that he’d never achieve anything until he’d sorted out these and a host of other problems presenting themselves, but he could also see, from watching older practising historians and talented, aspiring historians like himself, that brilliant, unbalanced people didn’t last long or achieve very much; his field of study required a

balanced mind, and that, he saw very easily, required a balanced life, which meant, of course, that he must ...

... marry well.

He cast around and found himself drawn to a most attractive (for him) young woman called Prue Gainsford, the grand-daughter of Lady Whitmore, whom his work was serving as much as it served his own ends. He made it his business to get to know the young woman, mostly in connection with the work he was doing on the shipping lines, so that when he was ready to present his work to the titled lady as well as to the university, he would have, at last, something of interest to show her which was also a presentation of himself.

His tactic worked. Better than I deserve, he told himself in a moment of humility. Lady Whitmore adopted the project and the bright young man who was carrying it out, she invited him to call on her to talk about what he was doing, and she asked Prue Gainsford to join her and her guest, 'to pour the tea and give him someone his own age to talk to, so he doesn't feel he's stuck with me!' The young people began to see each other privately, they discovered that there were many things they wanted to do – like travel – which they could only do together if they were married, so that was what they settled on: they would share a life, and two would live as one.

Some of CC's friends, and some of Prue's, were amazed that such a settlement could be reached so undramatically, so easily, 'like an arrangement', someone said. And yet it was not only so, but it was understood. Prue told CC one morning, over a cup of tea at Lady Whitmore's, while the old lady dealt with some matter on the phone in another room, that he was not to mistake her name for her nature. 'My mother,' she said, 'gave me one of those names that hand women the job of upholding, even embodying, various virtues – Constance, Mercy, Faith, and Prudence. Some of us take no notice, while some of us use the name as a mask for things we really care about.' She stopped at that point, sure that he would understand, and he did. If she could make a bargain and stick to it – as clearly she believed she could – then so could he. On one thing she would not yield. They would *not* marry at the school chapel, as he proposed, but at Saint John's, Toorak, like all the best society weddings. He fell happily

into line, if a trifle surprised at first, but the wedding, and reception nearby, was old, English Melbourne at its most confident, meaning its finest. ‘A lovely couple’ was the verdict, and they believed that not only was this true, but that it would remain so for the rest of a life together.

Prue’s parents owned an apartment in nearby Malvern and that became their home. CC was chatting one morning about things happening in the history department, while his wife flipped idly through a Georges catalogue; they supposed they would purchase a home of their own one day, and furnish it. Very quietly, but in some strange way abruptly, she said to him, ‘You won’t be able to write about Australia until you can see it from the outside.’ He raised his brows; what did she mean?

‘We have to go to Europe, and for us that means England. I think we’ll be surprised by what they see in us.’ She paused. He broke in. ‘Themselves reflected, do you mean?’

She didn’t. ‘We don’t know what we are until we know what they are. How they do the same things differently from us. When we first arrive ...’

She meant it then: he was startled. He’d certainly been tossing around the idea of a visit to the British Isles, because lots of people said you had to go there for one reason or another, but Prue was committed – indeed, was *decided* – on some level he hadn’t realised was there. It wasn’t a suggestion, or an idea, it was a command, yet it had none of the character of a military command. What was it? He saw, he sensed, that she’d perceived her idea as a necessity, and given it to him as her partner: they were equals. That was the meaning of marriage, for them if not for everybody. He saw also, for he was inescapably struggling with ideas of how history might be written, that he, as historian, had another lesson to learn. There was an inward dimension to everything, actions made compulsory by realisations that hadn’t, perhaps, been put into words until that moment. She was still speaking.

‘... they’ll have all the advantages. They’ll be on their home ground and we won’t know what to do. How to do things. We’ll show

our inexperience every time we speak, even to ask a question. We'll get over that part of the problem, but it will take time.'

He said, 'What other parts are there, that you can see?'

Her fingers were still now, on the pages of the catalogue. 'There will always be a problem until we feel better than them, or at the very least, equal. That will take time, and a lot of thought. Adjustment.' She looked into his eyes for a moment, then, to his surprise, she shuddered. 'I don't want to feel inferior, yet that's what going there will do to me!'

Anxious by now, he said, 'Is that what's going to happen to me?'

'It will,' she said, 'but you'll deal with it differently.' She went inside herself, considering. 'You'll deal with it as a problem of writing history, and that will be a good way to handle it, if not perfect. But I'll have to rebuild myself, covering up weaknesses I didn't know were there.' He wanted to go on, but she said it would be better to do their thinking when they were confronted by the problem, day by day. 'It'll be a struggle, but I think we'll win.'

He admired her strength. Her mother should have found some other name for her. He had another dimension to deal with now, in his study of the human past. There must have been women like his wife all over the place, saying things they knew were true because they couldn't avoid them, even if their men, their brothers, fathers and husbands, did. This would be the biggest problem of all, writing histories that took such women into account. That, he had a feeling, was one thing the British Isles were not going to teach him, nor could his homeland, the nation that had developed from a colony. He would have to work it out for himself.

They went to London.

They visited all the famous places, but they also studied the Underground map and got off at stations they'd never heard of, strolling to the next stop on the line, getting to know where and how ordinary people lived. Central London had been largely rebuilt but there was still wreckage from the war in outlying places, and a feeling that something had not been entirely regained. The Britons talked as if they still had an empire, but appeared not to believe themselves.

Ordinary people were poor, and struggling, so that CC and Prue found that they not only had enough money, but that they were abundant in their confidence. Shopkeepers said, 'The war never touched your country, you were lucky to be so far away.' It was no good telling such people that the Japanese had bombed Darwin and slipped into Sydney Harbour one night; no use talking about that wartime artefact of the Australian mind, the Brisbane Line. These people had lost homes and family members, had crawled into the Underground when sirens blew to warn them of approaching bombers: war ...

Their experience had been a sentence that neither CC nor Prue could finish; Australia had had luck, there was no dodging it. Australia had been frightened, but it hadn't lost its still-forming identity. Prue said to CC one morning, over a cup of wretched tea, 'Here's an ending for you, my love, and a new beginning, and we're in the middle of it. It's not such a comfortable place to be, is it?' and he had to agree. They went to Paris, and the world's most glamorous city had the poison of hatred in its air, because those who had resisted hated those who'd found it safer to please the Germans. Signs around the city told of shootings that had taken place when scores had been settled. They made a brief excursion into Germany and found themselves admiring the efforts they saw to rebuild after the devastation of a country now saddled with the opprobrium of 'starting' the war. 'These people too have seen an end to end all endings and are trying to start again,' CC commented. 'The Brits are trying to get back to what they were, but these people ...' He could only wave a hand at what they saw around them: what were these people trying to become, to build for themselves? Their Australian imaginations had no answer: they returned to London.

It seemed a little easier to understand, after France and Germany. They talked, the young couple, about what sort of country their homeland might have become if it had been settled – colonised – by another European power. La Perouse had reached Sydney at almost the same time as Governor Phillip's settlement had begun the modern Australian journey: the local blacks' millennia of occupation had yet to be recognised: La Perouse had gone away, and never been seen again. 'We'd be different,' Prue told her husband, 'but in what way, it's

impossible to say.’ He looked at her, and she went on – this was their understanding now, their two minds joining by day as their bodies did by night – ‘It’s impossible because to know different things you must let your imagination work differently.’

‘Is that not possible?’ CC wanted to know.

She smiled. ‘It’s possible, but we can’t imagine what it would be like. Why not? Because we’ve only got one imagination, and it’s the hardest part of us to control. In fact ...’ she began, but what she’d said had stirred her husband to finish. ‘... if you can control your imagination, it’s not your imagination any more, it’s some other part of your mind taking over!’ He finished, almost shouting, ‘By definition!’

They had worked themselves into a corner, but they were both smiling: how well they suited each other.

They had one last week in London, and it affected them, setting up some sort of norm of what a city should be, even if still damaged. ‘They’ll come back,’ CC said one morning, as they were walking in Hyde Park, passed by a troop of horsemen in uniforms of red and black, ‘Guards’ of some sort, riding the most splendid horses. ‘This country’s famous for restraint,’ was Prue’s comment, ‘but they’re about as far out as you could be.’ The Guards had busbees on their heads. What they had *in* their heads was a perfect surrender of identity: not people, hardly human, but institutions. One couldn’t imagine them with children, unless the little people were staring at them, admiring. Prue said, ‘They’re a sort of outlying part of the Royal family, and the funny thing is ...’

She looked at her husband with the beginnings of despair in her eyes, and yet, he sensed, some sort of resistance.

‘... so are we.’

He considered this, the Australian historian, or historian-to-be, standing with his wife, his other half now, in a country they felt part of, but couldn’t control, couldn’t restrain. It was down, for the moment, and not terribly threatening, but it mustn’t be allowed to get back in charge. He said, CC, half-humbled, half-insurgent, ‘I’m glad we’re going home. Only a few more days and we’ll be on the boat. I was reading, before we came away, about the soldiers in the first world

war, who'd been through hell in France, and how wonderful it was when their ship pulled into Perth.'

Prue looked at him, curious to know if he had an answer to the men on horseback, superb in their saddles, a little way ahead of them now.

'They'd been in France for four years, some of them, and they'd forgotten what it was like back home. Then they saw the country, smelt the air, and found themselves bathed with light ...' He stopped moving. He stood still, elated yet a little confused. 'They'd never realised how good it would be, after four years over here fighting, to ...'

He lacked a verb, he lacked coherence, his words had deserted him. Some realisation hovered about him, waiting to be called. Unexpected words came from him, while his wife looked, and understood. 'I am going to write our story. We've got a wonderful one to tell. Including the soldiers who didn't get back. They're buried all over the place in France. Some of them died here, in hospitals. How sad.' He looked at his wife, feeling a vow forming inside him. 'But there's other stories too, of men and women who never left. They lived simple lives, many of them, tangled lives, some of the others. Some made money and some made crime. Some made laws, legislation ...'

She knew he was thinking of Endless Knight, his friend, and laughed out loud.

'... and others broke the laws, or challenged them, but ...'

He couldn't finish. His vision had slipped away. She took his hand. They had their last days in London, they went to the theatre a couple of times, the British were marvellous at that. They packed their bags and caught one last bus. They were shown to their cabin on the boat that would take them across the same seas that had separated their country's soldiers from the homes they longed to regain, but couldn't, because they'd been changed by the war that had engulfed them and made them different. They went through the Suez Canal, the Indian Ocean, they reached Perth. Four days out from Perth, Prue told CC that she felt different, and three days out she said she understood the signs. She had the beginnings of a child, their child, inside her. CC felt responsibility pressing on his shoulders, and responded with strength and pride. 'You've told me, my love, and before long we'll tell, no, you'll tell your mother, your father, Lady Whitmore ...'

The list might have gone on, but that would do for now. Perth was humble enough when they got there, but they loved it. The waters south of Australia seemed different to the other waters they'd been through. Adelaide. What was it that made their country different? They were longing to be home. Melbourne at last, Prue's parents waiting for them with their capacious car, and a different sort of love, welcoming, wanting to hear 'the evidence', as Prue's mother called it, of all they'd done while they'd been away. Prue found a moment to whisper her news to her mother, and then, a few days later, a letter came in the mail. CC, bringing it inside, wondered why it had been written, stamped and posted when they were seeing her parents every second day. Their daughter, his wife, opened the letter, a tiny note really, and gasped. 'What is it?' he said.

'You'll never guess,' she said. 'Imagine this! Mother and Father are giving us this house! Mother said they were going to write a new will, and leave it to us, and then they thought, why not do it now? Now's the time!' She was exultant. The house around her became different in some way. Even houses have to be understood, and if the understanding changes, the houses change. 'That's most generous,' CC said. 'I was wondering if we'd move when we had the baby, but we won't be moving anywhere. We're there already.' Something triumphant broke out of him. 'There is here! It might sound silly, but it's wonderful!' He took his partner's hand. They stared about them, possessing as they were themselves possessed.

Antinous (Endless) Knight picked up a job with the Transport Workers Union as a research officer. 'To get better pay and conditions,' he told them, 'you'll need to convince people. You win the argument in the minds of the travelling public, and the results flow on from that.' Strangely for the time, when capital and labour were thick-witted opponents, he was taken on, given an office and a phone. He was smart enough not to ask for more until he had results. He attended the state conference of the Party and made friends: that's to say, he voted as people asked him to do. The ways of the Party had to be learned. Then he had a stroke of luck. The candidate for a marginal seat in parliament was forced to drop out by an unexpected heart attack

and, there being no obvious replacement, Antinous got the vacancy, campaigned cleverly, and won.

He was not the youngest member ever to sit in the House but he was close. He knew he had to be both visible and next thing to silent. This suited him because he saw that he must use his first term getting some basic knowledge of the state of Victoria, not to mention the procedures of parliament. It was clear that the Party would be in opposition for years, so the parliamentary knowledge could be acquired steadily, and the state could come first. He used his rail pass regularly, visiting every corner of the state, and he used his contacts to get himself driven to places beyond the reach of rail. Dressing very quietly, he stayed in pubs and occasional motels, talking. Mostly asking questions. He was a good listener, and his method – perhaps we should say his *aim* – was unobtrusive. He wanted to know how opinion was formed in each and every electorate of the state. Who listened to whom, who spoke first, who followed. The right to vote might be evenly distributed but the capacity to influence voters was clustered. Those too lazy to think listened to those whose minds were quicker. In any workplace, suburb or town, in any job, trade or profession, there were people whose demands and opinions stamped the minds of those around them. He wanted to know who these people were. He was ahead of his time in realising that sometimes they were women, strong-minded but out of sight, there not being many women in public life at that time. These had to be cultivated too, not an easy task in the noisy business of politics. How to do it?

One had to speak quietly, Antinous decided, so that those who were normally silent realised that they too were being addressed. He sensed, also, that different sorts of arguments would have to be presented in novel ways if he was to achieve the aim of speaking to men so that women too could hear. That, he saw, would take time; he'd have to work on that. In the meantime, he had to learn the state. What made one suburb different from another? What happened to people when their work took them to the central city? Who lived in fear of flood, fire and drought, and where? For every problem he heard about, what response by government had succeeded and which had been resented?

There were plenty of these! Farmers, indeed almost everybody, wanted handouts. Governments generally offered low interest loans in the hope that the problem would solve itself mysteriously. It was parliamentary wisdom that any problem could be solved if you threw enough money at it, but how much was enough? There was never enough, so the limits, the meanness, the bastardry, had to be disguised. Antinous saw the need for better solutions, but beyond the need he saw nothing for the moment: he hoped that time, and experience, would bring him cunning – and a successful method.

A number of his parliamentary colleagues were impatient and wanted to get close to power by any means they could, which involved doing deals with the Ministers sitting opposite. Antinous could see that almost every vote had a price, and wanted to put himself in a position where this would not be so, but he could only achieve that if he became leader of the Party, and everybody wanted that! Nobody, however thick or shallow, disbelieved in themselves to the point where they thought they couldn't ever be leader. They liked to quote sayings about Field Marshalls' batons in humble soldiers' packs. The more Antinous heard this saying the more he regarded his parliamentary colleagues as hopeless. He made it his business to read about every change of government, or change of leadership, for decades, confirming what his instincts told him. You needed luck, usually known as opportunity, and you needed to seize it when it came. That meant understanding what *you* wanted, and what others would settle for. You should only put your hand up if you knew you had the votes. That meant imposing yourself on other people's thoughts without them knowing, so that when the opportunity that you wanted arose, they thought of no one else.

It sounded simple but it would not be easy. Nonetheless, the Antinous Endless (the nickname made him popular) Knight who took his place in parliament after he'd acquired five years experience, was about as ready as a man could be. He was waiting. When would opportunity knock?

2

We left some people at Lake Mungo, one of the emptiest places on earth – until you accept its past as an influence on anyone there today. Those thousands of years when it was an inland sea, when it was *country* to aboriginal people, have a way of infiltrating those who visit today. We are not impermeable to what surrounds us, and the situation developing under our eyes was something that had happened often enough in the past and was close to becoming normal in the present. Ken Carver and Gillian, Neville and Donna Long, would find, not so long after their rush of passion was spent, that what they had done, what we will see them doing, was to become a commonplace in the counter-cultural times that were coming over the horizon. Distance is no defence. The impulse is in you, or it isn't. Donna, as stated earlier, was vital. Nothing would happen unless she allowed it. She might have gone into the weather-worn woolshed with her husband and Gillian Carver, blocking what she saw rising inside them. She chose to leave them alone. She kept away from Ken Carver until she allowed him near. She put her terms before him and made him understand. Gillian Carver, had she been questioned when emerging from the shed, might have thought herself to be the originating force of the four; perhaps she was, but she was not the *controlling* force that Donna was. One was saying, I want this to happen; the other was enforcing her idea of how far things would go.

Neither had children. Donna felt certain that she would be a mother one day. Gillian was no planner. She liked to move forward by triumphs, had had few of them in her home country and few if any since her change of location. Lake Mungo was miserable to her way of feeling. The few people she'd spoken to in Swan Hill thought it remarkable that there had once been something there. *Something!* They saw some virtue, something creditable, if humans made a mark on their wretched, dehumanised country. She'd been told about a tree in the middle of the country which had had the word DIG carved into

it, and there was a story about explorers failing to catch up with some other explorers ... or something like that. The people who'd told her this had seen the tree and it still had DIG carved in it. She'd nearly laughed in their faces. What sort of story was that?

She sensed that Neville, when making love to her, was in a state of bewilderment. He was lost, yet trying to find something he'd never had, or not properly, before. Unlike his wife, he was no manager; he wanted her to lead. She poured her scorn on him, yet it came out as passion because she'd never been able to give it its head before. His meekness did not, in biblical terms, make her mild. She raged as she straddled him. She wanted a child, and she wanted it born out of overpowering him. Her marriage to Ken Carver had in some way granted him equality. She wasn't doing that again, not with Neville, Doctor Long. She wanted him to get rid of Donna, but had had to put that aside for a time because, as she sensed, there was some measure of control, command, in the other woman. The four of them, as governed by Donna, made trips as two married couples, and re-coupled only when they were away from the town in which their reputations were created. A town of fair size by Australian standards, Gillian would have said, but filled with tiny minds. Tiny minds meant danger, even dismissal for her husband, a doctor gaining in experience and at the mercy of the Hospital Board, a gloomy list if ever Gillian had seen one. She knew her scorn needed to be hidden, and tried to do what she required of herself. Neville was a mystery to her in feeling at home with such people. This prompted more scorn in her, but she could see that he was tender and thoughtful with people he encountered, both professionally and personally, and realised, at times when she was alone with him, that in dismissing nobody on the grounds of what they were he'd made himself generous in spirit and capable, potentially at least, of a broadness, an inclusiveness not available to her. This surprised her. She thought of what she liked to call lifeboat puzzles, stories where an unlikely group of people were thrown into some fiercely inter-dependent situation, and it's the unexpected person, the meek and mild one that nobody takes any notice of, who amazes the reader by saving them all.

Neville? Good lord no! So said Gillian, but her wild, angry, loosely targeted passion was bringing about a change in her. If she somehow

managed to break Donna's control of the man they were fighting over, he, Neville, would bring about a change in her. She'd be a different woman from the Gillian that had married Ken. She could only have Neville and get rid of Ken if she became more like Neville, less like the self she was now, and - more thoughts assailing her - *settled* in a place like the one where she was unsettled now. She might drag him around the world on ships and planes, and make him look at cities and sights, but he'd want to settle in one of these dreary towns sprinkled across this country where they used *her* language to say things which didn't mean the same as they did at home!

This last realisation was fatal to the sexual passion which had started the quartet's crossover. Everything - not that CC our historian would have agreed - had a moment, perhaps no more than a passing impulse, when it began, and another moment, a realisation, when it first knows it is going to die.

There were times when Ken's work at the hospital and the demands of Neville's practice made it hard for them to get away. They had to be blunt with each other about arrangements. Each of them was seeking release for reasons deep inside them, hard, almost impossible to articulate. They had to be careful not to quarrel. Anger turned into a steely politeness. They didn't speak of their situation to others. Only a handful had realised, or suspected, what was going on, the chief of these being Mabel Langley, sitting at the front desk of Dr Long's practice. She checked results coming back from pathology, drawing Neville's attention to things she felt he mightn't notice. He understood what she was doing, was grateful, and cautious. Decisions he would once have made quickly were a little slower to arrive. Mabel approved of this. Mistakes could wreck a practice. Faulty reputations had a way of following practitioners from town to town. There were connections. Mabel was being no more than protective of her clinic. Dr Carver could look after himself, and as for that woman he was married to ...

What on earth did her employer see in her? The woman was as awful as she thought others were. Mabel could bear - though only just - the English woman's scorn for Australians, but she was vulgar. Mabel knew that Dr Long sensed her opinion, and did little to hide it. This

contempt had an effect on him that Mabel didn't know about: it made him compare, and sometimes equate, Gillian with Nigella Lacey, all those years before. What had happened to her, back in England?

What had not happened to him, as a young student, all those years ago?

Neville thought of Nigella as a test he'd failed because he sat it too early. Unprepared. But what prepares us for the demands of another person, wanting – needing – to be completed? Men think of women as giving themselves, neglecting to see that what isn't there in her gift is to be completed by the addition of the man. The young Neville had been at least partially aware that he was not *enjoying* Nigella, as young men's talk suggested he would, but was being presented with demands he had no idea how to satisfy. He'd been relieved when she'd pushed him away, and to his credit he'd not simply pushed his experience of her out of sight, but returned to it occasionally, in his mind, to ask himself if the years had given him any greater capacity to give such a woman what she needed. Gillian was the test of this, and he found that she didn't overwhelm him, fiercely though she pushed her demands. He was almost good-humoured in his responses, and this not only puzzled her, it drove her to wilder extremes, when she wanted to fling him about, and he did no more than smile faintly, and tenderly, on this lover who, he could see, would be a passing experience. She was enlarging him because she was wiping out the sense of failure and shame that he'd carried since Nigella. 'Let's be quiet, let's be tender,' he would say when she was in the opposite frame of mind, and it brought out in Gillian a faintly discernible, glimmeringly distant fragment of awareness that the quiet people of the earth were not inadequate, even if people like herself liked to think – to shout! – that they were.

Donna was the central figure of the four because she alone was possessed by a question rather than a force. She had sensed very early that people's sexuality might be different from their characters, might even be at odds with them. They might not be, in bed, what they seemed in their clothes. Only someone far more experienced than she was when she married could estimate what a lover was going to be like once s/he was possessed, or in possession. What would you reveal of yourself? What find out about a lover? She saw, while still

in her teens, that Christianity had imposed an impossible burden on the treatment of fidelity: eternally faithful, one to another, was the oath of marriage, but people simply weren't made that way. They had desires that came and went, unfulfilled for the most part, but urgent in the moment of feeling them. Moment? Some loves lasted a lifetime, others barely outlasted a fuck. People's own sexuality, let alone that of others, was so varied that it was madness to reduce the consideration of human sexuality to one basic, imposed-on-everyone rule. How could that work? Rules were meant to be sensible, acceptable to most people most of the time, but how could you say that about humans' sexual behaviour – if you could bring about a sensible discussion of the subject, as opposed to a convocation of rule-makers and self-appointed judges?

Donna saw, and again this was an early realisation, that it was going to be too hard. She'd stay with convention for as long as it suited her, and if exploration got its opportunity, she'd explore. But the game changed into something else once you had kids: that she saw too. The effects, or after-effects of what you did would affect your children, and your partner who was the other parent of your children. She disliked the idea of a family with more than two parents. That wasn't on! There were also the complexities of the woman's state of being: was she still in the stage of exploring and expressing herself, or was she on the way to that very altered state of being a mother? Mothers had responsibilities, freedoms and powers that she didn't understand. She wasn't yet a mother. That was a change, a transition, that she felt she should be sharing with her husband ... but he was caught up, for the time at least, with Gillian Carver, and what a disaster it would be if that was prolonged. She respected her husband and didn't respect the Carver woman ...

Did she respect Ken Carver? With the vulgar wife? A tricky question indeed! The English doctor liked women, preferably in his arms. He would have said, and did so frequently, that if you want to know someone, have sex with them. It's the frankest, most honest thing you can do because you can't hide from your partner. He was both lustful and without hypocrisy. Morality that blocks sex is usually wrong, he said, because if you have good sex with someone you remain

fond of them, and respectful, forever after, and the effect of that on the world is superior to systems of morality. Happy lovers don't make the world's problems, and people who went around condemning sin caused far more trouble than the so-called sinners, said Ken. Consensual sex, he would go on, is 99% good. The problems emerge when people let their clumsy, fantastical, whimsical, sickly ... et cetera ... minds take over and interpret whatever they thought had happened. 'That's when the mix-ups come in', he would say, 'the confusion, guilt, shame, the refusals, the indecencies people apply to what they thought they, or others, had done. People want to attack you the moment you step over one of the messy little lines they've drawn to keep things under control. Do you think it's all right for stepfathers to molest their new partner's daughters? Then they say, do you approve of teachers having relationships with their students? You tell them no but they don't believe you. They think that if you don't think the way they do then you must be capable of anything! Ach, it makes me tired!'

That was Ken. He was curious about Donna because she was quiet, and controlled. Most people had strains of excess inside them, or wild passions, never explored, that were crying for release. He wanted to see Donna released, he wanted to show her that his way liberated people, allowing themselves to find themselves, to know, and to understand, what they really were. It didn't seem to work with Donna. The best moments he could give her – best for him – came when he saw happiness creep into her eyes and the fringes of a smile crossing her face. She never explained and she rarely asked. He liked questions because they allowed him to give clever answers lacking in any sort of poetry, a dimension he appeared to lack. He was generous enough, in the sense of not being mean, but lacked the breadth that came from new insights. When he told Donna that life in her town was dull when you'd come from London, she said, 'Of course it's not dull. How could it be?'

That stopped him. He thought that most of what the world did wasn't worth looking at, and she was contradicting him. Him! It was almost funny ... but it came from the same mysterious source as those fleeting smiles which were her only statement of love for him. He felt he should be able to predict when she would smile, and he couldn't. So he

tried to test her by making her angry, or confused, and he couldn't. He flew her to Adelaide to see a play at the Festival, and he saw that smile as the little plane looked down on some red cliffs of the Murray as it cut its way through dry land. 'Call that a river?' he said. 'It's *muddy!*' The smile disappeared, the happiness, whatever had caused it, remained. She was telling him, in her wordless way, that what they were looking down on was as close to eternal as anything could be. He couldn't refuse whatever it was she felt. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I'm only a grumpy old Londoner. We think that where we are is the centre of the earth.' She was studying him, he saw. He went on. 'That doesn't take account of what people in other places think, does it.' He added, 'Sorry.'

The river beneath them crept towards the sea, unimpressive if you compared it with Chinese rivers, or the Amazon, but sure of itself, even in seasons when the land gripped it, the sun dried it out, and it could no longer flow. Donna said of the river, and perhaps of herself, 'Its time will come.' Ken Carver was amazed. He could find nothing to say. She'd aligned herself, identified herself, with a river that flowed across a land so flat that the water could only crawl, a land that rendered most living things helpless beyond simple survival, and, looking down on this emptiness she was content. Able to see a way. What was it about her? Why did she have such a boring husband? She could have anyone she liked. For that matter, if she wanted to extend her hands and grasp, she could be rich, and yet, it seemed, she wanted nothing, or next to nothing. She needed to smile, she even smiled for him at times, and he never knew what caused her to smile and when it would disappear, or what would cause it to go away. Women were mysterious, he'd said this for years, and said it to mean that they were inferior to rational, scientific, engineering males, and there she was smiling again as she looked down on a world he wouldn't give you two bob for, a happy, balanced woman.

Balanced? How could she be? She was travelling to Adelaide with him, they were going to see a play he'd read about, they'd drink wine afterwards, something they did quite well in Adelaide, he understood, and then go back to their hotel for the intimacies he needed ...

That was when he knew how useless he was, both to her and to himself. He thought love, sexual love, was a need which caused you

to take, and then, more or less incidentally to give, but she simply *gave*: it was a way of being that he couldn't understand. Had he misunderstood women all his life? Was Gillian like this? Of course she wasn't. She was embattled, like the other humans on the planet, struggling to define what she wanted and then to get it, or a fraction of it if she could ...

He looked at Donna one last time with the eyes of what he would have called love, and knew he was out of court. She was aloft. Humans had imagined gods, somewhere beyond the clouds, but Donna was in a clear sky, apparently detached, but richly bound to the earth below them, ready to come down, to walk on earth, even to go to a play, to drink wine, to sleep with a man not her husband, yet he, that man beside her in the hired hotel-bed, couldn't touch her. The aeroplane, in lifting her, had done no more than find a suitable place. The aeroplane was respectful, as he, Ken, had not been, and now, for a moment, was. At last. He didn't know what he was seeing. He didn't understand it, or know what to do with, or about, it, but he was being changed. She was looking down, then she looked up at the endless sky, then she looked down again.

And that smile, which he could never predict, or interpret, appeared again, briefly as ever, called out, apparently, by the red cliffs below them, marking the line of the river of life cutting through the richness of the earth.

When Neville next saw his wife she talked about the play in Adelaide, mentioned the red cliffs of the river, and said nothing about Ken. This was normal, but he felt there was a reason for the silence this time, and thought he knew. She was sending silent signals that it was time for the experiment to end. The next day, sitting in his practice after a busy afternoon, he asked himself for a verdict on his relation with Gillian, and decided that he didn't know why she'd selected him or what she wanted from him: this meant he had a way to travel before he declared the thing to be over.

Over? The word hadn't entered his mind till then. Over like the day, or over forever? Over with nothing left, or with something new to come across the horizon? Or over in that other sense that his

schoolboy friends had laughed about when they were going to turn on a light and made a joke of warning their dormitory: 'Everyone back to their own beds!'

Or was it over because some new realities had been discovered so that life, when resumed, would be different from what it had been before? There was only one way to find out: take the step and see. Yet he wanted to know, before he closed the door on what had been happening, what he had looked like in the eyes of Gillian Carver, who'd been unhappy enough to seize on him to give herself some hope.

Hope. It meant that there was a possibility that life might be different, and he'd never really thought about that, or imagined that it could be. Norman Long, his father, pharmacist in Wangaratta, had held out hopes of his son repeating his pattern, but the boy had gone further, in becoming a doctor. His parents were proud. They'd supported him all the way. Now it was his turn, and that meant it was Donna's turn. They would have a child, children perhaps. He not only couldn't have children with the overweening Gillian, he didn't want to. She took you over, and he could enjoy it because it was only a holiday, an escape, a discovery of an alternative he didn't really want. He sensed that Gillian must have been rejected on this deeper level by her husband too. She wanted a passion greater than she received from Ken and she wanted it to produce a child. If she had a child with him then she would want him as an appendix to the new life she'd be starting. No. No, he couldn't decently do it. What could he do, to get himself out of where he was?

He had to make Gillian be truthful about herself and admit that she'd clasped him to her to deceive herself into thinking she wasn't a failure, when she was. And if she was, so was Ken, her husband. They'd have to start again. This was going to be hard, very hard. He packed his things away, closed the door of his clinic, and went home.

The next time he saw Gillian, it was at the apartment the hospital supplied for Ken and Gillian. Ken was in Bendigo for two nights for some training on anaesthetics. Neville told his wife he wouldn't be staying the night, he hoped to be home at a decent hour but he couldn't be sure ... She understood what was happening as a stage of withdrawal and released him with a gesture of her hand which told

him to do whatever he must. It was a simple movement which made him think of diplomats discussing wars, peacemaking, and the future of the countries they represented ...

... or maybe she was pleased to be rid of him? Who could say?

Only he could, when he got back home from Gillian's. He left, got in his car and drove away.

Gillian was distant. He stood until she asked him to sit beside her. This he did. 'Oh bugger you,' she cried out, 'leaving everything to me!' He looked at her with his prim form of refusal, meaning she had to do better than that.

'Fucking Ken!'

'What's he done?'

She said, 'He's trying to make up my mind for me.'

'From what you've told me, that's pretty standard.'

She wasn't getting anywhere. Suddenly she said, 'Have you been talking to Ken?'

It was aggressive. He shook his head.

'I have to be able to trust someone!'

'You've no reason to distrust me.'

And angry. "'No reason to distrust ...' What sort of talk is that?'

It wasn't the way Neville worked. 'You're angry with Ken, you don't trust me. How are we going to get anywhere like this?'

He took her hands, she pulled them back, he put his arms around her, she accepted him sullenly. 'Tell me what you're thinking,' he said.

She shook her head. 'What's the good?' Her energy was gone. She was glum. For a moment, she burst out. 'I had a plan!'

Neville was a cautious man. 'To ...?'

Bitterly she said, 'To change the world. The bit of it that affected me.'

This opened him a little. 'The world's pretty resistant to change.'

Still bitter, she said, 'And so are you.'

'I'm not ambitious. I've got most of what I need.'

'Little people need. Bigger people *want!*'

The tone of his voice told her he wasn't going to fight to retain her. 'Then I'm sorry but you must put me down as a little person, then.'

It was the end, or near enough. He withdrew. He could feel her moving back inside herself, hating herself as she did. That was bad enough but he suddenly knew what it was like to be Gillian, and it was awful. A car went past and he envied whoever it was, free to go anywhere when he was stuck with what he'd done. He'd given her hope when she'd realised she had none. None at all. A country she thought was ghastly, a husband who couldn't be turned into anything she longed for, a lover who was not only relinquishing any last desire for her but was smug about getting away. There must be an ocean of self-hatred underlying all this. There was. Gillian buckled before his eyes. She had despair all over her face and it was awful to be holding her but he couldn't decently let her go. 'It will end,' he said. She considered this. 'So you know. I was never sure why you were so fucking prim. So ... settled! You knew. Well that's something, I suppose. What's my next step, Neville? Got any ideas?'

He released her. 'Ken's only a few weeks from getting his registration. That's a stage you'll have to sit out, but when he's registered he can practice where he wants, and you'll surely have a say in that ...'

She was almost amused. 'Surely?'

'He owes you that.'

She said bitterly, 'And what do you owe me, Mister nobody and nothing?'

He needed to defend. 'I don't owe you anything, nor do you owe me. I've disappointed you, I can see that very well, but what have you done for me? You've poured love on me but it wasn't really love, just a demand to be loved in return for the passion built up inside you. Doctors aren't good people to love, we see too much weakness of the body and the mind. People are far from their best when they come to doctors, and it affects us, whether you believe me or not.'

She was sullen again. She was married to a doctor and knew too well what he was talking about. 'You like to say what you just said. It lets you out, or so you think.' She paused, and then: 'If what you said was true, every relation you take on would be a failure from the start, and that isn't so. You might have saved me but you couldn't be bothered. You were too selfish.'

He wanted to go, but he was afraid for her, on her own, Ken in Bendigo. She read his mind. 'You can go home now. Donna's shaken off Ken. It isn't hard. He doesn't persist, once he knows that people have seen through him.'

Trying to be kind, he said, 'Everyone but you.'

Caught up in her bitterness again, she said, 'Ken is clever enough to accept what he is. I can't.'

Her most recent lover said to her, 'Then accepting yourself is what you must learn to do. When you reach that point – *if* – you'll be able to love.'

She wanted to stand and open the door for him. She wanted him to stay the night. 'I'll be a new woman when I get there, won't I. You won't recognise me if you see me then.'

He felt something new, a compassion that was not generalised, but devoted to the person with him. He looked at her, nothing to say. Responding, she murmured, 'You know how awful I am.' He said, in a non-sequitur that she understood well, 'Donna will want children when she finally gets back home.' Still murmuring, Gillian said, 'It's very likely she will. Let us hope she has them.' She studied Doctor Neville Long, assessing him, then added, 'What will Doctor Ken Carver want, if he ever grows up?'

An American singer told the world 'The times they are a-changing', and they were. Much that had been English in our characters' lives yielded to the foibles of an America that was rebelling – briefly – against its puritanism. Rich and showbiz Americans had long been able to buy their way out of marriage but this family-forming custom found itself being ignored or bypassed; sex had broken free. Intercourse became interaction, and was everywhere, like photos, like film. Drugs broke down everything, including law-enforcement departments. Money trails rippled throughout the world. Soldiers went into battle high, and were carried out horizontal. Mighty America couldn't crush the Viet Cong. Small, determined Asians fought an ice-cream army, moving them aside. Helicopters roared desperately, aimlessly, and the Viet Cong entered Saigon. Young Australians had their birthdays drawn out of barrels to decide whether they'd be engaged in this

stupidity or not. When it was clear that the Americans were losing, the government of Australia stopped sending those who opposed the war to fight it. The country changed its mind. Its soldiers came home to a sour welcome, made to feel both used and bruised – those that came home at all.

CC took notes. He'd write about all this one day. He was still digesting the first half of the American century and now a tide was turning. It was strange that powers didn't know when they were exhausted, didn't know what had made them great so couldn't tell when they were weakening. Leadership, like greatness, selected a people, used them, and put them down; nations barely learned their songs of greatness, and power, before they had to forget them because they were being laughed at when they sang. Could anything be more awful?

CC and Prue were happy, and busy with their child, then children – Angela the first, then Tom. History colleagues made jokes about CC and the counter-culture, and he enjoyed them. 'It can wash against the fence,' he would say, 'but it's not coming in.' He would also admit, to friends, 'Even Malvern is changing', but when they wanted to know how, he could only say, 'It's getting older like me, so it must be!' Only Prue, and a handful of those same friends, knew that he was building a collection of what he called 'issues', topics which might form the basis for further study, if he could see societal change revealing itself in them. 'We talk about women taking men's jobs in the war, then giving them up when the men came home. And it's true. But! As time passed, women began to slip back into many of those jobs. Historians have discussed the men returning but not the longer term changes. And quite often, we don't understand the longer term changes, so we don't talk about them.' His exemplar for this was the arrival of television, with the world presented to the masses – this was important – in pictures rather than print. 'Think of knowledge becoming a commodity to be bought and sold,' he might say, before brooding over the matter. Those who knew him realised that he was asking himself what sort of historian he would become: despite various well-received papers, he hadn't identified himself yet. When you weren't sure *how* you wanted to write you could hardly claim to be

a writer – yet! ‘People think historians are locked in the past,’ he might say to Prue, who understood him well, ‘but I think I’m trying to be a historian of the future, and it’s not very comfortable, believe you me.’

Colleagues respected CC’s intellect, and asked him to run a seminar, or even a series of them, on the relation of future, present and past, but he declined, saying that he could only do it when he understood the matter better. So they left him alone, since that was what he wanted, to work on it on his own. He became very interested in a British project called ‘Seven-up’, which examined the social circumstances of a selection of children, all aged seven, then picked up the same children at fourteen, and later at twenty-one, to see what had become of them, raising questions about how much control of their lives these young people had. Social class, as might be expected of a British undertaking, seemed all-important, but then, as CC knew only too well, the answers you produced depended on the questions you asked. It seemed to him that he had either to find a way to catch history making itself, as it were, or pick a topic far back in the past, generally agreed to be important, and then spend the better part of a lifetime making sense of it, if he could.

Was this the historian’s destiny then, his restrictive choice? If so, when, if ever, could the historian be free? Or was a historian a sort of higher class servant, fated to review things already done, offering interpretations to a world which, by and large, didn’t want them except as an intellectual form of after-dinner-mint? CC had it in his head that the historian’s role was a noble one, and that only someone with a degree of nobility in their mind, their world-view, could do the job, but how? How? That was the question. Or so he thought. But the question presented itself differently a little later, when he heard a report about Harold Holt, the prime minister who’d replaced Robert Menzies, having disappeared in the surf somewhere near Portsea. People were searching for him, so far without success. CC rang Kim Berg, whose mother, he recalled, lived somewhere very close. Kim had heard about the PM’s disappearance, was in Melbourne at the time and didn’t know any details of the search, but suggested that CC ring Barbara Bishop, a friend of his mother’s, ‘who will certainly know *everything* there is to be known about whatever’s happening down

there.' He didn't know the number but CC could look it up in the phone book. CC did this, wondering as he did so who it was that had printed the first phone book, and who had told him that they didn't have phone books in Moscow ... and what did that mean ... and he rang Barbara Bishop – BB, he couldn't help noticing.

Barbara was excited. There were police everywhere, helicopters, Cabinet officials and people occupied solely in keeping the curious public away from whatever was happening, and camera-men galore. There was a rumour that Mrs Holt would soon be there but that was probably only a rumour, except that she'd have to be there, wouldn't she? Barbara soon had CC envious of her position. This was history happening! Or was it? They'd find the missing man, or they'd find his body, or none of the above, in which case it would be a mystery that would pass into history, forever re-presenting itself to be solved. That was a form of history he'd been too scholarly, too intellectual, to bother with. Reality was giving him a push in the face. 'Whatever happens, Mrs Bishop,' CC told the phone, 'write down everything you can remember. What you saw. Heard. What people said to you. Those who were searching, write down everything they said. At the time. Don't stop even if you're covering pages. Get it down, as accurately as you can, and what you've written will be invaluable one day!' Barbara Bishop was impressed. 'Would you like to come down here and do it yourself? They've got road blocks to keep people out but I could say you were my brother-in-law, or something, and that would get you in.' CC was tempted, but the couple of hours it would take him to get there would be crucial, and mustn't be lost. No! Barbara Bishop must do it herself. He instructed her, ever so plentifully, then he told her to get down to the beach and see what was happening. 'Get a tape recorder tonight and tell it your memories. Every detail you can remember. Don't lose a thing!'

Barbara tried, but she was no historian. She was smart enough, however, to approach the beach through the bush, or along narrow tracks that officials didn't know. She saw the scene. It struck her that it was only pointless activity; Mr Holt had not been sighted. The waves were as eternal as ever, unceasing in a way that frightened her. What hope would anyone have in that? She thought of Mr Holt – he was

Prime Minister, after all – and CC’s instructions over the phone, and cried. If they hadn’t found him yet they weren’t going to find him. Days later, she remembered her tears because she read a rumour about a Chinese submarine coming to the beach to whisk the PM away. That was so silly she laughed, and it struck her, days later, when the searching had been given up and a service was being held for the late – as he now was - PM, with the American President there to mourn him, that she had both cried and laughed for the man who’d been swept away, and that was all a human could do. They might also, she realised, create a memorial to the man, if he’d done anything worth remembering, but that wasn’t a matter for her. The *government* – that great abstraction – must attend to that. Then her thoughts swung to herself: what memorial, if any, would remind the planet of her existence when she too had been swept away?

None at all.

She had a moment of desperation, of anxiety stretching to hysteria, before she accepted this. She had a family, and that meant she was not alone, but connected. That meant she was part of humanity, and it, surely, would survive? The most optimistic response she could give to that assumption was *probably*. The human race would probably survive – and how many species would there be on the planet that would welcome that, and how many would curse? She thought of the waves that had dragged Harold Holt to a swift extinction. Were they merciless for what they’d done, or merciful for their swiftness? She had to answer her own question by saying that they were both. Cruel, and kind, kind because they’d swallowed him in a moment. She read in the paper when the service was to be held in the PM’s memory, and she spent the hour in the tea-tree bush, looking again at the sea. There were no officials that morning to keep her from the beach, but she didn’t want to go there in case the waves rushed up to grip her too, as they’d gripped Mr Holt, a man who loved swimming and believed he was good at it. She’d kept a photo from an earlier front page, of the country’s leading man, smiling cheerfully at his daughters-in-law, beautiful young women pleased to be with their relative on a beach that was probably where he’d died. How sure of himself the soon-to-be-dead man looked, how pleased to be with these young women. He

must surely have known, as a very public man, that he and they were being captured by a camera as, a day or two later, he would be captured by a wave. Cameras were fateful things. They captured buildings on fire, planes crashing into the earth, brides with their fingers holding flowers, children looking at a world they didn't understand. Barbara Bishop shuddered at the thought of being photographed. You couldn't avoid it, but it marked you down. By putting you on record it reminded you that you would one day be struck off!

And when would that be? You had no idea. Next time she went shopping she looked out for Ariadne Berg, and a week or two later, she saw her. Ariadne looked at her so gravely she felt that her thoughts were being read, so she stood beside her friend as if the two of them were facing the cameras she'd been thinking about. Looking at the same empty space, Ariadne said, 'There's nobody there, my dear. Nobody at all. It's only emptiness, but it makes us afraid.' Then she added, 'You could pray for him. Or you could ask him to tell God to stop those things buzzing around our heads all afternoon when I want to snooze. I'm sure he would be kind enough to do that.'

Ariadne possessed a certain saintly condescension, and it began to calm her agitated friend, who said, 'I was hoping I'd run into you. I've been keeping an eye out for days.' Ariadne answered, 'People tell us that simple lives are boring. They want gunshots and drama. Simple lives are the only ones we're made for. Flowers and love,' she said, and then, 'Williamsons for a drink. And not a word about that man. You may talk about anything but that man.'

Barbara was immensely relieved.

CC was only momentarily downcast when he rang Barbara to find out if she'd written notes as he'd suggested. She hadn't, but she was affected in some way she wasn't telling him, so he ended the conversation; he had plenty of other things to think about. The presence of Lyndon Baines Johnson at the PM's funeral had prompted a new emphasis in his thought: America's influence on his country. The late Harold Holt, fighting the last election, had invited the President to visit, and Holt, finding the car he was sharing with the President blocked by anti-war protesters, had told his driver to run over them! The driver,

fortunately, had more sense. Was the President impressed? Nobody could say, but at least he was *there*: he was America in the minds of voters, needing support in its anti-communist campaign. This was such an extreme position that it couldn't have been reached in a single step; there must have been prior stages, CC imagined, and they needed to be identified. The antiwar movement was strong, and was about to stage huge marches in the country's capitals, which, in time, would lead the government under the leader who replaced Harold Holt to back away from its once-popular engagement in a country to the north. CC could hardly predict that this would happen, but he could see that the end of the Vietnam war would not mean the end of American domination. If that was to weaken, it would only happen slowly, and would probably retrace the steps and stages by which the United States had taken control of the Australian mind.

So he looked, our young historian, and wondered: where had it all begun? There was the visit of a Confederate ship in the 1860s, about which he knew little, but there were newspaper records and even a photo or two, so that shouldn't be hard. Then he thought of the Californian gold rushes shortly before the discoveries which brought miners to the southern colonies in 1851, and later to Western Australia (Kalgoorlie!) and north Queensland. Any number of fortune-seekers had come from the USA to Australia; what had they brought with them, apart from hopes? How could he analyse their cultural contribution, if that was what it had been? There'd be writings, goldfield newspapers had sprung up all over the place, and it might be profitable to examine the watercolours of S.T.Gill, whose eye must have picked up influences and similarities between Ballarat and diggings in California? Next it occurred to him that the early whalers in our southern waters must have borrowed much, possibly negro sailors, from the American practices so well documented in certain chapters of *Moby Dick*.

Next he saw that he would have to compare the frontier experience of the two countries, which would involve comparing the American (Red) Indians with the Australian aborigines. American natives had fought ferociously to keep their lands, and as far as CC knew, the Australian natives had not fought so hard or so long ... but was that

true? He would have to look into that, and it might take years. You could only study things that had been discovered and discussed, and as he knew only too well, much of the work of reading what had been documented was still to be done. This might have disheartened CC but the effect was the opposite; there was plenty of new ground to break. The real challenge was for him to do his job so well that later writers, in fifty or a hundred years time, would find little to alter, or reassess, in what he'd done.

He discussed this with Antinous, who suggested that at some stage he'd have to commit himself to estimating the similarities – and otherwise – between Australia's Liberal Party and American Republicans, and also compare Australia's Labor with America's Democrats. 'People look to London for the comparison most of the time, but I think the US comparison is more fruitful.' Then he told CC that he thought it was time their class had a reunion: 'I've been working on Robyn Briggs to organise it. He's got the contacts, and the time.' CC had to be reminded of who Robyn Briggs was; he'd had little to do with him at school. Now he was a successful estate agent in the Toorak, South Yarra and Malvern areas, so CC should see his name in the papers from time to time. 'Tell me what he looked like,' CC wanted to know, but describing people's appearance wasn't a skill that Antinous had developed. 'He wore a blue suit!' he told his friend: 'Didn't we all?'

This prompted CC to ask if a reunion was necessary. 'It's a bit early, don't you think? I haven't started to recall my school days. I haven't even forgotten them yet!' Antinous told him, 'You'll be surprised when you see us all together. You'll know who you are, where you came from.' Catching the disbelief on CC's face, he said, 'As soon as you walk in the door, you'll feel bonded, and the bonds won't tie you down. They'll release you. You wait and see.'

CC didn't believe what he'd been told, but he trusted most things that Antinous said; the politician had a way of knowing how events would flow, begin and end, then start all over again. He'd probably write history better than I can, CC thought. I hope he hasn't wasted his life by going into politics ... This started him thinking again. When could you say that a life had been wasted? He thought of the

bushranger Kelly; there, surely, was a man of passion and not a little talent, hanged by the neck at the age of twenty-five. But Kelly wasn't dead, he was kept alive by people's use of him as an example of something. In a curious way, he was still keeping the Victoria Police somewhere near honest because Kelly had made distrusting them respectable. His challenge to the very basis of law was still having an influence; Victoria tried harder than other states to wipe out corruption in the justice system, and in government. Then he started to doubt this idea, remembering some notorious nineteenth century politicians in his state, one of them at least celebrated by a prominent statue, and he laughed. Was American influence good or bad? It depends; did you look at their cowboy westerns glamorising the land grab as America took the mid-west from the Indians and the bison, or did you admire their constitution and Supreme Court judgements for their eloquence and nobility?

The question couldn't be avoided, nor could he dodge asking similar questions about his own country. The sails of Arthur Phillips' first fleet had meant the end of an ancient, and for the most part well-managed way of life which had used the continent more evenly than Europeans had been able to do. The outpost of empire, while still a youthful democracy, had rushed to take part, on the British side, in two disgraceful wars, and saw nobility, not disgrace, in having done so. The thought of trying to show this in a lecture series, or a published book, was a heavy weight on his mind. If he was going to write seriously, he'd have to be very strong. Cautious, too, and careful. He'd have to build the supporting parts of his case, and ease them out a little at a time so that people could get used to them, before he tried to pull everything together in the sort of unifying vision that alone might redeem his country.

Redemption: it was the most persisting feature of Christianity, and likely to outlive it. His country, for all the ghastliness of the convict system, was a creation also of the European enlightenment. Charles Darwin's ideas about evolution had weakened religion over the years, and Darwin had been in early Australia, before his famous thesis had been developed. CC wondered if the evolutionist had written any letters, or scientific papers as a result of his visit, and he didn't know.

There was so much he didn't know. He felt weak, and insignificant, and hoped that this feeling would pass before too long.

Antinous discussed the idea of a reunion with Robyn Briggs, but the agent proved hard to pin down. It was a great idea, they certainly ought to do it, but it was also a matter of timing. Maybe ten years on from when they'd all left school? When it was pointed out that they were starting to get near that milestone, Robyn jibbed: 'I'm not quite where I'd like to be when we all get back together. I'm still developing a business. I'd like to be able to point to an achievement or two before I explain myself to my peers.' Antinous didn't ask him what an 'achievement' would look like because he'd already built a reputation. He'd developed the idea that the residents of Toorak, South Yarra and Malvern were central to the city's existence and could, and should, be proud of it. He not only sold houses in these areas but squeezed extraordinary prices out of buyers by associating these suburbs with a sense of arrival for those who were able to move into them. He did this by concentrating on the achievements of previous owners. Residents of these suburbs, he gave aspirants to understand, had not only gathered considerable wealth, but had *contributed* to society at large. They worked actively for charities, they provided all the extras necessary to make their schools great, they raised funds for the state's art gallery, they ran the famous cricket club, they gave Portsea, at the entrance to the city's bay, its reputation, they dressed dramatically for the spring racing carnival, they were the mainstay of the city's better shops, they funded various projects at its first and still best university ... and so on. They contributed. They made the place far more than an economic machine, they added all those extras that gave it its reputation. In working publicly in their reserved and private ways, they made life better for the whole vast, sprawling city.

They showed the way!

This, Robyn told Antinous, was his second job, and perhaps the more important. Anybody could sell a fine house, after all, but knowing what else a city needed was not so common. Antinous knew when he was beaten. Robyn was using the same bag of tricks that he used himself. He invited Robyn and a still-slim Louise to the

Flemington racetrack for a late winter meeting with the promise that if they enjoyed it they'd do it again in spring. Antinous was charming, they were greeted everywhere by people who knew the young parliamentarian, and Louise was keen for Robyn to ring their friend to do it again: 'I've only got a few more weeks when I'll be able to dress up, Rob, don't forget! After that, I'll be bulging!' Louise was also keen for Robyn to find someone to partner their friend, but Robyn, quick and perceptive as he needed to be in his profession, told her that intervention wasn't needed: 'He's got someone chasing him, and she's going to track him down, believe you me.' Louise didn't know who, until Robyn reminded her of the bookie who'd taken their bets at the first meeting, a bulky, noisy fellow who over-filled the suit he'd been wearing and who had assisted him, not one of the slim shrewd fellows that assisted bookies, but his daughter Jodie. 'Remember Jodie? Always a step behind, standing in the old man's shadow? With the bag full of lists, and all the names at her fingertips? She's the one!'

Louise was amazed. 'Yes, I remember her. I thought she was ... plain! Antinous ... Endless ... he's so popular, he could have anyone he wanted. He's got a career in front of him, that fellow, he needs someone ... glamorous beside him, for photos, for big occasions, to be the darling of the press when he's being photographed.' She looked at Robyn. 'Don't you think? No, I see you don't. Why am I wrong?'

Robyn was grinning. Louise could see that he wanted to laugh, but was preventing himself from offending. 'That's what everyone expects, but he's too smart! He plays the long game, Endless. He's always been like that. A lot of the fellows we went to school with got married early. Had the hots and couldn't wait. But he waited until he could see the path in front of him, then he waited again until he saw someone suitable.'

Robyn waited. Louise offered what he wanted. 'Suitable?'

'Think about it. She's smart, she's got money behind her, she's a woman of the people, and she's not a rival in any sort of way. She'll adore him all his life and when people see her there beside him, because she's a very likeable, good humoured sort of woman, they'll think that he must be likeable and good-humoured too. It's simple.' He looked at Louise. 'Am I right? Tell me. Am I right, or am I wrong?'

The answer was obvious. Louise felt deflated. Could anything be as simple as that? Almost gasping, she groped for words. 'But marriage, your life's partner ... when we choose each other ...' She was looking straight at him. '... it's holy, it should be a mystery, it should take years to unravel ... No, I don't mean to break down, I mean for the two people to know why they chose each other. Like I mean ...' she was struggling, desperate for the meaning she was talking about to assert itself '... their understanding of each other, when they find it, should be hard won, so they appreciate that they've got something really special, because it took them so long to realise what it was, what it *is*, they have together. I mean ...' and at last she was beginning to know what she was trying to say, '...if they marry each other for a clever, simple reason, if they don't have to struggle to find what the reason is, then it's been too easy. Love's a force, it compels you, and you have to go with it to see where it's taking you, and it's only when you've got there, maybe twenty years later, or more, that you can say what the force that picked you up and moved you was. If it comes too early, it's come too soon. Rob? Don't you agree? Don't you see what I'm saying? Don't you agree?'

He folded her in his arms. 'Every word! We're lucky. We're doing what you say. But Endless has another way. Always has had. He's never been easy to read. He's smarter than most. A tricky bugger, but a good man too. You watch him. He's a man who's going places, and he'll take Jodie with him. When he gets to where he's going, she'll be right beside him, you mark my words!'

Louise could see that he believed in what he was saying, and had little choice but to believe him too.

Antinous and Jodie married quickly. Jodie's mother took it for granted that the ceremony would be at his old school, or possibly Saint John's Toorak, a place for society weddings, but no, Antinous insisted that it be on the Macdougalls' side of the city, somewhere close to their very large, sprawling modern house overlooking the Maribyrnong River, so that the reception – catered for, of course - could be held on her family's home ground. Havergail Macdougall and Betsy, his wife, were amazed, and not a little flattered. They were not used to people

from the other side of the city wanting to place themselves beside them. Life, for them, had been more of a contest with the city's social barriers, and here was Antinous, their future son-in-law, stepping over the barriers in his confident style; barriers, if he chose to ignore them, ceased to exist. Had they been a little more suspicious they might have noticed that it might help his progress through the ranks of what was still thought of as the workers' party to marry into the heartland of its class, but if this had occurred to them they would have been persuaded by the happiness of their daughter. Jodie had been waiting for a man like this. It was plain to her that elaborate ceremonies, lovely gowns, flowers and God's blessing were the source of many women's delusions about their place in the world. The realities were money and power, and women were lured through the transition by trivia, supported by a rush of feeling about the change of state they were going through. Virginity to motherhood: what bullshit! Both of them were inflictions, yet for Antinous, Endless, her man, marriage was a supportive partnership of equals. He said so and he lived in accord. She was surprised by his clarity; few men of her acquaintance could compare with him. He knew where he was going and he wanted a wife to go with him and to share his undertaking. When he looked at her she saw confidence in his eyes, and she was flattered at first, then satisfied, then pleased. The true test was that she'd never felt the same trust, and confidence, in any man before him, and he would do! They married, they moved to a modest house in bayside Port Melbourne (his electorate), and they held a series of parties to merge those she knew with those he'd attached to himself since he left his bluestone school. He invited a handful of classmates to these functions, sprinkling them among those who'd come later to his life. It was clear to the old boys that, bastions of friendship as they might be, they had no higher ranking of affection. CC, Prue and their children came to one, and approved. 'You've made a great start,' the historian said. 'It's only a matter of how far you can go.' Endless accepted this as a general might ponder the ending of a war. 'It's largely beyond control,' he said, 'and yet you must do your best to control it. If you want to capture the big political prizes, you have to be in the right place at the right time. The right time is quite beyond your control, so you have to be in the right

place all the time, and the right place is hard to know too, because the public's moods swing about like a little yacht in a bloody big storm.' He might have gone on but CC did it for him. 'It would be easier if the yacht was crewed by friends, but it's not. The crew ...'

Endless jumped in. '... are crocodiles and sharks!' They laughed, closer than they'd ever been, closer than they'd ever be again. Prue told CC, when they got home that night, that Antinous – she could never get used to his nickname – had made a fine start, and would be the state's premier one day if he played his cards well. 'The trouble is,' her husband replied, 'there are no rules, there's no checklist to tell you what's wise or unwise. You get the support of some group and you think you're doing well, but when they fall out of favour, you're on the nose because you're associated with them. You want to be popular with all the people all the time, but it isn't possible.'

'Democracy,' Prue said, and the historian smiled.

Sandy Clarkson left the Windsor once he realised that Anita Silbermann had put him behind her. A part of her past when he thought he was still new. But he wasn't. This took time to deal with. When he talked about jobs, people asked him what experience he'd had. They liked to think that people knew what they were doing when it was clear to him that many, perhaps most, didn't. They did what they were told, or what everyone else was doing. He felt he should lead, but you had to know what you were doing. One afternoon in the Mitchell, the pub he never thought he'd be entering again, a half-drunken fellow called Samson Klitz told Sandy that he lived on his ideas: he was an advertising man. 'Advertising?' Sandy said, 'but what do you *do*?' Klitz said 'My dear Sandy, I see you're behind the times. I don't *do*, I make people think in certain ways. People like you belong in the past, when everyone was taught to think *properly*! That is so *dated*. Dated!' He was drunk enough to add, 'You know what that means?' Sandy, feeling insulted, wanted to hit him, but restrained himself. 'I've got a fair idea. If it's as good as you think it is, how did you get started?'

Klitz was smart enough to recognise the urgency of the question. 'I hung up my shingle and started.' He almost knocked his beer over in saying so. This amused Sandy, who knew the signs of people letting

go. 'You bloody well didn't. You went through the telephone book and made a list of anyone you thought was likely.' It was the turn of Klitz to laugh. 'Not far out my boy. I've got more than I need to keep me busy. Why don't you join me?'

Two days later, Sandy found the 'office' where Klitz worked. It was upstairs and at the rear of an old building off one of Melbourne's many lanes, and it was a mess. It was obvious that he did everything himself, and good though he might be with a brush his skills didn't extend to a broom. He had a huge print of a cartoon on the wall opposite the only window, showing a jet-black man wearing a white shirt. Pelaco, the maker's name, ran across the top, and under it Sandy saw that the black man was saying, 'Pi corry boss, mine tinkit they fit!' Sandy burst out laughing. 'Did you do that?'

Klitz shook his head. 'Wish I did. That's my standard. That's what I aim to beat.' Sandy looked at the Pelaco ad a little more cautiously. 'It can't be all that hard.' Klitz shook his head. 'It's all in the quality of the idea. There's no quality in the drawing.' Sandy saw his way ahead. He'd go in with this Klitz fellow, learn the ropes, then take over. The quality of the idea? He'd recruit the best and brightest young people at the Gallery School, pay them real money, push their work into the most public places. When Klitz next got drunk, he'd get rid of him. Or start up somewhere else in an office with real presentation, double his fees, and pass on a ten per cent rise to the artists. Easy. 'Let's have a look at your client list.' Samson didn't have one; he tapped his head. Sandy said, 'All right, you're on. But we're going to start running this show like a business. You can work here if you like but we've got to get another place where I can talk to clients. If they see a shambles they'll think that's all they've got to pay for. Oh no. We need to do better than that!'

Sandy found an empty office not far away, furnished it smartly, and made arrangements with a nearby parlour to bring in tea or coffee for his clients; he decided to get them in, if he could, rather than go out looking. 'People only want you if they know you're in demand.' Then he went to the Gallery School who were scornful at first, but became interested when Sandy made it clear that his wages would give support to their students, not all of whom came from 'good' families. 'The

work they do for me won't interfere with what they do for you. Don't worry about that. Any problems any time, come and see me.' He gave the art teachers his card. 'There won't be anything we can't sort out.' Sandy was working on the principle that problems could be pushed away until they had to be sorted out – one at a time and in a way that suited you.

Six months later, Samson Klitz had disappeared and Sandy set up a new office, overlooking Collins Street, with a work room at the rear where the young artists brought their designs for his appraisal. A small gallery next to his office was where clients saw what he was offering, after which they moved into discussions about the tactics of their campaign. Morning or afternoon tea came up from a cafe below. Sandy dressed simply and expensively. He was flawlessly polite and made little attempt to sell. He began and ended his presentations with 'This is what we propose.' He had more imagination than he'd realised as a student and quickly learned to see what his clients couldn't see about their various businesses, that is, how they were perceived by the public they wished to win over. Advertising was calculated to move the potential buyer from a position of uncertainty to the required decision. It was simple. All you had to comprehend were the doubts that people entertained, the thing holding them back. Suggest a way over or around these doubts and John and Jean Citizen were buyers. Everything you did had to look costly, demanding a suitable reward. Sandy saw, before the second year was out, that he was becoming wealthy. Gratifying as this was, it was also a point of danger. People not used to money often lost it stupidly, or wasted it. He'd do better than that!

But how? He rang Endless Knight, well established in parliament by now, and asked to meet him. 'Your office or mine? Or do you want to have a drink somewhere?' Antinous didn't do business over drinks if he could avoid it. 'Yours,' he said; it was part of his technique. Most people had little idea how much of their circumstances were embodied in their surroundings. Morning tea arrived, in a beautiful Wedgewood pot with matching cups, and slices of orange cake without cream. 'They look after you,' Antinous remarked; 'I trust you look after them in return.' He said this knowing Sandy to be smart

enough to get such things right. 'You're starting to make money and you want to know what to do with it. It's a good problem to have.' Then he surprised the man of his own age sitting opposite. 'We'll talk about that in a moment. But I want to ask you something first. Do you remember a class, a lesson, we had in year twelve? Rhonda Mathieson's Australian History? She got us to read a passage from James Cook's journals. His ship had run on a coral reef at what's now called Cooktown?' His eyes glowed with inquiry. Sandy was surprised, but said he did.

'How did that class affect you?'

Sandy was amazed. He wanted to say it hadn't affected him at all, but Endless must have some reason behind his question. 'Why do you ask?'

'I thought you might remember it. I've never forgotten it. Something struck me that day. I saw the possibilities of Australia.'

This was a new one on Sandy. 'Possibilities?'

'The place was empty, or that's what white men thought.'

Sandy put his mind to it. 'The sailors were scared of the blacks, though. They didn't know when they might come out of the bush, chucking spears!' This amused him.

Endless smiled, loving a cliché as he did. 'I wasn't thinking about pitched battle! Cook had a ship, and sailors. All they did was touch the coastline here and there. But later on, once the people back home had digested his news, they came back and settled.'

'So?'

'That's us, my friend. That's how we test ourselves, and anything we've done.'

Sandy looked at his peer, who'd gone into politics for some reason, surely? 'Or anything we're going to do?'

'Touché. There's a judgement, in that landing at Cooktown, which we can ignore, or accept. But once you know that landing happened, and the blacks met the whites and vice versa, the battle – if it was a battle, I'm not sure about that – was joined.' He seemed relieved, Sandy noticed, to have said it. 'A battle? Well, we took the country, so I suppose you could call it that. But it wasn't much of a battle, if you think of Waterloo or something like that.'

Antinous said, ‘True. But I don’t think of Waterloo, which hadn’t happened at that stage, by the way. What did happen? We know and we don’t know, that’s the funny thing about it.’ Sandy had no idea what he was thinking about, or why. ‘Fill your cup, Endless, and tell me this: if I build up this business the way I hope to do, what’ll I do with what I earn? I’d like to put it somewhere safe. I don’t want it to disappear. That’s what happens when people make money and haven’t got a plan.’

Antinous found himself admiring Sandy, whom he’d never thought of as being very bright. ‘You have to buy something which is cheap today, but going to become expensive later on. Antiques maybe, or land. I’d suggest land. Get in your car and drive around the perimeter of the city. Where’s it going to spread? Buy up farms. Orchards. Big blocks for schools and hospitals. Don’t tell anyone what you’re doing. Leave the farmers on the land on nice cheap rent. You’ll make your money when there’s a subdivision for new estates. Housing. And when you sell one block, go further out and buy some more. That way, you’ll always be ahead.’

Sandy was amazed. ‘I never thought of that. Hey! That’s what I’ll do, you’re right.’ A thought came to his mind. ‘How many farms have you bought up, Endless? You cunning old bastard!’ He was all smiles – two rich men congratulating each other. But Endless surprised him. ‘Farms? None. Not one. I’m a Labor man, don’t forget. The government should be doing the buying for the generations to come.’

‘And are they? Will they?’

Antinous Knight disclosed an empty hand. ‘They’re too short-sighted, and we’re no better. Most of my party would be in there buying for themselves if they’d had the wit to think of it.’

‘And they haven’t?’

‘No.’

‘So why are you telling me?’

This was not an easy question. Antinous went quiet. Sandy had a feeling that he’d shut his man down entirely. Then the politician spoke. ‘You put a problem to me. I gave you the answer. Why? Because we belong to each other, in some strange and silly way that we can’t avoid. That’s why. The chance is there in front of you. Grab it. Don’t look back. Except one day when you get to the end of your life and

you wonder what you did with it, and what else you might have done. There will be such a day, god help us, and we don't want to look stupid when it comes.'

Sandy had never understood Antinous and now, he realised, he had even less idea what made the man operate as he did. Yet he was grateful, because he had to be. 'Thanks Endless. I think you've put me on a good track. That's a good idea you've given me. Why don't you do the same, and make yourself rich?' He was even more surprised when he heard his answer.

'I am. Already. And it's rather painful, much of the time.'

They met as they'd been meeting for years - Rhonda Mathieson and Margaret Nilsson, in Margaret's tiny apartment at the girls' school. They were discussing retirement, not because either of them wanted to retire, but because Rhonda believed that her headmaster felt it was time to replace her. 'It's my grey hair,' she told her friend. 'That and nothing else.' Margaret, knowing her friend's capacity for work, and love of the subjects she taught, looked concerned. 'The men can get old, and fat, and bald, and muddle up things they should keep clear, but so long as they address the head respectfully, they're kept on. Sir! Sir! Sir!' she added.

'What about the head? How do you know?'

'Two things. He's taken on a very bright young man who did some lecturing at Melbourne Uni. He's teaching at the junior school at the moment, but he's my replacement, sitting there waiting, and the other thing is the headmaster's secretary. She spoke to me the other day. They've got a rather inadequate pension scheme and she printed out my entitlement, such as it is. She assured me they were doing it for everyone because they're hoping to fund improvements to the scheme, but I've been listening in the staff room and there's nobody I've heard talking about *their* entitlements, and they'd have been talking if they had, you can take it from me.'

'If they raise it with you directly, can you refuse them, do you think?'

'They'd send me to the junior school and bring in their bright young boy.'

‘What’s his name?’

‘Daniel Kerr.’

‘Cur? Sounds like a dog.’ Margaret knew the ways of administrators. Rhonda gave a dry laugh. ‘With a K. He could do the job. He’s clever, and he’s on the way up. He’s obsequious, and he fits in.’ She saw no hope. Margaret was turning the matter over in her mind. ‘If they edge you out, where would you go? Where would you live, I mean?’

‘I could go to my sister’s. Jim’s not well, she probably needs a hand. Looking after him, that is.’

Margaret’s silence was her answer to that. ‘How many years is it now you’ve been there?’

Rhonda looked at her friend. ‘Same year you got this place.’ She meant the apartment allocated Margaret by her school. Margaret’s eyes took in the niche where she’d lived for ... years. ‘They don’t give us much, do they. And they take it away when they feel like it.’

Sandy’s first purchase was not an old farm, but a modern house that overlooked one. It stood above a winding stream finding its way to Melbourne’s river; the stream had cut cliffs and created a slab of flat land which had been, and still was, used for grazing cows to be milked by a little dairy on the verge of closing. There were the remains of a farm house to be seen, a row of mulberry trees, a distant quarry, and the usual variety of weeds. There were plenty of these, not that Sandy cared. Nothing in his past had taught him to notice plants, but he understood the value of a good view. Besides, if he brought someone home for late afternoon drinks, the huge space darkening at his feet was something to share with a guest, and enjoy, before further intimacies developed. In this respect the house was an excellent investment. The women he met in advertising appreciated the comfort, and warmth it offered, and Sandy had spent well, on the location and the furnishing. He had surprised himself with his ability to make a good home. ‘You’re getting ready for something – or somebody,’ his mother had said. A couple of months into his residency he decided to extend a verandah that overlooked the view, and open the two front rooms to the verandah with double doors instead of restrictive windows. This

meant having workmen arrive in the early morning, something which had a curious effect on the new owner. Getting up early and checking out the work achieved the previous day caused him to look down from his verandah, and to his surprise he noticed a couple lying under a blanket not far from the stream flowing beneath his house. Lovers! He smiled. Nobody was making them get up early! He went to the kitchen and put the kettle on, then came back for another look. The woman was looking in a bag for something, and the man was folding their blankets. Sandy watched. A few moments later, they glanced around their spot, then walked slowly, hand in hand then separately, towards the suburb on the other side of the ...

Sandy didn't know what to call it. Farm? Park? Clearing? The couple beneath him didn't seem to belong, but they were quite untroubled as they strolled away, the man carrying the folded blankets and the woman her bag. They held hands and they didn't, according to the ground they were walking on and they seemed a well-established couple. They were obviously happy, and Sandy found himself touched; then the carpenters arrived and he thought no more about them until the following morning, when he went to the verandah again to see – he realised – if they were there.

They were! The man and the woman from yesterday, looking just the same. 'Warm night,' Sandy murmured. It was January, there would be plenty of warm nights to follow. He found himself hoping they would come back, again and again.

They did. One warm night followed another, Sandy's carpenters did their job, and left, but more than the house was changed. Sandy slept in the front room giving onto the verandah and he looked out before he went to bed, but could never see the couple who made him curious. Was it because it was dark, or did they not arrive until late? He had no idea. They began to affect him. When he got up in the morning he looked down from his observation point to locate them before he did anything else – toilet, shower, kitchen. They were always there, usually still sleeping. He liked to watch them till they stirred. They were ever so comfortable with each other, it was reassuring. They didn't clutch each other as if they were afraid. They always had the same things, her small bag and the two blankets, which he folded

before they left. Their pace, when they were leaving, was casual. Sandy realised something. Not only did they make him feel happy, but he needed them. There was a wet and windy night when they didn't sleep in the park and he felt a quiver of anxiety the following day. Then a warm night followed, and they were there in the morning. This relieved him. He cast his mind forward. There must come a time when the park was no place to sleep. What would they do then?

Sandy was not the only one affected by the couple. On the far side of the park, among the modest, unprepossessing homes of Northcote, Noel McGraw had bought himself a place to live. Finding a fresh phase of rebellion rising in him, he decided to move. He would live where nobody knew him or cared. He kept the shop – or shops, because there were three of them by now, all turning over household goods at a speedy rate – and moved. He too, like Sandy, set up house. Moving into the northern suburbs was like absenting himself from judgement. He felt he belonged to himself in some way that he hadn't before. His eccentricities were his alone. Then he too noticed a man and a woman walking past his house in the mornings, sometimes holding hands, sometimes not. The woman carried a small bag and the man a couple of roughly folded blankets. It seemed to him that they must have slept together ... somewhere. Where? There was only the park. As they walked past his property – there was no front fence – they seemed as if they might lie down on the grass, curl up together and float off to sleep, yet they never did anything but walk past, ever so contentedly, comfortably ... No, there was something more. They had each other, and they appeared to need nothing more. Warm night, Noel reflected, who does need anything more? They fascinated him, he admitted to himself that he wanted to follow them and see where in the real world they belonged, but he never did. He would have been ashamed to do that. He wanted to meet them, ask them questions which were none of his business. He wanted to know if any of his neighbours knew who they were, or if they'd even noticed them. This would have gone against his rules, however. He stayed silent, watching and waiting. If he missed them, or they didn't come out of the park on any given morning, he felt bereft. He wanted them to pass his house. It was so reassuring when they did. Eventually he decided they had to

have a name so he called them Adam and Eve; to Noel, that was one name between the two of them. They shared a dual name; they were so close that this seemed reasonable. Noel found himself consulting the kitchen calendar. It was January, the nights would still be warm in February, then the temperatures would decline in March, ever so slowly, Melbourne's loveliest month. But ...

... they must eventually be gone. Some other arrangement would force itself upon them. How sad! They felt, for Noel, a vision of what he could be, might be, but the vision couldn't last. Nobody slept outside in winter. Other things were done in other seasons. Everybody belonged to their time. Adam and Eve must have come from somewhere. They must have homes? Friends? Families? Responsibilities? Even jobs? Things they were going to become, and couldn't escape? Noel yearned for them, would have bled for them, but could do nothing but rejoice, in his innermost heart, when he saw them, and their bag, their blankets, go past in the mornings that followed those warm nights they shared. He stared at them with his most restlessly penetrating eyes, but he couldn't break in. They had each other, the world was observing them, and they ignored it, dismissed it, at, apparently, no cost to themselves.

The two men moved in different directions. Sandy prospered, developed his agency, held parties at his house, swept along by the times. Noel divided into two lives: his mother's son, prosperous, with a chain of shops selling things like mad, and the recluse who sheltered in his Northcote home to hide his realisations from the world. Feeling lost, he dug out the books he'd read at school. Shakespeare devastated him; nobody could live on that level of understanding. He took refuge in Blake. Tiger, tiger, burning bright: why couldn't he live like that? He riffled through the pages, searching for himself. 'No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings.' He liked that. 'What is now proved was once only imagin'd.' True, everywhere you looked! It went on for pages. Who was this man? Where did he get his ideas?

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

He seized on the next one:

If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.

His fingers were tingling as he turned a page.

He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.

The cut worm forgives the plough.

He was laughing by now, and then:

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.

He ran his eyes over the rest of it: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It was what he wanted. It was his release! It was marvellous, but what could you do with it? He thought of the couple who walked past his house in the mornings, lost in each other. Would he call them in and read them Blake? They knew it already, of that he was sure. They were living it, they were alright, they had each other: he was the problem looking for solution. Desperation ran through him, and yet he wasn't helpless. What he wanted had been written for him, almost as if Blake had known he was coming one day, so he didn't have to work it out for himself. The question for him was different. What could he do with these ideas? How could he live in the way they pointed to? When he drove home after a day in the shops, he could open the door to a different world, and live, inside, as he couldn't in the world. But why couldn't he take that inner existence and translate it into the world outside him? Because nobody would understand and they'd say he was mad. Well, Blake must have been mad, and he was a famous poet ...

... who'd lived in some other century! He thought once again of the lovers who passed his house. How had they been able to do what he couldn't? Was love such a transformative power? It was, or rather, it must be. He'd never been in love, not with the completeness, the commitment that he saw in the woman with her bag and the man carrying their blankets. How simple, how pure! But how hard to find. Noel went to his bedroom and lay on the bed. He'd made a discovery, and he was helpless. He'd certainly advanced, yet he was nowhere.

On the other side of the farm/park/clearing, Sandy had women stay with him. He knew his mother wanted him to 'settle down' but the times were telling him the opposite. It was an uproarious time with drugs, starting with marijuana, with heroin and LSD plentiful, and authority diminished by the stupidity of America's latest war – which the Liberal government supported – and a general feeling that

everything that had been said by earlier generations didn't matter. Well, not as much as living life to the full! Work, and virtue, earlier paths to fulfilment, didn't matter as much as pleasure, and sex was the first and greatest of these. No apologies, no hiding! In music, classical gave way to rock and highly explicit song. Bands gave themselves names. Performances were happenings. Governments changed laws. If you wanted divorce – and who didn't – you only had to live apart for a year. No cause, no offence, your choice! In an age of plenty, there was plenty of everything, and only time would run out! One day, if you didn't use it up before it soaked away. No hanging back! Get in and have yourself a good time. What had once been proper began to look like inhibition. It was called the counter-culture and, strange to relate, it owed something to Blake:

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.

He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence.

It didn't sound like Blake, though, to those who lived in the age, it was American and therefore, if not religious, then an act of faith. The faith of the times was changing, something the poet Bob Dylan told the world in his songs. Nobody wanted to be left behind, that was the worst of things. Sandy held parties, people sang and danced in his house, drank in quantity and got themselves high. Couples used his beds, none more than Sandy himself. On a night he would never forget, he was in the kitchen when there was shouting on the balcony, a scream, and then confusion. Panic. Laughter too. Andrea Murray, they told him, had fallen off the balcony. Sandy rushed out, expecting to see a body in the stream below, but Andrea had been lucky. She'd fallen at the point, opposite Sandy's bedroom, where there was a ledge, and on it a lemon tree of considerable vintage, a low-lying, broken, twisted thing, and its branches had caught the falling woman. She, having no idea where she was or what was happening, was crying for help in a voice fit to be heard ...

... on the other side of the park, where Noel McGraw was deep in a sullen sleep, having done nothing of any excitement or scope for months ...

Sandy instructed those on the balcony not to let Andrea do anything stupid, while he found a step-ladder he had under the house

and rescued her. ‘Don’t let her move!’ he shouted at them, as if they could do anything if she did. Sandy found the ladder, dragged it out to the ledge where the lemon tree grew, and, wedging the ladder between branches so it wouldn’t fall, or slide down to the stream, he got an arm around the struggling woman, who didn’t understand where she was or what was happening. Sandy was himself far from sober but he hadn’t smoked anything that night and he tried to make her understand that she had to cling to him, but not to wriggle or wrestle because if she did they’d fall and there was a river, as he called it, beneath them. Amid plenty of advice and comment from those on the balcony he managed to get her out of the tree. Next! He told Andrea to climb up to the storage space under the house, keeping her feet on rocks so she wouldn’t slip and hanging onto anything she could find. She whimpered that she couldn’t. He pulled the ladder so that it rested against the foot of the lemon tree and pointed up the slope. ‘Get yourself onto that, use the steps to climb, and pull yourself up with your hands. Go on! You’ll be okay!’

She did it, but fell into a heap at the top. It was carry her or leave her. ‘Put your arms around my neck and hang on!’ he ordered, turning so she could rest against him, and thus, with a groaning, sobbing Andrea on his back, he got her, first, to the storage space and then up the steps to the little ledge he’d had built at the back of the kitchen. Cheers welcomed the rescuer and the rescued. The music, whatever it may have been, roared on. ‘I’m buggered,’ Sandy told the room. ‘Get her in a chair. She needs to calm down!’ He was sick of her. Someone else could look after her. She was moved to a chair in the front room. Someone turned the music down, then off. An emptiness filled the consciousness of the house, as if God had withdrawn his services for a while. Sandy drank, of all things, a glass of water, heard her sobbing, and found it pulling him to where she was. ‘You saved me,’ she said, ‘and now I want you to save me again.’ What did she mean? He had a feeling that she was terrified of something – probably herself. The house was getting quieter. People were leaving. Sandy looked around, wanting them to stay. Someone said, ‘Put her in bed. She just needs to sleep it off.’ He laughed, this man, whoever he was. ‘She got lost, that’s all. Didn’t know what she was doing. She’ll be alright in the morning.’

There being no better advice, Sandy told Andrea that he'd put her into bed so she could sleep. She'd be okay when she woke. He meant in the morning, though morning had never seemed further away. He helped her into his room, took off her shoes, got her to lie back, then put a blanket over her. One. It was a warm night. A few people were talking on the balcony and voices were coming out of the dining room. He had a sudden urge, or need, for poetry. He wanted someone to say something memorable, to read to him something he'd never forget. Strange! He didn't normally feel like this, drunk or sober. The only thing he could remember was a poem they'd read at school about the charge of the light brigade, a moment of madness in the Crimean War when soldiers on horseback had charged a line of cannon and been wiped out. This had been, apparently, a glorious moment in the Empire's story. Death could be glorious? He thought of Andrea, poised above a long fall to the creek below, and saw no glory in it. He laughed in fact. She was in his bed and he'd have to sleep somewhere else, if there was an empty bed in one of the other rooms. How in the name of god did she get to where he found her? Did she fall? Jump? Nobody had told him and the ones who knew had probably gone home by now, if they knew where their homes were. Suddenly he had two contradictory thoughts. He had a feeling that the world was ridiculous and he was one of the few people left who was sane and succeeding, and this made him laugh in self-centred triumph; and he remembered his displeasure with the headmaster of his school telling an assembly about the drunken old boy – that other three-colour man – who'd accosted him in Brisbane. Long, long ago, but he'd never dealt with it, not properly. It was a representation of disaster, of failure so profound that it didn't bear thinking about. Yet it had never let him go. The drunk had recognised his blazer pocket, and said, I was like you! Who wanted a memory like that? He drank another glass of water (!) and looked at the bed situation.

There were three people in the second bed and a couple in the third. He looked in his own room and Andrea was asleep. She hadn't been sick and she was breathing lightly enough. He stripped to his underpants and got under the quilt which he'd pushed aside when he was putting her to bed. Would he put it over her? No, the night was

warm, she'd be alright. There were still a few sounds and movements in the house but that had never bothered him, he put his head on a pillow and slept.

She was still there when he woke up, breathing lightly, hair tangled. I'll give her a brush when she wakes up, he thought, and went to the kitchen. Then it occurred to him to look out, and down. The lemon tree hadn't suffered much damage, but the couple weren't there. Someone had gathered the cows for the dairy, and the park was deserted. What did that mean? What time was it? The sun was well into the sky, so maybe they'd left at their usual hour. He didn't know what rules managed their two lives. One. That was what he felt about them. They were one. They were some sort of instruction, sent by ...

He'd long since given up believing in god, or gods. There was nobody out there twirling the planets, or spinning the earth for sunsets and rises, no! Silly people believed that sort of stuff, but common sense drew lines around his world, thank you very much. But where did the couple come from and why were they there? How had they made that spot their sleeping point, their place of togetherness, way down there beneath him, but really so far above? It troubled him. It reflected on him in some way he couldn't understand. He had a shower. He dressed. He made a pot of tea, toast, as quietly as he could because he didn't want to wake anybody. He needed the moment to himself. The drunk in Brisbane had walked into his life with a warning, and he'd been stupid. He'd told the headmaster and he'd told everybody. This warning ... no, this *message*, had come more privately, for him alone. What was he being told? This was the question he couldn't answer. He wanted to ask Andrea: why? Because she was mad enough to think of something that wouldn't occur to him in a month of Sundays. He looked in on her. No sign of stirring, hair still tangled. He put the brush on the floor on her side of the bed. People were sharing beds all over the city, the world, even, yet it was still a mystery. What did you get from it? As much as you gave, he supposed. He was pleased with himself for having a comfortable bed to share but the people who slept in the park didn't need a bed. They had ...

Love. The word annoyed him. His mother had told him that it made the world go around; so much for astronomers and their spinning suns and stars! It must be quite a force! He remembered Anita Silbermann and how wretched he'd felt when he realised she wasn't his any more. That had been a deprivation! Thinking of her now, he realised that he hadn't loved *her* but she had released in him whatever the spring of love sprinkled on the world, and he'd probably done the same for her. Perhaps she had to have his passion raging about her in order to learn how to control the same force inside her which she was planning to take into a marriage ...

Hearing a sound, he turned. Andrea was crossing the room. She glanced at him as if he was a table, or maybe a chair, and went to the balcony. She looked down. She was trying to work out what had happened. He got another cup and put it on the table. He was going to pour but had a feeling that he needed her permission, or at least her attention. He joined her on the balcony.

'Long way down.'

She shuddered. She looked at him, questions in her eyes, but saying nothing.

'Cup of tea inside. If you feel like it.'

She moved inside, and sat at his table. He poured and passed her the cup, touching the spoon and the sugar bowl with his left hand. She shook her head, sipped a drop or two, then spoke.

'Thank you.'

'I'll get you a towel in a minute. Have a shower. You'll feel better. You'll be surprised.'

He saw that she would do as he said. The day had started. Recovery had begun.

Andrea didn't exactly move in, she simply didn't move out. From time to time Sandy noticed that she'd brought things from some other place. When he asked, 'Where do you get these things from?' she would answer 'South Yarra', leaving him none the wiser. If he said, 'What's at South Yarra?' she would reply, 'It's where I used to live.' No explanations, that was the *modus vivendi* of the time. He found he liked having someone to come home to who enjoyed cooking and was

interested in his thoughts. His parents' home had given him an idea of normality which he'd never replaced. There were difficulties, though. She wanted more money than seemed reasonable and he never knew when she was going to ask. Much later, after she'd left, he realised that she'd been picking his trouser pockets regularly but modestly, so he hardly noticed. She knew he was making plenty and work was flowing in. His way of using talented students was paying dividends; they often invented irreverent solutions that worked surprisingly well. Sandy began to bump up what he paid them, and their peers at the art school came around asking for work. When he told Andrea this she said she'd like to meet some of these people. She might be able to manage them better. This offended Sandy: better? He wasn't doing too badly!

Her sweetness when he bridled softened him. It was her certain way of winning him over. He liked to master her – something he'd not experienced before – and she let him do it at the least sign of any disturbance in their relationship. He became used to managing her in this way, not realising that master and slave can be indistinguishable.

Which was he? They went away for a weekend while summer still ruled the land, and hired a caravan near the ocean. He was reading the paper one night, felt like a drink, and called to Andrea, who'd been sitting outside – to watch the sun set, she'd told him. She wasn't there. He looked out. Light in the sky, still, but no Andrea. Where was she?

It was an hour before she came back, and dark. He was angry. 'Where the hell have you been?' She said nothing. She stared through him as if he wasn't there, so he yelled, 'South Yarra?' This time she answered. 'No darling. Along the beach a little way. It was lovely.'

Suspicious, he repeated her words. 'Along the beach? Why were you doing that?'

She waved a hand, as if referring to something he was too dull to know about. It angered him. 'A little way!' Sarcastically, 'It was lovely!'

She burst into tears. 'It *was*. It was very peaceful. The tides were still.' She looked into his eyes, neither of them trusting the other. 'Night gives freedom. I wanted to walk. I needed it.' He looked sourly at her. 'It was lovely,' she said again.

They made a sort of peace but the following morning he noticed a group of three young men standing near the shower block, and one of them looked at him with unusual interest, as if he knew him in some way from somewhere else ...

... or through someone else! He had a feeling of certainty. He *knew*. It made him cunning. He walked on towards the beach, and took the first opportunity to duck behind a clump of tea-tree, and watch. The stranger – stranger be buggered! – checked with his eyes the path to the beach, then moved towards the caravan where Sandy and Andrea had spent the night. Sandy stepped back on the path, heading, this time, for the camp. The fellow was close to the caravan by now, though Andrea was still out of sight. Sandy felt rage rising inside him, getting him ready for the attack he'd have to launch, but a second young man, the first one's mate, had noticed Sandy and called. The first of these fellows must have been experienced because he didn't look around, but quickened his step and passed the caravan where Sandy and Andrea had slept, on his way, apparently, to the office, or possibly the road at the edge of the park. The moment Sandy stepped into the caravan and looked at Andrea he knew that she hadn't been aware of the young man's approach. So it hadn't been planned. 'I'll settle this another time,' he thought, suppressing his rage. 'Did you walk on the beach?' Andrea asked. 'Was it good?' It left him in disarray. 'I was going to. Walk on the beach, that is. But I thought I should ask you to come with me, so I came back.'

This pleased her. 'For me? That's lovely. Let's do it now. I'll get my sandals and off we go.'

The following weeks were an up and down time for Sandy's new relationship. When he loved Andrea he thought of her as liberated; when he didn't, he said she was out of control. It didn't occur to him that they meant much the same thing. Everyone approved of liberation; it belonged to the times. 'Being out of control' was a condemnation – *put-down* was the term – that might come from a generation – the *oldies* – being pushed out of the way. Much authority had been lost. Take it or leave it had moved from being an ultimatum to the spirit of the age. Manners declined because the social agreement

had become uncertain. The language of music changed as Europe yielded centrality to the US of A, and in that country the intellectual east coast yielded to the Californian climate, the Republicanism of the central states, and the traditions of the deep south. The world discovered that when it wasn't at war, the States had many voices, most of them pushing, and little idea of how they affected others. America crusaded, converted, and addressed the world as if it wasn't any different from itself. The liberties it offered in the counter-culture years weren't liberties of enlargement but of escape. Barriers, instead of being shifted a little, or lowered, were broken. Those who weren't *for* were against! It was that sort of time. There was plenty of work for Sandy's agency. His earnings pleased his mother, amazed his father. 'I've been in the wrong business all these years!' Sandy said no. He wanted his father where he'd always been, it gave him stability. 'Don't you sell up, dad. No partnerships! You've sailed your own ship for so long now I couldn't bear it if there was any change.' This flattered his father but left him uneasy. 'How do you feel about this, son? When I get a bit older, how would you feel about taking over, maybe building a chain of shops?' His mother, Sandy noticed, was hanging on his answer. He prevaricated, talked about the trends and fashions of the times. 'You've got the right approach,' his father said. 'You know the way things work. How about it, my boy? You feel like dressing men the way they ought to be dressed? Tee shirts and jeans, that's not clothing, that's just American poverty. They've forgotten how to dress these days so they say their ignorance is fashionable.' He chuckled. 'And as for grooming, they do a better job on horses than they do for themselves! Don't you think?' His feelings were inclusive; he was proud of his son, doing well, but only in a field where you made quick money that got you started in something respectable. His mother Pat, sensing that her husband was getting ready to go too far too soon, changed the subject:

'Have you seen ... what's his name? ... Robyn Briggs lately?'

'Not for ages. I can't remember when I saw him last. He was in the property market. He handled some pretty fine old homes, as I remember. Why do you ask, mum?'

She asked, of course, because Robyn was in the sort of field she'd like her son to be in, but she said, 'Some of those boys you were at

school with were fine people. From good families. If you've got good friends, it's nice to stay in touch with them.'

Sandy thought of the people he'd been with at parties in recent times, people who'd gathered at his house, which, he realised, his parents hadn't seen since the week after he moved in. 'Speaking of being in touch, you and dad must come over to my house one Sunday afternoon when you feel like a drive. It's got a great view, as you remember, I'm sure.' As soon as he spoke he wanted to kick himself. Andrea would be there – well, she might – and what she might say, or do, couldn't be guaranteed. Oh! He'd have to word her up ... but the more he warned her the more likely she was to do something outrageous. Any attempt to restrain her acted as a counter-suggestion ... but maybe she'd feel like being charming, and respectful; he never knew. It was part of the pleasure of having her around, but he didn't let her anywhere near his business. That needed to run on well-oiled wheels. She hadn't met, as far as he could recall, any of his school connections. Old Boys weren't exactly her type! So what was he doing with her?

The question bit. What was he doing with her? Being with his parents made him see the other side of himself, the side they wanted to be the completeness of their son, summed up in his mind and theirs by that three-colour blazer, emblematic of success. Well, he was more successful now than he'd ever been. Dad's shop looked pretty small. Small and humdrum, like mum's life, her taste, her friends, her aspirations. A fine woman, focussed on her husband and her son, particularly her son and his welfare ... It occurred to him that she'd soon be asking him who he was going to marry, and that would be a comment on Andrea, if mum had met her by then. Two worlds, two standards; some people had more than two worlds, or bed-partners, or ways of making money, but most of us have to settle, one of these days and eventually, for one. What would the rest of his life be like? What would he be like when he was dad's age? What would the old man say to him about *his* life when he couldn't, or didn't want to, work any more? All those years in his shop – they wouldn't amount to much, would they? Or perhaps they would, if you'd never set your sights any higher. He felt troubled. Lots of people thought he was doing well,

but he knew he hadn't reached a point where he wanted to settle. He didn't know where he wanted to go but he certainly wanted to keep moving. He wasn't *there* yet, wherever that was supposed to be.

No. Not supposed to be, but the right place for him. Where was that? He didn't know. He was still searching.

Pat and Rupert Clarkson dropped in one Sunday afternoon. There'd only been the mildest of gatherings the night before so the house was more or less presentable. Two couples had stayed the night and were still around when the parents came. Andrea decided to be charming. Sandy knew his lifestyle was under inspection and felt queasy. At all events he had to seem happy. 'If you give us a little warning we could have you for lunch, or maybe dinner, whichever you'd prefer.' The overnight couples were amazed to hear Sandy's father's reply: 'In the army, if they were going to inspect you, they never gave you any notice. Boom! You'd be sitting around in blissful ignorance and there'd be a yell, On parade! Then there'd be an inspection. Rifle, boots, uniform or the barracks. Whatever, and there'd always be blokes who got caught.'

Sandy said to his father, 'What happened to them?'

Rupert Clarkson was amused. Days and nights long gone flooded into his mind. He chuckled. 'You'd get a deadline for showing that whatever it was had been put right and could face scrutiny. Or they'd have another inspection of something else a couple of days later if they reckoned you were slack and they wanted to smarten you up.' He looked at the outsiders, whose names he'd already forgotten. 'We would have said we hated it if you'd asked us at the time, but it smartened us up. That was their aim, and they succeeded.' It sounded ghastly, unthinkable really, to the outsiders, who could think of nothing to say to this weird old man and his wife. The normality of the period included contempt for older normalities. Sandy's parents seemed not to know that the world had changed. How come they hadn't heard? Sandy himself tried to find a position in the middle. 'I suppose you had to make the best of it. If you're in the army they've got total control of you, haven't they?' His father wasn't budging. 'If there's a war on, they need you fit, sober, ready to run, or concentrate, for hours. They

haven't got time to ask your opinion on anything, they have to be able to rely on you!' Everything he said seemed to have become an article of faith as he'd aged. Then he looked at the men sitting on the sofa in Sandy's living room. 'What do you fellas do for a crust, anyway?' One of them was amused by the question, or perhaps the questioner. 'If I wanted a crust, I'd beg for it.' The other one, catching on, said, 'If I was hungry and there wasn't anything to eat, I'd smoke a joint and forget about food.' He thought, then added, 'That, or go to sleep.'

They were wastrels, Rupert thought. Glancing at his wife, he stood up. 'We should have told you we were coming. That, or got you to come over to our place.' He glared at his son and the people associated with him. 'The place where you grew up!' The Clarksons left, telling Sandy and Andrea not to see them off. 'You've got your friends to look after.' Pat Clarkson looked at her husband's back as he left the room, caught her son's eye to look sadly upon him, then followed her husband to their car. The sound of its engine starting was audible, if faintly, in the room. Andrea looked guiltily on the man she'd moved in on. 'You want us to go? For a while? For good?' He shook his head, saying nothing. Andrea asked if anyone wanted coffee, but nobody did. The next move was Sandy's after the parental visit, and he wasn't saying anything; couldn't apparently, which meant he was torn. The overnight couples slipped away, while Andrea became quiet, waiting. She asked him, later that night, if he wanted to sleep by himself, but he told her he needed her. 'I've always thought I was a normal sort of person,' he told her, 'but every time you look around, these days, what's normal is changing. Today gave me a shock. I respect my parents. They've always worked hard to give me the best possible chances, and I've benefited from what they've done. But today ...'

He fell silent and she put her arms around him. 'Today was a shock, to them and to you. They didn't expect me to be here, or the others. But I was the biggest shock. They didn't like me.'

He knew she was trying to be good to him. His parents had done that all their lives. It was up to him to do something special now, for those who loved him and had looked after him. But what to do? He asked Andrea this question and felt her arms, her grip on him, weaken. She was scared, and in a deeper sense, she didn't care. Nothing was

certain in her life, and never had been. She'd always been wild and done mad things ... like falling off his balcony. 'You want me to go back to South Yarra?' He shook his head. 'I can if you want me to. Or I can go to another party and go home with someone else.' She could, he knew. She fitted the time's idea of beauty, long-legged and blonde. 'Stay with me,' he said. 'We've both got a problem. Maybe we can solve it together.'

So they spent another night together. They were living a day at a time. Everyone said it was the best way to live but they knew there was a better way and they hadn't found it.

Word about Sandy's success in advertising and news about his northern suburbs home as a partying centre found its way back to those who'd known him as a boy. They were surprised. He'd been good at sport, fair in the classroom, but not the sort of person they'd expected to take a lead, or show the times the way. How strange! He had a woman who was wild but nobody knew anything about her because she hadn't grown up on their side of the city. The chickadees, as they'd once been called, were a little older now, but not so much as to be immune to the movements of the day. They'd always seen themselves as the city's liveliest people so that what changed was not what they did as the spirit in which it was done. They were rapacious, concentrating on themselves rather than their families. People got left behind if they were dull. Antinous Knight saw that people asked for action and excitement rather than careful distribution; the radical left trying to soften and then pull down the capitalist system was long gone. A few old wharfies in his bayside seat told him about getting large consignments open by dropping them, then helping themselves to the contents, especially close to Xmas time. 'Not any more,' they said, and Antinous warned them that containers were the coming thing and that their jobs were on the verge of disappearing. 'Who'll you have to vote for you?' they wanted to know, but Antinous wasn't bothered. Another class would move in and he'd find out what they wanted, or ...

... what they aspired to. Everyone thought betterment was just around the corner. It struck Antinous as quaint that so many

expected better of society when they were running around indulging themselves. They smoked pot, they were interested in LSD because the Beatles had made it famous, they changed partners at the drop of a pair of pants, they expected their children to stay on board the ever-altering carriage which was their life. A phase, Antinous told himself, but he knew that it would alter his society permanently. He watched his parliamentary colleagues for signs. Where did they stand, personally, in their relation to the times? Anyone who did more than dabble to find out what was going on was a fool and could on no account hold a ministerial position. The lowliest backbencher had to be endless – he smiled at himself – in keeping watch over every move in the game they'd chosen to play. Politicians spent half their time frustrating each other but every advantage had to be gained, first, then held. While still, outwardly, remaining the amiable, watchful, good-natured and generous member for Port Melbourne, he became, inwardly, severe, ruthless, and decisive in judgement. People liked him because he was affable, not realising that if he had to disguise his opinion of his fellows, he'd judged them to be fools. The state had to be well run. It had made a certain number of people well, and they were the ones to be listened to and allowed to function. Others needed to be kept in line and their number was increasing. He was particularly concerned about a handful of his school fellows, those in a group led by, and including, Ken Jarman.

As a youngster, Ken had been promoted because he embodied his school's values; that is, he'd taken them as his own, raising no objection to the ethos of the place. He took on the counter culture just as easily, or rather, those aspects of it, notably the sexual freedom, that he wanted. If, confronting him, you'd said that he would do anything he could get away with, he'd have taken offence, but it was true, and he didn't realise it. Suzanne, his wife, was the same, insofar as women can resemble men. Both would have claimed to have a conscience, but neither consulted it. They wanted things, as people do, and they did those that they could get away with. Not long after they married Suzanne said to Ken, 'If you slept with someone else, would you tell me?' and he admitted that he'd try to keep it secret. This relieved her. 'I'm glad you said that. I think I'd be the same, if...' He looked

at her. Why hadn't she finished? 'You've been thinking about it.' She said nothing, made no move. 'Who is it you're keen on?' She wasn't telling him that. 'You see what happens? People say that in a good marriage, everything's right out in the open. I don't think that's good at all. I think it's not safe. We need secrets sometimes. If I got keen on somebody ...'

'If? It sounds like you are, to me.'

But she insisted. 'If I got keen on somebody, and I told you, I'd have two things to work out instead of one. Would I go ahead with this other person ...'

'Can you name him?'

'Stop it Ken. There's no other person, I'm talking about the possibility that there could be. Listen to what I say, not some buzzing between the ears that's got you interrupting me. And the second thing I'd be thinking about would be how to manage you if you knew about it. Double the problem, see?'

'I'm not stupid, I can see.'

They were negotiating while pretending that they weren't. Were they giving each other sexual freedom, or not? Both wanted it for themselves, didn't want to give it to the other. Both knew that was stupid. But marriage meant something and they didn't want to lose it. What was it? Neither could have told you, though they'd been through a courting, then a ceremony, they'd attended the weddings of friends and relatives as married people themselves, they'd taken up residence together, they shared bank accounts, they'd adjusted politely to the other's parents and family as being part of themselves and they'd adopted the mannerisms of – they spoke as – a single organism with two parts: each was the other half of the other. But sexuality, which was supposed to be the basis of it all, was the disrupter. Desire roamed; was always looking around. Each knew this about the other because each knew it in themselves. Hence the confusion over fidelity. *I want to make love with anyone who takes my fancy, and is willing, but I don't want you to know about it because at the same time as I wish to indulge with someone else, I want a part of myself – the rest of myself – to carry on as if nothing had changed. I don't mind lying, being hypocritical and having double standards as long as I'm*

the only one who knows it. If I have to get permission from you to go off with someone else then I can't pretend, because you, I know, are looking right through that pretence. It isn't protecting me at all. This is a summary of how they thought, of the many times in the early years of their marriage when they negotiated while trying to appear as if they weren't. Suzanne was the better negotiator because she saw how necessary it was, while the same process irritated Ken. He hated negotiating because it meant admitting to Suzanne and to himself the very things he wished to do while erasing them from his consciousness. He hated having to keep things dark but if that was how things were then he *wanted* to keep dark things dark. Darkness had to be shielded so that light didn't get in.

Suzanne began, conventionally enough, feeling much as Ken did, but steadily moved, and moved again, until she felt that complete honesty was the only way to hold a marriage together, and even to find out if you *wanted* the marriage to hold. If *you* wanted to split it was likely that your partner was having similar thoughts. Why not tell each other so?

Because it was painful. The pain didn't go away, it was there whichever way you treated the situation, telling each other the truth, telling lies, not talking about it, leaving hints and signals around to give your partner *some* idea of what was in your mind ...

It was painful. Men and women are meant to complete each other, but many of them, male and female, don't want to be completed. It's more fun, and more challenging, which is to say stimulating, to be no more than a work in progress. Those that claim to be complete can't be forgiven for any falling down in standards, and that includes, indeed highlights, infidelity. The body is promiscuous, nature is promiscuous, the mind creates hurdles, doubts, insecurities, justifications for and against: all these things it does to itself, and then it creates jealousy for the other. It's hardly possible to win, except by limiting the self and/or over-ruling the mind. What does marriage mean? Those who've been married for decades still have to work it out every day; that, or fall back on that great restrictor, habit. Those who've only recently married have still to work it out, and that includes inevitable failures, and can't avoid including moments of greater closeness with

someone newer than the partner who carries marital baggage from the beginning of day one. The attractive outsider brings the possibility of being a more exciting, better partner than the existing one, and therefore brings new hope into any situation: new hope! Who can turn away from that? Hey?

Everyone wants certainty and stability, everyone wants the opposite. True? We know it is. Ken Jarman didn't want to restrict Suzanne. He loved it when she surprised him. New clothes. Things to go to, shows to see. New friends, new conversation. Ideas. But she was so attractive that other men wanted her. They couldn't help it. He could hardly blame them, since he'd chosen her himself. It was as if they'd rushed to grasp each other in their early heights of desire but, having folded themselves into each other, they found themselves holding a problem. They'd got what they wanted and found it wasn't what they'd thought. They both felt cheated but who'd cheated whom? They wanted to blame each other but that spoiled the love that still existed. They blamed themselves but found it useless because it gave them no relief. If they'd made a mistake, what was it, and what could they do about it? They didn't know and that was when the pain came in. What should have been wonderful was problematic. If they talked about it with friends, these others either confessed to the same problems, or they didn't confess, and that was worse. Trust was being abused by lies and covering up. Purity was being lost to the extent that it could hardly be remembered. What was it? What had it been like, all those months ago, before the trouble crept in?

This was why Suzanne favoured complete openness, and honesty, however painful. 'We mustn't let it get on top of us,' she told Ken, but he, who'd never thought anything through for himself, but had always taken the ruling system of ideas as his own, couldn't do it. He wanted her to be free, and then he'd be free himself. And he didn't want her to be free. There were so many men looking over his shoulder, desiring her, waiting for an opportunity. Suzanne's father was a stockbroker in Sydney and he was injured in a bus crash on a trip to the USA. Her mother was horrified by the hospital bills and wanted to go and see for herself; she asked Suzanne to come with her, if she could; she needed support. Ken helped her pack, and as he did so, for all his loyalty, he

could feel his concerns, his doubts and anxieties rising. Would she be faithful to him while she was away? Then the inevitable happened. It occurred to him that her absence would be an opportunity: would *he* be faithful to *her*? He could hardly stand, yet he drove her to the airport, kissed her, told her to give his love to her mother and her father when she saw them, embraced her one last time, then crept back to his car, wishing that he could simply disappear from the face of the earth until Suzanne sprinkled some potion on the ground to bring him back. How easy that would be ...

That was how things should be done!

There were parties everywhere. Parties gave permission. Men threw their car keys on a table, then selected. The women went with the cars. Those who were watching – waiting – knew which keys to pick up. It was the age of feminism but that was only half of it. Men were studying women and women were learning new lessons about men. Public discourse was argumentative but something more was happening in beds. Cars. Bodies. In the vulvas and in the minds. Earlier males had assumed the demands of their pricks. Cocks, whatever you wished to call them. Women called the bluff. They took their pleasure with their men, and a hefty load of pain. The contraceptive pill and a certain amount of plain speech changed the nature of sexual occurrences. Some men felt humiliated, others saw their opportunity. If women were free to fuck, no longer having to defend their virtue, then there were more fucks around, so hey, that was good! That was one school of thought.

Suzanne thought her husband wasn't very good at sorting things out. He wanted to put every sexual occurrence in the same category. This was silly. Sex was the way that children were produced. If a couple wanted children, or one of them did, then the rules went one way. If they didn't, if they were a couple for only one night, or a few, then things followed the brief-encounter rules. If people were occasional lovers, then they left each other alone for long periods, neither bothering the other. And so on. If you try to make one rule cover all situations, she told her friends, most of the time your rule won't work. It'll be bad for those who try to apply it. And then another

thing, addressed first to men, and then to the world: don't try to possess somebody, try to give them the best of yourself, the most of yourself that you can, even if you're only ever in bed with them once. Make it worthwhile! Make it good! And no matter how good it is, don't ask for it again unless the other person wants it too.

Ken listened to this with a mixture of sadness and scorn. 'That's your ideal. It's a nice ideal, but people aren't like that. They're greedy. Hungry. If they've had something and it's good, they'll want it again, and again, that's for sure. One thing about sex you can be sure of; nobody plays by the rules!' He started to laugh. Suzanne laughed too. 'You see what I mean?' Ken said. 'You're admitting it. You know it's true. Kids? We all say we love kids but most of the time they're a bloody nuisance and we can't stand the sight of them. Kids are just god's accidents and when they come along we have to do our best by them, I know, but most men do their damndest not to get caught, that's to say, not to get their girlfriends pregnant until they reckon it's time to start a family. That's when everything changes!' He would have gone on but could see that she was sitting back with some new challenge in her mind and was ready to launch it at him. 'Okay, your turn now.'

She shook her head. 'Not today.' But they were busy the next day, and the day after that they had dinner with people they didn't know very well, and the day after that Suzanne got the message about going to see her father in America, so Ken had three weeks of wondering what she was going to say, but when she got back she had news that shook him, startled him, and made him feel that he'd missed a chance. 'I've got something I need to tell you,' she said, the first time they were alone. 'There was this doctor in the hospital where they were treating dad. He was a Frenchman but he was working in the States. I liked him the first time I saw him and a couple of nights later, after I'd got mum settled at the hotel, I met him, and he took me to his ... apartment, they call it over there. It was small, and full of interesting things, and we talked, and we had a bottle of wine ...'

She looked at him to be sure that he was aware of the inevitability of what she was describing. 'And one thing led to another ...'

She looked him full in the eye. 'And what about you?'

He'd rarely, if ever, felt more disarmed. 'What about me? There's nothing to tell. No story. No happening. No lover, no sin ...'

This last word amused her greatly. 'No sin at my end either. Appreciative love is what I'd call it.' She was still testing him, he knew, and didn't want to speak.

But she wouldn't stop. 'The last time I was with him, we agreed not to write. Or ring, or anything. It was wonderful, and its time had run out. Too soon, but that's how it was.' It annoyed him, it was too easily dismissive, it was as if she was tossing jewellery on the floor. 'Christ, Suzanne, you're pretty bloody casual, I have to say!'

She wasn't having it. 'We got pretty close to having an argument about it, before I went away. Now I'm back, it's clear to me that we don't need to argue, just accept.'

'Accept? Bloody hell!' He wanted to break her down, to see her crying out with guilt, but the opposite was happening. She was treating it as if it had been a gift to them both ...

Suddenly he saw that not only was she treating her affair in this way, but it was what she'd been going to say when she cut herself short, three weeks before.

'You are amazing!'

For a moment he felt she was going to touch her hair, but all she did was say, 'Thank you Ken. That's very generous of you.'

'Generous?'

'Yes. Of course. Lots of men would have flown into a rage. Some men might have punched me. Hit me. But you're different. You're surprised. You'd say you weren't expecting it, but you were. You've thought about little else for weeks. Months, probably. And now it's happened, you're thinking, very wisely, in a perfectly acceptable way, that you're going to even things up with me. Someone you've been interested in for ages is going to get a call. Be asked out for lunch, or a coffee, or something. There's always a way to start.'

He was amazed. 'You're telling me what to do?'

And still she was playing him, like a fish on a line. 'Only if you haven't got a better idea of your own!' He started to laugh, but it turned into a sob. They had started out on a long, long path, leading nobody knew where, and they were doing it in full knowledge of what

they were doing, to themselves and to each other. 'You're amazing,' he said. 'I'm amazed that you could ...' He didn't bother to finish. She finished for him. 'Whatever happens, we mustn't lose sight of how precious we are to each other, you to me and me to you. Never forget, Ken.' She was watching him. 'Never forget.'

And so they gave way to their times; but they were fortunate in that Ken never felt they had any right to other partners. They simply wanted them. Suzanne could be realistic because Ken wasn't, and she knew this. Or was it that he was realistic and she wasn't? It was impossible to tell. Nobody *knew* any more, though everyone spouted ideas of what was right and wrong. Nobody knew. How could this arise? It was the idea of a moral law emanating from god that had been dismissed by many. Many, but not all? Yes. There is a simple rule in matters of faith. Ask who believes in god. If everybody says they do, then god exists. If nobody says god exists, then he doesn't. If half say yes and half say no, he exists for half the people and half the time.

You think this is silly? It is, without doubt very silly. But if we admit that god is a creation of the human mind, then he may come into existence or disappear according to people's belief or otherwise. There are ages of faith and ages when faith is absent, or weak. The movement of the times I am describing was against faith, so it weakened, and humans felt they could manage the universe alone. This is silly too, given their record, but humans are not so much optimists as fools, believing that mistakes of the past won't happen in the future. They will, of course, because humanity is flawed. Nowhere is this more evident than in choosing partners. What we want of a partner, what we expect, may be beyond our powers to give, in which case we are asking for more than we can offer in return. Sounds familiar? Ken worked at one of the nation's biggest banks, in the section responsible for overseas funding for local loans. There were strict rules and procedures. People worked in sequence and could see what others had done or were to do. There were audits. Possible mistakes were picked up before they were allowed to happen. Yet the same people got drunk at weekend parties, took drugs, or whispered secrets into the ears of people they were sleeping with for the first time, and possibly the last.

Ken had absorbed some of the high seriousness of the King James Bible in his days at school and university. God held the world in his grip. The universe, known and unknown, was his mighty, resonant realm, yet people did things that brought shame to Ken's sense of standards. So much guidance had been built up as to what was right, fair and just, and people were throwing it away. Ken hated this, yet he wanted to throw it away too, all that wisdom, that guidance that mankind had stored up, down the years. He found a Bible in a hotel room in Sydney when he was attending an in-service for people in his section of the bank and he put it away, embarrassed. It had no meaning for the time he lived in, he was as lost, as bad – did that word have meaning any more? – as the rest of them. He slept with women whenever he could, and he knew, without having any proof – she was too clever for that – that Suzanne had her men, yet he was never more secure than when they lay beside each other in their bed in inner eastern Melbourne, no longer faithful, but closer, at least, than they were to anyone else. 'Never forget,' Suzanne had said to Ken, and he hadn't forgotten, couldn't, wouldn't, didn't want to. To use a religious term, they both wanted deliverance, and didn't know where it was to be found. It was invisible, they didn't know the direction it might come from, nobody else talked about this quality they were longing for, they could only hope it might bless their lives with what they needed most.

In his schooldays, Ken had been struck by words that had been read out in chapel; he, as a senior student, had read the words himself once or twice: 'the peace of God which passeth all understanding'. That was what he longed for and he suspected that it couldn't be experienced, this peace, until you'd lost your humanity and become like the god they were always talking about. He told Suzanne that he felt this way, and he was surprised at how quiet it made her. She seemed to understand. He didn't ask if she wanted the same thing, and she didn't tell him, but the words had joined them, and that must surely have some meaning?

New people came and went in the lives of Ken and Suzanne but were rarely named. They were discreet and left space for each other. She did the household shopping on Saturday mornings while he carried

the bags, suggesting things occasionally. They had coffee at or near the market, chatting to shoppers they knew, comparing prices, talking about political polls. They were friendliest as they lay in bed. When she asked him what he thought about this or that, what he felt, he sensed that she was interested in someone but kept it to himself. He asked her about places she'd like to visit, and things she wanted to do, as if they were planning for a certain future. Sometimes she felt he was going through the motions of politeness; at other times, that he wanted to share these journeys, these discoveries with her, and she took this to mean that he did want to be part of her life in years to come. She felt reassured, and pleased, when this happened, and moved closer to him to wish him a good sleep. He knew she was pleased with him for one reason or another if, in saying goodnight, she turned to face away but pushed back so that they were touching as they fell asleep. When her father, on his return from the US, took his wife, his daughter and her husband out for dinner, and mentioned a French doctor who'd been among those treating him, Ken decided that either he didn't know his daughter had had an affair with this man ... or else he was a first rate actor. It occurred to him that the latter was more likely, and this made him respect his father-in-law for being able to bring off this (minor to him?) deception. Deception could be well-intentioned too.

The next time Ken's work took him to Sydney he made a point of contacting Suzanne's father, and they had a brief but excellent lunch together, over which his father-in-law questioned him shrewdly about the bank's investments, in particular their purchase of a controlling share in the English Clydesdale Bank: 'A mistake, you mark my words. You won't make any money out of it and you'll find it diabolically hard to sell when your board wakes up to their mistake.' He went on. 'You're saddled with it now, though. Boards should never go into anything unless it passes the ten-year test. You want to know what that is? The board has to say to itself, if we do this thing, will people be heaping praise on us, ten years hence, and if so, why? If you can't be certain of the answer, don't do it.'

He wasn't to know that Ken Jarman, his son in law, was putting his marriage to the same test, and felt he was right to stay with Suzanne. He'd first chosen her, he thought – though maybe she'd chosen him? –

when the group known as the Chickadees – a name that had slipped out of use – had formed, they'd courted and married in the conventional way; he'd never told her about his affair with Stella, at the theatre; and it had begun to dawn on him as the years moved on that it was he who was the conventional one, not his beautiful wife. Ken had begun to realise, a year or so after they married, that Suzanne picked up things ever so quickly, whether it was scraps, and more, of foreign languages, the way musicians played or sang, fabrics, theories of early childhood learning, you name it. He suspected that the men he didn't know about were experiments with different types, each of them far from the conventional role played in Suzanne's life by he himself, Ken Jarman, the once-boy in a blue suit who was forging ahead in the bank because he had little imagination, followed orders and wasn't tempted, as some of his colleagues were, to try out the ideas and hunches that came to his mind as they came to everybody's. Similarly, and in just the same way, Suzanne, pushing back against him when she wanted to go to sleep, was testing his solidity, his trustworthiness, and drawing comfort from him. He was solid. Sound. You could rely on him. You could trust him to do what he said he'd do. He wouldn't let you down. He'd never told her about Stella in their early days of marriage, and wouldn't tell her now because it was his dullness, his reliability, that gave him his best chance with her. She felt sure with him because she'd worked him out, through and through. She didn't realise that he'd done the same with her, and was in his way simply lying wait, ready to take her hand in one trusting moment, and never let her go. He thought of Ezio Pinza, the opera star who'd made *South Pacific* famous by singing, in a way the world could never forget: 'Once you have found her, never let her go, or you will spend the rest of your life ... alone!'

Not for him! No!

He watched, he waited. Her moods, the rises and falls of people that he never knew in her estimation, her experience of them, her love for them and its eventual dissipation, became his moods, his rises and falls too. When she pushed against him in the night, drawing strength, he gave. When she came to bed late, coming home from being with someone else, he was inert. Turned off, but ready. Sometimes he

surprised her by anticipating a change in her feelings, something she hadn't noticed until he put a word on it. He spoke of her as hopeful, expectant, agitated, brooding, and so on: these weren't business words, weren't National Bank words. They were *his* words about *her*; unexpectedly, and before her very eyes, in fact, he'd grown up. She said to him, one night as they lay in bed, on their backs, side by side, 'You've changed, Ken. You've outgrown me.' He shook his head. 'No. But I have caught up. I think.' He had a feeling that she wanted to hug him, and cry, but she lay still. She didn't press herself against him that night. She rolled around, and slept mostly on her back. In the morning, when she showered and dressed, she did it modestly, as if they were new to each other. Ken felt this was a good sign, in some way inexplicable to him. He was hoping they'd make love again, but they didn't, not for weeks and weeks, though they slept in the same bed. It occurred to him that she was negotiating again, her return this time, and that if it happened, it would be permanent. He felt his heart opening to her, and wondered if he should say something, but remained quiet. They were communicating strongly, now, but without words. Words might de-clarify, and confuse, the feelings that were developing.

They lived, the pair of them, in a confusion of hope and certainty.

Time passed, they became lovers again, and though Suzanne didn't say it, he knew that she wished to become a mother. This would mean the end of a stage of his life and he was willing to have it behind him. He began to think about organising a reunion of boys from his school, and with it came another assessment of himself: he wasn't, he felt, making any contribution to society beyond his work at the bank. He had only to look at the CVs of his bank's board of directors to see that once people reached a certain position they were expected to play a different role in society as patrons, donors, spokesmen, standard bearers, and so on. Charities and cultural organisations such as orchestras, theatre groups and art galleries needed wealthy, well respected people to speak for them, launch appeals, play host to distinguished visitors. The list was endless. He'd had a privileged schooling and one of its tenets was that when the time came you

had to pass on a well-made world to those coming after. This meant scholarships for school and university students, indeed anyone young and gifted. He'd decided to hang up his football boots and though he knew he could get himself on the committee running the club, he was looking for more, something representing a development, an attainment, that had been out of reach when he was at school.

He looked around. He was amazed at the variety of clubs and organisations that he'd ignored for so long. There were bushwalkers, field naturalists, entomologists, more than he'd ever dreamed of. The one he kept coming back to was the group known as Friends of the NGV (National Gallery of Victoria). They raised money for new purchases, travelling exhibitions and the like. Their membership, highly social, added lustre to the gallery. They made the arts respectable. His banking experience would be valued by them; every gallery needed money! He visited the gallery a couple of times, realised his ignorance, and then he joined. At the first meeting he attended he was again reminded of how little he knew about art in general and in particular the art of his country. The Australian collection at that time was laid out chronologically, and this gave him a way in. Early paintings touched on the Sydney settlement, the extension to Tasmania, contact with blacks, and so on, but this historical treatment gave out after a time and the paintings varied in ways that puzzled him. It seemed that painters belonged to schools, with theories and programs that he didn't understand; he'd have to do some reading. But first, he'd have to look. He decided to start at both ends – the earliest and the most modern. He quickly discovered that some painters were regarded as progressive and others conservative, though why this should be so wasn't apparent to his eye. He wondered who affixed these labels to artists and why they accepted them, if they did. He talked about these things with Suzanne, kept quiet about them at work. Suzanne was surprised by his new interest, but welcomed it; some of the Chickadees had been friends of the gallery and talked with a nodding acquaintance with what it had on show. 'You'll need to do some reading, Ken,' she told him. 'Get yourself familiar with the collection. Then you'll have to find out what they've got in Sydney, and Adelaide after that. Later on, we'll need to go for trips to some of the places artists have painted,

so we know what they were looking at.' This surprised him; he hadn't thought of doing that. How did artists choose the places, the subjects, that they were going to paint? There was a woman – what was her name? – who painted the Sydney Harbour Bridge under construction, and he could see why her paintings were talked about. She made the bridge heroic, and popular. Her pictures took you back to the time when it was being built and the whole country – well, parts of it – hung on each stage of its construction, most of all, of course, the moment when the two arms would join in the middle. 'Grace Cossington Smith!' he blurted out over dinner one evening. Suzanne looked at him. 'What about her?' Pleased with himself, he told her, 'She painted the Harbour Bridge. She was an important painter!' Suzanne was amused, but hid it. 'You're getting somewhere, Ken. You're going to be an expert, one of these days.'

Suzanne too was ready for change. Though she still saw some of her friends from the chickadee days, the chatter they shared was trivial, bouncy, reflecting none of the change she'd brought into her life. She was waiting for motherhood, and the only person she ever ran into who, she felt, was perhaps in a similar position was Sophie Villeneuve, Sophie Berg as she now was. 'You've gone from being French to being German!' Suzanne commented to her friend. 'How does it feel?'

When she sat at home in the evenings with Ken, he sometimes suggested that they should go out, but normally she did no more than shake her head. 'I'm sitting here reading about painters,' he said. 'It can't be very interesting for you. If you want to go out, have a drink and meet a few people, just say so. I don't want you feeling caged up by me!' She smiled at this, aware of something that was only hazy to him. 'We're not caged up, Ken. We're moving on.'

As it happened, however, when she was with Sophie, or Sophie and Kim, she didn't feel in motion at all: rather, she felt becalmed. She felt an enormous energy inside herself, and it was idle, quiet, still. She was gathering herself, she felt: getting ready, and Sophie was the same. She would say to Suzanne, 'You must understand my friend that when I come to Melbourne, it's to have a rest. When we are down by the sea, Kim's mother ...' she paused '... Ariadne ...' her smile

made Suzanne smile too ‘... wants me to sing songs, and wants me to walk along the beach, and tell her what I can remember of France, and she wants to know all about our cooking, and how our *paysans* feed their pigs, and how we prune our fruit trees, and I am so ignorant that I have to make up stories to tell her, and I know she understands what I am doing because she tells me that I will become a great inventor one day, and we laugh, and when she puts her head back to laugh I am very proud to be loved by her, and I tell Kim that I love his mother and he is very happy because he didn’t know if we would get on well, he knows how difficult she can be when she wants to. She is like me, she is very hard to stop!’

They looked at each other, Sophie nodded, and Suzanne fetched a bottle of wine from a cupboard. ‘I don’t need a corkscrew, Ken opened it last night. He was in a good mood. We had one glass each and we went to bed.’

‘What made you have a good mood?’

‘He was reading about a painter and he could understand what the book was saying.’

‘He is a clever man.’

Suzanne said, ‘At work he is clever. Anything to do with money.’

‘You will be rich!’

Suzanne spread her hands. ‘They have so many rules. It’s not our money, Ken tells me. They are always reminding each other. This way, not that way. They’re all so smart I don’t know why they tell each other these things.’

Sophie raised a finger, meaning she had a theory. ‘Clever people are competitive. They study each other, each hoping the other will make a mistake. That is their opportunity to advance.’ Suzanne nodded. ‘Cheers!’

They sipped their wine. Sophie, liking it, called for music. Suzanne said, ‘I haven’t got anything you’d like.’ She tried to think of something. Sophie said, ‘It doesn’t matter. When you come to my place I will play you something by Gabriel Fauré.’

‘What will you play me?’

A beautiful understanding lay between them. In quiet reverence the French woman said, ‘La Bonne Chanson.’ Suzanne translated for

herself, 'The Good Song', causing Sophie to murmur a few lines in the tongue of her parents:

Que vienne l'été! Que viennent encore
L'automne et l'hiver! Et chaque saison
Me sera charmante, Ô Toi que décore
Cette fantaisie et cette raison!

Suzanne put down her glass, moved beside Sophie on the sofa, and embraced her, saying, 'I want to be you, Sophie. I want to be like you. When I become a mother, I'll turn into a different form of myself, and I'll welcome that, but really I'd rather become what you are. That would be better.'

Ken came home while they were talking. There was a feeling in the room that humbled him. He said, 'It's a wonder you're not playing music.' Suzanne told him, 'We were talking about it instead. Next time I visit Sophie she's going to play me ...'

She paused, waiting for Sophie to take over: 'La Bonne Chanson, by Gabriel Fauré.' They looked at him as if it mattered whether or not he knew what this was. Sophie was as beautiful as his wife, he saw, and she had the upper hand because she knew something wonderful that Suzanne hadn't attained. Yet. Ken looked next at his wife, who was like him, he felt, because she didn't know this music, whatever it was. The book he was reading about colonial painters lay on the floor near his wife's feet, pushed out of the way. He wanted to rescue it but left it where it was. To Sophie he said, 'La Bonne ...?' Her lips moving in the French way, she added, 'Chanson. Song. There are nine of them, poems by Paul Verlaine.

La lune blanche ...'

She looked at them. They were waiting for her to go on.

Luit dans les bois;
De chaque branche
Part une voix
Sous la ramee ...
O bien-aimee

There had to be more; Sophie went on:

L'étang reflète,

Profonde miroir,
La silhouette
Du saule noir
Ou le vent pleure ...
Rêvons, c'est l'heure.

There was silence. Ken knew the thing wasn't finished, he could feel it extending somewhere. Suzanne murmured, stirring Sophie to finish what she'd begun:

Un vaste et tendre
Apaisement
Semble descendre
Du firmament
Que l'astre irise ...

Her eyes told them that the last line was being conferred upon them:

C'est l'heure exquise.

After a long silence, Ken dared 'Any wine left in that bottle?' There was, it was poured for him, Sophie said she must get herself back home, 'in all that traffic', Suzanne invited her to have dinner with them but she declined, saying that Kim was expecting her, and 'she had a husband too!' They laughed at this, two happy marriages celebrating themselves, but after she left, Ken and Suzanne on their own again, there was a stiffness, an inadequacy, in the Jarmans' apartment. Ken wanted to pick up his book from the floor, but didn't want to draw attention to it; the book was somehow connected to the awkwardness both were feeling. Eventually, and in a heavy-hearted way, Suzanne said, 'She's got something, hasn't she.' He could do no more than nod. The something had gone out of the room, undefined although they'd felt it, knew it when their friend was with them. It was a dimension they couldn't provide for themselves, yet Sophie lived in it, belonged to it, shared it easily. Suzanne fiddled with the curtain, stared out the window. Ken sat on the sofa, and used his foot to pull the art book closer so he could pick it up. She said, 'Could we go out for dinner? I don't feel like cooking tonight. Nothing expensive. Some pasta at Mario's would be fine.' He was saying, 'Yes of course,' when she added, 'I need to be somewhere else for a while. We can talk about it later.'

They left. There were empty seats at Mario's, they ordered. Suzanne asked for a glass of the house white, Ken the red. Ken opened his mind a little. 'We're both missing her. I wonder how she gets on with Kim's mum. Ariadne. Did she say?'

Suzanne said, 'She imitates her. What do they say? The sincerest form of flattery.'

Ken: 'Imitates her? She's ... what's the word? ... inimitable!'

Suzanne: 'We're all influenced by others. It's how we come to be so different. Have you ever thought about that?'

'About what?'

'About what makes us all so different. And why we get on well with some people and can't stand others.'

'Human nature I suppose.' He knew he was being dense.

Suzanne said, 'We're a mass of contradictions. Take Cecile, Sophie's mother. She's setting up a native plant nursery. She's becoming more Australian than we are. Yet she also taught Sophie that poem, and lots of other poems no doubt. Why? Because she wants her daughter to be French, and the French honour their poets.'

'What about Sophie's dad?'

'I don't know him so well. I don't know much about him.'

They'd reached the point when Ken said, 'And what about us?'

Suzanne was ready. 'We thought we were grown up. Mature. We had our lives underway.'

'And don't we?'

She laughed. 'That book about painting. You don't take that in to work because you know they'd laugh at you.'

He grinned. 'I'd laugh at myself.'

She looked at him hard, appraising him. 'That's a good sign.'

'I'm afraid I'm rather ignorant.'

They were getting somewhere. 'Even better.'

He began to see. 'You're measuring yourself against Sophie and you don't like what you see.'

'True. But she's measuring herself against me, don't forget. That's the other side of it.'

His wife, his partner, said this: the woman whose opinion of himself he accepted. 'You said she imitates Kim's mum. Does she imitate you?'

Suzanne went pale. 'There isn't much to imitate. She uses her time better than that.' Ken, surprised, was going to contradict her, but she took his hand. 'Having a child makes a woman think. What am I? What can I offer my child? Milk? Is that all? I've got to *be* something.' She still had hold of his hand. He looked at the two hands, one clasping the other, as if they surprised him. 'We're only half-formed, then. In at work, I know what I'm doing, I'm as cocky as any of them, and believe me, they're pretty full of themselves. It comes from handling money in big quantities, and it's a bit frightening, sometimes. But when I walk out of the bank and into the street, I'm an empty drum. I joined the Gallery Society for the same reason I'm reading that book. I don't know anything.' He stopped, having noticed what he'd said. 'Can I go on, or do you want to say something?'

'Go on, Ken, if you haven't run out of things to say.' She was implying that he had, or that he might, because it sounded that way to her.

'I haven't got much more to say, really. It's good that we came here for dinner. We needed to get out of the place and be somewhere else. That means ...'

She broke in. 'We needed to get out of ourselves. And we have!'

'And?'

She didn't know what she meant by it but she knew it was important to say. 'Let's stay out of ourselves. Let's change, without knowing what we're doing. Drift. Let go of the controls. See what happens. Give chance a chance instead of being organised.'

It appealed to him, but: 'We were going to have a child.'

Again, she was ready. 'Nothing changes there.' He was amused. 'First lesson in control. When you let yourself go, hang on to the controls!' He was not an emotionally generous man but, looking at his wife, and realising that he was, for once, a little in front of her, he beamed upon her, hugely: 'My love!'

She stood, content. 'Home now Ken. Home.'

Sophie and her mother-in-law went for a walk along the beach, a national park behind them. From time to time seagulls inspected them, hopeful of food. 'Sometimes I bring them scraps of bread, or sausage,' Ariadne told her partner, 'but today I forgot. Sorry my friends,' she told the birds. 'Today you must search the bush, and the sea. There will be something.' A gull went off as if it understood. Sophie laughed. 'It has taken your advice, maman.' Ariadne's eyes followed the bird. 'It has forgotten us. We are nothing to it.' The gull disappeared, but there were ever so many more, foraging, swooping over the water on the lookout for what they wanted, and if they saw it, they plunged, snatching at things with their bills. 'They spend their energy getting food to give them energy,' Sophie said. 'They don't rest very often.' The two of them paused, looking left and right, then out to sea, causing Sophie to go on. 'It is a cold and empty life. Where do they make their nests? Have you seen one?'

Ariadne turned, as if looking at the scrub was her answer. 'In the bush, the mysterious bush, which we all love, but cannot understand.' She fluttered the fingers of her left hand at the ti-tree, flattened by the wind. 'Come.'

Age and youth, old and young, they hauled themselves through the heavy drifts of sand and into the directionless bush. Did Ariadne know where she was going? There were no signs, or symbols, to guide her, but she moved as if she knew. Sophie felt her confidence. Then Ariadne stooped, peering into bushes, looking for something she knew was there. Or had been. Was it still? That was the question tucked in her certainty. Sophie's doubts vanished when she heard the older woman gasp. 'Ah!' She turned her eyes on Sophie; could she see?

There was a nest, or the remnants of one, clinging to a branch only a hand-span above the hillock of sand from which the bush was emerging. 'Kim found this when he was little. He brought me here to see.' Sophie could feel the reverence in the voice, and the mother's pride. 'He told me there were three eggs in the nest, but when he brought me here to see them, the mother was sitting on them. She was angry with us, no, upset, because we were breaking in on her wish

to be alone. My darling boy would have shooshed the mother off the nest, but I told him we had to leave. It was not our place. He said it was very special and I had spoiled it. I told him it *was* very special, but he was spoiling it. He cried. He wasn't spoiling it. I told him, when something is special, you must leave it alone. He cried some more. I told him there are some things you cannot have. They are too precious to possess. You can *know* about them, that is all. If you know about them, you are special too.'

Sophie felt she should be looking over her shoulder to see if Kim was there. She knew he wasn't, but ... 'Is he still special for you?'

They stood among the ti-tree, wind moving the air, waves tossing and tumbling on the sea behind them. 'My son is always special to me. But now he is being tested again. He must be special for you.'

Sophie half-nodded, half-accepting. She looked at the remnants of the nest. Twenty years? Kim's mother was instructing her, offering her something she knew she must accept. What was it? She mustn't ask. Words would spoil. She opened her ... heart? her self? to whatever was being passed on. Something huge entered her, knowing her acceptance. Ariadne had brought her here for this. Crazy old woman no longer! She made the observation that 'The nest is battered now. It's done its job.' Ariadne liked this thought. 'It has been waiting,' she said. Sophie felt herself stiffening. She hadn't been fated to come here this day, surely? They might have gone anywhere and done anything ...

No, she saw. She had thought she was enjoying a state of blissful freedom, but she hadn't. The nest had always been waiting, and she'd been brought to see what she'd been avoiding. It wasn't much, now that its job was done, but the birds had built it, years ago ...

... and Kim had found it, and brought his mother to see it, all unknowing, but wanting to be told, and the day would come, she saw, when she, Sophie Villeneuve, would do the showing, and the explaining, if that was necessary, to the next who needed to know.

Kim knew something had changed, but didn't know what. It amused him that he didn't know. It was better. He'd have to wait and see. Perhaps it would come to him? Sophie, or his mother, might tell him, perhaps? He felt they had reached some understanding, and it was

to his benefit. So he went quiet, expecting to realise eventually. At work, he did the same. He'd been put in charge of the freight business because he had a clean background. He was supposed to ensure prompt deliveries but not to ask questions or inspect loads. He had an assistant in his office, a middle-aged lady called Dorothy Cornwall. Her names didn't match each other, causing him to think she should have married someone else. Dorothy, he suspected, knew more than him, or rather, she knew the essentials of what was going on, while he knew only the surface. She seemed interested in certain truck arrivals and departures, indifferent to others. What was that about? He didn't ask. He'd find out by being silent, apparently unaware. He chatted calmly with the drivers, or the people who left crates and boxes in the warehouse, and got receipts from Dorothy. They were people very different from himself, but he made sure he got on well with them. This was mostly a matter of being affable when they arrived, and letting them do their business with Dorothy, if that was what they wanted. Some did, he noticed, while others didn't care who took care of the paperwork. He knew this was an important clue. So he chatted about football, horses, greyhound racing, rock bands and American film stars as if he'd known about them all his life and they represented things that mattered, as apparently they did for some of his clientele, a word he never used without thinking of his wife: clients were English but the collective noun seemed to take them across the Channel. He meant to talk about this with Sophie, but forgot. He rarely talked about his work with her. Her possession of him stopped, or almost ceased, at their front door, though it grew strong again when they visited his mother, down on the peninsula. Especially the beach! He'd grown up in the house where his mother lived to this day, but in later years, she seemed to have expanded her consciousness to take in the winds, tides and currents; he thought of her as emblematic of her ever-enlarging place so that she, as emblem, covered and retained – knew about – more than she had when she was young and her boy was small.

It was then he realised that the connection between his mother and his wife involved teaching, and passing on, and this had, for him, the further meaning that he must grow to take on whatever his father

had been while he was alive. That gave Kim pause. Was he like his father? He must be, to some extent. One evening, when he and Sophie were getting dinner, something they liked to do together, he said to her, 'What was my father like? What sort of man was he?'

Sophie had a bunch of spring onions in her hand, and she put them down on the bench. 'Do you not remember him?'

'I do, of course, a little, but I was a boy. I didn't, and I can't, know what he was like for my mother.'

Sophie looked at him with uncertainty. He'd told her about his mother's letters addressed to his father via a post office in heaven, and they had laughed, ever so tenderly, about this. So why was he asking her now? She felt she ought to know. She thought of his mother. What could she say? She withdrew inside herself, waiting for something involuntary to come out.

'When your mother wants you to know something, she does not tell you. She causes you to understand.'

Kim nodded. 'And my father?'

'They must have spoken in silence.'

He said, 'Have we got to that stage yet?'

Sophie: 'We have got some of the way. We are not entirely there, yet.'

He said, 'We know how to trust each other. I think we will get there before long.'

She said, 'It will happen when we have our first child. There will be something connecting us that we cannot deny.'

He saw that she was right. 'How wonderful. Do you want me to chop up these?' He meant the onions. She said, 'As thick as the little finger of my hand.' She held it up. 'It is smaller than yours.' Very seriously, and with commitment, he put his hand beside hers. 'We are two,' he said, 'on the way to becoming ...'

She was about to say 'Three' but realised in time, and joined him, the two of them saying, 'One!'

Kim found himself wondering about the people he worked with. He was cheerful when with them, and friendly, but neither they nor the things they did mattered to him. This had long been so but marriage

had brought him closer to Sophie, and largely indifferent to things at work. It was a job, it brought in money ... but he worried that things he found trivial might enter his thinking, slowly changing the man he'd been. He couldn't imagine Sophie still loving him if he became as shallow as the chatter surrounding him at work. He would have to change his circumstances before they changed him.

What would he do?

What did he want?

He wanted to work at a level of refinement and in a field where he could have Sophie at his side; he always liked the affection and closeness of her parents, with Cecile running her nursery and Guy, Sophie's father, helping whenever he had time. Neither Kim nor Sophie wanted to create a man's world and a woman's world separate and apart from each other. Something to do with the home, then? Furniture, clothes, curtains, carpets, lighting, paintings on the walls? How did they sound? Then he had it: fabrics! There was a mass market, a prestige market, and a few levels in between. The simple stuff was made in China, or perhaps Indonesia, the quality came from France. As you would expect, Sophie would have said. How to get into the game? He rang Sandy Clarkson to see if he could put him onto someone who knew the things he wanted to know, but Sandy said such people didn't advertise very much, they mostly worked with people they knew. Try Robin Briggs, Sandy suggested. He's more likely to have the contacts.

Robin was, as they say, a gold mine. To begin with, he told Kim, Fabriques Alsace, top supplier in the city of quality materials, was looking for either a buyer or an active partner to take over the running of their business. 'Any sort of half-decent offer should get you in the door,' and there was a story going around that the Defence department had felt duded by an Asian contractor and wanted to get their uniform material supplied by someone they could trust. 'If you could get a grip on the supply of uniforms – anyone who wears them, and don't forget hospitals, they use up heaps of fabrics of one sort or another – you'd be made. You'd have two markets, each supporting the other.' Kim liked this. He took Sophie to meet the people at Fabriques Alsace, a small stylish warehouse in Malvern,

and was delighted to find that they not only sold fabrics but also the wooden frames of various furnishings, mainly chairs in a variety of period styles from Louis XIII to Art Deco. One chose the frame, then a fabric, and these were delivered to an artisan across the road who produced lovely French chairs for the customers. The Alsace merchants had let the business run down as they reached an age when their enthusiasm ran out. They wanted to sell up and return to their country, and were prepared to negotiate a purchase-and-payment scheme over three to five years, so long as it was guaranteed by a bank. Kim saw no difficulty with this. He took Guy and Cecile Villeneuve with him, as well as Sophie, on his second visit to the fabric house, knowing that it would reassure the owners, and it did. Over dinner that night with Sophie and her parents, Kim explained his idea of a two-tier business, one dealing with mass quantities of low-level products, and the other with the quality articles they'd seen that day. 'We'll set up a family company, owning both trading companies, that's the best way to work it.' Guy Villeneuve wanted to know how he would start the second company, and Kim was all smiles. 'I've been thinking about that. It's a matter of starting in the right place. Defence contracts appeal to me, or maybe fire brigades. Not sure yet. But I'm working on it!'

A few days later he ran into a buyer for a well-known brand of sheets, who gave him the contact number for an importer from China who was dissatisfied with his current distributor. 'Give this fella a ring. He spends most of his time in China getting around the factories, he wants to leave the local end to someone else. But it's not working at the moment.' Just what I wanted, Kim thought. If I look efficient, and halfway honest, he'll give me a try.

He did. Kim gave up the freight business willingly, despite a few regrets about never quite working out what was going on there that he didn't know about. He made a point of buying a bunch of flowers for Dorothy Cornwall on the morning of his departure. Addressing the handful of people who were there to say goodbye, he told them that after he'd gone, the place would run in just the same way it always had, thanks to Dorothy. In accepting the bouquet, Dorothy praised Kim for the way he'd run the depot. 'A gentleman,' she said, 'never

quite one of us, but you always knew where you stood with Mr Berg. A straight-down-the-line honest man.’ She meant it to sound well but it said something about the depot and what it wasn’t. Fabriques Alsace, thought Kim, you are looking good!

Noel was slow to realise but eventually it struck him that the twin poles of his life were home goods and home. He sold stuff in his shops that was said to make life easy. Vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and the rest. When he got home, shutting the door meant locking the world out. Good job I enjoy cooking he told himself, otherwise nothing would get in! Away from home he was friendly to everybody but he had no friends. If he turned on television to watch the news the world looked like a comic strip. An ABC presenter told him that the leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition had been found dead in a hotel room, presumably of a heart attack; gossip stripped him naked and fitted him with a condom. Noel took this in with glee. The bastards! The country had at last elected a government to bring it up with the times and confer a bit of humanity on its voters and the dead man had been an obstruction now removed. Yet a fair slice of Noel’s customers didn’t see things that way. They grumbled about rising inflation. Why was Whitlam’s government in such a hurry? They seemed to think the world started with them. Noel wanted to tell them that there was a mood for change, that events had speeded up with the defeat of the Liberals, they’d better try and catch up. But the suburbs were as small minded as ever. Noel retreated to his home, pulled out a sheet of paper and drew – or rather, started to draw – a cartoon. Billy Snedden, the late opposition leader, was lying on a bed. Asleep? No, dead. Noel had a photo of the man, wearing a suit, and standing in front of the parliament in Canberra. The People’s House! He could have spat on it. Instead, he took pains to get the face right, or a version suitably stupid for the man trying to hold up the new government’s reforms. Once the face was finished, he turned his attention further down. A condom, they said. Who had Billy had in bed with him? He thought of drawing a partner for the last minutes of the man’s life, then found himself putting the pencil down. He had no idea who’d been the dead man’s partner, and he didn’t want to draw her anyway. The cartoon

lay before him, unfinished. Would he draw the dead man, desire wilted, condom crumpled where it sat, protecting nothing?

He couldn't do it. He felt a flush of sympathy for the dead man, challenged by another man, of greater scope and imagination, superbly articulate, a man of grandeur, and Noel felt sorry for Snedden, put in the position where he had to block, to challenge, to ridicule what he couldn't imagine to be good. In a flush of contempt, Noel ripped up the drawing and pushed it into a bin. I've got to do better than that, he told himself, but no thought came forward. He made tea. He read the paper, he put it down again. He wanted to go out, and he didn't. He wanted to watch a film, and he didn't. He took himself to bed in a bad mood and slept.

The morning brought little change. The shop that his mother had founded sold plenty but was never crowded. He had two young people to run it, strangers when he'd put them on, but they'd since formed a relationship, had no trouble running the business and, Noel felt sure, preferred to do it on their own. He spent most of his time at the Malvern shop, where the customers were choosier and less inclined to pay. Arriving there, he found that work being done to the footpath prevented him from parking behind the shop, so he had to search for somewhere to leave his car. This led to him walking the best part of a block, meaning that he passed an art gallery a few doors from the traffic lights on the corner of Trafalgar Road. It had rarely caught his interest before but this morning it featured two paintings in the window, one of a tiny, low island, with a couple of sails visible over the central hump of sand, while the second one showed a huge shoal of fish divided, not by a vicious shark but a nosey, playful dolphin. It made him laugh, reminding him of ... he didn't know what, and then he heard a voice: 'I thought that one might bring you in!'

It was Lola Moon, triumphant at having captured him without him knowing he'd been surrounded. 'Good god!' he shouted, accepting. 'However did you get this close without me knowing?' She smiled a rich smile. 'You like to think you're invincible.' He studied her after ... how many years was it? 'Nothing's conquered me yet!' Laughing, she took him by the hand. 'Except yourself. Look at you. Haven't you got a mirror?' He was suddenly concerned. He'd been studying himself

lately and hadn't liked what he'd seen. 'Roll me over,' she sang, 'roll me over in the clover, lay me down and do it again!'

'Funny buggers eh? Let me have a look at these pictures of yours. How long have you been pushing paint?'

'Since just after I left you. I had to do something to get myself steady again.'

'You being steady? That'll be the day!'

'Come and have a look. I was hoping I might run into you.'

'I've got a shop a few doors down. I opened up a couple after mum died.'

That gave her pause. 'That's bad news. What happened to her?'

He told her about the accident in London. 'She got pushed off a platform and hit her head on a rail. Died in the ambulance on the way to hospital.'

'And you?'

'I was home here in Melbourne, running the shop. Of which I became the owner. I bought a couple more.'

She laughed. 'A shopkeeper!'

It humbled him. 'Would you believe, I'm good at it?'

'No I don't.'

He didn't know what to say. 'Well, I make money. What I make of myself is another matter.'

She looked into him. 'That's more like it. Come in and see the show, then you can tell me the rest.'

Each was what the other needed. Lola painted the sea as if she was afraid of it, yet loved it; he could see this, and say it. She treated him with the disrespect that he liked, because it liberated him. He both did and didn't like being treated seriously. If people spoke to him with a logic that he admitted, he was forced to follow. Whimsicality was freedom. Then he noticed a couple of red dots on the walls. Pictures sold! He looked at Lola with new respect, and took the paintings more seriously. 'Not bad,' he told her. 'I could be good,' she said, 'but I'd have to put my whole heart into it, instead of just enjoying it every now and then.' She looked at him as if appraising his brain: 'I'm too flimsy. I'd have to change.' He took it seriously, and made a decision.

‘I’ll support you. You can live at my house. It’s in Northcote. There’ll be nobody to bother you. Most of the time, I’m over here, on this side of the city. There’s a bloody great garage, I’ll leave the car outside. You can do what you like with the place, heaters, coolers, and stuff. Put in a skylight if that’s what you need.’ She knew he was appraising her. He wanted to test her, and she wanted to do the same to him. ‘And what about you? Noel? Mister Smart Man? What are you going to do with yourself? Fish for prawns in Saint Kilda Road?’ He said, ‘That’s my problem! I’m making you an offer.’ They were still sulky with each other when he went on to his shop, over lunch later in the day, and even when he took her to Northcote to see the space he was offering. ‘Not very *fuckin* comfortable,’ she announced, kicking the concrete floor.

‘You can sleep inside. There’s rooms.’

Then she asked him the sexual question. ‘How many?’

He didn’t care. ‘As many as you want.’

She said, ‘I might have a look then.’

As they left the garage, and stepping around the car, she said, ‘There’s something sticking out of your mailbox.’ He took the few steps to the mailbox, pulled out a letter and opened it. ‘Good heavens.’

This was the serious side of him. ‘What is it?’

‘Rhonda Mathieson’s retiring. You wouldn’t know who she is, but she was my teacher once. In Australian History.’

‘Was she any good?’

‘Yes she was. She was genuine about it. She used to look right into you. If she could see through you, you were a fool.’ He laughed.

‘What about you then?’

‘I don’t think she saw through me. I tried pretty hard not to let her!’

‘She’s retiring? How old?’

‘Dunno. Sixty-five I suppose.’

‘Are they asking for money?’

‘Not exactly. Yes and no. They’re going to set up a special part of the library and name it after her. I suppose they’ll ask for donations, but that’s all I’ve read so far.’

They went in. He said, ‘Have a look at the house while I read the rest of this.’ He flapped the brochure from the school.

She noticed as soon as she went into the passage. The house was quiet, neither oppressive nor assertive. It was waiting. She looked through the rooms. There were two bedrooms at the front. One was empty, the other was his. Both looked onto the street, and anyone who happened to be passing. She liked the empty room. It had high ceilings and a high, Victorian window. It was waiting, she felt, for someone to turn it into a lived-in space, and make it personal. This, she felt, was a job she was ready for. She went back to Noel. 'Front room on the left. That'll do me. I'll have to make it liveable, but you won't mind that.'

'I'd like that. We owe it to the house, do we not?'

'We do.' They both noticed the pronoun and accepted it for whatever meaning it was going to assume. He'd read the notice from the school. 'She built up quite a collection of history books, and pictures and documents, over the years. They're going to house them in one part of the library and give it her name. They're asking for donations, money and books, to go in there and build it up further. It sounds good.'

She was pleased at his positive mood. 'Are you going to help?'

He nodded. 'Not sure what I'll do yet, but I'll do something useful. If I can.'

She asked him to make tea, and he did. He asked her what she was going to paint, in Northcote. Birds, she told him, clouds and sky. Changing moods, whatever she could find. 'Is there a park anywhere near here?'

'There's a bloody big one at the end of the street, if you find your way through a few last houses. An old dairy farm. People on the other side have had working bees, turning it into a park. It's going to be good one day, even if it's a bit of a wreck right now.' Suddenly he remembered something. 'Hey! You don't know about this, but some people put a blessing on this house!'

'What?'

'A blessing, strange as it may seem.' He told her about the couple who slept in the park the previous summer, and passed his place each morning after they packed up in the park, and left.

'When did you see them last? And who were they?'

He had to think. 'I'm trying to remember when I saw them last. It would have been back in the hot weather, when it was okay to sleep outside.'

'Did you ever speak to these people?'

He shook his head. 'They just appeared and disappeared?' He thought for a moment. 'Funny, isn't it. Funny that they could appear and disappear, and funny that they had an effect on me.' She raised an eyebrow. 'I never stopped believing that things were going to be okay.'

Lola thought this required investigation. 'Has this got something to do with me?'

'Of course it has. You didn't turn up out of nowhere, like a ghost becoming solid.' This made her laugh. 'I've been putting on weight.' He didn't care, and said so. 'You disappeared out of my life and you appeared again.' He considered. 'Now you're taking the front room you'll be able to see them.' He thought of the winter weather they were having. 'Next summer, that is, if they come back.' His voice was suddenly sad, then he brightened. 'They have come back. You're them!' His eyes blazed. 'Bloody amazing!' He was suddenly full of joy and happiness. He took her in his arms. She laughed wildly, mad with joy. 'Why did I ever leave you? What a fool I was!' Thoughts ran madly through her mind – painting, sex, parties, trips they'd make to places they'd never seen ... She looked at him, asking herself why she'd never seen him the way she was seeing him now. 'You think it was those people that you're never going to see again that made you like you are now. That's madness, mate, and well you know it ...'

He broke in. 'Who wants to be sane with the world the way it is? There's an army of loonies marching and I'm one of them. And so are you, don't pretend to be something else. Great painters aren't sane, they're courageously mad. That's why they're good.' It all looked simple, and he was happy. And Lola? This was how she liked a man to be. You could make something out of a man when he wasn't fixed in the mental straitjackets called suits. Two front rooms, each with a door. A passage to cross. Independence, the excitement of love. The ghosts he'd been talking about had found a home. Something good might happen, hey?

Bob Enright got his letter from the school, read it, then put it on a little pile where he put things that couldn't be ignored. Gloria heard about it over lunch a day or so later. 'What're you going to do about it Bob?' He didn't know. 'Suppose I should send them something.' She laughed. 'The history of our farm?' That reminded him. 'I could send them last week's bank statement. Give them my overdraft!' They exchanged glances of truth. Their children were the most precious thing they owned. Like most farmers they owned a lot but never had much money. Paddocks of wheat, orange groves, olive trees, a fair sized mob of cattle, a pump to pull water out of the river, a car big enough to hold the family, a comfortable house and plans to enlarge it ... but they rarely thought of cash. They wrote cheques when accounts were payable. Bob rarely worried about money, and Gloria even less. They sold and they bought, looking for value, but money was something else. Fools chased it; it attracted fools. Fools were people who believed in money, thought it meant something. Bob and Gloria had a good life because they lived in a good place and lived in the right way. She was down on people who couldn't manage their lives. There were drunks, people who didn't eat properly, but the great crimes were to do marriage badly and/or to neglect children. If there was love in a home it was enough, and you could tell that the moment you stepped inside. A house or a home? That was the test. A woman's work was foremost, a man's work supported it. A woman didn't do her work for money, handy as it might be. A woman's work was sacred, both duty and reward. There were also responsibilities, in Gloria's mind at least. When it was the season for picking oranges, or olives, the district received an influx of pickers; Gloria accepted this but preferred locals, so she offered the nearby secondary school a twenty per cent bonus on top of any payment received by its students, or their families, for picking fruit. The school welcomed this idea and urged students and their parents, brothers, sisters and cousins to earn this bonus for the school. Gloria fitted out a shed for the workers so acquired to eat their meals, sleep overnight if need be, or simply rest without the sun blazing down on them. She also equipped the shed with an old kerosene refrigerator to keep their drinks cool, and made orange juice from some of the fruit they'd picked. She was careful to

keep her children away from this shed, knowing how offence might be taken if the pickers felt any obligation to be careful with members of her family about. Bob agreed with her on this. ‘They don’t mind if you treat outsiders as having lower rank but you can’t do that with people who live around here.’

In the rural world everyone has a place. It’s allocated by everyone else, and is inescapable. Road workers, hotel keepers, nurses, pensioners, truck drivers, bank managers, parsons’ wives ... everyone is subject to the limitations of opinion as to how well they are filling their role. Village rules allow certain people to do certain things, while others may not. Kindness may show itself anytime, but charity is for professionals. The wise avoid getting caught up in public opinion which is all the firmer for being hard to pin down. It exists, though, as anyone will find who breaks a rule. The quirky and the crazy are as fixed in place as anyone else, laughed about, but secured. They are, in a way, told what their madness is when they’re accepted. Thus far and no further! Bob Enright came from an early-established family, not exactly a pioneer, but not far off. He’d inherited, and was a third generation in the district and after marrying Gloria, they were creating the fourth. Bob’s parents had been devoted without showing it in any more than the conventional ways, until their failings in later years drew out of them an expressive love shown in services they did each other. They died two days apart. Bob accepted this as a train accepts a signal – proceed with caution, and knowing what to expect. No exceptions occur!

Contrasting with this acceptance was Gloria’s triumphal faith. Her church – the world’s church, as it thought of itself – nominated human sinfulness as the dominant agenda of the universe, and Christ Jesus as the answer, with the additional proviso that Christ and his Holy Father – the one in heaven, that is – were revealed and interpreted to mankind by the church. This challenging notion was made real for Gloria by the way she lived. She spoke very little of her belief. Instead, she embodied it. She said to her children, ‘God’s watching you know.’ This had an effect on her husband as well. Bob had accepted the Christian faith of his school without bothering to think about it. It served you well if you followed it without troubling yourself too much.

You only needed religion occasionally, but when you were born, marrying or dying, you wanted to be in good hands, and the Church of The Anglicans provided those in services as confident as those of the Romans. Working in the paddocks didn't make you think of God, it kept you busy and threw up enough problems without bothering about hovering divinities. The whole business – crops, rain, drought, fire and floods – was so chancy, so uncertain, that you could hardly bring God into it, and nature was so cruel – crows picking sheep's eyes out if they could – that it would be ungentlemanly, almost insulting, to think that God had anything to do with it. God was better than that!

If Bob had been dragged before an inquisition, therefore, it would have found that he believed in two gods, the one of his school, now quite a few years behind him, and the other of his wife, the living principle of his life. Hers was certain to win out, she knew it, and she never tried to win her husband over. In finding her, she might have said, he had found her god. He had only to realise. He did this slowly, a day at a time, over several years, until he began attending mass with her and the children instead of sitting outside in the car. 'No harm in coming in?' he said to Gloria, and she did no more than smile. It would have been another six months before she asked him if he could leave the packing shed for a few minutes that afternoon because Father Murnane was calling for afternoon tea so the children could meet him before the younger ones went to school, and Bob, knowing that Father Murnane was a supporter of the Border Football Team said he would, did, and found that the Father knew more about the team's performances over the years than he did. Well! Not only that, he could talk you through the multiple premierships of the Collingwood club in Melbourne, helped, as they had been, by John Wren who had a hand in anything touching the working class. Bob had a healthy Anglican wariness of the priesthood, so Gloria, ever-deferring to the Father, didn't bring him back to the house again, though speaking to him after services at his church.

This had an effect on Bob which it took him a long time to realise. Once he began attending church with his family he found himself welcomed and indeed popular with the congregation, particularly the women, something he ascribed to their recognition of Gloria's

qualities as a mother. Over time, however, he sensed that a number of the men had reservations about his presence, and he thought about this when he was driving the tractor or moving stock. He felt they didn't trust him: why? He got his chance to ask one morning when a load of timber was delivered by a driver known as Lofty Tibbits, a short, paunchy man who, like Bob, had a loyal Catholic wife. Bob took the opportunity to ask about what was concerning him. Lofty began by saying, 'Don't you know? It's obvious,' then explained that it was because Bob's wife – his missus – was so close to Father Murnane and Bob so close to his wife that other men suspected that anything they said to Bob would be passed to the priest when sometimes men did and said things they didn't want the priest to know about. Bob was puzzled. 'But they go to confession don't they?' Lofty looked at him for the fool that he must be and murmured, 'They're men, mate, sometimes they've done things they don't want to talk about.'

It took Bob a while to digest that. Men? He and Gloria had a two year old called Tim, or Timmy, and he wet his pants one day in the orange orchard. Bob told him that if he felt a need to do wee, he should have pulled his pants down and done it on a tree, but, as things were, he'd better go inside and ask his mummy to change his pants. Timmy cried. Bob told him not to cry; he'd take him inside and do it for him. But when they got to the house, Timmy, on seeing his mother, ran to her, still crying, and clutched her hand. "He's got more faith in you than in me, apparently," Bob said to his wife, who took the boy inside and changed him. Gloria asked the boy if he wanted to go outside again, but he didn't. He wanted to stay by her and the stove, a slow combustion that warmed the kitchen in winter. When Bob came in, an hour later, for a cup of tea with his wife, Timmy was still there, day-dreaming as far as his father could see. 'Got a good spot there, mate,' Bob said to his son, but the boy's only response was the one word 'Mum'. Bob drank tea with his wife, something they liked to do in quiet communion, but when he got back to the orchard, that word kept sounding in his mind. It occurred to Bob that the child had said it with the same certainty that people at the church said the word God: how strange, because they weren't the same thing, surely? Or were they? God was always a 'he', and mums were women, so what

was going on? Bob was no thinker, no analyst, but he had a problem this time, something he knew he wasn't good at solving. Who could he turn to?

The only person he could think of was Gloria. There was no one else. Father Murnane? Oh, come on! How silly would that be? He looked around. The oranges were growing on a sandhill, like most of the orange trees in the area, and the sand had been swept into these hills by floods from the river, over thousands of years. He knew, as a farmer, that things only grew well if they suited the soil, or the other way around, if you liked, that is, the soil suited the plant, or tree. Putting things together in a way that harmonised ... that was farming. A good orchard, a good mob of cattle or sheep, a crop ready to harvest, was a sign that things had been done well, and that needed luck too, of course, the luck of the weather – rain, and no frost. No hail storms at the wrong moment. And so on. It was a combination of luck and skill, what was known and what wasn't ... that's what farming was, and he was good at it, so why did the little fella want to stay inside?

He wanted security, of course, and it didn't exist. There wasn't any. The best you could do, the only security you could have, was to get a good balance in the bank, and by god that was hard to achieve! Bob grinned. He wasn't doing too badly, even if he wasn't rich. Four kids to support, with the likelihood of more. He, he felt like announcing to the world, provided the security which allowed Gloria, his wife, to provide the security she wrapped around their children's lives. This struck him as odd, or perhaps the product of faulty reasoning. That couldn't be right? Women were different from men, but what was the difference, and why was it so important? It wasn't clear to him, and he felt it needed to be clear, he wanted it to be clear. Why didn't he know? How could he know?

He knew the answer. He must keep on doing what he had been doing, that is, live side by side with Gloria, his wonderful wife, his puzzling wife, and fit in with everything she did so that he could work out what it was that she did. It suddenly occurred to him that that put him in the same position as Timmy, his little boy, who depended on, and believed in, his mother to make things right, to reassure, to keep things on an even keel ...

Men were powerful, dangerous even, they moved forces here and there, both creatively and destructively, but women were the points of balance. It was women who decided if things were as they should be, which was much the same as *right*. That was their work and they must be allowed to do it. I think I'm doing a fair sort of job of it, Bob told himself, but if I am, it's not because I understood it, because I didn't. Not until now.

He lifted his hat so he could scratch his head. All that because Timmy pissed his pants!

The school contacted CC; would he join the group planning Rhonda's room, as they were calling it: a suitable name was one of the things they had to decide. He did so happily; drawing on its old boys was one of the strengths of the place. The headmaster and the president of the old boys attended the first meeting of the working group, then withdrew. The country's best known historian presided, but again, it was clear that the work would be done a little further down. CC had a feeling, correct as it turned out, that he would be the project's engine room, apart from the librarian, who acted as the group's secretary, calling meetings, distributing papers, and so on. The school already had an archivist and an extensive collection of its own records, so something else was to be the goal.

CC tried to remember his earliest attraction to history, and it came to him that it had been on a chilly Anzac morning when he'd arrived at school for its service, only to hear bagpipes sounding from the hill where the city's Shrine of Remembrance stood. He'd understood, that morning, that something huge had happened, far away. A week or two later he'd gone up to the shrine, and read the names of battles carved in stone – Pozières, Bullecourt, Villers-Bretonneux, and most sombre of them all, Somme. He hadn't done much reading at that stage but he'd seen photos enough and he knew what those names meant. Trench warfare, dawn attacks, slipping over in the mud, endless shelling, the famous Christmas truce, out-of-touch generals, the madness consuming Europe and its satellites for years. How many more things tied his nation to its distant past? Parliament and the endless struggles to make it more powerful than

the king. The Globe Theatre by the Thames where Shakespeare's plays first amazed the world. By his last year at school, when he was studying his own country's history with Rhonda Mathieson, his path had been chosen, and now he was following it. He hoped to do a great work one day so that he too would be part of the country's history, and he wondered how this could be brought about. He discussed this with the leading historian after one of their meetings, and the senior man suggested that the time would come when historians of the nation would not turn their minds back to Europe in discussing the period pre-1788, but would want to know what the land was like before the white man's arrival, that's to say, the land itself would take precedence over those who'd settled it; 'How we'll write *that* sort of history is anybody's guess, but you're young, it'll come to you one day and it won't come to someone of my generation.'

This statement moved CC. He discussed it at home with Prue. It meant, surely, a change in the power balance between black and white Australians? Then it struck him that it meant no more than the arrival of a time when the races, black and white, had intermingled, inter-married, so that there were large numbers of mixed-race people whose wish to have their lives explained would necessitate an examination of pre-1788 Australia, that's to say an account of the country which considered the aboriginal experience equally with the settlers' experience. It was logical, it would certainly happen, it would be ridiculed by conservatives who saw no need to think in this way, but it would become the accepted norm after a few years. Most moving of all was that this reconsideration of the country's history had been handed to him by a man who was too set in the old ways to do it himself, but could see where his discipline had to go. Will I ever have vision of that sort, CC asked himself, and didn't know. The only way to predict the inevitable change of outlook that produced a new history was to exhaust the methods, the outlook, the scope, of the history of one's own time, so that what had once been a new understanding had become an old one. When that happens to me, CC saw, I'll be as old, as worn out, as the man I've been talking to. He was grateful, glad, proud to be young! He must think of ways to transmit this excitement to those who were coming after him.

So the group talked about the Rhonda Mathieson room, and how it might draw students in. It must be an important source of reference material for any history subjects taught in the school; that was clear. There should be an audio-visual section, ranging from maps, flags and the like to modern films, and authentic newsreels and documentary film. This led to a discussion of music and theatre, its relevance to more conventional history writing, and the usefulness of certain forms of travel writing to an understanding, at least, of places that had been prominent in their countries' stories. CC was pleased to see that the senior historian, their chair, favoured the most open approach possible: 'We need to raise the interest of our students. That's the start!' Discussion led the group to the idea of one or more documentary projects for the room itself; the presentation, year after year, perhaps, of the Melbourne Cup, crowds flocking into the MCG for the Boxing Day test match, or perhaps the crowds enjoying Myers' Xmas windows, with their themes changing every year. 'We're not trying to make decisions at this stage,' the senior historian reminded them, 'we're casting around for the broadest range of ways that the collection, not to mention the room, the space itself, might capture young people's imaginations. That's the first step, Everything else comes after.' CC approved of this approach. 'I'm not sure if everyone's familiar with this,' he said, 'but whenever I visit the Ballarat Art Gallery I make a point of looking at the Eureka flag, which they've got on display there. Sorry, they did have; it's been lent for the time being to the museum at the Eureka site, but it's supposed to come back after three years. Ballarat itself has a remarkable ambience from the gold mining days, and the Eureka flag caps it off.' This idea was well received, but what could the Rhonda Mathieson Room offer to match the Eureka flag? 'Perhaps a number of things,' CC suggested. 'We can't drag in Phar Lap from the Melbourne museum, so we might have to go for a number of smaller objects, a range of them, from various places and times.' Suddenly the senior historian who had appeared at one stage to be dozing off, came to life. 'Many years ago, I was walking in the countryside of France, not far from Amiens, and I noticed a little bit of barbed wire, and picked it up. It was rusty, and there wasn't very much of it. It was about as long as my index

finger.’ He held up his hand. ‘It had the most remarkable effect on my imagination. I seemed to hear the yelling and screaming, the guns and the silence when they stopped. I could imagine men charging their enemies in the trenches opposite, diving in with bayonets. Men dying, some of them killed instantly by a bullet, others lying in the mud for days, dying slowly. It was awful. It took me days to recover. I understood how men who’d fought in those battles could never make the transition back to civilian life, no matter how well they were looked after. Some things,’ he said solemnly, ‘can’t be undone.’

The room fell silent, waiting for him to go on, but he’d drifted away; CC said, ‘What did you do with the piece of wire?’ The elderly man said, ‘I put it in my pocket and I didn’t touch it till I was back in Sydney. Then I put it in a drawer of my desk, and it’s still there today.’ All of them, but particularly the librarian, expected him to offer it to the school, as item 1 of a collection that might stir the students’ imaginations, but he’d withdrawn into himself again, unaware of what they were expecting. The librarian, disappointed, and looking at CC, said, ‘I think we’ve covered all our topics. Should we end it there and make a few decisions at our next meeting?’ The senior historian was suddenly alert. ‘I believe you’re right. We can close the meeting at that point, and, as you suggest, start to firm things up next time!’

Prue Claringbold could see that the memorial project at his old school was unsettling her husband. One evening, while he was having a sip of port before they went to bed, she raised it with him. ‘Brian,’ she said, that being how she normally addressed him, ‘what is it about those meetings? They make you uneasy, and I think it’s something to do with ...’

He nodded. ‘You’re right. He disconcerts me. Sometimes I’m amazed by how much he knows, and at other times ...’ he paused ‘... I’m amazed at how silly some of the things he says can be. For minutes at a time you can see he’s not listening, and I keep wondering where he is, in that scattered mind of his, and I never know whether the next thing he says will be brilliant or stupid, and if it is the latter, what I’ll have to do to cover it up, or turn it into something useful. Workable.

We're supposed to have the project planned by the end of this term and I can't see it happening, the way things are going.'

In taking this in, Prue sensed that there was something else, some other element yet to be uncovered. 'And the university, darling, how about your courses there?'

He shrugged. 'The courses are going all right, as far as that goes. But two of my students disconcert me, all the more because they're both very bright.'

'Who are they?'

'The first one's Tommy McGuire ...'

'Tommy?' She broke into what he was going to say. Nobody at the University of Melbourne was called Tommy. 'Yes, Tommy. He's been called that all his life, and he insists. He comes from Echuca, up on the Murray, and he's aboriginal. He's actually *part*-aboriginal, but again he insists. He's doing well, so people humour him, or that's how it seems to me.'

'And the other?'

'Melissa Milicevic. Melissa's not her real name. She says it's the Italian form of what's unpronounceable for Aussies like us.'

'Aussies?'

'Apparently that's all of us.' He chuckled. 'I'd describe her as cultured rather than multi-cultured. Multi-cultured is what Aussies are. To be cultured, you need to come from Europe and have a good background.'

'What's her background?'

'All I know of her mother is that she quotes poetry a lot, and it gets quoted at us, while her father once played in some orchestra in Prague, not the Czech Philharmonic. But I'm giving a wrong impression. She's delightful really, humble, and determined. She's well on the way to being truly cultured.'

'What's disconcerting about these two?'

His wife, he saw, was listening closely. 'They both give me the feeling that they don't really believe what I'm saying. Not that they interrupt me or try to tear down my arguments, they're too respectful for that, but being respectful is part of the problem. I have this feeling that their minds work along different lines from mine, or the faculty in

general, and they're too smart to show it, so they always sound a little hesitant when, being as clever as they are, they ought to be making bold statements.' He looked at her as if for help.

'What are you going to do about that?'

'There's not a great deal I can do about it.'

'Can't you ...' She stopped herself, and went silent.

'Can't I what?'

'I was trying to think of some way to force them out into the open. Get them to say what they really think.'

He grinned. 'If this was China, that's the last thing they would do.'

'Well, it's not!' She was annoyed with herself for not having a ready answer.

CC said, 'I think I know what they do think of my course, but I don't know that I could answer them if I did get them to come out with it.'

She looked at her husband. 'You think you know?'

He felt a weight upon his shoulders and he'd have to talk at length to get rid of it. 'Tommy sits there and I can tell that he's thinking – this is what you people think, but it's not how we see it. We being the first people, of which he thinks of himself as one.'

'I suppose that's natural enough.'

'I do too. I accept that. But he's not just an isolated case that the rest of us can ignore.'

He's one of the first aboriginal students that our faculty's enrolled, but there'll be lots more, over time. Some of them are getting educated now, really and properly educated in the whitefella way. Once upon a time they were called half-castes and that meant they were nobody because they were neither fish nor fowl. But as time goes on, they'll be the middle group, they'll be central, they'll be the norm. Do you see what I mean?'

It was a new idea to Prue, but she saw what he meant, and it surprised her. She wanted to put her husband right. 'Scholars work over decades. In Europe, we'd say they work over centuries. There's a tradition. The student has to come to terms with the tradition, in order to start learning. The student has to accept a great deal in order

to be allowed in to the conversation ...’ She saw that her husband wanted to interrupt: she paused.

‘Exactly! But suppose you are teaching that tradition – and it’s not so very long in this country – and you can see that someone wants to refute it, doesn’t believe a word of it. In short, wants to ... not so much rip it down, but move to another point and start again! That’s why I find him disconcerting, because he has that effect on me and he isn’t even trying to have that effect. He’s very polite, but, he just doesn’t believe all the things that I believe, and the rest of the faculty believes!’

He could see that Prue wanted to say, get rid of this nuisance, but equally, she knew she couldn’t say that. He said, ‘I could go on for hours ...’

She broke in. ‘Not just for the moment, darling. One thing at a time. What about the other one? Melissa whatever her name was?’

His head lowered. She could tell that in some part of his being, however controlled and proper he might be, he was in love with this other one. ‘She thinks our history’s boring. There’s no passion. It’s no good arguing with her about this because it’s not rational and she doesn’t pretend that it is. She’s disappointed! She feels let down. She tells us she enrolled in Australian History to find out all about her new country, the one her parents brought her to, and there doesn’t seem to be much in it. It’s not interesting. She wants it to be, but it isn’t!’

Prue said to her husband, ‘A lot of European people would feel the same way. She’ll come to realise ...’

CC jumped in on his wife. ‘To realise what? We can’t turn our history into something that it isn’t. If she thinks it’s boring, I suppose it is, for her at least.’

Prue felt it was time to exercise some control. ‘Do you think it’s boring?’

‘No of course I don’t!’

This wasn’t good enough. ‘That’s what you have to say, but if they gave you a choice: the French Revolution, Shakespeare’s England, Russia under Stalin ... what would you choose?’

He was ready for this. ‘I don’t have a choice. We study the past to find out how the present – *our* present – was made. How it came

about that things around us are as they are. Nobody gets a choice about where and when they'll be born. We just find ourselves at a certain place and time. We need to understand. Studying history is a necessity. It's not a choice!' Since she said nothing, he went on, giving himself the last word. 'Both of them, that's Tommy and Melissa, don't want to be where they are, but they're not being realistic. They are in this city at this time, and that means they have inherited a great deal which they, it seems to me, don't want to have as their inheritance ...'

She interrupted. 'Well, isn't that their right? To protest, if they don't like where it is that they find themselves?'

'Yes, it is their right, but if they exercise it, they only make themselves miserable.'

She said, not without sympathy, 'And their lecturer, their tutor, he gets a little miserable too?'

It came out as no more than a mumble. 'You can hardly blame me for that.'

Rhonda Mathieson's memorial took shape. On the first Friday of a new term, it was opened by the country's best known historian, suitably briefed by J Brian C Claringbold. Rhonda herself was gravely present, having a feeling that the school had been too cunning for her, and she was being replaced by a room, but the eminent historian, in opening the collection, invited her to return to the school as often as she could, settle herself in the place named after her, and share her wisdom with the youngsters of the day. She had no wish to do this very often but nodded as if appreciating the invitation.

Over the afternoon tea that followed, CC was approached by Robyn Briggs, one of the few of his contemporaries present at the function (Noel McGraw had sent a supporting cheque for \$100). Robyn said he had a folder of letters to and from Alfred Deakin, second Prime Minister of Australia and if CC thought they might be useful to the collection, he should call at the Briggs' a night or two later. CC did so and was pleasantly surprised by the number and interest of these letters. 'How did you come by these? I didn't know Deakin was an interest of yours.' Robyn indicated that he had discovered these letters some years before, when Toorak had been riven by those who

wanted to preserve *Besma* and those who wanted to replace it. ‘The house got pulled down,’ Robyn told CC, ‘but quite a lot of the contents were saved, and made their way into a range of people’s homes. I’ve got two of Deakin’s chairs; one he sat in to read, and one he pushed up to the table when he wanted to do some writing. We think of him as a progressive these days,’ Robyn said, ‘but he was very much a man of his time, free trader and then protectionist ...’ he laughed ‘... and a firmly believing spiritualist, something you don’t often find these days!’ CC added something Robyn didn’t know. ‘Indeed, he used to comment on Federal Parliament for a British newspaper, using another name of course. I don’t think that was generally known at the time.’ They chuckled, the pair of them; insider knowledge of someone connected with their school was meat and drink to old boys such as themselves. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got anything else from *Besma*?’ CC inquired, but Robyn shook his head. ‘No, but in my business you never know when something’s going to turn up. People die, someone has to clean out the house, all sorts of things come to light.’

He paused after saying this, and CC, observing, would have said that he was withdrawing to a prepared position. ‘Does the name Colin Driscoll mean anything to you?’

CC looked blankly at him. ‘No. Should it? Who’s Colin Driscoll?’

A sombre Robyn said, ‘That’s something I’d like to know.’

‘Where did you hear his name?’

Robyn looked over his shoulder, though Louise, his wife, was upstairs, putting their daughter to bed. ‘Sunday afternoon, last weekend, we visited Louise’s parents. Normally it’s Beth, her mum, who answers the door but this time Tony, her dad, was at the door and talking to someone who was just leaving.’

‘Colin Driscoll?’

‘Ah no. No no no. Just give me a minute. I didn’t like the look of this man.’ Again he glanced over his shoulder at the door where his wife might return. ‘Nasty piece of work. Louisa adores her dad, can’t see anything wrong with him ...’

‘While you?’

‘Have to play along. When he says something that’s meant to be funny, I laugh. And he is funny quite often, and he’s very generous to

us. Wants to hear about his grand daughter, what's Trudy doing, all that sort of thing.'

'There's a but to this?'

'There is, but I don't know what it is. Anyway, as I was telling you, we arrived for a little visit ... and Tony pointed us down the passage while he finished with this fellow who was leaving. The nasty piece of work. They were worried about something. The other man said something about "the university" and Tony said the name "Colin Driscoll"; he said it very quietly. Normally, if he's talking about someone, he's very blunt. Gives it to you with a punch. But this time, he let it slip out the side of his mouth as if it was a name he didn't want to be associated with.' He paused.

'You think he's leading some sort of double life?'

'He's been doing that for years. And he's still doing it. Louisa would have no idea. She idolises him. He's Mister Perfect Dad to her. And he is. Beth? I'm not sure. She's pretty smart but maybe he leads a double life with her too. He's smart enough to cover all tracks except the respectable ones.'

'So where does Colin Driscoll fit into all this?'

'That's what I want to know. At the moment, I've got no idea, except that he's connected in my mind with university. The university.'

'People like us, and people older than us, say *the* university. Don't forget we've got three now, and there'll be more before too long.'

Robyn understood this. 'Got to start somewhere. Keep your ear to the ground, would you. If you hear anything, let's know.'

Two days later, in the corridors at work, CC ran into the Dean. They chatted for a minute, each seeming to the other a little preoccupied. CC showed what was on his mind by asking the senior man, 'Let me ask you something. Does the name Colin Driscoll mean anything to you?'

The Dean was amazed. 'Where did you hear that name?' Then, before CC could reply, he said, 'Come into my room and have a chat for a minute. You've touched the very thing I was thinking about.'

The Dean closed the door with an emphatic quietness, sat down, then asked, 'Where on earth did you pick up that name?'

CC told him. The Dean looked as if he didn't know what to say, then opened up. 'The Vice-Chancellor had a meeting of all the Deans the other day. The Chief of Victoria Police had warned him that the universities were likely to come under attack from drug barons. The warning was that the approach to students was likely to be through staff members, not from people who obviously didn't belong on campus. He said that one such approach had already been made, and gave the VC that name.' They looked at each other. 'The VC didn't recognise the name, but he checked, and whoever Mr Driscoll is, he's not on the staff at Melbourne. Thank God, but that doesn't guarantee that someone else mightn't do the same thing.' He thought for a moment. 'Did you say that the man who knew the name was your father-in-law?'

'That's right.'

The subject was touchy. 'What do you make of that?'

'I'm suspicious, and I feel awful. I'm open to suggestions, I think I have to say.'

The Dean thought before he spoke. 'We'll have to get this back to the police chief. It could be an important lead. But obviously we don't want you being identified as the source. That could be very awkward.'

CC felt the same, and keenly. 'It'd be all right if they just watch him, but if they confront him then he'll wonder what started things off, and that could come back to me.'

'I'll warn the VC. He should be able to get that clear to them. In the meantime, don't mention this to anyone else.'

'Except my wife.'

The Dean looked him in the eye. 'The man you're talking about is your wife's father. She may feel she needs to protect him. I think silence would be the better policy.'

It was his ruling, but Brian CC Claringbold had his loyalties too. He hesitated. 'Thank you for the advice. You may be sure that it will be considered. My wife and I are deeply loyal to each other ...'

The Dean broke in. 'Drugs are a very nasty business. We've been largely successful, thus far, in keeping them off campus, but that could be about to change. If we're challenged, all of us have our particular loyalties, but what we have to keep in mind is the greatest good of the

greatest number; in a word, our students. Once a thing gets into the culture, it'll be diabolically hard to get it out again. I think you should do what the police chief would advise you to do, and that's keep it to yourself. Sit on it!

CC was deeply troubled by the time he got home, and it was apparent to Prue. 'What's on your mind, darling?'

He tried to think of some story to tell her, but knew he couldn't. That wasn't the way they dealt with each other. He trusted his wife more than he trusted himself. 'Can we have a sherry darling? I've got something I need to tell you.'

She checked the children, put some olives in a bowl, put two sherries on the table near the sofa, and sat close to him in the way that was precious to them both. He told her first about the words he'd heard her father say to the man who was leaving, then, as best he could remember, his conversation, word by word, with the Dean, his heart growing heavier as he spoke. Prue put down her glass. 'That's about as bad as could be.' CC waited quietly, knowing how deeply the news would affect her. After a sombre silence, she spoke again. 'Thank you for telling me. I'm glad you didn't do as your Dean told you to do.'

'I couldn't do that.' Their marriage was built on trust. He looked into her soul, wondering what agony he'd caused, and she looked back at him, suspecting that his view of his life's work had undergone a transformation, and not for the better. 'You're going to see the world differently,' she said. 'Things won't be the same.' He looked at her. 'What are we going to do about your dad?' She wasn't ready to speak, so he repeated words he'd heard earlier that day. 'The greatest good of the greatest number. How do you feel about that?'

She could have been swallowing poison. 'He's right. It's the only honourable way to look at it.' He admired her even more than he loved her. 'They'll watch him, night and day. Tap his phones. Open his mail. All that sort of thing.' His brows seemed larger as he looked out from under them, at his wife, who said, 'He's to be tested. I think he'll come through. If he doesn't ...' Her voice began to weaken. 'If he doesn't ...' She couldn't say it.

'Let's not think of that as a possibility,' CC said. 'Let's leave it, as we must, to others to decide.' She took up her sherry, looked at it, and

put it down again. 'I'm not sure if this is rock bottom. It probably isn't, but it certainly feels like it.'

Time passed. Prue's father remained affable. If he knew he was being watched, he didn't show it. The name Colin Driscoll didn't resurface, no matter what he meant to Victoria Police. The children of Prue and CC grew, and were loved. Angela began to resemble her mother. Tom, as far as anyone could say, might have resembled an almost forgotten uncle, or maybe he didn't resemble anybody. Likenesses are only a convenience for relatives trying to pigeon-hole the young who, by and large, have no wish to be classified. A pre-determined destiny is one of the most imprisoning ideas the race has developed. At the university – *the* university – there was a strange case of the discovery of a forthcoming exam paper being found in the textbook belonging to a Singaporean student of engineering, who claimed that the book that had belonged to him had been stolen a month beforehand. He said he had reported the loss to the faculty secretary, who bore out his claim. So how had the exam paper and the missing book been brought together, and then placed where they could be found?

Nobody knew, and the student announced that he was innocent of any cheating, and he would use the considerable wealth of his family to defend himself. The faculty re-set the exam, and the young Singaporean passed easily. The matter was allowed to rest. The Dean of Arts kept an eye on Brian Claringbold, even asking him, one day in the passage, what he was working on. 'What have you got on your work-bench at the moment? Any projects, promising or grand?'

CC smiled in the wan way that was characteristic of him at the time. 'I'm busy enough,' he said, 'on bits and pieces. Little contributions here and there. But I can't seem to develop any big themes. Nothing that would really grasp any wide public dimension ...' His voice trailed away. The Dean looked at him. 'Why's that, do you think? What's happened?'

The young historian said, 'I don't think I've recovered from Colin Driscoll. If you remember the name.'

'I certainly do. I won't forget that name easily. What effect is it having on you?'

‘Hour by hour and day by day, it’s having very little effect, but long-term, it’s undermining me. I’m one of those people who always feel optimistic about my country. We’ve had the chance to do better than the rest of the world. I’m one of *those*,’ he offered the Dean, who would certainly know what he meant, then he went on: ‘Early development of parliamentary democracy, full adult suffrage, unions to overcome the effects of the industrial revolution. And so on. But the idea that someone would try to push drugs into students using university staff to do it ... To tell you the truth, I think it’s shattered something vital in me.’

The Dean understood this, but had reacted differently. ‘It’s a battle, Claringbold, and we have to win it.’ He looked down the passage, as if there was something to see when there wasn’t. ‘It’s always *da capo*. Go back to the beginning and start again. All the fortifications you thought you’d built so well they’d never be torn down ... they’ve got to be built a second time, a third time, a fiftieth time. Nothing good is ever free from attack.’ CC knew the Dean had said it to himself before, many times, and wasn’t yielding. What could CC do? Find similar strength? He didn’t have it. He told the Dean he’d do his best to think as advised, but knew that something was sick inside him. He had to see history differently or he couldn’t go on.

Prue sensed this without him having to say it. Days went by, quietly, with him receiving thoughtful support, for which he was grateful. Nothing erupted at the university. If there were students selling drugs, they weren’t visible. The year was proceeding normally. Then he got a phone call from Robyn Briggs, who told him about a wealthy old boy who’d heard about the Rhonda Mathieson room, liked what he’d heard, and told Robyn he wanted to make an endowment. ‘No figure’s been mentioned yet,’ Robyn told CC over the phone, ‘but it’ll be substantial.’ CC was pleased. He asked Robyn to encourage the donor, if he could, and tease out how he’d like his money to be used. ‘The moment you think he’s looking for a bit of guidance, I’ll send you a list of possibilities, so he can make the choice that pleases him. How does that sound?’

It sounded well to Robyn, but it only further depressed CC. He could function well enough within the confines of the school where

he'd started, but the main game, his university career, was still soured. Why was that? He knew the answers. He was not an objective historian. He believed in the progressive improvement of humanity's lot, and Australia had more of that improvement in its short history than most countries. A full democratic franchise had been achieved more easily, and earlier, in Australia than elsewhere. Humanity had reason to hope, in his country. Its citizens were positive in outlook, and in achievement, in almost every field, be it politics, medical research, agriculture, marine science, sport, singing ... When Australians put their mind to something, they could do it as well as anyone else in the world, possibly better. This belief that problems could be solved was a deep-seated characteristic ...

Or it had been, but now there were fellow Australians, many of them young, who were taking drugs. Why? Because they got a thrill out of them, and didn't bother to think about the consequences, or else because they looked at the world around them, didn't like what they saw, and preferred to give themselves a different experience, however unreal. Both categories were turning their backs on the tradition that sustained him. The Dean, he knew, would say that this was a challenge and he should fight harder for what he believed in, but he didn't feel that way. He needed to feel that he was being swept along by an achieving wave, that he had the power of the majority behind him, underneath him, sustaining, and he'd begun to feel that he hadn't. Left to himself – the feeling that was undermining him – he was floundering, uncertain of where to go and what to do. Yet he had to find a way. He had a wife and two children, whom he loved. He had the job he'd always wanted, people respected him, and he needed their goodwill. He'd been lucky and he was still lucky, but he had to find a way to get his confidence back. He needed a belief in what he was doing, or what he *had* been doing, and it wasn't there. He was deprived of something essential, and he didn't know where to turn.

Rhonda was not alone in reaching retirement. Margaret Nilsson, for many years in charge of the girls' school boarding house, was also persuaded to quit. For a brief period she considered asking to continue her teaching, relinquishing only her boarding house duties,

but changed her mind after studying various brochures she picked up in a travel agency. The world was so beguiling and she'd seen so little of it. She'd lived by the values she'd taught and it was time to live in some other way. The girls she'd looked after for so many years were scattered far and wide and she was curious to know what they'd made of their lives. She'd been a fixture in the years of their growing up and she had a feeling that it was time to draw on their lessons by way of searching for the future she was going to inhabit. There were so many of them, spanning so many years. Some of them had married and had sent their own daughters to the school they'd attended. Another was Julie Wade, an impassioned, headstrong girl whom, Margaret believed, she'd influenced for the better at a time when she might have gone in any direction. Julie, as Margaret understood it, was managing the property she'd inherited from her parents. A story there, surely! Margaret wrote to Julie to say that she and a friend (this was Rhonda) would be driving through the western district on their way to the Barossa Valley, and asked if she and her companion might make a brief call. Julie wrote back to say that she would be delighted to see them, and invited them to stay for a day or two, if they could spare the time: 'I must owe you more than a couple of nights accommodation!'

Margaret replied that they'd stay for one night only on their outward journey, because they were keen to get to the famous wine area in order to do some drawing; both women were keen, if only amateur, artists, but they'd call again on the return trip if it suited Julie to have them. On the day they'd appointed, the retirees set off.

Finding their way out of the city was like looking for a new life. What would be new in the world they were entering? The steps and stages of the road to Ballarat, including a diversion from the highway to look at Bacchus Marsh. Rhonda asked Margaret to drive through the avenue of honour because an uncle of hers was commemorated there, though by which tree in the two long lines they didn't know. The avenue was eloquent enough: all those lives! It hadn't been a wide road because the country whose soldiers it recalled hadn't been so motorised back then. Most of the soldiers would have travelled, if they'd travelled at all, by horse and cart, or steam train. Rhonda

thought of a point she'd have made to her history students, then put it aside because there wouldn't be any more of them: she was on her own, now, Rhonda Mathieson and an avenue of trees. They subdued her. They were the response of a district, a small town, to what they'd allowed to be done to their men. No one had told them, 'Don't go!' So they'd gone, and large numbers had not come back. The people who'd let them go, their families and friends, had turned them into trees, a second life, longer than they'd enjoyed in their bodily existence. Could trees love? Not in any way that Rhonda knew of. Could she love? Only in the generalised way of a teacher; she was too old to marry and have children but she had at least an array of years before her to explore: something, surely, could be wrung out of them?

Margaret drove a little below the speed limit, which meant that cars were passing her all the time. 'I hope you don't mind,' she said to her companion. 'It's ages since I've been on the highway. I'll speed up a little once I get used to driving again.' Rhonda assured her that she was in no hurry. 'The rest of my life is starting today!'

They had lunch in Ballarat, visited the art gallery, and drove on. The skies became bluer as they drove, seeming to hover higher above the world, woolly clouds reminding them of the wealth of the region. Rhonda observed that she was unsure whether they were driving into the future or the past; both seemed to be entering her mind. Margaret smiled at this. 'Julie sent me a little map she'd drawn for us. We have to get to Hamilton first, then follow her directions. Her property's called 'Ormiston', which was some ancestor's name, apparently. She'll tell us when we get there, I'm sure.'

There was an avenue of elm trees, almost a mile long, between the road and Ormiston, and beside the elms, but keeping away from them, two rows of lemon-scented gums, three or four metres high. They appeared to have been planted as replacements for the elms, which looked imposing enough. Approaching the homestead, Margaret said to Rhonda, 'Remind me to ask Julie about the trees!'

Then they entered the garden which had completed the house for a hundred years. The drive turned itself into a circle in front of the house, the circle containing some huge magnolias, supremely confident trees, and on the steps of the home, dressed in white with

some formal bands of pale blue, was Julie. Margaret brought the car to her feet, turned off the engine, and the ex-teachers got out.

Julie remained where she'd been standing. The house was welcoming them, and she was the house. 'Leave your cases at the door,' she told them. 'Gordie will bring them in. He knows you're coming. He's in the shed at the moment, doing something to the car.' She supervised the leaving of the cases, then took the visitors indoors. There were portraits and photographs in the long, wide hall, which led to a reception room, oval in shape: passages led to the rear and to the east and west. 'You've been on the road a long time,' she said. 'Will you have a cold white wine, a sherry? Or would you prefer a cup of tea?' When they chose tea, she left them to take their order through to the kitchen, then led them to another oval room, but smaller. 'Do sit down,' she told them. 'Mavis will bring the tea.'

Rhonda had expected Margaret's one-time student to be limited by comparison with her former mentor but Julie held an authority many times stronger than her age would suggest. 'How long has your family held Ormiston Julie?' Rhonda asked, and their host ran through three generations of the connection, and the mysteriously uncertain connection to the original settler which suggested something illicitly fascinating in the story. 'I think we've always taken pride in Mistress Hazel's connection – if that was what she was, nobody's ever proved it either way – with the man who disappeared.' Regarding Rhonda with a firm eye, she added, 'It's very Australian, after all, to have something questionable, and probably disgraceful, back at the beginning!' They laughed. Rhonda was glad they'd come. Margaret could feel the balance changing between the three of them: then it struck her that the number under consideration was really four, because Ormiston and all that had transpired there was certainly a player, even in the present day. She and Rhonda had taught for years in places with powerful traditions, and memories that lost track of nothing unless it was deliberately done, yet they were being introduced, by the house even more than by Julie, so many years younger than they were, to some reality, or was it realism, that was new to them as they began their retirement. Margaret switched the conversation to their destination, South Australia's famous wine-making area, and what they might

see when they got there with their pads and pencils, crayons, folding chairs and tiny easels. Julie said, 'I only know what I've heard people say. I have been there but so long ago I've quite forgotten. Besides, you're looking for those very special moments when something shows itself ... I can't help you with that. Drive around and you'll find what you're looking for, I'm sure. Everyone who goes there says it's a very special place.'

Mavis brought the tea, and told Julie that Gordie had brought the ladies' cases in and put them in the rooms she'd specified. Julie nodded, and thanked her for the tea. Mavis asked if Miss Wade wanted dinner any earlier or later, or did she want it to remain at six thirty as usual? 'As usual,' Julie indicated, and poured tea into their cups.

Julie waved goodbye to the amateur artists in the morning, watched them move away, then set out to walk to the highway herself. Shortly before the trees ran out, she stopped, and turned, ready to go back, but only after she'd answered the question in her mind about what the visit had meant to her, and to the visitors, now departed, but returning in about a week's time; Margaret had promised to ring in advance to let their host know when they were coming.

Looking towards the gate, Julie recalled the day the family left to take her to school in Melbourne. 'There'll be lots of temptations,' her father had said, and her mother had finished for him, 'but never forget who you are!' He'd turned the car ninety degrees so she could look past her mother closing the gate. The elms in their two lines led all the way back to the house. Her father, in saying nothing, was telling her it was hers. She mustn't let it down. Easy for him to say! He was a man and gave himself the freedom of the male, that's to say, he travelled to the city, 'on business', whenever he wanted adventure. Her mother, possessing only the outer attributes of her husband, possessed the homestead, the property and the inheritance all the more thoroughly, in a combination of prestige and pain. Scraps, fragments and bits of tittle-tattle to do with his city activities occasionally reached her ears, but the crowning unfairness was that at about the time his trips away diminished and the high-lifer began to dwindle into the estate-owner, she had shown the first signs of an early onset of Alzheimer's Disease.

It had brought out the best in her husband. After years of not-sharing the best and most exciting sides of himself with her, he devoted his efforts to keeping her happy in her ignorance.

‘My father,’ Julie said to herself. She thought of those avenues that towns planted to remember their dead and entertained - it was no more – the idea of dedicating each of the trees in her drive to some recollection of her mother, her father, and herself. Quite a line, she told herself, looking toward the house.

It had taken her a term to settle in to her city school, and another to feel easy in it. Then it became freedom, and escape from whatever her parents expected of her. She could pass exams and win occasional prizes without satisfying her parents’ needs, his for excitement, power and privilege, and hers for the lifelong buttressing of her position which she didn’t get from her husband. She wanted her daughter as an ally against her marital partner – two against one, a female majority – but Julie had too much of her father in her to take up that position. She wanted admiration for the whole of her persona, and she’d inherited a house. Her mother’s ending had been unexpected. Her husband, her daughter, Mavis and Gordie all looked after her so thoroughly that it was second nature to them, until the morning when Gordie had left the car at the front of the house, keys in the ignition, for father and daughter to do some errand, and gone inside. Julie’s mother hadn’t driven in years. But this morning she’d come out before her husband and daughter, slipped behind the wheel, and driven away. Gordie, coming out a minute later, assumed that the car had been taken by those for whom it had been left, and went inside again. A phone message an hour later told the inhabitants of Ormiston that the car had hit a tree at speed and its driver had not survived the crash.

That was a terrible day, and it lived on in the dead woman’s husband who had to some extent reformed himself by dedicating himself to looking after the wife he’d done his best to ignore. The house, having lost some of its reason for standing there, was emptier than it had been. Julie came home from school having passed year twelve but declined to go to university as many of her peers were doing. Her own energies would give her purpose. This phase had hardly begun when the next blow struck; father’s bowel cancer was diagnosed. ‘They tell

me it may spread,' he said to his daughter. 'That's their way of saying it will. I haven't got very long. I know it's selfish of me, but I'd be grateful if you'd stay with me, here at Ormiston, for the next few months' – he meant the time he had left – 'after which, when I'm gone, the whole place will be yours, to live in, sell up, or what you will!'

Julie looked down the drive. The house was still there, as was she. She'd made only one change, the planting of a second row of trees, an outer avenue of lemon-scented gums, native trees, to coexist with, then eventually replace, the historic avenue of elms, European trees that had been almost wiped out in their homelands, but were well represented in Victoria. They represent a state of pride, she thought, but not one of belonging. They'll die eventually and they'll need replacing. That's for me to do. She meant it was her duty to act in this way, but that could only be done if she had her own passions under control, as her father had not. He'd had himself treated by a Collins Street specialist, but this doctor had insisted on sharing details of what was being done with a GP in Hamilton: 'Ever so much closer than I am,' the specialist had said. 'Your need for him may become urgent at some stage.'

Julie, strolling between her trees, remembered the mixture of sarcasm and fear in her father's voice when he'd repeated the specialist's words. 'Euphemisms abounding!' he'd said. 'Urgent. At some stage.' It was already urgent. So urgent they had to operate straight away. She remembered her father lying in a Melbourne hospital bed, asking her what the doctors had told her because they weren't telling him anything. She'd known what that meant. They weren't telling her anything either, young and female as she was. It wasn't hard to work that out. She'd gone to the specialist and told him that she was hiring an ambulance to take her father home. She'd look after him, she said, defiantly, but was caught a little unexpected by the softness of the surgeon's answer. 'Your heart's in the right place, my dear, but you can't do it all yourself. I'll write to the local hospital and tell them what they'll need to do. With some nursing help you'll be able to have him at home a little longer, but after that he'll need to go to the hospital ...' Julie had started to tell him that the local hospital wouldn't be good enough but the surgeon had both disturbed and calmed her by saying, 'Palliative care's all that will be needed, of course.'

She'd repeated the word, all those years ago, not recognising it, and she repeated it that morning, her guests well down the road by now, on their way to the Barossa, as she made her way, if only slowly, towards her home. It was hers by now. Her years of going away for sexual adventures, like those of her father, were behind her. The mother and father who'd brought her into the world had left her; the house was empty of them, apart from memories. The house wanted new life brought into it. It was waiting, silently demanding. It didn't want riotous parties or raucous affairs, with people's passions screaming through the rooms. It wanted civil, decorous, orderly lives inside it; marriage holds houses together as it does people. Marriage. It occurred to her, at a point possibly four hundred metres from the magnolias which the famous gardener had planted all those years ago, at the beginning of the story – the story of the house, to which the story of the family would be added – it occurred to her that the house had not known much of marriage in recent years, unless one considered her attentions to her dying father a marriage of minds, for she resembled him, and understood why he left home in pursuit of passions which he also scorned for being beneath him. I've been through all that myself, she told the house, looking at it as she slowly drew near.

She looked at the paddocks. She didn't understand them very well, but Gordie and the local agent would tell her what she needed to know. Neighbouring property owners would be pleased to advise. Unless wool prices went up – not to be expected in an age of synthetics – she'd have to stay at the high, specialised end of the market: no change there. She'd do as she was advised until she understood as well as her advisers. The house would hardly be rich again in her lifetime, but it had no habit of being poor. It was confident of itself, as was she. She'd travel when she chose, and invite people to stay. Any men she invited would realise that they were under inspection, so if they could lower their pride to come, they would be worthy of consideration. Anyone she married would be marrying her house, her past, so it was a fair appraisal they'd be going through.

In stories, suitors wanting a princess had to answer questions, or die in their failures. This caused her to laugh. She had a feeling that the

elms above her, shading her, were curious. She looked on them, lined up as they were in rows, like a line of servants before whom anyone approaching her would have to pass. She kept walking, acknowledging them with her attention, standing, as they did, outside in all weathers. Her house had seasons, as would she. She would travel, mostly on conducted tours, a sort of chaperoning, and she would escape when the trip was done. That would be fine for Europe, perhaps for China; she would have to work it through. There was a globe in the oval room at the end of the opening passage. She loved the way the oval reception rooms accepted visitors without letting them know what was behind the encircling walls. People looked about, curious to know what was out of sight. That was an advantage she would hold over anyone coming to inspect her; if they passed that test she could afford to be open with them.

It struck her that her thoughts were too focussed on controlling what lay ahead of her; she was waiting for her second half to attach itself. Was she already too old for this to happen? She thought not, but it had to be possible. In that case, house, she told herself, you must provide the company that I will need. Her mind went to the family's station office, its records kept intermittently by her father, more thoroughly by those before him. That will be my job, she reminded herself. The journals will contain my notes, observations, thoughts and feelings. I will share with the books until I share with the man that I bring in. Admission to the house will be admission to my life. The house: she was close by now. Guilfoyle's magnolias were quiet, but the buds were forming. There would be a display later in the year. The trees couldn't escape the seasons and neither could she. The seasons were part of the whole, each a quarter that had to take its turn, do its business and move on. I am no more and no less, she told herself, loving what she was turning herself into, but realising that in accepting these forces she was also surrendering herself to what they brought her. I would like a poem at every door, she thought. The front door must be the main one; what words would I like to be there?

She stood at the bottom of the steps; only half a dozen of them, just enough to let the owner of the house, when looking out, feel that

she was also looking down. This needs adjustment, she thought. Some signal should make the visitor feel welcome. How could that be? She saw at once what was lacking. The magnolias stood on an oval plot of land, and the room at the end of the passage was an oval too. The brickwork near the door should not be two columns, vertical and strict, but curvaceous reminders linking what was behind with what was before. She would bring out a tape measure later in the day and draw it up. Then there would be the problem of finding some bricks the same as those already in position, and they would need to be as weathered as the ones in the upstanding columns. The welcome mustn't look like an afterthought!

Full of warmth, contentment and a feeling of distinction, she accepted the house she was entering. She'd lived with it the twenty-eight years of her existence: the terms were set.

When the artists, the former teachers, returned, they stayed three days and nights. Time took on an elastic quality. Meals and tea, mid-morning and mid-afternoon, arrived as if expected, but the intervening hours appeared to stretch or contract according to their moods. As mistress of the house, Julie told herself, I must move with the hours. The visitors walked the property, or got in Gordie's ute to be driven about. He was garrulous, or mysteriously withdrawn. They saw that he liked to be questioned. When they rejoined Julie in the sitting room beside the oval with its dome above it, light filtering down, they pieced together what she knew of the family's history, and the owners before the Wades. Photos of these people were to be seen in the hall, and elsewhere. Rhonda and Margaret studied the pictures in their rooms. When Juliet said she must take a photo of them before they left, the visitors realised something about themselves in relation to the property, indeed to the world they lived in; it was their first lesson after leaving teaching. Cars moved people from one reality to another without becoming realities in themselves, as they did in under-privileged popular culture, which was about all there was these days. 'When we were doing our drawings among those famous wineries,' Margaret said at morning-tea, 'I wondered ...'

As she paused, Rhonda and Julie studied her.

‘... what the world would be like when we were no longer in it.’ Addressing Julie, she added, ‘Do you ever ask yourself that? Or hasn’t it started to bother you yet?’

Julie surprised the older woman, before whom she had once been a girl. ‘There can only be one answer to that. We use our passions to fill in time. We use our passions to defend ourselves.’

Margaret: ‘Against what?’

Julie again, ever so easily: ‘Ourselves, and knowledge of ourselves. We let our passions teach us instead of our insights.’ Seeing that they were uncomfortable with where she’d taken their thoughts, she asked, ‘What did you draw in the Barossa? You must have felt time passing there. The whole place is built on the seasons and what they produce.’ Conversation moved to their drawings, and Rhonda suggested that when they got together at afternoon tea they should show Julie the drawings they’d done. ‘That will be lovely,’ she told her guests. Let’s do it in the oval,’ as she called the adjacent room, ‘the light’s better in there.’ So Rhonda and Margaret, having finished their tea, went through their drawings, their pads, notebooks and larger sheets of paper, sketches, watercolours and beginnings of oil paintings, still to be finished, but show-able to their host whose mind, they well saw, could follow on from their initial thoughts. They spread these in the oval, had lunch, then walked in the paddocks surrounding the house, seeing them differently this time around. Gordie, acting as their guide, tried to explain the difference between Ormiston and a stud. He was a conventional man and he was careful with this subject before unmarried ladies. ‘A stud,’ he explained, ‘is a place that manages nature to bring about the finest animals you can produce.’ Allowing himself a laugh, he added, ‘It’s about as different from the human world as you can get!’ The ladies looked at him stiffly, but this didn’t stifle his amusement. ‘We’re careless. We don’t care about the results! You know, I think it might be a good idea to bring back slavery, so that everyone got bought and sold! That way, we’d start to take care of what we brought into the world!’ Margaret and Rhonda smiled. This was enough to please him, and he settled down to telling them whatever came to his mind about Julie’s father and grandfather, as far as he knew anything about the latter. ‘Julie was an only child. Spent

most of her time at school in Melbourne. She always surprises me how much she knows about the property when she's never had to run it! Not until now, that is.' He realised that they'd be talking to his boss before long, so he'd better be careful. 'She treats it differently from her dad. She treats it as if it knows its own mind!' He studied his audience. 'Excuse me, won't you. None of my business, these things I've been saying. But Mavis and I've lived on the property thirty-odd years by now, and it gets inside you, as you might imagine ...'

The visitors nodded. It was something they could see, most particularly in their host, who had some steel in her that hadn't been there as a schoolgirl, and was, in some way, far in advance of them in her understandings. She made them feel that they'd taught too long. Rhonda found herself wishing she'd only taught for a few years and had then done something else. Everyone should teach for a few years, she thought, then they should do some work that gave them understandings they would teach. She wanted to get back home so she could remake her life, then had the uncomfortable feeling that the Barossa trip might have been the remaking, such as it had been.

Displaying their drawings and paintings to their host was made an event by the ambience of the oval, a space evenly and softly lit. Julie told them that she liked their concentration on the tight, straight, even rows of vines, contrasting with the more cumbersome, because more natural, movement of the land, full of sun-blasted grasses and ancient river gums. 'It's the natural forced up against the human,' she said. 'It's something I see everyday here on the property, but I take it for granted. But when it's pointed out to me, as you've done, I like it all the more.' So the showing was a success, and both visitors asked Julie to choose a picture for her walls. Rhonda and Margaret undertook to have these works framed, and Julie said she'd think about where to hang them while they were away being framed. Margaret suggested that she put the pictures in the rooms where they'd slept, and Julie liked the idea. 'When you come back, those will be your rooms.'

A few days after they'd returned to the city, Julie was in Hamilton, shopping, when she saw a man in a suit standing outside the recently opened art gallery, with an elderly lady beside him. Both looked

lost. Visitors to the town, they claimed her attention. She asked if she could help. The man, and she knew he was French the moment he spoke, said they were driving from Adelaide to Melbourne and had chosen to see whatever was on show in the Hamilton Gallery, but it was closed, and that didn't agree with the opening hours in the booklet they'd been given in Adelaide. He flourished it in scorn. Julie didn't bother to look. The gallery, she explained, was only very recently opened and it was often closed because the director was away, arranging its first exhibition: in effect, it wasn't really open yet. The Frenchman said 'But ...' and didn't finish. His eyes looked contemptuously on the street, then he took the hand of the elderly lady in a way that told Julie that she was his mother. Julie acted on impulse. 'Please! This is my town you are visiting. I cannot have it let you down. Come to my house with me. This,' she said, pointing, 'is my car. You were going to spend an hour in the gallery, spend an hour with me.' She added, aristocratically, 'Then I will let you drive on!'

The Frenchman spoke rapidly to his mother, then nodded to Julie, who put them in her car. Moments later they were on the road to Ormiston. 'I will introduce myself when we get to my house,' she told them. 'For the moment, I am your driver.' This amused the Frenchman for some reason, but he didn't confide. The double line of elms, and associated, younger eucalypts, impressed him, and he was surprised when there was no gate, only a row of steel bars which thrummed as they drove across. The magnolias caused him to gasp and the house surprised him with its formality. He was suddenly respectful. 'Your family is the owner of this?' Julie told the man and his mother, 'I own this and it owns me. That is the bargain we have struck.'

Suddenly, and to the surprise of them both, their cultures met. He said something rapidly, softly, to his mother. Julie knew she had their respect. Beside the car, stopped between the trees and the house, they exchanged the formalities of their names: 'Julie Wade.'

'Norval deLattre.' He took his mother's hand. 'Emilie deLattre. Our home is in Grenoble. You have been there?'

Julie shook her head. 'I have heard of it. I think I know where it is. Come inside.'

She took them to the little room off the oval where they had afternoon tea. She introduced them to Mavis – ‘My housekeeper.’ Mavis chatted, then disappeared. Julie told them the story of the property, including its origins. ‘There must have been fighting with the blacks. But that was never mentioned. It was quickly forgotten, though I suppose the men would have talked among themselves.’ Emily picked up on this. ‘Men? Les hommes?’ Her son nodded. ‘Comme toujours,’ he told her, and Julie, understanding, liked what she heard. He was redeemable, even possible. ‘What brought you to Australia? We don’t have many French visitors, especially here.’ She meant the countryside. Norval explained that he was part of a company that conducted tours in Europe, long low boats on inland rivers, quality accommodation in ancient chateaux. Something about his appraisal of her home told her that he was thinking of doing something similar in her country. She questioned him, and she was right. He asked her if she was interested. She was, but she told him that she must give it thought. Such a decision, if she made it, would affect the lives of the people who worked for her, and her own as well. She meant that if she told visitors, year after year, about the history and the work of Ormiston, it would change Ormiston, and at this stage at least, she had not earned the right to make such a change. Norval accepted this, and Emilie, though understanding little of what had been said, caught the feelings in her voice, and appeared approving too. When Mavis reappeared to fill the teapot, if that was what they wanted, Norval became formal, and asked to be returned to the town. ‘We have taken enough of your time, and we have a booking at a hotel further on for tonight.’ This was at the George Hotel in Ballarat, which was opposite the art gallery, Julie told them. *That* they must not fail to see. ‘It is a much older gallery than the one we have just opened in Hamilton. This one is worth inspecting.’ Norval asked if he might take photos, and was given permission. He asked Julie to stand on the steps of her home, and then put Emilie beside her for a second picture. Julie took one of Norval with his mother, and then, she could see, he was thinking about a picture with her. She gave the camera to Emilie and stood beside the visitor, amused and pleased. As they got into her car, and closed the doors, Norval asked, ‘Do you like your town? Or is it not really yours?’

Julie considered. 'I suppose it's like an outer layer. Or an old coat that I put on without thinking. I don't really know if I like it. I think I simply take it for granted.'

This pleased Norval. 'I should be grateful to it,' he said. 'It has been looking after our car!'

He was thoughtful as they drove towards Ballarat. Emilie, beside him, was silent, puzzled by the countryside. It was boring, yet it fascinated her. It changed regularly, yet she couldn't catch it doing so. Much of the time she found it hard to tell whether what she was looking at was natural, or man-made. The distances were great between one thing and another, yet there was character in the absence, if that was possible. If you wrote a postcard back home, what could you tell them? There was nothing, and yet she was perplexed. Why was Norval thinking of touring parties through these places? They would be bored! And yet, she was interested. Ballarat, when they reached it, impressed the old lady. There was a huge archway to the west of the town which caused her to dive on the brochure, and yes, there was a photo of it, but the words were in English; she waved it at her son, who stopped the car in the shade of an old, rather overgrown tree. 'Maman?'

'Qu'est-ce que c'est?'

He looked at the brochure and explained that the arch was a memorial to soldiers who had died in World War 1, and the trees, even the one shading their car, represented the soldiers, one by one. She looked over her shoulder; they had been driving between these trees for ages, and they stretched ahead as far as she could see. She was amazed. Mothers' sons! How could it be? Her mouth fell open and her eyes began to mist. With a hand she waved at the trees on the other side of the road. 'Il y a des milliers.' Then she wanted to know if the Australians did this for every war. He said he would have to find out. He didn't know. The trees unsettled him. He drove back onto the highway, and into town. There were statues, and fine old buildings. It looked like a place where you could live. There was nobody in the office, though, only a young woman coming past without a uniform who said, 'I'll get John for you.'

John was a man of sixty, affable, unconcerned by their foreignness; he found their booking, pulled out keys from somewhere, and showed them their rooms. 'I'll put the car away for you,' he said, 'we don't leave them in the street.' Norval sensed what he meant, but was puzzled to know where the car would be going. John, untroubled, assured him that when he needed it, he'd bring it round for him, and as for the gallery he'd been asking about, it was straight across the road. Then he disappeared. Norval, who should by now have become attuned to local ways, found things becoming indistinct, as they had a way of doing in this country. Perhaps, he suggested to his mother, they might feel more certain in the gallery.

They crossed the road.

Australia, as chosen by a long line of directors before them, not to mention governing committees, and wealthy locals, presented itself. Russell Drysdale, Tom Roberts, all the names you know – or don't. Norval saw some surrealism in the Drysdale, though he struggled to know why it had been applied to a poverty-stricken outback family group; it was called 'Football' for some reason. The whole thing was sparse. A number of other paintings were clearly meant to recall the impressionists of his own country; they seemed, weak, pallid, until he realised that the approach he knew well was being applied to something he didn't. This gave him the clue to his looking. He found himself having to rid his mind of previous expectations. The style, the approach, of these painters was misdirecting him. They had something else in mind. What? He was in the position of his mother, looking at the countryside. A notice on the wall told him that many of the painters had studied in France, even its capital. This notice, something that no gallery in Paris would have allowed, referred to a painting by Hugh Ramsay, an artist who had died young, but back in his own country at the end. There was even, Norval saw, a quotation from a Frenchman like himself, saying farewell to the young man going home to die. He read a little more, then went around the pictures again. There were sculptures here and there, but he ignored them. 'Let us sit now maman,' he said to Emilie, and she joined him as he went down the solemn staircase towards the exit, before noticing a corner where meals and drinks were served. They sat. The gallery

had dignity, even if there was a glass-topped box where the public was invited to drop in donations. Hundreds of coins and quite a few five dollar notes were scattered there. This amused Norval. It was a chapter in that mighty tome called 'The Art of Extracting Money'. If the gallery cleaned out all the money gifted there, the thing would be empty and nobody would realise the expectation on them to give. You could only take out a little of the money at any one time, otherwise – what was the saying? – the cupboard would be bare, and that would never do!

'They have borrowed our language,' Norval told his mother, 'but when they use it, they don't talk about the same things as we do. It is strange.' She said to her son, 'You will not bring our people here. If you do, they will be puzzled all the time. They will tell their friends that they did not enjoy themselves. You will bring a first party, but not a second. You will have wasted all your money.' He nodded, having no wish to argue. 'And yet I am troubled. There is something interesting here, and I cannot put my finger on it.'

The following day, Norval and Emilie walked about. 'This place has been wealthy for long time,' he told her. 'They grew accustomed to it. Yet so many of the paintings show people who are poor. Struggling. That must be their history too. They are not without refinement, but it has not been easy to get. If I stay here I will come to like this place.' His mother snapped at him, 'When are we going home? How many days?'

A week later they were on a flight to Paris: Qantas, a word Emilie could not say. She wanted to call it Kontuss, but people smiled. Rather than be wrong, she fell silent. Norval reminded her of things she'd liked, or been curious about, on their trip, but it was clear she would do her talking when they got home. Both were surprised to find that the plane contained a party of French people who'd been on a tour of the South Pacific – Fiji, Vanuatu and other ports of call. A plane had brought them to Melbourne and they'd stayed at the hotel next to the airport; the city had been no more than a vision of towers to the south. Norval questioned some of them, curious, as ever, to know what they'd expected and what they'd liked. They'd seen nothing of the country he'd been inspecting, and wanted to know if it was worth visiting. The moment he showed his uncertainty, the tourists lost interest. One man

told him that Germans liked the place, as if that decided the matter. His wife mentioned crocodiles, as if one saw them chewing up people in hotel dining rooms. ‘They are restricted to the tropical parts of the country,’ Norval told her, but since she had no idea where these parts were and weren’t, she was unconvinced. He gave up after a while and resumed his seat. His countrymen were no better and no worse than usual: not good tourists, most of them, because too happy with their own; too complacent; not curious enough to want to know how other nations thought about the world.

So he sat as the plane put vast areas of the continent behind itself, the captain occasionally advising passengers with window seats to look right or left and see Lake Frome, Lake Eyre ... ‘It’s actually got water in it this year, that’s uncommon.’ Having a seat on the aisle, Norval felt no need to look, and the people behind him, he noticed, had no interest in landmarks either. They seemed to have no idea why they were travelling. The man thought the airline should inject everyone so they slept for the length of the flight and were only woken on the other side of the world, while the woman with him thought they should have gone by ship so they could spend their days in saloons, drinking. ‘What about nights?’ said the man. ‘Fifty fifty,’ replied the woman, and when her companion didn’t ask, she clarified, ‘Fifty per cent fucking and fifty per cent sleeping.’ A strange couple, thought Norval; they sound like they are my age, or a little younger; why are they talking in this way?

When the plane took off after landing at Singapore, the same couple were behind him, but in a different mood. The man sounded scornful, sceptical, the woman removed. Wanting to change his mood, the woman asked, ‘What’s the first thing you want to do in Paris?’ He said, ‘Look around a bit. Everyone says it’s a great place, I guess we go for a look.’ A moment later she asked about London, and that changed his mood. Very lightly, and very quietly, he sang a few lines in a tone of ridicule:

Some talk of Alexander, and some of Hercules
Of Hector and Lysander, and such great names as these

She told him to shoosh, but he wasn’t loud.

But of all the world's great heroes
There's none that can compare
With a tra lul lul lul laaaa ... ara ...
With the British Grenadiers!

Norval snickered. The higher up in British society you got, the more pompous they became. Or so he thought. The man behind him agreed. This was pleasing. But the woman attacked her man, accusing him of being scared of how he would feel when he saw the ceremonial at the heart of the empire.

'Empire be buggered,' said Noel. 'They lost that ages ago!'

Lola, for it was she, said, 'But they still put on a show, and you're scared of what it's going to make you feel.'

Noel: 'Weedy little poms wearing those great big fur hats to impress you. Banging their feet into the ground as if they want to wake the dead!'

Lola said, 'You'll be impressed whether you want to be or not. That's why they do it. Never fails. That's why they get people there every time they change the guard. Thousands turn up. And why? Because it's bloody impressive. You're scoffing at it to shut it out. You're afraid of it, that's why.'

Noel: 'They're not going to stick their bayonets into me. Why would I be afraid?'

The plane droned on. Norval considered the man behind him. His lady friend was right, or near enough. He scoffed because he was afraid. Of what? Of being impressed despite his unwillingness to concede anything to the British. In his own country, to which the Australians were flying, the President appeared on formal occasions with mounted troopers before and behind him. It was meant to make a statement, and it did. Stand aside, little people, the rulers are coming through. Most powerful of all was God, shining through the stained glass windows, a power in another world making itself visible. What did the man behind him have to put beside that? Nothing, only the vast emptiness of the land they owned, and only then because they'd taken it from the blacks ...

A feeling came over Norval, flying toward his home. The thing that had puzzled him during his visit was now a little clearer. The black people had not believed in the Christian god. What had they believed in? He had no idea. He knew they had totems, and marriage systems, there were all sorts of rules about what they could and couldn't eat, and they had remarkable knowledge of the life around them but they appeared not to feel any need for redemption. They had, apparently, no feeling of being lost, or even of being under judgement, apart from the feelings and actions of those living near them. He cast his mind back over the places he'd travelled to with his mother, Emilie, in the seat beside him, dozing. Once or twice he'd been told that the natives had special regard for this or that place, but he hadn't been able to see whatever was making the place special. Such places looked no more to him, and no less, than other places. All there was, was land, endless land, stretching from one side of the country to the other, from top to bottom too. How could you live if there were no holy places? That seemed to him to be the overwhelming defect of the country he'd been visiting. Then a counter-thought entered his brain. There were no holy *places* because everything was holy? Was that the way the black people had managed it?

He didn't know, but he felt shaken. It was quite a concept, quite a difference from everything he'd known. Everything was holy. Everything? It was too much. The word holy wouldn't do either. Holy was a human word and the land wasn't human. Most certainly not human. It was indifferent. What did the Australians say? 'I couldn't care less.' They got that from the land, surely, or maybe from the natives preceding them ...

He felt baffled. He stood up in his seat and moved into the aisle, so he could look at the couple behind him. They'd stopped talking. The man nodded affably enough, the woman didn't know he was looking at her. To Norval, she looked vulgar, but with that perspicacious vulgarity of nightclub singers who could see into you even if you thought them worthless. To be rated at zero was, for them, a sort of affirmation of their real worth, and that was more than yours. How long to L'Aéroport Charles de Gaulle? Hours, of course. An attendant said, 'We're serving dinner in a moment sir,'

meaning he should stop blocking the aisle. He went to the toilet even though he didn't need to. When he came back, he felt discouraged, emptied out in more than bodily ways. He needed to be home to reconstitute himself.

Paris pleased the travellers. It offered grandeur, and intimacy. Lola was amused at Noel's long consideration of cake shop windows. Everything was cut, or shaped, ever so neatly. Voices rang out in cathedrals, organs played, choirs sang. Cars and motor bikes were parked – dumped – in outrageous places, but their owners argued passionately with the police, tight men for the most part, and looking dangerous. 'If you were going to argue with those fellas, you'd want to win,' Noel said. 'They'd beat shit out of you if they took you back to the station.' He said this grinning. He looked on the city with unusual cheer. 'Look at that!' he roared at Lola, pointing into a window. 'Kiwi boot polish!' She looked, and it was. 'So?'

He thought she was stupid for asking. Couldn't she see what he saw? Something from back home, something they wouldn't think about, where they came from, had made it to this new level, this standard. If you could sell it to the French, it had to be good. He loved the shops, he loved the metro. 'They treat you as if you're intelligent,' he said, 'not as if you're a sucker!' Lola was amused. 'You're going to be hard to live with when you get back home.' 'I'm always hard to live with,' he said. 'I don't know why you put up with me.' There was rare geniality in this confession. She asked him if he wanted to visit Pere Lachaise, where so many of the mighty dead were buried. 'Not ready for ghosts,' he told her. 'Not yet. In a couple of days, maybe.'

'Notre Dame?'

'No. God might grab me and rush me off to heaven ...'

'Installing electrical white goods?'

'If they've got 'em up there. They might have stayed old-fashioned.' He rushed on. 'That's what I like about this place. Everything's modern, but it's also old. You can feel the past, going way, way back, but you know it's a trend-setter as well. By the way, remember where we nearly got knocked down by that car this morning – had to run for it, remember – that's where they had the guillotine set up at the time

of the revolution. It's where they knocked off people's heads, the king included. Bloody frightening, don't you think?'

The past didn't frighten Lola, didn't affect her really, while Noel wanted to soak up every part of this city, new or old. 'It's got something special. It's changing me.' She looked at him. 'Shakespeare Bookshop?' He shook his head. 'I don't want to spend the first few days doing all the obvious things. We'll have to do them eventually, but today, right now, the whole place is freaking me out. It's the little things that matter. Stuff the locals take for granted. This city's full of rich people. Not vulgar-rich, but intelligent rich, with taste. Look in the windows. Stuff you'd never see, back home, on display in all its glory. All very discreetly lit up. And the fabrics! Again, I've never seen the likes of them before, and I want to live with what I see. I want to change the joint where I come from! I want to alter everything when I get back home!'

Watching him, listening to him, she could see that when he got home and reflected on what this visit had meant, he'd call their relationship into question. Right now, she was going through the same things that he was, even if they affected her less, but when he sorted out his impressions, back home, and what they'd meant to the two of them, he'd want to rid himself of her. He'd associate her with the things he wanted to be rid of as he tried to rebuild his life. That was certain. He'd want to do that. Would she want to play a part in the rewriting of his nature, or would she want to go somewhere else, with someone else, and let him fend for himself?

Could she leave him like that, or did he need her?

Would he need her, when the transition got strongly underway?

She didn't know, couldn't say, had to see what the streets of Paris did to him next.

They travelled. They visited London, Madrid, Rome and less famous places. They watched a bullfight and loathed it. They watched a wedding in a bluestone cathedral and loved it. 'I don't mind the church in Europe,' he told her. 'It holds everything together. Back home, it's bullshit.' She reminded him that he'd been to a church school himself. He thought about this. 'Yeah, they did try. A few of them were fair

dinkum about it. The rest only went along because it was what you had to do to get anywhere. They had everything arranged, and if you fitted in, you got your reward. It was a deal. Quite a good deal, actually. It was played fair and square. But the stuff they taught you was bullshit, and everybody knew it. Baptism, confirmation, holy communion, what a load of crap. At least it was Anglican crap, none of this rubbish about original sin!’ His eyes opened wider at the stupidity of this idea. ‘Original sin,’ he said again. ‘The catholics go around the world pumping propaganda into the heads of people who don’t know how to combat it ...’

She’d heard all this before. ‘Belt up Noel! You like to do a bit of preaching yourself! Give us a break, would you?’ He laughed. She was right. He liked to hold forth, so what they should do was walk, letting the good things of Europe find their way in. ‘A walk it is,’ he said; ‘which way do you want to go?’

‘I want to walk onto a train. Versailles. That’s what I want to see.’

The palace and its gardens amazed them. They attached themselves to a party for a while to listen to the guide, then slipped away when the group moved into the gardens. Lola had a map she’d picked up, and decided, after some working out, that the staircases had been placed so that the Queen and the King’s mistress need not encounter each other. Foreign envoys would be brought into the royal presence on routes chosen to impress. The King received people while sitting up in bed, they were told, but only if you were important enough; rank was calculated in steps downwards from the king. ‘The King,’ their guide told them, ‘embodied the British notion of Divine Right.’ She said these words before leading them into the Hall of Mirrors. ‘Take it in,’ she told them. ‘You will never see its like again. No questions. Everything you want to know is in the booklet.’ Noel was amused by this, but also baffled. Only one ruler in the long history of humankind had attained these heights. He’d been called the Sun King, and Noel wondered whether it was because of the brilliance that he’d let loose upon the earth or because there had been a setting to end even his long years of glory. Outside, beyond the windows that overlooked the famous gardens, a square lake housed a lively group of sculptural figures, as alive in their own way as the reflections in

the mirrored walls of those walking about, necks craning to look at paintings of the royal achievements – battles, mostly – on the ceiling above. The monarch, long dead, lived in everything that could be seen, touched, marvelled at. He'd set a standard that would never be surpassed. Later times would produce aeroplanes, computers, weapons a thousand times more terrible than the monarch's soldiers' swords, but they would never equal his assertion of mortality lifted beyond the realm, the oceanic waves of fear, distress, loss, damage that had troubled people in the age before the royal sunset. 'It makes me feel like I'm nobody and nothing,' Noel said to his companion, who replied sharply, 'Know why? Because that's all you are.'

This angered him. 'It ought to be destroyed, then, even though I know it won't. You know why?'

Lola said confidently, 'I do.'

'Well?'

She took him up. 'It's a challenge. One of these days, some lunatic will blow it up, proving that they were scum. It's a challenge, and the king knew it couldn't be beaten. If you want to take up the challenge, you have to equal it, but in some different way.'

'What's that mean?'

'I don't know. I haven't thought about it before today.' He made a scoffing sound. She regarded him with equal scorn. 'Supposing you said, everyone will be fed. Three meals a day for everyone, rich and poor. It's your right, everybody, step in and enjoy. And now suppose ...' her voice was rising '... that you made it happen. Hey? That would be an achievement, wouldn't it?'

Not knowing what to say, he said nothing.

'It would. It would match all this glass and glory that surrounds us. It hasn't been done yet, but it will one day. Somewhere, by somebody. And I hope I'm around to see it.' He was going to speak but she cut him short. 'They'll make a saint of the person who does it. Hey? Noel? Hey? What do you say to that?'

He looked at her, hostility in his eyes. 'I don't want to be a saint. Heaven spare me! You know what? The king that had all this made for him, he didn't give a stuff whether the poor had meals or they didn't. He wanted glory! He commissioned it, and he got it! That must

have taken a very special sort of courage. He got what he wanted. Nobody's ever done it since. Nobody ever did it this well before him either, although there must have been plenty who tried.'

'Bastards, trampling on the poor!'

They'd found a fundamental difference. 'If the poor let themselves be trampled on, they're poor indeed. And they deserve to be trampled on. Everyone wants success of some sort or another. But they only get it if they set their standards low enough. This one ...'

He gestured at the long hall, the exquisite, never-to-be-repeated hall.

'... aimed at something impossibly high, unreachably high, and he reached it. No doubt he did shocking things along the way. But ...'

Again the gesture, again the hall.

'But ...' Words failed him. Lola watched him tenderly, fearing he might break. 'The gardens, Noel. You wanted a walk, earlier.' She took his hand. 'It's time to turn your back on this. You don't want to, but it's time. This way. I saw a doorway back here, somewhere, I'm sure I did.'

Cities have character: nobody would dispute that. But can we change it slightly and say that cities *are* characters? This is a tricky question. Having character, and being a character: what's the difference? By way of beginning a discussion, let us imagine it being said of someone that s/he acted in a Parisian way. Would we know what that meant? Not very precisely, no; but loosely, broadly, the probable answer is yes. Can we, further, imagine that someone might have adapted their behaviour to make themselves more acceptable, more successful, in the city where they live? Of course: it happens all the time. Each of us is taking our signals from the surrounding society; this is normally taken to mean that there is connection between the individual's actions (and possibly thoughts) and the prescriptions of society surrounding. These prescriptions change in their nature and their sources, from time to time and place to place. For example, the power of Christian sermons delivered in Sunday services has declined enormously in the last two centuries, but what has been created since is not an absence so much as a commercial replacement. Modern man – I am writing in 2017 – is

surrounded by advertising pressures in a way not previously seen. A society that puts high value on individual liberty – and its equivalent in commercial choice – has deftly found a way to (apparently) offer even further choice, while in fact circumscribing that choice by making sure that the citizen – now called a consumer – is restricted in their thinking about their choices. If I watch test cricket on television I see almost as much advertising material as I do cricket, and if the cricketers pause for a drinks break, as they do after an hour's play, I will be shown a sequence of ads. One can't even watch, let alone commit, a decent murder these days on television without an ad-break interruption. Our perception of the world around us is endlessly rearranged, altered, substituted. We are offered a semblance of choice but the specifics are controlled, as are also the circumstances of our choice-making. Freedom's belt has been tightened!

One way of doing this is by focussing on the moment when the individual exercises his/her freedom of choice, while neglecting to analyse anywhere near-so-closely the forces acting on the individual from outside. All of us look outside ourselves for signs of approval or its opposite when we are faced with making a decision. To ensure that we make the 'right' choice, the signals from society must be adjusted to push us in whatever is the desired direction: this requires someone – politician, ad-master – to adjust society's signals in an appropriate manner, meaning one that leads to the desired outcome: 'desired' by some forces in the surrounding society and hence – by influence – by forces inside ourselves.

This means that society has to be created and recreated, over and over, so that whenever and however perceived, it suits the desired outcome of the choice that is being made by ...

... whichever one of the lost souls is destined to make the choice in the moment we are considering. The moment, and therefore the choice-manipulation, moves endlessly. Society has to change with time. Does society have a character, then? Is it a character, as we asked before? Answer to the first question: society has a character, and it's ever-changing in today's terms, in order to suit the decisions being made at the time. Was this always so? I don't know. Off to your history books to see if you can find an answer!

Is society a character? I take this to mean, does it have self-awareness and a capacity to take a path of action, or to restrain itself? Societies do have such things, yes, but do they have the equivalent of individual responsibility? The classic example of trying to prove that societies did have such an equivalent, and one that was, in my opinion, neither proved nor disproved, was the Nazi war criminal trials post World War 2. Individual guilt was assigned to various people while the question of communal responsibility was left clouded. One suspects that most people, then, would answer my questions by saying whatever it suited them to say, whatever it was necessary for them to say, according to their situations at the time.

You think that's not an answer? Neither do I.

These questions were raised, you may recall, at a time when Noel McGraw and Lola Moon were coping with the effects of a visit to Versailles, as created by the Sun King and his brilliant artisans, something that amazed them as it's done for visitors down the years. Lola, if you recall, suggested that a madman might blow up the wondrous palace, and perhaps this will happen one day in a terrorism-infatuated world, but will it mean the end of Versailles as an influence? A possibility? A challenge? The answer's no. There are millions of photos to show what it was like, and there are the effects of those photos and of endless visits on people's minds. A grand idea, once thought of, and created, can't be un-created. It's there forever in the human mind, a statement of unrelenting power.

Nobody walks away from such places unaffected. The limits of what mankind can achieve have been redrawn. Extended. There is a difficulty with this line of argument, however. The modern world doesn't allow a new Versailles to be created. On the contrary, it divides us so that we are all working, if we can find paid employment, to create small homes for small families, each with a tiny plot of garden, possibly, and often wittily, mimicked by letter boxes imitating the houses they serve! We have come from the palace to the cottage as modest as those who dwell in it, to the mockery, the self-satire sticking out of the ground near the gate on a pole – from king, to commoner, to clown!

Of the characters encountered in this book thus far, the one whose experiences have been closest to the descent I have been describing

would be Nigella Lacey. Nigella, when she was last mentioned in this book, was living at Government House, where her father was a military attaché to the Governor, a political appointment but in those days either a member of a noble British family or someone, if Australian born, acceptable to the monarch and those surrounding him/her. His family returned to London when his stint in Melbourne ended, with Nigella continuing at London University the studies she had begun at Melbourne. The sexual freedom she'd granted herself in the southern city was greatly restricted, however, back home in England, and she soon married a man not unlike her father, though many years younger. He allowed himself the sexual freedom that she had once taken for herself, but hampered her movements, once the children came, by setting up a household where Nigella, while apparently able to live as she pleased, was in fact caught up in regulating those who had the appearance of serving her, though their real function, as intended by her husband, was to keep her concentration on the family. Faithful to the children, she put up with this for almost four years, and then, being offered evidence of her husband's doings, including a serious matter of misappropriation of public funds, she confronted him. He would sign the house over to her; she would grant him unlimited access to the children so long as it didn't involve anything that hindered their educational or general social development, as judged by her; he would make a modest contribution to the expenses of maintaining the children; while she, in turn, would remain silent on his misuse of public funds. 'You drive a hard bargain,' he said, prompting Nigella to say, 'You're getting a second chance, and I don't doubt you'll take it.'

She remarried, this time to a man working at Australia House, and the question of a return visit to his homeland presented itself. She'd long felt that her father's position at Government House had prevented her seeing what the common people saw of their country and wished to look again. Her new husband supported this, and the couple, with her three children – he had none – made the journey in the modern way – by plane. They leased an apartment in bayside Saint Kilda, and set out to travel. They inspected the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme, Sydney, the Gold Coast, then Adelaide and the Flinders

Ranges. Back in Melbourne, her husband, a Sydney man, asked to see the university where she'd begun her undergraduate degree. They drove to Parkville, parked the car and walked about. Nigella's children wanted to know where she had lived as a student. She told them that there had been a couple of women's colleges, though she hadn't lived in them, and led them in the direction of Janet Clarke Hall, but to get there they had to go through the grounds of Trinity College, the comparable men's institution, where the atmosphere – trees, buildings – appealed to her Sydney-born husband. 'It's rather pleasant,' he said. 'Did you know anybody here?'

Her reply was ambivalent. 'One or two,' she said, suppressing a smile, and then: 'We might even go and have a look.'

'You mean their rooms?' her husband asked, and then, before she could answer, a man her own age came out of Clarke's, a long, wide building facing the college's spreading oak, swung to his right, and was almost past them when Nigella claimed his attention. 'Would anybody mind, do you think, if I took my family to see the building behind that one?' The man, dressed comfortably rather than stylishly, said, 'I don't believe anyone would mind, but the building that used to be there has been pulled down. There's only an open space and a bit of parking.' Nigella gasped. 'Oh! There was a building there once, a long wooden one, and I ...' She was surprised at the effect of what he'd told her.

'I remember it well,' Neville Long said. 'I lived in it once, for a year.'

She studied him. He seemed not unfamiliar. 'What year was that?'

He didn't have to think. 'Nineteen fifty-two.'

Nigella's husband tapped his wife on the arm. 'That was your year at this university.' Neville Long, the stranger, said, 'I remember it well because it was my first year at uni. And the college. In those days they used the wooden wing for first year students. You had one year in a little wooden box, and then you got something better. So long as you passed, that is.' He smiled, and suddenly she knew who he was.

'Neville!'

He looked at her. 'Good lord! It's ...'

She couldn't stop it coming out. 'I'm Nigella. Nigella Lacey, that was. I'm Nigella Rawlinson these days. This is Arthur, the cause of my

change of name. My second husband. And these are my children from my first marriage. Their father's name was Ellicott, and they've kept his name. It was explained to them, and they haven't taken Andrew's name – Rawlinson – or my unmarried name – Lacey.' She touched Neville's coat sleeve. 'If you can follow all that!'

He was doing his best, though the substance of these remarks bore no relation to the surprise of encountering Nigella where they'd encountered each other years before. They could hardly talk about that, with her children and second husband in attendance. He looked startled, and she said, 'And what are you doing here, on this extraordinary day?'

'I'm attending a conference down at the Royal Melbourne, and they're having a session that doesn't concern me so I decided to walk up here and have a look around. This is the first time I've been back!'

'The first time?' Nigella was amused. 'Well, it's my first time back as well. How extraordinary that we should run into each other. Do you have a family?'

He told her about Donna and his practice up on the Murray. 'We've got two children now, a little bit younger than yours. We were a bit late starting.'

'Why was that?'

He was diplomat enough to deal with the question. 'Like many couples, we had a period of uncertainty ...'

She knew what that meant. Touching his sleeve again, she broke in, 'Tell me where you live!' So he told her, they talked, she brought Arthur Rawlinson into the conversation, and then she caught Neville glancing at his watch. 'You'll be wanting to get back to your conference. Let's exchange addresses and see if we can arrange something later. When we're on our travels again!' She said this ever-so-cheerfully, as if it was almost certain, when both of them knew, and hoped, that they would be spared another encounter. Diaries and biros were found, details written, and they walked, together, to the college gates. Arthur Rawlinson offered to drive Neville wherever he needed to go, but he pointed to the hospital not far away, and said he'd prefer to walk. He'd be sitting for the rest of the afternoon ...

Arthur Rawlinson got the children into the car, seated with belts on, then looked at his wife, who'd gone quiet. She was, he sensed, on the verge of tears. 'Home, I think,' he said, 'then I'll go and get something for lunch. Won't take a minute. We'll have a quiet hour. Then we'll decide what we're going to do next.' He drove their car down Royal Parade, through the city, and back to the place they were renting in Saint Kilda. As they were getting out of the car he sniffed, and said, 'Sea air's unmistakable, isn't it. What a joy after London. Inside, darlings. I'll get our usual take-aways, we can cook properly tonight. Won't be a minute.' And drove off. Nigella wanted to thank him for his goodness, but he didn't care for anybody drawing attention to what was, for him, a necessary thing to do. Andrew thinks it was an affair that wasn't properly ended, she told herself, but it wasn't that. It was something that never properly began.

Neville found it hard to deal with. He could push it out of his mind at the conference, but it haunted him on the drive home to Swan Hill. Nigella had become a fine looking woman, and she was richer for her experience. As for himself, he didn't know how to handle this reminder of his young self. How immature he'd been! It was embarrassing. He'd gained confidence from dealing with patients these many years, but meeting Nigella had reminded him how scared he'd been of women's sexuality. This had had the good effect, in the long run, of making him respectful of female patients, so perhaps he'd turned a defect into a quality ... but he didn't feel that way when he thought of the recent meeting. Something in him wished that he'd re-met Nigella without her husband and children so that they could go back to the challenging rush of blood that characterised their first encounter – which he'd failed. He wanted to show Nigella that he'd become a man after all. Another effect of the meeting was that it undermined him. When he got back to Donna and their children, he wouldn't feel as simply stable as he'd grown to expect. To take as natural. He'd always felt sorry for, and looked down on, people who couldn't simplify their complexities. He was fond of interrupting patients' monologues with 'After all ...' or, 'Yes, that's all very well, but, to get to the point ...' His patients were used to this, and accepted it. He had status in the

town, and in its hospital. People deferred, and he expected it. Nigella had brought this undone.

What had he been doing at the college anyway? He could have been dithering around at the conference, having a cup of tea, reading a newspaper, or talking to a colleague about something of interest to them both, and, if he had, he'd be heading home now with a little more knowledge and a good deal more confidence, of certainty that he could handle the problems brought to him every day. What had he been doing at the college? It wasn't a safe place to be; he could see that now, clearly enough. What had he been doing at the college?

He'd gone back looking for his earlier self, that was what. There was no doubt about it. And time, or something, had punched him with a paradox. The evidence of his previous self that he'd expected to investigate wasn't there. The circumstances – the building - had been destroyed. Instead there was a void and a car park, another sort of void. But! There's always a but! Out of the universe of possibilities, guess what! Nigella Mark 2 had been there, a very different person these days, yet, he sensed, still far in advance of him. When would he grow up? It struck him that to ask the question was to notice that the process you'd feared, and avoided, was underway. How far till he got home? He had to talk it through with Donna.

He drove to Swan Hill. The children were pleased to see him. 'What did you bring us, daddy?' Donna was welcoming, gave him messages, made him tea, then sat with him at their kitchen table. 'How was it?' she said, as he knew she would. 'Conference was good,' he said. 'Useful. I learned a lot, I think. Then a funny thing happened ...'

'What was that?'

He took his time to answer. Donna waited. 'It was strange, and so unexpected.'

'Yes?' She was still waiting. Slowly, awkwardly, he told her about the meeting with Nigella, her second husband, and children from her first marriage. 'At Trinity?'

'Yes, that's what I'm trying to tell you.'

She would have to be patient. He had mentioned this business of youthful sex with someone, but it had never presented itself as important. She'd quite forgotten it until this strange, tangled

confession. She didn't like that way of seeing it. He wasn't really confessing anything. She had a fleeting moment when she wanted to send him back to Melbourne and tell him not to come home until he'd had a week of real passion with Nigella, whoever she was. But he wasn't confessing. He wasn't so much regretful as ...

What?

She studied her husband. Rather foolishly she commanded him to drink his tea. Something about the way he did it told her that he wasn't at odds with her, whatever else was going on. She waited. Suddenly he said, 'I think I can see what's happened.'

'What?'

He looked confused but his thoughts, slow as they were, were starting to flow. 'I can't connect with Nigella as she is today, because I can't connect with Nigella as she was, all those years ago.' Donna waited. 'And she can't connect with me because I'm not who I was.'

'Go on.'

'I'm not the person I was, way back then. He was a boy, and now I'm middle aged. You realise that? I've never realised it before. I thought I was ever-young, but of course, nobody is. I'm middle-aged ...' He stared at the walls of the room.

Donna was tempted to state his age in years by way of dragging him back from wherever he was into the present, but then she realised that his age was her age, she had two children, that she too had passed through one of those gates that mark the stages of a life. 'Perhaps it's happened to both of us,' she said.

The world, however, was old. Dr Long received a letter from the Australian Tax Office querying certain claims in his return from the previous year. Neville, looking at them, could see that his accountant had over-claimed, and he'd signed the return without looking. Hell! He made a note in his diary – See Lewis. When would he have time for that?

The Malaysian Prime Minister took offence at some comment on his performance by the Australian Prime Minister. An insincere apology was issued. Somebody proposed a high speed rail link between Melbourne and Brisbane, travelling inland but going

through Canberra. Bright ideas had to include Canberra. Those who favoured the rail link waited but no details emerged. On the wharves, where strongly unionised labourers had turned their slavery into something approaching affluence, containers came in, lifted and moved by cranes. Pubs emptied and workers' homes, being by the sea, rose in value. The Labor Party, as Endless saw, became gentrified. Work was still paid for, but labor became a thing of the past, done mostly by machines. Fashions came and went, slang dropped out of use to be replaced by what the scholars called neologisms. In Bayreuth, Wotan farewelled Brunnhilde in a supreme expression of sorrow, in Palestine, Israelis occupied land the Palestinians had once thought theirs. America out-powered the Soviet Union but couldn't control Asia, where communism took new forms. It couldn't control the Middle East either, because it was too closely aligned with Israel. Historians wrote more books about the French Revolution, trying to understand what had been done, and what had not. Films were made about Hitler, giving evil a human face. Everything changed, nothing changed much at all.

The world was old, time was old; couples were made young again by their children. Sandy Clarkson knew he'd never marry Andrea. She was too unstable. She was already lost, would be hopeless by the time she was forty, and degenerate ever after. She'd end up an old lady in a nursing home, unvisited, known to nobody. She was fun in the crazy world of advertising but he'd have to end it. Soon. He was making money and investing carefully. He wasn't going to stay in advertising much longer. It did more than wear you down; it turned you into the rubbish you produced. There was no avoiding that. His father, whom he'd looked on with something between scorn and pity, began to acquire dignity in his son's eyes. They drew closer, and his mother, pleased, began to look around. Sandy needed a real woman, not a sexual promise clinging to his arm. She could provide better, she felt sure. Only a woman who'd become a strong mother would be able to make a man out of him, but first, she saw, he'd have to show he was ready for change. With the patience of a woman who's never been entirely satisfied with her life, she began to wait, and watch for signs.

J Brian C Claringbold slowly altered his vision of history. He'd based his thinking around the idea of white settlement having to meet a challenge: could it, in forming a new country, do better than people had done in the world they came from? Behind this question lay an assumption expressed by R.M.Crawford, history professor at his university not so many years before. Crawford had begun an interpretative essay with the words, 'The history of Australia is a chapter in the history of migration.' No mention had been made about the years before 1770, when Cook sailed up the east coast, or 1788, when Phillip and his marines and convicts took possession at Sydney. It was a viewpoint that didn't allow the aboriginal people to exist. *Istoria bianca* sat beside *terra nullius* as governing concepts! This would hardly do. CC had spent years looking for a new angle of vision and now he had it, he was a little overwhelmed. The land was much older than white settlement, certainly, but how to conceive a history that preceded settlement? You could hardly write about the land! It didn't think, it didn't do anything except evolve, if that term could be shifted from living things to the surface that they lived on. And if you tried to write about the earlier occupation by black people, you ran up against the problem that they didn't think historically at all. They had a wealth of stories, most of which seemed ridiculous to white people, and they had the bewildering concept known as the *dreaming* which appeared to negate history by offering some sort of endless present. How to build a life's work on a grounding like this? He didn't know, and yet the problem had entered him. He had to do better than the early white settlers who'd pushed the problem aside in occupying the land, shooting blacks who resisted, or pushing them off cliffs and letting them fall. The situation dramatized itself by telling him he couldn't write a history unless he wrote a better one than had ever been written before.

Ken Jarman's thinking took him in something close to the opposite direction. His section of the bank thought globally before the term became widely used. Their key concept was value rather than currency. Money moved in value all the time. Money was regarded by most as a means of exchange, but only because most people never had very much of it, and thought about it on a restricted scale. Banks

had to think of it in huge quantities, spiralling in endless relation, currencies to currencies, each of them compared to benchmarks like the US dollar, or the price of gold, which themselves were unreliable because as changeable as anything else. So what was valuable then? It was changing all the time. The value of anything was no more and no less than what you could get for it at a given time, and that too was changeable. So how did you know if you were getting ahead? Ken and his colleagues argued about this all the time, knowing that their colleagues in other departments were issuing loans against securities which the foreign exchange people often thought either worthless or having more reputation than actual value.

Ken rarely spoke of these matters outside work because few people had been forced to conceive of money in the way that he had learned to take for granted. When he got home to Suzanne – and their baby daughter Cleo, for she had entered the world by now – and she asked him, ‘What sort of day have you had?’ he told her about the people he worked with, their love lives, their gossip, their travel plans, the rumours they were circulating, but rarely about currencies and the trading thereof. Does this sound patronising? He didn’t mean it that way. The truth was that Suzanne was such a natural mother, and so good with Cleo, that he marvelled at the way his life had changed, and the things he did at work – for which he was extremely well paid – struck him as foolish, no, artificial, in the extreme. The happiness of their daughter seemed more valuable than the money he’d traded that day. When Cleo wriggled in her mother’s arms because she wanted to be held by her father, Ken knew that the three of them were happiness itself, not tradeable, not marketable, but supremely valuable because irreplaceable. Human life, when it was held in your arms, irradiated by love, outstripped anything in the world.

Bob Enright and Gloria, living on their bend in the Murray, were, though it would never have occurred to them to think in this way, something of a combination of the Jarmans’ happiness and CC’s problem. They lived on, and with, the land, yet their way of knowing it came from the river flowing past every day. Its motion drew attention to the immobility of what it crossed. They were thankful for their property, with its orchards, crops and animals: perhaps the very best

thing about it, Gloria would have said, was that with life all about them they could be at peace with death. People who can't see death around them, she would have said, have a fear of it bordering on the hysterical. To overcome this, or prevent it happening, people must recognise death, encounter it in daily living, and be at peace with it, accepting it as part of everything that lived. She was a mother. Life endlessly renewed itself. It had to, because everything was dying, or would do so one day. Death would come eventually ... or might be just around the corner. One never knew. So one kept an eye out for what might be coming, and then got on with the job, whatever it was – making clothes, cleaning, cooking, talking to one's children, helping others when they ran into difficulties; there was always something that needed to be done.

Bob, her husband, would have done no more than nod at these concepts. He was active, not very cerebral. Why bother? You needed your mind to work out things you were going to do. He heard, for instance, that one of his neighbours, an elderly man, was thinking of retiring to Bendigo or Swan Hill. Bob, who had been eyeing off this man's property for years, rang the bank manager in Deniliquin. Any chance of a loan? He wanted to make an offer for the property before it came onto the market. The bank manager thought he'd better make an inspection. He came across the plains and the pair of them drove around, inspecting. Bob thought a quarter of a million dollars would get him the property. The banker wasn't sure. Bob saw that a decision would take time and invited him home for a cup of tea. Gloria, sensing that no agreement had been reached, invited them to sit in the room overlooking the river, served morning tea, and left them alone. The banker admired the view, the room, the position of the house. New to the area, he asked how long the Enrights had been there. Bob told him that his grandfather had been the first Enright in the area, then his father, himself and Gloria, and, as the banker must have seen, their kids' things were all over the house, no matter how often they were told to put them away. 'Kids drive you crazy but where would we be without them?' The banker smiled. 'What would you do with that property if you got it?'

Bob said, 'I'd do two things, or rather I'd go in two directions. It's not the sort of thing that'd cross your desk these days, but my family's

been here long enough to remember – or talk about – they’re not the same thing you know!’ He smiled. ‘To talk about the clashes between squatters and selectors, back in the eighteen sixties and seventies. Well, I want to fight both sides’ battles and show you can win.’ The banker had no idea. ‘You see, at the moment, I’m running stock on the dry country and growing oranges on the sandhills. I want to expand. Close to the river, where I can irrigate, I want to do all the things the selectors should have done, but didn’t. Fruit. Veggies. Flowers.’ The banker was surprised. ‘Yes, if you can get’em to market quickly enough, you’ll do very nicely. And in the dry country ... well, there’s a few creeks out there to give the stock water ... you need to operate on a decent sort of scale. Like the squatters used to have.’

His banker couldn’t see it. ‘All that by yourself?’

Bob played his trump card. ‘No. I need a partner. He can do the small scale farming, I’ll run the station. We’ll employ as many men as we need, and we’ll move them around according to what has to be done.’ He looked at the river as if he knew he had its support.

Noel was confused when they got back. He’d seen the glories of Europe and he’d walked through cemeteries in northern France. So many men had been killed. He’d been with Lola to Villers-Bretonneux where Australians had been remembered. Surrounded by crosses, graves and flowers, they wept. What was the sense in this? If you believed in something, you fought for it. If you fought for it, you might have to die for it. And when you were dead, the sense had drained away, or become another thing, which the sign and symbol people called sacrifice. What was the use of that? The something for which the soldiers had offered their lives had become nothing again. They were dead. Nothing returned to nothing. The next generation built memorials: to what?

He went back to his shops and ran them even more busily than his mother had. He scorned them, but they were making money. The lasting thing their trip had given him was a wider sense of humanity. The Europeans were people too, connected in some way with his own people on their island continent, far from the world. Even the places they’d flown over, the Middle East, the Balkans, Thailand and India, were places now, rather than shapes on maps. The world was more

difficult than ever: it was humanity's challenge to grab a bit of the whole and turn it into a life, and he couldn't see a way to do it. 'I don't know what to do with myself,' he told Lola. 'You can stick around if you like, but I can't make promises to you if I don't know what I'm going to do with myself. I'm sure you can see that.'

Antinous Endless Knight was busy. Trivia, mostly, and the occasional issue worth thinking about. When queried about ambition, he told people, 'I've got a field-marshal's baton in my haversack. The trouble is, I haven't got any stripes on my sleeve just yet!'

Robyn Briggs was busy; houses were always being bought and sold. 'We never run out of things to do,' he said to his colleagues at work, 'but to succeed, we have to be like champion tennis players or golfers, pulling off something amazing. Something people didn't know was there. That means we have to be a few steps ahead of the game. The other fellow's trying just as hard as we are, you know. The trick is to be that one little step ahead!' He sensed when families were on the verge of breaking up, or when old people were going to die. He commissioned a series of photos of 'Stately Homes of Melbourne' and circulated them among the branches of his office – almost his by now as the originators grew older and ever so slightly dependent. He was a good father to the children he had with Louise, and he didn't let his eyes stray to other women, beyond the exercise of professional charm, at which he excelled. He never met Nicole Serisier again, though he wondered about her occasionally, the partner, the companion, he hadn't chosen to follow. Something about that untrodden path haunted him, but he wasn't an introspective man, and couldn't have told you what it meant.

Kim and Sophie had two children, selfish and a little spoilt. 'It's quite normal,' Ariadne told them. 'What matters is your behaviour in front of them. Children learn by copying. If you're tender and polite, if they can see that you love each other and you put the other in front of yourself, they'll do the same, after a time. It takes a while to get them there, but believe me I know. It's one of the hardest things to accept. Our children are following us.' The last of that group of once-schoolboys was Alan Downer, but the reader will remember that he was buried many pages back, and will play little further part in our story.

3

Antinous (Endless) Knight represented a bayside suburb. His office was in a shopping strip running down to the water. Endless got to the office as often as he could, but its daily operation was in the hands of a woman of fifty called Moira Langskaill. She, with the occasional assistance of her sister Eva, dealt with problems brought to their member of parliament by the public. Moira's desk was in an open working area, Endless had an office, and there was a meeting room of modest dimensions with a tiny kitchen attached. Endless and Moira called the place 'our empire', but this shared joke was an isolated feature of their working relationship because, although he addressed her as Moira, and had the highest regard for her, she addressed him as Mr Knight, because, she said, that was how his constituents should refer to him and she didn't want them picking up anything familiar from her. Mr Knight's role was both to serve and represent the public, and was deserving of respect, even if it was beyond many of the public to see him as they should. She would set the standard.

Antinous felt that she set him a standard too. Her knowledge was amazing. People complained about their gas bills, the treatment of their children at school, the police (always the police!), parking fines, elderly relatives who'd been discharged from hospital when there was nobody to look after them, teenagers who'd run away, noisy parties, manufacturing of drugs in nearby houses ... et cetera. They expected their MP to help. 'He's actually in parliament right now,' Moira Langskaill would tell them. 'Perhaps I can help you?'

She never pursued these complaints until she'd probed the stories people brought to her. She had a host of ways of testing what she was told. People convinced that injustice had been done to them had to convince the Scottish woman because she hated to be bested in argument by someone she felt was covering up a wrong. Sometimes, in the office when Moira was on the phone, Antinous listened with admiration to her dealing with the bodies responsible for the

grievances of his residents. Some of them folded quickly under her stern inquisition, causing him to smile: they'd had dealings with her before! When referring to a complainant she used their family name preceded by Mrs Mr or Miss. They were citizens with both dignity and rights. She confessed to him once that there was an element of self-protection in this: protection of the citizen too. 'Some of them are so stupid they don't deserve the rights they've got. I call them by a title to deceive the person on the other end that we're talking about someone with dignity when whatever dignity they once had has been lost for years. The messes that people can get themselves into!' When she spoke to him in that way, or looked at him with challenge and disgust in her eyes, he admired her but couldn't help but feel, though he never showed it, that she was teaching him his job.

She wasn't. Listening to Moira Langskaill, and he listened carefully when he was in the electorate office, made him aware that it was society that he wanted to improve, rather than the lives of potential or actual complainants. Half of them, in his view, weren't worthy of the rights they claimed as theirs, but since they complained and they had votes, he was out to win them. It was no more than an extension of his basic political principle – do them a favour, get them in your debt, claim nothing until you need it. What he sought was not so much power for itself – he was no autocrat – but leverage, because it could be used to get him into power. His deepest satisfaction came from attaining a position without having to beg; from being chosen; from being seen as the obvious, indeed the *only* choice. His idea of perfection was to be chosen without having to present himself as a candidate. What you did after that – what he *would* do when the time came – would hardly be more than amusing play, much as he hoped it would seem like a consummate premiership to everyone else.

Antinous Endless Knight was a perfectionist waiting for his time!

The state of Victoria went on its way regardless. Rivers ran down to the ocean, or to the Murray, the border to its north. Forests grew, and were felled for timber. Timber towns sat on the lowland, saws screaming and trucks roaring in. Business claimed the right to make money, and gave government the job of making jobs. When there was nothing to do, that was the fault of government. Antinous was cynical.

‘They’d chop down every tree in the forest and blame the government when the jobs ran out!’ Fundamentally he knew that he, and everyone who sat in parliament with him, were part of the system, and this couldn’t be escaped. How to make the financial system work? There was no answer to this problem, any more than there was a limit to human greed. Everyone wanted money, but the more you printed the less value it had. He remembered his grandmother telling him about Germany in the 1920s ... people with wheelbarrow loads of worthless notes! Early Australia provided a better example, more likely to be true: the publican who signed IOU notes on soft paper, knowing that the notes would be handed around as money until they were so crumpled and unreadable that they’d never be presented for payment! There must be ways to make a financial system work; how come these ideas had never taken hold?

The definition of money, he thought, was the underlying problem, and the reason why it couldn’t be solved was that money was no more than faith. Even gold, or diamonds, were valuable only because people believed they were valuable. Amusingly, they were known to financial markets as ‘safe havens’; you could put your money into these things when the values of the dollar, the rouble, the euro and the pound were plunging. Why? Because people believed in them, working people most of all. The Liberals, the conservatives, who sat opposite him in parliament claimed to be better money managers than Labor; it wasn’t really true but they did, perhaps, have more of the faith that propped up money than those who sat on his side, ready, they said, to form government at any time!

Antinous wanted to be in government, but hoped he and his party would be able to choose their time. Forming government when the other side had left a mess was what you didn’t want. The media would watch you, saying let’s see you do better. This would, at the start at least, be a no-win situation because you’d have to handle the mess, whatever it was, and that meant getting dirty. Worst of all was that you couldn’t control the political dialogue. Press, radio and television, operating full time (twenty-four/seven, it was called) needed you, used you, to provide the material they worked with. Even at your best they saw you as a fountain of copy, of noise, as a topic for

discussion. They would tear you to pieces and use your screams to attract more viewers. Politics was a function of parliament, and that, a gathering of representatives of the people, was society's summit and the place where decisions were made – that had been the rhetoric when Antinous had decided that being in parliament was his chosen road. But the institution had been changed. Dominance belonged to the media and the political process was hardly more than a game to be called. Politicians, becoming defensive, sounded nervous, and were accused of hiding something.

What? The pride they'd once enjoyed? The souls they'd formerly believed they'd owned? Their shame, that was it. They couldn't any more do the things they'd once set out to do, so they used the political game to get rewards of another sort – overseas postings, public recognition to be used in outside life: everyone in politics needed an honourable exit at some stage! Such idealism as lingered in A. Knight's life, and there was still a store of it, a spring dribbling if not exactly bubbling with pure intention, focused on the possibility of using power, if he could get hold of it, to outwit, to step above the plane where, the media said, politicians played their petty games. I will overcome this one day, Endless told himself, or I will retire having failed, as most polties fail. Thinking in this way gave him a certain freedom because nobody believed anyone in parliament could possibly have such a thought in their heads!

Antinous had a sense of humour. When told that the local branch of the postal workers union was celebrating fifty years on the job, he tossed off the thought that they might dress themselves as kangaroos, with a few done up as King George the fifth, in reference to the country's early stamps. To his surprise, they organised to do just that, and invited him to the function. 'Anything they can do!' he told Moira Langskaill, and rang one of his more eccentric old boy friends to borrow a Rolls Royce powered postal van of early vintage in his mate's collection. He was rolling smoothly through Albert Park in this machine when he had to brake suddenly to avoid hitting a child running onto the road. He stopped to pick up the little girl who'd fallen over in front of his anciently dignified machine, and the mother emerged from the bushes of a pocket-size park, calling out and crying.

The child told her mother, 'I saw daddy coming with a bottle of milk!' The distressed young woman, taking the girl in her arms, said, 'No you didn't. With his razor strap more likely!'

Antinous said, with effort yet weakly, 'What's going on?'

It was sad, and terrible, and apparently quite usual. *He* got drunk and inflicted pain – beatings – on his wife and child. *She* decided that it would be better if they weren't there. She tried to make it an adventure for the child – they'd sleep in the park – but the drunken husband had come looking for them, and almost stumbled upon them, but they'd hidden in the bushes and he went home, presumably to sleep. 'He'll have the most fearful hangover this morning and be twice as dangerous!' Antinous told her to hop in the van and he'd drive her and her daughter to his office, where Mrs Langskaill would organise a bed for them at the women's refuge. Mrs Langskaill rang the refuge but was told that all their beds were taken till next Thursday. The young mother began to cry again and even the child, drinking a glass of milk provided by Mrs Langskaill, could tell that the 'game' had become serious, and stared at her mother. 'What are we going to do, mummy? Why can't we go home?'

Antinous acted, and not in character, either. 'You are going home,' he said. 'To my place. Hop in the car. I'll take you straight there.' To Mrs Langskaill he said, 'Ring Jodie please Moira. Tell her what's happened and tell her we're on the way. Five minutes!' To the young mother he said, 'We've got plenty of room' and to the little girl, 'And milk too!' To himself he said, 'I hope!' and off they went.

Jodie's warmth and generosity were endless. She had toys in the house for the little girl, whose name turned out to be Tina, and treated her mother – Daniella – as an equal. Daniella wanted to talk about her husband, but Jodie wanted to know about herself. What she was interested in, what she liked, what she wanted Tina to be when she grew up. 'I want her out of harm's way, that's the main thing,' she told Jodie, who saw how dire the situation was.

'Why did you marry this man?'

Daniella's answer was as old as time, and as worn. 'I loved him. He seemed to love me. I never saw him drunk until after we got married. Things were good for a long time.'

‘And then?’

‘He became jealous when he saw how much I loved Tina. He’d fly into rages about nothing.’

‘Except?’

‘Except they weren’t nothing. It was always him being jealous of his daughter.’

Jodie puckered her lips. ‘Same old story.’

‘That’s what everyone says. But I can’t do anything about it. I try, but it never works. He’s not grown up enough to be a father, but a father he is. It ought to make him grow up but it makes him childish.’ Her eyes glistened with tears. ‘What’m I going to do?’

Jodie sent Antinous back to his office. Moira Langskail was as respectful as ever, but he could feel something stern in his assistant. ‘We’ll need to get her husband in here, and frighten him,’ she said. Antinous felt his way. ‘How exactly do you think we should do that?’

‘We’ll find out who he works for,’ she said. ‘We won’t contact them - not yet – but we’ll hold it over him that we will if he doesn’t change his ways.’

‘One last chance? Is that the idea?’

Her face assumed a bitter smile. ‘We’re warning him.’

Over the following days, the scheme became clearer. The husband would be summoned to the office. Jodie would be there, as well as Moira. Wife and daughter would be sitting in Antinous’ car, out the back. The women would do the talking, while the parliamentarian sat listening. He would nod when referred to by Jodie or Moira. ‘It’s not your role to talk to him,’ Jodie told her husband. ‘You’re there as a threat. You’re listening to what he says to us, and if we’re not happy with the way he shows himself, you’re there to take action. We’re not saying what action. It’s better to keep it vague and let him imagine the worst. That might induce him to behave.’

And so it worked out. Daniella’s husband, a postal worker called Con, was both frightened and ashamed. It was clear when he arrived that he had made up his mind to bluff his way through the situation, but the combination of the two women, and the silent presence of the MP, overcame him. He broke down and wept. He was ashamed, and relieved when Moira went out to bring Daniella and Tina into the

office for a reconciliation. The child hugged him. Daniella, though composed, was deeply relieved. 'We're starting again!' said Con, and the others present accepted this as the new beginning he claimed it would be. Moira, in farewelling the family, made sure that Daniella's husband could see her give his wife a card with the MP's office number on it. 'Call us if ever you need us,' Moira said, prompting a flush of fellow feeling in Antinous. 'Give Con a card too. I hope he'll ring us and tell us things are going well.' Moira did so, in a silence that showed the idea was her employer's, not hers, but Jodie was pleased with her husband. Sentimental as it might have been for him to think so, he believed the man had been changed, and that, after all, was one of the markers – that others believed you were different. Jodie moved beside her husband and put her arm around him, and Con, and Daniella, saw that there were couples who didn't need to fight.

Sophie Villeneuve – Sophie Berg – had her first child. Kim was with her as she delivered. They already knew it was a boy, they had his name ready, and called him as he entered the world: 'Gabriel!' This had been Sophie's decision. The name had run in her family for generations. Kim was pleased with her choice. As was his mother. Ariadne knew the child would be an angel. Sophie had no need to explain. Mother and father held the child, Sophie exhausted, but jubilant. Kim rang his mother and she came in as soon as she dared. 'You must rest,' she told Sophie. 'It's the last rest you're going to get for twenty years!' They laughed, knowing it was true. They were the sort of family that hospitals like because they did everything right and listened to everything they were told. With the baby a new wave of love entered the world. Gabriel! 'How many Gabriels have there been before this one?' Sophie announced. 'But this one is special!'

All was joy. When the baby woke in the middle of the night, Kim and Sophie laughed. They laughed at themselves, stumbling around with Gabriel when he didn't want to sleep and they did. Ariadne wanted them to visit her as often as possible, something they had also to make light of, because they were trying to maintain some sort of routine in their home. 'Your mother makes so much fuss of Gabriel,' Sophie

would say, 'it's like there's another child to look after.' She almost said 'One too many' but repressed the thought. She knew Kim was happy to see his mother so exalted. Sophie started out wanting to feed Gabriel in quiet and restful places, but soon grew used to putting him to her breast as they drove to Sorrento from the city. Ariadne always had beautiful meals ready. She wanted to know everything the child had done since she saw him last. There were many jokes about this. Kim teased his mother by telling her Gabriel was starting school, had finished it, had enrolled for university, was about to start his first job ... all while he was lying in his cradle, or the carry-basket they used to transport him. It was remarkable how easily they accepted that there was someone more important than themselves in the house, in their lives.

This was when Sophie began to notice something peculiar, as she put it, about Kim's mother. Ariadne wanted to sleep in the same room as the child. When the new parents visited her in Sorrento, they found that their room was across the passage from Gabriel's room, and that was next to Ariadne's room. If he woke in the night and cried, Ariadne got to him first. Sophie would say, 'I'll feed him now grandma,' but Ariadne wouldn't go back to bed until Kim took her by the hand and led her there, soothing her with small talk as if she was the baby, or perhaps its twin. Even in the daytime, Ariadne would pick up the waking child and walk about, holding him, trying to soothe him to sleep when he plainly wanted to be fed. Back home in Melbourne, the parents discussed this. 'She thinks she's me,' Sophie complained. And Kim didn't know how to deal with this development in his mother. Was she reverting to the time, years before, when he had been her child? He felt, he knew, she was. What to do about it? She'd always made, and lived in, realities of her own: it was what had made her so marvellous, and now it was impossible. Kim, knowing his mother better than Sophie did, feared how it would end. The old lady, his mother, Ariadne, would break. Might lose her mind. Might ...

Anything, really.

They stayed away from Sorrento one weekend, inventing some story about why they had to stay at home. Home? The word stirred Ariadne in mysterious ways. She was home, Gabriel couldn't develop

in the smoke and noise of their city. They should bring him down at once, and she, his mother as she called herself, would walk him by the sea, and quieten him as nobody else could. She knew he wasn't sleeping properly 'up there', where they had him, he needed to be in her arms, otherwise they would have to take him back to the hospital for advice on how to look after him properly, and if they did that they'd be in danger of having the child taken from them and made a ward of the state.

When Kim reported this conversation to Gabriel's mother, Sophie began to cry. It had all begun so well, and now it was out of hand. 'I can't focus on my son,' she raged. 'The old woman's trying to take him away from me!' It was true. Kim was desperate. Sophie wanted to know what he was going to do, and he didn't know. She said she wouldn't go to Portsea again. He could see his mother if he wanted to, but she wouldn't, and – this was said so softly that he knew it was a shout – Gabriel was staying with her. How else could he be fed?

Kim was distracted at work, wandering among the fabrics, forgetting who he'd ordered them for. The staff saw this and made him cups of tea, giving someone the job of looking after him while the rest of them did their work. Kim saw what they were doing for him, was appreciative, but felt helpless. This was no way to run a business. He'd have to do his orders soon for the following season, and he couldn't concentrate, hardly knew what he was doing. Gabriel waking in the night and crying was running him ragged, and he knew that Sophie, defiant as she was, was on the verge of losing control.

There was only one thing to do. He rang his mother. She wanted to know where the child was. He told her nothing, but said, 'I'll see you Friday evening.' She said, 'Bring plenty of milk,' but he told her, 'No. We're drinking our tea black this weekend,' and hung up. On Thursday he said to Sophie, 'I'm going down there to put a bit of sense into her. You and Gabriel will be at home, here, so is there anything you'll need? I'll get it for you today, before I go. I won't be back till Sunday night.' She only wanted a couple of things, and he got them for her. After work on Friday he called in at home before heading south. 'I'll eat down there at mother's. Don't ask me what I'm going to

do because I don't know, except that I've got to sort this out. Do you think you'll be okay, on your own with our little man?'

Puzzled, and sullen, because confused and mystified, Sophie said, 'I should be all right. When will I see you next? Sunday night?' Kim nodded, and left.

Ariadne wanted to know where Gabriel and Sophie were.

'At home.'

'Why aren't they with you?'

'I'll tell you a little later.'

They dined in close to silence. He had a glass of wine; she didn't. She cleared away the dishes, he washed them. She made sure that he knew there was pain in her silence. He ignored it. He found the chess set and put it on the table. She was terrible at chess but enjoyed making a scramble out of a game. This evening, however, she refused to play. He pulled out a pack of cards. She shook her head. The house was filled with an oppressive silence, something unusual, because when she was on her own she sang. The house was used to lullabies, arias, scraps of songs she picked up from the radio, and quaint old ballads she sang with sentiment. Not this night. Kim played patience, responding to anything she said except her questions about the mother and child. The word Gabriel struck him dumb. She got up when the tension reached a certain point, said 'I will walk on the beach for a while', and left.

He was ready. The moment he heard the door close he went to the bureau where the letters she wrote to her husband were kept, pulled them out and put them in the centre of the table. He'd never read them, never opened one. He didn't open them now. Perhaps an hour later, she returned, and saw at once what he'd done. He was still sitting where she'd left him, the cards in front of him, the chess set beside him, ignored. He looked as pleasantly as he could at his mother as if there was nothing between them, but there were, of course, the letters.

Nobody had ever got them out except Ariadne herself, and that was rare enough. Normally she added another letter or two every year, but didn't touch those already there. But her son had touched them all, put them on the table, violated her secret shrine! She sat,

guiding her body into its chair as if it were a stone of considerable weight. 'These are mine,' she said, 'and mine alone.'

He nodded.

'They are not to be opened.'

He bowed his head, accepting.

'They are the most precious things I have.' She added, 'Memories. You understand?'

Again a nod.

'They belong where I put them. In the desk. Around there.'

He said nothing, and began to spread the cards for another game.

She was growing angry, but also uncertain: 'They are mine!'

He reached out and pushed the pile of letters in her direction with the tips of the fingers of his left hand.

She reached out and grabbed a few of the letters, pulling them towards her, while others remained in the middle, between them. She raged at him, 'Why are they here where you've put them, on the table?' He looked interrogatively at her, saying nothing.

'Why!'

With his right hand, this time, he waved at the letters, inviting her to take them to herself. He didn't want the letters. They were hers, not his.

'Why?'

She reached out to clutch the remaining letters, gathered most of them but left a couple behind. She reached again to pick them up but he was too quick. He slapped his right hand on the last two letters, pressing them hard against the table. She pulled at his hand but couldn't move it; he was getting hold of the last of what was hers. She pushed her other hand into the middle of the table, trying to push or pull his hand away. He looked her full in the eyes, whispered 'Gabriel!' and withdrew his hand.

The last letters were hers. There was no obstacle. She drew them to her. He said it again. 'Gabriel.' There was jealousy in his voice; anger; a willingness to disown her forever. He was her son. Sophie was his wife. She understood. Watching her, Kim Berg knew that his mother had received his message. She hadn't accepted it yet, she hadn't understood, but the shaft had gone home. Had struck the

middle of her selfish mind, and killed something in there that had caused his rage, jealousy, unwillingness to share his love. He had demanded what he wanted and made her recognise his claim. Things would never be the same between them again, but that had been the case since the moment Gabriel had entered the world. He had transferred what he felt for his mother to his partner and their child, and there was an element in that possession which they wouldn't, couldn't, share, even with Ariadne Berg, widow of the man to whom she wrote letters expressing a love which had never died but had also lost its mortal existence when his body had been cremated and his ashes thrown to the winds that pushed the turbulent ocean against the rocky shore.

Ariadne said sourly, bitterly, 'You'll be on your way home now, I suppose.'

Kim Berg said, 'Not till morning, mother. I'll leave after breakfast. You may come with me if you wish.' His mother looked disconcerted. 'Don't tell me now. See how you feel in the morning. For now, go to bed mother. I'm going to bed now. We both need a good night's sleep.'

Sophie was surprised when Kim arrived home earlier than he'd said. 'What happened?'

'She got the message. It'll take her a while to absorb it. I think it's a bit like medicine. It tastes nasty, you swallow it, the effects come a bit later.'

A strange way to talk about one's mother. 'What was the medicine?'

He told her about the letters. 'It was the only way I could get at her. Get through to her. Through something precious which she doesn't share with anybody.'

Sophie saw the danger in what he'd done. 'She's going to be ...' she searched for a word '... unhinged.'

'What else could I do?'

She conceded his point. 'Nothing. But everything we do has effects. Something will happen.'

'We'll wait and see.'

He was hard, but she moved through the day expecting a phone call. Something would happen.

It came as the sun got low on the horizon. It was Barbara Bishop, Ariadne's friend. She had Sergeant Cameron of the Victoria Police with her and he had Ariadne Berg with him. She'd been found wandering on the beach in a confused state. Someone had noticed her in the morning, and again during the afternoon. She was alone, and whoever it was that had rung the police said she felt there was something wrong. They went to investigate and found her in the tea-tree. They'd asked her name but she hadn't answered. So they'd asked her to tell them her friends' names and she'd given them Barbara's name. Once they'd got her to Barbara's she'd brightened a little, and seemed less confused. All the same, the sergeant and Barbara agreed, she shouldn't be left on her own. Hence their call.

Kim told the policeman he'd be there in an hour and a half. Mother would be all right at Barbara's, so long as she knew he was coming. He thanked the sergeant for what they'd done. He hung up. He looked at Sophie.

'It's not good, but it could have been a lot worse.'

Sophie said, 'You're going to get her?'

'Yes.'

'Bringing her here?'

That was the question that mattered. 'She'll be different, I promise you. We're over the hill. Whether or not she'll recover from this, we've still to find out.'

Ariadne, when she arrived, seemed relieved to be in a place she knew. She was only mildly interested in Gabriel, was pleasant to Sophie, treated Kim as her jailer. Which room was hers? She seemed unclear. Sophie, changing Gabriel, asked for her help. She half-folded a nappy, put it down, and said, 'You're better at it than I ever was.' Kim, making conversation, wondered what Gabriel's first memory would be. 'My first memory, mother,' he said, 'was of you dropping an egg. You were cooking something, and it fell on the floor. You swore, mother dear, yes, you swore. I think it was the first time I heard you say bloody, and it stuck in my mind.'

Ariadne smiled limply, saying only, 'I don't remember that.' The feelings of her day had exhausted her. 'You must excuse me,' she told them, 'I'm tired.' She added inconsequentially, as if they didn't know,

‘I had a day at the beach.’ Sophie invited her to hold Gabriel, and give him a hug. She held the boy as if he was a blanket, or perhaps a pillow. Vague. Hardly there. Shortly after, she took herself off to the room that was hers, got into her nighty, reappeared to look at them, said nothing, then withdrew. Sophie looked at Kim. ‘We have a problem on our hands.’

The old lady’s son replied, ‘She’ll recover. She’s tougher than you think. And smart. Somewhere inside, she knows what’s going on and she’s playing it for all it’s worth. There’s only one thing to do and that’s to keep the pressure up. No weakening on our part. Believe me. I know it sounds hard, and mean, but she wanted to claim our son for herself. We’ve stopped her doing that. Now we’ve got to get her back to earth ... as a grandma this time, not as a child-robber!’

He said it bitterly. Sophie was amazed. ‘Kim!’

‘Yes?’

‘That’s dreadful!’

‘What she was doing was dreadful.’

Sophie was a woman too, and her loyalty flowed that way. ‘It was natural, in its way. It wasn’t meant to be against us ...’

‘Yes it was! That’s the point that gets to me. Being robbed by ...’ He pointed at her room.

Sophie yielded the point. ‘How do we get her back to being normal again?’

Kim: ‘She’s never been normal. That’s what was so wonderful about her. She’s been as mad as a hatter half the time, and it’s been wonderful to watch. And,’ he confessed, ‘to live with.’

Sophie: ‘What was your father like with her?’

‘I can’t really remember. I think he let her go her own way. He might have laughed at her when she was really outrageous.’

‘Did that work, do you think? Laughing at her?’

‘From him, it probably did. From anyone else, laughing’s a big no-no.’

‘She resents it?’

‘With a passion!’

She turned her attention to Gabriel. The problem of his mother was Kim’s.

Ariadne stayed until the following weekend. She was attentive, respectful, played with Gabriel and talked to him dutifully. Once or twice she picked him up and walked around the house. She was reasonably lucid – by her standards - when talking to Sophie, and quite charming when Sophie’s mother called, during the week. On the Friday evening, when they’d had dinner and washed up, she told her son that she was missing the beach, the waves, the seagulls. ‘And they’re missing me. It’s time I was home.’ Kim said he would drive her down the next day, and did. He wanted to go shopping with her but she said she had an arrangement with Barbara, so that would be no problem. It was her dismissal. He left.

The following Monday he rang from work, and she assured him that all was well. She was vague and he knew that she hadn’t found any peace after what had happened. What to do? He could only wait.

At work, he appeared to have recovered his composure, but was still brooding. He’d done what he had to do. He couldn’t have let his mother take over the child. He wasn’t sure of Sophie either. She was absorbed in Gabriel and didn’t want to think about the protection her husband had given her. Them. People had warned him that women saw their husbands differently once they’d had a child. Was this what he was dealing with, or his mother’s intrusion, or both? Something else he didn’t know about? He wasn’t sure. Then he was told that there were two young art students at reception who wanted to show him their designs. He was reluctant, but went. Their voices told him they were well educated, their hair a different story. Their designs were wild, sometimes quite funny, spanned a whole range of approaches, and were obviously the product of considerable excitement. He couldn’t help liking what he saw but the young artists had started out with no idea of how fabrics were printed, let alone designed. ‘Look, the best thing I could do for you,’ he said, ‘would be if we were in France and I could send you to the mill where they make the fabrics we sell here.’ The young people looked hopeful. ‘Unfortunately,’ Kim said, meaning to dash their silly hopes, ‘I can’t afford to do that. But if you visited the sorts of places where we get our materials ...’ he waved a hand at the showroom behind him ‘... you’d find that the designers have an intimate knowledge of the machines that print the fabrics.’

He sensed that they couldn't see his point. 'That is ... I mean ... they derive their ideas, not from their heads, but from the machines that produce the fabrics. The machines are set differently for different types and thicknesses of thread. I'd better show you what I mean.' He led them to a bench strewn with samples of a range of cloths, some of them very expensive. 'Compare these with these.' The young people fingered some samples, not knowing what they were supposed to feel. 'You see? One fabric feels quite different from another, because it's made on a different machine. You couldn't print *this* one on the same machine that made *this* one. Clear enough? So when you go to design a new fabric ...'

He was warming to his task by now.

'... you ask yourself what machine you are planning to use, and that depends, of course, on what quality and thickness of fabric you're planning to use. You start with the fabric, and the machine, and then you ask yourself what you can do with them.' They looked disappointed. 'You see,' Kim went on, 'this is not an artist in a garret sort of industry. The artist only gets his chance ...' He paused. 'The machine comes first. It produces the fabric, and the designer has to work with the machine, which means he has to understand it thoroughly before he can even start to have any ideas.' The young artists had heard enough by now. He led them back to their folders, lying open at reception. 'So you see,' Kim said, 'you've got some very stimulating ideas here, but they ...'

The young people closed their folders and left. Kim felt a little sorry for them, but when he told Sophie about them that night, she studied him critically.

'Is that all you could do for them?'

He was surprised. 'They came in out of the blue. Nobody recommended them to me. I couldn't do anything with what they showed me. They'd just been having a bit of fun.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing at all. But it's not how you design first class fabrics. Everything we sell has to be usable. Chairs, armchairs, tablecloths, bedding, curtains, and of course clothes. Clothes first of all ...'

He stopped because sadness had entered her eyes. 'Sophie?'

‘Why does the world have to be so hard?’

He wanted to feel hurt, but sensed it wasn’t allowed. ‘I wasn’t being hard on them. Only sensible. Telling them. They were looking at some samples that came from ... Amiens, I think it was. I couldn’t send them there to have a look, telling them was all I could do.’

Sophie was still sad. ‘They wanted more, they needed more.’ He looked at her. What could he do for these people? They were very young, he didn’t know anything about them ... She said, and it surprised him, ‘There is nothing wrong with having fun. It is the beginning of everything good.’

He felt wounded. ‘So?’

She said sadly, ‘We are on the other side of the world. If we were near Amiens, you could have rung the manufacturer and sent them to him. They could have had a tour of the factory, and learned what they needed to know. Also, if they did a good design as a result, they would have someone to show it to. Someone who knew them. If they did a good design, it would have a chance.’ She added, ‘*They* would have a chance.’ A terrible sadness came over her. She blurted out, ‘I am on the wrong side of the world. My mother and father, they are the only home I possess. Your mother talks about waves and seagulls. They are foreign to me.’ She slumped; sat; gave herself to misery and tears. Kim rushed to her, but couldn’t make himself hold her, as he felt he should. She was ringed by her misery. He tried to wipe her eyes with his large, man’s hanky, but she pushed it away. He stood, went into the bedroom and picked up Gabriel from his cot. He carried the baby to its mother and put him in her arms. She looked at the boy’s father in confusion. Then she looked down. Gabriel was still asleep. She didn’t know what to do. She raised her eyes, intending to see why Kim had done this stupid thing. Their son was sleeping ...

Kim, no singer, came out with some words in no particular key, and a clumsy curve of notes: ‘*Que vienne l’été!*’ Then he stared at her and she wasn’t sure if he was trying to frighten her, or something else she couldn’t understand, until the words he wanted came back to her, and she sang: ‘*Que viennent encore*

L’automne et l’hiver! Et chaque saison

Me sera charmante, Ô Toi que décore

Cette fantaisie et cette raison!

She was standing now, and he was sitting. They looked into each other's eyes and he liked what he saw. A first stirring of confidence in a week reached his troubled soul, and he said, 'Thank heavens for that. It might be all madness but I think we're getting somewhere.' Happiness, or a crazed state in some way resembling it, returned to Sophie. Clutching her boy she said to Kim, in a loud gasp – 'My son!' Then she felt an urge to tell Kim about the time his mother – the Ariadne who was troubling them – had shown her the remnants of the bird's nest by the ocean which had shown her the rightness of what she was going to do – the *need* to do what the nest had told her – but decided she would tell him in the morning. Or – she was postponing now – she'd show it to him next time they visited Ariadne near the beach, near the sand, the sky, the birds that lived there, the waves beating endlessly on the shore. She'd tell him then, show him then, and then he'd understand!

Feeling that he'd dealt with this second crisis about as well as he could have, Kim said, 'I'm buggered darling. Let's go to bed. Put him down too, unless you think he wants a feed?' The young mother, the first-time mother said, 'It's not time for him to feed. Look, he's still asleep. We should get some sleep too before he wakes up. Don't you think?'

He wasn't expecting the question. 'Yes I do. Sleep, that's what we need. It's in pretty short supply these days!' There was something like happiness back in his voice. Sophie put the baby down, kissed him tenderly, then got into bed with Kim. Five minutes later, they were asleep.

There is a view that one's thirties are a plateau, boring for some, after the drama of getting started, satisfying for others, because years of evenness allow concentration on the goals one has set. These are contrasts, of course, alternatives not suitable for judging every life. Sandy Clarkson, in his early thirties, became dissatisfied with what he'd made of himself. Being quick-witted, and able to adapt to whatever people wanted of him, brought him easy success, but he found himself envying simpler, more easily settled types, male or female. He was

also aware that he showed his parents, when he visited them, or vice versa, very little of the man who ran an advertising agency. They would think less of him if he did, because they'd see that he'd ditched the notion of service which they'd tried to impose on him. Rupert Clarkson was in no doubt that a man's first duty to himself was to dress well, and then live up to the standard of his presentation. A good suit and a good man inside it was his remedy for most social ailments, and his wife Pat's recipe for life was similar; one served humanity by looking after those who weren't very good at looking after themselves. Leading a life of dignity, she allowed those she looked after to retain their dignity because she was too wise, and too good, to take control. A little discreet management was as far as Pat allowed herself to go. She admired her husband and he trusted her in everything she did. Sandy's life in advertising made mockery of the things his parents stood for, but he never allowed himself to criticise, or disown, their values because, he sensed, they made his parents better people than he'd become.

He hadn't expected to reach this point. He'd been proud of his father when he'd first been taken to the famous school, neatly dressed in navy blue, like hundreds of others boys that morning. As the weeks had gone on, however, he'd become aware that many boys had fathers of greater standing than a menswear shop; Rupert Clarkson had begun to fall in the eyes of his son. Sandy's first three friends at school had fathers who were a general in the army, a director of BHP, and the city's leading heart surgeon. As the weeks passed, Sandy was taken to meet these men, each of whom welcomed him warmly, asked about his parents, wanted to know what he was going to do with his life, then moved away so that their sons could show the visitor the (large) house where they lived. The mothers of these boys too had a sense of social polish that Pat Clarkson didn't possess; one of them talked about her year at a Swiss finishing school, something Sandy had never heard of. 'Finishing?' he asked: 'that sounds a bit like dying!'

The mother was very amused, and recounted the lessons she'd learned in deportment, in correct responses to titles, in the usage of expressions from other languages, even ones you couldn't speak yourself; flowers, making a home look beautiful; furniture, fabrics,

and paintings. Setting tables, hosting dinners. Seating people at table. Allocating rooms to couples and to single people who may or may not have designs upon each other, a matter of some delicacy, she intimated to her son's schoolboy friend, who could only think to say, 'Gosh, that sounds exciting!'

There was also the matter of people's interests; you should have interests of your own but other people's were more important to the good hostess, who had to have the skill of getting people talking, and knowing whose conversation would or wouldn't interest other people. This was called *matching*, an important social skill. The young Sandy listened, absorbing the idea that some people, at least, were concerned with making things go smoothly. He supposed his parents felt these same concerns but had never thought of turning them into an art. Would he ever acquire such polish? He doubted it.

He had, he supposed, thrown away his chance of being a virtuous force in society when he joined the armies of control, shaping the wishes and ambitions of people so that they bought what they were supposed to buy. His father had struggled through the great depression and the war that followed, clinging hard to his money and saying things like 'Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves.' Now his parents were ageing, unable to prevent it showing, much as they tried to understand the young. Times were different and there was no escaping that. Sandy knew they studied him to see what had become of themselves in that penumbral area where one life drew to its close while the replacement started to take over. Was it what they wanted?

He was aware of how much he was hiding from his parents, making sure they didn't know, yet he knew also that they picked up a lot in his silences, and most of all from his occupation, which concerned itself with self as a form of purchased presentation. Whole industries were based on people disbursing their dollars wherever the advertising people intended. And directed! Advertising used great subtlety to achieve the crudest ends. Father's suits and mother's charity felt lost to him, yet there was a yearning he felt to be what they had tried to make him. Again and again he remembered that incident of his boyhood when, walking through the streets of Brisbane with some

lads from his team, he'd been accosted by a drunk who claimed that he too had once worn the famous school's blazer with its triple-colour badges denoting the finest of the fine!

That was youth: he was a man. The wretched, smelly drunk wouldn't leave his mind. He'd got as far as Brisbane in the long coastal attrition that had led to Cairns and Cooktown in the days when the south was good and the tropical was decadent. Things were different now, but old problems found new ways of presenting themselves, and he felt challenged by his own success. He had four people on the payroll by now, younger than he was, and smarter, because more conversant with their age – their own age, and the times. Yet it was Sandy's conscience that was being flouted, and something about it was making him feel that he should change course, and revert to something that his parents could admire. What might that be? He didn't have an answer to that, but he knew he wanted to find one. He couldn't make a move without knowing where it led. Then two things happened at much the same time which caused him to make up his mind. He had to go to Sydney to organise a new client, which left Andrea on her own for a time, not that that was anything new. His mother Pat had rung him in Sydney, wanting to share her concern for his father who'd been sent by his local GP to a heart specialist in response to some 'murmurs' in his system. The specialist had kept him under observation for a number of hours, and then prescribed medication, which Rupert was taking, and so far everything seemed to have been righted, but the specialist had given Rupert a number of things to watch out for and told him to contact him immediately if any of these symptoms appeared. His concerns about his father were still in the front of his mind when he got home to an empty house with just enough signs of another person's presence to suggest to his already stimulated imagination that Andrea had had company while he was away. She hugged him so sincerely when she got home a little later that he felt sure that he'd been replaced while he'd been away. Who by? He didn't give a stuff because it was Andrea that he was angry with, not any opportunistic male she might have had dealings with. There were enough of these in his business circles. The state of the house reminded him of a Sydney colleague who operated under the name of Moriartey Friedmann who told him one day that

sexual predators were part of the territory: 'In outback New South Wales, there are wild boars in the grassland. They're very dangerous because you don't see them until they come out in the open. That's when, my boy, you need a good gun that you enjoy using!' In his case, he could see, the wild boar had been and gone, but it was time to move Andrea on; she wouldn't lack company for long.

That night, when they'd eaten dinner, he put it to her. 'If you moved on from here, where would you go?'

The question was his way of giving a direction, that she knew. 'Why would I want to move on? It's good, living here.'

He repeated the key word which obscured what he was saying. '*If*'

'When you say *if*, it means something's possible, doesn't it?'

'It does, I suppose.'

'So why are you saying *if* I move on from here when that's not my plan?'

He had her where he wanted. 'It could be my plan though.'

She shrieked at him. 'Bastard!' Then a thought came to her. 'You saved my life!'

She meant the tree just below the balcony where she'd fallen, months ago. He looked at her sternly. 'I'm not saying it hasn't been good at times, but times have a way of ending.'

'Such as?'

'Such as when one person comes home and knows – *knows* – that someone else has been here!'

So he knew; but she still said, 'There's been nobody here while you've been away!'

And so it went on, truths about each other, lies about other involvements. He got a name from her, someone she could move in on, then he threatened to call a taxi, but she said Wendy would come and pick her up. 'Ring her then, and tell her you've got twenty minutes to pack. No!' He changed his mind. 'Just get out. Come back in a couple of days and get your stuff. We might be civil to each other then. Right now I just want to see your back!'

Andrea gave as good as she got, but she rang the unknown Wendy, and a few minutes later a car tooted in the darkness outside. Sandy went into the room he used as an office, he heard the door slam and then

the engine of a car moving away at speed. ‘Good riddance!’ he called into the night, but something in him darkened, he turned out the light and went to the balcony to stare into the night. What would it bring him next? It dawned on him after a minute that he was looking at the tree from which he’d rescued Andrea, months before, to bring her into his life. He’d never thought of her as a permanent partner, but for all that he’d found commonalty with her. They’d shared a fraction of their lives with each other, they’d had their moments and now there were no more. Why did it have to end in yelling? He knew the answer to this. People yelled at each other when they were yelling at themselves. In ordering Andrea out of the house he was ordering himself to change his life, to end his old existence and start something ...

... older still. That was what he was going to do. He thought of his father’s murmuring heart. He might live for years, or ...

All lives end. Some people knew when their time had come, most didn’t, or were too stupid to realise. He supposed he had decades to come, but the ideal was to live so closely in touch with the best of yourself that you were ready to go at any time you happened to be called. He looked into the night. People were dying in hospitals, others were being killed in cars. The whole catastrophe. It occurred to him that he’d be moving too, as well as Andrea. You couldn’t start a new life in an old home where you’d lived with the partner who’d become part of your past. You too had to move on, find something, somewhere new. He planned it. It only took a minute. He’d sell the business he’d created, he’d offer the buyer the lease of the place he was leaving. Present staff would transfer with the business, their positions to be reviewed in three months time. That gave both sides an out if they wanted it. *If!* The word was omni-present tonight. *If!* He’d pack, he’d be ready to leave when Andrea came back for the last of her stuff. He’d leave when she did, and take his things around to his parents’ place for a few weeks, while he thought about what came next. He wasn’t sorry about splitting up with Andrea. It would give him the fresh start he had a feeling was not far away.

The absence of Andrea seemed to clear his mind. He didn’t leave when she got her things. The phone rang a little later that day and he

found himself accepting two new jobs. This made him laugh: fortune was on his side! For all that, he felt troubled, and rang his mother. How was dad? She told him his father was taking his medicine, would be seeing his specialist at the end of next week, but had been talking about taking a holiday, or perhaps reducing his commitment to work. Pat told her son she'd been encouraging this idea; everyone had to steady down a little as they grew older.

Sandy recognised the concern inside the clichés; his mother was trying to bring his father back into the home, to limit him, restrict him, save his life. Comedians were making fun of what his mother was doing, and he was on her side. The smart-arses who laughed at parents didn't have parents of their own, or they chose not to know what was happening to them. Sandy fixed a time for his next visit, and prepared himself by wondering what he'd be like as a tailor – he felt ashamed of his lack of his father's skills – or at least as a retailer, something his dad did with ease.

When he arrived, a little before lunch on Sunday, his mother was talking to a young woman in the hallway. She was introduced to Sandy as Marion McArdle, and she was an organiser and fundraiser for the Red Cross. Sandy was intrigued; she seemed too quick-witted, too lively of mind, to be a worker for good causes. They'd always struck him as rather frumpy and sombre-minded people, and here was one with real character. But Pat waved him through to Rupert, sitting in the lounge with his Sunday paper. 'Gooday dad,' Sandy said, and then, pointing at the paper, 'You won't find much in that, you know.' The older man grinned and said, 'Advertisements. And political gossip. When they've got nothing to talk about, they talk about politics. Makes you wonder how we managed before we had television. I seem to remember most people got on all right. We did our work, looked after our family, didn't worry much about what was happening up top. Sit down son, let's talk about something else, or next thing I'll be talking about the good old days!'

So Rupert was getting old. Sandy asked him about the business, and how much he'd like to be involved, and how much he wanted a rest. Did he want to travel? Overseas, or driving around Australia?

Rupert said, 'I thought of taking on a partner, but I'd have to work as much as he did. He might set a pace that was too fast.'

'What about a manager then? You'd tell him what to do, leave him to do the work, and you could knock off whenever it suited you?'

This didn't satisfy Rupert. 'I'd get anxious. I'd get in his way. I know myself. I wouldn't let him do things in his own way. I'd be a bloody old nuisance.'

It was time for Sandy to tell his father his plan. Rupert was amazed. His son! That would solve all his problems at once. Then his doubts started to surface. Sandy would want to marry soon and have children. The shop wouldn't support two households. Rupert had always seen himself as setting a standard for his son; he couldn't stand by and let his son do all the work. They'd argue over what to stock. He, Rupert, would want to stock the things he'd stocked for years and Sandy would want to stock all the young people's clothing that was around. Nobody dressed properly any more! And so on.

They had lunch. The table was set for four, but Pat cleared away one setting. 'Marion was going to join us but she rang me. She had to look after some people from Switzerland who're visiting Australia, I'm not sure why. I thought you'd enjoy getting to know her,' she told her son, 'but this other thing cropped up. There was no way of getting out of it, she had to look after the visitors.' Beaming at her son, she said, 'Maybe next time. She's looking forward to meeting you.' Rupert was amused. 'Sounds dangerous, son.' To his wife he said, 'Don't frighten him away, darling. She's a very marriageable item, that Marion!'

All Sandy could do was allow a grin to appear on his face. His parents had almost given up on him marrying; now they were raising new hopes. Oh well. At least he liked the look of this Marion, about whom he knew next to nothing. They could meet secretly, without telling mum and dad, that might be the idea. But Sandy was up against something stronger than the times, which were lax; his mother could see what should happen, and Marion could play the sexual game as well as anybody. Six months later, they were married, in an obliging church – marry anybody, so long as they pay – followed by a quiet but highly organised reception, two families meeting, eating, and being photographed together. Marion hadn't even allowed Sandy to propose

until he'd taken over his father's shop, and added to it another three in suburbs where a menswear could sell to three generations from the same outlet: places that were still connected. Sandy the ex-advertising man had to use all his skills in determining whether an area fitted his sales plan or not. He strolled up and down shopping strips, looking at what sold and what didn't. He asked questions, looked at leases. This process was still underway when the ceremony was held, but by then his commitment was clear. Rupert Clarkson's business was being brought into a new age. Marion knew a man who was going to succeed, even if it had taken him time to find himself. He was, now and at last, himself, and that, she knew, meant that he was hers.

Robyn Briggs had used a combination of scholarship and snobbery to assist in the building of a successful agency. He'd gone to the city's two leading architectural faculties and asked them to combine in developing both a list of land subdivisions in the city's history, and then a catalogue of buildings, both landmarks and private homes, designed by leading architectural practices. Both were ongoing projects, and he'd offered to fund them quite generously, so long as the universities worked together, and their findings were available to him for business use. Buyers of the city's better properties liked to be told about their origins, additions, or things that they'd replaced. Robyn felt that the money he was putting into the libraries was money well spent because he was able to say things like, 'This is one of Beverley and Ussher's best Malvern houses. There aren't a lot, and those that are still standing don't come on the market very often.' It helped him immeasurably to know what he was selling. Vendors expected to get better prices if they used his people to sell their homes, and buyers knew that if they came to him they might be shown something interesting. Agents elsewhere in the city couldn't see any purpose in following his lead because the areas they serviced didn't have much designed by famous architects. Robyn had spotted an advantage, and used it. It was the way he lived, and in this was representative of his social group, who lived in Melbourne's inner east, and travelled in a long curve to Portsea, at the mouth of Port Phillip, for their holidays. Strangely enough, the first white settlement in the state's history had taken place

in the area now so precious to the city's inner social circle. The city's first rebel, a convict from Tasmania, had slipped away from the party and wandered around the huge bay, assisted by the aboriginal people, whose belief system had it that a white man was one of their own dead, returning to his place; their respect for land was different from ideas held by the whites, who'd found no water and long gone away. Robyn wondered from time to time why the settlers hadn't made better use of the man who'd lived with the blacks. He could have told them much to their advantage, surely?

Robyn was a natural networker. If you didn't know people, you didn't help them. Strangers who came into the office were shown a few properties, then told, 'Sorry, that's all we've got for the moment', while people known to the management caused long chains of phone calls and private 'mentions' to get under way. Rentals were adjusted, up and down, and hints were – or weren't – dropped about properties likely to be listed. So much could be done by using one's connections, but the trouble was that years of migration and multiculturalism had eroded the influences that people like Robyn could draw on. New people had moved into the poor suburbs and improved them. They'd pushed aside the old distinction between high and low quality and replaced it with the virtues of a mixture. Something for anybody, something for everybody! That was the incoming tide. The old way was to concentrate the best, and treat it like a club. Were you a member, or someone trying to get in? Getting in was a matter of being known, of knowing what to ask for, what to say, what to wear. Background mattered. What school did you go to? Where were your parents admitted and where ignored? It mattered. It was Anglo-Saxon, and it was slipping into the past. Georges had sent their buyers to England for decades, bringing back whatever the Brits thought had *class*, and Georges was waning, getting ready to die. The arts, mainly painting, had a certain clout, but not as much as racing, or fashionable clothes: these last were *de rigueur*. French was the only language worth studying because the French were close to England and the English were close to God. They had separated from Rome and set up a church of their own. Famous British stores set the standards for their local equivalents; Harrod's had the world's best marmalade and much

else besides. Robyn's father had been an Old Melburnian, his mother a graduate from the equivalent girls school, so that the way of life he took to be natural was not only inevitable but came naturally. It was an inheritance of empire, tinged with Australian confidence. There were ways to do everything, and much to avoid.

Presentation came first. You should dress well, though there was room for eccentrics. Above all, you should speak well. Men were the way they spoke: women too. England had produced many poets, and the greatest of them all. I am dying, Egypt, dying. The seven ages of man. And Prospero, above all, with his Ariel, wisdom and magic working together to put old wrongs to rights. It could be done. Tradition told mortals what to do because it lasted longer, knew more, had seen more, had heard it all before. The young caught only glances of wisdom, but they could listen, look, and have respect. Centuries rolled past, more thunderous as they grew. People could know what they were by looking behind ...

Or this is what they were taught, those with access to tradition. Robyn was not a thinking man, but he accepted the values of his place. Marriage was inevitable, necessary, but simple in its place: part of the tradition, certainly, but that didn't cover the individual you were married to. Robyn might have learned to love, back at the time of Besma's demolition, but he learned only the form of it. Nicole Serisier travelled a path not available to him. He hardly thought of her, then one day he saw her, across a crowded room as the famous song has it, didn't know who she was, and then it came to him: her name, first, and then the realisation that his life had divided, years ago, and he'd married the woman who was pregnant by him. What else could he do? Half the human race got married that way – slept around until the inevitable happened, and the baby became the bond. It was a rough allocation of justice, but simple, and there was no way of escaping that any decent man could take ...

He saw Nicole. She was one of three people representing the National Trust, quite a reputable organisation by now, part of the establishment. Things were changing. The old bull-at-a-gate people had given way to those who could see Heritage giving them an extra advantage in the lottery of life. If a building was old and well-made

it belonged to those who were themselves advantaged by a past they could display. The National Trust people had set up a meeting with the Real Estate Association to see if the organisations could ally themselves instead of opposing. A number of speakers had been invited to address aspects of the matter, after which the Agents and the Trust were to meet, three on three. Robyn had been flattered to be included, though his interest in the city's architects made him an inevitable choice: he had simply not thought about who might be representing the Trust.

And there she was. He could tell she was no longer full of opinions in the way she'd once been by the way she looked at him: curious, accepting, knowing how ridiculous it was, this meeting. He took himself very seriously these days and it was odd to be facing someone who didn't, and could have told you why. Why? He was practically running the office, sales were at a record, they had a reputation for *knowing*, people came to them if they wanted quality. The rest went somewhere else. 'It's been a while,' Robyn said cautiously. Nicole patted the seat beside her. 'It's a surprise in more ways than one.'

He didn't know what she meant. 'What are the other ways?'

She gave him a smile of recognition. 'We went in opposite directions, and the two paths have brought us to the same place. That tells me something, though I'm not sure what!' She was on the verge of laughing, and he suspected he was part of the joke. He tried to be professional. 'Have we got any chance of an agreement today, your people and us?'

Again that smile. 'There's every chance. You've brought us pretty close together.'

Again he wasn't sure. 'Me?'

'You.'

So there they were, looking at each other, she, who might have mothered his children, and he ... he ...

... who what? He had no words, no idea, there was something missing in him as a man. She knew what it was, he could see that, but he couldn't see himself. He said limply, but to some effect, 'Tell me what you've done with yourself ... since we saw each other last?'

She put it in a few words. 'I got angry with this city, I went to Sydney, I studied architecture and law ...'

'And law? Why?'

'So I knew what to do when an issue came up. And I wanted contacts. I wanted bits of string that I could pull.'

Something occurred to him. 'You married one of those bits of string?'

She laughed this time. 'I did! He's a lovely man. He's got a great sense of humour. It helps him put up with me.' He looked blankly at her, so she added, 'I hope you'll meet him one day. You'll like him. Everyone does.'

Robyn said, 'He may not like me, though.'

She said, 'I think he will. The reports I hear are good.' He looked at her, surprised. Reports of him? Who ... Then he realised that gossip flowed around all the time, everyone found out about people they were going to have to deal with. He'd been slack in not checking on who the National Trust people were that he'd be meeting; it was a sign of his over-confidence that he hadn't bothered. He was ready for them, whoever they were, except that he hadn't been ready, he'd got a considerable surprise ...

A minute later they were in a meeting room, ranged along a table, three on a side, talking politely about the mutual interests and the differences between their two organisations. Nicole had told the others, 'We met at the time of the *Besma* affair', not mentioning that they'd been on opposite sides. It seemed so long ago. How was it that time could make such a difference? What else could it do, if you gave it leave? The two of them had been within a whisker of being lovers, then they were enemies, years had passed and here they were sitting at a table, talking with people who were strangers as if they too were strangers: it was very odd! Sitting at the table, talking about buildings that should be saved for a variety of reasons, one of them being, his reason that the better they were and the older they got, the more valuable they became, and the more people hungered for them, he realised that what he felt for Nicole, as she was now – now, now – was a tenderness that he didn't feel for Louise or any of the other women he'd been involved with. He felt sure she felt something of the same

tenderness for him but not the slightest urge to make him her lover because she was very happy with the man – no name mentioned, he recalled – who was her partner. She didn't have to focus on another because she was focussed on one she already belonged to. He, on the other hand, was still in the grip of possessing. It was why his work was the buying and selling of properties. You lived in them once you owned them, and that getting of ownership, proprietorship, was what his life was about. He realised that he didn't particularly like this, and he wondered if he could find a way out of where he was. He didn't know, and he wanted to ask Nicole, but she was talking animatedly about heritage properties and how to convince city councillors that value came in many forms, and reconciling these forms was part of a council's job. The people would support them if their policies were wise; she said this with a confidence that made Robyn a little envious. He was a confident man but her confidence came from some place his confidence didn't own, and he rather wished their ways hadn't separated, all those years before.

The world had changed again; when would it stop? In a thoughtful mood, Robyn rang the only historian he knew to tell him – Brian Claringbold – about his scheme for putting value into the city's better homes. 'You've probably heard about this already, CC, but what we're doing could be useful to people connected with your department. People might want to know when something was built, and who did it.' CC had heard, but was pleased to talk about the scheme; university people might be able to develop its usefulness to scholars in some way he hadn't thought of yet. 'What got you started on this?'

Robyn reminded him of the *Besma* story, years before. He had a feeling, as he talked, that he was going back to the start of some process in his life. Nicole, whom he didn't expect to see again, had shown him – or was it *reminded* him – of something in himself that he'd suppressed. How much more of himself was hidden away? He had a feeling that he'd lived a cliché rather than a life: what could he do about that? They talked; CC offered to drop in at the office to find out more about the scheme, but Robyn said it would be better if he talked to the people doing the research, and gave him a couple

of names. They left it at that, but after they'd hung up, CC found himself thinking about the way Robyn had used the *Besma* story; he appeared to take it as the starting point of his public life, and that meant he'd solved, for himself, a problem that was troubling CC in a different way: when did Australian History start? Captain Cook? He remembered a class in his last year at school when they'd dipped into the sailor's journal to read about the discovery of the east coast. On the other side of the continent, of course, were any number of Dutch names, affixed to the land by sailors on their way to Batavia in the Dutch East Indies, as they had once been called. These sailors had known next to nothing about the continent they were skirting. The English people who settled it built little townships on the edges, then ventured inland as far as the climate was tolerable, then gave up, while the black people, earlier by thousands of years, were spread far more evenly. It was the habit of white historians to trace things back to Cook, or the early governors, and from thence to the British Isles, as if that was the source, as no doubt it was for the historians' thinking! But how could you write a history of the country and omit the millennia of aboriginal management of the land? For that matter, how could you place humans at the centre of the story when the aboriginal humans, at least, did no such thing in their stories, all of which fitted into some concept which Europeans had translated as 'The Dreaming', an idea which nobody understood. It seemed to CC that the very idea of Australian History was limited, and sat beside, or immediately after, an earlier formulation, comprehensible to the black people but not to the white, and that those who understood the first couldn't understand the second, and vice versa!

The young historian, therefore, concentrated his studies on the transfer of loyalty which took place – over a long span of years – from the imperial founders – Great Britain – to the imperial saviours – the United States of America, which had crushed the Japanese threat. CC had a feeling that he'd put himself in a trap that he couldn't get out of, and should therefore operate within some different paradigm of thought, working backwards, perhaps, from a more-or-less unquestionable point, such as the atomic bombs that had ended World War 2. Working backwards? Was that the answer? His thinking was

interrupted when the tram taking him home from the university pulled up in Swanston Street at a stop where an argument was raging. CC could hear the voices, even see some of the angry people abusing each other, and then the tram moved off. What was that about? A few stops later, outside the art gallery, the tram stopped again with a sudden jerk, causing passengers to lose their footing and grab for anything that might give them balance. The tram was fairly full, and the shouting this time came from the front, where the tram driver was abusing a truck driver for stopping suddenly in front of him. The truck driver was yelling, 'What did you want me to do? Crash into these?', referring to a young woman with a pram and an older woman, probably the grandmother, who'd hurried onto the road to get to the tram stop in time to get on. The tram driver had plenty to say in return, the women got on board with their pram, and the tram trundled down Saint Kilda Road, passing the Shrine. To the historian, CC thought, the war memorial's the big event; to the women with the pram, it was their moment of fear when they saw a truck coming at them; to the people arguing in Swanston Street, it was something else entirely, a mystery to the onlooking historian. We interpret, CC told himself, no matter how scholarly we may try to be, we judge what's important and what's trivial, and much of the time we're relying on others' thoughts and values. He thought of his friend Antinous, judging what to encourage, what to step around. History and public policy were supposed to give guidance to thought, but they were as subjective as anything else. He'd known this for years, but he was still troubled when he got home. Prue sat him down with a sherry, then moved away to the kitchen. Often enough she sat with him, hearing whatever was on his mind, but today she sensed that he was better left alone. Why? She got things out that she would use for dinner, then she felt like a sherry herself. The bottle was beside her man. Would she ...

CC came to the kitchen, glass in hand. 'I was on the tram when something came into my mind, that's the best way to put it.' She accepted him, listening. 'Three things happened.' He told her about the quarrel he'd overheard, the shrine standing on its hill, the pram, the truck, the tram lurching to a stop. 'I don't think anyone actually fell over, but we all went pretty close, those who were standing. People

got a shock. The mother with the pram, though, and the granma, they got on unhurt. They were okay.' He was looking at what he'd said; offered her as evidence of his thought, really, but the thought wouldn't become discernible. He was troubled. She said, 'You got home all right. What about it darling?'

He said, 'Nothing happened. There was energy flying around, but it all dissipated. We all got home all right.'

'So?'

The world was active, the world was at rest. She said it again.

'So?'

He was thinking. 'In a politically unstable city, and there's plenty of those in the world, heaven knows, something might have developed, but this city's quiet. Nothing much happens unless it's meant to happen, that is, there's a solid, grass-roots movement making it happen ...'

He paused again. 'Historians are forever looking for causes. We like to think that something *makes* things happen. But sometimes they just explode. Or they don't.' He regarded his wife, who said to him, 'And today they didn't. But you became aware of something. Can you say what it is?'

'No I can't. Well, nothing that I haven't said already. There's always volatility. Anarchy is crawling around, waiting to happen. History's full of moments when something might have happened, but didn't. Or wasn't going to do anything, until something unexpected exploded. Why did World War 1 start? Because everything boiled over and nobody could control it. The war had been waiting in the minds of millions, and their leaders, for years, and all it took was some assassin's bullets, and all that pent-up force was released ...' He threw up his hands. 'Hence the shrine! Sitting on its hill, reminding us of how crazy we are when we lose control. It's got solemn words on the side, and on the stone where the light shines in ... all over the place, really, but solemn words didn't stop the shooting when that was what people wanted to do!'

He glanced at his glass. 'Bring your glass in darling. Have a sip with me.' She joined him in the lounge, he filled the glass she offered him. Then he lifted his own. 'Here's to common sense. It's not very common at all!'

The Reserve Bank advertised a new position, a research job with practical effects throughout the economy. Ken Jarman applied, on the basis that his work at the National covered the practicalities of the work and his fascination with global value creation – and loss – suited him for the research. He was already doing that in his mind. His supervisor at the National wrote him a generous reference, and he got the job. Suzanne was proud of him, affected even more deeply than he was. He was ready at last to be a father; his new status *required* him to be a father. Suzanne was soon with child, and mysteriously broadened by the change. Discussion of outside relationships, and being honest with each other about attractions were banished from their relationship. Suzanne was an active mother-to-be, but with a stillness at the heart of whatever she was doing. Ken had enough sense to realise that the worlds of finance, banking and economic management, basic as they were taken to be, were nowhere near as fundamental as what was happening inside his wife. He treated her so reverently that she told him, ‘I’m not a goddess, darling,’ to which he replied: ‘Yes you are. That’s exactly what you are.’

They laughed about this, but she took it to heart. What was she, now that she was changed? On the way to being transformed? She noticed how loving she’d become, and yet detached. Ken asked what she wanted to call their baby, but she said she wasn’t ready yet for names. ‘I’ve got to get to know him first. He’s still a mystery to me, in there. Perhaps he hasn’t formed, yet.’

Ken smiled. ‘Him? He? You must know something then.’

‘I said that out of habit. I don’t know if he’s a she or she’s a he. Not yet.’

‘You think you’ll know? Without a test?’

She thought. ‘Probably not. But some mothers think they know. I think it’s ...’ She searched. ‘It’s because they’re becoming mothers, and mothers are very powerful, but they don’t know how to be a mother yet. That’s what I think is going on.’

‘Do you know, darling, how to be a mother? Yet?’

More thinking. ‘Not yet. But I can feel it’s happening to me. Down there, out of sight.’ He was curious. ‘Down there? In the baby, you mean? Not up here ...’ he touched his forehead ‘...in the mind?’

She said, 'So many questions,' and he apologised, but she wanted to reassure him, and herself: 'Don't apologise Ken. There's no need. It's good that you want to share this with me. I want to share. It's too big to keep inside oneself.'

He looked at her where she wasn't swelling, yet. 'Getting the baby out seems to be the major difficulty, is it not?'

'For me.' She said it bluntly. The time would come when sympathy wouldn't be any bloody use. He said, 'Do you want me there, or would you prefer me out of the way?'

'There, I think. But I'm not ready to decide that yet. I still don't know what it is I'm doing. It's happening, but I haven't got my mind around it yet.'

Ken said, 'That's a lifetime's work for both of us.' He looked at her to see if she accepted this. She did, but it was someone else's thought, not her own.

Lola came home one day to find Noel studying a map. Of Tasmania. 'Oh god, where are we going now?'

He put a finger on a spot. 'Anywhere we haven't been.'

It was fundamental to their relationship that he did this sort of thing. 'What's that place you've got your finger on?'

'It's called Wharton. There's a cottage you can rent.'

'With an unreliable old wood stove, no power and a couple of broken windows. And they tell you it's not haunted, so you know it is.'

'I'm not worried about a ghost or two. And neither are you. You'd drive them out of the house with your talk.'

She bridled. 'Why don't we just stay here where we are. There's no ghosts here.' The moment she said it, she realised she was wrong. 'What's the problem?'

He pointed at the street. 'It's them. The people I told you about last summer. They're back.'

'Have you seen them?'

'No, but I know they're there.'

The man was mad. He was out of control. She said, as assertively as she could, 'They are fuckin not fuckin there. They haven't been there for a year. They disappeared. They went off into the sunset.'

They're on the other side of the world. She's Mother Russia and he's Charlie Chaplin.' This tickled him. He yelled at her, 'Jeezus you're funny! You don't know how funny you are when you try.' He chuckled. 'Mother Russia, that's good. And he's the little tramp.' He was smiling at her. 'Yeah, that's a possibility. You think they've gone away?'

She looked at him. He was hopeless. 'Tasmania,' she said. 'The coldest, wettest part, no doubt. Somewhere in the south west where the icicles point sideways.'

'When the wind's not blowing them right into your back!'

'How much do they want to rent us this shanty?'

'A few dollars, it's only peanuts.'

He'd got as far as the price. It was looking bad. 'And we're staying away for a year till I'm Mother Russia and you're the funny little man with the stick and the bowler hat.'

'I think a fortnight will do. A week's too short.'

'Jeezus! When?'

'Pretty soon. I've got a couple of things to sort out in the Caulfield shop. Once that's done, we can catch a pretty little aeroplane and flutter across the water ...'

'To the apple isle. How lovely. And some in-bred idiot will show us the axe and the woodheap and watch us make fools of ourselves.'

'No doubt. Until we piss him off, and get the fire going ...'

'... to cook the shining fish we catch in the stream at the bottom of the hill. Ah, nature's the landlord you've always been looking for.'

He said, 'What are you like at cleaning fish? Don't like to pull out their tiny wee guts?'

'Shut up. That'll be your job.'

So it was arranged. Agreed. They had only to get on a plane, and fly.

Suzanne rang Ken at his new job and asked him to get something for dinner on his way home. It was only a few weeks since she'd assured him that there'd always be a properly cooked dinner when he got home, but that was before morning sickness affected her. He asked her what she'd like and she said anything, it was for him rather than her. She'd only have a bite or two of whatever he chose ... but when

he arrived with some delicious Indian takeaway, she couldn't resist the Fish Nicobari, and finished her bowl before he did. He was pleased about this. 'We have to build you up. It's not only you we're feeding you know.' While he was washing up she said they really ought to go shopping but she didn't feel like it. She'd drawn up a list but hadn't felt like going to the supermarket, so ...

'In the morning, darling. After we've had some corn flakes or something. Cup of tea and we'll be right. Did you say you had a list?'

In the morning he set off as soon as he'd had his corn flakes and his ritual cup of tea. 'Just one to get me started. I'll have another when I get back.' She felt she should come with him but he wouldn't hear of it. 'Put your feet up and have a rest. Don't read the paper. Don't even think!'

But there was no stopping that. She heard the sound of his car a minute after he closed the door, and she was alone. And not alone, of course. What would the little one be like? She hoped she'd be a good mother, and that led her to recall, or try to, what her mother had been like for her. Memories flooded in. Her mother standing by the door, listening to see if she was needed. Wanted. She knew her mother loved her but had a mysterious respect for her privacy, and wouldn't rush in, interfering as she put it, unless her daughter called. There had been times, though she couldn't remember when, when she'd known her mother was waiting but she, Suzanne, knowing this, had refrained from calling because she was curious about her power. She could call, and she could be silent. But not when she was hurt, of course. She'd yell at those times! Yell! It was strange to think of herself as a child, a girl child grown up enough, now, to be a mother. It was a mysterious condition and men didn't know much about it. They were too busy being men. It was at that instant that something told her she had a girl inside her. It was intuitive, she didn't know where the idea had come from, but she was sure. A little girl, or something that was going to be one. What sort of girl? Girls became women: what sort of woman? Would she be great and famous, like Brigitte Bardot, or Cleopatra? That was like asking whether a boy was going to be Shakespeare, Einstein or Mozart. Or Hitler or Jack the Ripper. She had a girl inside her: what was she going to be like?

She didn't know, of course, so where did that leave her? She was like a balloon stretched around a bubble of air, of nothingness, the balloon defined by its substance, thinly spread, and its shape, while the air was free to do whatever it liked when it was released. Free? Free to be like everyone else, all the other people forming society which formed the little one as she joined the crowd. The baby would be unique, but, slowly and surely, it would be brought to join the mass, as she, its mother, had ... or was joining it now, by becoming a mother, which added her to all the millions of people who'd started out with a path of their own, which they walked sweetly and quietly, full of fun and humour, until they saw that it led to being like everyone else. The baby would be human, in being herself, and then, slowly enough, but very surely, the little girl would be human in becoming like the others ... all around her, present time and past, and future too, Suzanne realised. This was her moment of greatness, even as it was a moment of realisation that she was nothing, nothing at all, except the means by which the next generation was brought into the world.

The effort! The pain. The disappointment if things failed. And of course the pride and pleasure when things went well. The sound of a car outside made her realise that she didn't know how long she'd been thinking. How long had Ken been away? She didn't know, and it didn't matter. He'd be back soon with everything on her list, and a few impulse-purchases, tossed in because he felt one shouldn't be mean. He was paid well for the notions he added to the bank's thinking, yet he'd be paid nothing for the thought that went into his little girl. So important was she that she'd be served by love alone. She'd be surrounded by love until she'd internalised it and could give it, pass it on to, the child or children that she too, in her turn, would usher into a none too kindly world. Mothers had the job of making the place liveable, if they could, and weeping when they couldn't. Mothers in their millions were weeping, all around the world, at any given time. And why? Because humanity was being its usual awful, contemptible self, waging war instead of listening to Shakespeare Einstein or Mozart.

She pulled back the sleeve of her blouse, and looked at her watch. Ken would be with her soon. He was quick, and he didn't get caught

up in talking. He was a good man. Their little girl would have the best of chances, and then, like everyone else, she'd try her hand with fate ...

She heard Ken's car, she knew the sounds. He switched off the engine, flung the door open, then banged it shut before he opened the back door and pulled out the bags. When he emptied the bags on the bench by the stove he'd put her list beside it so she could check. She never did. Things would always be there, and if he couldn't get something he'd get something else, he was ever so reliable ...

If only the world would copy her man!

Flying over sea released them. Tasmania was an island, so land was both to be released and to be accepted. They got a car at the airport, and drove, Lola reading the map and Noel taking little notice. At first she thought he was reading her mind, and then that he'd been where they were going before. To both, he said he wasn't. 'Something funny's going on,' she said sourly, then: 'Nothing unusual about that!'

This gave him a lift, and he drove faster. Half way to Queenstown they turned onto a winding road. Buildings were rare, houses rarer. The sign WHARTON stood close to a dilapidated school. 'Been a while since any kids went there!' The people renting out their cottage lived in a farm house under huge pine trees, with ancient machinery lying about. Mrs Throssell told them she'd put milk and bread in the cottage, simple requirements could be bought at a store not far from where they'd turned off, but to shop more generally they'd need to go on to Queenstown. 'It's worth a look if you haven't seen it before. Trees are starting to grow back again, now, but they're awful slow.'

Noel told Lola about the devastation caused by acid fumes in the mining days. How the hills surrounding Queenstown had been stripped bare, soil and rock with no living growth to show. 'It's a funny thing you know,' he said, driving their hired Commodore, 'but when I listen to music that's got a choir singing in it, I think of Queenstown. Humans can be quite positive creatures when they sing. But put a mob of miners together, and boy, can they strip the earth!' She wanted to know what the miners had dug up at this place which was, apparently, not very far away, but he didn't answer. 'Just around the corner', she said, looking at the map. 'Hope you like it!'

His mockery was in the air when they came in sight of a simple cottage, newly painted, and in excellent condition, at the foot of a rocky slope and close to a trickling stream. They went in. Lola showed that she liked it by opening doors and windows wide. It was hardly more than a kitchen and dining area, and two bedrooms, each of modest size and housing a king-size bed. ‘Got their priorities right I see,’ said Noel. ‘Winters are long and cold around here!’ He was laughing, happier than she’d seen him in ages. She remembered the prawn trawlers they’d been working on when they first met, and it felt good to be with him, a long way from the tropics but in a challenging, yet reassuring place where, she felt sure, all would be well. ‘Light the stove, Noel. Warm the place up a bit!’

It was a slow-combustion stove and it kept the place warm for the two weeks they were there. They shopped in Queenstown and cooked casseroles. They got up early, had tea, then got back into bed. They talked in the middle of the night. They strolled along every path they could find. One path took them to the rocky mound overlooking them, and they found that the streamlet below the house issued from an opening in the rock pile. ‘It’s not where it starts, though,’ Noel told Lola. ‘If you follow the line of those rocks, you get to that hill behind them. That’s where it would start.’ Lola had never thought of streams, or rivers, starting anywhere: they just *flowed*. The only thing that mattered was that they all ended up in the sea. Didn’t everything? Rubbish did, and crocodiles, birds that got caught in Japanese drag-lines, and ships in the days of sail. Where did streams start? Who cared? You swam in them if they were big enough, or you fished, and you let them go. Who cared? But later that day she found Noel inspecting the stream near the house. ‘Do you want to come with me? Not far. I think we might be going to see something.’

So she went with him, and they came to another little stream which joined the one she thought was the only one, he said ‘Aha!’ and they crossed a grassy rise until he said, ‘Come over this way, we don’t want to get our feet wet’, and then she found herself looking at a hillock of fine green grass, up to its neck in running water, and at the top some ripples and bubbles where water was trickling out of the hill. Noel’s face showed how pleased he was. ‘Everything has to start.’

His confidence reminded her of the way he drove to get to where they were staying. 'How did you know this was here?'

He said, 'It struck me that there was more water in the stream when it passed the house than there was when we found where it came out of the rocks. How could there be more water? Only one way. Must be another stream coming in. Where? Had to be somewhere. So we came to have a look!' He was soberly triumphant. She queried him. 'We?' He looked at her quizzically. 'Did I let you fall behind? No. You were with me... we were together ... when we found the second source. It's a good omen.' He added, 'My love,' and took her in his arms. 'We had to come a long way to find this.'

Their stay in Wharton was the honeymoon they'd never had. Their cottage heard them whispering and murmuring in the dark. Why do we speak more quietly at night? Something tells us to tone ourselves down, so we turn off the power in our voices. We find it's beautiful to whisper. We're in control of ourselves, a rare dispensation. Noel and Lola visited Queenstown, centre of famous devastation. 'They must have known what they were doing, and just not cared,' was Lola's reaction. 'There's a book about the mining at this place,' Noel told her. 'Geoffrey Blainey. I haven't read it. I should now that I've seen what they did. It's a sort of holocaust, isn't it, only it was the trees that copped it, not the humans. Gas ovens for trees, only they didn't need the ovens, they just released the gas.' He looked about him. 'I want to tell somebody I'm innocent.'

'You expect them to believe you?'

'What?'

'We're not innocent Noel. We're human. We did this.'

He looked at the bare hills. 'I didn't do this Lola. I swear to god I wouldn't have done this if I'd been here.'

'But if you'd been here and other people had been letting loose the gas, and you were making money from a mine?' She thought she'd pinned him.

'What about it? It wouldn't have been me that killed the trees.'

She was ready for a fight. 'Yes it would. If you didn't stop people doing it, and you were around when it was happening, you were responsible too.'

He looked cautiously at her, unsure how to deal with this. ‘What, even if I’d kept my hands clean?’

This drew an affirmative. ‘Even if!’

He drove in silence for a minute. ‘Bugger it, you’re right. But what about us, looking at it. Are we guilty too?’

‘There’s no avoiding it.’

He wanted to spell out the implications of what she was asserting. ‘Every tourist that goes through the Tower of London, they committed the murders that happened there, before they were born?’

‘It seems funny, but yes, they did.’

‘Well, that being the case, there’s been millions of murders since time began, and you’re saying that people like us – just driving around and having a look – we’re guilty of all the crimes we never even saw. Or heard about?’

‘Every one.’

‘That’s mad. It’s rubbish!’

‘It’s why Christ died for us, that’s what the church teaches.’

‘They teach rubbish then. Christ dying for us is just a handy way of getting everyone off the hook!’

‘According to you, we were never on the hook.’

This confused him. Where did he stand? How did he get caught in this? ‘This all started because we wanted to blame somebody for wrecking the landscape around here.’

‘It’s still wrecked. Look at it. It’d make you weep.’

‘I don’t want to be made to think that it’s my burden. I never lit up the smelting works that caused all this to happen.’

‘But someone did, that’s my point. Someone just like us.’

This caused him to struggle. ‘You’re trying to put all the awful things humanity’s ever done on every single one of us. I didn’t turn on the gas ovens at Auschwitz. I didn’t drop the bomb on Hiroshima. Et cetera! You can’t put the whole world’s crimes on my shoulders. Or your own! You’re not Christ, you know. There never was a Christ to take the world’s evil on his shoulders. Some religious people made up the idea, but it doesn’t work that way!’

‘How does it work, then?’

It was a challenge. He stopped the car. As quietly, as calmly as he could, he delivered himself of his answer. ‘Good and evil, right and wrong, they’re not real. They’re just little labels that human beings stick on things by way of approval, or condemnation. Human beings commit the most terrible crimes against each other. On each other. I’ve just named two shockers. There are plenty more. Most of them are forgotten now because we can’t stand the memory of what we’ve done. We’re so awful, we can’t face ourselves. We don’t admit to being the dreadful things we are, which means that we keep moving forward, forgetting the last atrocities while we get ready for the next lot. Occasionally we notice some other mob’s atrocities and we condemn them. They’re crude, inhuman savages and we’re not. That’s what we say about ourselves. Bullshit! It’s just a trick to put the blame for being human on one lot of people but not on ourselves. A technique of avoidance, we might say.’

He’d run out. She looked at him, loving him, and wanted to laugh. She wanted to say, you’re right, everybody knows, deep down, that what you’re saying is true, but we can’t go on if we admit it. So we have to find nice sweet reassuring things to tell ourselves, to look at, by way of getting us going again as if what you said wasn’t true. Was never true. ‘There must have been a time,’ Lola said, running her eyes over the derelict landscape, ‘when this was beautiful bush. And,’ she asserted, confidence streaming through her words, ‘there will be a day – heaven knows how far off it is – when this ghastly place will be beautiful again. The earth will put itself to rights. Somehow or other ...’

‘Nature’s restorative power is the cliché you’re looking for,’ Noel said. ‘Maybe. We won’t live long enough to see it. Let’s go home.’

He started the car again, got it onto the road, largely unaware of her happiness, her love for him shining through the disaster they were leaving behind as they drove back to their cottage, and the second stream adding its miraculous top-up to the water flowing out of the rocks at the place that was theirs for a few more nights and days.

They flew from Hobart to the everyday world. They got a taxi home. Lola said, ‘That was a life-changer. What are we going to do now? They always say that what you do first is the thing that sets you up

for everything that follows.’ Noel was quick. ‘We’ll do nothing then. Sweet fuck-all nothing, that’s my policy for the future!’ He sat in a chair as if he meant it. She wasn’t sure. ‘Hey Noel ...’ He waved a hand. ‘Cup of tea is permitted. No alcohol till five o’clock.’ She said, ‘I made the bookings for Wharton ...’. He got out of his chair. ‘So I make the tea. There’s justice in this world my Lola, and you are its first recipient.’

She always played along with his crankiness. ‘What happened to yesterday?’

‘Time started a couple of minutes ago. Okay, it *re*-started.’ He grinned and sat on a stool near the electric jug. What he’d said had appealed to him. ‘It’s a good idea, isn’t it. You declare the past to be obliterated, and time begins anew.’ He liked the word. ‘Anew.’ She had a feeling that humour’s time had run out, but they drank their tea, talked about other parts of Tasmania they should visit, then went for a walk. When they came back, he read, she drew. She wondered when he’d ring around the shops, but nothing was said about them. They had wine at five, and talked some more. At six, he turned on TV for the news, and there in all its ghastliness, it was. Members of Hamas, having infiltrated Lebanon, were shelling Israel, in return, they said, for new Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. The settlements were shown, new, probably still unoccupied, but the viewer couldn’t tell. Then the wreckage. Noel watched in contempt. He could feel their holiday going down the drain. The plughole. Two minutes of television and the world was back where it had been before they left. Ruins, ambulances, mud-coloured wreckage, drivers picking their way through rubble, grieving families, bodies on the street ... the whole catastrophe. And of course there was always someone to talk to the cameras in whatever language they had, the language of eternal grief. Noel looked at Lola, she gave permission, he turned it off. He sat, said nothing, sipped his wine. She sat, waited for him to speak, heard nothing, followed him into despair. A minute passed, he turned his eyes to meet her eyes, she got up from her seat and went to him. They clung to each other, then they let each other go. There were no answers. Humanity was beyond redemption. Shells were still exploding, no doubt, in northern Israel. Somewhere in the world

the shells were being manufactured so they could be sold to Arabs. Elsewhere, rivers of money were flowing in support of the Israelis. In other places yet again, Jews wept at the crimes that Nazi Germany had performed on their people, while Arab mothers, clinging to their children, took their turn to weep for the world they couldn't escape.

Noel said to the love of his life, 'What was the name of that place? Wharton, wasn't it? Funny name. English like everything in Tasmania. It's part of Australia but it's very different. It could be worth visiting again.' She knew that he wanted to laugh, but couldn't. She opened her eyes to look at the man she was holding. His eyes seemed dead. He closed them, having seen enough.

News is everywhere, inescapable. Neville Long and Donna were connected, in Swan Hill, and again in Wangaratta, when they moved back there. Bob Enright, coming in from the orchard, turned it on, and Gloria told her children to play, or read, or do their homework because she liked to sit with their father while he was connecting to the world. Antinous (Endless) Knight felt it most keenly because it was affecting his constituents and he needed to know what they were thinking. News from the Middle East divided them. His once-working class district, being close to the water, was filling with people on the rise, some of them Jewish and putting themselves within reach of the synagogue standing a stone's throw from his old school; he'd been taken, as a schoolboy, to listen to the Rabbi explaining the differences of worship and custom between the Jewish faith and that of his school. He'd listened courteously, even tolerantly, aware as most of his fellows were that Anglicanism, if supported by money, would put you on top of the social pile, and that was what mattered. It was a cheerful way of seeing the world: they were on top! The Jewish boys among them were despised if noticeably Jewish, accepted if not. In his bayside electorate, Antinous found the general population accepting, so long as the newcomers were 'quiet', meaning they didn't obtrude, or make any effort to change the place. Even their money wasn't held against them, since everybody wanted that; and as for Israel, most on his electoral roll saw the compact nation as making a go of it – a virtue in the common man's eyes. Palestinian voices were rarely heard

in far-off Australia, but over the years, the sympathy felt for Israel gradually depleted as the Israelis defended themselves too brutally. People accepted the idea of a two state solution until it became clear that it wasn't going to happen unless it happened on Israeli terms. Israel-haters would rather fight than do that, so the fighting went on. And on. And on. The voters of his electorate were puzzled. Why didn't someone just ...

The public grew sick of it. Tired. It was fanatical and therefore tedious. Yet it troubled people in a part of their minds that they couldn't ease. They'd grown used to the idea of a dark period in human history, consisting of two world wars, a depression in between, followed by a long stretch of American anti-communist hysteria, culminating ... if anything ever did ... in the stupidest of wars in Vietnam, which America had lost. Could the world now improve itself? Armament makers showed no sign of going out of business. America, equipped with countless nuclear warheads, developed faster and more deadly aeroplanes and the means to shoot things out of space. Yes or no? Couldn't a new golden age be sighted, just around the corner? Yes or no?

Answer, no. No. The golden age wasn't coming. Mankind could see itself all too clearly. The floodwaters of miraculous progress had drained into the bottomless sands of despair. Israel, created in cunning and accepted with a measure of hope, was the shredded flag flying over a world of failure. Antinous, sitting in his parliament, or listening to the people he represented, knew that none of them could do anything to relieve the darkness, the gloom, which burdened them. What comfort was there in a generous, well-run state, when humanity wasn't going to deal with its problems except by generating more of the same?

Antinous knew he shared the general despair when he heard himself using the phrase 'closer to home' in conversation. It was an invitation to put the impossible aside and concentrate on the small but achievable things that a state government or local council could do. 'Closer to home' meant that the idea was at least do-able, and with any luck it might work for a while at least. 'I once believed in progress,' Antinous would say to Jodie when they talked in the quiet of their

home. 'I was brought up with it. It was what sustained people through what they thought was the last of the wars.' Jodie smiled sadly on her man, a parliamentarian who was expected to offer hope and promise to the people he represented. 'When big wars became impossible we settled for endless little wars. It's either that or we start to hope again.' She smiled at that idea too. 'I can't see that happening, can you?'

'People expect politicians to solve their problems, but they know we can't. The time's behind us now when all they expected was roads and cheap electricity. They want the world as it should be, and we can't give it to them.' He looked sadly at his wife. Jodie's feeble answer was, 'Then we can only do the best we can.' They looked in each other's eyes, loving each other tenderly but from a position of empty-souled despair.

The Murray flowed endlessly on. People talked about years when it had been a chain of ponds, but those times had drifted almost out of memory. Bob's two-farm approach was working well. Carlo Lanteri grew the vegetables, the fruit and the flowers, while Bob managed the cattle, sheep and some horses on the dry country. They worked well together. Bob had heard through an agent in Deniliquin about this man from the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area who had a wife and two children, was looking to move, but didn't have enough money to start out on his own. 'Put him onto me,' Bob told the agent, and it had worked out. The cottage on the riverside property had been done over at some expense – all part of the partnership, Bob had said – and a grader brought in to fix the road. The Lanteri children had been enrolled at the local school, where they sang, learned and played with the Enrights' children. Carlo was a frequent visitor at the Enrights' home. Bob was surprised by the quickness of his thinking. If he mentioned a plant they didn't already grow, Carlo thought, at one and the same time, of where he could get it, the best variety, what soil suited it, the best fertiliser, the time of year it gave a harvest and for how long, who would buy it and what they'd pay. A money man and a man of the soil! He was grateful for the chance he'd been given. He knew that if he succeeded Bob would help him to independence if he wanted it, suspecting, however, that the partnership added certainty

to both their operations. His children were happier too, because Bob's children, living just down the road and easy to get on with, had the run of the town and if the Lanteris were with them they were accepted too. He told Gloria, 'Maria says we are in hair-ven!', causing her to smile, and watch more carefully everything that was going on. They were like her own children, yet something different and age-old was in them too. This absorbed her; what made the Lanteri kids different from the Enrights? She decided that they expected to be handled, managed, guided, controlled, encouraged and sometimes shouted down by parents whose way of guidance was to fall back on their fears and their love; while she, and Bob, were so certain of themselves that they stood back, and left childhood to the children.

It pleased Gloria, and amused her, to have such a contrasting family two hundred metres down the road, the voices of their still-childish children lifting into the towering red gums like the cockatoo noises also to be heard when water or the prospect of a meal drew the noisy white birds. There were birds of the river, and birds of the plain, just as one species of tree gave way to others as you drove, dust swirling behind, from the river to the dry country, or back again. Gloria cherished her love of country, knew that Bob had it in him too, and was happy that her life wasn't going to lead her away. And yet! Her sons and daughters would want some other form of life, they wouldn't all settle where she and Bob had settled, they'd roam the world and its occupations, searching, as every soul had to search, before settling down, as Gloria had settled – a woman, a husband, her children, and a place.

Neville and Donna had moved back to Wangaratta because, in his years away, a new clinic had developed in the town, employing doctors, physios, a dietician, and so on. It was expected that each of the professionals would take further training from time to time, and carefully drawn-up schedules made this possible. Kelvin Lancaster, the chairman of this cooperative, said that general practice, as normally conducted, was simply too demanding for anyone participating in it, and was a barrier to the best functioning of healthcare. Everyone should have an outside interest, he believed, and Neville, a man of

forty by now, found this liberating. His mother had died some years before, his father needed support, his own children were well into their schooling and he was planning to send Robert, his first, to the school that had given him such substance as he possessed, happy as he was in his rural town. ‘These places are wonderful in some ways and very limiting in others,’ he told Donna. ‘There are limits which give safety, but they restrict young people ...’

‘And older people,’ Donna wanted to know: ‘what about them?’

Neville was amused. ‘That’s up to me to do something about!’

Days later, he got a phone call from Hans Schritt, a former patient whose skin ailments he’d treated, asking if he might see Doctor Long about a private matter, as he put it. Hans had a winery some way south of Neville’s town, and had plans to set up smaller vineyards in certain locations – microclimates, as he called them – to add variety, after blending, to the wines he made on the flat. He needed money to do this, and he wanted the support of a man of scientific training. Would Neville like to join him in the expansion of his venture?

Neville was attracted by the idea. Partner in some vineyards? Dispensing more than medicine? Yes. Hans showed him the places he had in mind. One of them was stony and cold, the second had a farmhouse on it, long empty, and the third was on quite rich soil but facing south. Hans planned to convert the farmhouse into the living quarters for the three properties, and to add to it a machinery shed and bunkhouse for grape pickers or other casual workers. He listed the varieties he planned to grow and where he intended to place them; it was clear to Neville that he was already blending them in his mind. ‘You’re not satisfied with straight shiraz, cabernet, or mixtures of the two?’ He wasn’t. Wines from the north-east of the state were famous for their strength, and fullness, but not for their delicacy. They needed refinement, Hans said, and before long, seated on the veranda of the house he planned to convert, the two of them were working out costs. Hans listed the varieties he wanted to plant – nebbiolo, San Giovese, and others – and where he would locate his sources. ‘I want to know what they taste like in the places where they’re planted at the moment, and compare that with what they taste like on our terrain. Some soils overpower the types of grapes and make them all seem the same, while

other soils bring out the characteristics of certain species as if they were meant to be where they've been planted. That's what we're looking for!

The bank manager was obliging, the properties were bought and the young vines, supported by posts and wires, were planted. Neville drew plans to convert the farm house to an extended, double-ended layout, so that he and his family could use it as a get-away, while the kitchen and dining areas were large enough to cater for workers at harvesting or other times of the year. Construction started a month after the last of the grapes were planted, and a few months later the Longs had their first weekend in the rebuilt home: 'Trying it out,' as Donna put it; they took only the bare essentials for the short stay but back at home they drew up lists of everything they'd need and then the special things that they'd *like* to be there when they went to the house. There were times, of course, when Hans needed help, and Neville or Donna had to move out of their holiday mood and turn themselves into farmers, or at least a farmer's assistants. The children enjoyed this rather more than their father, after years of sitting behind a desk and giving instructions to those who consulted him. 'I've had a privileged life,' Neville told Donna. 'I'm sure it's good for me to live inside another sort of discipline, even if it's strange to me.' Reflecting on this she saw that even though they had lived their lives among people who worked the land they had never really known what it was like to work in concert with nature. 'Neville's spent his life trying to fix nature when it goes wrong, now he's got to work with it to produce something,' Donna said to her friends when asked about the venture. 'Learning experiences aren't always comfortable,' she told them, 'but I dare say they're good for us.' They were also slow. Hans told Neville that the first two crops of grapes would be of no use for wine making, and only distantly indicative of the fruit the vines would eventually produce. 'We're in this for the long haul,' Neville told his wife.

Three years passed in which the Longs had two holidays in the mountains, as the children called the place. Hans called the property *Herzland*. It broadened Neville's sympathies. When he heard about fruit growers digging out trees in the Goulburn valley, he felt saddened; they had taken so long to grow! He found himself estimating farmers'

earnings as he drove around, wondering that they could work long hours for so little. 'There are other rewards' was what they said to him, and he wondered if there were. 'You get absorbed in it', they told him, and he could see that they did, but was that a benefit or a limitation? Working the land might put a limit on their horizons but it enlarged his, or so he thought until an odd occurrence during that second family holiday. The renovated house was by now quite comfortable, with a large kitchen and slow combustion stove at one end, then a long table joining the cooking end to the relaxing end, where chairs gathered around a free-standing iron grid with a flue taking gases away and providing a warming draft of air for the whole room. 'On a winter's day, with the two fires going, this is about the best room I know,' Neville told his family, but it was on just such a day that Donna mentioned to him that a truck was coming across the cattle grid and into their property. Neville, surprised, went out, and the truck pulled up beside him. 'Got a load of fruit forya,' the driver announced, and then: 'Dunno what y're going to do with it up here.' He jumped out of his cabin to stand beside Neville. 'Needy a to sign this.'

Neville was puzzled. 'A load of fruit?'

'Pears. Whaddaya gunna do with them?'

'I haven't the faintest. I wasn't expecting any pears.'

'Well there they are. Where d'ya want me to put'em?'

He was still puzzled. 'I'm not expecting any pears. We grow grapes up here.'

The driver was not very bright, and not expecting to argue. 'Where ya want'em?'

It was happening too fast for Neville's liking. He could see Donna and the children, on the verandah, watching. 'I think there's been some mistake.'

People who don't think usually affect to be in a hurry. 'No mistake. Seventy-two boxes of pears. Sign here. Delivery to this place with the foreign name, I seen it on the gate. I'm at the right place.'

Neville dug in. 'Well the pears aren't. Where are they from?'

'I can't tellya. I'm paid to shift things around on my truck. This is where I was told to bring'em. Sign here please.'

‘Who told you to bring those boxes here? Whoever it was, they were wrong. Something’s wrong somewhere.’

They argued, briefly, as it seemed to Neville; for some time, in the mind of the driver, exasperated as he was by not being able to unload: not, even, being able to make Neville do as he was supposed to do, sign, and wave him on his way. ‘I was told to bring’em here,’ he said, over and over again. Donna’s children were fascinated by the argument and wanted to get closer but she wouldn’t allow it. Daddy would tell them about it when the man had gone.

As eventually he did, swearing and fuming. Neville had dragged it out of him that he didn’t know who the consignor was, he’d received a phone call, had gone to a depot on the outskirts of Wangaratta, and been helped to load by the only person there, a young man of about eighteen who knew no more about the pears than he did. ‘I did what they asked me to do,’ he said. ‘Who’s going to pay me?’

‘That’s between you and whoever sent you on this wild goose chase,’ Neville said. ‘I didn’t order any pears. Hans didn’t order any, that I’m sure of. We haven’t got a bottling plant up here. We don’t even make any wine up here. Right now, all the wine gets made down near Milawa.’ He was thinking he’d ended the matter.

‘Whereabouts?’ the young driver wanted to know. ‘Is that where this stuff is supposed to go?’ Neville told him no, and sent a very angry young man back to wherever he came from, none the wiser and as yet unpaid. ‘What was all that about?’ Donna asked as he came down to the house again.

‘Blowed if I know. Someone’s having a loan of that young fellow. And us.’ He explained, the children were puzzled, and none of them could make any sense of what had happened. Neville said he’d ring Hans and see if he could shed any light on the matter, but Hans wasn’t home, and Elsbeth, his wife, didn’t know when he’d next be home.

Donna said to a still-disturbed Neville, ‘Is this what happens to people in primary industry? They must be in tatters half the time.’ She meant it as a warning to Neville, who’d filled out his life, as he thought, by attaching himself to the land. She was underlining, in her own quiet way, his decision not to specialise in some field of medicine but, instead, to broaden his links with the community surrounding

him; the community from which he'd sprung. Neville understood what she was pointing out to him, but took what had happened to be a blunder on someone else's part, in no way an outcome of his own decision. And so it rested.

Or so they thought, until a week or so later, Donna, picking up the children from primary school, overheard a mother saying something about the joke that had been played on the doctor. Another woman, out of sight to Donna, said that he deserved whatever he'd got because he was getting too big for his boots. It was not enough that he should have the income of a doctor, but now he had to go into wine making. 'How rich does he need to be?'

Donna's heart went cold. She made herself look away from this conversation, and kept her head turned as she moved away, trying to be both invisible, and obvious to her son and daughter when they came out. 'How rich does he need to be?' The boy was booked in to his father's school and would be going away the following year: the town didn't yet know that! Her mind raced. She didn't need to know whose voices she'd heard, they were the voices of the unthinking, the jealous mean-spirited negators who want to pull everyone down to their own wretched level ...

But what to do? When the children came out she hurried them into the car and drove them home. What to do? It had to be strong, and indisputable. When the children had had something to eat and drink, and gone outside again, she picked up the local paper. Neville had to do something, spontaneous and simple, that would put him out of reach of what she'd overheard. If one person had said it, it would be going around. It had to be countered by being pushed out of the way. What to do? She turned the pages. Local newspapers never do justice to the way of life they describe. People are always better ... no! They sit on, they embody, potential that's rarely realised, and only when they need each other's help, when there's been a fire or a flood, some disaster, can they be seen as positive, purposeful, intense and intent. Wars, which bring out the worst in people, also bring out their best! Her thoughts began to drift, until she realised she was looking at the wall, with her fingers still holding the paper she despised. She looked

at it. Her hand lay over an advertisement, her index finger pointed to a drawing, supplied by the manufacturer no doubt, of a shed. It was lockable. It was ideal to garage a vehicle, or machinery that shouldn't be left out in the weather ...

Donna laughed. The people of her district not only left their machinery out in the weather, the condition of their skins showed that they hardly ranked themselves as superior to the things they used to make a living. Those wrinkles, those leathery faces ... The shed was being offered at a special never-to-be-repeated price of \$2 750, because it was being offered in kit form. You got the discount if you assembled it yourself. It wasn't hard, there was a booklet of instructions. If you needed a garage for your second or third car, this was your answer.

It was Donna's answer too.

The children's school had recently bought a bus. Not a very large one, but big enough to run small groups to sporting contests around the district, or take groups on small excursions. The Mothers Club had worked for ages to raise the money and the whole school had been assembled to receive it. The headmaster had spoken proudly of their communal endeavour, a word he'd used with pride. Donna, like Neville, had thought it a waste of money, and wondered – at home, when the children weren't in earshot – why the money hadn't been spent on books for the library or something else connected with learning, but, Donna saw, the bus provided an answer to their problem. The bus would need protection if it was to maintain its shine in their hearts, so it would need to be garaged appropriately in a shed assembled from a kit bought at McAdam's Hardware. Two thousand, seven hundred and fifty dollars!

When Neville got home after a round of his patients at the hospital, he sensed that Donna was happy, relieved, but determined. She had something in mind. This meant that he must eat his dinner, and chat, wash dishes, read a book with the children, et cetera, until she was ready. He did these things, curious to know what was in her mind. The children went to bed. She said nothing of any consequence. He began to read. She poured him a glass of wine. Oho! She asked him if he had his cheque book. He patted his coat.

‘In here. As you know, I’m a man of habit. My father kept his cheque book next to his heart and I’ve followed him.’ He thought of their son, going away to Grammar the following year. ‘Robert’ll probably do the same thing when he’s got a cheque book. If they still have them when he’s grown up.’ She was in no hurry. They talked about the transition from cheques to plastic cards, and paying for things by giving people the number on your card – if you trusted them. There were so many things being swept out of the way by the electronic revolution that you didn’t know what would be next. Chat chat. At last he said, ‘What is it darling? You’ve got something you want to tell me. I know the signs.’ He smiled broadly, confident of ... not only her love, but her management of their family lives. ‘You’re going to hate this,’ she said, ‘you’re going to think it’s silly. But it’s necessary. We have a problem and we have a solution. It’s quite simple. All you have to do is write a cheque.’

A grin appeared on his face. ‘How big a cheque?’

‘Two thousand, seven hundred and fifty dollars.’

‘A fair amount!’

She was amused. ‘Nothing’s cheap these days.’

He went along with her. ‘What do I get for my money?’

She saw him reaching for the cheque book. Things were going to plan. ‘Reputation,’ she said. ‘Acceptance. Public goodwill. I think that’s about it.’

He had the book out by now. ‘Who’s it payable to?’

As if pronouncing the name of a saint, she said, ‘McAdams Hardware.’

He was surprised. ‘What have they got that’s any use to me?’

‘Nothing at all, I would say. But *you* are pleasing others, not yourself.’

So she was up to something. ‘Who am I pleasing and what am I giving them?’

She told him. He was amazed, confused, and angry. ‘Be buggered I am. They’ve got that silly little bus and they’re running around in it all the time, making up excuses to go for a drive, and you’re telling me to give them a shed to put it in!’

‘They’ll be very pleased when you do.’

‘When? I think the word is if, isn’t it? They can park the bus under a tree. The kids can make themselves useful washing off the bird droppings.’

She told him what she’d heard. There were people who thought that sharing the winery was a bit much. People who were small minded and jealous needed a target and they’d found one in Doctor Long. And his family. Robert was going away next year, to school in Melbourne, his sister would follow later. They’d have to come home to the town, and the people, that they’d left. Their schools would be seen, as the winery had, as an insult to those who were being left behind. A sign of superiority asserted whether anyone meant it that way or not. ‘There are always people not succeeding,’ Donna told her husband, ‘and who do they hate? Those who are doing well. Making a success of their lives. And if you are successful, what can you do about them? The answer is, buy them off. Do something they think is good. Something they can’t carp about. Something they have to agree is a benefit to all.’

He felt humbled. Donna was not only right, she was smart. He’d have to do it. He picked up his pen. ‘What a waste of good money. They could do something really useful ...’

She’d lifted her hand. ‘Don’t write it now. Go down to the school and ask for the headmaster. Donald Taylor’s his name. Make sure you remember it. Perhaps I’ll write it down so you can’t forget.’ He interrupted. ‘I know who you mean. I’ve met him. Stupid little creep ...’ And she interrupted him. ‘Tell Don Taylor the bus needs protecting, you’ve been thinking about it, and then you saw the ad in the paper. McAdams have the very thing. And you write him the cheque there and then, while he’s watching. And you hand it over with all the good grace you can muster. And you mention, just in passing of course, that Robert will be leaving at the end of the year, and going to Melbourne, and the school’s been wonderful to him, and you’re very happy with the way they’ve developed him, and you want to do something to show your appreciation.’ A huge smile appeared. ‘*Our* appreciation ...’

It sickened him, and he was going to do it. ‘Stop please darling. I know when I’m beaten. I’m going to do what you say and it’s going

to give me the shits. Thank Christ the kids will be going somewhere where people know what they're doing.' He reflected. 'That's just about the main thing I remember about school. You were never in any doubt about what they wanted.' He looked at his wife, who put it to him that the Wangaratta school did the very same thing, it was only that their goals were of a different order from the ones he was used to. He took this in. Was it really so? If so, there were thousands of parents pushing second or third rate experiences on their children and shaping them accordingly. If you wanted quality you had to put yourself in one of the right places, where it was handed down by those who knew what they had and valued it, those who were perhaps cynical enough to let the second-raters think they were good in order to keep them happy with what they'd dealt themselves and were handing on to others, and their own children, in their turn.

'So it's all a gigantic lottery,' he announced, 'but there are a few people who know how the thing's played, and they make it work to suit themselves.' He looked at Donna, who was looking back at him. 'Every parent does what they think is best for their children. I'm not apologising for that.'

Unpleasant news came down from Sydney for the Claringbold family. CC's aunt Dorothy, his mother's older sister, who'd been a wealthy, reclusive inhabitant of a charming Point Piper apartment, had been found in Sydney Harbour, close to a tiny park. The police had been puzzled to find a leather bag in the park, containing a number of letters addressed to various people in the neighbourhood. On going to her apartment, they had been amazed to find a room holding huge piles of mail, all locally addressed. They could only assume that the old lady had been roaming the Point at night, putting uncollected mail in her bag and bringing it home. None of it had been opened. There was no advertising material, only items addressed to individuals. The police put it down as one of the strange things that old ladies do when their minds start to crack, but CC felt obliged to go to the harbour city to see for himself.

The flight lasted a little over an hour, and it brought him to Botany Bay. Landing against the wind, his plane came over the sea onto the

runway pushed across the water. He thought of Cook and Banks, and the Sydney natives, and then of Arthur Phillip with his marines and prisoners. Of Watkin Tench and his journal, which CC had read closely. Of all the letters going back and forth to the authorities in London and the beleaguered settlers in the great south land. What an undertaking! The towers of the modern city proclaimed it a triumph of the Europeans; who would speak for the blacks? It seemed to CC that only the land could do that: the land, and time, that ungraspable dimension that he worked with as best he could. Time was change, time was process. Time was delay, inaction, and sudden flurries on the surface of whatever historians chose to investigate. Time was the backdrop, the stage, the obliterating force which washed away meaning. Time made servants of us all; time was our mortgage, our lease, our curtain. The Sydney poet Slessor had likened it to a theatrical performance in his grimly humorous way:

No pause! The buried pipes ring out,
The flour-faced Antic runs from sight;
Now Colombine, with scarlet pout,
Floats in the smoking moon of light.

Now programmes wave, heads bend between –
The roaring Years go past in file.
Soon there's the Transformation Scene –
And then the Footmen down the aisle.

For you must wait, before you leave
This Theatre of Varieties,
Their frozen fingers on your sleeve,
Their most respectful "Now, sir, please!"

Out in the night, the Carriage stands,
Plumed with black trees. The Post-boys grin.
The Coachman beats upon his hands,
Turn after Turn goes on within.

He'd had it read to him at school, and never forgotten it. Their English master wanted to show them that it was possible to write poetry, as opposed to bush ballads, in Australia, despite its remoteness. The country was said to lack tradition, when it clung to its British traditions against the overwhelming commonsense of endless land, and the ways of people who'd formed themselves on land, rivers, animals, birds, sky, clouds and stars. The Christians had a god for comfort while the natives accepted infinity as a matter of night and day. No doubt they had magic and nonsense too, because the imagination produced it in plenty, as every civilisation had shown since the world began. He got off the plane, collected his luggage and took himself to the taxi rank, rather more orderly than some he'd seen. It occurred to him as he gave the driver the Point Piper address that he'd probably expect a handsome tip from someone going there. The man was an African, and he told CC, as they drove through Redfern and CC was looking at its aboriginal flags and occasional graffiti, that life had been easier where he'd come from. He was thinking of going home.

CC was diplomatic enough not to mention the civil war raging in the country the man had come from, and cursed him for talking when he wanted to absorb whatever he could from the suburb the black people had made theirs. It was so easy to deal with the early encounters of black and white because black had been black in those days and white very clearly white (meaning right!). The situation had been greatly complexified by several generations of intermixture; it was by no means clear whether a step taken should be seen as moving forward, or back. He asked himself if the customs and practices of the black people had influenced the new – new to the country – civilisation of the whites. They must have, he felt sure, but how, why, where and when?

He didn't know, and it distressed him. He of all people should be able to see such things clearly – and he didn't know.

It was time to start another book and make himself do some thinking.

The new job changed Ken, in a way that he'd been made ready for by the arrival of their daughter. Cleo was the central fact of their

lives. The young need so much nurturing. They take so long to reveal what they are going to be. Parents sometimes grow old before they know. Children grow up in the shadow of their parents. There is a stage when they learn the power of saying no. Then comes that much longer stage when parents try to teach them the dangers of saying yes. There are the years, puzzling to the grown or growing children, when parents reflect on the beauty of the child when he or she was young. In the cradle. In their arms. Nothing yet decided. As full of possibility as a sky of stars. That brief but wonderful time when all is yet to happen.

Ken and Suzanne loved their child. Ken felt responsible for Cleo and carried the mood to his work, where he watched the nation moving its money around, carelessly for the most part, as he thought. The Reserve Bank was said to be an arm of government but it was hardly more than an influence, to his mind. Wisdom was more likely to be heard if it didn't raise its voice above a whisper. When people criticised the bank, as they did from time to time, for not asserting stronger policies or imposing its powers on more chaotic moments of the market, he would say, 'If I was god, I would walk through the world as if it was my garden – as it would be – and I'd drop the occasional note in the bushes, hoping that someone with a good mind would work out what I intended, and take appropriate action.'

Ken thought this was funny, but he meant it. Being a good leader or even ruler meant keeping one's hands off the levers of power. The world was best served when its wisest showed strength by withholding approval, and murmuring their thoughts into only those ears where they could expect to be understood. Suzanne loved this development. Ken hadn't always been like this, but apparently he'd always been headed in this direction, and now he'd arrived. Becoming a father hadn't *made* him change but it had certainly helped. She was slower to realise that becoming a husband had preceded his becoming a father, and was the more significant change. For her part, she had moved so naturally, effortlessly, from chickadee to mother that she hardly saw herself as a factor in the equation, and yet she was. 'I think I've realised something,' she told Ken one evening, when their daughter was asleep: 'I used to think, when I was young, that everything could

be counted. Or at least measured. Money, possessions, even friendship and love. How many friends did you have? How much were you in love?’ She was watching him for his reaction. ‘But now?’ he said.

‘Now,’ she said, then said it again: ‘Now, I think a little differently. I think everything is a process, and what you have to ask yourself is, what’s the process I’m in, and how is the process going. Not how am *I* going, but how’s the process going?’

Suzanne looked at Ken, waiting.

‘That’s an interesting idea,’ he said. ‘It largely wipes out morality. Things are not good or bad any more, they’re just better or worse. And then you have to ask, who for? Who are they better, or worse, for?’

Suzanne thought that was easy. ‘I look into those little eyes, and when I see them laughing or crying, that’s an easy one to answer.’

He was thoughtful, though he smiled. ‘And yet ...’

He paused, she prodded: ‘And yet?’

‘The child is ever so special, but the time has to come when it’s not special any more. It’s been loved, it’s been brought up well, we trust, and then it has to enter the world on equal terms with everyone else. Its days of being special are over.’ He waited for her reaction.

‘In the eyes of its parents, those days are never over.’

Ken studied Suzanne, unable to be separate, and yet knowing there was an edge, a limit, to what she was saying. The world didn’t work that way, although the world included everything that mothers did, and saw, and felt. And yet ...

‘A funny thing happened when I was a boy,’ he said, and she felt warmth rising in her heart: he was going to show her something of himself. ‘We lived not far from a supermarket, and one day I found a shopping trolley at the end of our street. Someone had dumped it in a park. I told my dad about it and said we ought to take it back to the shop. He agreed, and said he’d come with me. So we found the trolley and wheeled it back to the shop and gave it to the owner – it was quite a small shop, not the giants we have these days. He was very pleased, and full of praise for me. What a good boy I had been!’ Suzanne was smiling now, listening hard. A happy ending, yes or no?

‘This man praised dad for having such a good boy and he told us to wait while he got me something. My reward! He went away and

came back with a box of chocolates! I was delighted of course and could hardly wait to get out of the shop so I could open the box!’

‘And then?’

‘Dad and I walked home. I gave dad a chocolate and he said we should make them last. One a day until there were no more.’

‘Did you follow dad’s rule? Or gobble them up on your own?’

‘I more or less followed the rule, believe it or not. I rationed them.’ He thought this was funny. ‘When there were no more, I had an idea. Abandoned trolleys were fairly common around our street, so I took another trolley back to the supermarket, expecting ...

‘Chockies!’

‘... but the man who ran the shop was in a bad mood this time, and he kicked me out of the shop. Thieving little buggers! All you know is tricks! You steal my trolleys and bring them back when you feel like it, expecting me to give you a reward every time. I’m not stupid! I know your tricks. Give it here! And he snatched the trolley off me and walked me to the back of the shop to make sure I didn’t pinch anything on the way out! Well! I was never so angry! I couldn’t believe the change in the man! All kindness one day and a cranky old bastard the next! It taught me a lesson, I can tell you.’

Suzanne was trying to stop herself laughing. ‘What lesson did you learn, I wonder?’

He loved his wife, he loved his daughter. ‘Don’t trust people. They can’t be relied on, mostly. When you find someone you know you can trust, cling to them. Never let them go! They’re a raft on a wild and treacherous sea!’ He stopped, looking at her intensely. She was ready for this moment, unexpected as it had been. ‘My love’s as fierce as yours, darling. Be in no doubt. We’ll survive, and so will Cleo, because we’ve got each other.’

Truth is said to be stranger than fiction. This allows us to stretch the bounds of likelihood a little in what happens next in our sequence of tales. Kim and Sophie and the little boy they’d had – Eric – went to France, and they met up in Paris with Cecile and Guy, Sophie’s parents. They had two wonderful weeks in the capital, then her parents returned to Melbourne, and the young couple, with Eric,

decided to visit Grenoble. They were in a TGV when a man sitting near them asked them what part of Australia they were from. This surprised them. They told him, and saw that he knew their city and its state. He wanted to know about the western district: its history, the pastoralists, what sort of people they were, what Australians thought of them. It was clear he had something in mind. Kim asked him if he had visited the western district and he told them about the young woman who had a whole great sheep station to herself. He told them about the magnolia trees, the oval room and the lines of trees that led to the house – European elms and Australian trees that he didn't know. There were many paintings and photos in the house: that he approved of. It felt strange, to the visitors, to be rushing at speed through the French countryside while talking about Victoria's western district. Sophie asked, 'What was the name of the woman who showed you her house?'

Norval deLattre, for that was who the Frenchman was, said, with the hint of a blush: 'Julie Wade.'

Kim and Sophie looked at each other. They didn't know the name. 'Tell us about her, whatever you can remember.'

He had remembered a great deal. Her mother had died in a car crash, her father of cancer. She felt she belonged to the property, with its most engaging home. The district was nothing like Europe but something about the home – he had trouble saying its name – reminded him of chateaux in his country; it was the feeling of a family line and a building in continued engagement with each other. Kim was amazed, and even more so when Sophie began to speak to the stranger, urgently in French. They were soon speaking at a speed that excluded him. Occasionally he caught his own name and the name of his business. Norval asked many questions; whatever part of him Sophie was trying to reach was buried in doubt. She pressed him and he put his hands, for a moment, over his face, as if to shut out the possibilities she was dangling. When he did this, she raised her hands, glanced at Kim as if to include him, and cried out, 'We have a song. Once you have found her, never let her go. I can't sing bass, but it's good.' She sang. 'Across a crowded room. Who can explain it, who can tell me why?' Urgency took hold of her voice. Norval had to do

what she was telling him. Kim had never seen his wife like this before. To Kim she said, 'Help me make him understand. It's the turning point in his life. He's got to go on!' Then she had an idea. 'Sing to him, Kim! Sing! About love, so he can't avoid it!' Again that urgency. Kim looked around. The carriage was mostly empty, so he put his head back and sang:

I went last night to the ocean

I went last night to the sea

Norval was looking at him in amazement. Were they all mad? Kim said, 'It's about a Yankee woman, probably no better than she ought to be. And her boyfriend who's gone off to war. When they go to war,' he explained, as if it was needed, 'nobody knows if they're coming back.' Norval was confused. 'And it goes on!' Kim lowered his voice to a whisper:

Ship ahoy! Sailor boy!

'Twas my bluejacket, answering me

Norval gathered himself to say, 'I must work. I cannot go to her and say, I have no money, take me in!' Sophie looked at Kim, conviction, even certainty, in her eyes. 'You will work for Fabriques Alsace! You will choose the fabrics and the furniture for us to sell! You will bring her to France and show her what you have left behind for her. She will be amazed!'

To which Kim found himself adding, 'And convinced!'

The Frenchman, speeding across the soil of his homeland, said, 'You think this will work?'

To which Sophie replied, 'Bien sur, mon ami. Autrefois, vous êtes perdu!'

Norval came, adding himself to the handful of staff at Fabriques Alsace. Kim took him about for the first weeks, until he'd seen every part of the business and met its customers. Norval wrote to Julie, telling her he hoped he might be able to visit, but first he had to learn his new job. She wrote back, inviting him to bring Kim and Sophie, and little Eric, to Ormiston with him when he came. He read the letter many times. It was calm, open, but watchful in its tone. The house and the family

line were not committing themselves at this stage. He saw that he would have to submit to something that he only partially understood if he was ever to stand by her side, holding her hand in trust. He saw also that he couldn't ask Sophie or Kim what he had to do, or say, or show Julie, the manager of the estate he longed to share. He would be what she wanted, or he wouldn't. It was that simple. Sophie and Kim were curious to know when he would seek out this woman, but he told them he had first to know that he could not only do what they required of him in their business, but he had to feel that he had added something, some new level, to Fabriques Alsace.

The day came. Kim told him to write. It was time to take the next step. Norval wrote; could they come? Julie replied. She suggested a two week visit, if they had the time. They drove west together, arriving at Ormiston in early afternoon. The European elms provided some reassurance to Norval, the eucalypts he found challenging: so young, so unknown. Julie was at the front of the house, the door open behind her, hospitality itself. She showed them their rooms, then led them through the large oval room to the small oval room. Mavis poured tea, refilled the pot, and left, not without feeling sorry for the foreigner, so tense. When she got back to the kitchen, Gordy was by the stove, also drinking tea though from a different pot, a very ancient silver one that he'd found on a tip, years before. 'What's going to happen?' he asked Mavis, and 'How's it going?' The sturdy old lady told him it was none of his business, and he must wait and see.

In the small oval room, Julie asked after Norval's mother. She had died, forcing him to realise how central she had been to his existence. 'She is buried in Grenoble. It was where she came from, and where she wanted to be.' He looked at the Australians. 'It is a thought I wanted to explore. Where did I want to be? If I had been dying, I would have said close to mother, but I am alive.' He moved his hand in a gesture that made clear that he was where he wanted to be. He had taken travellers on ships, trains and buses through the sights of Europe, recounting the tales of a power- and history-sodden civilisation, and he wanted to be clear of it. He wanted to be transformed and felt it was more likely if he put himself in the hands of fortune. He looked at Sophie as he said this but his appeal was to Julie, mistress of the house.

Such power she had, hearing what he was asking. She said, ‘When we finish our tea, I’ll take you over the property, and possibly the district, if you’re enjoying it.’ This was putting responsibility on the visitors. Would the place interest them, bring them alive, make them curious? Make them want to share?

She felt it would, but that was up to them.

She drove them confidently, but quietly, impressing Kim, and making Norval realise that he would have to unite himself with a place as well as a woman, if his wish was granted. What sort of place? The fields – they called them paddocks – were large, and to his eyes featureless, yet Julie murmured things about them as she noticed them. She was adapting to the ways of rural people but was by no means fully accustomed yet. He would have to join her, and his foreignness would help her cling to the world outside her inheritance. That must be valuable too? Only very confident people, or very stupid, because limited, could lead entirely local lives. They could travel securely because they would have a home. It sat strongly in its history. This history was short by European standards, but it was already settled, exercising its hold on them, even as they drove about.

Sometimes, when Julie stopped, or slowed down, her horses or cattle looked at them, looked into the car, or nuzzled Julie’s hand if she offered it, and Norval thought of himself on river boats in Germany or France, listening to the travellers, praising this or that, complaining about the absence of things they’d expected. He remembered an American lady asking for Pisa’s Leaning Tower in Dresden, but not what he’d said, correcting her. Deliver me, he said to himself, from any more of that!

With the woman came the inheritance. She was still accepting it. She was still learning to understand what it would require of her to be its owner. If he was to take part in her life he must be part of the process involving her house, property, region. You could only be liberated from your history, and by it, if you first accepted it. She understood that and was working towards the goal it represented. What could he add to her endeavour, her adjustment? The emptiness of his soul, that was the best, the greatest, widest thing he could offer. Some of the tension he’d been feeling slipped away. ‘When I was a

tour guide,' he announced, 'people gathered around me expecting stories. They thought I must know everything. I didn't know much at all, but I did my best to entertain them.' He lifted his hand as if allowing sunshine to pour on the land. 'This country will teach me,' he told Sophie, Kim and Eric, though he was addressing Julie, their driver. 'It can pour itself into me and I will learn.' Had he struck a blow? Won a point? Gained a centimetre, perhaps, or two?

Two days passed, then three. Little Eric loved the big house, so mysterious, the animals, the huge paddocks that ended somewhere out of sight. That made Kim and Sophie happy, but they were watching Norval and Julie. Would anything happen? It seemed so, and then it didn't. One afternoon Julie told them they would have dinner a little early that night. She wanted to take Norval for a walk. The visitors trembled; it sounded so decisive. Where would she take him? 'Down the drive,' Julie said. 'To the main road, and then we will walk back. Inside the elms, on the way out, along the eucalypts on the way back.' When Julie had left them, Sophie said to Kim, 'She is giving him his chance. If he doesn't take it, she will be ever so polite, but we will only be guests that she has to be nice to.' Kim wanted to know, 'What are we now?' Sophie said, 'We are the wise men in the Bible story. We bear a message, and we bring gifts.' This amused her husband. He chuckled, then he quivered with the portent of what she'd uttered. The silliness of it all! Who could make other people do what they needed to do? Grab their chance? And so on? People couldn't be pushed, or forced, persuaded or cajoled, you had to leave them alone and watch to see what they chose to do. It was agonising, it made you know how foolish people could be when they couldn't see what you could see ... but that was what humans were like.

He thought.

They had their dinner half an hour early. Julie drank only one glass of wine. Norval drank water. Eric wondered what was going on. The grown-ups were different tonight. Mavis came in, picked up some plates, and put them on her trolley. Julie stood.

'We are going for a walk.' Norval stood. Kim, sensing that a decision was close, felt fear running through his heart, but the Frenchman looked sure of where he was going and what he was going

to do. He looked at the Australians as if to say, 'I have been down the Rhine, along the Danube, I have seen Dresden rebuilt, I can handle this,' and he left with his young host, the property's owner. A minute passed. Kim said to Sophie, 'If we sit out the front, we can watch. We won't know what's going on, but we can say to each other, afterwards, that we were part of it.' Sophie, liking the idea, stood. 'We will be useless, but I have to be there to see.'

They took two chairs to the steps, put them side by side, and sat, looking down the avenue of elms, as if they were the owners and Julie and Norval were their guests. Seeing his parents seated thus, Eric asked, 'Are we buying this house? Are we going to live here now?' No, his parents told him, but if he sat with them, he might feel part of it too, and they'd explain that to him when they got home, to *their* home, after a few more days. Eric went inside. He'd found a billiard table, and liked to push the brightly coloured balls around with the funny long sticks they had for the purpose.

Julie, setting out, felt undecided, yet sure that whatever decisions or fates were about her, they would be correct. Her years of making mistakes, or doing silly things, were behind her. She was about to take a step, and it would be the right one, whichever way it took her. The visitor – the *man* – beside her had all the time in the world. She liked his assurance. She had a feeling that he was assessing her, and she welcomed it: what could he see in her that she didn't know? The possibility of another's vision of oneself was what made marriage both daunting and difficult on the one hand, and attractive, perhaps necessary, on the other. They walked. Neither looked back, so they were unaware of Kim's and Sophie's eyes, watching. He talked of his years of leading and arranging tours. 'Everybody knows all about tourists, until they travel with them. Then the surprises come!' She was curious, and it pleased him to entertain her. 'National stereotypes are true. Germans are like Germans, and there must be a handbook for Americans in Europe. Somebody sets their voices to loud, and gives them a list of stupid questions they must ask!' She dared not ask about Australians. He was so amusing about the British, he must have terrible observations on her own people ... but then, what was he doing here, walking between the elms? He was waiting to be serious; she had

to give him his chance. Or had he worked out what he had to say and when he would say it? She decided that he had. She chatted as they strolled. He would say whatever he had to say at the point where they turned to come back: at the gate between the property and the road. She caught herself beginning to order her thoughts so that she had an answer for whatever he asked, or however he asked it, then stopped herself. Let her mind be empty, and blunt. She would listen, and her whole personality would dictate its reply. She had only to be ready.

And yet he managed to surprise her. They passed the last of the elms, watched, from far away, by Sophie and Kim, they reached the end of the drive, and she turned to look back. Norval took a few more steps, as if considering his departure, as perhaps he was, or at least admitting, both to himself and to her, that it was possible. Standing on land that wasn't hers, he said, looking back like her at her distant home, 'Your family have passed down to you a wonderful inheritance. What are you going to do with it?'

What indeed? She said, 'I suppose I will live in it, day by day, all the years of a life.' It didn't refuse him, it didn't tell him anything. Why did it not? Because it didn't tell her anything about herself. She added: 'I must make something of it.'

'What will you make of it?'

'I don't think I know that yet. I'm still absorbing what I've been given.'

Norval said, 'Then it's clear. You have to take a chance!'

He was challenging her. She took a few steps toward him. She crossed the boundary of her property, took another three steps, and stopped, still looking at him. He said, pointing it out to her, 'You have your back to your property. That is something you have to do, if only for a minute.' Determined, yet annoyed, she said, 'What else do I have to do?' Norval said, with as much calm as he could muster, though he was trembling too, 'You have to take a chance!' He was telling her, asking her, to take it with him, but the words were left unsaid. She took three more steps to look him in the eyes. 'Here I am,' she said. 'I've taken it!'

From their chairs on the front steps of Ormiston, Sophie and Kim saw the distant couple start back towards the house, then swing

away to walk along the line of young eucalypts that Julie had planted. 'I think she said she planted five hundred of them,' Sophie told her husband. 'Or maybe it was five hundred on each side, I forget.' Kim moved his chair a fraction. 'We have to stay here, where the chairs are. Looking down the avenue of elms. We have to be here, exactly where they left us, when they get back. But as they get nearer, we'll catch glimpses of them between the old trees, and maybe we'll be able to guess?'

Sophie, like the people she was thinking about, was trembling too, but she said, 'Something tells me it's good. I'm not feeling any bad vibes. But we'll have to wait till we see them.' She was suddenly alert in her chair. 'There they are now! Were. Just for a moment. I thought I saw him taking her hand, but maybe I'm making that up. I'm so nervous, Kim. Kim! I'm so nervous I can't bear it!'

They looked down the elms, catching occasional glimpses of the couple, for that was what they were by now, coming back via the young trees that Julie had had planted. From time to time they could be seen by the other couple sitting, standing and sitting again, at Ormiston's front door. Minutes passed, then the waiting couple were certain that they had seen the other couple's hands engaged, and felt sure. 'Go and get Eric, darling,' Kim said to Sophie. 'He ought to see this. He may not remember it, but we should give him the chance. I think you'll find him in that billiard room he's so keen on!'

That was where Sophie found him, and she pulled her protesting son away from the green baize and brightly coloured balls that clicked when they hit each other and clunked when they fell into the scoring pockets, and his father, he saw, when he got outside, had found him a chair to sit on as the other people, whoever they were – one of them owned the house and the other one worked for mummy and daddy – came into view, holding hands. His parents watched this other couple, and clapped them as they passed the magnolias, clapped them and clapped again, then jumped out of their chairs to embrace them, kissing them and squeezing them, holding their precious hands as if they still contained magical presents which they had just given each other. 'Norval didn't drink any wine with his dinner,' Julie reminded them. 'For a Frenchman, that's a sacrifice!' They laughed, and they

scrambled inside to get some wine and some glasses, and they brought them out again, as darkness settled on the land, to drink to long life, health, happiness and everlasting love.

Noel said to his partner: ‘You know what I’m like by now. I’m never going to change. Most people come to terms with the world and I can’t. I don’t and I won’t. That makes me pretty terrible to live with.’ He gathered his pride, and his shame, to make the offer: his presentation of himself. ‘You can leave me if you want. I don’t deserve you. It’s up to you.’

He waited.

Lola said, ‘You’re not telling me anything I don’t know. I’ll stick around.’

Lola had worked on prawn trawlers because, by and large, women didn’t. That was where they’d met. She’d come from a Catholic family, first of five children. Her mother expected her to look after those who’d come later, but Lola had been cunning. She’d never resisted or rebelled, but she’d done only what she couldn’t escape, and was always somewhere else when her mother expected her to develop her nurturing instincts. Her father thought she’d have to become a nun if she wasn’t going to be a good mother. But she began to play her mother’s piano seriously, and was given lessons. Her teacher in Ballarat sent her to another teacher in Melbourne, and that was her break. Though she enjoyed playing the instrument, she knew she’d never be a professional musician, or even a serious amateur. It was too demanding. She got a job as an air hostess and had three years of fun, exploring cities with the other hostesses when she wasn’t sleeping with pilots or passengers. There was a planeload to choose from every time they took off! After a time the glamour disappeared and she decided to swing out of all the orbits she’d known. She went to north Queensland and nosed around the boats. That was where she’d met Noel. They’d separated but she’d had a feeling that it was only an intermission. And so it had been. The catholicism of her childhood had long given way to a certainty that if you trusted time, or the fates, or whatever forces were working away out of sight, you’d find yourself

somewhere you wanted to be. Noel told her about the couple who'd slept in the park, one summer long ago, and how they'd come by his house on their way to wherever else they belonged. And she liked the story, and secretly believed that she was an alternative version of the summer woman, as she thought of her. She, Lola, had come from far away, there was nothing holding her beyond a feeling that Noel was right for her, even if he couldn't make himself content. Who wanted to be content? It was what people settled for when they'd given up trying to get life to give them a full serve. She was open, still alive, she'd stick around.

Station Street in Alphington was the easiest place for Lola to shop. Sometimes she drove there with Noel, sometimes they pushed a trolley and walked. She liked shopping with Noel because people talked to him. He said whatever was on his mind and shopkeepers and their customers often came back with unexpected replies. He said to her one morning as they pushed past a service station, 'Have you ever noticed how media people love to quote surveys? So many per cent think this and so many per cent think that? It's like grabbing a bottle of everything you can see in a grog shop and mixing them together, then having a drink of the slop you've made. They try to control us by telling us what we think. They've got no idea because they don't listen.' She liked to hear him holding forth because she knew he needed to. She rather wished he'd take up acting again but he showed no sign of doing so. She liked teasing him. She liked to say, 'Who would you be today if you had to be someone else?' Answers varied. He said one day, 'Ronald Reagan. I'd get into my pyjamas at sundown, have a whiskey, and ring up a general or two. Or a couple of admirals. And I'd ask'em who did you shell shit out of today? And if they hadn't got rid of a few of the nation's enemies, I'd demote'em!' This was followed by a whimsical look at Lola. 'Who would you like to be?'

She took a glance at Station Street, an appraising glance at him, and answered, 'Me. Is that a surprise to you?'

It took him a while, but eventually he got out, 'Good on you Lola. Everyone ought to be able to say that.'

'Why?'

‘Because people who aren’t happy with themselves are a drag on the world. They weigh down everyone else.’

‘And the people who give other people a lift?’

He stopped, the trolley handle in his grip. ‘We’d be lost without’em.’ Suburbia surrounded him. She waited until he went on. ‘I saw a photo once. Taken by some famous anthropologist, I forget his name. About fifty blackfellas, somewhere in the Northern Territory. They were dancing, everyone in the picture was dancing. They were heading in one direction and they were just starting to turn. Most of them were in the air when the picture was taken. In the air. I’ve never seen a group of people so united. They were like a flock of birds or a shoal of fish. If they’d been white they’d have been a corps de ballet. But they were black, and the same idea was in the mind of every one of them. I was envious. It’s never happened to me.’ He pushed the trolley forward again, and they resumed their walk to the shops. They got to the supermarket and he paused to wipe his nose with his hanky, while Lola peered in. ‘It has happened to you,’ she said. ‘It’s happening to every one of us. Look at all those people in there, in between the shelves with their trolleys. They’ve all got the same idea in their minds. It’s hardly a thought. It’s to get a bargain. We’re all shoppers these days and we can’t feel good about ourselves unless we get a bargain. Not much of a fate, is it.’

Antinous Endless Knight, though he’d never met Lola, looked at humanity in much the same way. If you saw people individually, they might become your friends – or the opposite. If you saw them as a crowd, a mass, they needed laws, rules, regulation to make them bearable. Then there were clubs, offering a sort of compromise. They liked to be exclusive, sought after, special. Thousands of people, Antinous included, were members of the Melbourne Cricket Club, meaning that they were superior to the scores of thousands who filled the rest of the ground. Male members wore ties, women respectability. Members led the clapping, and drank enormous quantities, but it was the mob in the other stands who did the brawling and yelled out the memorable witticisms. Parliament too was a sought-after club, bitterly divided, strangely united, its business enacted before a

carefully controlled public ushered in and out by attendants. Antinous cherished the formalities of parliament. Silly, or puzzling as they might be, its traditions had outlived ridicule and lived on a plane where replacement was scarcely possible. There was, he noted, a move to cleanse the parliamentary chambers with aboriginal smoking practices; the day for such ceremonies might come, but they hadn't yet been accepted. He wondered what his friend CC would advise, should he ever be consulted on this practice? Endless was aware that the historian was grappling with the notion of an Australian history that didn't swing back to England at the point where Governor Phillip claimed the country, but kept going, straight – if that was the line that time chose – back to that earlier beginning – the dreamtime – when aboriginal people had taken over the continent. CC's work and his own were intertwined. Government could only govern according to its understanding of the lives of its people, and one needed the work of historians to complete this knowledge, or even to begin to think of a legislative program. People en masse were not the same as face to face. Antinous knew, by virtue of a chance encounter at the cricket ground, the last Australian wicketkeeper but one, a man called Driscoll. The cricketer had tried to tell the politician what it was like to play in front of a Boxing Day crowd. 'The atmosphere's electric. I tellya what, if ya dropped a catch in front of that crowd, you'd want the earth to open up and swallow you, fair dinkum. It's just the same for the blokes in slips. They're as tense and tight as you are. It's a very special feeling. And if you get a chance, and take it, you're on cloud nine! You can hear the roar! And you're safe because you've got the ball in your hand. You're the centre of attention. It's the greatest moment in your life, and you *know* it! There's nothing better!'

Endless asked him what it was like at the same ground when there wasn't a crowd, and Driscoll slumped. 'The pits, mate. No atmosphere. You might as well be out in Sturt's Stony Desert. That huge great ground, such a mighty place, and nobody there to fill it. You seem to drain away into emptiness. It's funny to think how a crowd can put life into you, even with only a shout or two. Or take away what they gave you.' Endless thought at once of Gough Whitlam and one of his 'It's Time!' speeches that he'd heard. There was energy in the air and the

words had made it available; the words of the coming Prime Minister were shaping the days ahead as they enlisted the mental energy of those receiving the message, and that was the whole of the country. Ideas had power! Yet there was nothing more dreary than an attempt to move an audience that wasn't ready to be moved. Unless, Endless thought, you had a huge stadium, a scrappy match, with nobody there to care. Then he saw that his thinking had room to run. Everyone knew about sporting arenas and famous parliamentary chambers, but other places too could be, might be, special. The world was full of places, known to nobody else, where secrets had been whispered, love declared. Plots had been hatched, signals sent. Illicit gains had been stored. People had been tortured to make them give up what they knew. Some had died in agony rather than yield. Others had broken down, losing their soul's integrity to pain. Human beings had whipped themselves, lashed themselves, in an attempt, surely ridiculous, to rid themselves of sin. Antinous Endless Knight, in his tolerantly intolerant way, wondered that these things were housed out of sight. James Brian C Claringbold, history lecturer, wondered that they were not more visible to anyone inspecting the record. Humanity was an endlessly variable creature, consistent only in its inconsistency. Why then had he bothered, troubling himself so deeply, over the question of bringing the awareness of the aboriginal people into the history of his country? It was their country too! Surely he could bring their understandings into his narrative at any point where he knew something worth including? There were sections of the story where it was silly to leave the aborigines out. There was, for instance, the section of the 1860s, and all the years that followed, including postwar soldier settlement schemes, when the very point at issue was how best to use the land, and whether to divide it up in smaller sections – farms – or leave it in huge, open runs? Or to let the aborigines use it in their way, unfenced, burning regularly, rearranging rocks in the river beds so they could farm fish as well as crops. Nature, which was said to abhor a vacuum, probably wasn't very keen on straight lines either, yet the Europeans surveyed and divided the land that way, though it wasn't the way the land treated water. The land offered water here and there, forcing humans to adapt. Europeans didn't accept this. The earlier people

had, letting the land have its way. CC accepted this as a basis for narrative, though he knew he'd have to choose his topics, giving up his idea of a general narrative starting before the English arrival. That, if it was ever written, would have to be after his time. As ever, the ground-breaking would have to be done by lesser lights; he would, he saw, be like those small farmers whose role he would have restricted ... if he'd been in charge at the time!

Human society had to be managed, had to be controlled, yet there was little honour distributed in his country for those who allowed and disallowed, those who made the rules. Such honours as were distributed, such fame as was handed around, was normally to those who made the lucky breaks – importing Spanish sheep, finding good timber in the hills after the gold had been exhausted, starting up a first, tiny airline, and so on. It was a country for those who were smart, sharp, quick, and determined. Thinking of such people caused CC to give a sour grin. He had Reg Ansett in mind, Reg, who'd started an airline, one of the great successes of private enterprise, only to run into Debra Wardley, a woman who wanted to be a pilot, and managed to get there on the wave of equal opportunity let loose by a vast range of people, but not including Reg, who refused to let a woman captain one of his planes. Reg had gone from being one of society's heroes to a grumpy old resident of the cartoon pages. What a fall was there, my countrymen! A few years later, the airline went broke, its planes, after floating gracefully in the heavens for decades, stacked in a paddock waiting for the liquidators to get rid of them. CC did what he liked to do when his thinking got stuck: he called Antinous and suggested a drink. They met in the lounge at the Windsor, asking the waiter to bring them a bottle of wine that he could recommend. Settling in his chair, Antinous told his friend, 'If it's a matter that involves the running of the parliament, I drink in the building. If I've got to listen to somebody or some group, I meet them over at the Imperial. If there's a possibility of some pleasure, or even some matter of pride, I come here.' He looked around. 'I dare say you have habits of your own.' CC was amused. 'I dare say. But they're not as clear-cut as yours.' He too relaxed. They chatted, the wine arrived, was poured. 'Cheers!' They sipped. There are hundreds of ways of taking the next

step; they did it simply, chatting on until they realised that they'd reached it. Or it had presented itself, bringing about a sensation that they were properly together, these wise minds! 'Tell me, my friend,' CC said to the parliamentary man, 'What will Victoria be like if they put you in charge? Your name never slips out of sight when they're casting around for future leaders. Even the mob opposite seems to give you a pretty good chance.' Endless put his glass down. "I do think of it. It's a fascinating matter. You could spend your life waiting for your chance and then lose it in a few seconds.' He looked at his friend, the historian. 'I reckon there'd be nine or ten people at least, in the parliament, who give themselves a chance.'

'You're one of them.'

'I'm one of them. And it's a delicate matter.'

'Tell me.'

'If everyone thinks you're the obvious candidate, and a chance goes by, they think you don't want it. Or you haven't got what it takes to seize the chance when it's there.' Certain names were mentioned. 'Exactly,' Antinous said. 'Nobody quite knew what he wanted. So when they were going to make up their minds, nobody knew what they were going to get.' He smiled. 'That's one way of forcing a decision. Forcing them to look somewhere else. If you don't want it of course, you may decide to fall back on that trick!' It was obvious that he was amused. He glanced cautiously around and his friend knew he had something to say. Confess? 'If you're in leadership contention over a long period, you're sure to have rivals. People set up a competition, whether they mean to or not. It's what they do. Competition, unfortunately, has a habit of leading to a bidding war.' He moved his hands criss-cross, meaning that such a battle was not for him. 'No thank you! I want to put the party in the position where they've got to have courage to pick me, yet feel ashamed of themselves if they don't. Anyone in politics will tell you that's an unusual path to set for yourself, but the funny thing is that it happens to come naturally to me.'

CC was absorbed. 'Do go on.'

'As you must know by now, my friend, I'm a very proud man. I got it from my family, I got it from that school.' The two of them remembered. 'Most Labor people have pride, but what are they proud

of? Mostly, they're just proud of being what they are, and they leave it to their union organisers to get them the rewards they think they deserve. They've got a certain detachment about themselves, and you need to know that and respect it. Something else you need to bear in mind when you're negotiating – over *anything* – is that the workers have usually got a better idea of what's going on – what's actually happening, as opposed to what's supposed to be happening – than any but the best management. The owners and the bosses claim to be negotiating on the basis of the *value* of their workforce, but if you want to see a real joke, all you need to do is compare the value of management, as set by itself, with the value of those who work for them, as set by management. I like to think of God drawing up a job application before sending Jesus down to earth, listing all the qualities of his son and suggesting a preferred pay scale. If he picked up a job at the Commonwealth Bank it'd be in the fourth quartile of their employees, no higher.' He chuckled. 'Have you got Commonwealth Bank shares, CC? If not, buy some as soon as you can scrape a few dollars together. Their price is moving in a heavenward direction, and it's not coming down in the foreseeable future!'

CC was a little surprised: 'Shares? We make do with what the uni pays me. Prue's got a few shares, but I'm not sure what companies they're in. She talks about them with her father. I wouldn't be much use.'

Antinous regarded him sternly. 'Forgive me if I start to hector you, but it amazes me that money, which is probably the central facet of modern life, is so poorly understood. The reason it's misunderstood is that everyone thinks it can be understood in the old-fashioned terms of capital versus labour.' He paused just long enough to let the historian chide him, laughing as he did so. 'Old fashioned? I've only just caught up. I've been reading Marx to help me understand the shearers' strikes in Queensland ...'

'... in the 1890s! Well at least you think they're important! Most Victorians have never heard of them.' The Labor man laughed. 'God we're ignorant. In some ways it's our salvation.' CC considered his friend gently. 'The idea of salvation is a first cousin of the idea of redemption, and European history is shot through with that. So too is

ours, but it's one of those ideas that lost most of its power in crossing the equator. It's not such a burden, down here, even if the churches give it a bashing at Easter time.' The two men sipped, then agreed that their waiter had brought them a well-chosen wine. CC inspected the label. 'Clare Valley riesling. Nothing wrong with that!' Antinous sipped again. 'People tell me sometimes that I'm wasting my time in state government. I should be fighting the big fights in Canberra. I'm happy to have them think that way. Across the road there, in our House on the hill, we're responsible for schools, hospitals, public transport, police, justice, law and order. The battles in Canberra reach an impossible impasse, but at the state level we can usually manage to make a bit of progress at least, on almost any topic. Our advantage, and it's a strange one I admit, is that the media don't think we're as important as the feds, so that's where they concentrate their attention. Long may it continue.' He put his glass down firmly. 'When are you going to give us another book, my friend? I need something interesting to read!'

Decimal currency replaced pounds, shillings and pence in 1966. Prime Minister Menzies – Pig Iron Bob as he'd once been called – wanted to call the new currency unit the 'Royal', but found no support. Decades of America-worship had readied the population to think in dollars and cents. One hundred of one made one of the other. The decimal point was a nifty little dot sitting comfortably among its noughts. There was something a little sad – and very outdated – about the ageing PM restating his love of England, its ways and traditions, and his loyalty to its monarch. Cynical bureaucrats in London, hoping to please the old man, appointed him Warden of the Cinque Ports; Australian cartoonists seized on the so-called honour, leaving Menzies, so dominant for so long, out of touch with his times. He retired, and the stumbling, step-wise movement of the nation towards modernity began. Not for the first time, the parliamentary conservatives, having no direction, offered only negativism, and managed to tear down the country's first modern leader, one Edward Gough Whitlam, already mentioned. The general public, voting a month or so after the crisis, confirmed the dismissal by electing

Malcolm Fraser as its leader, but balanced the situation by scorning the Governor General who'd carried out the dismissal. People argued night and day about the powers and responsibilities of those involved, but shops still opened, and grass grew to be mown. Democracy still functioned at its lower end, no matter what tangles had been created at the top. State governors continued to open their mansions to the people. Antinous supported this, hoping that if the upper levels of power could be to some extent demystified then the lower levels might be that little bit safer. Don't let crisis happen, he would have said, because people panic when their system isn't working, and panic is an unstoppable epidemic that everyone must fear. The first achievement of any good government is to keep things running normally, so that the public believes that it's in a system that won't break down. Not much aspiration there? No higher level to aim for? To Antinous, it was good. Keep things moving. Prevent breakdowns occurring, then lift your sights by a notch or two. Most aspirants to high office have a list of intentions, which they tend to call policies, to be carried out if they get the chance. The aim of Antinous Knight, on the other hand, was to govern well. He was a natural aristocrat who believed in the greatest good for the greatest number. It could be expected that the sun's rays would light up a well-run society occasionally: after that, people must obey the laws and try to keep problems from pressing too hard. Margaret Thatcher, a leader Antinous detested, said that society didn't exist, but this was obviously untrue: who paid for the upkeep of 10 Downing Street? Answer, all those who were never invited in.

The government that Antinous would lead, if the chance ever came, would aim to involve as many of its citizens as possible, making them proud, if he could, of their state. It was as good a place as any in the world to live. It would remain so, and it would stay so with pride.

Moira Langskail, as we have already seen, dealt with the hundreds of calls that came to Antinous's electoral office, and handled them with tact. A day came when she heard the man she worked for talking to a colleague and it set her thinking. Later in the morning, when she took Mr Knight a cup of tea, she commented that she'd been thinking about something she'd heard him say on the phone and it had struck

her that when her employer's party got into government they should change the slogan on motor car registration plates to *Victoria – State of Pride*. Endless was horrified. 'Did I say that?' Moira assured him that he hadn't, but she'd liked the expression and had been wondering how best to use it, and had had an idea ...

Endless slumped in his chair, knowing he had to cover his tracks. 'It's something I've been thinking about lately. It arose in a conversation I had with my friend CC Claringbold, the historian, you know him. I didn't realise I'd said it to anyone else. *Pride*,' he said, as if an expert on the matter, 'is something that's best not talked about. It's fine to feel it but the moment you start talking about what you're proud of, things start to come unstuck!' He smiled, as if this was obvious to everybody. 'Victorians say we've got pride, but up there in Sydney they can't see why. They've got an opera house and we haven't. Go a bit further and they're blathering on about the Barrier Reef. You haven't got anything like this! When you get down to that sort of talk, it's pretty childish. Which reminds me. I saw a beautiful cherry cake somewhere the other day and I can't remember where it was!' Moira knew what to say. 'Who was driving you?'

'Charlie.'

'You should have told him.' This gave Antinous his way out. He should have told Charlie, he'd have remembered ...

Charlie remembered everything, Charlie was a constant, with a little bit of twisting they all saw political life the same way, it was a matter of making people see what the Coalition people were up to ...

Charlie, like Moira, wanted him to get to the top. To be Premier of the state. Of course *he* wanted it, but was there any reason why Charlie or Moira Langskail should want it, other than personal loyalty? He thought about this. If he was to get the top job, it would only happen if there were thousands of Charlies and Moiras in the streets of his state, with its capital pressing around him. Thousands. They wouldn't get a vote in the party's decision but the popularity they accorded him was what would bring about the achieving of his goal. Which was? Unity between his state, his public and himself. It sounded mystical, and perhaps it was better that way. He knew any number of union functionaries who made huge, impossible,

claims on behalf of their membership, with not the faintest chance of getting what they clamoured for, except that when they didn't get what they said they wanted, they could turn a spray of bitter rhetoric on those who, they told their members, were holding out against them. This normally included senior Party members who – they said – weren't trying hard enough for the workers and were therefore as pro-establishment as the bosses themselves. Either that, or they were corruptly in league with them. It was all so tedious. Antinous would cheerfully have led a buy-out by the party of dishonest or inefficient businesses, set up models, and taken over a fair slab of companies on the stock exchange as worker-owned cooperatives ... but it wasn't the way the party worked, as he could see very well. The union bosses holding up the party in its present form wanted the privilege of being critics without the responsibility of running the show on behalf of workers and the public. It was clear to Antinous that any move to make workers the owners of the businesses that employed them would soon be overtaken by the processes of globalisation, offering to take away work from workers in one country and set up a new working class in a new country, less experienced in handling the power and threat of capital. Capital. It was the operating force of his times, those who controlled it being masters of those who craved its benefits. For his part, he was happy to manage the state's control of forces it only partly owned. Everything was becoming computerised, they said it was simpler, but it seemed to Antinous that simplicities were slipping away with every passing day. He was getting older, things were that much more tangled than they used to be. He felt envious of those fellow-politicians who could trot out the simplicities of their first campaigns, getting them into parliament. He'd long since recognised that votes were to be won or lost with every public issue, so that for the most part one went with whatever was popular, reserving a few personal, privately chosen issues on which one could allow oneself to feel and argue strongly. This might be essential for one's popularity but it was, he'd come to realise, devastating for the gaining and retention of friends. The public were all his friends. They all mattered. And they had him trapped. Moira Langskaill didn't have to pretend that she liked them; her job was to deal with – that's to say, be efficient about

– their problems. Most of their problems were the same so she dealt with them in the same way. She was essentially a formulaic person, Antinous believed, and it was her salvation. She was the right person in the right place. He was the person who adapted to every position he was put in. He became very good at this, but it cost him. With everyone as his friend, he had no friends, with the exception of Jodie, whom he loved, their children, and his mate from school, CC, who, as a historian, was in something the same ambivalent relationship with society and time as he was himself. Most people lived life as well as they could, even if some were dangerously careless. Politicians, like historians, studied life as farmers study soil, wondering what it can be caused to bring them. Antinous was inclined to think of himself as the opposite of an advertising agent; in advertising you were doing your best to shape people's behaviour, while in politics you tried to anticipate what they would do. How they would react. What effect it would have on them today or tomorrow, and what effect if any on voting day.

These thoughts rarely left him. They occupied his brain. They had the unusual effect of making him more comfortable with a government member sitting opposite than with a stranger he met in the street, or in his office. A member of the Liberal or National parties – the Coalition – was in the same position as himself. They could speak very plainly to each other. They understood each other almost perfectly. They ran into each other at public functions and chatted amicably. Each might lose his seat at the next election. They were as subject to opinion polling as he was – all the time. These polls were the unkindest cut of all, endlessly reminding them of the vulnerability of the seats they sat in, and the vapidness of public opinion. They in their turn tried to influence voters, but they lacked the power of headlines, and most of them felt weaker than, and surrounded by, media people. If I was a sheep, Antinous thought, I'd have barking dogs giving me no peace until I moved where they wanted me to move. As a Member of Parliament, I am hardly any different, and often enough, when I get home at the end of the day, I feel I've been defending my dignity, but Antinous was a man of pride, and he didn't let anyone strip him of the dignity of what he was and what he did. The public, sensing this,

rewarded him with a high degree of trust. It sat well with them that he promised next to nothing.

The outside world thought better of aborigines than white Australians did. The invading whites had met their resistance, taken their land and where necessary, ‘dispersed’ them (the word that was used). They then forgot about them, where possible, or looked down on them with interest or scorn, according to character. The better part of two centuries had to pass before visitors and tourists became curious about their art and their adaptability in the face of a varied and difficult landscape. The original inhabitants were also stubbornly unwilling to accept their inferiority! Despite various illnesses, drunkenness and degradation, enough of them succeeded in some way to force a change in the way that white people thought about them. This recovery of their dignity was aided by the continent they now shared with the settlers, a huge land of endless variety which also possessed an indefinable unity. You might walk from top to bottom of the place, or one side to the other, without losing that connecting spirit. It was a land of complete and utter indifference to people, enforcing a humility which allowed humans to feel at home in its places and even to love it.

CC loved it and before long his wife and children loved it too. They travelled a lot, investigating. Prue loved it when he announced, as he did every once in a while, ‘Into the car! Get your bags packed. Two nights away from home!’ and they set off, perhaps to the Mallee (‘Bob Menzies was born in this town’), to the north-east (‘The Kelly family lived at the end of that road; do you want to see where it was?’), or possibly in Gippsland (‘Convicts landed here from Tasmania to get themselves a fresh start, I won’t say an honest one.’). The past was alive in CC’s mind, and he made it so for his family. Prue said to him, home after one of these trips, ‘I think of all the effort that went into establishing these farms, and the farm houses, with kids to be given a start, and old people to be looked after, and I wonder if we’re getting any better, or are we just struggling to maintain the standards those earlier people established?’ CC thought before replying. ‘I don’t know that it’s any use comparing one generation with another. It’s the obvious thing to do, but it’s too obvious.’

‘So?’

They were driving through open farmland, leaving the Wimmera as they headed for Melbourne. CC said cautiously, ‘There are continuities, like loving the land – and hating it. Continuities have to start, somewhere, some time. Sometimes they go through slumps. Sometimes they end. New continuities start, sometimes unexpectedly. One of my colleagues in the history department is the very last person you could imagine in a country town, yet he comes up-country to go gliding. He’ll talk you blind about up-drafts, and how you know where they’ll be, so you can get your craft a lift when you want it. Or ...’ He was looking across the landscape, as if he could see the things he was going to talk about. ‘... we see war memorials. Every tiny little town’s got one. They’re sombre and sad. It’s very hard to make yourself realise that once they didn’t exist. Something had to happen, namely a gigantic bonfire of human bodies and souls, lives had to be wasted in the millions on the other side of the world, to start that particular tradition. A lot of the little towns the soldiers came from are deserted now, so that the tradition no sooner started than it died. You see a war memorial and you see a tradition that lasted a few years ... and then it died away,’ He drove, eyes on the horizon: ‘Perhaps it’s best that that tradition died, moving as it was.’ Prue knew that he was thinking of their children, strapped in the back by seat belts, reading, and he was hoping they’d be deaf to anyone urging war when they got older. But who could say? They might be the noisy ones, wanting action, reprisals for some wrong their country had suffered ... Who could say?

Prue turned in her seat to look at her son and daughter. Surely they wouldn’t ...

A family was a tradition, in a tiny, endlessly changing sort of way. Marriage joined two traditions, the woman’s and the man’s, and neither knew what the outcomes would be of their joining together. Their car was rushing across the Wimmera at a constant speed, CC driving with concentration, fast, the children silent in the back: Prue felt quite incapable of escaping whatever destinies were attached to the four of them, yet hated being powerless, as she was.

Robert Long, son of Neville and Donna, went away to school. His parents drove him down, feeling the wrench as they took him south. Melbourne seemed larger than ever, an endless metropolis with, at its very heart, a school built of the bluestone that took its traditions back to the city's earliest years. 'Eighteen fifty-eight, that's when it was founded,' said the new boy's father. 'It's had its ups and downs, but it's in great shape now,' the old boy told the new. 'Or that's what everyone says.' Then he added, 'It's going to seem strange at first, but that'll disappear. All those things that seem strange ... think of them as opportunities. Don't jump headlong into things. Wait and see how they turn out. Your mother and I will be back in six weeks to see you ...' He found he couldn't go on. The boy was crying too. Donna felt she was being robbed. She told herself what she had to tell herself, that it was for the boy's eventual benefit. She couldn't believe that was true. It was going to be a terrible drive home. She'd want to sit in the back with Joan, the daughter, two years younger than Robert, but she'd have to confront the highway, and then Wangaratta, their town, from the seat beside her husband. She wanted to say it was his decision, and it was, but she hadn't tried to resist. She'd known for years that this moment would come. The bluestone looked so hard, so unyielding. It must get into the minds of the people who lived inside it. It wasn't natural. What did you have to believe to be able to hand your child to an institution and let it bring him up? You had to believe that they could do more for your child than you could yourself, and, even though thousands of people said it, and did it, it was hard to believe.

It was, she realised, an act of faith. Her faith was being tested. It was being found out. What did this school believe in that was more than she did? She realised that the answer – one generation's answer – was beside her, driving the car. Doctor Neville Long, father of two, and her husband. He drove well, he did most things well. He told her often enough about being called to accidents at timber mills, on the road, people's arms getting caught up in machinery ... She knew how skilled, quiet and controlled he was when disasters were around him. He had only to nod, or murmur, and stretcher bearers moved their patient into better position for a pain-killing injection. Crises made him cool; what about this?

They were sad for days. Their son, Joan's brother, was missing. Joan, or Donna, would say, 'What's Robert doing now, I wonder?' and Neville would look at the clock, and tell them. He remembered the boarders' cycle well. It was still a part of him. Donna slowly adjusted to not having her son to fuss over, but Neville, she noticed, hadn't got on top of it. What was troubling him, apart from the obvious? She waited, troubled by what was troubling her partner. One evening, after a day at the clinic, he said, 'It's permanent, then,' to which Donna said, 'Until he finishes school, and then he'll go to uni, I suppose. We'll get used to it.' A gloomy Neville said, 'He's probably in the routine by now, not even thinking about it. With any luck he'll be thinking the change is a good one.'

His wife looked at him. 'So?'

Doctor Neville said, 'Maybe I'm just getting self-centred as I grow old, but the big change has happened to me, and I didn't see it coming.'

'What was that?'

Donna was waiting. He said, 'It seems only the other day that I did what Robert's just done. I put on my blue suit and went away to school.' He looked sad. Donna said, 'It must have done you good because you insisted that Robert had to do the same thing. Neville? Isn't that so?'

'It is, and that's what's crept up on me without my thinking about it. I didn't know what was coming.'

'Which was?'

'When I went away, I was faced by opportunities, new friends, enemies, disasters and possibilities. All of them without number.'

'And?'

'I found my way through. I think I can say that.'

She said nothing.

'Now it's Robert's turn.' There was something so wretched, and final, in his voice, that she saw what was troubling him, and at once it was troubling her because, she could see, it could be applied to her as well as to him: 'We haven't lost him.' Neville said, 'That's true. And he's pliable, adaptable, he'll be fine. But we've ended a stage in our own lives. This is the start of growing old. I didn't realise this

was going to happen. Excuse me, but it's a bit of a shock.' She wanted to say that it was only a stage, they'd soon get over it, and similar clichés, but he was right, and she knew it. They'd pushed him into the spotlight, the dramas of his life were about to begin, and they ... they must live quiet, orderly, controlled lives, parents of the young man they'd sent away.

Two days later Neville came home from a meeting at the clinic. Embracing Donna as he entered the kitchen, he announced, 'Once you open a door in your mind you don't know what's going to walk in next.' Donna asked, 'What's got into your head today?'

'Nas Gupta,' he answered, naming a young Indian doctor who'd recently joined the clinic. She'd heard more than she cared for about this young man. 'What was he on about today?'

He looked sour. 'Unfortunately, the little bastard was right.'

'What did he say?'

'He hands out about fifteen per cent more prescriptions than anyone else, and someone picked him up on it and wanted to know why.' Neville, no mimic, tried to produce the low piping of the Indian. 'Our patients are living longer. Once, they worked a lifetime, had a short retirement, then died. Today, when they retire, they have years, decades, to live.' She waited. 'Our job is no longer to perform the last rites over them, but to humour them, encourage them in their hobbies ...'

His dislike for this was palpable.

'... keep them going as long as possible, encourage new interests ... oh what a load of crap!

Donna was smiling. 'A new generation has arrived, and they see things differently.' He could tell she wanted to tease him. He said, with some exasperation, 'We've spent years arguing with governments that we need more resources. More money! And now this fellow wants to encourage their hobbies. I'm not a bloody social worker!' He was glaring, yet he knew he sounded silly. Donna reminded him: 'You said the learned young gentleman was right.'

He had to chuckle, however sourly, at that. 'I think we knew what he had to say, and he said it. Medicine's changing. People *are*

living longer, so the way we think about the elderly has to change. Has changed. We've got what we didn't always have; really good pathology services not far away. We can test before we diagnose and treat. It is a different ball game. It's just that we didn't need him to tell us, insignificant little prick that he is.'

She turned away, apparently to find a knife to cut some beans. He knew she found him amusing. 'Feel like a sherry, love?' She said, 'No. I feel like something bubbly in a deep, long glass. We'll drink to our boy.'

He looked at the clock on the ledge behind her. 'Five to six. They'll be putting on their suits for dinner. White shirts and house ties, navy with a royal blue stripe. Roll call. Alphabetical order and you have to listen to get your call in on time!'

'Your call?'

'Sir! Meaning, I'm here.' He thought. 'Adsum!' She started to cut the beans, while he continued. 'Benedictus benedicat, per Iesum Christum dominum nostrum.' Suddenly he shouted, 'A-men!'

Looking at him severely, she said, 'It means So Be It, as I'm sure you know.'

He said, 'Yes I do know that. They got that much into us, way back then!'

She wondered how long it would take him to remember the drink she'd suggested, while he, the old boy, was thinking about dinner at his school as it had been years ago, and must be again, today, for his son.

The British and the French, working together, produced a remarkable new plane. Passengers, only a hundred or so, sat in a narrow tube. It had delta wings, and a beak that dipped down, and came up again. It flew immensely high, at twice the speed of sound. It halved the flying time from Paris or London to New York. It guzzled fuel at a rate that made other planes virtuous. It was loud. People accused it of being suitable only to fly over water. A special visit was planned for Melbourne and Sydney, to test it on the kangaroo route, with permission to cross the empty outback. Its arrival in the southern city, much advertised, was timed for the mid-afternoon. The future of aviation would arrive in this new craft called the Concorde.

The city waited. Antinous knew the thing would cause an outcry. Too noisy! Keep it away, don't let it land. Imagine what they'd charge to get you to London and back!

It was, in its way, a modern *Titanic*. Celebrities flew in the thing because they had to! Robyn Briggs, his wife Louise and their children were excited. What if it could halve the time to reach Europe? Half a day instead of twenty-four hours? That would see some changes!

In far-off Portsea and Sorrento, Ariadne Berg hardly knew, hardly cared. It was something for Kim and Sophie to talk about. They would be in Melbourne when it came. She would be between her two waters and it wouldn't be flying over her. She'd been told she'd hear it once it got close but she didn't believe that. Glamour didn't make a noise.

It was the speed of the thing that attracted CC. Australia had been settled by ship, not by plane! Things had quickened considerably since the colonies' foundation, but this plane, flying high and fast, had shrunk the world. It would surely give rise to effects nobody had yet predicted.

The Jarmans, Ken and Suzanne, were delighted by the prospect of high speed transfers to the other side of the world. Ken's work and Suzanne's friends were attractions, they were experienced travellers, they'd already caught the spirit of early globalisation, they were talking about buying apartments in places that pleased them, renting them out to pay for them, then keeping them in the family as it grew. Money ruled, the rulers of money ruled money itself, the Reserve managed the commercials lightly, inflation discreetly reduced debt, unions weakened to the point where government bodies had to control cowboy capitalism - wages unpaid!!! – consumers had to be assured of money so they could spend ... into a cloudless sky flew the ultimate aeroplane, stared at by everybody, admired by most, heard by all! The country's leaders read the sounds and the silences and the visitor didn't become a regular guest; it was admired, praised, and allowed to fly back to Toulouse, where it had been made. Something that might have happened didn't happen, and life went on as before, with an element of sadness, sorrow, disappointment added.

The Jarmans bought apartments in Paris and New York, and when Suzanne's parents were killed in a crash on the Great Ocean Road,

and she inherited their wealth, they debated whether to add a London residence or start buying paintings. Ken favoured the paintings, so long as they could access good advice; he, he knew, had neither the knowledge nor the taste to build a good collection. They went to an auction, they discussed their idea with the city's leading dealer, they talked about it at home. How wonderful to surprise their friends in foreign cities with artists they'd never heard of. But if they rented the apartments – and they'd probably have to – the paintings might get stolen. And what was the sense in owning a painting if you only saw it a few days in every couple of years? Wouldn't it be better to build a collection at home, and buy French works for the Paris apartment, North American works for New York? Their dealer told them to go for painters who knew what to do with paint. 'If it's easy to remember an artist's pictures, you'll probably lose interest in them after a while. I'm going to suggest a way of trying yourself out. Go to the National Gallery of Victoria and walk around the collection in an hour and a half. No more. A couple of days later, write down the paintings that you want to see again. Then go back to the gallery again. See what you missed the first time, see which ones still excite your interest. Give yourself a couple of days, then rewrite your list. Both of you do this, as separately as you can manage. Then come back to me, and we'll start to plan your collection.'

They did what he told them, then read him their lists, eliciting, they noticed, a smile. Suzanne had liked Yvonne Audette and Clarice Beckett, and Ken had gone for Roger Kemp and Peter Purves Smith. 'I think you're going to build a collection with two halves,' their dealer told them. 'We'll have to make them as compatible as possible.' Another smile. 'Now. When a painter dies, there's usually a slump in the value of his work. For a while, but not for very long, if the paintings are good. You buy in the slump. The best time to buy, of course, is when the painter's not very well known. Or they've made a reputation overseas but aren't yet known back at home. That's the sort of gap in the market that you're looking for to get your collection increasing in value. And one last point. Don't tell anybody you're collecting. Not till you've got fifty or sixty pieces, anyway. Most of your friends will have guessed by then.'

So they started. Suzanne wanted to be bold, and Ken agreed. ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained!’ Their first painting was of an old Victorian mansion, chosen not for its grandeur or confidence, but because it had hidden itself in garden and could only be put together by the viewer. Neither Suzanne nor Ken had heard of the painter; they were told that their picture was of a dilapidated rural property, north of the city and overlooking farmlets where racehorses rested between appearances on the track. They felt they should go looking for their building, as they thought of it, but didn’t know where to look. They kept that first painting in their bedroom, above their bed. ‘Where are we going to put the next one?’ Suzanne wanted to know, and Ken thought it should go in the same place, while the earlier painting got promoted to the lounge because they’d be used to it by then. That made sense, and that was what happened when they bought their second painting, a sombre scape of waves and rocky headland by Kevin Lincoln, an artist they’d never heard of. ‘Good choice,’ said their dealer. ‘He’s a wonderful painter, but not very well known. That will certainly appreciate in value.’

Their third painting was shown them by their dealer, acting for another dealer that they never met. Suzanne commented that it was tiny and looked very old-fashioned, and their dealer assured them that it was cheap, due to some unusual circumstances, and that once they hung it on their wall they’d find those objections fading. They asked to have it on a three month trial and he was able to make the arrangement. In a few days they came to love a beachside scene by Clarice Beckett and hung on every word he told them about the way her work had been brought to the attention of the modern world after being forgotten for decades. Suzanne sensed that they’d begun to swim in waters deeper than they’d realised when they began; she revered the seaside picture and told their dealer to look out for more by the same painter. ‘If I get the chance,’ he told her. ‘They’re much sought after, these days.’

Ken and Suzanne began to look at the world a little differently. Painters showed the world as they saw it, and they didn’t work for banks! They didn’t live like businessmen either. Some of them started with a scene, others didn’t. They used canvas, brush, colours on a

palette. They used their eyes. Their imaginations. Themselves. Once you owned a painting you owned a little of the artist, a presence in the painting. Suzanne and Ken bought a late Lloyd Rees, when the old man was all but blind, his colours blazing with the life still left in him. It cost them a fortune. Ken said to his partner, 'Don't ask me what it's got, it's got something I've never seen anywhere else, and we had to have it!' Suzanne agreed. It was the beginning of their second life.

Robyn and Louise were next. They were still living in the building that had replaced *Besma*. They had no wish to spend holidays at Portsea or Sorrento. These places represented nothing to Louise. 'I like the feeling of a great garden, close to other fine gardens. You don't get that by the water.' There was only one place to look, and that was Mount Macedon, north of the city but looking down on it. There were splendid homes in the area; all you had to do was wait. It was a place for people whose idea of a garden began with trees. Its noble gardens had been planted when the city itself was furnished by trees from England, Europe, The Orient, North America. Australian identity was still forming, if as yet unrecognised. Macedon people liked to think of their residences as the city's Hill Station, an Indian notion pleasing to those who wanted to set themselves above the ordinary. There was a village pub, a primary school, and not much more, except seclusion. Robyn said, 'I've been selling properties for years, but I've never felt as much at home as I do up here.' Louise wanted to know what was special about the place, for him? 'In my business,' he said, 'you have to stay with the times. You can like old things but you have to sell new things too. You know, I've always envied collectors. Once they decide what they're going to collect, they can concentrate on that thing. Guns, bird cages, chess sets, Rolls Royce cars ... they can love them with loyalty. That appeals to me.'

It sounded trite enough but Louise knew it came from somewhere in her husband that he allowed to be seen only rarely. She studied the place as he drove slowly past. It was rather English. It made her think of jigsaw puzzles, except that the gardens emphasised trees and clumps of trees, over and above their displays of flowers. The houses lived quietly in their settings, with a feeling that the residents, the

owners, did the same. It had its appeal, certainly. ‘Father made a mistake, all those years ago,’ Louise said suddenly. ‘He should have kept *Besma*, brought in a good gardener, and kept it another twenty years. He’d have made a fortune, you know.’ Robyn answered quietly, even guiltily. ‘I do know. I knew it at the time but I wouldn’t admit it. Or I couldn’t, whichever it was.’ Louise knew this was aimed in her direction, and her father’s. ‘Everyone makes mistakes,’ she stated. ‘You can’t live without a few blunders.’ Sadness trembled in her husband’s heart. ‘You say that the way everyone says it. As if saying it cleans up the mistakes. It ought to be the first thought we have, but it never is.’ There was, as always, plenty of fight in Louise, and she wanted to take him on, but sensed, fortunately, how far away he was, looking at the gardens, the huge trees, and the hidden homes. She waited for him to speak. He drove for another minute, stopped, looked, and drove again. They were coming to the edge of settlement and the beginning of bushland when he stopped the car again. ‘Let’s do it. I came for a look, and I’ve made up my mind. What about you, Louise? What about you?’

She hesitated and he knew he’d lost. Or he hadn’t won, and that was what he wanted. She took a long time to answer, and when she did, it surprised him. ‘They closed down Georges a couple of years ago. You’d remember the sale. That’s about all there is to remember, these days. It was an institution, for years and years, and then nobody wanted it any more.’ She swung her eyes to the last of the discreetly hidden homes. ‘You know what I’m talking about, don’t you.’

He did. It made him more determined. And assertive. ‘The city lost something when Georges closed its doors. Something it’s never recovered, and never will. Taste. Class. Certainty. You went in there, you knew what sort of thing you wanted, and they had it, and whatever they had, it was not only good, it was the best. You paid, oh my god you paid, but when you brought whatever it was home, it lasted till the end of your life. They’d discuss things with you. If you weren’t sure, and you were a good customer, they’d bring things out so you could see them in your home. That was the way to run a business ...’

He was sad. He’d lost something that mattered to him, and Louise had never known.

‘The world keeps changing,’ she said. ‘We have to keep up.’ It didn’t change her husband, sitting stiffly beside her. She added, ‘Truly, Rob. Life’s a river. It keeps moving all the time. These people up here, they’ve made a beautiful hideaway for themselves, I suppose I envy them just a little, but ...’

He broke in, desperate to salvage something. ‘But you can’t be like them? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? You don’t *want* to be like them, do you? What they’ve got is so good that you think you wouldn’t belong if we moved up here. That’s the problem, isn’t it? It’s in you and what you think about yourself. Who you are!’ He was on the verge of saying *Besma* again, but hesitated, and their marriage was saved because she, seeing how close to the precipice they were, conceded. ‘It’s a beautiful place, Rob. I never thought we’d see anything that would satisfy you, but we have. This is it. These places don’t come on the market very often, and I know you’d only want the best, so we’ll be waiting for a while, but yes! We’re moving.’ She adjusted. ‘We’re getting ready to move. As soon as something really good comes on the market.’ Suddenly a thought came to her mind. ‘No! We won’t let it get on the market. Go to the local agent, or anyone who’d know. Find out before it happens. Put in an offer. Tell the family that the minute they’re ready to sell, you’re ready to buy. Get it all arranged before anybody knows about it. That’s the way to do it. We’ll start today. Drive back through again, Rob, we’ll pick the ones we like. And the ones we wouldn’t look at. We want to get it all clear in our minds, before we go back ...’

She was going to say ‘home’, and of course she couldn’t say it. Tears came into his eyes. He’d won. It had been close, but he’d won. He felt an overwhelming urge to do something for her, but his mind was blank. She wondered what he was thinking, and there was nothing. Suddenly a thought emerged from a dark cave in his brain and he said to his wife of however many years it was, ‘That’s the rest of our lives taken care of!’

Robyn had taken his stand. Most of us have to do it. The river that Louise spoke of keeps flowing, but we grow tired of it, crawl onto the bank and make a place for ourselves, and possibly our children too.

Then the children move away, impatient for their own experience. The children move with the river while the parents watch, full of hope yet fearful. Sometimes the parents on the bank see the children drown. This happens in many ways, drugs being the most common. Drugs. Drugs had hovered around the edges of European consciousness for centuries but their main manifestation in the land of this narrative linked itself to the six o'clock closing of hotels in order to stop working class men making themselves sodden with alcohol. Perhaps the most lasting result of this movement was the creation of the words wouser and killjoy for those in favour of limitation. Something of another sort presented itself one morning when Bob Enright called in to talk to Carlo on the part of the property given to fruit and vegetable production, and saw a bulky man of perhaps fifty entering a shed. 'You got a new man working for you?' he asked.

Carlo was quick. 'Cousin of mine. Helping me out. Angelo. Cousin of my wife.'

Bob knew it wasn't true. Something was being covered. If Carlo needed help, there were locals he could rely on. And whose cousin was he? 'Where's he from?'

Carlo named a tiny village near Griffith, in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area. 'How long's he here for?' Carlo was ready for this one. 'Just a week or two, while I need him.'

Bob said no more, but later in the day, filling his car with petrol at the service station, he spotted the police sergeant drive past, and raised a finger. Ken Fillimore turned around and swung into the station. 'Morning Bob. How's it going?'

Bob chatted in the rural way for a minute or two, and then, when the lad who'd filled his tank was inside, he told the sergeant about Carlo's 'assistant' from the MIA: 'He didn't look like a farm worker to me. He didn't look like a worker of any sort.' The policeman saw what he meant. 'Mafia bastard down here havin a look around. Any ideas?'

Bob said, 'How old's that boy of yours? Is he looking for work?'

'Not up this way if his mother's got anything to do with it.' The policeman looked a little sheepish. Bob said, 'Doesn't matter if he does any work or not. What about bringing him down to have a look around. You come with him, of course. In uniform.' He paused,

stressing this. 'We show him my part of the business, then we go and ask Carlo if he needs anybody. No! *When* he'll need someone. He'll give us some bullshit and then I'll suggest that he might need a hand when Angelo goes back north.'

The sergeant was cautious. 'What happens then?'

'I think you'll find that Angelo will disappear very quickly and won't be sighted again.' Bob was pleased with this idea. 'That's the aim of this little exercise.' Fillimore was amused. 'We'll have Carlo shittin himself. And that's how we want him.' He added firmly, as a sign of closure, 'Eh?'

It went according to plan. Ken Fillimore parked the police car beside the shed where Angelo had placed himself out of sight, and chatted affably to Carlo about rainfall, things that were doing well, the season, prices, when casual labour was needed and when it wasn't ... rural people have a gift for extending time. When the policeman felt that the job was done, he concluded by telling Carlo that if he saw the young man in the street it meant he would be looking for work and would be glad of anything Carlo could put in his way, and he and his son drove away.

Two days later, Bob was pleased to observe, Angelo disappeared. He reported this to Gloria but she didn't see this as a victory, as he did. 'You handled that well, Bob, but I've got a feeling that the relief will only be temporary.'

He trusted her judgement. 'What do you think's going to happen?'

She said, 'They're so vulnerable, these young people. There's not enough to do. Life's not challenging enough for them. Most of the time, they're waiting for something to happen.'

Bob looked at his wife, absorbing the way she saw things. 'They'll be waiting a while, won't they?'

'Unless they make something happen themselves.'

Bob said, 'That Angelo fellow was a mafia bastard if ever I saw one. Doing a few jobs, according to Carlo. You only had to look at him to know it was years since he did an honest day's work. He was down here checking us out for outlets.' He was angry, and something inside him still felt triumphant. Gloria said, 'He'll be back, or someone like him will. He's only low down in the organisation. If the top men come

under pressure from the police, or parliament, a few of the men down the bottom, like this Angelo, will be let go. They'll get charged, maybe jailed, while the men at the top, with all the money, withdraw for a while. That's how they do it in Italy, that's what they're doing here. The smart men don't commit the crimes, but they cause them to happen. People like Carlo get frightened. People like Angelo do the dirty work. People like ... what was the name of that man who disappeared, up at Griffith, because he tried to stop the mafia? Donald Mackay. People like him disappear. They still haven't found his body.' She looked at her husband, a man of goodwill and propriety: the man she loved, and had had children with. 'They make the world, these mafia-men. They reshape it to suit themselves. Thousands of lives get ruined by drugs, and hundreds of people get shot or mysteriously done away with, because they're prepared to push drugs.' Suddenly she burst out, 'And the mafia men at Griffith are not the worst of them! They grow plants that give people a fix, but others make chemical drugs, and some of them are doing it right here in this country, under our noses, so they must be buying protection ...' she was worked up by now into a righteous rage '... while the others, the worst of all because the smartest, are bringing drugs here in boats, and they wait out at sea until people go out to meet them in their little boats, and bring the chemicals back to shore to twist our brains!' She wouldn't have stopped but Bob came to her and put a hand near her mouth as if to stop her.

'I know it's terrible darling, but stay calm! It's no good getting worked up unless you can think of something to do about it. You and I and Ken Fillimore aren't going to stop it. Not on our own. Not here in a little town like this.' He knew, and Gloria knew, that he had no idea what to do. With a bitterness he didn't know was in her, she said, 'Alex is eleven. Nearly twelve. This is the world he's going to grow into. I want to give him a good world. He'll get a good education. He'll ...' Suddenly she stood, to go on: '... expect, that if he works hard and lives by the standards we've taught him, then he'll have a good life, like we have.' She pointed at the window where, she and Bob could see, the endless river was flowing. 'And his brothers, and his sisters too.' They may have been children, but she spoke of them as if they were gods,

and she, by possessing a greater power yet again, had created them. 'I'm their mother! Am I to watch them destroy themselves because a bunch of criminals want to make money out of destroying people? I'll kill Angelo and I'll go to Griffith and I'll kill those men ...'

Suddenly she slumped. Then sat, weeping. Bob sat beside her, respectfully, but feeling stupid, and empty. Her passion would do nothing unless she could get thousands, perhaps millions of people around the world to stop the drug outbreak, and he, Bob, saw no sign of it stopping. There are problems that can't be solved by an individual's determination, or anything else. That was what they were looking at. They'd protect their kids of course ...

Of course!

... but how would that affect the world?

Poor countries stayed poor, but rich countries changed. The notion of society became a hypocritical façade, insofar, at least, as it required an appearance of virtue. Drug dealers picked off the weak and impulsive. They made money to buy their compulsion by selling more of it to others. Those involved involved others. Councils, parliaments, police picked at the problem. The nation exported its jobs to China; goods came back, and had to be paid for. The financial system ground on, carrying the deadweight of those who'd rendered themselves incapable. Many of them died. Families that had hidden their black sheep – or laughed about them – buried them now, some of them scarcely more than lambs. Gloria and Bob Enright kept their children out of harm's way, but other youngsters, and oldsters too, had weak or no defences, and succumbed. Parties, which had once offered fragments of hope, linked the weak and vulnerable. Dealers dealt a moment's relief and endless captivity. Police charged people but it didn't stop the supply. What had once been homes became chemical factories. Lights and watering systems were rigged up between ceiling and roof, or in garages that had forgotten cars. Television screens showed federal and state police with piles of plastic bags, swollen with this week's chemicals. The noble art of medicine became sullied by comparisons – good drugs and bad drugs? Or only drugs, with nobody to stop them? Drugs had to be moved; they came in by air, by sea. The island of Bali,

once a spiritual place, degraded. Tourists flocked there in thousands, drugs followed. Australians got caught. Indonesians applied their own law in their own way. Australians jailed or executed for drug crimes became objects of sympathy for the popular press: there were places where those who got caught were put to death!

Parents studied their children's friends, and the parents of those friends, wondering who to trust. The counter-culture years, once thought of as progressive, had diluted parental authority. The multifarious urges of the teenage period had been sexualised, meaning that decisive steps were taken by people not ready for them. The financial system steadily drained money away from the supposedly affluent, concentrating it in fewer and fewer hands, meaning that those with wealth became indifferent to the general. The media became the de facto ruling class, courted by those seeking political power. T'was ever thus?

No. The churches had been pushed aside. Some of them, notably the ancient church of Rome, had disgraced themselves by recruiting sexual predators as priests, losing their right to make moral pronouncements. They might speak against drugs, but what notice could you take of them? Society's rules had weakened, because not everyone was backing them. The stuff was getting in. That meant that people knew how to get around barriers. Customs opened containers when they had a tip-off. How much more got in undetected? Nobody knew, or if they knew they weren't saying. Plenty of people reached an accommodation with their habit; that's to say, they used what they wanted without reducing themselves to a level where they couldn't function. Alcohol had been accepted on these terms for centuries. Trust eroded. Parents couldn't trust their children. Lies were told in thousands. Children couldn't trust their parents. A famous football team, heroes to their followers, succumbed. Men shaking hands on a rostrum, or folding their arms about each other, were hauled into court a few years later, and out again for prison. Small scale theft, robbery and cheating, increased as those in need found what they needed. Parents agonised, sons and daughters slipped away. Disappeared. Refused treatment. Recovered eventually, a few of them.

Sandy Clarkson had his premises checked. He'd extended his father's business to three shops, with a fourth in mind. They were all in a Liberal-voting belt through south-east Melbourne. 'You can't sell clothes if you don't know your area,' Sandy told the people who worked in his shops. 'Get to know everything about the place. What people watch, what they read, if they do read anything. What they drive, what they listen to. That's to say, what they think about themselves, how they see themselves. Then you'll sell. And in the meantime, keep the premises secure.' He had builders and insurance people check the shops. He had grilles placed over side and rear windows. 'It won't stop them smashing their way in the front, but they have to do that where they can be seen.' He thought of doing the banking via guarded pick-up trucks but decided that would draw attention to his modest shops. The main thing was to hold as little cash as possible at any time; customers with cards were the advantage shopkeepers had over drug thieves: money was being turned into numbers moving in electronic streams which shouldn't be capable of being diverted. Sandy spent occasional mornings in the Magistrates' Courts, listening to cases involving burglary and break-ins. He wanted to know how these people thought, so he could be ready if they came. He often questioned his move from advertising back to retail, coming always to the same conclusion: he couldn't stop himself thinking of advertising as a form of *urging*, something he had despised as a boy ...

... and that reminded him of the key experience of his young manhood, when, visiting Brisbane with his school team, he'd been accosted by the alcoholic who'd once been what he was – sporting champion of a famous school. He'd talked about this with Marion, his wife. She knew it mattered to him but had never really seen how vulnerable he was from this angle. It's dangerous to tell people they're special when they're young. They not only believe it, they internalise it, and once inside themselves it's not quite under control. Sandy's three shops, and the death of an older man in the same line of business, had led to him being invited to join Rotary as its man from menswear, and he'd no sooner accepted than he thought he shouldn't have put himself in such well-meaning but pedestrian company. The advertising man inside him was scornful of what he'd become. Marion needed him.

She trained him into becoming a steady, stable father, and then a very good father, more interested in his children than he was in himself. Charli (without an e) was a delightful girl, and Greg was a very proper little boy who needed to be made adventurous. When his parents took him to the zoo his reaction told them how cautious he was about anything that challenged him; he was unusually wary of the giraffes, not amused, entertained or amazed. Simply worried by something so mis-shapen. When his parents and the much bolder Charli led him along the bridge spanning the lions' enclosure, he wanted to know what kept the bridge in the air. Neither Sandy nor Marion knew. Something kept it up! A few poles, or whatever! Don't worry. Look down, see, they're resting! But Greg was smart enough to know that lions rested after a kill, so they could digest what they'd swallowed. The question in his mind was when would they be ready to go hunting again, and what would they chase? Clearly he felt the zoo wasn't safe, and families going around pointing at the animals didn't realise the danger they were in ...

'Ever so serious' was Marion's description of her son, and 'rather bold' her reaction to her daughter – not enough caution for the one and too much for the other. 'Put them together and you'd have a good balance,' she was fond of saying, and Sandy's answer was always, 'We've got them together. It's up to us to make a good mix out of what we've got.' He had, in a sense, given up on himself to concentrate on his children. This pleased Marion. Charli and Greg liked their father to read to them before they went to sleep, sometimes in front of the heater, sometimes in bed. Charli had a way of rolling onto her side when she'd heard enough and wanted to sleep; Sandy would finish the sentence, then read one more, just to tease her, then bend to kiss his daughter before whispering good night, and returning to his wife, smiling happily in the lounge. She loved it when Sandy read to the children, or did anything with them, really. If they went on drives into the country, or chose places to stay and explore, it was always he who decided where they would go, and Marion enjoyed guessing where he might take his family this time. Or that. He was always willing. In her happiness at seeing him rouse the curiosity of their children, she failed to notice that he too was exploring. There was an element of knowing what he would

never be, and never do, as he drove quietly through places that other people had made interesting. Best of all, he loved dry grass in summer, rippling in a breeze: the combination of the eternal and the transient touched him in a way that nothing else could. If he remembered his days as a cricketer, centreman or athlete, he wondered how it had ever satisfied him to do those things professed by his school as making boys into men. That was a job that belonged with parents, with himself and Marion, and they had two children they thought beautiful, and they were doing well, all four. Those country roads, those little settlements, and the sprawling city they left behind when they went driving, were all possibilities, holding their futures among other people's presents and pasts. Driving was a way of waiting, for Sandy, as well as searching and arriving. He liked to introduce his children to the people leasing the cottages or running the motels and hotels where they stayed, because they'd been brought up to be well-mannered, and when the time came, they'd put their state schools behind them and go to the schools where he, and Marion, had studied while they grew up. Something they felt confident of would be handed on, and this, they knew, was a proper way of using a life. Occasionally – only rarely – he thought of Anita, the woman at the Windsor, and could hardly remember the sensations that had thrilled him then. What had become of her? Where was she now? He felt no need to see her again, let alone engage with her in any way, but he wanted to know.

Then he saw a photo in the newspaper he picked up, thrown carelessly into his drive, wrapped in plastic. It showed a large brick home in Caulfield, with blue and white tape stretched here and there, and policemen examining a costly looking car. Neighbours had heard shooting – two shots, and then a third – and had come out to find an injured man, still carrying a gun, sitting in the car, sobbing, with blood streaming from a wound to his shoulder and neck. They talked about Mr Goldberg as if they'd long expected something of the sort. His jealousy had been roused by his wife's relationships with younger men, he'd made threats before, but this time something had pushed him that little bit further ...

Sandy felt his heart grow cold. Goldberg. His wife. He too might once have been in the firing line if the possessive 'businessman' as

the paper described him had known what was going on. The jealous husband had ended one life and intended to finish his own, but as so often happens, hadn't been able to bring it off. He'd been charged with the murder of his wife and the report named the city's costliest barrister as being in charge of his defence. Sandy felt contempt. There'd be a trial, Goldberg would spend a fortune on his defence and he'd go to jail for a few years. He'd buy himself a few comforts in prison ... what did it say about Anita?

He read the article again, quickly. The murdered wife wasn't named. Strange. He read it carefully. No, no name. He looked at the photo. A big house in Caulfield, that seemed right. He'd never known exactly where Goldberg had lived, apart from using the Windsor ...

He looked again. This time he noticed that the name of the man was Golderberg, not Goldberg. Golderberg! He drew a deep breath. What a mistake! His heart was pumping and the palms of his hands were sweaty. How stupid could you be? He read the article again, slowly, asking himself what had caused him to misread the name and then the story. He didn't know. It was the name, though; he realised that was the cause. Sandy was not an introspective man, and he'd caught himself out. The mistake was what he wanted to believe ...

Surely not? No!

He made himself go for a walk. Quietly, slowly, in the streets where he lived. Into his mind came Anita's eyes in their moments of passion, glowing as he'd never seen a pair of eyes before or since. Marion was nothing like her. Marion was something simpler, well enough in her way, but on a lesser trajectory. What about him? Was he on a trajectory right for him? I'm not a man of passion, he told himself. Anita used me and I used her, and when the time came, I slipped away. I gave up the hotel and I went into advertising. I was smart, I was good at it, but it wasn't right for me. I came back to what I knew because I was always going to come back. I run a few shops and I keep people clothed. People like me don't go in for dramas, he thought. It took me a while to find out where I belonged, though: it took Anita, Andrea and the years of advertising. I was never so very different from my father so I run a few shops. The world's full

of people like me, we don't do any harm, we function well enough. There's no harm in us. We're not worth shooting!

When he got back home, Marion was asking the children what they were going to be when they grew up. They said they didn't know, so she made suggestions. 'What about a news reader, Charli? You could do it well!' But Charli was smart. 'Someone tells the news reader what to read. I want to be that person, mum!'

Then Greg. 'I want to be an engine driver mum.' This drew from his mother, 'No you don't! Driving trams and trains all day. What sort of a job is that?' Greg was smart also. 'I only said it because it's what you're supposed to say. I want to be the richest man in the world!' This amused Sandy, and disgusted Marion. 'No you don't! Rich men aren't necessarily happy, you know!'

Tell that to Golderberg, whoever he is, thought Sandy. He might see more sense in it than our boy.

It was time to move. The leader of the party wasn't seizing the opportunity; certain ministers in the government had been involved in dubious dealings with developers' access to land that had been rezoned and were alleged to have made themselves wealthy. Nothing was certain but the public didn't like what they sensed had happened. Antinous was listening hard. There are moments when to do nothing is to be swept aside forever, and moments when to act too soon is fatal. Antinous was listening. His sharpest attention was focussed on a man called Dennis Healey, the numbers man. A nod from Dennis would mean he had to act. Antinous said to Jodie, in bed one night, 'I've been waiting and watching for years. We're very close to the moment.'

Jodie murmured 'How close?'

'Can't say yet, but ... close!'

That was at home; in the office, he took calls. People wanted to know if he was ready, so they rang him on other matters. How imaginative they were! Others were direct. Names were named, of people who'd swung, or were swinging. Everyone had opinions, all over the place, of course. Everyone was watching everyone else. Everyone was listening, including Dennis Healey, who was saying nothing. 'Very fluid' was his reply to inquiries. 'Very fluid.' They knew that. That

was why they were asking. If you wanted to know, you needed to know what Dennis Healey was thinking. He understood that the party was an organism. Change something here and it would cause a reaction *there*. Loyalties and disloyalties were shades of the same colour. When people spoke, they were protecting their capacity to move. To change. What they said might be true, but truth changed its meanings, and its colours, too. What you said to one person was true – for that person: you'd say something else to another person. You had to. You had to be true to what you'd been, even as you readied yourself to be something else. You made up your mind only when it was safe to do so, and that was when others were making up their minds. Minds operated in a certain order, in accordance with the power, respect, authority and thought-speed of the party member. Those making up their minds were watching others making up their minds. Everyone was therefore guessing. Mistakes were being made, and corrected. Whispers were passed around, and shared. The party was reaching a decision. Dennis Healey was both listening and intuiting. He was watching Antinous closely and Antinous knew it. He had to say the right word at the right moment, just as in athletics the starter must fire his pistol at a certain moment. If he fires too soon, people aren't ready: too late, and they're unbalanced and confused. Once started, a race can't be restarted if it's had a bad start. Even a leadership change is a professional job; a person wanting to be leader has to know his moment.

Antinous made a string of phone calls, arranged and then rearranged his notes, and discovered ... came upon ... surprise, surprise ... a group of journalists on the steps in front of parliament. Victoria's parliament is its earliest fine building, and is still the finest. The wealth of goldfields propelled the builders. They picked a commanding spot, imagined a grand city where there were only shanties, tents and cottages, and built a meeting place from which it would be ruled. Looking down on the city that had grown under the parliament's gaze, Antinous told the journalists that when he spoke next in the parliament he would be referring to the actions and inactions of the premier in the matters under question. They wanted to know if he meant that he would move a no-confidence motion, and he nodded. They, knowing full well that such a motion would

normally be moved by the leader of the party, saw that he was ready to challenge. 'But all I'm doing,' he told the journalists, 'is telling you where I think the game is up to. If you misinterpret what I've said to mean that there's a leadership challenge, then I'll be forced to deny it. There's no leadership challenge ...'

Nor was there: not until reports of the conversation came out of the media, were denied, repeated, and thus became factual. The deputy leader, Antinous (Endless) Knight, was forced to suggest that the air needed to be cleared, confidence restored, together with the certainty required to keep the party functioning in the House of Assembly, and that it would be best if a leadership ballot was to take place.

It did, Antinous won, 27 to 15, the leader stepped aside, and the aforesaid Antinous (Endless) Knight became leader of the opposition, and moved his no-confidence motion. This was lost on party lines, 53 to 42, but the state's voters knew that parliamentary sittings would be torrid until the next election, due in a short four months. The premier would be lucky to survive.

He did, and he didn't. He too faced a leadership challenge and he won, 31 to 22. His government was ready to lose, and lose they did, four months later, in a landslide, 60 to 35. When Jodie kissed her husband, he let his eyes meet hers, but said nothing. They embraced their children, then Antinous turned to the microphone to say that the government he would lead would be a government for all Victorians. This statement was applauded, as it always is, and should be.

The moment he stepped away from the microphone Antinous knew that he'd been changed. He was not the man he'd been, despite the presence of Jodie and the children. He belonged to the voters of Victoria and they, by God, belonged to him. The democratic deal had been done. There was no undoing it until the day he, in turn, was defeated. In the interim, he must govern. Lead. Be available. Tell others what to do. Direct people. Listen. Set up commissions, tour the state. Feel responsible for fires, floods, droughts, disasters, murders, crashes, job losses and federal intervention in state affairs. Surprisingly, he was calm. The task and he were equal. For a moment he saw himself sitting in Lofty Franklin's maths class at his old school, getting things

right, getting things wrong. He would have to do a little better, but the same serenity that he'd felt back then, the same certainty that he had one path and one only to tread, was with him. Tenderly he took Jodie's hand, gathered their children about him, and moved to the people waiting to congratulate. They had got him to where he wanted to be. He must never forget to love them in that impersonal, generalised way of political love, every bit as demanding as personal, family, parental love, the love of man to woman and woman to man. Jodie was beside him. She knew virtually everything about him. He was not a secretive man, not convoluted by inner difficulties. He was what the voters had been attracted to. When his children spoke, he listened. They were speaking to him now, or perhaps it was only babbling, because they were excited. They could feel it in their mother. She was excited too. People were waving, whistling, smacking their hands together. There was cheering. Someone was trying to sing something. The room was incoherent, but happy. Antinous smiled broadly at anyone who caught his eye. This was the moment that would never be repeated, even if he won another term. Certain things don't happen twice. The Premier of Victoria felt a pull on his arm and looked around. Dennis Healey was offering his hand. Antinous shook the organiser's hand triumphantly, but felt a certain sagging as he did so. Counting the numbers would never stop. The moment his grip on the job began to weaken, Antinous knew, Dennis would be listening, arranging the groups of support and displeasure in his mind, watching the connecting points between groups, the crossover people, the signs by which experienced observers can know what's happening in the MPs' minds.

In the happiest moment of my life I'm challenged, Antinous saw. This is what I've waited for, and schemed for. I am that ominous figure, that fate-darkened figure, the one who's got what he wanted. Some time the following morning, he would sign something at Government House, and formulating that first signature implied that there would be, one day, a last signature, a last utterance, a moment of goodbye to what he'd been. One reaches the top only to be relegated, one day, to the bottom, the cast-offs, the lost, the forgotten. Crossing the stage with his family, beaming on his supporters, Antinous felt the limits of his time, his office, his power, moving in, ready to crush him. He

put out his hand to the nearest of his supporters, and stepped with confidence into whatever was to come.

He thanked his driver and walked up the steps. That was the place to start. He walked in without looking back, but knew that behind him was the long street with rises and falls where he'd led marches and where famous painters and poets had plied their trade, theatre-goers had congregated, restaurants were serving splendid meals. Problems would come from that direction too, borne by the city's prevailing wind. Problems! The first would be to pick a balanced cabinet, and he had it ready in his mind. The first person he saw inside the doors was Dennis Healey, to whom he murmured, 'Anything I need to know?' Dennis said, 'I'll come with you, if I may,' and the day had begun.

That night, when the children were asleep, he had a glass of port with Jodie. The house was warm and silent. 'We'd better make this a habit,' he said. 'Just one, at this time of night, to make sure we don't lose touch.' Jodie was pleased. She might easily have lost him to his job. 'You'll have to put up with me chattering,' she told him. 'You'll need to connect it with your job, so think of me as the ordinary person who's not involved in politics. Someone busy leading a life like everyone else.' Antinous broke in. '*Like* everyone else, but more important. Central. *Mine!*' It was an agreement. Then a thought occurred to him. 'Dennis Healey would tell me not to spend time on you. He'd say, you've got her vote. Talk to someone else!' They laughed so loudly that Jodie thought the children might wake, and shooshed him. They went happily to bed.

In the weeks that followed the state got used to its premier. They found him more demanding than they'd expected. Company executives used to being consulted found that they were expected to make a public contribution if they wanted access. Racing clubs found themselves reminded gently that they were using public land. A Chinese investor found himself welcomed, and photographed with the premier after he endowed a professorial chair at the state's oldest university. This photo hung on the wall above the premier's chief of staff's desk. That should be clear enough! Antinous liked to turn up unexpectedly, hear what people had to say, and compare it with media reports. He asked people

questions: what did they pay for their cars, how much did it cost to run them, what did they think about their kids' schools? He wanted to know when the people whose lives he broke into had last had a holiday, and where they'd gone. Did they read to their children, and what? He would say to a stranger, 'I'll tell you a problem that landed on my desk last week. I want to know what you would have done about it.' If people told him he ought to spend money on some idea they fancied, he challenged them with 'And what would you cut to fund what you're proposing?' The public sensed that he was curious about them, and they liked him for it, even if it was unexpected and therefore ridiculous. It was noticed quite quickly that questioning of this sort only extended to people normally ignored. People who expected to be listened to were at one and the same time received courteously but kept at a distance. His habitual courtesy to some extent weakened the demands and expectations of those used to getting what they wanted. Hence his love of surprise and the unexpected. Opening nights of plays, and first screenings of films were an indulgence that made him popular. He turned up at country shows, and veteran car displays, anything that stirred his curiosity. Mayors and shire presidents were asked what was happening in their areas and encouraged to keep their history societies active. He kept up his before-bed ports with Jodie, switching to whisky or vermouth in warmer weather; she sipped from a tiny glass of liqueur, mostly Drambuie 'for my Scottish origins', she said. He told her how much he regretted having to be away, how he missed her and the children when he was being a public figure while others were with their families. 'It won't last forever,' he reminded Jodie and himself: 'In a three year term I'll make thousands of decisions, and there'll be about ten, maybe twenty, that really count. I've been watching other people do this job. They think they're important all the time, when they're not. Knowing the moment when what you do *is* important is the secret of the job. At other times, relax. Go with the flow. Do what you have to. Be polite to everybody, especially those silly enough to envy you. But you must be watching. And waiting. For those moments that really count. If you let them slip by you, you're lost.'

His words meant a lot to Jodie. She realised that she took the same attitude to life. Most of the time you did what you had to, obeyed the

rules, and relied on manners. Civility. This was her primal teaching for the children. Be polite, listen, save your questions for later. Don't blurt out stuff. Watch the adults, see who's relaxed and who's tight. Be on your guard with the tight ones, loosen up a little with those who are ready for it. Remember what people say, but don't remind them unless you're sure they'll welcome it, as some will. Build on trust, but not too high, for fear of things tumbling down. If this sounds like a recipe for caution, it wasn't. Jodie was natural. Nobody suspected her of anything, perhaps most of all intelligence. They thought Antinous had married a yes-wife when he valued her for a sensibility unlike his own. She suspected most of the human race and if she trusted someone, Antinous trusted them too. She was his wall, his interceptor, his sniffer-dog. He needed her. She realised after a time that their drinks before bed were the moment in his day when he re-centred himself, and she made sure she was ready. When he opened the cupboard where the bottles were kept, or arranged cushions on the chair where he liked to sit, it was as if he was reminding himself of the reality that was theirs. The room changed. The state of Victoria vanished. If someone had asked him where it had gone, he would have said, 'It's in my brief case. In the other room. Waiting. It'll get its turn tomorrow, around about breakfast. It'll burst noisily into my mind. But for now ...'

Then he would smile. He was un-lost. Centred. With the love of his life, whom he trusted more than himself. Yet, Jodie was aware, he rarely asked her what she would do about this or that, or how she would handle such and such. He knew. They were together in his mind so that he could draw on her when he needed. 'I don't like being away from home,' he told her. 'I have to go up-country, as you know, I can't avoid it, and I enjoy it while I'm there, it's always good to be in the bush because the people are different, and much more likeable, by and large. But getting into bed in a country hotel without these minutes we share is miserable. I'm lonely.' Jodie would smile at such remarks and say, 'I'm sure someone would help you in that regard,' and he would shake his head. 'They would if I let it be known that that was what I wanted. But it's not. I don't. I married fairly late ...' he was referring to the fifteen year gap between their ages '... and when

Tim came along, and then Sally, I felt complete. The making of me was done. I could start my work. I'm a lucky man, darling. I've been given my chance.'

Jodie sipped the fierce but luscious liqueur from the Isle of Skye. Looking at her husband, she said, 'Only a few men get the chance to say that.' He was looking at her, a question in his mind. 'And women?'

She put the glass down, all but empty. 'We depend on men. We've got more to do, but they keep themselves so busy that they rarely give us what we need to feel completed, in the way you say. We should be able to, but most of us don't.'

He had to ask. 'And you?'

She said, 'We share. And because we share, I move into your world, and you move into mine. I'm not half, I'm whole, and so are you. It's rare, and it's good.' She wiped the tiny glass with her finger and licked the finger before standing, meaning the conversation had ended and it was time for bed.

CC assumed that he'd lose contact with Antinous once he held the state's top job, but the friendship had increased importance for the premier. 'I need perspective on what I'm doing,' he told the historian. 'I still want those drinks with you at the Windsor, and I want you and Prue and the kids to visit regularly. I don't want Jodie and the children cut off because I'm in the political world.' CC's faculty colleagues became aware of his closeness to the premier and treated him with new deference, waiting, perhaps, for a few state secrets to fall from his lips. But it was CC who did most of the talking when with Antinous because that gentleman wanted to know what others were doing in their more normal lives. The perspective of an active, thoughtful historian had a certain value in handling the state's problems, day by day. CC suggested that Antinous might like to keep a diary, a journal, of his thoughts on the issues of the day, but he said it would interfere with his connection with Jodie and the children, not to speak of the friendship they shared, if he kept another record of his experiences. No. No diary. Antinous had always thought of himself as superior – above – and he had to trust that feeling now. He would be natural, or he'd be nothing. He was also curious.

Moving around the state, he talked to people in all walks of life, but few of them interested him in the way CC did. The historian was absorbed in the difference between individuals as themselves and as social units - members of society. Society can be compared with the weather, he liked to say, changing all the time, always there, affecting us, but coming at us differently every day. Everything, he liked to say, implies its opposite. 'Think,' he would say. 'Australians are generous, people like to say. It may be true at times, but the opposite is also true. They're mean-minded skinflints, out for themselves and nobody else. They're tolerant - and they're not. They believe in free speech - for themselves, and as for their enemies, they want to shut them up! And so it goes. Anything you can think of, the opposite is also true at times, and in certain ways. So you can't build a history on any one understanding of society. If you do, it'll only work for a moment, and then it loses validity. Pity, isn't it!'

This was the side of CC that made Antinous curious. 'So what do you do? Write about individuals, or groups? They're not consistent either.'

'They're not, but we don't expect them to be. We know from ourselves and everyone around us - our family, people we work with - that they can be inconsistent. So if I say that General Monash was inconsistent when he did something, people can accept that. It doesn't surprise them because they know that plenty of people, including themselves, can be, and are, inconsistent. But we expect society to work by steady rules that apply to everybody and all the time ...'

The smile on the premier's face told him that he was wrong.

'Okay, yes, I know,' CC said, 'but I'm a historian, don't forget, not a polly. If I give as an explanation of something that society worked in a certain way, my students, and readers, expect me to be right. They're not very patient with historians who keep changing the rules of engagement ...'

Antinous raised his hand, and the waiter in the lounge started in his direction, then saw that he was signalling to his friend. 'They're no more patient with me,' the premier said. 'They hate you if you don't do what you said you'd do, but they hate you just as much if you don't say you'll do something, preferably the something they want. They've

got to be pleased – they think – and they aren’t easy to please, as you well know.’

The lounge of the Windsor is a comfortable place to talk. Old verities, abandoned elsewhere, can be brought out in confidence. Money gives assurance. Staff appraise the appearance of people intending to enter. The atmosphere must be maintained. Privilege is respected. Only people who know who they are get in. The chairs are leather and deep, the service assured. Time moves as quietly and with the same assurance as the waiters. Groups are seated well apart, so that overhearing is unlikely. People are judged according to their social weight, and courtesies govern all. This is no instantaneous, media-created world; verities, whatever they may be, still apply. Antinous loved the place, and loved CC for his ability to shift its elevation from the social to the intellectual, something that came naturally to him, and was therefore appropriate in the lounge. ‘For the first quarter-century of the Commonwealth, the national parliament sat across the road, as you know,’ Antinous reminded his friend. ‘State parliament sat in the Exhibition.’ This thought pleased him. ‘The men in those early Commonwealth parliaments would have come over here for a drink. Alfred Deakin and the rest of them. I like to think of them, or some of them, sitting here where we’re sitting, just as I like to think of men and women, because times are changing, from future parliaments crossing the road and talking about what we did in our time. Where we succeeded and where we failed. None of us,’ he said, looking at his friend, ‘are here forever. We do a few good things if we’re lucky, then they kick us out! Someone else gets a go. But if we’re lucky ...’ and he sat back ‘... we don’t die completely. We stay alive in the story. That’s good enough for me. I don’t mind if my part’s only a little bit part, and the stars are someone else. That’s how things work out and you can’t do anything about it. I’ll be happy to be remembered.’

CC grinned at his friend. ‘The orchestra wants to go to China. That’ll cost you a bit. But they’ll remember you till next time. They’ll want to go to Vienna!’

Antinous looked at his fingers. ‘The Commonwealth’s going to throw in a bit. We’ll cover whatever they can’t get from company sponsors. We have to do that. It’s our orchestra after all. Did you hear

them in the Mozart 39?’ CC shook his head. ‘Second movement was wonderful. Those falling phrases. He really did come down from heaven, that man. He made the earth a different place.’ Antinous looked at his friend. ‘He showed us all up really. A good piece of legislation ...’ he studied his friend ‘... is not easy to draft, and that’s only getting the words right. Getting the thing through the two Houses is another matter altogether. But when you hear music that’s *that* good, you know the difference between genius and ordinary mortals.’

He sat back, sipped his drink, then sat back further. ‘And where do you place yourself?’ CC asked. ‘And for that matter, where do you place me?’

The leader’s fingers stretched as if he was going to sip again, then closed. He should answer first. ‘I’m good enough to know the difference between good legislation and bad. I’ve got that far, and that’s something. But there are hundreds of others who can do the same thing, whether by learning, or just plain common sense. And you my friend? You’re going to do something great one day, but you’re still working out what it’s going to be.’

CC knew his friend had spoken truly. Why couldn’t he work it out? He’d written any number of papers, articles, essays in others’ collections. They talked about it at the Windsor and at the Knights’ home, with no resolution. ‘These things come when they’re ready,’ Antinous told his friend. ‘Einstein didn’t pick up a mail order catalogue of theories, you know. He had to wait!’ Then he had an idea. ‘Jodie and I have booked a house at Dinner Plain for a fortnight over Christmas - New Year. Away from everything for a few days. You and Prue and the kids come with us. It’s plenty big enough. We’ll go for walks, all of us together. Do you know the area?’ CC didn’t. ‘It’s supposed to be for skiers, but I think it’s better in summer. I’m not a snowman! There’s a pub there if we don’t feel like cooking, and we’ll take plenty of wine. You’ll be amazed at the effect it’ll have on you!’

CC wasn’t sure whether Antinous meant the wine or the surroundings, but he agreed, and Prue and the children were delighted. They could hardly wait, but of course they had to, and the months passed ever so slowly until the time came for packing. They’d

agreed on two cars, and the children in both cars were excited at keeping an eye on their companions, if they could. Prue drove the Claringbolds' car and Jodie the Knights'. 'I don't trust myself any more,' Antinous told his friend: 'I'm always thinking of something else. I get a driver in the job, and er ...' He glanced at Jodie. 'I don't think you mind, do you love?'

His wife said drily, 'I feel safe.'

They stopped at Yarragon for drinks and a snack. Jodie took the children with her to the counter to give the orders, and Antinous said to Prue, 'You're behind the wheel so I realise you're still working, but believe me, my holiday has started.' She asked him how he'd heard of Dinner Plain and he rambled on, forgetting himself, until Jodie came back with a number on a metal stand. 'We're number nineteen,' she announced, and her husband said, 'That's my identity for the next twelve days. Call me nineteen and don't call me anything else!' CC felt envious that he could unburden himself so easily ... if he could. The mountains would decide.

It was almost evening when they arrived. The sun was about to set. 'Find the firewood!' Antinous told the children. 'The nights get cold up here.' In a minute or two they had a blaze, all flame and little heat, but it was enough to tell them they were free of everything but whatever they'd transported in their minds. The children wanted to go for a walk because they were fascinated with this town, as they called it, where every house was the same as every other house, but also different. How could that be? The fathers told them to explore in the morning, and sit by the fire, and help their mothers, and make up their beds, and unpack their clothes and work out what they'd wear the next day when they went for a walk ...

The children, of course, said they'd wear the clothes they'd worn today, who needed anything else, and the fathers said, 'Kids!' and were grateful when Prue called from the bench 'After all that driving I need a drink. Isn't anyone going to pour something?' Jodie supported this and the men obliged ...

In the morning everything was fresh and new. They walked around the settlement and even put their nose in the hotel, but Antinous saw a copy of yesterday's newspaper and walked out again.

‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘No. As firmly as I can, and this really has to be a rule, everybody, no news.’ He said it again. ‘No news.’

They walked, and sometimes they drove. After a day or so they stopped looking at their watches. Antinous had left his in Melbourne without anyone realising. On the third night they went for a drink at the hotel, and someone recognised him. ‘Getting away from it all Mister Knight?’ The sometime premier nodded. ‘As best I can,’ and that was a hint. He ran into the same person two nights later, to be asked, ‘Comfortable Mr Knight?’ and felt contented enough to say what a good house they were staying in.

The children had no idea what life in the mountains was like. Where was everybody? They drove to Mount Hotham. ‘Is this all there is?’ Antinous told them, ‘Yes, thank god. And I hope we can keep it that way.’ He later murmured to CC, ‘There’s always some silly bastard who sees something beautiful and wants to develop it. That’s the word they use. All the time. Develop.’ The two men discussed ghastly buildings on the Great Ocean Road until Endless called a stop. ‘What sort of tree’s that, do you know CC? Is that a snowgum? I’m as blind as a bat when it comes to trees. I ought to take a course. People tell me we have to protect Leadbeater’s Possum and I say yes, it’s the state emblem, but I wouldn’t know one if I saw one. I know what a possum looks like, but a Leadbeater? Spare me!’

They’d been in the mountains a week before Antinous asked his friend, ‘What do you want to write, CC? Or to put it another way, what would you like to see in front of you before you put your pen down, turn off your computer, and say, I think that’s all I ever had to do!’ Prue, Jodie and the children were busy with something they’d found a stone’s throw away, and CC knew his friend had chosen the moment. The historian said, ‘Thanks for asking, Endless. You know it’s been on my mind,’ and readied himself to let out whatever it was that had been caged up in his thoughts.

‘People expect historians to operate on a level of truth that’s impossible for everyone else. I understand only too well the difficulties of trying to do what they ask. Yet I want, as much as any other historian, to do what they want. And what, you ask, is that? I know I’ve mentioned to you before that the opening sentence

of Crawford's book - just a few essays really - on Australia starts with a memorable sentence: 'The history of Australia is a chapter in the history of migration.' I accepted that for years. It's taken me ages to understand that what I really want to do is to turn it back to front, and start a new history of the country with something like "The history of migration is a chapter in the history of Australia". By which I mean, the country came first, and then, at some later stage, came the aboriginal people ...'

He could see that Endless was fully focussed, yet challenged and probably somewhat overwhelmed.

'... and eventually, at a very late stage indeed, in 1770 James Cook and company sailed along the east coast - no other - and eighteen years after that, a bunch of rejects were dumped here, with some soldiers to guard them, and, amazingly, a nation grew. This is usually regarded as a triumph, and it is, but at a cost. These people from England wiped out vast numbers of the aboriginal people ...' He paused, then explicated: "*Ab origine*, from the beginning" before getting back to his theme '... and they changed the country forever.' He pointed to the eroded land they stood on, high land, worn, but refusing to admit its own exhaustion. 'Look at it, Endless. It's *your* land, because you're the political head of this state. It's your land, yet you're like me, you can't do a thing to improve this land. And,' he added, 'you can't do much to spoil it either. There are plenty of people who are willing to do that, as we both know. But look at it, my friend, look at it. Look at it and then I want you to tell me how could anything be more eloquent than this untouched, un-mucked-up land. I call it eloquent. What does the word mean? It means that it can speak for itself. And what does it say? It says it's the complete works of the country, endlessly varied. Snowgums, my friend, there they are, all around you because you're in snowgum country. Snowgums and snowgum-related things grow here, but if you go over the other side of that ridge, something else will grow. Years ago, someone took me for a drive in the country just off the side of the road we drove up to get here, in the Tambo valley ...'

Endless thought he knew the area CC was referring to; the direction of his thinking wasn't yet available: but he was listening.

‘... and he started me walking along a mountain track with him, and he told me to look, and when I saw something, to tell him what I saw. Well I felt a bloody fool because after a couple of minutes I had to admit I couldn’t see a thing but trees. Of course, you dill, he told me, but what about the trees? What about them? I looked for a while, and then I said, well, there’s two sorts. They’re different. These ones have got bark on them and these ones haven’t. And I pointed to left and right of me, the ones with bark and the ones that hadn’t. And he said, you fuckin genius ...’

CC glanced at the wives and children to reassure himself that they were still out of earshot.

‘... is there anything else you notice? Or are you truly blind? Well, I looked for a minute, and then I said, they’re separate. The ones with bark, they’re all on this side of us, and the ones without, they’re on this side, and, now that I look a bit more closely, they’re not mixed. There’s none of the ones with bark over here among the ones without bark. That’s interesting, I said, thinking that I was pretty smart to have noticed. Then he said to me, the ones without bark are snowgums, *Eucalyptus pauciflora* ...’

Antinous Endless Knight, Premier of Victoria, looked very foolish. J Brian C Claringbold, of the University of Melbourne, touched his friend’s hand tenderly. ‘Don’t take it to heart. It hurt me too, but I had to learn.’

The historian went on. ‘... and the other ones, with bark, but only a certain way up, notice, are woollybutt, alpine ash, *Eucalyptus delegatensis*, there’s lots of names, but the names don’t matter, look at the way they grow. The two types grow within a yard of each other, he pointed out to me, but they don’t mix. There’s a boundary, and each species sticks to it. And he knew he had me on the defensive, and was I ever! I was looking at something quite remarkable, and I had no explanation for it. I wasn’t that clever. I’d only noticed it because he’d made me notice. What a fool I felt, and it’s a feeling that I’ve never really un-felt ...’

Endless said, and he knew he was saying it to protect himself as much as to assist his friend, ‘All right. All right. You’ve told me where you’re coming from. I don’t really understand it, but you’ve given me

something to digest and that's a start. But let's get back to the question. What sort of book do you want to write? You're belting me with the problem. What's the answer?'

CC didn't want to be stopped. Things that had frustrated him for years were getting an airing in a place that not only made sense to him but seemed to affirm something in his thoughts that was trembling on the verge of being said. He glared at his friend, looked moodily in the direction of the others, still doing whatever it was that they were doing, and raged on.

'We're not the only intelligence in the universe. Our story isn't the only story. Our mob, the white people from 1788 on, marched in and took over the country, taking a terrible toll of the black people – and got a bit back from them from time to time, which I suppose is only fair enough – and they changed, as completely as they were able to, one system, one way of doing things, which had evolved over forty thousand years, and they replaced it with another system, which they'd brought from Europe, the British Isles mainly ...'

Again he paused, while Endless waited: curious, polite as ever, unaware, as yet, how much of his thinking systems would be left when his friend had finished ...

'... and we've never stopped to ask ourselves if the way we tell the story is the best way to tell it. There's so much that our version leaves out. Ignores. We can't go on like this. There's got to be another way. Another story told in another way.' He paused, but still thinking. 'We think mankind, and our particular bunch of mankind, is the centre of things. We write our history accordingly. We're not the centre of things, we only think so because we think we're gods and nothing else is divine, whereas, I think that if we're divine, if *divine* has any meaning – and it probably doesn't – then anything and everything takes its turn. Just as I was saying about the Nunning Plateau – he'd suddenly remembered the name – 'that's the place where the trees grew side by side ... if you were there, and you noticed, then it was the trees that were central. Not the people looking at them!' Suddenly he grew calm. Endless could feel the tension in his friend draining away. He'd said what he wanted to say. They'd travelled a long way, and they'd found a place where the words could get out, feeling right.

‘Splendid, my friend,’ said Endless. ‘Marvellous. I see, truly I see, what you mean. Or I think I do. At last. We came a long way, but it was worth it.’ Then he swung on his friend. ‘What are you calling it, and when will you start?’

A few minutes later, Jodie, Prue and the children came back to the men. Jodie felt the difference straight away, ‘I want a photo,’ she said. ‘You two first, then everybody.’ The pictures were taken with the usual holiday hilarity. Getting back in the cars, Prue said to her husband, ‘Tell me tonight, if we get a quiet moment. Something’s happened.’ She patted his knee in a challenging way. ‘You’re quite different, aren’t you. After five minutes on your own, the two of you.’ CC smiled faintly, nodded. Saying it was one thing, doing it was another.

It was too noisy to think by the fire, with the children there. He thought of going for a walk but decided against. He told Prue, as they lay in bed that night, ‘It’s the book that I’m always thinking about. Endless put me on the spot and made me come out with a statement of sorts. Now I’ve got to work it into a project that can be made to happen. I think I’ve committed myself this time but I still don’t know how I’ll go about it.’

He decided early on that the project was too big for one person. He was aware that the land mass known today as Gondwanaland had split in the remote past and its parts had drifted from each other to form South Africa, South America and Australia but it was beyond him to write an account of this. He was aware that there were similarities between the vegetation of the divided continents but again, it would be out of his range to discuss these matters. Then there would be the arrival of humans: were they all from the same source, or different places? He had no idea, but someone would be able to deal with this question. How did they get here? Had there been a land bridge with what was now Papua New Guinea? He’d heard of it but wasn’t sure. Where would it have been? Then he remembered Tasmania which had not always been cut off. How long had it been an island? What differences had grown up between the Tasmanians and the mainlanders? Again, someone must know. Then there would have to follow a book, a chapter, something, about climate changes

and vegetation. There were still remnant patches of palms in central Australia, but remnants of what? That would need different expertise, and whoever wrote about that would probably have to take the story on to the eventual dominance of eucalypts over much of the continent. The rise of the gum tree would lead logically to the importance of fire in the story of the land, and that would be a feature of the section – the book, surely? – that dealt with the aboriginal people’s custodianship of the place. How had they thought of it, conceived it, managed it, what had they done to it and, for that matter, how had they spread and how evenly?

It struck the historian, juggling these ideas, that the aboriginal management of the land – and was ‘management’ the word he would use, as editor and partial writer of this project? – had gone on for so long that it must, surely, fall into parts, or sections, needing to be dealt with separately, but where these divisions might fall would be a later decision, and other people would have to make it. It also began to emerge in his thinking that what he had in mind would eventually involve so many people of differing backgrounds and outlook, that bringing such a project to fruition would change the nature of the department he was working in. This was no peripheral idea, but a centralising one, a domineering concept, perhaps, and likely to clash with the interests of others ...

That would be something he’d have to be ready to deal with!

The test of his ideas would be how the project moved from these pre-histories, as people would want to call them, into the period, post-1788, which had already been much written about. If the pre-histories had no effect, no capacity to enforce a rethinking and then a rewriting, what would have been the point of the exercise? If the new pre-histories did have such an influence, that’s to say did cause the last section of the story to be rewritten, what would be the result? The outcome?

That, he realised, was the question!

The result, he realised, would also be his life’s work. This last thought had a peculiar effect on the historian J Brian C Claringbold. He felt humble, indeed inadequate, yet at the same time he felt an immeasurable vanity run through him for a time, until it settled and he considered realistically the workload, the job he was picking up,

possessing, laying claim to. He imagined himself directing a team of enthusiastic volunteers, worker-bees doing as directed, and he felt inadequate, too puny for what he was proposing to himself. He thought of Prue, Angela and Tom: would he and his project be a burden to them, something that caused sacrifices in their lives, or would it bring benefits he couldn't see to their advantage?

He didn't know, but he suspected he'd made the commitment simply by analysing the matter this far, and it was their fates he was deciding as well as his own. That, he supposed, was in the nature of decision-making. He thought of Robert Gordon Menzies committing Australia to war in September 1939 and it struck him that ideas were born of their time more than they came from any individual mind. To put it bluntly, if he didn't do it, someone else would.

That decided it. He had a job, a very big one, to get started.

CC found the planning arduous. He had to find people who might undertake the various pre-history sections he'd planned ... and they, of course, as soon as he discussed his ideas with them set about changing them. Three months later, with no writers committed, no funding organised, and no sense, yet, of how the pre-history he envisaged might affect the formal history that would follow it, he confessed his worries to his political friend. 'Nobody's against it – or nobody that counts – but they're all wary. No one wants to commit until they know what the whole thing's going to look like, and that's what we all have to work to find out. It's a classic problem.'

Antinous was sympathetic. It was something he encountered every day. 'There's a famous statement attributed to Marilyn Monroe, not to mention half a dozen other busty beauties of their day – "How do I know what I think till I hear what I say?" How does that one ring in your ear?'

'Truly. I think you're telling me to start writing and see what comes out?'

'You're the scholar, CC. I wouldn't dare give you advice. And if I did, you'd be mad to take it.' They looked at each other, two brave men, unafraid of responsibility, but aware of things that bring human projects down. 'What's Gilbert Brennan say?'

This was CC's professor, a dour man, surprisingly bold, but awkward in manner and notoriously impatient. 'He says show me a scheme that's got a fair chance of working, and I'll back you all the way. But don't pester me. I'm busy myself, as you well know. He's worried about not finishing a thing he's been on for years. I think he's got a health problem that he isn't willing to talk about.'

'What's he working on?'

'Protestant-Catholic rivalry. Enmity. Class warfare, that sort of thing. He says that when you see it's ended, you'll know we've finally forgotten the British Empire. We'll have transformed ourselves into something else.'

Antinous was interested. 'You need him. That's part of your theme.'

'You think?'

'Oh yes, listen.' He launched into a long dissertation on the way the upper-class values that had been brought to the country by a number of the state's early governors, and supported by early colonial wealth, had given way, over time, to a popular culture that could be found in a range of places. 'Imagine yourself being driven down Saint Kilda Road in a well-sprung coach, and you see a statue at the side of the road. A gentleman, a soldier, a nobleman on horseback ...'

CC smiled. His friend was talking about the Marquess of Linlithgow.

'... and what he tells you is that the road can be used by anybody, but it really belongs to a privileged class who are good enough to let others use it too. The statue is placed between the city and the Governor's residence, and the Governor, god bless him, resides on a hill. You know what they say about Catholic churches, don't you!'

They laughed. How had the micks grabbed so many hill tops for their churches?

'Well, once you've said good morning to the Marquis,' Endless was saying, 'you go to the MCG, one of the biggest places of worship in the world, and you see who matters these days. Who really counts. Cricketers and footballers, all the champions we still love to remember.'

'I've never heard of half of them,' CC confessed.

'But you can find out,' said the premier. 'Go there on a match day and ask the first person you see. Who's that? What did he do, that

they've got a statue of him here? You'll find out. You'll get an ear full! People know because it's what they want to know ...'

CC was suddenly reminded of something. 'Hey! Speaking of statues, what became of that idea of a gallery of all the state premiers since the very first. To go with the prime ministers in the gardens at Ballarat?'

Antinous gave a smile of the knowing variety. 'I think I've been able to bury that little notion. I hope I don't disappoint you in telling you so.'

'I rather like that line of PMs. Some of them probably hated each other, but fate and the popular will puts them side by side, to be remembered and yes, even compared. The public has a right to judge, I think, and the display is dignified enough to make the judgement tolerably fair.'

'I think so too, but I also think one line of political leaders is enough.'

CC was curious. 'Where was it going to go?'

'It never got a home, I'm pleased to say, but in the suggestion that I heard, the state premiers would have been dotted through the Fitzroy Gardens ...'

'... in East Melbourne?'

'Antinous nodded. 'But not in chronological order, for some reason which I never understood.' His friend laughed. 'Just think of some of the people you might have found yourself next to!' The name that came to both pairs of lips was Henry Bolte! 'The last hangman!' They were both thinking of Ronald Ryan, hanged by the express orders of Bolte. 'John Cain, father and son.' Endless met this suggestion with approval. 'I could accept being in their company. But the whole idea was doomed. It was petty. There wasn't and isn't enough respect. Every ratbag protest movement would chain themselves to the dead premiers. Graffiti the living ones. And it's not how any of us live in the public's minds.'

The historian sensed something serious in his friend. 'How's that?'

'Take Lindsay Thomson. A small man. Nothing impressive about him to look at. You couldn't make much of a statue out of him.'

'But?'

‘He’d been a teacher, then he moved into politics. He was Minister for Education for a while. Then he became premier. He wasn’t a bad one, he wasn’t a good one. He was a decent man, he didn’t have any imagination but then he didn’t have a scrap of vulgarity in his body either.’

‘Unlike a few we could name.’

‘Indeed. But you might remember that some mad idiot held up a school. Forced a young woman teacher and her pupils into a van and drove them somewhere. Nobody knew where. Then he issued a ransom demand. Thousands of dollars, I forget the amount. The police negotiated. I can’t remember how that was done. The arrangement was that someone from the government would be at a certain spot on a bush road at six the next morning and would be holding a bag with the ransom money. When it was handed over, the children would be released. Lindsay Thompson was Minister for Education at the time. He said it was his duty to be the one who handed the money over to the ratbag at six in the morning.’

‘And he was there, but the fellow didn’t turn up.’

‘That’s right. But they found him eventually, and he was packed off to jail for a good long spell. The real hero was Lindsay Thomson though. He was Minister, it was his responsibility. I admire him for that. On a bush road at six in the morning, with money in a bag and some little kids and their teacher on his mind.’

They looked at each other.

‘He didn’t know what was going to happen. He didn’t know what sort of man he was dealing with. But he had a sense of public duty, and it told him what he had to do.’

CC wondered what this meant for his friend. He had a duty too? Antinous said, ‘The amazing thing is that I’m quite popular. I haven’t done anything much to deserve it. If I start doing big things, important things, watch my ratings go down!’ His eyes sparkled. ‘I’ll have to make a few moves before too long. When it’s all clear in my mind, I’ll announce the whole lot one after the other. In about six or eight weeks so people don’t have time to get over one before there’s another. Then we’ll start!’ The historian who was his friend considered. ‘You’ll find, I think, as I’m finding, that getting started is the hardest thing of all.’

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ said Antinous Endless Knight.

Bob Enright, living on the river which forms the boundary between two states, read the Melbourne newspapers when he bothered to read any papers at all. For the most part he relied on television and gossip. The politics of New South Wales rarely concerned him. Sydney was too far away. He was aware, though, of something stirring in the southern city when people spoke of what the pleasantly-mannered premier was doing. He’d told his state that it treated its towns and surrounds too casually; visitors from overseas should find driving through the countryside a pleasure not obtainable in their own countries. The unique qualities of the land should be made available. He’d ordered the Forestry Commission to start the regrowth of the ancient mountain ash forests of central and south Gippsland. ‘It’ll take time,’ he told the state, ‘but nature doesn’t work on our time-frame. Our children and grand children will thank us for it.’ Bob liked that. Endless was talking sense of a sort that polities usually avoided. To attract visitors, the state had to be worth seeing. Early settlers had bashed down trees they should have kept. Where he lived, on the Murray River, there were patches of ruined soil where trees had been cut down and the salt table had risen to the surface. Most farmers, having wrecked an area in this way, simply left a bleeding sore on the surface of the land, offending Bob, who believed that only those who respected the land should be allowed to work it. He wondered if Endless felt as he did about that, and would he try to enforce it?

Another development in the south that caught his attention was the choice of certain areas as cities within the city, with speedy train and tram services between them. Two such areas had been nominated, east and west of the city centre, and work had begun on the improved transport. ‘An experiment’, the premier was saying. ‘If it works, we’ll extend the treatment. I want to reduce our dependence on cars. It’s not something we can do overnight, but if we concentrate our housing – and I mean make it really dense – along the transport routes, then we can develop long, linear parklands for those who want to walk, or ride from place to place. The cost of land is our major problem, not to mention the way we use it. We’ve got tiny little

plots at the front and back of detached housing. Both the housing and the garden spaces should be amalgamated into huge stretches of consistent use.' Bob could see what he was getting at, even though he was sceptical. City dwellers were so selfish, so concerned with themselves. They'd cling to anything they owned, regardless of what it obstructed. Their individuality was so strong that they'd forgotten how to be social.

Other statements from the recently energised premier – he'd been so quiet when his term began – set Bob thinking. The years had been getting away from him, his two-properties-in-one had kept him busy, he'd prospered, he could see that he'd more or less ignored the wider world, or at least the city where he'd been sent to school when he was young. Young! He was a middle-aged man by now, his kids were growing up, they had to find a place in the world for themselves, he had to think about how to hand on what he and Gloria had made. Not at once, of course, but he couldn't push it out of his mind any longer. Human life was a succession of generations and the transfers needed to be done with care. He began to hear good reports of Saint Michael's, a school in Albury that had lagged for years but had acquired a new council and a new principal to lead it forward. Gloria said they should have a look at it, because Emilia, their oldest daughter, would need something better than the local school very soon. They drove upstream, following the winding river, and made their inspection. It was impressive. Gloria said, 'It's not famous like some of those schools in Melbourne, but it's cheaper, and we've got to think of how we support the others when it's their turn.' She meant the remaining five children of their marriage. Bob said, 'It seems modern, doesn't it. Up to date. I like the idea of not having to depend on whatever's happening in the city.' He meant he liked the conservatism of country life – even though the drug scare of a couple of years earlier had come from the north, another rural area, not the south. Gloria said they should go to a café for afternoon tea – she still talked in those terms – and Bob agreed. They found a trendy-looking place run by a couple who'd shifted up from Carlton, and sat at a table near the front window, where they were looking at the menu when they heard a tap on the glass beside them. They looked up to see a man of Bob's age

whom Gloria didn't recognise, but this man was beaming hugely and calling 'Bob Enright! What are you doing here?'

It was Neville Long. He came in and asked if he might join them. It was only a form of politeness because it was obviously what he was going to do. He wanted to know what they were doing in Albury and they asked him the same thing. 'I'm here to buy computers for the kids. I got 'em their first computers a couple of years ago but they tell me they're no good now, out of date, not enough capacity, and all the rest of it.' Bob and Gloria were amused. 'There's no satisfying them!' Gloria said, 'I learned my tables on a slate! I'd write them out, then wipe them off, then write them out again. A slate! Nobody's ever seen one today!' Bob smiled indulgently. He could remember having a slate, though only just. 'I had one too. Mum told me I wouldn't need it when I got sent away to Grammar.' He said to his wife, 'That's where I met this bloke!' In a moment the two old boys were asking each other if they'd seen this, that or the other old boy recently, and they hadn't, but of course they knew about Antinous – Endless – Knight becoming Premier of Victoria ...

'He always had it in him, I thought,' was Bob's estimation. 'He was a clever fellow but he didn't seem to go for the same things as everyone else. He was more interested in knowing what nobody else knew, and then managing things in a way that suited him. I remember thinking, back in the old days, that I'd never want to take him on. He'd be too smart. He'd find some way of getting around you. You'd be left there thinking you'd take him on, and he'd be way past you and you wouldn't know how he did it.' They laughed. Boys! It was so much better to be men, and yet they couldn't stop reminiscing. 'Do you remember ...'

They could, of course. Whatever else life gave, it yielded memories. 'What are you doing these days?' each wanted to know of the other. Gloria went silent, listening. She knew her husband through and through, yet there was more to him. There had been a time when he'd been a boy and hadn't known what he would become. This must also be true of the doctor man, Neville, who practised in Wangaratta but came to Albury to get computers from a bigger store. 'Tell us about your family, Neville,' she said, when she had a chance to break

in. He was happy to do so. He loved them, yet she knew she'd diverted a stream of story and memory that the two boys, old boys, ageing men, had been releasing. She apologised. 'I broke into what you were saying. Tell us about the school again. Some more.'

But they wanted to talk about Antinous. How had he got so high? There'd always been a born-to-rule element in their schooling, but it had never applied to them, they'd forgotten it, and now they'd been reminded. 'What's he going to do next? How long will he last? What's he doing in the Labor Party, why isn't he a Lib?' There was so much to wonder about, and to expect. They were pleased that someone they knew was premier, unpolitical as they were. The state was in good hands. Someone they trusted was in charge. God had long deserted the heavens but things on earth – their part of it, that is – were in good hands. Neville had heard good reports of Saint Michael's school. 'Our kids are headed for Melbourne – Robert went to Grammar last year, and it nearly broke Donna's heart – but all the same, Joan's off next year to Merton Hall. You've got to give them the best start you can. All the same ...'

He stopped to think. What *had* he heard about Saint Michael's? He couldn't remember.

'... you say you liked what you saw of it. So what's the decision?'

Gloria lifted a hand to break in if Bob let himself be carried away, but he grew cautious. 'It's the sort of decision you need to make at home, when you're good and settled, and not going to do anything silly.' Gloria was relieved. Neville liked what he heard. *That* was the Bob he remembered. Cautious, country, never to be rushed. 'Good luck with it,' he said.

4

In old age, women are discarded, while men become lost – or realise that they’ve never found an identity for themselves. Which is the more pitiful? I cannot say. Others stay consistent to the end, though they may drift with age into an unclassifiable swirl that only they can understand. Others again are clear to the end, mainly because they’ve never been clear to those who’ve loved them, but have given out enough to be rewarded with loyalty, a gentler form of love. Ariadne Berg was such a one, clear to herself, inscrutable to most until the morning she died on a walk along the beach she loved. Good deaths are handed out as unfairly as birth into a favourable family, country, period or place – those starting benefits tossed around by fates, or norms, or what- or which-ever forces control the life-lotto we’re forced to play. Ariadne had set off for a walk after promising to lunch with Barbara Bishop, who wanted to share some garfish she’d bought. When her friend didn’t appear, Barbara set out to find her. It didn’t take long. Barbara knew the old lady’s habits, and sure enough, there she was in a much-loved spot where she could gaze across the ocean or, turning her head to the side, look deep into the tea-tree growing out of the sand. Barbara sensed that there was some secret attraction to this spot but had never asked: Ariadne’s mysteries were part of her grandeur. Barbara gathered her thoughts; she’d have to ring an ambulance, but first she wanted to share a minute with her friend before she was taken away to be buried, or cremated if that was her family’s wish. What do you say to your friends when they’re dead? Barbara thought that Ariadne would want to know what was going on in the world she’d left, so she told her friend about the waves and seagulls, a ship entering Port Phillip, clouds swirling in a high wind, and some little birds protecting themselves by snuggling in and under the tea-tree. When this was done, she said goodbye to the body with a straw hat over the face, and went home to use the phone. Two calls. The ambulance and Ariadne’s son Kim, who was on his own, Sophie and the children

being in Queensland with her parents on a trip to see the Barrier Reef. Kim said he'd drive down straight away, and he did, at a steady 60ks per hour, reminding his mother as he drove of things she'd done and said over the years. At the back of his mind, however, was a job he had to do. He didn't want anyone reading those letters to his father, squeezed together in what had been his father's desk. His mother had talked to her partner, long after he'd gone. Kim sensed himself wanting to talk to her, but more strongly, to protect her secret, as he thought of it. His mother's words must be stored in the silence where she'd gone. 'Mother!' he said as he opened the door of her house. He opened a cupboard and found a shopping basket, took it around to the desk where she'd written her notes to her husband and put them, first, in envelopes and then in the little cubicles the desk provided. He pulled out the letters, written over so many years, laughing at the stamps she'd stuck on them, as if Australia Post could get you into heaven, and put them in the basket. Then to the incinerator at the bottom of the garden. Matches. He thought of opening the envelopes so he could more easily burn the notes she'd written but decided against, in case he yielded to the temptation of reading what the letters said. He did no such thing. He lit them, one by one, then, when a good blaze was sucking air through the incinerator, he dropped them, slowly, one after the other, until he held the last of them in his hand. 'Mother!' he said again, then set it aflame, before dropping it. It burned, they all burned, until, eventually, the incinerator was dark.

He went inside. He looked into the rooms of the house, so still, fairly tidy, but quirky in places and messy here and there. Mother's house, empty at last. He stood by the open door one last time, then closed it, got into his car and went to Barbara Bishop's place, to be with his mother's friend.

Sophie and the children flew home to attend the funeral. Days later, they accompanied Kim as he began to clean up his mother's house. 'I don't want to sell it,' he told his wife. 'It'll be hard for me to go there for a while, until I get used to the fact that it's ours now, not mother's.' He tried to explain. 'We'll have to change things to turn it into our house, but for the moment, it feels wrong to even think of changing

anything.’ That triggered a thought in Sophie’s mind: the letters. She wanted to read them. She wanted to know what Ariadne had said to her husband, over the years. And why? Because she felt she had to inherit as much of the late mother’s mystery as she could. Ariadne had been so certain of her own subjectivity. Could she be replaced? No, but she could be followed in some ways, Sophie had no doubt. The mysterious letters would give her guidance.

But they weren’t there! When Ariadne’s son and his wife eventually got around to making the house their own, Sophie got a shock. She’d been certain that the letters would be there, and they weren’t. That could only mean that Kim had got rid of them, but when? Not since her return from Townsville, because he hadn’t been down to the house since then. It must have been the day the old lady died. So suddenly! So peremptorily! Why?

Why?

His mother’s letters to his father, her husband ...

Kim came into the house and found his wife standing at the side of the desk he’d robbed, weeks before, and knew she wanted to challenge him. ‘It was the only decent thing to do.’

So he understood. She said, ‘I needed them.’

He shook his head. ‘They weren’t yours. Or anybody’s. I put them in the fire. I mean, I burnt them.’ He waved towards the incinerator at the bottom of the yard. ‘They were private.’

She was hurt, and angry, glaring at him. She dared not speak. He could feel her rage. ‘She was speaking to her dead husband,’ he said. My father. If anybody had the right to read them, I did, and I refused. It was my decision and I made it.’ Sophie was unmoved; he went on. ‘She died that morning on the beach. Barbara Bishop found her. Her life was complete. She’d always been unpredictable. It was what made her wonderful. I didn’t want her pulled open, and revealed. She had mystery and I protected it.’

That, he felt, must surely end the matter, but she persisted. ‘Before I had the children, I was lost. I didn’t have any direction. But she directed me in the wonderful, powerful way she had. I’m a mother now, but I still looked to her for guidance. That’s what I was hoping I would find.’

He softened. 'Then I was wrong. But I thought that what I was doing was right.' He didn't know if that was sufficient apology to make peace. Probably not, but what else could he say? 'You were hoping for guidance. What sort of guidance? What were you looking for?'

She didn't know; that was the point. 'I spent my time with your mother in a state of amazement. I never knew what she'd come out with next. She'd say strange things and it'd take me ages to work out what she'd been getting at. And by the time I'd worked out what she meant, I was changed. I had no way of telling, but I felt that as long as she was alive and I was near her, I was getting better. I wanted her to take me further. Now ...'

She spread her hands to tell him she was helpless. She didn't accuse him but he knew that he'd been the cause and he felt a sudden rush of shame for what he'd done, and anger with Sophie for making him feel as he did. 'There's nothing we can do now. I thought what I was doing was right. I ought to apologise, and I want to apologise, but the fact is I can't because when I was doing it I felt I was right. I was making things ...'

He looked at Sophie, trying to love her as he normally did.

'... better for her because if what she'd written to ...' he couldn't say his father's name '... was a lot of silly nonsense, as it might have been, nobody would ever know. I loved her, it was an act of love to burn the letters. I was protecting her privacy, I was sheltering her, and I suppose I was closing the books on her. The accounts, I mean. Nobody would ever know what she'd written. Nobody would ever judge. All we would know was how much she'd loved her husband ... my father ...'

He couldn't go on. Sophie considered him, wanting to accept what he said, wanting to attack him for what he'd done. Then she remembered her own parents when she'd told them she had to hurry back to Melbourne because of what had happened. They did everything they could to help, to hasten her return, but when she tried to tell them what she felt about her step-mother's death, the reverence she felt for the old lady, she could tell, from the polite silences of her father that he thought Ariadne sounded crazy, and from her mother's sympathetic questioning that she saw what her daughter admired:

probably aspired to it herself. That was her own mother, her own father, courteously, affectionately, at loggerheads as they'd been for the length of her life thus far. And now, here was a similar – or dissimilar; she was too close to tell – gap, or difference, opening up between her and Kim. Did this happen to every couple, in the end? Early or late? Did anybody escape? She didn't know. She didn't hold him guilty for what he'd done, not any more. Couples did these things to each other. Couples were made up of two people, and if they were identical they couldn't form couples, could they?

'Put it aside, darling,' she said. 'You meant well. I meant well too, in a different way. Let's look forward to a time when we can laugh at what we were doing, the two of us.'

Julie and Norval waited six months, came to Melbourne, got married at the Registry Office, then had dinner at home with Sophie and Kim – and young Eric, who remembered them, and the big house where he'd played billiards. It had never occurred to him that they might come to his house, but there they were, still laughing, holding hands and smiling at each other as if there had never been any wars on the planet. He was shy of them until Julie grabbed him by the arms and presented him to Norval, who kissed him on both cheeks. 'He is a Frenchman!' his mother told him. Like your granpa and granma, I have told you this so many times!' The boy knew what came next, so he said it to stop his mother saying it. 'When are you going to tell everyone in your class at school how lucky you are?' Eric said it so dismally, so wretchedly, that they all laughed and he laughed too, having scored a success. Julie and Norval had dinner with him and his parents, and he knew that in some way the visitors were re-living the events of that late afternoon when his father had pulled him out of the house to watch the strangers walking towards the house. Where had they been? He'd never really understood why walking up and down the drive at that big country house was significant, but now they were doing something like the same thing – only it wasn't – in his house, and he couldn't understand that either, but his mum and dad were excited and that made it good to be with them. Norval said to him 'You are *curieux* because you think that we are *curieux* but you

will understand one day. It will all make sense!’ Kim laughed into his wine and said, ‘You’re an optimist, Norval! Make sense? I’ve been trying to do that for years and look where I’ve got to!’ He waved his hand inclusively at the table, meaning his wife, his child, his friends and himself. Julie asked Sophie what she thought of that. The older woman, the mother, was suddenly serious, but her guests could see that there was something she wanted to say, so they waited while the thought formed in her mind. ‘Something came between us a little while ago. Something silly, but important. Important to both of us. We almost had a fight, but we didn’t. We listened to each other. Each of us knows now that the other was right. Half right. Or if you like, each of us was completely right, but!’

She emphasized the word with a sweep of the hand as if commanding an orchestra. ‘But! We were also wrong. We were as wrong as we were right ...’

‘Riddles,’ said Kim.

‘True,’ said Sophie, the mother of his son: ‘True. You’re right. But I’m right too. That’s what I’m trying to say, I think. We shouldn’t get caught up in who’s right and who’s wrong. Everybody needs to know how everybody else thinks. Or that’s how it seems to me, even if it’s impossible.’ She paused, unsure, and Norval jumped in. ‘When we are young, we are stupid. We don’t even know what wisdom is. Eventually we realise that some people are wise, but we don’t know how they got to be that way. Then comes the moment when we realise that the wise person is the one who stays quiet, watches, listens, and thinks.’ Another thought occurred to him. ‘That means that Eric here, your son ...’

He patted the shoulder of the youngster beside him.

‘... must be the wisest of us all because he is the only one who isn’t talking!’ In a moment the four adults were laughing wildly and the boy – the wise one – knew that they were, in some silly way, in much the same mood as they had been at the big house with the funny name, except that this time their excitement had somewhere to go because a moment later they were talking about France and how they were going there together very soon, and how it would be the second time for Eric, not that he remembered the first, and for Julie, the beautiful,

excited but strangely serene woman – women were such mysterious creatures, but had something men didn't have, couldn't have – sitting opposite, it would be the first visit to the land where her husband had grown up, the land that had made him, and delivered him to her, on the other side of the world. Eric, who didn't know where he'd come from – does anybody? – didn't know that Julie, the woman across the table from him, was already planning, not only her visit to France, but her return to Ormiston where she, in her turn, would conceive and eventually bring a child into the world. What would she call him or her? She hadn't got round to thinking of that. Not yet.

Lola and Noel took a trip on a luxury liner for a few days. They boarded in Melbourne, travelled up the east coast, and had themselves dropped off at Yorkey's Knob, a little way past Cairns. They were the only ones leaving the ship, and were lowered over the side into a tiny boat with a dinky little outboard motor that took them to the northern town. Lola was full of memories of her arrival there, years ago, with Noel. 'The place has changed. It actually looks prosperous.' He glanced at the buildings, cars and tourist buses. 'It's always been a shanty town and I bet it still is, if you could peel off the veneer.' Lola was argumentative. 'Veneers are real you know. If I put on make-up, I'm changing my face. It's no veneer, I'm a different person.' He shook his head. 'No you're not. You're the same person with different stuff on your face.' He was in a sour mood and she wanted to get him out of it. 'What do you want to do, Noel? After we've checked in at the hotel?'

'Sleep.'

They were close to quarrelling. 'You slept most of the time on the boat. What are we going to do now we're here?'

'Hire a car and go somewhere.'

This interested her. 'Hey! Where do you want to go? I know, I've got an idea!'

He knew where she wanted to go and it frightened him.

'It's too far.'

She knew that he knew what she had in mind. 'It'd be a good drive. Great country!'

‘We’ve got a booking here. At that vulgar swish hotel you insisted on.’

‘That’s easily cancelled.’ She pulled a mobile out of her pocket. He glared at her, surrendering. ‘Oh Christ, it’s a bloody long drive, as you know.’

‘I’m full of energy. I didn’t do any exercise on the ship.’

They hailed a taxi and had themselves driven to a place where cars could be hired. They put their bags in a Toyota and set off for the remote town they’d visited once, in their days of trawling for prawns. Somewhere along the way they stopped for lunch on the verandah of a roadside pub. It wasn’t a great lunch but Noel hardly noticed; it was fish from the seas they’d worked long ago, and something wonderfully monotonous about the road and the countryside had claimed his attention. His mind! He was happy, despite his earlier reluctance. Lola was happy, seeing him in a mood she could only just remember. ‘We should come and live up here,’ she told him. ‘It’s doing you a world of good.’ He could only smile. ‘It is, isn’t it. Who’d have thought?’

She wanted to drive and he was happy to let his eyes roam over the hills and grassland they were rolling through. Once he murmured ‘The surface of the earth’ and she knew that the thinking side of him, which troubled her so deeply at times, because he couldn’t make peace with it, was content. Once in a while he scoffed at roadside signs telling them where accommodation, or beer, or petrol, could be bought. At other times, and for long stretches, he revelled in the dry grass quivering in the breeze that fanned their road. ‘Grass,’ he told the world as they drove through it, ‘is like the population of China. It just goes on, it’s never-ending. We won’t be here one day.’ He laughed. The world was a joke. ‘But the grass will be here. Exactly where it is now. Green and lush ... but when it dries out ...’ he waved a gentle hand ‘... it’s magical. It’s like the earth is whispering a song. You don’t have to listen if you don’t want to, but if you turn yourself down to silent so you can hear what other things are saying, what joy it brings!’ Lola had never seen him happier. ‘Silly man. Talking about grass. You can’t even start a lawn mower!’ It didn’t trouble him. ‘Silly man?’ Again, a wave at the world rushing past at the edge of the road. ‘Silly grass if it wants to be cut!’ She heard him chuckling as she turned

her eyes to the road ahead. A red car and a green one, close together, rushed past. 'They're in a hurry to get away. They must've heard you were coming, Noel!'

'I haven't got any bastard children up here you know. No dirty deeds buried and forgotten. Nothing to be ashamed of. The world's my oyster!' Glancing at him for a moment, she said, 'Swallow then.' He laughed again, happily. 'If I opened my mouth, I'd swallow a fly! Sorry to be difficult!' He'd never been easier. She swung the car into a string of bends, curving its movement to fit the curving of the earth. He nodded approvingly. 'There's a roadhouse up this way somewhere. Just a petrol station in our day but someone told me they'd done it up with lots of photos. Early settlement stuff. We could stop and have a look.' It was casual to him but she felt nervous. 'I've got a feeling we should be careful. Something might happen.' He, taking no notice, was still lolling on the seat beside her when a huge truck, laden with cattle, went roaring past. 'Full of bravado, those bastards,' he noted. 'Driver's about nineteen, owns the truck, or rather, he owns a debt that'd sink the Bank of England, and he thunders down the road thinking he isn't hurting a fly.' Lola looked at her man, who said, with a finality she noticed, 'Youth!'

She wanted to prod him. 'We've had ours.' He didn't care. 'All the silly things I did when I was young. I couldn't ... really, honestly, I couldn't live through it all again. Young people are so bloody boring.' He glanced at the rocks where the road had been cut through a hill. Lola found herself wanting something like a wasp or a bee to bite him. A reality check! Who was he to say that young people bored him? He had young people in his shops, serving customers, pulling in the money that let him travel on luxury liners and hire cars to see Cooktown; he wasn't doing too badly on the backs of young people. She said, 'The best thing about being young is that you don't know the consequences of things you want to do. So you do them. When you get older, you get scared. And that's not good!' He asked her, 'Anything you particularly want to do in Cooktown?'

'Nuh. Get a few sammos, eat'em on top of the hill.'

What else to do? They stopped for the sandwiches and drove to the top of the hill. It was a perfect day and the view came to them

in all its glory. The river named after Cook's ship had cut its way through the coastal range. At the foot of the hill – no longer grassy, but scappily vegetated – was the beach where the sailors had tipped their ship on its side to see what damage the coral had done. The inland side of the hill dropped to a jetty where, a century after Cook, prospectors had landed before traipsing inland for the latest of the country's gold rushes, and where his sailors, fearful of a native attack, had laboured to repair their boat. The ocean was vast, there was an edge to the Barrier Reef somewhere out of sight, and the inland stretched away in its limitless fashion. 'Quite a sight!' Lola said, getting out of the car. 'They've built a new viewing point since we were here last.' She went on, trying not to look until she had it all at her eyes' command. Noel was much slower to the top. It was certainly grand, but did he want to see it? What he saw didn't disappoint him, but did he disappoint himself? The last time he'd been here he'd had no doubt about himself. Now, so many years later, he was all too sure. The view was full of promise still, as it had been on a day when the English sailors wondered if they'd ever see their homeland again, with smoke from native fires threatening them from the bush they didn't comprehend. Home was so far away! For Noel, the grand view told him that home was everywhere, the world was full of homes for native peoples and for visitors, home had always to be made, home was an ideal, and it had never looked more promising than it did that morning, following Lola to look at the seas they'd sailed together ... and left. They'd come back to find that a place is never the same as when you saw it last because you've changed even if the place has remained the same. How many years was it? He searched his mind. All those things that he'd done, he and Lola too, and they'd been wasted. He'd made nothing of them. He'd done things and they were past. It was as if he was only a stomach that digested years. Time, the ruler of the universe, had given itself to him and he'd wasted it. Could he do any better with the years to come?

On form, no. He'd waste the coming years as he'd wasted the ones gone by. He called sharply, 'Lola!' and when she looked at him, he said, 'Hold my hand. Support me!' She moved quickly to his side and did as he asked. She took his left hand and then his right. 'Do you want to

sit down?’ She nodded towards their car. He shook his head. ‘It’s too much.’ He was shaking. She steadied him, moving her fingers along and over his hands, his palms, his wrists, anything to make him notice that he was being held. He was safe, unless he slipped away. ‘It was too big for you, all at once,’ Lola said. ‘I thought it might give you a hit. You weren’t expecting it but somewhere inside yourself and out of sight, you were afraid and I could tell. You knew and you didn’t know, isn’t it strange. The mind is so clever, but it’s good at avoiding things it doesn’t want to see ...’ she adjusted her word ‘... to *know*. Now let me tell you something. Hang on hard, darling, while I talk to you. You’re ever so smart but you’re too good at it. You’re too good at deceiving yourself. You knew it was coming, so you didn’t look, and you didn’t see. Now you do. You see, at last. It’s grand, isn’t it? Too grand for you to bear, so you have to play with it, invent things to do with it as if you’re serious when you aren’t.’ She put her hands to his cheeks for a moment. ‘Cold! Up here in the tropics and you’re cold! Silly man. Now let me tell you something. You’re over the worst of it now. You’re almost ready to step out the other side.’ He mumbled something about getting him to a motel, he wanted to lie down and sleep. ‘No,’ she said. ‘We’re staying here. You have to take it all in. You have to admit it, and know what you’re doing. Talk to yourself, darling, talk to yourself, Noel, and this time, listen. Listen! Listen, if you want to save your life!’

She led him around the lookout, taking it all in, then she led him to the car. They sat there a while, then she did as he’d requested. They found a motel and he lay down, Lola beside him. He wanted to talk, but she kissed him, rubbed his brow, and urged him to sleep. ‘It’s the oldest cure in the world, darling. You sleep, the thing that’s troubling you loses its intensity, you’re different when you wake. The shock’s abated a little. You’re ready to talk about it then. You can handle it, or you think you can, and that’s what makes the difference ...’ She would have gone on, but he surrendered. He turned side on and slept. She drowsed, lying beside him. She woke when he did and the same thought was in their two minds: what had happened?

The first thing Lola knew was that it had been no accident that it, whatever it was, had happened where it did. What Noel knew was that

he'd passed some point that had frightened him. He'd needed to do it but it had scared him. 'At least,' he said, 'I won't have to go through that again. It's happened. I've got it behind me. I might even be able to build on it when I understand it.' She was looking into his eyes, his mind. 'Go on. What was it, then?'

He shook his head. 'Too soon to know. What do you think?'

She said, 'You faced up to something. Admitted something. Realised something. Let it into your thoughts after blocking it for years.' She studied him. 'How'm I going, Noel?'

He nodded. 'Right so far. But what?'

'Aha! That's what we both want to know. Tell me how you feel. Don't try to interpret or explain. Just how you feel.'

'I feel different. Whatever it was, it's changed me. I'm not the same. In the future, every time I do something I wouldn't have done, once, I'll look back and say this was the moment when I changed.'

'That makes it pretty big then.'

He took her hand. 'I was scared.'

She nodded. 'I could see that.'

'What do you think it was?'

She didn't know but one thing she could see. 'It was something about the place. It had to happen where it did.'

'Have you worked out why?'

'No.'

'Neither have I. But you're right. It had to happen here. In FNQ.'

'What?'

'Far north Queensland. I have a feeling that what happened today was supposed to happen many years ago when we were here, but it didn't.'

'Sounds odd.'

His mind was beginning to digest what had happened. 'I was too stupid and too cocky when I was young. I didn't admit things to myself.'

'Like what?'

'That's the question. Like ... whatever's wrong with me.' He looked at her, waiting for a list of grievances, but she wasn't in that sort of mood. 'You were very attractive, way back then. You thought

you could do anything.’ She thought about this. ‘No, you thought you could get away with anything. You thought you were smarter than other people. You could out-play them.’ He knew she was getting close. It started to be painful again. She felt the tension rising in him and knew she had to be careful. ‘Maybe that’s all we need to say for the moment. We don’t want you blowing your boiler. Keep calm. Let the change happen quietly. It’s probably going to take a while. It’s happened, but you’re still absorbing what’s happened.’

‘Whatever it is.’

She was still very close. ‘Tell me one thing. Do you feel better, now it’s happened?’

He weighed this thought. ‘It made a mess of me. It frightened me, but I know I’m going to be better for it, once I’ve settled down again.’

‘You think you can?’

He said, ‘Yes, it’s happening as we talk. I’m getting calmer. Not very, and only slowly, but yes, I am.’

‘Settling down?’

He nodded. ‘Yes. What do you want to do now?’

‘Have afternoon tea at that place down by the jetty. They serve meals and stuff. We can sit there and talk.’

‘I’ve got a feeling that talk isn’t going to get us anywhere.’

Lola said, ‘Probably not, but nor will silence. We’ve got to stick together, tell each other whatever comes into our minds, and listen. This is a big day in our lives, Noel. We’re in a great place, so let’s be thankful.’

The idea surprised him. He hadn’t thought of himself as being in the hands of fortune, but then he hadn’t thought about being in any hands at all. Fortune? It sounded like mysterious incantations, puzzling globes that had to be pierced by far-sighted eyes, and bullshit-encrusted stuff like that, but apparently it was where he was. Where was that? He had no idea, but he knew that he’d broken out of some old understanding of himself and he was forging a new one. Forging? It was what blacksmiths did with fire and steel, tongs and hammers, famously stern implements that mythology told us the gods had used to shape the world, so you could be sure that it was too brutal, too unsubtle, to describe what happened in the mind, but something, as

he well knew, had happened, and he wouldn't be the same again. James Cook and his sailors had gone through their crisis on the other side of the world from home, and that was easily understood, but he'd been shaken by some sort of tremor that had changed him, and it was going to take him ages to know what had happened, if he ever did. He would only know what had happened, he realised, and it was a relief, this thought, when it came to him, when he felt unusual, different, new, impulses in his being, calling to be obeyed, instead of the old regulars that had ruled his life till then. How will I know what I am, he told himself, except by seeing what it is I'm doing. New men have no idea what they've become until they see new patterns emerging from the clutter of the old.

This began to happen on their return to the south of the tall continent: tall and wide. Noel went around his shops with an increasing feeling that they were old-fashioned, and knew that that must therefore apply to their owner. Changes began. He closed one shop and handed it over to a young and distant cousin called Riley, instructing him to bring the electronic revolution to suburbia. 'There's a new frontier of understanding,' he told the youth, 'and we are going to make it run down the street outside. That's right, the street outside your house, my house, and Dame Edna Everage's *maison* in Pickle Street Moonee Ponds.' Riley corrected him. It was *Puckle*. Noel was in no way abashed. 'Pickle's good enough for me. In fact, we'll call the shops – because don't imagine that I'm stopping at one – Pickle Street. That's their name, as of now. There'll be Pickle Street Croydon, Pickle Street Moonee Ponds, and so ad infinitum. Now. What are we going to stock'em with?' Riley wanted to know if Noel was asking him. Noel's answer: 'Nobody else in the room is there?'

The second Pickle Street shop was managed by an elderly, bearded American who claimed to be a genius, and may have been, but couldn't connect with his Port Melbourne locale. Noel replaced him with a middle-aged German woman and the shop ... didn't exactly prosper, but it was usually full of customers. Marta, the German, a woman of fifty with daughters attractive to the nerds who frequented the edges of contemporary technologies, sold computers

like membership tickets of a movement that was taking over the world; her daughters' admirers purchased, speculated, questioned, listened and watched. And they hung around. Noel asked Marta if she'd like to set up one of the daughters in a separate store, nearby or not as Marta chose. Marta suggested Ballarat and Noel agreed. Five months later, Greta (born Gretchen, but Australianised) opened the third Pickle Street in Sturt Street of the goldfield city, its windows giving onto bronzes of nineteenth century dignitaries, royal or otherwise. Someone told Noel that he was subversive, and trying to set up an underground of some new political persuasion; this amused him, and he gave thought to doing exactly that in the desert at Oodnadatta, but postponed the idea until he'd extended the chain into a few more conventional places. Sydney followed, Adelaide, Perth and Darwin. These he regarded as outposts; his second wave of shops spread through the suburbs, as he'd always planned. Pickle Street became a household name. Noel found himself being interviewed on radio. He was one of those leading the way. He knew this was untrue. He was channelling his endless displeasure with what surrounded him into shops controlled by youngsters desperate to be different. It amused him to make them be thoughtful and considerate by linking their pay to repeat sales. 'The little shits needn't think they can be rude to my customers,' he told Lola. 'There's only one thing I can respect when I look back at my schooling. They wanted us to know that we were the best people in society and the only decent way to show it was politeness. If people spoke to you, you listened. Everyone deserved a hearing. It was bad manners to push an idea of your own until you'd listened to everyone else. This was supposed to show good breeding. Well, bugger me dead, it did! Dear old mum! She paid for me to get a good education, they only taught me one thing, and here I am wanting to say that she got, or rather *I* got – our money's worth.' Lola liked this raucous espousal of courtesy. She'd loved him as a rebellious crank, and now she was loving him as he turned into something else. What? He didn't know. He met all inquiries or raised eyebrows with 'Watch this space!' and it amused him to find himself in middle age developing like a teenager. 'Don't leave me behind' Lola would say to him and he would tell her to keep up: he knew that in some way he

was catching up with her by leaving old selves behind. He'd wandered and wavered and she'd occupied a space nearby. He wondered why she'd never wanted children and suspected that he himself was the answer to this question. Had she been mothering him all those years? He thought it was at least possible, and now he was growing up. The new shops were making money and he was reinvesting. Pickle Streets popped up everywhere, then he began to invest their earnings in city buildings – apartments, hotels, shops rented out by other people. He discussed his plan with Lola. 'I'm going to attach each source of revenue to some good cause. The people of Geelong are going to fund – without knowing it – a couple of surf lifesaving clubs. The people renting those offices in Toorak Road are going to fund a scholarship at the high school around the corner. And so on. I'm not in a hurry. I want every idea to have a pointy end. Most of all, I want to enjoy it. When they pay their rent, all these people, they're going to think they're making someone rich. And they will be, but it'll be someone they don't know about. They can go about their dirty little lives not knowing they're doing someone good.' It amused him. It amused Lola too, to see someone she'd clung to through all his years of floundering, turning himself into a secular saint. Mad of course, but most things were mad until they had society's approval, after which they became decent, generous, normal.

These schemes, Lola saw, were the children he'd never had and never wanted, so why had they taken so long to develop in his mind and appear in his life? If I knew the answer to that, she told herself, I'd have the answer to the problem of mankind, the most highly developed creature on earth, the best and the worst. Mankind, humanity, the human race. What could you do with them? They were taking over the planet, wiping out the big, blundering creatures which had threatened them but were only a quarter as deadly. She liked this development of putting money to good use, but it was still only half an answer, being as quirky, as perverse, as her lover had ever been. It was still a Noel-idea. He'd put himself, like the money, to good use, but hadn't transcended himself. Or had he?

She decided that she must wait and see.

Robyn and Louise bought a property called Chiltern. It had a splendid garden, it wasn't very large, but they added a cottage for their housekeepers and a wing for guests. Fitting it out for their children's friends took them to a branch of Pickle Street in South Yarra where Robyn discovered, to his considerable surprise, that he knew the proprietor. 'Noel McGraw! I wondered where you'd disappeared to. It turns out you were making a fortune, right under my nose!' Years of selling had turned him into a noisy man, in business at least. 'We've just bought a house up at Macedon. Making a few changes. Come and have a look, help us set it up.' He introduced Louise, who thought the man she was meeting was distinctly odd, but he was apparently an Old Boy, and that covered all peculiarities. He was pleased by the idea of refitting an old house for modern young people; as Louise told him, 'The children don't want to leave the city because they think they're missing out on what their friends are doing, but if we set things up right, their friends will want to come up where we are.' Noel arrived without Lola, who wasn't interested, but with Riley, who saw wonders that could be added to an old world establishment. After a speedy inspection, he laid claim to two rooms, one of them, admittedly, not much more than a cupboard that the housekeepers had used for storage. This would be the broadcasting studio, he suggested, and the room with big windows at the other end of the house would be the games room. Louise was amazed and called it 'Cheek!' but Robyn was inclined to see how it worked with their daughter and son. Elvira, the daughter, was quickly into a conversation with Riley that the adults couldn't understand, while Murray, the son, riffled through Riley's pamphlets choosing attractions for his room, as he called it. 'Life's changed, Robyn,' Noel told his coeval, 'they're not making them like they did in our day.' A few minutes later the older trio were sipping tea while Elvira and Murray showed Riley the grounds. The major surprise of the day was for Louise, however; aspects of her husband that she'd never thought about came into view as he reminisced with the visitor: masters they'd regarded as jokes, punishments they'd feared, famous scandals from years before their time. Noel, who'd been a boarder, told Robyn, a former day-boy, about a boiler that provided hot water for the boys' showers, and a place of refuge for those who were frightened. 'It was

dark in there,' Noel told the ex-day-boy, and it was tiny. If there was anyone in there with you, you could tell if their heart was beating fast. There were no secrets, so nobody talked in there. You could be warm and feel safe, even if it was only for a minute or two.' That reminded Robyn of something he'd heard years before, and forgotten. 'Didn't you find a way to make the clock keep striking? I never heard it, but I heard about it, and people said it was you.' Louise had never heard her affable, endlessly successful husband so excited about anything so trivial: the clock in the tower striking some uncountable number of times! This man Noel, master of Pickle Street, was grinning like a boy, the smirk on his face a confession of things he'd once done. 'They had it coming to them!' he announced. 'And they never knew how it was done!' Robyn, Louise could see, was in some way a partner in the other's victory of long ago. They shared ...

She didn't know what they shared, but she felt irritated, and then jealous. She was a woman who liked to hold advantage, some superiority, over the men she was associated with, and here was a stranger – truly a stranger – somehow levitating her husband away from the self he'd manufactured to suit his line of business and causing him to laugh like the boy she'd never known him to be. The coup de grace came when Elvira and Murray, returning from the fence-line where the garden touched the forest, told her that they'd invited Riley to bring some of his friends up to install everything they were acquiring, to stay the weekend and bring the old house up to the new place it was becoming. Robyn, taken briefly back to boyhood, didn't seem to mind, but Louise found a moment to make it clear to Noel that she wasn't hosting s house party for his employees and that any installation would be done by someone of mature years, or by nobody at all. This was not new to Noel. He answered 'Of course' and the matter was settled. He could not, *of course*, expunge the memory of Robyn dipping for a moment or three into the youth they'd shared.

People think about youth when they are growing old. Sensing that their end has crossed the horizon, they divert their minds to beginnings. They reminisce, re-evaluate, find similarities with parents once unacknowledged. The young need protection. They want protection

but they don't want to *need* it. When they reach this blessed state of not needing protection they cast their minds back to what it was like to be subservient. Those were the days? In gaining freedom of choice they lose freedom to choose. Their choices have all been made. In struggling to get control of their lives they are losing the control they thought they wanted. Louise had her way. The man who did the installation was Noel's age, polite, took careful notes, offered alternatives, and, agreement having been reached, did the installations inside half a day. It was all done while Elvira and Murray were at school; they didn't know until their next Macedon visit. They knew, entering the house, that something had changed, and then they found how much had been changed. Their last years of youth would not resemble those of their parents. They looked at each other and they looked at their parents. It seemed hard to think of them, now, as mum and dad. They were their parents, that's to say they were people of an earlier generation. Their names tied them to an earlier time. Elvira knew that her name linked her to some character in an opera, but since neither her mother nor her father had any interest in opera she wondered how she came to be identified by this name. And her brother? Not the river, surely, that brown and sluggish stream that dawdles to exhaustion in South Australia? If not the river, who or what? He would wear it – her brother – she realised, with eventual distinction. The name had been well deployed. Why had she been called Elvira? It sounded Spanish, and she knew nothing about Spain. She would go there one day, when she was married. She and her husband would discover the country and he would discover her. These two things would happen at the same time and some link of meaning would be forged, even if it hadn't existed before.

This was a pleasing thought. Elvira knew there was a gap, something missing, in her parents' marriage. She knew they would never tell her what it was because they didn't tell themselves. Whatever had happened had occurred at the beginning and their later lives had been built on it. Their foundation as a couple was a crack in the pavement, or something in the basement, perhaps. She was cautious, therefore, the young Elvira, not wishing to repeat whatever it was that divided yet mysteriously joined her parents. She was attending her

mother's school and Murray was attending his father's. It wasn't easy to be different.

The young people were only partially aware that they were being steeped in a tradition, and one of the remarkable things about traditions is that they can change while believing themselves to be the same. To this we may add that a vast range of human types can belong to a tradition, each in his or her own way. The tradition binds at the same time as it releases. Elvira and Murray were used to their parents starting sentences with 'Do they still ...' or setting out their own experience as if it was still contemporary: 'Well, the way to deal with that ...' Going to the same school as your mother or father means that your parent has a powerful grip on you, as does the tradition that you share with them. This reduces the power of the commercial culture affecting you and everybody else. Robyn, their father, was not a very reflective man, but he said to his offspring one day, 'I was never a teenager, like you. There was no such thing when I went to school. We were all boys, and when we left school, we understood that we were men. We got a job, we started to drink, go out with girls, and we were men. Silly young fools probably, but men.' He looked at his ... he could hardly say children, could he? Or could he not: he wasn't sure – he looked at them and said, 'The school was our initiation. That was its job. It still is, I dare say.' He looked next at his wife, the mother of his ... whatever they were these days. 'What would you say about that, Louise?'

Louise was a woman careful about detail and not fussed by generalities. 'It's still a man's world. We have to take that for granted.' With her eye on Elvira, she added, 'Work out what you have to do, and get it right. Find out who sets the standard, and what the standard is, then do it better. If you can surprise people, you're on top of them. That's what I'd say.' It asserted something her husband wanted asserted, and it gave her room to move. It was, in that sense, an ideal answer. Elvira felt that she was in no way advanced. Her parents were saying things that parents said. They were relying on the traditions that had formed them to do the same a generation later. It was as if they trusted the clothing that she and Murray wore, rather than their inner selves. So long as you do whatever the people wearing those

uniforms do, you'll be right. Huh! She wanted to know where her parents' tradition had come from, what it had gained and lost along its way. She glanced at her brother. He had less trouble with this tradition than she did, perhaps because it was clearer to a boy than to a girl. He was early in his teenage years but he'd absorbed the sense of honour that his father wanted him to hold to. He would always be proud, as a man, and of whatever men of his sort told themselves to be proud of. He had a path, if a difficult one. Where was she? She excused herself, and went to her room. Louise, her mother, knocked on the door five minutes later, and came in. She sat on the bed Elvira was sitting on. 'What would you like to say to me?'

Elvira said to her mother, 'I would like a simple solution.'

'Unfortunately, things are never simple.'

Elvira said, 'Oh yes they are,' and she repeated her mother's advice, word for word: "Work out what you have to do, and get it right. Find out who sets the standard, and what the standard is, and then do it better. If you can surprise people, you're on top of them." She studied her mother scornfully. 'Have I surprised you, mother?'

Louise was surprised, but wasn't letting on. She wasn't having her daughter get on top as easily as that. 'I'm not worried about being surprised,' she said, contradicting herself. 'I want you to be ready.' She gave her daughter an appraising look.

'Ready for what?'

'Ready to manage yourself. Ready to manage your family, when you've got one. And before that, ready to manage the men who come into your life.'

'Sounds simple!' She wanted to protect herself. Was her mother an ally, or a controller? She needed to find out. 'You can only manage people if you let them close to you.' Louise looked at her. 'It's dangerous mother! I don't want boys perverting on me. Teachers either. Ugh!' Louise sensed something. 'What's that about? What's happened?' To her surprise she found herself listening to a tirade about her English teacher, Miss Patterson. Patto had asked the girls to write a 'personal' piece under the heading 'Out Of My Cage'. The girls had done this, some of them more frankly than Patto could accept. Then she'd done an awful thing. The headmistress had shown interest and Patto had

allowed her to read the girls' essays. The headmistress had then made a point of visiting the class to talk to them about what they'd written. Elvira was a fierce mimic. 'It's part of my job description to know what the girls of my school are thinking. Thinking need not be the same thing as experiencing, and some of the pieces of writing I read did rather cross the line. That's a way of saying that the imagination may take us to places which our better judgement would tell us to avoid ...'

Louise broke in. 'For heaven's sake! What did you write? Are you in trouble for what you did?'

'No mother, something warned me. I wrote about a bird getting free of a cage.'

'A cage? What do you mean?'

Elvira allowed herself a grim half-smile. 'You'll remember our visit to Ripponlea, the old house with the garden?'

The house was famous, thought to be grand, thought to be the peak of an age long gone: some sort of beacon, therefore. Elvira went on. 'Remember that huge wire enclosure, bigger than this house?' Her mother remembered. 'Someone told us it used to be the display place for a collection of birds. It was empty when we were there. The birds had all gone. Some of them had been stolen, I'll bet. Others must have found a way out. They'd all been caged up in there and looked at, and now they were free.'

'Or dead! Almost certainly the latter. What about it?'

'I wrote about that. I really put myself into it. But some of the other girls ...'

She didn't finish. She looked sullenly on her mother. 'That stupid fuckin Patto ...'

The word shocked them both. Louise called, 'Stop!' They looked at each other, accepting, both of them, that what had happened mustn't happen again. 'Sorry,' the younger woman said. Louise grasped for something to say. 'What are you reading in English? I don't think I've asked you your books this year.' Elvira took the way out on offer. 'Pride and Prejudice,' she said, shuffling some other titles in her mind: 'And Shakespeare, of course.'

'Which one?'

‘Anthony and Cleopatra.’ This surprised her mother. ‘That’s not set very often is it? I don’t think I’ve ever read that one.’ She looked about the room as if it might talk to her about the Globe Theatre, or recite a few lines from Hamlet. Then she noticed that there were tears in her daughter’s eyes. ‘What is it, Elvira? Why are you crying?’

Why indeed? What does it matter if humans who live like gods die before our eyes on stage? A curtain will fall, applause break out, and the dead will get on their feet again. Actors know that it’s only when we’re imitated that we bother to take much notice of what we are, what we’re like, what we’re doing. The truths and lies we tell about ourselves. The things about ourselves that others can see but we ignore. Elvira said, ‘It’s the saddest thing I’ve ever read,’ her eyes still wet.

Louise said, ‘What makes it so sad for you?’ She was pleading to understand her daughter, but hoped the pleading wasn’t in her voice.

Elvira pointed to the book, on the back corner of her table. ‘Cleopatra runs away from the battle. Sails away. Heads for the shore, and what does he do? He follows. Silly man. And look how *he* ends up. “I am dying, Egypt, dying.” Great words. Great words, but he’s dying. And so is she. They bring her snakes so she can poison herself. It’s a love that shakes the world, according to Shakespeare, and look what happens. How’m I expected to feel good about that?’

Louise was amazed. Her daughter had studied the words, and they’d had a terrible effect. She wanted to quell what was happening to her child. ‘It’s a story, a book, it only happens in the imagination. Be careful! Don’t take it to heart, you’ll make yourself desperately unhappy!’

Her daughter looked at her, eyes still wet. ‘No! It’s not only in the imagination. It happened. Thousands of years ago, and we’re no better today.’ Her eyes scanned the walls, pictures of pop stars, actresses slinking against motor bikes, famous breasts on show. ‘Give me a reason to feel good. A reason to go on. I live in my cage. I know what it’s like to be out of it, and it’s no better. Just living because it’s a human habit to live doesn’t seem very good to me.’

Elvira grew up as most of us do, she married Anton Kleiber, and on the following day they flew out of the country, first to Doha, then to

Madrid. They walked till their legs were weary, they caught trains. They visited Toledo and Avila, with its ancient walls. Paintings in the Prado amazed them. They climbed to the highest turrets of Segovia's castle, and looked across a land steeped in mediaeval story. 'My family left Europe two generations back,' Anton told his wife. 'They've never regretted it. But standing here, with this castle underneath me, it's as if some witch, some genie, some miracle-worker has given me back the understanding they threw away.' Elvira said, 'Would you like to be Spanish, then?' He thought. 'No. It's enough that I'm Spanish for an hour, a day, a fortnight here with you. We can be Spanish briefly, before we go home.'

Elvira's happiness was intense. The building they stood on, she told herself, had been there for a thousand years, today its stones clattered under their feet, tomorrow it would set off for its future. It seemed impossible that a building could embody values, but it did: the pride of those who'd put it where it stood was palpable. Elvira looked down. Two rivers joined beneath them in a swirl of white water thrashing through rocks. The rivers had cut canyons in the rock, these met at a sharp angle, the foundation of their castle was narrow. It rose, straitened, for the air above. Sharply pointed towers rose toward the sky, stairs turning inside them, narrow doors opening to let those who'd climbed scan the horizon. Enemies? Let them come. The villagers, the shepherds, the peasants would be loyal. That, or they'd be cut down. There were kitchens, with fire, and storage rooms, with armour, beneath them. There was power, and over everything else, *in* everything else, there was pride. Elvira had never felt such pride near to her before, nor had she wanted it. It was frightening because it had no fear of death. It was willing to accept death as its ally in asserting how it chose to live. There was pride in that! More than the world needed. It was courageous, this castle, with its tiny, angular pennons fluttering here and there. It had put out its hands in metal gloves, seized the Christian virtues, and swallowed them. It enlisted god to give it support. On the way up they'd passed through a room where two sculpted horses, ridden by two sculpted knights, rode at each other in deadly pass. This was to remind visitors, tourists, of the sport of the time that built the castle. One knight knocked the other

off his horse, then rode away, sparing him, or rode to him to end his life. What was life without honour? Elvira looked at Anton, studying the horizon. He wouldn't encounter any challenge there. He was a young doctor, working in a city hospital, in Emergency when they needed him, in the wards, doing his rounds, at other times; gently receiving the public's ills in this clinic or that. Gaining experience, it was called. Hospitals were places of healing: a simple idea built on endless complexities of treatments, procedures, and bodies. Human bodies, which had to function for the mind, and beyond it the spirit, to live. A whiff of breeze crept up the castle from the waters below, causing the pennons to flutter as if the ideas they embodied had come to life. Elvira took her husband's hand. 'Anton? We are married. We are joined as long as we shall live.'

He turned, wondering what had happened. There she was, Elvira whom he loved, but something had changed in her, something unexpected had entered. If it had entered her it had entered him. A city, about which they knew nothing, lay about them, and they had found a way to its ancient beating heart, still pulsing, with a life that would not be theirs, because they would live in another city, in another land, with traditions understood and created by the aboriginal people who'd been robbed by the whites but had never given in. 'What will we be like when we get home?' he asked Elvira. Still holding his hand, she said, 'Rich. We've been given something we didn't expect. Let's go down now. By the way, did you notice, in the room where the knights were jousting, did you notice how small the suits of armour were?' He nodded. 'They were little men,' Elvira said, 'but so full of pride!'

Murray Briggs was privileged in his growing up. His family had contacts everywhere, anyone wanting to add something new but specialised to the city sought his father's advice, he was popular at school, he took to university life when he got there. He surprised his parents by studying science, but he took a good degree and found a position with the government's scientific and industrial research organisation. That lasted two years before federal cost-cutting caused him to be retrenched. On one level this was no problem, he simply transferred to the estate agency controlled and largely owned, by now,

by his father. But a search had begun in his mind, out of sight of his parents and friends. A bush walk in the Lerderderg Gorge, near Bacchus Marsh, west of his city, had caused him to notice the rocks, the layers of soil and their relationship with the plants forming the bush he was walking through. It struck him that there was at least one whole dimension of existence which he'd overlooked thus far: the earth we walk on. It was hardly a surprise; he'd done a unit in geology in his course without finding it either difficult or particularly enlightening. Suddenly it was basic. Fundamental. It mattered. He went back to his old faculty and sought advice. Could he start a Master's degree in geology? People who remembered him welcomed this but said he should get a better foundation; this meant part time study of the subjects which would give him a conventional major in his new area, and then pushing ahead. 'We might even be able to move you directly into a doctorate,' they told him. He enrolled. Louise, his mother, noticed the change. 'He's found something,' she said to Robyn, one evening up at Macedon. 'He's not looking around himself any more. Or rather, he is, but he's seeing different things.' Robyn felt affronted that their son hadn't told them about this change in direction, if that was what it was. 'He's trying to take it one thing at a time,' the boy's mother said. 'He's practically engaged to Simone, but I've got a feeling that she doesn't know much about it yet.'

This was something that made Murray wretched. He thought he loved Simone, but he needed this new path more. He sensed that she would never understand what he saw in the earth's make-up. It would be dull to her: tedious. He foresaw that his insights and achievements in this field, not to speak of living in remote and possibly dangerous places, would mean that they'd live apart much of their lives, and when they resumed the form of married life, he'd find himself humoured, restricted in her judgement to something childish in his ways. This was impossible. It had to be ended, as decently and honestly as it could be, but quickly.

He put it to his parents first. His father took it as a positive, for which Murray was deeply grateful. He foresaw himself coming home, after months or even years away, to the glowing lights of the family home at Macedon. He thought of buying such a home for himself and

his partner, yet to be found, so he could be close to his family when he was back. Back to what he'd once been, because now, it seemed to him, the world was to be his home. Louise loved her son patiently, more than anything else, but sensed that what he was doing was bringing him into a deeper relationship with himself, and therefore had to be supported. 'You must tell us what you're doing, son, so we know it's good and true, and we'll support you. But you must tell Simone what you're doing, and promise to support her if she needs you at any time. What you're doing will be a shock to her, and you have to soften it as best you can.'

Simone was deeply hurt. Her life had been planned ahead for years, and now the plans were being torn up. Why was he doing this to her? He found it hard to say. 'I've found myself. I've changed,' he said, giving no comfort at all. 'I know I'm tipping everything upside down,' he said. 'I want to help you, Simone, but I doubt very much if I can. All I can say is if I kept seeing you, and we married and went on and had children, that wouldn't be honest. There'd be a part of me that I knew wasn't committed, so when I pretended to love it wouldn't be honest, and you'd work out soon enough that I wasn't in the relationship ...' he couldn't say marriage '... and it would be worse, that way, than it is now ...'

And so on. He completed his undergraduate major, did extremely well, and the faculty allowed him to start on his doctorate. Robyn's contacts with developers ensured a steady, if intermittent, string of consultancies over foundation work, underwater stream flow and the like, and he lived at home. Louise and Robyn knew they would lose him one day, but he was in the process of rebuilding himself as a more substantial man and they were proud to have him as something still, in some way, their responsibility. When his doctorate was awarded, they were there. So were Elvira and Anton, proud of him too. 'You've got the world at your feet Murray,' Anton told him, and his wife, Elvira, saw that it was true.

The world is full of hopeful people, dreaming of a hill of gold, or a stream of oil. Diamonds, rubies, anything that glitters when worn by a beautiful woman. Global companies search the world, and so do little optimists, their shares selling for a few cents on every stock exchange.

Accused of selling nothing but hopes and dreams, they employ geologists. Murray was good enough to be in demand. Within a few years of graduating, he'd been in Patagonia, the Sahara, the Congo, the Gobi Desert, Mongolia and places closer to home. He'd passed Papunya, where aboriginal painters restated the spirit of their land. He'd flown past Uluru and landed in places nobody had ever heard of, except perhaps the legendary Lasseter, who died in his dream. Places have names, given them by men trying to make something secure. When he came home from these trips, he rejoiced in seeing his parents, but beyond them he loved the home they'd established at Macedon. He walked among the snowgums, he walked to the memorial to those who'd died in the war that was going to end war.

How many have there been since then?

Looking at the famous cross, atop the hills that had summoned his father years before, he felt he represented the earth. Someone had to speak for the eternal, and it had fallen to him. His response was to say as little as he could. If people asked about his travels, he told them. If they were curious he brought out pictures he'd taken. This was Alaska, that was Siberia, some place with a name he couldn't remember. Louise celebrated his returns with gatherings of people with eligible daughters, Robyn called in company directors; he needed work, though the offers kept rolling in, he needed a wife. Everybody seemed to know what was best for him, and how patiently he listened, but did he do what they suggested?

No.

Robyn and Louise knew that he needed a home, so they gave it to their son. They made it for him. They wanted him to make a home of his own, with a woman yet to be found, but, without realising, they negated their desires by giving him the only thing he needed. Their home on the hill was the place he needed. The only thing he lacked was sufficient faith in humanity to want to see it continued. He loved a number of women in his years of roaming, and he gave them the best that he could – a share in his endless peregrination. They camped with him, climbed mountains, trekked through country. They cooked in wild places and they drank together – the waters of the world, and the wine.

A day came, however, when his mother got an email. He'd met Natasha ('Tasha') in Vladivostok, she'd worked in America, she spoke excellent English, he described her as a woman of the world, and when he returned in a few weeks time he'd bring her to see if she found his country attractive: it was her decision, after all. Louise rang Robyn, telling him all she'd been told, and that night, before dinner, he opened a bottle of Grange. Glasses: 'Our son.' 'And Natasha.' 'Natasha.' The house was silent, the bush spread around them for miles. Each of them searched for something to say, but it all depended on what sort of person she was and they had no idea. 'When you reply,' Robyn said to his wife, 'ask him to tell us about her. We want to know.' Louise knew better. 'If he loves her enough to bring her home, he'd say that's all we need to know. You know what he's like.' Her husband, Murray's father, nodded. 'Good year, this. Always good, the Grange. Let's hope she's perfect too.'

Louise told Elvira and she contacted her brother. Details began to flow. Tasha was twenty-nine, older than Murray. She'd worked as an historian's researcher in New York, then moved to California after her mother died and her father got a job with the European Union, in Brussels. She'd decided, after much agonising, to return to Russia – but only its eastern extreme. She'd taught English there to the sons and daughters of wealthy aspirants to move on somewhere else, and she'd been working as a chef in the hotel where Murray had been staying. 'I knew I'd found my life partner,' he told Elvira. 'I knew it straight away.' Tasha left the hotel, and went with Murray on one of his excursions. The men he was working with had envied Murray but hadn't been so lucky. Tasha was unobtrusive in the camp, and dressed like a man. She expressed no opinions but anyone who came near her knew she was strong. 'I put my life in her hands,' said Murray to his sister, 'and she did the same for me.'

Elvira told her mother this, told Anton too. Anton said, 'Let's hope it works out, but heavens, what was he doing? That's what happens when you put one reality behind you for another.' Elvira understood. 'That's what he did when he switched to geology. He trusted himself, and he found himself. Well, that's what we have to hope.' Louise was most uncertain. 'Some men marry women like their mothers. It's the safest thing to do. Other men marry women who're

the opposite. When that happens, you've got nothing to guide you.' Robyn admitted that he was surprised, and puzzled too, but said he wouldn't make up his mind until he'd met Tasha. 'She sounds like she's something pretty special!'

On the appointed day, they went to the city's airport. Murray and Tasha had landed in Sydney, then taken a connecting flight. It landed, it taxied to its gate-lounge, inscrutable plane, slipping down from the heavens. Doors opened and a line of passengers came out, none of them known to our party, then they saw their son, their brother, with a foreigner, a woman, the soul who was to join them. What happened next? Possibly it was Murray saying 'There they are,' possibly it was Tasha and she simply knew when she saw them that they were her people. She left the line, bringing Murray with her, and crossed the lounge to the family she was joining. The word 'Mother?' came from her, and it was a question: might she embrace her? Was she accepted? Louise did what she was compelled to do, and embraced her boy's woman, Anton was charmed and Elvira waited. How would she be addressed? Tasha bowed her head to Robyn, who loved her straight away, then embraced her gently: don't get too far ahead of yourself with strangers. Tasha touched his hand, then turned to say 'Elvira' in a way that changed that young woman's life forever: she was, at last, accepted as a woman of passion who might cross an operatic stage, and sing. Elvira felt joy, but also the possibility of its opposite, sweeping into her life. How could one person enforce so swift a change? It took months for her new family to come to terms with the question. Murray looked around, and Elvira read his mind. 'We brought two cars. We'll all fit.' Murray laughed. His sister had always been able to do it, now she'd have to deal with Tasha's hold on his psyche. 'There'll be plenty of room, then,' he announced. 'I've got my usual two cases, and Tasha's got the clothes she's standing up in.' Then he spoke to the partner he'd brought home. 'You're not a fashion ambassador, are you Tash!' to which he received as answer, 'I am content to let every new place dress me as they wish.'

Tasha's arrival changed everybody but most of all Robyn. Marrying Louise had been a mistake, but they'd made the best of it. He behaved

conventionally, remembered anniversaries, was generous with presents, thoughtful in those small ways that people appreciate. Louise barely noticed the dimension that had been lacking until it appeared. He'd always copied his values from the groups he belonged to, but now a strange new being had been escorted to his city by his son, and something more was required. He knew he didn't know, so he watched and listened. The people of his city were unself-consciously selfish, he decided. They didn't know what they didn't know. They told themselves that they lived in the world's most liveable city, but they made no comparisons to justify this thought, if it was one. Headline might be a better word, since it was essentially a journalistic claim. How is it, he asked himself, that Toorak/Portsea-Sorrento people no longer set the tone? The city had grown too big, and the only thing holding it together, apart from endless traffic, was the media, filling people's minds with rubbish night and day. Rubbish! So how did they get away with it? The city once united by its class divisions had broken into areas that knew next to nothing about each other apart from what they were told on radio, television and the mobile phone. He saw it every day: young people not looking around them but looking down into the palms of their hands. Any messages, and disappointed if there weren't. If there were, they tapped in replies with their fingers. He grew nostalgic for the pen, and secretly relieved when he saw someone pull out a stylish fountain pen to write. He had his office redesigned, with photos of early Melbourne on one wall, and modern Melbourne's buildings on the facing wall. People commented, liking this and that, ignoring others, and so he knew them, these clients who made him wealthy, and found categories for them, little boxes in his mind where, he believed, they belonged. If he spoke about this, his son and daughter laughed at him; he was growing old, they said, and he told them there were good things about growing old. 'You see more clearly than you've done since childhood.' Tasha asked him questions whenever she was in a car with him because he knew so much about his city, its history and its people. He was, she said, the fountain of her knowledge, and Murray of her love. Her new family understood what she meant. It took time for newcomers to speak in the way of the place they'd come to. Louise handled her generously despite her inability to

comprehend Murray's woman. Her son was happy, and had gained a dimension by taking this Russian into his life. Her husband, she sensed, had lost something and gained something else at one and the same time. What had he lost and what had he gained? This was a mystery for her because she didn't think in those terms. He had no words, yet she knew that Robyn had taken some step with enjoyment, even a quiet sort of sedate excitement, if there could be such a thing. He was not quite in love with his son's partner, but his life, his outlook, had been changed by her arrival, and the young woman – if you thought twenty-nine was young – didn't know the effect she'd had. This made her appeal, her demand, all the stronger. Louise could see that Tasha loved to be asked by Robyn if she would like to see something, some part of the city, that he was going to. 'Yes, I want to know my new home,' Tasha would say, and stand up, causing Louise, Elvira if she was there, or Murray to tell her what sort of day it was, or was going to be, and what extra clothes – she had many new things by now – she would need. If Tasha made a journey, however brief, it was special to the family because it was special to her, with Robyn feeling it most of all.

'The world's great cities,' he would say as they rolled down Saint Kilda Road in his Jaguar, 'offer excitement, which usually comes from an element of danger or risk. Cities like Paris or London don't just draw on the countryside around them, they attract people from all over the world who are looking for something they can't find anywhere else. This city of ours isn't quite there yet, but it's getting there. It's changed since I was a boy,' he told Tasha, and she would watch out for the bluestone buildings which, she knew by now, were the school he'd attended, and then sent his son to. Whenever they passed the green fields and dark buildings, ever so ominous on rainy days when the stone was black, Tasha would ask Murray what it had been like to move through the years of his youth in the same place as his father. Robyn, hearing this question, would fall silent, leaving it to his son to answer. Murray's answers disappointed Robyn and failed to enlighten Tasha. 'I didn't think about him. I knew he'd been there but that was years ago, when the place was different. It's changed ever so much down the years. You can see it in photos of the place.'

This answer puzzled Tasha because it seemed to her from the many photos she'd seen that the boys in the photos had changed, and no doubt the cameras had changed, but the tradition they captured, the tradition that had captured the boys, was essentially the same. Robyn felt this too. What else was the place for? It had identity, it gave identity, it *stamped* identity on those who went through it. The fact that Murray seemed to have been impervious to this tradition made him all the more attractive to her; the fact that Murray's father was so proud of the tradition his son resisted, or ignored, made him a necessary part of her understanding of her new land, her new home, perhaps the first she'd had in any lasting way. She must have love, and she had it, but she must have understanding too, and this requirement was satisfied by the father and son in combination. What would Murray, her partner, be like when he was old? Robyn often told her that he'd changed with the years, but when she asked him how he'd changed he couldn't explain himself very well. 'I'm part of a tradition,' he would say, 'and traditions give us stability, even though the traditions that do it have to change in order to remain traditions.' This would puzzle Tasha. 'They have traditions in Russia, but I never wanted to be part of them. And the same in America. They had traditions but their traditions seemed silly, or vulgar.' She would swing her hips as if acting in a film. 'Terrible! I am glad I am here!'

After years with the Reserve Bank, Ken Jarman picked up a senior position at the National. When friends told him he was 'coming home' he said that was one thing he wasn't doing: his new job was in the international section. Jokes were made about the international side of the national bank ... et cetera, et cetera. A few months later, after some delicate inquiries and checking had taken place, he was invited to join the board of the state's gallery. Suzanne thought this an honour but Ken was more circumspect. 'I'm a banker. They hope I'll put them in touch with people who'll write a cheque when they're offered something too good to refuse. The art world's a devious place, but if you can prove that what you've got is a Picasso, you're seriously rich. Talking of Picassos, do you remember the time ...'

Suzanne remembered it well. They'd been in Paris's Pompidou and Ken had decided that he wanted to see a certain painting by the Spanish master that he'd read about somewhere, and he asked a gallery guard, an idle, surly looking man, where it was. 'Je cherche,' he said, 'une peinture ...' and he named it '... by Monsieur Picasso, Monsieur Pablo Picasso ...' The guard inclined his head, made a splendid flourish as if imitating Marcel Marceau, and pointed to the wall in front of the Jarmanns. They were looking at it. Suzanne hadn't known whether to laugh or cry; Ken looked around to see if anybody had noticed. They hadn't. The guard was retreating to his chair. Suzanne said to her recently promoted husband, 'We didn't know very much then.' He said, 'I still don't. I suppose I'm to be the money man on the committee. When they need it, they'll expect me to find it. That, or check the source so they can tell themselves it's clean.' This amused him; he was superior again. Clean money! What a delightful illusion. There wasn't any money that hadn't been in dirty hands. 'A bank,' he used to say, 'is like a bath for a dirty child.' He was fond of talking about this with Suzanne. 'No matter where the money's come from, no matter who earned it – or didn't – and where, it's clean once the bank hands it to you. Money's like rain. The water may be filthy, but once it evaporates, and forms a cloud, all the filth gets left behind, and ...'

Suzanne could only stand a limited amount of this. She interrupted. 'That was the day we saw the Matisse.' At once they were back in the Pompidou, in a very large room containing one very large – almost unframeable, you would say – picture of the utmost simplicity: a piece of blue paper pasted on a background of white. It had been done late in the life of the French artist, when he could no longer use his brushes, and had resorted to using scissors to cut paper into shapes. The shape in this case was a human figure, or the suggestion of one. There was a head of sorts, an upper body, an arm, an elbow, and the beginnings of some legs, but no feet. Was it a person, the suggestion of a person, or something else entirely? Suzanne remembered a talk they'd listened to, a couple of years before, in which some curator had elaborated on the theme of 'A pipe is not a pipe'. The talk had gone on for ages, baffling Suzanne, but the curator had begun, simply enough,

by telling her audience that they could make an initial interpretation of the statement's meaning by translating it as 'A painting of a pipe is not an *actual* pipe.' She suspected that Monsieur Matisse, the ageing artist, had given up on art and performed a trick for the benefit of his audience. This is not a human being, it's a piece of paper cut by my scissors to make you think of a human being. You – Monsieur Matisse was saying to the world – think that these twists and turns, these shapes and forms, are, in the language of painting, a human being, but I – a painter so supreme that I don't even need paint any more – I am making it clear to you that what you are looking at is not a human being – nor even a pipe! – but certain shapes and symbols which are normally used to represent a human being. How do you – you human beings! – how do you feel about that?

Ken was a simple man, but honest enough. 'I remember that. The thing he cut out with scissors.' Suzanne wanted to grab him. The *thing!* But he went on. 'It was baffling. I had a feeling I was being tricked. Made a fool of on some level that I couldn't understand but the artist could. I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. Experts can always make fools of the lay person. I sit in meetings where we discuss how much money we should hold in all the various currencies. On one level, it's simple. Enough to satisfy customers' demands. But if, let's say, there's high inflation in Russia, you don't want to hold your money in roubles for very long. So you look around. Ah, the Singapore dollar's moving up. You park your money there ...'

She'd heard it all before, and wanted to stop him, but why? It was unfair. Her husband was an expert. He and his colleagues had formulae for calculating the gains and losses they'd incur if they bought this currency and sold that. 'We're trading in value,' he liked to say, 'and there's nothing less stable in all the world.' When he was talkative, or drunk, he liked to postulate a currency based on mosquitoes' wings by way of exemplifying the instability of money. Money was not solid. Money was bought and sold according to traders' estimation of its value, which was changing all the time. 'The greatest illusion in all the world,' he liked to say, 'is the gold in the cellars of Fort Knox. What use is it? But imagine the panic if the markets found out that someone had backed a truck in there and got off with

a load or two!’ The strange thing, in Suzanne’s mind, was that Ken actually knew, actually realised, how stupid the world of money was, how artificial, and yet it was his area of expertise, the bank valued his expertise, they’d wanted him at the National because he’d worked for and understood the Reserve, he was a valuable man.

He was the father of her children, he was her husband. She loved him, not with a passion, but with a habit, and that was just as good. He was stable. She knew what he’d do, and say, and he did, and said, those things. What was wrong with that? Did she want a man who was unpredictable? No. Moody? No. He was honourable. He wasn’t mean. He wasn’t capable of unkindness. He gave to charities and he was boring, that was the truth of the matter, but as she agonised over a man who didn’t agonise over himself, she knew that to rebuild him, to remake him, even to change him, would be a cruel, indecent thing to do. She’d ironed out his faults and weaknesses in the early years of their marriage and she’d made him what she wanted him to be. If he was dull, she’d played a part in making him that way. Could she, then, claim any part of his virtues? Strengths, of which there many? She supposed she could. When Ken went to the room he called his office – called a *study* by everyone else these days, because hardly anyone studied in them but the word sounded good – Suzanne had a moment of understanding, a rare thing for her. She was not an introspective person, and what she did instead of contemplating and improving herself was to work on her husband, Ken, the father of her children. They escaped, but he couldn’t. This was something about the way love, which she knew she didn’t understand, worked in her life. She might have been ashamed, when she reached this understanding, but she wasn’t: she felt tenderly towards him, the man she’d built her life on. He’d only be a few minutes in his office, and then they could go to bed, a couple, such as they had made of themselves, so much better than being alone.

At the centre of any novel there is something to be resolved. The writer is working to find it, the reader waiting to be told. What happened? Human life is no different. The young want to know what will become of them, the old wonder when and how they will die. How long, oh

clouds, how long? Some of us sense our end nearing us; for others, it's a shock. We set off when young with no idea of what's to come, and when we realise that everybody dies, and there's no escape, our lives change. How will it be for me? Dying of what? Some occupations are more risky than others, so we can, if we're clever, put ourselves in a safe position, but the safety is only relative because there is an indefinable turmoil at the centre of things. In a well-ordered society, it's the nature of government to deal with disturbances as they arise. Politicians with foresight see the problems coming and prepare solutions in advance ... if their opposition and their own party let them.

Antinous was a far-sighted man, but the parliamentary process is frustrating. Perhaps that's for the best, slowing things so that everyone can have a look? It may be so, but patience can be sorely tested. He'd learned in his opposition years to do nothing without consulting those who might block what he wanted to do, but everyone, he found, thinks they own the premier, or can stop him. A premier is surrounded by those who want his position and his power, such as they may be. Premiers must know when to move, how far, and in which direction. This means that they must have others close to them unlike themselves. The party had elected a union man called Harvey Smith (Smithy) as their deputy, a man who liked a brawl. Journalists took it for granted that Smithy wanted Antinous to fail so he could take over the leadership. They questioned Antinous about rumours of rivalry, but the leader returned pallid answers. 'We agree on most things, we're talking to each other all the time; Cabinet's the place to sort out differences, not in the media.' They ran a good cop/bad cop regime, Smithy accusing businesses of withholding workers' rights and Antinous greeting foreign investors with charm, visits to wineries and the like. He referred to Federal Liberals entering the state with a brand of cool dignity that was popular with the public, which came to trust him. 'We've been a fortunate state, ever since the gold rushes,' he liked to say, 'but good fortune has to be created. If things are good it's because people have made them that way.' He was shameless about rolling out clichés, but careful to link them with popular announcements like extra trains for big sporting events. Publicity of this sort, for that was what it was, would be moved to the

office of the relevant minister, because Antinous, ever sure of himself, was confident that approval of the government was approval of him. He extended the boundaries of several national parks when properties came on the market, and encouraged schemes aimed at ridding the bush of feral dogs, cats, deer and anything else likely to harm native wildlife. He told Victorians that their state was beautiful and urged councils to take good care of historic buildings. The Opposition accused him of being a shallow do-gooder and he turned this to advantage by getting the Department of Infrastructure to publicise the historic properties collection created by the city's oldest university in collaboration with one of its boldest estate agencies, headed by none other than his friend, Robyn Briggs. 'When you build, build well,' he told the public. 'We've got a great heritage; add to it whenever you can.' He told his ministers to capture the public's attention. 'Don't let the media bluff you,' he would say in Cabinet. 'Newspapers are dying and free-to-air television is none too healthy. Commercial interests are forever pushing their messages into people's eyes and ears. Government bodies have to do the same. Whatever you're doing that's progressive or simply conserving something good, get the message across. Look at the Vietnam war. Who won? The side that won people's hearts and minds. We're creating a message about a way to live. Think of it that way and people will realise over time. They'll wake up and find they're in a different state, and next thing, we hope, they'll realise that they created it.'

Holding the top job had steadied Antinous in his wish to improve the state. There was much that he couldn't do because the pre-conditions didn't exist. Given the opportunity, he'd have had half a dozen boring, limited suburbs torn down and rebuilt, adding the richness that greater density allowed, but the city had long ago decided that it preferred separate dwellings on separate blocks. After more than a century of this sort of development, the city stretched far beyond its original limits, swallowing up farmland and forest. Only motor cars made it habitable, but these, accepted so joyfully when the motor age was young, had crowded the roads until traffic hardly moved. The further the city spread the less functional it became. Journalists liked to tell the public that they lived in the world's most liveable city, but

they, Antinous could have told them, didn't have to do what needed to be done with the state's limited budget. Schools, hospitals, police; fire trucks, ambulances, buses, trams and trains. Most damaging of all to his idea of a great city centring a great state was the split between public and private good. People had become used to wanting what could be provided, and advertising reinforced that. They longed for their own house and garden but once they got them they had to live within their limits. Suburbs that had once been outer were now inner, and once they became desirable their values went up, meaning that newly-weds wishing to start a family faced a lifetime of rental. The financial system had enslaved those it was meant to serve, had enriched the newly-weds of another age and made them its supporters. What could Antinous do? He could listen to his ministerial colleagues in Cabinet meetings, tossing around ideas, changing little. He could say to his historian friend, over a drink in the Windsor lounge, 'This job's harder than I expected it to be,' to which CC might reply, 'You and I both, friend,' and tell his companion that he'd bitten off considerably more than he could chew when he'd tried to plan a new way of writing his country's story. 'Tell me your problem,' Antinous would say, happy to be relieved of his own, and CC would sketch it for him. At the heart of the new vision he wanted to embrace was the wish to add the aboriginal experience of the land to that of the whites who displaced them, but the standpoint for doing the first wouldn't work when he tackled the later part of the story, after 1788. The later part would be quite incomprehensible from the standpoint of the earlier section. 'But CC, dear boy,' Antinous would say, 'that's exactly what you want to tell them, is it not? The black people lived and saw things in a different way?' The historian had to agree. 'We're used to using documents, evidence, and they're not.' This didn't trouble Antinous either. 'Then you must accept what they tell you in the way they give it to you. If they say one star speared another and it became a kangaroo, that's their story!' He was amused, and more so when CC said to him rather sharply, 'You think your job's impossible and that's what I think about mine: we ought to swop for a year and see if we can solve each other's problems!' This caused Antinous to say that they should have one more drink and go home. 'At least this pub'll be here tomorrow!'

The hotel where they drank still stands as this book is written, something fine and continuing in the city's tale. There are plans to build a tall extension behind it, but nothing has come of them yet. The current ownership is said to be Indonesian, but while the name remains, the public neither knows nor cares. Once a home to old money, it needs to renew itself, and does, once in a while. The Premier and the historian chose it because it was close to the parliament, had associations with the city that they were part of, wasn't frequented by the sort of people they preferred to avoid, expected patrons to be well dressed and above all to have manners. Manners implied respect for others, and this in turn required people to know who they were and act accordingly. Instantaneous fame such as might be conferred by media was to be shunned or at least avoided. 'I belong to the modern world,' Antinous would say to CC, 'It's my business to bring it into being, and I do, because even though I love this place, I think the world's far better now than when it was built. I truly do. But there's a part of me that's nostalgic, or finds its base somewhere back before I was born, and I don't want to lose touch with that.' He might smile. 'I'm probably frightened! Most people are when they say they're upholding fine old standards and that sort of thing. That's your job, my friend, isn't it? Not to allow us to lose touch with what we used to be, what we've come out of on the way to being where we are. We have to understand the past so we don't get lost when the future arrives, as it's inclined to do every morning.' He looked at his friend. 'These chats we have, over here ...' he meant from the parliament '... are my outlet, and my safeguard. The electors of this state expect me to know what I'm doing, and so too, though in a very different way, do Jodie and Tim and Sally. When I sit here I can draw on the world that used to be when I was part of it.'

The historian wondered what his friend meant by that, his silence asking the question.

'I'll lose an election one of these days, and I'll do the right thing and resign my seat as soon as I decently can, and then I'll rejoin the world, if it'll have me back.' This seemed to amuse him. 'I waited years to get to where I am. I wriggled around, I twisted and turned, and all the time I knew that being in the top job – the hot seat, with a

microphone in front of you so the public can hear your cries – wasn't at all like people think it is. They have no idea.'

'You'll write a memoir one day, then?' CC was truly curious. What was happening – what had happened – to his friend? 'I can't see myself doing that,' Antinous replied, 'though I would like to be remembered.' CC picked him up on this. 'It's not so long since you scrapped that idea of having busts of state premiers in the gardens over the road.' This brought a smile. 'Terrible idea. If all they can remember is what your face looked like, your time at the top was a waste.' CC considered. 'Memory's a tricky business. We remember Henry Bolte because he had that fellow Ryan hanged, last hanging in the country. What sort of memory's that?'

Antinous could only say, 'Not my sort, or so I hope. That's up to you, my friend. You and your colleagues. Today's newspaper wraps tomorrow's fish and chips, as you know.' Then he had a thought. 'That idea of yours, about writing the black people into our history ... making it theirs as well as ours ... where are you up to?'

CC looked glum. 'I don't know where to start. I think I know what I want to do, although everything changes once you start writing, or that's what I find ... but it won't get anywhere, it won't achieve anything, unless it gets off to a great start with everyone coming in and talking about it as if they had the idea themselves. But I don't know how to kick it off. Get the ball rolling, if you see what I mean. I need the faculty behind it, and I've talked about it with Brennan, and he likes the idea, by which I mean that the stubborn old bastard doesn't actually oppose it, but he won't give me any support until he can see a way to do it that brings a bit of credit for the history school. Which is fair enough, I suppose.'

Antinous looked at his friend. 'Ask him to talk to me. Ask him to join us, here, one of these afternoons. Tell him I want to hear what he thinks about the idea, it has a lot of merit in my eyes. How will that work, do you think?'

'It might, but it's also dangerous,' CC told him. 'He doesn't have a high opinion of "our political masters" as he calls you people over there. If he thinks he's being ordered to do it, he'll resist, and will you

ever know it! Political interference in university scholarship, blah blah blah. You'll never hear the end. He needs to think it's his idea ...'

'And he already knows it's yours,' said Antinous. 'Yes, that's a problem. But every problem has a solution. If you can only find it. I want to say leave it with me but it's your problem too, we're in it together. Hey!' His eyes were glowing. 'We've got a census coming up. People are asked to state their religion. You've already told me he's fixated on protestants versus micks. Catholics. Supposing someone raised the question about the census ... why shouldn't aboriginality be regarded as a religion? People's first reaction will be that that's a silly idea, but of course it's not. The way they lived was a bloody sight more religious than locking yourself in a monastery. Think about it, mate ...' he laughed at a word he rarely used '... that could be the back door we're looking for!'

There was a newspaper in the back room of one of Sandy's shops. Sipping a tea-bag infusion and cursing it for being weak – why didn't they make it in a pot? – he noticed a headline. 'Uni to recognise blacks.' What did that mean? Sandy was in a sour mood. This branch wasn't doing well; was it his fault – he'd established it in the wrong place? – or were the staff as lazy as he suspected? He recognised a name. J B Claringbold. CC! What was he up to these days? He'd noticed him at a reunion they'd had a few years ago but hadn't been talking to him. They'd never had much in common. He'd forgotten most of the history they'd ever learned, and CC had gone on with it. Was quite well known. He was to be editor of a series of publications, the paper said, about encounters – the word was used twice – between black and white Australians. The focus would be both early and late. The experience and the views, the interpretations of both sides would be presented. It was something new as a requirement of history writing, Mr Claringbold had said ...

Sandy sipped his piss-weak tea. Vile stuff. It would be worse if he added the milk that came to mind – if there was any. So what was CC up to? Bringing the blacks into the story. Well, they were good at football and some of them had a gift for painting, he had to give them that. But the grog and the fighting, the abuse of their kids ... He'd

never had much sympathy for them. They were supposed to be good with cattle and horses, but that wasn't much recommendation for city life, where most of the population were. He had a moment when he wondered why CC was taking this path, but soon turned his mind to the problems of the shop.

That evening, when he got home, however, he mentioned what he'd noticed in the paper to Marion. She'd noticed it too and, knowing that he knew this Claringbold man, was going to show it to him. Charli and Greg, waiting for their mother to serve dinner, were curious. 'Why's that in the paper, dad? What's news about that?' Sandy didn't know. He had a low opinion of media people, forever retailing gossip with little understanding. 'The best thing they publish is people's letters. That's about the only place where you can see what ordinary people are thinking about.' The children wanted to know if he'd ever written a letter to the paper and he hadn't. 'Never wanted to. Never expected anyone would be interested in anything I had to say.'

'Dad!' Charli and Greg were shocked. 'These people who write in, they're no more important than you.'

'No they're not,' Sandy said, 'but I'm no more important than them.' When he looked at his children, he saw that they were disappointed in him. 'I've got shops to run. There's plenty there to keep me busy. Not to mention looking after you two.'

Greg wanted to tell his father how important he was, but couldn't find whatever it took to bring such things into the open. Charli turned to her mother. 'Mum! Tell dad he should write to the paper.' Marion said, 'What about, darling?'

Charli wasn't silent. 'Whatever he thinks is important.'

Marion said to her husband, 'There you are, father. What's important?'

Sandy wanted to laugh it off but the three of them were looking at him, and his wife had addressed him as father. He had to speak. He went into himself, something he wasn't used to doing. He thought.

'The family you belong to, that's the most important thing. The four of us.' Greg was unimpressed. 'I don't feel very important. Nobody's ever told me I was important.' He looked to his mother,

disappointed in what his father had said. Marion said, 'Go on Sandy. Tell them the rest of it. What's important?'

He thought of the drunk who'd accosted him in Brisbane, years before. Why? Because he was wearing his school's famous blazer and the drunk had been a three-colour man himself, when he'd been young. And he'd failed. It gave Sandy his theme. 'The important thing is to succeed at something. It doesn't matter what it is, so long as it's decent. If you start out and fail, you've got to get yourself up and start again. You must succeed, in your own eyes at least. You've got to be able to point to something and say, this is what I do, and I do it well.'

Charli broke in: 'What are you pointing to, dad?'

This was easy. 'Your mother, you and Greg. A string of shops. The customers who come to those shops and go away with good clothing at a decent price. I'm there to dress them, not to rip them off. I make sure the people who work in my shops understand that. We make our money out of working to a standard. I don't want anything that is sold in my shops, anything that happens there, to be below standard ...'

He would have gone on, but Marion diverted him. 'That's your immediate responsibilities you're talking about. But beyond that? Where do you go from there?'

Sandy didn't have ready answers because he didn't much bother with the world at large. It was uncontrollable, endlessly surprising, and generally annoying to a decent man. But maybe his daughter and son would be different? What did he say to them?

'Treat other people the way you'd like to be treated yourself. That's what I was taught at school, and I believe it still.' He felt he was on firm ground, but his daughter asked, 'What if people don't treat you the same way? What if they do you dirt, daddy? What then?'

She was pressing Sandy on a point he wasn't prepared for. He dug deep into himself. 'If people do something dirty, if they do something against you that's wrong ...' he gathered himself '... walk away. Don't fight back. Make it clear from the way you're looking at them that you're looking *down*. Down! If they're not up to your standard, you won't have anything to do with them. You'll only deal with people who're worth dealing with!' He wanted to go on but knew he had to stop. If he went on the children would say he was raving. Despite

everything he and Marion had done to make them fine young people, well mannered, obedient, considerate of others, and so on, they were part of a later age and much had been lost. Or so he thought. It's rare for people to concede that standards may have risen, though they do, as often as they fall. The see-saw is endless, an improvement here, a decline over there. Without a generally agreed standard set by some moral authority – and see how the church is in decline – we can only fall back on pride, in ourselves and the things we believe in. Sandy had been weakened by his encounter with the drunk in Brisbane, all those years before. People like himself, people with the same background and the same emblems of status, could fail. Did fail, the evidence had put itself before his eyes. 'What's for dinner, darling?' he asked, hoping that the test of character, which was endless, could be put aside for an hour or two.

Word got around the girls' school that Margaret Nilsson had died. Most of the girls had to be told who she was because she'd retired several years earlier, but had continued to work in the fund-raising section of Finance. Now she was gone. Word reached Julie Wade on the day of her daughter's fifth birthday. She'd gone into town to get things for the party and the message was there when she returned. One of her school contemporaries had rung and left a number if she chose to return the call. She decided against. There was too much to do. Things had to go well. Melissa didn't have many friends because she wasn't yet at school, so the parents of those invited would have to bring their children, this meaning that they too had to be entertained. Norval had somehow found an acting group in the city that performed at parties, and Julie had, at considerable expense, hired these people to entertain the children ... and the adults too, if that was possible. They would arrive at any minute, they'd have to be given something to eat and drink, then shown where they were to perform ... No, she'd have to postpone any inquiries into the end of Miss Nilsson's life. A childless life, except that many hundreds of young women had passed through her care, and at times needed her badly. Julie remembered how she'd been invited to act as a model for a photographer when she was in her first bloom as a woman. She'd been suspicious as well as excited

and had gone to the boarding house mistress for guidance. That, she reflected, was a long time ago, but it had been done well. Her parents had been contacted and they'd agreed, but only when one or other of them was in the city next. There had been two modelling sessions but the photographer dropped her soon after because he didn't care to have parents setting limits on what he could ask his models to do. Julie cast her mind back; had she wanted the modelling to go on? She thought she had, but her father had been suspicious, and she, sensing this, had allowed *that* career to fall away.

Now she was a mother herself, protective of Melissa, wishing to give her daughter the social threads and pathways that she would need. Norval spoke to the girl in French as often as English, so she would pick up the language of his people; this was strange to the girls and boys who played with Melissa, but it was a positive, an addition, something that no other child she knew had access to. Norval had the air of a man sharing a precious gift when he spoke in French, and Melissa knew that other children envied her this father who could speak English and then something else. Where did languages come from? She had no idea. She could tell, in some way, that though her mother understood Norval, and answered him at times in his own form of speech, it wasn't natural to her, and if she laughed at her mother, as she sometimes did, she would be told 'I'm not a native French speaker. Your father is.' That brought in the puzzling word 'native'. Natives lived in stories, were black, and dangerous, and had to be overcome. Or so it seemed ...

Julie was proudest of her house when she entertained. She liked people to wander around the photos and paintings on the walls. She liked to have them sit at table. She liked to see cars coming down the drive, and to answer questions about the seasons, the stock, the likelihood of rain. It satisfied her to tell visitors about changes to the house, extensions, and who, in which generation, had done these things. The house gave her constancy, certainty, a place, and yet she was in time's river as she well knew. Melissa would look back on her one day, as she looked back, rather sadly, on her mother. What would Melissa understand and what would she simply miss? Parents are mysteries to their children, despite the understandings that flow through love.

Suddenly she found herself thinking once again of Margaret Nilsson, and the time she visited Ormiston with the teacher from the boys school – Rhonda Mathieson. Her school had set up a room in their library as a memorial to her. Had she been happy in her years of teaching? Fulfilled? Or limited in the way that people were when they didn't have children of their own? Teaching was a strange life. Julie was glad that it had never been her lot. She'd inherited Ormiston and all that came with it ...

And she had a birthday party to prepare. She snapped into action. They would have the party in the big oval room, the children for an hour or two at the centre, as they would be again, one day, when the generation above them had been put away.

Suzanne Jarman's mother died. There was a service at Saint John's, Toorak, and she was buried in the rose garden at Springvale. Suzanne, her only child, carried herself quietly, sang the hymns as on an ordinary Sunday, held her daughter Cleo's hand at the interment. Ken stood close to his wife, supporting, comforting, but feeling that the effects of this loss were unknown to him because his wife wasn't, at this stage, allowing anything to interrupt her performance of grief. Suzanne said it had been inevitable: she'd known the end was close the moment her mother had been admitted to hospital. 'They didn't waste time trying to save her. They put her into palliative care on the second day. Once they realised.' Ken heard the calm voice of his partner and wondered when she would express her suffering. Grief had tightened her face. She looked very beautiful. Cleo, standing beside her, contrasted with her mother, the daughter's face untouched, perfected because as yet unchanged; Suzanne, her daughter beside her, revealed her dignity in her bearing rather than her face. She'd had her hair done more tightly than usual, compacted. Ken, knowing how little time had been spent on dressing and make-up, was surprised. His wife had in some way been perfected too, like their daughter. He was what would be called by some 'a lucky man' but he knew he didn't understand what his partner or his daughter were feeling, and wondered how long it would be before he knew, of *if* he would ever know. His own parents, though ageing, were hale enough. He hadn't been tested yet, nor made to

estimate their loss. It occurred to him, helping his wife into the car after the service, that Suzanne had in some way gained as a woman from the loss of her mother. She'd had to take on some element of burden, responsibility, gravity perhaps, that she'd been spared from carrying while her mother had been there. In that sense he was now *lighter* than she was. His responsibilities were to do with the money that was society's means of exchange. This mattered, as the business pages reminded him daily, but the human burdens that women carried were heavier, and, being honest with himself, he could see that the beauty that people around them were noticing was somehow connected with the fact that her load was heavier than his. Ken looked at his daughter, almost a woman, and felt humble. He faltered in his step for a moment, Suzanne looked at him in the impersonal way that had been hers since her mother's death, and released Cleo's hand, her attention for the moment diverted to her husband. He smiled in a fleeting way, to tell her he was fine, she shouldn't be distracted, she could rely on him, and they finished the business of getting in the car.

Days passed before she was open to him. He came home from work, took off his coat and put on a jumper, and stood at the end of the kitchen bench where she was working. She put down her knife and moved to embrace him, simply at first, and then, he could feel, with passion. He stood, being held. 'We've been good Suzanne,' he said, and wondered why he'd used her name. 'We're a couple. A pair.' She said, talking to his shoulder, 'You know what that means, don't you? When one of us dies, the other will die soon after. That's what couples do. They grow interconnected, even if they don't know it. One dies, the other realises there's something missing ...'

'The other half,' her husband said.

'... and loses heart. There's no reason to go on, so that one dies too. Life's all about the will to live. While people have it, they're lucky. When they lose it, it's time to make room for someone else.'

'Sounds simple,' her husband said.

'It is simple,' Suzanne told him. 'It makes you wonder why people argue and fight over religion. How many people have been killed – put to death – because they understood god in their way and not the way they'd been told?'

‘I don’t think anybody could put a number on that.’ He could be simple too.

Suzanne said, ‘Mother’s in the rose garden now. It’s what she wanted. What do we want, darling?’

Ken said, ‘I’d like to be remembered, but for what? I haven’t done anything notable with my life.’ Suzanne shifted so she could look at him. ‘That means you haven’t made other people suffer. Don’t apologise for being ordinary. Or harmless. That’s how we need people to be. Forgettable, and safe to be with. Not ...’

She left it unfinished. He said, ‘What do you want, my love, if you go before me?’ She looked back at the fruit she’d been chopping and putting in a bowl. ‘I’m not sure. Do I want you to die with me, maybe a day or two later, and then snuggle into the same grave and say “I’m with you darling!” or do I want you to go on for years after I die, with a second wife, and have a second family ... Do I want that? No? Yes? I’m not sure.’

Ken said, ‘We don’t have to make up our minds tonight.’ They laughed. She looked at the bowl, estimating that there was enough for the three of them.

Lola suggested to Noel that they should sell their Northcote house and move south of the Yarra. That was where his shops were. ‘Somewhere on a train line, or a tram route, so you don’t have to drive me.’ He snorted. ‘If you’d learn to drive, you could go where you liked, and when. You know that. Kids learn to drive. Badly, most of them, but it isn’t hard!’

She said stubbornly, ‘I like to be driven.’

‘And don’t I know it!’

‘When I need to go somewhere, and you take me, you’re doing something for me.’

‘So?’

She wanted him to think that keeping her happy was the main point of his existence, but that wasn’t going to happen. So? She wanted to be on her own, but couldn’t think of a reason, and she didn’t want to walk out. She picked up a tea towel and started to wipe things in the drying rack. This annoyed him.

‘For Christ’s sake!’

‘Noel?’ This was her waiting game, all sweetness, simplicity and reason. And most aggravating.

‘You’re only doing it to annoy me.’

‘Wiping the dishes? That shouldn’t annoy you.’

‘I don’t give a shit about the dishes. You can wipe them all day for all I care. But you do it to annoy me ...’

‘... and it works!’

He was ready to rage, it was stupid and he knew it. ‘If I said yes, let’s sell up and buy another house, and I let you pick the house, what difference would it make? A week or two after we moved in, you’d be wiping the dishes to annoy me.’

‘No I wouldn’t. I’d be suggesting new carpets, or some new shelves, or ...’ she smiled mysteriously ‘... something!’

‘Exactly! You don’t give a stuff about carpets, or shelves, or fucking dishes, you just want to annoy me.’

‘And I succeed, do I not?’

‘You do. There’s no denying that.’

It was time to sharpen the point. ‘I’m your companion. I may not be your better half but I’m your *other* half, am I not?’

‘You are.’ It was like admitting that Nazis had killed Jews, or a bomb had wiped out Hiroshima. ‘There’s no question about that.’

‘Much of the time, however, and unfortunately, you don’t want another half. You want to be all on your sweet self-concerned own. Tick the box. True or false?’

‘True.’

‘Can we ... and I’m speaking to you now as *your* other half ... make a situation where you acknowledge that you need me?’

‘I acknowledge that I need you.’

‘Then we would seem to have no problem.’

In sharing their pain they were very close. He needed her. She needed him. Neither was any good without the other. ‘Why are you so difficult Noel?’

‘How many times have we talked about this?’ She raised an eyebrow. It was like a game of chess; they knew all the opening moves. It only took a minute or two to get to the heart of the problem. Noel

said, 'As you know very well, I envy people with a great passion. A central thread to their lives. Like composers who sit at the piano and music fills their head. Inventors, scientists devoted to something, I don't care whether it's cancer cells or the leaves of a tree, they know all about and it matters to them. It's so important to them that they're happy to put things aside so they can work on the central thing. They're not pursuing money or power, they want to create. Find out. Break new ground. Or even just do their duty, like a policeman on the beat. Not that you see them any more, much. They're usually rushing about in cars or helicopters ...'

She raised her hand to stop him. If he went on, he'd be raving. Insistently, she reminded him: 'You envy people with a great passion.'

He accepted the rebuke. 'I envy them. I don't have a great passion. I'm built like people who do, I've got the capacity, but there's something missing.'

'Accept yourself as you are.'

He said, 'You know I can't. Putting it better, I don't. I try, but I can't and I don't. You should have left me years ago.'

'I'm missing something too.'

He said, 'We form a couple of sorts, then.' He wanted to add something useful but all he could think of was, 'Of sorts. We're not like other couples. It's funny, we're quite happy, half the time.' She said, 'That's because ...'

He interrupted. 'I'm happy half the time and unspeakably hard to live with the rest of the time.' He was saying it to himself.

'Precisely. What are we going to do about it?'

'What we've always done in the past. As a result of the three hundred conversations like this that we've already had.'

'No change?'

'No development.'

'Another trip to Tassy?'

'Certainly, if you like.'

'You always enjoy it, down there.'

'I do.'

'You're not as cranky down there.'

‘I’m not. Or I hope I’m not.’ He felt as if he was made of steel, yet there was tenderness in his eyes. She saw it. ‘I still love you Noel.’ He said, ‘That is very very good of you. If you were doing it for the church, they’d call you a saint.’

‘I am doing it for you. What do you call me?’

‘I don’t call you anything, except Lola, and it was your mother gave you that name, not me.’

‘Then what word do you use when you want to call me something?’

He hated to say it, but he had to. ‘I don’t have words, only my arms. They’ll tell you how much I need you. How much I love you. How much I need to tell you that I love you.’

Satisfied at last, she said, ‘Sounds pretty desperate then,’ and took him in her arms.

America had led the world, towered over it for years, until China loomed as the global master, if it chose to be. An American President’s term came to an end, and he was replaced, via the country’s strange electoral system, by a new leader called Donald Trump. This man, in campaigning for the top job, made endless promises but only one that counted. He would make America great again. Crowds waved banners displaying these words. He couldn’t. To set it as a goal meant the goal was unrealisable. He appeared to think that America shouldn’t be held back in any way – this in an age when climate change had made the world fearful. Hundreds of millions living outside America shifted their attention to Vladimir Putin of Russia, Li X Jinping of China, Angela Merkel of Germany, the newly elected Emmanuel Macron of France: what did these people, and those they commanded, have to say? America’s deputy, Great Britain, the imperial power previous to the United States, was, in a state of some confusion, pulling out of the united Europe. As the saying has it, those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad.

What of our characters in this ever-changing world? They were settled now, getting ready for their later years. Most, as we have seen, had children who would replace them. The conventions of novel-writing cause novelists, story-tellers, to deal with some aspects of people’s lives, ignoring others, but life is multi-dimensional and much

is happening that can't be shown. The best we can do is cause our readers to infer from what we set down. Hardest of all to make the reader see is the movement of time, shifting swiftly, in a moment, to bring about the birth or death of things, lingering quietly through centuries of common practice or tradition. Each of us deals with it in our own way, each of us is handled by it, shown our classification sooner or later, used, then put aside. Thinking ourselves solid, we are as open to the world's forces as the Temple of the Winds, crowning a rise in the gardens laid out for the city of Melbourne by William Guilfoyle, master landscaper in a time before the people we are following. Taking control of the gardens as former directors had left them, he moved trees by the score, shifted paths, created vistas, moved the city's river to form a lake, plotted his creation to surround the Governor's dwelling, and his own. If this sounds autocratic, he was at least giving society what it wanted, a place where they could enjoy being seen, and more: he was giving his city, and the state of which it was capital, a heart. Antinous Knight, Premier, liked to stroll through the gardens with visitors he wanted to impress, which was most of them, for he loved his city, and loved to say so, at the same time as he deplored its endless sprawl. Something in him yearned for the days when its football clubs were still local, instead of the exhibits of national television they had become. Conversely, and following a perverse logic, he liked to see what he still thought of as his city's game, his *school's* game, played in distant places. He took his place proudly in the state's parliament, a building declaring how lucky the state had been in its endowment of gold. In a tiny street between his old school and the city's synagogue had been – it was no longer there, alas – the home of Guilfoyle's predecessor, Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, the German botanist who saw before most others that the colony was as rich in plants as it was in gold. He'd led horses through the state's high country, all its regions in fact, recording what he saw, developing a vast collection of its flora, writing endless letters to collectors and to garden directors like himself in other parts of the world. Antinous thought of him as a man who'd known how much was on offer, and accepted the task, vast as it was. His place in time was more than himself, and the same had been true of his successor, William Guilfoyle. Antinous

liked to walk to Guilfoyle's Temple on days when the nearby sports ground was filled by international cricket or a footballing crowd, and their roaring rushed across the gardens. Leaving the lake, and moving to the steps which would take him up to Guilfoyle's Temple, he would pause to examine the names, set in concrete or cut in stone, of the garden's directors, one below the other, hallowed names, all of them fortunate men. Guilfoyle had lasted thirty six years, something that always caused Antinous to smile. Premiers didn't last that long, nor should they. One of the reasons for his popularity was that people sensed that he would leave gracefully when his time came, a man not burdened by an ugly ego but, in his own estimation, a servant of the people.

What did they want, those electors of Victoria, and their children too young to vote, and their ancestors, lying in the soil, still alive in memory, or finally forgotten? What did they want? They wanted a quiet life, and they wanted the opposite, a series of big, memorable events. They should have it. He would give it to them if he could, or insofar as it was in his grasp to do so. Antinous had considerable strength of will but believed it shouldn't be evident. A body politic housed all the inevitable tensions but courtesy and correct form should manage them. Nobody gets everything they want, he would say to those who worked in his office, nor should they. The effect of someone getting more than their share is to make those who know about them greedy for as much, or more. Justice takes many forms but at least one of them should be seen to have prevailed. As Premier, his job was to explain himself, and to listen. It was as simple as that. This calm, patrician manner was not available to a number of his colleagues in the ministry, whom he had to chide gently but firmly out of the hearing of others. Sometimes this worked and sometimes it didn't; politics can be played in many ways. A journalist challenged him by quipping that he'd given his working class party manners, to which Antinous pointed out that there was no longer a working class in the state of Victoria. 'The name of the game these days,' he said, 'is manipulation, and you can find that anywhere you care to look.' Something about the way he said the last words made the journalist aware that he was being accused, and he didn't like it.

‘What are you getting at, Premier?’

‘In an ideal world, I would be in direct communication with every voter, but since that’s impossible, I have to use whatever intermediaries I can find. It makes the job somewhat harder.’

The rank of premier confers the right to have the last word, but using that right stirs resentment. Nobody likes to feel squashed, least of all media people, who are used to controlling others. Antinous knew he’d pay for what he’d done: when and where remained to be seen.

Gilbert Brennan, CC’s boss in the History Department, was flattered to be asked to join the Premier and CC for a drink. Joining them in the lounge, he said, ‘Hmm, this is a nice way to end a week. You gentlemen have the right idea.’ His estimation of his fellow historian rose. He chose to drink white wine, and asked the waiter where it came from. ‘Our cellar sir,’ the man replied. This amused Gilbert Brennan. ‘Connoisseurs such as I aspire to be recognise a wine by its origins, that’s to say the variety of grape, the vineyard and the wine maker. But this place is a name in itself, so ...’ He beamed at them. ‘Your health, gentlemen!’

As the conversation developed, CC saw his friend in a new light. Antinous, the consummate politician, wanted to know about the university and said, as he might not have said in the hearing of others, that the University of Melbourne was central to the state’s reputation, and people both here and overseas watched to see what it was producing, expecting all the while that it would be rock-solid in its scholarship but progressive in its quality of ideas. ‘This city has a considerable reputation for medical research. I’d like to think that scholars around the world held it in the same esteem for its ideas in the social sciences.’ Brennan nodded cautiously. Antinous wanted to know what plans he had for his department, what directions he was encouraging. Brennan referred to CC. ‘Doctor Claringbold wants us to rewrite our history in terms inclusive of the aboriginal people’s way of understanding the world. Or that’s how I understand it.’ To CC’s surprise, Antinous said, ‘Yes I know Doctor Claringbold’s plans in that area, and I’m sure he’ll be well supported by his colleagues: it’s an idea whose time has come. But what else is going on in your

department? It's something I need to know and something I'd like to assist, if possible.'

That gave Brennan a paddock to roam in. The waiter was soon filling his glass. He told Antinous that many of the state's problems needed to be looked at in new ways, giving public housing as an example. 'The older suburbs are full of these wretched Housing Commission towers. They were meant to solve the problem of depression-era slums, but they've managed to repeat it! Good housing is more than a necessity, it's an aspiration ...'

CC, noticing how patient his friend was being, wondered how Antinous could listen to people all day long, and still preserve his sanity. Yet he noticed, also, that Brennan's thoughts were being guided. The Premier wasn't wasting his time. Before long he was nodding vigorously as Brennan poured scorn on the quality of the 'news' offered the public by the media. 'Feed them trash so they lose the habit of thinking, or never develop it. They've got reporters attached to police headquarters so that the moment anything goes wrong, the headlines are ready! They don't attach anyone to us to see what ideas we're generating, what papers are being written, for people to live by in the coming years!' He was seething. 'They talk below the level of intelligence of their audience as a means of control.' He glared at Antinous, expecting him to bark a few commands and fix the problem. Instead, the politician murmured, 'I'll have a word to the Vice-Chancellor. It's a problem for the whole university, not just one department.'

After Brennan left, CC said to his friend, 'I'm gaining insights into government. I need them in my work. So much that you look at doesn't happen. Those statues of your predecessors ...' Antinous made a sour face '... or it does, but not in the way you intended ...' Antinous broke in. 'And it's the same for you. You'll write your aboriginal version of history, but it won't be one big, completely thought-through tome. It's more likely to come out as a collection of writings over time. And it'll be just as influential that way, perhaps more, we can't tell at this stage. Brennan can't see the wholeness of your concept, so he's not a great deal of use to you. All you want him to do is not to block you. I'd say just start, write papers or give lectures as things come to you. Do other work too, not connected. Perhaps nearer to his style of thing.'

But keep going, in bits and pieces, until other historians grasp your concept. They'll start to imitate you after a while. Once that happens, you're right. You'll have the wind behind you. It's the old trick. Pick off the bits you can get away with until what you're doing looks natural in the eyes of those who know about these things. Publish!' He was smiling by now, happy to have settled something for himself and his friend. CC gathered himself to say, 'You're a good friend, Endless. I'm very fortunate to have your backing. Bringing him in here today was a master stroke, yet I know, even if others don't, that you do these things all the time. Filtering, testing, looking for openings. Trying out ideas.' He would have gone on, but Endless Knight, his friend of many years, was looking seriously at him.

'That's one you owe me, friend.'

Surprised, CC said, 'There's not much I can do for you. What would you like me to do?'

The Premier said, 'Even the best of us make mistakes. Or we don't realise what other people are up to when they want to pull us down. They're plotting, planning something, and we don't see it. We should of course, but we've missed it. Perhaps something else is distracting us and we're blind. Deaf. And most certainly *dumb!*' His voice was suddenly louder. 'Be my eyes, CC, when I need you but don't know it. Warn me. Fend it off, whatever it is. Don't let it happen. Don't let me make a fatal mistake!'

The historian realised that just as there was a fearful side to the calm and quietly assured man who was his friend, and his Premier, there was a wily mind behind the history he'd written thus far. 'I'll do whatever I can, Endless. I owe you that.' They finished their drinks quietly, and went home.

Prue Claringbold sensed a change in her husband. He talked less about what he was going to do and more about what his colleagues were doing. She felt he was comparing himself with them, yet was at the same time more certain of himself. He spoke both scornfully and respectfully about the country's early historians: 'There were lots of things they didn't do but they got the story started. If it's an honour, and I think it is, it can't be taken off them.' Prue asked him

how he thought he would be seen by those who came after, and he said he hadn't done anything worth remembering yet. She knew of his plan to recast the country's story and felt ambivalent about him following the advice Antinous had given. He answered by saying that he had to build on work done by others and it wasn't possible to scrap everything and start again; you had to create new pieces and put them against older, less satisfactorily imagined pieces of the whole. 'You see, if you *don't* write about something, then I think it can be taken that you don't depart from, you don't differ from, the story as it's already known. In that sense we're all working on the one great building, each of us concentrating on a certain part.' Prue didn't like his image of a country's history as a building. 'More like a camp,' she said, 'with tents everywhere, higgledy-piggledy.' This didn't suit CC's orderly mind. 'In a good camp, the tents are laid out in lines.' He referred to army camps, and more orderly refugee camps set up by the United Nations, but she wasn't impressed. 'Look at Mosul, in Iraq, look at half those places in the Sudan or the Horn of Africa, and imagine trying to bring up children when the menfolk are bristling with guns ...' Her contempt was huge. 'Humans make chaos,' she announced, then looked at him. 'It's your job to put things back in order again, even the worst of the messes. Feel good about that?'

CC raised his hands to cover his eyes. 'Don't remind me. I don't need reminding. Every day's news tells me what humans are like, the disgraceful things we do, the good things too.' He took his hands away from his face. 'When I started out as a young tutor I was prone to judge people and movements. I thought I was doing god's job. I was the recording angel.' She was smiling. He looked tenderly at his wife. 'Not any more. I think that when I write these days, I'm secretly, somewhere in my being, asking for forgiveness for what I'm setting down. It's all too painfully true.'

Prue said, 'And does anybody answer you? Does forgiveness arrive? Tell me that, if you don't mind.'

CC said, 'You know the answer's no. There's no-one to forgive us even if we deserved it, and we don't. All that historians can do is increase – sorry, *try* to increase human awareness of what humans are doing, all the time, and down all the ages ...'

He ran out; she finished for him, 'Ever since time began.'

The conversation had made him miserable, but she had a little more to say. 'Have you ever thought about ministers of religion? It's their job to tell us what god has to say about what happens on earth.'

'Fools. Deluding themselves ...'

She accepted this. 'Historians are the next best thing. The second rank, when nobody believes in the first rank any more.' She saw that he was waiting. 'It's their job to tell us how it was, which is the same as how it *is* and guess what?'

He knew the answer. 'Unless we put the best side first, nobody can bear to listen.'

Bob and Gloria Enright had six children, the last two – Norm and Christa - arriving as twins. Like their brothers and sisters, they attended the local primary school before going away for their secondary education. Christa, in year four at the time, came home one afternoon to tell her mother about their partner Carlo's son Vito having a packet of grass, as she called it, in his school bag; he'd been told by his father to give it to another boy in the class who was to pass it on to his older brother. Gloria was appalled, and Bob too, when he heard about it. 'That dago bastard. I got him out of trouble a few years ago and now this!' He stomped away to his roll-top desk – like the one that had been used by Ariadne Berg – to get the contract he'd drawn up with Carlo, years before. Three months notice of the intent, on either side, to end the partnership. Three months! He wanted faster action than that! The trouble was, Sergeant Fillimore, a straight and upright man, had left the town, replaced by a younger man of Greek extraction whom Bob despised as corrupt. 'Should be running a fish and chip shop and he's keeping law and order in this town. Supposed to be!' Gloria told him to calm down. They had to do something. 'Shoot the bastard, that'd be the best thing I could do!' Gloria told him to go to the solicitor in Kerang and get a letter sent to Carlo. 'That way, you give him notice that he's got to go, and you can choose your own time to tell him why.' Bob got a can of beer from the fridge and took it down to the river. Gloria watched him watching the water go by. He too was an upright man and the place where he

lived, and by implication his own life, had been invaded by something he thought filthy. A youngster of seventeen or eighteen getting his drugs via the hands of school children! What was the place coming to? Some problems are easily overcome, some things can be fixed by spending money, and some are sicknesses of the culture which may never be cured. Fucking Carlo! The rat! What angered Bob most, yet left him feeling powerless, was the realisation that nothing he could do to Carlo would change the fact that his once clean-living district had been fouled by a man who accepted the mafia as a fact of life. He also noted the similarity of organisation between the church and the mafiosi: how conscious was that?

In the end, he didn't have it out with Carlo. As the three months passed, he saw that Carlo was packing up. On the morning he left, Bob spent the time with the river, sometimes watching it from the house, sometimes going out to sit where he'd sat with his beer when he became aware of his partner's misdeeds. He spoke rarely if at all to the policeman he suspected of being corrupt. The man left after a couple of years, unforgiven by Bob Enright for his indifference to what was eating into the integrity, the sacredness, of a way of life. We sometimes understand a thing only after we've lost it. Bob farmed till late in his life, and even then he and Gloria lived on by the river, though some of the paddocks were sold to fund their children's businesses, properties, homes, so that the ageing parents drifted on surrounded by paddocks they'd once owned. Giving up the soil in later life was not so hard because they both understood it by then. Water was cleansed by evaporation, by turning into cloud, and falling to earth again; earth was cleansed, in Bob and Gloria's minds, by being used, by producing, by being worked, by bringing it to yield grass to feed animals; wheat, oats, barley and all the other grains to make bread; by nurturing trees that produced oranges, apricots, pears and all the other fruits of the earth, most sacredly by producing wine. Humans had made wine for thousands of years, it was part of their heritage, not like all these new things that were being produced in secrecy, against the law because they were damaging, damaging because people had no idea how to use them, if use them they must.

The Enright would have told you that the earth and a river were all that anyone needed: that, and the idea of service, with everything grown, everything produced, benefiting other people too. Bob told Gloria, 'Everything feels different now. Those bastards up north, and their mates in the cities, have spoiled things.' When he said this, Gloria took her husband's hand. 'We've had a good life Bob. Other people won't be as upset by what's happened as we are. They'll make a go of it, somehow. It's what we've always trained our family to do.'

This was so, but although he admired the resilience that allowed her to produce this comfort, if comforting it was, he had lost one of his innermost principles, the one that connected the earth and what he did with it to his spirit, a feature of his self he never wanted to talk about, but something that had always been there, underlying his life. From the day that Carlo and his family left, he saw the river a little differently: it would go on, and he would not, or not forever, except through the children he and Gloria had brought into the world.

CC began looking at the origins of the six states, and also the laws governing the creation and eventual disbursement of the nineteen counties surrounding Sydney, looking for signs of how the black people had received and/or resisted these incursions. The land had attracted the settlers once they'd pushed through the nearby mountains. What to do with it? They had first to control it, and that meant conflict, or the alternative methods of dispossession - disease and despair. The three worked together and against the native people. The coherence of their world, built up over thousands of uninterrupted years, collapsed. They were mysteriously ill, they lost heart, they were hunted and shot (the term was *dispersed*), their country was treated with disrespect. Their old ways, though giving them certain advantages, were of little use. The invaders kept on coming. What bargaining power did the blacks have? They knew the country: that was handy when whites, especially their children, got lost. Occasionally they struck back, only to be 'dispersed' in retaliation. British law protected them, so any wiping out done by the white invaders had to be kept quiet, and was: massacres and dispersals existed only in the whispers and murmurs of

those in the know, those that could be trusted. How else could a poet write of his country in 1903:

Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West
In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?

This was Bernard O'Dowd, who went on:

A new demesne for Mammon to infest?
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face?

Australia had always been tempted to think of itself as having taken a step that the old world could not take: CC saw that the new history he was proposing would have to acknowledge that this idea of a youthfully virtuous nation was contradicted by the events of its founding – not, surprisingly, the convict stain, which had fairly quickly been outgrown – but the seizure of the land from its native caretakers. Australia's pride rested on not knowing, not admitting, what it had done.

He considered this for a minute, then he remembered William Buckley, the white man who'd lived with the aborigines around Port Phillip for thirty-two years, and James Morrill who, somewhat later, had lived for seventeen years with blacks in the Townsville area. Either of these two men, and no doubt a handful of other such cases, could have told the white society that in creating their way of life, they were destroying an earlier society which had functioned well enough over vast stretches of time. How was he going to deal with that?

It was a hard question to answer. White people mapped the land with straight lines and fences; blacks had other systems and he had little idea what they were. He'd heard of, but never as far as he knew ever seen, boundary trees, with markings made by adjoining tribes. Tribes? Was that the right word? CC, having no command of aboriginal languages, wouldn't know correct terms to use for the stages of aboriginal life: he recalled pictures he'd seen of native men entrusted by sympathetic, perhaps even admiring whites, with silver plates dangling on their chests which declared the recipient to be King Billy or some such name. King! Ridiculous! And meant to be a compliment of some sort! Everywhere he looked he saw difficulties,

and no easy solutions. Blacks and whites weren't used to talking to each other, that was the problem and it might take generations to fix. Still, one had to start somewhere.

Then he got a lucky break. An ex-student, living in southern Queensland, sent him a report of a 'scare' at a tiny settlement not far from the Carnarvon Range area. It had been published in a long-defunct newspaper not long after the famous killing of nineteen whites at Cullin la ringo station in 1861. The location and a couple of details in the account caused CC to think that the 'scare' was probably a sanitised version of one of the acts of revenge for the killings. How to go about this? He published a request in the historical society journals in each state inviting historians to examine the place names in their areas of residence and notify him of any that suggested early contact with black people. Over time, letters came back listing a variety of such names – Whispering Creek, Murderers Gully, Blacks Camp Track and the like. He wrote to his respondents, asking them to gather as many explanations of these names as they could. Later, when he no longer expected any more information to come to hand, he summarised what was known about these names by word of mouth handing on of stories, many of them at variance with each other but consistently about conflict or shameful occurrences; these were the place names with the least disguise built into them. On another level were the names of English dignitaries conferred by flattering explorers or colonisers; and there were also, of course, 'lazy' aboriginal names when nothing better had been available. These last were at least useful in that by examining the native words on the map one could form a rough but useful idea of the boundaries of the original languages of the land. It was of only limited usefulness but, added to the coastal names conferred by Dutch and French sailors, it sketched in some of the beginnings of modern Australia.

The nicest part of this activity was when Angela and Tom, wearing pajamas and fresh from a bath, would come into their father's study, point to whichever map he had on the wall and ask questions. Why was this place called such and such? Or that one called so and so? Who was Lord Melbourne? Who was Charles Darwin? Were there really springs in central Australia? Who, then, was Alice? What

did the native names mean? Could the tribes understand each other? How did they know how to make the markings on their bodies before they danced? How many languages were there before white people came? How many were there now? CC never loved his children so much as in these minutes before they went to bed, full of curiosity about a world they only faintly knew, but full of respect for their father who could answer their questions and talk about the places they indicated with their fingers. They knew they would be big people one day, knowing things like their father did, able to do things like their mother could, managing the world in the way of people who knew what to do.

When CC was talking to Angela and Tom in the atmosphere of his study, Prue Claringbold kept out of the way until she judged from the sound of their voices that they were well settled into their conversation or games with their father, and wouldn't be made self-conscious by her presence; at such moments she'd slip into the room, saying nothing until they addressed her. It pleased her to hear her husband passing on things he knew about people and the places they came from; it had always pleased her to be told as they drove through some town about a historic decision that had been made there, or striking personality born in the region: she and her children were discovering and as for CC, he was handing on, something he did very smoothly. The business of transition, in Prue's mind, was close to being life's central activity. So much of it was left to women that she was pleased to see her husband with their boy and girl. She wanted the two of them to have a wholeness in their minds and outlooks; it wasn't an easy quality to define but it meant that faced by any strong action or decision they would know how to steady the advance of what was being pressed upon them and find a variety of ways to see it before making up their minds. To live a civilised life required this, and it came from thought, and reading, listening and discussion; it required also a certain reserve of mind and unwillingness to be rushed, or act on impulse. These things didn't come easily to children, but if their parents and other adults they associated with were models, the young would learn to think in this way ...

Such transitions don't happen easily when there are dishonesties in a family. Let us cast our minds back to Anita Silbermann, the first lover of Sandy Clarkson, one of our 'boys'. Sandy had carried on his father's line of menswear sales, he was soundly married to Marion Clarkson (nee McArdle), his days as a maître d' at the Windsor buried deep in a rarely visited part of his mind. If asked about the time when he lusted after Anita, he would have told his fellow Rotarians 'Strange days, I don't know what I was doing then, and even less idea what I was doing in my next stage, when I lived with crazy Andrea. But that's what everyone was doing, back then!'

Anita had married Reuben (Rube) Goldberg, had had a child, Georgina, and then restricted her husband's access. She suggested that sexual activity on his part would affect his weak heart: 'I don't want you dying on top of me like President Faure of France!' Goldberg found this rejection not entirely negative since it cast him in the president's role of glamorous if ill-fated lover, and his response was to respect and possibly revere his much younger wife, and to sentimentalise the daughter who was the sole product of his sexual being. He adored her, idealised her, talked to her more than she wished without ever establishing any stream of honest connection because the household relied on falsehood. Anita got herself on the boards of certain charities, a school or two, and by virtue of being a considerable benefactor, onto the state gallery committee, making her an acquaintance of Ken Jarman and his wife Suzanne, though their worlds overlapped only slightly, because her life outside the home was the field in which she found, used and discarded the lovers she needed. She made occasional donations to the Jewish Museum at Ripponlea but didn't involve herself in its affairs because she wasn't committed to its mission as the embodiment of those who'd died at the hands of the Nazis. That aspect of her people's history she kept at bay as best she could, mainly by concentrating on her lovers, whom she met, for the most part, in other cities, telling her husband and daughter that she was attending meetings or otherwise involving herself in the affairs of her charities. Georgina, without actually recognising why these activities were important to her mother, was made uncomfortable by them; they kept her mother at a distance and prevented intimacy between them. There was something both central

and secret about Georgina's mother's life which the girl, and later the young woman, resented. She found it hard to trust people because she'd not been trusted herself. This was something she experienced as a serious lack without quite understanding it. She only became fully conscious of it when, in her second year at university, she met another Georgina, this one from a Greek family. This Georgina, the Greek one, was passionate, strict, a virgin still, and very sure of herself. She was clear about right and wrong. She'd made it plain to her family that she would marry only a man of her choice. No arrangements between two families. She would have children only with a man who wanted children. Her pride in herself made Jewish Georgina feel compromised in some way she couldn't explain, even to herself. There was something wrong with her that she couldn't fix.

What was it? She didn't want to live a false life; the Greek girl – no, woman – had shown her that. For that matter, why was she still a girl, and the other one, although the same age exactly, had long been a woman? She asked herself, couldn't find an answer, and looked where she sensed the answer lay: her mother.

Anita Silbermann/Goldberg used the family's money to dress well, and live commandingly. She talked with her daughter about university life with intimacy, even delicacy, but Georgina knew that there were rules and commands just beyond the edge of hearing when her mother spoke. Anita Goldberg had the reputation of being a good mother, but Georgina Goldberg knew that this was because she wasn't allowed to do anything wrong. When philosophy students at her university talked about free will, she realised that it was an alien idea to her. She argued the case, with her fellow students, that almost everything humans did was determined by the power, the influence of either society at large or influential people close to the individual: probably parents or siblings, but possibly aunts and uncles. Grandparents, too, sent their influence down – or was it up? – the family tree. We can't escape, she told her university companions – for she had no real friends – because the people that shape us, control us, are impossible to escape.

Words, if we use them truthfully to ourselves, have great power. On the way home from university on the day of this discussion, she

sensed, not that she was free, but that she knew where she had, first, to look, and then to take action, if she was ever to find release. Her mother: Anita Rosenberg.

Days passed before her opportunity arrived. Her mother had been in Sydney for two days, then in Canberra for two more. She got home talking about paintings she'd seen in the respective galleries, Sydney and the National. Georgina, listening, wondered if she'd been with two men, or one. She asked.

Anita, amazed, and frightened too, turned her head slowly to grip her daughter's eyes with her own. 'You are never to speak to your mother in that fashion, ever again. I will overlook it once.' Georgina said nothing. Anita said nothing. Georgina said nothing: the question hung in the air. Anita tossed her head in commanding fashion; Georgina said not a word. Anita stood, glanced momentarily at the source of the question that now had an independent existence in the room, snapped 'Vile girl!' and left the room.

Half an hour later, when she came back, Georgina was sitting in the same chair from which the question had been asked. 'Move!' Anita commanded, but her daughter didn't move. Anita, very angry by now, said, 'Don't think you can use silence as a weapon on me!' Georgina said, 'I'll ask father then. He'll tell me, if he knows.' She paused, studying the effect on her mother. 'Does he know? Or do you leave him guessing?'

Anita had spent her life controlling people, and she'd been pulled apart. Left without a feather to fly with. Searching for a way to suppress her daughter, she said, 'You know nothing about the ways of men, and even less about the ways to ... make them suitable for women. Men use women for their convenience. This has to be turned around. No man has ever had the better of me.'

Georgina repeated her last words. 'Does he know? Or do you leave him guessing?'

Anita said, of her wealthy husband, 'He hides what he knows about feelings. He uses what he knows about business. That's why he's got so much money and nothing to spend it on.'

Georgina didn't reply. Anita sensed herself losing control, not only of her daughter – that was already a lost cause – but of herself.

She shouted at her daughter, 'He's good enough for you. You've never wanted for anything. And, cunning little bitch that you are, you never will!' She swept out, but made the mistake of turning at the door, to find Georgina sitting still, in the chair, triumph in her eyes, mixed with the bitterness of despair. 'I'll kill myself!' she shouted at her mother. Anita, as bitter as the girl: 'Do it outside then. Don't make a mess in here!'

Even Rube, when he got home, couldn't ignore the anger filling the house. Hatred too. 'What's happened? What's been going on?'

Anita said, 'Your daughter and I have had a falling out.'

'What about?'

'About whether she will continue to live in this house, or move somewhere else.'

Rube was amazed. 'Move out? But she's studying at the university.'

'I believe she is.'

What was going on? He said, 'You believe she is? You've had a fight with Georgina. What caused it? What was it about?'

'It was about her trying to control my affairs!'

Only half-realising what his words were about, he said, 'Your affairs?'

In a fury, determined to challenge, she said it clearly: 'My affairs are no business of hers!'

He said it again, both mystified and in denial: 'Your affairs?'

'My affairs are no business of yours either because you choose not to know about them!'

There was no dodging it now, no means of making it slip away out of sight. He'd lived a lie and the truth had been shoved in his face. Anita, watching her husband, expected him to break down and cry but he sounded patient, even controlled, as if it was all – and only – some sort of deal that had gone wrong. 'You'd better go to a hotel tonight. I suggest the Windsor. I'll give you a house, and an income. You'll be able to keep up all your commitments, you'll be able to travel where and when you wish.' He looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. 'You'll be better off without me.' Anita said cautiously, 'What about Georgina?'

'She can stay with me if she wants to. She might go into college at the university. She'll need somewhere sane and stable.'

Periods end. They begin to end as soon as they begin. They're ending even as they're climbing to their zenith. Sometimes this progression is observed, even celebrated. One thinks of Edward Elgar, one thinks of Richard Strauss: 'ist dies etwa der Tod?' The process of dying, for an historical period, is called change, and it's all about us, all the time. The offices of Robyn Briggs' real estate empire were as modern as tomorrow, but the man himself knew that his time was running out when he heard two of his young salesmen talking about tracking somebody by the addition of a device called an app to their mobile phone. One could, apparently, locate their actual whereabouts without them knowing, so that they might tell you they were in one place without knowing that you knew they were somewhere else. Interesting, thought Robyn; can these young buggers play tricks on me? To ask questions was to reveal one's ignorance, so he watched sales figures, travel costs, all the day to day measurables and it seemed to him that all was well. People selling their homes were affable when in the office, there were no more than the usual grizzles from customers. 'I want people to know what sort of business we are the moment they walk in the door,' Robyn used to say, and he was prepared to back his policy. Chairs, desks, curtains, office equipment and cars used by the sales staff were of the highest quality. He commissioned photographers to record the finest homes sold by the firm, inside and out. He sponsored garden shows, he bought out a run-down agency in another suburb and used it to sell properties that head office didn't want to be associated with. He would have liked to bring his son Murray into partnership but Murray declined: 'I'm a geologist, dad, I could never get interested in properties. Beside, what you're planning to do needs a much smarter operator than I could ever be.'

What Robyn was planning was a developmental arm which would attract Asian money to build the housing the city would need as it grew to a population of ten million, as predicted. Robyn found a young man called Boris Harbecke who fitted Robyn's intentions exactly. As project manager, it would be his job to find developers with money to invest, architects with ideas, designers and gardeners, and to handle all matters to do with approvals from councils, road authorities and anybody else who might delay a project. 'If a council

raises an objection, offer to build them a refuge for homeless people. Above all, create jobs, that's what governments want most. If you need to get a nod for something from the Premier, let me know and I'll have a word to him.' Boris started and soon had projects at various stages of advancement. Robyn stressed to his new man that whatever they built had to be welcomed by the city it stood in. 'We can charge like wounded bulls so long as we give them things they admire.' Boris got the local architects association to invite a series of visitors to demonstrate the trends in building that they favoured, and invited the press along. Not since the days of Robin Boyd had people talked so much about buildings. Then, by way of stimulating sales and his own thinking, he hosted a series of talks on the theme of 'After the car?' which were later collected and sold as a publication. This success was somewhat marred by the fact that Robyn had a fall at work which his doctor diagnosed as a slight stroke; he ordered the busy man to reduce his workload. The doctor suggested he play a supervisory role rather than continue to act as CEO of the estate business. He further suggested that he take a few weeks away from work, either travelling quietly or, better still, at home, reading and/or gardening.

So Robyn and Louise settled semi-permanently at Macedon, taking walks, gardening, reading, entertaining friends. Robyn found the house a little gloomy, though Louise felt this was his mood rather than a reality, but she didn't oppose his idea of getting people from David Jones to bring up sample books of fabrics from which they chose the materials and patterns for new curtains throughout the house, an expensive conversion but something that Robyn needed to do to recover his spirits. Choosing the fabrics took days, measuring up a couple of hours plus a lunch for the man from the store, whose memories of the shop and its customers delighted Robyn, who'd sold many of the houses which the David Jones people had then redecorated. When the David Jones man had gone back to the shop to start the process of curtain-making, Robyn told Louise that the conversation over lunch was like a review of his life: 'There's so much to focus on when you're busy, and it's only when you step back for a while, as I've had to do, that you realise how much you've done, down

the years.' Louise smiled at this. 'You've always got the most out of yourself, Rob. You've got every right to be satisfied with your life.'

Robyn thought of these words as he crept into bed that night, an hour earlier than Louise, who wanted to finish whatever it was she was reading. 'Be satisfied with your life? It sounded as if it was over, or getting on that way? Surely not? And yet it was appropriate. His life wasn't ended but enough of it had moved into the past to allow him to make judgements on what he had and hadn't done. A couple of weeks later, and while he and Louise were still at Macedon, recuperating, he noticed a death notice in the paper for Nicole Serisier, whom he hadn't seen for ages, and it brought to mind the time when *Berma* was pulled down and he'd been attracted to Nicole. If he'd had a little more courage, or integrity, he'd have joined her side in that controversy, and married her, as he'd secretly wanted to do. Instead, he'd married Louise, and it occurred to him that he'd had, perhaps, the better fortune by going the way he did. Louise had been a good partner. How had this been so? He had a sudden, strange, feeling that his hour of judgement had come. He walked into the garden. No Louise. This was odd; normally, if she went to the shops, she told him, or asked him to go with her. He set off for the back of the garden, where it abutted the bush. It was good to be alone. He felt unchecked power, then he checked himself. What sort of life would he have had if he'd married Nicole Serisier? She'd been far more passionate than Louise, and she took sides on issues, and fought them. Louise had been almost the opposite; she'd allowed him to have his way, then she'd managed him. It was her characteristic to manage rather than to impose. So, most of the time he'd had his way – as with the purchase of this Macedon house – but he hadn't been allowed to fail. Louise could make things workable in her unobtrusive way. He could see that he'd never been as grateful as he should have been; Nicole Serisier, if she'd been his partner, would have pulled him up sharply, and often!

He found himself chuckling. Perhaps it wasn't always good for us to get what we wanted. He'd wanted his son Murray to be the developer in the family but Murray had preferred his rocks; perhaps he too had been wise. He thought of the people in his Toorak Road office. They knew, the whole lot of them, that when he looked at them he expected

to see quality of presentation. They dressed accordingly. He set the standard and he made sure they followed. On the rare occasions when he held meetings, he would say to his staff, 'People say that the really wealthy can get around in anything, and be comfortable. We're not trying to make people comfortable. We're giving the impression, which had better be the truth, that we're sharp. It's to their advantage that we're sharp. We're selling quality. It's what they want. They trust us to deliver. We have to look as if we can, and then we have to live up to our appearance. I hope that's clear.'

It was. It always had been. But today, walking at the edge of his garden, on the verge of slipping into the bush, he felt he was slipping out from under the regime of judgement that had been his life thus far in order to find another set of criteria by which he might assess what he'd done with the time he'd been given. The bush was comfortingly vague. It didn't try to look into him. Secretive itself, it didn't mind if he had secrets too. He looked up through the trees; it was a mild sort of day. The previous owners had put a gate in the fence, so they too must have had occasional impulses to slip away from what they'd made into what wasn't under their control. He opened the gate, moved through, and closed it behind him.

Boris Harbecke came into his mind. Why? He wasn't free like the bush, he was under discipline. He wanted money but far more than that he wanted success. He was a driven soul and he drove others. He was impatient and intolerant. If I wasn't on top of him, unassailable, I wouldn't have the man near me, Robyn told himself. He's a force I've let loose on the world. Such men are needed because there are things that would never get done without them. How could you house ten million people in a decent city without people like Boris? In the early days of his city, when it was class-divided, rich and poor set cleanly apart, the well-to-do could take up pleasantly large areas of land – subdivided farms, mostly – and build their mansions surrounded by trees, like Macedon was still, today. Then they could resist improvements until they were offered enough money to sub-divide: and after that, some people on the rise could move in with them. So it went on until the most sought after parts of the city were crowded with apartments as one group after another tried to buy the isolation

that had been associated with quality in the past. Quality, Robyn told himself, had been associated with separateness, but this was changing now. Quality meant being able to look down from apartments in sky-rise towers. Importance could be measured by the number of people underneath you, and the numbers were vast. So was the exclusivity of those looking down. New worlds, with new rules, were always being created. The rules were changing all the time and quality people were the ones who did the writing of the rules. He laughed. Fancy these thoughts coming to him as he strolled into the bush at the back of his block!

He was a free soul, and this had come upon him because he'd had what the doctor called a mild stroke. He'd been put off work for a while to ensure that one stroke wasn't followed by another. Did he want to go back? Of course he did, but did he need to? Could the office run without him? His staff were so used to him being there as their touchstone, their point of reference, that they'd say it couldn't, but of course it could. People of his age were rarely as necessary as they claimed to be, and why was that? Because they couldn't imagine anything new for themselves to do if they gave up the old things; they only knew themselves one way. They were getting new curtains for the house, why not do the same for himself?

Why not? Why not go back to the office a different man, and surprise them all? The idea appealed to him. He stared into the bush. It was different every time you looked into it. It did the opposite of humans, who were forever making things suit themselves: it adapted. It changed to fit in with, to express, the places where it found itself. What a strange principle? Had the native people lived that way? He had no idea. He'd read something in the paper about CC, his classmate at school all those years ago, wanting to rewrite the nation's history so that it took in the doings, the way of life, of the black people. What an impossible idea! He looked into the bush. None of them around here now, he was pleased to say, and then he thought of the snowgums growing not far away. Snow didn't fall very often at Macedon these days, so the weather had changed, perhaps? He supposed it must, over time, though what would cause it to change he had no idea. He really knew very little. The specialist he'd been referred to after his stroke

had said to him that specialists knew more and more about less and less. So who would want to be an expert, if it narrowed you in that way? Nobody, surely, and yet he was something of an expert himself, and proud of it. He hadn't wasted his life, he'd built a first-rate business and when he died, Louise could sell it for a considerable sum ...

He noticed that he was assuming that he would die before Louise, and he wondered if she had the same expectation. He'd ask when he got back to the house. Would she answer truly, or would she dodge the question by asking him why he was asking her? Or she'd say, 'What do you think, Robyn? Any ideas of your own on this matter?' She was hard to pin. Mostly, he said whatever he thought and left it to Louise to take up any position she chose. That was the way they'd worked out to get decisions and reactions. He spoke first, she decided: that was their pattern. Others must do things differently, of course, but he'd never bothered to examine what they did or why. There were so many things you'd do if you had your life over again ...

... and nobody *ever* got that!

He looked at the bush. It didn't interest him. He liked gardens. They were selling points. Half the time when people agreed with him about the garden of the house they were buying he knew very well that the moment they moved in they'd change it. Chop down trees and plant other trees. Give the lawns a different shape. Pave the sandy paths they'd praised when they were buyers. Humans were so fickle. Changeable. Only a handful ever had any real plan with judgement and taste to execute it. These were the people whose houses and gardens people travelled miles to see. Beyond these people were the great gardeners, the William Guilfoyles who took the heart of a city into their hands and changed it with their lasting mark. Robyn had been successful to the point where he was beyond envy, except in that one matter. Every fine city had a heart. Paris had its painters, Vienna its musicians, New York its builders. His own city had a great garden at its heart and thousands of lesser gardens for people to feel at home in, and it was his job to sell these homes and gardens, these apartments looking down on the earth, cloud-high. People moved endlessly, arriving and departing, climbing up, falling down, and he accommodated them, he and his staff. He supposed it was a useful

occupation, even a proud one if you dealt in the best and most central, as he did. He looked around him. Only bush. He found his way back to the gate, and saw Louise there, looking for him. ‘What have you been doing, darling? Have you been looking at the bush?’

He nodded. That much was obvious. He said, ‘Let’s go in for a cup of tea. I think I’ll be ready to go back to work in a day or two.’ He tried to keep the challenge out of his voice, tried to make it sound like an obvious thing to do. Louise took it as he intended. ‘They’ll be very pleased to see you. That office would be a headless chook without you to keep them up to the mark!’ He accepted this as a natural state of affairs, and moved to the kitchen to put the jug on, empty the pot, and find the spoon that they used as their measure: life was a ritual for Robyn and Louise, now.

And so was the office. Everyone was pleased to see him back. Smiles abounded. ‘Good morning Mr Briggs, you’re looking wonderful today!’ Those of sufficient rank shook his hand, others said that his presence brought the office back to normal. Pauline Dennis, his valued secretary, had everything he needed to look at on his desk, and she activated a buzzer to cause the coffee shop next door to bring in Mr Briggs’ favourite weak black a little weaker than usual. Mary, the young woman from the shop, brought it in with two biscuits on a tray, and greeted the senior man of the agency with charm. Pauline sat at her desk where she could hear the master’s voice if he had anything he wanted to know. She was soon in his office, answering queries. People who knew him put their heads in the door. When he’d caught up with what had been happening in his absence, Pauline told him she had a short list of things she’d like him to decide on. They’d been put aside till he reappeared. He glanced at the list. Nothing too hard there. He coughed. Pauline looked at him expectantly. He coughed again and put his hand up in a way he had of demanding close attention. Pauline came close to his desk and bent down to catch what he would say.

Robyn said to the ever-faithful secretary, ‘It’s lovely to be back. I’m getting the royal treatment. But I want to whisper in your ear that I’ll be making a vacancy before too long.’ Pauline looked soberly at her master. Whispering, she said, ‘Who will you ask to take over, Mr

Briggs?’ He confided to the stooping secretary, ‘Neither my son nor my daughter are interested. We’ll advertise. We’ll need to get someone very good indeed, because whoever it is, they’ll have a strong staff to manage.’ He watched, as Pauline absorbed what he was saying. ‘I’ve always thought of myself as a sort of racehorse trainer, with a stable of champions.’ Pauline smiled, and he saw that she wanted to cry. He touched her hand. ‘I’m telling you now, because I want you to apply. You know the business like nobody else knows it. You see everything that goes on.’ He looked inquiringly at her. Would she put herself forward? If she did, he’d put himself on the interviewing panel, and that would settle the matter. He saw that part of her wanted to grab the chance, and another part was afraid. ‘You could do it,’ he said. ‘You know everything there is to know about this business. You’ve seen it all a hundred times.’

There *were* tears in her eyes by now. ‘They wouldn’t accept me, Mr Briggs. Nobody would do what I said. They’d say the only authority I had had come from you, and you weren’t there any more. There’d be a rebellion. Quarrels. They’d shout at me and call me things I couldn’t bear to hear. They’d even suggest that ... you and I ...’

She looked at him. He was shocked. She didn’t go on because she didn’t need to. He was deflated, and suddenly angry. Who’d built the business? Whose was it to decide? His. His! His!!!

Pauline was shaking her head. ‘Don’t mention this for a few days, Mr Briggs. Let everyone settle down. Get used to having you back. Then, one day, get Mrs Briggs to come in for a staff afternoon tea, and announce it there. Tell everybody what you’re going to do in your retirement ...’

She was most firmly and fixedly *not* crying. She was telling him what to do. He knew these moods she had, though he saw them rarely: she was telling him what to do, and how to go about it. She was, in her way, managing him as, he knew, his wife managed him. Between the two of them they’d made his business a leader in its field. If he wanted to retire – and he did, he knew he didn’t have the energy or the desire to go on – if he wanted to retire he’d have to do it in the way that they advised because that would be the way that best ensured that the business would go on as leader in its field ... after he was gone.

Did he really want to retire? Had he really changed that much in the weeks he'd been away?

He had. He'd only come back, he realised, to enjoy the warmth and admiration he'd been shown that morning. To look at the things that Pauline had prepared for him to read while he drank his coffee. They made beautiful coffee next door, but drinking it had been like swallowing some potion devised to change him, and he'd changed. Pauline had been so good, explaining everything, listing everything for him to assess, and he, having assessed, deemed that everything was good. His staff were pleased to see him back. That was the perfect signal for him to go.

He would.

He would do what Pauline had told him to do. He'd wait three or four weeks. He would bring Louise down from their mountain and he'd make the announcement. He'd put Elvira or Murray on the panel that chose the next manager, and he'd be walking on the mountain as they made their decision. Then he'd return to the office one last time to meet the new manager and introduce that person to the staff. Then he'd go back to the mountain that he'd been turning to for years, and live quietly, welcoming friends and family when they made the rising drive to visit Robyn and Louise.

It was as simple as that.

On the day of Ken Jarman's retirement, Suzanne brought Cleo, almost forty by now, to the gathering in the board room. Cleo looked older than her years, Suzanne younger. Ken looked his exact age – sixty five. Two books sat on the table, gift-wrapped. Suzanne had been consulted on the nature of the gift, and had recommended a survey of the art of Fred Williams and a special edition, at cigar-box-lid size, of the famous 9 x 5 exhibition of 1889. The presents would come from the bank, but Ken would know who'd chosen them. The Chairman of the Board spoke of Ken's years with the bank, his time at the Reserve, and his return to the National. 'I think each and every one of us would have to admit, if asked, that he has made us think about the nature of money, and the nature of a financial transaction. As bankers, we're supposed to be experts in such matters,

but even among experts there are some who are specially gifted, and Ken is one of those rare birds that cross our skies from time to time.’ When he’d dealt with Ken’s career at the two banks, he changed his emphasis. ‘Most of us are also aware, if only in rather general terms, of his role on the Board of the National Gallery of Victoria, where he has ...’ the Chairman looked especially benign as he felt for the word ‘... *guided* the gathering of financial support for the gallery’s acquisitions. Prices, in the art world, are often as mysterious as they are high, and the curators who recommend purchases to the board often take it for granted that money can be found for things that are very precious in their eyes. That is when someone with practical experience of handling money, and locating it ...’ he smiled ‘... is a necessary contributor to the process. Those sacred walls of the gallery – if it’s not too extreme to use such a word – would have very little to show if the gallery wasn’t blessed by the judgement and support of people who know how to handle the finances required to run a great gallery.’ And so on. Ken listened to his own envoy as he’d listened to the praise of others before him. From the corner of his eye he observed his wife and daughter. Much of the praise being showered upon him belonged to them. Suzanne had been his well of common sense and Cleo, his daughter, was sharper in her awareness of artists’ techniques and intentions than he was. And yet he’d learned. He *had* been useful on the gallery board and it *had* been of benefit to the bank, at least in terms of reputation. There was a round of polite applause, then it was his turn to speak.

He began by recalling how little he knew about the world of banking when he joined the National, people who’d guided him, gods of the banking world back then, various crises of his early years. Political blunders, threats of recession, ‘things that kept us on the edge of our seats’. Then he moved to the theme that had fascinated him for years, the difference between the apparent value and the actual value of money. ‘At the Mint, they can print red notes with twenty in the corners, or yellow notes with fifty, or green notes with one hundred, and so on ad infinitum, but what you can – or can’t – buy with those notes is a matter of faith. Of trust. Of belief.’ He looked at Suzanne, in her quiet grey suit, dignity in her bearing, understanding in her

eyes, and they knew where he centred his ideas of faith, trust and value. ‘We’ve all heard stories of German bank notes in the thirties, so worthless that you needed a wheelbarrow to cart them to the bakers for a loaf of bread. A bank note, a cheque, any piece of financial paper, is only worth what people believe it’s worth. We all know that. We make jokes about it. But the ways in which ideas of value are created, or supported, or sustained, are complex and ever-changing.’ At the back of the room, he could see friends standing patiently. ‘But please don’t be alarmed. I’m not going to outline Jarman’s theory of value estimation this morning. I’ll spare you that. I’d just like to thank a few people for their marvellous support down the years, and tell you a little bit about the travel plans that Suzanne and I have devised to fill the months, and we hope years, ahead.’

When he finished, he opened his two parcels, and thanked his audience once again. People came up to chat. The Chairman of the Board was curious about the books that had been chosen by his wife. He asked Suzanne which of the destinations Ken had listed would be their first port of call. ‘Shanghai,’ she told him. ‘Ken’s been there often enough, but only flying in and flying out. He’ll have time to explore, next time he’s there. We’re there,’ she corrected. ‘He says he doesn’t know what places are really like if he visits them without me, as he’s done a lot of the time.’ The Chairman was standing with her, curious. ‘How will you choose the places you’ll go to, now you’re both free?’

Later, when they were home, and changed, Suzanne picked up the word the Chairman had used. ‘He said that we were *free*. Do you think we’re free, Ken, or unattached? Or even lost? There’s quite a difference, isn’t there?’ Ken considered his answer. ‘When prisoners get out of jail, they often commit some new offence, in order to get back in again. I suppose we’d have to call that a rejection of freedom. It’s given to them, they don’t know what to do with it, so they hand it back, poor souls.’ Suzanne said, ‘Fortunately we’re not in that position, unless I’m very much mistaken,’ to which he replied. ‘No, we’re not, but our position is somewhat analogous. Our position is more or less the opposite of what it’s been for a good many years. We have to find a new way to use our time, or a new purpose, or a new something, I don’t quite know what it will be.’

He never found out. He was an impatient traveller in his retirement, taking little pleasure in the places he'd said he longed to explore. Shanghai he found awful. 'You've got the whole population of Australia in the one place. They've tried to make it a workable city to live in but it's impossible. There's too many people. The whole thing's on an impossible scale. You'd need to be a giant to get any pleasure out of living here. That freeway to the airport! I've never felt more enslaved! More locked in! You remember that taxi driver trying to turn around in the traffic?' He could go on. He did, often, in Shanghai and elsewhere. Beijing, he told his wife, was a city of slaves. 'All those people locked away in little rooms no bigger than cupboards!' But he still loved Paris. 'Magic city!' He suggested that they buy an apartment there, but Suzanne wondered why you wanted to own something when you could stay at a hotel or lease an apartment whenever you wanted to savour the place. 'You've never had to stay very long in a foreign country,' she reminded him. 'It's very exciting to be in a new city for a week or two. You rush around seeing everything there is to see, fitting it all into a few days, and you don't realise that you're living differently from the way you live at home. At home, you've got friends, and habits, and things you love to fall back on at certain times, when you're in introspective moods, and you aren't looking for excitement, but reassurance. That's when it's best to be home. No, necessary.' She looked at him. Couldn't he see that?

Apparently not. One of his troubles was that he didn't have any friends in his retirement. The people he thought of as friends were still working, and although they were affable when they ran into Ken, he had nothing new to tell them. He was less interesting than he had been when he still had things crossing his desk and being probed by his mind. Ken's analysis of global flows of money weren't as up-to-date as they'd been. They noticed him repeating things he used to say in his working days, and they sounded musty. Out of date. He was repeating himself instead of flashing the sharp mind they'd admired and sometimes feared. To be blunt, he wasn't what he used to be. Nobody sought him out. Suzanne, seeing this, felt the future darkening. If she suggested things that might interest him he might reply, 'Looking for hobbies, are we? To keep the old gentleman interested?' She suggested

gardening; he saw it as a form of imprisonment. He put on a suit every morning and wore it as if his days were still spent at the office. When Cleo visited with her family, he was pleasant enough, and appeared to enjoy doing puzzles with the grandchildren, but Suzanne could tell that he was relieved when the younger people left. She suggested he might like to buy a new car, but his Mercedes didn't need replacing, he told her; you only bought a new model when the manufacturer produced something really special, and that didn't happen very often. She managed to get him to take her on a few excursions – to the snowfields at Thredbo, and a crossing of the dry country before the Flinders ranges, but these journeys always had one goal; any suggestion from Suzanne that they might simply travel for a few weeks at a time would cause him to bicker about pensioners dragging caravans around the country which, he declared, must be the most dreary, boring way there was to waste the later part of your life!

Suzanne found herself wishing, far too late, that she'd married someone else. Ken wasn't made for retirement, finding no freedom in it. That was the exasperating part of her situation; he had money, he had time and opportunity to do absolutely anything, and he couldn't liberate himself to enjoy it. She dismissed their gardener and took on the work herself. Work? It was a blessed relief. For hours at a time she could be on her knees, hands in the soil, up ladders pruning, painting, repairing, all the jobs that men are supposed to enjoy. She became friendly with the local nurseryman, and a florist in the nearby shopping centre. She watched for the blooming of the jacaranda, the range of azaleas growing locally, the golden wattles she loved to show visitors from overseas, and the orange-red *E. ficifolia* flowers at the bottom of her garden, where a tree growing next door leaned over the fence to share its riches. She loved to bring flowers inside, making her house participate in what was going on around it: how she wished she could do the same for Ken!

Neville Long continued to practise, but cut his times back to three days a week. He still did hospital visits, and occasional emergency calls, but much of his time was spent in the vineyards with Hans. The nebbiolo and San Giovese hadn't produced the wines that Hans had

been expecting, so they'd moved to other varieties, some of them rare, some of them common. Hans insisted that they be used separately, while Neville thought it would be better to produce blended wines: they were easier to sell, at least. 'Look at what they can do in the Barossa with GSMs!' They'd invested in a small wine-making plant at Herzland, and experimented with their grapes and blends. Durif was the grape that seemed to do best on all three of their blocks, but Hans said it produced only the sorts of wine that he didn't like, and he wanted to pull out the vines. Neville found himself forced to dig his heels in; it seemed to him that winemakers simply *had* to accept what the soil, the climate and the variety gave them, and work on the best way to bring out what nature was offering. Hans asked him if he was prepared to buy him out. Neville said he'd discuss it with Donna, and was surprised to find that she wanted him to take over the running of the vineyard and winery: 'You'll need it as the years go on.' What did she mean by this? She reminded him that Robert, their son, was already almost finished *his* medical degree and was talking about becoming an eye specialist, while Joan, their daughter, was working as a dietician in a medical clinic in South Yarra. They were going to surpass their parents, so it would be best if the parents moved into another field to avoid any unpleasant comparisons. Neville saw sense in this. He'd never seen himself as much more than a run-of-the-mill GP, and admitting this to himself, and picking up the burden of the farmers he'd once felt sorry for, seemed like a necessary and possibly fulfilling struggle to take on. He made it his business to go around the north-east grape growers, talking about ways to bring out the individual characteristics of the many varieties in use in the region. There were tricks and techniques he'd not heard about before, and offers to use his grapes for small-scale blending projects. For a year or two he tended the vines as other growers told him, and did most of his wine making in sample quantities, picking early and late, according to his instincts. He and Donna laughed at his changes of clothing, baggy overalls one day, smart suit the next, and the accompanying changes in behaviour. 'I can have a foul mouth on the farm, but I have to be professionally polite in the surgery! Which do I prefer? I'll be diplomatic, and say a bit of both!' Slowly he got the hang of grape-

growing, and began to think of his vines as he'd once done for his patients, understanding their needs intuitively. He found, eventually, that he was a more natural winemaker than Hans had ever been; Hans had wanted to impose on his vines, while Neville, far more modestly, was no more than curious. He was humble, too, and read anything he could find on the origins of wine making and the development of the varieties of wine and other grapes.

In his third summer in charge of the vines, he realised that he was seeing his patients differently now that he'd gained confidence in the vineyard. Getting people to exercise and eat appropriate quantities of the right foods was more effective in the long run than medicines, necessary as they were. Prevention was better than cure. It was something he'd said hundreds of times to colleagues and to patients, but now it took on new meaning. Because he was working the land, he lived on the land instead of in his mind. Thousands had done it before him, but the days when owners had had workers under them to do the work were long gone: people on the land these days, and he was one of them, stood alone. They were helped by government subsidies but they stood alone against whatever the weather brought them, and the financial world which wanted them to work for next to nothing. How was it that those who brought the world's food into being weren't its rulers? For the first time he thought seriously about the distribution of wealth, and was amazed that the normal was so strange. People who advertised fruit, for instance, earned far more than those who grew them! People who worked in shops, clean and well dressed every day, resented the tradesmen – plumbers, builders, and the like – who worked with bricks, pipes, water and concrete. If what you did was basic, you were taken for granted. How had this come about? Why did mill workers think they had a right to cut down trees without planting more? People who grew veggies knew better than that! Neville had spent the better part of his life as an a-political being, and suddenly he thought the social arrangements were highly questionable ...

Yet he knew better than to say these things in public. Respect was rather like money; if you had it, then lost it, you were a fool, and fools couldn't win back respect unless they did something heroic in a flood or fire, when foolishness – bravery – was admired. So he spoke

quietly to Donna when nobody else could hear him, and she knew that he was applying these thoughts to his children in the recesses of his mind. Joan was a dietician: why on earth did people need to be told what to eat and what to leave aside? Robert thought he'd move into a specialism of some sort. He'd pull in money that way! He wanted to. He thought it was a specialist's right. The more you served the public the more money you took home. The world handed out some pretty rough justice to those who were poor, worked hard, and could never get on top of anybody, but made things easy for the persuaders. It annoyed him, all the more so because he'd been blind to it for so long. He'd worked for his own success and taken the money that flowed in for granted. He'd picked this up, he realised, from his own parents who accepted society's distribution as natural. He listened to the news, he read the papers, but he couldn't hear anybody talking about what was troubling him. The Labor Party said they wanted what they called wage justice for working people but he heard nothing radical in their words. They didn't want to frighten any voters with policies that could be portrayed as upsetting. People whose ideas frightened anybody were called ratbags, and he, he realised, was a ratbag now, in disguise. At the winery, his experiments were beginning to pay off, he had varieties of grape that suited the soil and the climate, he was blending with a certain skill, he made full, strong, rich wines and people were starting to seek them out. Then he won a prize – a very minor prize – in the Rutherglen Show, and his name was made. More than that; he was offered a goodly sum by a leading wine company to let them buy him out. Not that they wanted to change anything except the ownership! He'd still manage the vineyards and make the wines, but the sales and distribution would come under other hands. Why? Because big companies made more money and making money was the name of the game.

Donna put it to him that if he sold the name and took the money, while retaining day to day control of the winery, he'd be getting the best of both worlds, but he said no. If he took the money he'd be giving them – he had no idea who the *them* were, but they were somewhere out of sight – control, meaning they could give him orders, or make arrangements that he would never have made. Donna asked him who

would take control when he died? Someone would. The winery and the vineyards would move into other hands then, would they not? Yes of course they will, he said, stubborn to the last, but I won't be around to resist. Donna said that if he sold the winery he could give Robert and Joan a really good start to their careers, and he laughed scornfully. 'We've given them a good start, both of them. They're doing fine.' She couldn't argue with that: they were. She saw that in some way he needed the winery. He'd made it for himself, or rather, he'd done so after it became obvious that Hans Schritt wasn't going to be successful. Neville had taken on something he'd never expected to have to do, and he'd made a success of it, to his own surprise and hers. She'd given him support, and she'd certainly enjoyed many days and nights at the properties he'd acquired with Hans, but the achievement that he was so proud of that he wouldn't consider selling, had largely happened outside or at least at the edge of their marriage. To her children, Donna knew, the winery was something to keep dad happy in his old age. No more than that. And if she'd challenged him by saying so?

He'd have said not everyone's happy in their old age, or their middle age, or their youth, and if it takes a winery to make me happy, so be it. I've got one and it's doing well!

Greg Clarkson should have been a girl; that was what Sandy said to Marion in bad moods. He was a sweet little thing, responsive and affectionate, but he showed no sign of becoming a *boy*. His parents waited five years, then had a third and last child ... another girl, whom they christened Jane. Even as a baby, it was clear that Jane would resemble her mother physically, and they assumed the rest would follow. So what about Greg? They would have to wait and see. Sandy felt robbed. He'd taken it for granted that parenting, for him, meant having a boy, whom you treated, you trained, as a boy. If you had a girl, you treated her the same and she developed in another direction. That was how things were meant to happen. But Greg? People in the media were forever talking about transgender children, boys in girls' bodies and vice versa, but Sandy was impatient with that sort of stuff. He didn't believe it really happened. The parents simply

didn't know what to do with their children. Now he was in that very same boat. What to do with Greg? Marion said it was simple; you loved the child, and you responded to his needs, as expressed. Anyone could do that?

Sandy tried hard. He knew Marion was watching him, and he did his very best. It wasn't hard with Greg, because Marion was there to guide him. The real tests came elsewhere. At Rotary, he noticed a certain Americanism in the proceedings, and it began to feel offensive in some way he couldn't define. He felt it more keenly with anything to do with football, because it was his city's game, and he'd been a good player himself. Watching television one evening, catching up with a major game that had been played that day, he watched as a team – it was the West Coast Eagles – bunched up as they came out of the players' race onto the ground. One of the players, by looking over his shoulder, reminded Sandy of himself when he played for his school and later the Old Melburnians. He liked to run on close behind his captain, and then, once on the ground, to slow down so that the players behind him passed him. He could feel their weight, almost as if he was the grass they were thudding on, and their determination to do great things with the ball every time they got it. There was a solidity that joined the players, and he'd taken it as naturally masculine. More than that, he'd *expressed* it as a natural part of himself, of being a man, and he realised, when he looked back it as something that came naturally to him, that he'd expected to pass on this mysterious connection with other men to his son, who'd do the same thing in turn when he had a son or sons. In fact he took it for granted that it would pass on uninterrupted for generations, just as genes were transmitted, shaping people in ways they didn't understand until they saw the same genes doing the same things to the next generation and the one that followed. Greg had broken into this flow, this transmission, and was therefore a mystery. Perhaps an isolate? Sandy thought of himself as a young man, slipping into Anita Silbermann's room at the Windsor, via Reuben Goldberg's connecting door. Only genes, getting themselves passed on? It hadn't seemed so at the time, it didn't seem so when he thought of it, even now. What had become of Anita and the wealthy man she'd allowed to marry her? He didn't know. They call us ships

passing in the night, he said to himself: it sounds pretty pathetic to be as helpless, as far from controlling yourself, as that, but he had a feeling that his days of certainty were ended. He was going to watch Greg grow up, he'd love him and help him, but what sort of man was he going to be?

Sandy had no idea.

Marion put Sandy on the spot one morning when he was grumbling about Greg. 'You're the problem,' she said, 'because you've got wrong expectations. Nobody's a problem until someone else says so. You want him to run around beating up other kids so we have to restrain him. Only being natural, you'd like to say, defending him. But he's not made that way. He's got a lovely temperament, he's curious, he doesn't make trouble. I'll tell you what, when he grows up girls are going to think he's the sort of boy they want around.' Sandy said something about kids who are different having a hard row to hoe, and she wanted to know what he'd been like as a child, and then a teenager. That caused him to think. 'I was never a teenager,' he said. 'The way we were handled at school, we went straight from being boys to men!' Marion was disgusted. 'You thought you did, because the only people you ever listened to were men. Men saying boys were men!' She was ready to laugh. 'Am I right? Tell me. Yes or no?'

It was an attack out of left field, and yet he'd always known it was there. Coming one day. His answer came readily. 'If things need changing as much as you think they do, how come they've lasted for so long?' As soon as he said it he knew it sounded silly. Marion was as ready as he was. 'I know what you're going to say next. It's *tradition!* Yes it is, Sandy, and it's a tradition that's long past its use-by date! You ought to know that by now.' She was looking into him, wondering which way he'd move. 'Don't spoil the kid. Let him be what he wants to be. Let him find his own way, if that's what he's got to do.' But Sandy was still troubled. 'We ought to talk about this with a psychologist. There must have been boys like Greg before.' That stirred something protective in the boy's mother. 'No you don't! I'm not having some mean-minded shrink bugging up our boy! You're trying to anticipate trouble and you're sure as hell creating the very trouble you say you want to avoid.'

Can't you see it?' He couldn't, and felt troubled. What she was saying came out so easily, it sounded like common sense but it didn't feel right to him. Feeling sulky, at an age when he should have been far past such emotions, he said, 'What do you want to do then?'

Marion said, 'Love the boy. Support him. See things his way. Be on his side. And don't *ever* let anyone put him down.'

It was simple. He could see that she was certain that she was right, and he wasn't. She'd won the argument and he didn't know how it had been done. Days passed without anything more being said, but he knew that Marion was watching him, and waiting. He'd gone quiet, he couldn't stay quiet forever. Something would cause new ructions ...

Something changed in his mind. Something new crept in. He was watching television one evening and saw footage of civil war in the Sudan, or was it Eritrea, not far away. A truck was bumping across red soil and there were men in the back, all standing up, twenty or thirty of them, shouting, waving their arms, and holding guns aloft: bullets were spraying into the air as if they'd never come down again. The men – how old were they? – were tall, black, and had their mouths open, yelling. They thought they were invincible, which meant they were one step away from annihilation by men with better protection, better weapons ... and better minds. That was the thing. Battles were won and lost in the mind. It was what they'd been told by their football coaches, except that boys like he'd been had restricted what they heard to the game they were engaged in, never realising that they were being taught to see civilisation as a form of male bonding. Those who played well got their colours. The colours got sown on their blazers. He thought of the alcoholic Old Boy who'd approached him in Brisbane, decades ago. He was still ... was it a threat, a warning, a premonition? ... in his mind. He hadn't gone away. He was still in there, waiting. What was going to happen to his son?

Suddenly it was everywhere. All the stuff those wretched boring feminists had been going on about for years was obvious. At the end of his nose! Sandy Clarkson couldn't understand how he'd failed to see it for so long. His business was menswear, perhaps that was what had kept him unaware. He could see it now. Men had defined the universe

in ways that suited them, and women had to fit in any way they could. Try sex for starters! How could he have been deaf and blind so long?

What to do next?

He relaxed with Greg. Instead of trying to push him into the games he'd been good at himself, he watched and waited. The boy had something special, or different, about him, that was for sure. Where would it lead? He didn't know. He had to follow. This didn't come easily, but he knew Marion was watching, with a hint of approval. That was his sign, his emblem, his hope. He would need support, because the men he knew put up with change in their women only grudgingly. Women became theirs when they married; men left themselves some wriggling room. Wasn't that natural? He wondered what would happen to him now; he felt exposed.

He was. He found himself laughing a lot, at himself, and at others. The world wasn't ruled by rules at all. It only pretended. Sometimes, driving down Saint Kilda Road, he passed the school he'd attended as a boy, grim, a powerful place, built of dark and heavy stone. It made him shudder. He'd been proud of belonging to it, now he felt fortunate to have escaped, though he still had its marks all over him. He hadn't found an alternative; his wife *was* that, and his son might *become* that: he would live the rest of his life in its shadow, but he would laugh whenever he needed to. So many things were ridiculous, from *ridere*, Latin verb to laugh. Others had found freedom too, for thousands of years. When did Caesar conquer Gaul? Hadrian had got as far as Scotland and built a wall. These things, whether facts or traditions, were part of the almighty pile of stuff they'd been taught inside the stone: they'd been taught, above all, the importance of power, and shown a way to use it. They'd been taught, also, that it was theirs to use. Only the properly trained deserved to take a grip on power, and that was why they'd been dressed in blue and sent there. What was the place like now? He felt sure it had changed. Changed fundamentally, or changed with the times? He didn't know, and felt a fear of finding out. It would be better to laugh, and safer too. While he laughed, Marion could love him, and his son might love him too, so long as they understood each other. That was his task, now, now that he knew how to save himself from what had been too strong.

It occurred to him, one night when he woke from a troubling dream, that he could watch the Premier of the state, Antinous (Endless) Knight, to see what he was making of the problem. Sandy knew that Endless was much smarter than he was, and in some way, mysterious to the menswear son of a menswear merchant, might know what he was doing. He'd look, and see, and try to understand.

Antinous was a Labor Premier, but he'd seen enough of Trades Hall influence on the party to move him towards the company of anti-Labor people, of whom there were plenty in the circles he frequented. He told these people that he had no intention of being directed by union leaders, although it was his job to listen to them and to ensure that they and those they represented were fairly treated by government, but government, with its considerable powers, resided in the Parliament, placed there by the voters of the state and not by any vested interests. Great buildings speak to us, he liked to say, as the embodiment of the expectations felt by those whose work placed them within. Our parliament is a noble building; to look at it is to have one's expectations raised, and the people of Victoria, passing it every day, have a right to expect those who represent them to draw upon its nobility. This places restraints on those who sit in the Parliament and on those who want things of them. Antinous conveyed, by his manner as much as his words, that if he was restrained by the nature of the parliament, so was everyone else. This outlook was regarded as pious nonsense by many who sat in the parliament and a fair number of those who reported its doings, but the public sensed that the Premier believed what he said, and would act for the most part according to these principles. He was appealing to the public over the heads of those who sat behind him and those who sat opposite. This almost certainly meant that his term as the state's leader would be limited, but since he was content for this to be so, most accepted his style.

In the minds of the public, however, style is superficial. Other things count. Jobs in the Latrobe Valley, for one. The coal industry had given the state cheap and plentiful power for decades, until carbon emissions began to preoccupy the world. Despite the efforts of a benighted federal government, states began to look for other sources

of power. The biggest power station in the state, owned by a French company, closed down. Then a grass fire got into a huge pit where coal was being excavated. The Valley filled with smoke. The state's chief medical officer said the air was fit to breathe. Thousands didn't believe him. Then came the news that a timber mill, the chief source of employment in a nearby town, would close unless the government allowed it to cut more trees in the mountains to the north. Antinous was busy. Jodie told him she hardly saw him; could he cut back on official engagements and spend more time with his family? He said he'd try but he couldn't, and didn't. The mill owners got the ear of newspapers far and wide. The town would die! What did a few birds and flowers matter? People's jobs, their lives, were in jeopardy. Antinous conferred with his minister and announced that the government would buy and operate the mill. That should have clenched the matter, but it didn't. He suspected that the owners were playing with the feelings of the public to loosen the government's control of the forests. One backdown would surely lead to more? Antinous knew he was being tested. Many in his party accused him of being manipulated by the Greens. Why should people living comfortably in the suburbs deny the right of a job to people in the bush? It was a potent argument and Antinous knew his position was shaky. Then came another blow.

He got to his office early one morning to find that there was a message waiting for him. The Vice Chancellor of his son's university wanted to speak to him. It was urgent. Tim? With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he dialled the number. The Vice-Chancellor, a man he knew well through CC, confirmed his fears. The university had become aware of drugs circulating in a particular faculty and had investigated. Tim Knight was the contact person with the supplier. At this stage, the Vice Chancellor said, only two or three plain clothes police knew who Tim was, but it would soon get out. They'd have passed his name to someone of higher rank and it would be recognised. 'You know what the news hounds are like. I'd say that you've got two or three hours for whatever you're going to do before the public hears about it and everything turns unpredictable. It's over to you, Premier. When the news gets out, everyone's going to look at me. What am I going to do about it? If there's the slightest hint that I'm going easy on

your son, it's the end of me. Council wouldn't back me, they'd be in a hurry to get rid of me. Sorry, Antinous, but that's the fix we're in.'

An icy calm had gripped the Premier. My son. My wife, my family. Me. He spoke. 'I'll call you back in five minutes. I've got a decision to make. I won't be long.'

He hung up. Five minutes? He knew already. He rang Jodie. 'There's only one thing to do. I'll resign. I'll ring the Governor straight away. By this time tomorrow the state will have a new premier. You and I know who they'll pick to replace me, the stupid bastards, but I can't do anything about that. My son has a drug problem and I've got to spend more time with my family. That's what I'll be saying.' He knew what she would be wanting to do, but ... 'I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Brace yourself, darling, and don't, whatever you do, say anything to anybody that can be quoted. Let the thing play out in front of you as if it's happening to someone else.' He smiled. It was.

The news broke later that morning. The Premier had driven to Government House and handed the Governor his resignation. There would be a party meeting at 10am the following day and Harvey Smith, the Deputy Premier, was expected to win the leadership ballot, if one was necessary. Jodie rang Tim on his mobile and told him to get home in a taxi as soon as he could. He protested that he had classes. She told him bluntly that his chances of remaining at the university depended on him following her instructions. 'Your father's resigning because of you. He's doing it to protect you. What you can do for him is something we need to talk about. I want it organised – with you – before he gets home. You hear me?'

Tim came home in a taxi. His mother met him at the door, mobile in hand. She pointed to the lounge and moved down the passage to finish the call out of his hearing. When she came back she sat where she could see into his eyes. 'You've worked out what's happened by now. Go back to the start and bring me forward with your story. Don't leave anything out.' She listened with no more than an occasional 'Keep going.' When he finished she looked at him, feeling love, hate, disappointment. 'Can you get off what you're on?' He said he'd try. 'You won't be able to do it straight away. Nobody can. But people

do get off. If they're strong enough,' she emphasised, appraising him. 'This is your big test, and you're going to be on your own. You've been talking about leaving home, and now you're going to do it. Somewhere a long way from here. You'll write a letter to the Vice Chancellor, saying you're asking for leave from your course. You're sorry for bringing drugs into a place of learning, and he won't hear from you for three years. At the end of that time you'll ask to be taken back. Or,' she said with emphasis, and rage swirling just below the surface, 'he won't hear from you, and he'll know what that means. You'll have lost your battle. If he wants to know about that, he'll have to ask us. We're sending you away but we're not losing touch. If you need to come home for a while, you can. If you think we can help, ask. But it's your battle, don't be in any doubt about that.' Tim started to say that he thought she was being too hard, he'd only made a mistake ... but she wasn't having any of that. 'You got drugs for people. That means you got people onto drugs. You played with their lives and some of them may die. Now it's your life that's in play. When your father gets home you'll tell him what we've agreed on. You've wrecked his life, you know, or rather, he's wrecked it in an attempt to salvage you. You owe him more than you can ever pay him back. Bear that in mind!'

When Antinous got home, Tim heard him and came from his room into the passage. Antinous closed the door and saw his son, head down in shame. The former Premier of Victoria took his son's arm lightly and guided him to the room where he'd been with his mother, earlier in the day. Antinous pulled out two chairs, and sat. Tim sat as he knew he had to. Antinous said nothing, waiting. The silence was long. Painful. Antinous was a calculating man and knew well what he was doing. He waited. Tim waited, expecting a blast of rage. Silence. Heavy breathing on the part of the young man. Finally the boy spoke.

'I'll do my best.'

'And?'

'I'll do what mother says I have to do.'

'Good. Where will you go?'

'I'll go to that timber town where you've been having trouble. It won't be easy there.'

Antinous said no. His counterpart – his *former* counterpart – in South Australia owed him a favour. He would call it in. He'd get him a job on the roads, the railways, the port. A government job. 'You can be like Otello, and do the state some service.' Tim didn't know the quote, Antinous didn't care. 'I'll talk to him tomorrow. I'll let him digest the evening news so he won't be surprised when I ring.' He was about to tell his son to sit in the kitchen when they heard the front door open. Sally, their daughter, called down the passage. 'Where is he? What's he done? He must have been off his head ...' Jodie showed herself in the kitchen doorway and Antinous in the frame of the front room. 'He's in here. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do. I hope to have that clear by tomorrow. Give your mother a hand. This may be the last time we eat together.' He turned his head to look back into the room. Tim had his head on the table, crying. Antinous said to Sally, 'Put your arms around your brother. He needs support at the moment and there's not a great deal of it, in this world.'

CC met Antinous in the Windsor lounge. A waiter they knew well brought them glasses, a bottle, and a tray of sandwiches. Antinous said 'Thanks John', and poured, waiting. CC was waiting too. Why on earth had his friend done it? Someone had to start, so he asked, 'Where's the boy? Tim?'

Antinous knew he was in for some questioning. 'Quorn. South Australia. Railway town, or it was.' CC knew it; the line had been moved, but it had been busy, once. 'On the way to the Flinders Ranges.'

'That's it. A fair way to walk, though, and he hasn't got a car. Or not yet.'

'So he's relying on the locals. Or hitches a ride with tourists.'

'If he stays.'

CC stiffened. 'How long's his sentence?'

'Three years. Jodie set that. I didn't argue.'

So the boy had been banished. 'What in the name of god do you expect him to do with himself?'

Antinous thought that was clear. 'Find himself.'

'In the back o'byond?'

'There as well as anywhere.'

'There's nothing to do but paint the place.'

'You'd have to find it first.'

'How do you mean?'

'He doesn't know where he is. He didn't know where he was in this city either, but he didn't know that. It took a shock to teach him.'

'Is that the name of the game? Teach him?'

'Not exactly. Jodie's put him where he has to teach himself.'

'There's counsellors at the university who'd tell you that that is a very hard thing to make happen.'

'Quite so. The easy bit is over.'

CC looked at his friend. 'Will you visit him? You and Jodie and Sally?'

'Jodie and I will, if he asks. Sally will make up her own mind. She might go separately from us. I think it would be better if she did.'

'Why do you say that, Endless?'

'If she goes, it'll be some comfort. Maybe even a bit of fun. I can't see him enjoying a parental visit very much.'

'That's a bit hard, surely?'

'Would you?'

'Would I what?'

'Enjoy a visit from your parents if they'd sent you into exile?'

'That would depend on whether or not I was enjoying my exile. Some people do.'

'Gauguin.'

CC nodded. 'What would he have painted if he'd found himself in Quorn?'

'The Flinders ranges, if he'd managed to get himself there.'

'So that's the idea. Salvation from the land?'

Endless shook his head. 'Salvation happens in the spirit.'

'You think he'll start painting?'

'Heaven knows. Good on him if he does. He's never shown any interest in it. I think he'll spend the first six months gagging ...'

'Gagging?'

'As when you can't swallow something.' Endless made an ugly sound.

'And after that?'

Endless raised his hands, as if to show he had nothing concealed. 'He might start to think constructively.'

CC wasn't getting anywhere. 'What else is there in Quorn, apart from the railway?'

'A camping park. Couple of pubs. Shop or two. Café. Not much more. There's a hall there, I think. I don't know how often it gets used. There's rather more stylish accommodation in the ranges. He might be able to talk his way into a job up there.'

'He's really out on his own then, isn't he?'

Endless was ready for this. 'So's his mother and so am I.'

There was pain in the words, few as they were. CC became a little more cautious. 'Any regrets?' He meant about the resignation.

'If something's got to be done, there's no point in regretting. You do it.' CC felt strength in the words, and sensed that his friend would come through stronger for what had happened, but wasn't sure about his partner, or their daughter. Sally. He decided to ask.

'Why did you resign?'

Endless was ready. 'I know. I could have pulled levers. Insisted the university give him another chance. Et cetera. But the public – everyone ...' he waved his hand at the lounge '... would have known that I was using my position to get special terms. For Tim and for myself.' He looked at his friend, his only friend at the moment, he was inclined to think. 'That's not the sort of path I choose to take.' There was defiance in his eyes. 'Would you?'

Challenged, CC thought. 'No. I'd have done the same as you.'

They sat in silence. They sipped their wine. Endless said, 'How's your writing getting on. Any new books in the production line?'

CC lowered his head as if he'd been caught out. 'I've got mountains of stuff that I've been trying to get into shape. Then a new book came out that showed me another way of doing what I wanted to do.'

'What was that?'

'It's called *From The Edge* and it's by a Sydney chap called Mark McKenna.'

'What's it about?'

‘He takes four ... incidents I suppose you’d call them, on four remote parts of the continent, and talks about the interaction between blacks and whites, back when they were first getting to know each other.’

‘Whereabouts exactly?’

CC saw that the talk about Tim, and his father’s resignation, had been concluded. There was nothing to do but go on. ‘An early settlement up in Arnhem Land, another one at Shark Bay, halfway up the West Aussie coast. A bunch of sailors who got shipwrecked in Bass Strait, got to shore on the Ninety Mile Beach, but their boat got wrecked so they walked to Sydney.’

‘They walked to Sydney? From the Ninety Mile Beach? I’ve never heard that one before!’

‘Neither had I. But the last one I *had* heard of, and so have you.’

Endless was almost smiling. ‘I have?’

‘Both of us have. And so have quite a number of people that we once knew.’ CC was, he realised, enjoying the secret.

‘Tell me more.’

‘He starts out the fourth story, the last one, with Cook and the *Endeavour* coming to grief at Cooktown. They sailed into a reef and got a chunk of coral in the guts of the boat.’

‘And?’

‘You know the rest of the story. They pulled the boat ashore, they saw that the coral was more or less filling the hole it had made, so they put the boat back in the water, and took it in to where Cooktown is today.’

Something faint and far away was signalling in the other’s mind. ‘Hang on! Didn’t they ... what did they do? They repaired the boat, and they sailed home. The east coast of Australia had been discovered!’ Endless felt that the signal he had heard was getting louder, and closer. ‘Why are you telling me this?’

The historian was ready. ‘Because he tells it from the point of view, not only of the whitefellas – Cook and Banks – but of the local aborigines. They saw it differently. They’d heard that the whitefellas’ ship was coming and they were ready. They kept out of the way,

watching. For three weeks, then they approached the strangers. And in a marvellous way, their side of the story has been passed down to their people in modern times, and it's recorded in the book. The story's told in a two-sided way!

'That's what you've been hoping to do, isn't it?'

'It is. And it's been done.'

'So where does that leave you? You're not all washed up, I hope?'

CC shook his head. 'No. It shows it can be done. I've got heaps of stuff I've been working on. I won't do it in quite the same way, but you can take it from me he's done it well.'

'So you're going to push ahead?'

'Most certainly. I'm not wasting years of work. I'm just going to put it out in a different way. Different ways, plural.' Endless was pleased. 'You and this Sydney chap are going to start a new school of history. Good one CC! You'll soon have followers, think of that!'

The Premier who'd resigned clinked the glass of the historian who'd found a way. CC said, 'I want to hear everything you can tell me about Tim. As an act of mercy, of forgiveness, you've done a ruthless thing. It deserves to succeed, but'

They were staring at each other, two friends who went back a very long way.

The former Premier said, '... you can never tell, can you.'

Something in Norval brought him to love his adopted country. Its indifference appealed to, and dominated, the French-ness of his mind. It contradicted him by being vast and mysterious in a way that defied the logic he had been brought up to admire. His habitual Catholicism gave way to what was for him a superiority, a double consistency – its size, and an inner coherence - that he, and his people, had long desired. He, and they, had long yielded to a religious definition that none of them any longer believed. It had become their miserable Christianity, a habit they longed to be rid of, even as they sustained it. It had died on reaching the shores of this new land. A new synthesis was needed. Not a faith. Faiths were madness and needed to be forgotten. Obliterated. Faith was not only dead, it was a mischievous influence from the past.

He had left his past behind him.

Julie was surprised by Norval's love of the property. To tease him she would say that he'd married the land, and she was only something that came with it. It made him happy when she said this sort of thing. It meant she had no doubts about their decision, made long ago, to live as one. She had a daughter whom she christened Sylvie. He was proud to be a father. He would say, 'If only my mother could see us now,' to which Julie would say: 'She saw the land, she knew you were interested in coming back. Perhaps she might have predicted what would happen after that?' and Norval would respond, 'We are giving her too much foresight. She didn't know what would happen. Nor did I.' This would content the two of them, and they would nurse Sylvie, play with her until child and parents were tired and Sylvie was put to bed. Norval and Julie, lying in their bed in the adjoining room, would consider their position like children playing. She would say, 'I'm under a tree somewhere. Walk outside and try to find me.' He would imagine himself to be at the front door, looking around, suggesting places, paddocks, directions, until she admitted that he was close. Then he would tell her where she was sitting, and she would say, 'I'm reading a book. You have to guess what it is.' They loved the silliness of this game because it meant that he was walking around in the spaces of her mind, trying to find where she was. Julie might say, 'When Sylvie grows up a little I'll play this game with her, so that she, when the time comes, can play it with her husband.'

This would cause Norval to ask, 'What sort of man do you want her to have?' and there was never any answer. That lay too far ahead, and they were very happy with where they sat in time. They went to Melbourne together ('Unlike my father,' Julie would say), and met with Kim and Sophie, usually as a prelude to Norval ordering fabrics and sometimes furniture from France. Kim's business had built steadily, mostly through word of mouth via satisfied customers. He kept a room in his premises for display; it became in turn a bedroom, a lounge, a porch, a dining room, as imagined by any or all of the four of them. Customers could feel, and seek to imitate, the shared taste of the group, though it was Norval whose wishes prevailed. 'Your people are uncertain of their wishes,' he would say. 'The Americans, whom you imitate, are worse. Most people are vulgar if left to themselves. They must be

shown what is good, and led.’ He knew he was adding something, and he knew that Kim and Sophie, his employers, wanted that something as much as Julie, his wife. He was a proud man, and he knew that he was fortunate in that his pride was respected, even admired, by those closest to him. He would say to Julie, ‘I never knew my father, and my mother is in paradise, or so I like to say. Your parents are dead also, so Sylvie has one generation only to know about: you and me. Everything we do will shape her, and she will have children to shape when she grows up.’ Kim and Sophie always thought that his talk of generations succeeding each other went a bit far, was a bit too much, but there was no stopping him, and they could see that Ormiston, the property and the tradition, had been accepted in his mind as giving him the dignity he’d never quite possessed in his homeland. ‘Europe is hard,’ he would say. ‘It is cruel. There is always struggle. There is calm here that I like, though I cannot possess it for myself.’ This would make them laugh because it was plain to the three of them that he enjoyed possession very much. Julie knew that Norval, if allowed, would throw out most of the furnishings that Ormiston had gathered over time as ‘too English’, ‘not grand enough’, but she restrained him by saying that any changes they made should seem appropriate to visitors entering the home after walking down the drive, as they had done on the day they’d accepted each other. ‘I don’t want an imported taste,’ Julie would say, ‘I want a taste that belongs.’ That gave the decision back to the land and the tradition, both of which she owned before her French husband had come on the scene. Norval accepted this because it accepted him.

Tim Knight, son of Antinous and Jodie, reached Port Augusta. Someone told him where the Public Works office was, and he went there. The man in the inner office ignored him. There was nobody else. The place was harsh. Tim called out, ‘I was told to report here. Are you in charge?’ The man looked over his computer screen. ‘Whaddaya want?’

‘I understand you’re expecting me.’

‘What giveya that fuckin idea?’

That was how it went. He was sent to join a railway gang at Quorn, several hours to the north. Some of the men lived in a shed not far from

the station. It had running water from a tap, a kitchen of sorts, a rough and ready toilet behind a scrap of cloth and a few bunks here and there. The alternative was the hotel. Tim chose the hotel. A room and meals would take up a fair slice of his pay. He was expected to drink the rest of his money, he could see that. Instead, he read *Crime and Punishment* in his room, annoying the people who ran the place. 'Not sociable, the pretty young bastard.' It became obvious after a day or two that they were waiting for him to declare himself. He read his book. When he'd finished it, he went to the store, for no more reason than that he could, and bought a copy of the Port Augusta newspaper, far to the south. The last outpost! He looked at it. This was the sum total of the region's thought! He went for walks when he wasn't working. The edges of the town were horribly close. There was a clapped out old house that had once been painted a vile yellow-green, last house before the road headed off to the port. He said something about it at the hotel. 'Maisie lives there,' they told him. 'A batty old bag, but got a good heart. Some fella used to live with her, but he ran off years ago. Keep out of her way or she'll get you to paint her house. She's got a tin of the same paint left over and wants to see it used. So she says.'

The next time he walked that way, Maisie spotted him. 'Y're a healthy strappin young man. What're you doin around here?'

He told her he was having a year off from university. 'A gap year, they call it.' Not a word about his disgrace. 'Y're lookin for a job?' she said.

'I'm working on the railways,' he told her, not yet dropping the final g. 'I don't mean that,' she told him. 'That's yer income. I mean doin something to help an old lady make her home look nice.'

He saw what she wanted. 'Have you got any paint?'

She did of course. She showed it to him. An ancient tin, but the lid had never been prised open. He supposed it would still be alright. 'Any brushes?'

They were dreadful, stiff with the paint that had never been washed out, years ago. 'Might have to get a new one I think.'

Maisie thought not. 'Can't afford a brush. Hafta use this one.'

Tim went to the store and bought a brush. The man behind the counter said, 'Whaddaya gunna do with it?' Tim told him. 'Ya gunna

paint for Maisie! Well, I tellya, that's an event. She's been tryin to get someone to do it for years!

Tim saw where he was, in the town's estimation. Then the counter man added something else. 'I dunno if she toldya, but she's only got one tin of paint. Had it for years. When ya run out, ya gunna have to get a different colour. Or else stop where y'are.' He thought this was delicious. A story would soon be doing its rounds. The smart young bastard from Melbourne had been fooled by Maisie!

He painted the front of the house the next weekend. Just enough paint to get up under the eaves. Maisie was delighted, but 'Ya can't leave it there. Ya gotta get some more paint!' Tim went back to the store. 'How many years ago was that made? Ya got no hope o'getting that any more. I can order somethin else forya, if y're still keen.'

'Have you got a colour chart?'

To Tim's surprise he did. 'I'll have to show it to Maisie.'

Maisie wanted a bright red. 'Somethin that'll really stand out!'

'That's too strong,' he told her. 'I'll just paint it white, and you can have that red colour on the spouting.' He could see that she agreed that maybe she'd made a mistake, so he pressed on. 'If it's mostly white and you have a little strip of red, that'll give you a nice contrast.' She didn't say anything but he felt she was in agreement. He went back to the store. The man, who told him his name was Jim – acceptance! – said he'd order the paint from the port, but Tim would have to pay for it first. 'If I get it up here and you can't pay for it, I'm stuck in the middle.' He rang his mother that night. 'I'm painting a house. Could you send me a couple of hundred dollars?' Jodie suspected drugs. Even in places as remote as Quorn, the stuff got around. 'Tell me what it's for, again?'

Tim told his mother about Maisie, and the vile, yellow-green front wall. 'I want to do better than that. I want to paint over it, and finish the house, all in the same colour. White!' Jodie agreed to put money in his account. She mentioned it to Antinous, later that day. He took it in, suspicious, but prepared to agree that Tim might know what he was doing. 'Ask him to send us a picture of the house.'

He did, when it was finished, but at least he'd persuaded Maisie to let him repaint the front wall so that it too was white. The town

watched these doings with pleasure. The young bastard had found his proper level in their estimation: doin somethin for Maisie! The people at the hotel said that the place needed a bit of freshening up, and if he liked to do the job, they'd settle on a price and deduct it from his board. Tim agreed. It would fill in his spare time, and give him something to talk about with Quorn. Quorn was both talkative, and silent. It spoke on its own terms. Up a ladder, with a brush, in the main street, was a focal position. People said to him. 'How long're you going to stay here? Workin on the railways?' He stuck to his gap year story, though nobody believed it. If he was in Quorn he was hiding from the law. They talked to their local constable who told them 'I don't have anything on him. Dunno who he is. Don't care much, so long as he keeps outa trouble.' Tim kept out of trouble. He worked on the rail gang for a little over a year, then he heard, from the people who ran the camping park, that there was a job going at the Wilpena Pound Resort, quality accommodation in the Flinders Ranges, further north again. He asked the caravan park people if they'd recommend him, and they agreed. Word came back that he was to go to the Resort so the people up there could have a look at him, and he made the trip on a tourist bus, was interviewed by Peter and Margo Robb, and got the job. The Pound looked harsh, and barren, but more interesting than Quorn. Although he didn't know it, a miracle had happened; his punishment, his isolation, his exile, had brought him to a position, a place, which might yet make him the man his parents wanted him to be.

People died, people grew old, the world went on. Tourists in all their variety visited the Pound. They stayed in rooms, they camped. They took flights, four-wheel-drive tours, they came and went in buses. They came from all parts of the civilised world, speaking their many tongues. Tim did a variety of jobs – anything that Peter and Margo threw at him. He mopped and cleaned, he made beds, he hung washing out to dry; he cut up vegetables and waited on table. He boiled billies in remote places and served tea to people with binoculars. He told people the names of peaks they'd soon forget. People wanted to know how this or that got its name, or what the names meant. He knew a few of these things, he made up the rest. There was no harm in a little

mythology. As he became more confident he realised he was becoming bolder; he noticed it particularly with middle-aged American women, some of whom desired him. These didn't appeal to him, easy as it might have been to slip into their rooms at a certain time of night. He wondered about this. Peter teased him occasionally, making jokes about how good it was to be single, as opposed to being married and restricted to one woman. Peter talked that way but he was centred on Margo: they'd twined their lives together in a way that Tim hoped would happen to him. Perhaps after he got back ...

His sister Sally visited him, with a girlfriend, travelling up from Adelaide on a bus. They stayed three days, and she told Antinous and Jodie that as far as she could tell, he was adjusted to the outback and wasn't using drugs, even though they were available from some of those who visited the place.

And what a place! So dry and hard, so awkwardly laid out. Its many meanings were not available to him at first because jobs at the Resort kept him busy, and, so far from friends, his interest was roused more by the visitors than by the place they'd come to see. He liked the Germans and the Scandinavians best. They had the most inquiring minds, and were curious about the aboriginal names and culture. They appreciated what they got without expecting luxury. People with tents made jokes about love-making on hard ground; some of them switched to beds. Three Norwegian girls did this after consulting Tim, first questioning about the arrangement, and then bargaining: if they all slept in a king-size bed could they have the room cheaper? Tim, after consulting Peter, told them it would be okay. They haggled over the cost of the room, amid much laughing, and told him he could have a drink with them when he'd finished work and would that lower the price? Tim said he'd see about that and sensed that the bargaining would be taking a new form, later in the night.

It did. They had a love-in, as they called it. Or was it his word? Tim hardly remembered, the following morning. They drank so much, took his clothes off, took off their own clothes, he drank too in a frenzy of excitement, then one of them – Helga – and only one, mounted him while the others pressed against the coupling couple. Four of them slept in the bed rather than three; Tim, a beautiful woman to either

side, woke just in time to present himself in the kitchen in the morning. Margo glanced at her watch, looked suspiciously at him, said nothing. Later in the day, after the trio took off on the aeroplane tour of the region – a considerable sum for twenty minutes – Peter remarked on the amount of noise in one of the passages the previous night: ‘Someone said they couldn’t sleep!’ Then he added, ‘Keep the volume down, mate. I mean it.’ The second night he told them that he’d been warned, so they had to be as silent as they could; it was Wilma who took the lead, with Helga and Sigrid assisting, and the third night it was Sigrid who was his partner. The following day, they were gone. Sexually emboldened as he was by this experience, something told him to hide it in his dealings with visitors, especially women; they felt free-er with strangers if they weren’t reminded of earlier encounters in the outside world.

Outside? Wilpena Pound could hardly be called ‘inside’, but it was cut off by a wide expanse of country dotted with abandoned homes of settlers who’d broken the local rule: there was a famous line beyond which a South Australian surveyor had said settlement was doomed. From this flat country rose the ragged, rocky ranges dominated by an enormous dish of rock, to which had been given the name ‘The Pound’. It had been settled, people had farmed there, then given up. Eventually, South Australians had stopped using it for the farming they understood, and began to use it for its tracks, and trails, and views. Even its flora, restricted as it was. Restricted, but haunting, overwhelming, once you submitted in your mind. Tim began to go on walks with Peter and Margo’s guests, to guide them, to blend their explorations with his own. He became curious. How could a place so gaunt be so attractive in its pull? The rocks, the ranges, were frightening if you imagined yourself there in summer, without a vehicle, without water, or anything to keep the sun’s rays from battering your consciousness. There was precious little shade. There were birds, but they could fly somewhere else. How often did it rain? Goyder, famous for his line, had told them it wasn’t very often. What was it like when it did? He felt he knew that from his walks and drives in the steep, often sheer, rocky gullies where the biggest, most knotted, gnarled and twisted trees clung to life with roots wrestling with rocks.

River red gums. *Eucalyptus Camaldulensis*, sub-species *minima*. The state was famous for them, grand and vertical in some places, but here, in the heart of Wilpena, they were inclined that way only because the gullies where flood waters gathered when a storm was shaking the ranges, valleys deeply etched into confusing rock, were so narrow that the sky was a pale blue belt towards which anything living had to grow. Hard country, but wondrous, because the trees, gripping the rocks with huge, twisted roots, were both enormous and barely clinging on. Life, mysterious, wondrous life was sustaining itself, but with a battle. Trees got a better go in other parts of Tim's country, but something about the place he'd been sent to had gripped him. It was his and he was proud to be in it, serving. Serving his punishment, serving the visiting people who paid to stay there, and serving, now that he came to think of it, three lusty Norwegian girls!

What more could he want? He knew the answer to that. It was a spiritual country. The Adnymathanha people had known it, scorned and despised as they'd been by those early settlers who'd opened up the land, the ranges, for settlement, settling a place that had been settled for thousands of years, looking for shade when there was none. The land had not only an integrity that defied the settlers and challenged the tourists who came in relative humility these days – Peter and Margo, and even Tim, when he could, made them comfortable – it had also the indifference, the pride about itself, exceeding the pride of European aristocracies, of a piece of the earth's surface that had no need to look within. The forces that had shaped it, so many stretches of time before, had been so mighty, so volcanic and relentless, that nothing that came later could change it very much, so it remained, eroding quietly, as it had always been. Always? We shouldn't use the word. It remained as it had long existed, and how long was that? As long as there had been human minds to be aware of it. Tim was aware of it. It humbled him.

'Who's this?'

'Which one? Where?'

Robert Long, eye specialist, was standing next to his father, Neville Long, retired doctor but still occasional winemaker. Donna Long,

mother and wife, was sitting nearby, in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Joan, her daughter, dietician, was far away in Melbourne.

Neville could see himself clearly enough in the photo, but Robert meant the boy next to him. 'Oh, that's ... er ... hang on a minute. That's er ... That's ... Alan Downer!'

'Who was he?'

Who were any of them? There were names underneath, scores of them, but who were they? The names didn't tell you much! They were old men now, those that were still alive.

'He was ... I forget where he was from.' Suddenly it came back to him. 'The last time I saw him, it was in the Swan Hill hospital.'

'That was a while ago dad.'

'It certainly was. I was doing my rounds, and I came on this chap ... The last time I'd seen him was the day we all left school.'

Donna Long was sitting in a commodious chair, saying nothing.

'And he'd been in a car crash, or something, I forget now. He was a bit of a wreck!'

'You fixed him up?'

Neville had bought the chair, years ago in Swan Hill, and it had come with them in their various moves since then.

'We did whatever we could. We do a lot of things better these days, as you well know.'

Robert felt that strongly. Medicine was getting better all the time.

'And?'

'He was discharged. I don't know what he did after that.'

'What had he been doing?'

'Working on a pastoral property. A station hand. Rushing around in cars, drinking, shooting up road signs.' Neville was tolerant of it, now that he was near the end. Young people couldn't help doing crazy things. They'd get over it, if you were patient. But Alan Downer didn't have the time to run out of. 'He went to Sydney and died there. Got killed, actually. I've no idea what that was all about. I never saw him after Swan Hill.'

So a chapter, a life, ended with nobody any the wiser. There would have been a police report somewhere. Filed away by now. Nobody was ever going to ask. Donna Long had nothing to say, sitting in her chair.

Robert, her eldest, said to his father, 'And this chap? On the other side of you. Who was he?'

Neville peered through his reading glasses. 'Oh yes. I forget his name, actually. He came from Fiji.'

'That's a long way to come to school!

'He was a boarder of course. They all were, these fellows. This is a picture of the boarding house in ...' he looked '... nineteen fifty one. My last year at school.'

His son took a closer look. 'You look proud of yourself. You all do, actually.'

Neville touched the photo. 'Funny to think of all those fellows, lined up to be photographed. The same photographer came every year. Several times a year to do all the team photos, and so on. And there was always a picture of School House, the boarders.'

'Did he take the day boys too?'

'I can't remember. He might have. If he did, he must have done it somewhere else, or at another time, because ... always, it was only us, the boarders. We loved it. Anything that interrupted the regular pattern was exciting. For a photo like that we had to bring down all the benches we sat on in the dining hall, arrange them, then the man with the camera would line us up, and shift people so there were no silly combinations ...'

'How would he know?'

'No great big fellows next to little fellows, I mean. We'd line ourselves up according to seniority, and he'd rearrange us according to size. You can see he's done that by the way the faces make a line.' Neville tapped the picture. His son felt a curiosity invading his thoughts. 'How many of them are you in touch with today?' His father laughed. 'Not many. None at all. Oh I still see Bob Enright occasionally.'

'How's that? Which is he?'

'He's got a property on the Murray at Barham. Or he did have. He might have sold it by now. He was talking about selling the land but staying on in the house, him and his wife.'

'You haven't seen him in a while?'

He had to admit it. 'No.'

Bob and Gloria were still in the house by the river. Their children, long grown up, were scattered. The river flowed past them, night and day. The river flowed past in summer, autumn, winter, spring. The river, like the land it flowed through, had no names for seasons. The river flowed, the land grew oranges, other fruit, vegetables, crops of wheat, oats and barley, and feed for stock. When left alone it grew redgum trees, whole forests of them, and further out, in drier country, black box. *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* and *Eucalyptus largiflorens*. Like the river, the trees didn't know these names. The earth was fertile, even in dry Australia. Their oldest boy, Lou, made a fortune in Sydney in information technology, and lectured his parents when he came back to see them. 'Stop this business of selling off land and giving it to us kids. Hang onto it! Rent it out, you've got to have something to live on!' Gloria was happy to drop back to the old age pension, and Bob loyal to the last, would have followed her, but their son prevailed. Their paddocks, their orchards, were rented. Bob would have taken cash but Lou told him to watch out for tax inspectors, so most of the money went through their bank account in Deniliquin. Someone asked Bob why he didn't bank in Kerang – it was closer – but he said he preferred to drive across the plains. He felt more of the history of the land when he went that way, and now that he was getting old, that mattered. Gloria queried him about this. Did he really feel what he told people he felt? He said of course he did, he couldn't travel through country without feeling the efforts of those who'd been on the land in earlier times. We use the land better than the black people did, he told her, but they've left their mark, you can feel their presence in lots of places ...

Where, Gloria wanted to know.

Everywhere, he told her. Anywhere they hunted. Anywhere they made camp. That meant places by the deeper waterholes flooded occasionally by the river, then cut off. He named a few such spots. 'They used to know where the best fish were, and dive in and catch them. They lived pretty well, or the ones that lived along the river did. I don't know how they divided up the land. Did they have separate tribes on the two sides of the river? Or did the one tribe have both sides of the stream? I don't know. I don't suppose we'll ever know now.'

This same question fascinated our historian. If whites had settled in places where blacks had camped in earlier time, they probably used the same tracks between them. Road makers did whatever was obvious; it stood to reason – if reason had any place in these things – that aboriginal groups would have moved across country in much the same way. The path of a river, or the point where it entered a lake or the sea must surely have had much the same significance for black as for white? Yet not everything had worked in this way. Blacks had cut the bark of trees to form their canoes, yet white people hadn't made their boats this way. What he was searching for was unrecognised similarities between the two peoples because he had a feeling that the land would have dictated some of its uses – or habits – to white and black alike: but was this so? CC wasn't sure.

He found, as he grew older, that he was more certain of some things, less of others. It was easier to write, harder to choose things to write about, because he liked only to write when he was certain, and certainty came less often with age. He found himself re-reading the journals of explorers, and noticing inconsistencies, often to do with the way they talked about the blacks they encountered, sometimes with admiration, sometimes with scorn. Major Mitchell wavered in this respect, and Sturt too, at times. The cause of this inconsistency, CC decided, was probably the white man's habitual certainty of his superiority brought up against the considerable skill-sets in the black people's way of life. These men were trained observers, yet what they saw had to be connected to the other thoughts habitual to their minds. Was this changing in his own times, CC asked himself: getting better? Or getting worse?

He wished he knew.

He published articles in various journals about the difficulties involved in recognising the earlier inhabitants and making their experiences and their thinking a part of the history being written in his time, but was rarely happy with these pieces because he wasn't familiar with the languages, and therefore the thought, of the earlier people. The values of the white society, however, were easily understood because people around him believed in them, and expressed them, even if he didn't himself. He had only to read the annual reports of companies,

and if he'd had any uncertainty about such things there were people he could talk to – among them his contemporary Ken Jarman, now retired and feeling rather grumpy about it, as CC understood. Nobody could give him such insights into aboriginal thinking, so he'd taken up reading the stories – even novels – which were beginning to be part of his country's consciousness. Alexis Wright and Kim Scott. Others too, no doubt. CC was facing the problem that the historian can't get very far ahead of the society of which s/he's a part because the language, the concepts, aren't available to say other things. How maddening! Was his project doomed to failure, then, because the failure was inbuilt in the thinking of the people that surrounded him?

He suspected that it was but struggled, wrestled, in an effort to find a way.

Having a drink at the Windsor didn't end with the resignation. The historian and the ex-premier amused themselves by sitting in the same spot. Staff reserved it, and made sure a bowl of flowers was there to greet them, every second Friday. CC liked to say to Endless, 'Still unemployed?' and be told 'At last!' They talked about things CC was working on, and job offers made to Endless. Nothing came that he wanted. 'Either they want you to add prestige to what they do, while you do nothing, or they don't know what to do and they want you to solve all their problems! Not for me!'

'What are you looking for then?'

Endless stroked his chin. 'Something that shapes the future. I'm envious of people who design solar-powered cars. Or driverless cars. The city's choked by cars. Too many of them by millions! If you look at communications, we've got mobile phones, we've got email, anybody can get in touch with anybody anywhere, or just about. But we can't do the same thing for movement. Even getting here, for instance. The traffic's crazy.'

It was. 'That's why this lounge feels strange,' said Endless. 'It's from another age, when leisured people lived close to each other and lived, in a normal sort of way, in each other's pockets, or next thing to it. Politics was easier, too!' he grinned. 'But I won't be going back to that.'

‘How’s your boy?’

Endless softened. ‘I thought we were being hard when we banished him, a couple of years ago. It was the best thing we ever did, for him and us too. Even Sally, who thought we were being unbelievably cruel, would agree with that.’

‘I think you said she visited him?’

‘She did. Wrote to him too, quite often. Then she started leaving his letters back to her in places where we could read them. I don’t think she would have told him that, though. He might have closed down. A lot of it was pretty frank, affairs with tourist women, all that sort of thing. And what really surprised me, he came to love the ranges. The word ‘unyielding’ kept turning up in his letters. It was a positive, though, not a criticism. I often wondered if he applied it to himself ...’

CC raised a hand: ‘Meaning?’

Tim’s father had to think. ‘I think when he used that word he was invoking a moral dimension that he knew nothing about when he was here. Of necessity. Of being what you have to be and not trying to alter yourself to please somebody else. Or anybody else,’ he said, the last three words more firmly.

CC felt satisfied by what he’d heard. ‘So he wasn’t punished after all, but exiled to a place of improvement?’

‘That’s what Jodie and I are inclined to think.’

‘You must be very pleased?’

‘Relieved, I can tell you.’

Noel McGraw’s business kept expanding. Finally he decided to turn it into a company. He took advice, hired lawyers, and the change was made. He was going to call it Flying Future, but scaled back to Future Corporation. He took fifty-one per cent of the shares and gave - gave - the remaining forty-nine per cent to his staff. A Board of Directors was set up and a CEO appointed. At one stage he’d been going to give the fifty-one per cent to Lola, but she talked him out of it. He’d built the business, it had to remain in his hands. ‘You’ve managed me for all these years,’ he told her, ‘but have it your way. You’ll still be in control.’ The shares opened on the market at a dollar twenty and moved, after a good first dividend, to a dollar eighty-one. A couple of

years later they'd settled around two dollars forty. The Future, if not exactly flying, was going well.

Noel kept a place on the Board for himself but didn't involve himself day to day. He read a lot, travelled, had time for galleries and theatre. Lola went with him. She tried to talk him into returning to far north Queensland, where they'd first got together, but he maintained a sturdy opposition. 'You can take me there when I'm a box of ashes, and chuck me far and wide.' Lola was horrified. A dignified burial somewhere close to home! He insisted. 'That will be my last trip. We'll do it together. You'll have to excuse me if I let you do all the talking!'

So he was as irascible as ever. She didn't bother arguing. He knew his mind, and it was what he wanted. And if it was what he wanted, why not? She didn't want to be haunted by an unhappy ghost, or by her own bad feelings because she hadn't done what he asked. She grew used to the idea. They made jokes about it. Future Corp. kept paying dividends. They had more money than they'd ever had, and he wondered what use he should put it to. Then he heard of a scheme that pleased him. A group of environmentalists – real ones, experts, not mere enthusiasts – had bought a large area of West Australian countryside and were returning it to its original state. They'd fenced it, they were trapping or otherwise eliminating introduced species, and had set up a small but well-designed headquarters for rangers and visitors. They were doing this with the cooperation and support of the local aborigines, whose tracking skills were a necessary part of the operation. Goats and camels were being eliminated and species long extinct were being reintroduced from places where they'd survived. 'I like it,' Noel told Lola. 'I'm going to help.'

He made contact. The organisers explained that they had a scheme whereby groups of artists were brought to Alice Springs, flown to the property, given a comfortable tent, and invited to nominate which parts of the place they would like to see. Driven wherever they wished in a landscape to dream of, and generously wined and dined, they readied themselves for work which they could later sell, the first forty thousand dollars of sales for each artist going to the project. They were amused at the name of Noel's business: 'We're trying to re-create the past! That's what we want the future to look like – the past!' Noel

asked them what they wanted. How could he help? They had lots of ideas but said they'd put a proposition to him when they'd worked it out in detail. They wouldn't be long!

That was when fate intervened. Noel was hardly back from the west before he was troubled by stomach pains. He went to his GP, who sent him for tests. 'I don't like the look of this,' the doctor told Noel. 'I'm going to refer you to a specialist. I think they'll open you up to have a look.'

They did. They didn't like what they saw. 'We cleaned up what we could but there were parts we couldn't get at.' He was told – those famous words – to get his affairs in order. He told the specialist they were. 'How long have I got?' The answer was most likely a year, two at best. 'People ask us for estimates of life expectancy but the truth is we're only giving estimates. It *can* depend on the patient. Some patients drop their bundle straight away and go quickly. Others don't so much resist as refuse to care, and they can last longer than anyone expected. We had a case last year ...'

Noel was a model patient. He had a feeling that somewhere in his being he'd always longed for an ending somewhere between protracted and swift. A year, maybe more. He gave the land restoration people a million dollars, saying, as he handed them a cheque – a thing of the past rather than the future – 'Once this would have been a lot of money, now everybody talks in billions or they think it's not worth talking about.' He also changed his will so that the money he'd left to Lola would pass on to the conservation project when she died. Did she mind him doing this? No, she told him, not at all. It was his money, after all. He could do with it what he pleased. He knew she meant this. Money had never had a grip on her. 'So long as you're doing what you want,' she said. That was when he knew how saddened she was at the thought of losing him. 'Lola, my love,' he told her, 'don't try to work out what you will and won't do when I'm gone. You may be surprised. Sometimes, when one member of a long-lasting couple dies, the remaining one gets a new lease of life. And sometimes it's the opposite. One goes, the other one goes almost straight away. I don't think anyone knows which way it's going to go until it actually

happens. So when I kick the bucket – what a funny expression! – open a bottle of champers and drink to long life. It might happen!

They had time for one more visit to the west before Noel became too weak to travel. Lola got herself into the four wheel drive at every opportunity, but he spent most of the time at the camp. He talked to the rangers, the artists, the cooks, he looked at whatever the artists were doing or drawing. He ate reasonably well, he sipped wine. He chatted to an old aboriginal woman called Olga. She showed him the footmarks of a cat, and told him it was both female, and pregnant. He didn't believe her but didn't say so. Maybe she was right! What would he know? He said to Lola, as they sat at table a few minutes before the evening meal was served, 'Once upon a time, I would have said that was useless knowledge. What good can you do with it if you know a thing like that? But now, in my present position, I feel humbled by what Olga told me.' Lola was listening with all her heart. She wouldn't have him a great deal longer, and they depended on each other. 'There's a tiny mark in the sand,' he said, 'and it means something. Olga knows what made it. Olga's people depend on knowledge as fine as that. It's how they stay alive.' She was close to weeping. She looked into his eyes, and spoke. 'They're brought up with knowledge. That's what they say. So are we. It's different knowledge, though. When you're out here in the wild with these people you can see the sense in their knowledge. Back at home in the city, people like us can't see the sense of it.' She touched his hand. He liked it that way, rather than taking hold. If she took hold of him he felt he had to do something, say something, respond in some way that he couldn't be bothered finding. He wanted to be like god, with perfect understanding, and nothing required of him to keep the universe running. How would that be? That was a role he'd never played. He wished he'd been King Lear but it was beyond an amateur like him, as it was beyond almost everyone. The imagination was both the noblest and the riskiest gift of humankind and a great imagination was the greatest gift of all, so long as you could get it under control, manage it, use it to produce great things. He was in a landscape that was vast and the people around him, with a bit of help from him – a

bit, and that was all – were trying to restore its purity and give it to their kind. Was there a finer thing to do than that?

One of the artists came up and sat opposite. ‘How are you liking it out here?’

Noel said it was marvellous. ‘I’m not too old to appreciate it. It’s worth waiting for.’

The artist fellow said, ‘It’s going to be hard to do justice to it, but I suppose we have to try.’

Noel said, ‘That’s life you’re talking about, my friend.’ The other man laughed, unaware, as Lola was, that Noel’s valedictory speech had been given to a world that wasn’t listening.

Tim Knight, back at university and in the good graces of his parents, spotted a headline in the business pages: Future Corp Founder Donates to Cleaning Up Country. When he’d read it, he put it on his father’s desk. Antinous read it later in the day. It excited him, and pleased him more deeply than anything since his resignation. He rang Future Corp. and asked to speak to Noel, but was told that the former head of the organisation was in hospital and, Antinous gathered, was unlikely to return to the office. The secretary said no more than that, nor did she need to. ‘I’m a friend,’ Antinous said, ‘or I was, years ago. Can you put me onto his wife or children please?’

The secretary told him, ‘I don’t think Mr McGraw’s partner should be intruded upon at the moment sir, but if you give me your contact details I can pass them on to her for you.’ She added, ‘Then it will be up to her, sir, you realise.’

Antinous saw. But several days later he received a handwritten note from Lola, who’d realised, as the secretary had not, who it was that was trying to contact Noel. ‘We got together when we were very young. Then I lost track of him for years. Then we got together again. That lasted a long time but it’s over now.’ Lola said that if he’d ever been a friend of Noel she’d like to meet him, but not, if he didn’t mind, for very long: she wasn’t feeling very strong.

Antinous drove to the house in Northcote, not far from Darebin Park, where the couple had lived for years, and knocked on the door. Lola let him in, and he was surprised to find that the owner-founder

of Future Corp lived in a 1920s house with little in it that was modern. Lola laughed at his surprise. ‘He’d have loved to see the look on your face, Mr Knight. He really would. He loved to surprise people, any way he could.’ For a moment she was happy, remembering her man. ‘When you became Premier, Mr Knight, he gave you lots of advice. You never heard him of course, he was only talking in our kitchen!’ Antinous smiled. ‘Tell me, if you would, about his plans for this place in the middle of Western Australia. I want to know what they were doing – *are* doing. I’d like to see something along the same lines start up here.’

Lola was pleased. ‘He’d be very happy if he could hear you say that Mr Knight. Very happy. He led a funny life. He was good at business but he hated himself for being good at it. He made himself rich yet he lived like a poor man.’ She indicated the house around them. It amused him in some way I can’t explain to take a bit of country that nobody cared about, and restore it until it was beautiful again. He wanted to help.’

Antinous told her about the item in the newspaper, which she hadn’t seen. ‘That’d be right,’ she said. ‘He’d have been pleased.’ Then she looked at the man who’d been premier of her state. ‘Have you got something similar in mind, Mr Knight?’

‘I have.’

Lola waited, not feeling free to question someone of her visitor’s status. Antinous said, ‘What I like is the unexpected nature of what he did. A big donation to a project that most people in this state would never have heard of.

Still nothing from Lola.

‘I retired – resigned – some time ago, as you may have heard at the time. It was everywhere in the news. Since then I’ve been looking for my new direction, and to tell you the truth, I’ve not only not found it, I haven’t had the faintest idea where to look.’

Lola brightened. ‘Aha!’

Something in Antinous was loosened. ‘These people that Noel was working with, was funding ...’ Suddenly his mind raced in another direction. ‘You realise of course that I was at school with your husband, many years ago?’

‘Lola said, ‘He wasn’t my husband, Mr Knight. We never even talked about getting married. We were companions, I think you’d have to say.’

‘Companions, then, it’s none of my business.’ Lola broke in. ‘I realise you were at school with him Mr Knight. I realised that when he started to give you advice in the kitchen. As he did from time to time.’

‘The rounds of the kitchen, eh?’ Antinous was amused. ‘I should have had him advising my son! He ran off the rails for a while. Fortunately he’s back on the right track now. I think it’s permanent but I suppose we’ll have to wait and see.’ Suddenly he realised he was taking up her time when she probably needed to be alone, or with someone she really knew. ‘What I came to ask, to beg, I’m begging really, is this. When things have settled down, and you’ve buried poor Noel, could you give me an hour or two of your time and tell me about what they’re doing over there in the west, or at least put me onto people who can brief me about the project: their aims, their finances, all that sort of thing?’

Lola said, ‘I’ll do that for you, Mr Knight. Now I’m going to ask you to do something for me.’

He was a little surprised, but ready; this sort of thing had happened all the time in his political career. ‘What’s that?’

‘I’ve got his ashes in a box, and he’s given me a job.’

‘A job?’

‘To throw them to the winds in a very special place.’

‘Where’s that?’

She told him.

‘And?’

‘I’m afraid to go on my own.’

‘You haven’t got anyone to go with you?’

‘Not that I’d trust.’

Antinous was feeling his way. ‘What sort of person could you trust?’

‘Someone strong and sure, who’d protect me if he came out of the air and called me to go back with him.’

‘You think he might do that?’

‘I do.’

It was crazy, but it was what she thought. She was ready to keep her side of the bargain, he had to do something for her. He had an idea. 'My son's just come back from the Flinders Ranges. A very different sort of place, but another very strong place. I think he'd go with you, if I asked him. If he says no, however, I'll do it myself.'

Tears filled her eyes. Antinous stood with her, moved himself. He said, 'When Noel was a boy, none of us understood him.' Lola butted in. 'You know why that was, Mr Knight?'

'Not really. I think we were too concerned about ourselves to try to pick the lock of others' minds.'

'Maybe. I think the real reason you couldn't understand him was that he couldn't understand himself.' She looked at Antinous, and he felt compelled to say, 'That's an almost impossible ask, you know. To understand yourself. None of us can see ourselves as others see us. That's an old saying, I forget who's supposed to have said it first. Millions have said it since. Have you ever thought about that? There's all these sayings which are supposed to show that we're wise but all they really do is show how little we know. How little of substance, or value, we've got in our minds.'

Lola said, 'When will you let me know about going north, Mr Knight? I'd like to get it over and done with, so I can see if I can go on, or if my life's finished as I suspect it is.'

Antinous said, 'I'll speak to my son. And my wife. My wife and my son, and I'll let you know.' She nodded. The deal had been done.

When Antinous met CC the following Friday, he explained that their next meeting would be in a month's time, not the usual fortnight, because he was taking Lola to Cooktown. 'Jodie and I will drive her, and Tim and Sally will fly to Cairns and meet us there. Then the five of us will drive to Cooktown. Lola's got Noel's ashes in a box. She's going to throw them to the winds on a hill up there, overlooking the sea.'

'Throw them to the winds! It's going to be quite a pilgrimage, isn't it, what with your family travelling too.'

'It is. I'm starting to see it that way. It's strange, I've been forced to look back. If I think back to those days at school, and people I shared

them with, I don't normally think of McGraw. I think he annoyed me, back in those days, because I couldn't understand him. He was a quirky bugger. I had very clear goals, and he didn't seem to, and I never knew why he didn't, or what he did think was worthwhile.'

CC raised his eyebrows. 'I sometimes think that people who just muck along the best way they can are more likely to be successful than those with tightly drawn plans. If I think about my own work, I seem to spend ages planning things I'm going to do, but if I look across the best things I've done in my career, they just happened one night when I got a bright idea and ran with it. I seem to need plans, and love to make them, but I also need to push them aside if I want to get something good done.'

A waiter brought them their glasses and a bottle of wine. He unscrewed the cap, and poured. They raised their glasses. 'Here's to ...'

'What?'

Antinous said, 'Here's to everyone in the world who's got a plan and needs to drink to something!'

CC was amused. 'It sounds like you've got a plan you haven't told anyone yet.'

'I think I have. A quite surprising plan. People are going to say it's silly, but they'll come around to the idea.'

'Which is?'

'As you know, I heard about Noel McGraw's idea for cleaning up a slab of country over in WA, and liked it.'

CC nodded.

'I started to ask myself, what would be a similar project that would suit this state.'

'Mmm. Very different landscape, of course.'

'Very different. So I cast my mind around, and one thing stuck out. People praised the early settlers in the South Gippsland ranges for the job they did with clearing forests to make way for farms.'

CC rolled his eyes; what a mess they'd made of that! 'One of the greatest environmental crimes ever committed!'

'Quite so. That's what I think too.'

'What's your plan?'

‘It’s a simple idea, though doing it – or rather *undoing* it will be a real tangle. God knows how many battles will have to be fought to make it happen.’

CC suspected he knew what his friend wanted to do. ‘I don’t suppose you’re thinking of ...’

‘Of?’ Antinous was smiling.

‘... a reforestation project, by any chance? Another mountain ash forest as grand as the one they butchered? It’d take a hundred years, just to get the first problem squarely in our eyes so we can see it!’

‘You know,’ said the ex-premier, ‘I rather think that the hundred years part of it is the easy part. If people accept the reinstatement part of it, the hundred years is part of what they’ve accepted. If you see what I mean.’

CC waved his hands, as if to push a thought away. ‘Think of the bloody stupid councillors down there, all shouting no! Horror! Trying to undo what the pioneers slaved to create for us!’ His distress was clear on his face.

‘There’s not a great deal of money in that area down there,’ Antinous said. ‘They’d make more out of tourism than they would off their land. It’s just a matter of getting the thing started in one progressive district, and then making the backward bastards realise that they need to get on board. If someone tries to force it on them, it’ll never happen. Digging their heels in and being supremely negative is just what some people are good at. The trick is to *make* them want to do it. Do it themselves! You see my idea?’

CC saw. ‘Forward to the past!’ He laughed. He sipped. An idea came to him, or rather, he remembered it. ‘Art is long and time is short! We learned it in Latin. *Ars longa, vita brevis*, was it? I’ve forgotten most of my Latin!’

‘I don’t think I ever learned any, though I should have. It would have been useful, at times, in parliament. Useful for carving up the Libs who don’t think anyone on the Labor side would know a word of Greek or Latin!’ He laughed again. ‘I’m going to enjoy this pilgrimage we’re going to make!’ An idea came to Antinous, one that he knew his friend could help him with. ‘Melbourne to Cooktown, CC. Could you draw up a list of things we ought to see along the

way. Stops we ought to make? I'm thinking of places where we can pay homage to those who deserve a little of the stuff!' He developed the idea. 'Melbourne to Cooktown. We could look in at Greta, and then Glenrowan: Ned Kelly and the gang. Bowral! The immortal Don, belting a golf ball with a cricket stump, developing his eye! Arthur Phillip's landing spot at Botany Bay, somewhere near the airport, before they moved to Port Jackson, at Circular Quay. Hey, what a scheme!' He was delighted with his own idea. 'A pilgrimage, yes! You're good at this sort of thing, CC! You're always telling me where famous people first saw the light of day. Hey! Remember in the shearers strike in the 1890s, the government sent a cannon and a bunch of soldiers out to frighten the incendiaryists? Did it ever get fired? I don't think it did. Where did they get it from? Where did they take it? Would it be anywhere near our road north? If it is, we could make a diversion if it wasn't too far ...'

CC was appreciative, and willing too. 'All right, all right. I'll make a list for you. But first you have to give me an idea of which roads you want to travel so I know what I'm supposed to be looking for. I don't want to spend a lot of time on this and in the end you don't go to the places I suggest.' Antinous was most placatory. He'd pick a likely route and possible stopping places, and CC could follow it, with excursions left and right if he thought desirable. 'Jodie'll be delighted. She likes to have everything organised. Lola? I really don't know about her. I don't know what she's like. Or rather, yes I do. She'll want to get ... what was the name of the place? In Cooktown. Captain Cook got up on top of it and tried to work out a way to get through the coral reef that had trapped them. Grassy Hill! That was it! I'll bet it's not grassy any more! I'll bet the local authorities have paved it over with bitumen or something horrible! Huh! I'll bet. What do you say, CC? Am I right or am I wrong?'

CC said, 'You're excited. You're making me wish I could come with you ...'

Antinous, suddenly alert, was about to invite his friend, but ...

'... but I can't. I've got a conference in Auckland. I'm one of the guest speakers. I'll tell you about that another time.'

The day came. It was clear and sunny in Melbourne and, said the Weather Bureau, also in Cooktown. Antinous had the car full of petrol. He'd studied the weather map, listened to highway reports. He had CC's list in his pocket: Kelly, Bradman, and various others, including a Queensland sheep station where shearers had burned the shed in 1894, quite a way from the coastal roads he mainly meant to stick to. There was even a street address for the place where the cannon which had been intended to frighten rebellious shearers had been housed in Brisbane. 'God knows what's standing there now,' CC had told him, 'but that was the address at the time. Some sort of military installation. One of my PhD students dug it out for me. When you get back, a little thank you note would be appropriate; it took him quite a while.'

They picked up Lola. She was simply dressed in black, a colour which would not change. She had only a modest case and a straw-coloured shoulder bag which contained the box holding Noel's ashes. She'd collected it from the crematorium a few days before. It unlocked with a little key which she'd tested in the privacy of the Northcote home where the couple had lived for years. 'Just a little pile of ash, nothing much at all. It hardly seems to represent him but it's all we've got. It'll have to do.'

Something about the way she said these words told Antinous and Jodie that she'd do what they were setting out to do without breaking down. They got in, started the engine, and headed north. Melbourne, claiming to be the world's most liveable city, took ages to get out of. The outer northern edge showed signs of new suburbs starting. 'There's buggerrall public transport out here,' Antinous said. 'They're all dependent on cars.' Jodie chided him. 'Aren't we?' He chuckled. 'True. But there's countryside ahead and we're going to enjoy it. It takes a while to get the city out of your mind.'

They drove. The highway spun itself out before them, a four lane, divided invitation to speed. Antinous left the highway for Benalla, then moved on to Glenrowan, first of their pilgrimage points. He knew where to swing over the railway line to bring them to the spot where Mrs Jones' inn had stood before Victoria Police riddled it with bullets and then burned it down. It had never been rebuilt: it was

an empty block with a sign, within an easy cricket-ball toss from the railway station. Antinous stopped the car and he and Jodie got out: Lola preferred to stay in the back seat, the straw-coloured bag beside her. ‘We mustn’t be too long,’ Jodie whispered to her husband. ‘It looks like she’s got her mind set on only one thing,’ Antinous nodded. ‘This is where they captured Ned,’ he said, moving onto a vacant block next door. ‘Right about here would be my best guess,’ he said, pointing to a patch of open ground. ‘He’d have come from that direction there,’ pointing again, ‘out of the bush. He got wounded in the shoot-out the night before. Nobody knows about the next few hours. Was he on the ground unconscious, which is quite possible, or talking to one of his mates who was supposed to bring in support. Their plan was to derail the police train, wreck it, either shoot the coppers or capture them, and if they captured them, what then? There’s a theory that he had a sort of reserve army hanging around to form a breakaway republic of north-east Victoria.’ He chuckled; this idea pleased him. ‘Imagine Ned trying to manage his public servants!’ He looked over his shoulder at Lola, still sitting in the car. ‘She’s lost, isn’t she. Poor thing, the Noel that I knew, years ago, could never have inspired such loyalty. He must have changed, or else she’s a remarkable woman who could see things in him that others couldn’t. I suspect that’s what it is, but who knows?’

Antinous and Jodie went back to the car. Antinous told Lola a couple of things he’d noticed, then said, ‘Let’s have a look at the town.’ They were disappointed. Signs everywhere made claims on the attention of tourists, and Antinous looked on them with contempt. ‘Somehow these people manage to make the gang’s armour – the one thing that really lifts them onto a plane that most of us can’t quite understand, though we revere it, or I do – look crude and silly. They Disney-fy it in some way. They ruin it. They take away Ned’s moment of real dignity.’ Jodie could feel that he was troubled. ‘Dignity? They put him on a train, didn’t they?’

Antinous pulled the car over because he wanted to talk. ‘They did. But not before he’d gurgled down a couple of bottles of whiskey. How big were they, that’s what I want to know, and nobody’s ever told me that. He knew his days in the bush were over, and he needed the

grog to keep him strong for what he had to face. I really feel for him then, lying on the station, or in the little building – I wonder if it's still the same? It could be – with some of the cops wanting to shoot him, or kick him. But he had Superintendent Sadleir to protect him. Sadleir knew they'd got someone very special on their hands.'

Lola, from the back seat, piped up: 'What was special about him? Can you tell me that?'

It was unexpected. Antinous was surprised. He said, 'It's a good question, Lola. I find it hard to answer. Let me put it this way. The police force that Ned was fighting was a rotten outfit. To call them corrupt would have been praising them. They weren't even organised. Ned took them on. These days, we'd say he seized the moral imperative. Somehow the public realised what he was doing, and they sided with him. Well, the law has to win eventually, but they knew that they'd been disgraced, and Victoria Police has been trying that little bit harder than other police forces, ever since.' Lola, satisfied with this, sat back, but Jodie wondered what else would release a lecture on his nation's values as they drove along. She asked him where they were going to stay the night and he told her Beechworth; it had been prosperous in its mining phase, and remained unspoiled. It had the dignity that comes from never having faced a challenge to its identity, and Lola, having decided to go for a walk when they reached the place and found their motel, came back at peace with herself, and a little more talkative. 'Where are we stopping tomorrow, what's our port of call, Antinous, I know you've got a plan.'

He did of course. He showed them half a dozen places of interest, reading from CC's list, but the one he wanted to see, deeply and reverentially wanted to experience, was Bowral, which, if you knew about these things, you could also call Bradstow, because an academic had written an analysis of the town's social groups, calling his hypothetical subject a shortened version of 'Bradman's town'. The young Don had played for Bowral before moving to Sydney, where he'd played grade cricket before being picked for New South Wales, and then, at the age of nineteen, for Australia. He'd failed in his first Test, been dropped, then recalled for the third Test in the series. In 1930 he'd gone to England with the Australian team, batting first

wicket down, and changed both the game and his nation's view of itself, forever.

The country had been set up as a string of English colonies. There was a Governor for each state, usually an English aristocrat or royal. There was a Governor-General, and the finance to build the new nation came from England's banks or companies. Australia had no foreign policy beyond what was prescribed for it; the Empire took care of itself. Sport, as well as allegiance, joined Australia to England. Australia had always done well in cricket, but Bradman was something else; his performances in England in 1930 amazed the Marylebone Cricket Club and they determined to bring him down. They invented bodyline bowling, and sent a batch of dangerous bowlers south to wipe the floor with a people that begrudged British capital the interest that it owed. Constitutionally this was hardly a time for change but in the shadow world of sport the resentments and the rising confidence and certainty of the once-colony became clear. In Bradman, the young country had something the mother country could not overcome. They drove around Bowral, the little party, in their car, stopping here and there, and finally at a motel. Antinous wanted to settle for the night.

The following day they entered Sydney, finding their way to Botany Bay to see where Phillip's founding party had first landed, then to Circular Quay (a madhouse of modern traffic) to see the place of second settlement. Then across the Bridge, an achievement of the 1930s, and onto a road taking them north. They stayed in the Hunter Valley because Antinous wanted to pay homage to the winemakers: 'They're not the only ones now, of course, and they can't any longer claim to be the country's best wine region, but they were first, and CC's listed a couple of spots for us to pass through.' The next stop was Armidale because of Judith Wright's family's connection with the region, and after that, for better or for worse, the Gold Coast and Surfers' Paradise, with the Pacific rolling in. 'We're leaving something behind,' Antinous told his passengers the next morning – Lola still in black – as they found their way through Brisbane and began the trek through places far more tropical than their city in the south. Jodie rang Tim and Sally to let them know where they were, and the date of their expected arrival in Cairns.

Then it was up the coast to Seventeen Seventy, historic name, to Rockhampton, after which, Antinous decided, they'd travel inland. 'We don't understand this country the way we once did,' he told Jodie, and the ever-patient Lola, 'because there's a whole vast stretch of Queensland which has lost most of its rural population. We're on the edge of it now. Away out there, over the horizon, that's where the shearers burned the sheds in the eighteen-nineties, because unionism was largely, though by no means entirely, a bush development. There's the Stockman's Hall of Fame at Longreach, which reminds me that Qantas began out there in that country we're looking at. They named their planes after Australian cities and one of them was famously called Longreach, an appropriate name you must admit. Those early planes flew over Waltzing Matilda country, or that's the most likely explanation of where the words and music came to be written.' Jodie saw her husband loosening up as he connected with things he liked to consider fundamental in his country's life; she tried to find an equivalent move in the mind of their companion, but she had *her* companion in a box in a straw-coloured bag which hung from her left shoulder when it wasn't sitting beside her on the car's back seat. 'We'll stay at Atherton the night before we get to Cairns,' Antinous told them. 'In the morning, we'll leave the tablelands and drop down to the coast. If I get the timing right I'll go straight to the airport so we're there when Tim and Sally's plane arrives!'

And so it happened. Tim and Sally had taken a flight to Brisbane, and then a second flight to far north Queensland. Their plane had swung out over the sea, then turned to land facing south, a little way north of the city. They stayed in the heart of Cairns, on a Saturday night, two things surprising them: a swarm of flying foxes invading the town as the sun set, and an endless thrumming of music until the small hours of the night began to grow a little larger, at which point the music stopped and the dancing crowd found their way home through the streets outside. This was when Jodie went to Lola's room to see if she was asleep or awake.

The latter; 'But don't worry about me,' she told the other woman: 'I've been grateful for the noise. I've treated it as company. Noel wasn't much of a dancer. But every now and then he had to go dancing and

there wasn't any stopping him. I've been listening to their voices as they find their way home.'

She meant, Jodie realised, that she'd been hoping she'd hear Noel's voice out there, but she hadn't. It was an invasion of the other's privacy, but Jodie asked, 'Have you got your window open, Lola?'

Lola said yes. 'I wanted to hear their voices clearly, in case I heard Noel. The voices were blurry until I opened the window. I might close it again in a minute, except that it would make me sad. They're just about all gone home by now.' Jodie said, 'Try to get some sleep now,' and left.

They had breakfast at a street café not far away; tropical fruit salad, eggs and bacon, coffee in large mugs. Antinous asked, 'Do you know the road, Lola?' Lola said she remembered it as it had been, when it was hardly more than a track; she supposed it would be bitumen all the way, these days. And it was. Lola murmured occasionally, when she remembered something, some place, but had little to say when Sally tried to draw her out, Sally sitting beside Lola, and Tim on a little seat in among the luggage. 'This car's only just big enough,' Antinous said. 'I thought it might be roomier than this.'

They got to Cooktown and took rooms at a motel. Someone at reception told Antinous how to find the track to Grassy Hill. He thanked them, and asked what else his party ought to see, to be told about the Catholic Mission that had been turned into a museum. Sally and Tim expected him to drive there, but he suggested a walk. 'We've done enough driving for the moment.' They found the museum interesting mainly for its aboriginal section, leftovers from a way of life they barely understood. The whitefella mind finds it hard to believe that blacks could do so much with so little. Antinous said, 'There's a famous poem by A.D.Hope, called 'Australia'. It ends with something like this:

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from deserts the prophets come

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes

The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes

Which is called civilization over there.

‘The strange thing is,’ he went on, ‘that there was indeed a savage and scarlet springing in that waste, but he couldn’t see it. There was a civilisation out there, and the cultured apes, or not so cultured, were crushing them. But they’ve hung on. They’re starting to fight back for themselves ...’

He would have gone on but Jodie was frowning at him and inclining her head towards Lola, who was sitting on a bench, staring out a window, her straw-coloured bag over her shoulder. ‘Oh dear. Yes,’ said Antinous. ‘I was going to leave that till tomorrow, but we’d better do it now.’ He went over to Lola and apologised. ‘I thought you might prefer to do it in the morning, but I see you want to do it now.’ Lola rose, nodding, but saying nothing. ‘We’ll need the car for this part of the job,’ Antinous said. ‘If you like I can walk back to the motel and get it, and meet you back here?’ But the others preferred to walk, and it wasn’t far, so they were soon back in the car, Lola in the front seat now because this part of the trip was hers. They would have preferred to have the lookout to themselves when they reached it, but, although a car left as they drove up the hill, there was a car parked beside the viewing platform. Antinous parked on the opposite side of the platform, and they got out. Lola slung the bag over her shoulder and walked to a grassy patch, licked her fingers and raised them to the breeze to let it signal its direction. Tim, having observed that the earlier car had South Australian registration had drifted towards it, accompanied by Sally, who felt more comfortable with her brother than with Lola and her parents attending on her. Jodie was a few steps behind Lola, her bag and its contents, while Antinous, though keeping an eye on Lola, was also taking in the view.

It was enormous. Vast. The ocean, the mighty Pacific, reached to the eastern horizon. Close to the shore, white shapes could be discerned under the surface of the water, coral which had brought James Cook and his ship undone. The coral was less visible further out, but his reading told him it was there: Cook had had to navigate most cautiously to find a chink in the reef, and even then an unexpected wind had almost brought him undone again. That was when the

Endeavour was trying to escape the south land and its surrounding waters and get back to England, but first the damage had had to be diagnosed and repaired. The first of these jobs had been carried out on a tiny, curving beach which they could look down on from the top of the hill. Then the Englishmen had pulled their boat back into the water, manoeuvred it through the break in the coastal range cut by the river which they named after the ship, and beached it a second time at the spot where fishing boats from modern Cooktown pulled up to a wharf.

The view was huge. A coastal range separated the ocean from the inland, spreading to the west, endlessly rumpling and rolling in the light of a tropical afternoon. Lola stood, took the casket from the shoulder bag and dropped her bag on the grass. There was a key in the metal box, she turned it, and lifted back the lid. She held the box in one hand and looked around for the others. She wanted their support. Jodie was first beside her, then her husband. Tim and Sally were waving as the South Australian car began to move down the slope. As it disappeared into the scrub that had long since replaced Cook's grass, they came back to their parents and Lola, who said to them, 'We've come a long way for this. Now!'

They looked at her, the young woman and her brother. What was she waiting for? Couldn't she make up her mind and do it? Antinous said, 'Do you want a hand, Lola?' though throwing the ashes into the breeze was clearly one person's job, and it was hers. Couldn't she do it? Then she turned so that the movement of her arm would follow the movement of air in the breeze, tensed her body, and flung. Ash, or dust, whatever it was that the crematorium people had pulled out of the fire followed the breeze downwind. The casket slipped from Lola's hand and clattered on the ground. Lola yelled, 'Goodbye Noel! Come back to me one day, if you can!' Then she weakened and began to cry. 'If they let you, whoever they are.' Then she slumped and needed Jodie and Antinous to stop her slipping to the ground.

They all looked at the sky, half-expecting something mysterious to appear. To happen. Lola looked at the young people, she who'd had no children, and said 'Nothing! Nobody. Nil, nix, nought!' Antinous said, 'A good life though. You wouldn't have loved him, otherwise.'

Lola sobbed, 'What was the use of him? He couldn't save himself, when he got sick.' Jodie said, 'None of us can, if we get sick enough. When it's our time, we have to go.' She took Lola's hands and kissed her tenderly on the cheeks, the forehead, the eyes, then her lips, a kiss for each. 'He'll come to your mind when you least expect it. You must tell us when he does. We've shared his parting with you, you must tell us when he comes back.' Her love poured on the stricken Lola, who said, 'Last time I was here, I was young. Now I'm old. Where's my life gone, Jodie? Antinous? Tell me that! Where's my life gone?' Antinous put his arms around her, he and Jodie holding her, Tim and Sally standing close. 'It hasn't gone anywhere, Lola love. It's Noel that's gone away. Will he come back one day? We've no way of knowing. When will we have to go and follow him? There's no way of knowing that either. Tomorrow, before we leave, we'll come up here again to tell Noel we're leaving him on his own for a while, but if he ever wants to see us, he can journey down to Melbourne, as we've journeyed up here, specially for him, specially for you. We're all special, every one of us, and every one of us has to end.' Tears were streaming down Lola's cheeks but she had nothing to say. There was nothing to say. Tim and Sally saw the outlines, the shape, of a life, and what it entailed for those who, like them, had been entrusted with one.

One.

Grassy Hill

This book begins and ends at Grassy Hill, in Cooktown, far north Queensland, Australia. At the start, a teacher is pressing her students to consider the nature of history, which they are inclined to see as something separate from themselves. Her immediate subject is James Cook, his ship Endeavour, and its crew, but the aboriginal people of the vast continent the Englishmen are ‘discovering’ slowly become visible in the narrative; and the narrative itself comes under question: to understand it, should we use the Anglo-Saxon notion of history, or the Italian concept of *istoria*? How different are these ideas of history and story, and how much the same? Where does one end and the other start? The book follows the lives of ten members of the original history class but as they encounter lovers, partners, children, in-laws, friends and social contacts it becomes clear that the ten people we are following are not so much case studies as representative of humanity at large. At the end, we watch as another of our boys – Old Boys – dies and his ashes are thrown to the winds on the same Grassy Hill from which Cook and his men considered the world – and their chances of ever getting home to England – back in 1770. The hill and the questions it poses remain.