HOUSE of MUSIC

like to walk with you for a block or two. If you don't mind.' There was anger in him, but also a feeling that this last meeting shouldn't be spoiled. She told him how she would get to her apartment - which, he knew, and accepted, he'd never see - and suggested he accompany her to a point where he could catch the subway back to his friends on Second Avenue. **So they walked, for a few blocks, beneath the shining towers, the colossi of capital, the rabid over-development of what had once been modest blocks of scrub, amid the beggars and the wealthy, the handsome, well-groomed citizens of the world capital of rhetoric, and the victims, maimed and pleading, of the forces that had created the towers, and the wealth, and they knew, as they turned to each other for the last time, at the point where he had to go underground, that though they'd done their best to manage their lives, they'd always been eddying on currents too large for them to understand, let alone control, and that things had rarely, and for only handfuls of people, been any different.** She took his hand. 'I'm glad I saw you. It hasn't been easy, has it, but it's better that we saw each other than if we hadn't. I forgot to tell you - René still talks about the time you got up when your legs were giving you hell, and took him for 'an instructive

a suite of stories by Chester Eagle

House of music

Other books by Chester Eagle

Hail & Farewell! An evocation of Gippsland (1971)
Who could love the nightingale? (1974)
Four faces, wobbly mirror (1976)
At the window (1984)
The garden gate (1984)
Mapping the paddocks (1985)
Play together, dark blue twenty (1986)
House of trees (reissue of *Hail & Farewell!* 1987)
Victoria Challis (1991)
House of music (1996)
Wainwrights' mountain (1997)
Waking into dream (1998)
didgeridoo (1999)
Janus (2001)
The Centre & other essays (2002)
Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (2003)
Melba: an Australian city (2004)
The Wainwright Operas (2005)
Oztralia (2005)
Cloud of Knowing (2006)
Benedictus (2006)

Mini mags
Escape (2004)
Hallucination before departure (2006)

House of music

a suite of stories

Chester Eagle

First published 1996 by Trojan Press, Ivanhoe. Cover design by Vane Lindesay. Printing by Print Synergy, Notting Hill, Victoria 3149. This electronic edition published 2006 by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is (03) 9497 1018 (within Australia) and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

ISBN 0 9592077 1 6

Contents

House of music

The house was full of music. Full also of the accumulated rubbish of Vance's thirty-seven years, and the mess of human lives.

You want to locate it? Look for it, then, in a provincial city built on a grid pattern. Around the corner is a park, perfectly square. Vance has no time for geometry. When he drives, he's often drunk, and in the way of his times - now a fading joke - he hugs the gutter, swerving to avoid anything that looms, parked, in his path. Vance has no wish to damage, except, perhaps, his body, into which he pours fortified wine, which he buys from a dealer on the opposite side of his city.

Vance knows every crevice of the inner suburbs, but of the areas beyond trains and trams, he's ignorant. A prodigious reader of magazines, information is a gold he expects to find daily. Ignorance of something is his form of contempt. He likes to explain the reproductive system of women: this is where his goal, his ambitions, and his comfort lie. Desire fills his eyes with moist and tender supplication. He thinks fidelity an admirable principle for a time, then the demands of variety, and exploration, must be yielded to. Beds should not be empty long. There are several beds in his house. None are empty long.

Vance opens the door one night to a knock - he's disappointed if a night passes without knocks - and it's the Princess, with a man. They've got bottles, Vance brings them to the group by the fire. The man introduces himself as Stan; it's a city small enough for surnames to place you. Once the beer's been passed around, he settles where he can watch the Princess. She's subdued tonight; he knows there are rages, incoherence, and flashes, seconds-long, mostly, but extending occasionally to minutes, of super-abundant sweetness. When the Princess fucks Stan,

she swings between sweetness and rage; he finds it the best case-history he's had. Stan is her psychiatrist, and has capitalised on that moment when the patient has had enough of problems and throws responsibility on the man behind the desk. It's unprofessional, but as long as the profession doesn't hear about it, what matter? There are no other shrinks at Vance's.

The Princess catches a young man studying her. Her anger flares. But Stan is watching her, so she moves beside this young man who's curious. 'Who are you?' she demands, and he says, 'Andy,' as sweetly as he can because there is a passion to be satisfied in her voice. 'Tell me about yourself, Andy,' she says and there is a feeling that things could go anywhere at any moment: Vance's eyes, taking in what's happening, are glowing. He gets up and goes to the next room, where his home-made hi-fi sprawls between cabinets, and he puts on Sleepers Wake. The simple, sturdy grandeur, the unbelievable dexterity of Bach's counterpoint, flood about the Princess and the young man she's set about seducing.

'Randy Andy?'

'I could be,' he says, knowing there's no vulnerability in her voice, and therefore no love. Not yet.

'You don't like being watched,' the Princess says, because Stan is not far away, disconcerting in his detachment. Andy knows he would be raving with jealousy in Stan's position, and wishes he could be in Stan's position, with the Princess under him in bed. 'It makes me feel good,' the Princess says, 'to be desired. Feeling desire directed at me, and knowing I can satisfy it, or reject it, is what gives me power. Do you mind me having that power over you?' she asks the young man.

'To get that power,' he says, 'you have to put yourself in the position where you're the object of my desire. To get me in your power, you have to put yourself ... well ... at risk of being in my power.' He thinks a moment. 'What do you say to that?'

She thinks too, deciding that she is starting to like this ... what's his name ... Andy. 'Hold my hand.' He's too aware of Stan, watching

professionally, is it, or jealously. 'I'm not sure if that would be a wise thing to do.'

'I want to start a fight,' the Princess says. 'Don't you want to fight to have me? How very disappointing you are.' She tries to show contempt, but a liking for Andy softens her tone. 'It's not the way I go about things,' he says. 'And how do you go about things?' she asks, truly curious. He answers as only an innocent of twenty can answer. 'I don't think I've done enough yet to know,' he says, flushing, and the Princess loves his flush, feeling that her madness - Stan says she's mad, she does lots of inexplicable things, and she's never consistent, so she must be mad - has been alleviated for a moment by contact with some principle which the boy - that's all he is, now that he isn't going to fight for her, or fall for her - embodies and she doesn't understand. 'Don't you go,' she says to Andy, standing, and relieving him of her pressure, and the scrutiny of Stan, 'without talking to me some more. You've got something I want. Something in you I need to know.'

She calls shrilly to Vance, 'What's this music and why'd you put it on? What's it got to do with me, Vance, I know your tricks. This is a comment on me, isn't it!'

Vance smiles his smile of sweetness and artifice - his honey and lemon smile - and purses his lips as if he's going to whistle along with JSB, but doesn't; he smiles along with the composer, who, Vance likes to tell you, among reflections on the fallibility of birth control in eighteenth century Germany, would have fathered as many children as he wrote cantatas, if the faith of his time had allowed multiple marriages, like the Mormons, and other peoples Vance names, who have a better understanding than we do of desire and how to manage it. 'Desire,' says Vance to nobody in particular, or perhaps to the Princess, 'should be allowed to flow endlessly,' and he swings his arms twice or thrice, catching the music's flow. 'He's just a bloody old sewing machine,' Vance says of Bach, 'but boy, what a sewing machine!'

There is another knock at the door. Vance opens, and a taxi-load come in, carrying bottles. Vance gets glasses, and while the beer's being

poured they continue an argument they've been having about whether a Labor government, if the public could be persuaded to elect Doctor Evatt, would provide a step forward for the country, or only an illusion of social progress propping up the capitalist system which this taxi-load think should be overthrown. Lenin and Marx are quoted. There is a reverence for Trotsky in the air. When Bach ends, Vance puts on a disk of Latin American brass, making some comment lost on the room. The noisiest of the new lot, a huge Irishman called Denis, tells Vance what he said to the others in the taxi, and Vance laughs, and says 'Yes! Yes! Yes!' but his eyes are roaming until Ellen, his lover, brings him his dinner, and a knife and fork. He beams approvingly on his underdone steak before putting the plate on top of a stack of records, and hovering over the gramophone. As a track ends, his hand hovers, shaking badly, above the pick-up, then swoops, and the brass are no more. 'Can't eat to that stuff!' he says, and puts on the sixth Brandenburg. 'This is dee-*lishus* darling,' he says to Ellen. 'There is no more satisfying thing in the world!' 'The steak or the music?' Ellen says, sharply, unsure of her status despite a year in his house. 'Both!' he says, as if widening the approval enlarges the resolution which he, if no one else, is feeling. 'A man at peace with himself,' he says, presumably of Bach, 'and therefore' - he swooshes the air with his knife - 'at peace with the world!'

There is another knock. Vance half turns, sees somebody is going to the door, and grunts approval as he cuts into a potato. He isn't even looking as the newcomer enters the room, a medical student called Alan who drops out of college and hospital life to get among the bohemians. 'How's your dinner, Narnie?' he says, calling Vance by the nickname his mother gave him when he was born. Vance pours a wide smile on his plate and his head bobs up and down in approval. 'Couldn't be better.' Bach motors along, keeping pace with Vance's foot. The political argument rages, people bursting to fill the room with the sound of their opinions, someone drops a glass and Ellen has to push people out of the way to get the fragments onto a fire shovel. The door bell gives a metallic squawk and Vance looks up. 'Someone who's never been here before.'

There are four of them, and they are beautiful people. They press through the door, anxious, uncertain, and it's not clear who's with whom. They say, looking around for the owner, that they've heard it's a place anyone can come to, so long as they're interesting, and they've got grog. 'Well, you pass on the second count,' says big Denis, who's put himself in front of them so he can inspect the women, one fair, one dark. 'And I think maybe the first one too!' Vance chuckles into his steak. 'Some more glasses, Ellen?' Denis calls. 'These people don't want to drink out of the bottle!' Ellen gives a sharp glance at the new women, goes to the kitchen to wash glasses, and returns, expecting to see Vance's eyes liquid with desire, but he has his head over his plate, and it is Denis who is telling everyone, in the roar he uses in political argument, that the newcomers are called Charlie, George, Wendy and Jo, ' ... and I'm not going to tell you which is which, you're gonna have to talk to'em to find out. Not a very arduous condition!' he says, smiling at the fair one, who stirs his lust. Which fella's she with, he wonders, thinking about how to get them apart, but another taxi-load turns up, the political argument enlarges, and the party becomes several parties happening at once.

It lasts till morning, it lasts another year and a half before Vance's heart attack, and the breaking up of the gang. We'll take it room by room.

First on the right as you enter is the gramophone room, filled with equipment and a few chairs. This is where the music buffs cluster, leaving the connecting room to others. This is a room full of *The Magic Flute*, the songs of Schubert and Brahms, Beethoven's quartets, and his consummate trio for the Archduke. Friedrich Schorr sings Wagner here, Furtwangler conducts, and, when there's been a concert in the Town Hall, and the merits of the local performance are being argued over, the disks are brought out for comparisons - Bruno Walter, Mengelberg, Rubinstein, Solomon, Vladimir Horowitz, and Fritz Kreisler, whose cadenzas for Beethoven silence the room. In warm weather Vance opens the double doors, making it easy for him to pull a spike off the cactus if he wants to play 78s, and sends music into the streets like a gospel.

This is the heart of the house, and its focus for those who visit, bringing disks. Andy spends anything he can spare from his university allowance on records, and offers them to Vance, who puts them down with a glowing 'Hmm!' until, hours later, he's in the mood.

By then, if the house is full, it's hardly possible to move between the loudspeakers blaring out the Great Gate of Kiev, or the farewell of Wotan, with Hans Hotter assuming the mantle of god. Victoria de los Angeles comes to the city, and someone brings to Vance's machine her recording of *Les Nuits d'Eté*. Andy falls in love with Berlioz; Vance wonders why he isn't making use of the house's beds; there are people who'd have him, but he's reluctant to plunge into what's about him. Then he brings a girl called Margaret to the house, and she, from a well-controlled home, is amazed at the bohemian mess, but sees its richness, and dances with Andy in the crowded front room and they sway on even after Vance has put on the Unfinished Symphony, and Andy and Margaret, swaying to this music as easily as any other, set the others moving, Vance douses the light, so the room is lit only by the valves and bulbs of the sound machine, and Sir Thomas Beecham wraps the music around itself as if it held infinity in the moment, and Andy, touching fingertips with Margaret, knows that he is riding the crest of a wave, and never wants to be anywhere but where the music is. He loves life, he loves Margaret, and he loves Vance who shows him what it means to love - he thinks.

This front room is where Ellen is courted by Carlos, a Spanish waiter - but only, he says, because the doctors' association won't recognise his training, because they want to reduce competition for their high incomes, but he's working on a scheme to get the better of their scheme - on a night when Vance is reassembling the distributor of his car under a light globe dangling from a tree in the middle of the street, with ROAD BLOCK AHEAD and other signs stolen over the years to slow drivers as they cross the cord looped over the cactus on the way to where it's wanted: Ellen is courted by Carlos in what will be the downfall of Vance's curious, self-created world. 'I,' says Carlos to the red-headed Ellen, 'am going to make an honest woman of you', and he knows,

though she fobs him off, that he's touched her; Carlos thinks the scorn of marriage in Vance's house is only skin deep, that they're all going through the youthfulness of their choosing, and will, whatever they think now, settle down, yes, down, with someone of their choice in marriage, and that's what he's signalling to Ellen, subverting her life by reminding her of something deeper. Carlos is a beautiful dancer, and sometimes, if the right sort of music's playing - and for the most part Vance makes sure it isn't - he brings the front room to life with a few movements of his lithe body. Ravel gives him opportunities, and even Delius, though Carlos says 'This is all in the head, you know? He's written it in a chair!' Carlos lives through his body more than most of Vance's network. One night Carlos spots Ellen's sister Sherry leading someone to bed in the room across the passage, and he rips off Tchaikovsky and puts on Manuel de Falla, and leads the household through the doors and along the passage, so that Sherry and her chosen know their lovemaking is acknowledged as a triumph! Vance sits sipping tearfully, facing Ellen, as the line sways between them, round and round, Vance knowing, and Ellen knowing he knows, that the security of his household is vanishing. 'Youth will always win,' Vance mutters into his glass, though Carlos is almost the same age as he is, and he lifts his eyes, full of tears and appeal, to Ellen, who can see what's best in him at the moment when he's most concerned for himself. She taps the arm of her chair, and he knows he's been put on notice: not abandoned yet, but warned - as if he needed any warning - about impermanence. He's a partner in his father's firm, he gets an income without working, he can have the life he wants as long as people keep coming to the house, flowing through it, as the dancers are sweeping between Ellen's feet and his, but the moving line will move on, and he knows it. 'When you go,' he says to Ellen, 'I'll kill myself ... ' his cheeks are wet with self-pity ' ... because I won't be able to start again. That's how deeply you've affected me, I want you to know that.' She gets up and rips off the record. 'Let them have it to themselves,' she says, and the dancing line gets back to drinking, and Carlos slips out, and Sherry and the man she's with try to get the mind-space around their

bed back under control sufficiently to let love-making take its course. A few hours later the man slips away, and Sherry comes out in the morning, to find Vance making coffee in the kitchen. 'What the fuckin hell was all that kerfuffle about last night? I didn't want people going on like that just because I had someone in bed with me. I know it was Carlos who started it. Who put him up to it?'

'He didn't need any putting up. It suited his purposes.'

'What do you mean?' But Sherry knew what had been said to her sister, and what Ellen was thinking about, and since she didn't feel any commitment to Vance, even if her sister did, she looked at him with scorn. 'If you actually did a bit of work, and led a regular life, you wouldn't be at risk of losing her.' Vance poured coffees, then tilted the saucers so the spillage from his pouring finished in the cups. 'Poop,' he said, troubled but contemptuous. 'You don't know what Ellen wants,' her sister stressed. 'She wants a cup of coffee,' said the master of the house, and he slip-slopped down the passage in his dressing gown, spotting the carpet with coffee from his unsteady grip, and Sherry asked herself how long she could stand the mess, and something moved her to push open the doors of what had been built as an enclosed verandah to the room where the open fire was, and she looked at the accumulation of rubbish it contained - old newspapers, old suitcases, wrecked chairs, a condom, a teddy bear and a doll in each other's arms, and at the bottom of it all, long forgotten, a sewing machine. She pulled away the cloth that covered it, and saw the ironwork: WERTHEIM. 'Ah, Jeezus,' she said aloud, and then, to herself, 'Get out of here, Ellen, get out of here! Before he wrecks your life, get out of this place! Marry Carlos, marry anybody, but rescue yourself before he drags you into the fuckin pit where he lives, and where he fuckin belongs!'

That night she moved out. She got Alan the medical student to move her things in a van he borrowed, and she moved into a flat at the back of a house in Brighton. 'I'm going to be very much on my own down here,' she told Alan. 'I wouldn't mind some company, you know. I've always liked talking to you, and ... if you want to bring some friends

over, that's okay.' So Alan began to spend his evenings off with her, troubled by what he was doing, because when he arrived she was always huddled in front of the silliest television shows, and when she snuggled against him she did it with the television still flickering. Sometimes, when she was asleep, he came out of the bedroom to turn off the TV, and it was only then, with silence reigning in the flat, that he could feel halfway decent about sharing her bed. He had the sexual pleasure, the half-desired, half-unwanted feeling of being needed, and a sense of loss: he wanted to be back in Vance's circle, but he couldn't have both, if he was going to keep up with his course. He wondered how he could get back to Vance's without further depriving - robbing - Sherry.

At the hospital one morning a nurse greeted him by name, and told him, reprovingly, though sweetly enough, that Vance was wondering where he was. He looked at her closely. Clichés ran through his head - nurses, uniforms, bodies, sex - who was she? Then he remembered his last night at Vance's. 'You're Wendy?'

'Jo.'

He apologised, then: 'Are you still going round to Vance's?'

'I'm living there. I moved in when Ellen's sister moved out.'

Alan desired her. 'I'll see you there tonight.'

'I'll tell Vance you're coming.'

He had her on his mind all day. When darkness settled on the city, he rang Sherry to say he was needed at the hospital. When he got to Vance's, George, Charlie and Wendy were with Jo; they were argumentative and drunk. Alan joined Andy and Margaret by the fire while Vance held court in the front room, discussing Don Giovanni. Andy had been reading about the Burke and Wills expedition, and couldn't stop telling them about it; Alan fed him questions to keep him going, because he was intrigued by the quarrel of the beautiful quartet, and by Margaret's attention to what was going on behind her; he sensed that she understood it in a way that was hidden from him, a woman's way, and he hoped he'd get the chance, some time, to question her. Then Vance put on the final scene of the opera, very loudly, and the last thing Andy could

be heard saying was, 'I'd really love to go up there one day. I think it'd be great to be out there on your own, knowing you'd die unless you managed yourself carefully.' Margaret put her arm around him, and asked to be driven home; she had an essay to finish and couldn't postpone it any longer. 'Good night Margaret, good night Andy,' Alan said, then he noticed that Wendy was leaving too, on her own, and Charlie and George were a morose, angry barrier between him and Jo, and he started to get up, frustrated, and wondering if he'd bother coming back, when he saw Jo, catching his intention, stab the air with a finger and say, with silent lips, 'Stay where you are.'

So he sat through the supper scene, and when he looked around, Jo had disappeared, though the two men were still there. When the powerful chords that herald the entry of the statue rang out in the orchestra, Vance turned the volume up, and up again. The stone guest's invitation sounded like the end of everything. Alan had never heard the music so loud; the glass doors behind him - beyond which lay the rubbish of years - were quivering. The orchestra was silent for a quaver's length, and in the silence another, unexpected, voice called, almost as supernatural as the murdered Commendatore's.

'Alan!'

It was Jo, across the passage. The doctor-to-be flushed. He looked at bodies, dealt with bodies, every day, but kept his feelings to himself. He'd always thought desire needed to be hidden to be decent - or that was what well brought up people thought. It came again, at another flash of silence in Mozart's illumination.

'Alan!'

Flushing, but gripped by desire, he passed between the young men who thought they had prior ownership of the nurse, and opened her door. In the second before he enclosed the room in darkness again, he saw Jo on her side in bed, hair out, and saw also a staircase going to an attic he'd never known about. 'Get in with me,' she said. 'I want you.' He undressed and got in.

When he woke in the morning, he looked at his watch, and dressed hurriedly. 'See you tonight, Jo,' he said, but she was fast asleep. Creeping down the passage, he realised the light was on in the front room. He pushed the door. Vance was sitting by the briquette burner, an empty flagon beneath his chair. There were records all over the floor. 'I decided,' said a very drunken Vance, 'to reacquaint myself with Franz Joseph Haydn. He's just ... the greatest composer ... ' His hand went wandering in search of a glass. 'Narnie,' Alan said, 'I haven't got time, I'm sorry. I'm due at the hospital. It's a day when there's a changeover of shifts. Rosters. Sorry, I'll explain when I see you tonight.' Something about the way he said the last word caught Vance's attention. He smiled as if the world had opened its legs for him.

'Good root?'

'Fantastic,' Alan said. 'Best I've ever had.' Vance was still chuckling as the medico shut the door, feeling, somewhere beneath his anxiety about getting to work, that he'd made a terrible mistake. Done something wrong. What? He couldn't tell, but it troubled him all day, and troubled him that night when he opened the door at Vance's with the key he'd been given: 'You're the only person not living here I've ever trusted with a key,' Vance had told him, and the key never entered the lock without him feeling that there was something precious about his right to enter.

Jo wasn't there. Vance didn't know where she was. Ellen didn't know either although he had the feeling, as with Margaret, that there was some reproval in the silence, some awareness of another truth, another viewpoint, that wasn't available to him. He stayed till half past eleven before going back to college, frustrated and disappointed. She'd chosen him, and she hadn't wanted him any more.

Days passed. Nights. He couldn't go back to Sherry's, he didn't go to Vance's. Then she passed him, pushing a trolley at the hospital.

'Will I see you tonight? At Vance's?'

'Sure,' he said. 'I'll be there.'

The other three were nowhere to be seen. They got into bed early, and loved for hours. When he left in the morning, she came to the door, hugging him, and pleading with him to be back that night. He left with a confidence that the world - all of it that mattered - was saturated with desire.

When he came back, she wasn't there.

He said to Ellen, 'What the bloody hell is going on? She hugged me at the door this morning, after a really exciting night, and she pleaded with me to come back. Well, here I am ...'

Ellen said, 'You don't understand what she's going through.'

'No? Well, can you tell me?'

'The four of them are all mixed up. They keep swopping. She wants to be with Charlie, she wants to be with George. Wendy's the same, except she's a bit more secretive about it.' He thought about his nights with Jo. What was Wendy like? 'They could have worse problems!' Her eyes told him he was a typical male. 'They've got sexual freedom, it's true. But what's the good if you walk out of a restricted space into a bigger space, and you take your problems with you? You never escaped at all?'

He had no idea what she meant. 'Come again?'

She said, 'They are four very shaky people. They lean on each other. They keep each other going. None of them can stand on their own two feet. They try to stay faithful to each other, but they can't do it. You think their position's enviable, but it's frightening. They stop each other growing up, because if one of them does grow up, the others are left. They're really pathetic. How are you ...'

He knew what she was going to say, and it hurt.

' ... ever going to make people healthy, if you can't see what their lives are like? Are you going to stick pills into them, cut them open, then stitch them up again? You've got to do better than that, Alan!' He felt she was paying him back for Sherry. 'Okay,' he said, 'I've got a lot of thinking to do.'

He went back to college, he worked hard at the hospital. He found where the nurses' rosters were displayed, and her name wasn't there. He asked the sister in charge, and she had no idea where Jo had gone. 'Said she had another job. It didn't ring true, but who was I to question her if she wanted to go?' Alan could only nod. That night he drove to Brighton, and knocked on Sherry's door. When Sherry saw him she started to cry, then rushed back to the television, trembling.

'Got yourself a sofa!'

Out of the tears: 'I want you beside me.'

He put his arms around her, and she rested her head against his chest. He thought of kissing her, then realised that what she wanted him to feel was her vulnerability, her state of having been deserted. For a moment he wanted to kick her, hit her hard between the eyes. Then he thought of Ellen, and the rebuke she'd administered. 'What I've come to say,' he said to Sherry, 'is that I know that what I did when I disappeared was terrible. If I apologised I'd be a hypocrite because I knew what I was doing and I wanted to do it. I wanted to sleep with Jo, and I did. Twice. Now she's gone and I've no idea where she is. She's moved out of Vance's. She used to work at the hospital where I am, but she's left there too. I don't understand this, but somehow I know I'll never see her again. I'm not asking you to have me back, because I've got too much respect for you to try that on. I came here for one reason only. I wanted to say to you that I do know what I've done, and I apologise to you for doing it. It's no use to you at the moment, that apology, but it might make you think more kindly of me one day. And I'd also like to say that I really do hope things go well for you in the rest of your life. You were good to me, and I hope things go well for you.'

She clung to him, then kissed him with a foolish, empty passion. They stayed together that night, but in the morning, as they dressed, he felt he was already a stranger. Someone else I'll never see again, he thought. How many more? He went to the hospital, and committed himself: a few more months, and he'd take his final exams. One morning

he saw on a noticeboard an article from a newspaper, about the flying doctor service at Broken Hill.

It was what he wanted. He organised leave, caught the overnight train to Mildura, then a bus to the outback mining settlement.

It was an oasis in a desert. He went to the hospital and introduced himself. 'I want to work here when I graduate,' he said. 'Any positions coming up?' An interview was organised and when it was ending a woman came into the room and murmured something in the senior doctor's ear. To Alan he said, 'Feel like a flight? We've got a chap to pick up at White Cliffs. Opal miner. Heart attack, by the sound of it. We can show you a bit of country.'

When the plane took off, Alan saw that the land could be read, not so much as a map, though that was possible, with its long straight roads and occasional homesteads, but as a drawing of life's patterns. The gradual drainage of water from the almost imperceptible eminences could be traced by the meandering lines of trees, curving this way and that until the water went too far underground. He felt that that underground must be where the stories came from: there, and from the stars. He looked to the strato-cirrus above, and the ground below, and a great serenity came over him. He'd found where he belonged. It crossed his mind that Vance might be at home with music on, and wondered what he might be playing. The Great Gate of Kiev? Alan felt that a door had opened for him, too, and knew he was going to live where the silence was more appropriate, more natural, than Vance's music. He gave me so much, Alan thought, I took it, and moved on. Poor Vance. It's what everyone does. He determined to ring his friend that night, when they were back.

At White Cliffs, the opal miner lay in the tray of a utility, unconscious. They transferred him to a stretcher, then the plane. The earth darkened as they flew back, brightness draining from the land. Looking down, Alan wondered about the boundaries of the plant populations that grew down there - when it rained. He considered the old miner: Douggy, his name was, and they'd wondered, the men who'd brought him to the

airstrip, if he'd come back. One of them had said that Douggy would be back for certain because he had nowhere else to go. I'll be looking after these people, Alan thought, until one day I leave - and where could I go, after years out here? They might bury me out here too. He wanted to cry, but the older man at the end of Douggy's stretcher said, 'Don't let your mind wander. It's something we can't afford.'

Back in Melbourne, Alan got a note from Ellen. Addressed to his college, it asked him to keep an eye on Vance. Ellen had gone to live with Carlos, but wanted someone to make sure her former lover was all right. 'I know you're coming up to your finals, but maybe you could have dinner with him at The Boundary once in a while. I'd like to think he was eating properly and not drinking too much. Sorry to put this on you but most of his friends are no more responsible than he is. Love, Ellen.'

Love, Ellen. The words stayed with him for days. Eventually he rang Vance and they had dinner at The Boundary. When he said he had to get back to his books, Vance pleaded with him to listen to an hour or two of Bach, and study in the small hours. 'I really can't,' he told Vance. 'I can't muck up this stage of my course. This is when it all comes together.' Vance smiled wanly, and offered to drive him back to college, but he said he'd prefer to walk ...

... to reflect on what was happening. Vance had said he wasn't lonely - 'If you keep an open door there's always the drifters, and who else do I deserve?' - and that had upset Alan more than anything else. His friend - his idol, for a time - was irredeemably lost. It was the sort of realisation he wished he'd never had. That was the trouble with the inheritance he'd got from Vance: if you were wide open to everything, you found there was pain everywhere, waiting to reveal itself. If you were healthy, sickness was waiting. Everything had to end, the only redemption being that if you'd been lucky, or wise, there'd have been some flowering before you went.

They had two dinners at The Boundary, then Vance wouldn't go again. On the morning of Alan's last exam, Ellen rang him at the college. 'I'm sorry if I got you out of bed ...'

'It's okay, I was up. Got my last exam this morning.'

'Well, that makes it all the worse. Vance died last night. About midnight he said he wanted to go for a walk. Denis and that mob were there. When he didn't come back they went searching. They found him under a tree in that little park around the corner. They rang an ambulance but he didn't recover consciousness. I'm sorry to drop this on you but I thought you ought to know.'

They arranged to meet at Vance's that afternoon, and he went to his exam. Sitting down in the university's grandest hall, he felt that he had two tasks ahead before he entered adult life. There'd be a wake for Vance - and there'd be three last hours of writing what the medical school wanted. He studied the paper, then picked up his pen.

Ellen was late, and they had dinner at The Boundary before they looked at the house. 'There'll be a fortnight's dishes in the sink,' she said. 'And I need to get rid of all the bottles and flagons before I let his parents come through. I suppose they'll want to sell it. They'll have to get cleaners in, but I'd better do a bit of cleaning so it's not too disgraceful.'

'Didn't Vance own it?'

'His parents gave it to him, but they never got around to transferring the title, so in law it's still theirs. Good thing really. God knows who'd own it now if he'd had the title.'

He considered her. She was his *late friend's former lover*. How ambivalent it all was. 'There's not much that's lasting, is there. Secure.' He flushed. Why had it taken him so long to learn? 'I've got an ideal of marriage,' he said. 'That it lasts for life. I've also got a horrible feeling that when I get married, I'll make a mess of it.' Ellen smiled. 'You'll marry someone like Jo. Nothing surer.' The young doctor looked startled. 'Why do you say that?' But Ellen refused to be drawn. He looked at his plate. 'I suppose I would like someone like Jo. But I don't know where she is. I don't know anything about her, really.' Ellen smiled again, as if he'd reached the first real, self-discovered truth in his life. It unsettled him, and he switched to what they were going to do at the house.

They were cleaning when Vance's parents knocked on the door. 'We were going past and we saw the lights on.' So the wake began with cups of tea at the kitchen table, Ellen assuring the parents that she and Alan would put the place in order. Then Denis and some of his friends turned up, carrying beer. The parents talked for a time, then slipped away as another taxi unloaded at the front. By midnight the house was booming; 'Just like it always was,' one of the musos yelled above a thundering chorus. 'Pity Vance isn't here to hear it!' 'He'd have to be a bloody long way away not to hear it,' Alan said to Ellen. 'By the way, have you noticed? We don't have to organise anything. This is it!' They laughed, started to cry, and were hugging each other when the Princess imposed her presence on the kitchen. 'What are you two up to? How long's this been going on?' She turned to her psychiatrist, who said, 'I think you've got it wrong, darling.' The Princess wouldn't have it. 'I never get anything wrong. I want some decent music, not this trash.' She spotted someone who might tell her what she wanted.

'Randy Andy! Come here to me. Put your arm around me. You know how I like it.' The young man grinned at Margaret, and moved a little closer to the Princess. 'Put your fuckin arm around me, will you? Have you had your balls cut off?' He did what she wanted. 'What was the music Vance played the night I met you? He was being smart.'

'*Sleepers Wake*.'

Taken aback, the Princess said, 'Sleepers wake? That won't be much fuckin good to him. I wanted to hear it. Now you've put me off! Sleepers fuckin wake! We're havin a fuckin wake! Fuckin Vance isn't gonna wake! If he fuckin does there'll be consternation! Put it on! I do want to hear it! It might do him some good, after all. Get him on his way, you know what I mean.'

Andy moved through the mob to the front room, and put on Bach. A few bars, and the house was silent. People looked in from the passage and the second room, half expecting to see Vance there, directing events. But after the chorale, the big tune, Bach was pulled off, and the slow movement of the Coronation Concerto was put on. Then it was a free

for all among the music buffs. Wine was discovered in the attic. Beer came with the taxis. 'You'd think he was up there, making it all happen!' Alan shouted to Ellen. 'What about Carlos? Is he coming round?' She shook her head. 'He said to do whatever I felt I had to, but he didn't think it would be right for him to come. I guess it's Vance's night.' The Farewell Symphony came on; time seemed to have come to a stop. Night held the household in its memories. The lights were turned off in the front room and candles lit. People blew them out as Haydn's musicians made their exits. Then it was *The Song of the Earth*, with thunder in the orchestra, and the agonising farewell of Kathleen Ferrier. As the last 'Ewig' died away, Ellen turned on the lights in the front room. 'Sorry, but we're closing down now. There's no more music.' She flung open the double doors; light was entering the sky. 'Alan and I have to clean up. It's time to go home. Really. Home. Please. I don't like to kick you out but I can't stand another minute of this ... ' something swept through her, contorting her face ' ... *this fuckin music!*' Rage took her over, then left her as suddenly as it came. She went limp. Alan moved through the house, getting it into people's heads that the party was over. Absolutely, finally, over. 'Time to go home,' he said. 'We all had a good innings.'

Half an hour later Alan, Ellen, Andy and Margaret were standing on the footpath in front of the house. 'We were going to clean up,' said Ellen sourly. 'It's a fuckin shambles in there.' Margaret took her by the hand. 'It got a bit emotional. We could come back tomorrow, do a few hours work, get it so his parents can take over again. It'd take ages to get it really clean. Clean enough to sell, or rent, I mean.'

It struck Alan that the formative period of his life had ended. 'It's funny,' he said to Margaret, 'I find it impossible to imagine that house being lived in by new people. It'll always be Vance's, for me.'

'There will be new people,' she said, 'when we've gone our various ways.' Ellen said she wanted a taxi, and went inside to phone. Alan asked Andy and Margaret what they were going to do in the coming year. He was sure they'd say they were going to marry, but they didn't. Andy said he was going to teach wherever the Department sent him, and he'd find

out where that was on Monday of the following week. Margaret said she was going to do her Masters in Paris, if her results were good enough, and she'd find out next week too. 'We are all breaking up,' Alan said, and told them about Broken Hill, and what he'd felt, walking around the town, and in the air on the way to White Cliffs. Ellen came out again, pulling the door firmly shut. Over the poor suburb to the east, the sky was filling with light. They agreed that the coming day was going to be a scorcher. Ellen's taxi arrived. She insisted that Alan get in with her. 'I'll drop you at the university and go home from there.' Andy and Margaret said they'd walk into the city to catch their trains. Alan would have liked to go with them, a walk being something he wanted, but Ellen's needs were stronger. 'I'll probably never see you again,' she said in the taxi as it neared the university, 'but I'll always know, when I try to tell people about this stage of my life - the stage that finished today - that there is, somewhere, someone who knows about what I'm saying. And I'll always be the same for you.' The taxi swept around College Crescent, with the far-flung cemetery on the other side of the road. 'That's something we'll always be for each other.'

Angela's child

Chris decided, when his club didn't want him any more, that he wouldn't go back, a fallen hero, to his bush town, but he'd try Queensland's Gold Coast - the hedonistic capital of the country. Waves, women, wine and warmth ... who could ask for more?

When they found out, at the City office, that he had three quarters of an engineering degree, they wanted to make him a draftsman, but he said he was as fit as he'd ever be, and he didn't want to lose it. 'I want laboring work. Digging trenches, I don't care. I want the sort of tan you can't get down south, and I want to be where I can see what's going on!'

They put him on a gang that was trying to fix the drainage of a new apartment block - the most luxurious for twenty miles, according to a sign at the front, because the penthouse was for sale. Only millionaires need apply, according to the gang. They'd fixed the problem, they thought, but when they came back after a new complaint, the sign was down, and a white Jaguar with a Victorian numberplate was in the penthouse garage; the door was raised, so they reckoned the owner couldn't be far away.

A minute later, two people came to the car, a woman of twenty, blonde and shapely, and a weedy man twice her age, the sort of man, Chris thought, that didn't deserve a woman like that, so he had to be rich. What did the fellow do? Chris looked at the numberplate: HUGO 69. The couple drove away. A couple of hours later, the woman came back on her own, pressed a hand-control device, and brought the door down. 'Life at the top!' said Digger, foreman of the gang. He looked out to sea. 'You'd get a bloody good view up there.' Horse, the oldest

of the men, said, 'I reckon you would. But I wouldn't be lookin out the window!' They laughed, and Chris knew that talk was as far as these men ever got.

At lunch time he rang a cop he knew in Melbourne, and asked him to find out who owned the car. He had a feeling that the woman stayed on the coast, and the man came and went. That, if he was right, gave him the opening he wanted.

The next day the gang were working at the back of the building, and only Chris and Giulio were at the front. Chris said, 'The problem's in the building, not the pipes. Stay here while I check it out.' Giulio, who understood little English, nodded, and Chris went inside. A minute later he was knocking on the penthouse door. A voice that turned him on said 'Yes?', and he explained that he needed to check the water pressure. She let him in.

'I need to inspect every tap. How many showers and baths have you got?' She showed him. He went around them quickly, finishing at the *en suite*. 'This might be the problem,' he told her. 'I need to let it run for a minute.' She went somewhere else in the apartment. He stood by the running shower, looked out to sea, looked at the bed, then wondered what he needed to do next. She'll be lonely when that feller's in Victoria, he thought. She'll have a lot of time to fill. I've got to get her interested in me. She came back. 'There is a problem here,' he told her. 'Minor blockage somewhere. I'll need to come back. Any particular times that don't suit?'

'I'm going out this afternoon,' the blonde told him. 'And tomorrow. It'd have to be the day after.'

Chris took a punt on it. 'I reckon you're going sailing. It'll be lovely out there this afternoon.' She nodded. 'I've got a friend who's got a big yacht. He's up and down the coast all the time. We're only going out for a few hours this afternoon, but sometimes a gang of us get away for three or four days. Hugo - he owns the flat - gets jealous.' She smiled, and Chris found himself smiling; starting to tune in to her, he thought. 'It doesn't hurt to keep us jealous,' he told her. 'At least you know we're

still interested.' She changed the subject. 'Okay to use this shower? Or do you want me to use the other one?' Chris's rule with women was that you agreed with them, then challenged them when they weren't expecting it. Get'em comfortable, tip'em off balance. 'No, this'll be fine. It's getting away fairly well. Just don't have a real long one, that's all.' She smirked. 'I'm talking about a shower, of course.'

'Of course,' she said, and he knew she was interested.

His Melbourne cop rang him that night. 'Nineteen seventy-six Jaguar, registered two months ago.' Brand new, Chris thought. 'Registered in the name of Hugo Vandervelde, 21 Leopold Place Toorak. HUGO 69. Want the engine number?' Chris couldn't see why he'd need it, but he wrote it down. 'What's this Vandervelde do for a crust?' The cop had anticipated this. 'Bookie. Licensed, not SP. Member of a whole row of clubs, apparently. Is that all you wanted to know?'

'Yeah, that'll do. Just keep your ear open, see if there's anything else you can find out.'

'Why do you want to know?'

'He's got a very attractive woman in a very attractive apartment up here, and she's on her own a lot of the time.'

'Good hunting, mate,' said the cop.

Chris went to a bar, bought a beer, and sat in a corner. What could he make of it all? Vandervelde had only had the car two months. He'd bought it in Victoria, and now it was in Queensland. But the apartment had been lived in longer than that. Where and when had he picked up the blonde? Was she a Victorian, or had he found her up here? Chris drummed his fingers on the table. If he knew her story, he could work out how to get himself into it. You've got to put yourself at just the right distance, he told himself: alluring, available, but mysterious. Never fails!

He became aware, after a while, of a group in the adjacent bar. He moved so that he could see through an opening. At the centre of the group was a man in his forties, whose confidence spoke of wealth. There was a woman of the same age, who smiled but said nothing, and

there were a number of younger people. From what Chris could catch of their talk, they were into sailing. He thought of the view he'd had that morning of the open water. I've got to get to know these people, he thought.

He went through and started talking to one of the group who'd gone to the bar. He wasn't much older than Chris and he too came from Victoria. 'I had a good job,' he said, 'but I preferred the lifestyle up here.' Chris nodded. 'Much the same as me.'

'What were you doing, down south?'

'Studying engineering, playing a bit of football.'

'Who'd you play for?'

Chris had his opening. 'Richmond. The mighty Tigers.'

The other man studied him closely. 'I think I remember you. What's your name? Yeah, I saw you play.'

'Hope it was one of my better days.' The other man laughed. 'I'm supposed to be getting the drinks. Come over and I'll introduce you.'

Early the next morning he rang Digger. 'Sorry, mate, I've got a migraine. Can't be with you today.' The telephone gave off disbelief. 'When I get these days, I have to lie down in a darkened room.' Digger snorted. 'There's worse things than lying in a darkened room if you've got someone with you. Who're you onto?' Chris laughed. 'Now now, don't over-estimate me! I've got a migraine!' His voice was full of triumph. Digger was jealous. 'Okay mate, you've got a migraine. I tell you what, I hope she's smart enough to make you wish a fuckin migraine was all you had!' He hung up. A smiling Chris ironed his white shorts and decided that a lemon t-shirt would do nicely. Understatement, that was the trick!

The blonde was surprised, and not particularly comfortable, at seeing him on the boat. As they headed for the open sea, she sat with her feet on the bowsprit, gazing forward, surrounded by an invisible wall. Chris played a self-effacing role, but he got to know the boat party, and he had, at least, her name.

Angela.

He said it to himself, over and over. Every time he glanced at the bow, where she sat, entrancing, immobile, her hair rippling in the wind, her dainty hands on the deck, fingers fanned to half the compass, he repeated the name to himself.

Angela.

He hoped he'd find a way to have her, and he wondered what it would cost. If you wanted to get on with women, you had to spend a part of yourself, something that would never be returned when the thing was over. Coiling up a rope, trying to be useful, he decided that it must be the same for Angela. What she had to give was obvious, but what did she have to lose? It occurred to him - and he realised that he hadn't thought so hard about anything for a long time - that the luxurious apartment would be the least of Angela's worries. She couldn't love Hugo with the Jaguar and the nice fat bank account, so if she lost him - and he had a feeling that Angela would be smart enough to juggle Hugo and himself - she'd land on her feet somehow, somewhere. No, there was some other consideration on Angela's mind - he glanced for the thousandth time towards the bow - and he needed to know it. Everyone's got problems when they're young, he thought; and if they're going to fall in love, however briefly, it'll be with someone who's a flying leap away from the problem, or someone who looks like the way out. The solution.

'You're very quiet, Chris,' said Don, the owner of the boat. 'Take the helm for a while. Jenny'll tell you all you need to know. She knows more about sailing than the rest of us put together. Don't you love?'

Jenny was the wife he'd met the night before. Don disappeared into the cabin, and Chris was alone with Jenny: alone, except for the rest of the party moving about, and, at the bow, facing into the breeze, still immobile, the weight of her upper body resting on those hands stretched behind her, hair still rippling, the alluring siren.

Angela.

Chris steered, Jenny told him about sailing. Wind conditions in the area, how they responded to them. Storms they'd had to battle through,

days of fishing, parties held on board. He noticed that she spoke in generalities, without mentioning names. He wanted to ask her about the beauty at the bow, but if Jenny didn't volunteer, he was bound in silence. After half an hour she went below and came back with a bottle of mineral water, very cold. She gave it to him. 'Take it up front,' she said. 'I think she might need it.'

Chris approached the object of his desire. If she heard him, she didn't show it. Two steps behind her, and surprised to find himself trembling, he said softly, 'Jenny sent you a drink.'

She didn't turn. Speaking to the ocean, she said, 'Just put it there.'

When he got back to the helm, he felt there was something different about the way Jenny saw him. She was no less courteous, and instructive, but he felt she was seeing him as an interloper, a man on the make. This must mean that his way of moving forward, under Jenny's eyes, had revealed things he thought concealed. He looked at her. She looked at him with eyes that had an habitual kindness, and a steely perception cutting through. He swallowed. 'I think I'm standing right on the brink ... ' He hoped she'd finish it for him, but she pointed at a sail. 'Keep the boat into the wind. You don't want any slack up there. That one's your indicator.' He swung the helm. 'Go on,' she said. 'You were saying ... '

' ... on the brink of falling in love.'

'And that's why you're on board?' He nodded. Something in her, he felt, softened. 'You know about Hugo, of course?' He nodded again. She went on. 'There's something in her family, and I don't know what it is. Something she has to overcome, or maybe it's something she doesn't want to repeat. I don't know what it is, but it's a strong thing in her. And as you can see, she's very strong.'

He could feel it. She might be leaning back like a magazine model, but she reminded him of those emblematic beings, the figureheads on old Norse ships. He was congratulating himself on this comparison when she got up, walked back, smiled at Jenny, and went below. When Don came up, a few minutes later, and took the wheel, Chris settled himself in the figurehead's place, straddling the bowsprit, and tried to

use the hypnotic effect of moving water to help his concentration. What was he getting himself into?

The next morning, Digger's gang found the problem, a few metres of pipe crushed by careless roadwork. They dug, they got muddy, they called up a load of crushed rock to buffer the pipes they were going to lay, and when it came twelve noon, Digger called a halt. 'Lunchtime gents! I tellya, my tongue's hangin out!' But Chris said he wouldn't be joining them. 'Where the fuckin'ell are you goin?' Digger asked. 'Goin to lie down with your migraine?' Horse said, 'Who's this migraine? She got a flat in there somewhere?' Chris endured the ribaldry, and when they'd left, he got into the lift. Approaching her door - Hugo's door - he felt so nervous he could hardly walk. All morning he'd felt her eyes burning into the back of his head. She'd been watching him from the penthouse, high above, where she had the advantage and he - and all his intentions - were laid open like so much X-ray art. She opened the door. In her eyes he could see the mess of his work clothes. 'The shower, of course,' she said. 'Come through.'

They went to the *en suite*. 'Get your things off,' she said, 'we'll wash them.' He looked surprised. 'There's a dryer. We'll get you back to work. Eventually.' He undid a couple of buttons, quivering with nerves and, he felt, something like shame.

Why wasn't he leaping out of his things? It was the cruelty of her regard. She stepped past him and turned on the shower, hot and full. 'You need a lead?' She undressed herself. She wasn't wearing much and she was in the shower before him. As he came to the sliding glass door, feeling decidedly shrunken, she handed him a piece of soap. 'It smells of sandalwood. Just the thing when you've spent your morning in a trench.' Something in her voice broke the sexual barrier. He laughed, and rubbed her body with the soap. She took the soap from him and ran it up his body, from knee to neck. 'Out now,' she said. 'I like a minute on my own.'

He dried himself with a huge white towel, feeling his sexuality flooding into him. He looked into the shower recess, then lay on the bed,

closing his eyes, opening them only when she was on him, dripping wet, using his member to rub herself where he'd wanted to touch her, to feel the softness inside. He sucked her breasts until the spasms he'd wanted to feel in her shook her body, then his. They were, he felt, as they finished, united and yet as distant as they'd been on the water. 'Can I live here when he's not here?' he asked. She nodded. 'That's my plan.' He laughed. 'It's a bloody great plan, and I'm going along with it!'

Sitting by the window that night, gazing at the darkening sea, Chris heard Angela's rules. When he left in the mornings, he was to leave no trace. No clothes, not so much as a biro, or a phone number scribbled on a pad. The place had to be clean, in case Hugo arrived. 'Do you know which window this one is, if you're looking from the ground?' He said he did. 'If he's here, or if he's coming, there'll be flowers here. Here.' She tapped the sill. 'If there's no flowers, it's clear. It's a case of come on up.' He twined his fingers in hers, hardly able to believe his luck. 'You'll have to keep where you're living now for your washing, clothes, and your retreat while he's here. He only stays a couple of days, then he goes back to make money.'

'Where's he live, in Melbourne?' She told him. Noting the address, he said, 'Has he got a woman down there? It'd be a pretty big place to have on your own, wouldn't it?' She said she didn't know.

'Have you ever seen this house? At Leopold Place?' She shook her head. 'You'd like to though, wouldn't you?' She shook her head, and he realised how much of his desire for her centred on those mobile strands of flaxen hair, darkening now as light withdrew from the sky. 'Aren't you curious?' Her answer was firm, simple.

'My life's up here. You're part of it now. When he's here, he's part of it. When he goes away, he goes out of my life. It's as simple as that.'

Someone else, he thought, would have added 'How does that sound to you?', but she hadn't. Was she so truly, so splendidly, independent, then? He hoped she was, because he wouldn't be going south while she wanted him.

In the morning they woke at first light, and made love all over the floor. Chris saw himself at one stage in a mirror, thrusting between the legs wrapped around him, squeezing his ribs till the only response he could give to the pain was to thrust harder towards the climaxes that would release them. When their lovemaking was finished, they ate grapefruit and boiled eggs in silence, conspirators, their boundless lust quiescent for the moment, as they entered a day that would be lived apart, and by other rules, until, if she signalled, he came back.

Something occurred to him. 'Your signal - that I can come - and the other signal - that I can't - shouldn't they be the other way around?'

'How do you mean?'

'Shouldn't the flowers be for me - sorry, us - and when there's no flowers, that's the signal for him?'

She still looked puzzled. He tried again. 'Flowers ... there's really no words for what they mean, is there. Lovers give each other flowers. You put flowers in a room to make people welcome. To show people you're feeling good.' This time she saw his point. 'Hugo - you have to realise - owns this flat. He doesn't lease it, he owns it. He's put me in it for his purposes, and what you and I are doing, Chris' - she squeezed the muscles of his thigh, then ran her hand, pressing firmly, across his groin - 'is all about deceiving him. If we keep him happy, we have the nicest little nest we could wish for. If we don't keep him happy, we lose it. I don't want to lose it. I like it too much. So we have to reverse the signals. He gets the flowers, and I get you.' She took his hands across the table, and looked into his eyes. 'The flowers are for you. They're to remind me of what I'll have as soon as he's gone. They'll keep me going when I haven't got you. Tide me over. When I've got you, I won't need any flowers.' She saw that she'd overwhelmed him, made him uncertain. 'What time do you finish this afternoon?'

He told her.

'Come around straight away. I'll be wanting you by then.'

He went to work, making sure he left no trace of himself in the flat, uncertain of who was being deceived, but determined to see the thing

through. It wasn't everyone who got to do what he and ... *Angela* ... did together!

It went on for months. After work each day, he drove past Angela's apartment and looked up. Every two or three weeks, there were flowers telling him to keep away, but most days the emptiness of her window allowed him in. He was philosophical about the nights of exclusion, joking that it gave him time to recharge his batteries and wash some clothes. She smiled distantly, and it occurred to him that she was never alone, and must therefore, in some important sense, be always alone with her feelings, her intention. Nothing lasts, some instinct told him, and this bliss, this enjoyment of possession, must end eventually. Blow up in his face. Or maybe he'd triumph, and get the apartment off the Jaguar man, mister moneybags, and claim ... *Angela* ... as his entirely. Then the flowers in the window would be for him alone, him and Angela, and the flowers would show the world there'd been a change!

But for the moment, he did his washing, slept deeply, and came back when the window facing the coast was clear. Then he got a letter from his mother.

I'm afraid I've got some bad news. It isn't going to be easy to write, but here goes. Dad wasn't feeling too well, so he went to Doctor Balmford. Doctor put him into hospital for tests. In the couple of days before we got the results Dad got some rest because the nurses doped him up but your sister and I didn't get much sleep at all. Well, the result was that Dad has a cancer in the colon. Doctor wanted to do an exploratory op to see how far it had spread, but Dad wouldn't have it. He says he'll just go when it takes him. The funny thing is that he's more cheerful now than when he wasn't sure. He talks about you a lot, gets out all the photos you gave us. He'd love to see you if you could come down for a while ...

He showed it to his lover. 'You need to be with him. Go home for a while.' He was relieved that it was her suggestion. 'But what about us? It's going to be a struggle, being away from you.' She took his hand. 'If we're clear about each other we'll be okay. I'll travel to Melbourne with you. It's time I saw my mother. I haven't heard from her in ages.

Something's wrong, and I think I know what it is.' It was the first time he'd heard her say anything meaningful about her family. 'What's wrong with your mum?'

Angela's face was firm. 'I'll tell you about her when I get back.'

He laughed. 'There won't be any flowers in the window for a few weeks.' She shook her head. 'I'll be back a lot sooner than that. I'll only be away a few days.' It occurred to him that there was a danger in this hiatus. 'What about the ... ' he pointed to the window. 'The flowers, our signal?' She said, with disconcerting calm, 'As soon as I get back I'll put the flowers there, or I'll take them away, as usual. Don't write to me. I don't want Hugo finding something from you in the mailbox. Just come back, when you're able, and look up here to see what I'm saying.' She pointed at the glass, and he thought the sea had never been more inviting. 'It'd be a beautiful day to go sailing.'

'Just what I was thinking. I'll give Don and Jenny a ring.' A minute later she was back. 'Jenny's got something on, but Don says he's going out this afternoon. He's going to ring around, see who else wants to go out.' Chris liked the way this had been made to happen. It was the way he wanted to live, really.

'Great!'

A breeze had sprung up by the time they were on the water, and the waves, though small, were lively. Chris and Angela sat at the front, arms around each other. As the yacht got further out, they felt their passion rising. They looked at each other, and saw agreement. They slipped out of their bathers and she did what he'd been dreaming of. She stretched along the bowsprit, her feet pressed against the hull. He got on top of her, his legs outside hers and his hands clamped beyond. The water seemed awfully close. They thought they were unobserved, but Don, at the helm, had noticed. He did what he wouldn't have done if his wife had been on board - he went below for his camera. The vessel slewed about, undirected, and Chris had to stop his thrusting and steady himself before he could go on. In the confusion of water, spray, and roisterous movement, he lost his connection with conscious thinking and felt

his way into her being more deeply than he'd done before. She had been different, in this lovemaking. How, he didn't know.

They scrambled back on the bow, and sat naked for a minute, and silent, before putting their bathers on. Don put his camera under a plastic coat, smiling to himself. *That* moment had been captured!

Two days later Chris and Angela flew south. At Melbourne airport, she said, 'We're not going the same way, I'll get another taxi. I hope you enjoy seeing your parents. I doubt if I'm going to, but who knows? Something might come of it.' She seemed less in command of herself; he had a feeling that some current in her life was moving her away. She noticed how sad he looked. 'I'll be back there in a few days. You do what you have to do. When you're ready, I'll see you again. Up there.' The words had a terrible finality about them, and he clung to her, but she was wooden, uncomfortable, and he let her go. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. A taxi pulled up, and another, and they were parted, in separate cars.

She had herself driven to her mother's, a large, run-down house in a patchy suburb - the half-rich and the genteel poor side by side. Her mother was out, but the man who might have been, but probably wasn't, her father was washing his van in the drive. 'Gooday Stan. How is it?'

'Oh, just so-so, Ange,' he said, and she felt all over again the hopelessness he'd always induced in her. Why couldn't he have been a proper father, and, for that matter, have been a halfway decent companion for her mother, whose vitality so grossly over-matched her partner's. Men! She picked up her bag from where her driver had put it down, and Stan made a half-hearted gesture towards taking it inside. Wearily, and feeling like getting herself back to the airport then and there, she held the bag away from him. 'I can manage.' She wondered if she could.

The room that had been hers had been refurnished. Her mother's taste appalled her. Every bit of furniture was bossy, and they were all competing. Stan, she remembered, used to call it 'The House of All Nations', and for once she was on his side. Her mother had taken up painting when she'd left home, and it seemed that her bedroom had

become the gallery. It struck her as proto-feminist and gaudy. She decided she'd sleep in Stan's study. He didn't use it any more, except as a place to fill in forms and write cheques - his pretences that some part of the professional he'd been still existed. His degree from the University of London still hung on the wall, and, beside it, framed as close to identically as he'd been able to manage, the letter from the Australian College of Psychology, stripping him of his right to practise. 'Misconduct,' it said, 'in that ... '

... he'd slept with my mother, she thought. And much bloody good it did them. But they'd stuck together, and that was what she wanted to find out. Why? What made people do it?

She went outside again. Stan - her father, if he was - was finishing off the van. She watched, then: 'Are you going anywhere, right now?' He wasn't. 'I've got a call I want to make. About an hour. Sorry to run off as soon as I arrive, but it's something I need to get done.' He waved at the van. 'All yours.' She got in, catching the whiff of sprays, herbicides, and the cut-grass smell of his mowers. 'Won't be long!' He waved again, aware that he'd never really known ... his daughter, if she was.

She drove to Leopold Place, a leafy street, and parked opposite number 21. She wiped a window carefully, and got in the back with a camera. She stayed there most of the afternoon before she got what she wanted, but was sullenly satisfied as she drove back.

Her mother was in the kitchen. Stan was in the room opening off. Her mother hugged her briefly before getting onto Stan's shortcomings. Angela, knowing that this happened regularly, glanced in at Stan, who had a newspaper on his knees. He met her eye. 'When I first knew her,' he said, 'she was a Princess. Now she's the Queen of Invective. It makes me wonder - and she, unfortunately, doesn't stop wondering - where we went wrong.' He smiled sadly at his wife's daughter. His? He doubted it. She didn't have his temperament - fortunately for her. 'How do you see yourself Ange?' he asked, as if the commentary from the kitchen was nothing more than a radio nobody had bothered to switch off. 'Lucky,

or not? You've got it made up there, or it's a fantasy you're living out for someone?'

'Good question Stan.' He waited attentively, only a habit now. 'I think the first five minutes after Hugo comes into the apartment will be decisive.' He fiddled with the paper. 'The decisive moment might already have happened.' She thought of her afternoon, spying on Hugo's house. 'I think you're right,' she said. 'If you are, I'm in the clear.'

Stan said to her - and the once-Princess, realising that the exchange in the next room was important to her husband and her daughter, stopped to listen - 'That's the ultimate test you're talking about. Being in the clear. Lots of people - believe me, I used to see them all the time - create their problems because it's the only way they can live. If you took their problems away they'd cease to exist. What are seen as psychiatric disorders are actually intimate diaries being lived out in public. The person who doesn't need a problem will never have one.' The Princess was in the doorway now, trying to find a place to intervene, but her husband and her daughter had found a connection not easily interrupted. They went on, discomforting her, because she'd always held the power.

'I'm Angela because you two called me that. What does it mean to be 'Angela'? I know, it means anything I want to make it mean. But it carried a meaning for you two when you gave me the name, and that meaning shades my life. When others call me Angela, their understanding of what it means colours my life. People have only got to speak to me to take hold of me through my name. There's only one answer that I know of. I wonder if you know any others. The only answer I can think of is to put out more energy than anyone you have to deal with. The thoughts going out of you are stronger than the thoughts coming in. You don't let thoughts in unless they suit you.' She said this so strongly that Stan knew that what she'd said came, in part, from her reflections on him.

'Where do you think that leaves me?'

The Princess, still in the doorway, was like an actor, dying to come on stage, but determined not to do it without an opening worthy of her ego. She scowled at them, understanding each other for the first time.

Angela said, 'That's for you to say.'

Stan lifted his hands in a gesture of acceptance, a recognition that his situation, though disagreeable, was simply understood. 'I realised, quite early on - the first five minutes, probably - that your mother had the greater power. She's always doubted it, which is why she attacks me so continuously. Isn't that so, my love?'

Angela felt tears in her eyes. Stan did love her mother, always had. And her mother would never be sure enough to stop the relentless attacks which never quite wore him down. They'd go on for the rest of their lives as they had for the last two decades - and more: she was twenty, a little younger than her mother had been when she'd conceived.

'I think,' she said to the room as much as to Stan and the Queen of Invective, 'that when I get back, I'll have a child.' Something in her mother softened, and something in her went hard.

'Who with?' the once-Princess asked. 'Who's going to be the father?' Angela could hear, in her mother's voice, a yearning to have at last the truth of her conception out in the open, yet she, for the moment, wanted to reject it. Keep it under wraps a little longer. 'I'm not sure yet,' Angela said. 'I've got two men in mind, and I'll have to choose.'

'Don't choose in your head,' Stan said. 'Choose in your guts. In your crotch if need be.'

'I'm not sure how I'm going to choose,' Angela said. 'That's something that isn't clear.' Again she felt that duality in her mother, trying to keep out what she was saying, yet longing to enfold her. Stan's weakness made it easier for him to accept her wholly. Angela's face filled with light. 'I do know. It's suddenly come clear. I'm going to do it with Hugo. But I have to sort him out first. He's too weak to accept me fully at the moment, because he doesn't understand what a woman is.' She turned to her mother, but her question was to Stan. 'Why do we have to sort out men before we can do anything decent with them?' Stan's

eyes went moist and her mother went back to the bench, pretending she was getting things ready for dinner. 'Why, mother? Why is it, do you think?'

The Princess fumbled with some onions, but her daughter said, 'Don't start peeling. They'll make you cry, and you'll have the excuse that it was the onions, when it was really what I said. Why, mother? Why?'

The Princess stood at the bench, knife in hand, the onions that would give her justifiable, explainable, tears close by. Tears from deeper inside began to run. Her daughter remained in the doorway between the woman and the man, waiting, inexorable, relentless, determined. The Princess struggled to say, 'I didn't know what I was doing when I conceived you. I'd had a row with Stan. He said he didn't want children, and I said I did. He got cranky and wouldn't come near me. I spent the next week at a pub in town, and a friend's place in East Melbourne. I don't know how many men I had. I was drunk the whole time. I wanted revenge on Stan, and I don't know how many times I got it. I don't know who I got it with. If he didn't want a child I determined I'd give him one. And of course I got pregnant, and we were living together. I said I'd have an abortion but he wouldn't hear of it, would you Stan? For some reason, that cringing bastard in the room behind you ... ' Angela wanted to laugh: she had a feeling that Stan was being justified - '... wanted me to go ahead with it. You. Well, I suppose I'm glad I did, but the way I had you decided me. I wasn't going to have any more. It was too humiliating. Fuckin Stan rejected me, so I had to go to the sort of men I thought I'd finished with, the sort of men who'll put their pricks up anything and not care - that's who I had to go to to get what I wanted. And the truth is, when I got it ... the way I felt was ... that if I'd had to stoop that low to get it, I shouldn't have had it anyhow. There's only one use for a man!' she shouted. 'And it's not what you fuckin think! The only useful thing a man can do is to make his woman feel wonderful about what she needs to do!' She flung the knife at the bench; the point of it stuck in an onion, causing the onion to roll and the

knife to slap the bench. The Princess was oblivious of this stage-business. Angela knew the moment belonged to her. Stepping forward, she put her arms around her mother, and led her into the room where Stan was sitting, the newspaper still on his knee.

'Sit down, mother. On the sofa with me. I've got some big things to do, when I get back, and you've taught me how to do them. You don't think you have, but you've released all sorts of things in me. It only needed the truth.' She looked at the man who wasn't her father, but was smiling weakly as she comforted the love of his life. 'You think you've told Stan something he didn't know, but I think he's always known, and he's been waiting for you to discover the truth inside yourself. That right, Stan? Am I right?'

Stan, his eyes on the floor, was wondering how it had all come out that day, and the whats, and the wheres, of his life with the Princess: the Queen of Invective, he hoped, had been killed in the exchange he'd just witnessed. 'Well done, darling,' he said. Which of them was he addressing? 'It had to happen one day, but by God it seems ages that I've been waiting. I'm glad I'm not a shrink any more because if I was I'd be looking to claim some of the credit. But there's no credit. Truth, when it bursts the bubble that contains it, is usually a miracle!'

Angela stayed with them a week, then flew back. She put flowers in the window, changing them every second day. She looked down occasionally, knowing she was being hard.

Hugo arrived one Sunday, late in the afternoon. He'd had a good week, and wanted to take her out. 'Absolutely anything you want!' he told her. She studied him. 'I can have anything I want?' He was smiling broadly. 'It's a long time since I had such a good run. Wherever you like!' He started to suggest places, some of them an hour's drive away, but she interrupted. 'I've got wine in the cupboard. What I'd like you to do, Hugo, is to go to that Chinese place two blocks away ... you know the one ... and get us something to have here. I want to dine with you, alone, by this window. What I see from here is the most precious thing, for me, about this apartment, and I want to share it with you.'

He was amazed. 'You want to send me to a bloody take-away! Is that the best you can think of?'

'I want to eat with you in this room, looking at the sea like we're looking at our future, and yes, that is the best I can think of. You know anything better?'

Grumbling, he went away. By the time he got back she'd pulled a folding table by the window and set it so that each would be looking at the flowers. He lifted the vase to put it on the table, but she checked him. 'Leave them there. They're something we're working towards.' He didn't know what she meant, but went along with it. Something was running through her that wouldn't submit to crankiness, or him being over-bearing. What's happening, he thought. Am I handing over control?

They ate, touching only a fraction of the feast he'd brought back. They drank until she heard some readiness, some preparedness, in his voice, then she took him by the hand. 'I want to lie with you now.' He said, 'You're pretty speedy tonight.' She said, 'I want to start early. This is going to be the longest night we've had.'

They got into the bed as strangers might, touching each other's bodies as unknown places. She was looking for the depth, and the tenderness, in him. He responded as best he could, wondering what the transformation had been in her, and if it would spread through their sexual contact to him. He felt it was happening as they moved, as slowly as she could manage the force inside her, towards their union. What seemed ages later, when it had happened, he was surprised to hear her murmuring, an un-melodious, wind-like sound that was enchanting to anyone whose ears took it in. He pressed against her, unable to make any sense of what was coming out - coming in - but knowing it was changing him. This is enchantment, he thought. It's what happened to sailors in stories. Should he pull on his clothes, and run away? She put her arms around him, found the source of his desire, and drew more energy from him before she let him sleep.

Chris came back to the coast. Day after day, he parked outside her building. The flowers that repelled him, that forbade him, were always there. He sat in his van until darkness had control of the sky. He sensed that she was looking down. Was he locked out forever, or would she let him in?

On the eighth night of his vigil, he saw a door opening, and Angela crossing the road to join him. In her eyes he saw a brightness which made him aware of his hollowness within. 'What's changed?'

'I could say a lot,' she said. 'Let me in beside you.' He opened the passenger door. The van reminded her of Stan's, with its odd-job smells. 'Give me your hand,' she said. His caution, his rejection of her, was strong. 'I'm not going to cut it off,' she said. 'I want to tell you something.' She put the hand where it had caressed her in the past. 'I'm going to have a child. Hugo doesn't know. You're the first I've told. I haven't told my mother yet. I had to run it past you.'

'Run it past me?' he said, seeing that nothing could be more in the past, for her, than he was. 'Hugo's child?' She nodded. 'More accurately, more honestly, more satisfyingly, mine!' He looked at the window, high above. 'Is he there now?' He meant, why are we having this talk down here? She said no. 'You've changed the arrangement,' he accused. She nodded. 'Don't we all? Isn't that what bargaining is? Trying to get what you want?' He felt glum, future-less, and small. He'd never enter the high apartment, or go sailing with her, again. Never. He could feel nothing but loss. Rage began to boil in him. Sensing it, she said, 'Don't drive like a lunatic. Don't get drunk. I know you're going to suffer, but suffering is what you pay for the pleasure. Rule number one! You don't get anything for nothing.' He grumbled. 'What about fuckin Hugo? Isn't he getting everything he wants by throwing suckers' money around? Why should he have it all his own way?' He was in the mood where men kill each other for something neither owns. 'Hugo's changing,' she said. 'It's well underway.' He observed sourly, 'Got him under control, have you?' She nodded again. 'It may still need a little bit of blackmail, but I hope not. He's coming round.'

Chris said, starting the engine, 'Well, I guess, if that's the way things are, there's not much point in me hanging around.' He glared at her, meaning she should get out.

'Aren't you going to wish me well? Me and Isabel?'

'Is that what you're going to call it?'

'Mmm.'

'You think it'll be a girl?'

'I know it's a girl.'

Something in him wanted to shout 'Another fuckin woman!', but while he struggled with his feelings, she said 'How were your family?' He softened, then tears came into his eyes. 'I'll have to go back. Dad's hanging on, but he won't be around much longer. Mum needs me, and Jen, that's my sister. We need to be together.' She sat beside him in silence. Suddenly he said, 'We weren't into family formation, were we?' She said, 'Neither of us was. Then I was, and you still weren't. It seems to be the way of it. Going to wish me luck?'

He put his arms around her, and the purest love he'd ever felt flooded out of him. She got out of the van and came to his window. 'Thanks for that. I hope someone gives as much to you.' He watched her cross the road, and close a door. In his imagination he followed her up, but before she could reach the vantage point, he drove away. I have to leave this place, he thought. I don't belong here any more. It occurred to him that it would be bad for Angela and her child if he was still around. He needed, for their sakes, to start another family line instead of wrapping himself around what she was doing, sending bad energy in. That wouldn't be clean. That was her lesson, he thought, something about living as you must. He drove hard, but carefully, to the border of New South Wales before he stopped. He was in for some sleepless nights, he saw, before he was home.

Angela entered her bedroom in the dark and felt the flowers, brushing her palms across them. She examined the grief she felt, searching for any trace of the confusion, the dishonesty to self and to Stan that she'd seen in her mother. There were twinges a-plenty, but basically, she told

herself, rubbing where her child was forming, I'm pretty right. She had a feeling that she should throw a flower down for Chris, but didn't: he'd be on his way south, by now, and the centre of the world was where she was, high above the sea.

Those shining towers

When Margaret got to Paris, she went straight to Notre Dame, and the same morning, La Sainte Chapelle. She felt overwhelmed. Knowing that she was being silly - that it was gobbling everything on the table, instead of tasting carefully, and with knowledge - she caught a train that afternoon to Versailles, to walk through the rooms created for Le Roi Soleil. The next morning she found a table in a café, and wrote to Andy.

My life's been changed. I thought we had grand things where I lived all my years till now, but what I've seen has shown me there are dimensions of glory and grandeur that nobody in our country has ever dreamed of. It's as if I've lived all my life, until yesterday, in a cloud, and now at last I can see!

Andy didn't open the letter straight away. He wanted to read it in a place that would be precious to him. He had hopes of marrying Margaret one day. He took it to a bluff, high above a river emptying into a lake, with land, water, and mountains spread before him. He kissed the envelope, then used a twig to prise it open. He unfolded her thin airmail sheets, and read:

I haven't been near the Sorbonne yet, because I'm scared. I'm feeling so tiny, it's as if I'm almost invisible. If I didn't have my family, back there, and you - how 's your bush town? I can't imagine what it's like, but I'll bet it's no stranger than where I am - then I could disappear without a trace. We live in our bodies but it's our minds that keep us going, and our imaginations that really bring us to life, and they can easily die if we're not in touch with people that love us. Please think of me, and send me strength. I'll write again soon. I'll need to!

Strength? His teaching was disastrous. He thought he knew how to do it, but he'd never seen kids like the ones they'd put in front of him. Wrong - that he'd been put in front of. He was on trial every time he went into class. The kids knew each other, they knew all about their area - they thought, though he, with his history training, could see they knew very little - and they made newcomers unwelcome, because locals wanted to reduce the threat of outside knowledge. He looked at the mountains: blue, distant, enticing, and mysterious as the unknown must be. How he wished these mountains had been painted by Chinese artists, revealed, so the minds of newcomers could find their way along mysterious trails to find a welcome, however strange. 'I know how you feel,' he said aloud, talking to Margaret on the other side of the world.

She went to Senlis, Laon, and Chartres. She went to Rheims, where the kings of France had been crowned, and then, with a woman much older than herself, to La Place de la Concorde to be shown where Marie Antoinette and the sixteenth Louis had lost their heads. 'The terror,' Margaret said, 'had to be as powerful as the King, because it replaced him.' Her companion smiled. 'The space, once made available, is always there, waiting to be filled. It is a very considerable thing to make a space in the human mind.' Margaret's head seemed to be one great emptiness, filled with odd lots of rubbish, bric a brac, and a few decent pieces where she could comfortably sit. 'I feel so second-hand,' she said, and that night she wrote to her distant friend:

The gothic imagination frightens me. All that stuff about hell and damnation! Wouldn't you think that hell would become normal after a while, if you had to live in it? I suppose only people who'd spent years in a concentration camp could answer that question. I wonder if the camps the Nazis made were their effort to fill a frightening space in their imaginations. If you think I'm brooding on dreadful things, you're right. The past is very much alive in Europe. You can't shut it out because it's all around you. I have to say that, back home, we did a pretty good job of wiping out the world of the aboriginal people, but maybe it's a series of vast and alarming spaces we're simply blind to. Have you been into those mountains yet? I want to know what you discov-

er. A little further on she said: 'Isn't it strange! *This is the most important dialogue we've had.*' He laughed. It was, and he'd never felt more alone. Two minds, he thought, two voids, which we are trying hard to fill!

The letters between them, so eagerly awaited in their period of newness, and estrangement from where they lived, grew further apart. Each came to terms, and made friends who filled the foregrounds of their lives, yet they lived, once the correspondence became infrequent, with the memory of their connection providing, still, an open line. After a gap of months, she wrote to him that she was going to marry René, a young man at the outset of a diplomatic career:

He's much cleverer than I am, but less mature. I sometimes tell him he's thin. But right in the middle of that vulnerability, that uncertainty and - I have to call it this - that narrowness - is his fiery pride. Thinking that I am chastising him, cutting him back to size, we'd say, I liken him to Robespierre, or the other blood-letters of that most bloodthirsty period, but he takes it as a compliment. He's French!

Andy knew that his reply would be important to her.

You'll have a wonderful life. René will have postings all over the world. You'll inhabit the great capitals, and I dare say some of the more dubious ones, in Africa, where La belle France has such strong connections. You'll be the ambassador's wife, a well-placed vantage point for studying societies and people. Your children will be citizens of the world. I wonder if they'll ever be curious about where you grew up. If I'm honest I have to admit to not being very interested in my parents' lives before they had me. I know it's self-centred, but we're all guilty of that. Tell René I look forward to meeting him one day, and it's my hope that I'll be able to show him around the mountains that I've come to regard as my spiritual home. It'd be good to visit you in France; I'm not much interested in overseas travel right now, but I dare say that will change - and I do want to see those cathedrals!

Years passed, and Andy married too. He came home one day to find his wife looking through a book on gothic architecture. She, Janine, noticed his strangeness. 'Why are you reacting like that? I thought you were interested in architecture.'

'I am.'

'So? You went very funny when you saw me with this book.'

He told her the association he made between the architecture and someone she'd never met that he used to be involved with.

'Some part of you's not properly married to me. Are there any more remnants of your past hanging around our marriage?' Foolishly, he said there were not, because he didn't have the courage to say 'Of course!' and 'So what?'

So the lies of purity and fidelity - those Christian virtues - had been uttered by him. That, he felt, when he'd had time to think about it, was a gothic mistake. As a student, and a young teacher, he'd valued history for showing the continuities of human life, but continuity, he decided, was a two-edged sword: it meant that parts, perhaps most, of your mind had been created in another time and place. The mountains to the north seemed free of the taints of the European mind, and its bloodthirsty imagination. The French, he observed sourly, were unable to get themselves out of Vietnam; what was René saying to other diplomats about that? More importantly, what was he saying to Margaret in the privacy of their lives - if diplomats enjoyed the honesty of private lives?

So the connection was still there, paining him.

Margaret had children with René, Andy with Janine. The children with the French surname were born in Nairobi, Lausanne and New York; the Australian babies were born in Melbourne. Andy sometimes saw Margaret's parents, in the house he'd visited many times, appreciating their tact in getting themselves out of the way when he and Margaret were kissing and fondling - the limit for proper young people of their time. He heard scraps of the news Margaret let through the filter to her mother, and sent fragments in the other direction. Each was deeply involved, but the signal lines were still open.

Janine showed him an advertisement in the travel section of a paper - thirty seven days, a study tour of the art and architecture of Europe. 'I want to go! Why don't we both go? Darling?'

The cautious side of him took over. 'And drag the kids around behind us?' She looked at him with the coldness she reserved for his more obtuse moments. 'We've taken them into all sorts of places, camping and walking. Why not? We'd stay in decent hotels!' But Andy felt something overshadowing any enthusiasm he might have felt, and, contrarily, a desire to put himself within judgmental reach of the palaces of Europe. Its civilisation had conquered his country, the Americas, Africa and Asia: why not go and see it? Why not look it in the eye?

René and Margaret developed a way of keeping touch with the friends they developed in a roving life. Shortly before Christmas they generated an account of their year, people encountered, travels, the doings and development of their children. 'While René has been having anxious days and sleepless nights trying to get our trade mission access to certain presidential advisers who had better be nameless, Margaret has managed schooling - Jacques has music lessons with some nuns who aren't corrupted with transatlantic pronunciation - and ballet classes for Jacqueline and Simone ... ' There's a secret life going on, deep underground, in that child manager, Andy decided, because there was a secret life inside himself, and his wife as well, though she contested the notion. He fretted. No description of human life - sociological, psychological, historical - quite made him feel that it applied to him. He challenged himself: was this simply a sickening, self-concerned egotism, demanding freedom for itself that it wouldn't allow to others? Perhaps it was, but he felt not. When his wife got angry with him, he heard what she said, and said back to her, 'That might seem right to you, but your description doesn't accord with what it feels like to be me.' Janine, as strongly individualistic as he was, could admit that there was always a gap between the outer description and the inner feeling. It seemed to Andy that to have that gap closed, to be without that split, would be bliss indeed.

Or would it be a trap? Life made possible, enjoyable, by the loss of a vital dimension to the mind?

Years passed. Andy, Janine and their children went to Europe. Within hours they felt themselves changing, becoming aware of their

provinciality as they began to shed it. They walked happily through Roma, discovering marvels. In Firenze's Boboli gardens they looked at a cuprous-green god and his horses, the boldest of charioteers, bursting from the waters of a pond. 'We're poor,' Janine said. 'Aren't we. In spirit?' Andy couldn't but agree. The optical tricks of the Italian gardeners intrigued him. Sight-lines always led to a statue, an urn, something focal, yet, two or three metres from a path, a wall of leaves intervened, and one was alone - within a few paces of others passing by. Andy looked at his wife, wondering if she was feeling his yearning for the eucalypt forests of their land, antipodeanly beneath them. He saw she wasn't; she was asking her children, who were starting to be bored, to find something funny. They were scornful, but, a minute later, they came upon a statue of a solemn man, arm upraised rhetorically, which was being repaired: an awkwardly cut sheet of corrugated iron held aloft by two sticks and the figure's eternal curls, gave him a tricorn hat. There was a sign telling people to keep their distance, but the children rushed in to wobble the sticks so the hat trembled too. Janine laughed gleefully, and Andy, looking around to see if a guard might be going to accost them, knew that his wife had given their children access to a dimension of fun and the ridiculous which wasn't his, any more than the Italian way of gardening was his. He wrote copious notes in the hotel that night, questioning himself in the way he'd done as a student. Travelling through Europe was bringing him to life!

They entered France from the south. The train, approaching Narbonne, headed straight for a lake, running along a spit of land that narrowed until the windows on either side showed water without end. 'Talk about walking on water!' Andy said, and his wife smiled, absorbed in her private joy. Minutes passed, and the train was still making a crossing where, visually, there was nowhere for rails to rest: was it therefore floating, airborne? 'This is one for those Italian gardeners to think about,' Andy thought, and then he searched himself for his own reaction: he was in the country where Margaret had settled, and he didn't know whether she was in France, or with René on a foreign appointment,

their 'foreign' and his being different. Australia would be foreign to René. Was it foreign, now, to Margaret, or still her home? Would the world ever be his place, and if it became so, would that mean a loss of identity? Or could you travel without losing, but acquiring, so that you came home richer than when you left?

Notre Dame gave him his answer. The gendarmes directing traffic were no more knowledgeable, or culturally rich for their proximity to one of France's marvels. They simply hustled the traffic, idling tourists included. Janine wanted to walk around the church. Andy wanted to go in. Again he felt her impatience with him. 'Go in then. Take the children. I want a minute on my own.' He pushed the door and entered, his children by his side as they moved into the gloom.

The children, hanging on to him, knew something was happening when they felt his hands trembling. Then he pulled his hands away to find a hanky, and wipe his eyes. 'Dad's gone gooey,' his daughter said. His son got in front to look more closely. Something in the boy's face showed that he felt let down by this un-parental behavior. The cathedral soared above them, resonant with the murmuring voices of those wandering about. Flash bulbs emphasized the dark: and the light! 'It's another world,' Andy said. 'Let's explore.' The children were interested in the people, and none too impressed, but Andy's eyes went to the glass high above. As they reached the transepts, he looked back at the great west window, and then at the rose windows on either side of the crossing. He felt pulled both ways. Making up his mind, he faced the southerly one because it had more light pouring through. It was at least a minute before he realised that the pieces of coloured glass depicted things. His psyche had instinctively grasped what the builders had been up to. The light, which, were he outside, could be taken for granted, seemed, to those within this miracle of a building, to come from a world which was somewhere else. This is what they mean by 'revelation', he thought. It's what the word says. Something is revealed. What is it? That, he knew, would only be discoverable by looking inside himself. His daughter tugged his hand. He lifted her, turning so that her eyes were shown to

the rose window. His eyes were drawn to a glowing red window beyond the altar. Birds flew past outside - pigeons, he presumed, birds he scorned, back home - and their fluttering movement, over in a second, emphasized, in the glass that glowed as urgently when they'd gone, the unchanging, timeless presence of that blazing world above.

That night, in a travel guide, he read how the glass that had so amazed him had been taken down during World War 2, how the revolutionaries of 1789 had commandeered the cathedral to use it as a store, how Viollet le Duc and others had restored its gargoyles ... and the claim of the great edifice to have its eyes on eternity seemed all the stronger, all the more proven. 'I want to go again,' he told his wife. 'I want to see them all.'

The next morning it was La Sainte Chapelle, and in the days that followed they went by train to Amiens, Rouen, Rheims, and Chartres. On the days they remained in Paris he found a few minutes to slip away from the hotel to place himself, humbly, and full of curiosity, in the nave of Notre Dame. Janine was pleased, amused, and slightly scornful of this unexpected development in her husband. Knowing this, and feeling a little uncomfortable, he nevertheless wrote in his journal of their trip:

It's a denial of this world's importance. Why were they so keen to reject it? Plagues? Wars? Human life produces plenty of reasons to want to deny it. I don't want to deny 'normal' life, but the sheer perfection of the concept that gives these cathedrals their spirit is pulling me. I want to live inside a concept - that's the truth of the matter. A concept that embraces everything. Yet I don't want to be a fanatic, and sometimes, in the ecstatic upward thrust of these sombre buildings, built from stone to let spirit flood out, or in, I feel that the people who built - and more importantly conceived - these places must have been crazed. Modern psychiatrists would want to certify some of the people who created those windows. And it's the windows that are the soul of these buildings. Mighty as the walls and buttresses are, rising so high that the steeples can be seen from miles away (I'll never forget the sombre outline of Chartres, as the train approached through the surrounding fields!), it's the glass that allows the triumphal entry of a vision accessible to the most ordinary,

or lowly, beings. I say 'triumphant entry'; the other day I was talking to Janine about the 'revelation' that comes to one, walking modestly on the grey, paved floors: today I want some other term to encase my feeling, and I can't think of it. So what is it I want to put on record? I think it's my feeling, in the light streaming down, or drawing my eyes up, and my spirit with it, that there is a way out (of this world) and a way into that other world the gothic builders so passionately believed in. Is it really there? I've never believed so, in the past, and I don't think I believe it now, but I concede that those who believed the other world was there, accessible, omni-present (but what about the dark? Did they fear the dark? They must have!) were luckier beings than I am. Believing themselves blessed, they were blessed. Did they delude themselves? Perhaps. Is delusion preferable to being without illusion? Yes, it is. Sadly I have to admit, it is. And I don't share their delusion, illusion, or whatever you want to call it, but I envy them. It's an experience I've never had, and I envy them.

When they got home, there was a letter from Margaret in the pile their neighbor had collected. She'd been in Australia briefly, because her father had died. She'd stayed with her mother for a fortnight, and would be back again in a few months, perhaps a year, to lend support. 'Sorry I missed you,' the note ended. 'Where were you? I rang day after day, and there was never anybody home. What a pity! I'd love to know what you're doing these days.'

Months passed, a letter came from Paris, then a local phone call. Janine talked to Margaret, and invited her for dinner. When Margaret arrived, Janine said, 'Margaret, you're tiny! I thought you'd be much bigger than me!' They both laughed. They had dinner together, four from one family, one from another. Janine told Margaret where they'd been in France, and Margaret told them about places they must go next time they were there. 'And you have to stay with us, we've got plenty of room. Give us a bit of notice, but if you just arrive, and we've got people with us, we'll put you in a lovely little hotel around the corner. I call it our bungalow, and René doesn't know what I mean!' They laughed. Margaret's Australianness was as strong as ever, overlaid lightly by a smartness that she joked about. 'Sometimes I'm checking the children's

clothes before we go out to René's car - he has drivers, most of the time, but I've got a Citroen 2CV for my own - and I'm picking strands of hair off Jacqueline's collar - she sheds it so easily: what do we say? She moults!' Margaret laughed, Andy smiled, and Janine touched the current of the other woman's life, and knew she would like to be Margaret's friend, but if she were, how would she be able to make Andy leave the friendship without male intrusion? That would be hard, she thought. He's still linked to her in a part of his being he doesn't like to uncover.

Sitting by the fire after dinner, the three adults talked about their childhoods. 'I think every child needs to have a few years of being fundamentally a savage,' Margaret said. 'I don't mean their parents shouldn't try to make them well-spoken, well-behaved, and even, if luck's on their side, a little bit educated, but children need to know there's somewhere they can throw it all off and be whatever their fancy makes them.' Janine talked about her childhood on a farm, where she wandered for hours without adult intrusion, but while she was talking, Andy noticed a change coming over Margaret. She wasn't looking at him, she was looking at Janine, at the fire, the pictures on the walls, and sometimes, too often for it to mean nothing, her own well-groomed hands. Eventually she looked at her watch and announced that she should go home. She mentioned a taxi, but Andy said he'd drive her, and Janine agreed.

The fifteen years since they'd last driven together seemed to have vanished without trace. They spoke, listened, cued each other in, as they'd always done. He touched her knee, she put her hand lightly on his leg. Close to her mother's home, he stopped the car under shady trees, on the edge of a park, and they took each other in their arms. He said, 'This is extraordinary, but nothing in me's denying what we're doing. I want it to go on.' She cupped his cheeks with her hands, and he brought his hands to the same position on her face. Each looked into the other's eyes with certainty of welcome, of ownership. 'It came over me while we were talking,' she said. 'I knew I wanted you. Isn't love strange!' Each moved back, in mind, to consider the implications of this. They were in

love, it was certainly strange, and what was going to happen, now that love had entered in its mysterious, forceful way?

Looking into the back of the car, he found a rug. He pulled it into the front and looked at her again. Were they going to lie on it, fondle, and take their love to a new fulness? She nodded, they got out. He ducked back to the car and found another rug - one for each of his children. He wrapped himself in one, and she in the other. They found a dry, hard spot between some bushes, and opened these casual wraps to each other. Lying in each other's arms, murmuring, they felt richer for the fifteen years they'd spent apart. Each claimed the other's life in retrospect; each gave what had been shared with another to this new-old other. Love is about otherness grasped and owned, stroked and fondled, because, fundamentally what is being done is impossible, yet it happens every day. Every night. Andy and Margaret whispered in the leaves of a bush that gave them park-privacy. 'Something in me was always yours.' 'When you went overseas, I didn't let you go. I just put you away, in a hidden place, hoping to take you out one day.'

She quickened, the laxity of post-lovemaking already behind. 'I want you to take me all over Australia! I want to be with you again! I want us to make the start we weren't up to making, years ago.' He said, 'The trouble is, we've got partners and children.' She thought. He waited for her reaction. In this pause, each became aware of the leaves pressing on their hair, and of the night, breathing around them, whispering to them that what they desired was impossible. Once one has started, a fresh start is impossible. Not on. You can't get off the tiger's back, or the marital wagon. Only egotists can do it, the night might have told them, because they damage others, unaware. Andy and Margaret were loving partners and parents. They lay between some bushes in a park. 'Take me home,' she said. 'Ring me tomorrow. I need to think.'

They saw each other twice before she caught her plane to France. On the day she flew out, Andy stole countless glances at his watch. They'd agreed not to write. Thought messages would be all. At the time appointed for her take-off, he pictured her plane speeding down

the runway, efficiency and elation designed into each other, a marriage better organised, better chosen, perhaps, than the marriages he and Margaret had made. As it took off, Margaret glanced at the land falling away - brown, austere, yet so comforting for those who acknowledged it as home - and knew that returning to her other home was permanent. She loved Andy more than anybody, and what had happened had given her flashes of happiness better than anything in her life of making things happen for other people, but there was no way out. The land where she might have lived became more distant as powerful engines took the jumbo to cruising height: 'I've made a choice,' she thought. 'What do they call it? The choice you make when you haven't got any choice.' For a moment she felt bitter with Andy for not making her stay with him whatever she said about family in France, and then a numbing acceptance took over, and she allowed the freedom machine, the winged tube, the human answer to birds, to take her to the family, the life, chosen years before, from which, ever so briefly, she'd escaped. Aware of her middle aged-ness, she thought tenderly of her daughters, wondering what heartbreaks lay in the future for them.

Another year passed. The French government sent René to Canberra to negotiate matters to do with the European Economic Community's proposed rules on trade. Margaret rang Andy and Janine, proposing a camping trip to fill a ten day break René was due for. They agreed. The arrangement was that the four adults and five children would meet at a junction of two tracks, at five in the afternoon, of a certain day. 'René's very keen on this,' Margaret told Janine. 'He's never been in the Australian bush before.' Janine passed this on to Andy, who reflected that his own camping trips were now quite a few years behind him. He sensed there was pain ahead for all of them, if they took their minds from forest and beach to consider their situation.

They met, at five o'clock on an afternoon that was oppressively hot, at the junction of two bush tracks. 'Well navigated!' Andy called as the visitors drove up. Margaret was at the wheel. René, a stranger to the Australians, had a map on his knees. 'The navigator was very good!'

Margaret announced. 'It was easy enough,' her husband said. 'There are much harder places in Africa, you can believe me!' His English, though good, had the sounds, the voice production, of French. Some red and blue parrots flitted across the clearing in the forest. Margaret pointed to them. 'They're wondering who's talking in that unfamiliar way.' René raised his hand with a smile. 'I'll make friends with them!'

Half an hour later the party - the two parties - had reached their spot, at the edge of a modest little lake, banked up because the river that fed it was hardly flowing, in summer, and the waves on the Ninety Mile Beach had moved sand to block its exit - its entrance - to the sea. As the tents started to go up, a storm broke, and the downpour forced the two families to huddle in what they'd been able to erect. Andy and Janine, Margaret and René, with their children, huddled under their separate, half-erected shelters until the rain had passed, then crept out, awkwardly, shaded by the ambivalence of their situation, to finish the job of building the homes that would last them a week.

Janine and René had each seen the danger in their situation, and made moves to control it. Washing the dishes after their meal that night, Janine offered the tea towel to René. He knelt on the sand beside her, asking questions about the area, the coastline, the lighthouse which sent a beam to ships travelling through Bass Strait, and eventually about her family, and where she'd grown up. He's a diplomat, she thought; he hasn't taken the next step of asking how I met Andy. That, from a professional, is my signal. Janine said to him, 'You and Margaret can't be a very common type of couple, over there in France. How did you meet?'

René smiled, very pleased with Janine. He looked across the camp fire at his wife, seated near, but not next to, Andy. 'We met on the banks of the Seine, one Sunday. There were lots of people selling books. Postcards, magazines, I think you've seen it?' Janine remembered their visit to Paris, longer than they'd planned, because of Andy's obsession with cathedrals. 'I won't forget that in a hurry.'

'It's important not to forget those big moments in your life,' René said, 'when something new bursts upon you.' Margaret heard it as the rebuke it was, and cringed. She sighed deeply, knowing she was going to be made to suffer. 'You were saying,' said Janine.

'I saw this beautiful young woman,' René said, reclaiming his wife, 'and I moved beside her. They can't criticise you for that!' He smiled again, fending off the anglo-saxon spirits who'd overtaken the continent he was visiting. 'I had a look to see what she was reading, and it was *La Député d'Arcis*. Balzac. La Comédie Humaine. I was collecting early editions, and I hadn't seen that one before. It's uncommon, even in France. Something greedy rose up in me, and I said to Margaret, "If you don't want it very, very much, if you could bear to be without it, I'll buy it off you at twice their price." He looked at his wife in the light of their fire, sitting on a waterproof blanket because the sand was still damp. 'And when she looked at me, she studied me carefully, and I had no idea what she was going to say. I didn't know, you see, that she was not French. I think I expected something capricious, some ... you say *flirting*, from her. But she held the book out to me. I felt she was giving me more than the book. Perhaps it was a lesson, meaning that when you are certain, the most difficult things are simple to do. She gave me the book, and I said to her, "If you write your name and address in it, when I have read it, I'll give it to you to read." That's what I said to Margaret, twenty years ago.' Margaret interrupted. 'Don't make us so old, René! You aren't even forty yet!' Andy knew his cause was lost.

'Oh well, it's been a long time,' René said. Janine came in. 'And you've still got the book?' The diplomat smiled with pleasure at her professionalism. 'I keep it in the bookshelf next to my desk, in my study. When I look at it, I tell myself I have been very lucky.'

Though the next morning was hot, and a wind from the west was rising, they set off for the lighthouse. Grandest creation on the coast, it seemed closer than it was. By the time they got there, the sun was burning, and wind was whipping sand against their legs. Andy walked alone, leaving it to Janine to protect their children with cream. She called to

him to rub the cream on his legs too, but he said he was okay, he was walking quickly and would be at the camp sooner than they would. Janine looked at him angrily, knowing that he didn't know how stupid he was being, and Margaret observed the refusal with a feeling that their situation was sinking into a foolishly chosen abyss.

He lay down when he got back, his legs already swollen and red. By the following morning they were worse. Janine said he should drive to the nearest town and see a doctor, but he said he'd be 'all right'. Scorn in her eyes was her answer. He lay on his air mattress for days, talking to his family only when they entered the tent. Occasionally, in the middle of the night, he dragged himself to the ocean's edge and listened to the movement of the water, knowing what his problem was, and wondering how he could become reconciled.

Margaret stayed away until the fifth day, then she came to his tent. 'I know your legs are bad,' she said, 'but I want you to do something for me. Go for a walk with René. He keeps asking me questions about the bush that I know you could answer, because you know this district so well. If you'd do it, it'd be something he'd remember.' She meant, he saw, that he could be forgiven if he put himself to some trouble. He wanted to be angry with her, but mumbled, 'All right Margaret. I'll get up shortly.' Janine came to the tent a minute later. 'René's got sun cream on his face, and he's put a feather in his hat. You're on, mate, so up you hop.'

By the time the two men had walked a hundred metres, Andy saw that René's wound, though different from his own, was no less deep. The pain in his legs forced a lyricism in his mind. They walked, Andy drawing attention to the changing ecosystems, the plants near water, the plants on sand. And the birds, above all the birds, flitting through the shapeless, featureless, un-formalised forest, so fascinating, so disconcerting, for René. 'Some of the birds,' he said - 'perhaps I should say your birds, but I don't think they belong to anybody - make their sound in their throats, or somewhere, maybe it's their ...' he patted his stomach '... but those ones ...' ... he pointed '... make their cry in their heads. It's

very distinct.' Andy told him, 'They're parrots. That whole family of birds can be recognised before you see them because they make their cries that way.' René said. 'What a nice calling card,' and smiled as if he'd pleased a roomful of people.

When they got back, René said, 'You probably want to lie down now, but I'm very happy that you took me for that walk. I know so much more about your bush. I know that it really exists! It's a living thing. I can see it changes all the time, and every change expresses something. It was fascinating, thank you very much.'

Andy lay down again, but Janine brought him a cup of tea soon after, and he felt he'd redeemed himself, at least partially, in her eyes. The children came to sit beside him. 'What did you show René, dad? He won't stop talking about the things he saw. And it's only bush.' They felt René had been conned if he thought a bit of bush was anything. 'We'll talk about it one day, back in Melbourne,' Andy told his children. 'When I'm feeling better.'

Our story could be said to end at this point, but a postlude took place twenty five years later, in the city of startling towers. Andy was in New York for the first time, and he visited the home - the art collection - of the coal millionaire, Henry Clay Frick. He was comparing Fragonard's The pursuit and The lover crowned, when he became aware of two women talking around a corner from where he stood. One was brashly American in utterance; the other, softer, voice was Americanised, but was also Gallic - vowels made with lips pushed forward - and there was something else. Suddenly he felt a prickling at his collar. The voice was not only Australian, it was the voice of someone he'd loved, once - twice - long ago.

He looked about, uncertain of whether he wanted to make himself known, or slip away. There was nowhere to sit down. He rubbed the back of his hands, he took off his hat and put it on again. Then he perceived that the conversation of the two women was drawing to a close, and that the American was leaving first. He steadied himself, still unsure. As their voices moved away, he shifted so he could watch.

Margaret, farewelling her friend, had the charm that comes to those who find certainty in themselves, and age well. An embrace, a touch of hands, and the twangily-spoken one was gone. Propelled by a force he could neither have explained nor predicted, Andy moved so that when she turned, he would be in front of her, interrupting her view of the paintings on the wall. She turned, ignoring him at first, then realising that in front of her was someone she had known.

'Andy!'

'Margaret.'

They moved courteously through the information-seeking: what he was doing in New York, what she and René were doing in New York, what their five children were doing now, which were married, and which were not ... then she said, 'We need somewhere we can sit. They won't let you sit on the chairs, and I'm not going to sit on the marble out there.' She waved at the elegant courtyard; he said, 'There's a lecture theatre open, back there.' They went into the theatre and sat beside each other on seats facing forward, both of them turned unnaturally in their seats. He sensed that their conversation could not be a long one. He thought of asking her to have a drink somewhere, but decided to let events take their course.

She studied his coat. The buttons were loose; he'd probably slept in it on overnight trains. 'Where are you staying? What hotel?' She was sorry for him, he saw. She thought him lonely, since he was alone. 'I'm staying with some young Australian friends of mine. An apartment on Second Avenue.'

'Is it good?'

'I'd say, by what I've seen, that it is good, and even, by New York standards, cheap!' 'There's nothing cheap in this city,' she said. 'Anything you want is either dear, outrageous, or something else again. It's quite simple ... '

'Nothing's ever simple,' he interposed.

She went on, regardless: '... they price everything to the pockets of those who've got money, and those who haven't, they miss out.'

'And sleep on the footpath.'

'In filthy old overcoats, with everything they own, and it's never very much, in a bag that should be thrown away ... '

'... and has been thrown away, probably several times, and retrieved.'

They looked at each other. 'So what are you doing here?' he asked. She started to tell him about René's negotiations, but he interrupted. 'No, you. Yourself. *Toi-même!*' She was startled by his approach via the language she'd acquired, then adopted. Studying him in a measured way, she hoped he would perceive that a question so personal, of such intensity, would be the climax of their conversation, of their meeting. She answered. 'I'm not separate from René any more. We're truly married now. I had a period of indecision. That was when I visited you and Jennifer in Melbourne ... '

'Janine.'

She took the correction in her stride. 'How is she?'

'We're not together any more. When the children grew up, there was nothing holding us together, so we agreed to give it away. There's been the odd squabble over furniture, or who owes money over what, but I suppose we've managed it smoothly enough.'

'You never seemed very close to me.' It was said out of compassion for him, he saw: that, and the comments on his coat, made him want to strike a spark out of this polished, once-young figure beside him, but before he could think of a way to do it, a uniformed attendant called softly that he would be closing the theatre in a moment, and the gallery would be open a further thirty minutes. Andy said, 'Let's leave. I'd like to walk with you for a block or two. If you don't mind.' There was anger in him, but also a feeling that this last meeting shouldn't be spoiled. She told him how she would get to her apartment - which, he knew, and accepted, he'd never see - and suggested he accompany her to a point where he could catch the subway back to his friends on Second Avenue.

So they walked, for a few blocks, beneath the shining towers, the colossi of capital, the rabid over-development of what had once been modest blocks of scrub, amid the beggars and the wealthy, the handsome, well-groomed citizens of the world capital of rhetoric, and the victims, maimed and pleading, of the forces that had created the towers, and the wealth, and they knew, as they turned to each other for the last time, at the point where he had to go underground, that though they'd done their best to manage their lives, they'd always been eddying on currents too large for them to understand, let alone control, and that things had rarely, and for only handfuls of people, been any different. She took his hand. 'I'm glad I saw you. It hasn't been easy, has it, but it's better that we saw each other than if we hadn't. I forgot to tell you - René still talks about the time you got up when your legs were giving you hell, and took him for 'an instructive walk,' he calls it, in the bush. He respects you for that. I think it's his way of dealing with something that would otherwise be too difficult. Too nasty, I mean.'

She saw that he wanted to probe what she'd told him. 'No, kiss me now, my friend. We haven't the time for complications. We've all got simple little things to do, and they're the things we have to do, because anything else is beyond us.' They touched each other's cheeks with the sides of their lips, then, for a moment, they embraced, truly and with strength, before she headed for her apartment, and he went down the steps, into the underground, leaving the arrogant, shining towers to stand above the docile, too-easily-tameable earth.

Who shall comfort ye?

'Doctor has a rule,' Jocelyn said. 'If you want to speak, you have to hold the apple.' She put an apple, of unknown variety, on the low table. 'He analyses only what goes onto the tape, and he keeps your microphone switched off unless you are in uncontested possession of the apple. I think everything else has been explained. Good luck!' She smiled professionally, though without conviction, and joined Doctor Harris at a table to one side of the room.

The four who'd come for counselling looked stunned. 'This isn't what I expected,' said George. 'Me neither,' said Charlie. To the women he said, 'What about you two?' Wendy wrinkled her nose, while Jo turned to the doctor at his desk. 'You expect us to talk, in front of each other, while you just listen?'

Doctor Harris whispered to Jocelyn, who got up. She took the apple from the table, and put it in front of Jo. 'Think of this,' she said, 'as being wisdom. Knowledge. Imagine that it can tell if you're deviating from the truth, or leaving out things you ought to be saying. Think of it as a microphone with a mind, an intelligence which expects the best you can give. You came here for counselling. The best counselling is an improvement in your understanding of what you are, and how your problems came about. You might find it hard to talk frankly - and honestly, I have to say - to each other, so you have to imagine another, perhaps superior, intelligence in the room.' Her eyes moved around the group. 'A bloody apple!' Charlie grunted. 'Beats me!'

Jocelyn picked it up. 'Get used to it.' She gave the apple to Jo, who wished immediately that she hadn't been first. 'Here,' she said, handing it to Wendy. Small though Wendy's hands were, she held the apple

between two fingers, sniffing it more than looking at it, before dropping it into Charlie's hand. 'Where'd you find this?' he said. 'Hanging in the Garden of Eden?' Feeling his joke made him superior to what had been foisted on them, he hand-passed the apple to George, who caught it, held it up, then spoke.

'Okay, I've got the apple, so I'll start. Turn this mike on Doctor, I'm ready to go on the record. The four of us have known each other a bit over twenty years. I'm married to Jo ...' he looked in her direction '... but Wendy and I slept together quite often before she married Charlie - Charles, he likes to be called, by the way - and the four of us have one thing in common. When we run into a rough spot in our lives, we head for the one we're not married to. I go to Wendy. Charlie wants to have Jo. Jo lives with me, but when she's in a dark patch, she calls up Charlie, and they get together. Wendy's a bit more reserved than the rest of us, but I know when she's in a hole, and if I go around, we comfort each other.'

'You fuck,' Jo called.

They looked at each other.

'That's not on the record,' Jocelyn said from the table at the side. 'If you want to speak, you have to hold the apple.' Jo held out her hand to George. 'Come on, hand it over.' Unwillingly, he did so. 'They fuck,' she said, 'and just to get the record straight, let's say it again. They fuck. Fuck.' She looked pleased with herself. 'And why do they do it? Because they are inadequate human beings, and they think that if they have it off together, they're telling Charlie and I how inadequate we are, when it's really them that have the problem. That's how I see it, anyhow. Want the apple, Charlie? Wendy?' She held it up, a thing that had already changed in their possession of it.

Charlie extended a hand, but put the apple down as soon as he'd received it. 'You have to hold it while you're speaking,' Jocelyn called from the side. 'Otherwise your words are seen as having no commitment, and we don't record them.' Charlie picked up the apple as if it represented everything bad in his life. 'I don't know how I got myself

into this bullshit.' The others had no idea where his thoughts might be heading. 'It'd be easier to say nothing. We could all go home and live the way we've lived for twenty years, and I don't know that anything would be any worse. I mean, who says the rest of the population's any better off than us? How do we know the rest of them' ... he waved vaguely, as if a mosquito was near ... 'aren't in as big a mess?' He lapsed into silence. George and Jo put out hands for the apple, but Charlie clung to it. 'You know what's going to happen? We're going to walk out of here without a shred of dignity, or decency, left, we'll be confused, and these people' - he pointed at Doctor Harris and Jocelyn - 'will write us down in their appointment book, and it'll cost us another three hundred dollars which I'm going to have trouble finding, and there's no promises that we'll be any better off than if we sat at home with a few bottles and had a really bruising row which might show us a way out. That's about all I can say. There's the apple, if anybody thinks they can use it.' He rolled the apple forward. George was quicker than Jo to grab it.

'That's gutless, Charlie. We're here to solve the problem, not run away from it. We all agreed to give this a go because we couldn't stand things the way they were. We have to get to the bottom of what's been happening! Jo?' He rolled the apple towards his wife, who picked it up with a savage smile.

'I've got a question for each of you,' Jo said, 'and one for myself too. Here we go. Ready? You don't have to like them, just answer them. Wendy, you can be first.' Venom filled her voice. Her husband cut in. 'Don't do this Jo. You used to do it before we got married. You'd find some bombshell to drop on us. You wanted us to be unsettled, and you still want it. It's your oldest trick, and I'm ready to say I'm sick of it. I'm telling you that if you go ahead with these questions, whatever the hell they are, I'm leaving. Out!' He gestured dramatically at the door.

'You don't have the apple George,' Jocelyn reminded him. 'We didn't record what you just said.' George swung his head to speak over his shoulder. 'Maybe you didn't, but she got it clear enough. She's not to go on if she wants me to stay.' Jo snorted, but her husband went on.

‘This is supposed to be a problem-solving session. We’re not going to get anywhere if we just resort to our hoariest old tricks. Surely we can do better than that!’

Wendy spoke for the first time. ‘There’s tricks and there’s tricks. What about refusing to listen to someone? Isn’t that the meanest trick of all?’ Her lover of years was amazed. Cut down by the one he expected to give support! Animosity and a wish to justify himself struggled in him. He felt his chest swelling. He wanted to rise from his chair and do something dramatic. But the control came from elsewhere. ‘The apple, you must have the apple if you want to talk. We don’t take any notice if you haven’t got the apple.’ The quartet joined in resentment at this stricture. Hostile sounds came from their throats, but Jocelyn put it to them: ‘You have to get used to the technique. It’s one whereby nobody gets to be heard - by us, as opposed to you - unless they can speak within a consensus shared by the others. If you all fight for the apple, it means you’re not ready to listen. That’s the key word - listen. We can all talk, but are we prepared to listen? Jo has the apple. Are you ready to let her speak? Or do you want to leave right now and not come back? You can if you like. The door’s not locked. You’re not tied to your chairs.’ Their reaction was as she’d expected. ‘Jo, you have the apple.’

‘Thank you, yes, I’ve got the apple.’ Jo held it up. ‘Now, as I said a minute ago, I want to ask some questions.’ Her husband slumped under the triumph in her voice. ‘Wendy,’ said Jo. ‘The first question’s for you. When I’d been married about two months, George was away for a few days, and I ... ‘

‘ ... had a one night stand with a doctor,’ her husband said. ‘Jesus, do we have to go through this again!’

‘Three nights, George. Don’t minimise my pleasure, I never asked if you had anyone while you were away. But that’s not my question. You, Wendy, found out because you were working with me at the time, and you told George, and Charlie, and God knows who else. Why did you tell them? Why couldn’t you have kept my secret? If I need a little bit of secret space to do things other people shouldn’t get to hear about,

couldn't you have given it to me? You need a bit of secret space too, don't you dear? To do some of the things I'll bring out later in this session. So why did you have to put what I did - while George was away; nobody needed to know, or suffer - out in the open the way you did?'

Wendy said nothing. Jo smiled. 'A bit hard for you darling? There'll be more later.' Jocelyn, from the side, asked, 'Are you going to let her speak? She's playing by the rules, if you notice.' Jo realised her mistake. Affecting an air of contempt, but feeling stripped of power, she put the apple where Wendy could pick it up. Wendy lifted it in her left hand like a golden orb. 'I'll answer that,' she said. 'I did it because I felt you needed me to do it. Would you like to add to that, George?' She offered the apple to her lover, who shuddered. Jo was storming silently. 'No? All right, now I'll tell you why.' Her voice, deepening as she crept into her forties, cut them with the power of her concentration.

'I did it to contain the problem we had. You'd slept with Charlie, Jo, hadn't you, before we all married. We'd all slept with each other. Do you know anything about crystals, Jo? I don't think you do. It's very hard to get one single crystal, absolutely pure in shape. Usually, one crystal starts to form out of another, and another out of that one, until you've got dozens of crystals all growing out of each other. It's worth having a close look, if you ever get the chance. Each crystal knows what shape it wants to be - that's the perfect shape it's trying to achieve - but as it tries to take that shape, other crystals ... '

Jo was by this time waving her hands in protest at the irrelevance of what she was being forced to listen to; Charlie, however, was listening intently, hearing something his wife had never said to him before.

'... push into what it's doing and try to achieve their perfection at its expense. What you were doing, by bringing someone else into a situation that was already difficult enough, was to ensure that the problem would be impossible to solve. And it's never been solved, has it? You destroyed our chances of achieving what all of us wanted. A normal, conventional, married life. We'd all like to have it, or we wouldn't be here. Charlie?' She offered her husband the apple, but he, seeing Jo

wanted it, indicated by inclining his head that his lover should reply. Wendy wasn't receptive. 'George?' she offered. George took the apple, knowing that, short of a miracle, he and Jo would be living apart until this matter was resolved.

'I suppose I'm fighting for quite a lot now,' he said. 'I know you're angry with me, Jo, but I do have a right to have my turn.' Jo, finding a smugness in his voice which she detested, snatched the apple from his hand. 'You can wait your turn,' she said angrily, but from the side of the room came Jocelyn, over-ruling her. 'The apple has to be held by consent. If it's grabbed from someone, the person who took it has no right to speak. The microphones go off and if order isn't restored, the session's at an end. It's up to you,' she warned. Sullenly Jo surrendered the apple to her husband, who gave her a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger look which enraged her more.

'What I want to say is, I think we shouldn't be trying to even up old scores, or drop the blame on each other. That's too easy. We've all done things we wouldn't like to be reminded of. I think we ought to keep those things out of what we say here today. They'll be in the back of our minds, for sure, and they'll keep us honest, but we should concentrate on what we think's the problem. Here's my two bob's worth. I want to be free to give my love to Wendy, so I have to accept, even though it isn't always easy, that Jo can give her love to Charlie. Or anybody else, I suppose, though I don't think there's been any outsiders for a long time now. Now, if I ask for that freedom, and give it to Jo - or she takes it anyway - then the one thing I can't have is the certainty that my wife and I love each other in the way that makes the restraints of marriage worth-while. And that troubles me. So I get it in my head that maybe I made a mistake, and that if I'd been with Wendy all these years, everything'd be okay. You understand? But Wendy can't give me that certainty, because she's in the same position with Charlie. It's as if we're all chasing an illusion, and the illusion has become more important than the reality, and each time one of us achieves the illusion - you understand me? - we achieve it with someone who has another reality they have to live. So,

the way I see it, we're looking for a way out, inside a system that has no way out. We're in a room with no doors, and all we do is talk about finding a way out. There isn't one - except this. Why don't we just say we made some marriage vows, and we've never taken much notice of them in the past, but we're going to change our spots and stick to'em in future?' He looked around. 'Anybody got a better answer?'

His wife held out her hand for the apple. 'Oh shit,' he said, handing it over. Jo said, 'My questions. One for each of us, remember?' George swivelled in his seat to turn his back on his wife. Charlie and Wendy stood up. Jocelyn stood up too, and came to the middle of the room. 'You've reached an impasse. You can't go on usefully from here. Doctor Harris has ended the session. If you want to continue, you have to make a fresh appointment, and before he'll grant that appointment you'll need to identify a theme, and when you come back, you'll have to agree to stick to that theme alone.'

'It's easy,' Jo said. 'The theme is fidelity. And its opposite. What else have we been talking about?' She looked at the others, expecting the two who were standing to sit down, but Jocelyn was firm. 'The first session's ended. Let us know when you're ready for another. Thank you. Take the apple if you like, we never give a group an apple that's been used by a previous group. The associations make it too difficult.'

A minute later the quartet were outside, Jo saying she'd get a taxi to a friend's place, and stay there. Charlie looked sick, and hostility burned in Wendy's eyes. George was a shaken man, his reliance on what he thought common sense clearly not enough to solve their problems. As they parted, no arrangement for a second session was made.

Nothing happened for weeks, then, one Sunday afternoon, Jo was having coffee in Lygon Street, when someone she recognised settled at a table nearby. It was Jocelyn, from the counselling clinic. Jo called to her, signalling with eyebrows and gloved hand, and the counsellor's assistant changed tables. 'This isn't very ethical,' she said, 'but who cares?'

The two women studied each other. Jo felt there was some recognition of her in Jocelyn's eyes, some curiosity of longer standing than their

recent counselling. 'Do I remind you of someone?' she asked. Jocelyn, slim, mid thirties, nodded. 'It's uncanny.' Jo said to her, 'Tell me about this person. I'd like to know about a life that resembles mine.' Jocelyn ordered coffee from a waitress before she answered.

'I haven't been in Melbourne long. This is the first time I've ever spent any time in this city. I was brought up in Sydney, trained in nursing, and took a job at the hospital in Broken Hill.' She paused.

'The outback. How long did you last out there?'

'That's the unanswered question. You see, I was surprised how much I liked it, but I had a feeling I might get stuck, so I went back to Sydney and got a degree. I majored, would you believe, in psychology. Don't laugh. I even started post-graduate study in psych before I decided to go back to Broken Hill. The study interested me - I was working on motivation - but it felt barren, without a living community that I had connections with all around me. Well, that's what I said when people asked me about it.'

Jo picked up her meaning. 'What was pulling you back to Broken Hill?'

Jocelyn laughed. 'A doctor. A man about five or six years older than me, and' - she winced - 'married. To someone remarkably like you.'

Jo put the challenge aside for the moment. 'And do you want him to join you down here, or maybe come down and take you back? Is that what you'd like to happen?'

'What I'd really like to know is whether he's going to leave her or not. He says he is, but she's fighting hard to stay with him. I knew I had to get myself where I couldn't be hurt ... well, you always get hurt ... not hurt in any obvious sort of way, while they worked it out. He was from Melbourne, originally, and he's still got friends down here, so he can come here on leave, if he wants to, without any talk about me getting back to his wife, or the people he works with.'

'Tell me about him.'

As Jo listened, she recognised a medical student she'd had a brief affair with, years ago, a man she'd moved away from because of her

involvement with George. And Charlie. And Wendy. That mess. She kept her realisation to herself, deciding that she needed cover if she was to make anything of this unexpected but inevitable-feeling encounter.

'Tell me about his wife.'

Jo listened for a time, then: 'What's wrong with his wife? Why aren't they good together?'

Jocelyn spoke passionately of a woman not fitted to make the man she loved happy, and the longer she went on, the more despairing Jo became. It might have been her. She interrupted. 'I'm not going back to that stupid Doctor Harris again. It'd be a waste of time compared to talking to you. I've got all the faults this woman's got. I think I'm probably worse. If you love this man like you say you do, I don't know why you're talking to me, because really I'm the same as his wife. I'm the sort of person who could be your enemy. So why are you letting me see your weaknesses, and trusting me, when I'm like the person you want to replace. I have to ask, why are you doing this? Why are you doing what you're doing with me?'

Jocelyn looked at the woman who resembled her rival. She thought for a moment, accepted her coffee from the waitress, with cars rolling past behind her, then said, despondently: 'I don't hate Alan's wife. I could live in a ménage a trois quite easily, if there was love flowing between all three. But the first hint of jealousy, or rivalry, and I'd have to move out. I think I'd like to explore you, to see what's lovable in you, so I can, by extension, find it, or at least understand where it might be, in her.'

'You haven't said her name yet. We've been talking for some time, and you haven't said her name.'

The counsellor's mood darkened. 'I can't. And I won't. Sorry, but that's how it is.'

The whimsicality of it struck Jo. 'And you're trying to sort us out! What about your boss? Harris? What's wrong with him that he has to make a life out of pretending to fix others' problems? You can't tell me he's in the clear, sweet, sane. and sure of himself!' Jocelyn's face softened

a little. 'No, he's madder than anybody that's been in the clinic since I've been there, though I must admit he hides it so well it takes a while before you see it. But once it's obvious, boy, is he nuts!' She twirled her hand above her head and they laughed like people released from a dangerous and demeaning belief. 'So you and I,' Jo said to Jocelyn, 'think we're the only two who know the way things work? That'd have to be a sure sign that we're both nuts, wouldn't it?'

Jocelyn started to laugh, but her face crumpled, and she began to cry. 'I don't want to be nuts,' she sobbed. 'I don't want to work with nuts. I want to be happy.' She put her hands to her face and sobbed bitterly.

Helpless, and wondering what those around her were making of this scene - and feeling that such a reaction was to her discredit - Jo saw that, for better or for worse, she had responsibility for Jocelyn. It was she, Jo, who would have to calm the other woman, get her home, visit her, have her around, introduce her to people in this city she didn't know. Create a life for her, really. She couldn't back away from what could only be described as a breakdown. Jocelyn showed no sign of recovering. Her tears, and the shuddering of her body, were continuing as before. Suddenly, like a flash of light in unbroken gloom, Jo realised she'd been given her chance.

If she could get Jocelyn out of her mess, she'd get herself out of the thing that had dogged the four of them - the two couples - for years. They'd made a mistake in going to the clinic together. For any one of them, alone, there was a chance that it might have worked, but together they created, and continued to create, every moment of every day, their trap. A trap was the only thing that they, as a foursome, could tolerate. A trap, therefore, was their expression of the meaning of marriage, as they understood it. To escape this feeling of enclosure, they simply went to a partner who occupied a different part of the trap. If one of the four escaped, the other three were entombed worse than ever. Therefore it was in the interests of the group not to let one of its members escape.

I have escaped, Jo thought. I'm out! I'm free! She felt a pang for George, her husband, and a lesser pang for Charlie, her lover, even a twinge for Wendy - who, Jo saw, would never be faced with the questions, and the evidence, that she, Jo, had intended to fling in her face. Jo smiled. Wendy was going to be spared the lashing that had been prepared: a self-lashing inflicted on someone else. She put her arm around Jocelyn's waist, then, with her left hand, pulled the scarf from around her neck and dabbed at Jocelyn's eyes. When Jocelyn lowered her hands, Jo wiped her face, brushed back some of the fallen hair, and kissed the younger woman, ardently, tenderly. 'You need someone to love you,' she said. 'A little bit of evidence, some certainty. Something positive. What would you like to do now? We're going to spend the next few days together, you and I, getting you back on your feet. What would you like to do?'

Jocelyn surprised her with the readiness, the certainty, of her answer. 'Take me somewhere private where I can ring Alan. I have to know what he's feeling. Without that, I can't go on.'

Jo said, 'I can't take you to my place, because I've left it. But I can take you to my friend's. She's away at the moment, but she wouldn't mind me bringing you there.' Suddenly she wondered about the outcome of this call. 'You can lie down on my bed afterwards, if you need to.'

They walked the few blocks, and let themselves in. Jo showed Jocelyn the phone in the front room of the terrace, and was going to the kitchen at the rear, but Jocelyn asked her to sit in the second room. 'I want to feel support.' Jo sat by the darkened fireplace and listened to her newly acquired companion dialling the man she loved in Broken Hill.

There was a hush in the two rooms as the phone rang in a city far away, then a click, and a man's voice, formally presenting himself. Jo read the conversation from Jocelyn's state of being - anxious, laughing too strongly too soon, tender, curious, questioning, listening intensely, unspoken doubts in everything she said. At one point she groaned, and the male sound rose, justifying himself, pleading his difficulties, trying

hard, Jo could tell, to give. She found herself wondering where the wife was, this wife that resembled her. Suddenly a warning flashed through her mind: she'd not be able to do for Jocelyn what she needed to do if the doctor realised who was with his lover in Melbourne. She rushed into the front room and picked up a pad and pencil.

You're in Anita's house at 276 Kitchener Street Carlton and the number is 03 347 2211. If he writes, tell him to write to you, care of Anita.

She signed it with an A. Jocelyn took the page between tense fingers, nodding, and a minute later Jo, back in the second room, heard the question that mattered: 'Can you come down, and be with me?' Jo, hearing equivocation in the male voice, could hardly bear the tension emanating from the woman who, a few weeks before, had been expounding the doctor's rules to those in search of counselling. From her childhood she remembered the question: 'Comforter, who shall comfort ye?' Her sense that she herself was the answer made her strong, and terrifyingly responsible. The doctor must have made a concession because Jocelyn was murmuring, in a sexually vulnerable voice, 'That'd be beautiful. That'd be just ... absolutely ... beautiful. You can't know how much I'm looking forward to that.' Then Jo heard her read the address and phone number she'd provided. Her lover must have asked who Anita was, because Jocelyn told him, 'She's someone who's befriended me. I met her through my work.' The doctor's next observation was witty, because from the front room came a shout of laughter, the lover obtaining her full release, before intense concentration resumed, Jocelyn projecting everything in her psyche in darkly murmured farewells. When she heard the sound of the phone being put down, Jo went to the front room again, to sit beside this woman who loved more intensely, more riskily than she'd ever done. She looked into Jocelyn's eyes, and let her eyes ask a question.

'He has to organise some leave. But he said he'd come.' Jocelyn smiled, but there was no relief in her voice, only anxiety. 'He said he's looking forward to meeting you because you're helping me.' 'That'll be lovely,' Jo said, and started to plan how she could put her friend in a win-

ning position - against her self, her look-alike - and yet be absent so the doctor would never know whose hand had given him what he needed. She shook her head as if something was sweeping through her. 'I'll show you where you can sleep. Then we have to get your things. And you can tell me some more about your love. I hardly know anything, yet.'

As the days passed, Jo narrowed her search. Two things had to happen. The doctor - Alan - had to reject his wife - whose name was never spoken - and she, that wife, had to want to leave. What we really need, Jo thought, is a situation where the two women turn up in Melbourne, and only one of them goes back to the mining city, sitting in its - according to Jocelyn - fascinating wilderness. 'You need to see the birds,' she'd said, 'and the land after heavy rain, to know what it's really like. The hot weather can be devastating, and you think it's hell on earth. Even then, when people are sitting around at night, talking and drinking, you feel as if you're one of a small band of keepers, given the job of looking after a land that can be a furnace when it wants to, and can destroy anyone who risks their lives in the open. And when you've been reduced to despair, and you wonder why you ever came near the place, the rain comes, you can feel the earth soaking it up if you go walking - and you're mad if you don't go walking then, because that's when you recognise the feminine side of this masculine demon, and you wonder what this wild beast will be like when it's had its drink - and then the earth's covered with flowers, miles and miles of them, and you weep with gratitude for having had the strength to sit out this harshness, this refusal to give you anything, which ends up denying itself by giving you something more wonderful than you'd ever dreamed of.'

Listening to her, Jo was painfully aware that she was forty and had never been a mother, and that Jocelyn was desperate to bear the doctor's child. Assuming she could send her charge back to the inland with the man she loved, what would she, Jo, do when they were gone? Try to rescue George? (And Charlie and even, perhaps, Wendy of unhallowed memory?) She thought not. I haven't got myself out to get myself back in. But there have been so many twists and turns in the last few days,

what do I know about what's going to happen? She decided to concentrate on the job in hand.

She asked herself what she would feel if someone were to send a message that her husband was going to a distant city to meet a lover who wanted to merge his life with hers. I'd want to spring a surprise on them, she decided. Catch them in the act. Assert my superiority over their nakedness. Discover them at play and make them feel ashamed. I'd want to belittle them because they were robbing me. That's what I'd want to do.

Then she thought some more. If such a situation could be made to happen, what would the man at the focal point of this pressure do? Return, cringing, to what he'd always had, or grasp the nettle, the opportunity, the never-returning moment, and do what his heart told him? Make one woman happy and cast another out?

That, she decided, was a question unanswerable in advance. If she could set up the situation, she'd make Jocelyn happy and the Jo look-alike wretched - or the reverse. Whichever way it went, one would win and one would lose. Wrong. The doctor would lose if he didn't follow his heart and take Jocelyn through the experience she wanted. And if he did, the tradition of marriage would lose a little more of its holding power over a race that seemed to need it, however much they wanted to flout it.

For a moment Jo believed in God, and felt he'd given her a power; then she decided that the heavens were as empty as most people thought, and that the powers once attributed to the almighty had to be used, with what little wisdom they possessed, by the walk-on-two-legs mortals who over-ran the earth. She waited till Jocelyn was out of the house, and went through her things. Before long she had a name, two phone numbers and two addresses for the man, none for the wife. She rang the doctor's clinic. 'I'm organising a family reunion,' she told the woman on duty, 'and I need a postal address for the wife of one of your doctors ...' A minute later she put the phone down and looked at what she'd written on the pad, which she replaced, and took away to her room:

Claire Tregowan, 77 Penfold Street, Broken Hill

The woman on duty had told her it was two blocks behind the post office, very convenient for Doctor Tregowan when he was called out for an emergency, or a flight to a remote area. Jo rang Information and asked for the phone number of Claire Tregowan of Broken Hill. Information had it for her in a moment. Now, she thought, everything's in the timing.

For two and a half weeks the women worked - Jo at a private hospital, Jocelyn at the counselling clinic - and talked at night about love, marriage, and how much and how little we understand our motives. 'There's always an unseen,' Jo maintained, 'moving us to things we can only dimly sense. Yet, unclear as it is what that unseen force is doing, we won't get anywhere if we try to go against it.' Jocelyn murmured with a passion she no longer concealed, 'I know what I want. I want Alan in my life. He wants me. I know he wants me. There's just this barrier. Is it her? Is it habit? Is it a fear that if he takes the step he'll be broken by it? If I knew, I could do something to help it happen.'

Jo told her to wait patiently. Their borrowed home was a house full of waiting, days and nights of it, then Alan rang. He'd be down the following Monday, allegedly to attend a conference; he asked Jocelyn to meet him at the airport. When Jo got home, only minutes after the call, she found Jocelyn in a state of elation. 'I'll take the week off work. No! I'm resigning! I'm never going there again. That's not what my life will be about, after this!' Her eyes were ablaze with love, with possibility, with the absence of any qualification to her hopes. The next day Jo rang Claire Tregowan, of Penfold Street Broken Hill, and told her what was being planned, and where it would take place. 'To get in, you'll have to come up the lane. The back gate's been missing for years.' She told this woman who resembled her how the back door, though it would be locked, could be opened by wrenching the handle in a certain way: 'Anyone who knows can get in. You'll find them in the front room on the right.' Claire Tregowan wanted to know how she could be sure of what she was being told.

'Walk in on them. Your doubts will disappear very quickly.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'I need to, for reasons of my own, which, I'm sorry, I'm not able to share with you.'

'If I need to contact you after I find whatever I'm going to find, how can I get in touch with you?'

'You can't. The house where you'll find them isn't mine, and the place where I used to live won't be my address much longer either. I'm in transit.'

'You make it sound like an airport lounge.'

Jo reflected. 'I like that. Thank you.' She put down the phone.

On the morning when Alan was due to arrive in Melbourne, Jo had a friend ring her from the hospital with a message - the day off that she'd intended to take was impossible because not one but two emergency operations had been scheduled, staff were sick, Jo had to come in. She apologised to Jocelyn, who said, 'You've been so wonderful to me, I was really looking forward to being able to introduce you to Alan.' She took her helper in her arms. 'We'll all have dinner tonight!' Jo set off, apparently for work, in her little car, but drove straight to the house where she'd lived with George. When he got home that evening, he was amazed to find her back, and even more amazed to hear her telling someone on the phone: 'I'm really sorry, but I've had to organise him into hospital. I think it was a fairly mild heart attack, but they've got to do tests. I need to be beside him tonight. We're not living together, as you know, but it's the least I can do. I really hope everything goes well for you and Alan. I can't tell you how much I want things to turn out right. I'll be thinking of you. Bye darling, love and kisses!'

George folded his arms. 'What in the name of God are you up to? Giving me a heart attack is the latest, is it? Shit!' Then he couldn't stop himself. Raucous, crowing laughter came from him. He rubbed his eyes, then said to his wife, 'Well, aren't you going to tell me anything? Are you back here to live, by the way, or just popped in to make a few

dubious phone calls?' She smiled sweetly, giving him nothing. 'The latter, actually.'

His mood began to sour. 'Now come on Jo, I haven't seen you for weeks, I've been thinking of moving interstate and about fifty thousand other things, including asking you to come back and live with me, and you're clearly up to some bloody thing, there's some tissue of lies you're fabricating, and you don't even bother to stop me hearing it, so do you mind if I ask, where the bloody hell are we? What the fuckin hell is actually ...' his hands wavered, unable to make the meaningful gesture he wanted '... going on?'

She looked her husband in the eyes. 'George, I can't tell you because I'm not sure what's going to happen. All I can tell you is that I've set up a blockbuster. It'll be at least tomorrow, and probably much later, before I can tell you anything. In the meantime, my tension's great enough without you adding to it, and no, I'm not explaining anything just now. You'll have to wait, and by the way, I'm not here for long. I need this place for a little while, then I'll be moving on. Sorry to drop that on you, but that's how it is.'

Her husband stared at her glumly. 'Shit! After twenty years, this is what we've come to!'

She said, 'Don't treat it as bad. That's the easy way out. It may be truer, if harder, to say it's a good thing.' His brow creased, but he went to the kitchen and started to cook. She sat, in the seat she'd sat in for years, waiting.

Each morning, before she went to work, she checked the mail at Kitchener Street. After a fortnight, it came, a letter postmarked Broken Hill. She went to the ending first:

So, thanks to Alan, I've overcome you. He's given me the triumph I longed for once I realised what you'd done. What you did was the vilest piece of treachery I've ever been hurt by. How you kept up the pretence of looking after my interests I've no idea. You must be truly EVIL! Well, suffer for your evil. I've got the love of the most wonderful man, and I'm wildly happy. It's my good fortune to stand on a sunlit height, but I'm aware that there's a deep,

dark and dirty pit not far away, and that's where you're lurking. Alan tells me to forget you, but it'll be a long time till I do. Suffer, is all I can say. You failed in what you tried to do, so SUFFER!

Jo felt cold, and shrunken. She went back to the start:

We were lying in each other's arms after a night of perfect love …

Which I gave you, Jo wanted to shout!

… when she came in, gloating and sneering, thinking we were at her mercy. Alan turned his back on her. All he said was Go away! But I knew, when I looked into her eyes, how she'd got to be there. You'd called her down to destroy us. I knew I was fighting for my existence, and my love, against the vilest forces …

Jo riffled through the rest of the letter, looking for something. It was on the bottom of page two:

It was days before Alan realised who you were. He told me how you'd had a brief relationship many years ago, when he was a student. He told me about your little quartet of lovers, and how, once he realised what your situation was, he never saw you again …

The signature was in blood-red ink: Jo recognised the other woman's attempt to find a symbolism that did justice to her rage. I succeeded, she thought, staring at the pavement, but without getting many thanks! Then a new pressure came upon her; a new influence, even more hate-filled than the letter, surrounded her, looking for a point of entry. Jo scrambled into her car and drove to George's as quickly as she could. She rushed inside and lay on the bed that had been hers for twenty years.

When George came home, he saw her car in the drive. Pleased that she was back, he banged the front door behind him, shouting, 'They didn't keep me at the hospital. They said your heart attack isn't fatal, mate, go and have dinner with your wife! Where are you Jo?' Laughter in his voice, he expected a good-natured cry to answer him.

But the house was frightening, as if an outside force had taken over. He found her lying on the bed, clutching her stomach with both hands. For a moment he thought of the miscarriage she'd had years before, then

he decided that the problem was not in the body, but the mind. 'What is it Jo? For heaven's sake, what's happened?' She waved a hand helplessly. 'Keep them away.' He scrambled onto the bed and put his arms around her, feeling the agony within. For minutes he lay there, trying to protect her against whatever had entered her, thinking - the only explanation he could find - of possession by devils. After a long time she pressed her head against his chest, and he knew that she was gaining reassurance from listening to his heart. 'Jo,' he murmured, 'I love you Jo.' He could feel childlike trust beginning to regain some of the lost ground in her invaded psyche. 'Whatever's attacking you won't get anywhere while I'm here.' He had no idea what he was saying, just as he knew it was right to say it. She would explain, eventually.

Hours later, after she'd slept, they talked, still lying on the bed. She told him what she'd done. 'I made a mistake, you see. I thought the one I'd made happy would protect me from the one I'd made unhappy. But she was too stupid to see what I'd done for her. She thought I'd done it against her, and she hated me too. The moment I realised that I became vulnerable. I rushed home in the car before the other one could get a proper grip on me. She's been at my throat all day. I was longing for you to get home.'

'You should have rung.'

'It was better for me to suffer. There was an immense amount of rage that had to be discharged somewhere, and the somewhere was me. I know I'll have more bouts, but the worst is over.' He wanted to hold her again, but knew it would change what was happening. Had she come back, or was this another phase of moving out? He dared not ask.

She picked up what was in his mind. 'I don't know, George. I truly don't know. Because, you see, you'll have to go through something - maybe not the same as I've gone through, but a fundamental change of who you are - before we can even think about a new start, or a separation. But, if it gives you any hope, I can say this: you've stuck to me today when I needed it most, and if you'd failed me God knows what would have happened. I might have killed myself to get away from them.

But you didn't fail me George, and when you go through whatever you're going to go through, I won't fail you either!'

The eyes of the blind

When Carlos died, Ellen refused to mourn. She buried him, saying to herself, 'I don't know what he meant to me because I don't know what my life would have been like without him.' Her friends told each other that she'd been in public life so long, and so intensely, that she'd lost touch with her feelings. It'll hit her all of a sudden, they said, when she realises what she's lost. It won't be a pretty sight when this passionate speaker, this tireless committee worker, cracks. When she realises that she's become a void, a sounding board for others' ideas, a hollow drum. For all the good she's done, they said, it was Carlos who kept her human, lent her warmth and charm, and now he's gone, her essential emptiness is exposed - to everyone but Ellen.

This viewpoint was reinforced, a few weeks after his death, when she announced that she wouldn't contest the next election. She told reporters that she'd serve out her time as productively as she could, she'd play no part in the preselection of her successor, and she hoped - she was vague at this point - to find plenty to fill the void when she retired. 'There's more to life than politics,' she said, hard-mouthed, insecure, and feeling, somewhere deep within, an anguish, a pain, beginning to gnaw at her. Was there really a life outside the political struggle? Or was she, in giving the game away, getting ready to follow her husband?

She worked hard up to the final day, then something disconcerting happened. On the day the House was to rise for the election campaign, she found she didn't want to get out of bed. She woke at her normal time, but couldn't bring herself to get the coffee which would be percolating in the kitchen. She lay there, pulling the quilt up to her chin, feeling helpless. Then she remembered Carlos.

The morning when she was to make her maiden speech in the chamber, Carlos had woken her early, caressing her from top to toe. 'I'm going to send you in there looking ravishing,' he murmured into her neck, 'so when they look at you they'll hardly know what you're saying because they'll all desire you. And they'll know that though their hopes can hover and circle like gulls, there is only one who can have you.' And he caressed her for ages until the sensuality at her surface overcame the anxiety within, and the last, flickering glimmer of consciousness told her that the love Carlos was preparing her to give was the birth of what would be her greatest day: she would be ready, and a fitting person, to speak in the parliament of the people.

A few hours, and it would be no more. 'Thanks darling,' she said aloud, and she pushed off the bedding, remembering as she did so that on that first morning, years ago, Carlos had pulled everything back, leaving her naked, glowing, and warmed by love on the bed they'd shared. Looking at her with joy in his eyes he'd said, 'If the world could see you as I see you, it would be a better place.' As he'd walked to the shower that morning, towel on his shoulder, she'd felt the same about him: if every woman had a man like him, there couldn't be any trouble. She could go into the public arena because she had perfection at home - a perfection that Carlos had nurtured so that it was ready for her, ever-changing, like a large and lively garden, but ever-growing too. If he was here this morning, what would he think of, Ellen wondered, and the thought, painfully as it reminded her, gave her a little strength, and she readied herself for the day.

Pulling the door of her apartment closed, she said to herself, 'And tomorrow, what then?'

When she got to her desk, there was a message from the Prime Minister's office, inviting her to morning tea at ten thirty, a small gathering of those who, like her, were not returning to the parliament in the hill. It struck her that when she left the building that afternoon for the last time, gazing over Canberra before being driven to the airport for the last of many flights to and from the capital, she'd be leaving behind a

carefully forged identity to become a new person. And what would that new person be like?

Who could say?

The Prime Minister greeted her warmly, almost tenderly, and asked her all the obvious questions, but no less pertinent for that. How did she feel about her years in parliament? Highlights? Low spots? 'I had a feeling,' he said, 'when I heard you'd lost your husband ... I never met him, but I knew he was very important for you ... that you'd leave at the next election. I should thank you for seeing out the full term. It can't have been easy.'

Ellen went pale. The Prime Minister refrained from asking her what she'd be doing next, but something about his tact caused Ellen to blurt out a decision she hadn't known that she'd made. 'No, it hasn't been easy,' Ellen said. 'Frankly, I think I've been hanging on out of habit. But you have to let go eventually. My husband came from Spain.' The Prime Minister nodded, concealing whether or not he knew this; I wonder how many political tricks I've got, Ellen wondered, and how long it'll take before they're all washed away. 'He never went back, in the years we were married. It was an unspoken rule - we travelled to all sorts of places, but we never went to Spain. I think I'll go there. I know where he came from, and I've got the names of a few relatives, distant enough, God knows, but I don't suppose that matters. He wanted to put his early life behind him, and now that he's gone, I have to ... not put him behind me, so much as beside me. I'm going to have to build a new life in some sort of parallel with the old.' She wondered if it made any sense. People were waiting beside the Prime Minister, wanting to lead him away, but he moved his cup into his left hand and took Ellen's arm with his right. 'If there's ever anything we can do for you, just get in touch with my office. Thanks a lot, Ellen. You've been terrific!' And he was gone, moving elsewhere in the group, keeping the situation alive with his formulaic words, his ritual approaches and departures, his performance of a role that others would perform when he no longer had the numbers to hold the position of head ghost, or spirit, of the land. She

added a couple of names to the list in her mind of people that had to be thanked, or sent a note, if she was to make her departure as gracious, as seemly, as it should be.

The following week she bought her ticket, and three weeks after that, she landed in Madrid. It felt strange to arrive without a packed itinerary of meetings, interviews, places to inspect, but she'd decided to do this trip with a modesty that verged on secrecy. She was no-one. Whatever she was seeking would offer itself to her at an unexpected time, lighting her situation in a way she least expected. All she could do was to be open, ready, waiting.

If you're not listening, you'll never hear, she told herself.

She took a room in the Gran Via, in a place where they spoke a little English. On the third day a young woman at the desk asked her, 'Are you waiting for your husband?' Ellen thought about this: she was, of course, doing just that. Waiting for Carlos to reveal himself, in some way that he, or his spirit, would decide. She regarded the young woman gravely. 'I can't do that. You see, he died not very long ago. I am in Spain because I want to see where he came from.' The woman at the desk, discomfited, but striving to be professional, said, 'We have many connections. If you want to travel anywhere, we will arrange.' Sipping coffee a few minutes later, Ellen ran the incomplete-sounding sentence through her head. Arrange what? Where? How? Why? When? She riffled through the pages of the two papers she'd bought, one in Spanish, one in English, one to be read for news, information, one to be glanced at like a foreign building, authentic, incomprehensible, because Carlos, apart from a few muttered swear words, had never spoken Spanish in their years of marriage. Ellen started to call him up, to ask for him, to look for his face in the crowds that passed her in shops, streets, railway stations, in festive, though Europeanly formal, parks. She longed for him to appear, young, middle-aged or, like herself, ageing, but loving, to take her in his arms again, exciting her with his way of overcoming his darkest fears by giving her the lifted confidence which had been the backbone of her career. She felt she was nothing without him, yet knew

that to want the impossible, to court its arrival, was to lay oneself open to any other forces that might be hovering, waiting for a chance to enter a vulnerable human life.

She thought it might have been better to die when her husband died; that people who made pacts to end it together had the best, the only good, way of approaching the inevitable exit. She wanted to be with Carlos, even if it meant no more than a fleeting second of recognition before the onset of extinction.

After a few days in the capital, she went south to Andalusia, closing in, however circuitously, on the source of her husband's life. She took a room in Sevilla, overlooking the cathedral, still waiting, expectant, dangerously - she feared - open, waiting for that influence, that presence, to return. But the psychic connection she was seeking to reopen was as silent as the city was noisy about her. Carlos wasn't there.

She studied her map. Where to next? She felt she was being too pressing, asking too much, too hotly, crowding the fates, leaving them no room to do something unexpected. She took a bus and a train, getting herself into Portugal. Almost at once she felt better; taking the pressure off what she was asking seemed to give the air - what else? - a more welcoming opportunity to speak. She moved through southern Portugal, as conventionally tourist as possible, readying herself, waiting, marking on her map of Spain the towns, the villages where Carlos had relatives, or connections of one sort or another, the places she would visit when she had her call.

Carlos had to speak! To appear before her, affirming what they'd shared!

That was what she was asking for, and if it was too much, then she'd have to wait; at least she knew what she wanted. Something warned her that we never get what we want in the form we expect; if it appears, it comes transmogrified, unpleasantly, from the angle least expected, making us doubt that we could ever have asked for what we've been given - though we have!

Then it happened. She'd spent the morning at the Hieronymite monastery, close to the wide, brown Tagus River. She'd sat for ages in the elaborately bounded courtyard, unpicking, in her mind, the cumbersome yet somehow delicate stonework that accompanied the two levels of walkway, and then she'd entered the warm stone church, a heavily carved coffin on either side. The dead were represented by sculptural versions of themselves, their hands erect in positions of prayer. Ellen was pleased to see a sparrow perch momentarily on these saintly hands, before flying to the heights of the nave. Some spirits are free, she thought: who wants to lie, encrusted, in a case when one could be a bird? She preferred the Hindu cycle of rebirth to the Christian resurrection. The matter seemed so much more pressing - something she would have to face up to - than when she'd written about it in Comparative Religion. Her student days seemed incredibly far back, separated from her by a busy adult life - and a loss.

The bus to the city dropped her in the Praca da Rossio, near a structure so covered by people that she couldn't read its intent. Most of them were African, more sociable than she'd seen them in other parts of Europe where, for the most part, they either did menial tasks, like cleaning, or urged unattractive goods on tourists - living what she'd always called the cigarette packet life. Among the black people, leaning on a pillar, or column of some sort, she saw a man with a red face, and eyes closed, listening to a transistor pressed against his ear. He had fat cheeks, and clothing that showed no sign of care. Among the vibrant Africans, his withdrawn state, his ugliness, made him notable. She glanced at him for a moment, intrigued yet repelled, before going on. Then she caught a sound she distantly recognised, a musical sound, the murmur of orchestral strings, and a plangent, penetrating instrument, keening with the intensity of the European orchestra. What was it? She turned.

Her sensations in the next moment were intense, separate, yet confused, in that they all arrived at once. The man leaning against the column had a white stick, a cane, against his body. His eyes were more

than closed. They would never open. He was blind. The music was the prelude to Tristan & Isolde, a work she'd listened to any number of times with Carlos when he was pensive, brooding, unhappy or withdrawn: unhappiness had always been the underlay from which he brought forth the miracle of his love. The last sensation, and the strongest, was that the paunchy, slovenly body of the blind man housed the immortal spirit of her husband, Carlos Manuel de Grigente. Stunned, she looked more closely. The blind man moved not at all, his concentration, like his ear, pressed against the sound source he held against his head. In no way did he resemble the husband she'd lost, yet the sensation - the certainty - burned itself into her. He was so ugly, the blind man, yet he seemed to live in the music of a tragedy which would never befall someone so unattractive, so isolated, so lost to normal life. Ellen, horrified, turned her back on him and fled inside the hotel. Yet as swiftly as she could she made her way to her room, pulled back the curtains and opened the window onto the Praca. He was still there, the blind man, absorbed in his music, reminding her intensely of the husband she'd lost. She pulled down the window and drew the curtains across, then lay on her bed, gasping, confused, not knowing whether to rush into the square again, or to catch a train out of the city as quickly as she could.

I'll give myself ten minutes to decide, she thought. I'll lie on the bed, forcing myself to keep away from the window, and when the time's up, I'll look again, and decide what I'm going to do. A part of her mind, she was relieved to see, was still running coolly despite her panic, her feeling of having been surprised by the very thing she'd sought - contact with the man she'd lost.

As the minutes passed, Ellen, lying on her bed, considered as many interpretations as she could imagine for what had happened. Had Carlos really been there, waiting in the blind man's body to catch her unawares? Had he plucked some malice out of the afterlife to frighten her, still enjoying this one? Was the whole experience centred on some urgent desire within her for something outside her to happen? If Carlos had been there, in the Praca da Rossio, minutes ago, was he still there,

sneakily garbed in fat, and with a red face to taunt her, or had he flown by now, troublesome spirit, to some ornamental finial or tower to observe her world? Had he, impishly, taken residence in some other living corpse, walking around, rowing, running, flying perhaps, so he could cross her path whenever he desired? Was she being followed by the man she'd loved? Was he seeking her out, to force upon her the unhappiness he'd been forced to endure? Her energies, her capacities to think, to analyse, drained out of her, and she lay on the bed in the foreign hotel, weeping, distraught, savaged by her feeling of loss, mourning truly at last, admitting frankly what had happened to her, all her mechanisms of protection, of distraction, broken down, leaving her stranded, without aid, rescue or protection, at the mercy of her loss.

After a long time, she slept, and when she woke, it was dark. She went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror, expecting that other face, so dear to her, to share the glass. But she was alone. 'I've lost you Carlos,' she told her reflection. 'You came to me once, to remind me, but now you've gone away.' She thought of the Prime Minister; what would he think of his loyal supporter, a great worker for the Party, talking to herself like this? She decided that he didn't matter to her any more; after yesterday, and the all-extinguishing sleep, she was more like Eurydice of legend than she was like Ellen Marriott, former member for Batman, except that in this case it was Orpheus who'd been taken away and she who had to endure the surface of the earth, the place in the sunlit world, without the one she loved. 'I've come back,' she told the mirror. 'I have to go on alone.' She turned off the bathroom light, and went to the window beside her bed. The lights of a police car traced the four sides of the square, then it was gone. For a long time the Praca was empty, a dismal sight, though the night was mild, and then she saw a figure coming out of the shadows on the opposite side, walking slowly, testing the air in front of his feet with a blind man's cane. She felt the back of her neck grow cold. He knew the Praca well; as he neared the tracks of the little tramcars that serviced the city, he slowed, and when

he was close to a pole that carried a sign, and a lamp, he paused, taking hold of it for a moment before he went on.

Ellen felt time was slowing around her, giving her space to make a decision. Was she rejecting him, this man of the walking dead, or giving him permission? Let him come, she thought. I'm afraid, but not so afraid that I'd deny all we've shared. The blind man came close to the building sheltering her; another stride and he'd be out of sight beneath her window. She stood; when he disappeared, she strode boldly to her door, and opened it to anyone who came along the passage, then she lay on the bed. It was in his hands now; she'd been strong enough not to refuse.

Minutes passed. Nobody came. Somewhere, in the walls, she heard the sound of water in a pipe. In that part of the world not concerned with spirits of the dead, someone was flushing a toilet. She looked through her window again. Someone was wheeling a small cart across the space in front of her, but matutinally, getting ready for the day. The mystery of the night had followed the blind man to his bed - if that was where he'd gone. She knew she'd never see him again, and felt that she had now to divine what purpose Carlos had had in prompting her by his disguised re-entry to her life. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she felt there was something she had to write down. She opened her diary and wrote, by the light coming in from the square:

He didn't say anything. There was no message, only an appearance. So there's nothing he wants me to do. He's telling me that my days of doing are done. My years of introspection are ahead. What am I? I was not a mother when I might have been. That would have negated him. What do I say yes to? That's what he was asking me. Tristan & Isolde chose death, and died in its comforting arms. Those arms hold him, now, but have released me. What am I to do?

She put the diary down, and watched the long, patient, exasperatingly slow arrival of the day, feeling that if the two clocks of the earth's movement and the inner one of her body could be made to coincide, something trivial, but good, would have been achieved.

When the Praca began to come to life, she showered, dressed again, and went down to the first cafe to put out tables. A man brought her rolls, and coffee. Then he said something which she didn't understand. He pointed to a shop, just opening, where parcels of newspapers were being carried inside. She nodded, feeling that it must be a principle of her life, now, to do what people wanted. He brought her a paper, smiling, and she felt pleased with him. 'Do you speak English?' He nodded. 'Leetle.' She said, 'Tell me about the blind man.' He didn't understand. She closed her eyes and made wavering motions, as if with a cane. He understood, but it had no significance for him. Shrugging his shoulders, he said, 'Don't know. Sorry. Don't know.' He smiled at her, and took himself away, moving a chair or two into neater position before he disappeared.

She wrote to her sister that afternoon, asking after the children she'd largely ignored in the years of her parliamentary career. Her sister's children were the closest connection she had with the continuity of flesh. She wished she could do things for them, reaffirming herself as she did so. Strange, she thought, how selfish we are when we're doing things for someone else. She remembered Carlos coming to her one night when she was wading through a pile of submissions on child care funding. 'Some of the most rabid individualists you could ever meet,' she'd said to her husband, 'have no qualms about putting their hand - their whole arm, actually! - in the public purse!' His response had been to extend his arms around her, seated in front of her desk, and rub her where, had she been carrying a child, the pregnancy would have shown. 'You want a child, my love?' He was asking her if she wanted to change their understanding. To her surprise, but not his, she started to cry. She felt his hands continuing to pose the question. She shook her head. His gratitude was boundless. 'We are fortunate to have each other,' he'd murmured in her ear. 'Plenty of people never find what we've got.' She knew - and she'd known that evening - that for him the arrival at the haven she offered was all he asked; the terror, therefore, that he'd known as a child must have been overwhelming. She'd agreed to protect him,

to maintain a circle of love around him, keeping that terror away. For that, she could have anything. But the transfer of love that bearing a child brings about would leave him abandoned, and vulnerable, again. She'd kept her promise, and it was only now that she was determining what the price had been.

She wrote the next day to her sister, and the day after. She returned to Spain. She visited the quaint rock dwellings outside Guadix where she knew he'd lived as a baby, Arcos de la Frontera where his mother took him after his father was killed, and Toledo where he'd lived during the city's siege; the worst of his memories, and fears, came from that period, she thought, but had never had them shared with her, and could find nothing now, except things on the public record - the bombings, the gallant - Franco-loyal - defence of the Alcazar, the eventual relief of the town. In the days of this search she felt no sense of the intimacy, the proximity, she'd experienced in the presence of the blind man.

She wrote to her sister again, asking her to meet her at the airport, spent a few last days in Catalan territory, then flew out. Home.

She was grateful for the boredom of the flight; she sensed she'd said farewell to Carlos and, more pressingly, for her, to the woman she'd been. She hoped Sherry would bring her children to the airport.

They were there: Damien, at twenty three, the oldest, Shelley, nineteen, the youngest, Leanne in the middle, the only one with her mother's looks, with Sherry, a name at odds, now, with a plain broad-browed woman whose worn but determined outlook gave her face its character. The two sisters flung themselves at each other, Leanne and Shelley clung to them, and Damien put his arms around them, masculinely tolerant, and tender too. 'How was your trip, Aunt Ellen?' he asked, feeling the question had to be put, but in the innermost part of the huddle, Sherry was looking into her sister's eyes. 'What happened over there?' Her sister said 'When we get to your place I'll tell you. It was amazing. A release, I think, in a way.'

Walking through the car park, with the young people carrying her bags, Ellen noticed that Damien had holes at the knees of his jeans, and

Leanne's jeans, too, had patches of contrasting fabric sewn on. Damien, observing her glance, said, 'Did it myself Aunty Ellen. Ya have to look scungy to be in style.' He grinned, pointing at Leanne, whose tight bottom followed her steps; Ellen remembered that this had been Sherry's body once. 'When one of my friends chucks out something they've worn for a long time, I ask'em for a bit and stitch it on,' Leanne explained to Ellen. 'I've got'em all over me!' Ellen's eye rested on a purple patch across the seam of her backside. 'I know what you're thinking,' the young woman said. 'Mum's already had a go at me about that. That bit's to remind me of Tommy.' Her mother and siblings laughed loudly; Ellen smiled. 'He fell from favour, did he?' Already she was light years from the parliament in the hill, dominating the nation's capital, symbolising the relationship that was supposed to exist between government and people - power tempered by humility and responsibility. 'Sort of,' Leanne said. 'He was just ... ' She screwed up her face, as if that would do for the rest of the sentence. Ellen knew that in all her years of 'serving the people', she had felt herself well and truly above them. Yet it was she who was alone, and this group, fatherless though they were, belonged to, loved, and trusted, their mother who, on any journalist's count, would be no more than a voter swinging, a rejecter of this and a supporter of that, one of those people thought worthless by those who sought power, except they had to be persuaded to give their little bit to the one who sought it. Voters.

Sherry said, as they bundled themselves into the car - Damien's, it appeared, because it was rough and rusty, and he took the wheel - 'Isn't it funny! I made a fruit cake because I remembered you liked them, but we haven't had breakfast yet, and you're probably stuffed full of airline food. It's on the table in the kitchen. I don't suppose any of us'll want it.' They laughed, yet Ellen felt an uncomfortable feeling coming over her: they were the family she'd never created, and she wanted to be part of them, but she'd been made a different sort of person by her years in parliament, and the fact was she had to learn to like again - if she'd ever liked - ordinary people who bumbled along without ulterior purposes.

Voters!

Shelley said softly, from the middle of the back seat, 'Tell us all the places you've been to, Aunty Ellen. I studied Spain in Geography last year. I should know most of the places.' Ellen named towns and cities, in a litany that fascinated the youngest in the car, who said, after a while, 'I'm going travelling one day, when I've got the money!' Her sister and brother laughed - 'We all say that!' - but Ellen knew that Sherry knew that under the singsong of names and places there lay another experience, unexplained and probably inexplicable, which had brought the superior sister back to the family about which she'd felt ambivalent. Sitting in the middle of the front seat, between Sherry and Damien, Ellen felt childish, inexperienced, in need of the plain spun wisdom her sister had acquired, mostly from suffering and disappointment. She knew it would be hard - again, perhaps impossible - to say any of this. She took her sister's hand, the softness of the flesh long gone hard, and squeezed, more from hope than from anything else.

At Sherry's home they sat around the kitchen table, while Leanne made scrambled egg, and Shelley toast. Ellen said she only wanted tea, 'made properly at last, dear God!' The others wanted to know how Europeans made tea; Ellen, noticing a packet of teabags on the shelf above the sink, decided they wouldn't know what she was on about, as they put it. Talk idled over the scrappier features of her trip, and the doings of Sherry's three, until the hosts had breakfasted, then Sherry repeated her question: 'What happened over there?'

Ellen told them about the blind man, and her feeling that for a time his body contained the spirit of her husband; how she'd seen him cross the Praca in the small hours of the morning, coming, it had seemed, to her, and how she'd found the courage to open the door of her room.

'And you never heard any more of him after that?'

'Not so much as a footstep in the passage.'

Shelley asked, 'Did you shut the door?' Ellen had to think. 'I did eventually, when I decided it was time to have a shower, and go down to where I'd seen him.'

Shelley again: 'Could you feel anything - his presence, I mean - when you got down in the square?'

'No. No trace.'

'Were you scared, Aunty Ellen?'

She had to think about that. 'No. There was a creepy side to it, because he was so near, yet in a form I couldn't associate with him. It felt ... it felt as if I wasn't surrounded, as we are most of the time, with things we understand, but by mystery. Nothing that was going to hurt me, but nothing that was going to conform to normal thinking either.'

Sherry said to her son, 'Tell Ellen what happened to you.' Damien said, 'You mean ...' and saw agreement in his mother's eyes. 'Ya need to know that I've got a girlfriend, Aunty Ellen. Pretty bumpy sort of relationship. When it's on, it's great, but it's off as much as it's on. Right now, it's OH DOUBLE EFF.' He made a weak attempt at a grin, but the pain was clear. 'The reason it hurts when it's off is that we're so close. Sometimes I can see her. I can see what she's wearing, and I know what she's doing. If I ring up, I ask her what she's wearing, and when she tells me, it's what I thought. Sometimes I ask her to tell me who's been to their house that day, and when she tells me, I know already. But if I tell her about it - that's ... if I tell her what I know - she goes funny, and doesn't want me near her.'

'She's too young to handle it,' Ellen said. 'It's no small thing to be that close to anybody. She's afraid of losing her autonomy to someone - I have to say this, sorry Damien - she still isn't sure she can trust. No, sorry, someone she isn't sure she *wants* to trust.'

The young man 's eyes filled with excitement. 'That's right!' He looked at his mother, who said 'Tell her about Monday night.' Damien wriggled in his seat, and fingered his mug with awkward theatricality. 'She borrowed my car to go to some friends in Geelong. Anyhow I woke up in the middle of the night, about 1 am it would have been, and I could see her in front of me, as close and clear to me as you are. She said to me - and I half knew I was awake, but I think part of me thought it was a dream ... you know how sometimes you don't know

which is which ... she said to me "I shouldn't have done it, and I'll show you where your car is. I'll lead you there." And she disappeared. And I woke mum and I asked if I could borrow her car. And she said a few things I won't mention at the moment' - Ellen could feel their bond in the sheepishness mother and son exuded - 'and I drove to Geelong, right through, past Bell's Beach, past the lighthouse at Airey's, and onto the Great Ocean Road. You know how winding it is.' Ellen signalled that she did. 'And I found the car - my car - stuck right on the edge of a drop, with waves thrashing wildly at the bottom, and it was just perching there, front wheels hanging in the air, resting on the chassis, and Gloria - that's her name, and yeah, I know it's a bit over the top, but it really is - she was sitting in the back seat ...' He paused; his mother added the next line.

'And there was no one else.'

Her son grew more animated. 'She'd gone for a drive with this chap. In my car, if you don't mind. And they'd had sex. And he'd got real steamed up, and he started to drive in the wrong direction, and he was driving more and more wildly, and she realised he wanted to kill himself. Kill them both. Sex and death! He was one crazy bugger! And she didn't know if it was best to try to stop him, or let him go on and maybe calm down. Then she decided he was getting worse, he wasn't getting any calmer, and she told me she felt shocking about me, and she decided that what he was trying to do - kill them both - was right. So she grabbed the wheel just as they were taking a curve, and tried to send the car over. And he, for some reason, jammed on the brakes at that moment, so they didn't go over. They ran off the edge, and sort of hung in the balance, and he yelled "You're right! I should have let you do it" and he staggered into the night, and she thinks he must have hitched a ride back to Geelong, because a car stopped after a while, with two blokes in it, and they couldn't pull my car back on the road, so they offered to drive her to Geelong, but she said no, she'd stay with the car, and she'd see if she could contact me. These fellas asked her for my phone number but she wouldn't give it to them. She said to them,

if I can't reach him in my own way, I don't deserve to reach him, and I'll have to take whatever that turns out to mean. I'm sure she meant she'd climb down the rocks and jump in the water.' He shuddered. 'So I found her, and I put a rope onto my car and I managed to pull it back on the road, and I let her have mum's car, and she followed me. And we got back here about dawn.' His agitation was calming now, as he approached the true mystery of his tale. 'She got out of mum's car and came over to me. And I could tell she wanted to put her head on my chest, and make it up with me, but something stubborn in her refused to do that. She said, "When I know how to say sorry, I'll say it." And off she went. There's a taxi rank near the shops, she'd have gone there. And I haven't heard from her since.'

He slumped. Something about him invited sympathy and something else, Ellen could tell, was staring at a mystery, wanting someone to be brave enough to give it meaning. Ellen said, 'She betrayed you. She wants someone to show her that the betrayal has led to better love, deeper wisdom, not the shame she feels, not the weakness she knows is her position, where you could walk away from her and nobody would blame you.'

'I know that, Aunty Ellen,' the young man said, 'but she doesn't, and my problem is, how do I get her to understand it the way you do?'

Ellen could feel her sister's eyes on her: what she had to do was clear. 'I'd like to talk to her.'

'I'd be really glad if you would, Aunt Ellen. Someone's got to break the silence, but she wouldn't want it to be one of us. She might talk to you.' A pretence of hope infiltrated the young man's voice.

So Ellen, equipped with Gloria's number, thought about timing, and approach. She rang three times, getting only an answering machine, and hung up at once. The fourth time she rang, late one night, she started to put a message onto the machine, then a voice broke in.

'Who is it?'

'My name is Ellen Marriott. I'm the aunt of your friend Damien. He says you've left him without telling him why. He's asked me to con-

tact you. He says if you're determined to leave him he'll have to accept that that's what you want, but he feels he has the right to know why you're doing it. He thought you might talk to me because I'm a stranger. I won't take up much of your time. I'd like to meet you, you can tell me whatever you want to say, and I'll pass it back to Damien. After that I won't bother you again. Let's make an arrangement.'

Gloria sounded flustered. 'It isn't like that at all!' she called; Ellen remained distant, cool: 'Give me a time and place to meet, and you can sort out my misunderstanding. Damien's misunderstanding. Meet me, tell me whatever you want to say, and I'll pass it on. Exactly as you would wish. I won't add anything, or leave anything out. I won't interpret. The message will be yours.'

Gloria could almost be heard sulking, feeling caught, resentful; but she made an arrangement to meet outside her work at lunchtime the following day. Ellen spent a long time looking at her clothes. At all events, she thought, I mustn't look like someone - anyone - this Gloria dislikes. She'll have long black hair hiding her face; I have to be open. Managing the office at a panelbeater's, she'll be dressed the way men expect her to look; I'll have to do the same. She reached out a hand for the suit she'd worn on her last day in parliament; she could almost hear Carlos - or was it the Prime Minister? - laughing: 'Ellen, you wouldn't be out to trick that young woman would you?' to which she gave her answer: an inward smile, and three quick nods of her head. She hung the suit on a hook for the morning.

They met outside the panelbeating shop. Gloria inspected her visitor closely, then, apparently approving, or at least accepting, she invited her to get into a large, shiny car. 'My boss's,' she said. 'He's in Adelaide. A pity they don't leave him there, I could have this all the time.' Ellen thought of Damien's rusty vehicle, with half a dozen paint jobs on the hulk. She decided not to comment.

In a better suburb, they stopped at a smart cafe. Gloria went to a table she liked, and made signals to the woman at the counter, who set

about making things. Ellen was struck by Gloria's composure. Wasn't she supposed to be giving account of herself?

When their bowls of soup arrived, Gloria got to business. 'What's Damien want?'

'He wants to know where you're at. He wants, very simply, to hear from you.'

Gloria backed away from this. 'Tell me something about yourself.'

Ellen told her about her years in parliament, the death of Carlos, her search for a new direction, her trip to Spain - and a strange incident that had taken place in Lisbon, when she'd opened her door for the return of her husband from the dead. This activated Gloria, who suddenly opened up to the older woman.

'You didn't go far enough. You went as far as you could, I suppose, but not as far as there is to go.'

'Tell me what you mean.'

Gloria said, 'I've been to the edge. The edge of the cliff, the edge of life, where it crosses into death. It's a place you can't come back from.'

'Of course you can. Look at you. Your clothes, your hands ... give me your hands.' Gloria nervously extended her fingers for Ellen to hold. Ellen took Gloria's right hand in her left, then offered her own right hand for Gloria to hold. They looked at each other, Gloria, at least, a little surprised at this development, then their regard turned into something close to a contest of will, eyes locked on each other. Ellen said, 'It's wrong to think of where you are, where you've been, as a place. It did happen somewhere, true, but it's a state of mind. An insight, actually, into the way life is shadowed by death, the two of them being companions, almost. We only want to know about one - life - because it's more comfortable for us, but neither can exist without the other. That's something you've got to teach Damien. He's ready to learn. He's very receptive.'

Gloria said - their hands still clasping each other - 'I don't want to share it. He's lovely. I couldn't find fault with him. I don't. He's been very good for me. He let me drive home in his mother's car after I ... '

'Fucked another man. Which we can translate quite easily as *made a mistake*.'

'That's the strange part of it,' Gloria said. 'It turned out not to be a mistake. I felt so rotten about it that I tried to kill myself. And that's how I got to where I am now.'

'Share it.'

'I can't. I don't want to.'

'If you think about it,' Ellen said, and their hands were still locked firmly on each other, 'you already have. You've told me. You've shown yourself clearly to me, and now I know. Will you let me tell Damien? And I'm asking more than that. Will you drive him to where it happened? He'll have the chance to pull the wheel and run you over the edge. He won't, he loves his life too well, but you'll have cut a hole in the veil between you, and he'll be able to join you because you'll have shared something that's so precious to you, because you know - and I'm fortunate enough to know too - how rare it is for humans to see beyond the veil, to know what life is, because, though you and I are still in the land of the living, we know what it would be like to take that step ...'

She let Gloria's hand go, and gently withdrew her hand from the younger woman's grip. 'Will you do that for me? For all the people who haven't been where we've been?' She felt the younger woman was conceding. 'We can't keep anything to ourselves,' Ellen said. 'If we could, there'd be no such thing as love, because we'd say it's too precious to give away.' They smiled at each other. Gloria brushed her hair from her face. 'You've convinced me. Tell Damien to drop around tonight. We need to talk.'

Three strikes

'All right lads', Denis said. 'I'll just get my lawyer, and I'll be happy to oblige.' The police said he couldn't make phone calls, and he had to come at once. 'No problem, boys. My lawyer's in the next room, as ready as I am. You there Donald?' A wiry, sharp-faced man appeared in the doorway. 'These gentlemen,' Denis said, waving airily at the cops, 'think I may be able to help them with certain matters. I've told them we'd be happy to do so. Okay by you?' Donald, though impassive, had the look of a man who enjoyed a fight. He stepped forward.

The sergeant, gaunt and poorly trained, said, 'No, Mr O'Connell, we've had no instructions about lawyers, you won't be able to bring ... ' he found it hard to call Donald 'this gentleman' but couldn't see how to avoid it '... this gentleman with you. You're facing questioning on a serious matter.'

'The very reason I might need him,' Denis said. 'Outline my rights, would you Donald?'

Donald did so, aggressively and effectively, and the four men were soon on their way to police headquarters. 'A beautiful morning,' Denis announced as their car passed the cathedral where he intended to get married when his girlfriend had given birth to the child she was carrying and had slimmed to marriageable girth again. The sergeant said, 'Let's hope it stays that way, eh?', striving to get on top of this breezy crook. 'I'm sure it will,' Denis said, 'though I suppose the game you gentlemen are in is pretty unpredictable. Do your wives ever worry about you coming home at the end of the day?' The younger cop wanted to punch this bastard in the front seat, but felt overpowered by the lawyer beside him. 'My wife doesn't worry, mate,' he said. 'What about yours?'

'She'll be sitting up in bed this very minute, rubbing her tummy, and waiting for me to get home!' Denis liked to make sexual taunts, knowing he'd never be on the other end of them. They travelled in silence a few blocks, then, as the police tower came in sight, Donald said confidentially to his friend, 'Did I ever tell you about the chap the cops dangled out of a skyscraper in Chicago?' Denis said cheerily, 'After a confession, were they?'

'They were. And they couldn't get it. So it seems they opened the window and held him out. They said they'd let go if he didn't sign what they'd typed out. He was pretty quick, this chap. He yelled out that he'd sign whatever they liked, but he had a biro in his pocket, and he made a mark on the bricks, and he put his initials next to the mark. I suppose he dropped the biro as they pulled him in. So the cops got their confession, but when the case came up, this chap told the judge it had been extracted by the cops promising to drop him twenty stories. The judge called a halt to his trial and he checked, and sure enough, a few feet below the window of the room where the cops had questioned him, there was a blue line and the man's initials. The judge threw it out of court.' Donald eyed the cops shrewdly, and Denis, as they pulled up, said noisily, 'All right gentlemen, who do we have to talk to before I get to my office?' The cops, decidedly on the back foot, asked the two men to accompany them in the lift.

Two hours later Denis bought Donald a whiskey in the Britannica, a couple of blocks from the police tower. 'Cheers!' they said, satisfied with the morning's work. 'A pity our constabulary's so poorly educated,' Denis said. 'It means they can't do their job.' The two men laughed. Denis pulled a roll of notes from his pocket. 'Here's a couple of hundred to go on with. I still owe you three. And you get first choice of the blocks. There's about two-fifty in all, but you'll want one along the river, they're the ones to go for.' Donald asked if Denis and Molly were going to pick a riverside block. 'Only as an investment. It's too far from Molly's friends for us to live there. She likes to be close. And I'll do anything, mate, anything, to keep her happy, because while she's happy

she makes me a very satisfied man indeed!' The pleasure that beamed from his face was entirely sexual. 'So you're good together?' Donald said, looking lonely.

'Yes,' said Denis, toying with his glass, 'I had a lot of women, but when Molly came along, it was different. For a start, I respected her, and that was uncommon for me, I have to admit. And I saw very early on that she believed in me. As long as I made her happy, she didn't bother herself about anything I might be doing, she accepted whatever I told her. Don't imagine she's indifferent, she's not. When her old grandad passed away, she wept for days. I'd go to bed, leaving her brooding by the fire, then after a while this wild thing would get in with me. Wow! I can hardly wait till a few more of the Byrnes pass on! I hope they don't leave it too long!' He grinned. 'One more, then I must get home and see how she is.'

Molly was sitting up in bed, writing letters, a pad on her knees and a pile of pillows behind her: 'living in her body', Denis called it. Warmth ran through her when she heard the door open. Her man was home. She'd listen to his account of the morning, they'd make love and lunch, in that order, then she'd see him leave for his next excursion. She missed him when he wasn't there, but he couldn't return if he didn't leave, and it was the response, immediate, and full of need for her, that he gave when she summoned, that affirmed the ties, the bond, between them. 'I feel married already,' she told him when he sat on their bed. 'How much better will I be able to feel when we've tied the knot?' His smile was full of the pleasure of possession. 'It may not seem very different. It's more of an affirmation for others than for the couple, if they're sure of each other.' She rubbed her tummy where her first swelling was beginning to show. 'You haven't kissed me yet.'

'I didn't want to come between you and whoever you're writing to.'

'It's my cousin Fran in Darwin, and I want you to come between us.' She pushed writing pad, pen and newspaper onto the floor and slid deeper into the bed. Starting to undress, he said, 'Can't do much with a suit on.' She pulled his pillow against hers and said, laughter in her

voice, 'Hang up your things, don't throw them on the floor.' He said, throwing things off as quickly as he could, 'You'd reprove me if I didn't hurry. I'd face criticism. It'd be like the Communist Party!' They were both laughing as he lifted the bedding to be where she was. She reached to take hold of him, wanting to feel him grow hard. 'What did you do with your morning?' He stretched out to let her fondle him: 'Nothing that mattered more than this.' She sighed deeply, and he knew she'd roll on him, and then she'd have that swelling tummy next to his, and he'd kiss the breasts she'd lower into his hands, and they could lose themselves in love-making. She rolled on him, as he'd known she would, and he thought, again, how she made him think of the earth rotating - no thought behind it, but inevitable, all-embracing, incurious, dangerously powerful if you got in the way - or if you refused to be there when she wanted you. 'I have never, ever, wanted anything so much as I want you,' he said, 'in my whole blessed, blasted, footloose, feckless, irresponsible life!' She began to swing herself about with vigor - her capturing, invasive stage, he called it when, lying together afterwards, he amused her by describing what she'd been like. She always said, 'Was it good for you darling?' and his reply, every time, was to close his eyes and press his forehead against her cheek, kiss her shoulder, squeeze her, then, slowly, to let go, lying beneath in a content she'd created in him. If they ever discussed this, away from the bed, she would say, 'I've been good for you, haven't I?' and he would nod, smiling faintly. 'You must never leave. If you go, I'll know my luck's run out. I'd be pretty close to the end, if that were to happen.'

Years passed. The child was born, Belinda Jane. Molly was a doting mother. When she'd slimmed to her girlhood shape, she and Denis were married in the Catholic cathedral, a matter arranged with delicacy and deceit through Denis's contacts. The priest who married them came from the country town where Molly's parents lived; he was full of flattery when he saw what a striking woman she'd become. Her baby - Belinda Jane - was held through the ceremony by one of her sisters. The honeymoon - a strange word, in the circumstances, but Molly

was determined to have one: 'What am I going to tell Belinda, when she asks?' - was a long drive through northern New South Wales and southern Queensland, staying at hotels, camping occasionally. 'These are the years,' Denis said, as they made tea over a roadside fire, while a sunset coloured the heavens, 'of our expansion. Do you realise, darling? Sometimes you're at the crest of a wave, and you don't know it. I don't mean there's something bad around the corner, I just mean that some things are so good that it's hard to imagine anything better.' When Belinda was asleep - and Denis loved to play with her, to make her giggle and gurgle - the parents - not so long ago a couple held together only by their lustful appreciation of each other - took off their clothes and stood arm in arm before entering their tent. 'You're like a river in flood,' he said. 'There is no stopping you!' She reflected, unusually for her: 'You're like a fire. You come whirling up from nowhere, taking over everything, and when you've passed, nothing's the same. My God, Denis, I'm glad you passed my way!'

Belinda went to school, and Molly said she wanted another child. Denis faked enthusiasm, but had to repress a feeling that the earth was moving beneath his feet. Events were making his old self - that cocky, imaginative, charm-laden crook - untenable. He had to do something to re-establish what he'd been, or he'd be nothing more than husband of Molly, father of two - a nobody, if you pleased! He looked around for opportunities.

At the office one morning - the same old office, twice refitted - he had a call from Donald. Bluster was the only way Denis could cope with a feeling that the years since he'd seen the lawyer had not so much slipped by as collapsed, like an old mineshaft caving in. 'Haven't heard from you in years, you old bastard! What are you doing these days? For that matter, where are you drinking?' Donald said that an ulcer had finished off his pub-going days. 'I couldn't stand there with a lemon squash and watch other bastards pouring it down, so I gave up.' Denis wondered why he'd rung. 'What a fate! Hope it doesn't happen to me! Anyhow, what can I do for you, Donald? Your credit's still high around

here. You know that subdivision we did? After the parliamentary probe was over, I took back all the blocks I'd put in the names of Molly's family - not that any of them ever knew they owned them! - and sold them off very nicely. And I'm happy to say that Molly and I gave a few family dinners which I'd like to think were more than sufficient repayment for the use of their names.'

Donald said, 'Well, I hope you haven't lost your skills, because I've got something else that could interest you. Would you like to talk about it?' Denis assured him nothing could be of greater interest, and they agreed on lunch the following day.

They met at a fashionable dining room across the road from state parliament. Donald got down to business over their first drink - a rare glass of wine for him. 'There hasn't been much in the papers yet, but the boys over the road are looking for somewhere to build a new airport.'

'The betting seems to be that it'll be north of the present one.'

'That may well be, but what isn't generally known is that Civil Aviation is gathering all sorts of information, mostly to do with wind speeds, frequency of turbulence, sudden gusts, that sort of thing. If you want a trouble-free airport you need more than broad acres. Conditions have to be right. Planes are vulnerable as they're landing.'

'Where do we come in, my friend?'

'We want all the technical information Civil Aviation's got. And it so happens that of all the people with access to that information, there is one who bears the name of Byrne!'

'Shit eh!' Denis said, smiling broadly.

'And I'm reliably informed that he does what he shouldn't do.'

'A Byrne?' Denis was still grinning.

'He writes most of his reports in a bungalow in his back yard.'

'Not a very secure spot for state secrets!'

'No indeed. Now what we want is to find out when he and his family are going to be away from home - for sure; no uncertainties - so we can get in, copy what we need, and put it back without anyone being any the wiser. Except us, of course.'

'A Byrne. Tell me more about him.'

That night Denis suggested to Molly that they should start a new family tradition - an outdoor barbecue at the time of the spring race meetings. 'All living members of your family and mine. How about it? Here. We've got all the room we'd need!' Molly liked the idea. 'We'll have it on our wedding anniversary, and ...' she took her husband by the hand '... we'll try to have something to announce on the day!' He knew what she meant.

'Great!'

Donald would have liked it earlier, but had to accept what Denis gave him. 'Molly hadn't even heard of the Byrne who works at the Bureau, but after a bit of looking at family trees, it occurred to her to wonder where Aunt Ursula's children might be living these days. I tell you, I was very relieved when she thought of them: I knew I couldn't name our man. And that's why, this time, everything has to be in your name, mate, because I mustn't be anywhere near it. You appreciate that, of course.'

'Of course.' The two men saw in each other's eyes an unspoken assessment of their needs - trust, honesty in being dishonest, frankness, quickness of wit. Denis said to his partner, 'The trap in playing a wide game is that you start to play it on those who're on your side, and even on yourself. When that happens, you're heading for the rocks, mate, the rocks!' Donald acknowledged their need with a nod. 'We've done a lot together over the years; we'll make a quid or two out of this!'

When the spring racing carnival came around, the city was at its loveliest, poised between its winter of football and summer of cricket. Denis thought, not for the first time, that he'd like to be a member of the cricket club so he could go to the big games, but he'd never put his name on the waiting list and, as he grumbled, 'It's the only thing in this town you can't fudge!' Octavian Byrne was, however, he discovered, a member. Octavian rang several times, once he'd got his invitation, to explain why particular dates didn't suit him, were impossible, were less than ideal, et cetera. 'Let's forget about him,' Molly said. 'I didn't know

I had such a crank in my family.' Denis said they should humor him. 'His job sounds interesting, and if he's difficult, that might mean he's interesting too!' Molly, suspecting nothing, went along with this, and when the day arrived for the barbecue, Octavian and his wife - they had no children - were among the first to arrive. Denis found him charming. Years of eccentricity had shaped his body; he knocked a glass off a bench and caught it before it hit the ground. 'If you're as awkward as I am,' he told his hosts, 'you have to be quick. It's nature's compensation.' He had a name, an expression, for everything: it was as if the world had to be renamed, before he could do anything with it. Denis soon had him talking about the Bureau of Meteorology. 'It's the sort of place, thank God, where so long as you can do your job you don't need to be good with the public. Nobody cares if I'm not *consumer-friendly*! I can have anything I want, within reason, so long as I get things done. Well, nobody's ever been able to say I don't get things done!' He beamed on Molly and asked her to tell him more about their familial link. 'Before I do,' said Molly, at her most beguiling, 'tell me how you came by your first name.'

Octavian was delighted. His wife slipped away. 'My father,' he said, 'was one of the weakest, most hen-pecked men you could ever conceive. Speaking of which, I don't know how he ever did his part in bringing me into the world!' He grinned, so amiably that Denis felt a twinge at having seduced him from his home so it could be ... not robbed, investigated. 'And my mother,' he continued, 'was as Irish as Paddy's pig. And they had an argument - this is when I was still on the way - over what they'd call me. My mother wanted me to be called Cuchulain, if you please. As my first name, the one that everyone'd use. Cuchulain!' he snorted. 'And my father wanted me to be called ... have a guess!'

Something about the brightness in his visitor's eyes gave Denis the clue: 'He wanted you to be called *Denis*!'

'Ten out of ten!' cried Octavian. 'And my mother wouldn't have it. She wasn't going to have any common name - sorry my boy ...' He put his arm around his host '... for this precious infant she had inside her.'

He flashed a look at Molly, who flushed, and Denis realised that he'd never seen his wife caught out in this way: truly a first, and he realised in the same moment that Octavian's insight - plainly registered on his face - had made him, Denis, more loving of his wife than he'd been in ages. Octavian, eccentric as he was, brought a special delight to human connections. Denis responded to the arm around his shoulder by putting his arm around his visitor's waist. 'Anyhow,' the visitor went on, 'they settled it eventually. My name was their peace treaty. *Robert, Denis, Cuchulain, Octavian Byrne!* Laugh if you like. Nobody realises how ridiculous it is better than I do. When my mother insisted on Cuchulain, my father insisted on Octavian. Mother shouted and cried but for once in her married life, and I'm prepared to wager any sum I can lay my hands on that it would have been the first time, she couldn't make father budge. The worm had not only turned, he was fighting back, if you can say such a thing about a worm!' He laughed. 'So for his Denis she gave me the plain, unadorned, modest little cognomen Robert, and against her Cuchulain he opposed Octavian. I don't know where he got it, but it sounds operatic, not that he'd ever have been inside a place where they put on such things. It was last, you notice. But, after a childhood and a boyhood of being Robert, I decided, on the first anniversary of my father's death, and as I turned twenty-one, to take the name my father had given me. And I did it because I knew - I felt it very strongly - that it suited me. I would be, and I would remain, Octavian Byrne. I went to the register of births, deaths and marriages, and I struck out the other three names. I've got one, and it commemorates what was almost certainly the only victory my father ever had over my mother!'

Holding this unlikely visitor, and remembering that at this very minute Donald would be searching Octavian's papers for anything that might be commercially valuable, Denis looked at his wife. He could tell that this talk of naming a child during its pre-birth months was driving Molly to the point of making the announcement she wanted to give the family. He looked into her eyes, affirming her wish. 'Talking of names,' he said, 'what are we going to call our next one darling?'

Octavian was quick. 'Next one? Has this occasion been called to make a family announcement?' Molly was big with pride. 'It has! But we haven't discussed names yet, have we Denis. What would you suggest ... Octavian?' She thought his name ridiculous, and yet, coming as it did from a world far from hers, it distinguished him: 'I'd like very much to hear what you think.'

'I'm clear on that,' he said. 'As you can be when you haven't got any of your own. Julian if it's a boy, and Grace if it's a girl.'

'Hm, that's interesting, 'Molly said. 'Why did you pick those two?'

'Julian because it comes from Julius, which I like even better, but the kid wouldn't appreciate the ribbing he'd get at school about being a dictatorial Caesar; and as for Grace, it's the finest of human qualities and you couldn't hope for a better name. Grace.' He beamed: the word suggested something he palpably lacked, in body, and yet had acquired, in some mysterious, compensatory, way, in spirit. 'Grace,' he repeated, and Denis and Molly said the word too, savouring it as something they hadn't expected to visit their lives.

Molly's second child, when it was born, was also a girl and so Belinda acquired a sister Grace. And by the time of the little girl's second birthday Donald and Denis had bought up, and re-sold, tracts of land to the city's north on the basis of what they called incontrovertible evidence of where land would be needed for the new airport and the road joining it to the city. They were, as Denis put it, pleasantly distant from the ugly suggestions voiced when the location of the airport was announced that certain friends of the government, associates and supporters, had cashed in. Questions were asked in the House, and newspaper headlines focused on the matter. Then the domesticity of the O'Connell household was disturbed by a phone call from Octavian: he'd been following the controversy, had decided that the people who'd made big money from the land transactions must have had prior knowledge of where to buy, and had remembered a sensation he'd experienced on the day of the barbecue. 'When I came back to my bungalow,' he told Molly, 'I felt certain that somebody had been there. On the day of your

first barbecue, you remember. And I looked around very thoroughly, and I couldn't find any trace of any other person, and nothing was missing, but I could feel it. Someone had been there. You know what I mean? You're a Byrne, you must have that knowledge available to you. We've all got it. Not just Byrnes, but some families have it more highly developed than others.' He wanted to know if Molly and Denis could give him a list of the people who'd been there on that balmy spring day when a cloudless sky had suggested the impossibility of evil, even of double-dealing. And yet someone had entered while he was away. 'It's giving me uneasy feelings, Molly. Who could have known what I had there? Or that I was going to be out for the afternoon? I'm troubled, Molly, troubled.'

Denis told Donald, at another of those lunches across the road from parliament, about the concerns of Octavian. Donald laughed at the name. Denis smiled. 'Silly, isn't it. But he has charm. And he's got a mousey little wife that I suspect watches for give-away signs while he holds the floor. He's a good talker. Very instinctual. He doesn't claim to have found any trace of you, but he knew someone had been there.'

'Well,' Donald said, 'our involvement in the airport deals is now a pile of BHP shares owned by Alpha Securities which, at a suitable time, can be put into yours and my names. There's no trace. If anyone comes looking, they'll find that we - sorry, I - owned some land at one stage, and sold it again at a nice mark-up. My interest in the land was purely agricultural, you understand.' Denis grinned. 'Bullshit!' They knew each other's comic routines as well as they did everything else. 'As I said, purely agricultural!' They laughed. 'Can't you get some quack to fix your ulcer,' Denis said, 'so you can drink at least half as much as you used to do?' And yet, despite the reassurances, Denis was troubled. There *was* evidence: Octavian's intuitive grasp of what had happened. 'I'm starting to believe in ghosts,' Denis told himself, and then he put the idea aside. Intuitive knowledge *was* knowledge, and his only safety, his only security against Molly knowing about the hidden facet of her husband was that Octavian appeared not to suspect his hosts on the day

of the barbecue. Analysing the situation, trying to make sure that what was hidden remained so, Denis perceived that he was his own worst enemy: his knowledge of Octavian's half-knowledge might make him do something silly, inconsistent, fatally revealing. Looking at his children playing in the garden, or playing on the loungeroom floor, put a burden on him: he had connections of immense value that could be lost. He thanked God for Molly's blind acceptance, her disinclination to look into anything that made her happy. She was a fool, he thought, and thanked God again, but half knew, even as he closed his mind to it, that he despised the woman he loved as much as he loved her. If she hadn't been able to work him out by now, she didn't deserve the two beautiful daughters she'd brought into the world. In the war of his affections, Denis found himself siding with the children, not his wife.

But he knew well enough what needed to be covered, and how to do it.

He continued his buying and selling; estate agents in areas he was interested in supplied him with lists. He pored over these, maps and street directory beside him, occasionally marking one as worth inspection. One morning an address caught his attention; he checked the phone book. It was Octavian's house; the operatically named relative was moving. He drove past, and sure enough, there was a sign. It was for sale.

Why?

Talking to his children that night, he realised his isolation. It was something he'd always craved, in the past, and now he felt it excluded him from some dimension of living that others enjoyed. He watched Molly, moving about the kitchen, speaking to her girls, quite without self-consciousness: 'a natural', Denis had always described her. Restless, fidgety, and abstracted in a way that even the children noticed, Denis realised that the extra dimension of awareness, of surreptitious activity which had always been his means of making money, was something that separated him from ordinary people. I don't love anybody, he realised, I never have. I've gone through the motions of normality, of marital

affection, because it's provided my secret self with cover. My family is my best disguise. He looked at Grace, trying to put a garment on a doll, and tears came to his eyes. Logically, he saw, he could betray his family, even - unthinkable as it had been a moment before - even Grace. The love of my life, he thought, regarding the child, and more tears ran down his face. When Molly came to tell the children their tea was ready, she noticed. 'Whatever's wrong? How many years have we lived together and I've never seen you crying. Never a tear except when you've been laughing too hard. Whatever's wrong, Denis?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I had this terrible fear that I was going to lose you and the children. Don't ask me how I'm going to lose you. I just know I will, and it's upset me, as you see.' He felt wracked by an agony he couldn't understand. 'Of course you're not going to lose us,' Molly said. 'We're not going to run away! Whatever's put this nonsense into your head? Denis? Where did this silly idea come from?' For Molly, problems had an external source. Denis experienced it differently; it was as if, in some geological, perhaps volcanic, upheaval, a strand of mineral below the surface was being brought into the open, shown clearly in the light of day. 'It's something about my nature that I don't know how to deal with,' he murmured. She had no idea what these words could represent. 'You've always been the best-organised, most successful man I've known. Don't you start cracking up, for heaven's sake, or where will we all be then?' She wanted to admonish him further, but realised that, silly - indeed almost impossible - as it might be, he was vulnerable. He was open, exposed, and things that had been hidden, even to himself, were finding their way out. 'You need a few days off,' Molly said. 'A holiday. We're going away somewhere. A trip. Taking a break. A change.' She felt inadequate without his strength behind her. 'It's only a question of where we'll go. Where would you like? It's your choice. It's for you to say.' She wanted to keep talking, to keep her confidence upright, but eventually she had to wait for his reply. The children too, Belinda and Grace, were staring at their father.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I just don't know. I need a day or two to think.'

The next morning he was sitting in his office when the phone rang.

'Denis O'Connell.'

'Denis it's Nadia Byrne.' She seemed to expect that he'd know who she was, but he had to think. 'Oh yes Mrs Byrne.' What on earth was she ringing for?

'Call me Nadia. I'm ringing about Octavian. I need to see you. As you know, he's got our house for sale ...'

'Why would I know that?'

'I saw you driving past.' Flattened very smartly, he thought. 'Well, yes I did. I didn't realise there was anyone home.' He wondered how much more he'd have to say to get past this point, but she seemed relieved. 'It gave me the courage to ring. You're in danger. Octavian blames you for a break-in that happened the day we came to your barbecue.' Denis was furious. Fuck their fucking break-in! Fucking Octavian hadn't been hurt by it, it benefited others! What else is knowledge for? 'Danger? What do you mean? That's a nasty word to use!'

'I need to see you. To explain. Octavian's the gentlest soul, but there's a really mad streak in him and it's got control of him. He thinks he's a virtuous knight ... I know it sounds silly, but it's how he is ... if his cause is just, it doesn't matter what he does. You probably think I'm mad, but believe me, I know what I'm saying's right.' Denis wiped his brow with a slightly sweaty hand. 'When do you want to see me?' She had her answer ready. 'Now.'

As soon as he hung up, the phone rang again. Never rains but it fuckin pours, he thought. Who's the next nut? 'Denis O'Connell.'

It was Donald. 'Do you want a mission? I can't get away at the moment. My daughter's going through a rough spot. Detoxification is the word they use. Funny how we can all see through the jargon - the bullshit - of other professions, yet we use our own bullshit without even blushing.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I had an old lady in here yesterday who claims that her family own an island not far from the Whitsundays. One minute she goes on about a tropical paradise, the next minute it's a bit of rock. She says the Queensland government claims it but I think there's a loophole in the act. I want to know if the place has got any prospects.'

'You want me to go up?'

'Who better? If you think it's any good we'll talk terms when you get back.'

The holiday Molly said he needed had been dropped in his lap. He thought of ringing home, but remembered he still had Mrs ... Nadia ... to deal with. When she arrived, she surprised him. She was distraught, and it suited her. She was slim, and unobtrusively shapely and he found himself wondering if his years with the exuberantly buxom Molly mightn't have dulled other sides of his awareness. 'Nadia. Sit down and tell me everything you want to say.' He sat on the same side of the desk, and looked at her, listening hard.

'Octavian couldn't stop thinking about his room being broken into. I told him that if nothing had been taken it didn't matter, but he'd insist that something had been taken. Knowledge has been taken, he'd say. He used to sound as if he was dealing with a ... what's the collective noun for a group of magicians?' It was the silliest question Denis had ever been asked. 'A top-hat?' he suggested. Nadia laughed and her face filled with radiance. 'I had an idea you'd be like that!' My God, Denis thought, she thinks I'm in danger and she's halfway or further to being in love with me. It occurred to him that Nadia had led a life without excitement, drama, or any of the dangerous storms humans can't keep away from. 'You need to hide,' she told him. 'He's got a pistol. It's a funny old thing, but I'm sure it works. Anything Octavian owned would do what it was supposed to. And right now it would be supposed to do away with you.' Denis hardly knew whether to laugh or jump out the window. 'Where the bloody hell is he?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I haven't seen him for days. On Sunday, he said he was going for a walk. When he didn't come back, I knew he was

away on one of his trips ...' She pointed to her brain. Denis looked at her; fear and excitement had brought her to life. 'Funny thing, a minute ago a man I know asked me to do a job for him in the Whitsundays.' She looked uncertain. 'Off the Queensland coast. I doubt if your husband would find me there, especially the place I'm supposed to inspect. Away from the beaten track, I'm told.' Mention of his journey heightened the excitement in her eyes. 'When are you going?' He studied her ruthlessly, sexually, and made a decision. 'Today, and you're coming with me.'

A foolish, uncluttered acceptance filled her being. 'I had an idea you'd say that. Perhaps it's why I came. All right, let's go.' Denis rang Donald, got more details, rang a taxi, and within the hour they were at the airport - the new one, built on land that had once, and briefly, belonged to his ally. Boarding the plane to fly north, Denis dropped back a pace to study his new ally, and wondered how long she'd be worth what he was giving up so he could have her. Or could an apologetic phone call to Molly - back later in the week, sorry about the short notice: that sort of thing - do the trick? He was buggered if he knew and buggered if he cared. He was going to check out an island, and check out Nadia Byrne - the name was starting to grow on him - at one and the same time.

They flew, they hired a boat, they found the island. Both of Donald's descriptions applied. On the outer, ocean side, it was a craggy place, calling to mind the idea of the ocean as a place of endless questing. The inner, landward side was densely vegetated; it took Denis and Nadia some time to find their way through luxuriant growth and discover the remains of a cottage. The sadness, and the mystery of it, drew them together. Nadia pressed against him. 'I want you, but not here.' They undressed at the edge of the vegetation, then advanced on the glorious water over sand that responded to the pressures of their feet. She took his hand; her eyes filled with a question and a declaration of openness, readiness for them to go ahead. They drew each other down and satisfied themselves with the warm sand as their bed-linen. When their first rush was over, she put his hand on her breast and looked into the sky.

'What we've done is madness, and it's wonderful. I never want to leave.' Denis, rapacious as he was, had the grace - he hadn't begun to miss his family yet - to say, 'I'm telling Donald to grab it. You might be coming back one day. Maybe you'll end up living here, if his plans go ahead.' Still staring at the sky, with sand here and there on her white skin, she asked, 'Will you live here with me? Have you made that much commitment?' It crossed his mind that the scene they were playing would seem pretty lousy if he was seeing it on film - but he was somewhere uncertain on the continuum from acting to living, from reality to make-believe. He wondered if he would ring Molly that night, or just disappear. He had money in accounts, under various names: he could start again in the north, doing what he'd done in the south, using his wits to divest other people of dollars. He realised Nadia was waiting for an answer. 'Let's give ourselves twenty-four hours,' he said. 'Without thought, recriminations, bargaining, or phone calls back home. Twenty-four hours of commitment to what we're doing. Then decide.' He hoped she was accepting. 'Is that a bargain?'

The depth, the foolishness of her passion only then became apparent. 'It's taken me a lifetime to find this place, this experience. I'm not going back, Denis. Even if I die here, I'm staying on.' He sat up suddenly. She was mad. Yet, looking around at the ocean, the other islands, near and far, and the great southern continent on the horizon, only distantly visible, her idiocy seemed the sanest thing possible. He said, as if bringing to the world of wakefulness, of so-called reality, the insights of a dream, 'I'm lost. I no longer know where to go or what to do. I'm naked. I'm helpless. My clothes are over there and I can no more think of putting them on than I could fly to the moon. Where do I go from here?'

'You don't,' she said, drawing him down again, her desire rising. 'You're staying with me.'

Molly rang the office when he didn't come home at lunchtime. There was nobody there. She assumed, correctly enough, that he'd been

called out unexpectedly. In the middle of the afternoon, the phone rang. She went to it, expecting Denis, but it was Octavian Byrne.

Their conversation was brief. When she put the phone down, she called the children. 'We're going up to see grandma and grandpa. We're going to stay with them for a while. Get your toys, anything you'd like to take.' When she'd packed, she put the children in the car, fastened their seatbelts, then went back inside. She took the photo of herself with Denis from above the fireplace and smashed it with the poker. Then she rushed into the kitchen, grabbed the breadknife and jabbed it into the image of her husband. She slammed the door and drove north to her parents' farm.

It was two days before Denis got back. The empty house told him that what he'd feared had come about; the mutilated photo went close to destroying him. It had a magical power, a sorcerous grip on his heart. He'd spent his whole life getting away with things, and this had at last been realised by the one who'd lived closest to him without bothering to notice. Now she knew, and her knowledge was like a poison creeping through his veins. He half-expected to die when it reached his heart - except that it already had. He was stricken. He knew that the worthwhile part of his life was over. Suddenly the analytical part of his mind flicked itself on. How had Molly found out?

Octavian.

If Octavian knew, he could be nearby, armed and even madder than his wife, who'd settled herself on an island she didn't own, with a boat he'd bought her as a means of getting from coastal town to hideaway. Paradise on her own! He wanted to sneer, but her island would be a lot safer place to be, right now. He slipped around the house, keeping well back from the windows. I can't stay here, he thought: that nut might come at any time. He thought of Donald's, but he didn't want his partner to know the mess he was in. Nobody wants to know you when you're in trouble. He fled the house, caught a taxi, and took himself to a city hotel.

As the days passed, he became increasingly irritable. Dejected. He left a message with Donald's secretary that the island was great, and he'd be around to talk about it, but he went no further. He thought of ringing Molly at her parents' farm - that was where she'd be - but he knew she'd never let him near the children. As the days passed, he realised that the only person on earth with whom he had a living, breathing awareness was Octavian. And Octavian had to be destroyed.

Denis went home. He left his car in the drive. He left lights on, night and day. From the shed at the back of the block he kept a watch on the garden of the empty house behind him - the way the avenger would come. He took a long lead and ran it along the side fence so he could have the telephone in the shed. Then he decided it would be safer to put it up a tree. And that was where he was on the night Octavian clambered over the fence and made his way to the O'Connell residence, pistol in hand. Denis watched him in the moonlight, moving around the house. As soon as he was at the front, Denis rang police headquarters.

'Can we help you?'

'You'll have to be quick.'

The police were very quick; the car could only have been a few blocks away. The moment they pulled up Octavian rushed into the back yard. As the police came down the side of the house, he tried to run to the back fence, but tripped on Denis's phone cord, and fell. The gun went off as it hit the ground. Denis ducked, clinging to a branch as if it were his life. The police ran into the back yard, pulling out weapons, but Octavian wasn't interested in them. He was gripping the cord that had brought him down, and was following it, hand over hand, as if in love with its destination. The tree. He looked up, and there, silhouetted in part, because sheltered in part by foliage, was the man who'd brought about his dishonour. He looked up, maimed, feeling the pain rushing through him like an electric shock, knowing that there was nothing he could do to his enemy before his enemy's allies grabbed him.

They grabbed him. They had him down and searched in moments. It was some time before they realised that their prisoner's attention was

on the tree. They looked up. A gorilla in a suit clambered down to greet them.

'Well done, gentlemen. If we didn't have law and order upheld by officers such as yourselves, where would we all be? Looking down the barrel of a madman's pistol. Not a very pleasant place to be, eh?'

Coming down

The younger doctor said, 'I think that's all we can do till we get him back to hospital.' Alan agreed. Four station hands carried the stretcher to the plane. The pilot strode ahead to slide the door open. The manager of the station walked with Alan. 'I'm really sorry we're losing you doctor. I want you to know we think very highly of you out here. If you and your wife ever feel like coming out to stay for a while, let's know. We'd be delighted to have you.' He held out his hand, a tender smile contrasting with his beefy frame. The man on the stretcher caught what was said. Wriggling to get a look, he caused himself pain. 'Steady Billy,' the young doctor said. 'We've got a long way to take you.' The stockman said to the older doctor, 'Am I ya last patient, doc?' Alan smiled. 'Yes, Billy, the very last. I'm giving it away.'

'Ya shouldn't,' the stockman said. 'Ya never too old unless you tell yaself ya can't do it any more. I tellya, I'm comin back. Coupla days and I'll be on me horse again.' Alan grinned, knowing that these remarks were addressed to the station manager rather than to him. 'You'll be back Billy. Bit more than a couple of days though. They'll have to get you walking again, and that thigh's going to be tender for a while.' Strange, he thought, that Billy's so desperate to get back, while something in me wants to be away. His wife had asked him why he was so certain that he wanted to leave the district he'd loved all his life, and the best he'd been able to tell her was 'It's necessary. It's a change I'm going through,' and that had never satisfied Jocelyn, nor had he expected it to, since it was as big a mystery to him as it was to her. And yet he was certain. His life had to take a new course, even though he'd never been more aware than today of how lucky he'd been. Billy was loaded into the

plane, hands were shaken, with the station manager's wife arriving at the last minute, a child in her arms, to give the doctor a kiss on the cheek. 'You've done a lot for us,' she told him. 'The best thing about it was, we always knew you were there.' Her words, full of gratitude and affection, cut the ground from under Alan's feet. He was going. He was taking to the air one last time in his God-of-mercy machine, and when he came down to earth, he'd be handing Billy over to others while he went on with all the steps, the actions, of moving to another life. He felt both elated and heavy in the heart. As the plane rushed down the bulldozed track, past the people from the station, he waved and they waved back. A minute later they were too tiny to see any more, yet he knew they'd be watching his plane fly away, and he knew that a part of him would always be in the outback, using his skills to alleviate suffering, a clean, rewarding way to live.

Why am I doing this, he asked himself: the question that wouldn't answer itself, and wouldn't go away.

As the plane reached its cruising altitude, the pilot called Alan to sit with him, so he could survey, one last time, the country he'd made his own. His colleague indicated, with a gesture of the hand, that he should do so, but Billy needed reassuring. 'How come I finished up like this?' He jabbed a dark finger at his thigh. 'I was on a horse before I could walk, I never done anything so stupid before.' Alan asked him to tell them what had happened, though he'd been told the story by the manager: Billy needed to talk. So, as the plane took them towards Broken Hill, Billy told them, in broken episodes, interrupted by grunts of pain, and sprinkled with witticisms at the expense of his employers down the years, the story of his life. Alan recognised all the symptoms of a man talking to keep out fear - that he wouldn't recover, that his employer wouldn't want him back, that he wouldn't be as good as he'd been, that - even - he wouldn't be good on his horse any more: that, finally, his identity, built up over many years of expert work and simple living, was fading. This is what it means to be aloft, Alan thought: Billy's expressing everything I've been locking away in myself because I've no more idea than he has

whether or not I'll be able to start a new life. 'That sounds like the end of the story, Billy,' called the pilot at a convenient break. 'You'll have to make do with one doctor. We're within sight of town now Alan. Come and record this for your memories!'

As Alan started to move forward, Billy called, 'Take me with you doc. I want to see it too!' Alan felt a flush of sadness though he grinned at the stockman, and the sadness remained as he sat beside the pilot. The land that had been his for thirty seven years was spread beneath him, bathed in light. It was the mildest of days, and the land, after recent rain, would be rippling with flowers. 'How many trips have you made?' the pilot asked. 'Did you ever count?' Alan shook his head. Apart from occasional rumbles from Billy, the men in the plane were silent for the remaining minutes of the flight. The pilot veered and banked slightly to give Alan a last look at the town where he'd spent his working life. When they landed, there were at least forty people there to welcome him - a photographer and a reporter from the *Barrier Times*, the Hospital Board, some grateful patients, other Air Ambulance people, a handful of colleagues, and, camera in hand, his wife.

Jocelyn. Alan moved modestly through the throng to be held in her arms. The photographer snapped busily. Those nearest the couple beamed. Everyone shook hands with Alan. Billy's stretcher was brought across and the photographer signalled that he should face the camera before he was loaded into the ambulance. 'Your last patient, doctor! We can't let this go unrecorded!' Alan knelt beside the stockman in a media representation of inspecting wounds, and was close enough to hear the injured man grumble, 'Lotta bullshit, doc, but I reckon you're worth it.' Alan took the stockman's hand. 'Thanks Billy.'

His career was over. The simplicity, the finality of it, was amazing. He'd shed everything he'd ever been, and had to find a way to go on. He turned to Jocelyn. 'May I take you to lunch, darling?' She shook her head. 'Let's go home. I want to be out of the public eye.'

It was unusual for them to be home together in the middle of the day. Jocelyn was troubled. She knew that he'd like to go into the front

room and commune with Mahler, or Mozart, or Monteverdi, settling his own emotions via their expressivity, but she couldn't allow it. She wanted him insecure so she could get through to him. 'I'm worried about Damian. I know there's something wrong.' He studied her. Their son was doing the third year of an art course at Sydney Tech. Some months earlier he'd moved out of the house they'd bought years before in Potts Point, telling them, 'It's too good. My friends aren't comfortable with it. Either that, or they want to wreck it,' and he'd moved to a warehouse in Pyrmont, close to the water. He hadn't written, or rung, since the move. 'I rang the man in charge of his course this morning,' Jocelyn told him. 'They haven't seen him for weeks. He's dropped out. He said it's not their policy to chase people if they stop attending: "they're no good to us if they don't want to be here", he told me. I tried to make him see that they had a responsibility for their students, but he backed away from that. "Painting, drawing, sculpture, photography ... we're in there trying to help. But the way they live their lives - or don't - that's none of our business." He made me so angry I hung up.' She looked at her husband. 'That's what I was doing while you were making your last flight.' He could feel the accusation pressed into him like a knife.

'Do you want to go to Sydney to have a look?' he said. Jocelyn flung it back at him. 'Don't you want to go? Don't you want to find out?'

'I want to know what's happening, but we have to do it in a way that doesn't suggest to him that we think he can't manage his own life. Young people are not as independent as they like to think, and if you bring that home to them, sometimes they'll repay you by some further irresponsibility that damages them in a way they can blame you for. If you want to have a look at the way young people are going, you have to make your inspection without them knowing.'

'That's a pretty stand-off-ish way of bringing up your only child!'

'There's usually plenty of ways of making a mess, and one way - if you're lucky - of getting it right.' She looked sullenly at him; they were deadlocked. He thought of an idea. 'Remember his mural plans that he did last year. Suppose an architect approached the art school with

a low budget project: he wanted to give a young artist a chance. Why? Because it's all his client could afford. The people at the art school recommend Damian. But where is he? Lecturers ask the students. Someone knows where he is, they get the message through to him, and the phone number to ring. He rings. You've got your contact.'

'Why did you say you and not we?'

It was a thing that had come between them before. 'Let's not get stuck on that. I'm as anxious as you are, but I think better if I think with detachment. I was trained that way, and my job's reinforced the tendency over many years.'

She wanted to slap him. She took his hand. He could feel the coldness, the grimness, in her fingers. 'Let's go to Sydney now. I want to know. I want to hear him tell us how he is.'

'Let's find out how he is. Let's do it from here. By phone. Your brother would know an architect or two. Get onto him, and get it started.'

'Your plan? You want me to put that into operation?'

'Are you saying you want me to do it?' His eyes roamed for the telephone book. 'No,' she said, 'I'm doing this. I just wanted to know that I had you with me in what I'm going to do.'

'Why not?' he said sternly. 'I'm his father.'

'And I'm his mother,' she said. 'We're different, aren't we?'

They looked at each other. It occurred to them that in bringing a child into the world they had put the possibility of their own unhappiness, even misery, into the hands - the mind, really - of this new being. In looking after their child, they nurtured their own fate, whatever it might be. And the child, growing up, had not only to carry his own responsibilities, but the weight, perhaps unsuspected, of his instigators. Creating lives and destroying them are the two poles around which humans swirl. Both, in their own way, sensed where and how they were caught. 'Perhaps you retired,' she said, 'because you knew what we were about to go through.' He responded: 'I'm certain that had something to do with it.' She said, 'Your idea of a way to find out about him is

clever, Alan, but it doesn't come naturally to me. I want to get close to him another way.'

'What do you have in mind?'

'I'm not sure yet. Now. This is probably going to throw things out quite a lot, but I want to go to Sydney today, and the plane leaves at one-forty. I'll ring from there. You'll have to go to your farewell functions alone. Sorry, but he's too important. I can't let it drift any further.' Alan agreed; she had her things packed, he saw. A few minutes later they were back at the airport; it was not lost on either of them, as she climbed into the plane bound for Sydney, that there had been a role reversal. She turned in the doorway to see him smiling, at the situation as much as anything, and felt her love for him rise, swirling, in her, overwhelming, for a moment, the brooding sense of trouble that had darkened her mood for days. Minutes later, she was aloft, and it was Alan, confined, bereft, who stood on the ground watching an aeroplane, and a state of empowerment, fading in the sky.

In Sydney, she went to the Potts Point house, left her things, then taxied to the Pyrmont address. She found her way to the third floor, shoes ringing on steel stairs, and found four doors. Two were locked, two open. She went through one of them. It was very dark. She could hear sighs and groans - of pain, or pleasure? She discerned after a moment that two people were engaged in sexual intercourse, but had stopped to look at her. 'I beg your pardon,' Jocelyn said, 'I'm looking for Damian Tregowan. An art student. I think he lives ... here?' A white, female arm made gestures to the wall beside her, then slid beneath the bedding. The man put his head down again, and the arm reappeared to caress his back and neck. 'Forgive me intruding,' Jocelyn said, but they'd put her out of mind. She took herself back to the landing, then went through the second door. It was an apartment full of light from the harbour, and there were paintings in a development of Damian's style. She'd found his new home.

It was filthy. Rubbish littered the floor near a small bin, unemptied for weeks. Bottles lay about. The history of a fortnight's meals could

be discerned from remnants on the table. The sink was piled, high and clumsily, with dishes. Paintings and reproductions led her to a space used as a bedroom, an area which enjoyed a view of boats, water and the city skyline, through panes of glass unwashed for years. Laundry baskets provided the room's only storage, and its centre was a king-size bed with single bed sheets which had reached the point where they were not worth washing. Small bloodstains could be seen here and there on their filthy surfaces. Jocelyn looked more closely. Some of them were probably menstrual, while the tiny ones looked like the aftermath of injections - something she recognised easily. Anxiety clawing at her heart, she searched, and found a pouch which had traces of a white powder: she put it in her bag, then sat to wait. The afternoon wore on. Nobody came. She went downstairs and found a little cafe from where, if she sat in the street, she could watch the entrance to Damian's warehouse. The afternoon died, and it began to grow dark. People from the cafe apologised; they wanted to pack up the tables. Would she like to come inside? She refused. She went back to the warehouse and resumed her vigil. In the small hours of the morning she threw a rug over the unspeakable sheets, lay down and dozed off. When noisy footsteps on the steel staircase woke her, there was already light in the sky. She rolled over so her back was to the entrance, and her face was hidden. Whatever she perceived next would be by apprehending the condition of those who were coming, not from seeing them. That would come a little later, when she'd had time to feel, and think.

There were a number of them. Listening to their voices in the first room, she decided there were four - three men, including Damian, and a young woman with a silky, feline sound when she spoke, which was rare: her presence in the apartment was more easily felt than heard. Jocelyn knew she would be determined, dependent, and ruthless. Too strong for my son, she thought, and maybe for me. She felt her heart grow hard, and something in her reached back to where, she knew, her husband would be waking, early as usual, his habit of decades, checking out his routine for the day before he put his feet on the floor - except

that for today there would be no comforting routine, only a dependence on what she, Jocelyn, might be achieving in the cosmopolitan, distinctly un-simple city.

The young woman's footsteps came closer, then her voice: 'Damian, there's someone in there. In your bed. Who is it? Damian? Damian? Who is it?' Jocelyn heard her son mumble something, then walk into the sleeping space. Jocelyn pressed her face into the blanket and clung tightly so it would take him a long time to discover the identity of his intruder. Her son pushed and pulled, but without success. Angrily, intrusive with the intruder, he grabbed her from behind at the point where he had entered the world, and said, 'Fuckya, what're ya doin in my bed? Sally and I want to use it. We don't want anybody else hangin around!'

Jocelyn turned so he could see her face, and she his. It was a recognition of utmost pain. Each could see in the other's face what had been done, caused, by this re-union of two lives. They stared at each other, mercilessly, without speaking, sizing up the situation, what it held, and where it could go. Sally - the voice, the footsteps - came into the room. 'Who the fuck is it, Damian? You want me to come in there with you, and you got a woman already there? Who the fuck is it, Damian? The daytime shift, but she didn't go home? Or you were planning a little threesome? Not my style, Damian. You sure misjudged me that time, didn't you? Damian? Why aren't you answering? You're not usually so slow.' Sally came to the bed and squatted behind her lover, putting her arms around him, staring into the intruder's face. The first thing she saw was the woman's age, and she hated her for being old, long past loveliness; then she saw on the lined face signs of resemblance. Next she experienced the certainty of this older woman's possession, and then it came to her. Out of the blue - truly out of the blue, because the sky and water could be seen through the filthy glass behind the bed - had arrived Damian's mother.

'What do you want?' Sally said. 'Why are you here?'

'I came to find my son.'

'You want to take him home? To mummy and daddy?' She was trying to be offensive.

'Only to make contact. Not to be out of touch. So he can start to negotiate the next part of his life.'

Sally, who negotiated nothing, as far as she was prepared to admit, was suspicious: 'What do you mean, negotiate? What are you trying to make him do?'

Jocelyn spoke to her son. 'Do you want to be one of those people who disappear? It happens all the time. Pathetic advertisements in newspapers, complete with smiling photo, taken when the missing boy or girl had someone else to pay the photographer. I've got some nice pictures of you at home, we could use them when we've lost trace of you.' The boy looked troubled, and Sally angry.

'What's this bullshit about? You're trying to twist him. To get him mucked up so he doesn't know what to do, so he does what you tell him because he's used to that. Can't you let him go? Did you have to come here and poke your fuckin nose in where it isn't wanted?' She released her grip on her lover, and stood up. 'You've really got a decision to make, Damian! Do what mummy wants, or come with me. No fuckin ifs or buts, it's one or the other. You'd better make up your fuckin mind pretty fuckin quickly!' She strode somewhat unsteadily from the sleeping space, and a moment later her heels could be heard banging the steel staircase. Damian looked into his mother's eyes, his own eyes revealing to her the sickness, the desperation, within.

'Go with her,' Jocelyn said. 'You need to and I want you to. I won't trouble you here again. When you want to find me, I'll be at Potts Point. Go with her, quickly, before she leaves you. But don't forget, you have to negotiate. You have to stay in touch, or you're lost, and most people, when they're lost, are lost forever.' He stood, but wavered, uncertain of the terms that had been wrought by the two women. 'Go,' his mother said. 'I want you to have her. But you have to negotiate, when and as you're ready. Quick! After her, and I'll see you later!'

He left, and after a minute, just long enough to let the couple be out of sight, her shoes were the third pair to clang on the stairs. In the street she caught a taxi, to a house that needed life. She moved about, brooding, opening windows, wondering where one of Damian's paintings would look best, and which, if any, of the ones she'd seen she'd like. She knew that to reunite her family, to make her husband happy, there'd have to be a painting on the walls that linked him to his years in the harsh, wondrous, merciless, all-giving 'outback' where they'd chosen to live. She wanted some deity to give them blessing, or buckets of luck, but there was none, just her troubled family, and a landscape with an unwinking glance that nurtured those who trusted it. I hope I've done it right, she thought: I wonder how long he'll be?

It was four days. When she poured tea for Damian, by the window facing the city's skyline, she saw how he wolfed the cake. She gave him some more, and said she'd make an early lunch. She wondered how long it was since he'd eaten. What about Sally? Was she half-starving too? She waited for her chance to ask. He looked nervously at the city's towers: 'Probably a painting in that, but I wouldn't know how to do it.' She looked at the ships below them, traffic swarming along the expressway, and a red-tailed Qantas plane lumbering towards its place of landing, now hidden behind buildings, now drifting down to the invisible airport. It occurred to her that to take a flight was an act of faith - that the thing would fly, the pilot know how to find the destination, and, finally, that there would be a safe, clear space for the plane to settle its inflexible wings. Life should be like that! She turned to her son. 'What's Sally doing today?'

'Dunno. I haven't seen her since the day after you came to my place.'

'Is she angry with you?'

'Don't think so. Just independent. Says she'll come when she wants me.'

Jocelyn considered this. It was how everyone hoped the major relationship of their life could be. 'Tell me what sort of girl - sorry, woman - she is. I'd like to know.'

The young man sat back in his seat, thinking about her for the first time in the way of definition, description, as opposed to getting as much of his own way as she'd allow. 'She's very sensitive.'

'I could see that.'

The boy grinned feebly. 'And possessive. Riddled with jealousy, actually, though why anybody who could be with her would want anyone else is beyond me.' Jocelyn detected, in the mess of her son's emotions, the glimmer of love. 'Are you jealous of her? When she's not with you?' He said, 'I often wish she'd hurry back to me, but I don't think I'm ever jealous, or not very often, no.' She asked him to come into the kitchen and help her make a salad, but when they moved, he settled in a chair that allowed him the view which was the city's grand prospectus. Something about it pleased him. She said, 'I wonder if you'll be as happy, as fulfilled, when you retire, as your father is.' He slumped, and put fingers to his forehead. 'Retire? How do you mean, retire?' She told him what was going on in the town where he'd had his boyhood.

'Dad's given up being a doctor?' She nodded. 'What's he going to do now?' She said, 'In some way that isn't easy to see, I think it depends on you. I think he's waiting for you to make a decisive move.'

Damian groaned. 'What's he want me to do?' His mother said, 'He doesn't know. I think it's for you to decide. I think you need a bright idea.' It was too much for him. His voice rose. 'I've got no money to buy him anything. My painting's bloody lousy at the moment, not that I'm doing much. And I'm not going back there to live, with him one of the big fellas around the town. Sally'd have a fit if I said I was going back there. She wouldn't come with me, and if she did she'd be bored shitless after five minutes. It really is the end of the earth after living here.' He waved at the towers, full of opportunities, and the vehicles, driven by people seizing them. 'This is where it is, mum. This is where it's happening!' She got some steak out of the fridge, and began to trim it.

'The funny thing is,' she said, 'he won't want to live there much longer, now that he's retired. He'll be down here soon. Here.' The young man looked disconcerted. 'Too close for comfort?' his mother asked. 'Don't worry, I understand your needs. I won't let him move just yet. He can last out there a bit longer. But I'll have to let him eventually. You've got your problems ... as you see, I've got mine.'

He sensed that his mother was manoeuvring him, but where she wanted him was unclear. He'd expected criticism, and there was none. He'd been ready to apologise, but she hadn't asked for it. And he was hungry. She nibbled her lunch and he swallowed lumps. 'Finish mine, I'm not hungry,' she said, pushing her plate towards him. He took it. She made coffee, but he said he needed to sleep. 'Your bed's made up,' she said, as if nothing had come between them. He went to the room that had been his on Sydney holidays, threw his clothes on the floor and got between the cleanest sheets he'd known in weeks. Jocelyn looked in a few minutes later. He was as much a stranger to her as she'd been to him when he found her, face down, in his warehouse sleeping space. A bed from his years of growing up, she thought, and he's in it again, almost as a relic of duty to his body, and to me. Where's Sally? She needed to know about the petulant, selfish lover because she, she felt, was the key. She, Jocelyn, could only do for her son what his lover wanted her to do. The boy, the man who was her son, lay face down, as far away as we can go in sleep, but fated to return to the mess, the partly-ruined person who'd stripped himself naked for the bed, as he would for the acts of love he had with Sally. Who was she? Where had she come from, how was she free to live without family pressures to conform to? What would she want, apart from control of Damian? Jocelyn sipped her coffee on the balcony overlooking the city, and waited.

The phone rang. It was Alan. She spoke to him guardedly, saying she'd made contact with Damian, he was in a warehouse, they'd agreed to meet again soon. She promised to ring back as soon as that second meeting had taken place. She knew, putting the phone down, that he'd be troubled, would drive out of town twenty, fifty miles, and go for a long

walk, using the isolation to get his feelings clear. A part of her wished she could be with him; a part of her knew she needed cunning.

The phone rang. Hadn't he gone on his walk? She picked it up.

It was Sally, introducing herself without a surname, part of the mores of her generation when speaking to another. 'I need to speak to Damian. The boys he lives with said he was there.' Jocelyn felt unready; she'd hoped to have a plan ready before having to deal with this. She knew she had to be neutral, and wait. 'He's asleep. He had a big lunch. I got the feeling he hadn't slept much the last few nights.'

'That'd be right. Tripping on smack, probably.' Jocelyn felt her body grow cold. How could they say, so easily, the most devastating things? A little of the hardness, the professional indifference she'd had, years before, as a psychologist's assistant, returned to her. 'When he wakes, I'll tell him to contact you. He'll have your number?' The woman on the other end of the line was jubilant. 'Not where I am now, he won't. Could you take it down?' Jocelyn felt that Sally, for some reason, was crowing, had gained an advantage of some sort. She wrote down the number. 'I'll get him to call as soon as he wakes up.' She went back to the balcony. Something had changed. Alan would be on the road now, driving to one of the places where he liked to walk, losing himself in the country he'd decided to renounce. Men and their problems. There's as much transition in their lives as there is in mine, she thought, but they're not equipped to manage it. That's why they need help. She sat inactively on her balcony, letting time flow over her, waiting for her path to come clear. It's an afternoon I don't want to end, she thought: I've got my son with me, and I don't know what's going to spring on him, on me, when this sleep he's in brings him back to the world where he left it.

As the afternoon passed, she examined herself. I am readiness, she thought, that's the central thing in me. Readiness to grasp opportunities, but only to make myself happy, if I can be happy at all, by making others happy, by fixing their problems, smoothing out the little bit of their future that I can see. They walk, while I follow, or scramble ahead to make sure they don't stumble over things they haven't had the wit

to foresee. What sort of life is that? Was there an alternative? No, she decided, there was no alternative until the rites of passage were concluded, and that, she saw sadly, would only become apparent when nobody needed her any more. Before extinction, uselessness. She wanted to be wanted. Loved again: how she longed to put the clock back, the years, to the day before her marriage - her first, his second, to Alan. They'd slept apart on the night before, to make sure the ceremony had a meaning, allowing them to re-join. A few weeks later she'd conceived the young man lying in his bedroom, overcoming the tiredness of nights without sleep, and ...

She wondered how she could get the white powder tested. Most of the people she thought of knew Alan better than they knew her. She didn't trust them to preserve silence. She determined to confront her son when he woke, then she remembered his phone call. What could Sally's message be? She became aware of noises in the house: he was awake. She sat on the balcony, all stillness and readiness, waiting for Damian to find her, and before that to feel the need - if indeed he would feel it - to find her. Minutes passed, then he came to the balcony and sat opposite, looking into the eyes that had examined him in the warehouse, a few mornings before.

'I didn't sleep much. I was thinking.'

She cut across him. 'Sally rang. She wants you to ring her on this number.' She passed it across. Taking it without looking at it, he said, 'I've let you down, haven't I?'

'You've let yourself down. I'm just the mirror you can see yourself in. If you get yourself healthy again, it'll be because you wanted to do it, not because you wanted to please me, or your father, even though that's one of the things you'll tell yourself. It's easier to do something for someone else, because you can see by their reaction if they're pleased. It's much harder to please yourself - though everyone talks as if that's what we want to do all the time - because much of the time we don't know what we want.'

To his mother he said, 'What do you want me to do?' She struck. 'You could ask the art school to take you back.' He slumped. 'I didn't think you knew that.' She said nothing. Another aeroplane, Lufthansa this time, rumbled across the sky. She watched his fingers twisting and twirling, a substitute for words and possibly even thought. She said nothing. Finally he blurted out, 'I'm stuck. I don't want to be in the mess I'm in, and I don't have any impulse to be anywhere else. What do you make of that?' His mother indicated the piece of paper in his hand. 'Ring her.' He glanced at it, then at his mother again.

'How did she sound?'

'Excited. Otherwise she wouldn't have rung you here. Something good's happened. Ring her.' She saw that he didn't want to. 'Let her pull you out of your inertia. Don't you want another person to help you?' Glum, motionless, he failed to respond. She could feel her anger rising; she'd be screaming at him in a moment. 'Then I'll ring her myself, and I'll let her hear me calling you, and if you won't come, she'll know not to bother with you any more. Is that the only thing I can do for you? Put you on the spot with your woman? Put you where you have to do something realistic, something living, or let you fall down like a mummy bound up in strips of linen called self-love? Is that all that's holding you together? No wonder you can't paint. You don't love anything but yourself. Or perhaps you do a little, but self-love's getting in the way of everything that's generous, and giving, in your nature. If she'd been weeping you'd have been on the phone by now, but because I told you she was happy, you don't want to know about it. Reason? You can't bear to be in the inferior position, waiting to be pulled out. But that's exactly where you are. Get on the bloody phone and ring her!'

The young man stood up. 'I will,' he said angrily, 'but I'll do it back at my place. Which is where I'm going now.' She decided to lash him one more time. 'If this was movie-land, you'd jump in a powerful sports-car and swirl past other cars to your glamorous destination. But think ahead! Think about yourself and what you're about to do. You are going to walk through a glamorous city to a grotty dump and every step, if

you've got any sense, will be an act of contrition. You know what you've done to yourself. If you want to pretend you don't, look here in my eyes. They'll tell you what sort of failure you are, and that number, which you're not prepared to ring with me anywhere near, is your only hope.' Feeling whipped, the young man looked at her; her mouth, closed as it was, was as grimly expressive as anything she'd said. He wanted to say something sarcastic, but her challenge had been too broad. Fix yourself, or disappear! He turned his back and walked down the passage. She heard the door open, she heard it close, gently, firmly, thoughtfully, she felt. So far so good. She went to the edge of the balcony and pleaded with the view, the swirling forces of the city, to send good fortune, companions of kindness, confidence and trust, to accompany her son on his long walk towards which destiny? She wanted to ring Alan, she wanted to ring Sally, the boys who lived with Damian ... she wanted contact with anybody to fill the void created by what she'd done, but, she saw, having put Damian where he was alone, she too was alone, and while he had to walk, to find, to discover where his life was leading, she could do nothing but sit and wait. Powerless, powerful, full of energy, hope, yearning and a desperate desire to have won her son's life for him, she slumped on a chair. When the sky had grown dark, the cars had their headlights on, and the city's towers blazed with light, she took herself inside and lay on the bed where her son had slept, and, if he was to be believed, had thought about himself. She thought about him, wondering if he was ... home ... yet. There is no home but in the heart, she told herself. We make it. If there's no warmth in us, we can't make a home. She wondered how far from madness she was, a rageing passion confined in a house with no lights on. Yearning in the dark. She wanted to ring people, but she saw through that self-deceit: what she really wanted was someone to ring her with news she wanted to hear.

The night passed. She lay, sometimes drowsing, sometimes overheated in thought, in the bed that was - or had been - her son's. Where was he? Which way was he heading?

She was drinking coffee on the balcony - her observation point - when the phone rang. She rushed inside. 'Guess what!' It was her son's voice. 'Sally's got a job. Career, almost! She was in Ziggy's with a couple of her friends, and this guy came over and gave her a card. He asked her to ring him. When she did, he asked her to do some modelling for him. She's having a studio test tomorrow morning. The guy says if she does as well as he thinks she will, she's got an international career! How's that!'

Jocelyn said, 'And you? Are you pleased?' Damian said loudly 'Am I ever! She asked this guy if he had something for me and he said, bring him along, we'll find something for him. If he's got talent, this guy said, he'll find a niche!' Then the joy dropped from Damian's voice.

'Mum?'

'Yes?'

'You really beat me up yesterday. I needed it. I felt sick most of the way home. I wanted to go down to the water and throw myself in, run in front of a car, something silly like that. But I had Sally's number in my pocket, and I couldn't do anything till I heard what she had to say. And when I heard, I was over the moon.' He paused. 'I think what I have to say now is, thanks. I think I've hit the bottom, and I'm on the way up again. So thanks.' He hung up. He didn't want her to hear his tears. She felt tears on her own cheeks, of relief, and joy. One life - the one that mattered most to her - that might have ended in ruin was on the way back to the positive. The one that mattered most? Why had she chosen to do what she'd been doing without Alan, her husband, beside her? Was that selfish, or necessary? Had she been mean to him, or generous, letting him savour the afterglow of a fine career without the worry she'd taken onto herself? She wasn't sure. She wouldn't know till she was with him again. She decided to ring him that evening and ask him how soon he could be with her. Then she couldn't wait, and rang the number of her home in Broken Hill. Alan's voice came off the answering machine: 'I'm sorry, there's no one here at the moment. Please leave your ... ' Even the recording gave her reassurance. She went for a

walk, and streets, cafes, bars, all reminded her of him. The years ahead seemed enticing, now that the years behind had escaped the threat of being wasted. She walked, she imagined, she bought books and went home, hopeful, buoyant, wondering when she'd hear from Damian next. Then, when the afternoon was almost over, she heard the front door open - with a key! - and familiar footsteps in the passage. Trembling, wanting to greet him nowhere else, she clung to the edge of the balcony, and that was where Alan found her. He put his arms around her, not so much lovingly as interrogatively, and when he released her, he knew.

'Something tells me things are going well?'

'He's on the way back! He said so himself!'

He caught the relief in her voice. 'Tell me the whole story.' They sat on the balcony while she told him what had happened. He noticed that Damian had been in the house when he rang, inquiring, and she'd hidden this from him. He was wise enough to feel that there was some necessity behind this; he wondered what it was. He said to her, 'There are some things where mutuality, shared possession, give both members of a couple strength. And some things have to be done on one's own, because we're following an inner voice, some faint, intermittent trail of insight, and the presence of another mind, another personality, makes it impossible to do. But which is which? There's no way of defining, is there. What I mean is that for the finest possible partnership, one person must be able to give the other liberty any time they ask for it. Sorry, take it because they must!' The wonder of it overwhelmed him; she said, 'That's what you did for me. That's partnership at its best, and most perilous.' They smiled at each other, a little complacently, but relieved. He had a thought. 'When we look back, do you think these last few days will seem like the end of our years out there' - he pointed west - 'or the first big event of our years here?' He smiled again, yet she knew he was trying to place himself on a line from cradle to grave. 'Perhaps it's both.' He nodded, accepting but not entirely satisfied. 'When I was a student,' he said, 'I used to frequent a house in East Melbourne where there was drinking, and people sleeping together, and endless argument,

discussion, talk talk talk, and beyond all that, there was music. Vance's house, I must have told you about it?' She studied him. 'You've mentioned it, yes, but it's a book you've never really opened, for me. What's in there that I'm not supposed to know?' He laughed, so freely that she joined him, and rubbed his knee tenderly. 'Come on, out with all those secrets!'

'Not so very many. What I liked about that house - and it's the sort of thing that's more available to you when you're young; most of us lose it as we get older - was that once darkness fell, and the music started - Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, Ravel - I always had the feeling of being out of time. Out of time, and in a place - I wasn't *entirely* free, spatially - separate from other places, but able to consider them. Discuss them. Make decisions about them. Decide what to do when we'd rejoined the world where ordinary people - I suppose I must mean the non-musical' - he laughed - 'thrashed about, trying to keep their heads above water, their lives at least a little bit organised ... that sort of thing.'

'And when you went to the outback, was that to get yourself out of time, again, permanently?'

He thought, letting his eyes roam across the wall of high buildings that separated them from the place they were discussing. He said, 'Isn't that interesting! In our years out there ... '

'A very long time!'

'... I was conscious of time, because there was always so much to do. But the earth, the country around us, so strong in its personality ...'

'You think the earth has a personality?'

'Places have personality, and it was very strong where we were ...'

She laughed. 'We have made our move, haven't we! That answers your question of a minute ago. What happened with Damian was the transition, and this - your arrival, and now this discussion - this is the first event of our new lives. Isn't that so? Darling, you agree with me, don't you?'

He took her hand. 'Yes. It's wonderful. And I only dimly see it - you'll understand this much better than I do - somehow it took Damian

- Damian himself, I don't mean his troubles, which I hope to Christ are over, but who knows - it took Damian to pull us through from that time to this. We've arrived, and ...' tears crept from the corners of his eyes '... he's free to move on.' The wonder of it overwhelmed him. She looked at him, trying to sense what had happened. It was something about his existence in a moment of realisation. 'Are you out of time, darling? Where are you? Speak to me.'

His eyes were open to her, yet she felt he was in a far-away place. 'I'm out of time,' he said, 'and I'm well and truly in time, but it's not the relentless time that chains people down and makes them obey, the sort of time that robs people by taking away the years of their lives, the hours of their days. This time that we're in now is like an ocean of air that we're both free, you and I, to move in, to soar in ... it's the dimension where boundless spirits live, and it's ours. We've arrived, my love. I think we've done well!'

HOUSE of MUSIC

The stories in this collection can be read separately, and in any order. If, however, you read in the conventional direction, you will find that the characters who are named in the first story – as opposed to the endless throng of drinkers, talkers and excitement-seekers who pass through the house of music – are picked up at least once in their later lives. Their fates and fortunes – like the events detailed in the stories – differ widely, and the reader may well ask what, if anything, bonds these people, these events, together. The collection, finally, leaves the question open, but the last story reaches a serenity, an acceptance, which is somehow the outcome of al the events, and all the lives, detailed herein.