
JANUS
Chester Eagle

Janus

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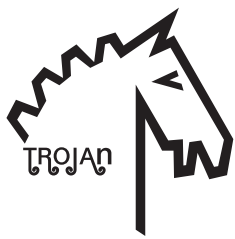

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Janus: an old Italian deity, represented with two faces, looking different ways. The month of January was sacred to him, as indeed were all beginnings. On earth also he was the guardian deity of gates, and hence is commonly represented with two heads, because every door looks two ways. On new year's day, which was the principal festival of the god, people gave presents to one another, consisting of sweetmeats and copper coins, showing on one side the double head of Janus and on the other a ship. (*A Smaller Classical Dictionary* by William Smith and edited by E. H. Blakeney, Dent, London, 1910)

Contents

The black soil plains

The Boeing, having brought them to the other side of the world, settled outside Paris. They had French money, they caught a bus. They found a hotel, they showered and lay down. When they stirred, he said to his children, 'What'll we do first?'

Tim was quick. 'The Shakespeare bookshop! Nowhere else!'

The boy was proud of knowing where it was. 'Mind you,' his father said, 'this is the third address it's had, that I know of. It could be more.' The boy was quick to see if his favorite sections were where they'd been. The girl stayed with her father, listening to him talk to the American at the table, who was interested to hear that the newcomers were Australian. 'My wife's interested in your country, she wants to go there. Come up and meet her, she'll be keen to talk.' The traveller looked at his daughter, but the bookshop man was quick. 'You know French money?' Leila was proud of having been in France before. 'You sit in my chair and run the shop. Anyone who wants to pay for a book, get change out of this drawer. The price is written here.' He flicked a book open. 'No problem to a girl like you. Dad's upstairs having a coffee.' It was clear he had no children and that this somehow made his approach reassuring.

Andy went upstairs with the American. George. Then he met Alicia. As they made coffee, Andy looked about. In front of him, as if it had ambled up to show itself, was Notre Dame, the heart of Paris, and on the wall not far from the window was a picture - a print - that Andy knew well: 'Across the black soil plains'. He realised, ruefully, that he was seeing what he'd come around the world to get away from. He was on holidays, a man educating his children ... and there was bloody New South Wales!

George and Alicia were comfortable with strangers. Living at the heart of the world, they were fascinated by its extremities. How better to judge than to have visitors explain. 'I got that,' Alicia said, seeing where his gaze was focussed, 'out of an Australian newspaper I bought in London. A few years ago, I think. Time gets away ... I think you know that painting. You know where it was done?'

He did. 'It was painted by a man called George Lambert. He painted it in Sydney, after he'd been travelling in the country. Up the bush, we say.' He felt feeble, and yet he was doing what was required. 'The bush is anywhere that's not a big city.' Alicia liked this. Her eyes told him to go on. 'I forget the exact place now, but it was near a little railway settlement called Nevertire.' George broke out with a chuckle. 'I like those names! We got them in our country!' He smiled at his wife. Andy thought he might be going to offer some American vernacular, but he was quiet again.

'He painted it in 1899 ...'

'Hey!' George said, 'you really know your stuff!' Andy shifted on his chair, feeling admonished by the great cathedral in front of him. '... and he went to a lot of trouble, back in Sydney - he lived on the northern side of the harbour, a suburb called Hornsby - going around dairies, or any other places that used horses for deliveries, looking for big powerful horses to be models for the work he was doing.' Alicia smiled. 'It's a little different from a fashion parade, isn't it.' She turned her head to remind herself of Lambert's horses, straining to drag a wagon laden with bales of wool. 'Black soil,' Andy said, 'can be very sticky stuff. Great to roll across when it's dry, though, in a good modern car.' He smiled inwardly, thinking of the years he'd shared with his parents and their wider families, when the great plains of his state had been virtually all he'd known. 'That painting,' he added, as the thought came to him, 'was exhibited in the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the year it was finished, and was greatly admired. Australia was strongly attached to Great Britain, but it was feeling its independence, its differences, too, and waiting for its character to be expressed.' He looked at the gothic touchstone, across a river

better known than the rivers of his own land, and wondered, absurdly, if it could hear him. 'People wrote poems about it, would you believe.' Squirming a little, he went on. 'O nobly manned/must be the land, and nobly horsed as well/Has such a sight as this to show, such story has to tell/The teamster who so sternly strides, the team so strongly strains/Till stride and strength be come at length, across the black soil plains.' Alicia's chin lifted with amusement and George beamed. 'Hey! You know the next verse? You go on if you do!'

'I don't,' Andy said. 'I'd forgotten I knew that much. You've brought a lot of things back this afternoon.' He could feel his mind slipping home to the places of his childhood. 'My parents used to drive me across the plains ... I should say that I was brought up a long way from Nevertire, which is inland from Newcastle, if you know where that is.' George looked at Alicia, who nodded. 'But black soil's black soil, wherever it is, once it gets wet. My parents were on the land ...'

Andy heard George repeating the phrase to himself.

'Yes, *on* the land, or should we say *of* the land? Maybe there isn't a preposition in the language strong enough to carry the meaning, they're such little words ...'

'Mighty important though,' George put in. 'Words are powerful according to the work they do. *I. And. But!*' he said, holding up a reproachful finger. '*But!*' He smiled a smile wide as history. 'Little words, but you try and do without them! They're like the forgotten people of history, the poor bastards who did all the work while kings and lords went off making wars, then came home, if they did, to eat banquets that would never have been on their tables if peasants hadn't been slaving while they'd been away.' Andy hadn't expected this from his host. 'Gently,' he said. 'Let's not forget that I'm away from home too.' Alicia and George didn't take it as a reproach. 'So are we,' she said. 'I suppose we'll go back, but it's wonderful, truly wonderful, being here.' Andy felt that her words had drawn some acceptance from the spire across the river. 'Tell us how you came to know about George Lambert,' she said, 'and also, tell us what you're planning to do while you're in France.'

Andy talked to them for an hour, then went down. He could only get the children out of the shop by promising them they'd come back soon. Tim had a couple of books which, he grumbled, his sister had made him pay for. 'It was my job,' she said, explaining all. Andy said to his daughter, 'That little excursion was Tim's idea. What would you like to do now, darling?' Leila thought. 'I'd like to see something we never see at home. Something completely different.'

That stopped them. 'Let me think,' Andy said. 'Hey, what's going on over there?'

They looked to the other side of the river, where a crowd had gathered. Laughter broke out, there was clapping, and a piercing whistle. The three of them ran to the bridge, crossed, and back to where the crowd was watching a man riding a bike in circles. He jumped off, made dismissive gestures, and beckoned his partner, who brought him a smaller bike which looked silly because the cyclist, the performer, was an elongated, bony fellow with knees and elbows that caught the eye. Somehow he positioned himself so he could work the pedals, and circled in dangerous, veering rushes which had watchers scrambling out of his way, then moving forward so they could read the lip movements that told French-speakers what he was thinking. Andy's children could see that he was saying things the crowd thought funny, but which you had to be French to understand. It was not so much a matter of language as of attitude; he not only mocked himself, and his viewers, but the notion of mockery itself. If you mocked, he seemed to say, you couldn't resist if someone thought the same applied to you. Mocking things showed you were as silly as they were. 'Je suis humble! Très humble!' he shouted suddenly. 'He says he's humble,' Andy said to his two. 'Very humble!' He laughed, and they smiled, though there was confusion on their faces. The performer got off his bike, pushed it with contempt towards those who'd been laughing most loudly, and waved for another bike to be brought. It was a child's bike for learning, with tiny wheels attached to the rear wheel. Josquin - Andy suddenly noticed the name on his chest - plucked off these trainer-wheels, tossed them over his shoulder to be

caught by someone in the crowd, and stooped cadaverously to reach the handlebars. He cocked one leg in the air, grunted loudly to make them think of farting, and rushed in a dizzy circle with his arms in triumph like the winner of a race. Around he went, faster and faster, in circles growing tighter until he was spinning on a spot. Then he got off, bowed, took a coat from his assistant, and put it on, disguising his identity as performer. A minute later he was sitting on a bench, filling a mug from a thermos. As his crowd broke up some of them threw money into a bag he'd left beside the last of his bikes, lying on the pavement. Leila's eyes were gleaming. 'Wouldn't see that at home, would we?' She took her father's hand. 'Let's go and see the fire-eaters!' Andy laughed, as did Tim. 'They're not far from here. If there's anybody performing today. Good idea. Lunch first though, I think.'

They travelled far in the next four weeks. They moved through France and Spain. On the train that took them across the border, announcements were made in Spanish, French, English, German and Italian. 'All these languages!' Leila said. 'What are they saying?' Her father told her that she only had to understand the English, the others said the same thing, more or less. 'How much more and how much less?' his son asked. Andy shook his head. 'Huh? What do you mean?' The boy knew he was out of his depth. He'd been expecting his father to know what needed to be said. 'They can't be exactly the same, can they? If they're exactly the same, why have different languages?' He looked troubled. 'You could get rid of all but one.' 'It'd better be English!' Leila said. Her father thought she was joking, but she wasn't. 'They're not wogs,' he said. They're just as civilised as we are, but ...'

What were the differences? How did you explain them, and why did you want to? Wasn't it better to think of languages as suits of clothes that the mind could use to dress its activities? Leila spoke. 'When I'm round at the Thomsons', they're always watching the races.' Andy wondered what had brought this into his daughter's mind. 'The jockeys,' she said, 'are real little lairs, in yellow silk, and red and blue and purple. But the horses aren't dressed up at all. Can a language be like that, naked,

so you can see everything, and another one be all dressed up and showy so it makes you want to look at it? After all, it's the horse that does the work, isn't it, and the jockey who's along for the ride.' What she was saying seemed certain to her, while her father and brother were puzzled.

'I suppose,' Andy said, 'one language can do both, depending on what you want to say. I mean, if I say, "Eat your toast, drink your milk." That's what you'd call a naked horse. Simple words because simple ideas. But if I want to say something involved, something very special ...'

Tim broke in. 'Like what?'

Andy thought. 'Try this.' He put a hand to his brow, amusing himself. 'For who would bear the whips and scorns of time/The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely/The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay/The insolence of office, and the spurns/That patient merit of the unworthy takes/When he himself might his quietus make/ With a bare bodkin?'

'What's that about?'

'I could translate it,' Andy said, 'but it wouldn't be the same. That is, if I put it in different words, I change the meaning.' His son jumped on this. 'So we have to have lots of languages because we can't translate. The meaning changes if we change the language. So different languages can't mean the same thing, because they can only be different if they're made to say different things!' He looked at his father, proud but uncertain. They stared at each other, wondering where the ideas led. Andy was conscious that others in the carriage would be listening. 'Did you notice something else?' he asked. 'When we were in France, and they made announcements, they made them in French first, then the other languages. When we crossed the border, Spanish came first and French dropped back to second. Did you notice?' Leila was scornful. 'How could I? It's all ...'

Her father jumped in. '... double-Dutch to me!' He laughed, his children smiled because they felt he expected it. Leila wriggled. 'I'm getting sick of this train. When're we going to get somewhere?'

They spent a week in Barcelona, making excursions from the city centre where they stayed. Each day they came back to their room where Leila installed herself, while Andy wrote notes and Tim looked through the things he was collecting in a lounge filled with daunting chairs and tables, and curtains almost too heavy to lift. If Leila came to see them, she said, 'This place gives me the shudders. How can you sit here?' Andy felt she was right. 'I'm absorbing Spain. This is natural to them. They've had the church on their shoulders for centuries and believe me, it's more frightening than anything in here.' Looking around, he wondered if he'd claimed too much. Leila, who wasn't interested in churches, said, 'Imagine if your whole house was like this. What a fright!' They looked at the lounge - sombre, impersonal, with a formality that told you where and how to sit, and heavy! Ornate. Controlled. 'You couldn't do anything impulsive in here, could you,' Andy said. 'Except, maybe, make a break for freedom!' He looked at his children, his charges, his care; what would life let them have, and at what costs, to be paid when? Nobody ever got anything for free. 'Have you seen anything yet, on our travels, that you'd like to take back home?'

Tim thought. Leila said, 'I don't want home to change. I just want to be able to look at different places. I want them to be different, so long as you can find your way around. Like, it's where you're born. If you're born here, this seems natural.' Her stillness, her way of using her shoulders to indicate separation, was touching: a young woman far from home. 'Are you going to write cards to your friends, darling?' She nodded. 'I'll write them on my bed. Not in here.' Then she was gone. Tim stood up. 'I might go back to the room too, dad.' When he left, Andy noticed that a couple of Tim's coins were under the chair he'd been sitting on. He picked them up, asking himself what they told a visitor about the country that used them. The king's head was on one side, his coat of arms on the other. Rey de Espana, a rampant lion, a castle ... Like most things in life, the coins had significance only from symbols that drew on the shared, the admitted language of the imagination. Lions with claws outstretched, fortresses that were supposed to be impossible

to enter, but were brought low by surrounding them and holding their owners in starvation. It was all so far from his world, his country, where people rapidly learned to disbelieve the schema of the imagination, yet, living in need, turned trivia into importance, and searched everywhere for meanings that they needn't refuse, while all around them was a silence, an emptiness, of greatest eloquence. Disbelief is as sustaining as belief, and less painful. Endless space, reverberating without the human imagination, is welcoming, despite the madness of the whitefella explorers who lost themselves, almost deliberately, wanting to find the edges of their meanings and doing it too successfully. That, he thought, is why we're fascinated by them, and base our histories on what they wrote, when in fact they discovered nothing but how different were their minds, their imaginations, from the places which they entered, bravely, foolishly, but driven! They travelled, surrounded by black people who knew exactly where they were, but who had to be scorned as inferior when their superiority was evident in everything they did. What an arrogance it was, he thought, to talk of the black people's '*ability to survive*'; their lives were richer than the words allowed. He thought of the discussion they'd had on the train, and then of the languages that had been lost in the European takeover of his country, and felt bereaved of the understandings that had been lost. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed his son and daughter in the doorway. 'We're hungry dad.' He nodded. 'Okay. Let's go down. You left a couple of coins, Tim. They were on the floor.' He handed them to his son. 'What were you doing on your own, dad?'

'I was thinking about Australia, actually.'

His children thought this odd. 'Here, in Spain?' He nodded. 'Doesn't travelling around make you think of home?'

'Nuh.'

'Oh come on.'

They weren't very interested. 'Not much.' He accepted. 'Usual place for dinner?' This was what they wanted. 'Yeah!'

It was down a narrow lane in the barrio gottico; they'd smelt it, on their first night, when they were looking for a place to eat. It was full of students, and people whose clothing showed they needed somewhere cheap. The place was packed, but each night the waitresses, recognising them, moved tables and chairs, putting people together so they could have a place. It was full of spirit, and noisy. People smiled at the Australians, accepting. A waitress noticed Andy's eyes following the drinkers who held goatskin bags above their heads to let red wine tumble in a long stream down their throats. 'You want?' she said. His eyes lit up. His children laughed when it came, and laughed more loudly when the waitress grabbed the glass of wine in front of him to take it away. Andy raised his eyebrows at this. She patted him on the back and put the goatskin in his hand. Seeing that he was nervous, she waved a hand around the place where a number of drinkers were letting wine pour into them in the African fashion. 'Go for it!' Her voice had an American sound. Andy put the skin to his lips, then slowly lifted until he had it at arm's length. 'I wish I had a camera,' his daughter said. 'We could blow this up and put it on the wall at home.' Andy chuckled. 'Spare me! We do things when we're away that we wouldn't normally do.' 'You drink plenty of wine,' his son said. 'Not like this I don't. Do you want to have a try? Just a drop?' Tim and Leila shook their heads, though they were tempted. The waitress said, 'What you going to have? Sopa? Caldo? For a start?' 'Soup,' Andy said. 'One's thick and one's thin. Unfortunately I don't remember which is which.' Leila thought this didn't matter. 'Get one of each, and we'll try them.'

They tried many dishes in Spain. They had sherry in their soup, they had gazpacho, they ate fish they'd never seen. They climbed towers and looked on torrents. They walked across chasms on eery bridges, they looked over plains where battles had been fought, and at the outline of cities Andy knew from El Greco. In the depths of the Prado they saw the black paintings of Goya and Andy felt they'd been taken to humanity's lowest low. 'This country had a shocking civil war about the time I was born,' he said. 'They did dreadful things to each other. It's a miracle

that they've recovered. Perhaps it was so bad they've had to push it out of mind. We've been fortunate that war's never come to our country.'

So he'd made them think about their country, as he did all the time. What was new experience for them was, for him, a comparison. And yet he noticed that his main aim in travelling was to make himself inconspicuous, to lose his foreignness and become local. He wanted to be Italian, French, a native of Spain. How did people walk, speak, gesture? He watched for, and imitated, their courtesies because these ripples from the interplay of persons told him as much as he was likely to learn about the things these strangers had internalised from their cultures. So much had been forgotten when Europeans had begun anew in the land he came from. And the land itself, he sensed, imposed insistences of its own. You couldn't remain European with a different land beneath your feet. 'We change to suit circumstances', he wrote in his notes; it was a cliché, but what wasn't, unless you had a new idea entirely, as most people never did. His former wife had said, not long after they'd married, that the closer your life was to a cliché, the easier it was to lead. It was well said. An important part of life, and the role of fashion, was to make yourself feel that repeating the past was somehow and miraculously new. This meant forgetting, or deceiving yourself and others. Systems of thought, he decided, have to be systems of lies, or deceit. Better by far to live in the great emptiness his landscape offered.

Europe was so different. Spain, Italy, la belle France. The density of their cultures denied any possibility of disbelief. They would make a faith out of no faith, he felt, because they needed to. In this he sensed a difference between himself and the people surrounding him. They had the benefit, the advantage, of non-exposure to emptiness, vast distances in which nothing happened, and no thing existed. He'd lived at the edge too long for it to seem anything but natural, but his trip to the central cultures showed him that statistically he was strange. He felt chosen, selected, by the destiny of his land. His escape, so enjoyable, so varied and exciting, was telling him that there was no escape, only the relief, the intuitive grasp of what it was like to live where his ingredients had

come from. How simple it would be if he could come back to Europe with its languages, its music, its buildings resonating against each other and the past they'd come out of. How simple, and how impossible. He felt himself in the grip of his great-grandparents' decision to move to the huge island in the southern seas. They'd made the choice and it had affected their descendants ever after. Was there no way out of this chain of inevitability?

There wasn't. He started to count the days until their plane would take them back, and to feel sadder every night when their exploration was done. A talk in the bedroom, a shower, notes or cards to be written, putting out clean things for the next day. Washing, and hanging to dry. 'The best thing in Australia is our washing machine,' he told Tim and Leila. 'That or the clothes line in the garden.' They scoffed. They were waiting to tell their friends about the trip. 'Make the most of it,' their father said. 'It doesn't go on for ever.'

They returned to Paris, the city that made you small. Powerful lines ran through great spaces. Important buildings sat apart from others, visible each to each. A taste for grandeur had never been overthrown with the kings who'd introduced it. Or had they? The visitor studied the people of the city, wondering what they had in their heads that wasn't in his. Precision, cruelty, a willingness to ignore much so that some point of perfection might be created ... and not a thought about sharing the moment of wonder, when it came. Monarchy's still here in its absence, Andy thought, and it pleased him; it fitted with his ideas of the void in his country, to which he'd soon be returning. He wondered what his children would remember, and what they'd forget, from their travels, and of course he didn't know, any more than he knew for himself. Importance discovers itself; there were pages in his diaries from earlier trips that meant nothing to him now, while other, passing, remarks made him wish he'd gone back for another look. We never know what we're going to want to know, it's a process of continual emergence, never fixed. This thought contradicted the great monuments, the Arc de Triomphe, the Palais de Versailles, Notre Dame, unless you dissolved

them in your mind and thought of them as sources from which flowed or attached new meanings. There! Meanings! Mankind was making them all the time, as regularly as bread in bakers' ovens, producing daily. What a silly world, he thought. Monuments are made to finalise meanings, and they're no sooner built - and photographed - than they start to change the production process. In his mind he reviewed some of the fixed objects of his country - bridges, soldiers' memorials, anything that might end up on a stamp! It seemed to him that the power of endless mention must mean either a weakness in the society - this needs to be emphasised, to keep us going - or a weakness in the idea - if I raise my voice you may not notice that I'm talking rubbish. What things were sacred, and did it make them more or less vulnerable to single them out? What things, he asked himself, were sacred to him?

He put his own life, back home, aside. He couldn't deal with it. Here in Paris? He enjoyed the question. What things were sacred?

The Place de la Concorde made him shudder, because the guillotine had done its work there. The Parliament and the courts of law were important, but sacred, no. The glass of the cathedral that had watched when he was with the bookshop people, that was truly sacred, seen from the inside and the out. When you looked at it from the street you knew what it was like, inside. You had to be able to see something two ways for it to be sacred. The blaze of vision wasn't bearable every day, you had simply to know that it was there, and have an occasional peep. What more?

Music was where the sacred resided, most of the time, yet if he thought of the *chambres*, the *opéras*, the *salles* where he'd gone to hear it, he separated easily the places from what they held. Music was fleeting, a sound in the air, then - importantly - a sound in the head. Without the mind, nothing was sacred. This made him gasp. Religion, even deity, *c'est moi*! It was a thought, a process of thought, that would never have happened inside him except in France, where people reasoned in this way.

He opened his eyes, which he'd closed while he'd been thinking. Leila was struggling with a puzzle. Tim was sorting stamps. Their bags were on the floor, and damp things hung on a line they'd stretched across the room. 'I thought you'd gone to sleep, dad,' Leila said. 'I was going to wake you, but when I stood up I reckoned you were just thinking.'

He smiled. His daughter knew him. 'Thinking about home?' Tim said. 'Thinking about here, this time.' They looked at him. 'Four days to go, then we're in aeroplane world for a day and a night, then we're back.' They thought of the flight. 'Maybe planes will be faster one day, and coming here will be like flying to Sydney. Only an hour.' They thought about it. 'Maybe it's best the way it is,' Andy said. 'I don't know.'

The next day Tim asked to go to the Shakespeare Bookshop again. There was no sign of George. A stranger was sitting in the chair that had been Leila's. He was reading something in thick, black German text. Leila was soon bored, and asked her father for a drink. They told Tim where they'd be, and went to a cafe. 'I don't know what he sees in that place,' Leila said. 'It's okay for a while, but he'd spend his whole time there.' It was an appeal to her father for an explanation because he too, she could tell, was drawn to the shop. 'Why can't he get interested in other things? Books, books, books!' Andy said, 'I think he can sense the atmosphere. He doesn't know the story of the place, but it's something he's drawn to. He's following a line of people who've been drawn to it down the years.' The girl was surprised, having never thought of a shop as having a past. She said to her father, 'Is it full of ghosts, or something?'

'In a way it is. It was started by an American woman, in 1919. World War 1 had ended. American soldiers helped the British and French to win the war. But America was restless when the so-called peace got started. They were already on the way to being the richest country in the world, but they didn't have confidence in themselves. Cultivated Americans thought Europe was where culture came from, and Paris was the centre of Europe. This woman called Sylvia Beach came here and started a bookshop. She was young, she didn't have much money. She

struggled, but surviving was enough. The fact that she had a shop, that there was a place, allowed lots of people to gather. English writers came to her shop. Americans who came to Paris felt they had to visit. French writers who were interested in books in English went there. Sometimes, when a movement's forming, it only needs a place, and then things start to happen ...'

Leila said, 'You think Tim knows all that?' She was scornful, but interested.

'No, he doesn't, but it's in the atmosphere. He's ready to be told it. I might try and get him a book about it, when we get back home.'

She scoffed. 'A book about a bookshop?'

Her father grinned. 'Why not? Books have been written about it, and all the people that gathered there, believe it or not. Also, Sylvia Beach swore by the Irish writer James Joyce, and she published what most people think is his masterpiece. *Ulysses*.'

'What's that about?'

He groaned. 'Too hard. Sorry. Sylvia Beach protected Joyce, and she spread the word for him. About him. She made the mystique, I suppose you'd say. Mystique's important in the arts, people have to believe they're mysterious, different from normal things ...'

'How're they different?'

He waved his hands. 'Who knows? People make reputations, then other people come along who want to believe the reputations, and once that starts, the cycle's begun. It'll never be unwound, it'll keep winding itself in its own way for as long as it's remembered.'

Leila thought it all very odd, but she took seriously the things her father said. He at least saw some sense in her brother's prowling through rooms full of books. 'I want to go to a great big shop this afternoon, dad. I promised mum I'd get her something. Where's the best shops in Paris? They don't have Daimaru or Myers, do they?'

Gravely he said, 'They do not. Of course there's lots of fine shops. We haven't been into them yet, we'll do it today.' This pleased her, and she was happy to go back to find her brother, but as they were leaving

the cafe, he appeared, wanting a coffee, so they went back to the table, and Andy picked up the bag Tim had put down. 'What did you buy, son?' He dipped in the bag. *All quiet on the western front*. 'I thought you'd read that.' Tim shook his head. *A farewell to arms*. 'Heavens above,' Andy said, 'you're right on the things we've been talking about.' Leila wanted to know what the books were about. 'They're about the war that ended just before the shop was set up. They're huge books, but they're also a background to the shop. Hey, what else have we got in here?'

There was a third book. Andy pulled it out, and his son and daughter noticed the change in him. He looked silently at his son. Leila grabbed it, and read on the spine, *Shakespeare & Company*, Sylvia Beach. She showed it to her father, wanting an explanation. Words to explain what was happening around her, intruding on her sense of order: her sense of sense. Andy said, 'You picked this?'

Tim said, 'The man that was taking the money, when he saw what I'd picked, asked me how long I was going to be in Paris. I told him we were flying out on Friday.' Andy nodded. 'He said to me, "You'd be a fast reader. You could get this read before then?" I knew I could, I told him so. He said, "I ought to ask for a deposit", then he shook his head. I knew it was going to be OK.' Leila leapt in. 'Scrooge! You had plenty of money, you should have bought it!' Her brother defended himself. 'I don't think he wanted to sell it. He wanted me to read it, that's all! I think, anyway.' They looked at their father, needing him to arbitrate, but his thoughts were attached to something they couldn't see. His hands clenched, his eyes filled with tears. He flicked the book open. 'World War 2 ends,' he said, and then he read, 'We're off to liberate the cellar at the Ritz.' He laughed, flicking the pages, peering at the photos. 'Adrienne Monnier. Her shops's not very different from Sylvia's, though her books are French.' He straightened, talking over their heads. 'They captured their time. No, they were captured by their time, very dramatic times indeed. European empires crashing against each other. And in the quiet between the storms, a couple of little bookshops.' The tears were on his cheeks, now, and he wiped feebly. 'They lived the lives they

wanted to lead, but immortality's touched them. Should we feel sorry for them, or say they were fortunate? I don't know ...'

'You're always saying that, dad,' his son put in.

'True,' their father said. 'Well, most of the time we don't.'

When they got to the departure lounge, the Boeing was waiting. It had the red and white of Qantas on its tail. 'Home already,' Andy said. 'All we have to do is fly.' The children didn't see any sense in this, but they felt a lift in their hearts when they were welcomed by voices they knew as their own. Those weeks of foreign sounds! Leila took her father's hand. 'It is like being home.' As soon as they settled in their seats, Tim pulled out the two books he'd read on the flight. 'You've picked a good place to read them,' his father said. 'Flying away from Europe.' The book about the bookshop had been read and returned ... to George, who'd been surprised at the arrangement between the boy from Australia and his occasional assistant. George had said to the boy returning the book, 'Tell your dad that if we make it to your part of the world, we'll come and see him.' The boy had nodded, acting for his father. Now, seated on the plane, he opened Remarque. Hostesses parading the aisles noticed the earnest young reader, and spoke to his sister and father, who responded in the way of people who've been missing something for so long they've forgotten what it is.

The plane took off, and entered the darkness. Flying a short night, it reached Bahrain. The formalities of a stopover were gone through, the passengers reboarded and the plane lifted into a sky filling with light. 'It'll be hot in the Middle East, this time of year,' Andy said to his two. 'I'm happy to be in an air-conditioned plane.' They flew over water, over India, over water. They landed in Bangkok. Next time they took off, Tim was reading Hemingway. 'There was a lot about him in the book they lent me,' he said. His father nodded. 'He seems to have been very attached to those women. I don't know if he needed them, he was pretty good at making his own reputation, but he did have an attachment there, yes. But he's a blustering bastard, a real Yank! At the end of the book, there, he's all set to go on a shooting spree. Sylvia makes it

sound an amusing, rather celebratory thing to do, but if you think about it, it wasn't needed at all.'

They flew over Indonesia, and the sky grew dark again. They flew over their country by night. The pilot told them the air would be rough as they crossed the Bight. It wasn't very rough, but the seat belt sign went on. When they reached the land again, the seat belt sign went off.

They flew. The plane inclined its nose, a sign of journey ending. They landed, got their cases, caught a taxi. They paid the driver, they opened the gate. As they reached the back door of their house a wave of exhilaration swept over them and they raced about the garden, wild with happiness. Their cats, which had been fed by neighbors, crept over fences. They were home. Andy unlocked the door. The cases belonged a minute longer on the verandah, symbols of travel, which they were happy to have ended.

Janus

They were in a coffee shop near Roma Termini. He'd gone to book tickets but only two windows had been open and crowds were pushing to be served. 'Italians can't queue,' Andy said. 'It's not in them. Even if they stand in line for a minute, the moment they see some action they start pushing and shoving. It doesn't get'em anywhere, but that's the way they're made. Half-made,' he added sourly. His children wanted to know how they were going to get their tickets. 'I'll go back,' Andy said. 'When they've got more windows open. Want another drink? Orange juice darling?' His daughter wrinkled her nose. 'Yeah, it is pretty awful. Trouble is, we're used to good things we don't get when we're travelling.' He looked around. 'Hey, there's something!'

The children's eyes scanned the place. 'Over there,' Andy said. 'See, Janus?' He pointed. A calendar behind the coffee machine featured the god from whom the first month took its name. 'Something you wouldn't see in Australia,' Andy said. 'We'd better not be too superior, I suppose.'

'What about it, dad?'

'Janus,' he said. 'It's where we get the word January.' He said it so they could hear the origin. 'Janus faced both ways. That's why they show him with two faces. He looks both forward and back. He was the god of doorways, of entrances ...'

'The god of doorways,' his son said. 'Big deal!'

'Just a moment, you think about it! It's why they named the first month after him. He looks forward to the new year and back to the old.' Leila rolled her eyes. 'It's actually very interesting,' Andy said. 'You listen to me!' In a moment he was into the days of the week. 'Take Wednesday. Wed-nes-day, it doesn't sound like an English word, and it

isn't. It means Woden's day. He was a Norse god. It's a clumsy name to us, it sounds wooden, ha ha, sorry about that, but it's also Wotan, the king of the gods in Wagner's operas, and Wagner gives Wotan some of the most glorious music ever written ...'

The children felt the need to head him off. 'He was a German, wasn't he? We had to fight them, you're always telling us about it.'

Andy didn't like being diverted. 'We fought the Italians too, in the same war, but that hasn't stopped us making this trip. The war's forgotten now ...'

His children's amusement stopped him. It wasn't, of course. It was part of the collective memory of his people and if it came to that it was a rather larger part of the collective memory in the city they were visiting. Everyone about them must have some sense of the war that had seen their country invaded, yet, if he looked about, none of it showed. Where could the marks of history be seen, if not in the face? He thought of his uncles Tim and Toby. They'd fought in the first world war, they'd had a spell in Egypt, getting ready for Gallipoli, but that campaign had ended and the troops who'd survived, and the reinforcements who were never used, were shipped to France, where the armies of the European powers were bogged down in trenches. The stalemate had to be broken, but the opposing sides put bigger concentrations of force against each other, and the stalemate went on. Tim and Toby had been dropped into the mud, they'd lived to tell the tale, and they hadn't told their tales at all. Never, as far as Andy knew. So two of his family had been through the worst of wars, and the only things they'd ever said about their experiences were a couple of jokes. Jokes. About some Aussie soldiers pinching dates from a Gyppo's tree, and being chased by the Gyppo's family, knives flashing. They'd fled through the night and got back to camp, where the Gyppos couldn't follow. Safe, with the dates they'd pinched in their hands. 'They were only just edible, in my opinion,' had been Toby's view. 'They weren't worth the risk, but we felt pretty cooped up in camp, we just wanted to do something.' Toby had always grinned when he said that. 'Just wanted to do something.' Andy smiled, thinking fondly of his

uncle, who'd always wanted to know how he was getting on, what he was going to do next, when he was going to marry ... all the rest of it.

'What're you smiling at, dad?'

'I was thinking of my uncles Tim and Toby. You're named after Tim, I'm sure I've told you that before.'

The boy said tartly, 'Once or twice.'

His father had the grace to be a little sheepish. 'All right, I like to talk about them. They're an earlier connection our family had with Europe.'

'And we don't know what they did,' Tim the younger said.

Andy stared at the Janus calendar. 'I was talking to a friend of mine, not long before we came away. Brian Robinson, I don't think you know him. His father fought in France too. Somewhere on the outskirts of Amiens ...'

Leila looked up. 'We've been there.'

'Last week.'

'That's where there was that old wooden mill on a little river, just one side of the centre of the town?'

Andy confirmed. 'That's it. And the cathedral's one of the finest buildings ever built.'

'The Parthenon of gothic,' his son said, teasing him.

'I know it's a cliché, but it's in a book I've got and it's stuck in my mind.'

'Tell us about your uncles,' Leila said. 'What were they like?'

'I used to see Tim and Toby almost every school holiday, we'd go to their town and visit, they were friendly and talkative, but on another level, they'd closed their lives completely to what had happened over here. Not one word did they ever say about it!'

'They didn't want to talk about war?'

Andy thought about this. It was obviously true, but it didn't satisfy. What had his uncles blocked from their lives, or was it that they'd blocked it from their speech but visited in the privacy of their minds? Their faces ... were they masks, or true indicators of the men they'd

become? Andy looked at Janus, on the calendar near the coffee machine where a tall young Italian who believed himself focal stood silently, claiming attention. 'Those fellers give me the creeps,' Andy said.

'Toby and Tim?'

'No no, they were great. Sorry, I was looking at that fellow who makes coffee. They're so bloody absorbed in themselves, you know they can't think about anything else. Looking-glass males, that's what I call them.'

'What about Toby and Tim?'

'And what about this friend of yours, Brian Robinson?'

'Brian's dad came back from the war, married, and had two kids. Boy and a girl. Then he died when they were quite young. They grew up remembering him, but knowing he was a mystery. Not deliberately, not consciously a mystery, but closed. It's hard for children to understand their parents at the best of times, and he'd died early, as I said. When Brian got married himself, he told me, he realised there was a gap inside him. Things from his father that should have been there were missing. There wasn't much he could do about it, but years later, when he had the money and the time, he decided to retrace his father's movements from the diaries he'd kept as a soldier.'

'He still had his father's diaries?'

'Yes, and he took them back to France. To Amiens, first of all, like us last week. It looks pretty quiet, today, but in 1917 the countryside around it, and all the little towns ... it was hell on earth. They only stopped shelling each other so they could bring up supplies and shell each other some more. That and bayonet charges, and gas attacks ... there wasn't much they wouldn't do. Brian showed me what his father wrote,' Andy said, getting closer to his point, 'and he'd written pretty calmly, but there was one thing that stuck out in his notes which I'd never realised before, and that was how close the war was to the capitals like London, Paris and Berlin. Men on leave could be at the theatre one night, then, after seeing a show they'd catch a train to the coast, a ferry, another train, and before they'd forgotten the lines that had made them

laugh in the theatre, they'd be back within sound of the guns. Heaven and hell, twenty four hours apart.'

'But not for the Australians,' his son said.

'No. Well, they could go to London or Paris if they got some leave, but yes, you're right, they couldn't dash back to Sunraysia or Geelong for a drink at the local. They were on the other side of the world.'

He paused, uncertain of what this had meant to the young soldiers, and what it meant to him.

'They must have felt different,' his daughter observed.

'I suppose so. Well, we're on the other side of the world now, aren't we? Look at us! Why are we here? It's because this is where people like us came from, but we've been away so long that we've almost forgotten – or we've never known,' he said, his children in mind, 'what it's like. We've grown apart. But Brian's father, and my uncles Tim and Toby, they came here when Europe called them. Great Britain, to be precise, wanted them. They felt they had to come. Everybody back home, except the Irish catholics, told them they ought to come. They didn't feel as separate from Europe as we do, though travel took far longer in those days. But something happened.'

He paused again, feeling that there was a thought pressing for his attention, but it wasn't clear enough, yet, to say.

'They were proud of fighting well when they got here, and they're still proud today, those that are still alive. They're dying off now, there's only a few of them left. But something happened, and people don't talk about it. They closed their minds to what they'd seen here, and they didn't talk about it when they got back home. They'd seen the evil which is so big a part of the European mind, and they tried not to take it back. They knew it was in them, because they'd shot men and killed with bayonets like all the rest, but they didn't want to take the war back home. What they'd seen was too much to be introduced to the lives of the towns and cities, the farms and streets that they returned to. Too disastrous, too evil, so it had to be locked up where it was, inside them. That's why Tim and Toby kept quiet about what they'd been through,

and it's why Brian Robinson's father's diary was in a drawer for the best part of forty years ...'

'Did he find it and read it?' Leila asked.

'He read it every now and again, over the years,' Andy said, 'and then he realised that even the diary didn't say as much as it might have, so he thought the only way he could add to what his father had put down was to bring the diary back here, and walk the very roads his father had walked. Marched, I should say, although, with shells bursting around them there must have been a few times when they dived in the ditches at the side of the road.' He looked into his son's and daughter's eyes. 'It's hard to think of explosions, and guns going off, and aeroplanes, and men screaming as they charged the enemy trenches, as you go through that countryside, like we did last week. It's as if the war is so wild and violent that everything will be changed forever by it ... but that's only how it seems at the time, because after the years pass and the farmers get their fields back in production it's almost impossible to believe that you're in what was once a war zone.'

Leila looked out the window of their cafe at the station, Roma Termini, on the other side of the road. 'Lot of people all of a sudden. A train must've come in.' Tim and her father looked too. 'It's not good to look at people in the mass,' Andy said. 'They look as if they don't amount to much, as individuals. As if they're just there to be given orders. As if you can shout at them and they'll go off to war, or go off to buy all the crap in the supermarket, or sit at their desks and do what they're told to do ...'

'They're people too,' his daughter said. 'Like us.'

The crowd gathered on the footpath outside the station, then pressed onto the road, stopping cars and buses. They reached the footpath outside the cafe where the Australians sat, and their coats and hats and cases, their umbrellas, their rolled-up or unfurled newspapers, their smiles and scowls, their face-masks hiding what was happening within, all passed the glass which allowed the visitors to observe. 'Did your Uncle Tim and Toby ever come to Rome?' Andy shook his head. 'Not as far as

I know. They never went back to France either, though they went to London once or twice, after they'd married, and made a bit of money so they could travel again.' He thought. 'Again. The first time wasn't really travel or not the way we think about it, and yet it must have had many of the same effects. Broadening the mind!' He grinned, then closed his face again, hiding his thoughts as the veterans had done. 'I think they felt contempt for what they'd been made to do, but everybody, back home and over here, told them it was heroic, and they'd made their country proud, and they must have wondered how stupid we were if we could think ... they must have had more sense than that ... if we could think anybody could be proud of what they'd been made to do. As far as they were concerned, suppressing it was the only thing to do.'

The butterfly

In Detroit he boarded a plane. It was full of Japanese. He wondered why they were flying to Sydney, as he was, from America. His schedule said there'd be one stop. Where? San Francisco, L.A., Honolulu? Why were all these Japs on board? He settled in his seat, the plane took off. At thirty five thousand feet the captain spoke. 'Thirteen hour flight to Osaka.' The Japs were taking him out of his way. What a world, where you could find yourself in a country you'd never known you were going to visit. Travel was a seeking out of the unexpected, he supposed, getting used to the idea. The young Japanese beside him pulled from her bag a pad of coloured papers, and stripped it of three pieces, for herself, her companion, and the westerner. 'Watch and do!' she ordered sweetly, so he watched, there being no polite alternative.

She folded, he folded, her companion folded. She folded again, showing what to do. He followed. A minute later, there were three butterflies on the plane, pink, yellow, green. 'Very good,' he said, wondering what would be next. The Japanese stripped her pad of six pieces of paper. They folded again, imitating. At a certain point she put the first paper on her knee and worked on the second. The pieces were not quite identical. 'Next bit is hard,' she said. 'I do.' She took Andy's efforts and combined them slowly, before his eyes, to form a box. He gasped, it was so clever. She made her own box, and she watched, pointing, while her companion caught up. 'Is good,' she said, and then, seeing Andy put his creations in the bag where he had the book he was going to read, she asked, 'What you do with them?'

He looked into her eyes and said tenderly, 'When I get home I will put them on a shelf in my kitchen, between the clock and my boxes of tea.' He wanted her to understand that this meant they would be cher-

ished, but his message appeared lost on her. They flew for hours. Films were shown, the Japanese women taking no notice. He envied their ability to shut them out. This rubbish is part of me, he admitted, because I know how I'm meant to react, so it drains my energies to block it. If I was Japanese I wouldn't lose energy defending. He closed his eyes, attempting the impossibility of sleep.

Hours, and meals, later they crossed some islands. Were they part of Japan? He wasn't sure. His seat was near the wing, so he got up and walked along the aisle for a better view. Many rows further back he saw two empty seats beside a European man, and through the window a glimpse of the island chain that made him curious. 'You want a look?' the European said, offering the seats with a wave of the hand. 'Nobody sitting here?' Andy asked.

The European - a German accent, Andy thought - said, 'A woman with a little boy. He needs exercise. They will be a while, I think.' Again he put his hand above the seats, disposing. Andy sat, his eyes on the window and the view, far below. 'I think they are the islands beneath Tokyo,' the German said. 'You and I will never visit them. Only see them from up here.' He chuckled. 'This will be my third trip to Japan. They are strange people. I should say, strange to us. I think they must know themselves!' He chuckled again. 'Are you going to do business in Japan?'

Andy shook his head. 'I never imagined I'd visit the place. I'm flying to Sydney, or so I thought, but ...' It was his turn to let a hand fill in for words. 'One stop between Detroit and Sydney, they just didn't bother to say where the stop was. Funny world.' The German was better informed than he was. 'The Americans are cheating. They let your airline fly into America. So they are allowed to fly to your country. But they do it in a way that means they get ... you say, two bites of the cherry. They fly one load of people to Japan, then another load from Japan to your country. Two flights when they have only allowed one to enter their land. You know, if you argue with them, they will speak millions of words. They will get another plane, full of lawyers this time ...' He

laughed. 'They rule the world. Nobody likes it, but what can we do? Tell me what you know about the Japanese.'

This caught Andy by surprise. He didn't think he knew much at all, but the German was looking at him, waiting. Things came back. 'How strange that you should ask! I've known two men whose experience of Japan was possibly the biggest thing that happened in their lives.'

The German nodded, meaning go on.

'One of them was called Harold Stewart. He used to work in a bookshop. He had a reputation as a poet. I couldn't get much from his poetry, I have to confess. Then he translated lots of Japanese haiku ...' he looked; the German nodded '... into English, in rhyming couplets ...' The German's brow creased. Andy thought.

'I bowed before the Buddha, now obscure
Now bright with lightning, on the stormy moor.'

The other man nodded, waiting for more.

'The host said not a word. The guest was dumb.
And silent, too, the white chrysanthemum.

Lovely, isn't it? And mysterious. What made them go quiet? We'll never know. What about this?

Through this shower in spring, at dusk dispersing,
A raincoat and umbrella stroll, conversing ...'

Andy looked at the man who'd invited him to sit down. Could he understand? 'Do your people translate Japanese poetry? Does anybody in your country like it?' The German shrugged. 'Maybe some. It's not popular!' He laughed. 'Go on. Do you know any more?'

'I once knew hundreds. How strange. I'll tell you how I got to know them in a minute. It was through the other friend I mentioned. His name was Harold Porter. Another writer. You won't have heard of these men but they had big reputations in our country, once.' The word flattened the idea it was meant to uplift. Once. Once was famous, once was well-known, unforgettable ... and how long did 'once' last, its fame,

its high regard? Once was a moment quickly over and when gone, vanished. 'Once,' Andy said, 'is almost the spirit of the haiku, and the senryu, I'll tell you about that in a minute.' He felt invigorated; the German had done something for him. 'What are you going to do in Japan? I think you're on a business trip?'

The other man swept the question away with that hand of his. 'Go on with the poems. I would like to hear more.'

Andy looked up, seeing not a sky but luggage compartments the length of the plane. 'I've forgotten ever so many. Dear oh dear. Yes! Here's one:

A seedling shoulders up some crumbs of ground:
The fields are suddenly green for miles around!

The universal is in the tiny, and vice versa. That's the secret of them, I think. Here's another:

I climb the pagoda, five storeys high:
There, on that fir-top, sits a butterfly!'

Andy wanted to tell the other man about the butterfly in his bag, but kept it to himself; some caution crept into the strange intimacy that breaks out between travellers if they are mad enough, or wild enough, to let it happen. 'How did you learn all these poems? Your country was at war with Japan, not so long before.' The German added, 'In the time when our countries were not friends.' He appeared relieved when Andy failed to pick up this apology, or courtesy, if that was what it was. 'How strange you ask! How odd! It makes me look back and see currents entering my life when I had no idea that they even existed, let alone what they'd bring! I had a friend who was a librarian, and he bought lots of books from the shop where Harold Stewart worked. So I used to go to that shop. And when Harold Stewart brought out a book of Japanese poems that he'd translated, I felt I should buy it, even though Harold Stewart's poetry wasn't my cup of tea ...'

He looked to see if this expression had been understood.

'Harold Stewart,' he went on, 'eventually left Australia and went to live in Japan. He lived the last thirty years of his life there, wrote poetry in Japanese, and died there. He was a man who didn't find his true home until late, but once he found it, there he went! Some people are like that, aren't they? It takes them time to know where they belong, because we think we belong in the place where we grew up, but for some of us that's not true, while for others, the more you travel the more you realise where your home is.' He was a little surprised at his outburst. 'Sorry about that. What about you?'

The other man said, 'It's very interesting, what you say, but I think our conversation is about to end. The lady and her boy are coming in our direction.' Andy swung around. A Japanese woman, half his age, and her tiny son, were hovering, unwilling to oust him from their seats. He stood up, gesturing at the space he was leaving. 'Please! I was talking to your ... I wanted to look down on the islands, I couldn't see them very well from my seat, the wing was in the way, so I came down here. Please!' He pointed to where the woman and her son should sit. They did so with smiles and formalities from the mother, who answered the German's inquiries. 'He is all right now. He was tired of sitting. He needed to walk. I think perhaps he will sleep in a minute.' Andy bowed, and went back to his seat.

There was a movie screening. He wanted to sleep, but his mind was racing. The girls who'd folded paper were drowsing, heads lolling to one side. Lucky them! He remembered how he'd read the poems Harold Stewart had translated, and how they'd filled him with wonder. The Japanese seemed able to isolate, in tiny poems, the moments of illumination, of realisation, that gave consciousness its edge. A flash of insight, a poem, made life worthwhile. Man dominated, not only by brutal strength, but through his capacity to realise, and to catch a meaning in a web of words. Style was all. Style, knowledge, and illumination, these three. Suddenly, into his mind came more poems he'd forgotten. He wanted to rush back, but the German was no longer available, so he whispered:

'His brush abruptly leaps and flicks and swishes:
Swiftly across the paper swim three fishes.'

He looked at the women beside him, eyes still closed.

'The butterfly, with airy stitches, sews
Together again the barley's parted rows.'

The barley field, in ancient Japan, would have been the size of his back yard. How huge his country was!

'Over the warriors summer grasses wave;
The aftermath of dreams, however brave.'

This was a poem that had always brought him undone because it forced him to see that things were transitory. The everlasting, so beloved of Christians, wasn't part of Japanese belief. It was the transitory that caught their hearts. The moment of truth, in the moment it's experienced, is all that links humanity to what it calls divine. Divinity is in the dust, if you can glimpse it there. Westerners like Harold Stewart and Harold Porter, who'd loved Japan, had seen the richness available to a culture where almost all were poor, so long as they concentrated on the available riches - poetic truth, and the beauty which springs from enforced refinement. The poor cannot be indecently rich, but if they yield graciously to everything inevitable, redemption - something yearned for in the west - comes easily. He thought it a wondrous thing, and it made him gasp, but he had hours of flying before he would be home to embody this truth in his life. He felt sorry for Porter, returning to Japan to find it made modern, losing its grace. Was that what had made him bitter, being separated from the possibility of his vision returning to the earth?

The plane's nose dipped. Their landing was half an hour away. Hostesses turned lights on low, then brighter. Things were collected. Seat belt signs went on. An announcement was made about customs. The Japanese women woke, their eyes shining. He promised the one next to him that he would remember her when he looked at his butterfly on the shelf in his kitchen, between clock and tea. She smiled, not

entirely aware of what he wished to convey. Nor was he, he realised; what had he learned from this encounter on a flight?

There was ground mist at Osaka. He couldn't see much, looking out. Four hundred got off, leaving seven or eight in transit. The German disappeared. The airport was like other airports. He wandered about. There were signs, computers, people studying lists. There were travellers milling around trolleys and bags they were unwilling to be separated from. It made him think of the contents of his bag - things he'd carted around Europe, the US ... and two little paper creations that were going home with him. Tomorrow, he thought, they'll be in my kitchen. He'd committed himself to a process, he had tickets, and money for taxi fares. In Sydney, he'd catch another flight, then a taxi, thirty dollars and he'd be dropped at his front gate. He flew around the world and the gate stayed where it was. Years before, he'd smashed it with his car, backing down the drive and not watching properly. He'd been arguing with his daughter about the need to vote, which he took seriously, and she very lightly. Bang! Bricks all over the place. A dent in the car. An argument brought to an end!

His flight would take him over Townsville, where she lived. It'd be the small hours of the morning. When the plane boarded again, seven or eight veterans and four hundred new Japanese, the pilot spoke to them on the ground. Planes couldn't land at Sydney before 5am, so there was no point in taking off just yet. He didn't want to get there and have to circle. He obviously thought the curfew silly. Planes were like trade and should be moving all the time. People on the ground should get used to the noise, or move somewhere else. They shouldn't block legitimate business.

None of this was said, but it was clearly what he thought, this pilot who was keeping them on the ground. Andy wondered if the Japanese could hear what was being implied, as he could, or was the American pilot's voice impenetrable to them? He thought of a senryu:

Not much of a face -
One that is willing to go anywhere.

He remembered the book he'd read it in, and Harold Porter putting the book in his hands, at his sister's farm, at the end of a day when they'd gone driving. He'd learned so much in his days at that farm, listening to the writer. He'd seen how the eccentric was loved. The sister's husband, a once-cricketer, had bumped the television, and a little white statue that could only have been put there by Harold had fallen, and would have smashed, but the other man had caught it, and grinned at his guest behind the writer's back.

He remembered arriving at the sister's farm, and Harold, home after a month away, dividing up the mail his sister had put before him: she should have *these* - a pile pushed before her - to open, Andy would have *these* - another pile - and Harold would have *these*. They were to read out any that were funny. Harold quickly found funny ones. In his bead-bright gaze, most things were ridiculous, and therefore, depending on Harold's mood, either contemptible or funny. On the day in question, everything was funny. Andy had never seen him more charming ...

The pilot spoke again. He thought he'd take off now. They did, all four hundred and seven or eight of them, on their way in the dark to Sydney, lulled, soothed or enraged by films. Years before, Andy had done military training and a fair proportion of the young men were convinced that the army drugged their tea to reduce sexual drives. Andy had never believed it, but it was certainly what airlines did to travellers. Food, grog and films! It sickened him. He kept his eyes closed but when he opened them, as he did occasionally, he could tell in a flash what had happened and what was going to happen next. It is a part of me, he admitted, and I can't avoid it, here on this plane, though I can at home, on the ground.

He wanted to be at home, on the ground.

He wanted to sleep. He dozed. He woke up. He dozed. He wanted to sleep. He drowsed. If his metabolism hadn't been wrenched out of its cycles, it would be time to sleep. He'd left Detroit in mid-morning, he'd flown across he didn't know how many time zones, he'd reached Japan - Japan! - and then there'd been two hours delay ... He didn't know what the time was, in the aeroplane, or even what time zone they were in. All

he knew was that they'd land in Sydney the moment they were allowed, which was 5am, eastern summer time. In his mind he prowled up and down; Osaka and Sydney might be in the same time zone? How much of the trip would be over ocean, how much over land? He pulled out of its pocket the airline's magazine, with its maps. The flight he was on was one of the simple ones, almost a straight line, Osaka - Sydney. He put the magazine back and tried to sleep. It would be easier without the flickering of the film, which he could sense even with his eyes closed. The young Japanese paper-folders had been able to block out the films, and he couldn't. He wished they were still beside him, but they were home and he had elderly tourists instead. At an earlier stage of the trip they'd been showing cameras to each other and it had crossed his mind that if someone gave them a bundle of cards - the Barrier Reef, Uluru, the Opera House - then they wouldn't have to bother with flying. Shaking his head he decided to try and calm himself, and get as much rest as he could.

He drowsed. The plane droned. The film ended, another followed, just as tedious. He drowsed. The plane pushed through the night. He drowsed.

Adrift in air, carried southwards to his home, he became aware of ... something starting, like the flickering that occupied a screen before the pictures flowed. It was an awareness, and he thought of radar, about which he knew nothing. But something was coming through, a message arriving. It wouldn't focus, he couldn't grasp, nor see nor hear ... then it came clear, suddenly and with no room for doubt. He was directly above his daughter, who'd travelled with him on many occasions. The awareness was only one way. She lay beneath him, thirty-five thousand feet down, asleep. He didn't see her, he knew. So that was where he was. The pilots of the plane, up the front in a semi-darkened cabin, had instruments measuring electronic signals that told them where they were. An older apparatus was working inside him. He was directly above his daughter, deep down far below. He knew the house, the very room, on the hill that rose up in the city of her choice, which endured

cyclonic lashings when its rain-shadow wasn't in force. All was still and peaceful around her. There were no words. It was a simple current, like the last visions of themselves some people send their loved ones as they die, or drown, or know their end is near. He'd often wondered about these connections, and here he was caught in one. It seemed a rarity that put him apart from others who didn't, or couldn't, take in such messages. She was below.

Minutes passed. A steward came down the aisle, darkened now that the film had ended. Andy put out his hand. 'Can you tell me where we are?' The steward thought. 'Somewhere over northern Australia,' he said, as if that helped. 'I can do better than that,' Andy said. 'We're directly over Townsville.' The steward made no comment, and slipped away in the gloom. Andy returned to his meditation, the message that had entered him. It was still there, but fading slightly.

It lasted fifteen to twenty minutes, then it dropped behind. The plane was heading for Sydney and the earth. It flew, it landed, spot on 5 am. 'We must be the first plane into Sydney this morning,' Andy said to the hostess who was overseeing the readiness of passengers. 'I think we would be,' she said. She was American, and she added, 'If anybody got in earlier than us, they were breaking the law.' Woe betide them if they do that, Andy thought, wanting to laugh. They'd face a lifetime in the US courts, what a fate! Minutes later he was getting his bags, queueing up in customs. For some reason - he was a lone traveller? - they went through his things. He wanted to say, 'Hey, I've got another plane to catch!' but that would provoke further examination. So he watched as his things were unfolded, tested by probing fingers, and all the rest. 'Where did you get this, sir? And this?' They let him go at last and he took himself to the bus for the domestic terminal. He was nearly home. He swept into the terminal, read the screens, got himself to his gatelounge just as the doors were opened to board the plane.

Planes! He practically lived on the things. He went down the carpeted tunnel, greeted the hostesses who were welcoming passengers

on *their* first flight of the day, and found his seat. An hour later he was hovering above his city, inclining to land. The plane touched down, passengers disembarked, farewelled by hostesses, and suddenly, in the carpeted tunnel of his own airport, he was off the travel machine. All it needed, now, to reconnect him with his daily life, was a taxi, a shower, a cup of tea in his garden ...

... and a call to his daughter, to tell her what had happened.

Une idée géniale

He was trying to hurry, but the snow had melted and re-hardened, and he had to be careful. 'Bloody freezing!' he said, rubbing his gloves together. He was close to the bookshop he wanted to inspect, but little streets led in every direction; he decided to follow the best lit. Even so, it was gloomy, and he came on the man without realising what the lump on the footpath was.

Humanity shouldn't be brought so low, but what was he going to do? He had a rule of not interfering with the way other countries did things; do-gooders, he told himself, don't know what they're doing. But this man ...

... lay on a hatch cover which was clear of snow, and dry. Andy bent down to touch. A metro station must be somewhere beneath. The man's face was pressed against the warmth. A scarf wrapped around his neck. His coat was thick, but his shoes ...

Andy shuddered. What protection would those soles afford? He looked around. There was nobody in sight. He thought of pushing a hundred francs into the man's pocket, but he was as likely to be robbed as to spend it. And one meal, half a dozen meals, what lasting good would they do? Even kindness, charity, needed a trajectory, and a target. Throwing money at a problem solved nothing. If you wanted to help someone, you had to be part of that person's life. Andy looked around. Nobody. He rushed down the street as swiftly as the ice would allow.

A minute and he'd found his shop. It was attached to a printery and most of the titles had been produced on the premises. His eyes ran along the shelves. There were also books in boxes, with men doing something in the doorway which linked shop and printery. They nodded, then left him alone. He took up a book, read for a time, then opened another.

The card, hardly thicker than paper, which made the cover, was furry. The title was red, other words in black. A slender line followed the edge of the book, which, he felt, was saturated in French pride. This is no consumer object, Andy reflected, this is thought; he looked at the shop, full of riches, then began to explore ...

Two minutes later, the man on the metro-hatch had vanished from his mind, and he was dipping into books, confident that one would anticipate his state of mind, posing questions that troubled him, and offering answers of a sort. Why else would one read except to find the answer to a need?

What was his need, he asked himself; what did he want to know?

He thought, half-listening to the printery men. His mind settled on a question that had bothered him at university, and never been answered. If you had been an aristocrat in eighteenth century France, could you have stopped the great revolution from taking place? He disliked the idea of historical inevitability. It seemed to him that if something was declared to be inevitable then nobody, at the time or later, had understood what had been happening. Their ignorance rendered them powerless. Better minds might have diverted history's current. He was thinking about this, hand on a book, when he noticed one of the men approaching. 'Monsieur, pardonnez-moi, mais nous allons fermer à huit heures ...' Andy looked at his watch, but realised that the man was pointing at the cash register, and explaining something Andy couldn't grasp but which appeared to require that they turn off the register some minutes before they closed the shop. 'I won't be buying anything tonight,' he said in French, 'I'll come back tomorrow.' The bookshop man nodded in the grave, understanding way that Andy loved. 'Bonne nuit, monsieur. A demain!' Even this tiny acceptance made the visitor feel he belonged in France, a country as famous for courtesies as for incivilities. What happened at the guillotine, he wondered. Did anybody pray for those being shorn of their heads? No, the revolution was too anti-clerical. He imagined the souls of those who'd been decapitated screaming as others were put to death, a flock of spirits invisible to those

watching, a flock which might still be fluttering where the machine had stood. Souls had no power in the modern world but at times and places they'd filled humans with mortal fear. He said goodnight to those in the shop and faced the dark streets separating him from his hotel.

Were any of those spirits lurking in the Paris he loved today?

He wondered, finding his way back, why these thoughts, superstitions to his rational mind, had got loose, but it wasn't until he realised that he was in the street of the unconscious man that he knew why he was troubled. The lump was on the hatch, unmoving. Andy felt a chill run through him. The streets were frozen, mercilessly hard. What am I supposed to do, he asked himself, aware that his strongest reaction was rage at himself for having ventured down the street he'd vowed not to enter again.

Curse the bloody wreck of a man! He'd no business to be there!

Andy looked around. Unyielding dark. That's your fate, your fortune, mate, he said to the unconscious man. I can't even give you a warm room for the night, they wouldn't let me into my hotel if I was dragging you. Again he thought; money in the man's pocket? Ring the gendarmes? As if they were connected to his thoughts, they appeared, behind the lights of a car, rolling down the icy street. They stopped next to Andy and a window wound down. Andy pointed at the man, giving his responsibility to the police. They glanced at the body, then looked at Andy. 'Vous le connaissez?' Andy shook his head. 'Je suis un citoyen Australien,' he began, but the driver said quickly, 'Ah oui. Vous avez un hotel, monsieur?'

'Hotel-Pension Suisse, Rue ...'

'Allez-vous en, monsieur. Dormez bien. Ne rêvez pas de lui.' To Andy's amazement, the window rolled up and the car began to move. He felt only slightly less abandoned than the man on the pavement whom, apparently, no one was taking responsibility for. 'That's what the cops are like in this country?' he grumbled, yet understood, to his shame, that in clearing off they were clearing him too, of responsibility. The man on the footpath belonged to no one but himself.

Andy walked slowly to his hotel, but instead of going in he took himself to a bar across the road. He sat glumly with a glass of red, trying to ignore a man warming up at the piano, and other musicians sorting themselves out for a night of playing. Musical phrases broke out of the muddle, and the players whipped remarks between themselves. They were going to have a night of it while Andy tried to sleep - no, slept, because, he knew, no matter how troubled he was by the man on the metro-hatch, his self-interest wouldn't desert him: he'd sleep well, and wake on the morrow.

Paris would be itself and by mid-morning the street would be cleared of he-who'd-slept-there; he could lie there at night, if that was all he had, but in the daytime he'd be cleared away. Picked up. Put in a cell? Andy didn't know what the police would do with a derelict, but he imagined they wouldn't want to be bothered with him. The French police had a whimsy the cops didn't have in his country. He imagined them putting the man in a van and driving him to another police district, or putting him on a train heading for a far place. It was one way of solving the insoluble problem of rebuilding a life that was lost.

He grinned, despite his sullen mood. And what about the revolution, could it have been stopped? Not once it got going, but could it have been circumvented, redirected, or allowed to be only a minor event? Could the line of kings which led to, and through, the Emperor Napoleon, have been made aware of a need to moderate their grandiloquent sense of power, or did the creation of Versailles, over the long life of the Sun King, mean that royalty's sun had to set in a welter of blood? Human life was so haphazard that it was hard to believe that there were direct causes of anything, but there were certainly forces unleashed, and they usually took their revenge on those who came later, and hadn't caused them. It was the best answer Andy could find to the question he'd put before himself. He finished his wine, went to the Hotel-Pension Suisse, and slept.

In the morning he went to a part of Paris far from his hotel, to inspect paintings by Monet. Many of them were of water-lilies, floating

on the surface which gave the painter-gardener his subject. Andy had been there before, and he couldn't stop his eyes wandering to the bench where his son and daughter had played cards while he examined the masterpieces. The gallery attendants had been amused by the foreigner's children, to the extent that Andy had suspected them of wanting to play cards themselves instead of watching as gallery-goers looked reverently at Great Art. Great stuff and nonsense. If it couldn't take its chance in the everyday world it deserved what it got, a drawn-out death in sombre chambers of respect, which you had to pay to enter. Thank God for kids!

In a swing of mood he thanked God for Monet too, for having had the courage of his obsession. Humans were a species of moderate lifespan, wasted on most of them, but there were always a few with a thing they had to do. These few were lanterns to the rest, followed rarely enough. Most blundered about in the dark, claiming they could see. He knew he'd have to go back to the street that had put him in this mood. He'd face the street of despair, and it would be clear, and it would trouble him, but he would get through it. You could face anything if you had your mind ready.

He caught the metro back to his Quartier, he had lunch. He set off again for the bookshop. There were people in the streets, so many that for a moment he didn't realise that he was almost standing on the spot where the man - the lump - had been. The hatch was still free of ice; the street had had sand tossed here and there, to give wheels and shoes a chance to grip. He was past the hatch-cover in a moment, and outside the shop, looking in. It was an entrancing spot, because so industrious, so serious, devoted yet good-humored. The man who'd spoken to him the night before saw him through the glass, and lifted a hand. Andy went in, and the workmen nodded. He felt he was one of them. He wanted to laugh, but he had a serious role to play. He looked among the books he'd been reading the previous night. There they were, the ones he'd thought about buying, and yes, he still felt the same. I wish there was one on whether revolutions can be avoided, he told himself, a

grin breaking out on his face, and another about that bloody man who'd slept in the street. That would be a book to sorrow over! He paid for his purchases, nodded to the men near the doorway to the printery, and left the shop, feeling as if his own resumption of normality had pushed the world's problems to the edge of the mind, where they belonged. If the mind couldn't deal with them, what use was there in concentrating on the wretched plagues they brought?

He left Paris a few days later, and didn't return for five years. It was the same when he came back because its changes were the cutting edge of fashion. Someone has to set the pace; indeed, someone has to say that a pace is being set. Paris was it, for Australians of Andy's generation, an idea they'd been given by their English forebears who knew that close to home - across the channel - was a place they'd never conquer because they couldn't understand it. It was sharp, and superior, setting itself goals inaccessible to the English mind.

Andy went to the hotel he always went to and at the end of the day took himself to the bar across the road. He put a glass of red beside the book he was reading, and declared himself as contented as any man alive. He read. He drank, he had another. Lifting his eyes from the page, he noticed that the man running the place was watching with suspicion something in the street. Andy looked. A couple who had to be American had been accosted by two young men who were, with protestations of innocence, trying to sell some idea, some scheme, to the tourists. The world is full of schemes and every scheme involves money changing hands. He went back to his book, but a minute later he heard the man behind the bar making a sound full of contempt, and he looked again. A police car had cruised into the narrow street, and stopped, blocking everything. The Americans looked pleased because the young men were being ordered into the car. They got in, protesting, and it drove away. The man at the bar was pleased, though Andy felt he despised the police as much as the con-men, in fact he probably despised everybody except those who spent up big in his bar. These he

would scorn, but welcome. This is the city I keep coming back to, Andy thought, it draws people to it ...

... because they want, I want, to be part of its mysterious allure. If I think like that, he told himself, I'm an outsider, looking through the glass and wanting to be inside, where I'll never belong. Oh well, what about tomorrow?

The next day he took a huge walk, winding through narrow streets on the left of the Seine, and then along the ruthlessly cut central boulevardes until he diverted into the railway areas north of the river. Twice he stopped for a drink, twice he sat on seats to rest his feet, but wonderfully happy, concentrating on the intensity of the atmosphere. You'd have to lift your game to live in this place, he told himself. Nothing but the very best would give you a living here. The idea appealed to him; his own country took an easier, less challenging route and its satisfactions were reached on an accordingly lower level. Finally he decided it was time to turn towards his tourist-home, the Hotel-Pension Suisse. Walking in that direction, with the sun lowering itself on the rooftops, he became aware of a feeling of familiarity. A moment later he saw the shop where he'd bought books the last time he'd been in France. He looked at it, smiling, too tired, too satisfied, to go in. Then a warning, a sudden chill, entered his mind. There was a street he had to avoid, because, once, there'd been a man, a lump, on the footpath, in the ice ...

He settled on another way home, and headed down a street that was new to him. Something caught his eye. Between the parked cars, in tiny, marked spaces, were plastic cones, known in his country as witches' hats, and on the footpath beside each of these a piece of white plastic in the shape of a dog had been glued to the bitumen. Dog after dog pointed its nose towards a red plastic cone. What was going on?

Andy stopped a man coming in the other direction and asked. The man was pleased to have an audience. These signs, he told Andy in quick-fire French, were to instruct dogs that they should 'faire wee-wee' on the cones, not on the wheels of cars. He beamed, seeing that the foreigner saw the foolishness of this scheme. Andy pointed. 'This isn't

going to work!' The Frenchman, in a costly coat and with a fur cap covering his grey hair, let a sparkle enter his eyes. 'C'est une idée géniale. When you have no petrol,' he said, 'you think of such things! Laughing, he continued down the street. The tourist, forced by the Frenchman's attitude to feel his inferiority, stood in the street of the city where he'd never belong, much as he admired it. A silly white plastic dog pointed its nose towards a silly red plastic cone. Piss here, not there, dogs, please! Where do I fit in, Andy wondered, and then he saw, clearly enough, at last. He fitted in when he spoke to a Frenchman of moderate wealth to ask something that showed interest and respect. Curiosity. If you treat them as the centre of the world, the source, the fountain, they'll take notice of you. Anything else, you don't exist.

In service

Andy had been awake some minutes. He thought Tim was awake. Leila was making noises to tempt her brother into declaring himself. Andy hoped they could have a few more minutes before their day began. Then came a knock, a jingle of keys, and the door was open. He rolled over to look. Moving through their room to the bath was a woman of fifty. She'd been in the room when they'd arrived, the day before. She'd said a few words in English. Now, she had her lips pursed in some caricature of Roman pride. Leila sat up and giggled. Andy looked at her. She was staring across his bed to Tim's bed, Andy turned and Tim too had an impish look in his eyes. They were wide awake now! Andy put his feet on the floor. The Italian chambermaid, servant, domestic ... what would you call her? ... was at the passage door, towels across her arm. 'Hey!' Tim called, but she flicked the towels to show them what she was taking, then she was gone. 'Sucking lemons!' Leila said, 'that's what she's like!' She imitated the woman who'd left. 'Let's seeya suck your lemons, Tim, they're good for you!' Tim sucked lemons. 'What's this about?' their father said. His children made faces that made him laugh. 'Sucking lemons? She does look like that, doesn't she. By the way, since we're all awake, who wants first shower? If she left us any towels, I'd better have a look.'

They showered. They had breakfast, and went for a walk, gravitating to the piazza in front of Saint Peter's, full of buses, tourists, horse-drawn vehicles for hire, people selling souvenirs, an obelisk, and an army of columns overwhelming the space they'd never seen empty. 'People must come here the way we do,' Andy said, 'to feel that they're somewhere. It's as if nobody can go anywhere in Italy until they've doffed their hats to the Pope.'

'Where does he come out when he's going to give a speech?'

Andy got behind his daughter and pointed. 'That balcony there, I think. Whenever they show him on television I try to see where he is, and I'm pretty sure that's where he delivers his messages. Unto the world,' he laughed. 'All mankind! What an outrageous claim!'

His son and daughter looked in surprise. They'd supposed him more indifferent than atheistic. In the presence of the mighty church, scorn and aggression were apparent. 'Are you a bit dark on the Pope, pop?' Leila said.

'Il papa,' he said, grinning. 'The pontiff. He of the robes, and blessings. He who excommunicates. He who turns bread and wine into the bloody and bod of Jesus. Ach! Mystical mumbo-jumbo. A lot of rot, actually.'

There wasn't much his children could say. 'Are we going inside?' They moved through the doors, feeling the gigantic space taking them in. 'Who built this place, dad?' Tim wanted to know. His father said brusquely, 'I forget. It's all in the guide book. We'll have a look later. But look at these people. How many of them are believers, and how many have come out of curiosity, like us?' Leila felt troubled by this. 'I didn't come here because I was curious. I've been here before, so it's not new to me. I think I wanted to be reassured ...'

She tailed off. Her father and brother looked at her, so she tried to go on. '... I guess if it wasn't here, we'd know Rome had changed. Europe had changed. This is the first place we saw in Europe, and I suppose it's still number one for me. So yeah, I wanted to be reassured.' She looked at them. 'What about you?'

Tim said, 'I'll bet a lot of these people live in pretty terrible places, but they're happy if they come here. None of this belongs to them ...' he sensed his father wanting to interrupt '... well, it's not theirs to do what they like with ... so why do they come? I guess they want to be reassured like we do.' He looked at his father and sister. 'Dad?'

Andy smiled. 'I am being put on the spot! Let's analyse our feelings. How do you feel about being here? Does this place make you feel worthless, or special and valuable?' He looked at them. 'Hey?'

His daughter said, after some thought, 'Both. You can tell you're a complete nobody, the place is so big. But you feel you must be important, just because you're here.' She turned her head to look upwards into the cupola which was where, the building suggested, the spirit would settle on earth, when it chose. 'Nobody there at the moment,' Andy said. 'All's quiet, up above!' He smiled slyly. 'You said that very well. I think the church, that's the Roman Catholic Church, wants you to feel that way, and if we do, then the building's done what those who built it wanted it to do.' His son was disturbed by this. 'It's not just the building ...' He didn't know how to finish. His father said, 'Remember Churchill: we shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us. He was so right. Hundreds of years ago, the pope of the day and the priests he had around him said to some builders, this is what we want to make people feel when they come in. And if you think about it, we're all human, so even if we aren't Christians, and even if we come along hundreds of years later, we'll still feel the same way, if the building's been well designed, as it certainly has.'

All three felt that enough words had been said. The building was a force trying to shape them, and they considered themselves to see how they were being shaped.

Tim found himself thinking of their airline tickets. If anybody tried to trap them into becoming nuns and priests, they could fly back home. He knew his father had the tickets in his money belt. With the tickets, they were safe. He looked around. Light poured on the tiled floor, on the altar, and seemed to create a reverberant dimension to the sounds of the building. He realised that it was hard to think of it as a thing, made of stones, that had to carry its own weight and hold out the storms and winds of centuries, it was more an embodiment of faith, and that was insubstantial because it had to be renewed, and yet it was a lasting force, like a glacier crushing downwards through thousands of years. A group

of priests moved close to the Australian travellers, red-faced, wearing black, murmuring to each other in deceitful subservience. Tim could feel a revulsion for these men run through his sister and father. The men were practised in moving through crowds. It was a secret of their trade. They were obtrusively unobtrusive. Tim wanted to scream at them, but knew it was smarter to be silent. While dad had the tickets, they were okay!

Leila responded as she knew she was meant to respond to the filtered light, the gold, statues, windows and incense. Above all, the murmur of hundreds or was it thousands of people, all talking, but reverently, told her that they were in the control of a force which they were meant to think was the power of God but which, she knew instinctively, was held by a group of men who must look on the crowds in their church with glee. Gotcha! It was creepy, the way they did it, and they were, she knew, very good at it. Every doubt, every suspicion, had an answer, a restorative to faith. Once you give in, once they've got you, you're lost. It's obedience for the rest of your life. When we leave this church, she thought, I won't come back. Getting out was the thing! She looked, the doors were still open, people were leaving as well as coming in. They didn't actually lock you in, they let you commit yourself. You had to ask them to bind you in a wrap of faith. She felt safe, safe and strong. There was nothing in her nature that wanted to be bound.

Andy wavered between contempt and admiration. The Church had got hold of the teachings of a middle-eastern desert wanderer, sensed their grip, their resonance, and had welded onto them an amalgam of ideas centring on the fallibility of humans and their yearning to be released from all that was limited or disgraceful inside them. The Church had sensed that this was a path to power in a violent, warring world. If humans could be made to submit to something that they were convinced was superior to themselves, then they would submit to those who so persuaded them. The talkers would out-power the sword- and lance-wielders. The Church was cunning. It could not be successful without delicacy, diplomacy, foresight, and an infinite capacity to master

the thinking of those whose minds were more limited because more direct. Souls could be captured because they were directed towards their own aims, so the secret was to keep them inside their limitations, then to worry them by causing anxiety or even guilt, and at the same moment to offer a way out. Christ's words, Christ's sacrifice! The double whammy! He looked at the priests slipping between what they at least would call 'the faithful'. He hated them. Why? He thought, looking vaguely around him while his mind searched. It was because they avoided sex. They didn't marry. This abstention from normality made them abnormal, which meant, humanity being a species limited in its capacities, that their lives, supposedly pastoral, mentoring, and lived for the purposes of God, had to be, were, inescapably manipulative. They were waiting for people to give them their trust. That was an offering nobody should make to an organisation, though he knew, well enough, how desperately some people wanted to be rid of responsibility for themselves.

That was why, Andy realised, he hated the whole elaborate set-up they were in. Like his daughter, he looked at the doors to check that they'd not been closed, trapping all within. They were open, still. One could walk out into the clear - or not so clear - air, and take responsibility for oneself again. That was the only way to be fully, decently, human. 'Let's get a drink,' he said to his family. 'I think I need it.'

They drank, they looked at shops, had lunch, and lay down, laughing, for a siesta. 'If they sleep in the middle of the day,' Leila said, 'they must be up half the night.' Her father said they were. 'But not us, unfortunately. We have to get our money's worth out of each day!' This caught Tim's notice. 'How much is this trip costing us, dad?' Andy told him. Tim thought the figure huge. 'If we hadn't come to Europe, what would we have done with that money?'

'Wasted it, probably. Spent it on things we wouldn't miss, and wouldn't remember.'

'Is that why you write notes each day, so you remember?'

'Yes. I also think that unless you say something, either aloud or in writing, you never get to know it properly.'

'It's in your head, though.'

'True, but you may not have admitted it. Think of somebody saying something that you don't like because it unsettles you. What do you do? You shut it out. Try to make the thought go away. Well, if you don't write something down, or say it to someone who takes you seriously, then you're not admitting that it's a possible ground for action. You're trying to dodge the idea. It's a form of dishonesty, to my way of thinking.'

Leila said, 'Aren't we supposed to be sleeping?'

Her father laughed. 'Good one, darling. Right on. I can't stop myself talking ...'

He paused. Outside, somewhere in the passage, they'd heard a jangling sound. Keys. 'Oh no!' Tim said. Andy laughed. Leila's mouth changed shape. Then she snickered. 'Lemons!' was all she could say, and the three of them roared. Nobody entered. Tim dashed to the door, pulled it open, and looked.

'Not a soul!'

His sister and father laughed at him. 'Disappointed, mate?' He came back to his bed. 'Door,' Andy reminded him. 'Oh fuck the door,' the boy said, but closed it, and then they were lying on their beds as they had that morning, but this time the tension had been broken, and they eased into sleep for half an hour.

In the days that followed they went to many places: the catacombs, the zoo, and the central ruins, which they explored for hours. Andy often found himself on his own while Tim and Leila pried into what was left of the Rome which, he noticed, was many feet lower than the city around it. One had truly to dig into the past! The young people bought postcards and a large picture of the city as it had been in the age of Constantine. They spread it on a bed and picked out things still standing. They compared it with a modern map, and planned excursions. They walked, and caught buses. They noticed that nobody tried to sell them tickets, then they realised you were expected to have a ticket before you

got on. This was travel! Tim did calculations. 'I reckon we've diddled this city's bus company out of forty six dollars!'

'How many lira's that?'

'Millions!'

They saw that some things were done gracefully, and some were next to impossible. When a car broke down, nobody helped; they tooted, until ancient buildings at serviette-sized crossings quivered under the blast of warring horns. A restaurateur, a few steps away, put a table on the footpath, and a menu, inviting passers-by to lunch. The meals they ate, and the wines, seemed unadventurous until they realised that the Italians had for almost everything a standard which they hoped to approximate. There was a centre to their tradition, where people thought it proper to be clustered.

In the middle of these explorations, Andy became aware that their hotel was delimited only by a sign at the front door. Sometimes he saw the lemon-lady heading up or down the staircase, but he never knew where she was going. He realised, too, that when rooms were being serviced the doors were left open only a moment. He wondered how many rooms the place had, but when he looked for a rack of keys at reception he discovered that only the person on duty could see it. His knowledge, indeed his observation, was restricted to their room, the entry, and a lounge, a formal place with polished floor, television, a couch, table and six upright chairs. Andy liked this room because its heavily draped window looked down a street that swarmed with traffic, night and day. 'It's like an artery,' Andy wrote in his notes. 'We go to sleep but the city always has some of itself on full alert, and this street is one such part.' He liked to go to the room at the end of the day and sit in the gathering dark before he switched on the light. Tim and Leila knew this, and sometimes came to the door to catch his mood. 'Want the light on, dad?' He'd answer with a nod or shake of the head, and would feel loved and loving when they went away. The red glow in the west intensified his awareness. He wondered how he wrote his notes in places where there was no benediction. He thought sometimes of the

huge skies of his own country and wondered how much it had gained, learned, from the ancient empire in whose capital he sat. His home seemed far away.

What was it like to be Italian? To live in Rome? They took more care of themselves than his people. They paid attention to everything close to the person - hats, gloves, shoes, spectacles, ties and scarves. Everything was a presentation. They were reserved, yet somehow on offer. They were intense, yet sequestered from the rest of the world, about which they were incurious. They were stricter about closing doors than about celibacy. They enslaved their women, then let them rule. They bothered little about government, seeing it as a cover, a form, for deeper forces to operate. He thought frequently that there were two mafias running the place, one carrying guns, the other crosses. Even to think of it made him shake his head, yet the gelati were delicious, people got where they wanted to go. He remembered how he and his children had been cheated out of their seats on a train because an old woman wanted a beautiful young couple standing in the passage to sit beside her, so she'd told the tourists lies about when they needed to get off. Again, it made Andy shake his head. It was a culture that went on about honour in its operas, and cheated with bare-faced abandon. L'honore! They couldn't separate it from the ribbons, the sashes and medals they put on every uniform. To wear the form was to imply the quality, and make the claim.

What a puzzling lot they were!

He sensed that the owners of the hotel were out of sight, yet knew what their staff were doing. They must have a spy, then, a confidante? He studied the people in the place, wondering which was in the family's pay. By the third day he was certain it was the lemon-lady. She was the only one he ever saw on the staircase, therefore she must be the only one with access to however many levels the hotel occupied. The under-powered, unreliable lift was used by the women who took mops and buckets up and down. The staircase had higher status, unlike his country, where lifts were favoured. What did she report, the lemon-lady? Where

did she meet the owners to tell? Did they put money in an account for her? Andy didn't know and knew he never would. They define me by my needs as a guest, they satisfy those needs in their insular way, and they keep their methods shrouded.

He wondered how anyone ever broke through the web, the mesh, that held them; did they, even, realise that there was a web, a mesh, and that they enforced it on each other? He supposed so, but he didn't know. Was that why they were so intuitive about things people wanted? He felt sure that he and his two must seem crass to these Italians whose history ran back through the centuries separating the ruins at the heart of their city from the time when they were built, new, adventurous, still to be defined.

He found himself longing for home, and the ways that were normal, for sheets that smelt as they should, for fruit in mountains instead of tiny trays. He wanted to catch the lemon-lady going through their bags, but she held the keys, she could let herself in and out ...

He gave up. You could only see what you saw from the positions where they held you, enslaved by custom as they were themselves.

Days passed, they made trips into the countryside, they found new things in the guide book to visit. Their flight home crept up on them. A hollowness ate into each day. Their commitment to the place they were returning to stopped Andy from committing himself to what he saw. Rome had been made, and was valued, by people who belonged here, while his inner clocks were preparing him for there. On the last night he said to Tim and Leila that he wanted to write his notes. 'You won't have to write them tomorrow,' she said. 'We'll be on the plane!' Happiness filled her. 'That'll be good,' Andy said, 'but I'll be sad. I can't stop myself, I'm feeling sad enough as it is.'

He went to the lounge, a little later than usual. It was dark, but there was somebody sitting on the arm of a chair, looking at the sombre immensity of a city that never slept. Standing at the table where he wrote, notebook and pen in his hands, Andy became aware that the seated figure was in a state of unity quite different from his feeling of

transitoriness. The figure moved, fractionally, but enough to tell Andy who it was. The lemon-lady was staring into the approaching night. Andy coughed. 'Do you mind if I put the light on? I want to write my notes before we go out for dinner ...'

The figure got up gracefully, as if occupied by the spirit of what she saw, and moved to the door of the room. She touched the switch and the two of them, fully lit, were re-revealed. 'I do apologise,' Andy said, 'I realise you were enjoying a quiet moment ...' The other would have none of it. 'You are a guest of this hotel. You are paying for your stay. I am in service, and I am here to see you get everything you want.' Andy checked her, but she went on. 'It is my duty to be ready for everyone's wishes, and if you wish to have the light on and write then it is impossible for me to be here. The room is yours.' She bowed her head and left. Andy sat down, wishing he hadn't broken in: she deserved a still moment for her day to revolve around. He opened his notebook, but words wouldn't come; he was still thinking of his interruption to the Roman's serenity, for that was what it had been. Serenity was important for Andy too, it was the mood he needed for writing his notes, but it disturbed him to know that his mood of quietness had been obtained by breaking into hers. He was sittting without writing when Tim and Leila came in. 'How's it going, pop?' He told them about the lemon-lady, and how he was feeling troubled. 'This time tomorrow she'll have forgotten us. We'll be gone and someone else'll have our room. She won't remember us. How could she, doing the job she does?'

He knew it was true, the young people were right, but he - he - couldn't forget the lemon-lady because she was the most Roman thing he'd seen.

Gipsy alert

'Gipsy alert!' Tim said. Andy looked up; there were four children ahead, the same age as his two. As far as he could tell, they were the kids they'd seen yesterday, from the other side of the river. 'Stay close,' he said. 'Keep walking. Don't let them slow us down.'

Father, son and daughter advanced on the challenge. The gipsy children put out their hands to touch, but the tourists pushed through. The gipsies kept pace with them, stroking their coats. One of them tried to fondle Leila's glove, but she pulled away. Tim elbowed a boy who blocked his path. 'Out of the way!' Andy said. 'You're molesting visitors. People who come here don't want to be interfered with by you!' Two of them pressed searching hands into the folds of his coat; he wanted to wrench the hands away, but that would mean leaving his pockets undefended. 'Piss off!' he shouted angrily. The gipsy children seemed connected in mind; three of them walked backwards in front of Andy while a fourth moved behind, clinging to his coat, aiming to confuse him while they searched those pockets, and the bag around his neck. Leila, seeing the aim of their attack, chopped at the hand that clung to her father's coat; the gipsy boy let go and she rushed at one of the boys trying to slow her father. Tim rushed at a second boy and the middle one stepped out of Andy's way. In a stride or two the touring family reunited and the gipsies had stopped. Andy glanced over his shoulder. 'Scum! We did'em that time. What's wrong with the cops in this bloody city, you can't tell me they don't know where the gipsies are making pests of themselves. They could kick them out if they wanted to.' Did the gipsy women let the police have them as the price for letting the kids prowl tourist areas? He wondered; the city would be rid of them if it was smart ... but what city was smart? It wasn't a natural condition. Cities changed without

letting themselves know. The societies that built them, and lived in them, talked as if change was a development whereby the old negatives were swept away, but there was never any accounting ...

He was in a bad mood by the time they got to the Castel San Angelo. They paid, and went in via a long rising tunnel that made him think of a body's tube for getting rid of waste. So much of Europe was about grand, formal entrances because those deemed important used arrivals to celebrate themselves, but this was different. Earlier on their visit they'd looked at the winding, hollow wall which allowed high-ranked religious to slip from a besieged Vatican to the Castel without being seen; this entry, open for paying visitors, let you know you were walking contested ground. In the tunnel an attendant drew visitors' attention to the fact that they had crossed a bridge, or wooden section of the walk; it could be picked up, he showed them, because it was hinged, and a frightening drop was revealed between the lower and the higher reaches of the tunnel. 'This was where,' the man said in a weary voice, 'the castle's guards could fight soldiers trying to break in.' His eye indicated where their thoughts should take them, that is, to the plunging drop below any intruders stabbed or speared as they tried to cross the void. 'Was built in hard times,' the attendant said, as solemnly as long practice would allow. Tim sniggered and Leila, her father knew, was memorising the accent, which she'd imitate over dinner that night. Their father glanced at them, trusting them to realise how they should behave.

They made their way through rooms and passages, many of them secret, according to their guidebook, until they reached the top, with its views of Rome. Beneath them, but within the castle, were stacks of cannonballs, and men in ancient uniform bearing halberds, leading Tim to say, 'I don't know whether those men are dressed up to represent the past, or whether they're modern guards with old-fashioned weapons.' Andy and Leila looked down. 'I don't think I know either,' Andy said. 'Europe's got so many formalities hung over from its past that often I can't tell if they believe in them or not. I don't think they know themselves. Mind you, if we challenged them, they'd bristle and tell us about

their great and living culture, but among themselves, when we've all gone home, God knows what they think. I *think* they're surrounded by so many historic memories they treat them as friendly ghosts. Which reminds me,' he said, 'have a look around. We're on stage. This is where the third act of *Tosca* takes place.' He sang, softly, a few words from 'E lucevan le stelle', irritating his son and daughter. 'Don't make me squirm, dad. Who told you you could sing?'

Andy was amused. 'Sorry about that. I couldn't let the opportunity go. I'll never be on stage in Tosca again.' His daughter said, rising to the bait, 'Whaddaya mean?'

He told them the story of the opera, and how its hero was shot not far from where they stood, despite his lover's attempts, successful she'd thought, to save his life. Tim found it puzzling. 'She had a safe pass for him, but they used real bullets when they weren't supposed to? Is that what you're telling us?' Andy swept the question away. 'I'm buggered if I know, I don't think it matters. The lovers *thought* they had everything right, but that was when things went wrong. Bang! Live bullets. Very sad. Audience weeps. We all go home with damp hankies, we paid our money and we got what we wanted!

The young people thought this was crazy. 'People pay to see that?' Their father was not disconcerted. 'There is nothing so silly people won't pay to look at it, or bow their bloody heads before it. We're only talking about the human race, the poor dopes ...'

Leila broke in. 'Where do those gipsies come from, pop?'

Andy smartened. 'They'd live on the outskirts of the city, somewhere, and come in each day by train. Without paying, I'd imagine.'

'No, I mean, like we come from Australia. Where's their home?'

This was another matter. 'What a question! I don't think anybody knows, really, though there's plenty of books been written about them. I read a few, once, I've forgotten nearly all of it now. Some people claim they came out of India ... well, that's a good explanation for the origin of anything! Some people think they came from any one of a number of places in the Balkans ...'

'Where's the Balkans?'

'Another loose term, but roughly, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, all those countries between the Arab world and Europe. Pretty terrible places, most of them. The gipsies do have a language of their own, though, called Romany, and if you studied it you could trace its origins, I suppose. However,' he said, smiling, 'life's too short!'

'They go round in caravans, don't they?'

'They did, and they do. That's an attractive feature, if you think back to an earlier Europe with about one hundredth of the population that's here today. Wandering gipsies seem to fit in. But in a city like this, with cars and trains and aeroplanes, they don't fit, or not in their old way. There's nowhere for them to hunt, when they want some food, so they have to get it from us. Our system. Which they don't fit into. They don't belong any more, if they ever did. They're the classic outsiders, living on their wits, which means robbing us, any way they can. I hate them. I ought to be sympathetic, and I am if I stop to think, but most of the time I hate them, and why? Because they give me the creeps the moment they come near me.'

'Me too,' Leila said. 'What is it about them?'

'I think it's because they're so gentle,' her father said. 'They're not thugs, so you don't feel you've got the right to bash them. They accept that you're civilised, then they start to bring you undone, in that ever-so-gentle way.' He shuddered. 'Those fingers, running up and down your arm!' Tim made a noise. 'Yuck!' Leila was still curious. 'How come we hate them, though, when they're sort of gentle?'

'They're still out to rob us,' Andy said, 'even though they get on the upside of you ...'

Tim and Leila looked unsure.

'... if someone's violent towards you, you feel justified in striking back. But the gipsies slip under whatever it is that allows you to feel righteous about hitting somebody. They seem to tell you that you've no right to resist, and at the same time their fingers are feeling for your money ...'

The three of them looked at each other, united in contempt. They looked about from their high vantage point. Rome seemed to be suffering from a sickness it was unable to be rid of. 'The Nazis gave them hell,' Andy said. 'Tried to wipe them out. They've copped it everywhere. People hate outsiders, and if anything goes wrong - fire, floods, mysterious illnesses - then everywhere in Europe, gipsies got the blame. They've been driven out of more places than ... and they still survive. I do rather admire that, much as I detest them!'

They walked back to the hotel. They saw more gipsies near the central railway station, but kept away. They went out for lunch, and back to the hotel again. 'How do you feel about a little siesta? Before we go out this afternoon?'

'I still want to know about the gipsies,' Leila said.

Andy looked at his daughter. 'They're troubling you. What do you want to know?'

'What you said makes me feel sad,' she said. 'They shouldn't have to wander forever, always being driven out of places.'

'No,' her father said, 'you're seeing things from their point of view, and that's good. But when we ran into them this morning, and they molested us, we'd have cheered if the cops had put them in a van to run them out of town.' He wondered what his daughter would say.

She was thinking. 'They must have stories that they tell each other. I bet some of them are sad.' Tim seized on this. 'You feel sad if you feel sympathy for someone. But if you hate them, then you laugh!' He cackled harshly. 'See what I mean?'

His father laughed, but Leila remained serious. 'That's just it. They annoyed us, so we're down on them. But if they hadn't tried to get our money, we could feel sorry, like I feel now.' Her brother said, 'Don't waste your sympathy, Leila. They're bloody pests and that's all about it!'

She still felt troubled. 'They are pests, but that's not all about it, that's why I feel funny about what happened. I feel we've done something wrong to them, and we don't know what it is.'

Andy tried to deal with it. 'We have. We've surrounded them with a way of life that isn't theirs, so they have to rob us. And, naturally, we don't like it when they try!'

'Ah!' Leila said, her face lightening. 'So we put the blame on them. Both sides caused it, but only one gets the blame!' This seemed to satisfy her. Andy said to his daughter, 'Your idea about their stories is a good one. They would have stories, I wonder what they're about.' Tim was sceptical, but his father went on, 'Someone would have collected their stories. If you spent enough time in libraries you'd get them. They'd be there somewhere, in a collection.'

'Do all the stories in the world get into books?' Leila asked. 'They can't, surely?'

'They don't,' Andy said. 'We hear stories we don't pass on, because they're too sad to tell. It's the stories we're afraid of that have the most effect.' It was clear that he was thinking of one. 'Going to tell us, dad?'

He looked at them, in a room on the far side of the world. 'This is a sad story. It seems wrong to tell it, even here, so let me start by telling you where it took place.' They became still, concentrating. 'Years ago, I lived in eastern Victoria, but I had lots of friends in Melbourne ...'

'This is before you married mum?'

'Long before. I used to drive up and down the highway every third weekend, and at holiday times. I knew the road, including all the danger spots, of which there were plenty, because the highway wasn't as good as it is today. They've spent millions over the years, it's far safer, cars are better ...'

He paused. 'Outside Morwell, there's a low lying stretch. A river, and a swamp. The road twisted and turned to get on any little bit of hard ground. At certain times of the year, it would be foggy. I struck that fog many times as I went up and down. They had double white lines practically the whole way from Morwell through this swamp. If you came up behind a truck, and there were double lines, you had to sit there and grind along because if you pulled out to pass when you

couldn't see, you had a pretty good chance of being hit by somebody. Head on!' His voice trembled.

'Is that what happened?'

'Not to me, but yes. There was a young man working in the area, a carpenter. And he met a girl, they started going out together, and they decided to get married. They did get married, and they had their reception at a hotel in Traralgon, that's the next town further east. And after the reception, the young couple set off on their honeymoon. I don't know where they were going to spend their first night. Maybe Melbourne, maybe somewhere closer.'

'I know what's going to happen,' Tim said. 'Was it foggy?'

'It was, and I'm sure you've guessed. They were driving through the winding, twisting part, the swamp, and there was a thick fog. Double white lines. They couldn't see anything. They came up behind a truck, and the truck was only crawling. Its driver wouldn't have been able to see much either. The young man who'd just got married was impatient, and he pulled out to pass - in the fog, and despite the lines - and of course the worst thing happened. Another vehicle came out of the fog and they crashed, head on. The young man survived the impact, but his wife ... no, she was never really his wife ... his bride, was killed.'

Silence controlled the room.

'I was working in Gippsland when this happened. Not long after, I left. We left, your mother and I. I don't know much more except that two years later I saw a little piece in The Age. I'm surprised they put it in, it was more like local news for the Traralgon paper, whatever that's called.'

'What did it say?'

'It said that this young carpenter had tried to rebuild his life after the crash that killed ... and he'd been a steady worker, good carpenter, all that sort of thing. But he'd never lived in the house they'd bought for themselves. He stayed at the pub in Traralgon. He slept and had his meals there. He'd tried terribly hard to get his life going again, but he couldn't, and one night he'd gone to his room, with a bottle of whisky,

and a few bottles of sleeping tablets, and he'd drunk the whisky, and then he swallowed the sleeping pills, and they found him in the morning ...'

'Did he switch the light off, or die beside the lamp?' Leila asked.

'I don't know.' Andy wondered. 'I think I'd leave the light on, if it was me.' He got himself going again, to bring it to an end. 'He wrote a note and left it for someone to find in the morning. The paper didn't print what it said. I don't suppose it matters. In a sense, we know without being told. He couldn't go on without her. He couldn't go on after that terrible mistake.'

Leila put her hands over her eyes. Tim stood up. 'Sorry about that,' Andy said. 'It's the saddest story I know.' The power of events that had happened before the young people had been conceived held the three of them. 'Everyone carries stories around in their heads,' Andy said. 'That one's had me in its grip for years.' He felt he should apologise again, but perhaps it was best to let the sadness wash away, like a tide taking time with no human controlling it. 'Sadness is inevitable,' Andy said. 'You can never be sure where and when it's going to strike.'

In fog

When they were getting back to the hotel, he wanted them to go to the station with him. 'To get tomorrow's tickets. Down the Loire to Saumur.' They thought it could wait: 'We're not going anywhere *now*.' He insisted. They crossed the road grudgingly, Tim affecting a limp. Andy looked around for something to alter their mood. It was there when he needed it; a train had come in with snow on top. 'Snow!' Tim said, amazement in his voice. Leila said, 'Hey, look at that!' They dashed about, trying to find more trains. Andy stood near the one they'd seen first. People were still getting off. Tim and Leila came back, then they walked the length of the train. 'It must be snowing in Paris,' Tim said. 'Let's go back today!' Leila looked at her father, who said, 'It's a cold front that's going to last for days. It was on last night's news, if you noticed.' They thought forecasts were boring. He went on. 'Saumur tomorow, Blois the next day, then Angers. Great places!'

The next day was shrouded. From the train, the river was grey, the countryside invisible in fog. Things appeared only to disappear. 'Don't they ever see anything in this country?' Leila wanted to know. 'Half the time they don't,' her father said. 'What do they do when the sun comes out?' Leila asked. 'Rush around having a rave?' 'No,' her brother said, 'they get in buses to look at cathedrals. And castles!' He wanted to distance himself from his father's diet. 'Don't forget the art galleries,' Leila said. 'It's important to arrive when they're closed for lunch!' They'd done this a few days earlier. Andy bided his time. He thought the fog might give way to a clear day. He coughed, and the children knew he was uncertain.

It was still foggy when they got to Saumur, but as they trudged over the bridge separating station from city, a breeze cleared the air and the

turrets of a castle came into view, at once unexpectedly close and tantalisingly distant, as if emerging from a dream. Tim, who'd been trudging glumly, looked up, willing at last to think the day worthwhile. 'Hey!' His sister's eyes shone. 'It's so ancient! How long's it been there?' The fog moved, and they were looking at nothing. 'Magic!' Andy called. 'Magic!' He wanted to laugh with joy. 'What a stunning apparition! Vision! How can the rest of the day live up to that? Do you want to stop for a drink, before we go and find it?' Tim and Leila didn't want to stop. 'It may not seem the same when we're there,' Andy told them. 'That might be the moment we remember, always.' Tim and Leila pressed on more quickly than their father, but waited when they weren't sure which way to go. His sense of direction was better, in the murk that made the city invisible, and they came fairly soon on an entrance. So many francs for adults, so many for children, and there was a family rate. 'That's us,' Andy said, going through his pockets before he fronted the window. The woman behind the glass wanted to charge him more, though, than the sign said, he protested, and she affirmed the higher rate. It was the sort of thing Andy would have said he didn't need. Patiently, taking care with his French, he reminded the ticket-seller of the sign, which he pointed to. Somewhere in his presentation he saw her face change. 'Trois personnes seulement? I thought your wife would be with you. Pardon, monsieur, pardon. Excusez-moi.' She gave him change at the lower rate, then came through a door at the side of her office to walk with them a few metres by way of atoning for the mistake. When she stopped, pointing forward, Andy bowed, thinking how well the French did this sort of thing, then he beamed at his children, ushering them forward as if he too had picked up something of the land they were visiting.

They climbed. They explored. There were numerous displays, and enticing flights of steps, some of them polished by thousands of feet, some grim, as if holding memories better forgotten. 'Battles,' Andy said, 'that's what these places are about, though people would have lived here for years without being attacked. The whole idea was to look so

formidable that nobody would have a go at you.' Somewhere near the middle of the castle they came on a raftered space with display cabinets; at one end they held plates, bowls and cups, which Andy saw had been made in Sèvres, while the other end featured a display of saddles, bridles, banners, and protective leather or metal for horses to wear in battle. 'The medieval horse!' Andy said, smiling, then noticed that they were being approached by a young woman wearing a long blue coat; she had a white silk scarf and jet black hair, and she was coming to talk to them. Approaching Andy, she let him see her eyes turn to the children, then back, acknowledging. She lowered her head in deference and he found himself melting; they did it so easily, these cultivated people. She welcomed him, and said he and his children were the first visitors of the day. 'Nous sommes embrumées,' she said, making the fog sound internal, and creating a philosophy of its own as it wound itself about things. Andy felt that his simplicity and clarity were protecting him; in a world full of fear, he was unafraid. The lovely guide asked him where he came from. His answer caught something in her beyond professional skills, or interest. 'It is so far that you have come,' she said. 'I have always wanted to come here,' Andy replied. 'In our culture, France is one of the highest places, perhaps the very finest.' He gestured towards the finely decorated, finely shaped table ware. 'Even the Chinese could do no better than this. I've seen nothing so delicate in all my life. It's not only fine, it's ...'

'*Raffiné*,' she said, her completion of the sentence joining them strangely. Andy felt a stillness entering him, and at the same time observed the penetration of her eyes. 'You have had the whole morning, then, to think about the world?'

She nodded. 'It is troubling. Perhaps, where you live, it is not so dark?' He thought. Dark enough, but his country had the barriers of isolation, and its people, though they might despair of the world, could treat it with the contempt of indifference. It was too far away to bother about. But here in the middle of Europe, with disintegrating Russia nearby, tribal Africans with rapid-fire guns, and the Americans overshadowing everything, he could feel the world worrying him, and see

the worry in her face. 'Tell me something about these dishes,' he said. 'While there's beauty in the world we need not give in to despair.'

She led him to a cabinet, and talked about the things she pointed to. They'd been made long after the castle that housed them. 'You must know the history of many periods,' he said; it seemed to please her, and to expose a weakness. 'It is necessary for us, if we are to be educated, to know the history of our country, but we are a proud people and we are so busy learning about ourselves that too often we know nothing about others. It is the bad side of something good. Tell me about your country, so very far away.' She added, 'Here it is day, though we are in a cloud of fog. Where you live, it is night.' He felt a European way of thinking gripping him, beautifully defined, but too tight. 'People who look at us,' he said, 'if they've been educated here, think we are careless. Wide open. Good-natured but stupid. In a word, slack. We cannot build huge, high constructions of thought. We can't build skyscrapers like the Americans, we aren't refined as you are, we aren't as subtle, as clever or devious as the Chinese ... apparently we're inferior to everybody in the ways they judge their own qualities. The remarkable thing, though, is that Australians are convinced that they - we - are right. We don't know where we're going yet, but we truly think that the future of the world is ours. Civilisation is a huge pretence, it's something people admire because they can't think of anything better, and we, stupid as it may seem, have a feeling, an inkling ...' he paused, wondering if she knew the word, but she was following '... that to live simply, to survive, in the surrounding presence of infinity, is the best that anyone could wish for!' Amusement brought lustre to her eyes. 'And all we can offer you is fog!'

In a moment she was with Tim and Leila. Andy heard her ask their names, and tell them that she was to be called Esmé. He asked himself why she and he had not exchanged names, and saw at once. Familiarity, for adults, was not the same as intimacy, a necessity for children. In the French mind, there must surely be a limited number of moves, steps, positions; life was like an elaborated chess-game and only the crass didn't know how to play. What he'd said to Esmé in his outburst, as it must

have seemed to her, was a refutation of the importance of all she'd been trained to do: Europeans were forever trying to trap each other, and forever moving adroitly to avoid a snare. Adroitly: to the right. To the left was gauche. *Le droit* meant also the moral or intellectual ascendancy, and those who had it not were ...

... *gauche*. He looked with tenderness on his children, leading the French woman among the exhibits, listening closely, loving her accented English, taking possession of her in a way he could see that she found thrilling. He felt immensely happy that he'd brought them to this castle, this enchanted place of Merlins and witchery, of battle, knighthood and feasting, battlements and bodies, battering rams and oil. He put his hands to his brow and closed his eyes. Long before the exquisite ware of Sèvres, people had murdered each other in the building where they stood, or hacked at each other as they climbed the walls, or repelled those trying to take possession. That was when European civilisation was forming, and the castle they stood in would have been built in the age of cathedrals, European spirituality somehow linked to European war, which was European death. A tremor ran through him, making him desperately comforted that he was not a European ... yet, to see the blue-coated guide - royal blue; the word reminded him - pointing into the cases, and leading his son and daughter to the fabrics she wanted them to feel, was comforting to his parental heart. She had a fineness that it was beyond him to give.

She came back to him, she took the young Australians to see some other rooms. When she brought them back, she told Andy, 'I leave now for my lunch. You will be all right, there is nobody here to trouble you. The whole castle is yours. I lock only the office. That way, if somebody comes, they will think we have some money, when we have not.' She smiled and shook his hand. He started to thank her, but it sounded silly; what she'd done was naturally gracious. They watched as she left the raftered room, then they took the staircase she'd told them led to the highest turret. It was narrow and steep, and they were puffing when they reached the top. Standing there, gripping the stones - in excellent repair;

somebody had been making the tourist attraction smart - they found the fog pressing against them, as if to drive them below. Then it cleared for a moment and Andy saw a little Citroën turning into a street beside the wall of which their turret was the highest part. 'There she goes,' he murmured. 'How lovely she was.' His son and daughter pressed against him, following the car to the corner where it disappeared. The opening in the fog grew broader, over a minute or two, until they could see the river, the bridge they'd crossed, the railway, and fields of green. 'Their soil's so much more fertile than ours,' Andy said, 'so much less exhausted. They're lucky to have such a place.' Then new billows of fog swirled around them and they could see nothing but each other. 'It's funny isn't it,' said Leila. 'You know there's things out there but it makes you feel that everything's disappeared.' Her brother added, 'And there's nobody left but us. Creepy, isn't it!'

Their father said, 'Let's have that drink now. We could stay here all day and not see a thing.' They climbed down, went through the raftered hall, and found their way out. At the point where Esmé's car had disappeared, Andy looked, but saw nothing. Nobody was moving in the whole of Saumur. They walked a hundred metres, then noticed a down-market bar which seemed to be the only place open for coffee. They went in and sat down. A woman behind the counter ignored them in the studied, guileful way they'd come to expect. Eventually she came to them with a pad. Andy asked for a café noir, café au lait, and for himself, 'un chocolat chaud.' The woman looked at him appraisingly, then left, disappearing through a doorway leading back. Tim asked his father if boats went up and down the Loire. 'I don't see how they can,' he said. 'The bridge seems pretty close to the water, you wouldn't get anything under there, unless maybe it's in flood at the moment, and isn't normally so high.' Leila wanted to know if Europe had any aborigines, early people who predated all the others. Andy said they didn't, all the early peoples had been incorporated into the main societies, except for the Basques in Spain. Then he thought of the resistance of the Scots,

the Irish and the Welsh to the rule of southern England. 'Well no, sorry, I'm wrong, actually ...'

He stopped because a young woman had come from the back of the premises where the first woman had gone. The newcomer was no more than seventeen, was blonde, had a body of notable perfection, and came to their table, standing so close to Andy that he felt disconcerted. 'Monsieur désire?' she said, turning her hands to make a space which it was for him to fill. Andy looked up. 'Ah, we've ordered ... nous avons ...' The young woman, the most desirable, the most frankly and, Andy felt, totally sexual person he'd ever had near him, said again, 'Monsieur désire?' Not understanding his situation, he said, 'Monsieur désire un café noir, un café au lait, et aussi un chocolat.' When he looked into her eyes to see the effect, he saw the completest contempt that had ever been turned on him. She had no pad in her hands. He couldn't imagine her carrying anything which diverted eyes from her body's shape. He looked away from her scornful glance and saw that his son and daughter were looking at the woman ... the word l'inconnu came to the front of his mind ... like birds mesmerised by a snake. What power was she exercising? He looked again for eye contact, but she was staring at a corner of the room. With a sudden, sharp movement, she was gone. Through the door. Out the back, where she'd come from, leaving a sexual smell in the air which made the children's father sniff, feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable ... no, feeling a failure in the eyes of l'inconnu, according to some test she'd applied. 'What was all that about?' he said to his son and daughter, who couldn't answer.

Two minutes later the first woman returned to the bar, made the drinks, and put them on the counter. Then, picking up a tray, she came to their side of the bar, put the cups on the tray, and transported them two or three paces to their table. 'Voilà,' she said, and disappeared, out the back again.

That night, as he lay sleeping in their room in Tours, Andy dreamed of l'inconnu. He was kneeling before her on some muddy grass, and she was telling him that he had to leave his head at her feet. Shaking what

she intended as her prize in refusal, he looked at her feet. One was bare, slender and shapely, and the other was hidden by an elaborately scrolled metal protection they'd seen earlier in the day, in the raftered hall at the castle. The seventeen year old wore a robe from the same place, and he knew that it gave her magical powers. She was offering him a choice, and a choice within a choice. He could leave his head, or kiss one of her feet. Which? One was beauty, one was war. One meant death, the other victory, but which was which? He knew he'd been brought into her presence to lose his life, and there was no way out ...

He woke. For some moments his mind lingered in the dream, while he struggled to wrench himself around, and then to sit on the side of his bed. His son and daughter slept. He felt the dream, now vanishing, had shown him something he hadn't understood. He heard himself say, half aloud, 'How many people think I'm stupid? How do they know they're right?' He took one hand with the other. Both were trembling a little. A need for control ran through him. He got back in the bed, and rearranged the blankets, then lay on his back, and straight. His eyes burned into the dark. What had all that been about?

Junk

Sam loved New York. It existed for her need. She'd been there five years when Andy called. He told her after his first walk that he would never have come - or if he had, he'd never have stayed - if it hadn't been for her friends, and the feeling of belonging that her flat gave him. 'I've never been to a more alienating place.' She liked people talking about the city. The more it put visitors off the more she belonged. 'The struggle to survive, that, for me, is what life here's all about. Someone is going to do you down if you haven't got your wits about you every moment. You really can't afford to sleep, except you've got to.' She stood. 'Let's go down and get a couple of bottles.'

It was only fifty metres from Sam's door - the lower door she shared with God knew who else - to the bottle shop. Andy followed her and found himself in a space, surrounded by glass, scarcely bigger than a telephone booth - which reminded him that phones were stuck on poles in New York, they offered no shelter at all. He wanted to ask why, but she was pointing. 'They've got a few Aussie wines, lots of Californian.' He saw a Langhorne Creek he liked. The prices made him wince. He saw that you had to point, or shout the name, and the man behind the glass would put things in a bag and pass them through a slot - after you passed him money. 'Not much trust,' he grumbled. 'Luxury we can't afford,' Sam said. 'You don't get anything till they've got money in hand. Like I was saying!' She had the most casual veneer, the utmost determination, and she was teaching him, he felt. Making him see. It felt odd. He went through the transaction sullenly. Fucking Yanks! The world's superpower, and the only thing super about them was their bullshit, their Hollywood control, their missile delivery ...

Dealers of death and controllers of capital, the world's most righteously evil force, most self-deceiving of nations ... he was still unhappy when they got the corks out, upstairs, and Sam was filling glasses. 'We've got to welcome you! Sorry to make you buy the wine but I'm broke until a few payments come in. They should have been in the mail, and they weren't. Bastards!' She smiled at him, and her friends, and they drank. 'Cheers!'

'Cheers!'

America. New York. He'd arrived, it was overwhelming. 'Tell me what you want to see,' one of them said, and he thought. 'What I'd like to see, he said, looking around to check that he wasn't offending, 'is a special button. You press it, and the whole bloody balloon deflates. Tall buildings go soft, and settle on each other's shoulders. Cabs disappear. The music stops. Planes grow small, and cling to trees. Warships turn into frogs ...'

They were grinning. 'No chance! You press a button in this country, you go up!' They were laughing at him, and talking about buttons they'd pushed. 'Pity there's no booze button!' 'There is, all you need is money to press it!' They started to drink. 'You don't like it here?' someone said to Andy. He shrugged. 'In *here*, it's great. But out there, it's crazy! It makes me so uncomfortable!' 'Welcome to the crazy club,' the other one said, holding out his glass for Sam to fill. She poured, then raised her voice. 'Before we get too excited, everybody, we have two bottles here. Two. You want some more, you need folding stuff, and the shop down below closes at seven, dead sharp. After that, you got a long walk, or a taxi ride. Okay? Got that between your ears?'

They got two more bottles, Sam made spaghetti marinara. When she put it on the table she said loudly, 'No need to have nervy-dos, this is fresh. I got the sea creatures from Tingé, little man around the corner. Said he had a parcel for me. He did, a big one. Thanks, Tingé!' She looked at her friends, someone said, 'Howya know this guy?' Sam said, 'I put him onto a lawyer who got him out of some trouble. Someone in Immigration wanted to send him back to Algeria, he didn't want to go.

Too many of his family buried there. He won,' Sam said firmly. 'He's here, and he's on the way up!'

Even at the bottom, they struggle to get up, Andy reflected. Nobody really disbelieves in what the rest of them are doing. It's a battle, and the baddies are part of the system. They might be running it after the next election. Virtue, honour, are what you preserve as a shield, so you can fight better, in fact in many battles you need them because if people don't believe in you, you can't win. People noticed his face. What, they wanted to know, was wrong? He said, 'Today, I saw the towers of business. Where the money is. Tomorrow, I'd like to see the poor. I know they're going to hate me because I'll look wealthier than I should, but I want to know what it's like from their point of view.'

Sam's friends found this amusing. 'The poor? That's us! You're right in the middle of it, all you gotta do is look! Ask, we'll tellya!' They saw disbelief, scorn, on his face and laughed some more, but Sam said she'd take him for a walk in the morning, she had something she wanted him to see.

She took him a few blocks past buildings that were low, by Manhattan standards, and there was even some recreational space - basketball courts, a children's playground. He said, 'Seems a pretty fair area?' Walking steadily, she corrected. 'By day; we wouldn't be walking through here at night.' He looked around. Where did the dangers hide? Did they go into the backs of people's brains and wait? Apparently. He refrained from asking what she wanted him to see. That was her surprise. She looked over her shoulder at him and he knew they must be close.

When she stopped, it was beside a high mesh fence which constrained thousands of tons of rubbish. Half the plastic bags of the world were there, some full of scrap, some blowing about. It was like being brought face to face with the excretory pipe of an organism that was ashamed of itself, and veiled its process in secrecy that was easy to penetrate. You had only to walk a few blocks, if you knew where you were. From the corner of his eye, Andy saw Sam studying him from the corner

of her eye. 'Are we being a bit dishonest with each other?' 'Not at all. This is it. Over to you.'

It took Andy a while to see what she saw in the rubbish. There were car bodies piled high, some of them sitting on oil drums, as if to give back some movement of the wheels they'd lost. It dawned on Andy that the shop dummies and bags of refuse wearing cast-off clothes were meant to be the passengers of these vehicles, and that they were making a pretence of progress only because they were being pushed by more shop dummies and potato-sack people, the first, and biggest, wearing the clothes, colours and hat of Uncle Sam. On a slab of three-ply, tatty at every edge, was painted, 'faith moves mountians.' Uncle Sam, the leading pusher, had a gleam in his eye. 'Is faith the name of a drug?' Andy said. 'Not that I know of, but if it isn't, it will be. Nothing takes long around here.'

'What else have they got?' Andy said. 'Hang on, let's go round where we can see this.' 'This' was the jib of a lengthy crane from which another dummy hung - or was hanged - by a chain around its neck. A wrecker's ball also hung suspended above the dangling body, and again there was a sign: 'If first barstid dont getya, second will.' Andy laughed. 'Too true! Hey, I see what you like about this place! Let me see what else there is.' His eyes passed over the mess. The yard was so deep in crap that the exhibits, if that was the word, were above eye level. 'How many years has this stuff been piling up?' Sam thought it wouldn't have been long. 'They wreck a building, and if they don't start something straight away, people bring out their trash. They have to throw it somewhere.' Trash, Andy thought; if you consumed, as you were told, you had to throw out. It all had to go somewhere. 'This is the arse-end of the city, isn't it? It's a lot of rubbish, but in a city this big, there must be more places like this? That right, Sam?'

She said. 'Course it is. Don't imagine this is the whole city's rubbish. We could've found others, but these are the best sculptures. I wanted you to see them. There's a lot of imagination in what they've done. I brought my friend Muriel here, you haven't met her yet, she's a

real expert on cartoons. Everything from Uncle Sam to Donald Duck. And beyond. She can tell you what period any Uncle Sam drawing comes from, just by looking at it. She says whoever did these ones styled them after the period of the cars. So we're not dealing with a bunch of loonies having fun, we're looking at the work of people who *know*!' Then she took him by the arm. 'Come round the other side. There's one you mustn't miss.'

It was even scungier on the other side, and the rotting smell was stronger. 'There's days when I can't come here,' Sam said, 'because it stinks so much. Sometimes I think the people who do these things must shit here to add to the effect, but maybe it's just a blockage in the sewers. It's actually not too bad, today.' Andy thought it was very bad indeed, but went where she led him. A huge metal cow, which must have come from an outdoor nativity scene, was giving birth to the leather-clad and helmeted rider of a bike, of which the rear wheels and pillion were still in its uterus. Saintly figures from some Christmas window looked on. 'The doll,' Sam said, 'on his back.' Andy looked more closely. There was a doll clinging to the shoulders of the cyclist. A halo of thorns had been nailed to its head. 'My God,' he said, 'welcome baby Jesus.' It made him feel queasy, but it had a savage force. 'Actually,' he said, 'this beats most of the stuff I saw in the Metropolitan Museum the other day. It's got more nerve. It's more relevant. They really fling it at you. They're right down the bottom, the people who did this stuff, and they don't give a shit about you being upset. They'd think that was a win for them, if you hated what they'd done. This is art coming out of the people with a vengeance!'

Sam showed him a few more things, then they went back to the flat, as he called it. The apartment. Andy listened for how much and how little her pronunciation had changed. Mid-Pacific, he would have said. Five years had adapted her to the American way, but much was unchanged. He supposed he'd find a lot in common with the Americans if he stayed long enough. What he would have called an underling in his mind snuck away from his thoughts to work out how many days he had

before he could fly out. Fly *home*. Their expressions were creeping into his thinking; he could see the way change took place. Nobody could live isolated from what surrounded them. Sam made coffee. Putting it on the table, she asked, 'What are you going to do today? That was only an appetiser. Have you picked yourself a main course yet?' He hadn't, he felt helpless. He said to his friend, 'I don't know, Sam. I'm still thinking about those junkyards you showed me. The sculptors ... there's a question in my mind I can't answer. Tell me what you think. The fellas that get in there and rearrange all that junk, dress up Uncle Sam, all the rest of it ... are they rebels, staking out a protest, or are they the same as the big boys at the top end of town? Is there a difference, that's what I think I'm asking, or are they about the same things? What do you say?'

She wrinkled her face. 'I have to admit I was hoping you'd be able to tell me. Listen ...' she pushed the pot in his direction and moved his cup to be ready when he poured '... it's not easy being in this place, I've told you that lots of times, in letters. Trouble is, you know it's affecting you, but when you're in it and you're trying to pick up jobs that pay money, you can't admit to being any sort of rebel. You have to have a face that shines with hope. The world's all fine and sunny. No problems here. The mask becomes your mind, after a while, without you knowing it. That junkyard haunts me. I don't know when those people do those things, it must be in the middle of the night. Maybe they work on their stuff when there's some call on the cops to be at something, some demonstration maybe, in another part of town. Nobody I know has ever seen them at it. I've got friends who live close to where we were. They haven't seen'em. They go past in the morning on the way to the subway, and there's a new ...' she couldn't find the word '... *thing* been built overnight. Overnight! How the hell would you get that jib standing up without another crane to do it? How many guys would it take to push and pull it where you want it? You tell me! But it gets done! Somebody wants to do it, and he's got determination, no, faith! Faith! That's what makes this country. They believe in themselves. It's why they rule the world! They've got more faith than anybody else.'

Since he wasn't pouring, she did it. She spilled a few drops on the table. 'Sorry, I'm feeling worked up. Actually ...' she got up, grabbed a cloth from the sink and wiped the spill '... actually, I don't think I know any more. I'm not an outsider now. I was hoping you'd be able to tell me. It's why I wanted to take you there. So tell me, Andy, what you think. I can't answer your questions, you'll have to tell me the answers yourself, and I'll tell you what - you've got about twenty four hours left before you're sucked inside their system, wondering if there's anything beside a plane that can get you out!'

It was eloquent, and desperate. He said, 'Five years, and you still think about getting out. It hasn't completely taken you over, has it.' That established, he said, 'Maybe questions are the best answer I can give. So what are the questions in my mind? I've already put the first one: are they rebels or trying to be like the big fellas? You've answered that. You say the country's built on faith, in which case it's easy. So's their junk. Case closed. Next question. How old are these people? How long do they live? Do they make their statement and crawl away to die? I know it sounds silly, but that's the thought I have. I feel that their work's so crazy because they know it's their last and only statement and everything has to be packed in. Is this so? Am I right?'

'Good one,' Sam said. 'Keep going while you're hot.'

'There is a protest in there, though,' Andy said. 'Whether they know it or not. Think about it. If you can deliver the same message as the battleships, the stockmarket on Wall Street, Macy's, the Metropolitan Opera and the mansions on Second Avenue, and you can do it in a heap of shit, you have found the key to it all. You could just as easily bring it undone as build it up, reaffirming ...'

He was lost, but he'd started something in her mind. 'That's what I've been thinking. If I wanted to pull the whole thing down, like you were saying last night, they're the ones I'd go to. How do I do this, I'd say. They'd know what I was talking about, they'd have some ideas ...'

She too ran out. They were left with their coffee in an apartment that was empty because the friends of the night before had gone off to work, or to sleep ...

'I can't go any further,' Andy grumbled. 'Sorry. I fired up there for a moment and now I don't know what to think.'

'Welcome to the club. I need the show to go on,' Sam said. 'Income. Rent. Christ, I'm a week behind, if dollars don't come in this week, I'm in the snow. It's no place to sleep.' Andy felt startled. 'Hey, hang on! I've got travellers' cheques I won't be needing. Couple of thousand dollars US, the only money the markets believe in. You can have all I don't need, pay me when you can ...' He looked to see if she was accepting, but she was somewhere in her thoughts. 'It's okay. I was just, maybe, dramatising a little. I'll be right, truly.' She was still turned in on herself. Respecting her, curious about his friend of years before, he said, 'What's the question in your mind, Sam? You've been here a long time now. What are you asking yourself, away there in your thoughts? Can you say? For that matter, may I ask?'

She looked up. He remembered that she'd done it the same way, many times, in Australia when they'd first known each other. She said, 'We all need to belong. It's frightening to be on your own. We're herd animals, like sheep, rabbits ...'

He broke in, mocking: '... lemmings?'

Something less than a smile, an acknowledgement, crossed her face. 'We might even be that crazy. I hope not, but who knows? Now the funny thing is, the people in this country are the biggest individualists the world has ever known. They act like they're ten feet tall. They make the biggest, the best, the strongest ... and if I want to survive, I have to keep up with them. It kills me, Andy, to do it, but boy do I do it! I'm not letting them push me down. I'm a survivor, but at what cost? I don't know the cost because there's no platform to let me see. Look. View. Judge myself. I'm swimming along with all these crazies and I don't have a way of measuring what it's doing to me. That's one hell of

a problem.' Her friend said, 'There's no solution to it,' but she broke in: 'There's gotta be!'

'Let's try, then. Go back a bit. Why did you come here?'

'I was bored, at home. I knew there were bigger challenges somewhere, so I started roaming, and I finished up here.'

'The challenges were big enough?'

'They sure were! I told you about my first year, in those letters ...'

'I've still got them. They were pretty harrowing.'

'It was tough. But I came through, and here I am.'

'Troubled.'

'You know why? It's because I'm doing pretty well, most of the time. Don't be mistaken by what you hear me say, this is just a rough spot. Six weeks time, I'll be sitting pretty again.'

'What's the difference, inside yourself, between being home and here?'

'At home, I know the rules. Too well. It's too easy, and too limiting. It doesn't stretch me to the limit, the way I need.'

'And here?'

'Here, I can only survive by playing the game their way. Acting. All the time, pretending that I'm like them.'

'And sometimes you want to blow them up, or make them laugh, because you hate them as much as you admire them?'

She nodded, reaching for her cup.

'It's the tension of what you're doing, then. I think it's only because I'm here that this is hurting at the moment?'

'Every time someone from back home comes to stay, I love it, but I go through the same stuff. My confidence goes. I wonder how much longer I can keep up the act.'

He gestured. 'Any of the natives know you go through this?'

'No. Maybe one or two, if they watch me closely. Muriel. Anthony. Nobody else, I wouldn't think.'

'Do they say anything about it?'

She shook her head. 'They know they're not invited.'

'It's your secret, then. Sometimes we need our secrets, though they're hard to keep. You've shared this one with me, and it's safe. When you write next, you can tell me how it's going. Give yourself an outlet.'

'That'll be a relief,' she said. 'Good one, Andy. I think you've given me the way out I needed. Hey, what's that? That was the posty! Let's go down and see if there's any cheques.'

The pavilion

On Andy's first night in Beijing, Zao Li, his host, asked, 'Are you an optimist or a pessimist?' Andy said it was a tricky question, because most Australians were optimists who pretended to be pessimistic. 'It's our defence when things go wrong, as they usually do.' His host's brow creased, but Andy jumped in. 'And you, Zao Li? Which are you?' He beamed, in what he took to be the Chinese way. The other man replied, 'You know our population, and you know how little our government can control pollution. I think that is your answer.' He sounded melancholy, though calm. 'We have a one child policy. My wife would have liked one more, at least. But it was not allowed. I would not hold my position if I broke that rule. So when we die, two will become one. My country must do this ...'

His hands spread expressively. Andy finished, '... or there will be too many people, as there are already. Chairman Mao made a big mistake when he thought your country's best defence was population.' He shook his head. 'It's not a defence, it's the biggest problem you've got.'

Zao Li spoke blandly. 'Every country has special problems. The measure of a country is whether it can deal with them. We are making good attempts to reduce the difficulty. Food is plentiful, after centuries of conflict when peasants could not do their work. But let us not talk of these things. I want to know what you are going to say in your paper.'

Andy was at an Oceanic Studies conference, invited by Zao Li. Months before, he'd sent a copy of his paper, and a summary to go in the conference brochure, but his thinking had changed and he wanted to give a different talk. Zao Li had told him, characteristically, to link the new and the old. Easier said than done. Andy wanted to keep the same title, but to develop an entirely different set of ideas under its banner.

'Lateralism and conformity; acceptance and rejection of diversity in the early years of the Commonwealth'. Phew! Nobody would think you were learned unless you could devise such titles. They were a code for people considering whether they'd attend: necessary courtesies. What you served up under the titles was another matter. That would be judged by other means, fair, cruel, honest or downright shifty. He'd begun by focussing his inquiry on the rise of labor, the basic wage, and industrial legislation, but over time his attention had moved to early feminism, which had shown him that it was never possible for all aspects of a matter to move evenly, right across the society. Thus it was that women had been able, over a span of years, to get the right to vote, whereas sexual freedom didn't arrive until many years later, and the effects of that freedom had still to alter social values more than superficially. Or so he thought. He tried to explain this to Zao Li, who listened without comment. When Andy paused, the Chinese said, 'Only Chinese scholar influenced by America, or your country, would express such ideas. Your way of thinking is different. You talk of freedoms, as if they are always benefit. We would talk of restrictions, as if they too were benefit. People of our country need good restraints to shape them, so they can be good people. That is necessary, to us.'

He smiled, knowing that he was turning Andy's ideas upside down, and that he'd meant to do so. It was what he'd have thought a necessary correction. Andy knew that he and all the outsiders speaking at the conference would be talking down, however well they disguised it, and that, equally, the Chinese would be listening down. On each side, the behaviour of the others would confirm what they'd always known. He didn't know what could be done about this. Keep talking, he supposed; it didn't seem much! He said to his friend, 'What did you say about Australia, when you got back after that conference where we met? I don't mean in a faculty report, I mean in conversations with your colleagues, who must have been curious.'

It was asking too much, and he knew it, though, conversely, Zao Li was travelled and would not find it unexpected. The Chinese smiled

again, saying, 'The question poses no difficulties. I said that your country was rich, and for two reasons.' Andy knew that he, making the same point, would be tapping the fingers of one hand with a finger of the other, but his friend was motionless as his ideas came out. 'The first is that your population is so small that people are not forced to share. Anything you make does not have to be cut into a million pieces. The second is a matter of balance. Rich man in Australia says he has worked hard. He deserves what he has got. Nobody has the right to take it away, or make him share. This, to us, is wrong. Rich man is out of balance unless he has learning as great as his wealth. He must know the poets, and the men who have written about the meaning of life. If he does not, he will use his money foolishly. I think you do not see rich men in this way. You are American now, and Americans do not see need for restraint and balance. They are ...'

He thought, searching for a word.

'... excessive. Extreme. Always at the edge of warfare. Bang!' He said it loudly, and laughed. 'When the conference is over I will take you to my city, and you will tell me your reactions. I will be interested.' Andy knew that he would be under observation, and therefore judgement. It was no different from his own observations when taking Zao Li about in his city. 'I look forward to that,' he said.

Later in the week, the organisers took everyone to a tea-house in central Beijing. Or that was what they proposed, but the bus, after crawling for ages, came to a stop in a street far from its destination. It was forty minutes before the bus moved forward, slowly still, until it passed the point of blockage, where people were standing around a group of cars, not arguing, not fighting, and the ever-present police, or soldiers, were nowhere to be seen. As the bus speeded up, Andy said to the young woman beside him, 'What was that about?' She glanced at him, as if noting the origin of the question, and made no reply. She didn't know, and nobody would be making a pronouncement. It was like an act of the weather, and beyond regulation.

The tea-house impressed the Australian. People sat at tables in an auditorium stepped to give views of the stage, where an orchestra - a European word that didn't seem to fit - was playing. Instruments, dress and the sound itself were from traditions that weren't a part of him. He remembered how strange the European classics had sounded at first, and how slowly he'd learned the forms that allowed their meanings to be read. These Chinese knew what they were doing and the precision of their music's movement was clear. He had a feeling, when they ended, that the night would decline into more popular forms of amusement, and it did. Then tea was brought around the tables, and plates of savouries. Cups were filled, refilled, and filled again. The Chinese were always drinking, but after their water had been boiled. It struck him that maintaining hygiene in a country of a billion and a quarter people must pose problems. They all lived downstream of each other on the same waterways ... his mind couldn't cope. He listened, he watched, he sipped, he spoke politely to those who inquired if he was enjoying himself. Their courtesies are what I've come to see, he thought, rather than their show, which isn't amusing me now that the highest level of music has been left behind. He wondered if there would be another traffic jam on the way back to the university, but there wasn't. The blockage, and the crawl, had been cleared, to reappear somewhere else.

In the morning! Another bus was taking delegates to the Great Wall, and it too ground to a halt on what in Australia would be a country road. Delegates stood up, then got out of the bus, the Chinese among them wandering to a roadside stall and coming back with persimmons. Smiling, he shook his head when they were offered. He'd eaten well at the hostel where what he would have termed a banquet appeared each morning. Food! It was a shared consciousness of the Chinese people, and they wanted you to join in. He found it endearing, yet he sensed there were meanings in the exchange that he didn't know about. Weren't there always!

They drove on, they stopped for lunch at a shopping centre, full of things to buy as gifts. Andy kept out of notice. Then they were led to

a large space, full of tables, and another meal was served by waitresses of great delicacy and strict uniform. No flirting! Everybody was cheerful, but in a way that kept him wondering what they were cheerful *about*. This was too hard to solve.

They reached the wall. It had been in view for kilometres before they parked, in a space too huge to be wasted, Andy thought, in a country where land was precious. He counted sixty buses, then gave up. The area was also a milling space for people between the buses and the circle of shops surrounding them. Andy went to look, and felt his heart sink. There were thousands of everything - hats, teatowels, postcards, film, and cigarettes by the millions, perhaps billions of cigarettes. There were clothes with pictures on them, and any number of Great Wall souvenirs, replicating the fortresses punctuating every few hundred metres of wall. Andy remembered being told at school that those who'd died in its construction had been dumped as filling between the walls of stone. The thing was so vast, stretching so far into the mountains, that it could swallow, he felt, as nothing else could swallow, the billion or so who were today's excess. There were too many people! He wanted to shout at them to stop crowding him, to get out of each other's way ...

He turned to where the walk began, and made his way as quickly as he could, which was slowly, threading his way between those coming back. High above the parking area the wall delineated the skyline, every part of it crowded. People were milling along the wall, some kilometres from the buses. Beyond that, the wall turned, and Andy couldn't see. This was a relief. He joined the river flowing uphill.

It was a steep climb, at the beginning, and he knew his knees would wobble when he came down. Soon he had other things to think of - vendors of film, cigarettes of course, flags, souvenirs, biscuits; as an outsider - a foreigner - he was assumed to be wealthy, gullible, and in need of everything. He wriggled through, squirming, and then he hardened his face, and whatever was inside him - soul, spirit, sensitivities: he noticed that though his mind was working swiftly, eyes probing for challenges or incursions into his space, those parts of him that needed

poetry or music had been subdued. The Chinese had poetry and music, but it was related either to wealth, or solitude. He wondered how long it was since anyone in China had experienced solitude. Solus, alone; it couldn't exist!

A couple of kilometres from the buses, which he could see far below, he came on one of the numerous fortresses, giving onto a platform of flattened rock. There, an unhappy dromedary was tethered to a mounting stand. Bits of straw lay on the ground from the last time it had been fed. Visitors were encouraged - shouted at - to climb the stand, fling themselves on the unwelcoming hump, and be photographed. On handing over the required number of yuan, they got the picture, and the beast waited for the next pair of legs to straddle it. Peasants, Andy thought, but Zao Li had been telling him, in the bus on the way out, that shrewd peasants were now among the well-off in his country. Andy shook his head. He realised that he couldn't find sympathy for anything he saw, and that sympathy involved acceptance, and he was too unready, too uninformed. He didn't know the basis of anything, or the terms on which it operated. Typical tourist, he saw things he didn't like, but not the part of society where these things were compensated for in some alternative way. He stood at the edge of the dromedary's elevated prison, wondering if they led it down at the end of the day, or kept it tethered, high in the mountains, a captive of the imperial past.

He turned to go down. People pushed themselves in his path. Picture, mister? Sit on dromedary? Cigarettes? Coke? Yes, Coke was there. It made him laugh, and this heartened him. He was hardening. The poetry might come back? He tried to hurry, but the crowd made it impossible. Thousands were coming up. It occurred to him that there wasn't a decent tree in their mountains. He stopped and leaned over the wall. No, no trees, just bushes, growth, what his country called understorey, with no canopy to keep out the sun, or dance in the moving air. It was a miserable sight, and it made him homesick. People pressed against him, going up, going back. He went back. He ran into Ho Shusen, a man who'd amazed him with the swiftness of his translations

from Chinese to English. Shusen wanted to talk to him about his paper; he thought it should be one of those to be translated and published. Andy assured him that this idea was pleasing, and that he would send Shusen a copy as soon as he arrived home. Then Shusen waved at the wall. 'We say to foreigners that the wall was built to keep invaders out. This is true. But it is also an expression of our wish to keep ourselves in.' He smiled. 'This is strange to you. You are a traveller. We are not travellers. We only leave China to make money or gain knowledge. Both of these have no value until we send them home. Today, our rulers do not let us travel unless they see advantage for the country. You are free to fly wherever you have dollars to take you. We are not free. We must have permission to leave. If we are truly Chinese, this is not a restriction. If we feel restricted, this means we are not truly happy, here where we are at home.' He smiled, but only faintly. 'Professor Zao Li has visited your country. Next time you invite him, perhaps you can put my name on the list also. I have many credits with my university. They would let me go.' Andy felt touched, and pained. He sensed that among educated Chinese, especially those whose English was good, there was a yearning to be free of those restrictions, those endless obligations which, in their ceaseless ebb and flow, were both current and water of the Chinese stream. He said, with a gravity that was painful, 'I will do this for you. I have learned so much in your country, there must be things of benefit to you in mine.' Shusen was happy at this, and offered to treat Andy in one of the places where tea could be had, but Andy said he'd walked far enough, and he needed to be alone to consider. Shusen may have been amused by this, because he lifted his hand to the line of buses. 'I wrote down the number,' he said, 'so I would not board the wrong one ....' he was laughing, in a way Andy found delightful because it opened up the possibility, no, the certainty, that every last one of us is ridiculous '... and finish up far from my bed tonight!'

He handed the foreigner his card. The number of the bus was scribbled above the details for contacting Ho Shusen by post, phone, fax or email. 'We are in touch,' Shusen said, but his hands were mak-

ing gestures: 'you can get through at any time.' Andy thanked him, and searched for the bus with the right number. He'd already forgotten its other details. When he found the number, and looked up, he saw the driver, smiling, at the door, touching Andy's elbow in a ritual of help. Andy flopped on the first seat. The driver rubbed his knees as if they were a source of pain, and groaned. It forced a laugh from Andy. His knees were hurting, and he was sorry for himself. The driver pulled out a thermos of tea. Andy thanked him. What else to do?

The conference party reassembled over the next three quarters of an hour, and the driver headed for Beijing. As they drove, Andy looked at the Great Wall every time it could be seen from his window, and he studied a train that drew level with them and travelled alongside for some distance. Eventually it veered down a different valley, and he had only the road to hold his eyes. People were talking around him but he stayed self-contained. He had a feeling that he was loose in the river of history, that those who'd died of starvation in earlier centuries were buried beside the road, and that warring armies were loose in the stream that was moving him on. Long-gone emperors and forgotten courtiers were hovering in the capital to which he was returning. He wanted nothing to do with them, but their lives, such as they had been, were hovering in the air. Zao Li had taken him to the Forbidden City, and they had seen the bed where the emperor had engaged his mistresses in sexual intercourse. The bed was enormous. It was also in open space, so presumably the emperor welcomed spectators at his sport. Andy had realised, looking at the bed, that he belonged to his own tradition of sex as an inward connection, a crazing force which could be used to develop an inwardness of relationship between two people. Not so for the emperors, though they too must have had feelings, which perhaps they were unable to act on, for all their power. The whole design of the Forbidden City was to isolate the emperor in his grandeur, and the grandeur was of the mind even more than in the buildings and courtyards, vast as they were. The areas of the mind commanded by the emperor were as regimented as the spaces within which he lived, so that even

he, who had to live up to his environs, was tradition alive, chained to its past as its future attached itself to him. The understanding is everything, Andy saw; even the meals he shared with his Chinese friends at the conference were different in his mind and theirs. This capacity for two people to look in the same direction and see different things had been brought sharply into focus during his days in China. How much further was there to go?

He travelled to Zao Li's home city, and he travelled from there. He began to feel that there was a lack of variety in Chinese life, but every time he mentioned some limitation to his host, Zao Li told him of a part of China where things were different. His answers came readily, subverting Andy, who realised that his criticisms expressed no more than his limitations; he'd never felt so ignorant before. He assumed that this was due to the differences between China and his country, but something nagged at him without letting him know what it was. The closest he came to contemplative satisfaction was his reaction to some gardens in the city of Changsha.

Zao Li was too busy to take him around himself, so he told his visitor that his daughter Jasmine would be his guide. Andy was by now used to Chinese people with English names, a practice he found delightful, though he could hardly imagine its like back home. Jasmine took him about the city, showing him how silk thread was developed and dyed, and then its uses, chief among them the embroidery of garments, which could hardly have been finer. The patience of the Chinese people, their preparedness to be devoted to a task, shone through the fabrics that Jasmine led him to see. Then she said he had to visit certain gardens, and summoned a taxi. On arrival at the most famous garden, Jasmine's demeanour changed, and Andy sensed that he was to be shown something precious, a source, perhaps, for something dear to his guide. They approached the gate, hardly more than a hole in a high wall, they queued, they entered, and then Jasmine said to Andy, 'I leave you on your own for a few minutes. When you are ready to talk, you will find me

over there.' Andy knew that where she was pointing must be the centre of the excursion for her.

He moved along the crowded pathways, but always circling; he wanted to discover what it was Jasmine centred on. There were pools, rocks, and pavilions everywhere, and visitors were swarming through and over them, cameras flashing, all chattering and moving restlessly. You never get any peace in this country, he thought, and then it struck him that he'd expressed one half of his central reaction to China; what was the other?

He looked about. With an effort, he subdued his disappointment, and saw the place without its visitors. Graceful pavilions were surrounded by rocks which were not so much natural, as representations of wildness; what, then, was the source of the grace with which the pavilions were informed? They were places of contemplation, he saw, and they were open so that wind, odours, light and shadow could play on the minds of those seated within, sheltered, but only by a roof and by the depth of their concentration. 'Ah!' Andy said. 'So that's it!' He circled back to where he'd left Jasmine, and looked around. He could see her, at a distance, in a pavilion that was rectangular, not circular, and seemed to be the largest building in the garden. He drew closer, unobtrusively, not wanting her to feel she had to resume resonsibility. She had forgotten herself so far as to put first a need of her own. He studied her, trying to imagine himself into her mood, her contemplation, then he realised he was unready to do this because he hadn't studied the pavilion where she sat. He'd taken it for granted.

He looked again. The pavilion was symmetrical. At either end was a table, two dragon chairs, a bench, a bowl, and two huge dragons sculpted of wood and painted, standing higher than a man. All wood was dark. The walls were panels, and all of them, he thought, though perhaps he was wrong, could be opened. If all could be open, all could be closed, or some, a few, as many as you wished. The fiercest wind, the gentlest breeze could be kept out, or admitted, allowed to flow through the contemplation of those within, or refused. In his own country, he knew, any

building open to the weather would be rough, but the contents of this contemplative pavilion were forceful, yet delicate, strong, yet refined. It pleased him. More than that, he felt envious. Man could make things, and ideas, that were his best, yet open to any test the world could bring. Power of the mind did not have to be locked away. Secure in itself, it could be open to the scrutiny of everything it considered: the passage of observation was two-way, from ruler to subject, from lowly to exalted. This was the centre of China's wisdom? He thought it was.

Later that morning, he thanked Jasmine profusely. 'That,' he told her, 'was one of the great experiences of my life.'

The ringer

He was home. Unsettled, he'd taken himself back to the lands of the Murrumbidgee and the Murray, where his family had pioneered (a word they laughed at, because it imposed obligations) in years almost forgotten. He walked about his favorite town, feeling it had tired, and felt irrelevant as it had not when the wealth of empire was generated in its hinterland. Heavy trucks roared through, the railway had closed. Shops had shut and nothing had come to fill them. The town's expansion was over. The question was in its mind, is this the end? A long process of dying, or can we renew ourselves one day?

Nobody knew, but all feared the worst.

Driving towards the town, he'd stopped on the plains, unfolded a chair, and sat, in the dying afternoon, with infinity as companion. Man can ask no more, he'd told himself. There is nothing better than land to which one feels attached. Ownership's not important, but connection matters. The thing the species fears most is to be without ties. What bonded him? Cloud, sky, horizons, were the gentlest ligaments; the rest was in the mind. He hadn't searched himself, he'd put his mind to absorbing whatever precious thing his spirit drew from this place that was no place to anybody who needed a crowded human history stocked with events. Serenity had filled him. Now, in his hotel room, with a hot night ahead, he wondered if any answer would come.

He went for a walk. There was the cast-iron drinking fountain, the shire offices, pubs, eight or nine of them, the library, lawyers' rooms, plate glass displays of machinery and everything needed for sheep. It ran back into his childhood, and further, to the generations of his family that he'd been named to continue. He smiled, walking alone, greeting the few people he passed. There was a store he wanted to look at, and he

hadn't noticed it as he'd driven in, when he'd been looking for his hotel. Then he came on a surprise. The store had been replaced by a motel, and the low-relief of a shearer which had been the emblem of the store had been turned into the name and the talking-point of the motel. The ringer, proudest of shearers, who'd accepted admiration from twenty feet below, had been brought to earth. The architect had kept him for the new premises, but he wasn't being looked after and weeds had grown up, obscuring his feet and the back of the sheep. He looked smaller and most of his pride had been taken in bringing him down. Andy felt shocked. The depression, the impossibility of elation that he'd felt on re-entering the town, had entered him. He tried to remember the store that had stood on the spot, but he'd lost the detail; he could remember little more than the filtered glow that fell softly from the skylight, high above. He'd thought it a fixture, the soul of New South Wales, and it had been ripped down. It occurred to him that most of the people who stayed at the motel, driving at speed from Sydney to Adelaide, would need to have the ringer's meaning explained because they would never have heard the term. *The ringer*; what would you say?

You would say that shearers were paid by results, were competitive, and that the man who shore most sheep in the day took pride in himself and was admired, or more likely envied, by the others. Why was he called the ringer? Andy supposed it was because he was leading in the count when the bell rang to end the day's shearing. What else could it be? As a child he'd watched wiry men stripping fleeces, the boss watching everything, a lowly individual sweeping, the owner watching as closely as the boss ... He remembered that the ringer was given first choice of stands, and took number one, because the figure was your status. One! You were ...

... the ringer, and you were an unexalted figure in today's world of breakfasts, television, and managers who knew little of the districts in which they served. A town gathered soul from those who committed themselves, and here-today-gone-tomorrow travellers offered nothing.

Andy's world had crumbled without him realising. He went back to the hotel, got a glass of wine and took it to the balcony outside his room.

The night was hot. He sipped. The street was boring, with nothing moving. He remembered the intersection of the Boulevardes Saint Michel and Saint Germain, looking out of the room he'd shared with his wife and children, the first time they'd been to Paris. Paris was the centre of the world. It knew about itself. It had pride. The skin tingled in the European cold, the mind tingled with the certainty that thought was vital, taste mattered, everything you did could be examined, thrown away, restarted. You needed only creativity, excitement, and a wish to be in the inventive, argumentative throng to be found anywhere you went. He longed to go back. Yet here he was, victim of a family decision, generations back, to come to a world where they thought there had been hope. The hope had died in what had always been a frontier town. The empire that wanted wool had died. Wool was still used, but certain types, certain quantities. Its days of optimism were past; those who produced it needed to be cunning now, and find niches, opportune moments, in the market. They had to switch their crops, their products, from year to year, even month to month. Opportunists had to move where the winds of the market blew. Was this exciting, or depressing?

He sipped again. A truck came down the street, spreading a smell of cattle. It would cross the river, swinging right or left, Sydney or Adelaide. Straight on to Melbourne. Andy thought of the estate agent who'd tried to sell him a block of land when he saw him looking at notices in the window. 'We're very central,' the man had told him, then he'd pointed, ritualistically intoning, 'Sydney. Melbourne. Adelaide.' The trinity above a dying town. The trinity not giving a hoot in hell about a settlement in the backblocks where nobody that counted had ever been.

He sipped. The wine had lost its chill, while he'd been sitting on the balcony. It breathed. Its nose - odd word - had become more pronounced. He wondered where it had come from. The publican's wife had not thought to show him the label. It was a bottle, not a cask, and

it was in the fridge. That would keep him happy? It stirred his curiosity. The wine would come from another regional town with a main street empty at night, and it would be sharing in the excitement of the nation's wines getting known throughout the world. Had his country's history been a string of excitements as outsiders rushed to find something good? Something that they'd hoped, for a year or two, would be so fortunate that life's problems would move away? That was his country's history, and the excitements were always moving, from natural gas to chasing whales in tiny boats, split by a smack of the creature's tail. Whoa there, up she rises! He wished the street was full of the venturous, foolhardy people who'd fought the blacks in northern Queensland to get the gold in their streams. The station owners' wives, importing furniture, importing gentility, to a land that had never seen crystal, silk, or lace. The men of the sea, who'd brought everybody and everything from the other side of the world. The scientists who'd studied stars unknown till the south land was settled, the poets and painters who weren't sure where they were, their minds sustained by traditions born elsewhere, unable, though they tried hard enough, to find meaning where there was not only a lack of meaning but its absence was the strongest thing on offer. He sipped. It was too much. He'd go to bed, and if he couldn't find anything to hold him, he'd go back the day after next. It was only a day's drive. He could go down the main street, like the big truck a minute ago, and take his choice - Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide.

Paris, London, New York!

He spat. He regretted it at once, feeling embarrassed. He wanted to know why he'd spat. He wanted to sip again, continuing his train of thought, but it had reached its end. At the end of the universe, if you could get there, was there anything beyond? Yes, there were three places, well known in local lore, called Hay, Hell and Booligal. Marlowe had said, 'Why, this is hell and I am in it.' Marlowe had been a dramatist; people who lacked his inclination, his skill, had to make something of their situation. They lived it without talking. On the opposite side of the street, lit by the lights, shaded by the trees, a couple came along the

footpath, holding hands. He was white, she was black. Andy looked down at them, feeling a strange connection. They strolled, the couple, accepting the heat as natural. Hidden by trees, they emerged into light, then became hard to see as they moved along the street. Andy leaned from his balcony to watch, wondering why he was doing it. Puzzled, he finished his wine, undressed and slept.

In the morning he drove to the west, taking tracks that led him to the river. It pulled him, a lifeline of fish and birds, and redgums that sprinkled the earth with broken light. High above the water there were bushes full of dead grass and beer cans, debris of a flood. When would be the next? He wanted to light a fire, but that belonged to those who ...

... belonged, and he didn't, though his family had been active in the area long before. He felt silly, he felt childish. He wanted to light a fire. He drove away, he drove down another track. More redgums, more cockatoos screeching, more ripples in the water, snags, fish, the remains of a boat. He wanted to light a fire. He tried to analyse his need, then he succumbed. How silly not to do what you felt like doing. Peace, and acceptance, ran through him. He'd given up exploring what he didn't need to explore. It was home, it was in him already, it was home.

His fire burned, proclaiming by its smoke that he was there. He wondered if anybody would come and demand to know who he was. No, this was silly. He belonged. He wasn't really a visitor. Wherever the smoke drifted was soul territory. It was distinct from the other land surrounding it. He thought of his uncles, who'd gone to the first world war. He thought of them after they came back, ordinary men. He thought ...

... of a white man and a black woman who'd stirred his mind the night before. He wanted to know who they were ... no, he wanted to know what their lives had been like. He'd rejected the life he might have had, on the land in New South Wales, he'd gone off like the cattle truck to a capital in the south, and lived away from where he started. Didn't most people do the same? Didn't they start a journey and follow

it to the ends of the earth? No wonder he felt strange, he was where he no longer had a right to be. The fire was wrong. The smoke was false. None of it was his. Trembling, he knew he was desperately unhappy. A white man and a black woman, he wanted them to walk up hand in hand, and tell him who he was. Tell him he'd led a life worth living, tell him that it was okay, he had as much right as anyone to be on earth.

He sat on the ground, watching the fire die down. Cockatoos screeched. There were ripples in the water. The remains of a boat lay rotting in the mud. Time and the river moved at their natural speed. His mind stopped racing. He grew calm again. When the fire gave no more smoke, he drove back to the town, a little more lively during the day. He stood in the street opposite his hotel, and what he wanted happened. A man came along that he knew from the night before. The man paused nearby. Andy said, 'Good morning.' The man looked at him, watchful, accepting, but cautious. 'Morning.'

There! It had begun. 'Not as hot as I was expecting.'

'Mild enough, today.'

'It can be scorching in these parts.'

The man grunted. Smiled faintly. 'Whereya from?'

Andy felt stupid. 'That's harder than it sounds. Melbourne. But my family settled in this district, many years ago. I don't think there's any of them left, now.'

'Settled here? In the early days?'

How far back was that? 'The eighteen forties, as far as we know. I was never the expert in family affairs.'

'Musta been among the first people,' the man said, and then, 'Well ...'

Andy knew what he was thinking. 'Black people were here a long time before us.' The grin told him he'd touched his man. 'I gotta friend who keeps reminding me o' that.' Andy wanted to say he'd seen her the night before, holding hands, but knew he mustn't, it was too intrusive. 'We need to be reminded, most of us. We think we've done everything

that's been worthwhile. The trouble is, much of what we've done was mistaken, because we didn't understand the land.'

The other man thought he was on the right track, but said, 'People did what they thought was right, I suppose. They just had foreign ideas. Didn't know the place.'

'Do we know it any better now?'

The other man, Andy's age, the night walker, said, 'Those that are left probably do. Buggers that made the mistakes made the money, they've all gone and left us now.' He grinned. 'Better off without 'em, ya think?'

This was acceptance. Andy introduced himself. The man's name was Teddy. He laughed, and said his second name as if it was a confession. 'Teddy Black.'

'You get any remarks about that name?'

Teddy Black laughed again. 'I getta lotta remarks. Water off a duck's back. Howya know that?'

Andy told him he'd seen him the night before. Teddy Black accepted this. 'Donna. That's her name. She's very attached to me. I'm very attached to her. I suppose it's okay to say this to a stranger ...'

'Though we're not strangers, now that it's been said.' The mystery of it was closing on them.

'No,' Teddy Black acknowledged. 'No, we're not. It feels like I was fated to run into you. That's certainly what I felt with Donna when I saw her. She had a husband, a black, useless bastard. Drunk most of the time, if he could get the grog. She left him. Quite a story. Tellya that another day, if you stick around. Whenya going back to Melbourne?'

Andy trembled. 'I suppose I have to. I work down there. But part of me feels I belong up here. It's the land that pulls me back. The plains, and the rivers that run across it, the spaces ...' He lifted his hands, palms toward the sky. Teddy asked him, 'Whaddaya do down there?'

'I work at a university. I'm a teacher. I teach English to the people who don't know the language very well. Overseas students, recent

arrivals. Young people from homes where they never learned anything properly. I don't think I'll ever be out of work.'

Teddy wasn't sure what he meant by this. 'Ya gotta good job, ya gotta stick to it. If it's whatya know.' He sounded resigned, as if their moment of closeness, of accepting, was over. It was a finality Andy wanted to avoid, if he could.

'There's something I'd like to ask ...'

Teddy looked at him, waiting.

The university man felt sure it would sound ridiculous. 'Have you ever thought of writing the story of your life?'

A faint smile came to Teddy's face, as if he'd been caught out. 'If I told it to you, wouldya write it down?'

'Not what I meant,' Andy said, 'I meant writing it down as a way of telling yourself. I mean ...' He decided to take the plunge. 'If you go to a cemetery, there are all these headstones, with names carved on them. You've seen them, silly memorials, because after a while nobody remembers who these people were. If you can't get yourself into a story, you're going to be forgotten.'

Teddy Black thought before answering. 'I don't think I have a problem with being forgotten. Most people that are remembered made a hash of their lives, or a lot of other people's lives.' He added decisively, 'Or both.'

Andy found himself admiring the stranger that he felt he knew. Over his shoulder, and further down the street, he could see Teddy's partner, Donna, moving in their direction. He no sooner recognised her than Teddy, alert to something in him, turned and saw her. Then he turned back to Andy, kindly, apologising. 'That's Donna now. You know that, you saw her last night. Once seen, never forgotten, that's my woman. I'm a happy man, mate, I'd better be on me way. I'm running late, she had to come and get me. Won't do at all.' His love for Donna made him cheerful. He offered the visitor a hand to shake. 'I hope you'll always be happy together,' Andy said, amazed by his own sincerity. Teddy Black nodded, turned, and said as he was leaving, 'I reckon we

will. We've been through a lot and it's been good so far.' Andy felt the other man wanted to hear his blessing a second time, but it was written all over his face. Donna, much closer now, had stopped, seeing her man getting ready to break off his conversation. Andy knew that the moment they were together, Donna would ask, 'Who was that?'

He felt he had to answer it himself. Who was Teddy Black, that he'd been talking to? Why had it mattered so much that they should meet, and recognise each other? He crossed the road, he walked to his hotel, and he was at the foot of the stairs when it came to him that Teddy's was the life he might have had if his connection with the district hadn't been broken. Had he had to go so far, to come back so far, to find himself? What he might have been? Whatever the answer was, he'd found it. He could leave in peace. He put his things in his bag, paid his bill, and drove out of town, over the river, onto the plains, heading south.

This book looks in two directions. It is a collection of travel pieces, taking the reader to France, China, Rome, New York and other places, but the observations and extensions of thought opened up by distant places return the traveller, and with him the reader, to Australia. To travel far is to know one's own place a little better. The first piece shows the traveller in Sylvia Beach's bookshop in Paris, explaining New South Wales to two Americans who have a print of George Lambert's 'Across the black soil plains'. Later pieces look at gipsies, those who travelled to make war, and those who came to know that their spirit was better suited to a distant land. In the last piece the traveller returns to what is no longer his home, finds it changed, and encounters the life he might have led had he not taken his path of study and travel. Janus, the god of ambivalence and the divided mind, presides over everything in this book which is named for him.

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