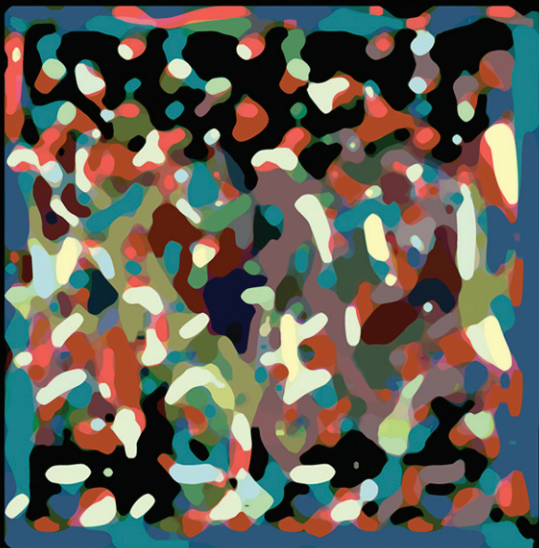


So bitter was my heart

A Memoir



Chester Eagle

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So Bitter Was My Heart is published by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is (03) 9497 1018 (within Australia) and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

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First published electronically in 2008. Design by Vane Lindesay, DTP by Karen Wilson. Cover image by Rodney Manning, 2008.

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I want to tell you about some things that happened many years ago, but there is a difficulty: I am not the same person that I was then. The two are connected, no doubt, but the young man would have been surprised had he been able to see the old man he was fated to become, and as for the writer, he knows he is cheating if he says I did this or thought that because to say so is a distortion of truth. The old man, in his benevolence, and forgetfulness, cannot help tidying, improving ... falsifying, really.

So we'd better start with a few things beyond dispute. The young man, and I'm going to call him Trevor, because he'll need a name, is boarding at a house long known as Reardon's Folly, though at the time of my story it is also called Kracke Mansion because the name gives the right feeling to a group of young men who board there with Trevor. He is a teacher and they are plumbers, working on an extension to the town's nursing home for the elderly. Trevor has been to this place to see an uncle who says, 'Next stop's the boneyard!' while, in trying to light a cigarette, his lighter produces a prodigious jet of flame. Trevor wonders that he's allowed anything so dangerous, but the place hasn't burned down yet ...

It seems to Trevor that most of the elderly are well on the way to the boneyard. Some have their heads on pillows, dead to the world. A few of them wander manically, searching for the clues that used to make the world make sense. Age has stripped them of everything

that masks their craziness, and they are unbridled in their stupidity. Age takes away the illusion of purpose from lives that never had much of it; there is no other purpose, once you've reached the nursing home, than to last another day.

The plumbers who board with Trevor know some of the nurses at the nursing home and the response of these young women is sex. It's the simplest and strongest assertion of themselves against the decay they attend to. Desire. Lust, that search that occupies us all. Young men like the plumbers at Kracke Mansion make a distinction between those who nurse the elderly and those who work at the hospital because something of the hope, or expectation of recovery, that sustains hospital patients transfers itself to their nurses, who have, most of them, professional pride. Those who work with the old and insane are simply driven: the young plumbers scoff at them, as if their sexuality is handed out too freely, too easily, to be worth having. The young men laugh a lot about sex, and 'doing it', but they are circumspect, and Trevor knows that they preserve their self-respect at times when it would be easy to go to the nursing home at the end of a shift and pick up what's on offer. You might be as driven as everybody else by the need for a root, as men say, but something restrains the plumbers, and amid all the laughter and scandalous anecdotes, the huge, high levels of risibility they see in everything, they cling to their decency too.

Trevor's got a girlfriend in Melbourne and somehow it lifts him above the problem – he thinks! It gives him a way out of the town's judgements on those parts of people's lives which are said to be 'private', an expression which means that everybody works unceasingly to make them as public as gossip can achieve. The plumbers know, and Trevor knows too, that to pick up a girl who nurses the elderly is to categorise yourself as being so desperate that you belong to those who have no alternative ...

... and without alternatives we have no hope.

Mrs Kracke – Eva – is respectable. Her huge home is tidy. Generous meals are served, washing is done, cleaning, and there are torrents of hot water for showers. There is a large lounge, sometimes used as a dining room, though most evenings, when the residents are only Trevor and the plumbers, they have dinner at the kitchen table with Eva presiding over the stove, and her husband, Clarry and their two children at the table as well. Eva, for all her skill as cook and housekeeper, is unsure. What if Clarry's ulcer flares up again? Will her son find a good job when he leaves school? Will he have skills to match his father's? Clarry works at the butter factory, fixing the engines of the place, its trucks, and of course his own; he has a Ford car, and a boat down at the river, which he loves to take on fishing trips. He gets around in overalls and a battered hat, and his drawl is wide, and funny. His cheerfulness and humour are somehow a product of an underlying, inescapable

misery, or is it despair? To Clarry, every ambition in the world is bullshit, an attempt to grasp at something unattainable, and therefore ridiculous. His wife wants to sing. This causes him to shake his head. Eva takes lessons from 'Madam', an old phoney who sneers at anybody that doesn't know their Schubert, though she herself knows little enough about the composer. Madam wants Eva to learn a bracket of songs for the Eisteddfod in Sale, so she'd better start practising. Now!

Every time Trevor sits at the kitchen table, and Eva is standing at the stove, she tells the young teacher, whom she knows is keen on music, about her lessons, particularly the mistakes. 'Madam stopped playing, Trevor, she stared at me, and she said, What would you be feeling if you'd just done that in front of the audience in Sale?' Trevor grins. 'What did you do?' he asks, and Eva tells him. Mistakes, breathing problems, misreading the score, leaving out a bar ... all the accidents of the barely competent. 'It's all very well for Madam,' says Eva, 'but what else has she got to do but criticise people who've got other work to be done. If I spent all my time up there in the lounge, practising the way she says I ought to, there wouldn't be any meals to put on the table!' If Clarry is in the room she may add, 'And Clarry wouldn't get his socks darned!'

Clarry, who could buy socks if he needed to, allows a watery smile to cross his face. 'Madam'd have us all barefoot if she had her way!' Eva rushes to defend

her teacher. ‘Oh Clarry, you love to make a mockery of things, but what if ...’

Trevor tries to evaluate the contending energies of the situation. Can Eva sing? He doubts it, but he’s never really heard her. He knows that Clarry thinks his wife is ridiculous but senses that there’s a well of loyalty there, forever full. Trevor scoffs at the household that shelters him at least as much as the young plumbers do, but he knows that he can’t separate himself from Eva, foolish as she may be, because he too thinks that music alters the world and that humans need things to lift them, or else they’ll ...

At the bottom of his thinking, at this stage of his life at least, is the European idea of mankind’s need for redemption. Without something to give us meaning, we’re lost. He has his work, he has an attachment in the city far away, and he, like Eva, has his music ...

A new couple come to town, a radio repairman, his wife Teresa and two children. Trevor has known them in Melbourne, where they are on the fringe of the circle that Trevor mixes with. Teresa, to his surprise, wants him to tell her about the town, and show her where things are. He does this willingly enough; it makes him realise how much he’s come to know. She asks him if he’s interested in seeing films; he isn’t, because the theatre never shows anything he wants to see. ‘I need to get out,’ she says. ‘I’ll meet you at the theatre ...’: she names a day and time. He drives to the theatre at the appointed hour, sees her car, and parks beside it. In a

moment she's in his car. He's not very experienced but he's not so silly that he doesn't know what to do. They drive to Reardon's Folly and walk through the garden to the room downstairs, overlooking the valley, which is his. They hurl their clothes on the floor and they cling to each other in the urgency, the extremity, of desire. A minute later they are holding each other loosely, passion exhausted. 'I should have worn a contraceptive,' he says, fumbling in a drawer, meaning to be ready for the next rush, but she tells him no. She wants their lovemaking to be unprotected, and she will come to him when her period's arrived and again a few days later, when she's sure they'll still be safe. This puzzles him, but it's part of her mental arrangement for allowing herself to do what she's going to do, twice a month, and he's so pleased to have the satisfaction of his desires brought to him, on a plate as it were, that he'd agree to anything.

This arrangement lasts for many months, and it amuses Trevor, when he's listening to Eva telling him about Madam's advice on phrasing Schubert, to think of what's happened in the room directly beneath the kitchen, his room, only a few nights before ... or last night ... or the arrangement that's been made for the following week. Desire is well hidden, but well expressed, and Trevor, whose city girlfriend is now a thing of the past, thinks that desire is all the more desirable for being a wild joy coming alive in the dark. He wonders why Teresa insists on their coupling being unprotected and he assumes that she has tamed desire, in her marriage,

by having the children whom she mothers, and that she must come to him to regather something which has been lost in the areas of her life she publicly acknowledges.

Desire enters Reardon's Folly in a different guise when Mrs Kracke tells Trevor, over breakfast one Sunday morning, that that very afternoon she and Clarry have to drive to a nearby town and collect Beryl, a niece of Mrs Kracke who has been leading a 'risky' – that's Eva's word – life. 'She's left school,' Eva tells Trevor, she standing by her stove, he seated at her table, 'and ... well you know how many single men there are in that town, all those mill workers, and the ones who come out of the bush at the weekends and drink at the hotels ... and they've all got it in their heads that they'd like a young woman, and there's Beryl, with nothing to do but ... talk to them.'

Trevor sees how it is. 'Will she be living here, Mrs K?' Eva says she will. 'She'll help me with the housework, making beds, doing the washing, helping here in the kitchen, she'll be very useful and she'll learn a lot about hospitality. She may decide one day to run a boarding house herself, or a hotel ...'

Beryl's at dinner that night, standing beside Mrs Kracke in front of the stove. At sixteen she's already tall, and it's clear that when she fills out she'll have Mrs Kracke's size and strength. Family genes have built her in the same way. Mrs Kracke smiles shyly at Trevor and the plumber boys as she directs Beryl in serving up their meals. 'This plate's for Tom,' Eva says, 'and

that's for Les. Leo's is on the right, he likes more gravy than the other boys.' Beryl takes all this solemnly, as if books of etiquette depend on such pronouncements, as perhaps they do. Tom, Les and Leo thank Beryl for their plates and compliment Mrs Kracke on the dinner's she's served. 'Best roast lamb I've ever tasted,' says Les: 'Oh Les, you needn't flatter me like that!' The plumber knows how to lay it on. 'I've told you before, Mrs K, my mother's a terrific cook, but she's not a patch on you!'

'Oh Les!'

'I tell you what, Mrs K, when I get back to Melbourne, I'm gonna send mum down here for a holiday, so she can learn off you!'

Mrs Kracke tells the young woman who's moved to her house in order to have her morals improved, 'They're only flattering, Beryl. They do it to keep our standards high, and in that at least we have to satisfy them!'

Trevor is thinking of Teresa, with whom he finds ecstasy in the darkness of his room, directly beneath the kitchen, he doesn't find Beryl at all desirable because she's big-boned, while Teresa is slim, and, though more than twice Beryl's age, she's far suppler in the movement of her thighs as she twists and turns for him; but he knows the plumbing boys by now, and wonders what they're thinking about Beryl. Is she like the nurses at the nursing home, too desperate to be taken seriously, or is she properly desirable, like the hospital nurses, the higher grade establishment where men have no shame in

gathering? Or something else? She is, after all, a young woman who's going to live in their midst, and she's got a past to leave behind which the boys think she won't have a hope in hell of throwing off. How's it going to go?

A couple of weeks pass, in which time Trevor has visits from Teresa which make him wish he could have her every night, there's so much sex in his body to be expressed, and she's as excited as he is to be together, clinging to each other, caressing, tumbling into bed, he on top of her, she on top of him. Surprisingly for one so engrossed in himself, Trevor notices that Teresa sheds her years when she's on top, concentrating on the movement of her body, somehow controlling the excitement running wildly through him and bringing it to give her a peak to ride on: she is, Trevor realises, very beautiful when she's making love, and it occurs to him that perhaps he, perhaps the whole world, may be beautiful too. It's an idea that's never occurred to him.

Then, one morning, when he's about two minutes from leaving for work, he finds Beryl in his room. She's come to make his bed, and he gets out of the way, but he sees she wants to talk. 'Do you think I'm too young to get married?' she asks. 'Sixteen! Good lord! After fucking half the mill workers in her town!' 'Has someone made you an offer?' he says. 'Yes, sort of,' she says. 'I wasn't expecting. It came as a surprise.'

Trevor's surprised too, but she needs to talk to someone, and she's chosen him. 'How did this come about?' She answers simply, 'I've been going out a bit

with the boys.’ Trevor didn’t know this, the boys not having told him. ‘You wouldn’t have noticed,’ Beryl says, ‘with all that work getting ready for your classes.’ He feels humble; she’s never said anything about his teaching before. ‘Leo, mostly, he’s been very nice to me.’ Trevor knows that Leo is struggling to throw off catholicism, which means the restrictions it puts on sex. ‘You’re going out with Leo?’ he says, feeling his way. ‘He took me to the pictures,’ she says, ‘and once he took me for a drive.’ Drive of course means parking, and kissing, and possibly more. ‘Did you have a good time?’ Trevor asks, and she surprises him again.

‘He says he’d like to marry me. He thinks perhaps we should.’

This means there’s been sex, and the priests, the pope, his cardinals and bishops are looming behind. ‘Sixteen’s a bit young,’ Trevor says. ‘I think we need to take a good long look at the world before we commit ourselves.’ It occurs to him to add, ‘Unless there’s been an unwelcome surprise as a result ...’

‘No,’ Beryl says. ‘No problem there. So you think I ought to wait?’

‘Definitely,’ Trevor says. ‘It’s too important to rush into it, or let anybody rush you if it’s not how you feel yourself.’

She moves past him to make the bed, her mind settled by this exchange, Trevor grabs his things and dashes through the garden, with its view of the willows, the river flats and the farms on the other side, and it

occurs to him that Beryl has spoken to him so openly, so tenderly, that he could, if he wished, be enjoying her at that moment. Eva would never have noticed that he was a couple of minutes late in going to his car. Beryl, he thought as he drove to work, probably half-expected it of him because that's what her experience had told her that men were like – quick to enter, quick to rush away. I'm glad I didn't, he thought, driving his car, but what would I have done if I'd realised that was what she expected before I dashed out of the room? Would I have used her, and caused her to seek the confidence of someone else to work out what she felt had happened between herself and Trevor, Mrs Kracke's music-loving boarder?

At this point in my story, I want to rush on, but something warns me that a gap's opening up between the young Trevor and his developing sense of integrity trying to guide him while his desires are ready to sweep him in any old direction, and the older man who's writing this piece. I'm searching for my subject matter among all those memories, many of them hilarious, of a time when life's direction hadn't revealed itself. Looking back, I sense that there must be clues, but, when I look for them, there seems to be so much – too much – that has to be got out of the way before the evaluation, the judgement, the wisdom, if that's possible, can emerge.

Trevor's meetings with Teresa continue, at her bidding. When he can remember to ask, he has her on top of him so he can see the miraculous transformation he's already observed; she really is another woman when

she's making love. Her black hair falls on her breasts and she responds to his every touch. He senses that for her he has something to give which he isn't aware of, and he wonders what she gets from him. Youth, is the only answer he can think of, but he knows there's more than one word's content in what she's drawing from him. As she rides him, astride, he realises that womanhood is not the receptacle for male desire but a something, perhaps a principle – that's the best word he can think of – that's equal to whatever it is he stands for. He's always believed in truth, high principle, and all sorts of lofty, idealistic things, and it seems that when she's matching him in sexual intensity she's making a mutuality out of the pair of them which floods away his notions of possession, conquest, and achievement of desire. In his bed beneath the kitchen, he's learning something that the whole society wants to keep out of sight, and he senses that there's truth endlessly pressing in, about him, everywhere, and, if what he sees in Teresa's eyes as she rides him in her joy – at least as great as his – is true, then truth, and the love that attends it, is no hierarchy, but something endlessly abundant and available.

Weeks pass, then one day after work, Trevor runs into Les, who tells him, 'Where were you last night? Ya shoulda been around.' Trevor tries to remember, but Les is going on. 'We were in the lounge. And Beryl comes in. I've just run a bath for Mrs K, she says. We ask if the old girl's in the bath and Beryl checks. She is. She usually takes a good twenty minutes, she says. Then Tom says,

What're you going to do till she needs you? Beryl says, I don't have any idea. Tom says, I've got a really good idea, Beryl, if you feel like it. Beryl says What? But you can see she knows what he wants. Next thing she's on the sofa with her pants down, and Tom's in her, going for his life. Leo's at the door, keeping watch.'

It occurs to Trevor to ask, 'And what were you doing, Les?'

Les has a girlfriend, the daughter of a local plumber, and the family are very protective of her virtue. Les is always saying, 'They want me to marry her, but what they don't realise is that no matter how they dress it up, it looks like a trap. Know why? Because it is!' He laughs at this point, too smart, he thinks, to get caught in that one!

Trevor adds, 'If she had Tom she probably wanted you to go on with?'

'She did, but I wasn't getting caught in that one either. A man's got to keep his head above water, sometimes.'

This engages Trevor's mind. A man's got to keep his head above water. Is he drowning in his desire, or is it under control because Teresa only allows it by arrangement? What he feels is not exactly insecurity, but he knows he doesn't know enough yet to be beyond surprise; in Les's terms, he's not beyond being caught in a trap. He's far from knowing all the moves in the sexual game and he doesn't know anybody who does.

Not even Teresa.

Life goes on, however, and he goes to work, coming back to Reardon's Folly at the end of every day. He's full of ideas for his teaching and he feels that if he keeps improving for a few more years he'll know the secrets of his trade. The inspectors who visit schools accept his headmaster's recommendation that he should have an outstanding mark. This is flattering, but insecurity lingers. His desire for Teresa is still smouldering underground and being satisfied, by darkness and by night, when she allows. In this sense he's still a mystery to a world that doesn't know. His room under the big house with its view of the river is host to a wild force that enters and leaves in the dark, unacknowledged except in those mysterious moments when Teresa, hair hanging over her breasts, rides him in a joy they share but cannot show the world.

Madam has her way. Eva enters the Sale Eisteddfod. She's to sing a bracket of three Schubert songs, beginning with *Die Forelle*. She practices as often as she can, then, as the event draws near, Madam squeezes more and more rehearsals – that's the word, as the time approaches – into her busy schedule. Beryl has to do more of the housework, and manages well enough. Trevor senses that Beryl's changing, as he is, under the influences coming in. She's filling out, and this doesn't mean she's pregnant, merely that her body's becoming more like her aunt's, she's accepting of the domestic routine, and ...

... she's sensing that her destiny doesn't lie in the hands of the mill workers she's left behind. Life has a way with us, and Trevor realises, or the old man he was to become has realised, at this late stage, that for the most part we have to submit, unless we're clever enough to skirt around what lies in waiting.

The trap, as Les the plumber says, almost every day.

So Madam has her way, Eva practices, and never stops talking about it. Trevor's the only person who can stand her because he's interested in what she makes of Schubert, the greatest song writer of them all. 'Madam says I need to manage my legato better,' she says to her boarder. 'What do you think she means by that?'

Trevor's a teacher, he has words for almost every situation. 'When did she say it, Mrs K? Sing me the phrase before she said it. Now the one that follows.' Mrs K sings in her awkward way the lovely phrases of Schubert, and Trevor thinks, at one and the same time, that she's hopeless, and that she deserves some success because she's striving to reach the top of a minor foothill in a range that's splendid in its peaks.

Most of the singing lessons, the rehearsals, take place at Madam's, and Clarry is required to take his wife there, and pick her up at the end of an hour and a half. 'He doesn't have to go away,' Mrs K tells Trevor, 'but he insists he won't stay and listen.' Whether this is an accusation or an expression of gratitude is an open question, but Clarry, if he's there, says something like,

‘I don’t know head nor tail about it, I’d only put you off if you had me sitting there. Besides, I’ve got things to do!’

Clarry is one of those men who think that houses are the preserve of women. ‘I tell Eva,’ he tells Trevor in his garage one night, while he’s getting his rods and reels in order, ‘you can buy whatever you need, but don’t ask me to choose it. I wouldn’t have a clue.’ Trevor isn’t made this way; he thinks there are large areas of overlap between the worlds of men and women, but Clarry is another sort of man, and he’s generous to a fault ...

... yet the strain inside is making him break loose. He starts to drink, and this shows when he wanders into the house after a couple of hours in his garage, and cracks jokes of the men-only variety to Tom, Leo, and Les. The boys think the jokes are corny, but Clarry’s irresistible, and the laughter is more raucous than the lounge is ready for. If Mrs Kracke hears the noise, she enters with a rebuke: ‘Clarry, you let the boys have their evening to themselves, I want to talk about business with you. I got a statement from the bank today.’ One evening, when Trevor is in his downstairs room, wishing Teresa was with him, he sees a lantern moving among the fruit trees. He goes out, but the lantern’s gone. Then he hears a voice. ‘Trevor, is that you?’

‘Yes, Mrs K.’

‘Do you know where Clarry is?’

‘Not really, Mrs K, but I saw a lantern out here a minute ago.’

‘He’s out of control, Trevor. I’ve got to find him!’

Trevor thinks. ‘Why’s he in the garden? Are you sure he’s not in the shed?’

Her voice comes out of the dark. ‘He’s been in the shed, the light’s still on, but he’s wandering around with a lantern. He blew it out when he heard me call.’

‘You saw him blow it out, Mrs K?’

‘I saw him. Then he disappeared. If you see him, Trevor, let me know. It means he’s drinking, and he shouldn’t. It’s getting very serious.’

‘Yes Mrs K.’

A few minutes later, Trevor runs into Les, who says, ‘Clarry’s out of control. Pissed as a newt. Mrs K’s out there trying to find his supply.’

‘Has he got a cache of grog?’

‘Must have. He didn’t get like he is by drinking water!’ The two of them laugh. This is better than listening to Mrs K talking about Madam. Les says, ‘He’s cracked up. All this sing-song bullshit has got too much for him.’

‘He is spending an awful lot of time driving her to lessons, and picking her up afterwards.’

Les says, ‘Have you heard her sing?’

‘Not really.’

‘Well I have, and I tellya, it’s like a bloody storm. It’s supposed to be refined, but that’s all crap. When she’s singing, she’s more out of control than Clarry when he’s drunk!’

They laugh again. They see a torch, and then it goes off. ‘You there, Clarry?’ Les calls. Out of the dark comes a voice they know well:

‘Twas on the good ship Venus.

By Christ you should’ve seen us!’

There’s a couplet with another rhyme, and then:

‘The mast-head was a penis!’

The young men snicker. ‘He’s away,’ says Les, and they see the light of Clarry’s torch exploring the trees for possums, or maybe some amorous mariners from the Venus. ‘I’m getting a bit dry,’ Clarry calls. ‘I’ll see you when I get inside!’ The light goes off and they hear his boots on a path. ‘We don’t need to know about this,’ Les says. ‘Let’s go in for a respectable cup of tea.’

‘Which Beryl will provide!’

‘Beryl’s the girl when you need a cup of tea,’ says Les. ‘Quick fuckin smart. You notice how she’s changing? She’d rather give you a cup of tea than a root!’

The young men go inside. Beryl is in fact making tea, and, when it’s ready, she pours. Les talks to her as if she’s taken over the running of the house, as, perhaps, she has. ‘Where’s Mrs K?’

The kitchen door opens as if it understands. Mrs K enters. ‘There you are boys. What a night I’m having!’

‘Sit down and join us, Mrs K. We’re just having tea.’

‘No boys, thanks. I’ve got to find him. He’s on the grog, I know he’s got a stack of it somewhere and I can’t find it.’

‘You searched his car, Mrs K?’

‘I have. In the boot and under the seats. There’s nothing there. And there’s nothing in the garage, or the shed. And as far as I know there’s never been anything brought into the house, so where’s he hiding it?’

Les is quick. ‘Wouldn’t be down the river, in his boat, perhaps?’

Mrs K has thought of that. ‘I sent the children down to have a look. They know that boat back to front, and it isn’t there!’

Les and Trevor say they’re stumped. ‘I’ve got to find it,’ Mrs K says, ‘before anything gets worse. Beryl, you and the boys look after the house, while I go out and search. This matter’s got to be brought to an end!’ And she’s gone.

Beryl is affected by what’s happening to her aunt. ‘Men and grog! It’s a poisonous combination.’ Les is moved to interrogate. ‘When you get married, Beryl, are you going to run a dry house?’

The sixteen year old considers; she seems bigger, and more thoughtful, as if something’s coming clear. ‘You can’t keep it out of your life, but you’ve got to keep it under control.’

Outside, there is a raucous yell, as if someone’s told Clarry about a new happening on the Venus. Les has a grin on his face that makes Trevor certain that he

knows where the grog is hidden. He can't ask, though, because Beryl will have to pass it on to Mrs K and that will ruin Clarry's revolt against respectability, Schubert, Madam, and his wife. 'Thanks for the tea,' Trevor says to Beryl. 'Just what I needed. I think I'll go back downstairs.' Les adds, 'I might join you. We can keep watch together.' Down they go on the narrow staircase, footsteps tumbling. In Trevor's room, Les says, 'I feel like a drink but we'd better stay sober. Which reminds me. Mrs K knows about your lady friend. Beryl showed her blood on the sheets. You'll be getting your marching orders one of these days. Beryl reckons Mrs K is waiting till we go back to Melbourne, she'll empty the house and start again. Maybe something a little bit different. Sorry if that upsets you, I forgot to tell you before.'

Trevor looks into the night. 'I've had a marvellous run. I'll have to get somewhere else. It seems odd to be thinking about it when we're in the middle of something and we don't know how it's going to end.'

Les laughs. 'He hides his grog under that old rowing boat, out where we park the cars. Clarry never mows the grass too close so it looks like it hasn't been disturbed in years. But if you rock the boat over on one side and put your hand under, there's all the sherry and whisky you could ask for. Apparently he felt the need for a drop tonight.'

The two of them are very close; an unusual combination: 'A drop?' They roar laughing, they can't

stop, until they hear Mrs Kracke calling down the stairs. ‘What is it boys? Have you seen him?’

Les is quick. ‘No, Mrs K. Just a joke I heard at work today. Listen, we’re going to give you a hand. You grab that torch you had a minute ago and I’ll get another, and we’ll search the garden!’ Mrs K is grateful and the boys are soon with her, searching, while Beryl holds the fort, as Mrs K puts it, meaning she stays in the kitchen, the centre of the house. After a minute or two they come on Clarry’s lantern at the front gate, which he is apparently ‘fixing’, for he has a screwdriver in hand and is doing something to the screws that hold its hinges. ‘Must keep everything ship-shape!’ he tells them. ‘Which reminds me. Did you ever hear this one?’ He starts up again. ‘Twas on the good ship Venus/By Christ you should’ve seen us ...’

Mrs K puts a hand over his mouth. ‘Clarry Kracke, I won’t have you reciting that awful poem in my hearing. Come inside at once! You can have a cup of tea and then you must go to bed and sleep off whatever it is you’ve been drinking. Take his arm Trevor, and Les, and help him in!’

That would seem to be the end of the story, but having reached this point I find that things have been left out all over the place which I must, must add now, before I end. I’ve given you a wrong impression, entirely, of what it was like to live at Reardon’s Folly, all those years ago.

Trevor's friendship with the plumbers is something that wouldn't have happened in a city, where people move among their own kind. In the town where Trevor and the plumbers are working, the numbers are small, and people are forced to come to terms with those they'd rather avoid. All sorts of lines and distinctions have to be drawn, so that in the end nobody can understand why some are thought superior to others; the social lines are really divisions in the psyche of people who need to make some sort of peace with themselves and do it by accepting or rejecting others. Trevor finds that in the whole town there are perhaps two people he can talk with about music, three or four who don't turn off if he mentions Shakespeare, and so on. Teachers are bastions of a culture that's to greater or lesser extent distanced from its public, and people don't like them very much. They're not normal to the majority, so they begin to feel strange to themselves. Trevor talks about music and books with Richard, the town's librarian, but Richard makes him uncomfortable too, because Richard likes hardly any of the people Trevor mixes with, so that Richard has the effect, on Trevor, of making him feel uncomfortable with people he likes simply because Richard's uncomfortable with them. The place is too small, the two of them say to each other, forced into each other's company when what they want is to be released into a broad and sympathetic culture which doesn't exist in the town where their lives have been cast.

Even when they agree, they disagree; it's most annoying. Trevor plays Richard the recordings he's collected of Carl Nielsen's music, the Dane who drew his culture together on either side of the First World War. Trevor talks at length about his symphonies as the backbone of his work, with other works standing in relationship to this spine, as it were. Richard infuriates his friend by ignoring this. He asks for, and they play, the tenor song, *So Bitter Was My Heart*. It's a song that Trevor loves, but Richard maddens him by saying, 'I think he expressed his vision better in that one piece than he did in the rest of his work.' Red rag to a bull! Trevor swallows his rage; at least somebody likes the song!

Trevor's passionate about music, and it's something that almost nobody shares with him. Teresa likes some of the lighter, lesser things he plays, but music's not vital to her as it is to him. The first time he has dinner with her family, soon after they arrive in the town, she plays a Spanish guitar piece, a withdrawn, rippling meditation of some sort, looking back on an unexplained experience. Teresa smiles tenderly on him as he listens to this piece which means something to her which she doesn't want to tell him. She's attached the music to something that's happened to her, he senses, and wonders if it's to do with the conception or birth of one of her children: he's not sure, and knows he'll never know.

Some people would push ahead with questions at such a moment, but this isn't Trevor's way. As a young

man he's simply too awkward to ask probing questions, and as an old man he doesn't trust them, because a question implies the answer it requires: if you ask A, you get B; if you ask C, you get D.

And so on.

At Kracke Mansion, at Reardon's Folly, snatches of Schubert can be heard night and day. Sometimes Madam's at the piano in the lounge, sometimes Mrs K is trying things out in the kitchen. Beryl does more of the cooking because Eva's distracted. Then the day dawns. Mrs K tells Trevor, over breakfast, that Beryl will be cooking the roast lamb that night, because Clarry's driving her to Sale. And when Trevor gets home from work, Clarry's in a suit, and new hat, looking better than Trevor's ever seen him. He speaks to his wife respectfully, lists the things she's told him to make sure they take, and they agree that everything's in the car. 'The Trout!' says Clarry, with a smile. 'We couldn't leave that little fella out!' Mrs K says, 'I know it off by heart, Clarry, we probably could!' He pats her arm. 'Come on Eva, into the car. Off we go!'

Beryl looks at Trevor when the owners of the house are gone. 'He's very good to her, isn't he?'

'One of nature's gentlemen,' Trevor says. He starts to add, 'I don't think I'll ever be like that ...' when Beryl jumps in. 'I know I'll never find anybody to be as nice to me as he is to her.' They look at each other, something tender, and huge, flooding out of her, something tender, and respectful, rising in him. 'You

might be surprised, Beryl,' Trevor says. 'If we get what we deserve, as people say, you might do very well.'

Trevor's begun to feel that his liaison with Teresa can't go on forever, and is beginning to think about an end. If she can draw his strength and his tenderness into her enjoyment, as she does, then shouldn't he be making this permanent, and if he can't do this, as he can't with someone who's married, then with someone else? The truth is that she's developed him, and to his amazement, he's ready to do as much for someone else. Or something of that sort. And yet he doesn't want a break. He decides to let circumstances decide. Her husband might get another job, he might be transferred, perhaps if Les is right and he's to be shipped out of Kracke Mansion ... that might be the time.

Time is suspended.

But not for long. Clarry's quality clothes have been replaced by his overalls and battered felt when Trevor comes into the kitchen for breakfast. Mrs K has her back to the stove, warming herself. Trevor looks at her, and she looks at him, with amusement, humility and foolishness in her eyes.

'How did it go, Mrs K?'

'Oh Trevor, you've no idea what I did!'

He has to find a way. 'Was Madam happy, after all the work you did together?'

'Well,' she says, 'Madam gave me a mixed report.'

'Some good, some bad?'

‘She did say, that if I want to enter again next year, she’s prepared to coach me. She believes in me, she said, even after what I did ...’

There’s no avoiding it: ‘Something went wrong?’

‘I was so nervous, I felt this strain in my throat. I sang the whole of the first song a semitone high.’ Her eyes expect condemnation, but Trevor says, ‘It’s an easy mistake to make,’ and Clarry, listening, says, ‘It didn’t sound wrong to me. It sounded very good. Remarkably good,’ he says. ‘I was proud of you.’

Beryl, who is also there, catches Trevor’s eye; he’s starting to feel they know each other. Trevor tries to think of something to say. ‘They say if you fall off a horse you should get straight back on.’ Clarry, he sees, is waiting for his wife’s answer.

‘That’s very nice of you, Trevor, and I know I should think for a while, but I’ve made up my mind. I won’t sing again. I love working on my music, but there were so many people there last night who were so much better than I’ll ever be that I need to find something else.’

There’s a silence, and they know it’s final. Mrs K says, ‘You’ve been very supportive, Trevor, what would you like for dinner tonight?’ He’s amazed; she never asks Clarry, or anybody. ‘Mrs K, whatever pleases you will certainly please me, you know that.’ She beams. ‘Clarry’s going to catch some fish. He’s having a day off work today, and we’re going out in his boat!’

When Trevor gets home that afternoon, Beryl intercepts him before he goes downstairs. ‘We’re having dinner a little later today. Clarry and Mrs K have just got home. With a big catch. Six thirty instead of six.’ Trevor nods, his thoughts somewhere else, and he’s still a little abstracted as the household – the Krackes, Beryl, the plumbers and he – assemble at the table. ‘I’ve got some in the oven, I’m steaming some, and I’m frying some,’ she announces. ‘Clarry says each fish should be cooked in the way that suits it!’ This is too solemn for any of Les’s jokes, so he, Tom and Leo drop into their seats, Mrs K serves up, and the household finds itself staring at a feast, with chips and salad in huge bowls beside the fish. Trevor says, ‘This is marvellous, Mrs K. It’s not every day we get something like this ...’

... and then the room, the air itself, presents them with another surprise. There is music, the strings of an orchestra playing gravely, and a tenor with the sort of ringing tone once described as ‘manly’. Trevor is first to realise, because it’s his music, but even he falls under the spell. As Shakespeare shows us in *The Tempest*, unexpected music is like a change of soul, or its first arrival. The Kracke household is united under the spell. Then Trevor remembers. He’d forgotten his friend Richard in the change of dinner hour, and the librarian has arrived punctually, for him, too early for his host, and, finding the room empty, has put on Nielsen. ‘So bitter was my heart’. The singer is another Dane, Axel Schiotz,

and Richard, unaware that the whole household's above him, turns the music up. High. Loud.

'So bitter was my heart,
So tired was my foot ...'

This is sung gravely, then there is a burst of energy:

'Come spring!
Come Denmark's gentle summer ...'

The strings rise with the voice, then the horns enter, like an aurora, golden as they pursue their mission of happiness, their discovery of peace ... As the second verse begins, Trevor explains:

'It's a friend of mine. We arranged to meet this evening. He's on time, you see, but we moved our dinner hour. This is a song that he likes, almost more than I do. It's Carl Nielsen, Mrs K, you've heard me talking about him ...'

The horns come in for the second time and the kitchen fills with glory. Dah, dar dar dum! Trevor realises that although he's given the Krackes and their boarders all the explanation there is, he's explained nothing, or rather, he hasn't explained anything away. The magic is still magical. Axel Schiotz, on the other side of the world from his tiny country, starts the third verse in the same solemn way, then rises to his moment with Carl Nielsen, a man who loved the people's voice in song. The horns rise and fall, lifting a room full of people all unexpecting. Trevor knows that when the song ends Richard won't play anything else, and he doesn't. Trevor eats fish with the Krackes, with Beryl

and the plumbing ‘boys’, his friends by now, who’ll soon be returning to Melbourne, then he excuses himself to go downstairs. He’ll move out of Reardon’s Folly as soon as it’s no longer Kracke Mansion, that is, when the boys finish their job. He’s offended by bringing a lover to the house, and a married woman at that. Mrs K, like everyone else, has lines drawn where she thinks she can sustain them and he’s been crossing her line. It’s more than a matter of propriety, it upsets her pride in her house and the way she runs it. It’s strange, Trevor thinks, as he stops halfway down the stairs, before he faces Richard in the now-silence of his room, I’m going to remember this house for Mrs K, not for Teresa that I’ve made love with here.

That was what the young man thought, but as you see, dear reader, the old man remembers them both, and Beryl, Clarry, the kids, Tom, Leo, Les, and most of all he remembers the young man he was, he gives thanks for some things, he shakes his head at others, and he senses that if time carried him back and put him through the same events, there isn’t much he’d be able to change.

Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)

Hallucination before departure (memoir, 2006)

Mozart (memoir, 2007)

Travers (memoir, 2007)

So bitter was my heart (memoir, 2008)

Keep going! (memoir, 2008)

Who? (memoir, 2008)

At Baldy's feet (memoir, 2008)