With these prospects and impressions, Grace Marian Thrale, fortythree years old, stood silent in a hotel doorway in her worn blue coat and looked at the cars and the stars, with

the roar of existence

in her ears. And like any great poet or tragic sovereign of antiquity, cried on her Creator and wondered how long she must remain on such an earth.

a novel of sorts

Chester Eagle

the roar of existence

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*from The Transit of Venus by Shirley Hazzard, 1980



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Gippsland's First Great Book (essay, 2015)

Emily at Preston (memoir, 2009/2015)

These fields are mine! (reflection, 2015)

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Summer

They'd leased a house overlooking the ocean. Mighty dunes lay to the north and south, flanking the outcrop on which their building stood, with its many rooms, its car spaces underneath, its socially central kitchen, and its living room almost as long as the building, glass walls and doors giving onto a balcony, and thence the sea. We shall call the man Jack and his partner Olivia, and we come upon them as he answers her question about visitors: 'Can't give you any numbers. I think I just invited everyone in sight. Everyone who asked me what we were doing over the break. I told them where we were. Are.' She sensed problems and he saw it in her face. 'We've got enough food for an army ...' he saw that he needed to go on '... and more than enough pots and pans and casseroles, and that bread-making thing. Shouldn't be any bother. Besides, they'll bring food of their own, for sure. We did, so some of them will. And ...'

He was irrepressible. The world outside looked wonderful. '... there's always the pub.' The Albion was famous for its meals, so that finished the matter. 'Eh?'

Mention of the hotel had softened her. 'Catch as catch can,' she said. 'Is that our policy?'

All he did was grin. He felt he was on top. 'Here's someone now!'

A car swept up the slope. All the doors opened at once, as if creation had sent four overlords to take charge. 'The Brambles!' Olivia called. 'Hi there! Welcome!' Out stepped Les and Lorna and ... Olivia could never remember the childrens' names: a boy and a girl, anyway, one of each, a proper family. It was what she was hoping for herself, when her time came. Jack told the arrivals to put their things on the side verandah. 'You get first choice of rooms. That's what comes of getting here first. How fast were you doing on the way down?'

'I stuck to the limit most of the time,' Les told him. 'We saw three police cars between here and Geelong.'

'Three? They were out looking for you!'

'Sure were! Makes a man drive carefully. What's this about a choice?'

Jack explained that he'd asked so many people to visit that if they all turned up at once there wouldn't be enough rooms, so he was hoping ... This stirred Les to call his family: 'Come on Lorna! Terry! May! We're picking a room to sleep in!' Terry said he'd like to have his bed on the balcony so he could go to sleep with the sound of waves in his ears. His father wasn't having that. 'Maybe on a hot night it'd be okay, but the weather's pretty changeable down here. Five minutes of a cold southerly and you'd be in bed with us!' He meant himself and Lorna and this, the idea of a 'big' boy needing to sleep with his parents, was an embarrassment; the boy didn't want it known that sleeping with his parents was a thing he still liked, occasionally at least.

The Furlinghettis were next to arrive, advancing on the beach because, having found the house empty, that was where everyone must be. Maria carried the baby and Carlo held the hand of their girl, Angelica, who told Olivia that it was her first time by the sea, and she admitted to being a little scared. Olivia invited her to make a sand castle and they had a great time, until Angelica told the no-longer stranger that she didn't feel scared any more, so they went to the water and paddled, edging out until the water came up to Angelica's knees. 'You're not scared,' Olivia told the girl, 'so next time we'll go in a bit further and see how you like that!' Maria needed to feed the baby and said she preferred to do it at the house, or at least in the car where she'd left their things, so the party left the ocean as the tide was coming in, something they confessed they didn't understand very well – 'It's something to do with the moon' – and went back to the house.

There they saw the Furlinghettis' car, an ancient Hispano-Suiza. Jack wanted to know if they'd come all the way from Melbourne in that, and of course they had, though Carlo admitted that the very last slope, the run up to the house, had tested the venerable machine. 'Good job the house was where it was because another fifty metres and I think she might have conked out. But she made it.' And he patted the car that he loved. 'Now she's having a rest.' Maria pointed out to the gathering, 'He thinks his car's a lady. I ought to be jealous but it's not going to have a baby, or I don't think it can!' She sat in the seat next to the driver's seat, the centre of all attention, to feed her

little one, with an admirable certainty that a woman's body beat any machine. Olivia, thinking it her duty to support the feeding mother, slipped along the pencil-thin car. 'All these seats! It's a car for the extended family!' and Maria, without lessening her absorption in her child, said, 'Except when it rains. The thing's supposed to have a roof but it's such a problem getting it up, we mostly leave it in the garage,' and when Olivia asked if that was where the roof was now, Maria nodded, laughing loudly. 'We've taken a gamble. No rain either way, and a sheltered spot to store the car while we're here.' She studied her host. 'If that's okay?'

'Plenty of room under the house. Plenty of everything. Jack and I were talking about food a while ago. Plenty of it!'

'And wine? Have you got plenty of that? Mind you, I'm not supposed to be drinking while I'm feeding George.' She smiled. 'He's christened Giorgio, but I call him in the Aussie way. He can change when he goes to Italy.'

'Do you want to bring him up Italian?' Olivia was interested.

Maria shook her head. 'Here's good enough for me. It'll be good enough for him. If it's not, he'll just have to find somewhere else!'

The woman with no children considered the woman with two. 'He'll just have to ...' She thought it amazing. You made your children and they re-made you. A mother was a different species from a single woman; children made a mother far more than marriage did. They were the life-changers ...

'If my son went to another country I'd have to go there too. Or that's what I think.'

Maria was firm. 'They want to get away from us. Especially boys. Mothers are only aprons. If we want to keep control we have to be more subtle than that!'

Olivia wasn't sure how far she wanted this to go. 'When you've finished feeding him, get Carlo to put the car under the house. Come inside and we'll talk about what we're going to do. And you've got to choose your room yet, there's still a choice.'

The house was leased to them by its second owner. The first chose the position for its prominence, had no idea of working with architects, and dismissed two of them because, he said, they wouldn't listen. They'd been relieved to go. The local builder who followed had his ways with clients. He showed them drawings of what he intended to do and told owners that this was what they'd told him. He was pleased to be given a multi-bedroom house to build, and he did it with panache. In a way it was a statement of his own life, lived with ignorant skills, a shortage of brainpower and a dose of exhibitionism. The owner loved it, lived in it about two weeks a year, then lost interest when something far more flamboyant was erected five hundred metres further south, the most eye-catching monster on the coast. The owner gave the earlier house to an agent and asked him to keep it full for as much of the year as he could.

Jack said it suited them because they could have as many of their friends for as much of the summer as they liked, and Olivia, as we have seen, was accepting of this as she was of this pre-infant period in her life. She knew it wouldn't go on long, so she did nothing to bring it to an end. Why bother? She'd look back one day and feel nostalgic for something which had never been truly hers – a good enough reason to be nostalgic, we may suppose.

This puts in front of us the question whether our feelings, even the things we say with confidence, are innate or merely the colours, the pastel shades of a period coming into our minds according to our place in the endless transition of our life and times – if you will excuse the cliché, which I use because clichés are often the truest things we can say. Who lives a life without cliché?

Other friends or near-friends arrived over the next few days, filling the house until it could hold no more, and could only accept the last of the visitors, the Bartletts, because the first arrivals, the Brambles, had gone home to receive guests of their own, down from Sydney and up from Hobart.

The silly season!

The coast was ready to be explored, as was the hinterland. Olivia was the one who came closest to understanding the bush behind them. The things they saw on their walks grew under the influence of the sea. She wished she'd brought her guide books because she knew that some plants were localised near the water; a couple of hundred metres inland they disappeared from the scrub that rolled across the

country for miles, changing as it went. Eloquence was a matter of rich, deep soils, while other bits of bushland were scrawny. What grew was indicative, expressive, of what was underfoot. Tall trees, deep soil – and so on. Olivia knew this instinctively but could never explain it to the others, who simply said, 'Nice trees' or 'Not much of a place for a picnic.' Decades later, when her personality had been tested by the children she brought into the world, Olivia could pronounce with certainty on the character of places but in the period we have chosen for this book, she couldn't: it was as simple as that.

She felt her immaturity keenly, yet was aware that most of the others were only confident because they were blind to their own ignorance. They talked, and it was not lost on her that when they spoke loudly, they were at their emptiest. Each of them knew a number of things very well, but these rarely came into general conversation. They only emerged when things were quiet. Jack enjoyed a crowd. The house filling up, the long breakfast table needing another chair, were meat and drink to him. She likened him to a gong. If he couldn't hear his own reverberations, he wasn't functioning, or if he was, he didn't know it. Olivia blamed this on Jack being a man, but wasn't certain whether she wasn't the same herself. She wished that the household included people older than her contemporaries but it didn't. Some of their guests were into parenting but not so deeply yet that they were radically different. The youth of these people still lingered, and it was limiting. As guests, they were aware of their obligation to Jack, because their invitations had come from him but Olivia, despite her obvious closeness with her husband, was largely unknown to them, something the women put down to her not having children yet. If questioned about this, she might say, 'When I'm ready, it doesn't feel right for me yet,' and they were left with the feeling that she was delaying motherhood until she had become something, or reached some level, that they couldn't put a name to. Mystery, holding oneself in reserve, was not a part of their lives – or not that they knew – so they suspected her of ... lacking loyalty, they might have said.

She, in her turn, was approaching the judgement that they were shallow, so, such a thought being unthinkable in their circles, she had moments of disturbance which she kept to herself, and her friends,

in sensing this, were uncomfortable too. How could you know what your friends were like if they couldn't be entirely natural with you?

So the walks, the trips to the beach, the shopping at the local store, or the supermarket twenty kilometres away, the discovery of good picnic spots, and the picnics they had, sitting beside a fire many times the size of the aboriginal peoples' fires, all had a frenetic edge because none of them knew how to calm themselves. Their alternative, their substitute, especially for the children, was to get tired.

Olivia managed breakfast for the first couple of days, with a scattering of children poking tentatively into the cooking and serving space. Her morning activities at the cooking bench, her distribution of cereals and milk, were the only expression of routine in the house of what were for the children limitless rooms. For each of them there were more rooms, and more people, than ever there were at home. There was also a feeling that even though there were adults aplenty, nobody in particular was in charge. Rules might be enforced at home, but when everyone was on holiday, only the ocean had authority. You might add tides to that, and perhaps the currents that local people warned them about, without ever making it quite clear how you would know when and where the currents might be running. The children were more afraid of sharks, though no attacks had been recorded in the bay that their house overlooked. The ocean, though, would be there, endlessly in motion, except for those magical times when the tide was turning, and it lay listless, only a few ripples as evidence that it was thinking about doing something, as the children were doing all the time. How could you be bored by the sea?

It occurred to Olivia, one morning as she accompanied the children to the beach, issuing warnings and taking note of what each was wearing, that children knew naturally what to do about water and few adults, parents, added anything to what they'd learned when young. It cast a light on their holiday. When you encountered the sea as a child, it was overwhelming. You came back to it when you were grown up, but unless you were a sailor, you hadn't let the sea take part in your growth, so you scarcely recognised those fears felt in earlier years, although, by presenting you with challenges, they had led to your enjoyment. You could still enjoy the beach as an adult, but it was

as a form of reminiscence, so you did the old things over again. Pick up shells. Build sand castles. Put up a sun umbrella and sleep. Stare at the horizon for ships or seagulls – there wasn't much to do.

Except eat. Meal times were when everybody was social; children rushed through the kitchen, hoping to be given something to eat, and the adults gathered, wanting, perhaps to be useful - which meant that somebody had to take charge – or at least to appear so. Men who were otherwise useless could peel potatos and chop them up for chips. This was when Don Trevorrow surprised the household. An austere barrister, he did little at home, but something in him found itself when he saw the widespread kitchen of their hired home. He took over. He made inquiries and found that there was a farmers' market every second Sunday, and next Sunday was the second. He ordained that no less than three vehicles should be there to carry home whatever he purchased, and he studied the stalls, deep in thought, before going around again, and buying heaps! When Tessa protested that he couldn't possibly blend this with that, he told her, 'That's lunch on Tuesday! This is Thursday dinner!' She noticed that when he reached the stalls manned by two local fishermen, he paused, counting. How many kids would that one feed? How many adults were there in the house, come to think of it, each wanting, hoping for, a fish, or three, to be entirely theirs! Two bags of potatos went into the station wagons, causing Tessa to say to her husband – destined for eminence one day? - 'Don?' With no more than a whimsical smile as response, he started fingering tomatos, and she realised that his mind was on a salad path. She pointed out a gipsy-looking lady selling jars and bottles of this and that, and he pulled out a roll of notes to pay for capers and pickled onions from Germany. Then he dashed off and when he came back, he said, 'I was looking for something from Russia, but there's nothing here!' This caused Tessa to remind him that they were at a local farmers' market, so wasn't he casting his net a bit wide if he expected ...

He was. 'You know what a lazy bugger I am at home, darling. I wanted to do a few special things, this coming week, so we'd never forget this holiday we're having.'

She had a sudden feeling that he - whatever plans or intentions she might have – had no expectation of coming back. This would be a first,

last and only holiday by the sea. She wanted to cry. She cried. 'Onions!' he said. 'You've reminded me!' and Tessa, who'd been full of love and admiration a moment before, was furious with her husband! He was, we must suppose, dimly aware that he'd done something wrong, but then, like most men of his profession, he preferred to cast his mind over those many things he'd done right. Orders were given and things in considerable quantities were transferred to the cars. He checked them as a prelude to one last circuit of the market, came back, and offered the keys of their car to his wife. 'Feel up to driving, darling?'

The following day was windy, and they talked about bushfires, until the wind turned southerly and they talked about the Antarctic. Amundsen, first to the Pole. Scott, Mawson, the photos of Frank Hurley. Ships embedded in ice. Rowing boats setting off to get help. Armies of penguins. The way everything took its place in the food chain, dependent on krill at the bottom. Humans at the top, and the question of whether any of the polar explorers had ever eaten another human. There were children everywhere so these conversations couldn't be censored. Kids got to know their parents better because they talked with other adults all the time. Parents got to know their own children better because they saw them with other kids. Childhood was as endless as the afternoons on the beach, when the sun eventually lowered, and Don Trevorrow, in the kitchen he'd commandeered, started to ask if there was anybody who wouldn't eat whatever he had in mind to prepare. 'I want the kids here the moment I'm ready to serve,' he'd announce, 'and not a minute before. I don't want them under my feet while I'm concentrating.' Olivia and Tessa thought the best way to handle this was to estimate the time when Don would be ready, get the children back from the beach half an hour before, get them to wash, change if they needed to, and then to play a game in the lounge. Scrabble, Monopoly, something they could stand up from when Don called, and return to later. Sometimes the games they were playing sat on tables on the balcony, apparently playing themselves, the empty chairs accumulating paper money, the dictionaries like annoying little nerds ready to pronounce on how words were spelt. Coming on an interrupted Scrabble game, Olivia felt it was as if knowledge was loose in the world, ready to manipulate humans into needing it. Having no children as yet, she was protected from these games, but she'd have them one day, little babies that wouldn't be able to play, but when they reached the stage of needing Monopoly, she'd have been returned to this puzzling moment when the empty chairs, with money, houses and hotels in front of them, seemed almost as human as people.

Don Trevorrow wanted everyone to eat as if they were hungry. If people wanted to talk, it showed they weren't appreciative. If conversations, as opposed to scattered remarks, started, as of course they did, he would break in with an offer of second helpings, and he even threatened – admittedly, only once! – to put people on extra dishwashing duties if they talked too much when there was still food to consume. This was over-stepping the mark, but the others humoured him because if they didn't one of them would have to take over the cooking and they weren't silly enough to do that! He was asked if he intended to repeat his purchasing at the farmers' market in two Sundays time, but he said that he and Tessa would be gone by then. Gone the day before, first thing in the morning. If anyone was staying longer, it would be up to them to buy the supplies. Jack looked quietly at Olivia. She looked back at her husband, knowing what he was asking her.

'We got here on the Wednesday,' Jack said. 'We've got a three week lease. Ending on the Wednesday after you're going. There's a few people I asked that haven't turned up yet, but maybe they won't arrive at all. They just said they'd see. You got anyone, love?' Olivia shook her head. The question for the others was would there be anyone to keep their hosts company in those last days. Don's cooking was going to be a hard act to follow. Maybe Jack and Olivia wouldn't want to be left on their own. Maybe they'd feel lonely when all the others left and they'd leave early too? Jack's ideal was for everyone to get so caught up in holiday-making that they made phone calls extending their stay by the seaside and then, after a few hours of hectic, madcap packing, they all left at once!

When he told Olivia this she was amused. All those cars, full of kids and cases, passing and re-passing on the way back to Geelong, with laughing and waving as they rushed by each other, changing lanes, but gradually calming down on the Melbourne road, when the thought of their normal lives would settle them, leaving them tired, empty, but ready, after a couple of long sleeps, for the year ahead. 'I suppose we come down here to flush ourselves out, get over our worries ...' She was a great believer, Olivia, in self-induced good health. People made themselves sick, or they couldn't make themselves better when they happened to get sick, because ...

It was all a bit of a mystery. People liked to think they were brought down by germs and infections, but Olivia's explanation of illness was that it was something you did to yourself by not managing yourself, your diet, your working life in ways that kept you well. To be well, you had to live well, and that meant healthily, not expensively. If the kids wanted ice creams when they were near the shop, the way to control it was not to refuse them but to get the shopping done when they were at the beach, playing healthy games, and to take them on excursions into the bush looking for things right up till the time when they rushed back for the lunch Don put on the table. It wasn't hard to be healthy when you were away from home.

She looked at the weather all the time, something she did rarely in the city. It mattered. More than that, it was eloquent. She couldn't have told you what it was saying but it was a presence, controlling you, with a mind of its own: why else were forecasters at the Bureau daily predicting what it was going to do and what direction it -it – was coming from? There was a day when Jack came into the dining area to tell the mothers to get the kids to the beach early because it was going to be a scorcher, and it'd be too hot anywhere except the under-the-house area for games. The women smothered the kids in creams, trekked them to the water's edge and watched from a canvas marquee that Carlo Furlinghetti had found in the garage and erected at the bottom of a dune. Not all the women liked the beach – sand was uncontrollable! – so the marquee, which stayed there day and night, became a well-used space. Newspapers were read in it, romances, and serious books too, because holiday time included whole days when, with any luck and a bit of management of partners, some serious reading could be done, books exchanged, and discussions held. Donna Williamson had started Christina Stead's Seven Poor Men of Sydney and Madeline Quirk was well into The Dream of the Red Mansion, the Chinese classic. 'I'm not sure how much of this I'm understanding,' she told Donna, 'there's so many characters and the names are unfamiliar, but it's good to read about a world where you don't know what's going to happen. It's much harder to be surprised when you know the culture.' Jack used to say to Olivia that he couldn't understand how these women — as he called them — could read about ancient China or Europe between the wars when they were on a beach in Victoria. 'They're in the best country in the world and they want to be somewhere else!'

Olivia tried to explain that reading took your imagination to places it had never been and you might very well want to read a book set in a foreign place as a way of getting yourself there. You might encounter lions and tigers and then come safely back to yourself ...

'... in a tent, on a beautiful beach.' Her smile told him this was a good thing to do, and he could see her point without – this was disquieting, for him – believing for one moment that she believed it herself. What was her life then? One whole, long period of waiting? And then the realisation came: it was. It hit him as hard as it was sudden. They'd been married two and a half years, they'd done – he would have said – all sorts of things, and yet she was still waiting. She wanted her married life to begin, and that meant ...

... having children, like the Furlinghettis, and Les and Lorna Bramble, who'd gone home early. Suddenly Jack needed to shout. 'Hang on! These people haven't got anything that I haven't got!' It occurred to him that they did. Don Trevorrow who had no conversation apart from the law, had to busy himself with cooking, and those heavyweight readers, Donna and Madeline, needed to bury themselves in places he hadn't been to and didn't want to, just to amuse their imaginations. One of them had brought a copy of the Herald-Sun home last Sunday, the day of the market, and left it where she knew he'd find it. It was a trap! So he'd taken it to the downstairs toilet which was the convenient one when you were going to the beach or coming back. That way the whole party would know what he thought, not only of the paper but also of the idea that it was suitable for him!

Stuff them for their arrogance. He didn't talk, he didn't think, the same way they did, but that didn't mean that he couldn't match them in mind. Actually, he saw himself as being way ahead. It was only a matter of making them see how far they lagged behind ... It occurred to him that the day was getting seriously warm. 'How much longer are you going to let the kids stay down here?'

Olivia was ready. 'As soon as they start to hang around the tent, that'll be the sign. We'll go up, they can have a bit of fruit and ice cream, that's all they'll eat in the middle of the day, then games inside, and after that, I'll be suggesting a bit of a lie down ...'

Jack saw the plan. 'And they'll sleep through the hottest part of the day! That the idea?' He had it. 'It won't only be the kids that sleep, that's for sure!'

And so it was. Energies had petered out by late morning, the little party Don had cutting up fruit hardly spoke to each other, bowls were filled and emptied, and the washing up was done in next to silence. The children were told not to venture into the sun without a hat. For the most part they did what they were told. 'We'll have a barbecue on the balcony when the sun goes down,' Don told them. 'This afternoon we take it easy. Very easy,' he added, a euphemism for sleep. Then the household began to manage itself in the way of an institution with nobody in charge. Donna Williamson looked at the world through the glass of the sitting room. 'Tide's still coming in. Quite a big one, by the look of it.' Madeleine Quirk, from a sofa where she thought she might spend the burning hours of the day, murmured that the incoming tide would reach its high point, and settle, at about half past four. She could only have got this from one of the newspapers she affected to despise, and left in the downstairs toilet for Jack Page. That gentleman, getting ready for a lie-down but unwilling to acknowledge it, stirred himself to check on the outside of the house, which meant, of course, going out in the sun, which everyone agreed was to be avoided. 'Just going to check the horizon,' he said. 'Traces of smoke. We don't want any trouble blowing up later when some of us might be having a snooze.'

This meant himself, it meant all of them. They wanted to be reassured, they wanted to slip off duty, as it were, so they could weaken before the power of the day. By one subterfuge or another they

found excuses to lie down. Olivia delegated Jack to check the broken awning that was deflecting light into Rex and Nancy Naughtins' room. A squabble broke out between the Furlinghettis' children, but Maria managed to calm it while Carlo told his little ones, 'Shoooosh darlings, people are trying to sleep!'

The sun had its eye on the sea. Each made its assertion in the same measured way. The tide, coming in, splashed a few bathers on the beach. They slipped away, crossing the road, then disappearing. Traffic dwindled till there was hardly any in the heat of day. In the house on the hill, doors were closed. Don Trevorrow checked everything he would need for his barbecue at sundown, then went to his room, where Tessa was already asleep. 'Got everything I want,' he told her. 'All I have to do is be fully awake by then, not drowsy like I am now.' She of course said nothing, but it was enough for Don to have said what he wanted to say. Only in court did he care if he was being listened to, because only in court did he need to persuade. In daily, domestic conversation with Tessa, or anyone else, he was, we might say, emitting progress reports; what people did with them was of little concern to Don. 'You're asleep old girl,' he told the wife beside him, then he pulled off his shoes and stretched out beside her.

On the balcony, the Svendsens, Rory and Ruth, were the last to succumb, having no door to close. Rory said, of the house, 'What a position,' and Ruth murmured. It was. Something on the horizon made her look again. Was it a ship? A wave? What else could it be? She didn't bother herself. A gull hovered outside, then curved away towards the beach. 'Kids are having a great time,' she murmured, causing Rory to chuckle. 'They're all asleep!' 'Well that's a good time, isn't it?' she said in the contrary way of partners with nothing to say. 'Can you tell the time by the sun?' he said, a city man through and through. Ruth glanced at her watch. 'No,' Rory said. 'I mean ... oh you know what I mean.' He didn't bother to emphasize. He stretched himself out on a banana lounge, shuffled cushions, then put his head back in the way that his wife, who found sleep harder to come by, envied.

But not today. Within a couple of minutes she too was in what adults liked to call 'the land of Nod' when there were children to be humoured. The sun ruled the sky so firmly that any clouds drifting

about clung to a line of getaway: the horizon kept its distance, though strangely, the edge of the sea seemed closer than the edge of the sky. Birds kept to the air, not diving within sight of the house, which wasn't looking anyway, because it was occupied with nursing those who trusted it to keep them safe. If the sea had any ruler it could only be the moon, governing its tidal falls and – now – its rise. The moon was nowhere to be seen, except in the movement of the waters it controlled. There was a high water mark somewhere, perhaps a step or two before, or maybe beyond, the marquee which Jack Page and Les Bramble had erected. Neither of them had thought about where they were putting it. It was low tide at the time, though they didn't realise, and the water looked a long way away. Now Les, back in Melbourne, was at work, if you accepted that what a racing broadcaster did could be called work. 'I knew a bloke once,' he liked to say, 'a man up in Horsham. Kept a pub. Called himself a drunks' labourer! Not a bad name, I thought, then I started to wonder what I was.' He would smile at the company before concluding. 'I decided I was a bookies' labourer, and a punters' labourer too. The only trouble is,' he would announce benevolently, 'I never had any money on the gee-gees, so I never got any of the pay that labourers get. Makes a man wonder if he's in the wrong game.'

This was Les in the process of self-examination: shallow enough. His wife Lorna would listen to his ramblings and say, 'Never gets to the bottom of anything, my Les. I think he's worried about what he might find. That right, darling?'

Les, a man who accepted that scripts had to be stuck to, would answer, 'Whatever you say, Lorna. I've never known you to be wrong.'

The Brambles were back in Melbourne by now, and the household was asleep. Jack Page woke at some stage of the afternoon, heard nothing, sipped from a glass by his bed, and reverted to his pillow. Minutes later, his wife woke too, and feeling that the silence required exploration, she got up, and moved through the house, nothing on her feet. She'd never noticed how many doors the place had, until now, when most of them were closed. Taking the line of least resistance, she explored. It seemed strange to see toys, and games, without hearing voices. Things for their barbecue that night were already waiting

where Don could pick them up. How efficient he was, she thought, and how immature. For a moment she pitied Tessa: would she ever be able to make that man share a child? She knew she'd have no problem with Jack; he made manly noises as often as Don, but it was only bluster, and he was ready for the change that would take place in her – or she thought he was.

No, it was more than that. He was hers to control, and they knew it. That was probably why she was so uncertain in finding her way forward. She was responsible for two and maybe three or four, when they came. It was she, Olivia, who was searching, just as she was exploring now, while he lay on their bed. Exploring what? The house was known to her by now. The afternoon? Where was the unknown in that?

Where indeed? Ever so quietly, pushing doors tenderly, almost, to ensure there were no squeaks or bangs, she made her way to the balcony, where the Svendsens lay, Ruth and Rory. She had a feeling that their sleep was shallower than that of those shut within. The power of the afternoon enveloped them: she could feel it grasping her, too, as she edged towards the balcony. Rory, with his head back, lay on the banana lounge while Ruth, for some reason, had taken the cushions off the sofa and spread them on the floor as a form of mattress. Why, Olivia wondered, and of course there was no answer beyond the simple 'she had'. Olivia looked at what she felt was the carving of Ruth's features, sharper than she'd noticed before she'd seen them in sleep. Features, faces, told you so much about a personality, but it was strange to feel that that was still true even though the face was at rest, making the personality available for consideration separately from the need to interact. It was as if Olivia was a thief, stealing the opportunity to examine the inner life of someone without needing permission.

Looking at the two of them, Olivia had a feeling that Ruth, in other circumstances, or with another man, might be both beautiful and capable of surprises, but the man she'd chosen to be with, Rory, reduced her to the problematic level where he carried out his schemes; this meant that she was protective of him and this involved forming judgements of the world as it affected her partner's plans. Looking at Ruth, Olivia realised how soft she was with herself, how un-punitive,

how un-judgemental. All she wanted to do was cause happiness to happen, although she couldn't even entertain the thought without hearing Jack in her mind: 'Sounds simple, darling, but simple things are often the hardest to achieve!'

Why did Jack say that? He must have heard someone say it, and liked the idea, because it didn't emerge naturally from the inner workings she knew well. Jack set himself simple goals, and achieved them. This made him pleased with himself in a way that wasn't offensive to others. Normally anyone and everyone felt included in his pleasure, as they were included in his invitations to the house he'd rented. They were pleased to be asked, and they came. Olivia studied the sleeping Rory. She thought he was shallower than Jack, but she didn't know. She was a part of Jack and she could look at Rory, or any of the others, sleeping on this sunny afternoon, and see them apart from everyone: solely themselves. Was this a good way to find out what people were like, or inaccurate because a distortion? If you separated one person from others in order to know what they were, weren't you killing the very part you wanted to grasp, and feel, and understand?

This idea making her uneasy, she considered the afternoon. The first thought that came into her head was that delicacy was strength. Was this applicable to her, or to the world - the sun, the sea? She studied them both. The sun appeared to be floating. It felt both higher, and closer, than it had an hour ago, when she'd drifted off to sleep. Its grip was absolute. The only resistance it tolerated was the casting of shadows, and they were everywhere, on land, where trees and bushes, houses and outbuildings stood. It gave Olivia the feeling that it hadn't moved, although she knew it had. How could this be? She realised the answer at the moment the question formed, and was pleased. Questions and answers belonged together. They were a form of marriage, or was it the other way around? 'The middle of the afternoon', people said, but what they meant by the words was that the sun was dominant, even domineering, though it was out of its range to bluster. Feeling the dominance – and how could one not? - caused people to say that it was mid-afternoon, but in fact it was just as true, just as applicable, at any time of the afternoon until the horizon began to claim the descending sun.

That was hours away. The sun was still travelling. Even time itself was something inferred from the movement of the sun. Time and space were coordinates of thought and the sun lived easily in them both. And the water, Bass Strait, the mighty oceans that it joined, was as powerfully active as the sun which stood apart to affect it. These things are beyond us, Olivia thought, and that's why we revere them, and can be scared by them too. The sleeping Ruth and Rory seemed ever so vulnerable, causing Olivia to feel protective. Looking at them was taking advantage. She took one last glance at sun and sea – the statuesque, immobile afternoon – and slipped silently through the house, back to the bed she and Jack had chosen.

He'd rolled onto her side. What a nuisance! There wasn't really enough room on either side of him. Could she shift him without waking him? She tried. No. 'What're you doing to me?' he murmured, his body resentful, his mind still asleep. 'You've pushed into my half,' she said, smiling. He was manageable enough, most of the time. 'Your half?' his mouth said. 'What's that mean?' But he moved. He rolled to his right, leaving space on her side of the bed. 'Thanks Jack,' she said. 'I love you darling.' He appeared to have heard, but said no more, and was soon asleep. Olivia slept too, but it took a little longer; her journey to the balcony and back seemed immeasurably long, or deep, in mind, and she hadn't had leisure yet to work out why this was so.

The barbecue, surprisingly, went well. In surrendering to the long afternoon, they were admitting there were things their well-defended urban personalities couldn't deal with, and a hot day was one of them. Nobody was particularly hungry, or so they said, but Don tempted them with dainty things cooked swiftly. The heat had gone out of the day by then, and there was a light breeze, straight from the sea, as they observed. 'We're going down to the water a bit later,' Jack told the group. 'No swimming. We're all full of food! But we can sit on the beach and soak in the mood so we've got things to tell our friends about. And we'll take a basket down with a drink or two!'

This they did, half an hour after Don's last offerings had failed to draw any attention. 'If you don't eat it now you'll be getting it heated up for breakfast, you realise!' Don told them, but with no result. The beach

was the attraction as the light began to fade. The holiday party fell silent before they crossed the road. Jack led them past the marquee to a spot halfway to the water. Someone asked him, 'Is the tide coming in, or still going out?' and Jack didn't know. The party had rugs for those who preferred them to the sand, still warm from the day, but cooling. Jack's 'basket' had become several, and a couple of portable car-fridges for fruit juice, beer and wine. There were more mugs and glasses than people. Drinks were poured and handed around. 'New Year's over, but we'll drink to it,' Jack announced, and they did. They began to ask each other about the old year, and plans for the new. Conversations take time to find direction. Some of the group were good at getting started, some relied on wine and beer. The children helped because they began to count the stars as they appeared, and within a few minutes of their arrival the sky was both black and glittering in a way that urban people rarely see. 'What a night!' said Donna Williamson, and her friend Madeleine whispered to her, 'In such a night as this ...', and the two of them laughed. Maria Furlinghetti, cuddling her baby, wanted to know why they were laughing. 'It's Shakespeare,' Madeleine said. 'A Midsummer Night's Dream ... no, hang on, ah ...' 'The Merchant of Venice,' Donna corrected. 'Remember?' She groped for a moment, and then the words came.

The moon shines bright. In such a night as this, When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees And they did make no noise, in such a night Troilus ...

She said the name with heavy emphasis, and Madeleine gave a clattering laugh, though nobody knew what the two of them were up to.

... methinks mounted the Trojan walls,

And sighed his soul towards the Grecian tents

Where Cressid lay that night.

The two of them touched hands and Madeleine said to her friend, 'It's the start of Act Five, I remember now. They've got the jew out of their minds for a minute. Who speaks next?' Donna said, 'It's Lorenzo and Jessica speaking, the lovers. She says something ...' She thought, but it wouldn't come. 'Sorry, can't remember what she says, then he goes on:

In such a night

Stood Dido with a willow in her hand

Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love

To come again to Carthage.

Madeleine broke in. 'And of course he didn't. He was gone! But Purcell and Berlioz picked him up ...'

'Picked up Dido!' Donna was impassioned and the holiday makers, who'd spent the afternoon asleep, were amazed by what had entered their moment by the sea. 'A faithless man! But he did love Dido for a while, before his plans took him away ...'

She broke off. Those around them felt her words as an accusation, and wanted her to find her way to an apology, or an admission that there was something shameful in what she'd been calling over their heads, but no such admission came, only:

'There's no moon tonight. Perhaps it's just as well.'

It was up to their husbands. 'What're you girls talking about?'

Donna spoke for the two of them. 'Talking about night, and how it makes people different. We've only been down here ten minutes, and look at us!'

Tim, her husband, said, 'Look at what, darling?'

'If I say it I'll spoil it,' she said. 'Let's give the night a go.'

Tim didn't know what this was intended to mean, so he reached into the basket for 'a stimulating drink', as he put it, and found a bottle of verdelho. 'Great stuff,' he said, unscrewing the cap. 'Very reliable. More so than chardonnay. It varies too much. If you buy by the name of the grape you don't know what you're going to get.'

So they talked about wine, and that led on to drinking, and great nights out, with hangovers here and there, and people's varied capacities for holding grog without becoming objectionable, with Randolph Quirk, Madeleine's husband – a childless couple – opening up on the subject of alcohol and intelligence, being heard to maintain that certain quantities of alcohol reduced the brain's abilities by percentages which he couldn't remember, this, of course, being attributed to what he'd drunk already ... 'so it looks like you'll have to follow us back to the house, mate, because if you try to do it by yourself you'll get lost ...'

'He might follow the road into Lorne because you can't get lost if you're on a road, you must be going somewhere': that was Rory Svendsen, rather primly for all the fantasy in what he was saying, causing Norman Bartlett, last to arrive with his family, to suggest that it might be an idea to erect some cricket netting on either side of the track so that everybody would know where they were going ...

The sound of Norman's voice reminded Jack Page that they hadn't yet worked out where the Bartletts were to sleep, but Olivia told him that she'd put the Bartletts – all five of them, because they had three kids, hadn't he noticed – into the room intended for the Svendsens, 'but they're happy on the balcony, as you saw this afternoon.' Jack was relieved. All problems were either solved or could be pushed aside till dawn. 'Can anyone tell the time by the stars?' he asked. 'Any whizzbang astronomers here?'

One of the girls said she wasn't in the whizz-bang category but at least she knew what the Southern Cross looked like, and she pointed. This was something of a relief because there were a number of the party, and not only children, who didn't know this item of national identity and were pleased to have it pointed out. 'It looks great, doesn't it?' and 'People in sailing ships must have needed that.' The next voice said, 'There's some way of knowing where south is, you can look at the pointer stars, whichever they are, and work out which way's south. But don't ask me because I don't know.'

Several people claimed that they knew how you could find your way to the south pole if you could see the stars, but then, nobody much wanted to go to the south pole, did they? They talked about crazy adventurers who crossed Antarctica on sleds, and people who trained huskies and how much they charged a polar expedition – not that any of them knew anything about it – and then they moved on to sea voyagers, round the world yachtsmen and women, until, of course, they remembered the teen-age girl who set off to circumnavigate the globe but had to come back, though nobody quite remembered what her problem was ...

At this stage the Furlinghettis' girl, Angelica, reminded the gathering that they were right beside the sea, if anyone had any ideas of going anywhere and maybe coming back again, if they survived, and she wanted to know if the adults didn't find the idea scary? 'No,' said Don Trevorrow, their chef and man of law. 'No. The sea's over there and we're up here, and nobody's going to change that. We belong on the land and that's where we are.' He spoke with the certainty and finality of the courts behind him. It took the conversation several minutes to normalise itself after his intervention. It was toys that brought about the change. Someone wanted to know what Angelica had got for Christmas – the question was actually 'What did Santa bring you?' – and she surprised them by answering in almost-adult fashion, 'Suitably chosen toys!'

They laughed and of course they needed to know who'd chosen the toys, if they were so suitable. Jack Page had a suggestion: 'You didn't have a private word with Santa beforehand, did you, Angelica? Like, you didn't slip the old boy a little list, did you?' His tone was cautious because he thought the Furlinghettis were old-fashioned and you couldn't tell what they would and wouldn't do. (Driving all that way in the Hispano-Suiza!) Randolph Quirk said he remembered waking up on Christmas morning when he was six and groping in the dark to see if Santa had left him anything. 'We were pretty poor and I somehow knew that if you had more money you got more presents. But mum and dad ...'

Donna Williamson butted in. 'You knew it was mum and dad, then? You weren't in any doubt? At six?' The gathering paused to think. When had they worked out that Santa was *really* their parents? Madeleine said she thought it was quite possible to believe in Santa Claus at the same time as you knew it was your parents who bought the presents and put them on your bed. 'Children don't see things in a clear-cut, either-or way,' she said. They know there's magic in the world. How does a plane take off? How do salmon find their way home to breed? How do birds get from one hemisphere to the place where they breed on the other side of the world? How do fish know where they are in the sea? There's mysteries all over the place and it doesn't bother them.'

People were interested in this idea and had things to say. Maria Furlinghetti told them that it was actually her father who'd heard that someone had the Hispano-Suiza for sale and he'd told his daughter and the two of them, not having money to pay for it themselves, had got the owner to put it in the Furlinghettis' garage when Carlo was interstate, and when he came home he found the much desired veteran in the place where he usually parked his modern machine. He was amazed, but also delighted, and not in the least put out when told that it was there on offer – if he wanted it. Did he ever want it! He posted a cheque that night, with a note inviting the previous owner to come around and tell him everything he knew about the car's origins and history. 'Luigi and Carlo are still the best of friends. Carlo actually lets him drive it occasionally.' Maria laughed. 'That's more than I'm allowed to do, I can tell you!'

They sat in the night, thinking of the skinny machine parked under the house where they'd be sleeping. The car was one of the family, and not only the Furlinghetti family because something about the night was making family of them all. Angelica said to her mother, 'That was a good Christmas story, mum, 'cos you didn't give daddy a gift, you gave him the chance to get the gift for himself if he wanted it.'

There was a pause, and then Carlo said to his daughter, and to everyone, 'She enabled me. She ... ah...'

Tessa Trevorrow picked up the idea: 'Empowered you. It's what wives can do for husbands if the two of them are lucky.'

'Or men can do for women too, again if they're lucky.' This was Don Trevorrow, determined to put in his bit for men, but nobody was in the mood to take it that way. Jack Page took up the words: 'Empowered. Enabled. It's good when we can do something like that. Half the time we're sticking up for our rights, or fighting for them. Or so we think.' Olivia supported him. 'Tell them about the Jacksons, Jack.'

This produced Jack's profoundest 'Hunh!' He'd have been amused if you'd told him that the snort he'd just produced was the most expressive noise he'd made since arriving. 'The Jacksons,' he said, 'were a couple we knew when we lived in Toorak ...'

Rory Svendsen broke in. 'Toorak! I never knew you lived in Toorak! It's about the last place I could imagine you, Jack.'

'Well,' that man said, 'Olivia and I lived there for a few months. These Jacksons were our neighbours and they had a tennis court and I don't think they had many friends. They also had a swimming pool and as I said, they didn't have many friends.' Rory had been listening: 'So they asked you in. Is that what you were going to say?'

'Spot on. Anyway, we had a swim with them a couple of times, and then a drink by the pool, and I never felt comfortable because I used to get the feeling that Jackson was interested in Olivia ...'

Olivia: 'He put it to you that you and he should swap partners. Louisa Jackson for me.'

This made Jack uncomfortable, even though it was what he had been trying to say. 'That's what he wanted and he didn't take it too well when I told him no.'

Madeleine Quirk, seated between Jack and Olivia, said, 'He must have been pretty thick to ask it, out in the open. Most couples form agreements with almost nothing said.'

'Agreements?' This was Randolph Quirk.

'I mean between couples. I don't mean swapping partners!' Madeleine again. She was speaking for the feeling of the group; there was in fact disgust in her voice at the thought of swapping. Even so, Donna Williamson was concerned to remember something she'd halfheard. 'Didn't Turgeney, the Russian writer, when he was living in England, didn't he live with another couple? I mean the wife shared herself between him and her husband?' Madeleine, the only one who would have had any idea, thought she'd read this somewhere, but couldn't remember, and the topic died, having done a little to make them all contented with themselves for not functioning in this way. Then Giselle, the youngest daughter of the Bartletts, asked Jenny, her mother, if tonight was Christmas and were they going to get some presents? This amused the gathering since Xmas was already ten days behind them, and even the other children found the query amusing. 'No darling,' said Jenny Bartlett, 'have you forgotten already? Don't you remember the tree we had at home? You got lots of presents. Remember?' She rattled off a generous list and her daughter remembered getting them. 'But ...'

'But what, darling?'

'Isn't Christmas supposed to be like this? Didn't the holy angels come to all the shepherds in the fields?'

'Yes. What are you getting at, darling?'

The child thought it both simple and obvious. 'The shepherds were all outside. I think they were probably sitting by a fire because it was cold. Well, we're not sitting by a fire because it's warm, but I thought we came out here to wait for something.'

Her mother was still puzzled, as was Norman, her dad. 'I don't think we're waiting for anything,' Jenny said, but her husband cast a doubt.' 'Maybe we are?'

This livened them greatly. Waiting for something?

What?

What could be going to happen? Jack Page was suddenly taken by the idea which had captured their thinking. 'The future, that's what we're waiting for. So what's going to happen? Let's all make a prediction. Something that's going to happen, and when, and who it's going to happen to. What a great idea! Let's do that! A prediction! Everyone in turn. Something that's going to happen, who and what and where. Hey! Great! We'll write down what each one says. No we won't. We'll remember. Who's going first?'

There was only one choice. It had to be Jack himself, and the rest of them told him so. 'Give us a lead, Jack. Let's hear it from you!'

Jack was pleased. He paused to create a silence and they heard the sea, little waves flopping on the sand a few metres away. They thought they heard the night as well, listening, expecting, but perhaps what they heard was the future, waiting to be called up in a form that they expected, a form which any decent future would fail to replicate. Futures are far from being under the control of even the human minds most keenly attuned.

'Jack! Jack?' They were waiting to hear what he'd say.

Jack Page was a man of considerable confidence but the intensity of their concentration found him wanting. 'Let me get my thoughts in order.' He coughed, as if wishing to call up the powers of cliché. 'What I want to see is the mass production of parts of the human body. Doctors could say to blind people, we'll put a new pair of eyes in your head and you'll be able to see. If you're deaf they'll give you a new hearing apparatus. If you've got a weak heart, they put in a new one. Just like that! New eyes, new elbows, new knees ...'

'New memory, Jack?' This was Olivia, making fun of him.

'Very good darling! That'll be one of the first things in my new world. They'll build new brain-sections and you'll be able to replace them, bit by bit, as you need. Bad memory? Part forty-four. No good at maths? Part G7. It'll all be easy.' Jack was glowing with this vision of the future world, but Norman Bartlett was sceptical.

'That's like a sign in a museum saying this is Washington's axe, except that over the years it's had two new heads and three new handles. It's not the same axe at all. If you start mucking around with people's brains you change the person. We *are* our memories, our habits, we *are* the genes we got from our parents and their parents and grandparents. It's wrong to think of ourselves – Jack!' – he spoke sharply, warning the other man that he was serious in what he was saying – 'as standalone individuals. We're not. We're part of a line. A thread, a string. A continuity interacting with everything it comes in contact with. Also, threads break. People die because they have to. The way you're talking, Jack, you could just replace bits and people would go on forever.'

He might have gone on himself but Donna Williamson broke in. 'There's an opera about this very same thing. People going on forever. *The Makropoulos Affair*. Janacek. There's a woman with this magic potion that keeps her young. Every now and again she has to invent a new name for herself and do something new because all her contemporaries have grown old ...'

Jenny Bartlett interrupted. 'Tell me about it! People who were at uni with me are growing wrinkles! Their eyelids are drooping. They're putting on weight ...'

She'd have gone on but everyone was chattering now, pitching in with whatever they wanted to say. Olivia said to her husband, 'You've stirred them up, Jack. Do you know how to quieten them down?' He shook his head. 'Tell them there's something they've all forgotten. Something they've never thought about. They'll stop and want to know what it is.' He said, 'That's up to you, darling. I don't know what you're talking about.' She gave him the look of a superior being. 'Not now. I'm speaking last. When they've all had their say.'

It seemed that this would take a while. People who'd been quiet since arrival had found their voices. The future? Anyone could talk about that! Maria Furlinghetti was telling anyone who'd listen – and that was everybody, because she was loud – that she wanted a good crystal ball, none of your secondhand rubbish, but a really good *penetrating* one because she didn't want to be all washed up when her kids grew up, she wanted to use her years of mothering to become an expert in something that hadn't been invented yet so that her kids would have to look up to her, and ask questions when they had kids themselves, instead of regarding her as some old-fashioned, washed-up-on-the-beach piece of rubbish they could disregard. 'I want to stay a jump ahead. Only question is, how do you do it? That's what I'm hoping someone can tell me!' Then she swung to face Jack. 'That's why I like your idea about body parts, Jack, it's a good one, but you're not going to be able to start a thing like that when you're forty-five or fifty, you've got to be doing it all your life. Like, right now!'

The assertion made them joyful, confused as they might be. The future? Nobody knew anything about it, but that meant everybody could have a say, and they did. Madeleine Quirk stopped displaying her musical knowledge to talk about her work as a sports psychologist. 'Have you ever wondered how it is that records keep getting broken? Seriously. We think limitations reside in the body, but they don't, they're in the mind. People said it wouldn't be possible to run a four minute mile, so guess what? It was impossible. Then they started to wonder how close they could get, and the impossible verged on the possible for a few years, and then, when runners started to get close, everybody saw that one day it would be done, so it was at least possible. And then it was done, so the barriers got moved again. Do you see what this means?'

None of them did, and half of them were talking anyway, but Madeleine went on. 'People think that a limit is a barrier, like a brick wall, but it isn't. The barrier's part of the motivational mechanisms operating inside us ...'

She went on, but her voice was lost because people noticed that Don, their chef, the barrister, had stood up and was heading towards the water. Tessa called out anxiously, 'Don? What are you doing? Don't rush away like that!' He stopped. 'Don?' she said. 'What's got into you? You can't go for a swim. It's dark, you can't see where you

are, and besides you've only just had dinner. You'll get a cramp!' Still he stayed where he'd stopped, looking away, as if he'd forgotten them and was hearing something, someone, calling him to the sea. 'Don!'

Was that Tessa, or the voice they thought they heard, pulling one of their number away?

There was confusion in the party, and an urge to do something. Jack jumped up and called, 'Stay where you are Don! Stop walking!' and then, at the people behind him, 'Tessa. Come and talk some sense into him.' She was with him in a moment, rushing towards her man. They grabbed his arms, Jack blocking his advance; he stopped, mildly enough, without resistance. What are you people getting excited about? Can't a man go and have a look?' Then he stopped, and Tessa, as she recalled the moment later, felt that some force, invisible to her, was pulling him away. She was quick enough to realise that she had a moment of advantage, and mustn't lose it. 'Come back and sit down,' she said. 'Tell us what we're doing for dinner tomorrow night.' 'Heavens above,' he said, as if it was Tessa who was being strange. 'We've barely had tonight's dinner and you're talking about tomorrow's.' But Jack was urging him by this time, and before Don quite knew what he was doing, he was back in the centre of the party, everyone making room, sitting him down, trying to think of something for him to do. Tessa was first again. 'Make a big pile of sand, Don. A back rest. You've been working hard in the kitchen. It's time to relax. Here, like me. Both hands.'

The sand where they were sitting was dry, or fairly so, and they soon had a backrest for him, and were getting him to put his head back to see if his neck was comfortable: such a fuss they made! 'Why are you making a fuss of me?' he wanted to know. 'I enjoy making dinner for you. It gives me something to do!' He thought for a moment, or rather, he detached his mind so it could present itself to them. 'What do you want for dinner tomorrow night?'

Jack and Tessa didn't want him to get away with this, but they were the two most aware of his detachment when they'd stopped him at the water's edge. The others thought that Don was coming back to normal and this should be encouraged, so they plied him with suggestions, ingredients, questions about cooking and so on. Answering brightly, he gave the impression – as no doubt he wanted to – that his walk towards the water was no more than an aberration, not the revelation of something dreadful in his mind. He was protecting himself, and the closest two knew it. They suggested that the group make an early night of it, but Don was the one who reminded them all of their afternoon sleep. 'It'll be hot again tomorrow, so let's enjoy the night while we've got it. Eh?' There was something aggressive, some aspect of his courtroom behaviour, in the way he posed his defiance, and Tessa began to cry. This time the gathering knew there really was something wrong, something had happened which they'd only been partially aware of, and it was serious: Jack saw his chance. 'Come on, Don. Tessa's upset. You've got to talk to her. In private. Not with all of us listening. In your room. I'll walk with you. Darling' – this was to Olivia – 'you walk with Tessa, make sure she's all right. Don't let her trip on those steps.' He turned to the others. 'We'll see you in a while. Up at the house.'

By morning Tessa had Don's agreement. They'd go back to Melbourne that afternoon. They'd see a man Madeleine Quirk recommended. 'He gets people to talk. He can see into what's troubling them.' But Tessa had already made up her mind: Don had a death wish. It had never been so close to controlling him, but something about the water and the night had offered him a way out; he had only to walk into the water, and swim, ever so gently, until he was too far out to get back. 'He didn't understand it. He thought it was going to be comfortable in the water, and that was what he wanted. He didn't see himself as doing away with himself. He thought it would be a positive experience.' Jack and Olivia listened carefully to what she'd got out of him, forcing him to remember what he wanted to forget. It had been an almost childish impulse, not something aimed at his wife to hurt her, but a regression, an escape. 'At all events I have to keep this quiet,' he'd told Tessa, somewhere in the night. 'It'll be the end of me, professionally, if this gets out.' She'd promised to protect him, wondering how she'd do it. Jack and Olivia could be trusted; the others? She wasn't sure. She didn't even know what they knew, how much or how little. So it was best to get Don away from any talk. She'd see what the shrink said ... maybe an overseas tour, before he resumed his work ...

So it was agreed that the Trevorrows would leave after lunch, and that caused the Furlinghettis to make a decision too. They'd leave at the same time. But their hosts, the Pages, said that Carlo and Maria, in the Hispano-Suiza, should leave first, and the Trevorrows, in their more reliable Saab, should follow half an hour behind. Carlo was displeased by the suggestion, but Jack insisted, and told Carlo on the quiet that the responsibility of seeing friends safely home would help Don stay on track after 'a little bit of an upset last night, that *turn* he had'.

So the vintage car set off in a century it didn't belong to, and a little later, the Saab, with Don full of chatter and confidence, as if nothing had happened. Olivia, reading Tessa's face, knew how worried she was: when would he break down again? How much would he need her to provide and would she be able to do it? Once love grows weak, energy drains away. Don eased the Saab gently down the hill, then roared away, leaving the Pages looking at each other. Jack: 'That's one car I'm glad I'm not in.' Olivia: 'That's two cars I'm glad I'm not in. God knows whether either of them will get home.'

She was too pessimistic. The Saab got home, carrying the passengers in the Hispano-Suiza, which broke down on the outskirts of Geelong. A connecting rod broke, causing havoc in its cylinder, at the moment they drew into a service station for petrol. Carlo pushed the veteran to a parking space, assisted by the man who ran the place. Two minutes later Don and Tessa pulled over, and opened up their car. The garage man told Carlo he was lucky to have friends behind him, and helped them transfer their things. Don was a model of respect. He knew what this was costing Carlo in shame and humiliation. 'Lucky I've still got the pack-rack on,' he told the other man. 'I had it on for a Sydney trip. Usually I take it off as soon as I get home but this time I left it. We'll put your things up there. I've got a rope.' It was the rope that stung Carlo most. Tve got a rope too. I carry it so I can tow anybody that's in trouble, but today, that's me.' Don said there was no trouble at all. He'd get them home; and he reminded Carlo to get the garage man to give him the name and phone number of the truck driver who would deliver the veteran vehicle to Carlo's home in Melbourne. That way, he should be able to start work next weekend. He'd have to check everything, and if one con-rod had broken he'd best replace the lot ...

Don was over his troubles, or so he thought, because he had another man's troubles to deal with. He was all charm to Maria and her Angelica, at his best when women were in difficulties. He drove the Furlinghettis to the front door of their Hawthorn home and helped with their luggage; standing on the front verandah, he told Carlo and Maria to keep him posted on getting the veteran car back to its garage and repairs underway. 'I know you'll be pulling the engine apart,' he said. 'Treat it as an opportunity.' Tessa, listening to him, found her husband remarkable; exposed only the night before as vulnerable to something that would end his life if he gave in to it, he was going through the motions of a well-balanced, caring and supportive professional. Self-deception was the trouble, and he was willing it to work, while she, who had believed in him when they married, had lost confidence now, and it was permanent. She was not to know that something similar would happen after they'd left: Maria, having fed Giorgio, and settled him in sleep, announced to Carlo that he was in charge of the baby because she, Maria, was going shopping. The house, she declared, was empty, and something about the way she said the word signalled hostility. His challenge to her came in the form of an offer: 'If you want anything, give me a list, I'll pick up a few things later.' But Maria was angry. 'You think you're to be trusted? I'll do the shopping. That way I know it'll get done.' She was pushing a view of him as reckless which he didn't like. 'Yes I know why you're in a shit mood, but I'll go in the Megane. You know you can trust that. You ought to, you made us buy it, it was completely your idea!'

He'd left himself wide open. She struck. 'And the skinny old shipwreck you're going to pour more money into, that was yours.' Then the coup de grâce. 'Was it not?' He flared in rage. 'It was ours and it is. Still. Everything I own is owned by the two of us, the four of us!' The words weren't under control. How could anyone stand in his way, or even want to? He might have said he loved her and she was using that to provoke him, but it was truer to say that he was childish because he was still a man of impulse, and didn't know that this could

be escaped. There were people who sought wisdom and balance and he'd never felt pressed to be like them. Everything, then, was a contest of wills. Both of them welcomed the prospect of a fight. 'Angelica,' Maria said, 'was frightened when the thing broke down. She didn't know Don and Tessa were behind us ...'

'Indeed she did! I told her so myself!'

'Well it wasn't clear to her, whatever you might say now. When that man at the service station ...'

'Les Hawkins! He gave me the name of the man who's going to bring our car home ...'

'Our car? Do you mind? When have I ever had any idea that it was mine? You can hardly say it belongs to Giorgio, and Angelica's afraid of it. She keeps thinking it's going to break down, and today it did!'

He was rageing. 'Tough bloody luck. We got home. We've got another car. Where's the problem?'

'The problem's in her head. She needs security and she can't get it from her father because you were silly enough to think we could travel all that way and not get stuck.'

He decided to overwhelm her with rationality. 'Jack had that covered. He told Don and Tessa to stick behind us in case anything went wrong.'

She wasn't playing his game. 'You've destroyed Angelica's faith in you. Her father. How's she going to believe anything you say after today? Tell me that.' He glared at her, accusing. 'The only reason my daughter might not believe in me is her mother putting disease in her mind. Sickness. Illness. Something rotten, to make her mind a bad scene.' He was fumbling for words and Maria was looking for a place, another weakness, to strike again. Suddenly their daughter, Angelica, hearing the shouting, came into the room. The parents looked at the girl. How much had she heard? Maria thought it advantageous to pull the girl onto her side. 'You and I are going shopping in a minute, darling. Make a list of anything you know we need, that'll help me get started.' Then she added, foolishly, 'Giorgie's asleep. We can go in my car since your father's isn't working any more!' She expected Angelica to come to her, desperate for her mother's confidence, but the girl, wiser than her mother knew, ran from the room. Carlo would

have rushed after her, but Maria yelled, 'Don't you dare!' and the two of them looked at each other with hatred, their marriage, at least as they had believed in it, in a parlous state.

The city, once Jack and Olivia returned to it, seemed cramped. Their inner-suburban terrace was small. Jack wanted to go out but Olivia said no. 'That little bar'll be crammed, and they'll get sweatier and drunker as the night goes on. It'd be unbearable!' So they lay on a rug in their back garden, a space about twice the size of their bed. Olivia brought pillows, they lay beside each other, looking up.

'I'd forgotten. I was thinking it'd be like it was on the beach.'

'No stars tonight, darling. Smog. City lights reflecting on the clouds. If we want to know about heaven, we work it out for ourselves.' Jack had the whole thing worked out.'What's going to guide us, Jack?'

He was amused. 'No guidance available. We've got to work everything out for ourselves.'

It was all so obvious to Jack that she was forced to laugh at herself, and then: 'Even so, we need the stars.'

He was tolerant, but prosaic. 'If we get enough people thinking the same way, we might set up business, in the country somewhere.'

She wouldn't let it go. 'What makes people think they can live without seeing the stars?'

'They can see'em on television!'

'Don't be disgusting Jack. To call those people stars ...': it was unthinkable.

He tried to speak for the common man, a creature rarely subject to scientific observation. 'You get an awful lot brought to you when you live in a city. Sport, racing, galleries, hospitals ...'

She waved a hand by way of urging him to stop. He did. 'I have to see the night sky. So I'm connected to our origins.'

It didn't silence Jack. 'You came into the world at a hospital in Wangaratta. Your mother told me. Yet you've never been back.'

'So?'

'And I've always thought you get on best with your mother when you're a long way apart.'

'So?'

He turned a little in her direction, a smile in his eyes. 'Darling, you say you want to be connected with your origins.'

A note he recognised as serious entered her voice. 'I want to be respected. Church people, when they talk about Jesus, they say he came down from heaven.'

He began to firm his position. 'Christian people say we all came down from heaven. If we did, it must be a pretty miserable place.' He could feel her resistance rising. 'I know what you feel when you look at the stars. I feel the same myself. They're magical, they make us feel humble, and it's good for us.' He paused, preparing his closure. 'Good for us, but it's not the way we live. Just look at us. Greedy as all hell, millions of wretched bastards competing for whatever we can get. A star or two in the sky makes us feel good about ourselves when we ought to be ashamed.'

Olivia was angry. 'We should have gone to that pub after all. Let's do it now. I've got money. Yes! Why did I say no before? I think I expected better ...'

He was glum, but immovable. 'I'm staying here, darling. I'm not moving. Please don't go without me. I don't want to be on my own.'

So they spent the next couple of hours on a blanket in their back garden, suburb of Carlton, city of Melbourne, southern hemisphere, the world ... et cetera.

But the world is various. About the time they were thinking of going to bed, there were sirens, howling until turned off, then another batch. Jack interpreted this to mean, first, fire engines arriving for a blaze in a nearby industrial zone, and then the police turning up to keep people out of the area. 'They say they're making sure nobody gets in the way of the fire-ohs, but that's what they're doing themselves. However, it makes a few more sirens, so they feel they're doing somebody some good.'

They lay together on their grass, seeing nothing, hearing a crash as a building caved in.

'That sounded terrible, Jack.'

'It did. It'd be about a kilometre away. I'd put it somewhere near the corner of Dunstan and Merrick Streets.' 'How can you tell that?'

'Just guessing.' He wasn't. 'If it'd been any further north, they'd have come down our street to get there, or else one over, maybe Downing.'

'You've got everything worked out, haven't you?'

She admired her husband's ways of thinking. He was amused. 'It's amazing. Everything that goes on in this world can be opened up, analysed, according to some line of thought. Whatever it is, it may not be obvious to you, or me, or any of our like-minded friends, but somewhere, not far away but out of sight to us, there's somebody who sees it clear as crystal. It's obvious to them because they're thinking in the right way, and the rest of us aren't.'

She was ready for this. 'Then that means that you, and I, and our friends and yes, our neighbours, even if we don't know them, have got the right way of seeing certain things, even if they crop up only rarely. There must be things, you know, Jack, that only happen once in a thousand years, and then there are people who can understand that thing on the rare occasion when it happens, and they can interpret it for us.' She was waiting.

'Once in a thousand years. That'd really test your intelligence, wouldn't it. But if you understood it, and got it right, you'd feel great, wouldn't you. Special!' Even so, it was his humility that she noticed, though for Jack, it was an oddity which he noticed in the following morning's paper that brought the fire closer to them.

'Newshounds got there last night before the cops, apparently. Someone we know gets a mention too.' Olivia took the paper from him but couldn't see what he was referring to. 'Little piece there about the owner, under the picture of the fire.' She found it. 'The owner, Mr Rory Svendsen, of Endeavour Crescent, Avondale Heights, said ...'

She paused. 'Read it out,' Jack said.

'... said the fire in the building was going to mean a heavy loss to his family. We had plans for it. We'd only recently been in discussions with architects about enhancing the value of the property. We'll need to have a very close look at it now and see what we can use the site for. As it stands, the place is a write-off.' Her husband, Olivia saw, was grinning. 'A quiet sort of man, our Rory. Notice what he goes on to say? About insurance? And he names the architects. Underhill

& Forrest. The bastard wants us to feel sorry for him. Plays his hand nicely, doesn't he? Last time he looked at the property, everything was fine. Alterations were just about to start ...'

'Jack! Be careful what you say. They're friends of ours.'

He was grinning broadly. 'As long as they stay out of jail. But he seems to have that covered.'

'What?'

'Not bad, is it? You want to burn down a building and get the insurance. So you start talking about developing the property. You hire some architects, have meetings. They draw up plans. It's going to cost millions ... but suddenly, surprise surprise, a blaze gets going. The owner's away, how did that get started? The owner rushes home. He inspects the ruins, he's devastated. Isn't it amazing? Rory's such a quiet bloke. You could watch him for hours without realising what an actor he is.'

She said, cautiously but with anger lurking in her voice. 'He's a crook, is he? Is that what we're saying?'

Jack grinned. 'To define a crook, you have to have a line. Rory's smart. You put your line here, Rory makes a move *there*.' He put his head back as if to start singing. 'I'm a law-abiding man! You'll never put bars between me and a glass of beer!' Olivia crumpled, her righteousness not holding against his humour. 'He's so quiet,' she said weakly. Then, more positively: 'I want to understand him. Ruth lives with him. She's a proper woman ...'

This time Jack drummed his fingers, meaning he too was baffled. 'You've put your finger on the problem. *A* problem, anyway.' He murmured, humming to himself. Olivia found him puzzling when he was in these moods, because she never knew what was going to happen. 'Tell me what you're thinking Jack.'

'It's a bargain,' he said, 'and it's a two way job. I tell you, you tell me ...' His voice faded. He didn't know where to begin. She was looking at him. 'What you're thinking, that is. There's always two sides to everything, or more.' He stopped again. 'It's so very confusing ...' Olivia looked at him, surprised at his inability to say what was troubling him. 'What's got you in such a muddle? You're not usually like this.'

'We're talking about something that nobody wants to talk about. It's called trading lies, or looking after a couple's untruths. I suppose most couples do it, one way or another. Ruth, as you say, is a proper woman. She wouldn't be easily persuaded to grant her seal of approval. Yet Rory gets things past her every day. He's one smart bastard, but how does he do it?'

'Do what, Jack? Can't you say? I know *who* you're talking about but I've no idea what you're trying to say. How does he do what?'

'How does he transfer responsibility for things he does all by himself into the joint zone where they share each other?' Olivia at least understood him this time, but seemed no more enlightened. He went on: 'She's strong and she's got a good mind. That means that he's so skilled at presenting things to her that she takes responsibility for what they do without any doubts. She's proud of him when he does things that I wouldn't touch with the proverbial forty foot pole.' Olivia began to be exasperated. 'Are you talking morality, is that what you mean?' That was exactly what he meant. 'He's immoral, and she's not. But somehow he gets her doing what he wants. She comes out with some idea he's planted in her mind and you'd think, listening to her, that the church had considered it in all solemnity before they gave his idea their blessing. How does he make her think that he, with his head full of greedy ideas, is as moral, not only as she is herself, but is a standard-setter for the rest of us, if you don't bloody mind!' He made the gesture of wiping his brow in disbelief. 'A-mazing!'

Olivia didn't want any more generalities. How did all this work in the case of the factory that had burned down the night before? She thought of inviting the Svendsens over for dinner, they'd never talk so freely again about the way they did things ... Jack saw that this was nonsense. 'We could pour bottles of wine down their throats and end up none the wiser. Rory 's a real professional. We'd be a pair of innocent dopes, to him. And Ruth'd be praising him for his socially constructive thinking and you'd be wiping tears from your eyes: they are practised at it. It's their game! It's what their marriage relies on.' Suddenly it was clear to Olivia. Her husband was right. The Svendsens were tricky, a clear case! 'How long have you understood

these people, Jack? She looked with some admiration at him. 'How come it took me so long?'

It was different at the Svendsens'. The police had been and gone, and Ruth was making coffee, when there was a knock at the door. When she opened it, she found a policewoman there, apologising for getting back so quickly, but wanting to see the insurance papers they held for the burnt-out building. 'We said we didn't need to see them today, but we do. I'm sorry to put you to this bother.' Both Rory and Ruth saw this as a trick. Rory nodded to his wife, meaning, get what this woman wants, but challenged boldly: 'I'd have thought any challenge from this quarter could only come from the insurance company's lawyers?' The policewoman had herself well covered. 'Insurance people don't see things in quite the same way that we do. We'll take a copy and get the original back to you.' With a faint smile – the smile that knows it can compel – she added, 'It'll be back in your filing system before you've had time to miss it.'

A moment later, she was gone, and Ruth was looking at her husband. 'What are we doing next?'

'That's what they're waiting to see. Which means we're sitting tight. Remember that place in Bladen Street?'

She remembered. They both smiled. 'Those people that lived across the road from us? Moncktons. They might as well have been monkeys for all the nous they had. He didn't check the title and it wasn't ... who was it now? His uncle's to give him. He took it for granted and offered the place for sale. His agent had to do a lot of smart talking to get him out of it. What a blunder!' Rory was inclined to laugh, but he didn't. Making mistakes like that was immoral, in his mind, a word he applied widely: any evidence of a slack mind was an indication that the person wasn't worth a place in the game, so they shouldn't play. Or if they did, it should only be at the shallow end of the pool where mistakes needn't be fatal. Rory was contemptuous of those who weren't looking after themselves. Things had to work. Business, politics, anything that humans valued, had to be played keenly in order to make winning worthwhile. Church people, and he never said this to his wife, were only amateurs, with no more authority than people in the grandstands at a football match: there could be thousands of them, roaring their opinions, but who cared? Only the umpires counted because they were part of the game. The institution. If you couldn't affect an outcome you didn't count. Morality was an attempt to exercise power of judgment by those who'd been left out—or never got into the act in the first place. Oddly enough, Rory favoured the creation of citizens' advisory groups and similar talkfests; they were places where people could talk idly, uselessly, with a feeling of being socially useful. 'Let them paint the bilge,' he would say, 'if it keeps'em off the bridge'.

This nautical metaphor was both revealing and accurate. Captains were meant to command. There could hardly be anything more useless than some superannuated old skipper going through the motions of directing a ship when it was only hopping from one glamorous port to another, giving opportunities for self-opinionated guests to dine at the captain's table. It dawned on Ruth that Rory's sullen silence had outlasted the return of the policewoman. It was evidence of a breakdown somewhere in his endlessly-in-action personality: where was he now?

Not talking, and that was worrying. He had nothing to say about the building, now in ashes, or how the fire might have started: Rory never went near the place without someone to accompany him; he made everything he did seem effortlessly clear. Ruth normally provided her own support, but sensed, this time, a weakness, a failing, in her man. 'What are we going to do?' she said. 'We're not just going to leave a pile of rubbish on our land. The Council would make us clean it up anyway, and I don't like getting orders from people like them.' Savagely she added, 'What would they know?'

Twisting his lips, he told her, 'What it's worth, perhaps. They'd have as good an idea as we do. If someone wants to buy it, they might be the first to hear.' He added, as if accepting a defeat in a way she'd never known him to do, 'I might run it past them. It's zoned industrial, but if Council wants some parkland they might be interested in a buyback.' Her disappointment was deep; she'd never seen him throw in the towel before. 'Rory!' she said, 'stand up for yourself. Don't get all weak and splintery when you need to be strong! You might have taken a hit, but fight!'

Her words were like a mirror to him. Fight? He'd always done it on the assumption that he'd win, and now that backing, that belief in himself, had collapsed. He needed to hide what had happened. Ruth mustn't know, because he could only make her believe in him if he believed in himself, as he'd done from the time they'd met. 'Don't get all weak and splintery,' she said: the trouble was, he was all weak and splintery, and more than that, he wasn't sure about recovering. He might be able to convince a new wife, a new woman added to his life, that he was confident as ever, but it would have to be by some new form of subterfuge: it might be hard to rebuild his old self.

This was a question he found burning inside himself. Mightn't he readjust, mightn't he come good, in time? Yes, he might, but it would only be a change in his life, and he wouldn't, surely, be able to hide what was going on from his wife? No. She'd know, because she built her own strength – snobbery, in a way – on his. Rory's scorn for humanity in general was the base, the secret landing strip in a huge forest, for Ruth. He, analysing this as they stared at each other, wondering what had happened, knew he wouldn't in future be functioning in the old way, but what he'd be doing instead, he didn't know. 'It's been a bit of a shock,' he said. 'We'll just go quietly for a period till we work out what to do.' Ruth pierced him with stern eyes, wanting to know what had happened, and what they'd have to do.

Madeleine and Donna had got to know each other when they'd been students in a women's college which was converting to include male residents. They'd formed the habit of meeting in the cafeteria for coffee before strolling back to college in the hour before dinner. This meant they could gossip about other residents without embarrassment, the few hundred metres giving them a buffer zone to cleanse their minds of things they'd said before they had to deal with their fellows. If Donna said to Madeleine, or vice versa, 'We'll talk about that later,' each knew that the other understood the topic was one needing to be reserved for a moment of private conversation about the people they lived with. Zoara Dickinson, a girl who lived two doors down from Donna, was an object of interest: she was brilliant, and she had a younger sister who, to judge by her appearance, had something

wrong with her. A few weeks after Zoara entered the college, a year behind Madeleine and Donna, she was seen showing the younger sister around at weekends, the younger one having an air of being above all that surrounded her. Yet she also had an air of being lost.

As the year wore on, the friends became aware that the brilliant Zoara was thinking about dropping out, and the younger sister stopped coming to the college. As to why this had happened, there was no indication, and then, halfway through the second of the university's three terms, Zoara left. 'Can't hack it,' she told anyone who asked why. 'It bores me. It's too easy.' This marked her off if nothing else did. Students didn't say such things! Too easy, when most of them were pretending to understand better than they did! They were in one of the most prestigious courses in the country, they had college residence to give them aura ...

And then the day came when Zoara was wandering around in a dressing gown when she should have been at breakfast, and when they came back that afternoon her door was open and her possessions gone. Nobody knew her home address and nobody wanted to contact her for to do so would suggest a risk of doing the same. A couple of days later one of the tutors mentioned that a note had been left in the room: an A4 page folded, with the simple statement, 'To everyone who was nice to Dawn when she was here, thanks! It's appreciated!' This was signed with a spectacular 'Z', and no more. Dawn was the younger sister's name, as a few of them knew, and she wanted to get a look at college life because she wasn't likely to live long enough to experience it. Zoara, Z, had lived out that little bit of life for her, and then had tossed it away.

What had that been all about?

It affected Madeleine and Donna deeply. Each had entered college in the belief that it was the next step, a comfortable one, towards a future glowing mysteriously. College people had support. Help was available: discussion, advice. They had only to eat at table, sleep in a college bed, or dash upstairs and they had the company of those who'd done these things before. The paths were well-known. Custom was useful. All you had to do was open yourself and let those earlier people in. There were honour boards, not to speak of magazines and

photographs, showing the way. Reports of the successful kept drifting through the doors. They were a swirling mixture, these bright young people, of rivalry, envy and support. They wanted to surpass each other, they wanted to make sure nobody failed.

Whatever had happened to Zoara, so bright, so far in front? Why had she needed to show her sister the college she might never reach? How could she have lived among them, being so different? Another student moved into her room, letting them drop back to their earlier normality, unchallenged. College rhetoric resumed, personal standards settled back to where they were pre-Z. It became the name of a period which had happened, now, only in memory. The initial effect of Zoara and Dawn was to make the handful of male residents seem more remote than before. Then, as memories of the sisters began to fade, the female residents became more conscious of the males among them. They had not only to be coped with – not so hard when they were a minority – but they had to be reckoned with. Who could say that they wouldn't be leaders in war-making? Instigators of crime? The inventors, the clever ones, whose investigations gave humanity the equipment it used to fly, travel, manufacture, meditate, to work the land, build the towers of shining cities, and so on? Women's control over men, essential as it was, couldn't prevent men escaping in thousands to use their brains in fields - creative, destructive which women, thus far, hadn't occupied. Women were victims of their paradox – they could free themselves to outreach men in those fields they'd thought their own, or they could stick to their specialty, the making of families, which left them where they'd always been.

College girls felt their future should be different, but how?

The college boys they met, and danced with from time to time, weren't going to give them this future handed on a plate because they didn't have any plates, as yet. Would they get them? Probably, but if women waited to see which ones were going to be profit-worthy, the same old game was being played in the same old way. No change there! Even so, it was a time when women's boundaries were moving every day, and old restrictions challenged. Nobody knew quite how far it would go, but a subdued optimism permeated the college, and even the older tutors, the least likely to benefit, could feel the air

tingling. Madeleine and Donna talked about it in the university caf from time to time, and were talking about it one afternoon on their walk back to college after listening to someone from the law faculty lecturing on human rights. They'd reached the lawns of the affiliated men's college: it was then that Madeleine stopped, standing by a bench, with some bowls lying around. People had been playing, and left them on the grass. 'That talk didn't mean much to me,' Madeleine said. 'He thought he was saying important things but I didn't know what to do with them.' Donna looked at her, wondering what would come next. Madeleine surprised her: 'You remember Zoara's sister?'

'Dawn,' Donna said. 'Funny combination of names. I'll bet the mother named one and the father named the other.'

'Two people I never knew,' Madeleine said. 'Strangers both. Totally.' Why she emphasised this, Donna had no idea. She said, 'I saw the mother once, the father never. I don't know anything about him, except he exists,' but it was Dawn, the younger sister, that Madeleine wanted to talk about. 'She was born with some condition, apparently, that meant she wouldn't live. She was also very clever, and understood everything, including what was wrong with her.' Madeleine was emphasizing each point as if it was the basis of some larger argument.

'So?'

Madeleine reached her first island of statement. 'So having rights didn't do her any good.'

'Well, she ...'

'No good at all. Her sister was showing her college life because she'd never know it for herself.'

'We all knew that,' Donna said. 'You felt sorry for her, didn't you?' Suddenly she was doubtful. 'You did, didn't you?'

Madeleine swept this away impatiently. 'Yes of course I did. What do you think I am?' She was in an irascible mood, bothered by the lecture they'd attended. 'I've got more than that on my mind.' Donna, though looking at her sharply, didn't know why she'd stopped, and was impatient. 'Come on, let's keep walking. I've got ironing to do!' This was a challenge to her friend, who recognised it well enough. 'I've got things to do too. You know what? On the last day, when they blow up the planet, people will be ironing clothes. They'll be mowing

lawns. They'll be washing dishes ...' She waved her hands in what she hoped was an expressive fashion. 'And why? Because it's all they've got it in their heads to do ...'

Donna was angry. 'Well if you're going to get blown up, what's it matter what you do? I'd like to be doing a crossword puzzle when they press the button. That or playing tennis!' She started to laugh. 'Sorry, Madeleine, what is it you want to tell me?'

Madeleine took her at her word. 'That fellow was talking about human rights, and responsibilities.' Donna, raising her eyes to the sky, said nothing. 'Some people spend their lives talking about these things. Other people, just as learned but in a different way, talk about human motivation. Why these people are criminals and these are virtuous. Why these people are in love, and what they do about it, while others ...'

'Yes. Yes, go on.'

'But it doesn't do you any good to think you have rights. You've got to stay alive, and be fit and healthy first, before you can get any benefit from these so-called rights.' She pointed in the direction of their college, because she was thinking of Zoara and Dawn. 'If you're born with something wrong in your brain or you've got some congenital heart condition, it won't help you to know the arguments in favour of human rights. You won't live to enjoy them. When the body serves up agony, the mind can't offer much help!'

Stretching her leg, she kicked a bowl, causing it to roll a metre or two. 'Who cares about human rights when you've got something inside you, in your genetic make-up, that is, which means you aren't going to get anywhere. There's such a thing as human un-rights too, you know. Look what was happening to Dawn. And Zoara knew about it. And there was something wrong with her too, she was smart enough to have anything but she didn't want it. So she left. Was that human rights? If it was it didn't get her anywhere!'

Donna saw the magnitude of the attack. There was no use dodging or avoiding. She took her friend's hand. 'We need to do some thinking, don't we.'

Madeleine was glum. 'Yes, we need to think. Or something. Adjust might be the better word. Sometimes thinking isn't any use because

you can't think of any answer to your problem. Why not? Because there isn't any answer to think of. Even the cleverest people haven't solved the problem. The world's housed the problem for thousands of years and no way around it's ever been discovered. It's like a rock in the ocean, or a reef. If you manage to avoid it, you go on, you're in luck. If you run into it, you're sunk!' The college buildings listened silently. If they acclaimed her, it was done by brick and stone, chimneys for fire, doors for people. Wisdom could live there, even be generated there, but it would have no visible effect. There was an order about the place, suggesting that finding limits was useful in itself, but what you did about your limits, the buildings seemed to say, was up to you.

Madeleine's mother Rosie was a tubby figure because she didn't regain her youthful shape after having her child. Her own childhood and youth were locked away behind this circle of flesh. Her husband, Bill, took this for granted. Advertising had had little effect on his family's norms, which had been formed in the years of bush selection blocks in and around the Strathbogie ranges, when rabbits were welcomed for the pot. Finding food was more important than its effects. Everybody knew hunger, everybody knew why poor Irish settlers had stolen animals. What else could they do? Put respectability in a pot and serve it on a plate? Bill's family had enough of the church in them not to swear, but they knew bullshit when they heard it. Life was hard enough without getting tangled up in words. Rosie's family had a concentration on warmth, and hospitality: things they did well, but they too stepped politely over or around anything that smacked, to them, of trickery or deceit. The effect of all this on Madeleine when she got to school and then university was considerable; delicate examination of the meanings expressed by great poets tended to undo the simplicities which underlay her family's collection of outlooks – their morality, we might say. If the thoughts were kept simple then the production of feelings was agreeably simple too; they were smart enough to say all the right things in tutorials and on exam papers but such checks on their belief systems as education imposed were themselves kept under control. Nothing should be allowed to outpace everything else!

So said Madeleine, as had her family before her. She and Donna did well enough to graduate with the honours they sought. They married men who were very different from each other, but managed to maintain their bond; the men, Tim Williamson and Randolph Quirk, were amiable enough. Men didn't throw away all their friendships, their pasts, when they married: nor should women have to. Children, if they came, would effectively have the same result, or might. Stability was something they both took for granted; they resumed their university habit of meeting each other but now, in later life, it was for city lunches. Both recognised that these lunches were part of an intermediate phase: children, if they chose to have them, would break them down. So they followed the newspaper recommendations and used the cutting edge restaurants, Lebanese, modern-Japan, traditional Italian, French, or whatever ... They were sipping coffee one day at Barbaro's when they saw Maria Furlinghetti outside their window, they tapped the glass and waved furiously, inviting her to join them. She came in, and though she tried to match their mood, she was upset about something. Donna inquired. 'You're a little distracted today, Maria? Has something happened?'

It had. 'Yes, I'm sorry to say. It only happened this morning. Carlo rang me from work. There was an accident. A man got run over by a bus ...'

Madeleine and Donna were intellectuals. Getting run over by a bus didn't happen to people like them. 'Was he hurt?'

Maria's eyes told them the matter was in some way important to her. 'Killed. Do you know the bus stop at the corner of Russell and Bourke?' They did, vaguely. It wasn't a part of their lives. 'There's a metal railing, it was put there to protect pedestrians from getting in the way of buses turning the corner.'

'Oh yes ...'

Maria's eyes were swollen, though they had no idea why she was so affected. 'This man somehow got on the wrong side of what was meant to protect him, and a bus pushed up against him, it squeezed him to death.' She gasped. 'All the passengers had to get off, the driver was too upset to drive, someone else took the bus away and they brought another one to take the passengers ...'

She was insistent; it meant something to her. Donna said, 'Did you, by any chance, know the man that was killed, Maria?'

'Yes and no.'

They looked at her, waiting for her to go on.

'You remember ... I don't know if you heard about this ... when we were driving back from the beach house, Carlo's car broke down at a service station ...'

'The Trevorrows picked you up, didn't they?' Donna recalled. 'But you got the car back, didn't you?'

'Yes, we got it back. The man at the service station had it brought to our place on the back of a truck. Which cost us a good pile of dollars I must say, but Carlo was happy and he got to work on it straight away ... that part of it was okay ...'

'So what was the other part?' This was Madeleine.

'Carlo was quite shaken. He actually saw it happen. An ambulance got there almost straight away and they lifted the man into the back on a stretcher.'

'And?'

'It was the man from the service station, the man who'd sent our car, Carlo's car, back to us. What he was doing in the city I've no idea, but he managed to get himself on the wrong side of the railing, and the bus crushed him ...'

She couldn't go on. Madeleine said, 'You didn't actually know him then? Or you did? Carlo recognised him, is that what you're telling us?' Despite their indifference, Madeleine and Donna could see that Maria was affected by what had happened: how, and why, was at this stage, and possibly forever, beyond them.

The story of the accident at the bus terminal reached the Brambles a few days later. It was somewhat distant to them because they'd left the beach house before the day of Furlinghettis' car breaking down, and all Les could say when Lorna told him was, 'It would have given Carlo a bit of a shake-up. It wouldn't hurt him to be taken out of himself for a minute or two, he's pretty good at putting number one first!' That was Les. Lorna's comment was, 'Funny thing to happen, though. You ask a stranger to do a job for you, he does it and you think it's the end

of the matter ...' Les was smiling: 'And it is!' He would have gone on, but she continued, 'And you were there at the end, and you got a hell of a shock! After all, he got killed when nobody expected it, least of all himself ...'

They considered what had happened. To Carlo, fortunately, not to them. To the garage man mainly, but nobody knew who he was. Had been. Every marriage, indeed every life has moments when nobody knows what to say. Living is in part a shared understanding and when something breaks in from outside, we are well-nigh powerless. Talking is our attempt to keep the social agreement working. So what can we say when it breaks down?

A certain heaviness weighed on them, limited by indifference, weighted with as much of their humanity as they could allow. Les twirled a paper. 'I better get this done. I need to post it. After all, I didn't know the bloke.' Lorna, by way of giving permission, added, 'None of us met him, only Carlo. So we're not going to miss him, but ...'

The sentence wasn't meant to end. Rather like a human life, it began without any particular intention of finishing itself. Leo went to his desk for whatever it was he was doing, and Lorna carried the consciousness of fatality a little longer before she too busied herself with something else.

The letter Les had to reply to was from the Moonee Valley Racing Club. They were selling sections of their land to developers who were going to build apartment towers. The city that had sprawled so carelessly for so long was trying to limit itself. Nobody thought the sprawl could be stopped but inner suburban land was valuable and anyone who owned it was under pressure to use it. The club liked the idea of money. There were however questions about the effects of shadows on race callers, the public generally, and of course the horses. Would it affect their galloping? The committee had decided to investigate and Les had been asked to contribute, first by answering a few questions on paper, and then by appearing before the committee. Les told the club in his letter that nobody should prefer a lump sum of money to a permanent, money-earning asset: you were mad if you did. Lump sums got spent, usually on one benefit only, while those

who retained the cash flow had their pockets endlessly refilled. It was as simple as that. If the club was prepared to allow housing towers, it should be prepared to build them; you could always divert a little of the cash flow the buildings earned to professionals who'd rent them out, repair them, clean them, etc. There were always people looking for work. You brought the two together. You didn't need to possess all the skills yourself, you hired people who could do what you couldn't or didn't want to do. Les was not much of a thinker, but he could see things in front of his eyes. There were many ways to make money but the one that gave the least trouble was to place yourself beside a stream of money and make sure some of it flowed through your hands. There were people on the racing club committee who couldn't see this. They partially understood it as a general argument but not when it was applied to them.

Bloody dills!

The club's reply when it came was simplicity itself. They thanked him in half a line and in two more they set up a time and place for him to have his say. That was it. They'd give him ten minutes and take no notice. He'd have to go through with it, though, because they mustn't be offended. If the racing clubs ganged up on him his station might get someone else. He was, he knew, expendable.

He'd better fit in. Money went where money was already being made. The protest camp was no place to be. Lorna told him the racing club was missing an opportunity. She said they needed to reserve some of the space in their new buildings for the fashion industry. Clothing design, clothing display, functions that drew people to the course. Things produced in these special low-rental studios would be seen on the course and would be featured in the dining areas where people sat down. There needed to be a tie-up between the brilliant jackets the jockeys wore and the wider range being offered to the public. The racing club didn't have half a brain if they couldn't see a chance like that. Leo thought she was right and wondered if he couldn't get someone else to take the chance she saw, and he and Lorna could get in behind them. 'You got a good idea there, darling. Let's see if we can make something of it.'

Jack was deeply comfortable. 'Old sofas mystify me,' he said. 'When I lie down on comfortable sofas, I get a feeling that they were made for me alone. So if they're really old, I feel puzzled. How come that sofa was made before I was born?' He took Olivia by the hand but she released herself, put her arm around his shoulder, and pulled him up so that she could snuggle against him. 'Remember that one we saw in Paris?' he said, reminiscing. 'Bright red. Gold beading. That street near the Louvre, whatever it's called. One of Baron Whatsisname's streets, wide and straight and true!' He laughed. 'He's supposed to have done it so soldiers could get into any mutinous areas. They weren't game to go down the pokey little lanes that used to be there.' Olivia nestled her head into his neck so she could kiss him.

'Darling.' She was very happy. 'I loved it when we were travelling.' More smiles. 'It's pretty good to be home!'

They squeezed each other, kissed, and it seemed that all strain and stress had drained away. Wherever it had gone, it wouldn't be coming back. Even so, he felt a doubt inside her, undissolved. It was as if the whole of her spirit was fluid, except for one little hard, crunchy dot, in there somewhere. What was that? He didn't want to spoil the mood by asking and if it was that deep, that persistent, he felt it wasn't for him to ask. Everyone had doubts, blockages, objections. It was only decent, if you loved someone, to wait until they felt the moment was right to voice whatever it was. If he let an interrogative note creep into his voice, she would notice and their intimacy would be spoiled.

'When we're somewhere else, we change.'

'Does that mean that when we're on an airline from one country we're different from when the airline's from another country.'

'I'm sure that's true, even if it's not very different.'

'I always take notice of where the things they serve you, like the butter or the biscuits, come from.'

'Remember, coming home from Italy, they gave us Australian wine?'

'Do I ever! It felt like being home again, after all that ...'

She couldn't stop herself laughing – at him, and at herself. 'You were going to say gin's piss!'

He laughed, decently ashamed. 'I was! Oh dear.' She didn't seem to care, but he admitted, 'I still haven't got myself cleaned up. Not entirely.'

'The layers of prejudice. Let's have a look.'

'There's piss. Waste fluid. It gets a bad reception, always.'

'Specially when it's female's piss ...'

'Black female's piss ...'

He didn't see it straight away, then he did. 'Oh gin, yes, as in black gin. Hmm.'

'What would we say if it was a man's piss?'

He tried it: 'Blackfella piss. Doesn't seem to work, does it.'

She was in great good humour. How would he get out of this? But he was laughing too. 'Popular sayings. You probably shouldn't try to clean them up. They're not funny if you make them acceptable in polite company.'

'So there's a place for dirt?'*

He was peace-making when he said, 'I think there is. If you've got standards, you've got to apply them. That means you need something to apply them to.' There was still an element of scorn in her smile, so he went on, 'Let's say you've got new shoes on. You keep out of the mud. You can't do away with new shoes, and you can't get rid of all the mud in the world. All you can do is keep the one away from the other!'

'How did we get mud and new shoes in the conversation? Darling are you trying to confuse things, perhaps?'

'No my love, I'm being crystal clear.' They were both laughing. She turned so she could get her arms around him and squeeze mightily.

'No you don't! I don't want my ribs cracked!'

They pretended to fight, or wrestle, for a minute, then she relaxed again. 'It's not that I doubt your love. I don't. Not at all.' He was curious, so silent.

'If it was only my judgement of you,' she said, 'I'd go straight ahead.' He waited to see what would come next, then she added, 'It's the world.' He replied, cautiously enough, 'It's a rough and ready place,' but she needed to go further. 'It's a truly awful place. All the things people ever imagined about hell as a place of punishment, are really what the earth is like.' She paused. And then it came. 'Everything happens here!' Jack knew, then, what she was talking about. It was

whether or not she'd have children. 'Darling!' he burst out. 'If we have a son, or a daughter ...'

'That's the choice,' she called. 'There's no other. One of your sort, or one of mine!'

'If we do, they'll start out with all the chances. They'll have fortune on their side.' She broke in. 'Bombs, wars, crime! Rape, torture, illnesses with no cure, just a rotting body ...'

'Steady darling! We're both doing fine! There's every chance that our children, our child, will do at least as well as us. Compare yourself with your parents. No going backwards there! Progress, in fact. Not everything's darkness and failure.'

He was looking at his wife. They had to make something out of this: that, or be defeated. 'Darling?' He was waiting. What would she say?

'Give me time. It's a hurdle I didn't expect to hit. I didn't know it was there.'

It was only a couple of days later that Olivia ran into Jenny Bartlett, the oldest of the women who'd stayed with them at Fairhaven. She mentioned this to Jack as soon as he came home, but, busy with getting dinner, she said no more. Jack could tell from her mood that there was something else and it was affecting her. She was light-hearted in a way that signalled to him that she was troubled. She served up. They ate. Nothing broke the easiness of the surface, except that Jack was waiting. Eventually Olivia said, 'You always know. I don't know how you know when there's something wrong, but you sense it. I wasn't going to say anything.'

'About what?'

'I was going to try and work it out for myself, except I couldn't.'

'Let me have a try.'

'I don't think anyone can work out this one. You know Mrs Morgan, Jenny's mother?'

'Yes. Just. What about her?'

'Jenny says there's something wrong with her. She has times when she's just not there. If Jenny says something, she answers, but it makes no sense.'

'For example?'

'I don't think Jenny actually gave me an example, but she said her mother would announce, 'I feel like going for a walk. I'll pick up the paper for you. Norman likes to read the paper before he goes to work. This is about four hours after Norman's gone to work and Mrs Morgan's read the paper herself, or as much as she can be bothered with.'

'She's not a great reader, I take it?'

'Never has been. And she's forgetting names. She's living in that big house with Jenny and Norman, and she forgets the children's names. She'll say "that fine young gentleman of yours" and Jenny will say "Thomas" and she'll say "Yes of course, that's who I mean", and she'll call him Thomas until she forgets again, and then she'll call the boy "that chip off his father's block" or something like that ... she's quick at covering up what she's forgetting but she's a bit too quick and Jenny knows that she knows there's something wrong, and she gets on the defensive if Jenny suggests having a check-up.' She looked at Jack, who had his hands over his eyes, thinking.

'It sounds like the early stages of Alzheimer's.'

Olivia sagged. 'That's what I thought, but I didn't say it.' Jack looked at his wife. 'You've always spoken pretty freely with Jenny. With all your friends.'

'How could I say that, if she didn't say it first? People have to realise something for themselves before you drop it on them.' She might have gone on but Jack wanted to argue. 'What's the good of friends if they don't tell you things you need to know?'

This was too direct for Olivia. She became confused. He might be right but she couldn't do what he suggested. She'd been put in a testing position, and had chosen discretion, however wrongly in her husband's view.

'People know things before they know them, if you see what I mean.'

'I don't, darling. What do you mean?'

It was a question that went to the heart of the way she dealt with things herself, or didn't, if she wasn't ready, or strong enough. 'I think I know what's going on in Jenny's head. She knows what's wrong but she hasn't yet developed the strength she'll need to deal with it.

Jack sensed a need for caution. 'It could be that she's waiting for some of her friends to offer the support she's going to need. Do you think?'

'And it could be that she's locked herself in denial, and it will take some tough talking from someone – her family doctor, for instance – before she's prepared to see what's under her nose.'

Jack wanted to force the matter because he felt that Olivia might be as keen to dodge the evidence of her own senses as Jenny Bartlett was doing: his argument was growing personal because that was the way his feelings were inclining him. 'Sometimes friends have to make people face what they don't want to face. The friends might prefer to keep out of the way but that's what they have to do, because they're friends. It can be a duty as much as it's a pleasure. Sorry, I said "duty"; I think I meant responsibility.'

Nervously, and warily, she took a certain position: 'I might resent a friend who told me I had to do something I didn't want to do. Something I was too scared to do.' Passion entered her voice. 'Something I was afraid to do!'

Then he saw where she was at. Fear for the world her child would be entering had control of her again. The isolation of Alzheimers had entered her mind as yet another of the calamities that lay in people's path. Jack was desperate to make Olivia strong. 'There's plenty of worse things than Alzheimers. In some ways it's a desirable condition. You lose your grip on the world's ugly realities, and your family look after you. They take you around in their motor cars, they tell their children to give you love and support, they serve you three meals a day and manage your finances. It sounds like a blessing, doesn't it?'

She knew he didn't mean it. It was his humorous side taking over in order to comfort her but it gave no comfort. Jenny Bartlett's mother had once been a bright young girl who'd married and had children and look what was happening – she was turning into one of the living dead, a burden bringing nobody any joy. She'd have moments of realisation and rationality that gave her family hope ... then she'd drift away again, a cloud that had the features, the appearance of the person she was no more. Olivia said to Jack, who wanted her to have children and guide them successfully to whatever their goals might

be, 'I've almost stopped seeing people as people any more. They're pathways for me now and all I want to know is where they lead. It's got to be a good journey I've given them, or else what have I done to them in bringing them into this world. Jack? What's your answer to that?'

It was a challenge he had to face. 'There's no guarantees. Everything's a gamble. Everyone gets a chance, and that's all it is. A chance to have a good life ... and there's always the chance that ill-chance will break in. No guarantees, as I say, but isn't it worth giving it a go? If everyone did what you're suggesting – and they won't – life would die out. Orangutangs would be the highest form of life ... or ants, or something ... and humans wouldn't be around any more because they'd given up. They'd ruled the earth, and they'd tossed in the towel. That'd be a funny way to make things end.'

It was late morning about a month later when the phone rang at the Pages'; Jenny Bartlett's voice came out of the machine, sick with anxiety. Her mother, Beverley Morgan, had gone missing. She'd slipped out of the house while Jenny was ironing, in a little nook under the stairs where she couldn't see what her mother was doing. Jenny had gone outside, looking, to be told by a neighbour that her mother had caught the bus which stopped just around the corner, something the Bartletts had regarded as a convenience because they could supervise the departures and arrivals of their three children without having to leave the house. Jenny had a feeling, from the time of her mother's disappearance, that she'd caught the bus to the Westfield shopping centre, a vast place where it would be difficult to find her: would Olivia help Jenny find the missing woman?

They set off with a distracted Jenny driving badly; Olivia was relieved when they parked. When Jenny wanted to know which way Olivia thought they should go first, the younger woman realised how shaken the older woman was. She took charge. 'You need to go to centre management. This sort of thing must happen all the time. Missing people, I mean. They'll have ways of spreading the news to shopkeepers faster than you and I can. I'll come with you to the central office, then I'll leave you there and have a look around.'

This is what they did. Jenny was made to feel foolish when she had to admit she hadn't brought any photos of her mother with her; she described what she was wearing instead – a smart, recently purchased, straw coloured skirt suit. She culled her memory of the house she'd left a few minutes before and ventured to guess that her mother had also taken a matching hat from a stand in the hall, though she wasn't sure of this; it was a memory of her mother's habits prompting her, and perhaps a temptation to show that she was more observant than she'd actually been. The woman in the office was pleased with this detail which, she said, would be helpful. 'The centre's proud to be full of people every day, but when you're looking for a single person – a needle in a haystack, as you might say – it's helpful to be able to eliminate large numbers of people because you're not looking for them. They don't fit!'

They don't fit, Jenny thought. Mother doesn't fit any more. Furthermore, she's forgotten where she belongs ... she started to cry. The woman she was talking with, using the authority of her position, told her sternly to stop: they'd act systematically, and they'd find her mother ... if, of course, the Westfield Centre was where she was. She could have got off the bus anywhere on its route through the suburbs. 'You're in a process of elimination,' she told the missing woman's child, making her feel like one of her own daughters.

Olivia searched. Where would I go if I was on the loose? If I had been childish (in my old age) and run away? She drifted, with this thought in mind. She'd let the building lead her. She emptied her mind, letting her instincts take charge. She found herself walking in a stream of people who led her to a vast hall, with glittering windows and galleries above, and in the middle was a place serving coffee and cakes, and in the middle of a cluster of tiny tables was one where a woman was sitting, by herself, in a straw coloured skirt-suit, with – ah! – a matching hat sitting loosely, floppily, on her head and shading, except the light was not of the sun, the head of a dreamily distant old lady.

Jenny Bartlett's mother.

What next? What now?

Olivia put herself where the old lady could see her, but it had no effect. The sight of Olivia didn't connect with anything in the old lady's

thoughts. Olivia affected surprise, and spoke. 'Mrs Morgan! On your own! Jenny must have left you. Did she see something she wanted to get for the children?' Mrs Morgan switched herself into something vaguely cognisant of what she was doing, and waved airily at the shops. 'Somewhere in that direction. I don't know what caught her eye. She has rushes of enthusiasm, even when I warn her to keep a steady mind.' She smiled. 'It's what the young are like these days. I hope you don't mind me saying so, I have a feeling you'll understand what I mean.' She smiled, one wise woman talking to another, then she added, 'Have you seen my daughter? They're huge, these places, so easy to get lost in.' She added, 'I tell her to keep an eye out for landmarks, otherwise you lose your way. But I think she doesn't believe she could get lost, whatever I say.' She paused. 'Jenny will be a while, if I know anything about my daughter. Will you join me for a coffee'

Mrs Morgan turned to signal for a waitress, but Olivia jumped up, saying she'd go to the counter and give the order. How was she to handle this? She didn't want to pull out a phone and let Mrs Morgan see her ringing. She'd wake up to the fact that they'd caught her. She signalled to the most mature looking of the people at the counter, said loudly, 'One hot chocolate, please, nice and strong,' then murmured that she'd run to earth a missing person and she would like this made known to the central office. 'Please! It's urgent!'

A moment later she was back with Mrs Morgan, asking if she might address her as Beverley. The older woman considered this acceptable, then, on further reflection, desirable. 'I sometimes think that younger people forget that we were once young too, we elderlies.' Then, having pondered what she'd said, a huge smile flushed her face. 'But I don't think I need to tell you that ...' Something in this response caused Olivia to ask, 'How many children did you have, Mrs ... er, Beverley?' The old lady said three, but seemed uncertain, and Olivia didn't know, indeed she wondered if she'd ever been told. She supposed she had but the word felt unreliable. Mrs Morgan may simply have said the first number that came into her head. Olivia thought of a way to find out. 'What were their names?'

Mrs Morgan – Beverley – answered quickly, 'Their names? Why, their names were Genevieve, Thomas and Giselle!' She glowed, made

radiant by the thought. Olivia, on the other hand, knew that these were the names of Jenny's children. She knew nothing about when people switched into Alzheimer-vagueness or when and how they came out of it, as she understood they did at times. If only Jenny would arrive and guide her mother – Jenny'd know how to handle her, surely? – to her car, the episode would be on the verge of ending. But it wasn't Jenny who showed up next, it was Nancy Naughtin, the quietest of the friends who'd shown up at the beach house, married to Rex, who was something of an artist as well as being a rather withdrawn young man. They greeted each other.

'Nancy! What brings you here?'

'I'm doing a job for Rex. Someone told him there's a shop here that sells canvas ... he needs it to paint on ... far below the prices they have at Dean's.'

Olivia said, 'Oh, where's that? I wouldn't have thought this was much of a place for artists' supplies.'

'Neither would I. But Rex got this idea in his head. Someone told him. You've got the day off, he said, go and see what you can find.'

'Haven't you got a name? Of the shop I mean.'

The answer was no. Rex had sent her to find out. They've got a guide at every entry, he'd told her, you simply had a look and worked out who might be worth investigating. To Nancy, this didn't seem enough to go on, but Rex had told her that it was like learning to swim ... you jumped in the deep end and you had to know what to do! For some reason this reported statement irritated Beverley Morgan. Breaking into the topic, she snapped, 'Isn't that typical! There are plenty of men like that! It's their wives they want to throw in at the deep end, never themselves!'

This startled Nancy, coming as it did from a stranger. She looked at the older woman in a way that questioned her right to exist. Defending herself, she said, 'Men can be arrogant, yes ... It's usually when they don't know what else to do. When I hear Rex giving orders that he couldn't carry out himself, I know he needs help.'

Both Olivia and Beverley Morgan said it: 'Help?'

Nancy was a little smug when she countered them. 'Help. Do you know what I'm going to do, now that I'm at Westfield?'

They didn't.

'I'm going to find him some canvas. We have an arrangement with money, you see. When I buy the canvas, it'll be *his* money I'm spending. I'll buy him some canvas somewhere no matter how much it costs, and when he complains I'll go quiet, and let him work out his own mistake for himself. You told me to get it, I'll say.' Beverley Morgan was outraged by this. 'But what a waste! Nobody should spend money like that!' She looked at Olivia, confusion on her face, and demanded to know, 'What am I doing here!' The confusion resolved itself in a simple question. 'Where's my daughter? Why isn't Jenny here?'

To Olivia's immense relief, Jenny appeared at that moment, as if summoned by her mother's recovery, however temporary it might be. Olivia signalled wildly, ordering Nancy via a stern look to be silent, and put her hand on Beverley Morgan's hand. 'There. There she is, see her? Over by that cinema doorway.' She indicated her daughter to Mrs Morgan, who'd claimed Genevieve, Thomas and Giselle in her absence, and flourished her hand again to capture the attention of her friend.

Jenny saw them. In a moment she was beside the table, but her mother was in no hurry to make peace. 'What were you doing in the cinema when I had to sit out here and wait?' Nancy wished she was somewhere else; this trio were mad. 'I'm here with a job to do, if you don't mind. I'll excuse myself and go looking for that canvas now. Rex ...' she began and ended. Her husband's name explained itself. Rex. Had a need and didn't know what to do about it, so he gave the problem to Nancy; in accepting it, Nancy was playing him at his own game and might well defeat him. Olivia wanted her gone. She wanted to be gone herself. Bloody Beverley, mother of her own grandchildren, bloody Jenny, who'd let her mother slip away ... 'Shouldn't we all be getting on home?' she said. 'I think we've finished our little excursion for today.'

Jenny responded to the anger she heard in the voice. 'Yes. Home. Today's excursion finished. It might be simplest if I go and get the car and bring it to *that* entrance ...' the word annoyed her, so she replaced it '... *exit* there. Mother! You go down there and wait with Olivia.' She looked at her friend, challenging her to challenge the ruling. 'I'll pick you up from there. Then it's home. We've been here long enough!'

She was gone. It fell to Olivia to get Mrs Morgan to her feet, laden with a couple of bags of things she'd bought, and down the broad passage that took people from the sumptuous hall that drew them in, to the swinging doors that let them out. They had only a minute to wait before Jenny's car swept to the edge of the walkway. They were taken home, Olivia first, then Beverley Morgan to the house which had reclaimed her. Jenny was cursing; she'd been meaning to get a man to change the locks so her mother couldn't escape, but she simply hadn't thought it was that urgent, and Beverley had got away. Not again! Taking the older lady inside, she implored her to put her feet up: 'It's no good offering you a cup of tea, mother, on top of the chocolate you had at Westfield. Perhaps you might show me what you bought ...' She indicated the shopping bags, but Mrs Morgan had forgotten them. 'I didn't buy anything dear. I didn't see anything worth buying. Besides, we've got everything we need already, haven't we, in this house?'

Nancy found her canvas. Rex would be pleased at the price, and the quality. It was in a household hobby display put up by Myers, and there were brushes also, made in China, ranging from stiff but delicate strands you could almost write with to beards on sticks, these latter attached to examples of Chinese calligraphy that had been chosen and mounted by someone with real expertise. Nancy bought a roll of canvas then considered the brushes. Would Rex like them? She thought he would, then she realised that she was yearning to present them to him. She had no gift for painting herself, she wished she had such a gift, and to add the brushes to her partner's skill-set ...

It would be an act of love, and she wondered how it would be received. She had a feeling, whenever he showed her some of his work and she liked it, that she was seeing it from an angle unintended by her partner, or that it didn't represent, to Rex, what it looked like to her. She felt very strongly, on such occasions, that he needed her approval but the reasons for this need were as obscure to him as they were to her. He had a gift, she knew, and he had a need, that too was obvious, but how the two were linked in him, and in his demand on her, neither of them properly understood.

Rex had come home one day with the news that he'd been standing outside the Channel Eight TV station when he'd been greeted by his friend Gabrielle - or that was what Nancy thought he'd said. Gabrielle had taken him inside the station and showed him around, introducing him to some of the people she worked with. They were witty, dancing on the line that led the present to the future, and they viewed everybody, even heavyweight businessmen and senior politicians as players in the game which they presented to the watching public. They'd excited Rex, who'd never been in a TV studio before and couldn't stop talking about it. He told Nancy about the lights and spaces, the bits and pieces of background, all the fragments of things which were enough to convince the public that they were connected to reality. 'It was a sort of belief system made of fragments,' he told Nancy, and, flitting everywhere in his account was Gabrielle: Nancy was jealous. It was a flush, a warmth in the cheek whenever the name was mentioned. At last, unable to bear it any longer, she accused him of being swept off his feet by Gabrielle. To her surprise, he laughed. Instead of looking guilty, or caught out, he was grinning broadly, even stupidly, as she thought.

'Gabriel's a man. He was good to me, and I'm not a poofter! Whatever gave you the idea he was a she?' The confusion on her face made him laugh. 'I said Gabriel, not Gabrielle!' She could hear no difference between the two, for the good reason that there wasn't any. She blushed again, then she was angry. 'I don't know whether to believe you or not!' This didn't trouble him at all. 'They're recording a show next Friday. They said I could watch, if I liked. Let's go together. They won't mind if I bring somebody, or I don't think they will. What do you think? Wanta be in it?'

She said she did because it was the only decent thing she could say. He poured himself a beer while she looked on, having no idea that their lives were at a turning point. They were young enough to believe that people could control what happened to them, who thought that one moved decisively towards goals that had been chosen because they appealed to the more or less rational mind. They watched the news that night in the belief that the messages reaching them were coming from a carefully converted old warehouse that had

been turned into a place of truth. 'You see that bank of lights he's got beside his right shoulder,' Rex said, 'well, there's a sort of partition behind those lights and behind that there's a little tiny room with a bench where ... maybe three people could sit, if they all moved up tight, though there's usually only two people there, on computers, and that's where they key in the little bits of paper their readers read from.' He made himself sound ever so knowledgeable.

'And Gabriel?'

'He's one of the people who puts the news together, but he reckons there's a good chance he might get a go at reading it one day. Matt Blake's told Gabriel he's leaving pretty soon, and he'll put in a word for Gabriel when the time comes. If it all comes out the way they want, Gabriel will get the job and we'll know the newsreader!'

If they'd cared to think about Rex's words they'd have seen them as a confession of unimportance, but they didn't: they revered the silver screen and what it brought. Gabriel was on the brink of taking a step beyond them, away from humanity to screen-land, where actions and words changed from trivial reality to something magical; life was lived by other rules on the far side of the glass. Television presenters walked the world in some protected way, drawing vulgar crowds to look into the cameras that made the presenters privileged, while remaining mortal themselves. Presenters spoke words and the world listened. A few nights later, Gabriel appeared before the cameras with his notes, amazingly confident. He had the knack of stressing here, relaxing there, so that every word could be noticed by listeners, and a way of talking to everyone individually and at the same time. He's been observing for years, Nancy thought, and working out how to do it. She studied their friend in his minutes on screen, bringing him into herself, taking him in as he revealed himself. This went on, night after night. Rex watched too, fascinated and envious. Success was that simple? Anyone could have it if they were in the right place at the right time. Gabriel! They read about him in newspaper guides and pop magazines, they saw photos of him, modest enough because he was smart and never allowed himself to be shown as anything but the wonder-boy next door. He carried it off. Three weeks after he started he was on the way to being a household word.

Rex and Nancy knew him!

Nancy taught at a primary school in a good suburb, teaching youngsters how to read, and Rex worked part time, three days a week, at a gallery that sold artists whose work was rising in value. He kept quiet about his own painting, partly because he felt inferior, partly because he wanted his paintings, when finally he showed them, to be a surprise. Nancy knew her teaching was valuable because when she entered her classroom or the school's library she could feel the love and warmth the children gave her: it was trust, acceptance so complete that she sensed she'd never find its equal, but it was also, she felt, a trap. Goodness, virtue, quality, were traps unless the surrounding society honoured you for them. In the praise of parents and school administrators she could sense their judgement that they'd found someone who fitted the niche they'd put her into, so that her importance for the children she managed was not equalled by the importance of those who employed her, nor by the children's parents, many of them. She was useful because she kept the kids happy, and that was what schools were for, in their minds – to get the kids out of their hair while they did the things that boosted their egos and reduced the hours when little voices and their piercing insights might reduce the adult world they believed they belonged to. When we evaluate ourselves we have to choose what messages we allow to affect us; only the strong, the well-balanced, can give a strong, full vote, value of one, to a child. They can tear us down so easily, those that are our own.

Nancy was valuable, but only half-realised it: we might revise that fraction to a quarter or less, especially if we had been privy to her thoughts in the weeks after Gabriel was promoted to a voice in the public mind, an access to the world's wholeness for those – all of us – who had to live knowing only their part. He spoke – and it was so. He read, and she knew that wells of knowledge had been dug to provide him with what he gave the public. She wasn't jealous any more, she was happy to share him because he shared himself with anyone who turned on a telly. They had only to choose the channel and time and he was theirs, lips moving sweetly as he read. He told her on one of the times she and Rex had drinks with him that sitting in front of the microphone made him feel both enlarged, and reduced. He was

nothing but the news he would be reading; and he was everybody's as he did it. 'You're lucky, you two, to have each other. I belong to everybody and when I don't, I'm nothing much at all.' He smiled a smile that would win his listeners' hearts, if they'd been sitting with him, and it told Rex and Nancy, that smile, that to be a lesser figure was somehow luckier; to be chosen, as he'd been, was to leave an earlier self behind, and become ... something new, and beyond his control.

He knew, but didn't say, that he wanted to be loved; and Nancy, looking on a face that would be made up in an hour or so for his minutes of magic, knew she loved him too, in some way she couldn't determine. She was too wise to compare him, his success, was it, with struggling Rex who hadn't marked the world in any significant way, and might live and die without leaving a mark, and she knew that if she transferred her affection to Gabriel it would damage Rex terribly, but the fact was that the feelings she had for the transmuted Gabriel lifted her onto a level she'd never dreamed she might occupy, and this new, uplifted self felt that the classroom Nancy, the loved-by-children Nancy, the admired-by-parents Nancy was a small creature, without drama, without any personal effect, was tiny, trivial, uninteresting, and really, not to be bothered with.

She could be something, someone, else; she had only to close her hand on the glittering stone before her!

It was through Nancy that Gabriel discovered his new power. When things happened at the studio that he couldn't cope with, he rang her. Occasionally they met and talked. He was surrounded by women, and by men who were smarter than he was, in a commercial system operating at speed. Owners had to be satisfied and the public amused. The one depended on the other. Gabriel was aware that he was part of an endless transaction by which his city dealt with itself and the surrounding world. It didn't pretend that what it did had any truth because it had to be functional; that is to say it would bring you news without vouching for it. If you didn't like it, it had been done by someone else. Responsibility lay elsewhere.

This was an astounding proposition and Gabriel was smart, or honest, enough to know that it must affect him to be part of it. Hence Nancy's importance. How did she judge him? Did she still like him? He made her tell him about her work and he envied her, yes envied her, those laughing, playful children. They were what he suspected he'd never been: happy because any thinking they did about themselves was softened by the tenderness of their teacher. Nancy managed to love them all, despite their quirks. Gabriel smiled when she told him things that had happened in her classes and said one day, a week before he allowed her into his bed, 'I think I'm just one of those kids you've got devoted to you.'

He was under siege at the station, with three or four of the women there showing their keenness on him, and he'd even caught the attention of the manager's wife, a woman of almost forty but years younger than her husband, his boss. She was called Dee, this older woman, though nobody at the studio knew what Dee was short for; queries of any sort drew the response 'It's not Diana, I can tell you that, and I'm not going to end up like her.' This was regarded as witty in the world of the studio, and it masked what she wanted to keep out of sight. She'd seen Nancy at the studio doorway once or twice and read the situation well: Gabriel was a beautiful boy who needed help in growing up. She talked to him when she got the opportunity and told him what he half knew and half repressed, that Nancy was in love with him. 'She's not satisfied with what she's got,' Dee told Gabriel, 'so it's up to you to take the next step for her, and lead her where she wants to be.' Knowing full well how foolish he was being, Gabriel said 'Where's that?' to her, and was answered by a wistful was it? - smile.

So the following week, on a day when the school was going on an excursion to the zoo, Nancy rang in to say that she wasn't well, and she went instead to Gabriel's little apartment near the studio, and they spent the day in each other's arms. The joy of possession for Nancy, the relief for Gabriel, who desired well enough the women who desired him but knew that to let them close would be to let them take control of him: not for nothing was the Queen the most powerful figure in the game of chess, which he'd played as a youngster and drifted away from; it was a power game and to play it well you had to analyse in a way that wasn't part of his nature. He wanted happiness

without results, or effects, that is, you did things that brought you joy and they didn't circle around you and come back as demands and responsibilities. That wasn't what he wanted!

They lay in bed, they walked around the tiny apartment arm in arm. 'I'd love it if we could go for a walk together,' he told her, 'but we'd have to get dressed and then it'd be different!' She was made happy by this statement. She wanted possession of him, and one way to do it was to tell the world she owned him. The other was simply to own him: strange that she felt a need to let anyone know? They had only to go back to his bed and take hold of each other, ever so gently, and lead themselves to that form of possession which was also a gift, an absolute which could be taken no further but might, as the years went on, become richer and more complex, more complete: the future was something to look forward to. Nancy cried with joy and Gabriel recognised what she was expressing, and waited tenderly for Nancy to reach the end of that slide, as he put it: 'There are times when our happiness has to be experienced solo before it can be shared.' When she looked at him in surprise he told her about his youthful visits to Luna Park, enjoying Big Dipper rides and boats in the Tunnel of Love, play forms of the sexual flights they were giving each other as they took each other, accompanied each other, in passing from the world of childhood's pleasures into the richness of maturity, where the pleasures were as strong but the prices higher.

In the weeks that followed, Gabriel used Nancy; he enacted with her the things he wanted to enact with the women at the station, the admirers, and Dee, most of all, partner of his boss. He wanted them all, desired them, but simply played the games of pleasantries, of flirting, while possessing Nancy, accepting the love she was giving him, a love which, had she known it, was developing him, readying him for the time when he'd think her love too easily taken and needed to move on to any and preferably all of the others: he was the station's darling, the public's idol, being groomed by their admiration for the many loves he would share on his passage to the serenity of self-possession. Nancy's first awareness that what was happening with Gabriel was changing her in unexpected places was when she realised that although she still loved her students, it was a more distant sort of benign observation,

a kindness which emanated from a part of her which had as its base her passion for Gabriel. Certainly she still loved them but they were secondary to the feelings she had for the beautiful newsreader who belonged to the watching world and could only be reconnected to the everyday world by her acts of self-giving love.

In her room in the apartment she still shared with Rex, she had photos galore of the children at her school, and none of the lover she'd taken as her way forward. Rex had without saying anything moved into the spare bedroom to sleep; it was both tactful of him to let her know in that way that he knew what she couldn't bring herself to tell him directly, and it was a signal from her former partner that he was readying himself for departure. A new job, a new relationship, a new anything and he'd be ready to take the plunge. It was his only way of bargaining – not to bargain at all. He was miserable, but he didn't plead and he didn't inquire. He still did the shopping because he enjoyed it, he still bought flowers for the apartment, and showed his affection when he took his turn to do the cooking. He'd never looked after her so carefully before, and Nancy wondered at this until she realised that he thought she would come a crash pretty soon and would need support and a shoulder to cry on; this infuriated her! He was seeing her with eyes of charity when she was the luckiest person alive ...

Or was she? Her first misgivings occurred at school where she began to see that the small people she taught with such love would become like her, the girls, and like Gabriel, the boys. They would grow up. The world was full of adult people who had once been young, and look at them now! Humans were such a dubious proposition – selfish, criminal, careless, short-sighted, and lacking, most of them, the wisdom that might guide them towards the tender, the generous, right-minded way of life. This condemnation began to spread backwards and down, until she saw it applying to the boys and girls that clung around her, needing her. Everyone needs, she saw. To be independent, desirable as it was, meant a loss of connection to those surrounding; her little ones were learning how to do all the things that would destroy their charm. They still had the signs of dependence but they were learning how to manage for themselves. It was seen as a virtue by the school and surrounding society. There was

no way out of this, Nancy saw, but to do what Gabriel was doing, and grasp anything you desired if it came within your grip. The moment she felt this she felt her purity disappear. There one minute, gone the next. She didn't love Gabriel, she simply wanted him, and knew that he wanted others more than he wanted her. He used her as a substitute, but as his confidence grew, he'd involve himself with the others that he met through his work – it brought hundreds into his scope – he'd find links of desire with each of them, he'd go to their homes or they'd come to his, and then, made bolder by sexual success, he'd go on trips, weekends, long holidays, with the women he loved and he'd give them the glamour he'd acquired with his work at the station, and they'd give him their richness, and as this happened and re-happened, he'd become wealthy in the ways of love, more desirable than ever, and she'd ...

... be left behind, not even forgotten, but half-remembered as a little step taken at the beginning. He'd look back from the place where he could have anybody and wonder why he'd needed Nancy? What must I have been like if that was the best I could do? She cried, in her desperation, and Rex, still sharing the same apartment, knew her pain. Waking one night to hear her sobbing in the other room, he got out of his bed and slipped into hers, careful not to touch her. The sobbing he'd heard was caused by an unhappy dream about her lover, but when she felt a person getting in beside her, she woke, sensed that it was Rex, and out of her mouth came the word 'No', uttered over and over. 'I haven't come here to drag you back,' he told her. 'I'm here to put a bit of backbone into you. You need it right now.' And then, into the silence which greeted his thought, he added, 'I'm right, aren't I? You need to be made strong?'

Weeks passed, with Rex taking care of her. He was attentive in ways he'd never bothered with before, and occasionally he came to her school to have lunch with her in the staffroom. The other teachers felt they were under observation, then changed their view; it was clear that he was supporting her, and they began to speculate on why this was needed. Nancy found him wanting to show her his work when he finished a session of painting, something he'd not granted in the past.

He sat quietly while she took in what he'd done, and tried to work out his intentions. She was only rarely near the mark and was relieved that he didn't snap at silly things she said: her pain was changing him.

She'd never lived with pain before, except for passing moments. Now it had become part of her. She read her children Alan Marshall's *I* Can Jump Puddles and was relieved to see how their sympathies went to the crippled boy who was determined to lead an active life. 'He realised he was different,' she told them, 'but made up his mind to have a life like everyone else.' The children liked the strength they saw in the boy Alan, not knowing that their teacher was going through something similar: her love had steadily been downvalued as its object, the beautiful Gabriel, transferred his sexuality from Nancy, the available, easy girl he'd known for ages, to the more exciting women he attracted through his work. Nancy felt her life had been pushed into a pigeonhole, a place where you filed something of little importance. She rarely saw Gabriel now, and if she did he was merely pleasant, affable but indifferent, politely holding her at a distance. Something about him told her he was faster in choosing and dealing with his circumstances; he used the word 'turnover' one day and she realised it came out of some subconscious reaction to his own life – speeded up, demanding, violent in its ups and downs. She asked him how long he would work at the station where he read the news and he laughed; another station had offered him almost double the salary if he transferred. 'But I'm happy where I am,' he said, 'money's not everything!'

This told her everything she didn't want to know, and he said it to her on the day she ran into Mrs Hannaberry on the stairs of their apartment building. Mrs Hannaberry was elderly, she lived on food bought ever so timorously within her pension, and she talked if anyone was prepared to listen about her illnesses and what her doctor was and wasn't able to do. Rex ran into her on the stairs one day and when he got back to Nancy he told her, 'Guess what! You wouldn't believe this! That old ... Mrs Juniper Berries or whatever her name is, she wants to swap apartments with us. Says she's too old to live on the first floor. The stairs. Says she should be on the ground floor!' He waved his hands. 'Where we are!' He was grinning hugely. Nancy was steadier. 'The stairs? I suppose they could be a problem ... How

many years has she been living up there, though? She must be able to cope by now.' Then she said to Rex: 'Do you want to move upstairs, and let her have this place? It'd be an awful lot of bother. We'd have to repaint your studio, it's a mess as it is now ...' Rex was grinning still. 'Move? Be buggered! I'm not moving. She's got a cheek if she expects me – us – to do that.'

The matter wasn't ended there, however. Rex had been affected by the request because he saw why it had been made. The old woman wasn't getting enough attention. He made enquiries at the council, and organised meals on wheels for Mrs Hanneberry. A social worker from the council came and took away a list of Mrs Hanneberry's relatives and connections. These were contacted and asked to visit. The old lady, who was not without possessions, was persuaded to make a will. She realised, after some considerable time, who had brought about these changes and took a fancy to Rex. She asked him about his job and mentioned the names of some elderly people – 'my generation, you know' – who had paintings by well known artists in their homes. 'Waiting to die, not looking at them any more, they ought to sell them and put them in hands of people who'll appreciate them.' Rex mentioned these names to people at the gallery where he worked, overtures were made, and some Heysens and a Clarice Beckett were offered for sale, the gallery people rewarding Rex with a slice of the commissions. 'It's only a few hundred dollars,' he said to Nancy, 'but we ought to use the money to do something we won't forget. What do you say?'

Nancy said they should go to the areas in South Australia where Hans Heysen had worked, and soak up the atmosphere that had fed into his painting, and they did this, flying to Adelaide, then hiring a car to take them through Hahndorf, the Adelaide Hills and Flinders Ranges. Stepping off the plane that brought them back to Melbourne, Rex said to his partner, 'That's the first thing we've done together after the storm. There's hope for us yet.' Nancy was startled by these words. She'd thought their separation was only a matter of time, a breaking of old habits so they could form new ones, and here was Rex talking as if they were going to sail on. 'Perhaps you're right,' she said. 'I hadn't thought of us in that way.' All Rex did was grin in the way that she

thought was stupid, was shallow and thoughtless, but which she now saw as a sign of persistence, or readiness for whatever came next. It was a side of him she hadn't accepted because she hadn't realised it was there.

Now she saw.

Rex wasn't a very developed, or mature, young man because his interests ran all over the place. It was no accident that it was Rex, not her, who had accommodated the presence, and the needs, of Mrs Hanneberry, and then done something for her. She, Nancy, would have shut the door to keep the world out. A whirlwind would be a blessing, an excitement at least, for Rex. He might put it in a painting. The people at the gallery where he worked rather deftly pushed his paintings away from their walls and recommended that he try a neighbouring – and socially inferior – gallery as the site for an exhibition – when he was ready. 'You need a body of work,' they told him, 'and at the moment you're taking a scattergun approach. People – buyers – won't know where to place you.' This angered Rex, who didn't want to be placeable, but was: he hadn't found his style or his subject matter yet, he was experimenting, as he called it, or looking around as the directors of his gallery would have put it. He'd fume about the gallery he worked for, and the weaknesses of the painters they represented, but even as he let all his unhappiness out, he knew, inside himself, that the criticisms he'd heard last time he brought the gallery owners home to inspect his work, were valid: the painter inside him was still growing up, was imitating what others had done, didn't yet have a way of seeing all his own, as you had to have if you were to get the recognition, the admiration, the respectful treatment he craved.

'It's all or nothing,' he told Nancy, one gloomy afternoon. 'I'm giving up painting for a few weeks, maybe a few months, and when I start again, that's it. One last try. Do or die. I get there or I drop it. I'm not dragging myself, and you – Nancy – through one long, lasting, lifelong failure. I'll have a show, everything linked and consistent, and I'll either strike a reef of gold or I'll fail and if I fail then I'll clean out the studio, and ...' he hesitated '... drive a truck!'

Nancy wanted to laugh, but he was so determined, and so miserable, that she had to stop herself. Besides, she knew that he, in

his way, had hit an end-point just as she had, not so long before. He'd stuck with her, even though she hadn't asked him to, and she knew he needed her to stick with him now. This must be what people did, she saw, to make their marriages last – and the two of them weren't even married, yet they were certainly bonded, and marriage was a bond obeyed by two people. It was other things too – a social link, a meshing of families, an incident in the ongoing creation of generations, one after the other, little babies growing up to be young adults, then parents, uncles and aunts, then grandparents, then people dimly remembered back somewhere in the family line. There was no stopping time, so there was no preventing the major figures of this generation becoming minor memories for family members in later years; time was a river, it was created - how strange this was - by those who swam in it, and it had to be endlessly recreated. Nancy wondered what Rex's next paintings would be like, because they were in the future now, they would present themselves when he resumed his painting, and they would become heirlooms one day, in her and his family, or the homes of other families not known to them yet. Nancy thought of her little people, laughing and crying, spiteful and tender, thoughtful and heedless, and it made her feel godlike to be in charge of them, shaping their days and their experiences as the children themselves didn't know how to shape them, even though they were doing it from the inner springs and sources of their characters. 'I feel so helpless,' she told Rex. 'I'd like to help but I suppose the only way I can help is by being here. So that's all I can do. If you want to stop painting, I'll support you. When you want to start again, I'll support you. As for the work you'll do, and the success I want you to have, well, what can we do but wait and see? Nothing. So we'll just wait and see.'

'Thank you,' Rex said. 'I can't ask for anything more.'

The couple saw less of Gabriel. Rex got Nancy to talk about the children she taught, and held forth volubly on what he hoped to achieve on canvas. But he didn't paint; he drew occasionally, usually things he hadn't seen, like circus acts, or skiers crossing snow-capped slopes. He said he'd like to take up riding, and suggested to Nancy that they go for a weekend in some bush location where

city people were guided through mountains on horseback. They only did this once. Nancy wasn't an animal lover, she said she preferred to walk, and Rex had to admit that he wasn't comfortable with a whole party of people who knew no more about riding than he did. 'It looks like I have to wait for the spirit to move me,' he said, and became withdrawn, although he still took Mrs Hanneberry shopping when she knocked on their door. 'This is the perfection of slavery,' he told Nancy one day, 'when we have the liberty we need to do anything we like, and we haven't got anything to do.' They stopped watching television after a night when they turned on a quiz show to find that the guest compere for the evening was none other than the Gabriel they knew, amusing the studio audience and 'reassuring' the contestants with a stream of genial nonsense. 'That's success in some people's eyes,' Rex said, his voice revealing that he was all too familiar with failure.

He had four days work a week at the gallery, kept busy by the Schulberg family who ran the place. They prided themselves on knowing who owned what and they were forever telling Rex to scour through lists of sales at auction – vendors, buyers, prices, families that had large holdings of any artist's work, and so on. 'It ought to inoculate me against painting, the whole art world and everything it stands for,' he told Nancy in another of their conversations which didn't seem to lead anywhere, 'but it doesn't. It makes me more determined than ever that I'm going to break into all this by doing things the way that pleases me.' Nancy knew better than to ask what that was; she'd find out when, and if, he restarted painting.

After a drawn-out two and a half months, he began. He began with drawings, no more than sketches, to see what sort of subject matter he was setting himself. To Nancy's surprise, he showed her drawings of Marilyn Monroe with Arthur Miller, and then with John Kennedy, her president. Miller looked severe, and intellectual while JFK simply had the hots for the actress. Marilyn was different but in what way Nancy couldn't be sure, probably because Rex wasn't sure either. His next series was quite different; it began with an owl, then a magpie, proudly black and white, then a white cockatoo in a cage, and followed by a wren with a wagging tail. A couple of days later

he returned to his theme of couples, with Charlie Chaplin as a waif and as Adolf Hitler, and that was followed by a vertical picture with Joan Sutherland at the top, mouth open and chin drawn down, while below her was her husband, conducting. So his themes, it seemed, were to be solitude, and couples; Nancy had a feeling that she and Rex himself would be the next embodiment of his couples theme, but days went by without this development occurring. She wondered if he would move from sketches to paintings, but this didn't happen, or not yet. She sensed that he was doing sketches that he didn't show her, and that they must be more sexual than the ones she'd seen. To test him on this, she suggested to him, one day, that he might like to draw Gabriel – and who would he pair him with?

Rex was amused, in a way that told her he'd been thinking of drawing Gabriel; she wondered if Rex sneaked a look at the newsreader's station when he was at work, for he didn't turn on Gabriel's station when she was home. Then it occurred to her to wonder if Gabriel was one of those he'd draw alone, or with a partner; Rex was interested in relationships and the solitary state which was supposed to be its opposite, but Nancy had a feeling that his two strands of thought would merge at some future time. Another thought which she kept to herself was the wish that he would concentrate on the two of them, he and her, and not so much analyse as display proudly the two of them in their state of recovery.

If that was what they were in: she wasn't sure. At last he started painting, and the first one brought to a state of semi-completion for her to look at was, to her surprise, an elderly Bernard Shaw with a vivacious actress. They were being served afternoon tea in a café, only lightly suggested, by another, older, woman turning away from Shaw and the painter. 'That's his wife,' Rex said, 'but I've deliberately made her unlike the real wife. She's just another woman who's jealous of the one getting attention.'

'These people are all famous,' Nancy said, 'or they were. Why aren't you painting people you know, people alive today?' He was ready for this. 'I'm developing my theme,' he said. 'People've got their minds made up about Marilyn and JFK. They know who they are, they're not a threat to their own ideas about themselves. That'll

come later. In the second series.' Nancy was pleased to hear this: a second series was planned! He really was underway. 'Have you said anything to the Shulbergs, or shown them any drawings?' He shook his head. 'That's the trouble with working at a gallery. They've got me on the payroll so I can't be any good or they'd be selling my work already. But if I show somewhere else, they'll kick me out because I wasn't *loyal* to them!' He was contemptuous in a way she hadn't seen before. 'Maybe you could put a few pictures in a group exhibition and get them to come and have a look. Private viewing so there's no one else about, only you. I can let you in and keep out of the way if that's any help.' He thought about it. 'Might be an idea. Especially for the second series I'm going to do. They'll know some of the people I've got in mind, they'll think they can sell into the circles that know them. Hmmm.' He was pleased. 'I could put Gabriel in with that lot, make his face a bit different but dress him in the things he wears on screen, and with the same women ...'

He stopped. He'd gone too far. She'd break down and cry and it would have been his fault. But she didn't. 'I'm over him now. I want to hurt him. I'd like to see him struck so that he can't strike back. Besides, I suspect he'd rather enjoy the notoriety. He'd threaten legal action, all that sort of warlike stuff, but he wouldn't do it. He'd enjoy the gossip, he'd fly even higher because he knew everyone was talking about him. Good one, Rex, let's do it that way!'

Nothing came of this, or not immediately, but it left Nancy troubled that something cruel had entered her mind. She rang Olivia Page and told her she wanted to talk. They met in one of Carlton's many cafes, a place packed with people like themselves. Nancy remarked on this. 'These people treat the street as an extension of where they live. They flow into cafes as if they own them ...'

Olivia knew this well. '... and they do. Some of them spend half their income in these places. They don't even cook, a lot of them. They pay to have their meals served. They don't eat till they get here at lunchtime ...'

'... to have their breakfast!' Then Nancy added, 'And they make me feel I don't fit. I fit as well as any of them, at least I have a job and

I work!' Olivia noticed that her friend was trembling. Would she wait, or would she ask?

She waited. Nancy picked over the events of their stay by the sea, and many things since. Olivia told her friend that she wanted to have children but she needed to feel right about it and such a feeling hadn't come yet. She told Nancy that Jack was keen on the idea of children so there wasn't any block there; it was inside herself. 'My mother wonders why I don't just do it, she says she never had any doubts about having me or my brothers. You all just happened! she says. I want the world to be ready for my child. I want to put everything to rights before I bring another person into the world.' Nancy smiled faintly at this problem - so different from her own. 'I want revenge. I want to get Gabriel on his knees. He used me to build up his confidence so he could start having lots of women and now he's got them I want to bring him down. The trouble is, I think it's shameful for a woman to want what I want. What he does is just simple male vanity but what I want to do is ugly. It's negative. It's a part of me that I'm ashamed of and I want to get rid of it.'

So, Olivia thought, that's what it is. 'How does Rex feel about all this?'

'He's lovely,' Nancy said, 'and yet he's useless. You know, we've got a lonely old lady in the flat just above us. She's such a bother, she's a real nuisance. Rex is amazingly good to her. Listens to her, puts up with all the silliest suggestions. You know what? She wants to have our flat. Says the stairs give her so much bother. Wants to have the ground floor that we've got. I tell Rex that when she starts talking that way he's not to say anything. It's all very well to be kind to her but she's not getting our place. If I decide to have children they'll want to go in and out without the bother of stairs. I don't want my kids falling down stairs and hurting themselves ...'

It occurred to her that she was talking thoughtlessly in an area that was problematical for Olivia. She looked hard at the other woman, trying to ascertain her feelings, yet Olivia yielded nothing beyond, 'What's our problem? Vanity, I think.' Having said this, she became silent again. 'I say my child deserves perfection. Who am I to say that? Look at the state of the world. I can't find perfection. I can't

create it. Yet I'm lucky. I've got a partner I can't fault. Jack wants to be a dad. Why am I holding back?' She looked at Nancy in an intimidating way. 'You want to hurt Gabriel. Well, he deserves to be hurt because he hurt you. But then again, take care. If you hurt him back, you're as guilty as he is. You've played him at his own game instead of lifting yourself somewhere better ...'

Nancy broke in. 'There isn't anywhere better, that's the problem. I do want to hurt him and that'll make me feel good. *Then* I'll be able to make a change in myself, but only after I've done something that brings him down. He's keen on his manager's wife. She's older than he is. He wants to bring her down to him and at the same time lift himself up to where she is. He wants to be top rank. He wants to be the star in her eyes. He wants her to chase him. They've all got to chase him! He's so *fucking* condescending.' Their eyes met. Olivia had never heard Nancy use that word. Nancy went on. 'He's so pleased with himself. I tell Rex I'm over Gabriel. I am. I don't want to see him. I don't want to bring him down myself, I just want to hear that he's come a crash!' She paused. 'And I'm ashamed of it. Got any ideas?'

Olivia said, 'You and I are the same generation. In some way, we belong to each other. We'll have children one of these days and they'll grow up together. They'll compare notes about their parents and they'll find all the ways we were the same and different. No matter how much we may feel that we're quite different from each other, they'll only notice what we share, and they'll lump us into the same category. That's what people were like in those days, they'll say. We're doomed to this, you realise, there's no escaping it. The only way around it is to withdraw from the world and I don't want to do that. I want a good life. You may say I *have* a good life but that's not how I feel. Something's still got to happen and ... '

She looked both foolish and noble: perhaps the qualities belong together.

"... I don't know what it is."

Most groups have a centre, or cause, though those that form the group may not give it any thought. Why should they? The group is a lively formation, with a life of its own. When Olivia told Jack about her

meeting with Nancy, it caused him to think. 'How did Nancy and Rex come into our circle? Can you remember?' She couldn't. He rubbed his eyes. 'They sort of don't fit. Everyone else, I think I could say how we connected with them, but Nancy and Rex, no, I can't.'

'Does it matter?'

'No, it doesn't matter, we're connected with them now. You and Nancy have just had a heart to heart meeting, sharing the things you've got on your minds.' He paused. 'You don't do that with every common or garden acquaintance. I wouldn't expect you to. In fact I think I wouldn't like it if you did, any more than I would myself. We need to protect ourselves and being choosy who you talk with is one way of doing it.' Then he changed tack. 'Did she have any suggestions?'

'No. I think it was me that handed out most of the advice.'

This made him look at her. Should he ask? He thought not. Suddenly he remembered something. 'I was asking you about Nancy and Rex. Our circle. How did they come into it. I still can't remember that, but I can remember how our little circle started.'

She looked at him, meaning, go on.

'It was before I met you, though only just. I'd been a friend of Carlo Furlinghetti at uni, he was on the student paper, writing lots of critical articles about business affecting the university. 'The Vice-Chancellor invites them in! That sort of thing. The Vice-Chancellor didn't like it and I had a reliable tip-off that he was going to do something about Carlo. Well, he didn't need to. We decided to have a weekend at Sorrento to plan our tactics. Everyone connected with the paper was there. And Carlo turned up in a brand new Ford. It took us by surprise, I think we rather envied him. "Capitalism works!" he told us. "You can see for yourself!" And he walked over to greet us, hand outstretched, and he nearly tripped over a garden bed at the motel where we were staying. Capitalism works! He had us all saying it by lunchtime on the first day, and he was right, we couldn't run the paper as a sort of marginal revolutionary rag, we had to admit the obvious. Root and branch revolution was in the past, and the system was working more or less as it was supposed to do. If there was anything wrong, it was up to us to make it better. The days of bannerwaving were over. Maybe there'd never been such a time. Anyhow, two things happened. The whole mob of us working on the paper became updated radicals, except Carlo. He drove home in the Ford, and the next thing we knew, he'd bought that Spanish wreck ...'

'The Hispano-Suiza?'

'That's the one. And set to work on it. He's done a great job. Getting it down to Fairhaven and back was an achievement, even if he couldn't quite bring it off.'

Olivia smiled at the thought of what the Furlinghettis had done. Would they be in Fairhaven next summer? She hoped so ...

'It was a good house. Considering the size, the rent was fair enough. How many people did we have?' She started to count, but Jack's mind was off in another direction. 'Capitalism works. We didn't like to admit it but we thought it did. I'm not so sure now.'

She looked at him, more from courtesy than interest.

'Communism's dead, but our minds are still evolving. Things won't be the same in another fifty years.'

She thought this obvious. Things never were.

'Evolution isn't so much a change as the natural order of things.' 'What are you getting at, Jack?'

He didn't really know, yet he knew his instinct was right. 'If my grandfather could come back, he wouldn't know what to do in the modern world. And yet he was a man of his time.' It was a mystery, he was confused and he didn't know where to start. 'Don't you think?'

She had no idea. 'How did your grandfather come into this?'

He had to laugh. 'I dragged him in, didn't I. I don't know.' His hands flailed helplessly. 'People like us ... we're up to date people. We know what we're doing. You don't catch us doing silly things, or that's what we'd say. Yet our grandchildren are going to think of us as hopeless old people who couldn't survive in the world they're busy making. They're going to look on us when we're old as if we were always helpless, when it was us who created the world they inherit. If you see what I mean?'

She half-did. 'Another reason not to have children.'

'Children keep you young. They connect you to the world that's going to replace your world. We teach our children how to live and they teach us how to keep up with things. It sounds simple, but it's

huge. It's like a landslide, or a glacier moving, something like that. We think that building a house is permanent, but it's not. In another hundred years people won't want to live in it. Either they'll adapt it so much that it's not the same house, or they'll pull it down and make a modern house with whatever they think it needs.' He wanted to go on but didn't know what to say. He looked at Olivia and although she'd followed him readily enough, she too had nothing to say. How could she? She hadn't played her part in this new generation business, she was stuck in the old, not yet equipped for the change which, according to Jack's argument, she should want to bring about.

'I don't think I've committed myself to my own generation, let alone wanted to produce the next.'

They were watching the news that night when it showed Prince William and his wife and their tiny baby – third in line to the throne, the newsreader said. The baby was lively and showed signs of personality. The screen showed him playing with some New Zealand babies, with the camera, needless to say, following the little royal, and the New Zealand mothers going through the motions of being mothers beside the royal mother, the only one who counted. Jack was careful not to say anything, but Olivia said, 'This disgusts me.' He grinned. 'Which part of it rubs you up the wrong way?'

She was still looking at the screen. 'Those two haven't the slightest interest in New Zealand. They don't want to be there. But the Queen or some of her minders told them to toddle off and charm the Kiwis, and charm us when they get back here, because the royals don't want to be done out of a job. They're symbolic, the media tell us. Symbolic of what? Of the empty-headedness of monarchists, if you ask me. Look at them. They're pretty people, but there's nothing there except privilege. It's oozing out of them. Even the baby knows he's special! Good lord!' She made as if to pick up the remote control, but Jack said, 'Leave it on. They'll be gone in a minute,' and they were, replaced by the early stages of an inquiry into the fires at Morwell which had smothered the town in smoke from an open cut coal mine. Olivia watched this in silence, and then she did what she'd wanted to do before; she switched the television off. 'Those people in Morwell know they're nobody.

The place hasn't got any influence any more.' A smiling Jack said, 'It never had much! I think they're living a fantasy that they used to be important.' He then announced that he'd do the dishes, and Olivia was left to think about her displeasures. What did it matter if the royals charmed New Zealand? Or Morwell was shrouded in dust? Democracy was supposed to give the people what they wanted but it wasn't possible; they got whatever people in power handed them. Substitutes. Entertainment instead of art, which could only be found by going back into earlier centuries. Or you could head for the fringes, where people with very little idea mingled with the gifted. Again she felt disgusted. Quality should be the norm rather than the exception ...

She went to the kitchen. Jack was nearing the end of his job, and in a good mood. She moved close and he put an arm around her. 'Television people bring us bad news,' he said. 'It's their job to keep us anxious. That way, we're easily pushed whichever way they want us to go. It's very simple. We have to be stronger than they are, even when they're all put together.' He looked into her eyes and saw the love he gave her reflected: she needed him, as a unit they were strong. 'The world's full of good people,' he said. 'Living quietly, doing ordinary things. There's no news in that! But that's the hope we've all got if we recognise it ...'

She broke in. 'They're testing us all the time! Something's got to give!' It was clear that she doubted her strength, but he was still sure. 'If they're testing us, we must be testing them! To win us over, they have to show their hand, all the time. And we can hold ourselves in reserve. Play a big card occasionally and surprise them.' He was surprised by his own eloquence, and more surprised than she was when more came out. 'We've got the advantage. We can go passive, let them have their way. And when they call on us, we've disappeared. We don't have to fight to hold the high ground. That's an idea that belongs to Napoleon's time, with his armies taking orders from their high command, standing on a hill ...'

She didn't know what he was talking about. 'What?'

But he was sure. 'You don't have to disobey. You disappear. The battle's for the hill, and where are the soldiers? Underground, hiding. Drinking beer! When you can see they think they've got you, you slip

out of sight, you do something else entirely. They haven't got you at all, they only thought they did!' He flung the tea towel on the things he'd put in the drying rack. 'Pour me a glass of wine, darling. Open something good! I want to have a talk. We'll do things on our terms, not someone else's!'

Don Trevorrow came home after a day in the courts. 'Cops have got Rory Svendsen in their sights. That factory of his that burned down. They think he did it. He says he hadn't been near it for weeks. Well ...' He was ready to laugh, but was watching Tessa, knowing she was fond of Ruth, for reasons not obvious to him. 'If you're smart, you don't do things yourself, you get someone else to do it. They slip into the place in the dead of night, do their business and slip away. Rory could organise that, he's smart enough. What are we having for dinner?'

She said, 'After our holiday by the seaside I think I should be leaving that to you.'

With a pretence of joviality he said, 'Bit of fun, wasn't it. Jack and Olivia provided the house, I thought I'd better earn my keep.' He had no intention of cooking, but he went through the motions. 'What's in the fridge?' – opening it. Tessa smiled faintly and drew back the curtain she'd made to screen off a little eating nook, as she called it, just big enough for two. It was already set. 'You get yourself a sherry and some biscuits,' she told him. 'I'll have a casserole on the table in half an hour. It only needs heating. You can tell me about your day at work while it's warming.'

He loved his wife. She could read him like a book, she served him faithfully, yet she had a mind of her own and it was a mystery to him that he loved to pursue. 'It was an interesting day,' he said. 'You get a sherry too and I'll tell you about it.'

She did so and she sat in the nook with him. 'Quite a big day. It wasn't the courts, though, so much as the story breaking.'

She had no idea. 'The story?'

'Didn't you hear? The stabbing in Sunshine?'

She didn't know where Sunshine was and rather doubted if he did. 'Who stabbed who?' She knew she should have said *whom* but let it go.

'A bloke they haven't caught yet stabbed his de facto of eighteen years.'

'At the court?'

He laughed. 'No! In Sunshine! The funny thing was, they'd been in court earlier that day, over in the western suburbs somewhere, about an intervention order. He was supposed to keep his distance from her. When the hearing was over, she went to a women's refuge, I don't know where that was ...'

She could feel the way it was going to end. 'And?'

'... from the refuge she went back to her solicitor's office, and when she came out, he was there, with a knife.'

It was hardly a question, just a few words to keep him going. 'He killed her?'

'Stabbed her lord knows how many times. In the throat, and in the stomach too, they say. They say she was pregnant in some versions of the story but I'm not sure about that.'

'She died in the street?'

'Yes. People rushed up and tried to protect her but the damage was done by then. They tried CPR but it didn't work. There was blood everywhere. He ran off, got in his car, drove a few blocks, crashed into somebody else, got out and ran off. Cops went looking for him with helicopters, but they haven't found him yet.'

She tried to cope with it. This was the news of the day! It made her sick. She wanted to lie down and moan her heart out. 'Anything else?'

'She had four kids, apparently. I suppose they were his, but I don't know.'

Four kids. Four motherless boys and girls who had to make a life for themselves. It would be impossible, no matter who looked after them. The damage, Don had said, had been done by then, but the killer in his rage had no thought for how much damage he had done. 'They haven't caught him, you said?'

'Not yet. He's on foot, and he's well known to the police in the area, so he won't get away. They'll find him in some back lane somewhere, shivering and not knowing how he got the rage up to do it. They're mostly like that when they're caught up with. They're like bull elephants when they go ... what's the word? ... I can't think of it. Remember George Orwell? Shooting the elephant? The elephant's quite calm when he gets to him with his gun. He doesn't want to shoot it but there's hundreds of people expecting him to kill it. Remember?'

'I think I did read that,' she said, still trying to drag her mind back to what had happened in Sunshine, wherever that was. What was the good of the law? He'd been told to keep away from his woman, or that's what he thought she was – his – and what did he do? Worked out where she'd go, went there, and killed her in an extremity of rage. There'd been a second or two when she might have been saved, but nobody knew there was danger. The knife would have been hidden, the man a stranger that they'd never seen before. He'd escaped his history for a moment and a moment was enough. She was dead and he might as well do the same to himself, his life was over. That was what happened when people lost control. They thought they were doing one thing but they were releasing demons in squadrons taking flight. Her hands were shaking.

'I don't think I'm going to be able to eat that casserole now. Shall I turn it off?'

Don couldn't see why. 'Don't turn it off. It's nice to come home to. It's good to come home every day. I work in a pretty mad world. In court you see everything that's gone wrong, and I have to defend these poor bastards. It's my job and I do my best, even though half of them horrify me.' He felt a need to make a point. 'We're supposed to think that everyone's equal before the law and they must get a fair trial ... and so on. Some of them are so rotten you want to haul them away to some trapdoor, drop them in, and put the lid back down again. Out of sight forever. Leaving the human race much the better for their absence. But that's not what we're allowed to do. They deserve a fair trial, apparently.' Again he paused, trying to see the end of his case.

'If we do anything else, if we give them what they deserve, we demean ourselves. So we have to stage-manage a trial that looks as fair as it can be. It's our only way of retaining a little decency for ourselves. We have to do it because we're afraid we might end up like them.'

He looked at her. The casserole was warming and a pleasing smell was spreading through their kitchen. Tessa was reaching inside herself to see if there was any strength down there, anything that resembled a sense of purpose, and value, left. There was, or there wasn't? She wasn't sure. He could see the effect he'd had.

'You hadn't heard?'

'Not a scrap.'

He was amazed. 'Where have you been? It's been all over town, all afternoon. The place has gone crazy with it.'

Where had she been? She mentioned a few people she'd spoken to, things she'd done. Nobody had mentioned the events in Sunshine and she was relieved, now that she knew, that they hadn't. It was shattering, too damaging to consider. But Don was a legal man, he heard these stories, he had to consider them ...

Apparently.

He took up his sherry, sipped and put it down. He sniffed the air of the kitchen. He fingered the fabric which closed off their dining nook when it wasn't being used. He was happy to be home. Tessa was beautiful, thoughtful, capable ...

Tessa was lost.

Tessa's father Andrew was a Fulbrook, a family on the wrong side of fortune for two generations at least. 'Unlucky me,' he complained. 'I can never get the wind in my sails. If I want to go somewhere, the bus breaks down, or the flight gets cancelled. Ships divert to avoid rough weather and they mightn't know it but it was having me on board that brought the rough weather!' This was how he talked about it in his forties, when Tessa was born. He made jokes of his failings. He gambled. He joined groups who pooled money to own racehorses, and he lost money backing them. The young Tessa saw that he loved these horses because they responded to him. He was good, also, with their trainers and jockeys because he didn't know enough about racing to be a nuisance, just as loving a horse was easy because it didn't question him. Affection was enough. He neither blocked Tessa's way nor directed her development. What she did and what she became were her business. If she'd disgraced him or her mother he'd have been distressed but wouldn't have been able to rescue her because it wasn't something he knew how to do. There was no structure in the life of Tessa's family, only opportunities seized or missed. Tessa grew up with an unusual awareness of security which, it seemed to her, surrounded her but was never available – except to others. As a schoolgirl she loved being invited to other girls' homes. Different as they might be from each other, she thought of them as normal. She learned early on to show gratitude, and to please; it was a way of ensuring that she'd be welcome among the normal where she knew she didn't belong. Her parents were inconsequential about everything. Nothing mattered enough to cause them to plan. When difficulties arose, they asked around to find out what other people were doing, unable to find basic principles for themselves. They lectured their daughter on fidelity in relationships without thinking that she might be able to judge their own actions according to the standards they preached. It was only talk. They told her to keep out of trouble but were in it themselves, most of the time. There was no wisdom in the air she breathed. The friends her parents brought home were hardly different from the Fulbrooks, and difference, perhaps her only useful teacher, came to her via the parents of the other girls in her class. Her school was proud of its standards and her parents, careless with money, gave her anything she needed for clothes, books, excursions and the like, so that the problems of her home life were not obvious at school, where she did well. The more discerning of her teachers sensed that she didn't know how to use her mind to its capacity. Had they looked a little more closely they'd have noticed that she followed leaders, was always watching for signals, letting the strong in the groups she belonged to lead the way. Her principles were those of whoever spoke most confidently. Her teachers would have said this was a temporary condition that girls grew out of, but Tessa, practising her follower-ways, didn't want to escape because she lacked the inner certainty guiding those who knew their own mind.

Her parents wondered how they'd produced a child so devotedly cautious, anxious, inopportune, yet gifted at pleasing those who mattered. Andrew labelled his daughter Little Miss Pursy-lips before she was seven, and her mother, also wondering where she'd come from, decided that Tessa was a genetic throw-down from Willa's Aunt Lucy, 'never known to uncross her legs if there was a man in the room!' Laughter. Willa wasn't cruel enough to mock her daughter

but the girl realised well enough how her mother saw her. By the time she was fourteen she'd firmed up sufficiently to what she perceived as rejection that she knew she would need to have left home before she could consider a sexual relationship: she would have to be stronger in herself to allow anyone that far inside her defences. This saddened her but made life simpler. She kept away from involvements of a deeper sort until she'd started university, and even then it was only with women she'd learned to trust at residential college. Don Trevorrow, then a young graduate, asked her to make a trip to Adelaide with him because, he said, he had a job interview with a South Australian legal firm and didn't want to go on his own. Tessa was surprised to hear herself say yes, and found, when she went to her college bed that night, that she was happier than she'd ever known. Don's acceptance, his need to have her, was the reassurance she'd needed. They hired a car and drove through the Barossa and Clare valleys where the famous wines came from, and the fact that Don didn't get the offer he'd hoped for meant little to Tessa; she told him to apply for jobs in New South Wales, Perth, Hobart ... she'd go with him and luck would come their way! Underpinning the light heartedness of these remarks was relief at having escaped the parental definition that had troubled her. A man had set her free. The fact that Don was rather casual about it, saying simply, 'It's good to be an item, Tess,' didn't trouble her at all. Freeing herself was change enough. She loved him for what he'd done for her, and she saw that her nurturing made him considerably more attentive to the feelings of his clients, who began, under her influence, to change from cases to people. When she married, radiant in white, she was both modest and blazingly assured. Women were so different from men that they – and they alone – could transform them. With her newly married partner beside her, Tessa was pleased to be seen, praised, even discussed. She was on top of her game that day, so much so that Don was amused, and her parents, Andrew and Willa, attributed the changed woman they saw to some perspicacity or subtlety in Don so they didn't bother to examine their son in law closely; neither Tessa nor her parents were aware of his wish to do away with himself until the night beside the ocean when he walked away from the group to enter the water.

Tessa had twice attempted to talk with Don about what he'd done that evening, but he assured her it was 'a one-off', and it wouldn't recur. She didn't believe this but couldn't make him open to her questions. He was in denial because he couldn't bear to have anyone probing for weakness. 'I've got a career to build,' he said on both occasions, 'I'm not going to throw everything away just because I did something whacky one night. A long time ago,' he insisted, although it was close enough in her mind. She considered her position. His reassurances eroded her. If she tried to put the problem out of mind, it haunted her. If he said, as he did once or twice, 'We ought to be thinking about starting a family,' then both she and her child or children would be dependent on Don: he wasn't even wealthy enough, at this stage, to be worth leaving. She and her child would be subject to the vagaries of a man not completely in control of himself. Much as she hated to admit it, she found herself looking at other men in terms of the sort of partners they would make: she was looking for an out.

This shamed her. When Andrew or Willa, her parents, called, asking after Don, she told them how he was winning cases, making money, gaining the respect of his peers and the magistrates who heard his presentations. 'You're a lucky girl, then,' her father said, not believing a word of it. Willa was bewildered. She hated to be aware of a problem which she didn't know how to fix. Sometimes she wished she'd not had Tessa, sometimes that the girl had been a boy. Many of the mothers she knew thought that boys were easier – until, of course, they entered adolescence, and then they were their father's problem! Willa dealt with trouble by talking to someone who wouldn't challenge her, by downing a few drinks, by laughing lots, and by a night or two of deep, deep sleep. And it wasn't working. Bloody Tessa wasn't made like her mother so she was finding problems no one else would worry about. Tessa's very being was a problem and always had been. There was no guiding her, no telling her what to do, because she wouldn't do it, whatever that was. Bugger the girl. Willa stayed away, doing her limited best to hide the fact that they were at loggerheads. What she wanted was a daughter who was sillier than herself, so she could say that the world was going downhill. Laugh. Ring friends and invite them over for a drink. Grumble to Andrew after the friends had gone about 'your daughter', handing the problem to him. Willa was the sort of parent who lets continuity break down because they've never been much aware of it themselves, when young. Willa's own mother ...

But we will lose the lines of our story if we excurse into the generation of Willa's mother. We have a group of people to explore, all of them picking up the threads of their lives after a time by the sea, courtesy of Jack and Olivia Page. The Furlinghettis, you will recall, had disappointed each other, their chosen pathways having gone in different directions, for the time being at least. The Svendsens were under police surveillance, with Rory, at least, aware that their steps must be carefully chosen. The Williamsons and the Quirks were living quietly, their household conversations trivial enough except when the two wives gathered to talk about books, music or what had become of the people they'd known at university. Don and Tessa Trevorrow were living comfortably on his earnings as a barrister, their lives dangerously poised - Don because he couldn't deal with the elements of self-destruction within him, Tessa because she couldn't create a foundation to build a life on, her support of her husband, her creation of him, therefore, lacking the security of a base. Les and Lorna Bramble, living thoughtlessly in the worlds of racing and fashion, hardly knew what would happen next - and, we might interpolate, who does? Norman and Jenny Bartlett had a grand new house to keep them busy, not to mention Jenny's mother, while Rex and Nancy Naughtin struggled to find themselves as a painter (Rex) or anything at all (Nancy): she had wanted to have Gabriel's glamour at the centre of her life, but couldn't, and had to accept the drudgery of looking after the Mrs Hanneberry problem that Rex had brought on them as a couple. First and last of our people were Jack and Olivia Page, Jack an inclusive man, sure of himself, considerate and confident but not yet able, for all that, to make his wife sure enough of herself, or of the pair of them as a couple, to bring a child into the world.

Autumn

The season announced itself with a clap of thunder. Clouds were crossing the bay, rumbling as they went, winds rippled the suburbs, boats headed for shore or battled the winds. Disturbed by movements in the sky, and fallen leaves clotted under street trees, Jack told Olivia he wanted to go for a drive. He was restless, he said, and needed to feel connected. 'What with?' she said, happy to fit in with any scheme, but needing to tease him too. 'Anywhere the car takes us,' he said, showing that he had somewhere in mind. 'Are we boiling the billy?' she said, 'or stopping somewhere for service?' He went through the motions of considering, and said, 'Stopping. Once we're out of the city and forgotten it, then it'll be okay to stop.' He added, 'We'll know.'

They went west. She thought they were going to Ballarat, but he turned when a large green sign offered Blackwood. 'Named after the trees,' he said. 'Acacia melano-xylon. Early mining settlement. Won't be many blackwoods left. They'll be replaced by English trees. They'll make the old buildings look picturesque.' And so it was. The bush pressed on the dank little town, old buildings slumped inside their greenery, or shone proudly as presented by new owners. There was a sophisticated looking nursery, a building with postal collection boxes outside and a fine old corner building which also claimed the status of post office. Stimulated by the little town, Olivia said, 'You could live honourably in a place like this, because ...'

She realised that she'd stalled, and Jack was waiting. 'Not so sure,' he said. 'Half the population would be people like us, so there'd have to be a social agreement of some sort. I think it would be a bit too narrow to be worth living in.' She looked at the place with his eyes and was disappointed. She was ready to move on, but someone had told Jack about a good place to lunch, and he was ready for it, he said.

They sat. Country places were simpler than city places; she felt like lamb shank and potato, and so did he. They laughed. 'How long since we chose the same thing?' They spoke about the nursery outside. There were half a dozen types of avocado on offer, and they'd never dreamed of there being more than one. 'It's the same as pineapples, or mangoes,' he said. 'There's lots of species but because we don't live

where they grow, we think there's only one.' She laughed, and then she noticed. Their table was topped by a picture which the tablecloth prevented them from seeing. Glancing around, she saw an un-set table and went to look. It was a photo of a railway flat-top, with three men loading cabbages ... but what cabbages! Three of them were as many as the flat-top had room for, crowded on. The thing was impossible. What was going on? They explored the tables in the empty corner of the room and all had similar things to show. Trucks burdened by five mighty potatos, with humans the right size for the trucks but tiny beside the spuds. Rough handwriting scratched into the negative told them that the picture originated in Warracknabeal in 1913. Jack burst into laughter, Olivia sat down with a smile, remembering similar pictures from when her grandmother's house had been cleaned out on the old lady's death. 'Grandma's collection had some rabbits, bigger by far than the traps. They looked ever so scornful! She had three or four others, I forget what they were of, but gosh we kids were amused! My father said she'd got them from her mother, but he didn't know when. Come to think of it, if there were any dates on them, like this one, I don't remember them.' She looked into her husband's eyes, as if that might bring back the dates, and he laughed again. 'Where did it say? Warracknabeal? That's a fair way from here.' By now a waiter was with them, telling them that the pictures originated with a photographer in Ballarat many years before and were thought to have been 'taken', and then played around with, in the general area. 'People tell us, though,' the waiter said, 'that they've seen similar things in other places. Apparently it was the thing to do, at the time!'

Off he went in good humour, his table-guests ready for lunch. 'How far is it to Warracknabeal?' Jack wondered. 'Did our man in Ballarat go that far to take his pictures, or did he muck around with anything that people brought him?' They had no idea, of course, so they began to talk about where they'd go for the rest of the day. 'Wherever you like, Jack,' Olivia said. 'I think we're having the sort of day when things happen to us!' They liked this idea. Things happen to us! It was a release to think that the day had ideas so you could be passive, and let them arrive. But an hour later, as they drove through bands of forest followed by huge spaces open to the horizon, Olivia

felt a heaviness in her husband, not talking as he drove, but raising a finger occasionally to point at the mullock-heaps of long-vanished mines. 'Some of them,' she said, 'have trees growing in them and some don't.' He drove in silence for a minute, then said, 'It probably depends on what sort of chemicals they used in getting the gold out of the rock.' She thought they simply washed the rock in a river, if one was handy, but he said no. 'Well, they might, but rivers are a bit short in this country. Even around here. Mostly they used a cyanide solution to extract the gold ...'

'Cyanide!' Olivia was startled. 'That's poison!' Jack was grinning. 'It's what they used though. Among other things. Don't get me started on nineteenth century medicines, or the doctors that handed them out. Or didn't!' He paused. 'Actually, I suppose I shouldn't be blaming the doctors because things were freely available that modern medicos wouldn't touch. We think we've got drug problems ...'

He talked till Clunes. She heard him out. He was changing. Something was getting at him. His theme was whether people knew what they were doing, and most of the time they didn't. Or so said Jack. 'What a country!' he said. 'It was full of blackfellas and nobody understood them. Then crazy people from the other side of the world flooded in, thinking they'd trip over rocks of gold! They roamed the land like hungry animals, trying to find their fortune. A few of them did. The rest had to patch together a life in a land that didn't offer anything. But they did. Mad buggers made our country! And when I follow events in Canberra, I think they're still there, nutty as ever!'

He went silent again. Olivia wanted to laugh but he was in an unpredictable mood. She looked at the land, rolling to a huge horizon. It was calmer than they were. It was pasture land, fenced, with occasional clumps of trees, and a few low humps to tell them that volcanos had broken the surface, long ago. Now, for company, they had sheep, cattle, horses, pigs and chooks, and more sheep. They weren't yet into fine wool country, but they were on the way. The horizon told them so. Major Mitchell's wagons must have rolled somewhere near their road, which made them part of the future which he foresaw, long ago. It seemed to her for one intense, cognitive moment, that the dimension of time – if dimension was what it was – was as vast as space, or even more

so. Space in their land wasn't strictly infinite but it was near enough. And so was time. 'I feel very little,' she said, to her own surprise, and Jack's. He slowed a little and took her right hand with his left. 'I love you darling,' he said. 'You're hugely important to me.'

They finished the day in Ballarat. 'This is one of the few places where people actually made some money out of gold.' In this mood they stayed at Craig's Hotel, with its decorated balconies and ceilings thirteen feet above the floor. Dark wooden panelling had been spread about as if forests existed for those who'd won gold. 'I asked them for a really good room,' Jack said. 'Dinner's at six. We've got time for a couple of drinks. In here.' She followed him to some luxurious leather chairs. Asked by a serious young man what she would like to drink, she called for a Spanish sherry. It came. Jack asked for a Hunter Valley white, and it came too. 'It's lovely,' Olivia said, more of the hotel and the whole day than of the sherry, 'but I feel taken out of my proper time and back to days when the rules were different.'

'And the standards,' Jack said. 'Funny, I've got almost the same feeling as you. I have a feeling I'm going to pick up a paper with the headline, PARKES CALLS FOR FEDERATION. AUSTRALIA SHOULD UNITE.' He laughed. 'You couldn't un-federate today if you tried. Even if it was needed. We'd stick together now. I feel sorry for people whose country gets split. At the end of a war, and they redraw the boundaries. How do people know where they are, or even who they are? It must be awful.'

He sipped and Olivia considered him, gauging this latest mood in an ups and downs sort of day. 'Federating, or de-federating, it's playing with the lines that define our spaces.'

He said, 'So?'

She said, 'Space and time. They're said to be the dimensions we live in. I've never believed it. Not completely, anyway. I feel as if ... there's something different, more important, more definitive, if we could only find it, or them, or whatever it is.'

He was waiting.

She tried. 'If you look at other civilisations ... Incas, Aztecs, and so on ... they must have lived by different principles. They couldn't have thought the way we think.' Insistently she added, 'Jack!'

He studied her over the wine he was sipping. 'Good job they don't have Incas or Aztecs in the kitchen. I like to eat something I know for dinner!' His brooding mood had gone. One glass of wine had taken it away. He apologised. 'Sorry darling, I'm being difficult today. Put it down to autumn. Change of season, misalignment of the personality, something like that.' He sipped again cheerily. The young man who'd brought their drinks reappeared. 'The dining room is open, sir and madam. When you please.'

Les had a habit of waking in the pre-dawn darkness, turning over and going back to sleep. It was annoying to Lorna and she said so, often enough. 'It's a seasonal thing,' he used to say, which only annoyed her further. 'So why do you do it in every season then? Tell me that!' But Les was comfortable with himself. 'It's my connection with the horses. And the jockeys, everyone at the stables. It's when they start to think about moving, you ought to know that by now.'

She looked at him with what would have been a withering look – except he didn't wither. 'Why don't you go and sleep at the stables then? With the horses. And the trainers could throw a bucket of water over you to save you the bother of a shower!'

Les loved a long hot shower, and resented the city's water restrictions. 'You gotta look after yourself. If you don't, you get cranky and you make others pay for your bad mood. We don't want that to happen, do we?'

We didn't. Arguments blew over quickly. Les was jovial at breakfast, liked to cook simple things, liked to share whatever the newspapers brought into the house, demanded to know what his children were expecting the day to bring and happily outlined his own plans. Terry and May, young as they were, liked him doing this, though Lorna knew that when they became teenagers they'd find it insufferable, one of those things they'd grown out of to the extent that they'd groan inwardly as he prattled on, annoyingly cheerful, and somewhere in his being Les knew that others valued silence, and the silent, even lonely, consumption of food as their inalienable right. This made him sorry for himself. 'They won't mind asking me to buy a car for them, or pay for school trips to half the places on the planet.' His

rule would be short-lived, and he had to enjoy it because it would be over by the middle of his forties, unless ...

Unless. He wasn't equipped to build a carefully imagined future. He couldn't do what he'd have liked to be able to do, that is, find the parts that fitted and manoeuvre them into place. It was the way great businesses and great empires were built, but for him, chance – which he labelled opportunity – was the best he could hope for. And hopes, he knew from his years in the racing game, were born full, fat and blooming, only to dwindle. Lorna made him cuddle babies when her friends, and then their daughters, had them, and he tried really hard to do it with noisy good cheer but the fact was he knew they'd grow old, and skinny, with illnesses and ailments, complaining, unable to do the things which had once driven them in pursuit of pleasure until they reached the point where pleasure was unimaginable rather than unattainable. Life had to be enjoyed while you were young.

Lorna understood all this, and hated the inevitability built into it. Life renewed itself even as its members, its constituents, as she liked to say, began to show signs of fading, so the only answer was to cling to every sign or renewal. When you began to thicken, you dressed differently. To wrinkle, you rubbed in smoothing cream. To go grey, you made your hair darker, or blonde if that was what took your fancy! You didn't lie helpless on the road till the steamroller got you! Les found this amusing, but it aroused his sympathies too, and he never chided Lorna for her efforts to disguise the ageing that was changing them. Racehorses didn't last long at the top, even the best of them, so the praises that made a champion glow in the minds of backers, and broadcasters like himself, were transferred every season to the new crop coming on. Three year olds this year were four year olds the next, and so long as they kept on coming, who saw any problems in that?

Lorna knew this too, hence her frequent exasperation with her husband; he was a little too close to be ignored, or his viewpoint discounted. It was too close to her own. This made her insistent in her ways of running family life, but the insistence which she hoped would gain her a little separation from her partner was the thing that made them close. All this was obvious to their friends but less than obvious to themselves, another one of those unresolved matters

which, without anyone quite realising, get handed on to the next generation to solve, if they can.

Terry, their son, attended a school with a careers advisor, and he poked his way through all the pamphlets on offer, searching, needing, but finding nothing because he was too uncertain of himself. His parents' amiability hadn't yet formed in him. 'Don't get anxious,' they'd tell him, 'it'll work itself out.' Okay for parents, he thought, rather envying the racehorses his father called because their choices were made for them. When to run, when to train, which events to go in. He understood from household talk that although racing went on all year round, the big events were in the spring carnival, and the best horses were reserved for then. Lucky them! The grooming and the glamour, the silks, the leading along before crowds, the shrieking and yelling if the crowds at the course were pleased! Terry had a craving for approval, and a hidden fear of it. If they cheered you, they had you under their control. He knew it, and it was something he wanted to rebel against, but didn't know how.

His sister May was too young for all this, but she knew her brother's moods, and did her best to avoid them. She was growing up in a household of moods, with ideas rarely more than half-formed. Terry, her brother, was demanding because both his parents were, and like them, he was short in memory and weak in mind. Noisy, inconsistent. May, had she possessed the words, would have said he changed colour regularly; even her mother's love, though constant, changed its nature from hour to hour. The reaction of the youngest member, May, was a detachment even inside herself. In later life she would have trouble with the notion of consequences, that is, of results, or effects, emerging from whatever it was that she had done. She might have said, again, that if she wasn't like her family around her then she was fully protected by not being entirely in the room, which was, in her mind, a synonym for existence. Although she didn't realise it, this caused her to resemble her father, who ran into a problem when he did something inconsistent with his normal practices.

Les broke the habit of a lifetime by getting up very early one morning and going to Flemington to watch the horses training. It was dark when he got out of bed, dark when he backed the car out of the

garage, and still dark when he got to the track. Others, accustomed to the hour as he was not, were busy with the horses, and the jockeys began to take them for their sprints, their gallops, and their leisurely rounds of the course. Les, apart from glancing at the sky for signs of sunrise, could do little but mumble when spoken to, which was rarely, because everyone's attention was on the animals. He spoke to the trainers when he could break into their concentration, and to the strappers if they could be bothered. Joey, however, was different. Joey was amused about something. Joey had a secret which he was dying to share, and the arrival of Les was enough. He spilled the beans, something about the broadcaster causing him to overflow. If Les wanted to back a certainty, he should get on 'Ambrose' – silly name, he said - in the fifth at Woodend the following Monday, the holiday weekend. It was a certainty. An instinct told Les he was onto something. He needed to be cautious. 'The fifth? What's the name of the race?' He was told. 'Ambrose?' he said. 'Never heard of it. Who's the owner? Who's going to be on it?'

Joe loved the scale of his secret. It was the best he'd ever had. Ambrose was a hack, had never won anything or even come close, though he had run a tidy third a few weeks before at Warrnambool. But on the coming Monday, there would be a ring-in, a better horse that looked like Ambrose. 'Fella that told me said they're just about impossible to tell apart. Even when they're together, which doesn't happen very often!' Joey was laughing. He was putting all he had on Ambrose and if Les had any brains he'd do the same. Les thanked him for the tip and said he'd be on it.

He was quiet when he got home and Lorna knew it was more than the early start to the day. 'What's got into you?' she said. 'I'll tell you when I've had time to think about it,' he said, and she knew it was something big. Les wasn't normally like this. What could it be?

It took time to winkle it out of him, two days when he was taut and troubled. 'I oughta tell the stewards,' he said, 'but I make it a rule never to interfere. Never. That's in normal circumstances, that is. This one, I'm not so sure. Maybe I should ...' The length of his silence was the depth of his dilemma. He wanted to shut up and let it happen, and he knew he'd be expected to keep the game honest; that would be the

accusation if anyone found out. He'd assisted crooks by keeping quiet. In the general run of his life he kept out of trouble by shying away from responsibility. Being a commentator absolved him of the burden – or that was what he'd always thought. But bloody Joey had dropped him in the shit. He knew he needed to make up his mind. Besides, he was tempted. He had a lot of money in various accounts and he could get friends to put it on Ambrose for him, different amounts with different bookies. The trouble was that the people he used to get the money on would know, and when 'Ambrose' won his first race they'd all have things to say. 'Musta known! Who gave you the tip?' That sort of thing.

Very dangerous!

He brooded. Put money on the ring-in, or tell the stewards what he knew? The trouble was, whichever he did, someone would know. He could win a heap of money, but everyone who put money on for him would know. Their knowledge would be held separately for a while, but they'd talk to each other, and word would get out. Once two of his mates got together they'd start inquiring among others who knew him. There were hundreds of these: some would stay quiet and others would talk. It would get out eventually. Then he'd be in the black books of the industry because he'd done the dirty on it. He could have gone to the stewards but he hadn't. He'd made a pile of money instead. The dollars? They'd get the money off him somehow. He'd lose his job because nobody would trust him.

Or he could go to the stewards. Within hours it'd be all over the papers and his name would be on everyone's lips. He'd be famous in exactly the way he'd never wanted. The people involved in the ring-in – and he could only guess who they were – would be after him, trying to get even. His job would be on the line, probably, but the real danger was an 'accident'. They'd run him off the road. Or they'd put a bomb in his car. Or they'd arrange a drive-by shooting of his house, nicely available on a corner block with a streetlight declaring it to anyone who went past. He wouldn't be able to sleep and the bullets ... what about the children? He couldn't expose them to the counterblast that would surely come, at a time of night when the kids thought they were safe.

And Lorna? If anything happened to the children she'd never let him near her again. Their marriage would be wrecked.

He looked for ways to act in secret. A phone call to the stewards? An email? It could be traced back to him, that was no good. Walk up to a copper in the street. Draw him aside and tell him he had some information he wanted passed on ...

Then he heard that Joey was in hospital. He'd been hit by a truck. He'd been first to the tracks on a certain morning, as usual, and was crossing the road to let himself in when a truck with no lights on came thundering past, clipped him, and roared away. Someone found him a few minutes later, called an ambulance, and he'd been taken to hospital. Reading between the lines of the report, Les could tell that Joey was terrified, and that meant he wasn't talking. He had no idea why it had happened. Completely unexpected. Didn't see who was driving the truck ...

Les felt sick. He felt doomed. He didn't know what to do. He waited till the kids were asleep and then he said to Lorna, 'I'm in trouble. I don't know what to do.'

Lorna wasn't used to managing him. She used him as a sort of beacon, showing her what she could and couldn't do. Now the beacon was showing only dimly, almost out. Helpless. She listened. She thought a few moments, then: 'Who's the boss of the stewards? Give me his number.'

He did.

She rang. The man on the other end of the call was displeased at having his evening interrupted, then he wanted details. Lorna queried Les and passed his answers on. The boss of the stewards told Lorna to move her family to a city hotel the following morning, and stay there until they got an all clear signal. He named a hotel and told her who to ask for. 'He'll give you a room where you can get in and out without being noticed. If he hasn't got one empty he'll find somewhere else to put you. It'll only be a few nights. Don't worry.'

Worrying, of course, was the only thing left to them. It was out of their hands and they didn't know who would know where they were. They had to keep silent so they couldn't even trust themselves. Lorna wanted to take the children to Sydney, or faraway Perth might

be better, but Les had to go to work as usual and he couldn't be left alone, so desperately did he need support. Lorna saw this, and though she hated her city for holding a danger to her husband and her family, she could see that for her to move away would be the end of the marriage she'd contracted years ago. She had to stay. This decision gave her courage. On the Monday when the ring-in was to happen and big money was to be made, Les was calling at Moonee Valley and Lorna and the children went with him, Lorna even ringing friends to see who else would be there. At breakfast that morning she watched her husband. He was trembling, and he used both hands to pick up his cup of tea. When the children had left the table, under orders not to get their clothes dirty, she whispered, 'Guess what, Les. If they try to shoot you I'm going to stand in the way. A wife and children mightn't look very much to a bunch of crooks, but if they want to get you, they'll have to get me and Terry and May first. We're going to protect you, Les. And when the day's over, we'll come home and do a bit of ringing up, if we haven't heard already, and see what happened at Woodend!'

The 3UZ newsreader had only a brief account to give his public. Victoria Racing Club officials had unexpectedly appeared at Woodend to examine all runners in the fifth race, and disqualified one of the runners because it was a ring-in. Its identity and the identity of its owners had not yet been released, but an inquiry was underway and an announcement would be made at a later time ...

The Bramble family came home in a taxi. Lorna stopped the driver at a bottle shop near their home. Getting out, she inspected the premises with a sweeping eye, then bought two bottles of champagne. Getting back in, she showed them to Les. 'One for tonight and one for tomorrow night. Unless you're so desperately relieved that ...'

She went through the motions of glugging down wine from a glass. Something like a trace of amusement, however feeble, flickered over the face of Les. It wasn't much but it was enough for Lorna. She'd brought him through.

Carlo was working in the garage when Maria called him in for a cup of tea. She was a little surprised at how quickly he responded

because he didn't like to be interrupted when he was working on his cars. 'How's it going?' she said because it was expected. He didn't say anything and she saw that he was brooding. She told him, filling the silence, that Angelica was at a friend's, two doors down, and George was asleep. 'He's getting a cold, I think. I'm keeping him inside today.' Carlo nodded, but she could tell he was pleased to get a report on the children. 'They're our future,' he said, surprising her. She did a quick appraisal. 'How are the cars?'

'They're our past.' She could feel him reaching around in his mind for something further. 'More than that, they're the world's past. We won't be obsessed with cars forever.' She was amazed. How much money had he sunk into the Hispano-Suiza, and others before it? She looked at him, waiting. 'The Hispano's a beautiful car, way ahead of its time, but its time's in the past.' He looked at her, as if judging her readiness for what he was thinking. 'I ought to be designing for the future, not a new car but a public transport system.' Some caution came over him. 'I suppose we'll always want cars because they're personal. They're at our beck and call. It's a nice thing to think about, a fine car in the garage, but most people wouldn't care if they had a street-car, in just the same way as they think it's glamorous to hop on a plane. They don't own the plane!' He was grinning by now, his thoughts pleasing him in some way. 'Unless they're Greg Norman or the Sultan of Brunei. They're the fellas with planes of their own. We can't all be like them!'

It struck her that something had happened to her husband. There'd been a tension between them ever since his beloved car had broken down on the way back from the coast, and somehow he was out the other side of that argument. It was almost as if he'd forgotten it. Lost his memory of it, even. She decided to take his side. 'There's going to be cars for a long time yet.' He nodded to this, but he was going back into the state of mind he'd brought into the room when she'd called him. She wanted to quiz him but he was somewhere else. 'Carlo? What have you been thinking about this morning, while you were working out there?'

'It's the season,' he said. 'Autumn. The year's closing in. We're on the way to winter, and when that's over, we're out the other side. It's time for something new. Not just us, the whole country. You go into the shops and they've got flowers. They've got all the new fashions on show. It's exciting, but it's still a long way ahead. We've got something to go through, first. You know?'

She'd always felt she knew more about moods and seasons than he did, and here he was checking to see if she was up with him. She knew she mustn't pull him up with a jerk. It was ages since he'd been so open. But what was going on, at the heart of this openness? She was curious, and it made her cautious. 'I'll just check little Georgie. I'll only be a moment.'

He was left on his own and he welcomed it, to the extent that something told him he must be open to her when she returned. He'd spent the morning on his cars, or so it seemed; he'd really been exploring his thoughts, and they needed to be shared. He was ready when she came back. 'He'd turned on his side, almost on his face, so I turned him back again and put a pillow so he won't roll over. His breathing's easy. There's a bit of a catch to it but it's still much better than when I put him down after breakfast.' He nodded, open to his wife as she was to her child. 'We've got to make a big healthy boy out of him. He might be a great athlete one day, running for his school. Running for Australia, even.' She smiled at his thought. Running for Australia? She supposed it was possible, and if it happened, then they, as parents, would have to be behind their son, giving him the backing that he needed. Everyone who achieved something, whether in sport, or business, or anything at all, needed the strength of others to let them draw on the strength they possessed inside themselves. Individuals could only be individuals if others gave them what they thought they already had. 'We're strange creatures, Carlo,' Maria said. 'Did you think marriage would be like this?'

Something about the wan smile that came to him made her know that he welcomed the question; that it was somehow an add-on to the thoughts he'd already had, working on his car. 'Nothing prepares you for marriage,' he said, still caught in his morning-autumn mood, 'but marriage itself, and you don't start to get much benefit from it until you realise that you're married.' With an effort, he added, 'And for some people that takes years!'

She felt bold enough to ask, 'And is that what's happened to you this morning?' He rubbed his chin, as if testing the morning's shave. 'Yes, I think it is. And that's the first thing that's occurred to me this morning. The other ...'

It seemed from the way his voice trailed away that it would be years before the sentence was fulfilled. Maria said, 'Don't keep me waiting. I'd like to know.' Thus prompted, he said simply, 'We have to decide if we're bold enough to walk into the future. In every generation, only a few of us do. The rest either follow, or cling to something that's already been achieved in the past. I'm sorry if that's not very clear. I'm not clear about what it means myself.'

Nor were things very clear at the Trevorrows'. Tessa studied her husband and he studied his briefs. She was waiting for him to digest what had happened inside him, master his realisations, and tell her. Talk! She was ready to protect him, advise, or stand behind him, beside him if he wished, in whatever might be the outcome of his thoughts. But he'd hidden. The night at the beach, when he'd walked to the ocean, ready to leave everything behind, was as if it had never happened. He acted as if he'd recovered, when he hadn't. Sometimes Tessa felt – mostly when she was on her own – that she was waiting for a storm to brew inside herself, a fury that would take her over. Yet nothing came. She was considerate with him, even deferential. He was the professional man and she supposed that his cases must be important to those involved. Considering how much they paid him to represent them, they must be satisfied?

She wasn't. She grumbled occasionally to those she trusted. Olivia Page, Jenny Bartlett. They told her to wait. Olivia, she knew, was waiting herself, but what was the good of waiting? Situations needed to be exploded once they became impossible, and she knew, even if her friends wouldn't admit it, that Don was dealing with his problem in the ancient way of denying it, hoping it would go away if it was left unrecognised.

No. It would burst out when least expected, surprising Don and shattering her willingness to help. She wanted to get in before the crisis and stop it happening, but she didn't know what to do. She

turned in on herself, ready to move but having no move to make. It'll burst out one day, she thought, and he won't know what's hit him. I'll try to make it clear to him what's happening but he'll plead ignorance. 'What's going on?' he'll shout, expecting the violence in his voice to bring her to heel. For a man of such high intelligence he was unbelievably stupid. They often were, the people who've been told they've got brains. They don't know how foolish they can be. That was the current of resentment flowing through her. She hadn't got married for this! The law, she decided, was like religion. It didn't liberate, it imprisoned. That was what happened when the best qualities of the human mind, the urgent need to define, understand, were used to provide a certainty that wasn't there. How the mind loved to have everything considered until it felt that its conclusions were firm, and its understandings followed. Resting your decisions on the law was like seeking Almighty God's wishes in the fabric of the church's teachings. It was immeasurably foolish because when you needed to create a system of thought it was because you'd perceived in some way the instability of the world. Life was a force, a mighty wave, and it could be ridden if you let your instincts tell you what to do, just as a swimmer can crest a wave or a rider manage a horse. Knowing this, or feeling its certainty, she knew that waiting would do her no good. The bubble had to be burst, but what bubble? Don kept everything as everyday, as normal, as an unimaginative man could. He'd run off the road at high speed one day and in the last moment before he crashed he'd wonder what he was doing.

There was only one thing to do, though she didn't know it, and that was to leave the road before he did, leaving Don to stare at the wreckage that she, Tessa, had caused, and feel his wonder, his amazement, turn into the first wretched, wrenching signs of a breaking heart. He had to be shocked, the earth pulled away from under him, before he'd see that he had to study himself, make an analysis and act on it to save himself. She must, she decided, not with her brain but somewhere in her intuitive life, she must destroy herself to save him.

Yet this was not what happened. Don came home talking about a case he was close to accepting. A man called Lou had shot his wife.

He hadn't killed her but she was still in hospital getting treatment for the wounds and for the effects of the shooting on her mind. 'She's a wreck, apparently,' Don told his wife, 'but the interesting thing is that so is he. He says he's desperate to do some good in the world but he can't bring himself to face his wife. He sends people he knows to visit her and apologise for what he did and he tells them he wants her forgiveness. He says he won't be able to restart his life until she's forgiven him, and she says she can't even think about it until he convinces her that he's a changed man. They're at a stalemate.'

Listening to him, and feeling that she understood such stalemates only too well, Tessa said, 'They're at a deadlock. It's got to be broken.' Don smiled. 'Want to take the case?'

She was shocked, yet a tingle of acceptance made itself felt in her mind. 'What good could I do?'

He had no idea. 'Just a thought, that's all. A stray little thought, one that got away from the mob!' He laughed. 'Thoughts can be like that sometimes. You get a really silly idea and it won't go away. Have you ever had that happen to you, Tess?'

She hadn't, and he had just such a silly idea in his mind. 'What about you taking over that side of the case for a while? I'll defend him, and you get him ready for counselling. No, you do the counselling side of it yourself. Talk him into facing his wife and apologising. He'll get a lighter sentence if I can tell the judge that he's trying to do something to fix up what he did wrong.' He studied her, trusting completely, and she saw that he believed in what she might do for this man who'd tried to kill his wife, and felt shame for what he'd done. What was his name? Lou. The word stuck on her tongue as if she'd swallowed a fly. It seemed a bad idea. It could go wrong. Yet if it worked Don might take her seriously. This needed a new way of working things out. It wasn't that Don didn't value her but men ran the world and women were other. They had intuition to deal with what lay outside the scope of reason. What a fool he was! 'You want me to talk to him? What about? We shouldn't go into this, Don, without clear aims, that is, something for me to achieve. An entry and exit point suitably fixed. If we can manage something like that I might be prepared to try.'

So it was that Don laid out his tactics to Lou, and the accused man agreed. He'd be introduced to Tessa at the office, and he'd see if her counselling helped. They'd know if it was successful because he'd be able to humble himself before his wife, tell her the shame he felt for what he'd done, and work out some peacemaking deal with her, even if it didn't go as far as reuniting them. Full of apprehension, but excited also, in a tingling sort of way, Tessa went to her husband's rooms – chambers as he called them. The secretary who served a number of barristers, a reserved lady by the name of Beth, ushered her into a room lined with books bound in leather, sat her at a table, and brought her a cup of tea. 'Your husband will have made you familiar with all this.' She went on to say, again of Don, 'He's been talking to his man for some time now. I think he's trying to get him into a penitent mood, ready for you.' Tessa was on the verge of urging Beth to join her in the ritual cup of tea when Don came into the room, a man in a solemn black suit. 'I think he's ready,' he told the two women. 'He's pretty depressed. He's quite ready to plead guilty and hope the judge will be impressed by his willingness to do something positive.' He looked at his wife and she nodded. 'Bring him in.' Don went away and came back with Lou.

He was a small, thin man, nicely built. He had an olive skin. He didn't look violent. Beth offered him tea and he thanked her. When she put it beside him, she and Don left the room, leaving it to the counsellor and the man who'd shot his wife. Tessa said, 'My husband thinks my plan's your best option.' He nodded. 'What I did was awful. It wasn't what I got the gun for.' She raised her eyebrows. He said, 'I got it to defend myself. The people I was mixing with got pretty rough. I needed to be ready.'

'Did your wife do something that provoked you?'

'Just having her there gets me all stirred up.'

She got him talking. Men of his type know better than to oppose anyone with the grip of authority. They do what they're told, looking for the moment when they can make a break, or see a weakness in the middle of strength. Realising this, Tessa found him fascinating. He wanted to win her to his side. She found this amusing. He had nothing left to bargain with. 'You have to make peace with your wife,' Tessa said. 'That, or show you're trying. And why would you be

trying? Because you know you were in the wrong.' What did he have to say to that?

'I'm going to cop it,' he said. 'The only thing I can do is put myself in her hands.'

'That would be rather risky, surely?'

It didn't shift him. 'I had a gun. I fired it at her. She was in my hands entirely. The only reason she's still here is that I was a lousy shot. So now it's her turn.'

'What will you say?'

'I'll say to His Honour that I won't feel I've been punished unless she has a say in my penalty.'

Tessa was amazed. Brave man! How on earth ... She looked closely at him, trying to gauge whether this was cunning, genuine remorse, or something she'd never heard of. 'I'm not sure whether my husband will think that's a good tactic, or not.' It didn't alter him. 'Your husband's a barrister. He knows how you play the game. I'm beyond all that. I'm in the pits. I put myself where I am. I've got to get myself out.' He was locked inside his thoughts. This is no manoeuvre, she decided. She asked him how he'd met his wife, how they'd related to each other in those early days, the first signs of anger when he couldn't get his way with her, his discovery in himself of a need to dominate, to be a ruler not a partner ... his inability to accept the need for change, his reaction when his wife told him she needed equality as a partner, that he didn't believe she was equal and wouldn't change in the way she wanted because change would mean, in his mind, a downfall in status. His own judgement of himself meant more to him than anyone else's opinion ...

'You're claiming superiority over everyone else,' she pointed out to him, 'or at the very least equality. But that's not your position in law. You're going to plead guilty, you say. That means you're accepting that you'll be sentenced. The judge will make a decision about you. How long you'll be locked away. That's his position, his duty to the public, he would say.' She was on the verge of triumph. 'There's no equality there. Anyone in the legal system would tell you you've got to grovel. You're on your knees whether you know it or not. If the prisoner shows no sign of remorse, then he'll cop an extra blast in his sentence ...'

He broke in. 'I'm going to say she can say what she wants to happen to me!'

'And His Honour will think, is this man for real, or is he trying to outsmart us? He'll ask you a question or two and I think you'll find he'll be smart enough to nose out what you're up to. He's trying to throw himself on the mercy of the court and he's going to find we're not very merciful with ...'

She was going to end with 'the likes of him' but she realised she didn't know what he was like. He was a mystery to her and probably to himself. People didn't get into the trouble he was in without being more than a little confused. Perhaps she'd rushed their interview from inexperience. To be fair to him she needed to introduce a delay. She said, 'Let's pause there, Lou. I think you need a day or two to think over what we've been saying to each other. I'll tell my husband that we need some time to finalise what we've been thinking about. He's a patient man, that'll be okay. Is that all right with you?'

Lou nodded. He was in her hands. Tessa went to the door and told Beth that she and Lou were finished, but would like to book the room for the same time three days hence.

Don waited until he was home before he asked his wife, 'How did you get on with Lou?' She considered the question carefully. 'I think he's a salvable human being.' Don took his time too. 'I'm not sure how well that'd go down in court.' Seeing that Tessa was starting to bristle, he went on, 'Sometimes in a court case you get a question from the bench that shows there's no decision been made just yet. These questions don't come very often because good judges work things out for themselves. But occasionally they're not sure and they want to hear what the prosecution and defence actually think, as opposed to saying what's expected of them. When those moments come, you have to be ready with your few words because they may swing the verdict, or the penalty that follows the verdict ...'

'So?'

'So what you say has to be decisive. What do they call it? You have the chance to make a sea-change in the case.'

He was annoying her. 'Whatever that means.'

'It means you've got to say something that solves the problem facing the bench. In the case of Joe, sorry, Lou, it would mean that I say something that shows that he's changing, he's been to the end of the road and he's turned around, he's a new man or starting to be, something like that.' He wasn't sure that she understood. 'It's got to be good enough to give the judge an opportunity to be lenient. Otherwise he'll chuck him back in jail.'

Tessa was surprised. 'Has he been in jail? Lou? Nobody told me that.'

'Well, it's not allowed to be mentioned until we get to the sentencing stage, that's why. But sorry, I might have told you on the quiet. I was acting out of habit.'

Something urgent entered her thought. 'All the more reason why I should see him again. Friday next. I told Beth to book the room.' Don got up to pour himself a sherry. 'Can I pour you one of these, Tess? Or something else? I only wanted you to know where to look when you're planning your next move.'

His words affected her. My next move? She smiled, but thinly, as if something had been handed to her that she wasn't expecting. And it was? She didn't know, but she felt something move inside her. I have a move to make? She thought of Don's words about the rarity of opportunities for shaping the viewpoint of a judge. Something like that had been handed to her. She had to bide her time.

Tessa travelled with Don to work on the Friday in his car, which he parked in the basement. They travelled upwards in the lift. She noticed that his limitations were less obvious in the building he shared with other people of the law. Great bundles of papers were being carried back and forth; there were trolleys for what must have been complex cases, with big sums of money involved. The watchful side of Don, cautious, careful, yet daring too, had risen to the top. What hopes for someone like Lou, who, in the hands of the law, had no chance at all? When Beth brought him into the room and pulled out a chair on the opposite side of the table from Tessa, he was a beaten man. He nodded, mumbled good morning, and waited. Tess realised that he was entirely in her hands; accepting this, something in her rebelled. Nobody should be brought to this! Even a man

who'd fired a gun at his wife had rights ... And what were they? She couldn't help noticing that a part of her had changed sides, and was exploring what she saw, hoping to find resistance. He was losing, so she wanted him to fight back. Head down, he waited. Then he looked up.

'You think I've got a chance?'

'I do,' she said, surprising herself with the intensity of what she'd said. 'Put your worst foot forward. Throw yourself on the mercy of the court.'

She saw him accepting this, then he said, 'What do you see when you look at me?'

She had no idea whether it was true or not, but she said, 'I see a great deal. When you say to him, take me away, he'll be sorry for you. That's what we want.'

'Take me away? He's not going to do it.'

'Never mind. It sounds good. That's the main thing. It sounds Christian.'

He managed a smile. 'Me?' The absurdity of it struck them, and they both laughed. The strands between them altered. She recovered first. 'It's a gamble, of course. His first reaction might be to strike you down and turn away, but something about the words will enter his mind. Or that's what we're gambling on.'

Lou liked this idea. 'It is a gamble. Everything's a gamble. You marry the right person or you marry a mistake. Eh? That's what I did, and I couldn't get myself out of it. Not decently. I got a gun and I was determined to use it.'

She raised her hands. 'Stop! That's the old Lou. You're becoming a new man, and it must be obvious. If he gives you a short sentence, you're on your way. You've taken the first step on the road back. It's going to take time, but there will be a time ...'

She could see Don in the next room, looking at his watch. Impatient man! A flash of anger showed on her face and suddenly she realised that Lou had recognised it and was terrified. 'It's all right,' she assured him. 'I wasn't angry with you. Something in there ...'

She pointed, but the fear didn't leave his eyes. She had to make him whole. 'Don't be afraid. I want you to come out of this. Through this. There's got to be a new start somewhere. We haven't found it yet, but we're looking ...'

He was slightly comforted, but didn't understand. 'Why?'

She was amazed. 'Why?' A pause enforced itself. 'Why not?

'Why are you bothering with me? Instead of leaving it to ... what'shisname? Your husband?'

She looked into the other room, but Don had gone. 'His name is Don,' she said, giving it all away. 'Don Trevorrow. He's charging you a big fee, and he thinks you ought to get something for it.'

He began to grasp. 'Your help?'

'My help,' she acknowledged.

'To make the judge think well of me?'

'That,' she said, wishing she had more words, 'is the idea we're working on.'

'Some job!' He was almost laughing.

'I said I'd take it on.'

Lou was both out of his depth and in his element. He saw that she wanted to believe in him. It was too much, he didn't deserve it, and he was going to grab whatever opportunity it brought. There was only one thing to say. The case would be back in her husband's hands any moment now.

'I want to see you again!'

She didn't trust herself to speak. She nodded. Twice, once to him, sitting opposite, and once to Beth, glancing in at the door. For the moment, they were finished.

When Tessa got home she felt ill. What was wrong? She also felt elated. She turned on the radio and recognised the violin concerto of Tchaikovsky. Exhilarating stuff! There were places where she wanted to dance, but oddly, she noticed herself looking out the windows whenever she entered a room. She thought she heard knocking and went to the door.

Nobody at all.

She listened to the music. The feelings that had captivated her came in wild bursts. It was wonderful, it was showy, but did it have a base? The question troubled her. She wanted to know something

about herself. She looked in, and what she found disturbed her. She turned the music off, and went to the kitchen to ...

... make a cake. It seemed a silly thing to do, but why not? She realised she was avoiding something, and it came to her, she wanted to hear news of Lou, the man on a charge of pulling a gun on his wife. Good heavens! It wasn't as if he mattered to her in any way, she'd simply had two discussions with him to make sure he understood what he was going to say at his trial, which would be held soon. Don would know because he was representing ...

... Lou. Tessa steadied herself. She wouldn't make a cake, she'd buy one, there were plenty of shops. She'd go out ...

She sat in a chair, almost without energy. She thought of turning on the wild Tchaikovsky again but it'd be in a different mood by now, expressing some sweetness she was never going to know. Don didn't love her, he simply wanted convenience, comfort, an arrangement that resembled what people called domestic bliss. The appearance would do for Don. She thought of going to a theatrical shop somewhere, she didn't know where but there would be one, and she'd buy a vast array of masks, pin them to the bedroom wall and ask him, every bloody morning, which one he'd wear today? There'd be Chinese masks, bird of paradise masks from New Guinea, horror masks from the Balkans where they frightened themselves with vampires ...

It was no good blaming Don. She'd failed too. She tried to think. When people couldn't help themselves, couldn't solve their own problems, they took on a substitute. They helped someone else in trouble that was worse than their own. When was Lou's trial? She'd go and listen every day. She'd give him strength by her presence. As Don defended him in the court she'd add warmth to make his heart know it had support. When he got his sentence there'd be someone waiting for him to get out. When he was still in there, locked away, there'd be someone to write to him, and she'd find out where he was and visit him. There would be steel between them but there would also be a stronger feeling flooding from her heart. Don would think it strange that she was doing this but she'd make him understand. People had to be supported. Lou had blazed with anger at his wife because he didn't know how to put another person in front of himself.

He couldn't defer, move aside, take a step back. He was a big, grown-up-wrongly, outsize child who needed to know how to love.

That was the human principle. That was what oiled the wheels so the world could go around. Love. It was what she lacked, and longed for. The whole wide world wanted it, waited, hoped it would come along, out of the blue, rocketing in from some place where it was the natural element while here on earth it was like a rare metal from outer space, falling to earth only when the tail of some comet brushed the planet on which her skerrick of life, her collection of days, had to be lived out.

Love was an escape and she knew what she was doing.

She rang Olivia Page. Could she come over and talk? Olivia agreed. Tessa drove to her friend's house, wondering how changed she was, how quickly Olivia would pick up that something unusual had happened.

She parked in the drive. Two large wattle trees arched over the spot where she'd left the car, and she noticed that they were developing buds; they were still a long way from flowering but they would flower in the coming winter. She envied them, doubting if anything so good would happen to her. Then she saw Olivia at the front door, and it was, for Tessa, both a challenge and a relief. Olivia looked ready, attentive, welcoming. She stood at the top of the little row of steps, inviting. 'You were quick,' she said. 'I had a feeling you would be.' Tessa was pleased to see that Olivia's welcome was neutral. Full of affection but not slanted towards shaping her visitor. She, Tessa, could be anything she liked. This was a beautiful thing. She walked up the steps, embraced Olivia, and heard her say, 'It's sunny. We could sit out here, if you like. I got everything ready when you were driving over.' Again that smile; Tessa was in a place where her problems didn't exist. She looked along the verandah and sure enough, Olivia had made things ready. There was a white cloth on a rickety old table, a teapot looking fresh, cups and something under a slice of cloth. Cake? It must be, there was a knife beside it. 'Olivia, how lovely of you! Let's sit out here!'

They sat. Olivia was in no hurry. 'It's a lovely morning. One of our warm autumn days. I often think March is the best month in this city,

but with global warming, maybe it's April.' Olivia was both quiet, and rich. 'Anyhow, who cares? Enjoy!'

She was cutting the cake by now, into slices. They sipped. Olivia asked after Don, and told her guest about Jack. 'He's got balance. When something surprises him, he takes a step back. It's very reassuring. I know he won't do anything stupid,' to which Tessa answered, 'Half your luck!' They laughed, and Olivia sat back, waiting.

Tessa told Olivia about Lou. The two conversations she'd had with him. He was going to throw himself on the mercy of the court – and his wife. Don was hoping for a sentence of about three years, but it depended on the judge's attitude to men's violence to women, and, as he had only recently been appointed to the bench, that wasn't known. Then she went silent. Olivia waited but nothing came. She filled their cups. When was sentencing to take place? Tess blurted out, 'It's already happened, for me. He wants to see me again and I want to see him!'

Startled, Olivia said, 'Who? This man Lou?' and Tessa nodded, crying by now.

'He wants to see you? But he's going to be in jail, isn't he? Three years, you think?'

Tessa startled her again. 'I won't be able to wait that long! I'll be shredded by then. Little bits of rag!'

Olivia was beginning to see why Tess had come. 'People in jail can have visitors, if it comes to that. But, heavens above, how much are you asking from Don? He's defended this man, and you, helping him, apparently, you've ...'

It couldn't be said. They stared at each other, Tessa desperate. 'It's impossible. That's why I need to talk to someone.' It occurred to her to add, 'who won't spread it around so everybody knows. I've got to deal with this on my own. Nobody I know would support me.' She might have added 'except you, Olivia', but didn't: she wasn't sure. She was in Olivia's hands, and waiting. Olivia took the only way she could see. 'Tell me about this man Lou. What's he like?' She prompted her friend. 'What were your impressions when you first saw him? What had you been told beforehand?'

It was the opening Tessa needed. She poured her feelings out. Olivia was quick to see that she knew next to nothing about Lou, the

man she thought she loved, and saw also that she felt imprisoned by her marriage to barrister Don. The man was obsessed with himself, yet couldn't be honest. 'It's like he needs someone to hold up a false picture in front of him and tell him it's a truthful portrait,' she told Olivia. 'That's what I'm expected to do and I hate it.' Olivia could see, also, that she had become good at it and if the untruth, the false picture, had become soothing for Don, it protected Tessa too. She drew a deep breath. 'You're in a fix. We've got to get you out of it, and we've got to do it skilfully so nobody gets hurt any more than can be avoided. Let me think.' She wanted to grab the teapot or cut some more cake, but they'd be distractions. 'We've got to work on Don. He's the problem.' Tessa pulled out a crumpled hanky. 'He's so dense. He's dense because he doesn't want to know.' Olivia knew this already. 'We've got to take a risk. A pretty big risk. When this man Lou goes to jail, you've got to visit him because you need to. He'll need it too. We've got to make sure his wife visits him too. I'm not sure how we're going to manage that, but he needs to feel that he's at least partly forgiven. Now, the visit. The first time, you won't tell Don where you're going. I'll take you there, wherever it is, and we'll tell people we're having a look at the countryside. Some nonsense like that. The second visit, you'll tell Don beforehand ...'

'And he'll go mad. He'll shout and yell and break down in tears and it'll be my fault and the fact is, I'll know it's my fault, and ... what am I going to do then?'

Olivia surprised her by her toughness. 'What are you going to do then? You're going to tell him that this visit will be your second visit and the first time was when I took you, and the reason I did was that he needed to find out that he was the problem. He needed to know that when he does the things that come naturally to him, he's making huge problems for other people, and because he doesn't see that, you're showing him! He's getting told the things he needs to know, that's what you'll tell him. If he can't take it, you can tell him you're coming over here to stay with us for a few weeks while he thinks about it. However! My guess is that you're going to be surprised by your husband. He might be a grown up child but he is capable of

learning. Or so I think. We're going to see, Tessa, aren't we? Do you have the courage? To go through with what I said?'

Tessa was amazed when she heard herself tell her friend, 'I've got the courage. I've got everything I need, including the foolishness, and the heartlessness and everything else that's wild and selfish and uncontrollable. Yes, I'll do it, but ...'

She made a feeble gesture. 'I'm in your hands. I'll do what you say.'

Olivia kept her promise of silence, of secrecy, but somehow the word about what was happening to the Trevorrows got around. The first suspect was Beth at the barristers' chambers, but those who knew her said she was the soul of discretion; nothing got out of the place through Beth. The next thing that happened was that Jack came home after running into Randolph Quirk in Collins Street, outside Kay Craddock's Bookshop. 'He seemed rather abstracted,' Jack told his wife, 'so I asked him if he'd been reading in the shop? No. He said he was concerned about the Trevorrows. They were in trouble because Tessa was in love with some murderer that Don was defending.' Olivia could feel her face stiffening. 'Randolph Quirk?' Jack nodded. 'Head in the clouds. Good old Randy. But he'd heard about it from somewhere ...'

'How do these things get out?'

Jack had no idea. 'They just do, that's all. I sometimes think the moment you say it's a secret, it's out. Or getting out. It's as if news has its own way of spreading itself.' He thought. 'It's funny to think of knowledge as something living, but it seems like it is. Anyway, how will this affect your plans?'

Olivia didn't know. 'I suppose it depends on how far the news has travelled. Who's found out and what they think about it.' She slapped a hand to her forehead. 'Oh Tessa, Tessa, Tess! She's not the right person to be handling this. She's not strong enough, I mean *broad* enough to handle this now it's got out.' Jack tried to be helpful. 'Do you want to ring her, and tell her?' She shook her head. 'I thought I might be able to manage them, so long as I was the only one that knew. But now it's got out, I don't know. I want to do something for Tess but I need to think. I need to get on top of what's happening and I don't know how.'

'I could ring Randy and ask him how he came to know. Where he got it from.'

She couldn't see this hurting anybody, and it might help. Jack rang Randolph and got Madeleine, his wife. 'He's not here right now but he said he thought you might ring. He mentioned that he ran into you today. You were talking about the Trevorrows.'

This annoyed Jack. 'Well, he was. He told me something I didn't think anybody knew.'

He could almost hear her thinking. The so-called secret was well and truly out by now. It was almost headline material. 'Do you know where he heard it from?'

'Well, forgive me Jack, but when he told me I thought he must have got it in some roundabout way originating with Olivia. I calculated that she'd be first to know, or pretty close. So that's where I assumed it had come from.' When he reacted angrily to this she answered him: 'Calm down, Jack. When I hear a bit of news – gossip, if you like – I want to know how true it is, and that starts me wondering where it came from. Is that person reliable, or someone who just picks up fantasies and spreads them?'

'And what did you think in this case?'

Madeleine Quirk told him, 'I thought, if it comes from Olivia, it'll be true. She knows how to sort out facts from rubbish.'

This calmed Jack a little. 'What's Randy think about it all?'

'You know what he's like. He sits there, saying hum and ha, and a week later, or longer, often enough, he does something, or he says something, that you'd never expect. It's his nature.' Then she went on. 'Would you mind calling him Randolph? That nickname doesn't suit him.' She could almost hear Jack smiling. 'It's a most unsuitable name. He's a good man, Jack, a fine man. I live with him and I know how high-minded he is.'

Jack, not wanting to argue, conceded the point. But after he'd hung up and was back with Olivia, he loosed his displeasure. 'Stupid woman. No sense of humour. Can't see through a joke to the reality behind it.' Olivia said, in her peace-making way, 'They live very differently from us.' This amused Jack: 'They surely do!' He wanted to go on but words didn't appear. Looking out the window, he tried to

summon the man as he knew him. Randy because he wasn't, the group would have said, but Jack had a feeling that the aircraft engineer had strong appeal for women in his remoteness; other-worldliness would surely respond to that, and Jack, who was very much of the practical world where things ran according to systems and on-time, knew how many people claimed to like things that way when what they really wanted was adventure, and special consideration for themselves. People who said they wanted justice usually didn't; they wanted an arrangement whereby the masses got enough justice to keep them happy, that is, subservient, passive, while they themselves received a special allocation of this world's goods ...

Goods: the word almost summed up the Randy-man. It didn't mean merchandise for him, as it did for most, it meant anything that Randy found it flattering to be among. He'd somehow got it into his head that he was special and should be treated accordingly. It was insufferable, and the only way to handle it was to laugh, something that needed to be done out of Randy's hearing. To live with him, as they'd done at the holiday house a few months ago, was to pretend; Jack would have said that the way to handle him was to pretend with absolute sincerity that he was reasonable, normal, fair-minded, et cetera, while preserving in memory everything he did or said for some later time. This way he could cope, and Olivia, who at least halfunderstood what he was up to, watched over their dealings with the Quirks with an air of attention bordering on reverence which would turn, weeks later, when they were home again, and alone, to laughter when Jack called on it with his witticisms. 'Daft!' he would say, as if he was high-minded too. 'Beyond their comprehension' was one of his favourites. 'The mad-house on the hill' was his name for Federal Parliament, which, he said, should have been buried deeper. 'It should have been built on a platform that could be raised and lowered,' he said on one occasion, during an after-dinner spat, 'in accordance with public opinion. The Honourable Members would find themselves in the bowels of the earth for weeks at a time, until some message was passed to them causing them to do something the populace wanted!'

Thinking about this later, when they were back in Melbourne, Jack told Olivia that the word populace was as close as Randy could come

to ordinary people - a common noun, of considerable dimensions, needing to be voiced with scorn. Jack thought no better of Madeleine. 'She took on the name of Quirk when she married him, and she signed her life away!' This statement caused Olivia to question her husband's judgement: 'I became a Page when we married, Jack. You didn't take on my name, I took on yours.' This caused him to reflect on her family name. 'You were Olivia Faye, which comes from the French word for a fairy, so when you called yourself Page you joined the real world and you haven't left it as far as I can tell, so the change was one that suited you. Hey?' His certainty was something her uncertainty never allowed her to overcome, so he ruled where she merely advised, his thoughts were the currency of their lives while hers were suggestions, hints, possibilities, and so on. By and large they worked well together when they were alone, because their system had only to satisfy the two of them, while such things as assessing the characters of other people, and making arrangements that were workable for getting along with those others required them to compare their private understandings with the means whereby others managed themselves, with resultant frictions.

In the Quirk household, Madeleine found herself shaken. Randolph, who was ultra-cautious with money, had decided a year ago that they could afford a federation period house with turreted windows upstairs and a sizeable garden, if somewhat reduced from when the house was built in 1901. Then Madeleine's connection with the Williamsons - or Donna, at least - had led to them being invited to the Fairhaven house the Pages had rented for three weeks. Madeleine had begun to feel that their marriage, in connecting with other couples, was gaining substance, something she yearned for and barely expected to get from her husband, whose integrity put him at odds with the world. How he scorned the upper echelons of his company, forever looking for ways to reduce maintenance in Australia and get it done where costs were lower. Madeleine had been hard-put to dissuade him from attending a company dinner in white top and black trousers with the intention of standing up when the general manager was about to speak and singing a parody he'd written of the advertisement 'I still call Australia home!' 'Lizards!' he liked to say. 'Speaking with forked tongues! We had a tradition,' he used to tell his wife, 'and it was the best in the world because it wasn't built on money-making, it was built on keeping our planes in the air when other airlines used to crash. The name of the quality was *pride* and by God, once people lose their pride they're reducible to nothing, quick bloody smart!' leaving Madeleine feeling reduced and with nothing to say beyond, 'For heaven's sake keep it to yourself. If you lose that job you won't get another because they won't give you a reference. You know what happened to Andrew Smallwood!'

This was a man they'd known who'd worked in a travel agency, noted certain irregularities, reported them, was accused of being responsible for what he was trying to correct, lost his position in a carefully orchestrated reshuffle, and finished up running a cleaning business, earning as much money as before, even a little more, but with his humiliation defacing the pride he'd once had. Mention of his name was Madeleine's most effective means of controlling – curbing - Randolph when his moods made him a danger to himself, but there is always damage to oneself when managing another person is your primary aim. Such losses have to be born or there would be no kindness, or compassion. Couples must look after each other, and parents their children. The elderly must be looked after, cranky and selfish as they may be. Selfishness would be unbounded if it were uncurtailed. Madeleine had developed a mechanism for protecting herself, by taking refuge in music. There at least the world could be ideal, love requited, tragedy more bearable. Even the storms of Mahler gained closure in the tenderness of his slow, introspective passages. Madeleine was unsure about Mahler. She preferred those composers who acknowledged rules imposed from outside: society's rules, to which the individual must defer. The reason she could live with Randolph, comprehending his mind's withdrawal to places where contempt was safely released, was that she too had her points, her habits, of escape. A few friends made all the difference. Like minds comforted, giving the illusion - for that was what it was! - that humanity beyond oneself was bearable, when it wasn't. How could the rest of humanity be bearable, acceptable, when she had to retreat from herself to find something that gave unalloyed pleasure, comfort and distraction? Only those beings who had perfected themselves to the point of becoming acceptable could offer any guidance to those struggling behind. Though she didn't realise it, Madeleine had allowed the arts – and she understood music best – to replace religion as the sphere of mental activity whereby the world needed to be ruled. Her friend Donna Williamson did the same thing. If they named a composer, or an important piece of his music, they were claiming the right to direct an issue, a conversation, onto ground which suited them, where they alone, and a few experts not available to other, ordinary people, knew the rules. Yet to do this, Madeleine knew in some part of her mind, was to use the brain to avoid what the brain knew very well; experience needed to be turned into common sense, the wisdom, such as it was, of ordinary people. Those who thought that they had high intellectual understanding were almost certainly deceiving themselves into thinking they recognised, and understood, the major elements of social life when they were in fact avoiding them.

All of this came to a head one evening when Randolph came home from the airport much later than Madeleine expected. The pilot of an Etihad flight had reported a problem with the unfolding of the nose wheels on his plane, and Randolph, as the inspection officer on duty, had been called. He'd rung Madeleine, said he'd be late, and thought no more about it, used as he was to eating at irregular hours. She was listening to Act 1 of Berlioz's *The Trojans* when he finally got home. The women of Troy were screaming as he put the key in the door, and Madeleine was so caught up by the music that she wasn't aware for a few moments that her husband was in the house. As soon as she realised, she turned the music down, and then off. 'Sorry darling, I didn't know when you'd be home.' By way of explanation for not being ready for him, she explained that she'd been listening to the musical tale of the ancient Mediterranean as a way of coping with the news that had come out that day about the shooting down of a Malaysian Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. The plane, with 298 people on board, had been hit by rockets fired by Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Randolph knew what she was referring to because he too, at various times during the day and early evening, had been getting similar reports. He'd been too busy with the Etihad people to deal with what he'd heard, and Madeleine's replacement of what had happened in the last twenty-four hours with something from thousands of years ago stirred his annoyance. She was focussing her attention on the wrong place, and more than that, her pleasure in the Frenchman's music was diluting her concerns for those who'd been shot out of the air a few hours before.

'Damn it woman,' he said sharply, 'you've grabbed the bull by the tail instead of the horns!' Madeleine was used to this sort of thing. 'What do you mean, Randolph? I'm not grabbing bulls by anything, I'm listening to this, or I was, because it was a way of dealing with something terrible that I'd only just heard of. And if you think I should have rung you to tell you, I knew that the airport was one place where you'd get the news of a crash sooner than anywhere else in this city!'

Randolph didn't bother to reply and his wife knew he was stroppy, a word he picked up from the mechanics he directed; it annoyed her that something so close to her own life as her husband's moods should be controlled by a carelessly created word which, she felt sure, would soon pass out of use. Trying to reassert the more normal strands of domestic life, she asked, 'How hungry are you? When did you last eat?' He was still sour. 'I grabbed a salad roll at some stage. You know I don't feel hungry when I'm working.'

This needed to be answered. 'And when you get home your body notices – before your mind, I might observe – that you *are* hungry. So what would you like?' She was about to offer alternatives when he burst out, 'I'd like a world where the better parts of human intelligence had control of the idiots that people this planet! The bloody Kremlin! They gave a rocket that can blast a plane out of the air at thirty thousand feet to some idiot *rebels* who couldn't tell one plane from another.' He looked at her as if she wouldn't be able to understand what he was saying. 'Gun-happy maniacs! They wouldn't know or care whether they were shooting a rabbit or a planeload of people who had no idea there was anything wrong on the ground they were flying over! Lord Jesus Christ!'

He moved to his favourite armchair but didn't sit. A second eruption followed. 'Those people fell out of the sky. There'd be a trail of bodies for miles! Who's going to pick them up? These *rebels*

that did the job are probably picking through the remains right now. For money or anything they think's worth keeping! They should be bloody shot themselves but they're in charge of the bodies! Talk about the lunatics in charge of the madhouse! They are, and it's never been any different, and it's the world we live in!'

Madeleine didn't want to hear another word. She knew what her husband thought of people who didn't measure up to his standards. 'There's some eye fillet steak. It wouldn't take long to grill. I could get a salad together while it's cooking. How does that sound?' Randolph managed to bring himself under control. 'It sounds good. I can always digest eye fillet, even when I'm tense. As I am tonight, in case you haven't noticed.' For a moment Madeleine thought he was on the way back to somewhere near an average sort of temper, but, looking at his eyes, she knew that he was still plunging down like the murdered passengers he'd been talking about.

He sat. 'Give me a glass of something, darling, would you?' It was as if a statue was speaking. She took a bottle from a cupboard and unscrewed the cap. 'Bailey's Bundarra. Of Glenrowan. Ned Kelly country.' She made the mistake of adding, 'You can ride your high horse into town!' It made him sullen. He was weak, his energy of anger had gone and she saw a man without protection. 'The world's a rotten place,' he murmured. 'The strong people, the ones who get in positions to make decisions to do awful things ... are the sort of people who like creating shambles because they know they can get away with it. And how do they know?' A trembling, tiny moment of strength came into his voice as he surrendered. 'Because they've got away with it before.'

He sipped the wine and turned his eyes on his wife. 'Thanks for this. It's wonderful wine. Strong and yet refined. It used to be rough as bags, years ago, but they've worked on it and brought it to this ...' he searched for a word '... perfection.' He sipped again and then his thoughts started to unroll. 'Two hundred and ninety eight souls. Every one of them loved by someone. The media's going to have a few great days. They feed on stuff like this.' He sat still and his wife knew he was trying to stop himself yelling whatever was in his mind. She knew, also, that he'd have to pass through despair

before she'd get any of what she called sense out of him. The moment came. 'Have you ever seen a wrecked plane? I have. We don't get big passenger jets crashing in this country. It's something they specialise in in Russia, usually ...' his voice was starting to crack '... because they take off without enough fuel, so they fall out of the sky. But even when it's only a little plane, like that one they found in the mountains a couple of years ago ... near Benalla, you remember ... it's enough to let you know what a big crash is like. Stuff everywhere. Things that should be stuck together, like a bird and its wings, spread all over a paddock. An engine, all twisted, and sitting in mud. That's not how the world's meant to be! But it's what happens.' His voice was cracking and Madeleine knew he was on the way down. She dipped the eye fillet in a saucer containing some oil, then she put the bottle near the salad bowl, where she'd need it in a minute. 'Stay strong, darling,' she said. 'Don't let your imagination get a grip on you.' She watched to see the effect, if any, of her words.

He nodded weakly, then he stiffened again. 'My imagination? There wouldn't be any music if we didn't let our imaginations take over. Would there?' He was almost human again. 'Imagine a world without music!'

Madeleine expected her husband's gloom to lift, but it didn't. She found herself wondering what prisoners were like if they had only an hour or two each day when they were allowed out of their cells. It would overpower you, she decided, and you'd know when this had happened because the time would come when you'd rather stay in your cell because that was where you belonged. Randolph was functioning but his spirit was dormant. Dumb. Sending out no messages. She tried jokes, games ... she rang a handful of people he hadn't seen recently and got them to ring him, or visit, and he was pleased by these contacts, but when they'd ended, and the friends had gone, he was the same cheerless, pessimistic employee of an airline he no longer believed in. 'Hard times are the best times,' he told his wife, 'because to survive, you need hope. Something to work for. It doesn't hurt to be poor so long as you've got an ideal. A new tradition is better than an old one, because the new one has to be tested every

day, while the old one is hardly more than a ball and chain that people convince themselves they're proud of.' He had these moments, and she appreciated that he needed her, but his misery – it wasn't too strong a word – was draining him. His work was a habit. She noticed him spending more time in their garden, snipping flowers and leaves for a vase, and when he did, his arrangements were low, and spreading, as if aspiration, and standing tall, was no longer part of his thinking. She noticed, also, that he rarely, if ever, put on any music, though he was pleased when she did; she was responding to both their needs, she felt, and chose carefully, going for music that *needed* to be written, she'd have said, meaning that it was part of its composer's journey: Bach's cello sonatas, or the little bagatelles of Beethoven, ideas he was playing with in between his major works. She found herself buying recordings of Alfred Brendel because he played the works of Schubert and Beethoven as he imagined the composers might have played them for themselves, improvising, playing with an idea until it had nothing more to offer, then plunging into some contrasting mood. 'Beethoven was an impulsive man, wasn't he,' Randolph observed; 'Too cranky to be a permanent friend, but then again, imagine if you lived in the same building, or just across the street, and you heard him testing his ideas, day and night ...'

'... and you had to wash his dishes, and empty his chamber pots!' Madeleine said, and the two of them laughed quietly, almost secretly, sure that they were well married because the same passages in the music affected them in the same way – smiling, glancing at each other to be sure that what the music was doing had been noticed.

Music saved Randolph in this troubled period. 'We had grape vines growing at the back of our house when I was little,' he told his wife. Not like the vines in a vineyard, all pruned within an inch of their lives, but high, trailing over a great big trellis my father built so he could go there on a hot summer's day and be in the shade. If his friends dropped around for a beer on a hot day, that's where they'd sit. If dad took a bottle of beer and a glass out there, I knew he was happy, so if I wanted him to let me do something, that's when I'd ask. When he got into his second glass of beer I'd come up very quietly and smile at him ...

Smiling at his wife as he said this, the unhappy Randolph would be almost happy again, and she might say, 'Is the music like the grape vines?' and he would nod, and they would be secure together because he was sheltered from that part of his mind that nagged him by telling him that there was no honour in a world full of corruption and that the airline which he'd once been proud to be part of was now like all the other businesses that were struggling not to fail. 'I've got to do something else,' he told Madeleine, 'and I don't know where to look.'

She told him he could go to Qantas's opposition, Virgin Airlines, and get a job with them, surely? He supposed he could, but he'd still be close to the situation that had deposed his certainties, and who wanted that? 'I'd be better off making myself an odd-jobs man, working on people's homes. Roofing repairs. Electrical wiring, I'd even paint fences, anything to stop my mind from troubling me. That's what hurts most, Maddy, it's as simple as that. I hate what's happening in my own thoughts. Music's a good way of blocking out what I feel the rest of the time, so it's good to come home and know you'll put on something.' He smiled wanly at his wife, who wanted to know, 'How do you manage at work, then? What's it like these days?'

After a long silence he answered her. 'I try to get lost in what I'm doing. The trouble is, I spend half my time listening to hairsbreadth possibilities, and I'm being asked to predict. Once upon a time, I'd have said, Fix it. That's why I'm always talking about the good old days when anyone at Qantas would replace any problem straight away. Fix it! was the motto. Don't take any doubts into the air. Fix it, and if the passengers have to wait, give'em a cup of tea. Or something stronger. If you're certain of what you're doing, your pride's maintained. But if the servicing's done by people you don't know and don't have any faith in, you're in decline. Not just the service, but you yourself, because management's not interested in your pride any more. Now! That's bad enough, but when politicians hand the latest deadly rockets to mad soldiers who are fighting some other mad government, and none of them gives a stuff if they happen to shoot down a plane full of ordinary people ...'

He stopped, and Madeleine could feel something building, getting itself ready to burst out: '... that's when anyone with any pride

doesn't want to go flying any more. Humans are clever! We can do things that only gods could imagine. Talk about the Arabs and their magic carpets ... we can do it these days. Planes are *that* good! We can take three hundred ordinary mortals and we can turn them into gods; we can take them higher than the clouds, up there where once there was nothing but the imaginations of astronomers, we can look after them, we can cosset them and comfort them ...

Another pause.

'... but it seems we can't get them beyond the reach of everything that's rotten, villainous and destructive in the human race. We can't make them safe from what we are in our own rotten selves. That,' he said, and now he was almost shouting, 'is what we've brought ourselves to. My father, with his bottle of beer under a grapevine, was safer than those gods we send into the air every day. And why was he safer?'

Madeleine waited.

'Because nobody gave a stuff about where he was, or what he was doing. He was out of sight of the world, so he was safe. What a world we've made for ourselves!'

Madeleine, knowing there were no words in the world that would answer him, put on *The Magic Flute*.

After not hearing from Madeleine for three weeks, Donna Williamson felt something was wrong. She rang her friend. It was what she'd feared. For years she'd rebuked Madeleine, far back in her mind and out of sight, she hoped, for making herself responsible for Randolph. Differently handled, in Donna's view, he could have been made responsible for her, something Donna felt he could do easily enough. Men were made to protect, and women to both bear children and care for the culture generally. Men were easier to replace because their role was simpler. Since, in Donna's view, their notions of the world were simpler also, this was appropriate. Madeleine, however, had taken on the role of manager of her marriage – and look where it had landed her.

Donna withdrew into her mind to plan. She had to stabilise Madeleine, put her back on top of Randolph, and not let Tim know what she was doing – or not till stability was restored. Where to

begin? She thought about her husband. People had told her before her marriage how difficult it was to manage men. They were obtuse, they despised women and their only wish was to manage them, to better them, and so on, yet Tim had been none of these things. Indeed, he'd been too easy. He was so tractable that she'd become suspicious, but in the months following their wedding she'd become a little surer about his need for her to direct him. It was as if, confident as he appeared to be, his need for her leadership must rest on some inadequacy, some weakness or lack of central purpose ... and so she'd taken control. In her day and age, she was uncommon for believing in high culture, however much it had been eroded by commercial society. She and her friends still believed in *quality*, both of goods and people. Confident people surrounded themselves with confident people and looked with scorn on those who were unsure. If that was her husband's weakness, she'd protect him. Good minds gravitated together and kept the others out: it was the only way to make good institutions, good families, cities, businesses, or human projects of any sort.

Tim would be safe in her hands!

He'd been a little strange, however, of late, and she sensed the stirrings in him of some mutinous impulses. She watched him closely, sternly, and he, knowing this, had returned to being the obliging, easygoing man under control he'd been since their partnership had formed. Would this continue? Disorder, once experienced, may be seeking order again but it must be a substitute for what's been lost. Nothing returns to the peaceful state it once enjoyed. New order must replace the old because habit rarely wins, once a contest is joined between old and new. The old can never be rediscovered as it once was. It needs to be re-created, looking like it was, perhaps, but reconstituted in some way. That was how things seemed for Donna, but Tim saw differently. If everyone else acted consistently with their beliefs, why shouldn't he? He began to wait for an opportunity worth seizing.

Letters to the paper came first. He could feel his way, making up people and choosing his issues. He could tell stories and describe situations. Then, listening one Sunday afternoon to Donna and Madeleine, he realised that what he'd been thinking about had already been done. The Russians had the story of Lieutenant Kije, the

heroic soldier who never existed. Poor Kije, or was it lucky Kije, had to 'die' and be given a funeral when the Tsar wanted to meet him. Tim listened to his wife and her friend laughing about the story. Silly Russians! Stupid Tsar, et cetera. Suddenly Tim saw that not only could he score off the world at large, he could deceive those closest to him: his wife and her nearest friend, two people who saw themselves as excelling in taste and understanding.

Ah, the joy of tricking them!

He started simply. A letter raising an issue. What should it be? Yes, an Afghan refugee, writing through his advocate, pleading for the chance to live in Australia despite the government's determination to keep him out. An accusation, though it wasn't actually levelled at the readers, from a man sinking into oblivion unless something was done for him. No! He would write as a woman, wanting to bring her son to the land where opportunities outnumbered fates. He did it, surprised at the way the words came out. Easily. Convincingly. All the same, he put it aside for two days, studying his words frequently. He found a booklet from the Department of Immigration and checked it against his letter. Okay. Now: would he send his letter to a member of parliament, or to a newspaper directly? The MP, he decided, then changed his mind, then changed it back. An MP with a soft heart, someone who'd go public, appealing to the people against the government.

It shouldn't have worked, because he hadn't created an identity for the writer of this letter, but it did. It was days before the letter was discovered to be a hoax, and by then the controversy was rageing. People decided that the sentiments, the situation, were true, even if the details had been contrived to deceive. It was a case of deception approximating truth. Tim had chosen his MP well, because the Member already had a file of cases against the immigration people, he'd been waiting for an opportunity to unload on the officials, and Tim's letter had been provocative enough to give him the start he wanted. The media seethed with the case for days before the government got on top of it again. Tim had the satisfaction of hearing his friends talking heatedly about the letter, and the enjoyment of not holding an opinion because, he told them, he hadn't caught up with the matter ... yet!

After it died down Tim was left looking for his next strike. Where? Women's football? People who couldn't swim? No, he wanted his punches to hurt. People who normally laid down the law should be tripped up. Then he became aware that one of the Mr Bigs of the city's organised crime gangs had been interstate for a period during which a well-known hit man had disappeared. Was there a connection? Yes, because not long after Mr Big came back one of the city's leading hospitals announced that a recent bequest would enable them to add a new ward to their cancer clinic at an estimated cost of two and a half million dollars. The donor, they said, was a well-known businessman who preferred to remain anonymous. Tim had a photo of Mr Big printed in another city with a statement identifying the man in the picture as the hospital's benefactor. Copies were left in the hospital's foyer and the streets nearby. The press was tipped off and the story went public. When questioned, the hospital said it was their policy to respect the privacy of those who chose to give donations. The lack of a denial made the truth obvious. Then a story began to circulate, mostly in whispers, that the police had allowed certain evidence of Mr Big's involvement in the hit man's disappearance to be destroyed – but at a price: the bequest to the hospital. It was the sort of thing the media loved – accusations, whispers, suspicions, conjecture, rumours, people trying to appear clean-handed, those who knew something doing their best to say nothing ...

Tim was well pleased. He'd strike again when he saw the opportunity, but what would it be this time? An uproarious joke, or another stirring of the criminal pot? It would all depend, he decided, on what turned up. Or would it? His work forced him to see what most of the population hid from themselves, namely, that the contents of people's minds had, for the most part, been put there. Society controlled the atoms that made it by managing the state of opinion. How well Tim knew that! Businesses came to the polling bureau where he worked to find out, via opinion polls, what people were thinking, which allowed them, in their turn, to drip new ideas into the feeding process, or reinforce the suitable ones already in circulation. It was, to his mind, a dictatorship very nearly as absolute as the regimes of the past that everyone regretted. Hitler and Stalin were

only the extremes, the tip-end of a very long branch. Opinion, which was thought to rise spontaneously, naturally, in the human mind, was an introduced species; the flowers of thought had been replaced by carefully cultivated weeds and only professional gardeners had any idea of their situation. Theirs, and ours, every last one of us. Tim ran his mind over what he'd been doing in his playful way in the last few weeks - the 'Afghan refugee' and the manipulation of the Mr Big story. Playfully? He saw that he'd started a revolution without quite knowing what he was doing, but now he'd seen the drift of his thinking he couldn't fail to see how far his rebellion might go. He was close to getting inside the machinery of his society's brain, he didn't like what it was producing and it was clear to him that he might subvert it if he dared. This was a possibility he'd never thought about in his years of working with public opinion. His understanding of history had always been a way of looking at the exercising of power by ruling classes, but now it was his class that were the rulers. Power had moved to the manipulators of the mind, who, by and large, worked at the dictate of commercial interests; couldn't this be changed?

He thought it could.

But who would do it, and in which direction would the mass be moved?

He had to think. He felt like a boy, an innocent, given a deadly weapon with no instructions about its use. He needed, therefore, to lie low, and think, and think ...

Donna, his wife, knew none of these thoughts, but she sensed when he relaxed, as he did: he became again the considerate, boyish, ever-quick yet congenial man she'd loved. More importantly, she felt back in charge again, and secure. Whatever had been bothering him had been resolved, or simply gone away. She suggested that they should make a journey. Go travelling. Visit places they hadn't seen so far. 'Where would you like to go?' Tim wanted to know, and saw how safe he was when Donna's reply came back, 'Let's think about it for a few days, and then let's surprise each other. Where do I want to go? I want to go somewhere you wouldn't think I'd want to go, Tim, that's my answer for the time being. Let's think for a while, now, before we give our real answers. Is that all right with you?'

It was. They were both happy in their different ways, and they had, each of them, a decision to make.

A week passed, and then Donna said they shouldn't cook a dinner that night, they should go to a restaurant. 'A middle eastern one, I think, so we've got a table full of good things to tempt us, while we talk about where it'll be and when. And whether we go on our own or get a party of friends together. What about that place ...' and she named a restaurant they'd noticed in Brunswick when they'd taken part in the demonstration mourning the rape and murder of a young woman who'd been followed home from a party she'd attended, and whose body had been found, a few days later, half-buried on the outskirts of their sprawling city. Donna had been seething, she'd taken Tim, who'd come willingly enough, but, professional to the last, had spent the time of the march and speeches that followed, observing the people whose sympathies were being expressed around him. These too, were people that believed that society belonged to them and it was they who would determine how things were done. Yet a rapist, a murderer, had interfered, and the man had been caught, first by a shop-window camera and then by the police. In another age he'd have been torn to pieces but their society did things differently, and he'd face trial soon enough. There were jails to house such people and when they filled, more jails would be built ...

The night for the middle eastern dinner came. As he got in Donna's car, Tim produced a rolled up map. 'Good heavens!' she said: 'The world,' said he. 'I have a feeling we're going to need this. Or I think we might.' She was amused. 'We might have to finish our dinner and get them to clear the table?' He smiled, leaving it up to chance, or simply the way things turned out, and they drove to Brunswick. The waiter at the restaurant asked them what it was they'd brought with them and when it was explained he gave them a table at one side, near a bench where the map could be spread out. Then they studied the menu as if they were staying for a week.

An hour later, and after the opening of a second bottle of wine, for Tim was drinking steadily while Donna, as driver, could do no more than sip, they broached the question. Where would they go?

Tim was amazed when Donna proposed Phuket, and if not Phuket, then Bali. When he raised his eyebrows at this clichéd suggestion, she said, 'We'd go to the other side of the island, of course. Away from the mob.' When his expression didn't change, she said, 'We don't have to go looking for nightclubs full of westerners, there are villages that are quite unspoiled, and that's what we want, isn't it? We want to get out of our culture and into theirs. Paintings and carvings we've never seen before that we can bring home and people will say gosh, where'd you get that?'

Tim sat back, certain that his idea would get a better reaction. 'You travel so that when you get home, the world looks different. That means you have to go to places that tell you something that was hidden, before. What about Lourdes, in France, down the south somewhere, I think it is.'

'Lourdes? Why on earth would you want to go there?'

'To see a miracle.'

She laughed. Tim had a way with him. But he was serious. 'Miracles happen when people see the impossible. It doesn't have to actually happen. It's enough if they believe it happened. Something impossible took place and people believe more than they've ever believed before. Their lives are changed by something they can't explain. Miracles happen,' he went on, 'when lots of people gather, some place where they know nothing, so faith can sneak in and turn their minds to believing that they did see something impossible ...'

'... like a statue of the virgin weeping!' Donna's contempt was unbounded, yet good-humoured too. Tim rallied. 'How come it's me that wants to go to Europe and you who want to go to Asia? I thought you'd want to go to London to see a Prom concert, or La Scala to see an opera. Ah!' He'd had an idea. 'We'll go to ... I don't remember the name of the place but it was where Berlioz sat in the shade of a tree all day, writing The Trojans.' He thought he'd won. 'How's that? That's somewhere you've always wanted to go! The birthplace of a great idea ...'

Suddenly she was affected. They'd found each other in their foolery. 'Or the death of one,' she said. 'Estelle. The woman he loved as a youth, he found her again when he was an old man, if you think

sixty's old. He wrote to her, he even visited her, and she received him nicely, even though I don't think she had much idea of what was happening. She'd led a quieter life than he had, the poor man ...'

They were suddenly and strangely close. Tim opened up. 'People say they're sorry for mad people. They think they've got them on the end of a rope. But it's the mad people who are free because they're not bound by normal logic. Freedom's a very tricky state to define. If we want to be free we need to get away from what's normal!' Suddenly, and for a dangerous moment, he wanted to tell her about the 'Afghan refugee' and Mr Big, but a warning flickered in his brain and he didn't go on. That was a secret tunnel he was digging for himself and it would collapse if anybody knew. So he looked into her eyes, pressing her to go on, and she scarcely noticed the break in his proceedings because there'd been no break in her mind. Her thoughts were a jumble, but full of fascination. 'Estelle. Plombières, that was the name of the place where he sat outside all day and wrote his music. I couldn't think of it. And where did Estelle live? I forget now, but we could find out easily enough. It'd be in the memoirs, or his letters.' She was excited: 'But what would we do when we got there? Wouldn't it be awful if everything was changed and you didn't get any connection at all with the reason you went there?'

Tim said, 'You'd take the letters with you and read them in a suitable spot. Maybe on the edge of town, where you could see the countryside. You'd pray for a storm to roll across the countryside ...' He knew she loved the Fantastic Symphony and he was teasing her, playing her on a line to see how far it might extend, and the paradox of this couple in their middle eastern restaurant in Sydney Road Brunswick was that both, in their separate ways, were as happy as could be, their minds fully exerted, fully occupied, in thoughts at the widest possible angle from their daily realities. Donna banged the table with the flat of her hand, and took hold of her glass, still half full. Up went the glass and down went the wine. 'Yes!' she called. 'That's what we're going to do and that's where we're going to do it. What a wonderful idea. Who knows what we'll be like when we get back? You don't know, Timmy, do you? And I don't know either. Let's

not talk about it any more but tomorrow we'll work out when we can go, and then we'll get the tickets ...'

Five minutes later they were in the car and ten minutes later they were home, map and all. Another twenty minutes and they were in bed, still excited, holding each other, talking furiously (Donna) and laughing (Tim) at the way his hidden, cunning foolishness had caused an upheaval that might take them anywhere, anywhere at all in the whole wide world.

The Svendsens lay low for weeks. Rory made phone calls, checking the lie of the land, as he put it. Ruth watched her husband, and the world, waiting for them to engage. Then she ran into Jenny Bartlett in the Westfield shopping centre car park. Jenny had just emptied her trolley into her car and commented that it was lucky she looked up when she did because a moment later Ruth would have been past. Ruth ran her eye over the things she could see poking out of plastic, feeling sure that there'd be nothing but essentials in Jenny's backseat pile, and noticed Jenny's daughter Giselle on the seat too, reading a pamphlet about the Royal Mail Hotel, Dunkeld. 'Are you thinking of going there?' she said. Giselle nodded, and moved the pamphlet to show it better. 'Dad says we might go up for a weekend. There's lots of great walks in the ...'

'... Grampians,' Ruth gave her, and felt, she realised, envious. At university, years before, she'd committed to a big walk in the Grampians, but for some reason it had never come off, and Rory, whom she'd married, had never shown any interest in the bush, wildflowers or anything of that sort, and she regretted it. She was fiercely loyal and wouldn't admit it, but when she took a jar of honey off the shelf in the supermarket she read the labels, envious of those whose work it was to cart bees and their hives through forests which were endlessly, in her mind, in flower. Yellow box. Blue gum. Red stringybark. There were people who knew all the trees, and when they flowered, carted boxes of bees around without getting bitten, knew where to drop them and when to pick them up ... there were worlds outside her comprehension and she wished for the freedom to visit these worlds occasionally, instead of ...

What was her life worth? Or Rory's, although that second question was not one she allowed herself to ask. For a moment, looking at Giselle, she wondered who the girl would marry; she looked about twelve and the processes of maturing were already underway. Seeing her, self-conscious but still able to lapse into the unthinking ways of childhood, Ruth realised that the girl would see her, Ruth, as a presentation of what women gained and lost in entering their maturity and then, of course, there followed the sickening question as to whether that process had not quite some way to run. She might feel mature alongside Giselle Bartlett, aged twelve, but she was still only half way through her twenties and her partner, Rory, was not as dependable as she might wish. He took risks. His calculations didn't go far enough ahead. Burning buildings! He thought he was cunning to have had plans drawn up for the development of the place but it didn't occur to him that the architects might not have been fools. Ruth felt sure they could judge to a hairsbreadth the genuineness, the enthusiasm, real or affected, of a client. Besides, it was only certain types of buildings that got burned – pubs that weren't making any money, houses involved in marital settlements ... If you wanted to do something that had been done before, you were never smart enough. Even if you got away with it, someone would know. And this, she realised, was close to the reason why she loved Rory. He took risks, while she, cautious by nature, couldn't escape her restrictions. Rory would make a fortune, or he'd go to jail, or both, and when he came to the end of his life he'd be able to say he'd lived, while she ...

... would be able to say no more than she'd been acted upon, once or twice, but had initiated little, thought of nothing new, hadn't even known where the outlets were to go and look for them.

She was dependent on her husband and they both knew it. Rory could therefore do what he liked, and she felt that he wanted her as she was because she gave him his freedom in a way that another sort of woman wouldn't. That was his need for her. Quite a bond! It meant – and she'd known this from before they married – that she must be ready for whatever he caused to happen to her life. Most people thought that fate, fortune, the future or things of that sort were indecipherable, invisible, dangerous perhaps but impossible to predict. Not for Ruth:

all of those dangerous, imponderable characteristics were in front of her eyes, embodied in her man.

Rory Svendsen: her life was going to be no less – though no more – bumpy than his. It depressed her. It didn't occur to her that this was the downside of love. They'd had their peaks, mainly because she hadn't been aware of the costs that must appear some day, calling to be paid for. On days when she was feeling low, Rory was affectionate and thoughtful; this pleased her until the moment when she realised he had some new scheme in mind but wasn't sharing it with her. He was waiting. This meant that she was waiting too. What was he going to do?

She couldn't bring herself to ask. Whatever it was, his daily activities didn't change. Up at six. A run, or a brisk walk. Back for breakfast, which they took together. 'If we start the day together, we're linked. We can do whatever we like, and not be apart, because, when we sit down for dinner, it'll only take a few words to join us.' So said Rory. Joined? She was chained to him, but she didn't know what he was doing, for all the things he shared. There was something hidden. She had an idea that she would only know when it went wrong, and he was in trouble. Watching him closely, she observed that he was interested in the values of houses. Rising prices in an area caused him to drive there. Weeks later, she noticed reports of shootings in certain areas. The owners of these houses reported gunshots through their doors, their windows, and claimed to police that they had no idea why anyone was targeting them. There were no criminals in their families, no drug connections. They didn't have an enemy in the world, there was nothing crooked in their lives to cause these random gun shots ... This is what they said. Ruth felt sick in the stomach. It could happen to them? Worse than that. She had a feeling that it was happening because of them. One evening, over a dinner of seafood marinara, with Pewsey Vale Riesling to help it down, she raised the question of these shots in the night, cars with no lights on, helpless people terrified. Rory, she saw, was amused. 'Racket of some sort,' he said. That seemed obvious. Ruth asked him how anyone could benefit from what was going on. 'They must want people to get worried,' Rory suggested. This annoyed Ruth. 'That much is obvious, but why?'

The wine had mellowed him. 'There's always a reason,' he said, 'but as you say, why? The reason's not obvious, is it?' She felt he was so pleased with himself that he was on the verge of telling her. Cautiously she said, 'No, it's not obvious. But that's because I'm not looking at it in the right way. If I knew what was really going on, it'd be obvious!' Rory smiled, and she knew he knew. Then they talked about something else for a time and she couldn't help noticing the warmth he felt for her. The words 'You're happy tonight' came out of her and when he smiled even more warmly she realised that what was annoying her was pleasing him. How could this be? She poured herself another glass, hoping it would make her more insightful. It didn't. It made her more accepting, instead: more passive, and that was what he wanted. It wasn't till the next day that she read her situation a little more clearly. He was involved in something that he didn't want her to know about. Further, this was nothing new. Bullets in the night. Why? Her knowing would make him vulnerable. People can only do dangerous things if they reduce the dangers in their minds, and to have her watching, knowing, would make him uncomfortable. Scared of her letting out whatever it was he needed to keep covered. Those shots? Those innocent – were they? – people whose homes copped a blast. What was the saying? Cui bono? Who benefited? How? Who else was involved, because she knew it wasn't Rory who drove the darkened cars or fired the guns; he was beside her, the partner who kept one side of her bed warm on winter nights. Cui bono? She couldn't work it out. Then she realised – and it took days before this thought flashed into her mind – that perhaps she didn't want to know.

It would be a lot easier, and simpler to carry out, if she kept on loving what she knew of Rory and put the rest, whatever it was, out of mind. He felt more secure if he alone carried the knowledge she'd been wanting him to share. It wouldn't be so hard to do what he wanted, and love him without inquiring. She'd been doing it since she first got to know him ... got to know what she did know, that is: it was clear, now, that she didn't know all of him and, if she wanted to get philosophical, it happened all the time, everywhere, with just about everyone, that people lived and loved together without the godlike understanding they affected to want. How people deceived

themselves if they thought they knew every corner of their partner's personality. You couldn't do it, and what was troubling her, or so she told herself, was that she had only just realised this limitation applied to her as it did to everyone else. That wasn't going to change. She had to get used to it.

This was what she told herself, but it wasn't enough. She wanted to know every corner, cubicle and cupboard of his being. It was her right, she told herself, as his lover, to know everything there was to know. Why, she told herself, there's nothing I keep back from him!

It only took a moment to realise that wasn't true. She was hiding her uncertainty and consequent unhappiness. If she closed her mind to the things he was doing outside the reach of her knowledge then she would have to adjust her whole way of living to maintain the front – the *different* front – that she presented him. And if she was changing, or about to change, would those who knew her old self notice? Would they know that something was happening?

There was only one way to tell. She made it her business over the next few weeks to catch up, one way or another, with those who knew her well, and be alert for their reactions. Would they notice something different about her? Would they see it in her clothes? Would she drop some old habits and show it that way? One by one she got around to Olivia Page, Maria Furlinghetti, Tess Trevorrow and the rest of them. 'I felt a need to catch up,' she told Olivia. 'We lose track of ourselves if we're not careful.' It sounded bland enough but the moment she said it she felt she'd given something away, yet Olivia didn't seem to notice. They had lunch in a little Thai place in North Melbourne, only just opened, yet popular already so they had to squeeze in at a table for two near the window. Olivia wanted to know how Rory was and apologised for neglecting them. For a moment they wondered, both of them, what they were going to say to each other, but an early model tram rumbled past, then stopped with a jerk because the driver had noticed someone hurrying to his stop. Olivia, looking over Ruth's shoulder, noticed this and said something about drivers knowing, once, where to expect their regulars to board and get off, and how, in a city with a growing population, they didn't know any more. That led them to the people who lived in North Melbourne, and how they'd changed over the years, and were changing again, as the poor district attracted the affluent. 'It's as if we've built a new city ... no, as if a new city keeps replacing earlier old ones and you can't see the new suburb any more because there's too many relics of the old!'

Ruth, not a witty woman, appeared to bridle at this. 'We're still in our twenties, Olivia. You're a little premature in calling us relics, surely?' They laughed, took up their menus and looked at the Thai cuisine. Conversation turned to that country's tourist destinations and political troubles. 'They're the softest, most beautiful people,' Ruth said, 'but there's another side to them, which I can never see when I'm there, but it *must* be there because when trouble flares up, they're so brutal to each other.' She recalled earlier riots and street warfare reported in the Australian media. 'But that's the trouble,' Olivia put in at one stage, 'We only know what someone tells us. If reporters and cameramen don't tell us something then we never know it happened. It makes us ever so dependent, doesn't it. I'm not at all comfortable with having views of the world that aren't my own.' Ruth was literal about this: 'If they're your views, then they are your own, surely?' But Olivia was ready, touched in a tender spot. 'You've put your finger on something else that bothers me. I'm not entirely my own. Even in my mind. My thoughts have been put there by someone else, lots of somebodies ... this conversation we're having will stick in my mind, or bits of it will, so there'll be a part of me that's been shaped, or at least influenced, by you.' She looked at Ruth as if what she'd said showed the other woman her helplessness and accused her of being in no better place herself.

Ruth seized on what she'd said, but held it for a moment while they gave their orders to the waitress who came to them, pad in hand and biro trembling. Then they resumed. 'When we marry, we choose our other half. Marriages are one thing made of two people. If I marry someone,' Ruth said, 'and I married Rory, then if he develops in a way I wasn't expecting, or *doesn't* when I thought he would, then the course of my life has been changed.' Olivia, though attentive, didn't say anything, so Ruth added, 'It stands to reason.' Olivia thought not. 'I don't know that anything stands to reason. I don't think reason *stands*! I think it flits about, sitting on one person's shoulder, probably

unexpectedly, for a minute, then it flits somewhere else, leaving the person it's deserted lost! I think that most people are in an awful muddle most of the time, and reason helps to sort them out, but when it deserts them, as it does, inevitably, then they wander around in circles, dithering, until somebody guides them.'

Ruth could see, looking at the other woman, that she was by no means sure of what she was talking about, and yet, and strangely, she'd said the very words that Ruth herself had been thinking lately, and wanted to say, but hadn't allowed to surface in her mind because she'd been afraid of letting anyone know she'd changed ...

Or had she? It was most frustrating. But again it was Olivia whose thoughts took a new direction. 'I want to do something. Jack wants us to have children, and I do too, but he's in a hurry to get started and I'm not ready. I need to make a mark in the world myself before I hand over any importance I've got to my child. Children. Jack won't want to stop at one and neither will I. You shouldn't. An only child gets lonely. They don't have support with their struggle with their parents. So what will I do? That's what I'm thinking about. Help me Ruth. Find something for me. And yourself. What are we going to do?'

Ruth was less surprised than she might have been. 'Children?' She smiled, mostly at herself, which was uncommon for someone preoccupied with how she faced the world. 'Rory's not like Jack. He thinks children would be the end of everything.' She knew this to be true; children might be helpless, vulnerable and all those things, but they weren't deceivable, and that was how Rory lived his life. What she was facing was the question of whether he could keep her out of his self-awareness, or not. It was unbearable, she'd been telling herself, and yet it might be more than bearable, it might be welcome if she could play the same game in reverse and involve herself in something he couldn't enter. What Olivia had said was good. 'You've really put something in front of me today. I don't know. Let me think! There's got to be something for us. Something for you, while you ...' she had to be courteous '... develop, and something for me while ...' Her sentence ran out, leaving her looking at her table companion. She tried again: 'While I ...'

Olivia didn't need to hear the rest. 'While you make yourself ready too. I'm sick of women waiting to be told what to do with their lives. Aren't you? Let's make a decision for ourselves. Dive in. Take the plunge. How long do we need to think about it? A week? Two?' Her pause only lasted a moment. 'Two! Let's have lunch here in two weeks from today. I'll listen to your ideas, you listen to mine, and we'll make a decision. What do you think?' Ruth was nodding vigorously, crying too, though she pretended she wasn't. They touched hands, unusually and unexpectedly happy with what they'd done and how they'd amazed themselves. 'Two weeks from today! Here!'

They left the Thai restaurant, ushered through the door by a beaming man who wondered what had happened. Had they enjoyed their lunch as much as that? He looked at their table. Neither had finished, nor had they had coffee. Two excited women, he thought.

A fortnight later, they were back, open with each other, needing no preliminary probing. 'A reading group,' Ruth said, and Olivia said, 'You took the words from my mouth. That's what came to me on the way home last time we were here and I haven't had any better ideas.' They talked about what they wanted from this group they were going to form, each noticing in the other an unrealistic idealism. Where would they find the readers who would conduct the discussions they were hoping for? Ruth thought that Olivia was hoping to find in herself a depth that wasn't there, while Olivia thought that Ruth had ambitions to be the group's mistress when she was incapable of getting a group together, let alone causing it to function. They decided that there must be people at the Council for Adult Education who had the experience they lacked, and they made enquiries, leading to the pair of them calling on Alison somebody who managed the Council's reading groups. Alison, loose in body and placid in speech, mentioned a group in a nearby suburb which was declining in membership and suggested to the pair that they might care to give it a lift, but Ruth and Olivia were determined to start a group of their own. They were suspicious of the reading notes that Alison showed them for a number of frequently-read books because the readers they hoped to attract wouldn't need props to help them articulate their reactions. So they said. Alison told them that they might be surprised at how dependent many readers were, and how they usually lacked confidence in building interpretations out of their responses to the books they read. 'It may seem unambitious,' Alison said, 'but the best thing you can do for many of the people in our groups is to get them through their first six or seven books so that they actually become *readers*. It doesn't matter much what those first books are, so long as they finish them. Also, they need to read them quickly so they don't go stale.' She smiled. 'I can remember people in the first group I ever led who could only talk about the second half of a book. They'd read the first half so long ago that they'd forgotten what had happened. They remembered the end of the journey but not the beginning. It's quite common, believe you me.'

Ruth and Olivia started energetically. They contacted a score of like-minded women and prepared a leaflet for others who might be interested. They put a quarter-page ad in their local paper. They rang around. They pinned up notices in libraries. They opted for Olivia and Jack's house as the venue for the gatherings, for the first six months – six books, of which the first was to be Germaine Greer's *Daddy*, *We Hardly Knew You*. That should catch those who'd read *The Female Eunuch* or provide a bridge to it for those who hadn't. They talked about the layout of the room they'd use at Olivia and Jack's, and the order of the books to follow the challenging Germaine. 'We don't necessarily want a lot of Greer-clones,' Rita said, 'but we do want them to realise that orthodoxies can be challenged. The thing we want to avoid is being smug, or timid. Discussion can go anywhere so long as it doesn't show up as one of those.'

It only took twenty minutes on the first night to show that timidity and shyness were endemic in their group. There were thirteen women present, and eleven of them were waiting for leads to be given. When Ruth or Olivia spoke, nobody disagreed. Most had only got a chapter or two into the book and found it unrewarding. Disconcerting. 'But that's the point,' Ruth wanted them to know. 'It wasn't possible to have a satisfactory relationship with this man because his whole life is a deception. He doesn't *want* to have a relationship with his family, he only wants the *appearance* of a relationship. If you look at the bit on page 73 ...'

If anybody had got as far as page 73, they weren't saying so. Olivia felt torn. She could make supper – an admission of failure – or she could open a bottle of wine, or ... what else could she do? Read the riot act? Tell them what she and Ruth expected of them ... and that would mean they'd be alone, the two of them, at the second meeting of the group. The group that wasn't a group because nothing held it together except some pallid notions of respectability, conformity, do-goodism rampant. 'Hasn't anybody ever met men like Germaine's father?' That was Ruth's challenge, and the group felt it likely that there were such men in the world but didn't want to identify anybody as fraudulent in the way Germaine was describing. Nobody wanted to accuse. Besides, many of them knew each other's families, and to have Germaine's father – only a fiction to the reader, however real he may have been - compared with people they knew ... was something they couldn't bring themselves to do. It was clearly what Ruth and Olivia wanted, but to join those two was to step away from the others. The night had failed. Olivia made supper early with lots of assistance because the second eleven, as we might call them, knew how to behave. Socially positive. Positively social!

It was three days before Olivia could bring herself to ring Ruth. Both were almost as angry with themselves as they were with the eleven. For a few minutes they contented themselves by quoting the weakest, most meaningless things said on the group's initial night, and then they faced the question. What were they going to do? The reading group had to be called off, but how to do it without offending? 'I know,' said Olivia. 'Jack's family are Sydney people. They're talking about a family reunion. I'll cancel the meeting for the date we've announced, I'll say the group will be notified of the date for the second meeting, and then there simply won't be any announcement. By the time people get around to asking questions – if they do! – I'll think of something else. I'm not going through that again!'

Ruth agreed. Then it occurred to her to say that they'd have to have another lunch fairly soon, to talk about what they'd do next.

They agreed on this but didn't set a date, only that they'd ring each other when they had some fresh ideas. It only needed one, obviously,

but neither of them had one, at that moment, so that was how things were when they hung up.

It took a month, with both of them stewing in their minds, and hard to live with, because unfocussed. Then the day came when Ruth told Rory, 'I've got to ring Olivia. The silence is deafening.' This amused him. 'Well, you'll have the house to yourself today because I'm going up to Beechworth.' She didn't even ask why, or who with; she was absorbed in her inability to think herself out of her current position. A few minutes later, as she went to the phone to make her call, it rang, as if it had been waiting, and of course the voice was Olivia's, and she wanted Ruth to listen to her analysis. 'The women's movement,' she said, 'was stuck inside its limits. It wasn't the broad and liberating movement that it ought to be. People have identified what's wrong with the old system but they haven't yet started making the society that they needed, and wanted.' Indeed she suspected that they didn't really want a changed society, a different society, at all. They were content to complain. They felt justified in complaining about the ways men used to block and limit them and they felt righteous as they described the faults of their position. 'Well,' Olivia said, 'I don't want to listen to ranting and complaints, I want to see strong and positive things happening. I want to be part of them. I want to do these strong new things myself.' This took Ruth by surprise. She'd heard the self-same Olivia talking about having children and it seemed to Ruth that Olivia was doing no better than calling for a situation – a system – where she could have her cake and eat it too. She wanted to know if Olivia could write a political program for bringing about what she wanted. Olivia felt this should be easy, and that the two of them should do it together, but Ruth wasn't having this. 'What you're talking about isn't testable. I doubt if it's even doable. It wouldn't even be possible unless having children was the central human activity, and the woman that's having children, instead of having to give up her job and go home to be overwhelmed by all she's got to do, could do everything she's got to do, and wants to do, with everyone else's lives rearranged to fit in with her needs. Which, let's face it, are enormous. Universal. The rest of the world would have to be rearranged around the life of mothers and children. Men would never agree to it. That's why the sexes are continually at war. We have to fight for the little bit we've got, and fight harder if we want even a tiny bit more. It's obvious. There's nothing new about saying this, Olivia! Everyone knows it. We know it in our guts and men know it in some crafty part of their minds which means they operate to stop it happening while, at the same time, they, or some of them, make supportive noises which they have no intention of acting on!'

'Exactly!' said the telephone connecting her to Olivia. 'Exactly! That's what we have to change, don't you see?'

'Olivia,' said Ruth to the telephone connecting them, 'of course I see. Haven't I just said it? What you've just done is admit it to yourself. You've been thinking about children for as long as I've known you, which isn't all that long, you've been thinking about children but you haven't gone ahead and had them. And why? Or why not? Because you've known all along, somewhere in your mind, but behind a curtain, behind a big stone wall of refusing to know, you've known what you'd be doing to yourself if you got pregnant, so you haven't let it happen. Now, and at least, you've faced up to the realities you refused to acknowledge. Admit! You haven't said anything new, today, at all. Nothing new at all. No advance, except ... you now know where you stand.

She paused. The telephone in her hands was silent, so she went on. 'You want children. Well, have them, but when you do it, don't make yourself believe convenient fiddle-faddle. Admit what you're doing if you decide to go ahead and do it. Admit to yourself. After that, it'll be up to you what you tell Jack. How much of it you admit to him. He'll work it out eventually, but only after you've worked it out inside yourself. What you want to do is a sacrifice that nobody's ever got around. The child comes first! Society controls the child. The mother ... all mothers ... serve society no matter how much they try to tell themselves they rule. They don't. Mothers come last! And how do they make us do it? How do they make us bring up the rear? By telling us a load of glamorised bullshit, by dressing us in white, by standing around the cot where our baby is and going goo and gah, and kissing us and telling us we look wonderful ... Aaaaaaah!' It was

almost a scream, the sound she'd ended with, and she realised, as she sat there, having surprised herself with the ferocity of what she'd said, that she hadn't heard anything back from the object she held in her hand.

She spoke again. 'Olivia?'

The telephone spoke back more strongly than she'd expected. Olivia hadn't been overcome at all. 'Have you got the courage of your convictions? Let's both have a child. Let's do it together. Let's keep each other company, from today till the end of our lives.' The telephone went on. 'Maybe that's the answer, and we had to fight each other to get it in the open. Are you ready, Ruth? Are you ready? We're standing on a headland, and the sea's below us. Are you ready to jump, Ruth? I am. How about we do it together?'

'You amaze me,' Ruth said, speaking to the phone, then, realising that she'd only murmured the words and Olivia mightn't have heard, she said again. 'You amaze me. In fact I've probably amazed myself. Let me have a few days to think.' She wanted the exchange ended, but was aware, however resistant she was, that the voice in the handset was saying, 'A few days. That's fine. Let me know when you're ready. We'll have lunch again. The man that showed us out will wonder why we came back!' There was glee in her voice. Ruth put the phone down. How was she going to get out of this?

Television, as everyone knows, is the modern pulpit. News is gospel. Commandments are easy: watch, listen, and respond as required. Much of this has been anticipated by George Orwell – truth is lies – but we have gone a little further: information is slavery. The minds of the public are filled regularly with whatever's to hand. A Malaysian Airlines flight sets off for Beijing. Before leaving Malaysian airspace, the pilot talks to the city the plane has left. Then silence descends, but the plane changes direction, goes very high, then drops low. After that, it disappears. The first to realise think it's been hijacked, because 'terrorists' are the evil of our day. But it doesn't touch down in central Asia, as conjecture expects. Nobody knows where it's gone and nobody claims responsibility. Half the passengers are Chinese and their government is suspicious. Who's done what to our people?

The world holds its breath. Planes don't disappear, but this one has. Then, to the amazement of the world, the search area is changed. Planes, ships and super-eye satellites patrol the Indian Ocean. Lines are drawn to show where MH370 might have flown, and calculations made about the fuel it was carrying and how far this would take the plane at various altitudes. The passenger list is examined and suspects are discovered, then later cleared. The pilot? Very experienced. Was he mentally stable? There are rumours about a separation from his wife. This consideration ebbs, and dies away. The world, waiting to pick up whatever's flung its way, never knows why lines of thought are pursued and abandoned. The government of Australia takes over the search off the country's west coast and television – the public's Vatican – shows planes above an endless sea. Things are spotted which may be from the missing plane. Hopes of finding it are raised, then let fall, it's never clear why. Nations mourn. Leaders speak. Every effort is being made ...

Three months later, another Malaysian aeroplane is lost, hit at thirty-something thousand feet by a missile launched by Russian separatists fighting the government of Ukraine. Moscow has given them weapons which they know how to fire, but, alas, they can't or don't distinguish between a passenger jet passing over and Ukrainian planes looking for them. Anger reverberates around the world. Thirty-eight of those shot out of the air were Australians. The flight took off from Amsterdam, and the majority of those on board were Dutch, sitting in their seats watching films or eating meals when, without warning, an exploding rocket ripped holes in their metal cladding. The plane breaks apart as it falls. Seats and bodies litter the earth. The wreckage catches fire. Nobody survives. The Australian Prime Minister rings Vladimir Putin, President of Russia. Everyone knows that his country delivered the weaponry to those who misused it, but he is placatory and grieves, saying he too is a husband and father. Contingents of Dutch, Australian and other investigators depart their homelands to search the crash zone, but the warfare which led to the plane being shot down doesn't stop, and the investigators cool their heels for days. Meanwhile, the media circle, brandishing their right to know. The world wants to know, and the media are their means of finding out ...

But who gives the media the influence they claim? Are they the best we can do when it comes to creating human understanding? Surely not! But there they are, taking pictures, broadcasting in front of crashed planes and burning cities, setting the agendas of our thought. They are a challenge, really, because those of us who think we've independent minds will discover, if we look into our thoughts, that most of them have been planted there by the gardeners of the press, teaching us to classify our thoughts as flowers, sometimes, but also weeds, a cause to be ashamed. Their own mistakes are quickly forgotten, so anxious are we to be guided. The desirable condition for the public, in a press-controlled state, is one of anxiety, and willingness to be led. Even novelists, creating the worlds in which their characters operate, must take account of this created world, because the necessities it imposes obscure other thoughts which might lead people to act in different ways.

The Middle East is the centre of the world's attention, even when worse things are happening elsewhere. Two examples. The government of our Commonwealth is concerned that young men may be tempted to fight for radical Islamists at the heart of the world's conflict, and then come home, radicalised by what they've taken part in. Attempts are made to discourage this. Yet one has only to step back to notice that this is exactly what young men did when the British Empire called them to war in 1914 and 1939: 'England, O England, and how could I stay?' Young Australians were cheered as they sailed away to war, and what were they like when they got home, if they did? Gassed, maimed, so overwhelmed by what they'd been through that they never spoke of it again, except to those who'd been there with them.

A second consideration. Jewish people, after World War 2 concluded, took possession of what is now the state of Israel. Palestinians were pushed aside. Wars were fought and the Jews prevailed. They were better fighters than the Arabs and well supported by American wealth and weapons. Their Arab enemies were divided, and couldn't fail to be influenced by the need of America for the oil beneath their lands. Whether radical or moderate, the Arabs could never be brought to make peace with the Israelis, so they tolerated

those among themselves who pursued an endless war; the Jews struck back. Rockets fired at Israel came out of Gaza, an enclave where Palestinians were clustered, so the weapons Israel possessed were deployed against this wretched, crowded city. Gaza was destroyed. Our interpretation of this? The Jewish people had done to others what had once been done to them.

Jack Page was troubled by his wife's indecision, was it, or unpreparedness for life with children. She'd taken the step of marrying him, and then she'd got stuck. She loved him well enough, but couldn't or wouldn't turn those feelings into the larger, broader scope of motherhood. What was the obstacle? She hadn't been so detached when they first got together. Things had looked simple then. Jack did his best to analyse the world they lived in, the values they brought to it, until he realised that he too had detached himself. He felt himself surrounded by people who took themselves for granted, unashamedly pursuing their goals, pushing aside anything that got in their way. That was how people lived, wasn't it? They were selfish without prevarication or shame. Then it struck him that there was no longer a governing class. The once-bottom ruled, and he was part of it! Governing had devolved onto people like himself. Democracy, which had begun as a protest, had to prove itself as a system able to function. Oh! This meant that people had to be trusted, and they couldn't be. They weren't worth it. They needed control, and they had it, courtesy of the media, and their situation was displeasing because it was shallow, and had no more confidence in itself than he had in it, and that was little enough. This, he realised, put him in the same position as his wife, who had seen enough of the world, and understood it well enough, to not want to go in any deeper. He couldn't push her or press her because, he now realised, he was in the same boat. As a couple, they were becalmed.

Then a phone call came, from Les Bramble. He wanted to know the estate agent that Jack and Olivia had used when they leased the holiday house the previous summer. 'You were happy with the house, I think, but what about the agent? Did he know his area well, would you say?'

Jack thought he did, as far as he could tell.

'I've had a very interesting idea put before me, and if it goes ahead, it involves acquiring a property in that area, and I want to check it out before I put any money into it.'

Jack thought the agent he'd used, and he was struggling to remember his name, would be all right. He was a man of sixty or so and had worked in the area for years.

'See if you can find his name, if you don't mind, and then Lorna and I would like to have you over for dinner so we can discuss the idea.' And so it was that two weeks later, with the football season by now well underway, the Pages had dinner with the Brambles in their terrace house in Royal Parade, Parkville, a premier address in the city's north. The Pages, on arrival, were taken to the front room and were touched to have the Bramble children, Terry and May, bringing them savouries to eat with the drinks Les had on offer. Lorna said she would attend to a couple of finishing touches, and then she would join them. She did, and the children sat on the sofa with her, one on either side, listening reverently to their father, but holding their mother's arms so that she had to tell them when she was going to pick up her glass to sip.

The scheme Les outlined was simple enough. A trainer he knew had decided that an area not far inland from the coastal strip where the Pages, Brambles and others had holidayed the previous summer would make a suitable place for stabling horses when they weren't required at city tracks. 'They have to have an all-year-round home,' Les explained, 'and it's got to be good because you can't afford to let a good horse decline in condition. The art of training is, first, to know what horse you think can win what races, and then to bring them to their peak in the right way and at the right time. Okay if you can do it! But the property where they live for the rest of the year is a big part of any success you have. It's your base, in two senses of the word. It's the place where you do your work on them, but it's also the level you bring them up from. It's where they relax, but you have to make sure that relaxing isn't going slack. You can't race a fat horse!'

Olivia was listening to him, but watching Lorna's children. They were close to their mother and Olivia could tell that a part of Lorna was tuned in to their thinking, even as she listened to Les and kept

another part of her mind on whatever was cooking in the kitchen. In three places at once, Olivia saw: how does she do it? Four places, if you counted the children separately; a mother could only do it if she took herself for granted, wanting almost nothing unless it was wanted by those she was mothering. Mothers mothered the world, unless they fenced it off inimically, setting up a contrast within themselves. Mothers making war were frightening indeed, because they urged on their menfolk to deeds they would never have done themselves. What would it be like to be inside the cruelty of a blood feud, or a war? Olivia wiped out the thought, hoping she would never know.

'This fellow,' Les was saying, 'Alan Wilkinson's his name, is a good trainer, got a good stable, good reputation, and so on, but he thinks that country behind where we were staying would make a great resort for his horses. He wants to buy a property down there, preferably a place that's already got a good house because he doesn't want to go through all the hassles of building, and he wants to set the place up for his horses ...'

'Has he got any money?' Jack wanted to know.

'Not a great deal. He hasn't actually asked me to come in as a partner, but that's an idea that's hovering in the air, shall we say. To be a partner. Or maybe one of a group of partners ...'

That's where we come in, Olivia realised, and was amused. If she had children as Jack wanted her to do they'd play with the horses, they'd learn to ride at a young age, and when they were old they could name some famous racehorses they'd ridden about the bush!

'It's all very tentative at the moment. Nothing may come of it. Racing people are always full of hopes and dreams, and most of them never get anywhere near the starting point, but it's an idea I want to have a look at. There's plenty of people out there prepared to put up money to buy good horses and get them trained, and the public only think of the horse on race day but the trainer's got to look after it for the whole year, and that's where the money is. Cup Day's not the only day of the year when money changes hands, believe you me!'

So that was the scheme, and Les wanted someone who knew the district to run an eye over the possibilities, the costs, and, although he didn't say it, the proprieties of the scheme. Would it work, was

it something a man would want to put his money in, or were there drawbacks he hadn't seen, or even thought of? Jack had, by now, remembered the name of the agent he'd dealt with: Tony McConville, with a son in his shadow called Clive. 'If you were in my place, and you wanted to look into the possibility of buying a property down that way, would you be prepared to use those fellas? Would you trust them, in a word?'

Jack said yes, he would.

'That's good enough for me then Jack. Give me a contact number and I'll ring him on Monday. See if he's got any likely places in mind, or knows someone who has. I'll mention your name, if that's all right with you ...' Jack nodded '... and if anything develops, I'll let you know. You and Olivia can think about the idea and see how it likes you, eh?' Then he nodded to his wife. 'How's that dinner coming along, darling?'

A fortnight later, the Brambles picked up Jack and Olivia. It was a gloomy morning, causing Terry Bramble to ask, 'Will it be sunny when we get to the holiday house?' His father was amused. 'It'll be like this. The whole western side of the state's got a forecast for rain. But that makes it a good day to look at country. On a sunny day, pretty well everywhere looks good. If you're looking at land with the idea of buying, you want to be in a bad mood so you don't let yourself get sucked in. That right Jack?'

Jack smiled as he was intended. 'Proceed with caution,' he said.

The Bramble children didn't remember anything on the Geelong road, not even the tower of the Grammar School which their mother identified, reminding them that she'd shown it to them before, on the way down to the holiday house. Jack was curious to know what it meant to her, and she told him that the school had gone co-educational, and that this was unusual for boys' schools which normally reserved their privileges. Jack smiled again. 'I never played in that league, thank God.' He said no more, but the remark caught his wife's attention. She'd never thought of appraising Jack by the things he wasn't: there were so many of them! He didn't snap at people when they annoyed him; he went quiet. He didn't question people

when they explained themselves badly; he looked at them, inspecting them, she always thought, for signs of self-awareness – if any. She'd never seen him unbalanced, or caught off guard: he had poise, and he needed balance to let him function properly. He was unusual, too, in that he was more talkative with people he thought were shallow than he was with his intellectual equals; he responded to people who needed reassurance. If I can see these things about him, she asked herself, what can he see when he looks at me? It occurred to her that he was taking her presence for granted, and that his attention was on what they saw as they drove along. The dreary outskirts of Geelong. The modest dignity of the city centre, an old-fashioned place because the newest buildings were so conventional that you hardly noticed them. Les brought the car to a stop at a red light and Olivia recalled her grandmother telling the family about the traffic lights that had once controlled Geelong: 'They weren't the same as the ones in Melbourne,' she'd said, 'there were five little bars of light, like fluorescent lights, but shorter, and if they were green you could go through, but as the time came for them to change, one after another the green lights went out until there were no green lights any more, and you were looking at five red lights, so you had to stop, and as the five red lights went off, one by one, you knew how long before you'd be able to go again.' Grandma had enjoyed telling the family this and it was clear that the knowledge she was sharing was important: the system she was telling them about was superior because it went back to an earlier part of her existence. What made people think that the old was better? For that matter, what made them think that the new was an improvement? Something restless appeared inside her, making her more critical of the place they were passing through, and she said loudly, 'Where's the service station where the Furlinghettis' car broke down?' Les didn't know, but he knew that it was Don and Tessa who'd got Carlo and Maria home that day. He supposed that Carlo would have fixed the Hispano-Suiza by now, he was fanatical with anything to do with that car. Lorna showed no interest, and Jack too appeared to be indifferent, but in fact the reference to the previous summer depressed him. They'd passed through two showers on the way down and the sky was still dark. It would probably rain again. In another half an hour or so they'd be outside the house they'd rented and he didn't welcome the idea. Summer had gone and the year felt heavier. It was the time of year when office workers lived on tipping competitions and football gossip made the newspapers unreadable. If you went into the lunch room to get yourself a cup of tea someone would be working out their predictions and saying inanely, 'Kangaroos or Bulldogs? That's a tough one!' Why did people need these common denominators? The car gave a little shudder in a fierce gust of wind. 'Oh Les,' said Lorna, 'Do you want to go back? It's turning into a wretched sort of day!'

But he was optimistic. 'It'll clear. I'll tell you what! I've got five dollars in my pocket that says that by the time we get within sight of the lighthouse, the rain will have stopped and it'll be clearing up. It'll be really mild, down by the water. You wait and see!'

They drove, and he was right. A shaft of light was making the lighthouse so bright that it was hard to look at. 'McConville, that's the name of the agent,' Les said. 'Keep your eye out for his sign, he's on the right just before the lighthouse. Tony McConville, and his son's called Clive.' The certainty in his voice meant their day was on track and for a moment Jack could feel, at least in memory, something of the summer's warmth returning. 'There's the house where we stayed. In the distance. See it? On the horizon. Right up high!'

They saw it, the four of them, and the children, and might have gone to find their earlier, younger selves, but Les swung the car off the road at the agents' office and took himself inside to meet the McConvilles. Five minutes later he was back with a roughly drawn map showing roads they could follow and areas that might be suitable. Olivia noticed, with a certain amount of admiration, how Les briefed Lorna and the children about what he was looking for, how he drove slowly, and stopped when one of them pointed out a paddock or even a forested area that looked as though it might be suitable. He was a family man and the four of them did things together; it was all the more admirable because unselfconscious. She looked at her husband, and knew that he, when the change came, would make the same transition, and that when this happened, her position would have changed. Instead of being in a polar relationship with Jack, her man, she would be central, a mother: she, who'd been born and christened

a Dowsett, would be the central Page. The name change, which had already happened, would take on a new, and heightened, meaning. This would, she felt, be a progression. A move made because it had to be. If you stayed as you'd always been you diminished yourself in some way because there had to be progress in your states of being. You couldn't remain the same and remain whole. Time decayed you and you lost your quality of the moment. She saw this, and felt some reassurance, as Les rolled his car down the back roads that led away from the water and into farmland, hills, and forest. Les, she saw, was fondling the landscape in his mind, testing it to see if he could attach himself to it with a commitment that would lead to successful business. 'Some of this country would look lovely with horses,' she said. 'I think it'd come to life. What do you think, Lorna?'

Lorna smiled. 'We'll have a home away from home if this thing comes to pass.' To Olivia, she seemed suddenly rich, her children adding to her without, for this moment at least, making her vulnerable. To Les she said, 'On the way back, we must keep a close eye on how long it takes. We didn't get held up in Geelong today, but you could get caught in traffic.' Les saw what she was thinking. 'That's the main argument against coming down here. You want the trip to be safe and quick, for the sake of the horses. You don't want a place that's buried in the hills, and a twisty track with lots of bends the only way in and out. Horses falling over or getting flung against the sides of their box. No good!' Jack could see that he was keeping an eye on the distance gauge, and as they rounded a bend, the trees dropped behind them and Les called, 'Ah!'

Perhaps a hundred acres had been cleared. At the edge of the remaining bush, a house stood, chimney smoking. There were sheds wide of the house, one of them very long. The grass looked luscious. Les stopped the car at an angle so they could all see, saying, 'McConville said the first place was the best. I reckon he was right. This'd be hard to beat.' Olivia sensed that reality had presented him with his dreams. She took a reading off Lorna: it was a moment in the other woman's life. She'd been ready to bolster Les if he was unhappy, but he'd found what he wanted. Taking a big step in his imagination, Les said, 'I wouldn't know whether to live down here or in the big smoke.' Lorna

smiled at him, to hear him go on. 'If you've got to have problems, that's a good one to have.' He laughed, and Jack felt a decision was on the verge of being made. 'Send your partners down on a separate trip, without any of us to sway them. They might see something we don't see.' He knew he was being a wet blanket, but he owed it to his friends to be cautious. 'Did the agent mention any prices?'

Les rubbed a thumb across his chin. 'He said this first one was priced to sell, but he said to have a look first, he'd tell me the prices when we got back. I agree with him on that. Find what you want before you start worrying about how much it's going to cost you. That'd be my policy, anyway.' He laughed, at himself it appeared: 'I want to do something that makes me the owner. Open the gate. Put up a sign – Under New Management!' He began to chuckle as if he could never stop. Lorna took charge. 'Les! It's not ours yet. We're just looking. A lot of things have to happen first. Let's not be in any rush!' She was no stronger than Les but he was being forced to treat it as a family decision. The chuckle stopped and he nodded. Lorna said, 'Do you want to talk to these people? We can wait if you want to go and make yourself known to them.' She looked at Jack and Olivia as she said this, and saw that they were willing. 'Les?'

He shook his head. 'No. We've got another three places to see. Better do that first. No good going off half-cocked.' He put the car in gear, swung it onto the road again, and headed for property number two.

A week or two passed, and then the news came through – another property had come on the market north of the airport, near Romsey. It was twice the price of the Fairhaven farmlet, but it was fully established, with separate sheds for each horse as well as a central stable. There was a manager's cottage near the gate and at the opposite corner of the property a large house with generous entertaining space and vistas of the property. Distance was an advantage because the city tracks could be accessed at least three-quarters of an hour more quickly. 'A pity,' Les said, 'I had my heart set on the other place but you couldn't pass over this one. It's a walk in-walk out proposition. There's nothing to do. Ninety days settlement, it's ours by the end of winter.

We'll be sending our horses down to the spring carnival, celebrating a win or two, hopefully. We'll be getting to know the place, practically live up there over summer ...'

The world was treating the Brambles well. Terry wanted to know if he and May would have ponies to ride when they lived at Romsey, and this caused Lorna to intervene. 'I'm sure we can do something about ponies when the time comes, but don't let your ideas run away with you. We will be up there in the summer holidays, some of the time at least, but you, my boy, will be going to school in Melbourne, five days per week as usual. There will be some changes when we take over the new property but most of the time things will go on as usual.' The children could see that their father was excited and wondered why this future wasn't extending to them. A few weeks later, however, both he and their mother were excited and the children suspected that the ponies they longed for had been purchased, and that was why they were driving to Romsey on a Sunday, the day following a race meeting.

They were greeted at the main stable by Mr McGinty who said he had something to show them, and led them through the stalls to a space normally crammed with buckets and drums, but home, now, to two brown foals. 'They're not ready to ride yet,' McGinty said, 'but you have to look after them every time you're up here, so they get used to you, and when they're strong enough, my boy Patrick will break them in and get them used to carrying him, and when he's sure they're safe, he'll put you on, and you'll be riding by the time you have your next birthdays. How does that sound?'

It sounded marvellous to Terry and May; they were going to be part of the place where their father looked after people's racehorses. They would have horses too, they were going to learn to ride, Mr McGinty and Patrick would teach them all they needed to know. They were distantly aware that the excitement in their father's voice when he called the races had something to do with the money people spent on betting, horses, clothes and parties that were wilder than their mother liked them to be. They sensed, young as they were, that the world to which their father held the door open was a place of privilege, they were going to be part of it, and that they must, therefore,

learn everything Mr McGinty and Patrick could teach them. They particularly noticed that their mother, always a step ahead of their dad, listened very carefully to anything they said about other children at their school: she was listening for the suitable characteristics of the boys and girls that would be recognised as family friends. 'Don't tell the other children about your horses,' Lorna told them; 'when they visit us, let it be a surprise!'

The children sensed, in this statement, that some requirement was being applied; only children for whom the horses would be a happy surprise would be admitted to the rank of family friends. They wondered, especially Terry, who was older, if boys and girls they already knew, and counted as friends, would pass the test. 'Mum,' he asked, 'Remember the Bartletts? Down at Fairhaven where we stayed last summer?'

His mother remembered, of course.

'Remember Jenny, Tommy, and ... what was the other one's name?'

'Giselle. Genevieve, Thomas, and Giselle. Try to remember their names the way their parents spoke to them. You might have called them Jenny and Tommy but that's not how their parents think of them, and neither will they think of themselves that way, as they grow up. They'll prefer to have their names said in full, the proper way.'

Another restriction. Adults couldn't be natural, with all their rules. 'What about them, Terry?'

'Would they like to come up to Romsey with us, and see the horses?'

This set Lorna Bramble thinking. Were the Bartlett children suitable? They fitted in well enough at the beach house but that was an open house, with people coming and going, and the main thing holding them all together was that they knew the Pages in some way. Lorna's main memory of the three Bartlett children was that they were somewhat mysteriously developed. They thought they were special, probably because their parents thought so. Norman Bartlett, their father, had been quite puzzling, and not a little annoying. He had rules for his children, and high expectations, but what these were, Lorna had no idea and Les, her husband, Lorna knew, had even less. Les was a man of the people, accepted wherever he went, and this

affected the family's life, making them, Lorna felt rather proudly, accepting of anyone who accepted them.

The Bartletts?

She wished she knew. She'd hardly given them a thought since the holiday new year. She supposed she could ring the Pages, though what would she ask them?

What did she want to know?

She decided she would ring the Pages, who had no children – that made things easier – and tell them about the newly acquired horses, and that would give her the chance to ask if the Pages thought the Bartlett children would be interested in visiting the horses at Romsey ... Yes, that would be the way to put it. She could make it rather vague, indefinite, to give herself an out if she came to think she needed one.

She rang.

The first thing she realised was that Olivia had next to no idea of choosing suitable friends for one's children. It was something she hadn't confronted as yet, so she was useless. It weakened Lorna's opinion of her, and made her recognise what a change it was to become a mother, responsible for others, both the children – of course – but also the parental side of her husband. Men had to be turned into fathers, which meant that women had to be aware of what had happened to them when they became mothers. She also realised, talking to Olivia, that the younger woman was no judge of the quality of a family's life, and really didn't know anything about the Bartletts' children. She 'felt sure' the Bartlett children would enjoy going up to ride the horses, if they were allowed. Why not? Children usually loved animals unless they were scared ...

'I'll do as you suggest,' Lorna said, by way of ending a fruitless conversation. 'It'll be quite an event for the children. And their parents. We might ask you to come up for the day. Have a look and see what we've acquired. It's not ours yet but I don't think the old owners would mind if we were around the place before settlement, they say they want to ensure a smooth transition, and so do we.'

Olivia murmured her support down the phone line, and then, at Lorna's request, got out her little book of addresses and phone numbers so Lorna could ring the Bartletts. She did this, got Jenny, and

at once felt the reassurance of dealing with someone used to making arrangements concerning children. It didn't occur to Lorna, putting the phone down, that she had once been unused to the management of families, she did it so easily now. She invited the Bartletts – Norman, Jenny and the children – to the property two Sundays hence, explained how to get there, and then rang the present owners to make them aware of what was happening. She made it clear that it was only to be a brief visit to get the children used to the idea that they had to be respectful of the horses and get to know how to behave with them, and to be equally respectful of the McGintys who would continue, she trusted, under the new regime as they were most welcome to do ... but Noel and Noela Adamson, the current occupants, insisted that the visitors have lunch or afternoon tea with them so that everybody could get to know each other and thus assist in making the transition smooth ...

Speaking to Les that evening, once the children had gone to bed, Lorna compared the ever-so-hospitable Adamsons – with their funny combination of names! – with the Bartletts, whom they really only knew through the Pages: 'Whatever is wrong with that Norman Bartlett, I don't know, but if you remember him down at Fairhaven, with the Pages, he always seemed half a mile away ... No, he seemed to be on top of some mountain, looking down on a world that he didn't need to belong to. You remember? Pleasant enough, in a distant sort of way, but he didn't make any effort to break down barriers between people who didn't know each other very well. If they knew each other at all! I mean, you put a lot of people together in a holiday house, then everybody's got to make some sort of effort to break down barriers, find out the other people's interests, and so on. Everyone's there to have a good time, and that means they've got to be made to feel close, they have to want everybody to have a good time. The Pages were quite good at that, although Olivia's still very young, but they certainly *tried*, and that's the main thing. People always know when other people are making an effort to make you feel part of the group ...'

Les broke in: '... and you're always aware, aren't you love ...'

'I am always aware of anyone who's not pulling their weight.' She might have gone on, but her husband warned: 'It sounds like the Adamsons are used to entertaining, and they'll be the hosts, and

we're next in line as hosts because we're taking over the property, and the point of the exercise is to get the kids used to sharing the limelight with a lot of pretty classy but pretty touchy horses ... that should keep us busy enough for an hour or two. Before we all come home again!' Then something whimsical came over the race caller. 'This is a big step we're taking, love. You know? What we're just about to take on will probably be with us for a long long time. I can't imagine us selling this place we're getting. I think we'll have it for the rest of our days. And Terry and May ...'

He paused. It was almost beyond him to say what was in his mind, because he could hardly visualise it. 'They don't know anything about horses yet, but they'll learn, and in a few years they'll realise that their friends, the kids they grew up with, don't know half as much as they do, and they probably won't know how much they've learned about keeping animals and getting the best out of them.' He paused again, half aware, but only half, that he was taking on the full burden of parenting in that he'd put himself in a position to see far down the line of his children's lives and he thought that today was a seriously significant day.

The import of the day began to come clear when the Brambles and the Bartletts were received by the Adamsons, whose ownership of the property was about to be handed over, and in the weeks that followed. The visit to Romsey was doubly revealing to the Brambles' children. Terry and May had never dreamed that they might in any way be radically different from their own mother and father, or the group of relatives who flanked them. Les and Lorna were not the sort of people who sought out opposites. Without thinking about it they sought reassurance from those they associated with. The Bartletts were different, and it showed in their children. Terry and May were captivated by Genevieve, Thomas and Giselle. The day after the Romsey trip they wanted to know when they'd see the other three next, and they nagged about this until their parents made an arrangement to call on the Bartletts the following weekend. Les couldn't see why this was necessary but said, as he often said, 'Anything for a quiet life!'

The Bartlett children had no such ideas in their minds. Giselle, a few minutes before the Brambles' arrival, snuck away to get dressed up, and had transformed herself into a Walt Disney elf by the time the visitors arrived. Lorna could see that this was normal for the other household by the way Jenny told her youngest, 'Tell them who you are today, darling. You can't expect your visitors to know.' Displeasure flooded through Lorna at that. *Your* visitor! She refused to think of herself in this way. It was insulting. And Norman, the husband, showed no sign of responsibility for this treatment of them. People needed to be put at their ease! When the two families gathered in the lounge, Thomas was seated at a little table with a chess set before him, and a book open, full, it appeared, of puzzles. White to mate in three moves. 'That's a tricky one,' Norman told his son. 'Can you see how to do it?' The boy didn't reply, amazing Les, who would have clipped Terry's ear if he'd not replied to a parent. 'I can do it in four,' said the boy. 'Doing it in three is the problem.' Norman was calm. 'Can be done, though. You'll see it in a minute. Don't give up.'

This caused Les to stiffen. By this time he should have been offered a beer, or at least a cup of tea, and here he was playing second fiddle to a child affecting to be a chess expert. Christ! But it was Genevieve, the oldest, who troubled the visitors most. She listened to the adults' conversation – when it was allowed to get started – with scorn. Lorna had a feeling that the moment she and her family left this lanky, leggy girl would be imitating them, showing, to the amusement of her parents, how closely she'd observed the visitors. When the child left the room to get something and didn't return, Lorna said to Jenny, 'And what are you going to make of her?'

Jenny caught her husband's eye. 'I think she'll make up her own mind about that. I think it's made up already.' Les, sensing his wife's annoyance, made an offer to help: 'Nurse? Run her own business? What've you got in mind?' Norman and Jenny smiled. 'She'll certainly run her own business! I couldn't imagine her letting anyone else manage her mind for her.' This angered Lorna, trying to keep her cool. 'Manage her mind? Is she going to make money out of it?' Jenny glanced at the door to see if the girl was returning before saying, 'I would expect so. She develops a good comedy routine when she's a mind to do it. But then she also likes a horror story. She likes to chill her audiences, but then again, she may grow out of that one day. She's

not yet at the stage where she restrains herself. It gets her into trouble at school, at times \dots'

'Trouble?' This was Lorna. Les sank into his chair.

'The school gives us difficulties at times,' Jenny said. 'They don't like Genevieve doing what they call putting on a show. And that's the very thing she's best at.'

'Putting on a show?' Lorna again.

'I sometimes think,' said Jenny, 'that the librarian's her only friend. The only one on the staff that understands her.'

'How's that?' Les, rather stiffly.

'Children need stories,' Jenny told him. 'They must have them. If you want to shape a child's personality, you have to put the right stories in front of them. It's no good coming out with a whole lot of moral precepts and trying to impose them. They'll go in the opposite direction.' She saw that Lorna was going to object, and went on as firmly as she could. 'At least Genevieve's got Mrs Hartshorne behind her.' This was presumably the librarian, though she didn't explain. 'She's a woman who understands that imaginative children need to use their imagination ...'

Her visitors looked on, waiting.

'... when Genevieve's class teacher wouldn't support her, Mrs Hartshorne took up her case with the principal ...'

'Her case?'

'She pointed out to him that the year twelve students were studying *The Getting of Wisdom*, yet here was someone who was doing almost exactly what Laura does in that book, and she was being criticised for it as if nobody had learned a thing from the book they were supposed to be studying. It certainly makes you wonder what education's supposed to be about when that happens.' Jenny glared suspiciously at her visitors who had little idea – especially Les – of what she was talking about.

Les made an attempt. 'I'm not clear about what Genevieve is supposed to have done wrong. I mean... ah ... did she copy something unusual out of a book?'

Jenny was full of the hot anger of a parent whose child has been wronged. 'That's what they said!'

Les again: 'Well, it's pretty hard to say anything sensible when we don't really know what it is ... Who got offended? And why? That's what's not clear to me. Sorry. Schools are not a field where I know much, really.' His apology earned him no credit with Jenny Bartlett. 'They just wanted to pull her down because she wasn't afraid to use her mind in a way that she's good at! Screen stars are paid millions and have crowds of adoring fans because they can act the parts that screen writers write for them. It's another world, the imagination, and it comes flooding into the everyday world to give us relief so we're not bored to death, and the people who have a rich imagination and can use it are ...'

Some passion, some belief, was struggling to free itself from her inhibitions about claiming too much for her daughter.

'... they're the god-people who give the world the colour it needs to save us all from being bored ...'

Norman had been quiet, but her passion had stirred him. Suddenly he broke in, 'Life has to be written, and since most people are pretty awful writers, it has to be rewritten. And the only people who can do this are those who've got an idea of how they'd like it to be. Our daughter's one of those. It's an honour to have her in the family.' He said this quietly to his visitors, modestly, even, as if he needn't have said it because they'd already have seen it for themselves. Lorna, speaking with restraint, as if she was a psychiatrist in an asylum, said, 'People with excitable minds sometimes need to have their thinking restricted a little. We don't want people blowing themselves apart.' She added, 'Do we?'

Norman said to his son, 'Thomas? Tell your sister we'd like her to join us. Our visitors haven't had a chance to get to know her yet.'

The boy left the room.

The Bartlett children looked for opportunities to invite the Bramble children over. The Bramble children, Terry and the younger May, felt flattered; nobody was that good to them at their school. Children of the easy-going Les and the shallow Lorna, they found the Bartlett trio a little daunting, though nicely-mannered; it was not lost on them, though, that the attraction was to the horses rather than themselves,

and the curiosity of the trio was directed not so much at the Adamsons, the outgoing owners, as at the rather more earthy McGintys, who were staying on. Young Patrick's reports on the development of the foals that would be Terry's and May's were handed to the Bartletts and to the parents of other children known to the Brambles; something more social than simply a training track for horses was being acquired. Then the Adamsons announced that an earlier settlement date was agreeable to them, if it didn't inconvenience the Brambles, and Lorna's children saw their mother advance by a month, on the calendar in their kitchen, the date of possession. The times were on the move.

Then word reached them, via Jack Page, that the police who'd been investigating the burning down of a warehouse, was it, or former factory owned by Rory and Ruth Svendsen, had reopened their investigations, following a tip-off from a separate inquiry into drive-by shootings at various homes in apparently unrelated suburbs. Jack was troubled. 'I told Rory and Ruth they were welcome to join us again at Fairhaven next year if they wanted to, but now ...' his voice broke off, leaving Les Bramble holding a silent phone '... but now ...'

The trust he'd had in the Svendsens was broken. He'd never known them very well, simply had dealings with them through other people, but included them in his loosely sprinkled invitations on the rather stupid assumption that anyone known to anyone he knew must be 'all right', and it seemed that this wasn't so. He had a reputation for being discerning, and this latest development showed that he was nothing of the sort. 'I should have looked into them,' Jack said to Les, 'I was too trusting. I'd met them a couple of times, they seemed all right ...' He didn't go on because he didn't know what to do next; he'd got himself into something and he wanted to get out of it. He valued cleanliness in the way that animals do, licking themselves to get themselves free of dirt, or mud, and even though he felt some sympathy coming from Les, he still felt foul. Something of whatever it was that Rory Svendsen had done had smirched him and he couldn't free himself of it, desperate though he was. He talked about it with Olivia and she thought he'd be rid of it after a day or two. 'It's not as if you'd done what the Svendsens did. It's natural to feel uncomfortable for the very good reason that we were close to them for a while, but, really, we hardly know them. They were our guests but not our *intimate* guests. We just had a house full of people, some of whom we knew better than others. They weren't all close friends ...'

She knew that what she said was only soothing, but soothing was what her husband needed. Feeling troubled about himself, he started looking at those he knew to see who else was showing signs of weakness, or failure. Inevitably his mind went back to the night when Don Trevorrow had intended to swim out to sea in the dark. How was he now? He kept wondering until Olivia felt she had to find out from Tessa if the problem had recurred. She rang. Tessa was relieved to be asked because, as she explained to Olivia, knowing about the danger hidden in Don's psyche was a burden that she felt she couldn't share. 'I can't unload on strangers, and even most of the people we know have almost no idea how vulnerable Don is. There's only a handful who realise ... and Don isn't any help. He hates it when I talk about what he ought to be doing. He says he's got it under control. He hasn't, not at all. He's in a state of denial but that doesn't help anybody, least of all himself. He tells me he's fine, he's appeared in so many cases in the last three months and he's won this or that number of them, so he thinks he's going well. I tell him he's like a ship with a bomb hidden below the waterline, and when it blows up the ship's going to sink. I tell him it doesn't matter that the ship was sailing along proudly five minutes before. When the bomb goes off, it's all over in a moment. Down it goes ...'

Olivia interrupted her with questions. Did Tessa see signs of the trouble coming to the surface? What brought this on? Was there anyone else Don might be persuaded to talk to, if he wouldn't talk to her?

Tessa said no to this; Don was too well-defended. Olivia said that if you sat on a problem, trying to ignore it, it would blow up in your face when you least expected it. Something had to be done.

'But what, Olivia, what? He can read my mind these days. If I think about his problem, he knows, and he either goes quiet, shutting me out, or else he invents some reason to go off and do something away from me, so I can't be near him!' Something desperate had entered her voice, and Olivia was sorry for her.

'He's got to see a psychiatrist. He's got to get on top of the problem. Know where it comes from, why it's there!' She said it strongly, as if such things were easy. Tessa, she could tell, from the silence at the other end of the line, was on the verge of giving up. Then a ray of hope entered her mind; the problem might be seasonal, that is, subject to rotation according to the time of year. 'Can you remember that night we were all down on the beach?' she said to Tessa. 'Your mood, I mean. Were you optimistic about the problem? Did you feel it could be fixed, in some way?'

Tessa was taken by surprise. 'Fixed? Yes I did feel that. I don't feel that way any more, though. It's worn me down. That night, on the beach, was the first time I'd realised the problem, so it was just a problem. By now though, months later, it hasn't gone away, I can't make Don do anything about it, you'd think he was the state of Israel trying to keep out trouble makers, he's got a wall around himself and he won't let me in ...'

'Are you still lovers?'

'Not very often,' Tessa said. 'We make love occasionally when he's in one of his positive moods, but they don't come very often. I think he wants someone new, to give him an escape. He hasn't started anything yet, as far as I know, but it's the logical next thing to happen. I'm a restraining influence, these days, I'm no use to him at all.' She paused, embarrassed about going on. 'The funny thing, the ridiculous thing, and I'm really ashamed of this, is that it's me that does the looking out for him. I see someone nice, and I think, he could pour his heart out to her, she'd listen, she'd sound sympathetic, and he could even be a bit boastful, or at least very positive about his career, which is quite impressive, and he wouldn't get the feeling, which he gets from me all the time, that he's in a trap and it's ready to spring. The death wish? Whoever it was wouldn't know about that, so he'd feel liberated when he was with her. I couldn't blame him, Olivia, in fact I think, that is I suspect, that I'm encouraging him in my own devious way.'

She drew a breath. 'I'm not clever enough. I'm helpless. I'm not doing Don any good and I'm certainly not doing myself any good. Have you got any ideas?'

The only thing Olivia could think of sounded awfully weak. 'I keep thinking that we act, we think, in certain ways at certain times of the year. In summer, we open up. In autumn we begin by enjoying ourselves, carrying on from summer, but then we start to close down. In winter, we're enclosed. Locked inside ourselves and very aware, too aware, of our shortcomings. In spring, we're nervous, but hopeful at times, and at other times slipping back. Then, when summer returns, we start to feel good again. We take steps forward. If we're lucky, we liberate ourselves from our problems, even if we can't make them go away ...'

Tessa said, 'That's cyclical. It's a good theory. It gives people a bit of hope, I suppose. But how do we know it's true? And worse than that, is there a way out of the cycle? Can anything ever really get better? Is there ever a time when the problem's solved and you can make some real progress, or do you just go round and round?'

Olivia had no answers. 'It's just a theory, I suppose. Is there a way out? Only the usual suspects. You die, and that's the end of the matter. Or you grow old and stop caring. Or something magical happens and the problem really and truly does go away.' She laughed, at herself, mainly. 'Not much comfort there, is there?'

There wasn't, but Tessa felt a fraction better for having opened herself up, for her own as well as her friend's inspection.

Don was in court one morning, conducting a defence, when the prosecutor challenged his right to call a certain witness. The magistrate ordered the jury to retire while the matter was argued. As the prosecutor began, Don put his arms along a row of chairs. He knew what was going to be said and he didn't expect it to be successful. The case was going well. He stared at the high ceiling, half-listening, but ready to spring to his feet if he detected a weakness. He knew the magistrate was keeping an eye on him; his reactions were almost a counterpoint to what was being said. Some part of his mind began to drift onto the Chinese dumplings he fancied when the lunch adjournment came, and then he realised that another quite different thought had appeared on the horizon of his mind. It was New Year again, on a warm summer evening at Fairhaven, and he was standing,

ready to leave his group of friends and walk down to the water, to paddle out, to swim, and swim, into the dark. He was shocked to find that he remembered very well the attraction of the moment, the allure of swimming into a darkness where it would be bliss to not look around, but swim on, and on, into a void of friendly water, until he was tired ...

He sat up with an awkward jerk. The prosecutor turned, thinking he was raising an objection, but was surprised to see a look of fear on his opponent's face. What on earth was wrong? His honour also turned, but by now Don had cleared his mind, and simply looked empty – and surprised. There being no explanation of this, the judge looked away, but the prosecutor knew that something had happened in the mind of his opponent and flung himself into his argument with passion. 'The fool,' Don thought: 'he doesn't know. His Honour doesn't know either. It's a secret, and while it stays that way, I'm safe.' The prosecutor's point was disallowed and the jury returned. Forty-five minutes later, Don ordered his dumplings ...

Not caught out. But was that true? He'd been caught out by himself. Nobody else knew, but he knew, that the attraction, the pull, of death in darkness, with water around him and the stars above, was strong. He wanted it. Not today, not next week, but it was signalling a day when the call would come, and would have to be followed. He knew. It dawned on him, with his bowl of dumplings before him, that he wasn't afraid. Every life had to end, and most people resisted this, or at least regretted it. He, however, would go in peace ...

... except for Tessa. She knew there was something devouring him, which he wouldn't show her. It was spoiling her love for him. Love? He didn't think of himself as being loved. He was merely the focal point of Tessa's curiosity, her anxiety and a certain tenderness she could as easily extend to a dying animal: a horse that had to be put down, let us say. His love for her had been stronger because it was a natural part of his pride as a man to need a woman: women were trophies to his sort of men, and he knew it because many of the most successful men he knew, in business or at the bar, assessed their position by their success, and then, as proof of that success they needed evidence, and that was where women came in. Powerful men

got beautiful women. Beautiful women looked around for success before they considered giving anything of themselves. It had worked for himself and Tessa. Now something else had come on the scene.

No, no, it wasn't new, it had been there for years, since he was a teenager in fact, but he hadn't understood that it was like a personal calling. He understood, in his youth, that everybody had to realise that death ended every life, but most young people felt safe with this because they expected long lives before the inevitable happened. It was hardly more than the realisation at sunrise that the sun would set at the end of the day. He partially realised, in his days at university and immediately thereafter, that whatever it was he felt was something stronger than most young men's apprehension of their eventual endings, but the sheer fullness, the inescapability of what was attending him only took control that night at Fairhaven.

Nor had it left him since. A few weeks after he and Tessa had returned from the beach, they'd driven to Bendigo, partly for an outing, but also to give advice to the City Council on the likelihood or otherwise of success in certain cases they were thinking of taking up. He and Tessa were driving, swiftly and contentedly, on the Calder Highway, when she noticed a roadside memorial, causing her to think aloud: 'He must have run off the road and hit that tree.' Don, not knowing what caused her to say these words, slowed down to look at her, and she told him that they'd passed an improvised memorial; a cross, painted white, something that might have been a photo, and some crumpled, dried out flowers. Twenty kilometres later, in a stretch of shaded forest, they passed another, and it was Don who saw it first. He lifted a hand from the wheel to point. 'It could have been an accident, but I'm willing to bet it was deliberate.' Tessa looked at him, inviting him to say more, but he was silent, their car swept through the curves of the Black Forest, and then he said, mostly to himself, 'It's too easy!'

Too easy? She took it, at first, as a rejection of the idea of doing away with oneself, but in the silence that followed she began to wonder. Why was it too easy to kill yourself that way? How could you want it to be hard? If people wanted to kill themselves, what did it matter whether the method was easy or difficult? The main thing

was to be successful, surely? Not to make a mess of it? Too easy? Had he then been weighing up the possibilities and probabilities, not to mention the aesthetics, of a self-organised death? The next thing they passed was a big shed by the side of the road that sold locally grown fruit, and she wanted to stop, but Don was driving faster now and a glance or two at his watch told her he was calculating when they'd reach their destination. This annoyed her. She hated driving when it was only a matter of point A to point B: what was the country for if you couldn't appreciate it as something separate from, and unlike, yourself? Minutes later they passed another shed selling provisions and she told Don to stop. 'We'll get some fruit and take it home.' Don thought the return trip would be a better time but she insisted, and they pulled up outside a place with a sliding glass door and a couple of old farming implements, museum species to amuse travellers and their children. Tessa was out of the car in a moment, and hurrying into the shed, more to get away from him, Don thought, than to reach whatever was on sale.

The man in the shop was cheery. He said little but clearly approved of Tessa reading the labels on the honey. Red Stringybark. Ironbark. Yellow Box. Orange Blossom. Red Gum. Clover. 'We've got three sizes of tubs,' he told her, 'but I usually recommend the smallest size, and taking two or three brands to see which ones most agree with you.' Tessa's fancy ran ahead. Red Stringybark? She didn't know one tree from another but doubtless the bee-men could tell you which was which. They wore clothes to cover their faces and gloves to protect their hands, though some bee-keepers, she knew, hardly ever got bitten. Was it confidence, the skills of their handling? She knew she'd feel fear and the bees would know it, in their amazing way. Somewhere or other she'd read about how bees navigated, and thought it marvellous; they were connected in mind in a way that humans preferred not to know about, although she often felt that groups of humans acted in a concerted way, whether they knew it or not. Prisoners knew what was going on in the minds of men in other cells; she'd read about that. She looked at the man running the shop, a retired local farmer, probably, filling in days being useful, surrounded by apples, pears, honey, bottles of cider, juices, lemons and grapefruit – the earth was good, life was good, he had jars of chutney on the bench in front of him, and some fruit mince tarts he was offering Don to try. Suddenly Tessa was happy; if Don had a bite of one, his troubles would be over. The earth was good, the people in this district were productive, there were none of the crazy shootings they had in other countries ...

Don smiled and took a mince tart. 'Looks lovely,' he said, and down it went. Tessa knew happiness in that moment. He couldn't go back to his misery now, or his fear. They were saved. She grabbed a couple of the honey jars, a caramelised onion chutney, an apricot jam she hadn't noticed before, and a bag of oranges, piling them on the bench. 'I'm so pleased we stopped,' she said. 'Lots of things to take home!' The man smiled quietly, tapping the prices into an old-fashioned calculator, before announcing the total. Money was handed over, change given, Don asked what sort of season they were having, and the ex-farmer – if farmers can ever be ex- this side of the grave – came around the counter to help them carry things to the car. They started, they were away, with Don peering left and right before moving off gravel and onto bitumen to resume their drive, and Tessa in a quiet, a stillness, she hadn't known for years.

They stayed at the Shamrock, grandest of country hotels, a still-living expression of the goldrush days, a building nearly destroyed some thirty years before, but saved by Rupert Hamer, premier of the day. Thanks to him! 'This place has vibes,' Don said as they entered, and Tessa smiled. A man who looked as if he would have been happier pouring a beer – or perhaps drinking it – gave them their keys and offered to take their cases up, but Don said they didn't need help. The room was grand, and gave onto a balcony. 'It's not really a modern room,' Tessa said, seeing little of the century they lived in: 'Not meant to be,' Don said, stepping out to look at the street. 'Let's imagine we've been digging for days, and the tunnel caved in and we only just escaped, but we had enough money to come here for a bit of recuperation.' He was happier than she'd seen him since New Year. 'Anything would do because the cave-in didn't get us! We wouldn't need much! A few beers, maybe a bit of theatre.' He mused. 'I don't

suppose any of the old theatres are left. There wouldn't be any acting groups left, either. Haven't been around for years ...' He trailed off, imagination wandering the world as it had when he was little. Now, a big man, over six feet tall, he was, thought Tessa, more vulnerable than he would have been as a child; she said, 'There's a moment ...', then stopped. What had she been going to say?

Don, head tilted back, was examining an old lithograph on the wall, trying to read the caption underneath. All he could see was the word Bendigo; the rest had been blurred in the reproduction process. Looking at him, Tessa knew that he had to be protected from the thought she'd hushed. There's a moment, she had been going to say, which people describe as moving from innocence to a knowledge which was in some way fatal, but that wasn't how things seemed to her. There was, she had wanted to say, a protected period when we're still to decide who and what we are, and that period, when it ends, gives way to a much more vulnerable time when, knowing who we are, we have an address, a bank account, a spot on the electoral roll, and so on, so we are, in each area of life, identifiable and therefore fate can hunt us down.

He was a big man, quick in his movements, oddly blind, and he was enjoying himself, moving around the period prints on the walls, yet a minute later he thought they should go out for a cup of coffee 'somewhere'. She smiled. It never occurred to him that what he wanted might not be there. What would he do if there wasn't a café around the corner? If she pressed him he'd say, 'Is this place civilised or not?' She said nothing beyond 'Let's go then', and they had left their room, Tessa aware that they'd opened themselves to whatever the hotel carried of its past to only a fragmentary degree, while Don's mind was already in the street, looking for a place to sit and order. He had to command – and yet he was so vulnerable. Then it occurred to her to ask, 'When do you meet these people? I don't think you told me who they are.' He already had a café in sight, and pointing to it to make her aware, he swung to his right, ready to cross the road. 'Council chambers, wherever they are. They're in the centre of town, though, so they can't be far from here. There's an issue over whether the council's got the right to charge rates over certain subdivisions gazetted in the nineteen twenties. Silly as it sounds, they might have been acting illegally in collecting rates all those years, and if they had to refund all they'd collected, they'd be in one big pile of trouble. I've been involved in a couple of earlier cases, in other cities, and they want to talk to me about the issues involved.'

'It sounds terribly involved.'

'Not really. They've got the wind up, but it's actually fairly simple. Or that's what I'll be telling them.'

They were in the café. They sat down. Don ordered cheerfully, and looked at the walls. A couple of historical pictures of the city could be seen. 'Pretty strong on their past, aren't they.' He chuckled. He was being patronising, but in some way it suited him. Tessa realised she was happy because he was happy. 'History,' she said, 'is never contentious in a place like this. They're so convinced they're good that everything that led to them being what they are today must have been good too. No matter how awful, or fraught it once was, it was a step towards today, and today is good. Nobody's ever allowed to say that they've inherited anything bad from the past.'

Don was in tune with this. 'Most of the country people I've met are the same. They're actually better at telling you what's going on today than people in the city. They have to be because they're always in danger of slipping behind. If they get too proud of what they've got in the bush, then they've taken their eye off the main game. And if you talk to them as if they don't know what's going on at the moment, boy, do they hate it. If you don't want to be asked back, then all you have to do is rub them up the wrong way, and you won't be!' He was amused, and Tessa saw that he'd never been more sure of himself. 'What time's your meeting?'

'Half past two. Can you amuse yourself, looking around? I don't know how long it'll go. It will depend on how much I need to explain and how much they already know.'

They had a look in the Chinese museum, then she dropped him at the Council Chambers, which they'd found by then, and took herself to a second-hand bookshop she'd noticed near the museum. It had been a hall with high ceilings and gothic-shaped windows, but later improvers had installed a mezzanine floor, and it was packed from

floor to ceiling with books, neatly categorised as Music, Local History, Australian Literature and so on. There were chairs and she pulled one close to a shelf that looked interesting. Five minutes later she was reading the letters of Hector Berlioz in English translation, bringing back to life the people the composer had loved and hated. How strange, she thought, and paused to look at the rows of books stacked around her: every one of them's capable of transporting the mind to another place, another time, another problem. If you knew nothing of psychotherapy and the mind, you could repair your ignorance, given time to read and dollars to buy. The man running the shop had nodded to her when she entered, then put her out of mind. His brain was busy somewhere in the known universe, just as hers was, but how far apart were they? She didn't know and it didn't really matter. If she spoke to him he'd speak back, politely no doubt, because he was there to look after her as much as the books, though they came first. Knowledge, she felt, sitting there surrounded by it, was more valuable than the knower? She pondered this. Knowledge, once lost, was probably gone forever. Only some remarkable accident of chance could bring it back. But knowers, ordinary people with ordinary brains of average competence, but not genius ... were expendable. Plenty more where they came from! She felt very humble. Don, by now, would be talking to the people at council who'd asked him to advise them, and whether or not they realised it, they'd asked the right man because, for all his shallowness, Don saw legal issues more quickly and clearly than most. She knew his methods of working. He'd examine the prints they had on the walls of their office, and ask the local people about them. They'd describe and explain and Don would gauge, from the way they responded to his questions, how intelligent they were, and deliver his opinions and experience accordingly ...

Think of the devil! She was somewhere in the letters the French composer wrote when he was engaged with *Les Troyens*, the work that called him to rise beyond himself, when the door of the bookshop opened and Don walked in, eyes adjusting from the daylight outside to the gloom within. The man at the desk looked at him in a way that suggested he might leave pretty quickly, but Tessa moved out of the niche where she'd settled, so he could see her.

'Don, good heavens, you were pretty quick?'

He was so angry he could only mutter, 'Found anything good?'

She pointed to a little pile she'd put beside her chair, on the floor. He said briskly, 'Could you settle up quickly? I need to talk. And I need another coffee. Can we go back where we were, earlier on?' She picked up the books she'd chosen and took them to the front desk, where the man she'd been alone with, a minute before, pulled out a calculator and tapped in the prices. She paid and he gave her a bag. Don had gone outside by this time, so she ventured a thought to the man at the desk: 'Looks like his meeting didn't go too well.' The man at the desk offered sadly, 'No matter what I do to try and stop it, the outside world keeps breaking in. Thanks, anyway.' Tessa felt they'd offended in some way they hadn't realised, she and Don. 'I'm sorry to be leaving. It's a lovely shop.' She started to go on: 'I didn't expect to find ...', and this caused the man to break in. 'People never do expect to find what we offer here.' Then he added, 'It's how things are,' and she knew he'd stepped back from her. She had to say something. 'I was reading Berlioz's letters. They're marvellous. A real discovery.' He smiled, faintly, and offered her the bag. She took it, realising, as she pushed the door to leave, that the composer's letters, the expression of his highest hours, were leaning against the leg of the chair she'd been sitting on. She hadn't put them away and she hadn't been quick enough to put them on the pile she was buying. The composer of *Les Troyens* must wait for another reader, and another day.

The meeting had been a disaster, Don told her. Useless. Waste of fucking time. 'I took a pile of stuff there from years ago. Old cases, arguments about how they applied to this set of circumstances and that. Yes yes, very interesting, they said, and I couldn't get them to take any notice. All they wanted to talk about was James Hird and the Essendon football club.

'Who?'

He looked at her in amazement. 'Tessa, I never know how you do it.' 'Do what, Don?' She wasn't angry, but she was ready to be. He looked at her, wondering why she never saw things the way that he or any of his friends did.

'I sometimes wonder if you live in the same world that everyone else lives in.'

The rift was widening. 'What makes you think I'm the odd one out, not you?'

'That's an easy one. You just said you don't know who James Hird is. He's the coach of Essendon, or he was, and you don't know who they are either, apparently.'

'So?'

'So about ninety per cent of Melbourne thinks they're pretty important.'

'You were just complaining that these people in the council office wanted to talk about football instead of listening to you.'

'Quite so. It gives me the shits. They've got better things to do. But at least I know what gets them excited, and you, my dear, don't.'

His dear? She didn't feel very dear to herself, and certainly not to Don. 'You could have said to them, I came a long way to talk to you, but not about football. Let's stick to our business ...'

Her voice trailed away because she didn't think that his business was very interesting either. Land boundaries in the twenties? Ho hum! All these cases depending on cases long ago. Who cared about the past? There was a future to build, it was a wide open blank to be filled, nobody knew what it contained, and she, for one wasn't going to compromise. The trouble was, he had this urge to destroy himself, and nothing she said or did made any difference. He didn't want to talk about it, he wanted only to block it out of his mind. Coming up, they'd seen those roadside graves, reminding them of what was troubling them. They hadn't talked, which made the reminders all the more pressing. Then he'd got into a good mood. Then he'd gone off to his meeting, she'd found a good bookshop and she assumed he'd be on the improve; work usually made him right. But no! These men had annoyed him, he was in a foul mood, she found him insulting, and ready for a falling out ...

'Let's forget it. I'm sorry you had a bad time because I had a good time. I found a really good bookshop, and I sat down and read. I came away with a stack of books.'

He had the decency to take up her offer. 'What did you get?'

She told him, he asked about them and he even expressed an interest in reading one or two of them. She asked him if he wanted to stay another night in the rural city, or go back to Melbourne. 'It's not a long drive. Let's go home.' So they set off, her books in a bag on the back seat. The weather looked changeable, although, as Don said, only a local could read the sky and know if it was going to rain, or simply blow over. Tessa suggested that they take a different route home. They could go through Heathcote. Clouds gathered as they drove. Don noticed that Tessa was looking closely at the buildings as they drove through the town. Then she pointed. 'Slow down, Don. I think that's the place.'

He slowed down. 'What place?'

'You know the coloured glass ceiling in the Victorian gallery?'

'The big place in Saint Kilda Road?'

'Yes. I'm pretty sure it was made in that building there.'

'Who told you that?'

'Rex and Nancy. Well, Rex, he's the art world connection. He was talking about it one day. I'd never been to Heathcote, and I never really dreamed I'd get here, but he made it sound interesting. The chap that did most of the work, but wasn't famous, he was killed by a bus in an accident in the city. That's what Rex told me. I think of that man when I go to the gallery and look up.'

'It's quite a sight, isn't it.'

They were peaceful now. Don was over his rage with the council people; he had, after all, managed to offer them his opinion about their problems, and tell them what to look for before they decided how to proceed, and if he hadn't apologised for his rudeness to Tessa he had at least been civil, even affectionate, as they drove along. 'They make wine around here,' he said. 'We ought to get a bottle or two of the local drop.'

So they stopped at a store. There were quite a number of local wines, and Don tried to persuade the young woman behind the counter to open a couple and let them have a tasting, but she told them she'd been forbidden to do that unless the vineyards themselves were paying for the bottles opened. 'I think you'll just have to take the plunge if you want to find out what they're like. But believe me, some of them are well worth trying.' Don felt a challenge in this. 'But which

ones are the ones most worth trying? We'll be back in Melbourne when we try them and I can't see us being up this way again in the near future.' Tessa was surprised at the goodwill, the charm, he was offering the stranger who was serving them. 'Actually,' the woman said, 'we've got a bottle left over from the last tasting we had. I think it's still there. If it is, I can do something for you.'

She found it, they tried it, talked about it, then chatted about the shop, the district, the things it produced as well as wine. And of course they bought a dozen of the wine she'd given them to taste. Carrying the box to the car, Don observed that the clouds were lower, and moving faster. 'What a change! How long were we in there? It couldn't have been more than half an hour?' Tessa laughed. 'I make it an hour and a quarter.' Don was amused as she was. 'Gets away on you doesn't it? I think it's going to rain on the way home. Hell! It's starting now!'

They scrambled into their car and set off in light drizzle. It cleared for a while, then returned. A few minutes into their drive Tessa saw what she didn't want to see – another one of those roadside memorials erected by someone who'd lost a husband, lover, brother, sister, wife or friend when a car had hit a tree. There was something written on a large sheet of paper but rain had made the message unreadable, then the rain increased and Don had to turn the wipers to high speed so he could see.

The rain's intensity flagged but it was gloomy driving. Each of them wondered about the effect on the other of what they'd seen until Don couldn't restrain himself. 'You saw that, didn't you Tess?' She nodded, not wanting to hear the shake in her voice if she spoke. He spoke again. 'It's worse than it was on the way up. I suppose it's the rain. No sunshine to let me lift myself.' He said nothing for a while, and then, 'It might be better if I let you take over. I'm afraid of myself. I might do the same as that last fellow, and I don't want to do it with you in the car. You drive, Tess. We'll get home safely, that way.' He pulled the car off the road, and stopped. They were right under an ancient red gum. 'See what I mean?' he said. 'These things drop branches when you least expect it. Swap seats with me, Tess. Let's get out of here.'

Winter

It was raining when they got home, and still raining, if only lightly, when they woke in the morning. Tessa lay drowsing while Don had his shower, and he was dressing himself, she noticed, more quickly than usual. 'I'm lucky,' he told her, 'I've got a couple of busy days.' Lucky? He meant he'd be too busy to think about roadside memorials and the way they affected him. This was heartening because he was sharing his problem, admitting it to her, for the first time. They could work on it, fight it, together. A breakthrough of trust! A split second later, she saw the trap, the thing he'd caught her in. If he shared it, it was hers as well as his. She sat up. She flung her legs over the side of the bed.

There was no way out, except to leave him, and he, by admitting, finally, the grip the problem had on him, was taking possession of her soul as his comforter. If she left him now he'd carry a burden of rejection which would lead him swiftly to his end. The news would be brought to her and she'd carry a burden of guilt almost as big as the heavy sack of self-knowledge he carried on his shoulders.

Every day. The moment she was in, she saw, the bubble of time, those few fateful seconds, would extend, now, to the end of their lives. She stood, picked up a towel, and took herself to the shower. Naked, she stepped into the rest of her life. Like Don, she showered quickly, and as she dried herself, she contemplated herself. First to deal with was a funny feeling that she hadn't woken properly and that some last bit of her past, some vestige of burden, was clinging to her until she was fully awake.

Not so. It was more than a change in mood. It was a change in being. Something had been added. Don had admitted to himself, first, and now to her, his problem. In moving from denial to openness, he was including her. They'd be a couple now, truly, and resemble all those other couples since time began who'd looked at the sky, hoping the storm would hold off. It wouldn't, she knew. The day would come ... She had to play along with his efforts. He was already in the kitchen. 'Eggs Benedict, Tess,' he said cheerfully. 'Tell me what you've got on today,' she said, trying to sound cheerful too. He told her. 'And what about you?'

Tessa would be guiding visitors through the state's art gallery, something she did two or three times a week. Most of the guides were retired people, but Tessa was using it as a way to explore the possibilities of the art world, getting to know who mattered, make contacts if she could, pick up little bits of part time work, find a way in. What she really wanted to know was what knowledge mattered, and it had dawned on her by now that the men who mattered were mostly homosexuals and the women who threaded their way through these networks were tougher, sharper than she was. An alternative path was to become trusted by families with collections; if they trusted your perceptions and the advice that led to, then you had as allies all those valuable paintings they sheltered. Gallery directors listened to those who might be instrumental in getting such pictures added to their collections. Don liked Tessa having these connections. When he spoke of her in the legal world, he made her sound much more important than she was, something that he was well aware of because it suited his conception of a woman to be beautiful, desirable or at least in demand, while not in possession of any economic value. The claims that women had made in recent years, the rights and respect they aspired to possess could easily be accommodated by someone like Don whose partner was vulnerable to being downgraded by attacks which he thought he was too enlightened to allow. Decency could be as protective as muscle; he judged himself leniently because he felt he'd made peace with the demands of women. Yielding himself, he didn't need to weigh up women's general position, or check how widely his views were accepted or rejected in the society that presented itself in cases coming to court. These he saw through a conventional understanding of legal history, not as test cases to be tried in a form of judgement that was still coming into being. This might have made him repugnant to his partner, but Tessa thought little, and for the most part shallowly, about Don's capacity or otherwise for accepting the modern woman, because what she wanted for herself was opportunity and that would only present itself if she knew enough about the issues and practice of art. She needed to be the person others turned to because they knew she knew. That was what she aspired to, and she was far from her goal. It seemed to her that if you knew a society's art you knew what was needed to understand the society, and that to understand your society was very close to understanding yourself.

It was a bold thought and if she could build on it, she might be able to sustain Don, his life, the burden of his demands, and the burden that she was for herself, if she listened to him.

Not to hear him was not to hear herself. She was married to him, and that meant something ...

What did it mean? It was too big a question to deal with, she had simply to accept it as a result of the decision she'd made to stick by him. A bad choice? Possibly, but to fail him now was to fail herself. Was this the same as failing in some broader, more objective way? She had no idea. She didn't know how you could answer such a question.

She poured herself a cup of tea. Don always had a pot of Twinings tea on the table by the time she got there, and, silly as it was, she felt that as long as it appeared, the bond of their marital agreement had not been broken; rather, it had been sustained, and so she felt it now.

He made toast, he spread it sparingly with butter, and put it on a plate between them. He was going to be busy and it made him feel safe. He too drank tea, between his bites of toast. He had honey on his and looked inquiringly at her. Everything, she knew, felt safe for him; the day had been secured in advance. 'Honey?' he asked, 'or there's some of that French jam. The real dark stuff.' 'Honey,' she said. 'I'll do it myself.' It was one of the pots they'd bought on their way to Bendigo, which meant it came from a well-secured past. The world was full of couples, families, having breakfast together. She thought of Ruth, having breakfast with Rory, a man fated differently from Don, but fated well enough. Why couldn't Ruth escape, or was she as tied as Tessa had come to be? How did women let themselves into this situation? That, again, was too big to answer. She had no answer so she must live in the shade of the question. Did men do this, she wondered? That is, did they appear to be in control only because they were swimming with the current and not against it? If you lived that way, you could stop swimming and let the current take you where you were fated to end up. So easy! She thought of her friends, if that was what they were, all those people they'd holidayed with, down by the sea. Suddenly Don's unexpected move to leave the party and embrace the water, looked different. It was the choice that everyone faced – the sea or the land? If you chose the land, which road did you take, or did you embrace something as mystical as the sea, the endless bush, or did you choose a road? If so, to where? The world was becoming a collection of metaphors from which you made a choice because you had to. Artists, she saw, or felt she saw, were the makers of images, therefore the makers of choices that ordinary people were offered, or took for themselves in a calculating or maybe a careless way.

Don spoke. 'A penny for them. Or would you prefer something decimal? Two cents, darling?'

She laughed. He'd caught her out. Normally it was the other way around. 'I was just thinking,' she said, but he interrupted. 'You're allowed. We're all allowed to speculate. You can tell people if you want to, but you can keep your thoughts to yourself if that's safer. God knows I do it all the time.' He looked at her confidently and she felt he was challenging her. 'God knows, does he? Well, I know too. I read your mind, or I try to, all the time. It's much more than a game. Our relationship depends on it. People who can't read other people's minds don't know what's going on in the world.' She was smiling now, with honey on her fingers and crumbs on the table. Don smiled too, as one who enjoyed finding himself helpless. 'People who think they know what's going on in the world, don't,' he said firmly.

'Don't?'

He knew what she meant. 'Don't know what they think they know.' He put a hand flat on their table.

'Who does know, then? Does anyone?'

'Everyone knows occasionally. Everyone knows a bit of the picture. Even the stupidest people have some knowledge. Their stupidity is in a way their knowledge because it gets in the way of the knowledge that other people, who are much cleverer, are trying to put into action.'

Heavens! It was time to stop. 'It's only breakfast time, Don.'

'I was only trying to catch up with where your thoughts had got to.'

'Well I think it's time we made a second start to our day.'

Something cranky in her tried to extend whatever it was they were doing. 'Is there one day and we're sharing it, or do we have separate days which we try to put together?'

'Blowed if I know,' he said. 'That's too hard for a feeble brain like mine.'

Ruth was amazed. Again? 'Beechworth? But you've been there already. Twice!' She stared into Rory's eyes and as usual, saw nothing. He was amused, playing with her. 'It's a nice place to be. Mountains not far away.' He added a thought or two. 'A couple of good wineries. Built in the gold rush days. Fine, simple buildings. With atmosphere, character. They're not easy to find, these days.' Every word was designed to eliminate any choice she might think she had. She knew this. His smile was made of steel. 'When are you leaving?'

'When we've washed up. I like to get on the road early.'

Let him go then. She needed to be alone. She said, 'I'll do the washing up.'

'As soon as I finish this cup of tea, then.'

And he did, and he left, politely enough, leaving her seething, not with rage so much as curiosity, and also with some disturbance of the self. 'I'll see you Wednesday night,' were his last words. She had three days to get through. When he got back, he would say, 'Who did you see?' She didn't like naming names; he'd be suspicious. 'What did you do?' She wouldn't want to say anything that roused him. She could tell him what she'd read; he read so little himself that her books didn't interest him. I'm his book, she realised: he reads me. It's the way he controls me. Half an hour after Rory left - for Beechworth, he said – she felt troubled, a crisis impending. What was wrong? She only knew she had to get out, go somewhere, make a change of some sort; she rang her work and told them that her husband – Rory! – was unwell and that she wouldn't be able to come in for a day or two ... she left it vague. Going out to the car, getting in and starting, she realised that she didn't know what she was doing, where she was going, or for how long. It wasn't until she was half way down the Geelong road that she sensed that her destination was the area where she and Rory had spent a few days over the previous new year, Fairhaven, and the house that Jack and Olivia had rented. Jack and Olivia: what would they think if they could see her now, speeding down the highway, not even sure if she could find the place where she was going.

Why was she going there? No reason at all, except it was somewhere, a destination known to her from a period in her life from which she was searching for an escape. If you want to find your way out of a maze, you have to know where you came in. Silly as it sounded, that was the thought that kept her company, murmuring in her brain for most of the highway to the outskirts of Geelong. On her left she saw the tower of the Grammar School; she didn't know what it was but she associated it with privilege, in which she wasn't wrong. Then the dreary suburbs, the city, and she was on the other side, finding her way. Luck and a few landmarks guided her until she saw the lighthouse, and soon after the house, which she remembered. Not much further along was a house, or possibly even a large and single room perched on a platform at the top of a pole, like some inexcusable sporting trophy. She took her eye off the thing and stopped at the turn into the house that Jack and Olivia had rented. Feeling a sense of relief at finding the place, she didn't consider why she was there. She got out of the car and walked onto the beach, stumbling in unsuitable shoes. She took them off and put them beside the marks she'd made in the sand. A moment or two and she was where they'd all sat on the night when Don Trevorrow had found his way to the water's edge, intending, although nobody had realised it until later, to swim away and not come back.

Where was he now? What was he doing? Ruth thought of Tessa and the burden she'd accepted without knowing it was inside her man. So that was why she'd come here, to the summer beach in winter, to find her only true companion, the other woman in the position she was in. Well, now that they were together, in her mind at least, what was she going to do? She wanted to be rid of Rory, but he was part of her, had found a way to secure her as his, doing it from within. There must be an escape, but what and where was the way?

She noticed how good she felt at being where she was. That was a signal of something, surely? She'd put herself back in her own past at a spot where she'd been untroubled, her situation not yet apparent to

her. She'd been normal then. She wanted to be normal again, or better! She was hopeful. There would be a way, if she could find it. Time passed, and she felt – perhaps 'observed' would be the better word – that she was already, in however small a way, free of Rory. I must make myself rid of him, she thought, without him being aware. He's dangerous. He needs me because he can't *operate* – he doesn't live – on his own. He concentrates on me when he's with me, so it's only when he's away that I can move myself away. I'll do it in bits, and each time I make a change inside myself it'll become, for Rory, the new normal, without him noticing.

She saw that it would be hard. He was cunning so she must be more so. She felt she could succeed. She ploughed her way back to her shoes. She picked them up and carried them to the car. She brushed the sand off her stockings and her shoes, then put them on. She drove to the foot of the hill where the rental house stood, stopped the car, and examined the rooms, the layout, in her mind. It wasn't hard. She placed the various guests in their rooms, then she brought them to the kitchen, the dining table, the balcony overlooking the sea, and then she started the car again, turned it around, and gazed at the sea. It was vast and empty, without a ship in sight. She drove past the lighthouse again, and back to Melbourne. She passed the service station where the Trevorrows had picked up the Furlinghettis after their car had failed. She drove back to Melbourne feeling, not so much secure, as quiet: it had been a successful trip – and there would be more.

Ruth's return to Fairhaven had not gone unobserved. The reason she'd stopped her car at the foot of the slope that ran up to the house was that there was another car parked where the holiday makers had parked, months before. Ruth assumed the house was occupied. It wasn't. The car belonged to Clive McConville, son of the agent, who was doing a check before they advertised it for lease again. There'd been tenants since the Page party had moved out; how had they left the place? Clive, an alert, opportunistic young man, had noticed the car pulling up, and the driver getting out. All women were opportunities for him: or challenges! He watched Ruth crossing the road and walking onto the beach, he saw her take off her shoes at the spot where the new

year group had pitched their marquee, and he noted her car with admiration – shiny, low and black.

Later that day he rang Jack Page. The owners of the Fairhaven house, he said, were trying to make up their minds. Would they let the house to casual tenants, or would they insist on a twelve month lease? What did the agents advise? Jack told the young agent that he, Olivia and friends would almost certainly be back in the summer holidays, although they hadn't organised anything yet. Clive was pleased and said he'd recommend that the owners continue their short term leasing. Then he mentioned the unexpected visitor he'd seen that morning. He didn't know her name but he was pretty sure she was one of the group that came down with the Pages. He described her, as best he could, and the car. Jack knew at once. Rory and Ruth Svendsen. No, Clive told him, there was only one person, the woman, no man with her; he described the part of the beach where she'd walked and Jack recognised straight away that it was where they'd erected their marquee, many weeks before. 'She didn't come up to the house?'

No, young Clive said, she stayed on the beach. She'd probably seen his car and thought it belonged to people living at the house. He had a feeling she belonged to the group of friends who'd stayed with Jack and Olivia. If they happened to see her, would they tell her the house was vacant and she was welcome to inspect it if she was planning a break beside the ocean? He gave Jack his number and hung up.

Jack didn't know what to make of it. He discussed it with Olivia, who was no wiser. 'Strange that she went down there on her own. What on earth can she have been doing?' Jack offered the thought that she might have had an argument with Rory. Olivia thought this possible, but suggested that Ruth may simply have been lonely if Rory had gone away for a few days. And so on. The young agent was offering Ruth the house; would they be taking sides in some dispute if they passed this message on? Eventually Olivia rang Ruth at a time when she thought Rory unlikely to be home. Ruth was amazed to hear that she'd been observed and assured Olivia that she had no plans to rent the house. 'I won't be going on a holiday just now. And besides,

who'd want to hire a great big house like that without a lot of friends to fill it?' Ruth, it seemed, was content to leave the house until the following summer, if Jack and Olivia took it for a second holiday with their friends ...

Ruth did make a note of the young agent's number, however; if he'd called to offer the house for rental it was only courtesy to thank him and say no. She rang, with a very different voice than she'd used for Olivia. 'You want to show me the house?'

'I do. Can you come down?'

'I will but I'm not sure when exactly it will be. It'll be soon, though. I'm sure of it.'

'Whenever you're ready. Give me some notice if you can.'

People know when they are agreeing to much more than they are saying. It's strange that we can offer ourselves by an inflection of the voice. 'I'll give you all the notice that I can.' He couldn't help himself saying, rather stupidly, 'You know the house pretty well, of course,' to which she answered, 'I'll be looking for something new.'

That was the end of their conversation, and it was three weeks before it was resumed. Rory went to Beechworth again, and she drove to the house for a holiday that lasted two hours. When she arrived, he asked her, 'Which was your room?' and she said, 'We're going to make it our room.' This excited him but it was only when they were into their lovemaking that he realised how impassioned she was. 'You're amazing,' he said. 'I'm only a stranger to you.' She replied, and it mystified him, 'I'm a stranger to myself. I don't want to be who I was. I don't know who I'm going to be. But we're going to find out!'

He had a bottle of wine in the car and they had a glass – one, which they shared. She tilted her head back so he could trickle a few sips into her mouth, before he drank himself. Then he sucked her breasts, and a look of triumph came to her eyes. 'I think I'm bleeding,' she said, and they had a look, finding that the sheets were stained. 'Pity,' she said. 'You've got this place on the market for rental.' He wasn't concerned. 'We've got an Italian lady, she's a widow. She does all our cleaning and household jobs before we rent anything out. She'll wash the sheets when I give them to her. In the meantime, we'll change them before we go. There's some in the hall cupboard. They'd

have been there when you were here. You mightn't have known about them, though.' He offered her another sip from the glass. 'I mustn't drink too much,' Ruth told him. Just enough so I know I've been changed!' He wondered about this. 'How do you know you've been changed?' He was different himself but unused to thinking about it. It occurred to Ruth to ask, 'This Italian lady, what's her name? Doesn't she ask questions?'

He grinned. 'You're going to laugh. She's Mrs Ferrari. Her husband was older than she was and we used to make jokes about the old Ferrari. He went into hospital and we said he was going to conk out, they couldn't give him a rebore! And they couldn't, either. He was a decent old bastard but all we did when he died was make jokes about it. She won't have to pay the registration, we said.' He thought this was funny and couldn't help himself laughing. To his surprise, Ruth laughed too. 'You put him in a graveyard for old cars!' Clive thought it funny. He laughed till he shook. 'I don't know what I'm laughing at!' Ruth was laughing too. 'I'm laughing at myself. All those years when I couldn't change!' She laughed with a passion, almost hysterically. 'We've got a lot of laughing to do before we're finished. We've made a good start, mate!' She didn't call him Clive. He had a feeling she was talking to herself more than to him, but if that was the way it came, that was great for him. 'When're you coming this way next?' She didn't know. 'I haven't got home yet to feel the restrictions. That's when I'll know. I'll tell you though, don't you worry. Don't rent the house out, though, we've got to have somewhere to be on our own. Imagine if we had nowhere to go!'

It was three weeks before they next met. Rory was in Beechworth again, negotiating, he said. Ruth didn't ask. 'Let's hope you're successful' was all she said. What he didn't tell her was that he was buying a vineyard, and winery attached. Trucks would bring supplies and take wine away. Cars would bring people to the cellar door and they would leave with parcels large and small. The home had two underground rooms, converted from what had once been a cellar. Rory had no intention of storing illicit goods at the winery but the comings and goings of vehicles meant that it could serve as a depot for

the transferring of goods best kept on the move. He wasn't interested in living on the premises but would visit regularly as needed. He found it pleasant to set off from Melbourne on a Sunday afternoon and return on Wednesday or Thursday. All this lay in the future but he was confident it could be made to happen. 'Negotiating,' he said, 'is something of an art. What you're looking for is the weakness in the other party. You do this while not letting the other party know the weakness of the position you're in yourself. A good deal is good for both parties.' Ruth thought this was satisfyingly true as she said goodbye to Rory at their door; another hour and she'd be on the road herself. Shortly after noon she met Clive at their house. It seemed wonderful to her that they could rush into each other's arms in a house belonging to neither of them, a house ready for a gaggle of holiday makers rather than a pair of secret lovers, yet it was the lovers who held sway. 'What do you think the house makes of us?' Ruth said to her young lover, making him laugh. Undressing, he said, 'I've never asked.' And then, naked as the day he was born, he added, 'I'm too occupied with other things!'

She seized him, burrowing her head into his neck and squeezing with her arms. 'I like it when you're hard!' He caressed her brusquely, severely, pleasure coupling itself with pain. 'Between the sheets, that's where we need to be!' They wriggled into bed, laughing, tense, full of energy looking for its other, ready for tenderness, wildness, whatever came. She slid across him, lay on top, moved to have him in her, then they sighed, both of them. 'I never knew how lucky I was going to be,' he murmured and she nodded, fully in his person, having escaped from Rory's hold. 'We need this big house,' she whispered, 'we've got a big secret to protect.' He nodded, ready to nod at anything she said, not really listening because his other senses were occupied with what they were doing. For a moment she thought she heard something and paused, head high, listening. 'What is it?' he said. 'You hear something?' The noise, if there had been one, didn't come again. 'Just imagining things, probably. Maybe it was the house creaking, it's windy outside today.' They concentrated on each other, aware of the other's desire, wanting to stir it, intensify it, asking, offering it to share. They loved intensely, a storm that settled eventually into deep and heavy breathing. 'I'd like to sleep,' she said, 'here with you, day and night, letting time have its way with the ocean outside, leaving us to ...'

He was amused that she hadn't finished, didn't know what to say: what need was there to finish, anyway? They were going on. When they'd rested they'd make love again, and next time she came to him, to the house, they'd make love again, on and on: neither of them saw any stopping, though they might have acquiesced if you'd offered them a cliché – nothing goes on for ever! Time slows down and speeds up according to the mind receiving it, or emitting it: a rubbery substance, time, elasticising itself to cope with events both great and small: as they lay in each other's arms, Ruth and the immaturely happy Clive, things were happening in faraway Sydney, in the city's Martin Place. A mad Muslim, feeling himself wronged, though guilty himself of a multitude of sins, had armed himself with a gun, entered a coffee house and taken possession of the lives of a couple of dozen people who'd paused, at ten o'clock in the morning, for a cup of coffee, talk, or a few minutes to read. Cities are bustling, busy places, and need places, which are also moments, where the mind can drop out and rest.

Ruth and Clive, drowsy now, lay in each other's arms while busloads of police cleared city blocks and closed the underground station nearby, unsure whether they were dealing with a lone wolf, as the media described him, or an integrated terrorist attack on other parts of the city. Was the man with the gun in the Martin Place café on his own, or was he a decoy for the bombing of other city landmarks – the parliament, the bridge, the opera house? Nobody knew. Every sign, every movement inside the café was observed as closely as could be from outside; was the man with the gun a loony, or part of a plan? Were bombs going to go off in other parts of the city, or would they be spared?

Ruth and Clive murmured in sleep their fulfilment, their satisfaction, their experience. Love was a state of mind, a readiness to believe in something more perfect than human life can provide, an enormous glow of blazing colour as the sun rises on a day when ordinary or awful things will prevail. Humans do well to grizzle, grumble, curse and complain; they know things can be better than

they get them, so they have to believe in gods, football teams, the sun rising and setting, the value of the dollar. Helpless humans can help themselves by exchanging love. It sanctifies, it gives momentary perfection. Ruth and Clive lay dozing, dreaming, then woke to a sleepy, self-contained bliss, protected by the walls of a house that wasn't theirs, surrounded half by sea and half by land, covered with an ocean of air, blessed by the presence of bushland that had evolved to live where they had temporarily borrowed a room, a bed, an hour or two from the onward rush of time, a moment when two were one, while, in another place, some terrified captives, having managed to escape their captor, ran from the café into the arms of police.

They were safe, and even though there were others inside, still under the orders of the madman, they were safe enough to cry, to let themselves be held, passed by the police to medical people who would take them to hospital, de-stress them, listening to whatever words rushed out of their mouths to see what could be learned. What weapons did the man have? What did he tell them to call him? Had he been taking orders from his phone? Or giving them to persons in other places? Did he have connections, and if so, to whom? The women who'd fled the café told them whatever they could, which was little enough. In the great global world of these events, the Chinese woman who'd escaped was wearing the dark apron with gold lettering of the Swiss chocolatier Lindt, the hostage-taker was thought to be Lebanese in origin, nobody knew where his gun(s) came from, or the bullets, Martin Place stood centrally in the country's richest, proudest city, and the New South Wales Commissioner of Police, directing operations at a distance, had an Italian name. Linking all this was what? The air, the people of Sydney, startled, shocked and distressed that their blessed city should be shaken by the arrival in their midst of violent madness surrounding death.

The city had been captured by the enemy of existence, just as the Fairhaven house, owned by names known to the agents who leased it but not to those who rented, had been captured by the servants of that other, almost equal power, the concentration, the absorption, the willingness to give oneself, to lose oneself, in the business of handing life on to those coming after. Such a paradox, that it happens via such

absorption in the self! Ruth hardly knew this when she woke, laughed with Clive as they drank a bottle of beer he'd brought, then took herself back to Melbourne while he tried to think of something to tell people about his absence from the office for such a length of time. 'Don't worry,' he told Ruth as she set off, 'I'm a good liar. Bullshit leaps out of my mouth. It's more or less a pre-requisite for what I do.' She saw this, and she laughed too. Bullshit wouldn't save her; she needed to be home, well before Rory's return, to get back inside the self that he both knew, required and imposed, so that he'd not suspect what had been happening while he ...

She realised, driving north, that she hardly cared what he'd been doing at Beechworth. She didn't want to know.

Newspapers and television could hardly believe it. Sydney was still reeling from the Lindt café crisis when an even wilder story burst out of Cairns, in the country's north. A woman who must have been deranged had killed eight children, seven of them hers. She'd stabbed them, and then herself, but it seems that it is easier to kill others than oneself: she survived and was taken to hospital, where she was treated under police guard. She was later charged with eight counts of murder as she lay in her hospital bed. The killings took place in a street much visited by police where aborigines and Torres Strait islanders clustered. It was not clear how many fathers had been affected. Names of the victims were not published. No photos either. Flowers began to pile up around a huge old tree in a park opposite the house of death. In Sydney's Martin Place flowers gathered in their millions as a city shed its tears. The fate of a few affected all. The Police Commissioner's wife said she'd been in the café only a short time before the gunman had taken his hostages. Anybody might have been there. Cairns was different in that the place of murders was not a place where 'anyone' might have been, nonetheless it was part of a city that was functioning in its own way until disaster stood up to show itself. Humans were prone to madness. It was never more than a step away. We depend for our sanity on other people holding theirs, yet madness was in us all. Flowers poured into Martin Place, a florist near the scene of the shooting said he was selling three times his usual number. The state's premier said the flowers would be left in situ for as long as possible. Nobody wanted them taken away but they would eventually become unsightly and have to be removed. The bodies had been taken away very early, with next to nothing being said about whose bullets in the flurry that ended the siege had killed the innocents.

Grief in Cairns was humbler because there was a little less willingness on the community's part to accept the deaths as *theirs*, but this restraint was only partial: 'there but for the grace of God ...' was in all minds. The problem was harder to deal with because the northern city had always known the problem existed; it had simply struck harder than expected. Those children: fourteen, eleven, and so on down to two, and last of all, eight months, lives that had hardly begun had been ended. If life was as precious as people liked to think, how could it be taken away so swiftly?

The dramas affected Rex and Nancy Naughtin differently. Rex resisted accepting death by asking himself what he would have done if he'd been in the café when the gunman took over. Would he have had the courage, unarmed, to try to overpower the man? No. He'd need a gun. Would he have had the cunning to get behind the gunman and take him by surprise, while he, Rex, superhumanly strong, yelled to the others to grab the gun? Possibly. But how to catch him unawares? That was the problem. He spent a long time thinking about it, to the surprise of Nancy, who was simply depressed. All those terrified people. You could see it in the way they ran towards the police when they got their chance. The police looked frightening, dressed in black or battleship grey and pointing fearful guns, yet the escapees had run to their arms, safe at last – they hoped, fearing, no doubt, that bullets would chase them as they ran. Rex imagined the Asian women clutching him, desperate to be kept alive, all their vitality in the pulsating, gasping breaths they drew. Above all he wanted to overpower the man who'd overpowered a city for a day and a night. Nancy couldn't get out of her mind the hail of bullets that had killed the gunman and the lovely young woman, mother of three. She might have been saved if she'd been under a table, on the floor, in the corner, out of the way, but with the room rocked by explosions, lit up by flares, and filled by the deafening noise of guns she wouldn't have known where to place herself. Or had the gunman shot her rather than let her get away, as he could not?

Nancy didn't know. More than that, the whole business set up a disequilibrium that almost stopped her doing anything, even thinking. The world was shaky, for all its glamour. How long would it take before it settled back to its accustomed self? Nancy didn't know, but she wished ...

She wanted to go shopping, it was all she could think of. It was mindless, and there was comfort in that. Then a new thought came into her head – her mother's sister Frances, in a nursing home somewhere: Nancy hadn't seen her in years. She rang her mother, who was surprised by the question. Frances was being cared for at a place in Beechworth; she gave Nancy the details. 'If you go and see her,' her mother said, 'don't believe everything she tells you. She was always a wicked liar and she's become worse.' Nancy, who hadn't expected this warning, asked for more detail, but all her mother would say was that her sister had had a very ordinary life, she knew very well what it had lacked, and she was making up for what hadn't happened with 'anything that came into her imagination.' Nancy pondered this in the days that followed. The imagination? It was a word she'd never thought of in any moral sense. Artists and musicians had imagination, painters too. Theatrical people, like actors and designers, had to have imagination. They made a profession out of it. But ordinary people? They used their imaginations as they were directed to do by those who made professional or artistic use of it. Or so Nancy thought, because she'd never really thought about it before.

Imagination? She wanted to see her aunt Frances, though she had little idea why.

She talked about it with Rex and he said he'd go with her. Nancy was pleasantly surprised, and a little amused. 'Mrs Hanneberry will be jealous when she hears you want to visit another old lady!' 'We'll tell her we're going up to Rutherglen to taste some wine. She might even have heard of Rutherglen, it's pretty famous.' Nancy thought Mrs Hanneberry would be too prudish to know about wine. 'She'd be scared of pulling a cork out of a bottle. It'd make a loud pop and let people know what she was doing!' Rex grinned at this. 'Most bottles

have screw tops these days. Though I suppose ... a nice old bottle of port would still have a cork.' It occurred to him to ask, 'You weren't going to take your aunt a bottle, were you? Or are you hoping to get her a bit tiddly?'

Nancy was puzzled. 'I don't really know why I want to visit her. Something tells me I should, that's all.' Rex was agreeable. 'It'd be nice to get on the road again. Which weekend were you thinking of?'

Three weeks later – that's to say, twenty-seven Australian Football League matches later – they headed north. Heading for the Hume Highway, they passed through Richmond, where the streets were busy. People, especially children and the young, were wearing blue and white, or black and white scarves and jumpers. 'North Melbourne's playing Collingwood,' Rex told Nancy. 'They're both trying to get into the top four. Should be a good game.' Nancy looked at the people on the footpath, and crossing the road. 'Loyalty. It makes a good show, I suppose. But what if your team loses, do you take off your colours on the way home?' Rex was amused. 'Not if you're true blue.' The last word rang a bell with Nancy. 'Blue? These people aren't the blues, are they?' Rex was automatically kind. Women never knew. 'The Blues are Carlton. They're the *navy* blues. North Melbourne wear a lighter blue, there you are, there's a few of them there.' He pointed. Nancy said, 'When this game's over, where will we be by then? Will we be in Beechworth?' Rex wasn't sure. 'Depends on when the game starts. These are the early birds, hoping to get a seat behind the goals. But I reckon we'd be pretty close to getting there by the time the game ends.' Nancy looked at the people on the footpath, making their way to the MCG. 'They'll be excited, all the time we're driving. Excited and we'll be keeping calm, even though we're wondering what's going to happen when we get there.' Rex couldn't see much happening in Beechworth. 'You'll be visiting Aunt Frances, and I'll be ... looking around, I suppose. I don't know what there is to see, up there.'

They reached Beechworth and went to the motel where they'd made an online booking. The woman at reception told them 'We don't bring breakfast to the rooms any more. We've got a dining room in the premises next door.' Rex said that was a break with tradition and she explained that many of their guests were tourists arriving by bus.

'They all want to eat at the same time, so it's easier if we have them at table together rather than carrying trays to one room after the other.'

They slept, Rex and Nancy, and because it was an unfamiliar bed, they were very tender with each other. Nancy said they were still a couple, despite the bumps they'd had in their relationship. She could almost feel him smiling, though the room was dark, and she knew that he was happy: relieved, perhaps to be with her, the chosen one. She woke in the small hours of the morning and knew, in the way of people who are used to each other, that he was awake too. She murmured 'Which way's east? and he mumbled, 'Your side of the bed, that's east. You want to see the sun rise?' For some reason she thought this was funny, she turned to press her bottom against him, and she slept. It was almost eight o'clock when she heard Rex calling from the door, where he was standing, showered and dressed, 'Time to be up, Nance. All the bus people are coming back from brekky, I reckon it's our turn.'

They had their first meal of the day then went down the street. Rex bought a paper to see who'd won the football. North Melbourne had got home by seven points, despite a last quarter flurry from Collingwood. Coach Nathan Buckley said he was disappointed by the loss but pleased by his side's late rally. If they could go on with that form they'd trouble most sides this season, he told the press, who repeated what he said. 'Any injuries?' they asked, and he told them what he knew. One or two players would be watched closely in the week to come. This, too, would be reported seriously. Football players, though still the public's heroes, needed to be on guard because these days they were society's answer to feminism: no swearing, no drunken nights, no abuse of women. Foolish males! No sooner did they claim respectability than the media broke open their privacy, finding women who claimed to have been raped, girls who'd wanted to go to bed with one player finding themselves under the weight of another. Court cases. Tears. Photos of the men and women in the reports. Players led their children onto the ground before an important match, but never their wives! Yet every year, the night of the Brownlow Medal was when men in suits and shirts wilted under the glamour of their partners; a men's occasion magically becoming women's night of the year. Subjugation seemed the more desirable state. Women who had no other freedom but choice exercised it before the cameras. The votes were announced as numbers – three, two one - while women's support for their partners showed the superiority of feeling over statistics. The totals were read out endlessly but the women stayed sober, not letting themselves be spoiled.

Rex and Nancy took a walk along one of Beechworth's shopping blocks, feeling out of place. They were dressed more smartly than the locals who, for the most part, were hardly to be seen. The newsagent saw they were from out of town. 'Having a look around? Whereya heading for?' Visitors spent money, it was worth knowing where they were travelling. If you were smart enough you might be able to divert some to your pocket. 'Great area for sightseeing, this. You can get brochures and a map at the information centre, near the town hall.' It was an inadequate, perhaps pathetic statement, but it served to guide people who didn't know what to do with themselves. Rex felt he had to say something, be polite. 'Any wineries you'd recommend to visit?'

The newsagent brightened at once. 'My word. Saint Arnaud. Not the name of the town, you probably know that, it's on the other side of the state! No, there's a winery of the same name, though, French name. I don't know why they called it that. They're open every day except Christmas and Easter. Normal hours, and no hard sell. Taste anything they've got on show, it won't cost you a cent.'

Nancy was pleased to hear this. 'Might be worth a visit while I'm at the nursing home,' and Rex was nodding his head. 'What do you think? An hour each? You're at the nursing home and I'm at the winery, and then we meet up? Or do you want to meet back at the motel?' It occurred to him to ask, 'Where is this winery? How far out of town? How far to drive?' The newsagent was readying himself to explain how to find Saint Arnaud when he relaxed. 'Here's a stroke of luck! Good morning, Rory. These people were just inquiring how to get to your winery! I'll let you tell'em for yourself!'

Rex and Nancy were amazed. It was Rory who'd walked into the shop and he was caught as unawares as they were. What was he doing here? They'd holidayed in the same house not so long ago, but today, in the newsagency of a town they thought remote, he seemed quite unfamiliar. Rex took a half step towards him. 'Rory? You run the winery. But ...'

The question was left unformed. Rory had been caught out. 'Good heavens! What are you people doing here?' Nancy sensed that he didn't want them on his ground, but couldn't imagine why. 'This gentleman ...' she indicated the man behind the counter 'said that the place Rex was going to visit was yours. How long have you had it? Because when we met you down at Fairhaven ... I don't think you had it then ...'

Rory gathered himself. 'No I didn't, not back then. But sometimes, in business, you have to move swiftly. And so! I'm in the wine business now. Come and have a look!'

Nancy managed an exit for herself. 'I'm up here to visit my Aunt Frances. My mother's sister, but a bit older. But Rex came up to look around ...' She looked at him. 'Do you want to visit the winery, Rex?'

She knew he did, it was a way of handling an unexpected situation. They made their arrangements quickly. She'd take the car, she'd visit Aunt Frances, and Rex would go with Rory and Rory would drop him off at the motel later in the morning, a little before lunch time, if that suited him?

It did, and they went their ways, Rex aware that although Rory was being most affable and talking freely about how he'd come by the winery, he'd been put out on first seeing them and had shown, if only for a moment, that he didn't welcome them, and Nancy was troubled by this addition, this intrusion, when her original mission was something she didn't really understand, for all that it could be passed off as an expression of family loyalty. Visiting Aunt Frances was problematical enough without this latest ... she thought ... mystery.

The nursing home also bore a saint's name: Saint Hilda's. The door was locked, forcing Nancy to knock. A simply-dressed woman let her in. Nancy announced herself, asking to see Frances Smithson. 'Sorry to keep you waiting,' said the woman who'd opened the door, 'but we have to keep it locked. They slip away, otherwise.' Nancy saw that Frances was one of 'they'; it was another world she was entering. Something like fifteen decrepit people were seated in a line around a lounge, listening to a beaming old lady playing a piano, and a few

of them were singing: 'You are my sunshine/my only sunshine/you make me happy/when times are grey'; then the pianist switched into 'Roll out the barrel/we'll have a barrel ... of fun'. It was a desolate scene. 'Who did you say? Frances! Yes, she's in sixteen. Come with me, I'll take you there.'

Nancy followed. The piano rumbled on. The women's voices were scrawny. If there were any men in the room, they weren't singing. Frances was sitting up in bed. 'Who's this? Debby? You've brought her to the wrong room, I'm not expecting anybody.' Debby was used to it. 'This is your niece. Your sister's girl. She's come to see you. She's come all the way from Melbourne. She drove up last night.' Debby gave Nancy a professional smile, and left. Frances exuded no interest in the young woman from Melbourne. Instead she scrabbled in the upper drawer of the cabinet by her bed, a wooden thing painted cream. 'Did you send me a letter? I got a letter, it's in here somewhere.' Her fingers scratched around. 'They've taken it away. They do that. They steal things. Who are you?' She wasn't looking at the visitor. Frances said, 'May I sit down, Aunt Frances?'

The courtesy did something. Frances waved a hand at a chair. 'Of course. Sit. There's nothing to look at but me.' Nancy took this to be a form of apology. Frances was chuckling. 'There was a big mirror but they took it away. I don't know why. They had it there and I could see into the passage. But they took it away and gave it to someone else. Someone who's paying more. This is a *cheap* place, even though I can't afford it.' She pulled a tiny mirror out of the drawer and studied her face. Nancy said, 'How much does it cost? Who's paying for you to be here, aunt?' but Frances didn't answer. She was looking over Nancy's head at someone standing at the door. Nancy swung around. A crazed old lady in a voluminous scarlet dressing gown was in the doorway, with a dark and very stylish Louis Vuitton bag dangling from her arm. 'They're not here yet,' she said. 'Today's the day they're taking me home.' She swung the bag to emphasise the importance of her announcement. 'I've been sitting at the door, waiting, but they must have got the time wrong. I told them straight after breakfast, I'd be waiting. Well, that was a long time ago.' She looked at Nancy, the stranger. 'Did you see them when you came in?'

Nancy shook her head. 'I didn't see anybody, except the nurse who let me in.' The woman with the Vuitton bag turned away, then scurried down the passage, with Nancy watching in amazement. When she turned to her aunt, Frances was twirling her fingers by her brow, indicating that the woman was mad. 'Nobody's taking her home. Imagine! Stark, raving bonkers!' Nancy had a feeling that everyone was, on this side of the locked door at least. To her aunt she said, 'Does she do that often?'

'All the time!'

Nancy didn't know what to say, but her aunt wasn't short of words. 'They ought to boil her up and feed her to the horses!' Nancy wanted to say 'What horses?' but it was already clear that thought patterns from the world outside didn't work inside. She looked stupidly at her aunt, wondering why on earth she'd come. What was the idea that had made her come such a way, and why was it so wrong? Frances was looking at her. 'You're Wendy and Pat Naughtin's girl. I remember you. How are they?'

So direct! 'Father died years ago. Mother ...' What to say? How could truth hold its shape in this atmosphere? 'Mother ... still plays the piano.' It might have been silly but it softened Frances. 'She was always good at that. I remember your mother playing a wobbly old piano at a seaside boarding house near Lorne, no, Apollo Bay, one new year's day. She was marvellous. She made it sound like a concert grand!' Something peaceful settled on the face of Frances as she remembered. Nancy saw the old lady's fingers twitching as she thought of that long ago keyboard. Down the passage came the sounds, fortunately faint, of the lounge room sing-song. The wavering voices were singing words made famous by Ezio Pinza, the Metropolitan star who'd gone over to musicals. 'This nearly was mine ...' Nancy felt shocked. How could they? But they could. 'Close to my heart she came, only to fly away ...' Nancy stood up. It was so painful. The mad woman with the Vuitton bag swept down the passage with the sound, and into Frances' room. 'Have you seen them? They're coming to take me home. They're coming after breakfast. It's supposed to be today! Let me know if you see them!' She swept away.

'Still dreaming of paradise. This nearly was mine.'

Nancy broke down. Tears were streaming from her and wouldn't be stopped by her tiny, wet handkerchief. 'I'm sorry aunt,' she said. 'I'll be back in a minute. I need to go outside.' She ran, or almost-ran to the lounge. The pianist was looking through her sheet music and the room, fortunately, was silent for a moment. Nancy pulled at the door but there was a safety lock on it and a combination of letters and numbers was needed to get out. She wailed, it was near enough to a scream. The woman who had let her in appeared, and pressed buttons to form the code. The door opened. Nancy was outside. 'I'll come back in a minute,' she said. 'As soon as I get myself under control.' Clack! The door closed behind her. There was a small front garden, with a bench seat in the shade, but she needed to go further. She walked two short blocks to a tiny park, and flung herself on the ground, helpless and weeping. She was out of the nursing home but it had caught up with her. It had entered her imagination, overwhelming her. Was that what life was like, at the end? If that was the end, how could anyone set out on the journey, knowing what they knew? Not only could she not go on, she couldn't even start.

She was supposed to meet Rex at the nursing home but she couldn't go back there. She went to the motel and let herself into their room, then lay on the bed, clutching the pillow as if it were Rex. She found her mobile and rang him. She told him where she was. 'I'll be there in a few minutes,' he said. 'Hang on hard. I won't be long. See you soon.'

It was what everyone said – see you soon – but it worked. The fear, the shock, the shame started to ease. She was breathing naturally when he let himself in, sat on the end of the bed and looked at her. 'What happened? And when you've told me, I'll tell you what happened to me.'

'What happened? I'm shattered. What on earth caused me to come up here? I wanted to see my Aunty Frances, but she's a gaga old lady who didn't know who I was. Or not at first. And when she worked it out she still didn't care. I thought we'd have a conversation but she's as mad as the rest of them. Do you know? They've got the door locked. You can't get in and when they let you in, they have to let you out.' She was shaking. 'The thought of being in there and not being able

to get out! There was a woman in a blazing red dressing gown who was waiting for someone to take her home. She was never going to get home. You could tell she'd been babbling about it for years! Oh Rex, I never knew there were places like that. Talk about animals in cages, what I saw was worse by a long way, so bad ...'

She couldn't finish. She sobbed, she snuffled, she said eventually, 'What happened to you?'

'I went with Rory. As you know. Not far out of town, to the winery. Beautiful place. He wanted to get me tasting straight away. I thought, hang on, I'll be on my ear before I know where I am. I said I'd like to have a look around. So he showed me the vines, there's four or five blocks of them, all very neat.'

'And?'

'Well, I don't know anything about growing grapes, all I could say was they looked really nice. Because they did.'

She could see he was troubled but why? He hadn't been locked up in a madhouse like she had.

'As soon as we got back inside he got back to this business of tasting. Try this. Try this and that. I had to say steady on, it's only Saturday morning. I've got to drive back to Melbourne at some stage.' The sooner the better, Nancy thought, but knew he'd have to have a sleep to get the alcohol out of his system: that, or she'd have to drive the whole way, and she didn't feel up to it, after ...

'It was while he was trying to push this muscat onto me, and I admit it smelt rather nice \dots *very* nice, in fact, that I got this funny feeling \dots '

'We have to trust our feelings,' she said, 'but they can get us into trouble ...'

'He wanted to get me drunk because there was something he didn't want me to know.'

'Thought control!'

'You got it in one! I knew there was something I wasn't supposed to see. Or realise. He wanted to dope me for some reason. I couldn't say no to all his tastings, and some of them were bloody delicious ... that muscat ... but I knew I had to slow him down. Was I relieved when you rang!'

Relief! She stared at him. How they needed each other. 'Did he drive you back into town?'

'He was going to, then some other fella that was there said he'd do it. Boy, was I relieved!'

Nancy forgot herself for a moment. 'Why were you relieved, Rex? Darling?'

It was a long time since she'd used that word on him. He knew his face was smiling, though the alcohol he'd taken in must be shaping what she could see. 'I needed to get away from him, that's why.'

'But why? He's hardly dangerous.'

'Don't you believe it. There's something funny about him. He didn't want us there, inspecting. He was afraid we'd see why he bought the place.'

'Why did he, do you think?'

'I've no idea, but he wasn't like what you'd expect a proud new owner to be. He didn't know one sort of grape vine from another.'

Who did? 'He can't have owned the place very long. He didn't say anything about it, down at the beach at new year.'

'He could learn if he wanted to. There's plenty of people could tell him. I got the impression that he bought the place so he could use it for something else. A front, is what I'm trying to say. He's got an open door policy, just about every day of the year, so there's people coming and going, and they're all taking grog away with them, and tasting ...'

'Did you buy anything?'

'A mixed dozen. It was the least I could get away with. It's in the car. Our car, outside.'

'A stranger gave you a ride?'

'What a relief. I knew he didn't want me.'

'Who?'

'Rory. He was nice as pie, couldn't do enough to make me feel at home, all that bullshit, and I knew he wanted to get rid of me. The first way was to get me drunk. The second was to let this other bloke bring me back home ...'

The word affected her. 'Lie down with me Rex. Hold me quietly. I don't know what to make of all this. It's been an awful weekend and it's only Saturday morning. I want to be back home but I feel scared

to leave. I feel something will happen if we leave right now. We need to be strong before we leave. That means working out what's gone wrong. I've got a feeling we'll sort it out but it'll take a while. Lie down beside me darling. That's your pillow there. I've been hanging onto it. You put your head on it now. Sleep off that muscat.' She nearly laughed. Muscat was the least of their problems.

They stayed another night before they drove home. They had dinner at a pub and hung around to talk. Everyone was friendly. People told Rex about places he might like to paint. He was invited to stay at a mountain lodge that somebody owned. Why didn't they relocate, someone asked. Houses were cheap, it was a wonderful place to live. Country people looked after each other, they'd make friends. Saint Hilda's? It was a good nursing home, they were lucky to have it, people were a problem when they got old. Mrs Bloomfield was wonderful, she went there almost every day to play the piano, get the old people to have a sing along. And Saint Arnaud? Well, they hardly knew the new man yet. He was okay. The man before him, Alan Evermore, would be a hard act to follow. He'd built the winery up from a wreck, made it really something. He'd got tourists by the dozen driving up in cars and filling the boot with boxes of table wine and port. 'Muscat?' Nancy ventured and their enthusiasm didn't slip. 'Yes, muscat was a specialty, delicious with a pudding, a piece of cake, or even plain ice cream, you couldn't wish for better.' The whole place sounded so virtuous, so advantageous, that Nancy thought that a dimension must have been sliced away. Nobody, nowhere, was that good! Were they all salesmen, or silly, or had they convinced themselves for some reason that there was no place on earth like their town. Come and join us, they were implying, and Nancy was tempted, as was Rex, she could see, but if they did, if they moved up here ...

... to Beechworth ...

... what would they do then? It was a temptation, a fantasy, a dream, and if they made the move they'd have to believe what everyone else believed because they all convinced each other and once you'd joined in – got your membership, as it were – you couldn't admit the mistake you'd made so you couldn't get out. Nancy thought

of the lock on Saint Hilda's door. Anyone could get in; they only had to knock. But once they were inside they were locked in and knowing the code to get out wouldn't help because the people that ran the place could change the combination whenever they liked, and tell the new one to selected people only.

What a trap!

Nancy told Rex she was developing a headache and needed to sleep, so they slipped away, if such a word is applicable to the noisy, overwhelmingly friendly goodnights of those they'd been drinking with. Rex sensed the presence of a police car and they walked the kilometre to their motel. 'I'll come back for the car in the morning. I wouldn't want to be caught right now. I'm well over point oh five.' They undressed in the dark, and they lay there, trying to work out what had gone wrong with their day. 'Something's happened, Nance. Everything was okay on the way up, so why did things go pear-shaped when we got here? You got any ideas?'

She didn't know what to say. There were new forces loose in her life and she didn't know what they were. Some of her certainties had been pulled down and she needed stillness. She needed to see herself in some new way, that at least she was sure of. But what would this be like? How would she find it and how would she know? She needed Rex, but she needed him having insights, not saying the first things that came into his head. 'Shoosh darling,' she said. 'Let's be still. It'll come to us after a while, if we keep our minds open. We have to be receptive. Just that and nothing more.'

They lay quietly for a long time, then drifted into sleep. If they had dreams, they'd forgotten them by the time they woke. First light tinged the window in the east, and they woke to the most humdrum, normal, forgettable morning. 'Let's sleep some more, darling, and see what happens.' They woke an hour later, Rex first, to a day which gave the impression that nothing had happened, but they knew, each of them, that something had. 'Back to Melbourne,' Rex said. 'We'll just cruise along. We might get some idea of what happened, a bit later.'

So that is what they did.

It took weeks for Carlo to get the car back to the point where he could start the engine again. It ran smoothly, and he switched it off. It was a Saturday morning. Something about the way he did it made Maria look at him. 'Carlo?'

'I'm getting rid of it.'

She was pleased, though she didn't know what had changed.

'Who'll you give it to? Or will you sell it?'

'Sell it, I suppose. I wouldn't wish it on my friends.'

She felt he needed to talk. 'You think it's unlucky? Why?'

'It's part of the old me. Something I want to forget.'

'Why, whatever's happened?'

He was glum. She could tell he didn't know. To get rid of his car! He'd loved it with a passion. It was as if he was detaching a part of himself. And apparently he was. He started reading newspapers – which he'd always called 'those bloody things' – and leaving them around the house. The things he was reading, she was amazed to find, were articles about football coaches: Carlo, who'd never been to a game in his life! Mick Malthouse was having trouble with the ethos of Carlton, she read. Nathan Buckley made sure his players knew about Collingwood's traditions as well as having their lifestyles scrutinised by dieticians and exercise people. And he gave interviews. He looked like a prize fighter but spoke like an educated man. She heard him on the radio and began to see why her husband had become a follower of this man. Mad as he might be – Carlo, that was – he was investigating the origins of faith.

Nathan Buckley believed in Collingwood. Bomber Thompson believed in Essendon. Alistair Clarkson believed in Hawthorn to the extent, football writers said, that he'd win them another premiership. Sydney, under John Longmire (ex-North Melbourne), was their main challenger for the title, unless it was the men from Geelong under their new coach – twin brother of the coach of North Melbourne. All this, apparently, was not so much news, as stuff you needed to know in order to be part of the winter game, which was better understood as a form of winter observance. Christians ordered their year around December 25 and the moving feast of Easter, but Melburnians, and now supporters from other Australian states, expressed their emotions

according to a cycle climaxing in September. Whichever team won the Grand Final stood on a platform showered in scraps of coloured paper – their team's colours – issuing from a machine blowing shredded paper into the air. Awards were made. People spoke. A huge cup was handed over with ribbons of the winning team's colours attached. Glory was shared when the winning team ran around the ground, waving their cup and showing it to their supporters, who waved flags, and reached out to their players. The losing team sat on the grass, trying to tell themselves they'd do better next year.

Football was not like Christ's resurrection. It was annual. This year's winner had to start again the following year and winning twice in a row was rare. Everyone knew the difficulty. Victorious coaches changed clubs in hopes of a repeat performance, and it was hard to bring about. New clubs welcomed them, but let them down. The premiership coach of one year was an unwanted man a couple of years later. Victory was elusive. Improvement was hard because other clubs might improve and push your club down the ladder. The ladder was a slippery slide. Snakes and ladders was a game but Australia's football was more. Carlo Furlinghetti didn't understand it but in his crisis of faith, that was where he was looking.

Maria was amazed. Her George was only a baby and even Angelica had no way of comprehending her dad. The family had had certainty when Carlo was absorbed in his cars. He hadn't realised yet that he was changing the operation of his marriage. He'd assumed that he was in charge and the cars he brought back to life were a privilege of his centrality: head of the family. Now, he thought, the family head was looking around for something else to occupy him, unaware that when he'd been working on his cars Maria had known where he was and where their money was being spent. In accounting for him she was managing him, not doubting that she was the controlling one. Now ...

Now?

He was veering around like a yacht without a wind, confused, no direction in mind. 'I'm not really interested in football,' he told his partner as she picked up the papers he left lying about, 'it's the way they manage things that I'm interested in. Control their people and

their finances. You've no idea how much those players get paid.' Maria wasn't impressed. 'They waste squillions on boys at school. Plumbers' sidekicks. They can't do anything except play football. They're no use to the world. If I could click my fingers and make them disappear, the world wouldn't be any worse off. There'd still be food on the table because I'd keep putting it there.' She felt like adding, 'Men!' but didn't. Her message should be obvious, and he needed support. In fact, he was going to need careful handling, and she wasn't used to doing things that way. 'What's happened, Carlo? You used to love the old car.'

He considered her question. 'I finally grew up. At last. I started mucking around with cars when I was a boy. Sixteen, to be precise, that's when I got my first, and did it up. My parents, dad especially, but both of them, thought it was a good hobby. Something to keep me interested. Out of trouble.' He smiled at her. 'You remember the first time we went out? I came to pick you up in the Suiza?' She remembered, he could see. 'I thought I was ever so stylish, doing that. And I don't think you minded, did you?'

She had to concede. 'I was excited. I'd never seen such a car.'

'Now you've seen enough of it, and so have I.'

'What started this?'

He didn't really know. 'I started to feel stupid whenever I put on my overalls to work on it. I had a feeling I hadn't grown up. Boys can't go on being boys forever.'

She was scornful. 'Oh yes they can. It's not hard at all.'

'Well, that's what I got sick of. Ashamed.' She suspected another woman, but couldn't find an influence in the attention he was giving her.

'Something must have triggered the change.'

He didn't want to be pinned. 'What I really need is to be something new.'

'Like?'

He waved both hands. 'Who knows? Not me. What I really want to know is that I've grown up.'

She was annoyed. They had two children, whom he managed to appear fond of, and here he was reading whatever he could about football coaches. 'And who's going to tell you that? Whose opinion would you believe?'

He sensed the question was loaded. He prevaricated. 'Players are lucky. If they think they're doing something wrong, they can ask their coach.'

'And when they do, that shows they're still boys. What do men do when they know they're getting something wrong?'

He knew the answer to that one. 'They work it out for themselves.' She moved in for the kill, knowing it would hurt. 'So how's it going?'

Again the two hands. 'You can see for yourself.'

It was up to her, apparently. 'When men have problems, they look at other men. Compare. What's so and so doing about this? What they need to do is look at their women and children, and ask themselves how *they're* going. To put it plainly, what's the effect you're having on me? Angelica? George? Ever thought about that?'

She felt him grow tight. 'That's a pretty big ask!' There was protest in his voice. She wasn't being reasonable. That told her she was.

Days passed. Maria brought herself under control. Carlo had committed himself to the motor car. It was a way of avoiding the maturity, the breadth of understanding, she wanted him to attain. Football? She spat upon it. It was another version of the childishness he'd accepted as his maturity-substitute. Yet he was good, or so she felt. He was potentially a man. A man? What did that mean, beyond being, as coach of a football club, willing to accept responsibility for your players, the boy-men who did, or didn't, do what you told them in your quarter, half and three-quarter time rev-ups, who did, or didn't, bring the result of victory to the club? She wanted to teach him, she knew she had to teach him, and it was so hard. Women had scorned men for centuries but they'd allowed them to boss them, thinking that they could *manage* them, manipulate them, lead them by the most subtle deceptions to the moment of being mature.

No. It wasn't happening and never would. Some other way had to be tried, some other path. What to do? She had to see the problem clearly. Men wanted to achieve. They liked to set themselves goals,

and reach them. Facts and figures were important because they showed them where they were. Women wanted continuity, and were its liberating force. Question: was it liberating, or enslaving? Men thought the latter. Women were in the tricky position that they had to make their children feel that they were the centre of the world until it was time to show them that their precious little egos were part of an endless chain of humanity, and that what they thought of others was what they really thought of themselves. Maria found it hard to conceptualise. Most women did. It was easier to let men pretend to dominate, and laugh at them, whether publicly or privately, than to frame the question for themselves. Maria's period of laughing at Carlo, of scorning him, was short. In his days of having motor cars as his hobby, he'd been secure. Now, in his days of studying leadership, and the development of men as players, he was out of his depth. He didn't know anything about football, he simply heard people talking about it all the time and felt the answers must lie within its mystery. It was talked about so much there couldn't be any mysteries lying within. He hated to be baffled. He liked certainty. An old car was a well-nigh perfect thing because even its weaknesses might be overcome with some modern adaptation of the original. You could honour those who'd built it while building on top of what they'd wrought. When you worked on a car you added yourself to what had already been achieved, avoiding conflict. You could embrace the qualities of the old car while adding new ones of your own ...

But he wasn't doing that any more. He felt he'd failed in marriage, by claiming to be its centre. Maria was right in at least some of the things she said about him and other men. He was ready to change, he wanted to win Maria in some new way, but how to do it was a mystery. Then something erupted on the other side of the world, throwing his thoughts into confusion. Two Islamic terrorists forced their way into the office of a satirical magazine in Paris, and shot the journalists and cartoonists, along with a couple of policemen protecting them. Then they made off, stealing and abandoning cars to stay on the run. Thousands of police and soldiers combed villages, towns and countryside. The world was outraged. National leaders spoke. Cartoonists across the globe responded. The pen they said – their pens

- were mightier than any gun. Liberty was more than any weapon. The terrorists' only success was to unite those they hated. Bells tolled in Notre Dame, Europe's beating heart. Crowds gathered in cities, holding banners – *Je suis Charlie* – uniting themselves (*Je suis*) with the name of the journal (*Charlie*). Those whose blood had streamed across their office floor were joined, in the world's mind, with those who died in the same city for the rights of man. Tyrants tried to stop the thoughts, the minds, of people, and the world's people, cleansed by shock, and the masses, their own nobility stirring in them, knew that the gunmen, in setting out to kill, had thrown away their humanity by not respecting others'. Carlo's attention, when he picked up papers, was on the front pages, not the back. He hated what the Islamists had done; of Algerian descent, born in Paris, speaking French, they'd contradicted the achievements of the long struggle for a liberty that could be outspoken, bold, as valued a part of the world as any faith. Belief made men strong in many ways ...

Maria was turned topsy-turvy. She felt pushed over by what had happened. If she'd been in Paris she'd have taken her children, and Carlo too, to Notre Dame to align them with the mourning she knew was flooding the earth. There was civilisation, and it mattered. Awful as the church had been at many times in its history, it revered the mother of god. She was a mother of gods herself, Angelica and George. If god mattered, they mattered, and vice versa. If you harmed one you harmed the other. The ordinary was the same as divinity and to be divine was to be, also, like a child.

Evil had to be overcome. Yet it was powerful, because frustrated people – men, mostly – embraced death because they couldn't embrace its opposite, which was love, birth, the tender trials of childhood, love, nurturing, training, teaching, chiding, nursing, love ... Love, the most challenging of principles, was embodied in women whether they liked it or not, but men were not so lucky. They could choose the alternative, and these men with guns and eye-slot masks had made the ultimate choice: to force death on those who wanted to live.

Scum! But she was helpless and wanted protection. She wanted Carlo to forget all this nonsense about leadership, and men leading men, and attach his meaning, as she had, to the lives of their children.

The funny thing was, he did exactly this, but in some way what she saw when she watched him putting his arms around Angelica and George was mysteriously different from what she felt, what she became, when she was protective too. What was it? How was it? What more could she ask? What more could he do? She knew that if there was a threat to her children Carlo would put his life in front of them to protect them, to save them even if he died himself in doing so. What more could she ask than that?

She struggled with this for days until it hit her. She was confusing Carlo with the world. He was as helpless as she was. Men had to do men's things, or be scorned. Women couldn't fight for freedom on their own. They could claim a little more than they'd had in the past, they could push the line between them and the others a little way in their favour, and what was the good of that? She was reminded of the trenches of the war that was going to end war. In four years of continuous slaughter the lines moved a few kilometres this way and that, and when the war ended most people had no idea whether the trenches had retreated or advanced. Some progress! And yet she was still scornful of the cars that he was giving up; they'd been an avoidance of the problem, and if he persisted in this ridiculous interest in the winter sport of football, he'd be avoiding it as much as ever. No! Some progress had to be made. There was such a thing as progress, a better balance, a superior way of doing things. She supposed she'd have to teach him, and that would mean learning herself what to do, when really she had no better idea than to express dissatisfaction.

What a rotten bloody world!

Carlo could feel her rages and sensed to some extent what was causing them. But what could he do? He couldn't make the world any different on his own. He wanted to say, let's get things good inside our own home and let the world go hang. But that was no answer, because Angelina and George had to find a place in the world outside. They could be protected for a few years and then the same problem would be theirs. The day would come when they had children of their own and would look back at their parents, judging, estimating, valuing ...

... or feeling sorry for them, another form of scorn.

Maria noticed before he did that to confront the problem, to recognise it as part of themselves, was in itself a semi-solution. The sting, and the shame, of their problem was softened by the simple fact of admitting that it existed. She was still restless, still full of rage from time to time, but she felt, as the days passed and the newspapers were put aside and the sporting programs on TV were not turned on, that she had won an ally. Her husband was her friend. They had each other, they had their children. The little ones were growing into a world as understood by their mother and father: that *had* to be something! Carlo came home from his work one day to say that he'd had an idea. He thought it would be good to buy a property in the hills and start a vineyard. They'd grow grapes and make wine. Maria told him they'd do no such thing. Why not, he asked, knowing that he'd crossed yet another of her lines and wondering how he hadn't known.

'It's not your fault,' she said. 'You didn't know. I've been talking to Olivia Page.'

'And?'

'She said she'd been talking to Nancy Naughtin ...'

'Who?'

'Oh Carlo! You remember. Down at Fairhaven. The young ones. She's a teacher and he works at a gallery. Does a bit of painting himself ...'

'Yes yes, I know who you mean. What did Olivia say?'

Maria rattled off what the Pages had heard about Rory Svendsen and his winery at Beechworth, almost certainly a front for something needing to be hidden. 'The man's a crook! He couldn't lie straight in bed! You're not going to be like him!'

Carlo knew he was beaten. It was no good saying he'd run his winery in a different way from Rory Svendsen; any resemblance would be fatal to the new understanding he and Maria had gained. He smiled weakly, faking good humour. 'Looks like we do something else, then. Any suggestions?'

Maria was happy. She looked at the things on the bench which she was going to turn into a meal. 'Not just yet. I'll think of something ...'

'Let me know when you do.'

She thought about putting an arm around him. 'Will do.'

The Bartletts' children pestered their parents about seeing the Brambles' children. They were envious of these younger people because they were going to live on a property with lots of horses. They'd have one to ride whenever they wanted. Jockeys who rode in races would teach them, and men who trained racehorses would tell them everything they needed to know. Genevieve, Thomas and Giselle couldn't see this happening for them! Besides, highly developed as they were, they felt curious about children who were more normal, simpler perhaps, than they were. Their parents, it was true, didn't find the Brambles very interesting but found it hard to block their children's demands. Norman Bartlett said to his wife, 'They're boring. If we're going to have them here, we'd better have someone else. Who do we know that likes them?'

This brought them to the Pages, who'd united them in the first place. Jenny rang Olivia, got Jack, and negotiated a suitable day. Then she rang the Brambles, hoping for Les, but getting Lorna. 'We're asking the Pages,' she explained to Lorna, 'so there'll be other people that you know.' Lorna was smart enough to see how the situation had developed. 'We'll be doing a lot more entertaining when we get possession of the property at Romsey, but that's still a few weeks away. Would you like to come to our house?' Jenny Bartlett was curious, having heard about the Brambles' place on Royal Parade, but suggested that that could be the venue for the follow-up gathering, but that this time round the Bartletts felt it was their turn to be hospitable. 'I feel we should be doing something for Jack and Olivia. They organised everything for us when we met you down at Fairhaven.' There was no getting out of that. Lorna fell in with the date Jenny and the Pages had agreed. She said to Les, her husband, as they washed the dishes that night, 'Your social life takes on a life of its own, doesn't it. You meet someone, they invite you to their place, you're under obligation to invite them back, then they bring in someone else, and before you know where you are, your family's linked to all these other families and you really can't quite work out how it all happened.'

It didn't bother Les. 'There's some things you can't get out of, but most of the time, you can opt out if you don't like the look of what's offering. The main thing's not to offend anybody, which means if you

don't want to do something you have to think of a good excuse.' He'd amused himself. 'There's a book you could write, darling. A book of polite excuses.' He thought. 'Five Hundred Infallible Excuses: How to Avoid Without Upsetting! What do you think? Print run? A couple of million to start with?' Lorna rose to his challenge. 'I'll write the first book if you write the sequel.'

'What's that?' He had a basin lid in his hand, and a tea-towel at the ready.

She thought. 'The Sniff Detector: How to Spot a Lie at Twenty Paces!' He liked the idea. 'You publish with one publisher and I'll publish with someone else. We'll make a fortune!' She tickled him. 'We'd have to do it under false names. We wouldn't want our friends to know what we really thought of them.' This quelled them both. What did they really think of their friends? For that matter, what did their friends think of them? Les knew hundreds of people in the world of racing. Lorna knew another shipload in the world of fashion, and they were changing all the time. She said to her husband, 'I don't know if we've got any friends. Real friends. We just know lots of people, so we're nice to them, so ...'

She let her voice trail away. She had an uncomfortable feeling that perhaps they weren't lovable, as she'd like, but conformers to the rules so that everyone was a near-friend, a pseudo-friend, and that there was some other level of friendship – dedication, commitment, loyalty – which they didn't know how to achieve. She looked at her husband. 'There's something I want to know.'

He was wiping the lid by now. 'Darling?'

She found it hard to pose the question that was nagging her. 'How do other people live?'

Les couldn't see any difficulty. 'Much the same as us. They might drive a different car, live in some other suburb. Go to different shops from the ones we do ... What's the problem?'

She was clutching for a way to get more deeply into what was worrying her. 'Well, if someone goes to a shop, and we wouldn't go to that shop ... that is, it's a part of their life and we wouldn't be seen dead going into the place, that means there's a difference, doesn't it!'

He put the lid in its place on the rack. 'It does. But does the difference matter? Let's say it's a clothing shop. Jenny Bartlett buys her clothes there ...'

"That's a shop I wouldn't be seen dead in!"

He laughed, almost triumphant. 'Well, let's say Olivia Page goes there, she's always well-dressed. And you go somewhere else. All that means is that when you see each other next, you'll be wearing different things. It's generally regarded as a terrible thing if two women meet at the races and they're wearing the same clothes. It happens every now and then. So what do they do about it? They keep out of each other's way. They're shit-scared someone might photograph them together!' Something in him relaxed. 'Ah let's not worry. It's not going to happen. And what if it does? You're at the racecourse, or maybe it's an evening gathering, a fashion display let's say, models on the boardwalk, that sort of thing, and someone's wearing the same thing as you. What about it?'

The idea made Lorna tense. 'Well, what about it? It's easy for men. You all wear the same thing. A suit!' She said the word with scorn, which didn't trouble him. 'You see someone wearing the same thing that you've got on. Does it embarrass you? No. You go over to them and you give them a huge hug, right in front of everybody. And you sit with them if you can. And by the time you've been talking to this other person for two minutes you've forgotten all about what they're wearing because you're starting to know them, and you're finding out that under the things they're wearing, they're another person, and what are they like, deep down? It's a mystery. And how did they get to be like what they are, and what's going to happen to them next – the next day, the following year - you've no idea! But you want to know, you're curious, you want to find out, so you see them again, and you know what? By the time you know a little bit about them, they're your friend! That's the answer to your question. It's as simple as that. It's no use going looking for deep explanations like the Pope telling us how life began, or something like that, because it isn't necessary. It's a waste of time. There aren't any answers, there's only what you see and hear around you, so don't let anything bother you!' He was wound up by now and Lorna was confused. This wasn't the man she listened to on other days, and yet, she realised, he never offered any generalities to his children. He left all that to her. Was he copping out all the time, or did he have a better idea of how to live than she did?

'No answers! That's going a bit far! People aren't quite *that* stupid! We have brains and we use them you know. I call races. I've got a lot of *knowledge* in my head, but no answers. I know all the horses and their jockeys and their trainers, and most of the owners and connections. I can tell you the results of just about every race meeting in the country for the last five years. And who's going to win the race that's just about to start? You've got a million dollars in your pocket and you want to put it on a horse, so you ask me who's going to win.' He smiled at his wife, truly triumphant by now. 'And I don't know. I know a hell of a lot but I don't know what you want me to know. I want to back the winner, you say, tell me who's going to win. And what do I say?'

There was no smile on his face. He had a central truth in mind.

'I say you're on your own. I say put your money on whichever horse you fancy, but be ready for a different result. In two minutes time you might be jumping for joy and inviting everyone in earshot to have a drink with you. Or you might have nothing left but the clothes you stand in. Apart from that, you haven't got a feather to fly with. That's what the racetrack means. It's life. You can organise as much as you like, and try to manage everything, but when the whips are cracking, you're on your own and you've got to deal with whatever happens. Riches and rags! That's what's on offer, my love.' Lorna was deflated by now, as well as amazed. She'd more or less known what he thought but had never heard it come out in such a torrent. She hoped he wouldn't talk like that when they got to the Bartletts'. Or maybe it would be good? She felt sure that if Les could surprise her then he could amaze Norman and Jenny. But then she might be being unfair. They might have floods of passion, and outlook, inside them, all locked away and not on display. People were mysteries, after all. She wasn't happy with what had happened, but neither was she unhappy. It took circumstances to show us the inner workings of people and sometimes people, she realised, never encountered the circumstances that would articulate them, so they remained mysteries to themselves and others. But not Les, not after tonight. She read, after the dishes had been put away, and he gave the children their baths, saw them into their pajamas and then into bed. He read to them for a little while, then told them stories till they went to sleep. Coming back to Lorna, he apologised, saying that he felt tired, and he'd go to bed himself. She told him, 'I think I'll join you.' He knew that this was a result of his outburst earlier in the evening, and felt flattered. 'That's lovely, darling. I'm glad you feel like that.'

Feel like what? She wondered if he knew how she felt humbled. And wondered, too, if their children, May and Terry, knew how good a man they had as their father. No. They loved him but they weren't yet in a position of being able to compare him with others, and thus to see him as he was. Time would bring that to them, she hoped.

Lorna and Les slept well that night.

The Bartletts lived in Towers Road Toorak. There was plenty of parking on the property and in the street. Jack, somewhat awed, parked in the street. So did the Brambles, when they arrived, and they were quick to notice a tennis court behind the house. 'Norman and I aren't interested in tennis,' Jenny Bartlett told her visitors. 'The agent who arranged the transfer suggested we might like to put in a pool instead.' She smiled. 'Silly man. We'll make it a garden but we haven't decided what to plant, so it's still a court. Maintenance is easy!' It sounded like boasting to Lorna, but her hosts didn't intend it that way, so the visitors smiled. A court it was and a garden it would be. 'Judging by the gardens surrounding you,' Jack said, 'you've got good soil to work with.' It was his way of complimenting his hosts. They took their visitors, who hadn't been through the house before, upstairs and down. Norman led them into a large room with a view, but delicately curtained. 'This one's for the children,' he told his visitors. 'They like quiet for their reading and the games they play, hence the curtains.' Both Lorna and Olivia were amazed at the tidiness, the orderliness, of the room. 'No rumpus here,' Lorna said, a respectful note in her voice. What was wrong with the Bartlett kids? Wasn't there any hint of rebellion in them? With the superiority that annoyed Lorna Bramble, Jenny Bartlett said, 'That's what the agent called it. The rumpus room. I didn't say anything to him but when we moved in I made it clear to the children that making a mess wasn't going to be on. It didn't take long to make that clear.'

Olivia Page knew that when and if she became a mother she wouldn't manage her children in Jenny's way. Jenny! People with that name didn't belong in Towers Road Toorak. If you were a Jenny you were insignificant. Olivia was going to struggle, she could see: 'What was the name of the agent?' she said for want of anything better to say. Jenny was pleased. 'Bateman and Macbeth,' she said. 'The oldest firm in the area. Four generations in the business and do they let you know!' She wanted them to understand that such people could be handled, however, by those who were sure about what they wanted. 'Come downstairs and we'll have some tea. The children can stay up here and get to know each other.' The visiting children, May and Terry, could hear the ring of steel in this gift of freedom, but Giselle, Thomas and Genevieve accepted it as natural, and were opening drawers and cupboards to get things to play with – things put away after their previous use. 'Mmm, quite a household,' Jack told his hosts as he turned to leave the room. 'Everything in its place. You're doing really well.'

The reception room, as the Bartletts called it, gave onto the tennis court. 'You can see why we want a garden,' Jenny said. 'The tennis court really won't do. Still, it's better than a mess. I'm not having it touched until we're sure what we want.' The visitors asked what their hosts had in mind, and the discussion struggled along until mention was made of the gardens opposite the city's art gallery, a place which had been in the news recently because a man had been charged with raping and then strangling a young Chinese woman in the area, and had pleaded guilty. Newspapers had reported that he was almost grateful for his sentence, welcoming gaol because it would mean that he wouldn't have to sleep in the open any longer, he'd have a bed in gaol, with meals and company ...

It was as if the conversation had been searching for a centre. They'd all read about this man. His face had been shown on television and in newspapers. He'd once been good-looking, anyone could see that, but his face was now red and his hair untidy. There was desperation rather than madness in his eye. What he'd done was ghastly but it

wasn't out of reach of their imaginations. He troubled them at least as much as he scared them. Why?

Why, why, why?

Jenny's view was simple. 'Lock him up and throw away the key.' She meant it. Les Bramble said they should bring back the death penalty. Someone demurred. 'Look at Indonesia,' he said. 'They shoot them over there.' Everyone knew that six drug traffickers had been shot in that country only days before. Two Australians were in line for the same treatment, despite protests from the prime minister. Some countries were soft and some were hard, they said. We were soft. Human life was held to be sacred ... 'That's why they should be shot,' Jenny said. 'They didn't respect the sacredness of other people's lives, so they lose their own. It's simple!' Jack found himself wanting to smile. Nothing had got in the way of Jenny and Norman occupying one of the grandest houses in the most expensive part of town! He studied Jenny, his host: did she have any idea of design, of architecture, at all, or did she do her rankings on the basis of price? He thought he knew. He also noticed that Olivia was unusually quiet. Talk of death had silenced her. She was troubled, he knew, but couldn't stop the conversation, which was sweeping on.

'The puzzling thing is' – this was Lorna Bramble – 'why he had to kill her. Throttle her. He'd raped her. Twice, according to the thing I saw the other night, and then he strangled her. Why didn't he just get up and run away? She'd still be alive and he'd be hiding somewhere. Didn't they find him up in New South Wales?'

They had. Nobody remembered how he was caught, or who'd recognised him. 'It's pretty hard to get away with anything these days! There's cameras everywhere. In shops, banks, you name it.' They talked about surveillance, theft of identity and the like till Olivia could stand it no longer. 'Let's get back to Lorna's question,' she said. 'Why did he do two crimes? He raped her and he strangled her. He must have squeezed her throat in the most terrible way. Like jaws of steel ...'

The others were shocked. Her imagination had made the action more than something to talk about. It was real. She wanted to know. They thought of the place – the most dignified gardens in a city proud

of its appearance. There was an art gallery and a concert hall across the road. There was a shrine to the nation's war-dead on the hill behind. There was the tower of Government House with its flag when the Governor was at home! There was the adjoining Royal Botanical Gardens, noblest thing in the city. When Olivia went on, it was as if she had a burning coal in her mind. 'There's something about what he did, some connection that I can't see. He had to do the two things, together and at once. To the same person, for some reason. He ...'

She hesitated, then she went ahead.

'... fucked her, then he killed her. All I can say is that that's two awful crimes, and as far as I'm concerned you could shoot him or hang him or electrocute him for either, or both, but ...'

Again she paused.

'... what I can't understand is why he had to do both things at once. That's the real crime, and I can't understand it! Anyone got any ideas?'

They were amazed. Jack knew that something was happening in his wife, and it was up to him to be her intermediary with the others. 'How do you mean, darling, the real crime? There are two crimes, that's obvious enough. What do you mean about the crime being the connection? You've got us a little puzzled.' They were all listening. What would she say?

Olivia gathered her thoughts as best she could. 'We were saying a minute ago that he ought to be put to death. Killed because he killed someone. Lots of people don't like the death penalty, but I'm not one of them. I think society can take someone's life if they deserve it. If they deserve it, notice! That's a judgement we can make and we might well make it in this man's case. But if we say he deserves it, then we've made a judgement. That means we think we understand what he did that was wrong. And that's where I've got stuck. I don't understand what he did, because ...'

She waved her hands almost helplessly, hoping they could follow what was in her mind. She started again.

'You can punish him for raping her, that poor girl from Hong Kong. How her people must wish she'd never come to Melbourne!'

They'd all seen them on TV, the family from Hong Kong, their sister/daughter/child dead in a city far away, killed by a man who ...

'You can punish him for strangling her. That's worth a death penalty if anything is. So that's two death penalties. But there's a saying that the punishment must fit the crime. That's where I've got stuck. There's two crimes, and why are they together? Why did he have to do both? The real crime, in my mind, is that he combined the two. He didn't rape her and run away. He didn't steal her bag and kill her when she screamed. He did two things to her and they were somehow the same thing in his mind and that's why I say the real crime was doing the two things together. Can you see what I mean?'

Jenny was amazed, but Norman, her husband, was struggling with a sympathy he didn't understand. 'I think I do,' he said, looking to his wife. 'Well I don't,' she said. 'He raped her. He realised he would get caught. Locked up for years. He was afraid. She still had a power over him, because the moment he let go of her, she could go to the police. Or she could scream and bring people running, and he'd be caught. He had to kill her to get away from what he'd done. It's obvious enough to me.'

The children were still playing upstairs. The tennis court was waiting to be turned into a garden. There were cars cruising through this most desirable area, their drivers wondering if they'd ever get a chance to move there and live. The city's wealth was in the air, causing men to dream commercial dreams and women to dress themselves in style. Style! It was impossible to think about in some areas but Toorak was privileged enough to ease itself onto another plane. Trees were huge. Bateman and Macbeth thought of themselves as gatekeepers, showing homes only to those who were ready to dwell in them, and this was more than money. Jenny Bartlett had pushed her way in, and Norman, her husband, had self-doubts for all the money he'd made importing luxury goods, of the highest quality of course, into a city that didn't make such things – or only rarely. Quality was what lifted humans above their wretched selves, and here they were talking about ...

Norman spoke. Jenny wasn't expecting him to say anything because for the most part he stepped back from difficulties to do the things he did easily and well. Norman spoke.

'I'd call it a mystery crime. I can see why you're puzzled. We're wrong to say that it's a crime against that Hong Kong woman, although it is, of course. It's a crime against life itself.'

There was a shriek from upstairs, and Jenny stirred anxiously, but Norman went on.

'We're all caught between life and death. We live lives and we know we're going to die. We see people born every day. No, sorry, we don't, because they're born in hospitals, but you know what I mean. We see children every day, we have them ourselves and we're lucky ...' He paused. 'We don't see many people die but we see it often enough on TV. In floods and shoot-outs and fires, car wrecks, the whole catastrophe. We're surrounded by life and death, but we don't feel part of it. We want to live, because our lives are slipping away from us, but we don't know how ...'

Les couldn't have this. 'Speak for yourself, Norm, speak for yourself!'

Norman went on. 'That's what I'm doing. That's exactly what I'm doing.' He looked around, and they all felt, even his wife, the hard-bitten Jenny, that he was opening his soul, perhaps for the first time. An undemonstrative man, he lifted his hand. 'I've got everything I could ask for. This house.' He smiled a smile of great tenderness. 'Sorry darling, we haven't solved our garden problem yet. But we will!' He returned his attention to his visitors. 'It's the best house in the best street. What more could anyone want?'

Again he paused, and Jenny murmured in that voice of steel, 'Nor-man!' but he went on. He lifted his cup and asked, as if addressing it and not his guests, 'What does it take to make us know we're alive? Not much. A bird rushing away when we step outside. But we have doubts when we look at ourselves. We feel unsure. We want to be reassured. Most of us are. We're surrounded by things we possess, and if we're lucky, by people we love.' He looked tenderly at his wife, something, Jack realised, he wouldn't be able to do if he was in Norman's shoes. Norman felt tenderly for the woman who shared his life, and directed it so that it benefited her in the ways she wanted. Jack rather wished it was time to go, though they'd barely arrived. His tea was still hotter than he cared to drink it.

He supposed it was his duty to listen, respond if he had something to say.

'Men like this man who killed the woman in the gardens aren't surrounded by things that make them comfortable. Reassuring things. Their lives are empty ...'

Lorna wasn't having it. 'That's their problem, Norman. Let them find solutions that don't involve wrecking the lives of other people! I don't want to be raped and murdered by someone who doesn't know me from a bar of soap!'

She was almost as tough, in her way, as Jenny, and she was rebuking him, yet he was respectful when he answered. 'So they're on their own. They've got nobody. They possess nothing. They see in other people's eyes that they're without value. They want to force some recognition out of people. They want to be made to feel that they're human. They exist ...'

'When in fact they don't,' Lorna told him. 'They're nothing and they're nobody, people like that! Isn't that clear enough?'

'All too clear. That's what they realise. It's because they know it that they're in trouble. They must be made to feel that they're alive. That's what they want. So \dots '

He paused and the room was noisy, everyone talking at once. Olivia, who had pointed the conversation in this direction, began to feel strange. Something meaningful was about to happen, she felt. Jenny wanted to get rid of them all for talking about such things in her house, her nineteen-forties mansion, to which had been added everything new and luxurious in the years since it was merely bricks and mortar. Time had been good to the house and its owners and she resented the intrusion of unsuitable, un-improving talk. Even her husband, she felt, was about to be disloyal; his thoughts were on a line she didn't know.

'So, they do the worst thing, the most eye-catching, attention-grabbing thing they can think of ...'

'And they bring a family from another country, in absolute and utter, wretched despair, to pick up the body they've flung down!' (Lorna)

'... and finally, at the very last, they find out what life is, they make it talk to them, they make it include them at last, by doing the

very worst things they can do to someone else. It's a problem of the male mind, a man who doesn't understand his own need for sex, can't understand it, knows he's supposed to be proud of it but actually and in fact, hates it. Yes hates it for making him so dependent on others when he doesn't want to be. He expresses himself sexually and then he swings to the other side of himself, the wish to bring about a death, and he does that too. If you're an absolute failure, and this man was, then you've had two successes in the same moment and they are mysteriously one super success...'

Olivia was hanging on every word. Lorna was still resisting. 'And you've done it at the expense of someone else! Whatever it is you've gained has been robbed – raped – from someone else. Let's not forget what we're talking about, Norman!'

Their host smiled. Hardly anybody but his wife addressed him by his formal-sounding name. 'You've achieved life. You've recognised yourself. You've admitted yourself into the ranks of the living, even if it was a forced entry ...' He smiled. 'Excuse me! You also know things you never knew before. First, it wasn't worth it. You're a disgrace because what you did wasn't done for love. It had to be forced on someone unwilling. What you've taken wasn't given to you at all, so it wasn't worth anything. Which puts you in the position ...'

More noise from everybody.

'... that you have to do one last defiant thing, and prove how worthless you are by swinging from one extreme to the other, from life ...'

He paused, but Olivia broke in almost shouting: '... to *death!* Thank you Norman. You've made something clear for me.' Nobody else thought so! They talked without listening. There was so much to say. Only Norman had been able to get his views into the air and they all wanted *their* turn – except Olivia, who was strong, ready, prepared, on the verge of life-change, reaching her left hand out to put it on the right hand of her husband. Jack stopped talking for a moment, though he didn't start to listen. Only Jenny could do that by calling out, almost shouting, 'Tea! For goodness sake, what's this all about? Tea, everybody. Tea! Who's ready for some more? Lesley, pass me your cup! Norman, for heaven's sake, you haven't touched yours,

you've been talking more than is good for you, your throat must be dry! Parched! Drink something and be quiet for a while!' Norman laughed, under orders as it were, and sipped. This amused Les for some reason, and he observed that nobody ever called him Lesley as Jenny had, so that was a first, and he had to leave Parkville and come to Toorak to have it happen. 'It makes me wonder what they'll call me if I go to some other places!' Names came to him. 'Sandringham! Yarraville! Williamstown. Olinda ...' The names of their city's suburbs sounded silly, funny, meaninglessly amusing, and when Les – Lesley – laughed, they all laughed, forgetting what had brought them to this state of hilarity and confusion.

Their laughter died down after a while. 'Thank goodness for that,' Jenny said. We're back to normal at last.' Another shriek could be heard from upstairs, and then Genevieve appeared above them. 'What's all the noise about mummy? Are you having a party downstairs?'

The Pages woke early the following morning. Jack would have made tea but Olivia pulled him back. 'Love me first darling.' Then she went to the toilet after they'd made love, saying, 'I needed that. Both.' She snuggled happily into bed again, in a way that told Jack she now wanted the tea he'd offered before, so he went to the kitchen, turned the jug on, and then the radio, down very low. The man they'd been talking about, the rapist and murderer, was to face a pre-sentence hearing the following week. The voice of the announcer was both indifferent yet laden with contempt. He'd been judged in the court of public opinion and would be locked away. Society wouldn't have to deal with him any more; only the grieving family remained, and they would have to deal with their grief alone. Nobody and nothing could mend their situation. Jack felt sorry for them, then he half-listened to the items that followed while he made the tea. He put it on the bedside table and rubbed his wife's back. 'Snug as a bug in a rug!' He saw a smile on her face, turned away as it was. 'Are you going to sit up darling? Or drink it through a straw?'

She wriggled to get herself around. 'Get in beside me darling.' They sat in bed sipping and in the same moment Jack knew that something had changed in his wife and that he knew what it was. The visit to the

Bartletts and the lively discussion about the murder/rape, had brought about the long-desired change in Olivia. She'd made up her mind, and Jack wasn't sure if she knew and hadn't got around to telling him, or didn't know because she hadn't discovered what had happened inside herself. He felt sure, but the decision hadn't made its way into words, not yet. How odd! There was no doubt in his mind that the decision had been made. The readiness was palpable, whether she knew it herself or not. But then she must know? He wasn't sure. He said, 'I feel like a shower, but I think you should go first. You should take precedence over me.' It was all he needed to say. She handed him her empty cup, almost carelessly; it was for him to take it away. She laughed. 'I will go first this morning!' She laughed again. 'All our habits are going to change!' He felt relief, elation and the deepest humility racing through him. 'I might get in with you when I've rinsed the cups. No! No! You must have this one alone, and I'll follow when you've finished. That's how things are going to be from now on!'

She said, 'It's been so hard to make up my mind and then it was easy. I feel like saying it came with a rush, but it didn't. It snuck into my mind while I was asleep. Think about that, Jack. Think about my mind coming to a decision when there was nobody in charge. It'd be like our car deciding one night that it felt like having a look around, so off it went, and came back in the morning a different car! Think about that!'

'I'm thinking,' he said. 'And then there's going to be a lot of waiting. Long months of waiting ...'

He might have gone on but she wasn't listening. 'It hasn't happened yet. I haven't got anything – anybody – inside me yet. All I've done is work my way through those nagging doubts. I'm ready.' She said it strongly, then changed her tone. 'The world's going to change, Jack. Isn't that strange? It's going to be a different place ...'

He looked at her humbly, ready to see what these changes might mean. He'd always wanted to have children, and now he was, and they were, about to find out. The world was different already.

Winters are long in Melbourne. Cold creeps in from the countryside. Stand-alone houses lose heat easily, blocks of flats do a little better. It's not cold enough to cause exhilaration, only a feeling of being

closed in, reduced. There are snowfields but they're a long way away. The city hasn't created an introspective culture; lots of people, not knowing what to do, long for spring, or immerse themselves in football, possibly racing, or sailing. Young people skateboard noisily, as if clatter has a meaning. People dress in black, making it their norm. Quality shops settle back in dignity, livened only by a handful of sales. Staying at home is the base, the basis, for going out; the inner city congregates in bars and cafes, the outer suburbs do little more than line the roads. Cars abound, people inside glass and metal. Those who are generous feed the homeless, the city's disgrace. Asian visitors see the city's openness, and pride, admire the space and gardens, edging, ever so slowly, Melburnians out of their inferiority to the capitals of Europe, forcing them to see, sullenly enough, that what they've made embodies an old-fashioned good, largely ruined by the car. Roads, roads, roads ... people think more about the pangs of getting places than they do of their architecture, every building a statement of an idea. Melbourne's a place of patient people, maintaining what they can rather than creating everything anew. Jack Page loved his wife, and was pleased when she told him she was pregnant, though it meant that he must become a new man; everyone realised that young women turned into mothers, but men had to change too, or be left behind, failures because they couldn't make the imaginative leap of being part of what was happening to the woman they lived with. Some time in the following March would be the event that triggered the change but readiness had to be worked on. 'Names,' Jack asked Olivia; 'what's this little one going to be called?'

Olivia said that she knew she would want to know, eventually, if she was carrying a boy child or a girl, but for the moment she preferred not to know. 'I want to know what I want before I find out,' she told her partner, who pointed out that if she decided she wanted a girl, only to find out later that she had a boy inside her, then the child's arrival might be diminished. She wouldn't want that to happen?

Olivia said that she wouldn't let her expectations build to the detriment of the child; she would be its servant, after all, and Jack noticed that of their various friends it was the mothers – Lorna Bramble, Maria Furlinghetti and even Jenny Bartlett – that she

observed, and related to, most closely. Change was upon them, it was working on them, day by day. It occurred to Jack that he didn't know what these three women had been like before the arrival of their children. He wanted to talk about it with Olivia but didn't, feeling that if he raised the topic it would make her self-conscious about what was happening naturally; all he could do was wait, and watch respectfully.

He did. What he noticed was that men took themselves for granted whereas women couldn't afford to. He found himself thinking of people playing cards, with men prepared to bluff and bluster, while women had to learn to play a hand full of low level cards without too many trumps. He found himself observing – to the point, he feared, of a minor obsession – the handsome young secretary of his immediate superior at work, a tall young woman of twenty five or thereabouts called Alexandra who made up her face quite heavily. She doesn't need to, Jack decided, so why does she do it? He wanted to ask the other women at work but again he decided not to. What was the advantage of a mask? You could present it as something for others to react to while you observed them from behind the altered, unrevealed face. But why would anyone want to do this? He wondered about himself, and decided that he didn't do, wasn't doing, any form of what Alexandra was doing every day. Finally, unable to keep silent any longer, he raised the matter with Olivia: would Alexandra make up her face – affix her mask – on days when she wasn't in the office, presenting herself? 'I wouldn't think so,' Olivia said. 'Why would she bother, unless she's living with a man and is struggling to keep him?'

Jack couldn't imagine Alexandra 'struggling' to keep a man; she had a presence that attracted them. And yet? He felt he needed to know; it was part of the transition which Olivia's coming motherhood was enforcing on him. He looked at Alexandra when he was at work, he listened to her. Her eyes were strong and she lined them heavily to make them stronger. She was aware of Jack's attention, he was sure. He tried to deplete it but it wouldn't go away. That searching attention was watching him, wanting to know what he wanted to know. Curiosity was part of sexual attraction and he was ever so curious.

If Alexandra had done what he felt sure she never, or only rarely, did, and that was to enfold him in her arms, he'd have awful trouble resisting her ... and yet he would be troubled, and later ashamed, because he wasn't trying to attain her as a sexual partner, he wanted to understand her presentation of herself because he felt that what she was doing something that many women did.

And what was that? Before he'd married Olivia he'd had girlfriends tell him that men were stupid, women were smarter (because they had to be), and if men insisted on seizing power then women had to develop skills to make men's compasses deviate, drawing them into terrain as yet untamed by the male mind. That, he supposed, must be why Alexandra made her face a mask. Her presentation was an offering to men that allowed them to see her in a certain way - on offer, really – while she withdrew to a point well camouflaged where she could watch what they did. 'Good morning Mister Page. You're early this morning. Car going well?' He answered these remarks without thinking, but they made him comfortable, and when she added, 'Couple of phone calls already. I've left notes on your desk,' he had been soothed into beginning the day as he was supposed to. Alexandra made things work, without anybody noticing, except of course they did notice and they all agreed she was first class at her job, and they chatted to her as if each and every one of them had something special in their relationship when in fact by treating each of them differently she was treating them all the same.

Jack came to realise this. The married women didn't do what Alexandra did because they were beyond her stage: she was still searching for a man of the highest quality and those already married were out of the hunt. While her mind played with the office her body was hunting and being hunted. Jack realised that his attitude to her was changing. He felt a tenderness for her which was a half-brother of pity. He couldn't show it because it would be humiliating, a breach of the rules by which she played life's game; this meant, he saw, that he had to do what she did, and retreat behind a mask of jollity and infinite goodwill, while hoping that she would someday encounter someone who matched her standards.

Then and only then could the hidden things be said.

Olivia was changing. She was yearning for her body to grow large while trying to keep it small. So much was going to happen to her that she wanted to hurry things along. She wanted to tell everyone she was pregnant but only a few had any idea. When she caught trams and trains nobody stood up because she was too young for that respect. 'It'll show and everyone will know,' she told herself. 'Do I want that or do I prefer the secret?' She preferred the secret. A truth wasn't true unless you could live up to it and she wasn't ready yet. A baby was forming inside her but it hadn't had much effect on her mind. Not yet. Mothers took command of everyone's lives. They were given a seat in the lifeboat when others had to swim. People rushed into burning houses to save them and their children ...

She'd always avoided danger, knowing herself to be timid. Mothers put their bodies in the doorway to stop murderous men breaking in. They protected. They couldn't help being afraid but they had to overcome it. Jack was more prepared than she was. He was more ready to protect than she was. He'd been that way since his teens, while she was a newcomer. It occurred to her that the whole world would be different once her adjustment was made. Her judgements would be made by the standard of how things affected her child. She realised early on that she thought of it as female, even before she knew. Females continued the species; men assisted and protected. The attitudes of men were important in the coming together, but the attitudes of women were even more so. Humanity was forever chasing rainbows, inventing things, lifting itself out of the brutal simplicity of animal life and even though men did more of these things than women, women mattered more. Women made sure that things were carried on. This thinking, this accepting of responsibility, wearied her. She wanted – pacé Jenny Bartlett – to play tennis while she could; she wanted to go swimming; she visited the zoo; she sat under the state library's great dome. Women had been queens and men had died for them; a French queen had died by the guillotine like so many aristocrats before and after, in the Terror. Humanity was always loosing terror on itself. It was everywhere. Central African women had to deal with men who lived in the jungle and belonged to it. She found herself fascinated by the events of what was called 'the Middle Eastern Spring'. New regimes were springing up and old ones overthrown. Was this any progress?

No. The new rulers were as bad as ever. The Egyptians overthrew a despot then installed a military despot in his place. Some journalists who commented on this were seized by the police, and sentenced to years in jail. One of them was an Australian, working for Al-Jazeera's English language version. The Australian government pleaded for his release, rumours flew back and forth. He'd soon be released, then he wouldn't. The only hope was a presidential pardon ... Olivia felt strangely affected when the man's Egyptian jailers put him on a plane to Cyprus, where he paddled in the sea, waving his arms with passion. He was free! Next he caught another plane, to emerge at Brisbane airport. His family were there, full of love and relief, embracing, kissing and hugging him. He spoke to the cameras, eyes blazing with happiness after four hundred days in prison, about the colleagues who hadn't yet been released. He wanted them free. Olivia looked at the man in wonder. Peter Greste was his name. He was so sure that truth and justice had had a win. Olivia wasn't. She had a child inside her. The child would grow up and take a place in the world. It would do something and that something, whatever it was, would place it in the world's drama, a moral drama and a life-and-death one too. What would be her little one's fate? Arms upraised, and smiles, or something worse? One of those hidden fates, rarely shown, which give us bodies in ditches, planes shot down, earth moving because people have been buried before they were dead?

War, war, war! Even those who lived in love and peace knew what they were escaping. It couldn't be kept out of the mind. Olivia said to Jack, 'I'm going to prepare our baby's room. I'm starting now. It'll have a cot because we might have it with us in our room at first, but I'll put a bed in there too. I'll clean out the wardrobe and the chest of drawers and I'll start to think of pictures. What do we want our little one to see?' Jack said he'd help in any way she wanted but he knew the jobs were small. What they really amounted to was changing the nature of the woman who was going to be a mother.

She couldn't change the Middle East but she could get a room ready for their child.

Olivia was keen to book the house they'd had the previous January. 'Ring the agent, Jack. And we'll ask all the same people, plus some new ones, perhaps.' Jack was happy to do this, but amused. 'Why's it suddenly so attractive? I admit it was good, but what's made it so urgent all of a sudden?'

She thought it was obvious. 'It'll be our second time. And a year after, when our baby's a few months old, we'll go there again, because it's a tradition!' She smiled; he would have to agree with that. He moved to the chair beside the phone to indicate that he would do as she wished, but then: 'You said the same people. Have you satisfied yourself about that?' She looked at him to indicate that she saw nothing wrong with the idea. Jack opened cautiously. 'Don Trevorrow gave us a surprise that night on the beach, if you recall. I'm not sure that he wouldn't do it again. There's something there that's not quite what it seems.' He thought. 'And the Svendsens? Ruth and Rory? I haven't had much to do with them lately, but I'm picking up some bad vibes from people. There's stuff going on with those two that we don't know about. They always made me feel a bit edgy but now it's more so.' Olivia was displeased. 'People talk. And when they don't know things they make them up. I don't want to be cut off from my friends because people think ...'

Jack wasn't to be put off. 'I ran into young Rex, the painter chap who works at the Schulbergs' gallery. He was telling me some story about running into Rory Svendsen up at Beechworth, he'd bought a winery and Rex thought it was a front for something else ...'

Olivia butted in. 'Oh Rex watches too many B-grade movies, that's the sort of stuff he thinks about.' She could see that she hadn't changed Jack's mind. 'If we cut them off because we're suspicious of Rory, then it's Ruth who suffers. Ruth gets excluded through no fault of her own. We should stay in touch with Ruth even if it does mean having Rory around. I can't see him doing us any harm.' This time Jack was convinced and she saw him looking for their book of addresses and phone numbers. 'I'll ring Ruth a bit later, Jack. You ring the agent and book the house, that's what you need to do.'

He rang, and got young Clive McConville, who remembered Jack's booking from the previous summer. 'We put a reservation on

that place for you. We thought you'd want to come back. What dates have you got in mind? Same as last year?' Clive went on to say that the rates would be the same as last year, and that a new highway diner had opened up for holiday-makers who didn't want to cook for themselves. 'I've tried it, and it's good!' Jack asked about the new eatery, and then about Clive's father's health. 'Oh dad's still at the office every day. You couldn't kill him with a meat axe! I sometimes think he's got more energy than me!' Then Clive asked, 'You and Mrs Page will be the tenants, of course, and will you be bringing the same people down to stay with you as last summer? You had a pretty happy crowd ...'

Jack considered the question. For some reason it seemed to go a little too far. Perhaps it was only the prattle of an inexperienced agent, but he had a feeling there was something more than chatter behind the question. When he got off the phone, he mentioned it to Olivia. She listened, but had nothing to suggest. An hour or so later, she rang Ruth and asked her when they could get together. Ruth suggested the following morning, and named a café in Malvern. They met, they ordered, they worked out how many weeks it was since they'd seen each other. 'You're looking marvellous!' Olivia said to Ruth. 'Something's suiting you right down to the ground.' The appraisal went both ways. 'You're looking beautiful, Olivia. I've got a feeling you've made up your mind about something ...' Ruth paused.

'Guess!'

Ruth felt she knew but didn't want to find herself being told she was wrong. 'I think you might have made a decision, perhaps?'

'You're very close. What did we say when we were kids? You're boiling hot!'

Ruth was sure. 'You're starting a family! Have you told Jack about it yet?'

Olivia laughed. 'I couldn't not tell him. But he reads my mind, I think he knew as soon as I did.

Something about the words gave Ruth pause. Slowly she said, 'He reads your mind?'

'We've always been close. He's not your average, ordinary male, all wrapped up in himself and not noticing what others are feeling. He's been wanting it for ages, long before I could make up my mind ...'

Ruth studied her friend, assessing a happiness she'd never known. Olivia studied Ruth, aware of some difference, something she hadn't noticed before. 'What about you?'

'How do I look?'

Olivia looked closely, wondering if she could say what she was thinking.

Ruth: 'I really want to know.'

So Olivia said it. 'You look ... dangerously beautiful. I'm envious of you, and I'm not. I'm sorry, I'm not sure what I mean. You've changed in some way. I'm not sure what it is, but it's powerful. I've always admired the way you present yourself, but you're different. It's something about your skin. You're glowing. You're wildly alive ...'

She thought it best to stop, and a moment later she saw tears in Ruth's eyes. 'So you can see it. I didn't want anyone to know.'

Olivia's heart slumped, as if it had missed a beat. 'Know what, Ruth? What is it? You're not pregnant too, are you?' She felt it was a silly thing to say, but it might trigger the reply she was hoping for – and not.

Ruth put her hands on the table, palms open and up. 'I've got a lover. I'm silly about him. He's very nice. He's only an opportunist but it's what I want. It can't go on for long but it's my little act of defiance.' She examined Olivia's face. Olivia said nothing, and waited. 'I realised I was in a trap, so I decided to get out of it. I did. I set myself another trap, and jumped into it. I'm in two traps now and I can't see any way of getting out of either, let alone both. Something's going to blow up. I thought I could hide what I was doing but you picked it as soon as you saw me. What did you see that was different?'

Olivia thought. It was her duty to find some truth for Ruth, who needed it. 'It's the energy I can feel in you. A person can be sitting still, and not saying anything, but if there's energy in their body, which means in their mind, you can feel it. There's no hiding it.' She stopped. 'I think that's all I can say.'

'I'm transparent then. It seems.'

One thing was clear to Olivia. 'Rory doesn't know. So I can't tell Jack?'

It didn't matter to Ruth. 'You can not only tell Jack, you have to tell him. You can't be having secrets now.' She meant the pregnancy.

'Jack will want to support you. He won't know how. But if things ever get bad and you can't stay with Rory, you can come to our place. We'll look after you.'

Ruth felt an impulse to clutch Olivia, but kept her hands still. 'Thank you. I may need it. I don't know. I can't be sure.'

'What is it you're not sure of?'

'I suspect myself. I have an idea I want Rory to find out. I think I want him to do something wild and silly, and change the situation, something that I can't do for myself.'

Olivia wasn't sure what this was supposed to mean. 'I don't think I follow you.'

'I might have picked a lover who'd be a threat to Rory. A real rival. But I picked a young man who'll discreetly slip out of the picture if things get hot. He's not going to hang around if things get nasty. I don't blame him. I'm not worth fighting for.'

This distressed Olivia. 'Ruth!'

'I'm not. What I'm doing is just a weak little protest. I suspect I want it heard, and seen for what it is.'

Olivia: 'You want Rory to take you back?'

'He doesn't know he's lost me yet. And as I was saying, it may be that I don't want to get away from him. I suspect myself of wanting to hurt him just enough to change the terms we live on.'

'The terms?'

'He's bought a winery, somewhere up near Beechworth. I haven't seen it, and don't want to. It's a hideaway for Rory. And it'll be a sort of post office for drugs and stolen things.'

Again, and because she was shocked, though not surprised, Olivia said, 'Ruth!'

'It's a dirty game, and I want him out of it.'

'Leave him then. That's what you have to do.'

'I'm not strong enough to leave him. I want to hurt him, so he either leaves me, or he feels ashamed enough to change.'

Olivia looked at her friend, whose body, she felt, was tingling with desire. 'Is it good with your lover?'

'Very good.'

'Who is he?'

'I'd rather not say. I don't think you know him, but it could be unhelpful ...'

Olivia remembered her conversation with Jack, a couple of hours earlier. 'I think I know.'

'Then keep it to yourself. And Jack, I don't mind if he knows.'

Olivia couldn't stop herself mentioning her discussion with Jack, after he'd made his phone call to Fairhaven, to rent the holiday house for the coming Christmas and New Year. Ruth nodded her head a couple of times, assenting. The Pages knew, and after the conversation with Olivia, they understood why. Olivia said, 'Is there anything you want me to do?'

Ruth shook her head, then said, 'Invite us down again, next summer.'

The news about Olivia spread quickly around the group. This is more than a matter of who told whom. Knowledge has a life of its own. Knowledge is often likened to a tree, but it is perhaps more like a plant that spreads via underground roots, breaking the surface here and there in apparently disconnected places. Binding everything together is the truth, or amount thereof, to be found in the various parts and places. Her friends reacted happily; Olivia's uncertainty, disquiet even, about bringing a child into the world had been known to them all, and they were, as a group, quick to appreciate that her decision was a reaction to her feelings about the discussion that had taken place at the Bartletts' Toorak home. The story of a crime, and the discussion of it, had changed Olivia. She'd taken the step, and was to be admired. Jack was a lucky man; Olivia was lucky to have Jack. And of course they all looked at their own lives in the light of this recently provided mirror. Had any ideals, or former goals, been put aside, or pushed out of memory's way?

Of course, but that was how things were ...

Madeleine Quirk came home after hearing the news and put on *L'Enfance du Christ*, of Berlioz, a piece she loved for its simplicity. Joseph and Mary needed shelter and strangers offered it. The infant Jesus was, one might say, creating his own good luck. It wouldn't last forever, that wasn't god's plan, but the great teacher, the world's redeemer, was off to a good start. A tenor reflected on what it meant. He sang in the simplest way and a choral response suggested that heaven was moved by the same simplicity as earth. Madeleine was pleased that Randolph wasn't home, because he'd say something, and, although she was a woman of words herself, she needed silence. She put the recording away. Modern recordings – compact discs, tapes – could be pushed back onto their shelves leaving no evidence in the air. Inner lives might be as secret as they were rich.

Madeleine was pleased about this. She thought that religions, or any big organisations, really – armies, parliaments – made a mistake when they instituted ranks and levels, procedures and entrance permits, as a way of controlling things. The spirit's workings were reduced by quantifying counts. A simple act of kindness was reduced by measurement, or by trying to judge the deserts, or otherwise, of the receiving person. A kindness was kindness itself; kindness was a condition of the universe, commonly, even regularly elbowed out by greed and similar attributes, but kindness was there, trying to find a way through. 'I'm not as kind as I should be,' Madeleine told herself, 'but at least I have the grace to know it.' She closed the cupboard door on the recording, and wondered if there was anything she could do for Olivia Page. Nothing came to her mind, but she noticed that she was still thinking of Olivia, and the kindness that had come to her a minute ago was still ascendant, like a star in her mind. Could Olivia feel this connection? Did she know that blessing, in whatever form it took, was about her, hovering? Madeleine had a feeling that she did, and then she glanced at her watch, to make herself aware of what time it had been when the connection had suggested itself to her, and at once, straight away and immediately, the connection was gone.

Randolph's car entered the drive and crunched to a stop. Madeleine pressed the switch of the kettle and emptied the teapot, ready for her husband to enter. She greeted him warmly when he came in, something of her Olivia-mood still with her. What had he done with his day?

Much the same as he did every day, but Madeleine, who knew little enough about aeroplanes, was interested; men like her husband

kept them in the air. She never saw film of planes landing, hovering above clouds, or drifting through the air over famous cities without feeling admiration for Randolph and people like him who kept the planes flying. It was almost as if they kept the world spinning. Madeleine, like millions of people, took the world for granted. Animals were killed and fish were netted for them to eat. Glamorous motor cars were built to enhance their lives. Cities were kept clean by workers who did their job under the blanket of night. If something went wrong in the home they made phone calls, and people came. Any slowness, incapacity or reluctance brought about complaint. It was why we had competition – to keep workers up to the mark. Awareness of this dependence can lead to humility but in Madeleine's case it had brought her to an awareness that she shied away from direct experience in favour of living through the standards of art already well-defined. When Randolph made some comment about Olivia's condition, Madeleine became stiff, and quiet. He knew this meant difficulty but thought it best to tackle it head-on. 'It's going to be a big change in their lives, having a child.'

Madeleine wanted to cry. It wasn't that she too wanted a child, but rather that she felt her habits meant it was out of reach for her to follow Olivia's path. If by any chance she became pregnant and the baby was born, it would cry, she and Randolph would be helpless, it would become malnourished – feeding a baby! – and their lives, their home, would become chaotic. Mishandled children grew up bad, they became social pariahs, they mixed with the wrong people and they finished up in jail, on drugs, or they disappeared. Madeleine had a horror of missing person ads because each was a family failure; the only way to avoid them was to lead a narrow life, not giving way to temptation in any of its forms. It was a relief for Madeleine that her husband, Randolph, was a perfectionist in his work. It meant that she too could avoid the opening up which was what being a mother meant. Children pulled you apart. Their demands came from inside a mother's protective barriers. Great mothers were great women and Madeleine, in avoiding the challenge, wanted some other way to feel good. Randolph, having mentioned the Pages, expected his wife to answer, but she moved across the room to the cupboard where she kept the discs she was playing at any given time. Why? Her storage of these discs was a point, not of contention but of amusement: the reserve stock, that is, those not being used at the moment, were housed in the hall cupboard, reconfigured by Randolph under exacting orders from Madeleine, to allow several arrangements for the storage of discs by composer, performer, period, nationality or other musical tradition, and so on. Nobody but Madeleine could figure it out and nobody was allowed to touch it. Madeleine alone transferred the discs from the hall cupboard to the smaller closet above the sound system. Randolph respected this but allowed himself a touch of amusement ...

Madeleine was going to the closet, then stopped, hand in the air. 'What is it, darling?' Randolph said, puzzled, surprised, but no more than that. Her answer was hardly more than a gasp. 'I can't. I know I should, but I can't. It's just impossible.' She let her hand touch the closet door, without opening it.

'Can't what, darling?' and then 'Are you okay?'

She wasn't. She sat down. Eyes still on the closet where she'd put the disc a short time before, she murmured, 'I'll never divide. It means I won't grow. I'll always stay the same.' Then, as if making everything clear, she told him, 'I was playing *The Childhood of Christ* before you came home.'

'Yes?'

She saw that he didn't see. 'I thought I was giving honour to Olivia. I thought I was making myself ready to do the same.'

'Yes.'

'But I wasn't.'

'Yes.'

'I was saying no. I was making up my mind. I was saying that I wouldn't.'

'Have children?'

'That's what I mean.' What would he say to that? Would he respect her, lose interest in her, get angry, fall in a heap, share her misery? What? 'What do you say about that, Randolph?'

He said, a little unsteadily, 'I say that if that's your choice then it's okay with me.'

She surprised him. 'But it's not my choice, it's *our* choice, and I've made it without respecting your wishes, whatever they may be.'

It seemed to him that she wanted to accuse herself for making the decision she'd made, and his mind didn't work that way. 'Well, what would it say about me if I said we're having a family whether you like the idea or not? You wouldn't respect me and half your friends would say I must be a ... rapist ... sorry, that's a hard word to say in this house where the only discordant note that's ever heard comes from an orchestra.' Seeing that she looked both frightened, and stony, he went on. 'The Childhood of Christ. That's a beautiful way to come to a decision. I'll remember this as long as we live. God's son came down from heaven in the form of a child. That's the most respectful way that anyone could think of for describing what it is to have a baby.' He stood. 'As for us, darling, you and I, if we've made the opposite decision, there's no better way we could say what it is we're doing.'

She accepted this, but was still glum. 'We have to make the best of it. It's as far as I can go. You, darling, may want to go further some time, with someone else. I can't get around that.'

He was strong for her. 'If it's your decision, it's my decision too. We're sticking together, on this and everything else.'

Randolph knew that Madeleine would like the news about Olivia to reach Donna, but would find it hard to acknowledge what she knew. So he decided to do it himself. He rang the Williamsons at a time when he thought Donna would pick up the phone, but found himself talking to Tim. 'A bit of women's business,' he said. 'Madeleine thought Donna might like to know.' Then he told Donna's husband. 'Pass it on, won't you.' Tim said he would, but put it out of his mind when he put the phone down because he was thinking about another of his misinformation strikes. He was tempted to parody the Abbott government in Canberra in some way, but they seemed experts in making fools of themselves. So where to turn? He found the AGE newspaper website tempting, but they were probably too smart, unless ...

It occurred to him that journalists love a mystery, particularly if they get a chance to show that someone important has made a fool of himself. A bit of misleading trickery? He started to think. Who needed mocking? Benjamin Netanyahu. Rabbis who'd done nothing about paedophiles in Jewish schools. Catholic ditto. Cardinal Pell, trying to clean up the finances of the Vatican. The money launderers of the world, closely linked to crime and the movement of drugs. Indonesian authorities who punished drug couriers without stopping the drugs from being made, or grown ...

The list was endless. If you looked at its bruises, the world was rotten. The only way you could feel good about yourself was to ignore what surrounded you; or else to mock it, laugh, feel scorn for what pressed against you. He wanted an idea to keep his spirits high, but none came. Donna put up with his mood for an hour or so, then demanded to know what he had on his mind. It occurred to him that rather than tell her, he should pass on the news about Olivia. 'The Pages are in the family way,' he said. 'Sorry, I meant to tell you, but I forgot.' Donna was scornful. 'The Pages! Only one of them, I would imagine. Who told you?' He told her the message had come from the Quirks, or rather from Randolph, because ...

Tim realised he didn't know why it had been Randolph who'd rung, not Madeleine. 'I'm not sure why it was Randolph who rang. I don't know. Perhaps ...'

'Perhaps what?'

He didn't know that, either. Donna was watching him critically. 'You're not on top of things today, are you?' This made him sullen, and he didn't reply. Donna thought aloud. 'Madeleine didn't feel up to telling me. That means she was shaken by the news. It's affected her in some way.' Tim tried to pick up her line of thought. 'She thinks it's time she had one herself, but ...' He couldn't finish. Donna was changing in front of him. He jumped up. 'I'll move the heater. You don't want that thing blowing hot air in your face!' She didn't want him blustering. 'Get me a cup of tea, Tim, would you? Please?'

He went to the kitchen. She needed to be rid of him. What was it about women? Whatever you did for them, it was always the wrong way about. They had to rearrange it for themselves, they had to turn things around so that they came to them some different way. They couldn't admit that men ever got anything right. He fiddled with a

packet of Chinese tea. He knew it was supposed to be very special and he couldn't remember where he got it. The water boiled, after taking its time, and he poured it onto the Chinese tea, a black tea, in their pot, also a Chinese one he'd picked up at a restaurant, a dainty black thing that he'd dropped while looking at it in the restaurant, and when it hadn't broken, being metal, he'd given the people dollars and brought it home. To Tim's amazement, Donna smiled lovingly at him when he took the tea into their front room on a tray and smoothed the spot on the table where she wanted him to put it.

'Tim,' she said, with ever so much affection, 'thank you. That's just what I wanted you to do.'

What was? But he was smart enough to smile graciously. 'Anything for you, my love.' He knew there was a need to take things on. 'You remember how we came by this?' He waved at the pot on its little stand. She nodded. 'You ...' and she laughed, accepting him, enfolding him as he'd only rarely felt enfolded before. Then she said, 'Poor Madeleine.' Tim wondered why she'd said this. Donna was in a mood that he partly recognised, and partly didn't. She was entering another person's mind intuitively, and the person had to be Madeleine. But what was she finding there? What did she think she saw? Then it seemed to Tim that she was putting Madeleine down, in her mind, and moving back to herself. She was considering herself and something in her mind was pleasing. She sipped her tea, not looking at him, and without feeling any need to comment. 'I brought two cups in,' he reminded her, and it worked: she poured a cup for him, albeit carelessly, and having filled it, she left it where it was. He waited for her to push it in his direction, but she was back in her thoughts, so he picked it up. It was a beautiful tea. It had clarity, and a feeling of continuity that he associated with China, while knowing full well that he knew little about that country. It was full of traditions that he had no way of understanding because he'd never been touched by them. Donna was still dreamily withdrawn, sipping once in a while. He dared not speak, even though he felt excluded. 'Where are we?' Donna said, and he was amazed, but she went on to name the month. 'July. She'll be six months pregnant when we're all together at New Year. January, February, March. She'll be quite big, she'll be active. Will she go in

swimming, do you think?' He was by no means sure if the question was addressed to him, so kept silent. Something about her mood was still closed to him. She was enclosed in her reverie, and it occurred to him that if she was contemplating a pregnancy, as he suspected, then her thoughts were about herself, and the changes that would settle on her personality as it became central. She was considering herself in her own imagination and he, he suspected, was, although still important in any such plans, essentially marginal because she would be taking for granted his compliance, his willingness to step back, or down a level, in importance. She was thinking about it, and he was being taken for granted. At once he felt a flash of ... panic? He couldn't have named it but it was most uncomfortable. He was being rushed, like someone pushed on a trolley into an operating theatre, within seconds of being injected with something that would anaesthetise his mind. No sirree! 'Can we get a few things clear!' he said, sternly, interrupting the sequence playing out in Donna's mind. 'If we're going to develop ideas that are going to change our lives ... forever,' he shouted, 'we'll develop those ideas together. Things have to be mutually agreed on, hey! I don't want to be left out! I'm here too, you know, leading a parallel life. I don't want to be pulled off my bearings without having any say!'

Donna turned her eyes on him, as if a little surprised that he'd been able to get out these words. Something in her mind had been cut short, but the special, almost saintly aura had been in no way disturbed. 'I won't be doing anything without your agreement, Tim. We're a partnership. We're two people combined into one ...' she didn't bother to find a word, so she repeated what she'd already found to say. 'Combined into one.' She didn't even smile. She was happy, and took his happiness for granted. 'We should do something for Olivia. She's very special now, isn't she. Perhaps we could give her a flag, as a way of telling her that she's leading the way!' She laughed. 'Do you remember those tour guides at the Vatican, Tim? Hundreds and hundreds of people all trying to remember which flag they were supposed to follow. All these parties of people getting mixed up, unable to see a thing, catching a few words from a tour guide going in the opposite direction, describing the wrong thing, which they couldn't see anyway. What a shambles. You remember, Tim?'

He did. They'd sworn they wouldn't go on any more conducted tours. Ever! In their whole lives! They'd broken their rule a couple of times since, but not often. The Vatican experience had changed them as travellers, and as people. Tim and Donna were agreed that they'd never felt less saintly, less interested in being virtuous, or even charitable, than when being shown the relics of saints, and martyrs and all the other unfortunates who were supposed to give guidance via their lives, deaths and remains, to the world of sinners. 'I'm not a bloody sinner!' Tim had said that day, and Donna had laughed, in a way that told him she could find her own guidance in this world. He'd accepted it joyously then, in Rome, and now ...

... here, home, in their own city of Melbourne, he saw that he must, and they must, be their own guides and her impulses, however surprising, or unexpected, must be followed. Saw too, that if he must follow her then she must follow him. He wanted to put a stumble-brick, a tripping-log, in the path of Benjamin Netanyahu, and Rupert Murdoch, and thousands of people with too much influence, and too many dirty tricks, all trying to coerce, to shape the lives of people who wanted to give their own lives the directions, and shapes, they decided for themselves.

But can this be done? We have been following the lives of a group of people as if, being autonomous, they understand what they are doing and can manage their lives to give them paths and outcomes according to their wishes. Readers will take it for granted that our people have personal psychologies producing these desires; that the secret of the individual is in the sub-conscious is perhaps the major tenet of the day. The consumer society which has largely swallowed the egalitarian democracy which once housed it, operates in another way. Decisions are made for us in places far from our subconscious and with only passing respect for our conscious thoughts. We are constantly asked how we feel about things as if they are choices when great effort is expended on us to remove, ever so gently, the meaning of choice. We tread a path that is constantly being designed and possibly re-routed at the whim, or wish, of a consort of controllers. Our feelings are respected because they are the means by which we

can be controlled. The modern captive is asked endlessly what should be brought to the comfort-filled cell. And lo, it arrives! Happy is s/he who never notices.

A cell is an ancient idea. Locking people away is an admission of societal failure. Keeping them under control while giving them the appearance of freedom is another matter entirely, yet by and large it has been done. Look around, dear reader. Look at Olivia Page, wondering what sort of world her child will have to face. Look at Ruth Svendsen, unwilling to know what Rory's doing on his country property where she never goes; look at Clive McConville, who's used by Ruth whenever she can get to him without constraints. And how does she find such moments? By waiting till her husband's created an opportunity: Rory's criminality gives her chances to be single again, sexually herself, a woman who might take another way, though she gets herself home in time to look settled when her husband returns.

Being settled: what does it mean? In the world of our characters it means living in one's allotted cell-space without resistance. Being settled roughly equals contentment, which is the low level form of happiness our society offers its denizens, that being the modern equivalent of being a citizen – an ideal long discarded, though popular when the French Revolution offered people the hope that the society they lived in was on the verge of becoming theirs, the previous rulers having been cut down. Oh the dignity of a citizen: where has it gone? How have the bars been made invisible, so that the cell doesn't look like what it is?

This is an interesting question. Realities have been turned into illusions. Centuries ago, Christians divided over whether the Catholic mass offered the *real* body and blood of Christ to swallow, or were the Protestants right in saying that what they offered at Communion was a representation, a *symbol* of the divine sacrifice? Something like this is happening today. We read about what's happening elsewhere, we watch happenings on television, we're told about them in the news, news is available twenty four hours a day, if we miss a broadcast we can scoop it up from endless support programs, we need not miss out! We can know; we can store up anything we're interested in. Certain places, certain parts of the

world, are the quarries for this illusory reality, and their doings are projected to the world in a variety of ways. Afghanistan, Iraq, what used to be called Palestine, and any place suffering a cyclone or a tidal immersion are quarries providing the raw material to be recreated and disseminated as *news*, the lifeblood of our days. The worst thing that can happen to any part of the world is for it to be the rest of the world's focus of attention, watched and judged and pitied. Security amounts to being hidden, that is, not under observation. Living quietly, unobtrusively, must be anyone's aim because to be in the news is to be in trouble. To keep us feeding on what they produce, media people have to frighten us, make us curious, puzzled, insecure, somehow incomplete. This is an interesting change from the tactics of the church over its millennia of mastery. It too had to scare its adherents, but offered also a promise: does anyone remember the threat of hell and the promise of heaven?

Does anyone remember that pinnacle of human experience, the last judgement?

Judgements are endless now, and to move through them comfortably, one must conform, first, and then consume. The role models are there for us, glamorous, superbly dressed, sexy, young, able to afford holidays in rarefied places, lounging in the luxuries of new business class cabins on international flights, speeding in superb motor vehicles along historic coastlines ... it's there for you if you're able to put yourself first, as we are now intended to do. Farewell atrophy, farewell the seven deadly sins! Farewell decay, obsolescence, farewell being forgotten while the publicity machines are shining on the chosen – those who choose as they are intended. Even death, our once greatest fear, can be held at bay by maintaining lifestyle and regretting the demise of those who can't. No need for resurrection because the means to make us new are in our own hands these days: they can be bought! When we return to the doings of the couples we encountered at the start of this book, we must judge them, see them, place them, according to the constructs of their time, as outlined above. This is their world, they are part of it, and whether they know it or not they must contribute to its workings, and that includes ensuring that their children are not singled out as strange. Everybody needs to fit, to look like the rest, to handle the same thoughts as their mental currency for if they don't they'll be excluded, unrecognised, ignored: the plainest words, the simplest feelings and actions are all, in their way, pleas to be allowed to live.

Olivia knew she was changing when she became aware that her husband was seeing her differently. Jack had always been respectful but as her pregnancy became more central to her thinking, he was, she observed, almost worshipful. Nothing was too much trouble. He listened. He studied her silences, doing his best to sense what she didn't, or couldn't say. And there was so much. She had a few days of thinking they should move to another home, then she changed her mind. Their house had three main rooms upstairs and one of them would be the baby's. Boy or girl? She didn't want to know. She wanted a daughter but tried to repress the feeling because it implied disloyalty to the boy she might be carrying. Her son! He would be brought up, if that was what arrived, to be aware of his female side; and if he – it – turned out to be a girl, she would have an intimate companion until the girl began to look at men.

It was all so far away, and the house was immediate. Looking out from the room, which was her reading room at the moment but would be her child's, she was aware that she'd never thought much about their garden. It was much the same as when she and Jack had moved in, two and a half years before. She wished she was a gardener, wished she had green fingers, and decided she must learn. She got Jack to go with her to the city's famous gardens, and she read about von Mueller, and then about William Guilfoyle. There were some rocks in a corner of the famous place, listing the directors down the years, caretakers of the city's glory. In envying them, she felt that she too was enviable; the city was full of women who were past childbearing, others who weren't ready yet, and the unfortunates who'd chosen not to breed. There was a moment, still far ahead of her, when she would be shown the child she'd delivered, and know that even for the everso-trained and qualified people who'd helped her bring the little one into the world, she, Olivia Page, was central, and the joy they would see flaming in her eyes would be as close to an arrival of the holy spirit as they would ever know.

She loved the gardens as she and Jack strolled through them, but knew that much had had to happen to make them what they were. The Baron had laid them out on scientific principles, and Guilfoyle as if they were a wealthy lord's estate; the walks were for the city's wealthy to show themselves, and more recently for tourists to be impressed. Loveliness loitered in the bamboo belts, and the ancient trees held by steel ties. Society of another day declared themselves in the plates at the foot of trees near Government House, planted by visiting royals. Dukes, knights and common people had shared these paths, these shades, and Olivia was filled with joy that her child, still unknown, un-named, would walk there one day when its prams and pushers were discarded. Yet the great garden was not something she could give her child. She wanted something small and secret, fitting her own size and unimportance, a place expressive of her defiance and her humility, something she would imagine, and Jack would help to build, and it would be the garden where her child would grow. The growth of a child, she knew, was a form of advance, and a form of leaving behind. The garden would express both. It would be their memory and their place of hope, secure, mysterious, deeply appreciated but forever unknown – like the person for whom it was to be made.

Attentive as he was in these weeks of growth, Jack Page knew that something was happening which he couldn't perceive. It was interior to his wife, this mysterious development, which even she didn't understand, so he could do no more than watch, and wait, and brood. Their child was going to change the meaning of their lives, yet what could be special about this? Everyone else had kids and they coped, they got on with things, they looked after their young, they brought them up, dressed them and schooled them ... all that sort of thing. It was ever so normal ... and yet it was more. Jack couldn't see it, he knew he couldn't see it, and he was waiting for this unknown thing to reveal itself, and it didn't. He started asking his friends, male and female, what it had meant for them to have their children, and mostly they laughed or were ultra-serious. 'Everything's different,' they said, but couldn't tell him in what way. Or they laughed. 'You forget what it's like to have a good night's sleep!' Younger men told him, regretfully, that there was less sex to be had; others told him the opposite. He saw that he would have to find out for himself, and this meant attuning himself to what was going on inside his wife.

Olivia's perspectives were moving. She was careful of her diet, and she read lots of things about her body, and the needs of a child. These were so great that hardly a mother on earth could provide them. Another school of thought told her to be natural; the child needed first to know it was loved, and everything followed from there. Don't worry, the guidebooks told her. Be natural. Others said that big families were best because the children couldn't be smothered by surfeits of parental love because the parents were too busy. This made sense but since Olivia didn't want a big family then the danger of being over-protective, over-loving, couldn't be pushed out of the way.

At times she grew sick of these thoughts, these preparations, and told herself that the only thing to do was to be natural and do or not do things according to how she felt at the time. This thought gave her respite, and she looked at the world again. It was as beautiful as ever when she and Jack were walking in their city's gardens, mad and meaningless when they were in traffic, which she hated, and boring and predictable when she paid attention to the media.

Her city was obsessed with football. There were days when it not only filled the back pages of newspapers, but also the front. Essendon's coach was the focus because he had employed a person of doubtful qualification to administer body-building substances to the club's players, and, people becoming aware of this, the accusation was levelled that some of these substances were illegal and banned for use in sport. Was this so? Certain journalists assured the public that the players had been put in an impossible position. If their coach wanted them to accept the injections, and they refused, would they lose their place in the team? Did they know what was being injected into their bodies? Yes? No? Unsure?

The public couldn't be sure. The club defended itself. Parents of the young men involved were reassured that their sons had done no wrong. The coach, once a famous player, denied that anything untoward had been done. Journalists raged. Members of the federal parliament made suggestions. Rival clubs "expressed concern". The Australian Football League stripped Essendon of sufficient match

points to exclude them from the finals ... and still the controversy raged. The matter was referred to a higher, anti-doping authority and they examined the issues all over again. The matter darkened two years of footballing before the seaside holiday which began this book and continued into the times we are describing. Meanwhile, the football competition, the endless indulgence of the city we are concerned with, played on, week after week.

How many weeks are there of football? For the media it never stops because no sooner is one grand final played than clubs are ousting coaches, hiring new ones, renewing sponsors' contracts, and recruiting lads to meld with the experienced men who are staying on. Clubs review their performances and hold annual meetings. Whispers find their way into the sporting pages, even in the cricket season, and despite the arrival of women's sport. Men are the focus of football, and despite a few female goal umpires and club committee members, the football season is about the display of ideal men – men of speed, power, skill, and strength allied to brains. At the same time the players are younger, on average, because they have to be: the game is now played at such speed that those who are slowing can't keep up. More umpires, too, are needed to impose order on this speed. Yet somehow the statisticians and broadcasters manage to keep up; how they do this and at what cost is hard to know.

Above and supervising all this activity is the Australian Football League and in a form of what an unhappy club president called 'football socialism', they distribute vast sums of money to clubs which can't take enough at the gates to keep themselves in the manner to which they believe they have a right to be accustomed. Football is the biggest show in town, and although nobody ever says so, it is men's last-ditch answer to feminism. Players have not only to be vastly skilled with the ball. They must be interesting because the media spend so much time on them. Television panels, numerously suited and vastly experienced, mention to microphones – and the whole country if it's listening – what they make of what they've seen. Famous players are paid vast sums of money to lend their names and faces to products that we might otherwise buy – or ignore – without thinking. Skin cream, vitamin pills.

Above all else, they must be role models. Married or randily single, they need to be in bed by a certain hour. Girls, young women and others old enough to know better have crushes on them, ring them up, follow them around offering themselves, while the clubs attempt to give this sexual frontier a measure of respectability, which is to say restraint. In a sexually liberated age, footballers' lives are closely examined. They must also be drug-free, which takes us back to where this diversion began: players are tested both regularly and at random to prevent them from using chemicals to make themselves super-mortals. No, they must be men, but they must be ideal. Olivia was asked by her GP whether she wanted to know if she had a boy or a girl inside her: she didn't want to know.

The doctor was surprised. Most women accepted testing as normal, yet Mrs Page didn't want to know. She asked her why. Olivia was ready. 'Because,' she said, 'it would change me if I knew. It would change the way I think about my child. If you told me it was going to be a girl, I'd give it a girl's name and I'd be preparing myself for the uphill struggle she was going to face. If you told me it was a boy, I'd give him a boy's name, a man's name, and steel myself to make him different, when perhaps he'd grow up not wanting to be different. I want to start on absolutely level terms. I don't want to know until the baby's born, and then I'll give it my best go, no matter what the terms. I think that's the fairest way to be, boy or girl, whatever.' The doctor had a limited number of mothers-to-be who'd made the same decision but not one who'd explained why. 'Thanks Olivia,' she said. 'I see your point.'

Olivia observed her husband closely, but Jack passed the test. He was going to give his best whichever it was. He'd long been thinking about a child, and she knew his fair-mindedness; she couldn't detect even a vestigial wish to see himself prolonged, extended for another lifetime, by the birth of a boy he could influence, or train, to be as he'd been. He was as curious as she was. Olivia loved him for that, and more than love, she respected him. These were not the same thing. She thought of Lorna and Les Bramble, fashion writer and race broadcaster. Lorna thought Les's occupation was not only trivial, it was a vast indulgence, similar to the nation's football clubs, tribunals

and whatever, and yet she loved him. More than that, she was able to love him more because she had such a poor opinion of the world of his occupation. She knew how much he needed her to give his life some shape, some justifiable concerns to be serious about. Olivia suspected that Les Bramble probably knew all this, somewhere in his being, but kept talking, talking and broadcasting, so he didn't have to say what he knew were the fundamentals of his situation. This amused Olivia, not only because it lifted her above Les Bramble by any calculation her head could produce, but also because it lifted her above her previous self. She was changing. She was no longer the young woman she'd been. Jack, her husband, would have to grow with her if he was to maintain her ...

... respect. The terms on which she dealt with the world, she realised, had changed and were going to move further as the months moved on. She wanted to be close to her own mother, who lived in Sydney; she asked her down to stay. Julie Dowling came down and found herself talking for hours about her husband, Olivia's father, who had died when his daughter was six; Olivia had many memories of him, mainly of him playing with her in their tiny back yard, within distance of the roaring sea, or of him reading to her as she lay in bed, ready for sleep. 'Was he a good man, mother?' Olivia asked, not once or twice, but by implication every time she got her mother reminiscing. 'How did you meet him? What was the first thing he said to you? What were his parents like?' Olivia wanted the full human caravan to be revealed: she was going to add to it, first of all herself, and then her child. Life was to be passed on. 'What was I like when I was six? Did I change when Daddy died?' There was so much to know, and knowledge itself was changing from the endless surface features of life to its inner impulses and manifestations. Everything was a sign of things happening inside. Goodness and kindness revealed themselves in the eyes of people so disposed, and so did ugly opposites. People couldn't hide what they had inside them. It was like an aura, a glow they didn't know they were projecting. Olivia wanted to know what she was to those who watched her, even those who knew her best. 'Did you ever warn me, mother? What did you feel when I married Jack?'

Julia Dowling flew back to Sydney a fortnight later, promising to return when her daughter called, and feeling vindicated, humbled, and, yes, wise. There was something gained by seeing life repeating itself, generation by generation. Something about the process absorbed her; she looked out the windows of the plane at clouds, forest and farmland, and then, as Sydney approached, the coastline and the sea. What had she learned? She thought, and it wouldn't come. The puzzle was still there as she gave a taxi driver her case to put in the back and was driven, swiftly and expertly, into Glebe. Then it came. Things changed when you saw them for the second time, a generation apart. Olivia setting the table, Olivia putting flowers in a vase, Olivia looking enquiringly at her when she was about to pour her mother's tea ... She'd done all these things and more herself, when she was young and her daughter, now preparing to be a mother herself, was still tiny, young, unformed. When you saw someone else doing these simple things, it was both easy and hard to remember doing them yourself, as you had, once. Once upon a time! Time, which owns us all, is owned by each of us in a different way, even when we are doing the things our mothers did. Perhaps, Julie Dowling thought, we are fortunate not to be able to burden ourselves with the experience of too many generations at the back of us. It was enough to feel the connection, the continuity, from our mothers and possibly our grandmothers: that was enough because we had to believe that we were making fresh starts, even if they aren't very fresh at all.

Only repeats of what had been done any number of times before. We have an illusion to live, Julie Dowling told herself, as she paid her driver and pulled out the key to her own front door. We have to pretend to be unique when we know we're not. She opened the door, stepped into the hall, and laughed. Home! Clichés flooded in. Home is where the heart is. If that were so, she realised, then she had two homes now, one in Glebe and the other with Olivia-soon-to-be-a-mother in Melbourne. She rang her daughter, told her she was home, was already missing her but would try to immerse herself in habitual activities on the morrow, but wanted to be told if there was any change in her condition. Olivia solemnly agreed. When Jack came home he was told by his pregnant wife that if he saw any changes in

her he was to tell her, because she'd promised to pass on any news, anything at all, to her mother who was now too far away to see.

Jack swore solemnly that he would do so, but he neglected to mention that the empty bowl at the end of the kitchen bench and the orange peel spilling out of the bin told him that she'd eaten her way through the best part of a dozen oranges since her mother left that morning. If Olivia didn't realise then he didn't know either. 'Did she have a good flight?' Olivia wasn't interested. Flights? You tried to keep your eyes closed so you couldn't see their idiotic film. She wondered why they didn't make aeroplanes with viewing rooms where you could look out through great panes of glass and feel as if you really were in the clouds. Airlines took the magic out of flight and they should be made to put it back. Or so Olivia said and Jack agreed. 'What did your mother tell you about your father?' and the answer was 'Lots!' Jack was pleased. 'I'd like to hear about it, when you're ready.' Olivia loved him, but preferred to keep back: loving was different when you had love's embodiment inside you. 'I'll tell you tonight when you're lying in bed, dropping off to sleep. Then I'll be telling you things in just the way my daddy read to me when I was little, something I'd never forgotten but heard about, all over again, while mother was down.'

Tessa drove Don to the airport. He seemed lighter than usual, happier in himself. 'I could still come with you,' she told him. 'Leave the car in the long-term park, and see if they can squeeze me aboard. Or put me on the next flight?' He touched her hand. 'It's only a couple of days. Well, three. They'll look after me darling. They ought to, it's costing us enough!'

He was going to a legal conference. Tessa had very little idea of what they'd be talking about, and Don claimed to know only slightly more than she did. She knew he wanted to make her feel better about her ignorance. She wasn't made to grasp the law in its intricacies. 'Some interesting people coming. Couple of New Yorkers, and there's a German man I want to hear. We really don't know much in this country apart from what they do in Britain and America. We get so tangled up in the daily brawls and everything else that's going on at

the coalface that we lose sight of the origins of law, and that's probably the most interesting aspect of it. Just drop me here, darling. Qantas. This is it.'

It was a day later, at much the same time, that she remembered those words. 'This is it.' They troubled her. She rang the number he'd left her for the conference, because his mobile was switched off, and they said they'd find him for her as soon as the next speaker had finished – 'We can't interrupt the talks' – and get him to ring her back.

He didn't, so she rang again. They promised to investigate, and let her know. She waited half an hour, then rang the hotel. 'Mister Trevorrow left about half past seven this morning. He got a taxi. No, as far as we know, he only had his briefcase with him. No, he hasn't checked out. We expect him back this evening.'

A taxi? The organisers had recommended the hotel because it was only a city block from the conference venue. Something was wrong. She went to their bedroom, put her head down, and thought. Where? What? The universe was huge, and he was somewhere. Or possibly he wasn't. The sea was the first thought that came into her mind. The sea at Fairhaven, all those months ago. Then it came to her. Sydney, The Gap. That was where they did it, all the unhappy souls. She knew what he'd do. He'd get the driver to let him out some distance away, and he'd stroll to the high ground overlooking the sea. He'd put his briefcase on a seat, a bench, somewhere innocent-looking, and he'd stroll, affecting the best will in the world, to the edge, frightened but relieved. Close to happy. She knew. She hoped the sea at the bottom had been wild, so it would be quick. Or would the rocks, and the fall, do the job? She'd never been there, she'd only heard people talking about the place, but she knew. So what was there to do?

She rang Victoria Police headquarters, and they gave her the number of the New South Wales police, and told her the extension she should ask for. She rang, they sounded cautiously sceptical, but said they'd investigate. She gave them her number and they hung up. What to do now? Wait?

She went to the gallery where she took visitors around, talking about the paintings on the wall. That was what she did when she was working. Well, today she was a visitor, so she took herself around,

telling herself what she saw. In a routine she already knew well, she started at the beginning: the earliest painters coming to terms with a land they didn't know. Eventual familiarity. Bold little pictures on cigar box lids, nine by five. The blazing light of Australia accepted, with all the landscapes' moods. How exhilarating they were. Always the land, when her thoughts were with the surrounding sea. Then Russell Drysdale, and Peter Purves Smith, two painters who borrowed surrealism for their purposes. She thought of an advertisement she'd seen on a tram in Flinders Street, before she'd come into the gallery. A young woman was playing a violin, and causing a crab – a fairly white crab, she'd noticed, so it wasn't a lobster - to dance! This gave rise to words which told you to buy something, which she couldn't remember. Surrealism, once so provocative, had been recruited to serve the economy, like almost everything and everybody else. Don was free of that now. She didn't want to cry. He'd wanted to end his life months ago, and she'd held him back. She'd given him months of life he wouldn't have had, yet the result had been the same. He'd found a way out. Everyone had to go, but why did he go early? She thought of those crosses and bunches of flowers alongside highways, remembering. Half of those flower-people would have killed themselves, or at the very least allowed the accident to occur. Don would have ...

Glib Nolans presented themselves. She moved away. Albert Tucker showed women of the wartime night waiting for Americans with their dollars; what a time was that! Then he went on to explorers with heads of unbelievable ugliness. Yet there was an anger in his work that she had to respect. It hit her that without Don her life was now empty; this walk around the gallery was her last promenade with him. She turned to a row of paintings, modest in scale and approach, by Clarice Beckett, and she found herself wishing that she could trade her life for another. It would be wonderful to walk along a bayside beach and see the young Clarice painting. She must have worked ever so quickly because she had her parents to look after, back at home, and they were demanding, and yet they must have known that their daughter needed her excursions to relieve the burdens they imposed. Clarice painted motor cars better than anybody, so she was

open enough to the modern world, turning her parents' time into something else. We can't fight the age we live in, Tessa thought, we must accept ...

This word ended her walk. She thought of Don, and the New South Wales police. She went home and rang. No, they hadn't seen any sign of his body, or not yet, but they had found a briefcase, and yes, it was at the famous Gap, where people threw away their lives. They weren't able to return the case immediately, there were things they had to do, but they wanted to know Tessa's name and address so that it could be returned and, said a sympathetic policewoman, there would have to be some proof of her connection with the presumably dead owner of the case and its contents. Tessa told the other woman what the case contained, including items that only someone with an intimate connection could have known. 'That's good enough,' the Sydney woman told her. 'We'll get it back to you as soon as we can.' And she was gone, as Don was gone, as a whole slab of Tessa's life was gone. She would have to start all over again.

She didn't cry. She wasn't ready for that release. She rang Olivia Page, hoping the other young woman could teach her to make some affirmation that would defy the forces that take us away. The phone was still ringing, and Olivia moving through the house to pick it up, when Tessa knew that she could cry soon, could empty herself in grief, because she would pick herself up again. There was more strength, more life, waiting round the corner.

This mood didn't last long. She spoke to Don's parents, elderly people who lived in Tatura, a rural settlement two hours drive from the city. They were distressed at their son's death, and confused about what one might do to mark the end of a life when there was no body. Tessa had no answer to this. She rang Jenny Bartlett, who, surprised, said she'd discuss the matter with Norman and get back to her. 'You'll need a ceremony of some sort, Tess. If you want a place to have it, you can have it at our house. Here.' Tessa's relief was obvious, as was her gratitude. Jenny saw that the younger woman wanted the problem solved by someone else. 'I'll talk to Norman. He's full of ideas. When we've got something sorted out, we'll get back to you. But don't

worry, we won't keep you waiting. We'll think of something that's appropriate.'

Norman said that there needed to be two functions of some sort: one for Don's legal colleagues, who would arrange something they felt suitable for them, and a second gathering, more private, to be held in his and Jenny's Toorak home, for those who'd been present when Don revealed his wish to die – the beach party at Fairhaven, months before. Don's parents – and Norman thought there were a couple of sisters – should be present at both. Anyone else the family wished to involve should be invited to some sort of function at Tatura, and arrangements for that were up to the parents. 'I don't think the parents will be up to it, though. Two ceremonies will be about as much as they can stand.'

Jenny put this to Tessa, and she agreed. It was only a matter of dates, and arrangements. Jenny said she'd contact Don's professional colleagues via his secretary, if Tessa would let the parents in Tatura know what was being arranged. To Norman she said, 'This has to be done as quickly as possible. The parents up in the bush don't know what to do and I have an idea they never knew their son very well. And Tessa? She's got no idea of how to deal with the parents, and even less idea of what to do with herself. She's known about Don's death wish for some time, but never had any idea about what to do about it, and now that he's done it, she's more confused than ever.'

Norman thought. 'Most of us are. If you've got a death wish, you feel its force more than you understand it. It's a bit like having a twin. You can't separate yourself psychologically, no matter how far apart the two of you are. The thing doesn't lend itself to explanation, it's simply a part of you.'

'So how do we make an occasion that gives Tessa some consolation? And the parents? Tell me that.'

Another closure of the eyes while he thought. 'The sea is the common factor. It's where he is now, and it's where he was going, that night last summer. We'll have a gathering here. The theme will be the sea. Everyone can read, or sing, or play some music, recorded music that is, about the sea.' He looked at his wife. 'Everyone can think of something. They can use the idea any way they like, but that's the

theme. It'll help Tess and maybe his parents think about what he did. It may be some use to them. On the other hand, even if it's useless, there's no harm done. At the very least it'll be an act of remembrance.'

And so it was. Phone calls were made, to Tatura, the legal profession via Don's office, and to those who'd been at Fairhaven the previous January. Andrew and Heather Trevorrow, Don's parents, and Lucy, his sister, agreed to attend the Bartletts' afternoon memorial service, saying that although Jenny's idea of people reading poems or playing music sounded strange to them, they wished to meet people who had known their son. His other sister, Josephine, was in America and would not be able to attend.

Once these arrangements had been made, Jenny called on Tessa to discuss how the afternoon would work. Tessa should be on hand to welcome Don's family members, and introduce them to those they didn't know - which would be everybody. They would meet the children, who could be present if they wished, but otherwise could retire to the play and reading room upstairs. When everyone was present, and ready, Norman would begin proceedings with another welcome, to the Trevorrows first, and then to everybody. He would explain that he would be calling on those present who wished to do so to read, or play music, and first to say a few words explaining how their contribution related to the theme of the sea and Don's disappearance, as Jenny put it. Tessa felt a little uncomfortable with the word because, as she put it, Don's parents were country people and didn't talk in euphemisms. They confronted things bluntly or they ignored them. What they didn't wish to discuss didn't exist, so clearly did they distinguish between what was possible and what was not.

Jenny, unfamiliar with the type of people described to her by Tessa, misread what she'd been told. They would be ready, she felt, for the contributions that had been proposed by those who'd already made up their minds. These were a very mixed set of responses to what Don had done, but each, she felt, was serious, and thoughtful. Tessa took this on trust. She was used to explaining the ideas embodied in works of art to people not familiar with them, and people of all sorts accepted what she told them as she led them through the galleries where she worked. It seemed like a good idea.

The day came. Don's family arrived at precisely the hour set down. The Fairhaven party were already there; Jenny had insisted on this. She indicated the chairs which were to be left empty for the family members, then fussed over the room until the door bell rang. She went to the door not knowing what her guests would look like, and found a tall, gaunt farming man, Andrew, and Heather, his wife, with weathered skin, yet possessing energy and an air of severity, suggesting that she would be a dangerous adversary. They had with them their daughter Josephine, a woman of a certain age, much older than her brother Don, and with that same severity which she'd taken from her mother. Jenny introduced herself, her husband Norman, then took them around the others in the room. Those who'd known Don through the Fairhaven holiday quickly came to understand that their connection with the Trevorrows' son was minor and that nothing they might wish to express about him and their loss would match the family's loss; Jenny found herself revising her ideas of the occasion she'd planned. Young Rex, for instance, had told her that he wanted to play The Animals' song, The House of the Rising Sun, because it was about a young man who couldn't break out of habits that were destroying him. No, Jenny saw, no. If he couldn't think of anything else he'd have to content himself with supporting the poem Nancy was going to read. Some of the couples had decided they'd make one contribution between them. Jenny ushered the visitors to their chairs, then stepped back for her husband. Norman advanced by half a pace, then addressed the room.

'Every one of us knew Don, and respected him as a barrister, a partner ...' he glanced in Tessa's direction '... a sometimes chef ...' he smiled '... and a friend. We all grieve for his partner Tessa, whom we know well, and his family, whom we meet today for the first time. We are all trying to come to terms with losing him, although we were aware that his hold on life was not as secure as we might have wished. Those of us who shared the hospitality of Jack and Olivia Page last Christmas to New Year ...' he let his gaze rest on this couple '... will remember our surprise when he left us, down the beach one evening, heading for the sea. We drew him back, and he settled down again, apparently as normal as any of us, but, if we'd only known it, we'd

been warned. None of us, apart from Tessa, had met his family at that time so we had no context for what we saw that night. It's something that none of us were able to forget, but neither could we understand it because none of us were carrying the same ...' he paused '... fixation that Don was carrying. We couldn't understand it and, I venture to say, Don couldn't understand it himself. He could only fight it with such strength as he was able to bring to bear, and in the end it wasn't sufficient to protect him from the demons he carried within him.'

He looked at the parents – angular, difficult people, who might or might not be accepting what he was saying. Their faces were impassive. For all that he spoke with a sense of correctness, Norman couldn't be sure if he was in some way transgressing in the minds of these rural people who were in his home. Their own home, in the countryside, would be Spartan by comparison, he felt sure. Yet he had a job to do, and he moved to do it. 'We've gathered today to examine, as best we can, the life of Don Trevorrow, and to reflect on the way it ended, in the hope that by sharing our thoughts we can increase our understanding, perhaps, and find some acceptance for the way his life ended. Hence our theme for today's activities: the sea. Jenny and I chose this theme, for obvious reasons, and asked everyone who was with Don at Fairhaven last summer, to reflect on what they knew of Don, his life, and the way it ended. We invited each of his friends to do this in any way that seemed suitable for them, you've all been good enough to give us your ideas, and I propose that we start our reflections by making ourselves comfortable ...'

Andrew Trevorrow looked as if he neither wanted, nor even understood why anyone should want to be comfortable: it simply wasn't possible; and his wife, Heather, appeared equally foreign to the idea being proposed.

'... and then, sometimes individually, and sometimes as a couple, offering these reflections we've chosen, one by one, until each family has said what it wants to say, after which we will move into the next room ...'

He pointed, and somehow the scale, the way of both demanding and imposing itself of the city's wealthiest suburb revealed itself in the house, its setting, and the assurance of its owners. '... for some afternoon tea, and the chance to talk with each other, and to get to know Don's family, whom we welcome among us today.' He had ended. With a nod, he added one last word. 'Jack.'

Jack Page bowed, but did it without standing. He shuffled a piece of paper. 'I'm going to read a poem. It's by the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas. It's in the form of a villanelle, which means that there are lines repeated throughout the poem and there are rules about when and where they're repeated. Hearing these lines over and over makes you very conscious of their message, as I think you'll see. Here goes.' He read firmly and slowly, slightly varying his delivery of the repeated lines, until he came to the end:

Do not go gentle in that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

There was an ominous silence. Don, of course, had not done what the poet prescribed. Tessa, knowing that her parents-in-law had probably resented the inferences of what they'd heard, put in, 'It's a fine poem, Jack, it's most memorable, but Don wasn't made that way.' She knew she was offending the first of their group to speak, and perhaps some of those yet to speak, but felt she had to say at least a little of what the parents would have been feeling. 'Thank you Tess,' said Norman, their compere, 'I think Olivia has another poem to add to that one. Perhaps we should think of them together.' He looked to Olivia and closed his face.

Olivia had a finger between the pages of a book. 'Kenneth Slessor, one of our very best poets. It's called 'Beach Burial', and it's one of the last poems he ever wrote. Some of you will know that he stopped writing in his forties. He reached his peak and decided, for some reason, not to go on.' She coughed.

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

She looked around to make sure they were listening. Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire, Someone, it seems, has time for this, To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood, Bears the last signature of men, Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity, The words choke as they begin –

"Unknown seaman" – the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men's lips,
Olivia was struggling, but read on, keeping her eyes on the page.
Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,

Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.

The silence this time was different, accepting of what had been said to them by Slessor and Olivia, their friend. Andrew Trevorrow said, 'Yes. I see why you like that piece. But the thing is, we haven't got Don's body to bury it. It's very confusing for Heather and me. And Josephine. We can't do what we know we ought to do, and that's bury our boy.' He clamped his mouth shut and they knew it had required an effort, and he wouldn't speak again. Norman glanced at his notes and invited Nancy, 'the youngest member of our group' to read. Nancy stood briefly, bowing to Don's family, then sat again. "It's only a very short poem. Very short. It's by Mary Gilmore. She's not well known these days, but she was famous once. She's on our ten dollar note, with Banjo Patterson on the other side. There's a picture of her when she was young and another from when she was very old. The second picture is from a painting by William Dobell. I think it's wonderful. The poem I want to read is very simple. It's called Nationality.'

I have grown past hate and bitterness, I see the world as one;

But though I can no longer hate, My son is still my son.

All men at God's round table sit, And all men must be fed; But this loaf in my hand; This loaf is my son's bread.

The effect was startling. Heather Trevorrow's hands clenched, lifted, then slumped down again as the mother of the man they were mourning burst into loud, heaving sobs. She retched, sobbed, retched again, then put her hands to her eyes for a moment, before bursting out in anger, 'This is how you remember him? Why don't you hold a proper service, in a church? God doesn't mean us to sit around talking. God wants us to pray for those who are being judged by him. Pray!' Andrew Trevorrow looked at his wife, apparently agreeing with her, then looked at Norman Bartlett, their host. His eyes said - look what you've done. How long is this going on? Don't you have any idea of how we're feeling? Norman stood and moved to where the family were seated. Jenny followed him but, unable to take Mrs Trevorrow's hands as she had intended, had to content herself with standing behind her chair. Like her husband, she tried to explain, to soothe, to cause, if possible, the distressed visitor to see that the purpose of the function was – or rather, had been – to give rise to reflection ... which was now impossible. Heather Trevorrow stopped sobbing and fell into a sullen, menacing silence, Andrew, her husband, continued to say nothing, so it was left to Josephine, the daughter, to create any reconciliation, if possible: something foreign to her character. 'Mother, they cared for Don, even if it wasn't in the same way that we cared for him. He was always a bit of a mystery to the rest of us.' Tessa, from the other side of the room, called, 'Don would have liked these poems, if he could hear them. He liked poetry. He liked songs, and opera. He used to say that there were only a certain number of things that made life worth living. He'd have agreed with what we were doing.' Heather's silence was her answer to that. Andrew Trevorrow's silence supported his wife's objection, though whether the crinkle-necked farmer believed in what his wife said God did and didn't intend, nobody could say. The Trevorrows were in some way invincible because Heather felt that God was on her side and Andrew, her husband, was backing her too, and Josephine's words were designed only to show some fairness to those who were, most unfortunately, their hosts. Suddenly, and most unexpectedly, Madeleine Quirk stood up, and, speaking from her chair directly facing Heather, announced, 'You need to know that none of us thought this day was going to be easy. Each one of us brought to this house something we'd chosen as an offering to Don, an offering that might give us a little better understanding of what he did when he left us. We need to open our minds, not close them. He was your son but he was our friend too.'

Heather Trevorrow was enraged, yet silenced. She'd not been spoken to in this fashion since childhood. She glared at the woman opposite. Madeleine went on. 'You believe in God. Good. Much comfort may he bring you. I believe in music. I chose a song, an aria from an opera, for us to hear today. I want to hear it. I want Don, wherever he is, to hear it.' She was in full flight by now, as furious, in her way, as Heather Trevorrow had been before she was silenced. 'It's a sailor singing. He's on a ship, it's anchored near the land, and there's a battle rageing. It's been going on for years. The sailor's got no idea who's going to win, or why they're all fighting, or when it will ever end. It makes no sense, so he wants to go home and get away from it all. So he sings about his home, and there's two soldiers listening, and they tell us he won't see his home again, because, being soldiers, they don't think anybody ever does, once they leave. It's a beautiful song, and this young sailor, when he sings it, he's singing to the sea. You'll know it because you'll hear the words "Oh puissante mer". Oh powerful sea.' With no more acknowledgement of the family than an angry glance, she moved to the gramophone where her disc was waiting, and turned it on. The gathering, willingly or not, found themselves listening to Berlioz:

Vallon sonore, Où dès l'aurore Je m'en allais chantant, hélas! Sous tes grands bois chantera-t-il encore, Le pauvre Hylas?

Berce mollement sur ton sein sublime,

Oh puissante mer, l'enfant de Dindyme!

Few of them had the French to understand it, but the loneliness, the sense of being infinitely lost, was apparent to them all, and the reference to the sea, the reverence for the sea, quelled any feeling they might have had that they could use their minds, their intellect or their will to master their lives in any way. The singer, a light-voiced tenor, no hero, an insignificant battler, as Australians call them, wanting to get away from the battle which seemed as if it would never end, went on.

Fraîche ramée

Retraite aimée

Contre le feu du jour, hélas!

Quand rendras-tu ton ombre parfumée

Au pauvre Hylas?

Berce mollement sur ton sein sublime,

Oh puissante mer, l'enfant de Dindyme!

The helplessness of his call had entered them by now. Even the angry Trevorrows could hear that through the call of the young sailor, Don's friends were calling to them, sharing the impossibility of making meaning of it all. In the third verse, two soldiers – sentinelles in the libretto - commented on the youth: 'He's dreaming of his homeland', which, they agree, 'he'll never see again.' The aria ended in silence, with the sailor falling asleep. Maria Furlinghetti spread her arms expressively. 'Sleep's a sort of death, I suppose. If you think of it that way.' Les Bramble murmured, 'I never heard anything like it. It's affected me.' He cocked his ear to see if he could hear any sounds of the children upstairs, but couldn't, and took Lorna by the hand, something she found pleasing, however unusual. Jenny Bartlett, keeping an eye on her husband, spoke up. 'I think that sums up all we wanted to say. I think we'll break off at this point and invite everyone to move into the next room, where afternoon tea is ready and waiting'. The appearance of two middle-aged matrons in simple black and white uniforms confirmed her announcement; they smiled as the guests began to move towards the amply-laden tables. Les Bramble said to Lorna, 'Those kids are unusually quiet. I think I might slip upstairs and make sure everything's okay.' Madeleine Quirk made a point of keeping in the rear until she saw that the Trevorrows had been given tea, and cake, and had found new chairs in the other room, then she brought herself respectfully to where they were. To Heather Trevorrow she said, 'I hope you will forgive me contradicting you before. I know how strongly you believe in what you said. I wanted, simply, to have you know how some of us felt too.'

Though she spoke of apology, there was little enough of it in her voice. Heather Trevorrow recognised the strength of the woman in front of her, and had no wish to avoid a confrontation. 'You did what you believed in. I may not like it, but I can't criticise you for that because Andrew and I have done it all our lives – put our beliefs out where everyone can see them. I can't expect you to do anything less.'

Madeleine spoke again. 'We are very different people. I wonder if we can reach some point of agreement, or make peace between the ways we see the world.'

Heather Trevorrow looked at her husband, as if drawing his agreement in behind her. 'I would think agreement would be most unlikely. Respect, however, might be possible.'

'What did that music mean to you?'

'It was unbearable. Very beautiful, very painful.'

'Was there truth, for you, in the pain?'

'Far too much. I hope I never hear it again.'

'It may seem strange to you when I say that I hope I can hear it every day of my life.'

Heather Trevorrow thought this idea worthy of being tested. 'Does that mean that you want someone to die, every day of your life?'

'No, I don't *want* someone to die, although I know they will. Someone will die, somewhere, whether I know them or not. Someone, somewhere in the world, is dying every minute of the day. And the night. That's why I listen to that music as often as I can.'

Heather's face closed, indicating that she didn't understand. Andrew Trevorrow made an irritable movement of his hand, but tried to do something with the silence, the latent hostility which had reappeared on this most difficult day. 'Everyone to their own,

I suppose. Our family will ask God to relieve our suffering. You have another way of dealing with things.'

It seemed unlikely that the two views would ever have been reconciled, but any possibility of this happening was interrupted when Les Bramble came noisily back downstairs, beaming. His hosts looked at him in surprise. 'Everything okay?' Les stopped on the second last stair and said loudly, 'Very okay if you barrack for Hawthorn!' It was grand final day, and the gathering at the Bartletts', if they'd had any interest in the football, as plainly Les did, had been distracted. Most of them had forgotten. One or two looked at their watches. 'Three-quarter time,' Les said noisily. 'Sydney's hardly scored. They're way behind. Well held on every line!' He was still beaming. 'Hawthorn's only got to hang on another quarter, and they're the premiers!' Flags were waving and crowds were roaring in his mind. 'Premiers, the mighty Hawks! Heeeeeey!'

Even the Trevorrows could understand that.

Spring

Ruth had gone to the Bartletts', and left, on her own. It was how she was, these days. When Rory went to Beechworth, she escaped to Fairhaven. It was sexually exciting, even fierce, but it wasn't solving any problems. Was she still married, or not? More importantly, was she not slowly dying, inside herself? She went to the city one morning, shopping, as she told herself. Shopping? She didn't need anything. She went into Myers, the famous department store, over the road from David Jones, their rival, and she was startled to find the shop transformed. Over the weekend, it had been made floral. Long stems of fruit trees – peach and pear and plum – were everywhere, high above and just over eye level, in bud. Bowls of flowers sat everywhere. Shop assistants were smiling. Customers coming in with hard faces were changed. They smiled too, slowed down, and took it in. Wonderful! The window dressers must have been there all day and all night, up ladders, cutting, snipping, arranging, standing back. How proud they must have been. Something broke in Ruth. Tears came to her eyes, as they had not at the gathering in memory of Don. There was such a thing as new life, even hope! A beautiful young woman, Greek in appearance, and the same age as Ruth, came from behind a counter and said to her, 'Enjoy!' Ruth flashed her a smile of love, before moving on, still wondering. What had happened? It was artificial, but what more could a shop do? They'd told you what you needed to know: winter was over, there was hope.

She stopped near a cosmetics counter, not far from a lift. Yes, hope. She could feel it. Was it in her body, or her mind? She didn't care. It was a change. She knew it wasn't permanent. A few paces outside and she'd be where she'd been for ages. Trapped. Yet she was quick enough to know that the trap wasn't made of steel, like the brutal things that captured animals, it was of her own mind's making. If she was trapped by her thoughts, surely she could unmake them, and find a way to be free?

The attendant was watching her. Ruth took a step toward her, wanting to embrace the stranger. 'I have a problem,' she said. 'I thought it was inescapable, but now I know better. I'm going to sit

down and think my way out of it.' The Greek woman, made up only lightly, nodded. Ruth wanted her to come to a coffee shop with her, down one of the city's famous lanes, but of course she couldn't; she was working. Yet she was smiling too, aware of a troubled presence, and offering strength because she was confident. Of what? It didn't matter. She was confident. Then, Ruth knew, *she* must be confident too, no matter what thoughts presented themselves. She said to the shop woman, 'I wish I had something for you,' and, to her surprise, the Greek woman said quickly, 'You have.' Then she gave Ruth a sure smile, and moved away to her counter where three schoolgirls were standing. 'Yes, my friends, what can I do for you?'

Ruth wanted to laugh, and that was unusual enough. She crossed the street, found her way through David Jones and into one of those narrow alleys which are the intimate paths of Melbourne's mind. She found a table and sat. She ordered, and coffee came. She looked around. There they were, the city's people, reading their papers, talking their heads off, smoking illicitly, one or two. It occurred to Ruth that freedom was not a permanent state; the word named only that moment when chains were struck off and s/he who had been bound felt a moment of release. Beyond that, everyone invented their own restrictions, rules they couldn't break, moralities to make things simple. What would she do? There was a man, much older than she was, sitting on his own, reading a book and sipping a cup of hot chocolate. French kings had once had the stuff brought to them as they held court in their royal beds, and now this once-rarity could be drunk by anyone with four dollars to pay for it, in a lane in her city ...

Ruth felt a pang, an urge, to interrupt the man, to say, 'Excuse me breaking in. I'm not going to tell you my name and I don't want to know yours. I'm going to tell you my problem, and I'm going to tell you what I'm going to do about it and if I can't think of anything to say then I'm going to ask you what I should do.' She did no such thing. She studied the man, wondering what book it was that held his attention. He read on, reading keenly, till she thought he'd never stop. She looked around the café, classifying its customers, trying to guess their occupations, their beliefs and disbeliefs, their habits and their pleasures. The man stopped reading and opened a briefcase. He

was going to put the book in it. She peered for a glimpse of the spine, and read *Wainwrights' Mountain*: what sort of book was that? The man let slip the book and bent to pick it up. Ruth bent down a little more quickly, because, she realised, he was quite old and moving slowly. The cover was simple, with a picture of a cloud rushing toward a rock; a black valley lay under the cloud and beyond the rock. There was a line of text imprinted on the cloud: 'They're calling me, Lucy, to go through it all again. Farewell, my daughter!' What on earth did that mean? Ruth handed the man his book. He thanked her, and was gone. She watched him pay and leave the café, another life that had connected with hers, momentarily, and was now moving through the city they shared. She could follow him, but why would she do that? What did it matter where he went? She had a journey of her own to make. A thought came into her mind, a nasty, rather vindictive thought.

A cruel thought. She'd wait till they were back at Fairhaven, this coming Christmas/New Year, and when they were all sitting at table, eating their dinner, drinking wine or beer, she'd tell them that Rory, her husband – she'd point at him, there across the table – was in league with drug runners, that he had a winery at Beechworth ... she'd bring it all out, ruin the man, disgrace him so he had to leave, and then she'd be on her own, surrounded by sympathetic friends, and she'd be free.

She enjoyed the thought for a moment, then she sipped her coffee and knew that it was too cruel. She couldn't do it. Never mind, she told herself. If there's not one way, there's another. I'll think of something. If I made the trap I must be able to make a way out of it. Nothing's unbreakable. The right force, shrewdly applied, can knock down any barrier, or shift it. There'll be a way. She finished her coffee, paid, and left. Standing at the door she glanced in the direction the elderly man had taken, and went the other way.

Somehow, via whispers and rumours, word reached Nancy Naughtin about what was happening with Rory and Ruth. She was amazed, and curious. It was important to her. Then she ran into Ruth, quite by accident, in Bridge Road Richmond. Nancy led Ruth into a coffee shop. She noticed, oddly enough, how Ruth looked around, as if someone might appear to give her guidance. They talked. Ruth was curious

about Rex's willingness to look after the old lady upstairs, and this led Nancy to talk about their trip to South Australia, earlier in the year. 'I'd like to go back.'

'What would you do that was different, if you went back?'

'Well, most of South Australia is desert, or we think it is, and it must affect the people. I don't know what it does to them, living on the edge of places where you can't live, or – I'm thinking of that place where they live underground, I forget what it's called – but they must know if they go any further they'll have to start living the way the aborigines did ... that must affect them?'

Ruth agreed that it must.

'That's what I'd like to explore. But you can't pick it up by going to a library, you'd have to travel around and go camping, or picking up odd jobs here and there and then moving on, just listening to people till you'd picked up the thread ...'

'... and then you'd follow it.' The idea appealed to Ruth because it implied a great, perhaps long-lasting detachment, and that was what she was wishing for. She looked at Nancy. She'd always felt older than Nancy but today she felt the same age, even a little younger. She mentioned this and Nancy wanted to know what had brought about the change. This caused Ruth to tell her friend about her situation with Rory, the likelihood that their marriage was over, and her need to find a way out of the situation she was in. She even mentioned her young lover at Fairhaven, how she'd met him and what this new relationship was like. 'You don't make it sound very good,' was all Nancy could say.

'The best that I can say about it is that it gives me something different. It's no way out but it's a change. I think about it when I'm feeling wretched and I feel a bit better.'

'You tell him this?'

'Clive? Yes. Or do you mean Rory? Good lord no!'

They laughed. Then Ruth told Nancy about the man she'd seen in the city coffee shop, and how she'd wanted to tell him her story, but he'd finished his drink and gone. And now she was telling Nancy; she wondered how long she could keep what was happening to herself, and what Rory would do when he found out. Nancy was suddenly very serious.

'You've got to plan for that. You must be ready, when it comes. You've got to be one jump ahead before he finds out.'

Ruth looked at Nancy, a question in her eyes.

'Because he'll try and stand over you. They all do. Most of them anyway. Have you got anything on him?'

Ruth, lowering her voice, told Nancy about the winery at Beechworth and how Rory was using it as a cover for other activities. Nancy said, 'I'm glad you told me that. It might be pretty ghastly but it could be your salvation.'

This was a surprise. 'How's that, Nance?'

Nancy said simply, 'The day you tell him you're leaving is going to be the most dangerous day in your life. There's no telling what he'll do. You mightn't see another day.'

Ruth felt a coldness in her heart and knew it was a truthful warning. 'You think so?'

'See it from his point of view. You know some very dangerous things about him, and you won't be part part of his loyalty protection any more. He'll think he's got to silence you. You could promise not to tell anybody, but he's not going to believe that. What you know means he's in your hands, and he won't be able to stand it. He'll want to get rid of you. Silence you. Forever.'

They considered this most powerful of words.

Barely able to speak, Ruth whispered, 'You said something might be my salvation.'

'Yes. The fact that you've told me. If you tell him you're leaving, he'll make threats. That's when you tell him that he can't suppress your knowledge of him by killing you because you've already shared what you know with someone else, and if you disappear or have a mysterious accident, that other person will know, and very soon the police will know all about his operation up there at wherever it is ...'

'Beechworth.'

'... and they'll set up watch, and follow people and do little searches whenever he's not around, and when they're ready, they'll pounce! How does that sound?'

'It sounds frightening, even to me.'

'It'll more than frighten him, it'll stop him in his tracks. If anything happens to you I'll know who did it. Even if he's paid someone else to do the dirty work. He's powerless, Ruth. We've got him. Next step. What about a property settlement?'

Ruth raised both hands. 'One step at a time, I think. What you've just put to me is enough for one day's work ...'

Nancy was stern by now. 'What I'm suggesting is more than a day's work, it's a complete life change. It needs you to go all the way.'

Ruth thought. 'I know you're right but I'm having trouble taking it in. Getting used to the ideas you're giving me. Let me have a day or two to think about it.'

She thought. She'd loved Rory once, then she wanted to get away from him, and now she was free. Nancy had made her see it. She was free of the man. Still married, but able to walk away. Not scared, because telling Nancy had given her the whip-hand. What would she do next? She felt like flying to Sydney, to Port Douglas, to the other side of the world and starting again under a new name. Freedom! Liberty at last! She smiled at herself. Tiny bird. Birds need nests, and so did she. She wanted a place, a new place though, and a life to go with it. She also wanted to confront her husband and get the matter over. This, though, had to be planned. Rory was away till the weekend and it was Wednesday. She went to a travel agency and booked a flight to Cairns the following day, and the bus to get to Port Douglas. So far so good. She rang Nancy and asked her to drive her to the airport. Nancy said she would, and could she bring Rex? This appealed to Ruth. Rex would be the second person with the knowledge Rory didn't want to get abroad. Rex was therefore her second guarantee, and he had Nancy to talk to; they'd know what was best to do for her. She felt safe in their hands. She was ready, now, to go. After one last sleep in the place she'd shared with Rory, she was ready.

It had been easier than she thought.

The next morning, on the way to the airport, she told Nancy, and Rex, who was driving, all she knew – which was little enough – about the winery at Beechworth, so that it could be identified to the police if necessary; a few names she'd heard Rory mention over the

last few months; anything else she could think of that might be useful to anyone investigating her disappearance. Nancy grew tense as they neared the airport, and when they got out, and put Ruth's modest bag beside her, Nancy gripped the other woman, the escapee, in her arms and held her, not wanting, ever, to let her go. Ruth, understanding the force of the other woman, said, 'I love you Nancy. You've given me this. I have to go. But I'll be in touch. I promise.' She looked at Rex. 'You too, Rex. I don't know how to thank you. I'm starting again, but I won't forget you. Ever! You'll have to come up and see me.' They were saying they would, with Nancy beginning, though only beginning, now to release her grip on Ruth's arms. 'Write to us, stay in touch.' Nancy released Ruth at last, and said to Rex, 'Give me something to write on!' He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and Nancy scribbled her email address on it, then gave it to Ruth. 'That's how to write to us. The moment you write, I'll write back. We're not losing you, Ruth, we're going with you in some sort of way. It's not going to be hard!'

Rex grinned. 'It's a bastard! But you're on top Ruth. This is one time when hopping on a plane isn't running away, it's heading for home, and first one there's the winner! Eh? What do you reckon?'

Nancy wanted to see Ruth onto the plane but Ruth said she didn't need it. She was going to be alone for a while and she might as well start right there and then. So Nancy and Rex drove away and Ruth made her way to the gate lounge, and onto the plane, when it was ready for passengers. She'd chosen a flight that stopped in Sydney, because that was when she was going to ring Rory. The plane took off, reached its cruising altitude, and attained the calm of a thing lifted clear of the world. Soon enough there was that magical change of state when the pilot puts the nose down and passengers are aware that their carriage is in landing mode. They will soon be on the ground, but only after minutes of descent when they can look at the ocean, ships, harbours, houses, towers, roads of rushing traffic, and trees, tennis courts, the whole caboodle. They landed. They disembarked. They got out of the plane with the voice of the steward in their ears: 'Passengers flying on to Cairns should proceed immediately to gate lounge fourteen where your plane is ready for immediate departure.'

It wasn't. The plane that was to take them on had just landed and passengers were still disembarking. Cleaners would have to go through before the next flight boarded. Ruth had the time, the little space, she needed. She picked up her phone and rang Rory.

He knew something was wrong. 'Where are you? What's the matter?' She let him have both barrels. 'I'm in Sydney airport. I'm boarding another plane in a couple of minutes.'

'Where?'

'That's no concern of yours. I'm leaving. In fact I've left.'

Scornful laughter. 'You're leaving? Pig's arse you are. I'll be back Saturday morning. Make sure you're there.' Ruth laughed. 'I don't think so. You'll find yourself on your own. From now on.'

'What's got into you? Something's made you crazy?' 'Yes, you.'

He tried to calm himself. 'Okay, start from the beginning. What's your issue? What do you want? What's it going to take to get you back to normal?'

'Getting back to something like normal will probably take some time. But it won't be with you.'

She knew he'd plead eventually, and he did. She listened for a minute, her eyes on the door that would open when the plane was ready to board. Airline people were moving about, getting things ready. Then it happened. The doors were flung open and check-points manned. Passengers, seeing this, were standing, moving, getting into line. She realised that he'd hear the announcement and know the flight she was getting on. She put her hand over the phone, then decided to shove it in her bag. She did this. A moment later the announcement came. He wouldn't have heard. She pulled the phone out. He was still talking. 'Stop,' she said, 'there's only one thing you need to know. Just in case you ever get it in your mind that it would be convenient if I disappeared ...'

'Bullshit!' he roared. 'What put that into your head?'

'Just in case one of your mates makes that suggestion to you one day when he thinks the cops or someone else is on his trail, you need to know this. Getting rid of me won't solve yours or anybody's problem. I've told some people I know that if anything happens to me,

or they don't hear from me and get the feeling I've disappeared, then they'll go to the police and tell them to start looking at your winery in Beechworth, and then to follow the tracks of certain people whose names they've been given. I've also told them to do nothing unless something happens to me. That's your safeguard, Rory. I'm stupid enough to feel I owe you that. That's my side of the bargain. Yours is that you'll forget me. You won't try to trace me. You'll let me go. No tracking, no following leads or traces ...'

He started to say something but she closed him off. 'Plane's boarding now. Good luck, Rory. Keep out of trouble if you can.'

She put the phone in her bag and pulled out her boarding pass. She was almost to the door of the plane when she realised that she'd told him more than she'd meant to. She'd told him she was in Sydney and he'd know the time her plane was departing. From there, he could work out where the plane was landing. That would track her to Cairns. Port Douglas wasn't a very big step after that. Would she have to give her name when she got on the bus? She wasn't sure. He might track her, or get someone else to do it? She wasn't sure but it was possible. The age of information; people were almost as adept at tracing things as the black people had once been ... but what they tracked showed a different appreciation of the world. She was worried by the time she got to her seat, but once the plane took off, she settled. He had his warning. At the least suspicion that he was following her, she'd be watchful. She'd put him in. She'd be okay.

She settled. The plane rose over New South Wales, heading north. Tea and sandwiches came around, coffee and cake. She took tea. She looked up the aisle. Toilet lights went on and off. Hostesses did things with charm. Stewards busied themselves filling coffee pots. For a moment, and for the first time in weeks, she felt *normal*. Then sorrow started to creep in, unexpectedly. Good times, happy nights, dinners and drives ... moments when they'd been good together. She'd expelled him from her life but he was there in her mind. She pictured him sobbing, getting angry and doing mad things ... She told herself she was only imagining and he might be doing none of the things she was attributing to him. She was creating a vision and that was the greatest mistake you could make in difficult situations;

she had to push him out of her thoughts until she had some hard facts to work with, something that one of the Fairhaven people might tell her about him, for instance. She'd ask Nancy and Rex to come up as soon as she'd got herself a place.

The Sydney flight had seemed fast. The Cairns flight seemed slow. Queensland had a gigantic coastline and they were cruising along it, blessed islands dotted below. If she looked inland, she saw country she didn't know. Who was doing what down there? How long would it take to become a native of the place where she was going? Port Douglas: she knew nothing about it. She'd be as ignorant as the silliest tourist. She didn't even play golf! She didn't surf, if that was what they did up there. She'd chosen it, not for what it was but for its distance from what she'd been. The plane knew its direction but she had no idea of hers. The plane had purpose and she was only cargo. It was painful, but it was what she'd planned to do, and it had been done. The earth was far below, and that was where her reckoning lay.

Five days later, Nancy got an email:

Hi Nance

Good trip. Port Douglas is certainly a change! I'm thinking about going back to Cairns. Here, if you're not a tourist or a local, you're nobody. There's all the usual things to do and I've been for plenty of walks but there's nothing to occupy my mind. I want to get a job and I don't feel like working in a bar serving counter lunches. The tourists bore me already and the locals haven't opened up. How many years does that take? I don't know. So Cairns it is. When I've got somewhere to stay I'll let you know. Love to you both,

Ruth

She showed it to Rex. 'What do you think?'

'The main thing is that she's out of harm's way. That's all we can ask for, for a while.'

It didn't seem much to Nancy, but maybe she was asking too much too quickly. The following week, another email came:

Hi Nance

Cairns calling. I've got a job. I went to an agent to ask about renting a place and they were in a muddle because someone had left and they offered me a job. Well, it wasn't quite as quick as that, but that'll do for the moment. I started yesterday. I'm still bunked down with a horde of backpackers but I get a temporary place next week. My final place? I don't know about that! That could be years! No troubles yet. No sign of anybody I don't want to see. Much love,

Ruth

She talked about it with Rex. They agreed that it was too soon to know how she was going. Nothing important had happened yet, beyond the shift itself. They 'd have to wait.

Days passed, then another email:

Nance,

It's happened, and it's behind me now, I think. I was at work – the place is called Croxfords – and I saw a guy looking at the notices in the window. I knew he wasn't a buyer, but then, most of them are only fantasizing when they look at the pictures. Then I realised he wasn't a local, and I had a sick feeling in my stomach. He'd been sent by Rory. Well, he was about five metres from finding me. The front cubicle was empty so I stepped backwards and sat down. He didn't come in. After a minute I pushed the cubicle door so it reflected the front window and there was no one there. He'd gone. In the afternoon I went on a trip to a new development that Alan Croxford has got going, south of Cairns. We took a whole pile of people to look at it in a little bus. I reckoned that the man I saw would have gone to Port Douglas. I don't know how long he'll hang around. I'll keep you posted.

Ruth

It felt ominous, but Nancy listened to her thoughts. No warnings, no anxieties; she had an idea that Ruth was safe, for the moment at least. Nobody in Cairns would know her yet so even if Rory's spy started asking around there wouldn't be anybody to tell him anything ... so long as she moved out of the backpacker world as quickly as she could.

Rex listened to her talking about what Ruth was doing, and what she should be doing, and he said: 'You're living Ruth's life with her. You're up there in Cairns, looking around for Rory's agent. I reckon you'd bump him off quick smart if you got a look at him!' He was teasing her and she took it as a good omen: Ruth was okay, or else, if she was in trouble, she and Rex would know. She said:

'It's funny. She's up there in Cairns. I'd do anything she asked to help her, but for the moment there's nothing. So. It's unsettling me. I'm starting to wonder about myself. Us. She's leading a whole new life and we're where we always were. I've got a feeling we should be starting something new, but I don't know what it is.' Do you feel the same way?'

Rex didn't feel the same way. Days passed, then the messages from Ruth took a sharp turn. She'd got in with a young group and they were partying, at hotels, private homes, on the waterfront, and at bush retreats. She'd spent Saturday night, all night, at a place near a waterfall. She wasn't sure where it was but hoped someone would take her there again. It seemed to be a haunt for the people she was with. She didn't say it but her Melbourne friends could see that she was in demand, a fresh face, a fresh personality landed in far north Queensland from the big smoke in the south. Nance tried to be bright when she wrote back: 'Well, you probably know it but the big smoke's a bit of a dated term these days because there's precious little smoke in our city now that everything gets made in China. No factories any more, they're turning them into apartments! All over the place. Places where people wouldn't have been seen dead five years ago are fashionable. Old boot factories are the place to be!'

She'd tried to sound bright but the truth was, she felt, that she and Rex were stuck in a rut. They were leading boring lives, or so she felt. People only a year or two older than her were having babies and they were content to do it. Wasn't there any more than that? She put it to Rex again, and he agreed that maybe they could go to The Thunderbirds, a nightclub in Prahran which was the hottest and wildest place any of her friends had heard of. Rex didn't like the name. 'There's gonna be so much noise you can't think. I never did like places like that and I think maybe I'm too old for them now.' Nance was scornful. 'You're

afraid of what might happen. That's why they play their music loud, so you can't stop yourself. It's to blow away all your inhibitions, that's the whole point.' That made Rex all the more cautious. 'What's wrong with having a few inhibitions? They're the barriers built into your life for safety. Have you ever studied the end of a railway line? They have great buffers there to stop the train so it won't smash up. But when humans have them, they're called inhibitions and people call you chicken if you stop where you're supposed to.'

'Chicken? Nancy had never thought she'd hear any of her friends, let alone the man she lived with, talk the way Rex was talking. 'What's worrying you? Not game to go to a night club any more? What are you scared of?' It was the word that broke his resistance. They went. They got there about midnight, after a noisy party at some friends' high rise apartment a couple of blocks from The Thunderbirds, and the place was booming. Still filling up with people, but full of recorded sound, bursting the ears. A few words shouted was the only conversation. The only thing to do was rock through each bracket of numbers, and drink through the silences – the bedlam – that followed. The energy of the music challenged the energies of the dancers, overwhelming them. Sound resembled silence because nothing could be heard for what it was. Minds quickly weakened, replaced by impulse and bodily desire, imperfectly aimed by consciousness beaten to a pulp. Yet Rex could see that a limited few of the night people knew how to operate under the duress of extreme music, and were looking for signals, of people wanting sex or mind-blowing drugs. Since your wants were simple, you could be catered for. Anything else, like sustaining the self, was exhausting. By 3am Nance wanted to get a taxi, but Rex was curious to see if he could last, or would he end up on the floor, dragged out of the way by bouncers who must have been deaf? He lasted. Nance lay against him, no more than semiconscious, while he sipped some wine, clinging to it so that nobody got a chance to drop anything into his glass. He'd found out how much he'd need for the night, in dollars, and brought no more. He trusted nothing and nobody. He felt he had to get Nancy through the night, by way of proving some point to her: what, he couldn't have said. Maintaining his existence was what it was all about by 5am, and by 7am it was a matter, not of survival, because he'd done so, but of being able to function in the outside world when the time came for re-entry. At 8.30 the call came that this was the last bracket, and by 9 the night was over – inside: what things were like outside, nobody knew any more.

The front doors were opened by the bouncers. Taxis had gathered, knowing they'd be needed. The inmates, the glamorously doomed, staggered out. Rex had Nancy on his arm, supporting her. There was a taxi, driven by an Indian with a turban. Rex told him their address, and opened the back door for Nancy, who slipped out of his arms and onto the seat. Rex wriggled in beside her, closed the door, and put his arm around Nancy, supporting her. She had little idea of where she was, but grasped the idea that they were going home at last. 'Bed!' was all she said as the taxi got them there. Rex supported her with one arm while he found the front door key with his free hand. They were home. He pulled back their bedding, rolled Nancy onto the mattress and covered her again. Then he realised he hadn't taken off her shoes. He did it, messily enough, and tossed them on the floor. He went to the toilet, pissed, and joined her. They were soon asleep.

Sunday passed in a blur. They ate little. They stayed inside. Nancy made coffee for Rex, and drank milk herself. Then she looked out the window for a few minutes before going back to bed, in her nighty this time. This amused Rex to the extent that he changed into his pyjamas, but they were soon asleep again without touching each other. It was late afternoon before Nancy woke up and decided she wanted toast and honey, and a cup of tea. Rex had another cup of coffee and two boiled eggs, which he broke with a spoon. 'I used up all that energy and I don't want to eat.' Nancy said, 'You're eating now,' and he said, 'Yes, but not what you'd call a meal.' That was their level of conversation after a night of deafening sound. About eight o'clock they went to bed, closing down the weekend. 'Do you want to do that again, Nance?' Rex asked flatly. 'I don't.' Nancy didn't answer, but as they lay in bed, hoping they'd be restored by morning, she murmured, 'You won't see me back there again. I'm past it.' Rex murmured his agreement, and they slept.

A couple of weeks later, they got their next email from Ruth:

Hi,

I've met a few people now who've really settled in up here, though they only came for a holiday. They said they were coming up for two or three weeks and they're still here, years later. We sold a house yesterday to a couple from Melbourne who reckon they've found what they always dreamed about. They're not much older than me. I can see the attraction though I don't think I could last here more than a year or two. I don't know. I've go to a lot of friends by now. I suppose they're only people to hang around with but it's all pretty easy-going. Not the same as it was down there. It's not as heavy and serious as Melbourne. I suppose you could wreck yourself on drugs or just drifting, but it's a lot easier without all the pressure I was used to down there.

I'll keep you posted. Lots of love, Ruth

Rex and Nancy felt they were losing her although, strangely, she needed them to talk to. The fact that Ruth was questioning, perhaps abandoning, her previous existence was unsettling for them. Nancy told Rex she thought they should do something new, make some move, some commitment that would be their answer to Ruth's adventuring, if that was the word. He accepted this idea, but couldn't think of any move to make. He told Nancy that whenever he thought of Ruth, up there in the tropics, he felt he was in the doldrums. Things he'd been going to paint didn't attract him any more. 'The spark's gone out of me, Nance, and I don't know what to do.' She was feeling much the same. 'Do you want to go back to the Flinders Ranges?' she asked. 'There'd be plenty of good painting subjects there?' He thought. There'd be any number of wonderful things to paint: nature at its most intimidating; the beauty of extreme indifference; the irrelevance of humans; the joy of bird life ... but he was out of touch with it all. He would look at it and not be moved. 'The trouble is,' he told Nancy, 'Ruth's walked out of her old life and started something new. I want to do the same, and I can't.'

What could she do about that? She felt useless. It seemed that any chance of excitement had drained out of their lives. 'Do you want to go up and visit Ruth?' He said he did. He didn't sound very keen but there wasn't anything else to do. Nancy emailed their friend and

arrangements were made, dates set down. Ruth told her Melbourne friends that she was living in one of a set of cabins at a place owned by the Corcorans, and that the cabin next to hers was empty. 'I could ask Mister A. I'm sure he'd let you have it. At a good rate too!'

And so it happened. Nancy and Rex flew to Cairns, picked up a car at the airport and drove to Ruth's office. Alan Corcoran welcomed them warmly, told them Ruth was out with a client but should be back soon, and took them next door for coffee, or fruit juice – whatever they pleased. Whatever would make them feel they'd been welcomed. He sang Ruth's praises, telling them he hoped she'd stay because she was the best recruit he'd had in years. 'She's got a future in FNQ if she uses her head, and I know she will.' It seemed to Nancy that he expected Ruth to strip away whatever she'd been and suddenly opportunity would be there, waiting – but you had to get rid of the old before the new would present itself. It seemed to Nancy that the same might be true for herself and Rex, if they wanted it. Alan Corcoran was full of suggestions for places they must visit. 'You've got to go out on the boats and see the reef, and the islands. You don't have to spend a lot of money, though you can if you do things in style. I think the simple things are best. Go up in the ranges and see where our water supply comes from. Visit the dry country, and then the rainforest areas. Go for walks. Go to Undarra, and see the lava flow caves. Go up to Cooktown, it's a wonderful drive. Stay up there a couple of nights. Or don't go anywhere, just look about our town. It's worth it, it's full of life. Go to the art gallery. Eat out by the water and enjoy a bottle of wine. Whatever takes your fancy. Once this place gets into your system, I tell you, it's hard to get it out! People come up and they say it's just for a look, but before you know, they've bought a property and they come up for holidays and they rent the house out for the rest of the time so it pays for itself. Or if the bug's bitten them really hard, they leave the southern states behind and move up here for good.' He was at his most expansive. 'You could do a lot worse!'

With Ruth as their guide – 'Here I am telling you what to do and I hardly know anything myself!' – they did some of the things Alan Corcoran had told them about. Rex said he couldn't paint in far north

Oueensland because the colours were so different, and the sea was so important, even when you were on the land. 'That hill, overlooking Cooktown - and the ocean, and the river passing through the mountains before it reaches the sea, and the reef ...' He could hardly find words for his amazement and he knew it would take years before he could do justice to it in paintings, yet he found himself saying, 'I might give it a go, when we get back home. Up here, I'd only make a mess!' This troubled Nancy because she was finding the visit difficult, marvellous as it was. She felt she was looking at things instead of being part of them, and she wanted to escape this feeling, and yet she had only to glance at Ruth, or feel her beside her, to know the difference. Ruth had arrived, and found herself, and she, Nancy, couldn't find a way. Everything was different, and it was tropical, and somehow easier, which meant an absence of moral burden, or even of serious purpose. Everything worked; buses ran on time, shops were full of stuff, there were restaurants if you wanted a meal, but it all seemed to arrive without any bother. Life wasn't hard any more, and Nancy couldn't let go, though she wanted to. She said to Rex one night, as they lay in bed in their cabin, 'When we get home and I write to Ruth, I'll tell her what a marvellous time we had up here and I know she'll know that I'm saying what I feel I ought to say rather than what's been true for me.'

When they got back to Melbourne, Rex went straight to his painting room and started preparing canvases; Nancy went to Coles and then to the market, trying to convince herself that more was available in Melbourne than in the north. And it was, but the feeling of losing independence remained with her. There was also a feeling that she had to make a decision about herself. Her identity had been questioned by Ruth's change of identity. Ruth had broken out of her marriage and had given herself a new life. Maybe it would be permanent and maybe it wouldn't, but she'd been brave enough to take the plunge, and Nancy felt she too should do something decisive, but what? The only 'decision' she could think of was whether she would continue her life as it was, teaching, and supporting Rex who was as yet unknown and earning next to nothing from his work. When he told her he was starting his painting 'all over again', she wondered

what he meant. She asked, and he couldn't tell her. 'I've got a feeling that I'm going to find out by painting, not by thinking about painting. Does that make any sense?'

So she waited, and it seemed to her that something ... not new, but newly decisive ... was emerging in his work. He painted cups as if he was searching for the form of the cup. He painted a loaf of bread with a knife and two slices cut. He painted a chair in their garden, with nobody in it, and another with Nancy seated. He went to the Botanical Gardens and painted trees, individually and in clumps. Slowly these forms became a little more abstract, and he told Nancy, 'They're moving in the direction I want. What I want to paint is not the thing, but my mind considering the thing. There's a difference. I can't explain it yet because I'm only getting the knack of it, but that's where I'm headed.' Nancy was pleased. She began to settle, and writing back to Ruth, from whom they were still getting emails, was easier. Nancy was back at work, and it felt natural again. The children in her care were regaining some of the preciousness she used to feel for them. It dawned on Nancy that she regarded herself as undramatic, insubstantial, not very important. She didn't need 'an outlet', because there was no special thing which needed letting out. She could support Rex, she could articulate things for her pupils, encourage and guide them, but nothing more than that. Was it enough?

She felt it was when Rex sat on their sofa with her, talking about what he wanted to paint. 'I look at a teapot,' he said, and there was one on the table to the side of them. 'Look at it,' he said, and they did. 'It's not abstract, but a thing. Yet I'm not painting the thing.' She could feel shudders running through him, of annoyance with himself. 'What I'm painting is me painting the thing.' He looked at her, causing her to say, 'But in that painting you did yesterday, you're not in the picture. There's only the teapot and a bit of green curtain.' He squeezed her hand. 'That's right. But I'm only painting the thing so I can tell you, not what the thing looks like ... I don't care about that, even though most people are going to think that's what I do care about ...' He stood up from the sofa and threw his handkerchief over the teapot, then looked at her to see if she was grasping what he intended by doing

this. 'The teapot's only a means to an end.' She challenged him. 'So what's the end?'

He pointed to the covered object. 'There's the end! No, sorry, wrong. That's not the end, it's the means to the end, I keep getting that muddled when I talk about it but I really do know what I want to do, in my thoughts.'

'And that is?'

'I want to paint the teapot, because I've got to paint *something*, in such a way that you know ...' he said it again, for emphasis '... you know that what you're really seeing is my concentration. You're not looking at what I see, but at my mind when it's doing the seeing. Is that clear, Nancy? Yes or no?'

She thought. He was staring at her, she had to be truthful. She thought hard. 'I think it's clear. I think I understand. But it's a new thought to me, and I'm not *used* to it yet.'

He was relieved. 'That's a good answer, Nance. Keep looking at what I do, the next few days. Watch whatever it is I'm up to, and tell me anything you see. Or don't see. I'll be listening, and I won't put you under any pressure. Just say whatever comes into your head. That's the best way you can help me. I'll know when I'm getting there by what I hear you say.'

So the relationship between them, which would last them many years, had been settled.

There began a period of hard and happy work. Nancy flung herself into her teaching and Rex into his painting and drawing. Had you been able to see them in the mornings, sharing a quiet breakfast, you would have felt their energy, their purpose. They would talk later, when their day had ended. Eating breakfast, they were keen to get started. The Schulbergs, the art dealers who employed Rex, noticed how attentive he was to their requests, but discussed, when he wasn't around, the change that had come over him. He was both keenly present, and distracted. 'Getting a bit of work done in my spare time,' was all that he would tell them but, exploitative as they were, they could hardly dismiss him for that. They noticed that his opinions were expressed more strongly, and earlier in a conversation,

and again they put it down to his private work, which they'd never expressed any wish to see, going well. Nor could they criticise him for that!

Nancy, on the other hand, felt herself on display. Teachers were role models as much as instructors, and her school, like most primary schools, was over-staffed by women. Where were the men? Decades of feminism hadn't balanced the teaching profession, and Nancy felt sorry for the boys she taught. For that matter, she felt sorry for the girls. They needed men to react with and against. Men and women: each needed the other. All-male men were so inadequate; any woman could see that, so mustn't the reverse be true? Nancy wasn't sure, but she told her students to be strong, firm in their responses, impeccably polite, to act as if they were joint owners of the world with everyone else, powerful or pathetic, as their co-owners. 'It makes a world of difference,' she told one of her classes, 'if you think you've got an ownership responsibility.' What did that mean, the children wanted to know. Nancy did her best. They lived in a democracy, and they would vote one day. They lived in a globalised world and its horrors, its inequalities and brutalities all had to be cleaned up and improved. The place had to be made better, and that could only happen if they put their own segment of society to rights and tried to influence the sectors where things were not as they might be. It might have been an impossible dream but Nancy believed it, and did her best to live the way she taught. The children adored her because they felt she was on their side in the almost impossible struggle to be a successful, lovable human being – the goal she had set before them and was trying to live before them, as an example.

She had also to listen to Rex at the end of every day. The place where he worked. The Schulbergs. The auction houses and the stupidity of what went on there. Painters ranked by auction values – really! And there was the confusion of what he said about his work. Nance gave him feedback day after day, mostly in response to what he showed her, but he tried, also, to make sense of what he was doing and it was hard to understand. Rex wasn't particularly articulate. A painter, he said, goes about finding truth in what he sees around him. Then he would go off in a diatribe about media people who repeated

what they'd heard or read. Their knowledge wasn't their own. Even when they had seen something – a motor-bike accident, a robbery happening under their eyes – they expressed it in other people's terms. They not only didn't develop a voice of their own, but they were told not to. They had to write in the style of their newspaper. They were the security guards of people's thinking. When an event occurred, they got in first with their questions and their interpretations which filled the minds of those who were attentive to them, and that was just about everybody. Nancy agreed with this because there was a man teaching with her – almost the only man – called Lionel Hawkins and he insisted on his grade 5 students studying society through their daily newspapers. 'He says he's training them to be critical,' Nancy told Rex, 'but he isn't. Not really. They're getting brainwashed. We have arguments about it quite often, but no matter what anyone says, he maintains that he's shaping a critical electorate.' He laughed, and Rex scoffed angrily. 'He shouldn't be allowed to do it,' he said. 'Kids get dowsed in that crap at home and then they get another dose at school. Can't anybody stop him?'

Nancy said they couldn't because he defended himself ever so fiercely, and he was older than the rest of them, and he did have good objectives ...'

'He's deceiving himself!' Rex insisted. 'The media's been set up to make us all toe certain lines. And we do, most of us. Most of the time. Even when people write letters to the editor ...' his voice trembled '... they're taking part in an argument that the editor allows. "No further correspondence on this matter will be published."' He grinned. "'This matter is now closed." But it's hidden in other ways. They send a correspondent to one country and not to another. They fill pages with something because they say it's important. What did they have the other day? Oh yes, they had nine pages about that fellow who'd raped or killed some prostitutes before he killed a respectable girl. Nine pages! They don't give a stuff about who gets killed. There's soldiers getting killed as we speak. In the Middle East there are cities getting blown up every day ...' He raged on till even patient, loving Nancy had to call on him to stop. 'Well, what can we do about it, you and I? Not much, is there?' This quelled him, but he still had something to say.

'My painting is my answer. I'm training myself to see. I don't want anybody else's thoughts in my mind unless ...' he smiled at Nancy '... I invite those thoughts in because I trust the person who put them there. It's the only way we can keep ourselves decent. We have to purify the terms. A cloud, what's a cloud? We have to look, and see, and then try to draw it. Paint it, so we know what it is because we know what we're doing when we paint it. A jug. A basket. Apples and pears. A human being. You – a portrait. Me – a self-portrait. Every stroke of the brush has to be a statement with truth in it. That's what I'm trying to achieve, and it's bloody hard work.' He was going to say it was better work than the rubbish provided by the media but he could see she was sick of hearing all that, so he asked her to pour him a beer or a glass of wine, and what was she having? She said she'd like to open the bottle of red he'd brought home the day before and he got to his feet to get it from the kitchen, with a couple of glasses, which he rinsed and dried before bringing them back. Sitting down again, Rex said to his partner, his humble, willing lover, 'In your own way you know what I'm saying's right because what you're doing with your kids is much the same as I'm doing with my paint.' Nancy felt that was going too far, but she thought they'd had enough argy-bargy for one night, so she raised her glass and said, 'Cheers!'

Rex worked for many weeks and when he was getting close to having enough work for an exhibition, he began to think about where he'd hold it. With the Schulbergs, or with someone else? If someone else, who? He knew the Schulbergs' fee at their gallery was 50% of all sales, then he heard Ilushka Schulberg talking to her husband Moshe about lifting the gallery's charge to 55%. That decides it, he thought. The gallery, as he knew, had a long list of artists whose work they showed when it pleased them, and he thought of them as being no better than cows trudging up to a machine to be milked. He wasn't having that – but where would he show? Nancy had discussed this with Olivia Page, who suggested approaching the Bartletts, with their large house in a sought-after part of the city. What would be wrong with having a weekend exhibition at such a desirable venue, and inviting everyone they knew who had enough money to buy at least a small painting

out of loyalty, if nothing else? Nancy said Rex would be too shy, too awkward, to approach the Bartletts, so who could they ask? Olivia said she'd do it for him. She was planning to see Jenny Bartlett later that week, and she'd raise the matter.

Nancy thought there were only faint hopes of the Bartletts agreeing to house Rex's exhibition, but told Olivia she was grateful for anything she might do on their behalf ...

Nancy got a surprise, a few days later, when Olivia rang to say that Jenny and Norman Bartlett were quite receptive to the idea, their only stipulation being that they'd like to see the paintings first, at Nancy and Rex's apartment, before they confirmed their willingness to give Rex two rooms of their house for his show. 'You're in good company,' Olivia told Rex, 'because the Bartletts live only a block or two from the house in Toorak where Hugh Ramsay had an exhibition when he came back from France. Poor Hugh didn't have much longer to live when he had his show; you'll be able to look back on this show as the time when you got your start!' Olivia was smiling as she said this, sure that what they were doing would prove to be historic in however modest a way it might seem. Rex wasn't looking any further forward than the date the Bartletts might give him. After that, who knew?

Nobody at all. Rex had been concentrating so hard on his paintings that he'd almost lost track of the world he was putting them into. They were, after all, about concentration. Most of all he liked a small one of a milk jug. It was light green, and had straight sides. His mother had picked it up on the nature strip outside her house and had no idea how it came to be there. 'Homeless destitute,' Rex called it, and accepted it gladly. He put it on a dull red cloth that shone in the light, and it pleased him, as if the little jug had wrought a change in its surroundings. Next he went to the zoo, drawing animals; he showed them to Nancy and she liked the emu best, so he worked it up into a painting full of character, she said. The character was innate, whereas the jug had got it from its maker. What about something to replace those awful trophies they give winning grand prix drivers, or people who win tennis tournaments, Nancy suggested, but Rex wanted to stay away from such things. 'I want to stay with very humble things that don't try to impress you. I don't want things that are associated with success. Flags caught his attention for a while, and then taps, especially ones which were set vertically, so their water gushed horizontally until it fell to the earth. He did a sequence of traffic lights, and then a useless old cannon pointing across the road which took traffic into the southern end of Northcote. Someone thought these guns would be impressive, Rex said to his partner. 'That would have been just after World War 1. But nobody even sees them these days, they're useless because they're unnoticed: they're just the thing for me!' He was warming to his work and Nancy was happy for him. An artist finding something that suits him is possessed by a form of rightness shared only by people dedicated to their work, or perhaps their children. Nancy wondered if she should comment on this quality creeping into Rex and his work, and decided to stay silent; self-consciousness might spoil things, so instead she asked Rex what he would work on next. He told her he'd seen a boot-last in an antique shop recently and she didn't know what he meant, so he explained how it was a piece of metal with 'feet' of different sizes, on which you put your shoes when you wanted to repair them. Even this had to be explained to Nancy because she'd always taken her shoes to someone else to be repaired, unless of course she'd simply thrown them away. Rex laughed at her for not knowing what a boot-last was and she laughed at herself: they were happy at this time of their lives, and their friends noticed this.

When Norman and Jenny Bartlett came to view the paintings they noticed the tenderness between the younger couple, and it made them aware that bringing up their three children, successful as it had been thus far, had also cast them into the morally doctrinaire roles of parents, and it had stiffened something that had once been spontaneous between them. They were very pleased by what they saw in Rex's paintings and confirmed that they would be happy to host his exhibition in their home. A date was fixed, and Nancy produced a list of the people she and Rex would like to invite, including, she announced, Ilushka and Moshe Schulberg. This caused Rex to thank her because he simply didn't know if he wanted his employers to see his work, or merely to hear about it through others, or perhaps a newspaper review. 'We're taking it up to them darling,' Nancy said,

and the Bartletts agreed. They knew their home – and its address—would impress force the Schulbergs to accept Rex as something like a social equal, something they'd never done before. 'What we need now,' Nancy went on, 'is a list of all the people who were at Fairhaven together last summer – well, those who are still part of our circle – and we'll ask each of them to produce *their* list of people they'd like to invite, and then we'll cross out any overlaps, of which there are sure to be a few, and then we'll whittle the list down to ...' she looked at Jenny and Norman '... two hundred? A hundred? A hundred and fifty? What do you think?'

Jenny Bartlett said they should be bold, it was a big house, and if they opened late on the Friday afternoon for a couple of hours, then two hundred was not too big a list and since the whole idea was to launch Rex as a painter wanting to be known, then the bigger the gathering the better. Norman agreed, and they went on to agree that the list of names should be finalised in time for the invitations to reach people a clear three weeks before the weekend of the show. They finished their drinks, Norman and Jenny congratulated the artist a final time and left: Rex sat down, a weight off his shoulders, and Nancy said happily, 'We're getting there, darling, we're on our way!' Rex, sounding dogged but inwardly very happy, said, 'Where?' and Nancy told him, ending the matter and the negotiation they'd been making, 'Somewhere good. There's going to be a lot of good come out of this, you mark my words!'

Ruth was pleasantly surprised when the invitation reached her in Cairns, but she rang Nancy to find out if Rory was going to be there as well. 'Good lord no,' Nancy told her. 'We wouldn't do that to you! Please come if you possibly can. I think most of the group know about Rory by now. Word gets around. You can stay with us if you like. We'll be pretty busy that weekend but not so busy we can't look after you. Or Jenny said you could stay at their place in Toorak. She thought you might feel safer there.' Nancy could tell by the silence that Ruth would feel safer in Toorak. She said, 'Stay with the Bartletts by all means. They'll look after you. They're going to have people there while the show's on the walls. Security, that is. We're inviting almost two

hundred people over the weekend. Nobody's going to know who's going to turn up, or when, so there'll be somebody on the door all the time. And don't feel you're missing out on being with us because Rex and I, or at least one of us, will be there pretty much the whole time the show's open. That's the point of it, really, to get Rex off to a good start.' Ruth felt safe with those arrangements, and said she'd let Nancy know her flight details as soon as she'd made bookings.

Olivia and Jack Page were also pleased to hear about the exhibition. Olivia had a feeling that she'd become withdrawn into herself, so it would be good to catch up with those she knew, and put herself on view again. She rang Tim and Donna Williamson because she hadn't seen them for a while, apart from the funeral gathering at the Bartletts' home where, for some reason or other, she hadn't talked to them very much. Donna thought they should go on a day and at a time when their presence could do most to encourage Rex, and to judge that they needed Jenny's advice, so she rang and asked when Jenny thought they could best give Rex support. Jenny thought about this and told Donna that she thought the Sunday morning might be the flattest period of the weekend: 'I think the Friday night will be busiest, and Rex and Nancy will be so surrounded by people they either don't know or haven't seen for ages that they won't have time to catch up with people they know well. And on Sunday afternoon Rex will start to drink and he'll be quite affable if he's sold a few paintings as I'm sure he will, now that I've seen them, and I don't think he'll care much by then who's there or who they are, he'll just chatter away to get rid of his nervous tension ... so I think Sunday morning is the time when you could do most good. Give him most support that he'll really appreciate, at least later, when the whole thing's over.'

So Sunday morning became the Williamsons' decision and this pleased Donna; they'd not only be seeing the paintings at a time when Jenny thought the viewing spaces would be less crowded, but they'd also be *doing good*. She was pleased, also, that Tim agreed with her reasoning about the time of their arrival and departure, but she couldn't help noticing that these arrangements for viewing the exhibition seemed to interest him in some way she couldn't quite understand. Was he thinking of doing something unexpected, like

buying up everything on show? No no, of course he wasn't: if he was going to do something as silly as that – and she wouldn't let him – then he'd want to be there on the Friday evening, early, so that he could jump in before anyone else bought anything!

Strangely enough, Donna wasn't so very far from what Tim was actually thinking. He'd been feeling that he'd been too quiet lately, too acquiescent; he wanted to make another breakout with some story that would set the world alight. Or at least a tiny part of it. He'd long been sceptical about artists' reputations, believing that most of them were fanciful accounts fed to the gullible by gallery owners and obliging critics. And now here was Rex Naughtin, a complete unknown, about to be launched by the Bartletts of Toorak. Jenny, he knew, had no idea of what made a painter memorable, and he was doubtful if Norman was any better, clever as he might be. It had crossed Tim's mind that he might invent some interstate or even international critic who would unexpectedly review the young man's show in a famous outlet - the New York Times, perhaps. There would be a surge of excitement, quotations, pictures - the usual nonsense - and then word would seep out that there was no such person as the visiting critic, and the famous newspaper would deny publishing anything of the sort ... that was what Tim had been thinking about, but he'd only to think of the damage it would do to Rex to realise that he'd been harbouring a very nasty fantasy in his mind, for which he'd never be forgiven by anyone who knew the young artist. Nobody else would see it as the joke it would have been meant to be. He'd be accused of bringing down a friend in the most treacherously insensitive manner and he'd never be forgiven.

So he'd shelved the idea, and Donna, who'd never known what was circulating in his head, was puzzled by his state of mind, both accepting yet in some way rebellious. She had a feeling that somewhere along the way she'd lost the intuitive understanding of her husband which had given her the certainty that it was she who defined and controlled the marriage. She had a feeling that he was breaking away from their agreement in some manner she couldn't define. Did he have another woman, somewhere tucked away? She felt reasonably certain that he didn't, but that made whatever it was all

the more puzzling. If one of her friends – Madeleine, for instance – had asked him if he gave his fullest support to Donna, he would certainly have said yes, most certainly, absolutely et cetera, but Donna drew on other sensations than hearing for what she knew. His support for her wavered in intensity. It rose and fell, and it hadn't always been so. Some part of him was slowly detaching itself from her imperium, and their agreement. It was no use asking him because he would say it wasn't so. It made Donna feel envious of Nancy and Rex because their devotion to each other had grown, in the time she'd known them, from a set of immature demands, with, Donna felt sure, attractions off to either side, to a deep trust that was lovely, and enviable, to see. Rex deserved the good start the Bartletts were giving him, Donna felt, and hoped that more good things – forward steps, in both confidence and achievement – would follow, and she knew that if she had said this to her husband, he would have agreed but that somewhere in his psyche there was another factor, as yet unknown to her, waiting to show itself.

How strange. She sensed also that this unknown factor was not aimed at harming her, so she could, perhaps, afford to wait until it showed itself, but it was, she found, a subtraction from her confidence because she liked to have everything under control: it was against her nature to be cautious, watchful or nervously expectant. She wasn't made that way, but neither could she do what many people would have done – ask around, talk about it with others to see what light, if any, they could shed. No, she had to be sure and she had to find that surety, that state of certainty, for herself.

She wondered how long she'd have to wait for the indication she needed. Days passed, and nothing presented itself. Then, one evening over dinner, she said something about the coming show of Rex's paintings, and she noticed, in Tim's reply, a minute trace of awkwardness. He dealt with the topic and then changed the subject, a little more swiftly than he might have done. She knew she was close to an area of tenderness, but didn't know how to go on. She switched the subject back. 'If we see something we like, will we buy one of Rex's paintings?' Tim was undisturbed. 'Why not? Certainly. If we like it enough.' He smiled affably. So making a purchase wasn't a problem,

not to Tim. 'From the picture on the invitation I think he's staying close to home, and that's what young painters ought to do. Stick to what you know.'

She wanted to trap him, to catch him out, but it wasn't the way they worked. She believed in spontaneity, she didn't like things settling into ambivalence. Still, there was no moving him now, she'd have to wait for Tim's show. The days passed, phone calls were made, art critics for various papers and magazines were sent invitations and caterers were readied for their job. Council agreed to send a parking officer to patrol the street outside, and the security people were briefed about the duties of their man. Wine and glasses were delivered by the nearest branch of Dan Murphys. Two days beforehand, Rex took his paintings to Toorak in a van, and moved them around the two big rooms, leaning them against the walls, then sitting at a vantage point while he thought about the ways people would enter, circulate and gather to talk and drink, then he moved several pictures to ensure the strongest paintings were likely to be the most seen. After lunch he came back and made changes. Then he explained his wishes to Jenny Bartlett, and she took those of her pictures already on the walls to a bedroom where they would be stored. Norman came home, queried the positioning of a few paintings, and Rex explained his reasons for placing them as he had, but, conceding that Norman might be right in two cases, he made the suggested moves. Then Nancy inspected, and declared that all was well. The artist, his partner and their hosts then had sherries, sitting at a central table that had been left where it was, and walking around the rooms to get themselves ready for the movement, and the possible reactions, of the morrow. It was almost six o'clock before Rex and Nancy left, excited, content, sure that everything possible had been done.

Gatherings in a private home are more personal than openings in galleries. People feel the owners' expectations. The space, not being public, requires more of those who use it. The Bartletts, also, were exacting owners. Their children were told that they could retreat upstairs whenever they wished but that while they were downstairs they too were hosts and should see that visitors' children were looked after. This they attempted to do, even though it mostly

meant taking such children upstairs; Jenny was amused to have to reassure certain parents that their accompanying children were not lost or missing, but simply in the room that belonged to her three. Rex wanted to sit down but had to stand because Norman made sure that he was introduced to anyone who showed interest in his work. The house, thrown open at four, contained fifty or sixty visitors an hour later. Drinks flowed freely and voices grew louder. Jenny whispered fiercely in Nancy's ear, 'It's going well.' Norman and Jenny had organised a one-sheet catalogue stressing the word 'Meditations' and linking it to Rex's name; this was successful in steering their viewers into realising at least a little of the painter's intentions. Four of the paintings attracted red stickers early – the small, vertical jug (pale green on a sombre red baize); a painting of some white feathers, presumably from a cockatoo; a hand (Nancy's) with a ring, the personal associations of which led viewers to assume that it must be a glimpse of the artist's wife – and it was: there was also a painting of a car, with an unrecognisable figure huddled behind the wheel, and a vast stretch of open country behind. This had been the first to sell because it had an air of mystery, giving off a feeling that its driver had something secret to do in this spacious landscape but offering no hint as to what it might be. Tim Williamson, who'd had no expectation of quality when he arrived at the Toorak house, found himself taken by surprise. Rex's intentions were very clear to him, and appealing. Rex was telling his viewers what he knew, and by implication, what he did not. 'We're surrounded by advertising, and by politicians and other people who want to get at us or get their hands in our pockets, I should say, and I can't respect any of these people. Why should I believe whatever bullshit they've got in their minds for the time being?' He was a little more subdued than the last time he'd expressed these ideas because setting up his exhibition had caused him to respect the Bartletts' standing as property owners; he had a feeling that they had earned the right to live in a sumptuous but still dignified home. And it was a home. He'd realised that Jenny Bartlett had spoken to her children about the artist who was exhibiting in their home, and had noticed how respectful the children were when he was setting things up. Her children were being brought up as

people with breeding and manners, and he knew plenty of kids who didn't fit these categories. He rather thought that he should leave an unsold painting behind when he cleaned up in the following week as not only a payment for having had the use of the home but as a mark of respect. This was what led him to ask Tim Williamson, who he could see was interested in his work, which picture he should leave for the Bartletts. Tim was surprised by the question, because he'd been asking himself which picture he might like to purchase, and this was a much more forceful question than he'd expected to face because when Donna had referred to the possibility of buying a painting his response had been more a matter of courtesy than of serious intent. Tim looked at the young man, thinking that if he'd been a little more mature in his outlook he'd have thought the matter through before the exhibition opened, in which case he could affix a red sticker to the best picture in the show and make it clear to his hosts that that was the picture he'd chosen for them - or he could have invited them to make their choice while he was still setting up the show. But if he was a little late, he was no less sincere, and had to be answered. 'Well Rex,' he said, 'You should act quickly, if that's the way you think. You should get the Bartletts' oldest child, that's Genevieve as I recall, and get her to choose a picture for the family. That's the way to put it: "for the family". And, like I say, you ought to do it straight away before any more paintings get sold.'

Rex liked this advice, and went straight to Jenny and Norman to ask them to get the children downstairs so that they could all see what Genevieve chose. Jenny and Norman were delighted. Norman went upstairs to tell the children what was going to happen, and then to bring them down. Jenny began to wonder aloud which painting her daughter would choose and Rex was very pleased that he'd put the matter to her in the way that Tim had suggested. Tim, on the other hand, was oddly affected by what he'd caused to happen. He found Donna in the crowd that had gathered by now, talking and drinking freely, and took her hand. 'I think we're just about to see something rather touching.' Donna had no idea what he was talking about but sensed that whatever it was it had brought about something of a change in her husband.

A few moments later, Genevieve, the Bartletts' eldest, was ushered into the first of the rooms holding paintings, and asked by Rex to choose a picture for her family. 'You have to like it, but you must also think of your mother and father and try to pick one you think they would like too.' The Bartletts' elder daughter gained in dignity as she comprehended what she had to do. Rex said to her, 'It's your decision but I'll stand beside you in case you want to ask me any questions.' Tim Williamson watched as the process he'd begun got underway. He remembered the idea he'd considered, of inventing a scornful critic who'd pass judgement on Rex's paintings, and he realised that his idea had rebounded on himself: it was a shameful idea and the girl who was looking at the pictures on her parents' walls must never know what he'd been trying to plan. He wondered what all the people gathered in the two rooms, drinking and talking, did to earn a living – if they earned it at all. He himself was paid large sums of money to investigate public opinion on many matters in an allegedly scientific – or statistically valid – method, and could hold forth knowledgeably to clients on how best to find out what they wanted to know. He didn't believe himself and wondered that his clients took any notice. His greatest distaste, however, was the political polling that the organisation he worked for conducted on behalf of one of the newspaper chains. It seemed to Tim that they used this polling as a way of validating their own editorial positions, and showing themselves as being more responsive to public opinion than the doctrinaire – they said – and less flexible party leaders and spokesmen. Essentially it was a way of removing the validity of parliamentarians' claiming to represent the public, in that the newspapers, which published daily, could claim to be more representative than a party whose numbers were down. Tim could see that his displeasure with this way of characterising 'opinion' had produced in him the scorn that attracted him to schemes that proposed to mock or pull apart the work he did: his money-earner.

Genevieve was looking at the paintings. She stopped in front of one which looked incomplete, hardly more than a few lines and shapes: a yacht swept across the waters of what might have been Port Phillip Bay. She looked at the artist beside her for guidance, but he was solemn and still. She looked at her father and then her mother, but they gave her no guidance; indeed Norman Bartlett had a group of people blocking his line of sight, so he couldn't judge the picture that had caught her attention. On an impulse, she jumped forward and tapped the edge of the frame: the yacht picture was the one. Rex was delighted, most of the onlookers were surprised, and Nancy too agreed with her selection. Tim was so surprised that he stepped forward to get a better look, and something in his movement gave him the right way to see what the girl had seen. It was hardly more than a sketch, it seemed, but it had caught Rex's reaction; the moment of delight, of excitement, at the fact that the yacht was as free as the wind that blew it along. Incomplete it may have looked, but Genevieve had caught its essence ... and chosen it for her parents.

They came beside her, Jenny and Norman, and told her they were delighted. Tim, watching from a little further back, doubted if they'd seen the real quality of the picture, and the choice, but had to admire her parents for trusting Genevieve. She'd done them proud. Examining his heart, Tim found joy, and relief that the choice had not been his. He knew he'd not have had the courage to make the boldest choice, as the girl had done. He clapped, not once or twice, but steadily, and it caught on. People with glasses slapped their sides, or put their drink on the floor to applaud something, or possibly everything: Genevieve, the painter and his partner, the owners of the house, the pictures on show, the occasion and even themselves for being there. Clap clap clap. It was a moment when it was good to be alive.

Ruth enjoyed the Bartletts' evening and was touched by Genevieve and her choice of a painting. She was proud to be part of an event which had this as its central moment, and pleased to observe Tim Williamson, whom she'd always found a little distant, at the heart of it. She joined him, drawing Donna from the crowd to put herself beside her husband. There were kisses and embraces, and much genuine joy; Donna was pleased to find that Rory's disgrace had not meant the loss of Ruth from the group. 'Will you come down again if we all get together at Fairhaven, as we did last summer?' Ruth laughed. 'Where I am these days, it's endless summer; I should invite you all up to see *me*!' Was she serious? No. 'It's hot summer, it's wet summer,

it's bloody humid summer.' She paused for effect: 'It's four types of summer in a single ... week!' They burst out laughing, noticeable even in the torrent of chatter surrounding them. She told them she'd struck a truce with Rory. 'I've moved away, if he leaves me in peace I'll leave him in peace!' Donna was sceptical. 'Most men aren't like that. They don't like losing. They'll strike at the partner they've lost, even if it means losing themselves.' Ruth nodded. 'Rory was like that at the beginning, but he's not any more. Or not that I can tell. I don't feel threatened now. Which means he's either making lots of money or he's got someone else!' They laughed, the three of them, then switched to the exhibition, which had surprised them. 'He's good, isn't he?' Ruth began. 'He's found a way of seeing. And wasn't the girl clever! She picked the one, the yacht, that really required you to know a bit about painting.' Then it was Tim's turn. 'It just goes to show that when it comes to art, it's best not to know too much, and best to trust your instinct. That yacht ... there's hardly anything to it, but that's what makes it good!' Donna smiled at him: 'Which reminds me. Have you seen one that you like well enough to give it a home?'

Tim was affirmative, and serious. 'I have. Much as I admire young, ah, Genevieve for her choice of the yacht, I like the one that matches it. The jetty and the boatshed. The boatshed *on* the jetty, and the water that's only a few ripples in a wash of pale.' He indicated the picture he meant. 'It reminds me of Clarice Beckett. Just a little bit. Her paintings are a mixture of sharp observations and blurry tone. She's a wonder at it.'

'And Rex?' Donna wanted to know. Tim's brow furrowed. 'It's not so easy to say. This is the first time I've seen any quantity of his work. In fact it's pretty close to the first time I've seen anything by him, and what I notice is the force of them, and that's a funny thing because the things he paints, the various objects are none of them very forceful: not in my view, anyway.' Tim looked at those with him, wondering what they thought. 'Yes,' Donna said. 'The things he looks at are mostly pretty mild by nature, but the intensity's in the way he looks at them. That means something, but I don't know quite what it is.' Let's ask him,' Ruth said, and her timing was excellent because Rex moved past her at that moment. Seizing his arm, Ruth put Donna's question.

Rex was practised with his answer by this time. The force, he said, was from the observation turned upon the object. The object, he wanted to say, was the subject but, having no grip whatsoever on grammar, he got tangled in the words. They were soon laughing, which caused Rex to say, 'Sorry I made a hash of that. I'm not used to talking about my work. Ask me again in twenty years time, I might know what I'm talking about by then!' and they laughed some more; then Rex moved on, and Tim found himself with the realisation in mind that Rex had come a long way from the inarticulate young man he'd been at Fairhaven the previous summer, causing him to say to Ruth and his wife, 'He's developing, isn't he. If he can keep his mind advancing, and show it in his art, he's going to be quite a painter.' They agreed. They had a feeling that the drinkers and talkers surrounding them were in agreement too; and that was when Norman Bartlett happened to join them as he moved around the room.

'A really good night,' Tim said to their host. 'You must be very pleased. You've got every right to be, you and Jenny.' Something about the fullness, the generosity, of these remarks caused Donna to wonder about her husband. It sounded like something had happened to him. No, in him. He was normally good-natured enough, but she'd long known that that was his way of masking his feelings, of showing only what he wanted to show while other reactions stayed hidden. Tonight, though, he was unusually open. Was this an effect of Rex's paintings, or the way he went about them? She thought it was, and she didn't know what, exactly, the effect had been, or why it had been allowed to happen, but at least she was, she sensed, on the right track for once. Wanting to take her discovery further without probing Tim, she said to their host, 'What is it, Norman, do you think, that's made this such a successful occasion?'

'I've been wondering about that myself,' their host said. 'And I put it to Jenny a few minutes back. All she had to say was that everyone was having a good time, we were all in a good mood ...'

'True, true,' Donna said, interrupting, 'but it's more than that?'

'It is,' their host said. 'I think it's because we're all a little surprised. We didn't expect Rex's paintings to be quite so good.'

'They are good,' Donna agreed, 'but that's unusual, or so I think, in that the subject matter is so varied. I mean. Taps, yachts, flags, cars ...'

Norman again: 'Wheels, oars in boats, flowers in a garden bed ...'

'Our garden bed,' Tim pointed out, as if it added a little importance to them, standing there.

'Such a range of things,' Norman said, 'that you're forced to realise that they are all simple, everyday things, and they're not treated any differently, one from another, which leads me to think that it's not the things that he's painting, but something else ...'

They realised, all of them, that they'd run up against something not easy to express: Rex had taken a step, they were sure of that, but where he'd brought them to, they couldn't say. It would need another exhibition to advance them from where they were, stuck in the same position – something had happened and they didn't yet know what it was. Or had been. And Tim was still different, and Donna not much wiser about what had happened. Then she had an insight into knowledge – his, hers, everybody's: she wouldn't understand what had happened to Tim until he understood himself. For the moment he didn't know, though he must have been aware that something had changed. It was clear that he was still thinking about it because he said, 'I'm surprised by the step he's taken. He's found a task to undertake and it's essential. He's got a grip on something that he has to do. All these pictures ...' he rolled his eyes around the room '... in some way they're all the same picture, and in another way, they aren't. That's what we're trying to work out.' Then, with less energy in his voice he said, 'It's going to take a while.' Donna said, 'If we all work on it, it can't be all that hard.'

She was surprised to find Tim's hand reaching for hers. He said, 'I'm going to sit down for a minute, in the other room, and see if I can work it out.' She said to him, 'Do you want me to come and sit with you? and he said, 'No, I'll be all right. There's a lot of people here we haven't seen for ages, you mix in and talk around. I'll be okay. I like to think and sometimes it's necessary. I'll catch up the moment I think I've got things clear.'

A moment later he was gone: to the other room, to a heavy chair in a quiet corner, a place not lit by the various lights that had been placed to show the paintings. Moving through the first room, talking to guests, Donna could see that her husband was both troubled, yet optimistic, as if he had only to define his problem to solve it. She wondered if things were really as easy as that, and entertained her doubts.

So Donna mingled while Tim sat. For a time he found himself looking at, and considering, the painting he'd mentioned – the jetty and boatshed which reminded him of Clarice Beckett's work. Then he found himself wondering why he hadn't settled on, as his favourite, the painting of his and Donna's garden. He got up to look at it, then sat down again. This time he noticed a shovel against a fence, giving a diagonal line quite at odds with the flowers – not all that many – in the lower part of the painting. He was always leaving tools around the garden and Donna was always chiding him for it. She said regularly – too often for Tim's liking – that he should put things away when he finished for the day. Not to do so was messy, the tools got rusty and the handles would roughen in the weather and he wouldn't want to pick them up.

This argument of his wife's had the opposite effect on him. He left things out all the more. Donna, realising this, had gone quiet. So he continued to leave things out, and it annoyed her. Either of them, if asked, would have said that little wrangles were part of marriage, yet each of them felt that in some way the garden tools mattered because they revealed things which both preferred to keep hidden. Donna believed, and would say it to friends occasionally, that women were fundamentally responsible for marriages. Men married because they needed a woman, and they did so, generally, on the assumption, backed by as much of society as they could see, that men managed the world more or less as of right, while women – as Donna and people like her saw it – managed those wide areas of human doings which men were mostly unaware of. Thus men believed themselves the rulers while women *knew* that they were. This would only be so while both parties kept the matter closed. A lid not to be lifted. Tim, for his part, housed considerable dissatisfaction within his apparently cheery nature. He felt that his life was built on a lie because his work was untruthful,

while pretending to be scientific. Put simply, Harvey-Helmholtz Information, for whom he worked, said that its investigations were accurate, checkable, provable and therefore reliable; while Tim, dissatisfied as he was, thought of them as selling people what they wanted to know, and telling them what they wanted to be told. 'We've got faith,' he would tell Randolph Quirk when the Williamsons dined with the other couple, 'but it's faith in ourselves, and what's it rest on? On our belief that we can make them think whatever it suits us to have them think. Faith! It's a mighty thing, and it's treacherous.' He had an unstated desire to do something simple and unchallengeably honest, like growing fruit and vegetables. Hence the restlessness he partially suppressed in the garden, the satisfaction it gave him to pick peaches off the trees inside his back fence, and the pleasure he took in seeing his tomatos ripen and move to the salad bowl. If you grew something with your own hands you could trust it. Spuds grew in the soil you'd transformed by composting. Nature was healthy. Or it wasn't, when it characterised itself via avalanches, tidal waves, cyclones and the like, but even then it was a worthy opponent. Worthy because it humbled humans, who were too big for their boots most of the time. You could dam a river and use its water for irrigation, or you could let the river run free to create a valley where people in their thousands could live. This – a blessed, separate part of the world where life was on a plane of no deception – was Tim's dream, rarely expressed, because of no commercial value, but latent in him, dormant, making him restless and unhappy, but showing him no easily opened door to a place where he could live. He made money for Harvey-Helmholtz, he did everything they wanted better than they could, because he didn't believe in what he was doing. Cynicism is a great facilitator. Scorn makes things easy to achieve. Tim's clients were easy to read. What they wanted was simple enough. They wanted surveys done, research undertaken, to back up the plans they would put into production before handing their results to advertising agencies. It was the clean, or clean-looking, end of the spectrum. Other people did the work and the dirty work. It was well paid, and business groups frequently wanted Harvey-Helmholtz people to give talks, and they did. Tim had done it often enough. Sometimes, on the night before or the night after one of these talks, he dreamed of himself directing a lifeboat full of people rowing for their lives. 'This way!' he'd say, pointing over his shoulder, and they rowed that way and their boat pulled up on the shore as if driven by an engine. When he woke, he wanted to get back to that island. But where was it? He knew there were islands in the Pacific, and they'd be underwater if global warming was true, as he believed it was. So where did that leave him?

Up shit creek without a paddle. That's where he was going to end up unless he did something, and he didn't know what to do but he was restless. Somewhere, even if he didn't know where, things would be better. He wanted to find the place. He wanted Donna to go with him. She had little or none of his restlessness, so the attraction, if he was to move her, had to be great. He started to look for places, or rather, to listen whenever people talked about great places they'd been. He remembered that Rex and Nancy had loved the Barossa Valley on their way home from the Flinders Ranges, which they'd also loved, but for different reasons. The Barossa? There might be something there. Ruth was loving it in north Queensland, and she was the last person he'd ever expected to settle up there. Also in his mind was the north-east of Victoria – God's own country, they called it, and he'd always felt that way when he went through in his car. Rivers running into the Murray, snow in season, a summer softened by the high country, flowers, some of the world's best wines, sturdy people of the soil ...

... and Rory Svendsen, of course, now living at Beechworth: that was a downer to be considered. But, Tim told himself, you could stay away from him. There were crooks everywhere. You couldn't sanctify the human race and if you tried you were going to be upset. No, Rory or no Rory, he was prepared to give it a go. But what about Donna? Would she be willing to try? He was persuasive, he could try to win her over, but he knew if he pushed her into moving, into changing the very nature of their lives, she'd be unhappy and he'd be to blame. Something which didn't have its origins in him would have to be found, and slipped under her nose without her seeing his hand. That wouldn't be easy. He'd need a good idea! Meanwhile, they could look around. Make trips. It didn't escape Tim's notice that Donna enjoyed

packing, and travelling, but most of all she liked to return. 'Home again!' she'd say with joy mixed with relief when they turned into their drive. Tim had been smart in choosing the house he'd bought before he married Donna. It was near a railway station, and he bought it at a time when people still scorned railways as noisy and somehow a sign of dependence which the middle classes feared. Only later, when the house was well on the way to being paid off, did public opinion change, and dwellings close to railway stations became valuable. Tim pointed out to Donna that they could move to a better suburb – introducing the idea of shifting – with the increased value of the house they owned, but she wasn't interested. 'We're near enough to our friends. If we wanted to be closer to the Bartletts, for instance, it'd cost us a fortune. Or Parkville: look how the prices have gone up there. We're on a good thing, Tim, let's stick to it.'

That meant, of course, that if he succeeded in getting Donna to move, it would have to be to the best house in whatever town, or district, they were moving to. The best, or close to it. In things of quality she was competitive; it wouldn't be easy to find a place that tempted her. She had a way of staying silent when they entered an area she didn't know, and stayed that way unless something really pleased her. Tim knew better than to comment on the qualities of a place unless she noticed first. Houses, after all, were the homes of marriages, and they were in *her* area of control. Donna enjoyed visiting regions she didn't know, comparing them, even thinking about what it might be like to live in such places. She was astute enough, however, to realise why they were making trips, travelling, or sight-seeing, as Tim preferred to put it. He was restless, she knew, even if she didn't fully understand his feeling that the work he was doing was wrong for him. This was something he kept hidden from her, and even in large part from himself. But the veneer of contentment and confidence was beginning to thin. The couple were invited to a gathering - it wasn't called 'a party' - at Les and Lorna Bramble's one Sunday afternoon and Les decided that they needed cheering up. The remedy was at hand! All they had to do was get caught up in the city's spring racing carnival and any doubts or misgivings would be swept away. 'This, my friend,' Les said to Tim, 'is the city's longest and greatest tradition. At the end

of winter, when a bit of warmth is creeping back into the world and the snows are melting in the hills, our best trainers are bringing their best horses to the peak of fitness. The races are arranged to suit them. It's a lovely schedule, and it's shared across the best tracks we've got. Flemington's the peak. On Cup day it's a picture. You've got a hundred thousand people there, all dressed up, some of them in company marquees, some of them out in the open, and they're there to have a good time. It really is the best. No, it's more than that, it's Melbourne's moment. You know what they say – the nation stops. And it does, you know. I've been in Darwin, I've been in Perth, I've been in little onepub bush towns, and they all come to a halt to listen to the cup. If you want a moment when the nation's one, concentrated on the one place and the one action, that's when it is.' He yelled, 'They're off!' and the room fell quiet. Tim burst out laughing. 'We're just starting the cup,' he told the Brambles' friends. 'Starting a little early this year. Les has put his house on the favourite and he's getting it off to an early start!' People laughed. Lorna came over to see what was going on. Les was in high spirits. 'He needed cheering up,' he said, pointing at Tim. 'Why's that?' Lorna wanted to know. 'You haven't had any bad news, have you?' Tim shook his head. 'Everything's normal.' Lorna sensed that it wasn't. She glanced around for Donna, but couldn't spot her. 'Where's Donna?' Tim turned to her. 'I don't know. She was here a moment ago. She must have slipped away for some reason ...'

Lorna was blunt. 'Probably didn't want to hear what she was going to hear.' Tim defended. 'Les was telling me to cheer up because the Cup was coming close. He thought everyone could solve their problems by getting out to Flemington, drinking champers and tossing a roll of notes at the bookies ...'

A grinning Les said, 'Weeeeeelll...' to which Lorna replied, 'Men.' Whatever she meant by this, it had the ring of finality. Men were what she thought they were. Donna appeared from wherever she'd been, and stood beside Lorna. 'They're incorrigible,' she added. 'Corrigere. Latin to correct. Am I right or am I wrong?' Lorna needed no time to ponder. 'Right every time! Not correctable, that's the word all right.' She glared at the men. Then she slipped in what she'd been wanting to know. 'Why've you two been driving around so much

lately? Can't you find anything better to do at home?' Les was used to this side of his wife but felt a need to soften its use against his friends. 'Steady love! They don't have to be homebodies if they don't want to be. Having a look at country's a great thing to do. Besides, you meet people on your travels ...' He would have gone on but Tim was getting ready to open. 'I guess I'm feeling restless. I want to see whatever there is to find.' Donna, sensing that something hidden was about to appear, stayed silent, and Lorna took up the admission. 'What're you looking for?'

Tim had shown more than he meant to. On the other hand, the situation demanded prevarication. 'No matter how well placed you are, nothing lasts forever. You need to be looking around to see what might come next. It's only exercising good judgement.' Lorna knew this was rubbish. 'Good judgement! Tell us where you've been, these last few weeks.' Tim produced some names. Lorna scoffed. 'What's the future of those places?' Donna, changing sides, said, 'Beechworth was charming.' Lorna laughed. 'It might have been till Rory Svendsen settled there. Bastard. Look where his wife's gone now.' She waved in a direction she thought might be north. 'Lost to us, and only because of him!' Tim steadied himself. This wasn't going to be easy. 'Life's just as real in the places we've been looking at. City people think country people live a half life, but that's an ignorant judgement. There's plenty of good things to do in the bush, and more hours in the day because you're not stuck in traffic.' Lorna looked at his wife. 'How could you stand it? No concerts. Nobody to talk to. No races to go to.' This was a dig at Les, and he knew it, so he butted in. 'Oh they have race meetings in the bush, and they're worth a look. You do miss out on the big events, though, and the top horses. There's not many Makybe Divas running at Manangatang!' He chuckled hugely. 'This year's spring carnival's been a cracker, and it's going to go on that way, believe you me.' And off he went with great horses, trainers, jockeys, fortunes won and lost, until Lorna tried to stop him. 'Oh shut up Les, we can listen to you broadcasting if we want to hear all that!' Tim found himself wondering what Lorna would be like with a few drinks inside her, something he couldn't remember seeing. For that matter, it was quite a while since he'd been any more than half drunk himself, and he felt a sudden need. Release! Permission from oneself to do impulsive things, however stupid. When he had a fruit orchard, a vegetable farm, a bit of earth all his own, he could drink as much as he liked, or not drink at all more likely, but he'd be free! So he felt, and a few tears escaped the corner of his eye, to the amazement of Donna, his wife, and his hosts, Lorna and Les.

'You okay mate?' Les wanted to know. Tim nodded, no words following.

'Darling?' Donna said, taking his hand.

'I got a bit carried away there,' Lorna said, excusing herself. 'I didn't mean to upset you. I talk pretty freely to Les because he's with people like that all day and I have to get through to him sometimes so I pitch it at a pretty high level. I'm sorry Tim. I shouldn't have been so brusque.'

Tim nodded. It was all he could do. There was nothing he could say. All the things he was yearning for, and the things that were spoiling him, were at the front of his mind and if he started letting them out he'd never stop. And he wouldn't be able to do a thing to improve all the things that were depressing him. He would indeed be up that creek without a paddle. In fact, he was already, and they were looking at him, and he was an object of their charity, love and support, and that meant that they knew his weakness and were being tender with him because they knew how helpless he was. So he said nothing, and when Donna said, 'I think we should go home now, Tim, and let you settle down, and get a good night's sleep,' all he could do was agree, and let himself be led away.

After everyone had gone, Les and Lorna saw their children into bed, talked to them, and got into their pyjamas ready for bed, Les suggested a whisky to his wife. 'No,' she was firm. 'You've had enough. I suppose I'm the same. Let's get into bed and talk.' They did so. For Lorna, it was like finding a clearing in the forest. Some sense might emerge. If they were lucky. Les would talk quietly instead of making public pronouncements. She waited for him. He coughed, and she knew he was going to start. Lorna giggled. Something tender, and compassionate, welled up in Les. 'Poor bugger, who'd have

thought?' Lorna said, 'I thought we knew Tim. What a surprise.' They paused. Les said, 'What's Donna going to do?' Lorna: 'She's going to need some help.' They thought. 'What sort of help?' They didn't know. They murmured on, wanting to do good, but knowing it was probably beyond them. Cuts and bruises could be stitched up and bandaged, but disablements in the mind ...

They were no wiser in the morning, but still determined. Lorna said something about the Furlinghettis, whom they hadn't seen for a while. 'Another problem,' Les observed, as if he had the job of counting. 'Carlo got rid of that funny old car he had. The what was it? Hispania something?' Lorna couldn't remember. Cars were men's business. 'They've only got her car now. The Renault. Smart looking thing.' Les had no feeling for continental design. 'Funny looking thing, I'd say. But I suppose it goes.' He looked to his wife, but she was blank, however well-intentioned. 'We ought to see them. Have them over. Go out with them, or something.' Les agreed. 'But I don't think they're interested in horses.' Lorna understood this. 'No they're not. But we must be able to think of something.'

A phone call established Carlo and Maria's willingness to have lunch. They thought it best to have the Brambles over because their little boy Terry wasn't yet adjusted to eating out. It would be easier for him at home. Carlo suggested Sunday because he expected Les to be race-calling on the Saturday – the Sabbath as he called it, mocking his friend. 'My day of free expression,' Les called it. 'The only day anyone takes any notice of me.' Carlo relayed this on to Maria, who was scornful. 'He's got a whole army of listeners,' she said. 'And journalists who quote him. 'He's known on every race track in the country. He's no blushing violet.' Carlo didn't say anything to that, but he felt envious. He was feeling lost since he'd given up the Suiza. Nothing seemed important any more. Maria was pleased to have it gone, and the children had no idea how central it had been. Their mother's Megane was good enough to get them around, it had a roof, it was warm and – all important – modern. 'You're better off without it,' Maria told her husband. 'You really are.' He didn't argue. He'd given in months ago, and sold the ancient treasure to someone who couldn't believe his luck. The 1904 model! He rang occasionally, the new owner, to ask about something he didn't know how to fix. When this happened, Carlo was informative, but he knew he'd go into a slump when he put the phone down, because the new owner's voice was tinted by an excitement Carlo knew he'd lost. How did people survive without a passion to make them feel special, and different from the bulk of people, the unredeemed mass? It was hard.

Maria only partly understood his predicament, because he was attentive to the children and a quiet, surprisingly respectful partner around the house. When he was on the road, or in motels, he felt the value of the home he shared. It was not dissatisfaction with what he had that left him miserable, it was the loss of an enthusiasm, however silly, that took away the edge of enjoyment which had been part of his life, and more: without faith in himself as a man with a purpose, he lacked an energy source, and he was vulnerable. Everyday life presented an endless roadshow inspiring both optimism and pessimism, and his balance had tipped, since he'd given up his enthusiasm for early automobiles, towards pessimism. There didn't seem to be enough to make him hopeful, and therefore positive. 'I wouldn't have done it,' he thought, meaning to sell his once-treasured car, 'if I'd known what it meant to me.' But he also knew that he'd made the change willingly enough, once he realised that he saw himself as wasting time, money, attention, and much else besides on a thing that was never going to bring any benefit to those he loved: his family. So he'd made the surrender, and its effects had surprised him. He needed to rebuild, but it didn't seem to be happening and there were no signs in the air, no signals, that it might be on its way. He'd been reduced; indeed, he'd done it to himself, and was surprised at how much difference the loss had made to him. He'd always been special in his own eyes because of his difference – a car that nobody else was driving – and now he was an ordinary member of the masses, the mob, with nothing to distinguish him from the rest.

He wanted to be special again, to be different, and couldn't see how to do it. Maria was troubled by his quandary, and knew she'd been at least partly responsible, if not to blame; he *ought* to have been able to find something else, something socially useful but not costly; she'd have allowed him almost anything ... and now she was

searching, as he was, for that outlet, as she called it, that something special which would remake him as the man he'd been. Couldn't he get on the money-raising committee at the nearby hospital? They were always looking for funds, and clever people to think of ways of raising them. I'd be no use, Carlo said. I don't know anything about hospitals, I've never been in one, I don't think I'll ever care about them until I get sick, and then I won't be into fund-raising, I'll be too interested in what's happening to me. The local school? No, I love my children, but a school's not my scene. Collecting, then? Coins, banknotes, the bones of dinosaurs? He explained why he had no interest in such things. 'The car came at a certain moment in history. If I'd been alive back then, I'd have been a man living at the frontier. When I had the Hispano, I was living the life I never had at the front line of where mankind was going. Today we're going into space and I don't know anything about it.' He was glum. No answers presented themselves. There needed to be a way, there almost certainly was one, but he hadn't found it. That meant it wasn't on his existing horizons: that meant his mind had a way to travel to find what it was that would bring him back to life. But which way to go?

His friends all had suggestions. Work for a charity. Get a job at a museum. Get involved with medical testing, the doctors were always trying out new drugs, conducting investigations, and so on. Do research on firefighting - what was the difference between aboriginal burning and modern fuel reduction burning? We needed to know. Deep sea diving? That was another need-to-know. Could we use the oceans better to feed ourselves, or were we depleting them unsustainably? These ideas, ever so well meant, cast him into dejection. When he was at home with Maria, and their friends, so full of bright ideas, had gone, he would say, 'They mean well but they upset me. I can't do any of those things and when they offer all these bright ideas, they make me feel so aware of everything I can't do, not what I can, or what I might. Everybody's got their limits, and talking about what my interests might be only serves to make me aware of how narrow I am, and how narrow I was when I was playing around with cars. Cars! What about them? Why did they fascinate me? I was good with them, that's why. I was better than almost anybody I knew, and that made me feel good. I need something to give me back my appreciation of myself and I don't know how to do it.' Full of misery, he'd see the tears in Maria's eyes and they'd creep quietly to bed, hug each other gently for a minute, then fall asleep, preparing for another day like the one they'd dismissed.

The answer, when it came, surfaced slowly. He was talking and thinking in a new way without realising it. Maria sensed it before he did. She said to him one morning, when he was grumbling over the newspaper, 'It might be better if you cancelled the delivery of that thing. All it does is make you cranky.' He apologised, and started to tell her what was wrong with what he was reading. 'They're talking about abalone fishing and they don't know anything about it. Not even the first thing. They're saying we're going to run out of abalone so they ought to have stricter limits, and all that sort of stuff. Stricter limits! They don't have any idea how much abalone there is in places that we don't know about. All they're doing is peddling their ignorance! Stricter limits! There ought to be a limit on the words these bastards can print. Or talk ...' Maria was looking at him. 'What is it, love?' She smiled, and something told him he hadn't seen that smile on her face for ages. 'Something's amusing you,' he said. 'Is it me?'

She crossed the room looking at him. She sat opposite him at the table. He felt unnerved, and watched her, waiting. 'Write them a letter,' she said. 'Or better still, do some research and write them an article. Show them what they ought to be saying.' Something about the pace of her delivery told him to take her seriously. 'I haven't got time to do that. I've got to ...' He started listing all the things he had on his plate but realised that she was waiting for him to stop. 'What is it?'

She was smiling. 'Who's the enemy? The abalone poachers, or the people who write about them?'

The dichotomy surprised him, and even stranger was the fact that he had no hesitation in answering. 'There's a whole class of people who think it's their job to tell the rest of us what to think.'

She said, his wife said, 'I thought that's what you'd say. You've found yourself. You've found your target. You're ready for the war you wanted to find.'

'What war?'

She was sure. 'It hasn't started yet. You haven't declared it. The enemy doesn't know!' She was laughing, and Carlo, puzzled, could see that she saw something invisible to him. He had a strange moment when he could see himself, with Maria sitting opposite, and he knew he didn't understand himself because she could see something and he couldn't. 'Could you tell me what you mean? What you want me to do?'

She was still smiling, still had the advantage. 'You want me to tell you what you're thinking? You never let me do that when you were working on your cars!'

So the joke was on him. 'Okay, I can see I'm being stupid. But I can't see what I'm doing wrong. Inform me, please love. Enlighten me. Pull me out of this dark spot!'

'You've been at war for quite a while. You haven't realised it. That's because you haven't known who your enemy was. You thought you were just grumbling, and unhappy. And you were. But now it's coming clear ...'

'For heaven's sake ...'

She was waiting for him to realise and he needed – or so he thought – to be told. 'Why are you annoyed?'

He was pinned, or so he felt. Still, she was his partner, he had to answer. 'Because everywhere I look, there are bloody stupid people laying down the law, thinking they're enlightening the ignorant public, thinking they know what our politicians should do, telling us how we ought to vote, telling us how we're *going* to vote, for Christ's sake, laying down the law as if they knew what it was when they're only talkative, opinionated blowhards ...'

She clapped her hands. 'Nearly there!'

'... it's the opinion polls that really get me. If you said to these people, you shouldn't be doing this, they'd say it was helping democracy to work if they ring up two thousand people for an opinion poll. Who's the most popular leader? Do you approve of this tax? Should the government let people who've been fighting in Syria back into the country? Et bloody cetera, ad infinitum!' He looked into his wife's eyes, wondering what he'd see reflected there: himself,

but what did she think of him now? 'They think it's democratic. But it's the opposite. They're using a democratic principle to pull down democracy. What they really want is not better government, but themselves to be in control. The media want to take over from the parliament. They want to be the bosses, controlling what goes on in our minds!' He was working himself up by now and Maria, he could see, was not only happy, she was proud of him. She thought he was solving his problem when all he was doing was trying to get it clear. She reached across and took his hands. 'You're working it out, Carlo my love. You've said it, strongly and well. Now, next question. What are you – you – going to do about it? Hey?' Smiling again. 'We've taken the first step. I wonder where the next one leads? We must have a direction. A goal. We have to work out what to do, so we'll know whether or not we're having an effect.'

How had she got so far in front? He felt strangely alone, despite her support, her warmth. 'I'm struggling, love. How can it be clear to you when I haven't got a clue?'

'You'll catch up. You've taken some giant steps. It's going to be good. We'll be strong together, because we'll be cunning. You say you don't know who the enemy is. More important, don't let the enemy know that you're their enemy. Look docile, calm, obedient. And when you see an opportunity, strike!'

Carlo's focus wandered in the weeks that followed. The Brambles were caught up in the city's high season for racing, and wanted their friends to join them. 'I like going out with Les and Lorna,' Carlo told Maria, 'but what I need most is time to think. Next thing they'll be talking about Christmas and New Year, down by the water again. I suppose we'll have to be in it?' Maria thought they should. 'When your kids are young, you tell yourself you haven't got any time to yourself. What you ought to think, though, is that you only have the kids once, so you've got to do what pleases them. Have you noticed?'

He had. He was a good father, and she loved him for it. 'I'll be able to go for walks, when we get back to Fairhaven. I'll walk down near the water, where the sand's nice and hard, and I'll be able to think.'

Maria laughed. 'When you're not teaching May to swim, or taking Terry for a paddle!' He knew what she meant. 'I'll have to get in a good big walk to work up a thirst.' She said, and he wondered if she was being optimistic, or was simply telling him his thoughts weren't as important as he liked to think: 'You'll have it worked out by then. You'll know what you need to do.'

Would he? He wasn't sure. He was happier now that he'd located his dissatisfactions as leading to an answer to his problems, not a weakness in themselves, but he hadn't found a focus, an aim, a plan. His thoughts were woolly. Maria, his wife, was not only a support, she was also a source of expectation that he hoped he'd be able to satisfy. She wanted more of him than simply being a father to their children; something more, a success of some sort in his own right which she could point to as a model for their children – *her* children when she thought of him in that way. So he asked himself what made him angry, and what he could accept. What made him most angry, he decided, was anyone – anyone at all – who spoke, or wrote, as if they were talking for everyone else. Journalists, radio people, television people, political people ...

No. Political people were doing their job. They were supposed to listen to everyone else, then legislate. Lead. There was a role for them, and yet he despised them as much as any of the others. Why? Because they listened to the journalists, the lobbyists, and were foolish enough, or was it simply weak, to let themselves be surrounded when they needed to be isolated, free. Above the ruck and acting in the interest of all. It was probably impossible but that was what they were supposed to be doing. He had a feeling that democracy wasn't working. It had probably only worked well when people were getting used to it. Now everyone knew how to play the game and they played it within a whisker of what was forbidden by the rules. The rules? Nobody believed in them any more. They were always being changed, and every time it happened, someone stole an advantage. It was like the law. You only stopped litigating when a court gave you the decision you wanted. The biggest purse usually won. Justice was like democracy: regularly praised, hymned, as sacred, but it was like a shining, fluttering flag with bodies of the maimed and tortured, those who were pleading and crying, scattered around the pole that lifted the fluttering ideals on high.

Justice! Democracy! They were deceptive, rarely honest concepts used by smart people to bring about ends other than those the masses wanted. Wealth was concentrated in ever-fewer hands and the masses did what they could. They did without. It was a dark prospect, and he realised, after a week or two of thinking in this way, that he was no closer to a solution – or anything else to satisfy his wish for change. You couldn't do anything unless you had an agenda, and it had to be narrow enough to be achievable, popular enough to get support, simple enough to feel right to those who bothered to look.

Quite a demand! Carlo went quiet. Maria knew he'd entered a stage, and it might take him a long time to emerge. She was strong, and well-intentioned, but had few powers of analysis. She was relying on Carlo to find the way, and she wasn't sure if it was within his range. He'd never set himself to think in this way before. He'd taken it for granted, in his antique car days, that what he was doing interested people, would even draw sympathy and support from those who weren't interested. What he was doing was popular, and drew admiration from those less able than he. But if he took on the media, the new rulers of the land, he'd be trying to take away a drug from those who'd become dependent: what he found himself hostile to had already won people over and reduced them to dependence. This was a problem he'd never faced before. 'It's hard, love; I can't seem to get things clear,' he told Maria, and she was supportive because she felt the same. She was proud of her children, her marriage, and of herself as a mother, but felt that in some way – hidden from her gaze – she'd been downvalued too. She'd often been irritated with Carlo in his antique auto days, but now her irritation took a new form: she felt it was his job to solve their problem, even though she knew it was hers as well. They were happy enough when they considered their family as an island, or reached out to friends in what could be taken as a normal, not-to-be-noticed sort of way, but society at large was too much. The illusion couldn't be sustained. She envied the Brambles, and the Bartletts, because they were at ease on all levels and in all places: they weren't carrying something pent up, frustrating, in their innermost beings. She envied them but knew she couldn't be like them; there had to be another way. But where? She began to see what was driving Tim and Donna Williamson to search the countryside for possibilities of relocation, and the impulse behind these moves, but knew that their search was not the same as hers and Carlo's: so what were they looking for, and where would they find it? You couldn't lead a life of dissatisfaction, even if criminals and poor people did, because ...

There was no reason, except pride, and Marie had plenty of that, as did her husband. They weren't giving in, even if they weren't getting anywhere. It was humbling, and the frightening thing was that both Marie and Carlo could see that there were thousands of people living and dying without finding a solution. People went into politics, or they barracked for Liberal, Labor or the Greens out of hopes that an organisation might find a path when the individual couldn't. People joined the armed services, or some big organisation, because its leaders took responsibility from their underlings, who had simply to follow orders. That was the solution, then, wasn't it? To be in a secure situation with no questioning to trouble the mind. Marie put this to Carlo on one of their evenings in bed, with the children asleep and their home giving no sign to the surrounding world there was any disquiet within. It was a good home, with a three-car garage built into it, housing only the Megane for the moment, though Carlo thought they should run a second car soon; it put too much weight on Marie to do all the driving. Marie pointed out that in both their families the church had once been all-important, responsible for providing the viewpoints, the philosophies and rules that gave ordinary people their guidance: where, she wanted to know, did people go these days? Was it available in reputable form, or did you have to give in to charlatans and shysters in order to put yourself in a position of security? Marie began to feel lost when Carlo couldn't find what they were looking for. He might get there one day? And he might not. Where would it leave the children? It mattered, Marie saw, for them. They mustn't grow up without conviction to bind their lives together. Drugs lay in the path of those who weren't strong, certain, and secure.

Drugs. Carlo liked a wine, liked a beer on a hot day, but the other, unsocialised chemicals had no appeal. Anything he ever heard or saw of their effects horrified him. People would have to be desperate ... or so he thought until it occurred to him that many people, perhaps most, would be desperate unless they were pacified by the messages pushed their way by the message industry. Maria drank next to nothing, saw no need for it, only did it to be social, and so on. Neither was taking the easy way out – but what was the cage, what was the trap? Who pushed people into it, who held the key? Carlo began to think that the problem he'd thought could be cut down to size, as he, for instance, had solved all his automotive problems with a part here, a new understanding there, the odd adjustment to tuning, and so on, was far too big for him or anybody else. It was dangerous to ask questions about human life because there were no answers except the old favourites that had been around for too long for anyone to remember how they came into being. Hell's bells! He wasn't smart enough to solve problems that no one else had solved! He'd have to make his peace in some other way. It was either that or accept a clutch of ready-made answers, of which there were plenty on offer.

The alternative was to go small, keep out of sight, be nobody's target, to answer their invasions of his home with Possibly, I'll have to think about it, That could be a good idea for a later time, and so on. Bluff them, erect no barriers, but dodge giving invitations of any sort to those who wanted control. Call it a quiet revolution, and hope to win that way. He was nervous. He doubted if it could be done. Like Maria, he wondered what his children would be like as they grew up; they'd see through him soon enough, of that you could be sure. But could they see through love? That was the surest bond. Maria was precious to him, now that he was challenged. He was sorry sometimes, but only occasionally, that he'd given up his cars. They'd been a blindfold, keeping him unaware of what was really happening. Being without them was painful, but he felt he'd emerge somehow, his problem solved. It might simply be, he reasoned, that he'd outlast the problem, that is, live with it until it didn't matter any more because he didn't care about his situation. If he wasn't worried about the problem, why should the problem worry him? He had a feeling that this was

the way to go: simply shoulder the load and carry it until he didn't notice it any more, didn't know if perhaps it had fallen off his back when he was thinking about something else. There'd surely be new problems as the children grew older. Things he hadn't thought about yet. This was an idea that satisfied him - more, it pleased him to think that personal problems were simply there to be lived with, like bad weather, or bushfires when their season came. That was every summer, and when there were no fires there was the threat of fires. One simply lived with them until their season went into decline, and it was cold weather you had to deal with. Warming the house and putting on clothes to fend off the cold became the next preoccupation. He dimly remembered that there was a song about doing everything in its right and proper season, and when he mentioned this to Maria, another night as they lay in bed, warm and reassuring each other, she told him that the song had been written using words from the Bible which she couldn't remember. Carlo laughed at this, his lovely, beloved wife not remembering. He told her to ask the priest, knowing she avoided the church as far as possible, although contributing a few dollars when accosted at her front door for a donation 'however small'. 'It's like a shadow,' she told her husband, 'no matter how far you move to get out of it, it moves to keep up with you. They don't want to let you go.'

They slept, they woke, night after night, day after day. Nothing changed, but the various realisations that had troubled Carlo and caused Maria to doubt him slowly lost their sting, their reliance on each other gave them strength, their children received their fill of love, their simplicity made benign periods of their days and tender reservoirs of their nights. Visitors commented on the happiness of their house, the politeness of their children, the warmth of the greetings they got from Carlo at the door and Maria within their dwelling. She liked to cook, she looked forward to the time when her children brought home friends from school, and all the little problems they were sure to have with maths, with grammar, if anyone taught it these days, with understanding maps and the solar system, the atom and various forms of energy ... all those difficulties which schooldays were supposed to bring and then resolve. Maria felt sure that May,

and then Terry, would have friends, just as she saw that the parents of those friends would become the circle she moved in, so that slowly – very slowly, she hoped – they'd drop out of Jack and Olivia Page's circle, and build, maybe, another of their own. But that all lay in the future, too far ahead to be known.

So what about the world? How was it getting on, while our people were filling in their days? Perhaps the simplest thing to say is that our people hardly knew what the world was doing, so long as it obeyed its habits – turning to give day and night, altering its angle to bring seasons. Humans, becoming aware that their activities were polluting the atmosphere, began to worry, but the nation's political leaders pushed these concerns away; the faith system known as economics told them to go on as before. Gross national product had to grow. Recession of any sort meant failure. The public was made aware that life, which naturally they sought to see multi-dimensionally, should be brought, via profit and loss accounting, to its – strange term – bottom line. The Catholic church, which had held sway for so long, fell into disgrace because its priests inflicted their sexuality on the young. Sad days indeed! The United Nations made timid steps towards management of the planet, but who knew what the planet wanted?

There was nowhere to look, nobody to say. Humans ruled. They devoured. The animals they once feared became remnant minorities. Tigers dwindled. Humanity revealed its preoccupations by slaughtering elephants for their ivory, rhinos for their horns! Travellers with better intentions used field-glasses but guns could still be heard. The armaments industry ruled nations and their rulers. Wars were provoked to maintain sales. Planes grew faster, flown by lords of creation, while risky tasks were given to drones. People wondered if bees would survive to pollinate things, as they'd done for millions of years. Nobody felt sure of the world because everybody saw it reduced by the overwhelming growth of man.

Population ... but let me leave this sentence unfinished. It grew, and is growing. People agonised over whether they should be allowed to assist those who preferred to die. Marriage began to move in meaning from the socialisation of fecundity to the companionship of

souls. Same sex marriage scented ... more than acceptability, triumph! And of course it was resisted. Every generation brought about change. Ancient traditions were forgotten, and reinvented. The wretched sought refuge in 'better' countries, which rejected them, unwanted. Or they accepted them on the fringes, maintaining the old qualities without sharing. The uninvited had to make do with the minimum, as always. Wars blasted cities and towns, while populations lived in tents, short of drinking water. Discoverers kept searching for evidence of earlier man, assuming, apparently, that what was happening around them was not primaeval enough. The idea that mankind was progressing began to die, recovered occasionally, and still fluttered, here and there, in minds that needed it.

Olivia was one of these. The world around her would receive her child. More than that, the child would become part of it. Identity doesn't stand alone. Identity is in the mix. Purity is rarely attained. Olivia felt helpless. All she could do was wait. She could get a room ready, buy things for the child, when it came – Olivia still didn't know, and didn't want to know, whether she carried a boy or a girl. She could listen eagerly – and did – to the experience of others. So many things could go wrong. It was wonderful when things went right. There was so much to watch out for, symptoms of diseases, and signs of early trouble. Deafness, poor eyesight, autism, the whole catastrophe! Then there was the need to discover the nature of the child, all awareness when it lay in its cradle, and no understanding at all. A mother's job was to train that awareness to align with a wonderful understanding, but not to suppress it. Good and evil had to be dealt with, something she acknowledged in her doubt-filled discussions with Jack. 'They're not naturally good. No one is. They have to be made that way. Question, Jack: How can imperfect people produce perfect people? Surely it can't be done?'

Jack had to ready himself too. If mothers were the front line, fathers were the first reserves. He said this one day and Olivia told him he was silly to think in military terms; what use were men, if that was the way they thought? He said it was only a way of speaking and she could be sure of him when the time came, as come it would. She saw that apprehension made him strong while it made her doubtful:

that was what men and women were like. She wasn't sure if it had to be that way but that was how it was for her and Jack. It occurred to her also that good mothers – she saw plenty of them about – didn't worry, or even think too much. They drew on a bottomless well that opened up inside them after they'd borne their child. That such a thing could happen, could even *be*, was a miracle. She prayed that it would settle on her shoulders when it was needed; that seemed to be the way it came. She saw a picture of a bird on a man's shoulders when she went to her doctors' clinic. It had been taken by one of the doctors on a visit to Mongolia, and he told her, when she asked him about it, that just after he'd taken his photo of sandy soil with rocky outcrops, the bird on the man's shoulder had spotted a fox, far away, and had flown to get above it, dive down, and kill.

But the fox had slipped into a hole in the rocks and escaped. The Mongolian man had smiled ruefully at the doctor. His prey had got away. Everything in the world lived by killing something else. This was the world where her daughter, or son, would need to learn to survive. She, with Jack, would have to teach their child the ways of the world. To succeed, s/he would have to live: to live, s/he would have to survive. The facts of the matter were simple. Mongolia looked harsh in the doctor's photo. She'd thought, at first, it must be Afghanistan, but realised, on reflection, that the same harshness of existence dependence on sucking life out of others – was true of her city, for all the lovely gardens and handsome buildings that suggested it was not. Turning away from the photo, and continuing to the room where she would talk with her doctor, a warm young woman not much older than Olivia herself, and without children of her own – of that, Olivia was sure – the mother-to-be felt herself harden. She'd be ready for the world if it threatened her child.

Jack Page found his thoughts moving about the borders of his being as their child grew inside his wife, out of sight. It was going to change him as it was already changing her, but in what way? He talked about this with men his own age and they spoke of the support he'd have to give Olivia: but he knew that already. They didn't seem to appreciate that men changed too, or should. Perhaps many of them

hadn't changed when their partners had children? He wasn't sure, because he didn't know what changes were required. Norman Bartlett had children. So did Les Bramble and Carlo Furlinghetti, so did lots of others. You had to look after children, everybody knew that, but Olivia was changing beside him, or getting ready to change; perhaps these two were one and the same thing? At the very least, he'd have to change in order to stay close to his wife because she was going to be different. In what way?

He wasn't sure. This was why his mind was prowling the perimeters of his life, looking for the changes that he sensed were approaching. Sometimes Olivia was unpredictable. She, who had never shown much interest in playing cards, for instance, wanted to have people around to play. This lasted about a month, then she forgot it. Sometimes she liked to go to bed early and have him hold her, caressing her and touching her gently, but going no further. Sometimes she slept in and liked him to bring her tea and toast, sometimes she was up early, doing things around the house. Sometimes she wanted him to take her on drives, and other times she preferred to read on her own. Jack fell in with whatever she wanted because he wanted to know what was happening inside her. She was not unwilling to tell him but as often as not, she didn't know. If he spoke to older, more experienced friends like Norman, Les and Carlo, they offered only simple generalities – 'It's good'; 'Women change, you have to change with them'; 'It certainly sorts you out, having children. You have to change your priorities.' The good part of this was that if others had been able to adapt then surely he, Jack, would do so too. The negative was that he was not much wiser for having asked. Platitudes were no use. He wanted to be ready. He wanted, for instance, to know when the baby would be born, and Olivia's doctor had given her a date, after which she'd prevaricated: 'Round about. Give or take a day or seven!' The doctor was amused when Olivia told her that her husband wanted to be ready, and that meant knowing when he'd be called on to act. She smiled at Olivia pressing for an answer, and parted her hands in a gesture that said, 'Who knows?'

It was a process that had Olivia in hand and she understood that she was not separate from what was happening. She was no longer independent, she was part of an organic development that was, remarkably, larger than herself. Jack, she could see, found it hard to think this way, even though he was trying to. Here at last was the difference between men and women. Women were moving into all sorts of male fields. Road workers holding signs to manage traffic often turned out, when you got close, to be women. Women golfers could be brilliant. Tennis players could be ruthless. Women were doctors, now, lawyers, barristers and judges. Surgeons too, occasionally. They no longer looked silly when they hit cricket balls or even – amazing as it was to men! – kicked footballs and bumped each other out of the way. Women were doing men's things but they were still women when it came to childbirth and the adjustments that it caused. Jack might go to his men friends who had children but Olivia knew that her friends who were mothers would come to her.

And they did. Lorna dropped in. Maria took her for a drive down the peninsula, for lunch and a visit to a winery. Jenny invited her to Towers Road, assuming it to be a privilege, and all three had plenty of questions. Why hadn't she found out if she was carrying a boy or a girl? How had her mother brought her up and did she want to do things the same way, or differently? What sort of father would Jack be? There were always surprises! Would Jack's parents be useful, would they step back, or try to intervene in some way? Olivia thought they'd step back. Jack was like that himself. They asked her who she'd turn to if anything went wrong, and was her doctor any use if she hadn't had children herself? They told her they had plenty of young children's clothes ready for whenever she needed them. She shouldn't think she had to buy everything new when every family had clothes their children had grown out of. Olivia knew that she was being inducted, and that it had been like this for centuries. Not all traditions were visible, or even public. There were threads linking her to women far back in time, and women yet to be born. She didn't talk about this with Jack; she thought he would see if he was attentive enough, and he did, yet he sensed also that he had only a minor role in this tradition, this lineage, that was claiming his wife. What was happening to him made him look at other men, and he realised that many of them stood aside from what was happening to their women,

which meant that they were claiming that their wives and partners should remain as they'd been when the couple had come together, and this was a misreading of the whole process. What they wanted to remain, stable and unchanged, was not only changeable but an agent of change. Men who thought they'd acquired a woman had been acquired themselves, and if they didn't know it, they were living in a world which was already changing from within. Poor things. They thought they knew, when knowledge was what they were denying. Men – and Jack could see it, though it was part of his make-up too - mostly created, first, and then clung to, an idea of objectivity that deceived those who believed in it. The world was change, not stillness; it was always moving on. Every mouthful of food digested something that had been alive, and death led to resurrection, not by graves opening and the dead coming back, but via the processes of decay, which led to fertilisation of the soil, itself a readiness for new life, whenever and however it came about. Trees died and fell over, but their seeds reached into the earth which was itself a home for decay, and the seeds opened, they grew, and lived! The human body did it differently but the process gave the same result. New life began, and, inevitable as it was, it was accompanied by that other inevitability those who were living would die. This was all so obvious that Jack, like millions before him, wondered why religions tried to articulate anything but the simplest schema for understanding. Ritual made more sense than doctrine, and none of it mattered to him more than the simplest words or wishes of his wife. People asked him how Olivia was 'getting on', and Jack told them, 'Nothing much happening at the moment, but she's well': inside himself, however, as inside Olivia, the processes were working themselves out. They'd have a quiet summer by the sea, again, and then they'd get themselves ready for the changes that were already happening to make themselves manifest.

One of society's pillars came crashing down. A Royal Commission into child abuse had three weeks of hearings in Ballarat, and the evidence pulled out of a jailed ex-priest called Ridsdale made sickening reading. People who'd been abused in childhood came forward with their stories. Rather more were unable to do so, having

committed suicide long before. The Church kept telling reporters that it didn't have money to pay compensation, though considerable sums had been spent on defending Ridsdale and other priests accused of similar crimes. How far up the Church did knowledge of these crimes go? The public wanted former Archbishop, now Cardinal George Pell, to give evidence. He said he would, if called upon. The public waited. The current bishop of the area was reported as having said that the church would go on for thousands of years, long after these matters were forgotten. Was he right? Possibly so, but the institution could hardly expect to rebuild the thing it traded on. I speak of faith. You may capitalise the word if you are so inclined. You must excuse your writer, a mere novelist, if he prefers not to touch a word with so little in it.

At the same time as the brick and bluestone buildings yielded up the shames concealed within them for long and miserable decades, ethnic groups were being driven out of Myanmar and taking to the seas near Malaysia and Indonesia. Would other countries help? Australia said no. It was clear that world government was needed to put nations in order when misrule was common and military rule was shameful or inadequate. Nations were not being dutiful towards their citizens. Indeed the word nation, so central to the European mind since the French Revolution, wasn't used in the countries to Australia's north. Bangladesh left millions between flooding rivers and rising tides. Drowning was common, as were starvation, poverty, disease and the rest. A little help was offered from time to time but by and large the world saw no reason to bother. Meanwhile huge sums of money were misappropriated under the flag of FIFA, a body responsible – if that's the word – for the world's soccer. Venues were allocated, viewing rights negotiated, and representatives from the world's poorest countries pocketed most of the money flowing through the organisation. Those hoping to wipe out this corruption had to accept the fact that the man who had overseen, or should we say overlooked it was re-elected as world president for a fifth term. Cleaning the stables was not going to be easy.

Olivia was happy enough, however, as she and Jack made arrangements for their approaching stay at Fairhaven. This time they

counted the days and allocated the rooms. When did it suit people to arrive, and leave? Did they have any special requirements, or things they proposed to do? Jack made some comment about them being better organised than they'd been on the previous occasion and he noticed that although Olivia said nothing, she was a little amused that they'd been so loose in their arrangements a year ago. 'Almost a year,' she said, and then, 'It will be a year, when we get down there and unpack.' Jack said in reply, 'We're going to notice the changes. Rory won't be there. I don't suppose Ruth will be either, but we'll ask her.' He thought. 'We could put her in the same room as Tess, because she won't have Don with her this time round.' They looked at each other. 'The year after, if we're still going to the same place, we'll have our baby, except it'll be getting out of the baby stage by then, and will be a little boy ...'

'Or girl!' Olivia corrected firmly, but found Jack ready. 'Or girl.' He laughed. 'And she'll have a name by then!' Olivia cast her eyes down. 'We're going to cope, Jack. Sometimes I worry, but most of the time I tell myself not to be silly.' He nodded. 'The little one's going to be all right. We can handle that. It's the world it's coming into that's out of control. Nothing much we can do about that.'

There wasn't. The globe was warming. It abounded with the energy of tides, winds, and the sun's rays, but humanity had learned to use fossil fuels and, more importantly, how to make money out of them. Tapping energy was scarcely the problem. Social change, a new way of operating, was needed. Answers were being devised all over the world, but it had become a race against time. How much hotter would the world become before the new ways were adopted? There was also the question of armaments. Powerful nations produced them, pushing them, at a price, into trouble spots. In large areas of Africa, men were men when they possessed guns. They rode in trucks, waving them, firing them into the air, apparently believing that bullets would stay in the heavens rather than fall to earth. Arming oneself in self-protection was taken to be a sign of wisdom rather than madness. In prosperous countries where watching TV was pastime, guns were fired all the time, but on film, mainly, living in the imagination as they did elsewhere in the hand. National accounting never totalled the weaponry produced, owned or used. Countries that didn't produce weapons imported them. Maritime nations produced luxury liners to take the well to do on cruises, while drugs and guns moved about with no such ostentation on smaller vessels crewed by Filipinos. As far as the average citizen could tell, law was averting its eyes: much of the world, many of its cities, were safe, and one simply kept away from other places. This was a result of humanity solving its problems of production while using only a fraction of the population. The rest were scarcely needed, so had to be sold the idea that they were useful if they simply consumed. The mutualities of this arrangement were not easy to find.

Nancy Naughtin taught her children. They learned their letters, they learned to spell. They sang songs with her, in moments of great happiness, beating time. They played keepings-off, unaware that it was the most lasting lesson of all. The nation her classes were going to join had begun in contempt for the lowest people, so poor they'd had to steal, but had then, miraculously enough, developed into the most democratic nation of all, and was now corrupting itself all over again in the hands of big money, much of it controlled from outside. Nancy's children, born into affluence, were hardly being taught to look out for themselves on the larger political scale which they would need to command if their virtues were to be retained. Nancy herself hardly knew this, her mind following her sympathies, to which the children responded every hour of the day. She came home tired but happy, to a Rex who was striving to develop the outlook and the mechanisms that had made his first show a success. 'I can't keep on saying the same thing,' he told Nancy. 'I've got to come up with something new.' They talked about this, hour after hour, sometimes Nancy, sometimes Rex, ending the conversation by pointing out that five minutes spent talking was five minutes when no painting got done. What was the use of talk? Answer: no use unless it was thought. The mind was where all battles were won and lost, all issues fought and if possible resolved. 'That's what I did right last time,' Rex would say to her. 'At the Bartletts'. I didn't paint all those pictures with my brush, or even with my eyes, but with my mind. That's the lesson I mustn't forget.' Nancy could only smile at this and tell him to get on with it. 'Will we buy a car, Rex, so you can travel about? Or would you rather take a train?'

This question caused him to stumble. He wanted a car, but he didn't need it to paint. He could paint almost anywhere. He only had to walk around for an hour and return home with his mind full of ideas. He'd painted his first exhibition without a car, so if he bought one, that meant it was a mark of success, and he didn't like to act that way. It was asking for trouble to declare yourself successful. You'd crash if you did, and you'd deserve it. On the other hand, he and Nancy could see their state. They could go and stay with people. They could linger in places that appealed. It was tempting. They were still thinking about the car when another surprise came, in the form of a phone call from Jenny Bartlett. She and Norman had been talking about the exhibition and what it had done for their household and their circle of friends, and they'd decided to ask Rex to exhibit at their house again, when his next show was ready. He was amazed, and wondered if they were going to ask for a percentage of sales, but Jenny was clear that they had no such ideas. 'You need all the money you can get. You need to buy yourself a car,' she said. Rex reported this to Nancy, who was all for waiting a while. 'You've had a boost,' she said. 'That's great. But that's when you need to hold off doing anything till you're sure about which way you want to go.'

Rex decided that she was right. He wouldn't make any decisions until he was well on the way to his next exhibition, which he would hold at Towers Road, since the Bartletts had invited him. They were giving him a wonderful start; he'd be able to mention the locale for his exhibitions when and if he started bargaining with commercial galleries. It pleased him to think of the Schulbergs trying to win him over to their walls, and clients, while he held back, secure in the backing of the Bartletts. He liked it!

Jenny Bartlett, too, was pleased. The exhibition had cost her very little, and it had brought her prestige. When others in her neighbourhood made mention of what she'd done she could see that they were, not so much envious, as willing to be guided. Money is always looking for ways to display itself to the benefit of the person whose money is on show. Good taste is frequently formed in this way.

Jenny was pleased to find, also, that her husband Norman's quietness, his reserve, which she'd long thought of as a defect, was an asset in the eyes of those acknowledging their rise. People waited for him to speak, and listened when he did. He had a way of making the obvious sound authentic, and new. He bought the best of things - clothes, cars, wine. When he went to the theatre or a restaurant, his arrival conferred something, and he could be sure of a welcome, which he received modestly. It was Norman who took Jack Page's phone call about the holiday at Fairhaven, and accepted without questioning his wife. They'd had a good time last year, they'd have a good time again. 'You won't be asking the Svendsens, I take it?' he said to Jack, and accepted what was for him an equivocal answer – Rory no, but possibly Ruth, if she cared to come south to be with them. 'I think I'd be a little more brutal than that,' he told Jenny, 'but it's his business who he asks, and I don't have anything against her, although you have to wonder how much she knew about what he was doing back in those days. Didn't he burn down a factory to get the insurance, somewhere in Carlton I seem to remember?' Jenny, normally much harder than her husband, was inclined to give Ruth the benefit of the doubt. 'Women trap themselves with men who haven't shown their hand by the time they get married. Then they find out what sort of thing they're stuck in. She's made a break for herself, I suppose we have to give her the benefit of any doubt.' This both pleased and amused Norman: it wasn't like his wife to make concessions of any sort, so she must feel some sort of kinship with Ruth. Her strength, he saw; Ruth had retaken possession of her life when she'd needed to, he had to give her points for that.

Unexpectedly it was Randolph Quirk who played the next card. He'd been impressed by the paintings Rex had shown at the Bartletts', but felt they were too limited in scope, in scale. Why didn't the fellow tackle something bold: he was young enough to be daring. He and Madeleine invited the youngsters for afternoon tea one weekend and Randolph explained what he thought Rex should do. 'When you're looking down from a plane you see everything in a new way. You can't see anything close up, apart from a cloud! But what you can see is what the world looks like from space. You get a god's eye view.

You can see a mountain chain. An island in the sea. Hilly country becoming flat. An inland river twisting and turning, making billabongs as it goes.' He could see Rex shifting in his chair. 'I know you like to contemplate in your paintings. Well, last time you painted small things, even tiny. Real close up, zooming in on things. Next time, what about going to the opposite end of the scale, everything broad. Things will still be tiny, but it'll be because you're far away. I can organise to get you on a plane or two, if you're interested in painting what you see from up there.'

Rex wanted to say it was a silly idea, but he could see that Nancy, even though she said nothing, had been caught by the offer. She told him when they got home that she thought he should take up the offer. 'It's not going to cost you anything, or not very much. Why not give it a go?' So it was that three weeks later Rex was on a plane to the red centre, Alice Springs, with a bus drive to the continent's heart, Uluru. He realised in a flash that he had no hope of coming to terms with the great rock in a day or two, but put this failing aside because he'd already seen, from the pilots' cabin on the way up, that his real and future subject would be the endless meanderings of the rivers crossing the plains of the Riverina: the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Darling. They twisted and turned, writhed and wriggled, seeking, apparently, the lowest land they could find on their way to the sea, drying out in summer, ever so broad when flooding, washing the feet of red gums, attracting endless birds, and forming innumerable billabongs. A river was not so much one stream, as city dwellers thought of it, but an extended ecosystem of which the water was only one, though very important, part. He saw the rivers as journeys, like life itself, a concept to explore when he got home. He made a point of talking, when he got to Uluru, with as many of the local people as could be bothered with him, and he realised that their mental systems were nothing like his own, and his, he could see, were small enough.

That was what tipped it. His recent painting had been of small subjects rendered on a small scale. He knew, even before his flight home, that he'd need to change in some way to deal with huge subjects – the concepts, that is, as well as the twisting rivers and all that they supported – and yet he'd still like to work on a modest scale.

He disliked great washes of paint on canvases metres wide. That was immodest, indecent; he wanted still to paint small. He wanted to be worthy of what he'd seen. The land had put him to a moral test and he hadn't passed it yet; it was an unexpected challenge. He told this to Randolph Quirk when he got home, and that gentleman's smile made it clear that what had happened was what he'd hoped for. 'They pay me to keep their planes in the air,' he told Rex, 'and I do it because I'm good at it. People who run airlines think it's all about making money, so they cram in all the seats they can, but the reason I do it is the reason I sent you off to the centre: it's a place of the spirit and everybody needs to go there at least once in their lives.'

Like Mecca, Rex thought, but didn't say it. 'Uluru was great,' he told Randolph, 'but it was really the rivers that got me. Twisting and turning, but never quite losing their way. They seemed to say something to me that I've still to work out.' Randolph only smiled. 'The blackfellas had nothing between them and the stars. They must have known something, after all those years.' Rex saw that his friend was content. Perhaps it was because he'd passed the problem to someone else to solve, and the someone was him? Yes, that was what Randolph had done and now it was up to him, Rex, to get some answers to the question he'd been handed. Would he go again? It seemed he'd gone too far and encountered, in the centre, a further problem to solve with his paints and brush. Uluru, the red centre, would have to wait. The rivers must come first. He got out his sketchbooks and started to draw.

Meanwhile, on a larger canvas, nations of the Pacific became aware that China was turning modest little sandbars into militarised islands, imposing itself on an area where the claims of several countries overlapped, and greatly displeasing the United States. A new power was establishing itself for all to see. Not exactly an act of war, but an imposition that couldn't be ignored. Nor could it be stopped. What would Australia do? It had gradually, over decades, persuaded a few highly placed Americans to use its voice as some sort of signal, pointing out things unnoticed at the edges of American consciousness. No such role of inner conscience had developed with China, to whom the huge, largely empty land to their south was almost

as silent as its spaces. Outside voices had never seemed friendly, to China. It understood its ruling party to be a stabilising force, powerful now as any of its past emperors, and forceful as the dragons that had symbolised arbitrary, uncontrollable force. They had to be taught how to dominate, the rest of the world knew, and groaned. Having largely failed to tame America, they had a dragon to convert, or tame, and didn't know how to do it. Giving China impossible tasks – lifting Africa, perhaps – might be one way to chain the behemoth down, but didn't they already have one point four billion to think about at home?

They did, and it had to take up most of their time, so what else could be expected but outbursts of militarism, particularly when Japan, the ancient and the recent enemy, was now aligned with the United States, in a reversal of the way the last great war had been won? Nancy and Rex's generation, Olivia's generation, could see that the old stabilities, awful as they may have been, weren't stabilising any more. Besides, the United States, once an isolationist country, had grown to love its violent side, and was hated in return by various segments of the Middle East, where America's backing of Israel nettled most of its neighbours. What would Australia do? It would go back to its pre-decimal, pre-1966 slang and have a bob each way. Prime Minister Menzies had wanted to call the new currency 'the royal', but history's river turned it into the dollar. What else could it be called?

That was then. A new power was rising, a red sunrise, a day whose dawn hadn't been understood. Self-appointed experts wrote in newspapers, but the public was unsure. Wealthy Chinese began buying properties in Sydney and Melbourne and the nation was unsure. To regulate, or rely on that old standby, 'market forces'? They'd been reliable when it was European and American money, or so business people liked to say, but what about now?

Nobody knew. Madeleine Quirk was troubled. Her central culture – as she thought it – was being challenged on two sides. An aboriginal consciousness, forty thousand years in its development if it was a day, was beginning, first, to crowd the old stories of the settlers' culture, and, second, to show how new, how young, they were. Greece, Rome, the Egyptians, and the owners of the manger where Jesus was born, were losing their centrality and it seemed

that without that the culture was beginning to disbelieve itself. Was that what was happening? And on the other side of the European inheritance, the stories and world-views of ancient Asia were stirring to make themselves seen and heard. The age of European centrality was over, something new was on the way, and nobody knew what it would be like. Madeleine played the music she loved, loving it as much as ever, but her ground was shaky. She went to concerts; the city had a beautiful new hall next to its art gallery and gardens. Then the city was rocked by the rape and murder of a young Chinese woman, opposite the gallery. A homeless man had followed her, pursued and captured her. He left her dead. Three days later he was arrested in coastal New South Wales: how had he got there? Hitchhiking presumably; the papers didn't know. Men murdering women had become almost a theme in Melbourne's life; women had never been so free and so assertive, nor so much in danger. The women's movement needed an equivalent movement towards male humility, but if it was happening in educated circles, decent circles, it wasn't happening where it was needed. The ancient policy of pushing the criminal and the poor to the fringes, first, and then locking them in jail wasn't working. Citizens were claiming freedoms that were too dangerous if granted to everybody. Surveillance was the only answer that majorities could accept. Cameras were everywhere, checking the speed of your car, managing traffic, watching you as you inspected things in shops. You were urged to look, even to lust, but not to snatch. An exchange of money ratified everything. Anything. Money teetered on the verge of becoming morality. Detectives wanting to know where legal boundaries had been crossed were told to follow the money trail, and they did, with skills not incomparable with those of blacktrackers, centuries before.

Jack Page rang the McConville agency on some matter to do with renting the house at Fairhaven, and was put on to Clive, the son. They talked. Clive, unable to stop himself, asked if the Svendsens were going to be part of the group this year. Jack told him that Rory was in Beechworth these days and Ruth in Cairns; they'd be inviting Ruth but didn't really expect her to come. The young man said wistfully, 'I suppose one bit of coastline's the same as another to her these days.'

Jack was surprised. He hung up, but the words wouldn't leave his mind. One bit of coast the same as another? Why had the young man said that? It took ages before he decided that there must have been a relationship, an intimacy between the two of them that he, Jack, hadn't known about. Whenever could it have taken place? Not during last summer's rental period, surely? No. Since then, obviously: it must have developed out of sight of the rest of them, unsuspected, unknown ... Jack was both curious and ashamed of being so. It was none of his business. As long as he and Olivia were right with each other, he had no claim on Ruth, Rory, or anyone. As long as he and Olivia ...

When he got home that afternoon he told his wife, wondering if she'd already known. She hadn't. She was as surprised as he was, and curious. Then he told her about something that had happened when he was a student, first year at university. He'd gone to a concert at Festival Hall, where a British band was visiting. They'd played a rousing first half and he'd noticed a beautiful young woman, no older than fifteen, swirling, shouting and dancing a couple of paces away. She'd found her sexuality in the music, and it was swelling inside her, asking for release. Jack had been close enough to feel her demand, and was thinking about putting his arms around her when a door under the stage opened and the lead singer of the group came out, pushing his way through the crowd till he reached the young woman Jack had had his eye on. The singer, deftly, and as if he'd done it many times before, pushed the young girl's underpants down, released whatever catch or button held his own trousers, and within moments was thrusting into this member of the audience who'd caught his eye from the stage. The girl was all response. She was as quick and certain as the man. People close to them urged them on, as children in a schoolyard will encourage a fight. A couple of technicians, shifting microphones on stage, looked down, grinning. When the couple had climaxed and urgency drained out of their grip on each other, there was a cheer. Jack took this chance to move away. He'd wanted the girl himself but doing it the way the singer had done was impossible. Beyond the pale, no matter how hot his desire. Jack said to Olivia, 'Sex makes everyone go mad. It takes hold of us, and when it does, it's uncontrollable.' She said, 'Rory got what he deserved. Ruth's lucky to be rid of him. She's got a chance to start again. With someone else.' They looked at each other. What Olivia had said about Ruth would never have been said about them. They were bonded differently. They had a child on the way. There'd probably be more, or at least another. They were still attached to Ruth, but the ways were parting; had already parted, perhaps. Jack said, 'Sometimes people drift apart, but they come back together later on. After lots of things have happened to them.' Olivia looked sourly on this idea: 'If you mean she'll get back together with Rory ...'

'No!' Jack said, so firmly, and loudly, that Olivia was surprised. 'Jack?' He frowned. 'Why did I tell you about the girl at the concert? What got into me? Why did I bring that up after all these years?'

She had no idea. 'Why did you, then?'

He was still frowning, troubled, saying nothing. 'Jack?'

He said, 'That incident has stuck in my mind ever since. Once upon a time, I'd ask myself if what she did was wrong, or right? I could never decide. Sometimes I thought it was the boldest thing I'd seen. Sometimes I thought it was the silliest, because it was so careless. She might have got pregnant. For all I know, perhaps she did. I wouldn't know if she did, would I? Then I'd try to analyse it ...'

'You wanted to know if it was right or wrong, was that what you were thinking?'

'More or less. Eventually I decided that it fitted the occasion perfectly. Everyone was there to get stirred up sexually. That's what the music was about, that's why there was this crowd packed against the stage.'

'Including young Jack Page!'

'Including me. Why were we all there? Sex of course. So what she did was a perfect expression of why we were there.'

'But?'

'The church, and most cautious parents, tell us to stay virgin till we're married. Even though hardly anybody does. So we make rules but we don't stick to them. We make the rules in one mood, and when we get into a different mood, we forget the rules. We break them, joyfully. Happily. Not a care in the world, until maybe afterwards we start to wonder, or have a few regrets ...'

Olivia was calm. 'Why are we talking about this? We're not in that position, you and I. Are we? It's obvious.'

Jack said, 'We try to make up rules. But the rules don't fit every situation. For instance, we say people are mad to have unprotected sex, unless they want to cause a child. But the girl I'm talking about ...'

'You don't know her name, do you?'

'No, of course I don't. Didn't know it then, and I've never seen her since. If I saw her now I doubt if I'd know her ...'

'Strange that we're talking about her then.'

'Maybe. I only ever saw her that once, but she's stayed in my mind because she puts a problem to me ...'

'Can you say it again? The problem, that is. What is it, Jack? What's on your mind?'

'It's something about having a rule. If you need a rule to tell you what to do, then it can't be obvious. If it's not obvious, then there's two sides to the matter. If there's two sides, then the rule's arbitrary. Somebody's dealt with the problem by coming down on one side or the other. People are always unsure about sex. This girl wasn't. The guy up on the stage, the singer, he must have seen it on her face, read it in her mind. When he got the chance he came out to fuck with her ...'

'He used her, then. That's pretty clear, isn't it?'

'We could say that, but she wanted to be used. That's why she was there. That's what the music was all about. That's why the mob around them were cheering them on. They'd come for sex too, except they were waiting till afterwards. On the way home, or in the back of the car, or somewhere ...'

Olivia didn't know where he'd stop. 'Maybe there's no one single moment when we can make a judgement. Maybe we have to know the whole event, where it started, where it ended ...'

Jack seized on this. 'Ah! That's the right idea. That's why I can't make up my mind.'

'What is?'

He said, 'Maybe it ended where I saw it. That is, when he went back through the door under the stage, leaving her. Maybe that was the end of it, in which case, I was right to sing her praises. But if it ended with her getting pregnant ...'

Olivia touched herself: 'Steady!'

'... then there is no end. There's a baby, and it grows up, if it's lucky, to be a boy or a girl, and then a man or a woman ...'

'The whole catastrophe!'

They laughed. Olivia picked up where he'd left off: 'And the man or woman went to a concert, and had sex with someone in the pit at interval ...'

"... or while the music was thundering along ..."

'... in which case there's no pause for judgement. Is there? It's just everything repeating itself and who cares whether it's right, or wrong, or in between, or we simply can't know...'

They laughed again, louder this time, stupidly, helplessly: what could they do? Jack said, 'Let's lie in bed, darling?'

'It's cold outside.'

'Then we'll keep each other warm.'

Maria began to wonder about Tess Trevorrow. She'd pretty well dropped out of sight since Don's death. Now the year was ending, they were starting to think about their holiday at the beach, so what about Tess? Was she still in mourning, interested in someone else, or how was she getting on? Maria rang: they agreed to meet in the city, outside the gallery, on a day when Tess was free at twelve. They had lunch at Young and Jackson's, the city's most famous pub, upstairs, seated near a window where they could see the crowds swarming below them. They settled, they ordered, they sipped a glass of wine. Maria wanted to know if Tess was joining them at Fairhaven, or maybe had some other plan? Tess wasn't sure. What were her options, Maria wanted to know. 'I'm going to be awfully lonely if I go down there with all you people, and you've all got your partners and your kids.' Maria said, 'It'll make you think of Don.' All Tessa could do was nod; tearful already. 'It might be best if I go somewhere where nobody knows me and I don't know a thing. I'll be lonely, but maybe it's something I have to face.'

'You've been facing it for quite a time, now.'

'I know. And I still haven't got over it. I'm beginning to think it's got me beaten.'

'Loneliness?'

Tess nodded. 'I don't seem able to beat it.'

'You won't be able to until you take up something new.'

Tess thought she meant the work as a gallery guide. 'The gallery's about the only thing that's keeping me going.' Maria was firm. 'Then hang onto it. Hang on hard. But you've got to look around for something. Anything. You have to make a fresh start.'

'I know that. But what?'

'Gliding. To get yourself out of the house. Underwater photography ...'

Tess's face said these ideas were silly. Maria grew more insistent. 'The battle you have to win is in your mind. Okay, those things are silly, because they don't interest you. But there's thousands of things you could do. You could start making jewellery, you could become an expert on tropical plants ... it doesn't matter what you do so long as you do *something*!' Tess knew she was right. 'I'll try, Maria. Truly I will. I'll try. But don't expect too much of me, not in a hurry. I'm stuck.'

'Stuck in the past.'

'Yes I am. Thanks for helping me. Can we talk about something else?'

So they did. They talked about Chloe, Young & Jackson's famous nude. 'Where is she?' 'Downstairs.' 'In the men's bar?' 'In a lounge, I think. I don't know, really.' They asked a waitress, who told them where the famous painting was, if they wanted to have a look. They stayed where they were. Maria told her friend, 'She hung on the wall all those years of war, when soldiers and servicemen drank down there, and looked at her.' Tess corrected, 'Her body.' Neither of them had seen the painting, but they knew about it. It represented women in the minds of men who only thought about bodies. Tess said, 'You'd think we wouldn't need to have nude women pictures by now.' Maria thought men were a long way from reaching such a point. They know there's got to be a change in the way they approach women, but they don't know where to start. So they fall back on what they already know. Which brings us back to Chloe. She's naked. Well, I suppose that was new knowledge when she was painted.' Tessa asked when that was but Maria wasn't sure. 'In the nineteenth century somewhere. They've probably got the date next to the painting. They've had it here long enough.' They looked on the crowd outside, coming from the railway station, or crossing to get to it, with its clocks telling the world when the trains would run. Maria felt restless. 'Those clocks have been there for a hundred years. More. It makes you wonder what it's all about.' Tessa stared at her. 'Having kids. Getting old and dying. Passing on whatever you know so it doesn't get forgotten.' She straightened up. 'But it does get forgotten eventually.' A light came into her eyes. 'What about that, Tess? Preserving something that shouldn't be forgotten. Or lost sight of. That'd give you something to cling to.' Nervously she added, 'Eh?'

Tessa was thinking. 'It would, yes. What you mean is taking up some cause. Save an old bridge or railway line. Some nineteenth century building. Or twentieth, they're under threat now from developers. Or I could swap sides and become a developer myself, if I had any money to do it. But of course I haven't, so whatever cause I took up would have to be modest.' She looked at the crowds outside, going to and from the railway station, or down the street to the gallery where she worked part time. 'But whatever I did, I know that eventually I'd feel empty, just like ...'

'... you feel empty now.' Maria.

'So no, there's only one thing to do that lasts, and that's to be like you, and have a child. Children. Live my life by passing it on. That's the best thing I can think of. Does it satisfy you, Maria, tell me please. Be really honest and tell me how you feel about yourself.'

They looked at each other, Maria a little surprised to be challenged when she'd thought she'd do the challenging. Then it struck her that she'd never understood the widow she was looking at, never thought much about what it might be like to live inside another's skin. For a moment she forgot Tessa, in front of her, and thought of Carlo, who'd been so happy, and confident, when she'd first met him. Was he lesser now than then? Tess noticed. 'What is it, Maria? Have I said something wrong?'

Maria recovered as best she could. 'Good heavens no. I was just thinking that perhaps I was being too hard on you. Telling you how to live your life \dots '

'I don't think so,' she said, even though these had been her feelings, more or less exactly. 'I have to think of it this way. I've been married and now I'm not. We didn't breakup personally, we didn't divorce, unless you call what Don did a one-sided divorce.' She tried to smile. Maria lifted a hand. 'In a sense, he never married you, because he left himself a way out. Which he took.' Tessa nodded to this. 'Still, it was a marriage, and it's over. So, before I take another step, in any direction, I have to weigh up what I gained and lost in my time with Don.'

Maria said, 'That's hard to do.'

Tessa said, and she was studying Maria as she said it, 'I gave it my best, even when Don was strange, or difficult. I really tried to make it work. Not everyone can say that.' Maria said nothing, so she went on, 'When most people enter marriage they keep a part of themselves in reserve. In case things don't work out, they can fall back on the part they didn't commit.' Still no reaction from Carlo's wife. 'Others do commit themselves entirely, but the effect of that is that they have to win. Marriage is a struggle for dominance.'

Maria groaned.

'I wasn't like that. I really thought of it as a partnership. A couple being more, and better, and wiser, than two times one.' There was sadness in her smile. 'Don did his best to match me, whenever he could. The trouble was, he couldn't always do it. There were those times when he was looking for the way out – not from me, but from himself. I was doing my bit but he simply couldn't do his. Not all the time.' She gestured with her hands. 'So I'm in the position that I didn't fail, but I was failed. Question. Did I choose that for myself?' Again she looked at Maria in an intrusive way. 'I don't think so, but it's hard to be certain.'

Maria said, 'Where's the end of this?'

Tess: 'Don's found it. At The Gap, in Sydney. I'm still on the road.' 'To where? That's the question.'

'Indeed it is. I'm stuck at the moment and I don't want to be stuck forever. But I can't seem to get myself back in motion, as things stand.'

She was lost, trying to be as honest, and positive as she could, but lost. Maria said, 'I want to make a suggestion. I know I'm trying to take control of you, because that's what I do when I see a problem. I want

to rush in and fix things up my way. I'm not very good at thinking in other people's ways. Sorry, but listen, and believe me, I do mean well. Come down to Fairhaven when we're all down there ...'

'Yes?'

'And bring somebody else. Man woman or child, bring another person with you!'

Tessa was intrigued. 'Man woman or child?'

'Yes. So long as you don't come alone. If you come on your own, we're all going to treat you as the problem. The lonely one. We'll try to make you happy and we'll end up making you all the more unhappy. Play it another way. Bring someone. If it's another woman, we'll get to know her. If it's someone's child, we'll do all we can to make them happy for you. If it's a man – any man you please – we'll all be curious and we'll try ever so hard to work out if he's going to be any good for you, and you'll be able to laugh at us, the two of you. You've got to have a good time, and that means you have to give us a good time. See what I mean?'

Tessa liked the idea. The best part of Maria's idea came right at the start. She had to stop thinking of herself and think of someone else who might enjoy the beach house, the swimming, the cooking, the talk. The laziness, walks in the bush, drives in the Otways ... 'That's a great idea, Maria. You've got something there.' Maria's face lit up. 'You're going to do it?'

'I'm going to try. I've got to find someone suitable, first. I wonder who it will be?'

Maria said to Carlo, 'So that's what she's going to do. I think. I'm pretty certain she will.'

'Bring a man?'

'Bring somebody.'

'But who?'

'That we don't know, yet.'

Carlo said, 'Now Maria, no matchmaking. No advice. From any of you.' He meant the women, of course. 'It's got to be her decision. Even if she brings someone she never sees again after Fairhaven, it's got to be her choice. It's her first step back. First steps ...'

"... are very important! You think I don't know that?"

'I know you know that. But we've got to be careful. You've helped her. You've done something really good for her. But the next step is hers. Maria?'

She nodded. 'I'm back in my box.' She studied Carlo, knew what was in his mind, and they both shouted, 'Not for long!'

Olivia heard the news from Maria, and passed it on to Jack, who said, as they were all to say, 'Who's she going to bring?'

'Nobody knows. We're all waiting.'

Melbourne filled in time with a dry October, an inconsistent November, and some mild, cool days that told them what sort of December they were going to get. Then Maria heard from Tessa again. She'd arranged to bring a man, one of her fellow guides from the gallery, to the seaside house, immediately after Christmas. 'We can't come any earlier, he's got commitments.'

Maria stepped up to the mark. 'What's his name?'

'Jason Springfield.'

Maria was amazed. Excited. 'He sounds like a singer. Big time in the US of A! Jason Springfield? What's his real name? He chose that one for himself, surely?'

'No. It's his real name. Truly.'

Maria was scornful. 'For how long, though? How long's it been his real name? You can go to the ...' She couldn't think of the office where you could change your name, if you wished. So she changed her tack. 'How long have you known him?'

'About three months. He does a bit of guiding at the gallery, like me. I don't see him very often. His days are different from mine.'

'So how did you get to know him?'

'There was a day when they got everyone in for some training. How to manage a group, questions that come up all the time and what we ought to say, that sort of thing.'

'And he sat beside you?'

'He did.'

'What did you like about him?'

'What I liked most is that he thinks he's pretty good.'

Maria wanted to yell. 'You think so too?'

'Yes I do. But I've told him that he's not to be overbearing on our holiday together.'

The last word caught Maria's attention. 'Are you an item yet?'

'I first thought he was gay. Now I think that's how he likes to seem until he's sure about what he thinks of you. Anyone.'

Maria was sure. 'Gay? I'll bet he's not. That's just how he likes to look while he decides.'

'About me?'

She didn't need to say anything. 'Are all the kids going to bother him?'

'He's good with them. Kids come to the gallery all the time. Teachers bring their classes. He gets them talking, and looking. He's got the knack.'

'What about our group? Are any of us going to be a problem for him?'

'I can't see why they should.'

So Maria spread the word, and the group got itself ready to encounter Tessa's new man, if that was what he was. Norman Bartlett thought he had to be better than Don. At the Williamson household, Donna told Tim she'd always had a soft spot for Don because he could never get on top of his problem, which meant his life was a struggle, and he was always going to lose eventually – as he had. Tim was less charitable. 'It's a pity he didn't cut the string before he married Tessa. She had to carry him while he was alive, and she's been carrying the burden ever since. I don't know what this new man's going to be like. He might be all right, but ...'

'But what, Tim?'

'The time to get married is when you're completely right for it. It might come early or late, that time, but when it comes, there's one thing you know for sure: it'll never come again.'

'Lots of people get married a second time, or even a third. Some people do it more than that.'

Tim wasn't budging. 'They might. But there's only one time that's completely right. And it usually comes pretty young. When people have first got hold of the idea of getting married. When they're still a

bit scared of it, standing in awe of it as something that's beyond them, but they've got to rise to the occasion and do it. That's the right time to get married. Just as there's a right time to have your children, if you're going to have them at all.'

This was dangerous ground. 'Tim!'

'I'm not trying to make you or anyone else change your mind. We made a decision because it felt right for us. Other people have to do what's right for them.'

Donna said, 'I hope this goes well for Tessa, all the same. Her second marriage, when it happens, when it comes, has to be better than the first. I'll be hoping this man, this ... Jason Springfield ...' she chuckled '... is good enough to make her happy.'

Tim said quietly, 'And so say all of us!'

That evening he pulled two suitcases out of their wardrobe and put them under the window. 'Heavens, Tim. You're noit thinking about packing?' He said, 'I want to get started. It's going to be vital, for her. I want to see it start well.'

Donna felt faintly irritable. 'You want to see it start early. It's only ...' She couldn't remember the date.

Tim said, 'We won't set off till after Christmas. That's the arrangement. Day after Boxing Day. But I want to get my mind pointed in the right direction.' He went quiet in the way Donna knew that his mind had closed. She said, more from confusion than anything else, 'We ought to hire a boat while we're down there. It'd give us something to do.' None of them had any experience with boats. It was a silly thing to say. For that matter, none of them had any experience with Jason Springfield, a challenging name, or was it a silly one? Donna didn't know what to think. She only wanted things to go well.

In Cairns, Ruth had become a necessary part of the agency she worked for, so when she told them that to stay on she needed to go south and get her things in order, they agreed. They'd be pleased to see her back! She booked her flight without telling anyone in Melbourne anything more definite than that she hoped to join the seaside party and please keep a room for her. In case! Maria Furlinghetti emailed to say how much she was hoping Ruth would come, and again Ruth

temporised. Why? She wasn't sure where she belonged. Cairns sat on an ill-drained patch of soil and next time a cyclone crossed the coast she'd see how long it took the water to get away. It was the first time she'd ever given more than a passing thought to land. Land had always been there, propping up houses and divided by thousands of miles of fencing, but in her new locale it had a different meaning. It was part of country, and she could see why aboriginal people had put so much emphasis on country in their thinking. Country gave habitat for things that lived on country, like birds. There were hardly any birds she knew in the far north, and she missed the ones she knew from Melbourne's gardens. She missed Melbourne too, its heaviness, respectability and reserve. Tropical people were slacker, yet they knew the magic of islands, reefs, sandbars, and everything. She studied the map and found that great slabs of Australian history had happened in the spaces under the plane that brought her north. Qantas had been founded at Longreach. Waltzing Matilda had been written on the nearby plains. Shearers had battled with station owners in the 1890s, burning woolsheds in the working man's battle for inclusion in the money-making of the state. Chinese gold-seekers had trekked through aboriginal lands, meeting their fate. The place had patches of rain forest and parts that were scrawny-dry. There were huge areas where rock-paintings had been done by the black people, mostly on land now owned by whites who knew the value of their holding. Coastal islands too held hideaways where blacks had painted animals, spirit people, and even white men's ships. Tales of exploration, and mineral discoveries, passed around; it had been a rough frontier and was still a mixing bowl, with planeloads of tourists flying in and out, boatloads of tourists taken to the reef, and backpackers traipsing through the region, picking up any sort of work that was going. Narrow-gauge rails supported tiny trains of sugar cane, and the old-timers who occasionally drifted into the office where Ruth worked told her about the days when the debris of cane-cutting was set alight and the air was full of smoke. It's another place, Ruth saw: could she make a place for herself up here, or must she be drawn back?

She'd go to Fairhaven, see if she still fitted, then make up her mind.

She had lots of friends, but they were friends of circumstance; people as loosely attached as she was. She had a feeling that the north had once been full of drifters, misfits from Melbourne, Sydney, and the towns attaching to those cities in their states. Brisbane didn't dominate its state the way the southern cities did. It was merely the first and largest of the settlements clinging to the huge coastline that found its way north as if curious to see what the tropics did to men and women. As often as not, it made them slack, willing to have a go at anything but stripping them of the will to build to last. She had an idea that most of the town's better buildings had been designed by architects far to the south, while historical photos showed homes and businesses resembling those long destroyed down there. Drifters had found their way north and when they'd got far enough from civilisation's demanding gentility, they'd stopped. Cairns had been, and still was, in a hidden way, the last stop. There was only Cooktown to the north, and then the cape. A couple of tiny settlements, a roadhouse or two, and the track that took you to the northern tip. Russell Drysdale had taken photos, even painted a picture or two. Ray Crooke had settled in and changed his painting style to fit. Books had been written, but there was little enough to build on. Anyone who started anything apart from catering for tourists was still a pioneer. Ruth found herself curious, unsuited to the place, but ready for its challenges, if she found them aimed at her.

What would her friends down south have to say?

They were all, in their way, bringing their year to an end, after which they'd holiday for a time, then begin again. Again? No, there would always be the unexpected. If you said that years repeated each other, then you'd given up. Our people were for the most part just starting, Olivia most of all. She was bulging a little now, sitting in her chair and letting Jack do things for her, then rushing about in bursts of energy. 'How's our little one going to keep up with you?' Jack would say, after which he'd sit down as if demanding to be waited on, something which, fortunately, amused her. She'd bring him tea. Or wine, and squeeze him till he gasped. 'You're strong! You won't have any trouble delivering that child you've got in there!' They had leisurely hours in their garden, or sitting inside when it was cool

enough for the gas fire. 'The year's running out,' Jack said one night: 'What does it mean?' He started to talk about his concept of time, but she took over. 'It only has meaning if you want to measure things. Bodies are the best exemplar of time. They run out. New ones start, as we know, and they develop. They come into the world, courtesy of us.' She meant women. 'They grow, they mature, they pair off like we did, they have their children too ...'

He broke back in. 'They have birthdays. That means they, or their parents, are counting! That means their lives are being measured. That means we need a concept of time. How else do we know where we've been?'

She was ready. 'Time measures process. Something has to happen, to be there, for anyone to measure it. Measure what? Us. We're it. We're the process that gets measured. If it weren't for us, there'd be no time.'

This prompted him to call, 'Hang on! We're not the only process. There are others. Like evolution. Water creatures crawling onto land, developing legs. Other creatures developing wings. See David Attenborough's films. See anything you like. The world keeps changing, and the changes take ... time!' He wanted to laugh, but was curious to see what she thought of that.

She was slightly apologetic. 'I suppose you're right. I'd better concede. There's been processes before us. Humans. But now we're in charge, or we like to think we are, so we think everything can be measured through us. If you must have it measured, because the process is more important than the measurement, surely? Every time?' He thought about this. 'I suppose ... in the human mind, the process and the measurement of it go together. Always. Otherwise,' he said cheerfully, 'we wouldn't have birthday parties!' This caused Olivia to soften. 'Can you remember any of your birthday parties, when you were little? I can.' They reminisced. 'One of my girlfriends used to sneak off into the city when she was supposed to be at school,' Olivia said. 'She asked me to go with her, and I was terribly tempted, but I was afraid. I knew if I went I'd get caught, so I didn't go. And I knew Sandy would get caught eventually, and she did, and she was brought out before the whole school and shown to us. The wrongdoer!

I've been afraid of being picked out ever since.' She looked at – into – Jack. 'Were you ever held up as a bad example?'

He shook his head. 'I was too scared to do anything very wrong. The big boys at our school used to frighten hell out of us with fielding practice – cricket. They'd get us little fellows into a circle, they'd stand in the middle and they'd belt the ball at us. Hard! If you didn't catch it, you had to chase the ball while they yelled at you. Or if it came at you down low, you had to stop it otherwise it'd smash into your ankles. Cricket balls are hard. We used to think it was torture, and it was, of a sort. I'm glad I'll never have to go through that again.' They looked at each other, a man and a woman ready to love their son or daughter when it was born. It was a moment of happiness that had yet to be tested. What if the child was stillborn? Had a rare blood disease? Was mute, deaf, or blind? What if it was a bright and beautiful child but took to drugs under the influence of reckless peers? There were such people in the world, some of them supporting drug habits by selling to people even weaker than themselves. Who was to say that their child wouldn't come under the influence of one of these, giving money for something to swallow, or put into a needle they plunged in their arm? You couldn't live a life without trust, but who could you trust? Every child was surrounded by other children, some of whom were bound to go wrong, to fail, and to take others with them if they could. Every child had teachers to guide them, but some of them were going to be perverted, or surreptitious drug takers, leading the unwary astray. There were no guarantees. There were people who did what their church told them to do, until temptation tore them down and showed them as weak. It was better, in Olivia's mind, to defend yourself, and fight for your family, trailing a hand, too, to those who were letting themselves down. Was it safer to be in a team, a group, or to stand alone, relying on nobody but yourself to get you through unscathed? Surely it was better to be on your own, with nobody to tempt you but your own mind: the trouble was, that if you took a lonely stand, people wanted to see you pulled down, and falling away to perdition like hundreds of others. Too great virtue was as bad as too little; the middle way was best, but the middle of what? The middle of the left, of the right, the middle of the lost? Olivia sensed that to think about these things for too long, or too often, was to put oneself in danger. To Jack she said, out of the blue, 'Let's have a game of chess!'

Surprised, he got the board, and the box of pieces. He clutched two pawns and held out his fists. She tapped the left and when he opened it she saw she had the white, and first move. They set up, then studied each other. What were they playing for? To fill in half an hour? If so, and someone rang to ask Olivia how she was, and she talked to the outsider, would they continue the game, restart it, or put it away, never to be finished? They made their opening moves, and then it came to them, at more or less the same moment of realisation, that they were playing in order to be close. Time was flowing, as it had been while they were arguing, they were measuring the strength or foolishness of each other's moves, but on another level they were occupying each other's mind, finding it possible to do this via the supposed enmity of black and white. The hostile forces were intimate as they manoeuvred to destroy each other, challenge each other, guard against each other: the game took an hour, they declared it a draw, and put it away. They turned out the lights and went to bed. They murmured a few things about their plans for the following day, then they turned to face each other, put their arms around each other, and slept.

The world was changing, yet hardly knew it. Put simply, it was becoming aware of itself, as it had never been in the past. Armament manufacturers pushed weapons into locales of discontent or dissension. Hostile feelings were encouraged by weaponry; warfare was forever at hand. Africa was hardest hit because its nations barely rose above the tribal. Massacres took place, governments were overthrown, while boundaries drawn for European colonies trapped unhappy minorities. Corruption took away the money that might have lifted the states, tiny or large, housing these mixtures. Cynical outsiders would have said there was nowhere for Africans to go, but there was.

Europe. Europe had led the world for centuries, spread its tentacles everywhere, created a series of welfare states, and had managed to unify itself after two disastrous wars. It had lost its dominance but not its attraction. It had, or most of it had, what the poor of Africa yearned

for – commercial wealth, the rule of law, healthy people, stability, even luxury, and the likelihood that anyone born there could live well. In the minds of wretches, Europe was the goal. There was no movement to make Africa as desirable as Europe, because it wasn't, had had seventy years since World War 2 to make the transition, but hadn't, and anyone could see that it wouldn't. Not much improvement there.

People took to the boats. These were overcrowded, and managed, many of them, by people who had little idea of sailing or even where they were going. Those who got across the Mediterranean ran into the lower part of Italy's boot, or some part of Greece, itself in financial turmoil and faced with the likelihood of being pushed out of the European Union. Those who didn't manage the crossing were turned back by ships of the European powers, or drowned when their wretched vessels sank. Italy didn't want these invaders, having no use for them, despite protestations that they were ready for work. What work could they do? There were no jobs and they had no skills. A developed economy was a much more tender, rarefied plant than the would-be migrants had imagined. Much as they might say they wanted to work, they presented as objects of charity, and even charitable Europeans saw them as an imposition. Better to turn them back. Besides, these pitiable refugees were no solution to their countries' problems: they brought their problems with them, asking other countries to solve them, while deserting places where the same problems were recreated over and over. Nothing would get better. Wealthy nations would be dragged down by miserable fringe-dwellers while the corrupted sources of these human problems were never going to get any better.

The total effect was to lower world morale. Humanity couldn't solve its problems. The United Nations was used by its members to protect themselves. Volunteers trickled out of the developed world, doing wonders in a scattering of places. Médecins Sans Frontières did what they could. Every now and again some horribly afflicted child was flown to a hospital in the developed world, treated brilliantly, and sent home. What more could be done? Those at the bottom would have to lift themselves; after all, even in the richest countries there was a poverty-stricken rump who resented any aid, any benefits, that crossed their country's borders while discounting them. Interested

Australians were well aware of the prior claim to their attention of the downcast aboriginals in our extended spaces. Why spend money or effort on people of other continents when we hadn't finished the job, had in fact scarcely begun it, of reconciling the original people, with all their rich understandings of the land, with the newcomers? We had problems of our own!

The world didn't know what to do, so it did as little as possible. A global government, had there been one, might have closed borders, and made a project out of states deemed inferior. Administrators would have ruled them at the behest of the global centre, nurturing self-government until it reached a standard when world citizenship could be awarded. Such a plan would, of course, involve elites, so who would choose them? Who would strip them of their powers when they fell away? What could such elites do about over-population, or making meaningful work – if work was thought to be desirable – for billions of souls? Or would some other contribution be required? To raise such questions makes it clear that the world's various social evolutions hadn't advanced far enough to match the diversity of human endeavours and ambitions. Society can only restrain the individual if it can give him/her something better than can be gained by her/himself. Is this possible? Probably not. Global society, then, is fated to be fragmented, full of rivalries, getting together at times when powerful interests can be brought to coalesce, however temporarily, splitting apart at most other times. So the world did as little as possible. Even keeping the peace wasn't really possible as long as armaments were made and sold; the nations most obviously fitted for world leadership were the ones most involved in weapons: virtuous policy and the means to enforce it was, apparently, a marriage of power, a marriage made on earth and not to be broken by ideas made in heaven! Even to pose such questions shows that human improvement can only reach so far unless humans can release themselves from the contradictions of their nature and nothing in our history suggests that we can do that for periods lasting longer than a few weeks. We are never at our best for very long!

Jack bought Olivia a chair. It was soft, low, and roomy. They put it in the lounge, not far from the gas heater. It was where she would feed

their child, and hold it in her arms when she was lulling it to sleep. It was close to Jack's reading chair, but at the perimeter of the light from his lamp. She'd been thinking of bringing a not very stylish armchair from the spare bedroom but hadn't got around to doing it, and was pleased by Jack's decision. Their alliance was steady. He told her that for a time he'd thought about a dog, but it would be relegated in their affections when the child was born, so it seemed unfair. Olivia had no wish for the dog, and found relief in its non-arrival. Their child would keep them busy. She sent an email to Ruth. Would they be seeing her at the house by the sea? Ruth replied that it all depended on whether or not she could get leave for long enough to make it worthwhile, keeping to herself the arrangements already made. She wanted to feel the weight of her arrival, without expectations or even prior knowledge added to it. Would they be pleased to see her, or simply accepting? And what would she feel about being back where she'd been with Rory? Relieved to be without him, or touched by pangs from the past? Someone had mentioned that Tessa was bringing a new man, someone she worked with, and that he was supposed to be a little difficult: what would she make of him? What would he make of her? Tess was easily led away; would she have stabilised by now, after the loss of Don? Ruth doubted it, but didn't know. She knew she'd be examined, and didn't mind: she'd always been strong. Would she now, this coming Christmas, be hard, in the eyes of those who'd known her? And what did it mean to be hard? You could be aware of people's feelings and choose not to respond. You had to do this if you were to avoid being controlled, managed, in a way she might have accepted from Rory but wouldn't accept again. She knew, also, that the days she spent with her friends were going to be a test of her, an examination by them, and that she shouldn't try to produce a particular result. Whatever was going to happen had to be allowed to happen, and that might be hard.

Best not to think.

Tim and Donna talked about the coming holiday in much the same way. It would tell them what sort of year they'd had, and how they'd changed, if they had, in the intervening months. Nothing would be quite the same, they'd notice differences in people and

others would find differences in them. In many respects it would be easier if they were with new people, so that the impressions coming in were fresh, instead of returning to a place, and a group, they'd already known. Certainly they felt loyal to the others but loyalty was a form of demand and when you went on holiday you wanted something new, anything for a change. Carlo Furlinghetti, for instance, wouldn't have his veteran car, meaning that some colour, some idiosyncracy, had been stripped away from him as a friend; they expected him to be more ordinary, more conventional, more groomed by his family. More mature, no doubt, but less interesting, probably. Or so they thought. As for the Quirks, they felt a little distanced from the Williamsons by the intervening year. Music and literature were still important bonds, but less gripping than they'd been, partly because the music and literature was a little older, a little further away from the times when it had bonded them, but also because Randolph had gone into himself as the airline he worked for had changed in the public's imagination. The pioneering days of aviation were being forgotten. Flying was no longer the adventure it had been. There were frequent flyer points – and there was the dense seating, the cramming, of economy, compared with ever-greater luxury for those who paid more. The class divisions that had disappeared from trains and trams had reappeared in the air. Randolph wondered how long the group would hold together when it contained the Bartlett family, who'd moved into Toorak because they had the means. Money talks, he said, but only after it's affected the minds of its owners. However, he had to admit he'd enjoyed looking at Rex Naughtin's paintings at the Bartletts', and hoped they'd host young Rex's next show; he and Madeleine really must buy one, this time, otherwise the chance would be lost. Rex would be snapped up by people like the Schulbergs, his prices would go through the ceiling, and Rex and Madeleine would find they could no longer afford the young man's work.

As for the Brambles, they were by now almost unchangeable. They'd moved, they'd settled in, they had the property, and associated aura, that they wanted: they were ready to age, doing the same things, year after year, until ... until something happened. Illness, an accident, one of the children going wrong ... nobody's secure from

fate's poisons, but for the moment, they were fine. And they talked about it!

Their friends talked, everybody talked, the whole world talked. Famous speeches, poems, plays were remembered. The utterances of the powerful were quoted as if they had more on display than the mumbles of the lowly. Perhaps they did, at times. On ancient recordings, Churchill still rallied his nation: 'and let us so bear ourselves that if Britain and her empire should last for a thousand years, men will still say – THIS was their finest hour.' Across the Channel – Le Manche - his antagonist, Adolf Hitler, inspired his nation, or tried to, by offering them a thousand-year Reich, so perhaps the opposites were more alike than they cared to know. Isn't it always so? By the time of the friends whom we've been following, few politicians attempted such rhetoric; they were managers, now, and governed as if their nations were supermarket chains. As in fact they were, if business could be believed. The bottom line, the profit and loss summary, was what mattered most. Decisions had become two-dimensional. The microphone ruled! Journalists, media-people, created a new class of those in the know: this they claimed and this they broadcast. Public debate, once the nature of a democracy, had been turned by media people into a ritual performed by themselves. The more that people were invited to write to newspaper editors or ring radio hosts the more they reinforced this new band of rulers; so many opinions were heard that real power lay with those who were hosting them, reducing the public to gaggling geese because they were never given the time to develop their arguments and show how they might work. Instead, they were allowed a sentence or two before being cut off, while sports broadcasters could and did storm on for minutes at a time, yielding way to the players only, gods of the sporting field.

Sport, or the broadcasting thereof, replaced religion as the ordinary person's means of expression, and it was shown, over and over, to its easily-taken captives. As a change, they were offered river cruises through Europe, tours of the Andes, Malaysian beaches, or the Kimberleys, Kakadu, Australia's north or centre. Red rocks replaced green fields: the dying Falstaff's babble had been put out of date by travel agents. The public grew used to being pushed around, and

when they were not on the move they were gripped by telephone surveys of what they thought, in order that the things they were offered would be certain to sell. They could hardly think of clothing without thinking, also, of the machine which would wash it, and the other machine that would dry it, ready for ironing. They were affluent, educated, well dressed and fed – but they sensed, insofar as anybody could in a society of perpetual distraction, that they'd given up something valuable for comfort, and their society spent most of its time reassuring them that they'd lost nothing in order to gain much.

Even if it was true, the question was daunting, and there was nowhere to turn to find out. Jack Page wondered what he should take to Fairhaven to read. Madeleine Quirk picked Steven Carroll's Forever Young. Her friend Donna said she'd reread The Transit of Venus, by Shirley Hazzard, first published in 1980 and still one of Donna's favourites. Hearing of this, Nancy Naughtin chose Bernard Smith's European Vision and the South Pacific, a book she'd never read but felt she should have. 'You can spend a lazy afternoon looking at the pictures,' was Rex's comment. He was taking his notepad and a range of pencils. So too was Jenny Bartlett, inspired by the success of the exhibition she'd had at her house, while Norman Bartlett settled on a couple of biographies - Robert Menzies and Nelson Mandela. The Brambles' and the Bartletts' children selected a little bag, each, of things they'd like to play with – bats and racquets, balls and games, and of course Monopoly: some things never changed. Maria Furlinghetti picked things for her children to play with, and Olivia Page chose the *Memoirs* of Hector Berlioz because Madeleine had recommended it to her. Tim Williamson put aside a book about the Boeing company in America, and how it had sustained its dominant position in world markets until the British and French governments were persuaded to develop Aerobus. Jason Springfield, hearing all this from Tessa, declared that he'd take nothing except his wits, he'd go for walks, he'd talk to people to see what their minds were worth, if anything, and he'd cook. He understood that Don Trevorrow, whom he'd replaced, had done most of the cooking last time and was sure he could do as well or better. Tessa said nothing about this. If Jason wanted to cook, why not? There were plenty of others to help, if he could tolerate them in his kitchen. She had a feeling that the presence of children would put him on his best behaviour, or she hoped so. Late in her thinking about the coming vacation she thought of Ruth. She'd like to give something very special for Ruth, if she arrived, but she couldn't think of anything to get her, so she asked Olivia, who said, 'There's a good bookshop in Geelong. Sorry, I've forgotten the name, but I know where it is. You could get a gift card from the shop, fifty dollars worth, or whatever you like, and if she arrives, you give it to her. If she doesn't, you buy something for yourself. What about that?' Tessa said it was a good idea, but she was thinking of something very personal, something extra special which she would buy before they left Melbourne. Olivia reminded her of the bookshop at the gallery where she worked: surely she could get something there? Yes, Tessa couldn't see how she'd not thought of that, and went into herself, already thinking about what was on sale in the gallery bookshop. There would be something there for Ruth, it was all a matter of deciding what she'd like.

All of them were rounding off their years, preparing, without actually thinking about it, for the moment when, on holiday, relaxed, surrounded by others they could talk to, they would begin to entertain all the questions brought to mind by the arrival of the coming year. The next step, or stage. The next chapter in a book whose ending was as yet unknown. Two of the characters had already been disposed of: would Ruth come down from Cairns? They all hoped so but Tessa felt it most keenly. It was going to hit her when she entered the kitchen of their holiday house. She'd already arranged with Jack and Olivia that she'd have a different room from the one she'd shared with Don, and Olivia had privately made up her mind that when the group set up their tent on the beach they'd move it a good fifty metres from where it had been the previous year. She was keen to get back to a beach she'd liked very much but she didn't want to feel haunted, and neither did Tessa or this Jason that she was bringing. Olivia hoped very strongly that she'd like him because she wanted these beach holidays, of which the second was coming up, to be a backbone of her life, and Jack's life – Jack was ready, she knew – and of course the child's life, which hadn't even started yet, though it was a life which already had rails laid down, meaning that it should start well, once the time came. The time, she realised, was in her, about her, around her and above. Her baby's life was human life, the lives of all of them, combined, at the moment, but preparing to enter the world and find what destiny had prepared for it, when it came.

Summer

Jack and Olivia travelled down on Boxing Day, a day earlier than the others, but were surprised when, only an hour or two after they'd arrived, Tessa and her Jason came up the slope. Olivia welcomed them as if they were expected. She showed them the room they'd share; it had two single beds. She went to the kitchen to make coffee for them, but could hear things being moved. When the coffee was ready and she went to call them, the two beds had been pushed together, Jason lying on one and Tessa on the other. 'We're not an item,' Jason said, 'but we need to be close.' With that, he got up and went to the kitchen ahead of Olivia. Jack was already there. 'Room okay?' Jason looked at him and said, 'We're in no position to make demands. It'll do us very well.' Olivia couldn't stop herself testing him. 'Jason's announced that he and Tess are not an item.' Jason told her it was a silly word, but it did have a meaning. Marriage, or even a serious relationship, involved two becoming one. Tess had been in this position, had now to extricate herself and do it all over again. 'Support is what is needed. But I don't need to tell you that,' he said, having just done so. He asked about the district. Shops, because he needed to do some shopping before any others arrived. He clearly had not only meals but whole menus in mind. 'Keep it simple,' Olivia advised, but Jason said, 'If I keep it simple it means I've gone simple myself. That will happen eventually, but not yet a while.' The man's a force, Olivia decided, but kept herself quiet. There would be a blow-up or two before the holiday ended, but not on the first day! Jack was amused by her control because he felt the same about this addition to their group: why couldn't he be humble, and watch for openings where he could fit in?

When they'd drunk their coffee Tessa said they should go for a drive, and then a walk. Jason wanted to study the vegetation, the flowers and grasses, trees and birds. So they went, in the Pages' car, Jason directing from the back seat. 'We explored a lot of these tracks last year,' Jack said, hoping to shut him up, but Jason kept up his directions, telling them there were certain trees and birds that he knew from his reading were common 'down here', and he wanted to see them. 'I need to have more in my head when I get back home than

when I came.' Then he swung onto fires. There'd been fires in the Otways in recent years: which had been the closest to the house, and how close had it come? The hosts didn't know. 'We should be keeping watch,' he said. 'Basically, there's only one way out of here, and that's the highway. If it gets cut, you're in trouble.' Olivia wondered why he hadn't said 'we'; did he think he was immune? She rather thought he did. Why did he need to say everything? Did everything have to be out in the open? She found herself hoping the Brambles would be early tomorrow. They had a way of talking over things they didn't want to hear. Usually this annoyed her but, as of now, it would be welcome. 'Have you had any experience firefighting, Jason?' He had. He'd been in Maryborough when the 2009 fires destroyed the town. 'Just a little holiday cottage I inherited from my aunt. Nothing much, but a handy spot for a weekend. I took the government's offer. I didn't want to rebuild. It was too dangerous a place. You couldn't have any guarantee that it wouldn't happen again.' All this time he was seated close to Tessa, rubbing shoulders and occasionally taking her by the hand. When they stopped for a walk, he took her hand again. 'Red stringybark. Makes the most beautiful honey.' How had he come to know this? 'I tried it last time I was at Beechworth.' The others could feel their throats stiffen at the name. Tessa murmured, 'Don't talk about honey when Ruth gets here. It's something of a sore point.' He could feel her willing him to keep quiet, but didn't know why. 'What's all this about Beechworth honey? It's very good.'

Tess explained how Ruth, if she joined them, would be the single person in the party. 'She's not an item. Or not that we know of. Not yet. I think she's probably pretty touchy about anything to do with Beechworth, because that's where her husband's gone.'

'What's he doing up there?'

'We don't know. We aren't sure.'

'Something crooked, you're telling me. Okay, Beechworth's a nogo in the conversation. Anything else I need to know?'

Tessa smiled. There was quite a lot, but she was going to let him find out for himself. 'You'll get to know us. We're a good group.'

This time he noticed her use of 'we', and it silenced him. A minute later they noticed a low branch of a eucalypt in flower, and it was

swarming with bees. 'Wild bees,' he said. 'They're smaller than the ones apiarists use.' Olivia sensed that some modesty had surfaced in the man, and he was offering things he knew. This pleased her. They might make something of him after all. She began to wonder about Ruth: would she come down from Queensland, or had they seen the last of her? She hoped not. She wanted to see Ruth now that she was free of her partner. People were different, once you split a couple into individuals again.

The following day, the rest of the party arrived. Jason put himself in the kitchen where, with Tessa beside him, he took charge. Cups of tea were made, drinks poured, snacks before the main meal, which was to be at night. They were all there, with all beds taken, and only the bed on the balcony still vacant when a red car, unknown to them, came up the slope. When the door opened, it was Ruth. Tessa, immensely pleased, rushed out to welcome her, and then to drag her inside to meet Jason, who was charming: 'I've heard so much about you,' he said, and they could tell it had been to her credit. Indeed they hardly knew why Tessa thought so highly of her that she had to make such a fuss of the new arrival by rushing off to her room and coming back with a book on the work of the Papunya artists, back in the 1970s when Geoffrey Bardon prompted the local men to do paintings that would amaze the world which until then had accepted that Australia's blacks were only what whites had said they were. No sir, what a surprise! Ruth hadn't seen the book before. She sat on a sofa, turning the pages to show pictures she liked to those who were interested. They all were, because this was not the old Ruth; she was free, unguarded, and responsive, so new that she made them all new to each other: by the end of their first day, they'd started again. Olivia and Jack sent eye-messages to each other, knowing that they were only the advance guard of conversations in bedrooms when the party were settling down to rest.

The third day began with Jason telling Jack that after breakfast they must all go for a walk between sand and sea. 'To get to know where we are. To start the holiday together, even if we go separate ways later on.' Jack did no more than nod. It was what he'd had in mind himself, but Jason's newness to the group made it easier for

him to direct everyone than it would have been for Jack. They walked to the beach, then gathered by the water on what promised to be a perfect day. 'We're not on the beach,' Jack announced, 'we're on the line between one element and another. Land and sea. There's no better place to walk in all the world. Which way, Tess? North or south?' Tessa pointed south. 'This way it is!' and they set off, never far from each other, but changing partners as they walked on the hard sand, their feet getting wet as they walked. Norman Bartlett picked up a strip of seaweed and showed it to Jason. 'Any idea what this is?' Jason shook his head. 'I don't understand the sea. It's shameful, and I wish I did but I don't.' Norman spoke with gravity, as if inheriting wealth and moving into Toorak had made him what he was: 'If someone said they'd sponsor you if you wanted to study the sea, where would you start?' Jason looked at him fiercely, yet with respect; he liked to be talked to in this way. He stared at the ocean, until he was ready to answer.

'Most people start from where we are now. The edge. The shore, the beach. I'd do the opposite.'

'What's that mean?'

'I'd go to the bottom of the deepest part of the ocean, in one of those great trenches out in the Pacific.'

'And?'

'It'd be warm down there, much closer to the centre of the earth than we are up here.'

'That would be so.'

'I assume no light gets down there, so the creatures that live there must get around in some other way. A human being would have no idea of what that way would be, so that would have to be where I'd start. It'd take time to work it out, but when I did ...'

'... you'd go straight back down again?'

Jason hadn't expected this. 'Yes I would. But why did you say that?'

Norman: 'You don't like things to be easy. You like things to be hard, not simple.'

Jason laughed. 'You're right. Now let me ask you something.' He felt no refusal, but rather an interest. 'Tessa tells me you live in Toorak.'

'We do.'

'She's described the house to me. She was very impressed.' Norman nodded gravely. 'So what are you doing with these people?' His hand lifted in indication. Norman said, 'I'm an only child, and a very late child. My father was an engineer, then he went into construction. There are things he built all over the city. He made a fortune, then he died. He left it all to me.'

'What about your mother?'

'She had the use of the money in her lifetime, then it came on to me.'

"Did she agree with that?"

'She suggested it.'

'Lucky you.'

'Lucky me. Though it wasn't the money that made me lucky, but the fact that I knew what to do with it.'

Jason looked at the man beside him, inquiring.

'People who aren't used to money don't know what to do with it. You see it all the time. If some poor person wins a lottery, they spend like crazy and a year later they've got nothing. Except maybe a flash car with dents and a lot of jealous relatives.'

Jason laughed again. 'And they're at a dead end. They've told themselves that if only they had money they'd be okay. But then they've had the money and they're not okay. They're finished.'

'It's a terrible fate for someone to feel they're finished.'

Jason said sourly, 'The only thing worse than being finished is not being able to start.'

Norman looked at his man. 'I wouldn't expect that to worry you.' Jason began to say that for the most part he had no trouble starting, and/or re-starting, when he found himself with Ruth and Tessa beside him, positively tingling from the sand and sea and sunlight. 'How's it going?' he said, taking her hand. Tessa said, 'We're having a spiritual walk. If they can have them at Papunya, we can have them down here.' Jason did a hop and a skip. 'Why not?' Norman said to them all, to anyone who was listening, 'There's spirit in everyone, so every walk's a spiritual walk if we let the spirit out. If we let it show ...'

Ruth said, and the group had covered a couple of hundred metres by now, from where they'd started their walk, 'After what I saw last night, that book you gave me ...'

'... every walk is spiritual!' Tessa was triumphant, and Ruth in accord. Without knowing it, without trying, they drew the group around them, walking on the hard wet sand. Jason smiled on his friend; she was recovering. More than that, she was reorienting the group. Someone asked Carlo who had the Hispano-Suiza now, and he told them. 'Do you miss it?' Maria waited to hear what he would say. 'Yes, I miss it. It made things simple for me, and I certainly miss that. We all need our excuses, I suppose. But it's also freed me up.'

'Not having the car?'

Carlo nodded. 'Not having the car. Whenever we went anywhere, in the old days, the car was my hero. Would it get through? When it did, as it did most of the time, I was elated, I felt justified. By a car, a grand old car. It's me that's on trial these days, though. However. I won't pretend it's always a comfortable change, but it was time I did it. The change, that is. I'm better for it now.'

Olivia hadn't expected him to say this. She looked at Maria, making it clear that she knew that Carlo hadn't made the decision on his own, even if he'd accepted it. 'That's a big step to take. It's a big test you put yourself to.' Carlo didn't answer her, but said the word that was in everybody's mind: 'Maria? What do you say?'

The group paused. Maria said loudly, 'Keep walking.' Jack said, 'How long? How far do you want to go, Jason? You're the new member of the party. That headland down there? Or do you want to go further?' Jason had his answer ready. 'As long as we're talking. As long as it's worthwhile.' He added, 'I want to hear what Maria's got to say.'

Faces can't groan, but Maria's showed some equivalent. 'It's up to me to keep us walking then, is it?'

They laughed. 'For a while. Then it'll be someone else's turn.'

Maria said, 'I did it for the children. I know that's a way of saying I did it to make myself happy, but that's what marriage is. You can't have one member of the family happy if the others aren't happy.' She looked at Olivia, and it would have been hard to say which of them was the more radiant. 'Sometimes one person has to lose a little, but

only so the others gain. We've all gained – me, Terry, May, and Carlo most of all.' Her husband was surprised that she took it so far. Jack, speaking for him, said: 'Carlo most of all?'

'He's got the best out of it. He's got a happy family!'

This gave them pause. What to do, or say, now? Even Jason was listening rather than directing. Jack felt it was up to him. 'What do you say to that, Carlo?' Since Carlo appeared to be lost for something suitable to say, Jack added: 'Or would you like us all to keep walking, while you think?'

Carlo looked at the headland and took a first step. 'I'd like us all to keep walking, and never stop.'