

Who could
love the
Nightingale?



Chester Eagle

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Chester Eagle

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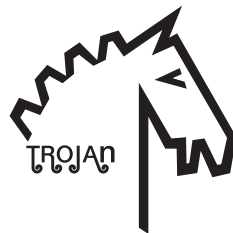
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1 Edward and Margaret

The nightingale was Edward Leon le Rosignol, forty-six, born in Australia though his parents were French. The one who nearly loved him was Margaret Ward.

She was new to the area, it repelled her, she felt she had to show an interest. His stories sucked her in.

It was a new irrigation district, he was a channelling contractor. He told her about the day the water was turned on. He said, 'It meant lots of work for me, all those ditches and channels they wanted me to dig. I was never so busy in my life. Up till then I scooped out the occasional dam, and I couldn't even do that in the really dry months. I called it a living but it was my defence against work. Back in the old dry days I used to keep a broken scoop or a harness in need of repair up the front of my shed. Then when people came to see me, I was busy!'

He's a strange man, she thought. The rest of them are so solid, despite their problems. They've all got identity, they're quite aggressive about it. Edward is the one who hasn't. He's got a way of being all of them, and yet he's got no weight. I like him, but he's a wisp.

Edward said, 'The day they turned the water on, I thought a new life was starting. And it was; I was just about to get married. So was John Comstock; we got married on the same day, the very next weekend. A difficult man, you might meet him one of these days. I was at the Methodist, John was at the C. of E.'

At opposite ends of the town, Margaret remembered, rather pleased that her local knowledge ran thus far; country people seemed to expect it of one. There was a baker called Bailiff in the shopping street, and she had given a nervous laugh when someone told her to go to the bailiff's; she thought it was an obscure legal joke. But by then she had

sensed enough of country life to know that one didn't explain; she fed her misconception to Myra Denham, whose boarder she was, knowing that Myra would pass another current through the circuit, and clear her name of snobbishness. Small towns were so difficult to handle, yet Edward managed to wriggle through the maze of traps; it was one of the reasons why she liked him.

He said, 'Oh it was a very grand occasion. The Premier was there, and the local Member with his tweeds and pipe. They had a big marquee for the invited guests and trestles outside for the rest. Did I ever tell you I made a speech?'

'You've never told me anything about it, I wish you would.'

'Ah, it's my big story, I have to keep something back, or I won't have anything to keep you near me.'

She smiled politely.

'I was to represent the Labour Force. The rest of them said Aw, gee, imagine gettin' up there with all the nobs. A man wouldn't know what to say! But I felt I had plenty to offer, so I went to see Mr Watchett, the water supply engineer, and said I'd like to do it. He said I could have two and a half minutes, they had a tight schedule.'

'I suppose you talked for hours.'

'I said just what needed to be said.'

He's got such a strange sense of humour, he probably sent the whole thing high as a cloud. 'Perhaps you weren't solemn enough Edward.'

'You know what the mirror-maker said: if you've never seen yourself, you're going to hate me.'

I suppose he means the truth about oneself; is there any such solid thing? A year in this place might tell me.

'Edward, when will we be going to Parton? I'm dying to see it you know.'

'I'll take you there tomorrow, fledgling, if you and Cecily don't get yourselves a hangover.'

'Will we be going in the truck?'

He nodded. He knew she doubted her appearance, though her coming had been quite an event in Turrumburrah. Porters at the station had gawked, and men had come to the goods shed window to whistle—loudly enough for the men at their shoulder to hear anyway. And people had come to like her, she tried so hard, but she was slow in making friends. She had Cecily, at the same high school, the Denhams she boarded with, and me, Edward Leon le Rosignol. We were mysteries to ourselves, and therefore with each other.

‘What time tomorrow?’

‘At crack of sparrowfart I’ll come to thee.’

‘What time, madman?’

‘As long after breakfast as it takes to get your face on. Ten o’clock? Are you bringing Cecily?’

A hint, she realized, though she knew he liked her friend. ‘No.’

‘Jusqu’au jour, beloved.’

‘You know I don’t understand your dog-French.’

‘Ten o’clock, my pidgin.’

‘Your puns make me sicker than anyone else’s.’

‘Ten o’clock.’

They drove in an arc until they met the Tuckarimbah Canal, then followed it two or three miles. It was an unintegrated feature in the landscape, softened by willows, but the clay banks and unkempt growth seemed terribly raw to Margaret.

Edward said, ‘That’s old Dawson’s, we mightn’t be welcome. We’ll duck in and see Tom Bowler.’

There was a little bridge inside Tom’s gate, and a water wheel sloshing away. Tom was there when they drove up, in muddy pants and gumboots. When the Bedford stopped, he poked the ground with his shovel, as if planting a staff, before resting on it for a yarn.

But in such a loud voice! He roared through my window, ‘Howareya Edward, bird that never wert!’ and the nightingale parried, ‘Daughter’s

home from college, I see. Dressing her native father in the white man's finery.'

Strange, this friendship by abuse. Tom roared again, 'At least I'm a native, not a half-integrated, half breed Froggy!' and showed his variegated teeth.

'You've got a mouth like an old picket fence,' said Edward, and then, 'This is Margaret Ward.'

'How do you do, Margaret,' said Tom, 'you're staying in with Jim and Myra, aren't you. How're those kids treating you? I see old Bunny's got some of his tribe at the high school now. They'd give you a bit of larry dooley, wouldn't they?'

She wondered how long it would take to learn this noisy banter. She said softly, 'Young Michael's done some wonderful paintings. He's very good.'

Tom Bowler said, 'Painting! By gosh, I saw him trying to set some rabbit traps the other day, along that fence o'Dawson's. He didn't have a clue.' But for once she insisted. 'Sometimes they're too realistic, and other times they're too vague. He seems to feel some mystery, but he can't sort it out from the commonplace.'

Tom: 'Mystery! I reckon there would be. He'd be wondering where he was, half the time, young Michael!' But I set my lips firmly and he stared across his lucerne. 'Old Bunny, eh. He never really got on top, even in the good years,' and then ...

Despite my reproof, which he must have felt.

'Dunno how he feeds them all on what he'd make. Nice kids too.'

Margaret caught herself looking at him as if he were a figure by Millet, and was annoyed, because it didn't fit the bluff, decided man who, one suspected, thought Edward also was ridiculous. And yet he hadn't altogether rejected the idea that young Michael might have something to him that other farmers' families lacked; but when would it be expressed, that admission to himself? It wouldn't, there would only be these mellow pauses, these moments between the obvious, the pressing and the practical.

‘Dump your gear over there, Edward, and you can show ‘er round.’

‘er! This was my femininity, my self? Did I leave Clive’s brusque and pressing courtship to come out here for this? Unmellowed, pushing Clive, moving forward, looking for business opportunities, really believing in the modern industrial city as the high point of mankind. Turrumburrah was a relief from that, at least. And from Clive, who could make love with you, and obviously enjoy it ... and I won’t say I didn’t either ... and then next day be no different, no different at all.

But Edward was shutting the door of the truck, and Margaret got out too. She noticed for the first time that the little bridge acted as a weir for the outlet through the water wheel. She said, ‘But how do you pull out those boards and stop the water? You’d get wet, wouldn’t you?’ Tom gave a laugh and got down on his knees.

Edward said: ‘First time in twenty years.’

But Tom took no notice, and in a moment he was leaning over the side of the bridge, pulling out a piece of piping with a hook and a small circle of iron welded to it. Tom said, ‘This is my trident. Watch how I rule the waters.’ The hook slipped neatly between the stop-boards, and then the circle slipped over a bolt poking out. He pulled, and in a moment he was handling a wet board, as if landing a fish, and the water was going over rather faster, a tiny Niagara of muddy water. Margaret said, ‘That was neat,’ for it had been, it was so practised and easy. Tom said slyly, ‘Edward’s better at this sort of thing than me.’

Edward was four yards back from them. He seemed cool, and said, ‘You take her up to the canal, I’ll give you the honour,’ but Tom insisted, ‘No, we’ll all go,’ and the situation, which had been easy and rural, was tense. Tom said, ‘Going to unload first?’ but Edward said, ‘No, we’ll go now,’ and for Margaret it was the first time she had seen him both challenged and challenging.

They drove half a mile to where Tom Bowler’s channel came out of the Tuckarimbah canal. Tom said, ‘I was one of the first to get the water. Edward’s probably told you.’

‘This is where they first turned it on?’ They both said yes. Tom said, ‘Show her how it works. You’ve got a wrench, I suppose!’

It was Edward who went back to the truck, and Tom who led Margaret up the canal bank to a concrete structure with a large iron wheel which you turned to release the water. But it couldn’t be budged without loosening two lock-nuts, and they waited for Edward to bring the wrench. ‘Used to be a wrench here but one of Bunny’s kids chucked it in the channel. All rusty when I found it. Then I started hiding mine among those thistles, but they found it and flogged that one too. I wouldn’t leave anything around now. That’s why I hide that hook and eye jigger under the bridge. Not that it does any good ...’ Edward was back now ‘... I came up there one day and I found it hanging off the top branch of that pepper tree. Little so-and-sos. They know the limb’d break if I tried to get out there.’

Edward said, ‘Nothing sacred.’ He even took off Tom’s rough voice, but he was more than laughing at his friend. Margaret thought of a drawing Michael Bunny had done. It was derivative Dad and Dave stuff, with an irate father chasing a baggy-trousered child, while cats, roosters and other farm animals away in full cry. It was all flurry and scurry, and she had told him it was too messy, there was too much action in it. It’s got no point of repose, she’d said, the eye needs one. And young Michael had pointed to the skillioned shanty which was presumably the angry man’s house, and said, ‘There it is.’ Sure enough, peeping around a curtain and barely visible was a woman’s face, detached, expressionless. The boy had said Mum, in a flat, disappointed way.

Margaret asked Tom how he’d got the thing down.

‘Edward came along, the old Edward. He got up there all right. Course he doesn’t feed himself, he wouldn’t crack a straw. I’d’ve broken my neck.’

Edward said, ‘Pity you didn’t,’ still in the rough Bowler voice, but now he was sending up the friendship-through-abuse approach of their meeting, or I suppose that’s what he was doing. Then Tom said, ‘Nothing sacred’ and I was really mystified. There was something between the two

men they couldn't handle, perhaps; for the first time Edward had a skerrick of attraction for me; all those years without a wife?

In the silence Tom put Edward's hand on the wheel that controlled the water flow, and took the wrench to loosen the nuts. 'Your honour, Edward.'

With fierce irony, or what?

Edward said, 'It's a pity I didn't jump in the bloody thing,' and I was hurt; it was direct, bitter and hard, and it was the first time I'd known him to be any of those things. But in my surprise was a compassion Clive never called out, being the same age as myself. I could soften to him sexually, but my apprehension of him was still too clear; it was one of the reasons I'd taken the country job.

Tom said, 'I never had any time for Watchett,' and then, 'You do it now,' but Edward appeared to be facing some psychological impasse and it was Tom who turned the wheel after giving the lock-nuts a few turns with the wrench. Margaret watched the dirty water run faster from canal to channel. She said, 'Is that what they call soldier grass?' but Tom told her, 'No, combungi. It's a pest. Chokes up all the channels. You can't get rid of it unless you burn it, but it won't dry out except in summer and that's when you want the water most. Eh, Edward?'

But I Edward was miserable, with my years of misplaced idealism since the day my heart opened, my mockery of people with a purpose, all my silly fooling. I said to him only 'I bite my tongue,' and I watched him with Margaret, looking, for want of better, at the dirty water that had brought the land to life, quadrupled its value, and filled the streets with agencies, banks, truckloads of super, and vacant blocks full of red, yellow, blue farm machinery, all bright as ambition and gaudy with purpose, the merry-go-round colours of practical men.

Tom talked about acreages, fertilizers, pastures and stock. He became quite effusive.

I've worked on Tom's farm, put in most of his ditches and check-banks. Oh, they all employ me, I'm busy enough, but they manage to condescend one way or another. I read too much, I have mystical lean-

ings they find absurd. They're farmers, their home paddock's practical, over the fence means ridiculous. They spend their spare time trying to get out of the pen they've put round themselves. Bowls!

'Don't you, Tom?'

'Yes, definitely Edward! Tweet!'

She said, 'What on earth are you men going on with? Have you been talking by telepathy or something?'

Tom said, 'Edward has these long quiet periods and then he says something. You're supposed to guess what he's talking about. Most people don't bother, but I waste my time on him.'

Edward said more urgently, 'Margaret, I was very young and confident when they opened up this country for irrigation. I thought I could reach my goals in life and that others could too.'

I was happy to think of us all sharing success. I tried to voice all my fervour and I made a big fool of myself.

'Never been the same since, have you, Edward?'

She felt terribly confused, and very young; was there such a thing as arrested development, or did people grow in a peculiar new way after some trauma? Or was that too strong a word? Edward was 'normal' in that he showed no signs of any particular strain of madness, but there seemed to be no solid centre to him; paradoxically, he lacked presence, and yet you couldn't stop thinking about him. Obviously something had happened to him when he was too young to cope. It seemed to Margaret that one could only 'cope' when one's personality was a quantity known to oneself—as hers was not. If this was so, the major things in life happened when you were defenceless. The thought unsettled her, and it disturbed her further that it had followed her to Turrumburrah; she had hoped that a placid environment would soothe and solidify her ...

She said, 'You told me there used to be dust storms, Edward?' But it was Tom who took her up. 'Dust storms! We had one the week before they turned it on. Couldn't have had a better start for the water, make people realize what they were getting. Oh, dust! Dolly had this jug of milk on the table; she forgot about it. Next day when she remembered,

she lifted off the cover and there was this dust all over the milk, like a sprinkle of cinnamon. I'll never forget that. This was in the house, mind you, with all the doors and windows closed. We hardly went outside all day.'

Margaret said, 'It sounds like a marvellous subject for a painting.' It was scarcely the right thing to say, and Tom stared hard at her ...

It's been his life, I shouldn't ...

... before coping with 'You do a bit of painting, do you?' Which puts me in the Michael Bunny class. She said she did, and Tom, sure now of the ground, told her all the local beauty spots, 'local' in Tom's parlance being anywhere within sixty miles.

And I was worried; in her unrest was something not unlike my own. She was only here by chance, she wasn't staying long; what was she going to do with me?

Margaret's unrest was still with her when she got home. She offered to help Myra with the vegetables, hoping for a chance to talk; then Jim came in.

'Hello.'

He looks like an ex-prizefighter when he gets cleaned up.

Must be going down to the Club. Usually flicks a look at Margaret.

'I suppose we can expect you when we see you?'

'Then or a bit sooner.'

'Smart boy. Bring home a bottle of gin. Get that Dutch stuff, Jim, it's better than the other.' He will now say, 'Christ, you think I'm made of money,' flick another look at Margaret, close the back door silently and then let the wire door bang.

He did. Myra looked at her lodger. 'Married twenty-four years; I could scream sometimes. You know, if it's predictable, if it's what he knows is going to happen, he's happy. He can smell any little change like a rat knows the ship's going to sink.'

So he is affected by me; it's hard to tell, with that wooden face.

She hardly knew how to probe the older woman; she fumbled: 'Myra, when you were married, was it a big change? I mean, it's supposed to settle you; er, did it make you sure of yourself?'

Myra said, 'Oh, I don't know, the only time I really wondered how I'd get on was when Jim got out of the army ...'

'But what about you?'

'We weren't married then. He was pretty stunned for a while, didn't know what to do with himself.'

So Jim became the topic, and the limit to any sharing of introspection: 'How did you meet him, Myra? Or did you always know him?'

Well, every time you mention someone, they say, known 'im all m'life.

'Funny you ask. I actually went to school with Jim but I never thought much of him. I used to say all the Denhams were twerps but I didn't really know them. Then they had a concert one night, trying to get people to buy Liberty Bonds. They had this troupe down from Sydney. There was a tap-dancer, piano accordion, a lot of fine artists. Oh, and the local nigger minstrels, they were in it too.'

She's smiling, it means something to her.

'That was the first night I ever took any notice of Jim. There was this girl singing; lovely voice she had, a mezzo-soprano, very rich. She was singing Lehar, the Chocolate Soldier. "Cooome, cooome, I love you oo-oonly, coooooome, coooooome, oh mine".'

Good heavens, and passionate, that funny dated music!

'I know what the young people'd say these days: she was luring them, or tempting them. But it was different then. She stepped off the stage and went round and round the hall, singing all the time. Men that looked like they had any money, she made up to them a bit, or sang at them, and if they stood up she raised their hands or brushed their cheeks and swept on, singing and singing ...'

'And they sat down, or what?'

Naive girl. ‘What do you think? The Liberty Bonds Secretary came over and signed them up. And in between numbers he read out the people who’d bought bonds.’

‘And what, Jim bought one?’

‘Bought one, he nearly brought the house down! He was in his uniform ... he hasn’t put on a pound, you know, he’s still the same. When she came near Jim she was really angling for old Dawson who was sitting just near him. But he squeezed past old Dawson, trod on his toes he always reckons, and picked her up. He put her hand into his pocket and she came out with his wallet. He gave a big wave and she pulled out four tenners, that’s all he had. Well, it was a lot of money in those days. And he signed the book with one hand and he carried her with the other arm, and she kept on singing, there in his arms. When it came near the end of the song, he sort of waltzed her back up the steps again. When she finished, there was Jim in the middle of the stage, beaming and bowing. It brought the house down, I don’t know.’

‘I’d have been madly jealous.’

You would, darling. But Jim was on the crest of the wave.

‘What? I wasn’t jealous. He soon remembered me. The other girl, the singer, she left town next day. I forget her name, it might have been Jeanette. It was only a stage name anyway.’

So sure of herself! How much potential do you have to lose before you’re secure in your place?

She stood in the yard with Cecily, who’d been sent to Turrumburrah in the middle of the previous year. She affected to hate the place, but had taken up with a squatter who was much older; nearly fifty, in fact, and reputed to be rapacious, and ruthless. People appeared unable to define what it was they didn’t like about him, and Margaret, aware that Edward, too, was twice her age, was looking for an opening to question her, when ... ‘Miss, Michael Bunny’s drawing in the toilet!’ Oh, Christ, he’ll be in trouble now! ‘You go, Cecily.’ Cecily said, ‘I don’t know why you bring this to a woman member of staff. Buzz off, Andrew, and if you must tell tales, tell them to Mr Ponds. All right?’ And as the boy

moved off: 'You might at least give him time to finish it.' The two of them giggled, then Cecily said, 'Ponds'll thrash him. Oh dear, on top of a solid weekend. John's getting very consuming lately. I'm going to blow up soon, Marg.'

You are making the pace a bit hot.'

'Who wants to stay sober and live in this place? Oh well, it's only till the end of the year, at least there's that.'

'Is he all that's offering?'

'Have you met anyone else?'

'I ...'

'Come on, we'd better soothe Ponds a bit if we can.'

Edward took Margaret for another drive on the Wednesday afternoon, and again it started well.

'You're driving with zing!'

'You steer and I'll cuddle you!'

'At this speed?' At your age?

They swung round Dawson's corner. 'Not stopping this time?'

He said, 'No twice-told tales tonight. I'll take you out to the best stand of Murray pines in the district.' He's in high something. 'Would that be part of Tom Bowler's place?'

'Yes, and see those pepper trees? Dawson's. Spare me the hush, the ground's familiar, I can concentrate without you getting prayerful!'

'Edward, I like his farm.'

'I loved it once.'

'Edward, shut the window. I'll lose all my hair!'

'We'll put you in a sideshow with the bearded Chinaman. You'll be a wonderful drawcard.'

'Thanks anyway.' But the farm. It must have been more than one generation in the family, it's got that well-possessed air. The roof is purest New South Wales from the front, I suppose, but from the back here it's got two big gables running back and the verandah all round. It looks like an aeroplane ready to go, weighty, poised, looking for a little jostle

with the wind. And the house paddock's surrounded by more of those peppers, with red gums making them look like shrubs. Looking on, I know they're the keep for all sorts of horseshoes, mudbrick fowlsheds, thatched roof stables and endless tangles of old barbed wire, all of which Edward has shown me; it's so native to him, so exotic to me. They've got such a funny attitude to machinery; there's all these old headers grounded in marshmallow, all these brand-new machines collecting the rust cheek by jowl with things they're starting to put in folk museums ...

I love her silences. It's my land, though I've never owned any of it; I was heir to the whole lot of it for a while, when I was the bright light in old Dawson's eyes. Jenny says I let her down; she brought me down with a thud.

A mile or two later the left-hand fence cut out.

'What's this?'

'Crown reserve, travelling stock, which includes us. We can camp by the dam for the night.'

That's his second amorous joke. Clive's enough for the time being.

'In we go!' They bumped off the road, with Edward laughing at her discomfort, went beside the culvert instead of over it, and on to a grassy flat. There was rain approaching. Heavy blue clouds filled the southern sky, but sun still poured on the grass and the trees of the stock reserve.

It's all light! I'll never paint this place, there's just this endless space, and light!

Carissima!

'What?'

He said, 'I didn't say anything, I only thought it.'

Then they were among the trees, and the grass looked even better; brushed, as it were, but a little tousled by the breeze of last night. Though the clouds were moving above, it was calm among the pines.

'Edward, this is marvellous!'

'Now there's old Johnny!'

Near the dam there was an old man furiously hitting a stump with a stick. Edward pulled up twenty yards away and yelled, 'Johnny, you'll

never get him with that!’ The Johnny man gruffed back, ‘Not too close, you’ll scare ‘em,’ Edward said firmly, as if expounding doctrine, ‘Why shouldn’t I scare ‘em, there’s got to be some places free of ‘em. Not all is dark, John!’

Margaret was more or less used to Edward’s inane conversations by now. She assumed the man had some sort of fixation on snakes, and had just seen one, or imagined it. Johnny mounted the dam bank to address them. ‘Seen ‘im in the water; I called ‘im out. Hoh, they’re cunning; he got out on the other side. Time I go round, he’s wriggled over here. Here’s his tracks, you can see for yourself! Trouble was, I dropped my stick in my haste to get at him ...’

‘You lost that vital yard.’

‘Yes. He got into the stump; you can see the hole. I see you’ve got a passenger. I’d be glad to show her, Edward.’

I looked at Edward because if he wouldn’t stand between us, I wouldn’t get out of the truck. But he knew, as usual; he stood in front of me while old Johnny laboured down the dam bank, managing to look like Moses without the tablets.

‘Follow and I’ll showya.’

Perhaps Edward is a bit off, he’s getting an axe!

Old Johnny jabbed at the stump; Margaret watched, fascinated despite herself, and drew a little closer; then Edward pointed unobtrusively to the truck.

I slipped back smartly. He began to hit a lot harder. Edward gave him the axe; I thought it was a terrible mistake to do that. He was a man possessed. He attacked the stump savagely but even I could see that he knew how to use an axe. Mad Edward kept talking to him.

‘No hope from the side, Johnny, split ‘im from the top.’

Old Johnny started slicing pieces of the stump away, with a running commentary from Edward: ‘Evil can be made into good, you know that, Johnny.’

‘Aye, Edward, but it’s better destroyed, destroyed, destroyed!’

I wanted to scream!

‘And yet if a man has a will, he can change it. There’s more than mountains can be moved, you know!’

The attack didn’t slow up but it became methodical. Johnny started to look like a woodcutter at work. Edward said, ‘Before the storm comes, Johnny, what about a bit of wood for Myra and Jim?’

The clouds were close now, and thunder rumbled. Johnny calmed to a rhythm of chopping. He soon had eight or nine good pieces cut and stacked. To the accompaniment of thunder he straightened up and said, ‘You’re a man of goodwill, Edward, and can work miracles.’ Then he moved quickly through the trees, and disappeared into a tiny cottage Margaret had not noticed before. Edward started loading the logs.

There was an aura about the very spot, as if the air was wobbling, or rippling in layers! I could hardly wait till we went.

On the drive back, Edward said, in a broken voice, ‘If he could only get down the hole and come up somewhere else.’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Edward.’

‘Who knows what meaning is, when Johnny’s the subject?’

The clouds hurried over; there was a wind buffeting the truck by now. For a few glittering moments they had both raindrops and bright sunshine, then gloom crushed the exquisite second; Edward still carried some of Johnny’s sadness, Margaret trembled and wondered.

She wrote to Clive:

... and the funny thing is that though I was frightened, I always felt there was a way out without anyone being hurt. He does give me confidence, you see, and you know I haven’t much, usually. Driving back, I felt purged, no, half-purged because I’d only been a spectator. But Edward was wrung out. He’d given this old Johnny something. No, rather, he’d gone through the paroxysm with him, and taken some of the hurt on to himself. It was a remarkable experience, but I don’t think I could ever go there again...

Clive’s answer took little account of the Johnny incident; he seemed to imply that Edward and the hermit were two sides of the same coin. He was more pressing on other matters—when could he come down and

see her, or, better, why didn't she throw up teaching for a secretarial job in the firm where he worked?

Margaret put a book on his letter and went to the kitchen; she noted wryly that Myra was leaving lights on all over the house, because she and Jim were going out.

It's Myra's you-never-know philosophy in action. There's always someone who might be lurking. Well, it could only be a man, and I could do with one at times. Though I only miss Clive momentarily. I suppose it wasn't fair to expect him to interpret the Johnny thing for me when I couldn't work it out myself, but I did expect him to be interested ...

At a loose end, faintly disgruntled, she tried to prepare some work, but lost interest.

I wish Cecily'd come round, though it'd probably mean a hangover. So what, I'm off first two in the morning. I hope John Dutton doesn't ask me out, I'd die of boredom. Shit! I've done four decent drawings since I've been here, two lousy paintings, and that's all. I might as well be back with Clive for all the good I'm getting out of it.

Myra's you-never-know philosophy. It struck Margaret that not only Myra but everyone she'd met in Turrumburrah so far regarded passion as an intrusion. Not only violence, but really strong feeling of any sort appeared to be quite inexplicable, except in terms of madness or crime. They seemed too busy keeping in good with each to study their own drives ... how would a Van Gogh or a Beethoven get on out here ?

KNOCK.

Uh! That mad old Johnny!

'Who is it?'

'John Comstock. Is Myra home, or Jim?'

'Who?'

Through the wire door. 'John Comstock. I came down for the sale tomorrow ...'

'Oh, I'm sorry, er, come in...' John Comstock! Thank heaven Cecily isn't here. Did she say she'd come round? Or was that tomorrow?

He was tall and big-nosed, big, bony, ugly, demanding. He had an air de seigneur; not my pigeon, I'm glad to say.

'Come in and sit down. I was thinking of making myself some coffee. They've gone off to a reunion in Ky. Is that the name of a place?'

'Kyamba.'

A man of few words.

'You're Cecily's friend.'

But to the point.

'I think we're friends. I mean I think we'd be friends anywhere. We're certainly friends of circumstance out in this place.'

'Where's the centre of the earth for you?'

'I don't really have one.'

'You must have a home.'

She said, 'Point Piper.'

'You've had all the advantages, my dear.'

'You don't exactly look underprivileged yourself.' Heavens, I'm starting to use their top-of-the-voice approach!

'You must find Cecily rather vulgar at times.'

'No, do you?'

'Oh, I'll grant you Myra can be just as difficult.'

How long's he going to stay?

'I'm finding you rather difficult.'

'That's a brave little rich girl!'

Pest!

I see in her the unconscious assumptions, the odd combinations of weakness and strength that I am beginning to hate in myself.

'You know Myra then?'

'Did you think I'd come to see Jim?'

She said, 'That seems to downgrade him rather.'

'He needs looking after, apparently.'

Can't you clear out?

A flash of temper, I like it. I'll sit with you and find out more.

That look! 'Buzz off, can't you!'

‘A vulgarism worthy of Cecily.’

RING.

It was tonight! But will it be better with her here, or worse?

Oh my sickness! Is that Cecily come to see this girl?

RING.

‘Margaret! Maggy! Mag-bag!’

‘Coming, Thistle.’

She opened the door. ‘You sound bitter about something. Oh, shit! The laird of Jingellic! What brings you, might I ask?’

It only needs Clive to drive up now and we could have a really beaut night.

‘To begin with, there’s a sale tomorrow ...’

‘You’re buying a few acres of flesh, I suppose?’

Her sensuality and mine, her pride and mine, must clash, it seems, but they couple well enough. Just let some hate in the love-soft, and you’ve got a fine fierce mixture we know how to make.

‘I’m flying to Sydney straight afterwards.’

‘Have fun.’

There’s a spare seat, as you well know. All right, I’ll take the rich girl. ‘Would you like a weekend in the metropolis, Margaret? I’m a perfectly good pilot. You can ask her about that.’

‘Oh, he’s a marvellous pilot, Margy. I’d fly to hell with him if I could come back on my own.’

Well, now ... ‘Yes, I would, so long as you come too.’ Life’s livening up, in Turrumburrah!

‘Who asked Cecily?’ Is she on, or not?

‘I’ll send Clive a telegram ... can you have them sent by phone?’

Fuck, there would be a Clive!

‘I’ll charge you a fare, to see Clive.’

‘He probably means it, Margy. He is positively the meanest bastard ... All right your lordship, you can pick me up at nine o’clock. They owe me a day off. For Christ’s sake don’t drive me past the high school like

you did last time. Tell ‘em I’m sick, Marg, tell Pondsy I’ve gone off to see about an abortion.’

‘You’d better ring him up. I’m coming too.’

Splendid!

‘That’s a girl, Margy. Your mother’s dying of quinsy, you’ve rushed off to stop the priest making her change her will. You tell Pondsy on Monday morning, he’s a fountain of mercy.’

Bugger Ponds or anybody! I’ve been locked up in this dump too long! And I’m going to have it out with Clive.

But Clive took her to Roberto’s, at the Cross, where they wined, dined, and danced. Then they drove out to South Head, to hear the sea and see the lights, as he put it. They made love in the car, a quick physical thing for him, a temporary relief for her.

It was almost against myself. But at least he treats me as a solid, unified thing, even if it’s only the thing he wants me to be. When I’m with Edward, who is twenty times the man, there seem to be no walls to close me off from everything, no barriers between self and world. And everything out there on those gruesome plains is so foreign I feel like a sandcastle with the tide coming in, slowly losing identity. At least with Clive I feel normal again. He pushes me, and it’s good to be pushed, even if he only gets my half-respect.

‘Why don’t you get a transfer? Don’t they have compassionate grounds, or something?’

‘I could say my mother was dying of quinsy and I had to be there or the old priest’d make her change her will.’

‘What are you laughing at?’

‘Let’s drive down the beach. I’ve got to hear the ocean.’

‘How do you stand it out there? I’ll bet it’s flat as a carpet.’

Dear Clive, he’s not hard to deal with. ‘Well, if we must talk about it, it’s pretty ghastly. But I think it might be worth staying all the same. When I’m home, I see big human structures in which achievement seems possible. Out there, they all seem to be battling, but they’ve got

solidity, and I can't find myself here. When I'm home, there's nothing for me but a function, a place to fill and moves to go through.' And that, dear fellow, includes your lovemaking.

'I'm one of them?'

Careful.

'It is a bit like that, Clive.'

He said he wanted to visit her; that he couldn't understand what she was involved in unless he saw it, and he felt she was blaming him for not knowing. Reluctantly ...

It was either that or break it off then and there, and I couldn't bring myself to do it ...

... she agreed.

'Beauty!'

'When I say.'

'Bugger! But, okay, I'll accept that.'

They walked by the beach, which was strangely quiet, no white-caps breaking. Margaret felt tender for Clive, who was making a success at work, designing houses for an expensive estate, even getting some of the office-building jobs handed to him before his superiors added the finishing touches which were the firm's trademark. Clive wanted to stride boldly ahead, and if you chose to keep up with him, there was little he would refuse you, or anybody. He wanted to be fully used up in the world. He felt the need for partnership more than love; one could not imagine him, at this stage, merging into another person, whereas Edward ...

... drove her to a quiet reach of the Murray, taking biscuits, billy and thick china cups. Margaret said, 'Gee, do we drink that water?' and Edward said, 'That's the town supply for Tilga, you know, but I brought some rainwater in a flagon,' and she was relieved.

They gathered sticks and made a fire. The dry leaves flared up and smoke drifted across the river. Edward stood by the fire with a handful of twigs, looking soulful; he seemed to want her to join him in his mood.

She smiled at him, and it felt artificial, but when she looked past him there was only a thin belt of trees, and then a featureless paddock.

Grass!

She doesn't like it.

Feeling inadequate ...

And horribly stilted.

... she said, 'Er, I came across this poem the other night; wait on, ah ... "Over soldiers' graves, summer grasses wave. The aftermath of dreams, however brave".'

No effect. What's he want, exactly?

'That's all; it's Japanese. They write little things, apparently.'

Edward stirred: 'But here, you see, there never were any soldiers, or any dreams. There's just the grass waving to mock you before you act.'

Mockery before you act! Is that the key to him?

'Why did your wife leave you, Edward?'

'I didn't satisfy the dear girl.'

'I would think you'd give more affection than most.'

Dangerous ground, but I had to say it.

'She wasn't what you would call a loyal person. She couldn't love you unless she respected you, but respect was something other people gave. If the town didn't grant it, she would wipe you.'

'Oh.' Oh?

'I should have been hard at work, piling up an overdraft, going night and day, working towards the day when I could stagger into council meetings and voice my ignorance because I was working too long to think. Ah, no.'

'She divorced you?'

'I divorced her—she wanted it. She went off with Watchett, the engineer. His wife died, poor shrew that she was. They're married now, in Sydney.'

'There were no children, anyway.'

'Oh yes, one.'

'Oh. Do you ever see ...'

He smiled. ‘Every day, my dearest. Tom Dawson, the young lad on the Courier. While she was waiting for the divorce to go through she went back to calling herself Dawson; the boy too, he was only two.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Messy.’

‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked ...’

He said, ‘Put the billy by the edge of the fire and we’ll go for a walk.’ They strolled among the huge trunks, with their coarse bark flaking, and the spindly saplings trying to compete. They tossed cakes of mud in the river, sending ripples around the snags poking up. Edward said, ‘They used to bring riverboats up here. They couldn’t do it now unless they snagged the river first.’ She said, ‘Oh, are those sticks part of big logs or something, are they?’ It was a lame attempt at an ‘intelligent’ question.

I want to push you in!

I will!

Edward yelled, ‘Let’s dive in and see!’ He put his arm round her waist and dragged her down the bank with him. She wriggled, struggled; they lost their balance, and fell on a soft deposit, half-sand, half-clay, where the river changed direction. It was damp, they got mud on his pants, her skirt. She jumped up angrily: ‘Why did you do that, you stupid clown!’ He pulled her over and she fell sitting in his lap.

He put on a suave, fake-American voice: ‘In the lap, that’s where the action is. Try Penis brand, king size, better than Monopole mid-gets; they’re the ONLY brand, for satis ... faction.’ She stared at him in amazement. He roared in his Yankee fake: ‘Get with it!!’

Good Lord! Good heavens!

He got up from under, and stood up. This time he affected the butler: ‘Your billy’s boiling, Lady Chatterley. Shall I assist you?’

She gave him a withering look and got up, unassisted. She marched at the bank, and slipped. He knelt in front of her. ‘Tread on me! Use me as your path to the top!’ She straightened, started to laugh, somewhere between a giggle and a snuffle. She wanted to cry, but laughing took over, got louder.

I'm getting hysterical. Well, bugger it, if I want to, I will.

Don't get up yet, that's a girl. 'You can if you want to.'

'I'll kick you in the slats! That's what the boys say. It's rude, isn't it, Edward?'

'Ribs, darling, only ribs, not balls. You can use the expression anywhere—rib-kicking is socially acceptable.'

He dropped her off at Cecily's flat.

'Cecily, what's this place do to people?'

'You've noticed!'

'No, really, what is it about them?'

'I don't know. I don't know if it's isolation, or working with animals, or working with things instead of ideas... I don't know.'

Margaret said, 'When people look at me I know they're summing me up; they look as shrewd as all hell, but I don't know their wavelength. Edward's the only one I can follow ... the only one I feel I might be able to follow.'

'Our ageing boyfriends.'

'No. He's not that.'

'You'll get sucked in. If you stay long enough.'

Staying! Margaret was living day by day, almost hour by hour; the implications of staying had never occurred to her. There was a silence; Cecily said, 'Oh, well, never mind,' and then ...

'J. Comstock's coming down next week.'

'What brings him this time, apart from you?'

'There's supposed to be Jasper and stuff on his property. Well, Rupe Larkin's got half the kids in the gemmology club and, lo and behold, he invites Sir John down to give a talk. At the School of Arts? No, room 31 at our establishment. He's only doing it to embarrass me.'

'Rupe is?'

'Oh, both of them, the pair of shits. I'll be sick that day... so he'll come round, or Ponds'll snoop, and I'm in the poo again.'

'Stop tormenting yourself. Twist his arm to marry you.'

‘He might do it. He’d like me on the property and it’d be the easiest way. But urrk.’

Margaret said, ‘You’d be a lady of leisure.’

‘Pleasure.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘You haven’t slept with the lecherous old bastard. He starts to fondle me and I want to kick him. I do kick him! He twists my arm or tries to pull my tit or something and I hit him and punch him, do everything but kick him you know where, and before I know what’s happening, it’s getting good.’

‘You two ought to be on telly.’

‘They couldn’t offer me enough.’

Margaret said, ‘What if they offered you Jingellic?’

‘Shut up! Shuuuuut bloody up!’

Well! That touched the button.

‘Sorry, sorry. But couldn’t you keep out of the way at school, if you’re worried about Ponds? That little room in the library office?’

‘I suppose I’ll have to.’

Ponds had been suspicious of the two girls staying away on the same day, and a Friday at that. He had been in the staffroom more than usual at the start of the next week, talking about weekends and Turrumburrah being a great change after Sydney. But his only revenge—if it was that—was to call Margaret into his office one afternoon to suggest that she ‘might be able to use her talents to assist the local community’. The Courier and the historical society—responsibility was rather imprecise—wanted to produce a booklet called *The Unwritten History of Turrumburrah*, a farrago of anecdotes, facts, and interviews with old identities whose stories should be set down before they were lost. The school had been approached for help with layout, illustrations, etc.; would Margaret help? It didn’t seem much; she said she would, and was told to contact Tom Dawson at the Courier ...

Tom Dawson!

... to find the time and place of the meeting.

The 'meeting' was a very slight affair, consisting of Tom, Margaret, and two of the committee, a Mr Dean and a Mrs Grope. Mr Dean wanted the book to be full of robust, rollicking pioneering fun. Mrs Grope wanted a cookbook of locally garnered recipes. Young Tom's main comment was that there was room for both; they could easily work both of them in; and the others appeared to believe it.

A strange, strange boy, retarded somewhere; no sexual identity. He appears to have shelved the whole problem. It seems to accord with Edward's mysticism and mockery, but when Edward fools about he partly means it. That fooling on the riverbank was an invitation of sorts.

Tom offered to walk home with Margaret after the discussion broke up ...

Which was a piece of almost Arthurian chivalry in that burg.

... but Margaret said she'd prefer to go alone. But when she came near the hamburger shop, she saw a group of boys lounging about. Two were doing repairs on a motorbike, a couple more sitting on the mudguards of a black Ford coupe with 'Love Wagon' painted on the side. She had seen the same car a few days before; someone had crossed out 'love' with a crayon and scribbled 'shag'. Their heads lifted, or turned. They owned the footpath; there was a feeling that one would be owned by them, even if not touched, if one passed through them. She turned across the road. From the darkness at the back of the car came two voices, barely broken: 'Hello, miss' and 'Good evening', polite and respectful. She said 'Hello' without turning, and walked on.

Margaret was at the fruiterer's getting some apples. She was idly glancing at the newspaper under the carrots and the limp lettuces from goodness knows how far away, when the fruiterer made a dash for the door. He closed it quietly, smiled at his customers as if certain that they'd understand, and stood staring at the street. So Margaret looked out too, and a hearse came into view, a converted Chrysler Airflow, of all things.

A very old man sat next to the driver, with a beaky nose, top hat, though it meant he had to hunch his head down, and the severest expression Margaret had ever seen. He could have been an Indian chief lamenting the loss of his land, he was so old and carven. He had the air of one used to sitting up front on a coach. Margaret began to speak, but the fruiterer flashed her a warning look. She moved to go out, and he was beside her, making her feel tactless but taken care of; the door was closed behind her while the other customers stood like dummies.

Behind the hearse was a long line of cars, each containing two or three men, with leathery hands gripping the roof of the car or fiddling with dark felt hats. The line stretched back to the street that led to the Methodist church. Margaret looked at the hearse again and was surprised to see Edward standing in the doorway of the Royal Hotel, hair unkempt as usual, but wearing a suit. As if at a signal, she walked with the funeral and he did the same on the other side of the road.

There were all these men between us, yet we were walking together. And it was surprising how many people on the footpath stopped walking, or broke off their conversations, as the hearse went past them. I heard one woman say, 'Oh, that'd be old Dawson, I suppose,' and though she sounded pretty indifferent about it, even she stood to a bowlegged attention. I felt very strange. I tried to pretend that I just happened to be walking in that direction.

Dawson was a righteous hypocrite, a pious swindler, a canting fraud, but I knew none of that when I fell in love with Jenny. He did me no harm except create a wife for me, and I can't hold that against him. I was heir to his land till the divorce, but it was his right to change his will. He's been a non-person in my life for years now, a man I avoid; but I'd have gone to the service if Jenny hadn't been there, with Watchett. Hence my suit, which has spots on it; I wonder if Jenny'd be sorry for me, or envious, if she realized I was tracking that girl there. Same age as Tom.

A car pulled out of the line and picked up the nightingale. As it moved back into line again, Edward raised one finger. Margaret kept walking, past the end of the concrete footpath, past the railway pas-

senger platform, the silo, the police station, the irrigation commission, and the tree-lined entrance to the golf club. From a side street came an overwhelming smell of sheep—the saleyards. Then she was at the gate to the cemetery, but stood back while the men banged their cars shut and dusted down their suits.

She spotted Edward, and he was no longer calm. He seemed to be keeping in the background, and then she noticed an unpleasant-looking woman of middle age, the only woman there, apart from herself, and next to her, supporting her, was young Tom Dawson. It must be Jenny!

Jenny! It's a birdy name like nightingale—jenny wren; it's a young person's name, a girl's name. How did he ever marry her? He's not that old? Jenny! The name was a better mockery than anything Edward ever thought of. Jenny! The horrible bitch, she'd spoiled Edward's life. She'd let a person ruin himself ...

My son! My son!

It crossed Margaret's mind that Edward might do something foolish, but the hearse provided the relief for him. When the wrinkled old undertaker got back into the Chrysler after opening the cemetery gate, the engine stalled.

Dead as Dawson!

What'll they do?

It refused to start. The starter motor whirred and whirred, gradually losing zest, but the engine failed to respond. Nothing happened. Margaret could see Edward's hands twitching, which she knew meant delight, as the farmers gathered round the vehicle. Young Tom led Jenny back to a car and helped her into it. The self-appointed mechanics analysed the problem. 'Proibly the carby.' 'Rotor button coulda fallen out.' 'Condenser mighta gone; they can go just like that. I had one stick me up one time, out near Blythe in the deada night.' A second man pulled a set of feeler gauges from his pocket and said, 'Gissa look at the points.'

They're actually enjoying this!

He's not a man. He's a half-thing, a non-thing. He's my son and a wreck.

Tom nodded when he caught the clergyman's eye, and he came over, his cassock trailing on the sandy soil. Margaret noticed a heavy-looking man standing near; he seemed to have cultivated a weighty, important presence.

She chose him.

He's welcome. And he's a hell of a lot older; but successful.

The hearse started, the screwdriver went back in the glove box, the oil cleaner on, the bonnet down with a bang. Dusting off again, the men filed after it to the grave. At the cemetery gate were Jenny, Tom, Watchett; further back, Edward; beside, almost behind, a tree, Margaret. There was also the minister, who felt it his duty to catch up with the body. He made a straight line for the hole, which meant going through thistles. They were dry, and caught on his cassock, then on each other. Soon he was struggling, with a thicket of saffron thistles dragging on his garment.

The poor man's puffing!

Marvellous idiot!

He barely made it to the graveside; some of the farmers were frowning. Jenny glared, then caught sight of Edward.

'What are you doing here?'

Tom said, 'Mother, mother, mother, mother, no, no, no, no, no.'

Watchett said, 'Perhaps he thinks he's going to make a speech.'

Edward spoke with the voice of a TV tough: 'Watch it!'

Watchett said, 'What?'

Edward: 'That's what I say, just watch it!'

Margaret: 'Edward, not this time! Don't be silly!'

Of course Jenny flew at her; she must be Edward's trollop, his hussy. She had a fine old-fashioned righteousness about her. Tom raised the level of hysteria by insisting, 'She's just his friend, mother, his friend, his friend.' But Jenny was livid by now. She spat at her former husband: 'You've been ratting Dad's house while he was in hospital. You've been seen driving out there, the two of you. Don't worry, I've heard about it half a dozen times!'

Why would we go out there?

Aha, the will, the will, the will!

Jenny shrieked, 'You claim-jumping bitch, get away from here!'

It took Margaret a moment to realize that it was she who was being addressed.

Shock!

Delicious!

Watchett signalled Tom to get Jenny moving. Once satisfied with this, he looked over his shoulder and spoke in his head-of-the-office voice. 'See you later, nightingale; up the Royal, about half past four,' and strode off to the burial service.

Trouble, trouble, trouble!

Right through the thistles; magnificent!

The burial service proceeded, with the dark suits more interested in Edward and his paramour—one of Jenny's words—and the minister's thistles, than in the fate of old Dawson, who after all had had a well-filled eighty-one years; a good innings, they all agreed, except a few of the family. Edward and Margaret passed through the sheep smell and were back near the silo by the time the gravedigger was putting out his cigarette and waiting for the show to finish.

And is that death?

They're worried, extremely worried.

Myra loved *Blue Hills*. She listened to the repeat before the evening news, as well as the lunchtime broadcast. She was settling by the radio one day with her cup of tea and two cream biscuits when she heard Jim come in the gate.

Trouble?

'What are you doing home?'

'Young Deneher got hurt. Log rolled on him. He's in a pretty bad way.'

'Oh, Jim! How'd it happen?'

‘He was on the log stack moving the next one down when a few of ‘em rolled at once. He fell between two as they were moving.’

‘D’they get Bruce?’

‘He came pretty smart, he was just over the road at old lady Morris’s. Ambulance. Bruce reckons he’ll save him, but he might be a mess. Thigh was awful. Said he might have to amputate. Trouble was, the pelvis was pretty bad too.’

Jim! ‘Time you gave up the mill, Jim.’

‘Don’t be silly. I’m mostly out cuttin’. You know as well as I do.’

His thigh, his pelvis.

Jim said, ‘I know what you’re thinking. He was engaged to that Jackson girl.’

‘She wouldn’t hang around long if he wasn’t ...’

He said, ‘I know, I know.’ There was a pause. ‘Comstock’s in town again, chasin’ that girl at the high school.’

‘Cecily Martin.’

He said, ‘Ever regret him?’

It’s not fair while she’s all squashed up about young Deneher, but it’s the only time she’ll talk.

‘If I did I’d be wasting my time.’

That’s no answer.

‘I made my choice; I’m sticking to it.’

She still wonders what it would have been like.

‘Oh.’

‘Yes, bloody oh. You’re a man of few words, you can just say something.’

He said, ‘Deneher’s the same age as Harry woulda been.’

Tears, tears, bottomless, endless tears.

Nothing much to live for.

‘If that’s the best you can do, maybe it’s good you don’t say much.’

She’s got to hurt something.

Jim’s only got animal reactions; it’s not right to lash at him.

He said, ‘Turn that bloody radio off. All that sappy rubbish.’

‘We’re not much better ourselves, today.’

And that’s a fact.

Jim can’t talk to anybody, that’s his trouble. He just doesn’t know how.

She said, ‘Anyhow, you haven’t told me what you’re doing home.’

‘Miller wants me to tell his mum. Says I know her better than anyone else at the mill. Which is true, but he’s the boss; isn’t it his duty to do it? I reckon it is.’

She held his hand.

‘D’you want me to go with you, Jim?’

‘People can’t help each other much.’

Is that a deep truth to him, or is he showing a wall in himself? I still don’t know about Jim.

‘Are you going to take the car?’

‘Rather walk.’

Old Mrs Deneher’s going to crumple. I’ll have to watch her crying. I’ll cry myself. Only way I’ll stop is think of Comstock. If he ever cried in his life I’ll eat my hat. I’ve been a flop. Once I done me first dash I was finished. Myra’s right, I just react. They can’t say I hurt anyone, any more than old Edward does. Though he hangs around Myra, used to till Margaret came. Legs. Calendar legs. She’s nice in the house. Myra says she’s snotty on Ponds. Which is because he tries to be her superior. Which he is, but not socially. I’m nobody, I can admire.

I’d spare you Jim ...

Comstock gave his talk, answered questions. The club was enthusiastic about the rock samples he brought. Could they make an excursion to his property? He agreed—whenever they wanted to. Rupe Larkin set about drumming up staff or parents’ cars. Comstock wandered through the corridors, hoping to see Cecily, who was hiding in the library office. He ran into the vice-principal. ‘Ah, Mr Comstock, how’d the talk go? Enthusiastic audience?’ The grazier said, ‘Well, I’m no gem man; I told them all I knew about the area, a bit of the background. Some of their

questions floored me. They're a keen lot, anyway. They're getting an excursion on the go.'

Will Cecily come?

'How do you allot staff for these excursions, Mr Ponds?'

'Well, it's largely a matter of who's free. And who's willing, of course.'

'I know Miss Martin would be interested.'

'Well, of course, she's been absent a lot; we have to take that into consideration.'

I don't like puritans.

'I imagine they're docked pay; why go beyond that?'

'That's so, Mr Comstock, but our main concern is the loss in morale to the institution.'

'And there you speak like a civil servant. Mr Ponds, I'm beholden to no one.'

A man's essence is pride. And pride based on land is well spread; there's no castle to attack. We who hold the earth have a fundamental grip, and the wealth to make use of our bodies.

Ponds said, 'Many people would envy you, Mr Comstock, but most of our staff haven't the social background to adopt such attitudes. May I say that if they try, they are likely to fall hard.'

Well, that was a kick in the bum! Cecily hates the hawkish thing I have. She'd rather rub along in the middle of a mess, being raucous and vital. She spouts these poems and shrieks out opera, but it isn't culture. She doesn't want refinement; she wants to be her messy, ebullient self. But I've got a grip on her body this government man won't break.

'Please yourself, Mr Ponds. If your school doesn't want to accept my hospitality, it doesn't have to.'

Up your swinish arse!

'That's up to Mr Larkin and the club, Mr Comstock. I don't interfere in staff arrangements.'

Beat me.

Edward met Watchett. They tipped glasses, Watchett being as sardonic as Edward was playful, then the searching-out began. They discussed the area, availability of work, new machinery, possible dam sites further down the Murray. They worked over state finances, Watchett's commuting in Sydney, Edward's painting his house. They traced a few of the remoter quarterings in the Dawson lineage. Finally Edward said, 'Anyway, I know Jenny's well provided for.'

And that was nicely ambiguous!

'Don't get the idea that I'm wealthy. I'll have a pension and my life insurance; I haven't been picking up any perks.'

'But she's got her inheritance; the old man wiped me off years ago.'

'So what have you been doing out at the old fellow's farm?'

Edward said, 'Whoever told you that was misleading you. My companion and I ...

Jet-setter me! Harem of hundreds!

... have been out to see Tom Bowler, and we did revisit the scene of the turning-on of the water, a place you'll know as well as I do.'

'I'm too old to be bullshitted, Edward.'

'Old Dawson wasn't. You know he had a fear of banks all his life.'

'So what?'

'He got worse. He got more suspicious than ever, if that were possible. He took up burying his banknotes and private papers, all under the guise of gardening, mind you, and farm improvement. Hence that enormous rose garden, those shelter belts, those plantations and wind-breaks.'

'You're a fucking liar, Edward!'

But a good one!

'Watch it!'

'Shut up. How do you mean he buried them? Did anyone see him?'

'He buried them in Arnott's biscuit tins. Which are not notably rust-resistant. You'd better get into action straight away.'

'Bullshit!'

Edward smiled. 'All right, it's bullshit. You and Jenny go back to Sydney and leave the whole thing to me.'

Watchett said, 'You set foot on that property, nightingale, and I'll have you for trespassing.'

Tut tut!

Edward said, 'Oh, I won't drive out in my truck. I'll just hop on the bike and pedal out one cloudy night when the wind hides the guilty whisper of my tyres on the sand. And I'll slip my spade in the soil like an adulterous instrument ...'

'You've always had verbal diarrhoea. Shut up and let me think.'

'I must get the beans on for tea. You can ring me when you've had a thought. Two-oh-four's the number, unless I'm out on the tiles.'

Stew in that juice, Mr What-shit!

Edward was two steps down the footpath when he was grabbed by Comstock. 'Hey! I want a word with you, a little heart-to-hearter.' But there was an uncharacteristic anxiety in his voice.

Nice to see the big boys beg occasionally.

Edward said, 'The Shamrock serves a better brew.'

He's twisty. 'What's wrong with this?'

Watchett barged out, pushing the door with his shoulder. He glared at them and walked away.

'Nothing now. After you.'

So they drank. Comstock said, 'How are you getting on with Margaret Ward?'

'Hands off.'

'I haven't had my hands on her and I doubt if you have either.'

'As they say on the news, no comment.'

'Now look, Edward, I've known you twenty-five years ...'

'Hearts and flowers.'

'... and I'm one of the few people who understands why you act the clown.'

Edward made faces, he looked demure, then coy, but said nothing.

‘God bugger you; listen to me. Is she putting in for a transfer? Has she said anything about Cecily Martin?’

A transfer!

‘That made you sit up, didn’t it? They put their applications in about this time.’

Transfers.

‘She hasn’t told you, has she? You probably thought your little romance was going along nicely. It’ll be fun sitting out the year once the transfers are announced. Won’t it?’

No.

‘Has she said anything about Cecily?’

‘Only that she finds you a handful.’

‘Touchy ground, Edward.’

‘Why?’

Comstock observed tartly, ‘Your questions are more direct than your answers.’ He breathed heavily. ‘She wouldn’t see me.’

‘As you always used to say, John, plenty more fish in the sea.’

‘What if the fisherman’s had it?’

‘Try powdered rhinoceros horn; they say it does wonders ...’

‘Never mind the funny remarks. You’re dishonest, Edward; you won’t face yourself. You’re like one of those birds that jump round madly so people won’t think of looking for their nest. That’s what your clowning amounts to. You’re as hard in the middle as I am, but you hide it. She’s going to leave you, Edward, at the end of the year; it’s only a stopover for Margaret; you’re just local colour while she sorts herself out. I don’t think she’s sleeping with you, Edward. It won’t be a difficult break. For her.’

Grog talks. All I did was hurt him.

How do I get out of that?

‘What do you mean, the fisherman’s had it?’

But Comstock said, ‘It’s odd it should be with Cecily Martin, there’s been plenty mean more to me.’

‘Skite.’

Comstock looked at him. 'You're almost beneath contempt.'

'Well, I was going home ...'

He said, 'The funny thing is, I'd like to know what happens ...' and stopped; in a quite uncharacteristic way, he seemed to be inviting confidences.

I'm not feeding him questions.

'I'm an uncracked ego at the age of forty-seven—which is rare, I imagine—and everything I'm proud of links with that. And I'm starting to go. You know, Edward? I could crack up, just like that.'

Believe it when I see it.

'If you knew the things I teetered on, the disgraceful props I'm using ...'

Anything new in that?

'I used to live by a clean, hard principle.'

Deliberately annoying, Edward said, 'Oh, yes, Johnny cruel but kind, careless of the individual, careful of the species.'

Succeeded too.

'I'll wring your neck if I can't get through to someone. I could do it once, you understand me, I could do it, because I could see it there in others.'

Though never you, of course.

'Now there's only two.'

Edward shrugged. 'It's like that book. What's it called? *Ten Little Niggers*.'

Put the screws on while you can.

'I've got it at home if you'd like to read it.'

Comstock squirmed in his chair ...

Got him.

... and said, 'One and a half, actually,' a bitter smile.

Play it your way, John. I've got nothing for you.

'What actually happened when that bitch ... Did you know you were bugged? Did you realize it was the end of you? Did you see it coming?'

‘I wouldn’t know, John.’

‘Oh, don’t be stupid, of course you knew.’

For once he lacked menace; Edward’s weakness would be accepted, not attacked; but ...

‘I’ve never really stopped hoping.’

That you’ll come good, it wasn’t really final?

‘Twenty-five years, Edward, is a long time to be deluded.’

‘I’ve been spared delusions of grandeur, John, at least.’

Comstock could have been angry, but instead: ‘You never had the stature.’

Useless. He’s been too scared to look at himself; over twenty-five years that amounts to one hell of a fright—or a pitiful weakness.

‘See you.’ And Comstock walked out.

Transfer. Feeble hopes?

Edward drew an M in the beer with his finger.

If only she’d live with me.

His head filled with plans; for a minute he was happy, then he realised that an uncertain Margaret could give him no certainty. A jealousy of Comstock filled him ...

My life’s been thinly sprinkled.

... then a dreary acceptance of himself.

Well, I’ll ask her to go camping. We’ll help each other through. We’ll go up his way, and bugger him!

But it was a shaky Edward who bought fish and chips to take home.

She mightn’t even be interested ...

Night wore on, in the way of country towns. Cars thrashed away from the drive-in, little pubs on the outskirts got glassy-eyed, with love and vendettas taking on strange unreality. Hamburger shops closed, street lights blinked and were gone. The disused picture theatre gloomed over an empty intersection, and the Royal’s publican handed out his last and final dozen carton under the fire escape stairs. The muzak tapes at the

motel were silent, the planks on the bridge still rattling. Down at the Servicemen's Club—membership half the town—the one-armed bandits grew more mechanically alluring, the conversation more inane; even the towelling on the bar was sloshed. The raucous band packed up, and only the cigarette vending machines were as potent as ever. Cops prowled the streets, a towtruck flashed vulgarly at a minor smash. Rejuvenated Fords came thundering in from the outlying dance halls. Deadening, insulating night lay heavily on the ragtag of human affairs. Emotion in Australia is often raw; the expression of feeling, except in isolated pockets, has to sneak behind curtains of embarrassment. Pregnancy, if contracted by the river, has still to be carried through streets where rules of no one's making—and therefore everyone's—grind on all. Custom loses its grip only to let people expose themselves more clearly, interlock more closely in the net of no man's making. Dark and drunkenness make all men more beholden to each other if only for an audience, that least of services, the giving of an ear.

Tom Dawson said, 'You're hooked on sex, Johnny. That's easy. All the normal outlets are open. Do what you like and boast a bit, there's someone'll admire you. What about me?'

Comstock said, 'She wouldn't speak to me. You hear that? She wouldn't even see me. All she did all day was dodge me. Anyone ever do that to you? No, they wouldn't do that, you're only a poofter.'

Smash him down a bit, he's only the mad bird's unsexual son.

'Well, Johnny, if you think I like to hold other boys, you're up the creek. I mightn't be much, I mightn't be anything, but at least I don't hate myself like you do.'

Another prop gone, or going.

The non-point struck like a hammer-blow. Comstock slumped on the sofa, and Tom, who delivered the hurt, spread out on the fold-up bed, trapped in the moral monolith of rural life.

The phone rang. Tom crawled over, bleary-eyed: 'Oh, mother. Yes, mother, I'm sorry. I know. Yes, yes, I'm sorry, yes. I found John Comstock

wandering round quite hopelessly rotten. I mean, he couldn't possibly drive, he wasn't booked in anywhere ... He's still here; perhaps about noon I could. I'm sorry, I'll slip out. I'll get over but you must let me freshen up a bit ...'

Jenny told her son, 'If it goes to the Supreme Court we'd probably win, but the costs would be enormous. I don't think the old will would stand but he'd get a slice. It might be a big slice. It might be your slice. You want to get out of this stinking little dump. I can't set you up. You're going to want your cut. You see if you can find out if your father knows anything.'

Jenny came round to see Myra. Jim hovered in the next room pretending to be absorbed in the Sunday footy replays.

Myra's not all that tough.

Myra was masterful in her cup of tea formality and lugubrious offering of fudge. Jenny was sullen, truculent, blatantly self-interested. Her silences barely passed muster as grief.

'I suppose you'll sell up the property.'

Jenny said, 'How can we till probate's gone through? If it's mine.'

Myra said, 'Of course it's yours, isn't it?'

Jenny said, 'What's this story about the old man burying things? You know what's going on.'

Myra said, 'Jim did a couple of days helping your father with those windbreaks. I'll get him.'

What's she want?

Jim told her, 'Your old dad had a ute full of stuff, bags, tins and all that. He never worked near me, he always used to get down the other end. We'd start at opposite ends of the fence, like, and meet in the middle, I always thought he did it that way because he liked to talk to himself a lot. I dunno if he was burying anything or not. I wouldn't know. I never spent my time watching him. He paid me to plant trees, and fencing. I wasn't there to spy on him.'

Bitch.

‘Edward was, he was about somewhere.’

Myra hated her. Couldn’t she put any rein on her suspicions? Did she have to treat them all as fact?

Myra said, ‘You let Edward alone. I never knew a man need protecting more than him. And I won’t say he’s a man who’s been treated as well as he might.’

Now she knows what I think of her.

Jenny blurted out: ‘There’s something dirty going on, with him and this girl of yours going out there all the time.’

There’s always something dirty in your mind.

‘If they’ve been digging up anything he buried, if he did bury anything—and I wouldn’t put it past Edward to tell the biggest lie that came into his head—and if they’ve destroyed any documents or anything, that’s a criminal act. And there’ll be proof. Edward’s not that smart, and we’ll get him for as much as we can, and the girl as well.’

Jim burst out: ‘She’s rich! She could get the best lawyers in Sydney. Someone low like you can’t touch her. You might as well forget all about your dirty little schemes. And if the old man hadn’t been left alone so much, he mightn’t’ve been half so dotty. What if he did bury things? There’s plenty other people I know got things they’d like to keep hidden!’

It was his longest speech in years. He looked surprised, and oddly triumphant. He nodded confidently to Myra, only sorry that there hadn’t been a bigger audience; he’d like to have had Margaret and Edward there to hear him defend them. What if they did dig up this will, or money, or whatever it was, he was protecting them!

Jim! A twerpy Denham ... I’ll show her the door, it’s the least I can do for him.

It was Friday lunchtime. Edward was putting camping gear in the back of the truck when Tom called.

‘Two tents, father?’

All my failings summated.

Tom asked him about his trip ...

A disguised form of taunting me.

... and Edward asked him about his plans for leaving Turrumburrah for the distant lights of Sydney. Tom told him he'd applied for a job at 2BL Blythe, as a means of getting experience in radio; he was hoping it would be a step to bigger things.

'And what about your plans, father? Are they summed up in your taking two tents?'

'Are you angling to come along on our little trip?'

'I'll spare you that embarrassment, though I'm going to be in Blythe on Saturday, that's when I see the 2BL people. No, I mean that people are starting to say that you and Margaret have been up to some funny business.'

Jenny's been in his ear.

Edward said, 'People! Don't talk people to me. Why should people be the embodiment of all that's mean, malicious, nasty, suspicious ...'

'You can't bluster your way out of it.'

'If people want to find out, let them follow me in the dead of night.'

'Can't you stop your silly play-acting? If they're right, you might be in a good deal of trouble.'

'And if I was, it'd only be legal. What's that to a mess in oneself?'

Too true for both of us.

'Father, must you go on with all that?'

'Yes, because your mother's been onto you to do some snooping. I saw you leaning on her at the funeral. She couldn't even fake a tear for old Dawson. What do you want to be all over her for? Why do you come pestering me? How can I trust you when you're all smudged up with her?'

The unhappy son said, 'How can I trust you when all you do is play the fool with me like you do with everybody else? You don't give me anything I want. You just treat me as one of people, who are all your

audience. All right, I'm spying for mother. You know I depend on her too. How do I get out of that? Through you? I want to set up a shop; I hate the Courier. I need some capital. How do I get on to that? Through you? They're starting up a folk museum in BIythe. I want to get in on that. Anything but that dreary newspaper.'

'Well, we've got a big weekend in front of us, my boy.'

And how do we get out of that?

'And tell your mother to get stuffed. Whether by What-shit or anyone else, I couldn't care less.'

I'll tear that thing between them, I'll grab and screw him, I'll wrench and rend him, I'll have him apart and rebuild him, I'll do anything, it seems, except face myself.

Tom said, 'You needn't notice me in BIythe if you don't want to. I won't be offended.'

Edward said urgently, 'Tom, I'm over that spasm; I'm sorry I was horrible. I'll be looking out for you in BIythe; don't avoid me, will you?'

Would Tom choke? No, he got it out. 'There's a water sports thing at the river, and an art exhibition that night. It's only local stuff, of course, but the 2BL people are going.'

'We might see you.' If it could be in a different light it'd be better.

'Give my love to Margaret, if you get around to it.'

There was so much failure in his voice, so much realization of it. Edward went inside and rummaged through old drawers and boxes, as if to find the source of the trouble, or consolations that the years had brought him. He had no photos of Tom, he realized, after the age of five. How did that angel-child, that cherub, become the handsome, weak-faced mess walking away now so unsurely to pack his overnight bag for a stay at the Crown, and an appointment with the rural deejay mob at BIythe?

Edward was excited. He called at the high school instead of Myra's, with the cabin of the Bedford swept out and washed. A tiny plastic vase stuck

by rubber suction on the dashboard. In it was a rose. She came out with the unloved John Dutton trying to carry her bag, and was delighted to be able to show him her delight at seeing Edward. She had to pass by the ranks of buses to get to the Bedford, and none of the schoolchildren's comments, nor even the formal smile of Mr Ponds, out supervising the supervisors of bus duty, could spoil her happiness.

Myra was down the street, but Jim was home, cleaning up for the Club. He came out of the bathroom in his singlet and working pants, and got a surprise. 'Ullo! Where are you off to?'

As if I didn't know.

She told him Blythe, and her happiness overcame all his embarrassment, which he still felt when she saw him partly uncovered. 'Well, good luck to you both.'

Like a honeymoon.

She hurled things in a case, and asked Jim what to take. Jim was looking out the window, pleased that Edward was sitting discreetly in the truck. Feeling oddly intimate, he squatted near her case and said, 'Er, where you staying, the Crown?'

'We're camping. I don't know where. I think Edward's got a spot picked out.'

Which makes it easier, for me; dunno why.

He said, 'Oh, camping. Well, you'll need a groundsheet, and a torch. I think I've got some batteries. Wait on ...'

Jim made himself very busy getting things she might need.

If Myra came in now—hope she doesn't—she'd say I was giving away half the kitchen.

Jim put things in a box, carried it to the front gate, gave Edward a wave, and went inside again to have a shave before he went down to the Club.

Fancy Edward! Makes me feel good for all that.

Margaret liked having her case in the back of a truck; it was so different from the Humbers and Volvos of her upbringing. She heard the case slide a few inches at a corner in the road; did Edward sweep

the tray? She hoped not, she would be happy if the case were grimed a little; everything she owned was so new and neat, so uninterfered-with, so much the same as the day it came out of the shop. Her possessions, she felt, expressed the manufacturers' personalities more than her own. Even her body, despite her yielding virginity to Clive, was much as it was, much as it had always been. Her clothing had always obeyed the fashions in a modest-rich sort of way. She was shapely, she was unexceptionable, she was attractive; she was yet to be, in any positive, active, expressive way. Had Cecily always been so vital and noisy? So prone to outbursts of temper? How could Cecily be so strident, so forgiving, so angry, so mild? These questions, which were self-questioning, annoyed Margaret. She felt extremely restless, and shifted on the seat, hoping Edward wouldn't notice.

Well, I saw her but I thought about my failings.

He said, 'A few more miles and we're out of the irrigation.'

And yet it's my bread and butter.

As if he wants to be twenty-one again, just starting out like I am ... Why are we going off together, and I, when I can avoid that horrible self-questioning, so happy? Perhaps he'll start to talk soon.

She began to ask about properties, and the fact that some of the families had children at high school gave her some avenues of conversation. She was surprised how much she'd absorbed in her few weeks in the area. There were gates, and channels, and box or native pine trees standing around in clumps as if waiting for the water to go away. Quite humble things had an air of expectation, of longing, of waiting for fulfilment. There were ramps rising out of yards in paddock corners, quite feminine in needing that other thing; there were stands for milk cans, and four-gallon tins set on poles, all waiting for the truck to bring or take away, all sitting up as a formal connection between the farmhouse and the world outside the fence. And there were the brave little property signs and owners' names, the little cattle grids that rattled if you went over them, as she had sometimes with Edward, the gimcrack iron sheds knocked up by elder brothers to house the schoolkids' bikes when they

got on the bus. It amused her to see that some of these had signs on them, the humour of pretending to be grown-up—'Parton Creek Hotel'; 'Myall Pub'; 'Southern Cross'—so poignant—and even one, though it was almost obliterated by a parental brush, which flaunted 'Jack shack'.

She said to Edward, 'The land that waited' and was surprised at the strength of his reaction: 'Ah, my darling'.

Now blushing, glowing and expectant, she sat straighter in the seat, thirsty for more observations, more praise if he had it ready for her, more understanding, more thoughts to crystallize to a solid thing between them.

They came to Parton; Edward drove straight through. Margaret had been hoping he'd suggest a cup or coffee or even a drink at the hotel; it seemed called for when they were going away together, but one glance at the cafes—Olympic, Wattle and Oasis, the latter boasting 'Australian civility and service'—made her glad to go on.

'How many more towns, Edward, before we get to Blythe?'

'Teddington and Boon.'

Those funny names! 'How did all these places get their names, Edward?'

'I don't know. Jack o'Boon was a famous character around these parts. I always associated the name with him, though o' course he got it from the town. He was a wagon man, used to cart the wool bales in to the station at Blythe or Parton. They never got the line to Boon, though they were after it for years. Had the Minister down to meet them and see the area, all that stuff.'

'Why was he so famous?'

'He was the best wagon man in the country. He used to build these enormous loads of bales; he'd get forty or more on. It was funny to watch him do it. He used to take hours—well, it seemed like hours to me—over the first layer. "All in the first layer," he used to say, "and in the knots. I can tie a rope like any man on earth." He could too. He struck a boggy patch just out of Turrumburrah one time, after the irrigation came; it never used to get wet there before, that's why he got caught. Oh, he

was furious. Standing there just crying with rage, he was an old man then of course, not as strong as he used to be. His wagon was way over on one side and he couldn't make the horses pull it out. So he had to unharness the nags and let someone pull it with a tractor. Well, as soon as the horses stopped pulling, the whole thing went on its side. And not a bale fell off. I can still see him standing there, mud from head to foot, rescuing his pride. "I can still tie a knot," he was telling everybody. "I can still tie a knot".'

'How did you come to know him, Edward?'

'I worked for him for a year after I left school. There wasn't much to do, the main job was to ride on ahead and scout out any boggy bits, and he'd find a way round 'em. Oh, he used to love to see a truck stuck on the road, and he'd skirt round half a mile or more with the wagon. When they got to Blythe he'd be waiting at the terminus, never saying anything, just sitting there with a big grin on his face.'

'He was a character, then.' A character.

'He was.'

He helped to shape me. He had strength and achievement by simplifying everything down to a task. His job was his pride; it was the rock he sat on to survey everything else. I went the other way; I said understanding came from being a part of everything and separated from none. It's made me lightweight.

'Did he ever marry, Edward?'

'He had a poor old thing in Boon, and a black girl in Blythe. He was kind to 'em, very kind, but I don't think they mattered to him like being master of his trade.'

There isn't any trade for a woman, though I suppose I enjoy my teaching. There wouldn't be any place for me if all men were like Jack o'Boon. He was an Everything But, like me.

'Did he talk about himself?'

'He kept a diary. He used to write in it at night time, sometimes in the day when he was sitting up on his load. I was dying to know what was in it. When he died, he didn't have any relatives; I helped 'em clean

up his place. I sneaked a look. Well, it was very ordinary; just the number of miles, the number of bales. "Cool day. Thought it was going to fine up but it didn't." Not much character in them at all. I remember one: "Snuck through big bog. Not bad for sixty-eight." That was about all.'

'What about the black girl and the woman in Boon?'

'Died long before he did, both of them. The one in Boon, I don't know if she was his wife, I doubt it. She was a bit simple; no one ever took much notice of her. But the black girl was a lively one. She took sick this time, just after he headed out for one of the stations. They got the doctor and he wanted to put her in hospital. He said she mightn't last the night out. She said no, she was staying where she was. Her sister could look after her; she'd wait for Jack. Well, he was away a fortnight; he was out near Comstock's and got hemmed in, all the billabongs flooded. She hung on till she heard his team coming up the road; they used to live just near the station. Soon's the sister said it was Jack, she just sort of eased off. Didn't say a word, just knew he was back.'

The end of a life, the only one we get. Could I ever have that dumb animal fortitude? I could, I could, if I ever felt committed!

Very moved, she said, 'I'm glad you told me that story, Edward. I feel stronger.'

Now they were coming into Teddington; it was still bright, though the sun was lowering. Edward stopped and went in somewhere to deliver a message; he seemed to know half the country. Margaret looked about her. Up the road was a large pepper tree, with the pink-clad berries dangling in clusters, and sprinkling the ground. There was just enough breeze to set the leaves swishing idly on the side wall of a store, on which was painted a Bushells' Coffee sign. Straight outside her window was the cup, still sending up a little steam despite the ageing of the paint. The signwriter had also done a sharp-nosed Turk, who gazed from his wall at a kelpie tied up to the tree. Its owner was, presumably, in the pub across the road with the sagging verandahs. A group of niners waited for the inevitable truck. Two truckies went in and a woman came out, passing the niners and the corrugated iron fence before entering the backyard.

Her legs were varicose and she was wearing slippers. Yet the moment she entered the gate the yardman's chopping redoubled, and shortly after there was smoke from the chimney as new wood went on the stove.

Perhaps she wanted to catch him? Their lives are as plain as old hessian, but I can feel the steady accretion of human effort building something recognizable. I like this place!

Margaret got out of the truck and braved the dog, which was absurdly fond when she patted it, she had to laugh. It followed her to the end of its chain when she walked away and she couldn't bear to look back. She walked right into the middle of the intersection ...

Feeling very brave.

... and stopped. To the north, it was true, the road ran up to some trees; it must be some kind of park? No, there was an ugly concrete tower, so it must be the town's water supply. But east, west and south the roads ran right out of town to the grassy distance beyond. Space, such space! And the cumulus wafting about all charged with light. Nothing blocked one but shimmering strands of wire, and droppers that didn't even set foot on the ground. Dogs barked and chooks clucked in a yard behind her. A truck rumbled along, one street back, and then Edward came out, beaming to see her so elated. She waved both arms; they seemed to float out with her fingertips.

There is no limit, no limit at all!

Oh, stay there, stay there, non-mistress mine!

But with Edward laughing she ran to the dog and gave it a pat before getting back in the truck, giving the door a hefty bang as the truckies had done before they went into the pub. Her chin up dared him to reproach her; he kept a poker face; she cracked first. 'Out in the open, Edward, I don't want a building in sight.' So the Bedford thundered down the road to Boon while she revelled in the telephone poles cut from twisted trunks, the insulators gleaming and the wires dipping down and up as they roared along. Light caught the grass everywhere, and the edges of a sheepskin flung over a fence; somewhere there would be a carcass,

or bones, but decay was out of sight and mind, with the world glowing softly.

Oh, afternoon and evening, and I'm young; and it's all indulgence with my troubles elsewhere, but what the heck? Cecily would heave a slipper at me if she knew I was having a moment's doubt while I was happiest.

It was good all the way to Boon, where Edward stopped with another of his messages, and a parcel for someone at the pub. He asked Margaret to have a drink but she preferred not to miss the last of the sun.

There was little of Boon. Two churches, one of wood, one of fibro-cement. A store, with the newspaper bills three days out of date. A couple of timber homes set back, some tiny cottages, one impressive brick dwelling almost smothered in garden. And, of course, the pub on the corner nuzzling under the pepper tree like the dog in Teddington, and the niners gleaming in the sun, right on the corner where a careless motorist might hit them.

The street was deserted except for two men talking across the tray of a utility. Margaret joined them; they weren't shy, though quiet. They were carpenters. They said they'd been supposed to start a job that day but the stuff hadn't arrived, so they'd gone fishing instead. They said they were in no hurry for the pub, so Margaret asked them about buildings in the area; would she be able to see any of the old homesteads as they drove to Blythe? We-ell, there were a few places along the road, yes, but they were mostly outbuildings, things built for workmen. There was a bit of a pub at Th' Crossin', just a shanty really. An old couple ran it; when they died it'd be delicensed for sure. But the big houses on the big properties, no. They were mostly set back by the river.

She asked if there were parties held at the homesteads, or balls, or big receptions after ... she didn't know what ... the local show?

The thinner of the two carpenters said, 'After the races sometimes. No, mostly they have the big dos in the school holidays. Lot of these fellows've got planes. Oh, school holidays're the busy time, great com-

ings and goings. I tell you, there's a big network of functions then. They sort of move up and down the country from one do to another.'

She was envious, momentarily, till she realized that many of the young men at Point Piper parties overlapped with this circuit; they were nothing so marvellous; she'd been glad to take the humble teaching job. And yet they knew who they were, and how they were supposed to live. But the thinner man was talking again.

'Course, there's always Comstock's parties.'

The other glanced up. 'Thought they were more or less a thing of the past?'

'Oh, I don't know,' meaning no.

Comstock? These men are writing off the flamboyant hopping from private airstrips as the exuberance of privileged youth, but something in Comstock brings out in them an inward urge and guilt, a gloating ... they feel he's like them, but, while they and their class are held in, he's got the money to indulge, and he creates something, if only in their imaginations, which answers their needs. What about Mr Baker, who cleaned our chimneys last year, making the most obscene remarks when he thought he was alone; Mr Johnson, the bread man, who rubs his hip on the kitchen door—what about Cecily's wilder moods ... what about my sickening habit of soul-searching!

Angrily she pulled back from the conversation, as if something dirty had entered her. The thin man glanced at his companion and said, by way of apology, 'Sorry. He's something of a legend in these parts, this fella.' She said, 'Yes. I'll go back to the truck. If you're going in, would you remind Edward that I'm here?'

But he came out while she was speaking. She was quite stony as he started the truck. Then, when they rounded the corner to drive out of Boon, they noticed a little scene. There was yet another church, a quaint wooden thing with exaggerated Gothic gables. The lights inside were quite bright, a collection of wood and orange tones against the deepening blues and dry-grass ivory of the fading day. Two old ladies were sweeping the church, and a third was tipping out flowers. Edward said,

‘Mm. That’s for the young Lewis girl. She’s getting married tomorrow. Her parents were dead against it for a long time; the boy’s a Pressy and the Lewises are micks, but anyway they came round in the end. So did he. He’s turning for her.’

So he is? All right, good. Let him. If that’s firmness, I’ll have more of it.

‘I’m learning, Edward. I’m gaining strength. Comstock doesn’t worry me ...’

Comstock?

‘... nor does Ponds. I love my parents, Edward, but they drove through this country one Christmas and all they did when they got home was complain of the heat and that the hotel didn’t have air-conditioning.’

It should have, I suppose, but after all ...

Comstock?

‘Why Comstock, Margy?’

‘Those men mentioned him. But we’re not talking about him now.’

‘You flew to Sydney with him.’

‘And Cecily. And that doesn’t make me a lesbian any more than it makes me Comstock’s latest lover. We’ll put him right out of our minds, Edward. You can tell me some more about Jack o’Boon, or yourself. I’d rather hear about you.’

But they were quiet for the next few miles. Occasionally something in Margaret seethed, or murmured, but falling darkness calmed her. Night fell majestically on the plain. Henry Parkes called Australia a land of magnificent distances, which is only politicians’ rhetoric for isolation or threadbare contact, until nature overwhelms the fretting mind with a road, a mood and a motion sustained for minutes and miles rolling out with a quiet lapping action that erodes the last hillocks of self-consciousness and leaves the mind tuned to the folding in of dark, the blues becoming black, the trembling birth of stars, the disappearance of shadow and the flurry of nightbirds. Then man and world are one; the headlights’ reach is only a feeble awareness beneath an Islamic moon

riding quietly through its arc; hopes and emotions are suspended, as if humanity held its breath till the turnabout of day and night was ended.

Edward turned off the headlights to let them appreciate the moon, but something between the two of them made him turn them on again; the probing lights pushing over the plain were a better image of their being. At last they saw a glow of lights flickering; Edward said, 'There's Blythe. They're flickering because all the trees by the Murrumbidgee are in between us.'

She said, 'Shall we go in, Edward?'

He said, 'No, we'll turn off. I know a spot.'

It seemed right to approach this city and not enter it, this sprinkling of electric fire; country towns straggle, and night can be best for meeting them first, when dark gives the lights unity, and the town is felt as relief to the plain. The tawdriness and shanties on the outskirts, the blacks rejected, the pub jokes, the pomposities of cricket and tennis players, are in the wings and imagination's players hold the stage. Thus night, gentle all-relieving night, whose only complement is fire. Edward bumped by the river, dodging red gums, found his spot and parked. In the lights of the truck he searched out branches and kindling, and sent man-high flames lighting up the dark. They pitched their two tents side by side, and Margaret made the coffee under Edward's instruction. She produced a cake she hadn't told him about, and he cleared the ground where she was to sleep, throwing sticks and stones under the flap of the tent. He helped her make up a bed. She asked him to throw more wood on the fire so it wouldn't die down till she was asleep, and he did it. Then she moved against his arm, took it, and kissed his neck as he was bending. He straightened; she kissed him again, gently, on the cheek.

And that was lovely, and enough.

I am myself, and whatever's true, I'll face it; whatever I want, I'll do it; whatever annoys me, I'll wipe away; whatever softens me, I'll love.

2 **The Love Wagon**

Margaret liked Blythe; its dignity, its way of hunching in a bend of the river, so that it was surrounded by red gums on two sides, open plains on the other two—and its quietness. Soft light played from the skylights of old stores. Old buildings sat undisturbed in narrow lanes near the river. The public buildings were large, and certain of their function. Panelling in the stock and station offices was dark, and carried photos of champion rams looking stuffy and important, like nineteenth-century Premiers. She felt that the town had never changed its purpose, and that this had always been to serve people who admitted the seniority of the great stations spread around.

But other things were more disturbing. One was that they met Comstock at the water sports display. There was this lurking sexuality about him which unnerved her; she felt that it could unseat any sense of personality she might develop, especially while Edward was her most important contact. Another was that she was bored by the water-skiing, and could barely bring herself to be patient with the art show, with its amateurish landscapes and embarrassing attempts to break into more modern idioms. She was grateful that Edward made no mention of her being an art teacher; the one time it did come out she was asked, ‘And what do you think of our local talent? We think we’ve got some jolly good painters here.’ Margaret said, ‘Yes, and quite a committee, too. I can see that by all the effort involved.’ Which was true; people had been quite clever in finding ways of dangling mobiles, and taping up the cut-out riverboats, Aborigines and wagoners to the walls in a sort of appliqué mural. And there was no doubt they’d spared no hessian in mounting every last thing entered for the show—child art, stone sculpture, bark creations and all. It was just that the people represented were only play-

ing at art, not letting its demands and revelations affect their daily lives, much less take over.

A man offered her the tray of sherries but she refused. She was standing glumly on the edge of the talkative throng when a voice said in her ear, 'There can't be much in this for you.' It was Comstock again.

Having him recognize her thoughts gave her a feeling that the weekend was already a failure, that the openness and opening-up of yesterday's drive had led almost inevitably to the peculiar problem of Comstock. She could make no contact with the part of Cecily that was involved with this man, yet he acted as if he knew her well; whenever she encountered him he seemed to be closing in on her. Why? One had to understand oneself better, or never be safe, never know what was aimed at one ...

Comstock asked her if she and Edward would like to go to the Club for a whisky. By now it was getting cold in the hall, and he said he wanted her advice about himself and Cecily, and she couldn't resist the hope that there might be opportunities for some home truths about him. So she accepted.

But there were some speeches, and they could hardly walk out of the hall just then; and when they did leave, they found that a thick fog had settled. Their headlights only intensified the murk. They followed Comstock's tail lights, with Edward peering out the side window, and Margaret shivering.

'Do you know where we're going, Edward?'

If he were a will o' the wisp, he could lead us anywhere.

Strange, I've never got the initiative, never did have; my play's always the comment.

'Margaret?'

'Edward?'

'Don't leave me, will you?'

'I don't want to be alone, Edward.'

I mean when we're at the Club, that's certain; if it's more than that, I can't say.

She didn't mention a transfer. I'll have to ask Myra.

Edward?

He said, 'Ah, I was going to ask, or rather, our friend up there wants to know, if Cecily's after a move, for next year?'

You must hear what I'm asking you.

'She's filled it in, yes, but she hasn't posted it yet.'

Go on.

'Edward, I'll be decided by my feelings at the end of the year. I won't leave it to the system. Sometimes you put in for a transfer and you don't get one.'

Hell, I'm putting this badly. I'm hurting him.

'Money's not the worry; I can get a job. And I don't want to make a career of what I'm doing. I don't think I'm cut out for it. I'll do as I please ...'

Awful!

No hope?

'... and, you see, saying that represents a step for me. You're giving me strength all the time, Edward. Which is strange because I don't think anyone else would say you were a strong man. Perhaps you're not, but you're strong enough not to let yourself get hemmed in to some simplified approach to life, like most people around Turrumburrah.'

Praise of a sort.

'And I'll promise you this, I'll give you back as much as you give me, every bit.'

Which will be good, but she'll still be giving herself room to appraise me, like she seems to appraise this Clive she's got in Sydney.

Comstock's lights swung left into a drive, and Edward followed.

But it's a house? We were going to the Club.

'Let's not go in!'

'Don't underrate me, Margy.'

Comstock's town house had been built after his wife left him and was unfeminized. There was no higgledy-piddledy. Things had been in the same place for ages. The mantelpiece and the tops of bookshelves

lacked little things. The curtains had been plainly sewn by the shop that sold him the material. The pictures were non-committal landscapes, or early engravings reprinted by newspapers.

Comstock said that the Club would be closing in less than an hour; he felt it would be better to come to the house.

Received in silence.

He poured whisky and brought out some sandwiches.

Bought ones.

He asked about Cecily and Margaret told him she'd been in a state during and after his visit; defiant, surly, and easily upset.

She told him about the unposted transfer application; it made him anxious. Edward had little to say at this stage; as the conversation went on, Comstock appeared to keep him out. Margaret led the talk back to the art show; Edward made some joke about people with calloused hands trying to paint, and Margaret was setting herself to challenge Comstock about the lack of character on his walls when he burst out, apropos of nothing, 'We were married on the same day, Edward!' There was a moment's silence, with Comstock perhaps as surprised as the others.

Sex is the basic, dynamic thing in man; everything has to line up on it, or else.

The soul is the centre, the soul and the spirit.

He won't see people for their mode of being, only the opportunities they give him.

Edward said, 'My wife's back in town. She's not game to leave, I've got her on a string.'

Margaret said, 'She hasn't gone yet?'

'No, and no sign of her going. Watchett's gone back to Sydney. Little Jennybird's at her sister's.'

Comstock said, 'Did you know she was making love with Watchett?'

He nodded: 'I saw her give his belt a little tug, it was a thing she did when she felt like bed.'

Bed.

Bed.

How many's he got?

We packed up the camp.

It'll be clammy in the fog.

I don't want to sleep in this house.

Let him wriggle a bit. 'It's a two-bedroom house unfortunately. I didn't bargain on this sort of situation when I had it built. You must come out to Jingellic, I could accommodate a football team out there.'

'When did you last see your wife, John?'

'Oh, God knows, ages.'

Now the rivalry was in the open. Edward said he'd been to Jingellic with Jack o'Boon, and Comstock affected to remember a small boy perched on the load. But Edward claimed to remember some charcoal drawings on the wool bales which Jack had ordered him to rub out because they were filthy. They might have gone on and on, but Margaret said, 'Can't you two do better than this?'

Comstock said, 'What shall we do?'

Edward said, as if acting in a drawing room comedy, 'Anybody for cards?' and Comstock got a pack from a drawer.

Not that any of us had the slightest wish ...

They cut for the deal and Comstock drew a low spade. Margaret got the ten of diamonds. Edward drew the queen of hearts; he beamed and said ...

Still trying to annoy that bloody Comstock.

'Well, that's appropriate.'

Not much better than Clive.

Comstock said, 'The balls and all confidence of a young man. Life's taught you nothing, Edward.'

Edward said, 'Most people repeat themselves. What about you?'

He said, 'I need a fresh start with someone unspoilt.' His eyes fell on Margaret.

He never had less chance in his life.

They kept sparring. Margaret was furious. She got up without a word to get her bag from Edward's truck. She couldn't find the switch for the outside light and was walking up the drive by the light from the hall when the door swung closed. She had a moment of fear; she felt clammy. She was cold, and the fog was everywhere. A street light glowed in the fog, increasing her awareness of herself as solitary, impotent, lost, unsure. She gathered herself together and forced herself to stride, not scramble, to the house. She pummelled on the wall. Comstock opened the door. As if talking to a servant, or a slave, she ordered, 'Get my bag,' and went in. She stayed in the hall, away from Edward; she took her case from Comstock and dropped it noisily in the doorway of a bedroom. Comstock said, 'That's mine, my dear,' and the gloating she heard in the depths of his voice gave her a hatred of anything in the human personality that studied another's responses and altered tactics accordingly.

But I do it to Clive.

So she hated herself too. Edward called out, 'Let's all sleep in here,' and she didn't even look at him. Very funny; was that the best he could do? She told Comstock, 'I'll have your bed, you can be your own guest tonight.'

His bed, urrk; but I wasn't going to back down, whatever.

He said, 'Mind if I get my things?' But she was in the doorway, and it was obvious he enjoyed the contact as he moved past, his coat touching her breast. She took an abrupt step; she could now see Edward with his head in his hands, some of the cards still on his lap; it occurred to her that of the two of them, she'd rather, at that moment, have Comstock.

What a choice.

How does he undercut me? I keep feeling his way might have some hope in it and my way none. I've got to hurt Jenny like she did me.

So Johnny's in the guest room. But I've stirred her; Cecily was hard at first. But this one's sick-looking when I approach her; she hasn't got the fight that Cecily's got; it makes her harder to get at. Strange little rich girl. What's she doing out here?

Margaret lay shivering in bed; it was as if the fog were inside too, or there were no walls. There was a footstep at her door. Thinking it was Comstock, she said fiercely, 'No!' But it was Edward; he said, 'He wouldn't have a hot water bottle; I thought of this. It's a lemonade bottle; I put hot water in it. It's not leaking.'

Christ, he means well, and I need something.

So she gave a terse 'All right' and he brought it over. He said, 'Jack o'Boon used to have a couple of bricks and heat them in the fire, then put them in his blankets.'

It was such a pathetic attempt to get back their rapport that she felt sorry for him.

Am I fastening on his weakness? Is he trying to treat me like that poor mad Johnny who wanted to kill the snake? If he is, he's ruining himself because I'm his only way out.

She said, 'Goodnight, Edward,' with a trace of fondness in a voice firmer than he'd heard her use before.

First term ended. Margaret decided, almost perversely, that she would spend the holiday in Turrumburrah. Her mother's letter showed concern ... no doubt it was an adventure to be far away in a pioneering town, but they'd been expecting her ... and Clive was annoyed. He said he couldn't make head or tail of her reasons and so—permission or no—he was coming down to see her.

She could scarcely have said why she stayed; it wasn't for Edward, though she had forgiven him the fiasco at Blythe. Comstock unnerved her too, and she was aware that Edward's battle was hers as well. Their relationship was not so much a courtship as a mutual working out of a problem.

Jim was happy to see more of her in the house, but Myra, who read little, tried to fill her boarder's days; there was the CWA cake show, the Red Cross flower show, card afternoons, golf ... Margaret sometimes went, if she could come home by mid-afternoon and read till Edward finished working.

The country style wasn't so hard to fit into, there was no disturbing focus on you if you observed the rituals of comparing casseroles and holding post-mortems on bridge games; she could hardly fail to see, however, that interest was rising in the reason for Jenny Watchett remaining in town. And as the holiday wore on, there was a distinct change; people began making references to Edward, and to old Dawson; their names were held near her like a bait.

Which Edward was delighted to hear. 'Haha! The potion's working! The brew bubbles! We'll give them a little bit more to think about.' There were nights when he got Margaret to drive the truck down the lane behind old Dawson's property. At the back gate he got out, took his bicycle from the tray and pedalled furiously towards the house. Margaret would drive around the side roads and meet him at the front gate, or the bridge over the little canal at the western side. Edward's spooking equipment included a small tin of kerosene, rags, candles and matches. Sometimes he would set alight old piles of rubbish, of which there were many around Dawson's farm; on other nights he would leave a burning candle and some rags on the verandah, as if for a miscued attempt at arson. When people began to comment on the mysterious fires and the lights burning in the night, he was delighted.

Fools! But we haven't got Jenny yet!

It was childish but it was rather thrilling too. I mean we weren't doing any harm, but then if people found out, they'd think Edward really was mad. When he left me and raced away into the dark on his bike I used to be terrified that someone would stop me. What on earth would I say? Sometimes I turned off the headlights but those little side roads were rough and there were some horrible muddy holes; I thought I was going to get bogged one night. It was just an elaborate joke to me, because all he talked about was what people were saying, all the gossip he was picking up. He was incredibly ingenious in reminding people how superstitious old Dawson had been. 'Perhaps there were reasons,' he'd tell them, with melodramatic emphasis. It was screamingly funny; I could hardly keep a straight face.

Then Jenny came round to Edward's.

And I was there that night, cooking tea.

The trap, she is sprung!

'Welcome, Jennybird!'

'Are you lighting all those fires?'

'Arson is a serious crime. Just as bad as destroying wills.'

'It's got to be you. No one else'd go on with all that rot.'

'Prove it.'

She said, 'Where's the will he revised? Do you know?'

He said, 'It might be in the house. I do hope the old place doesn't burn down. Though, of course, you'd do well out of the insurance. I always thought your father put a false value on that place.'

I thought she looked dangerously angry; I kept back out of the way. At least it wasn't like the cemetery, she didn't fly off at me.

'But, then again, the insurance on the house would go into the estate, wouldn't it? We'd be on equal terms again, wouldn't we? Or is your sister in it too; I forget; it's so long ago.'

This is crueller than the Edward I know.

Jenny's look was purest hatred.

But she at least can't wound me; of all the world, there's none so powerless as she, now. After twenty-two years I'm going to even the scores and heal myself.

Edward went on, 'Have at thee now, foul fiend!' and roared laughing. Jenny stood heavily, trying to think of a move. She looked briefly at Margaret, but her glance seemed to go past. Then she focussed: 'You'll get no satisfaction out of him. Even if he got you pregnant, it'd turn out weak—by example.'

But Edward's still smiling, and it's him she wants to hurt.

There was an ugly silence, with Jenny trying to gather herself for another lunge.

You don't know where it i-is; ahaha! Ahoohoo!

Why don't you go back to Sydney! Ahaha!

Thank heaven she left. That raven's voice; what did he ever see in her. No, she'd have been sexually confident; he wouldn't have known his failings then. Watchett must be quite a man to cope with her.

They barely spoke till tea was on the table, then Margaret mentioned that Clive was coming down; did Edward mind? Edward feigned indifference, said he'd be happy to meet the young man who would, of course, be pleased to see the advanced and unimpressive physique of her rural companion.

Covering up, of course; but it's not a big town, I can hardly help them seeing each other.

Besides, Edward was happy with the way his baiting of Jenny was going. Sometimes he drove flamboyantly past her sister's house, wishing it were summer, there'd be more dust, before parking at the end of old Dawson's drive. Once, with Margaret, he was strolling along the western boundary fence, carrying a shovel, and pointing ostentatiously at the windbreak trees when the sister's Holden bore down upon them. It slewed off the road straight at them. Edward presented his spade to the window, which Jenny was winding down. 'Hail to thee,' he said 'nightingale that wert!'

She spat.

He swung his spade down as if scooping in the spittle, and raised it with a solemnity that would have done justice to the host; then,

'Beeeeeetch! Feeeeeeeeeltha beeeetch!'

She said, 'We'll catch you on the property; just let's catch you on the property, and look out!'

He said, 'Sapristi! Poor old weatherboard house, dry these fifty years, and who knows what hidden behind its walls. An old What-shit fucking who knows who in Sydney?'

She said, 'There's more men in the family than him. And dogs. Dogs that could tear you apart.'

She went to drive off, but the Holden wheels spun on wet grass till she controlled herself enough to stop over-revving the engine.

Phew! If that's not malevolence, I've never seen it.

‘Does she scare you, Margaret?’

‘No, but she amazes me. You’re sure you’re not in any danger?’

‘Only of toppling too far the other way.’

Meaning what?

And forgetting that my foolishness was as much a matter of loving my country as of loving her.

Margaret and Myra were at a cake show. The School of Arts was partly filled with display racks fenced with chicken wire, behind which were tiers of sponges, seed cakes, fruit cakes, nut loaves, Swiss rolls, lamingtons, trays of biscuits, scones ...

And then Clive walked in, a day earlier than expected.

There was to be a dance that night, and as the women cleared away the cake display, another group of workers were spreading the wax for polishing the floor. A group of boys were hauling like Roman slaves on a box of bricks wrapped in an old piece of satin. Other children were screaming and sliding before and after the polishing crew.

Clive was still tired from the drive, though he’d rested at Parton. He said, ‘Hi! Long way down here. I thought it was the end of the earth by the time I got to that last place, whatever it’s called.’

‘Feel like going to this dance tonight?’

Clive said, ‘Whew! Er, I might. Just rest up a bit first and I might be a starter.’

She said, ‘We can have tea at Edward’s, and you can have a shower. He says you can stay there, but I think we’ll put you at Myra’s.’

Like Edward says, we might as well get the brew bubbling.

Margaret introduced Clive to Myra, and they left.

So that’s the boy. Plain, straightforward, sensible, reliable, well-educated, goodlooking too, really. Well, after Jim. But he couldn’t lead Margy to anything new she wanted; he’d just take her for granted. Pity, pity; she’ll probably overrate Edward now. Silly Edward; I miss him coming round to talk, like he used to.

Whereas Edward was jovial and welcoming ...

But made jokes about his bachelor kitchen.

... and repeated the offer of a bed. Then he got out a road map and Clive had to indicate the route he'd taken, and answer innumerable questions about things along the way.

He's a dangerous bastard, Edward.

Then he asked Clive if his firm had any clients in the Riverina. There were two or three, and their houses were discussed in detail.

He's building Clive up to his own exact estimation of himself.

He's making me see him, exactly as he is. It's a strangely objective performance.

Clive asked Edward what schooling he'd had ... He would.

... and Edward told him that most of what he knew had been picked up from reading. Clive nodded approvingly. Then Edward said, 'And my reading, like my thinking, is very much an applied thing, a clothing. I'm basically a man of the soil. I work with it, I'm attached to it. It's all over me at the end of the day. I come home, I have a shower, I feel I've let go my real identity.'

Who's he sending up? Wily old bugger's up to something; he's not posing for nothing.

'Whereas I,' said Clive with total lack of self-consciousness, 'am an urban man through and through. As far as I'm concerned, the bush here, the outback ...'

Oh, shit! Atta boy!

'... is just a great big place that dilutes civilization. In a city, it's concentrated; in a city, with all it offers, a complex person can be satisfied in all his aspects.'

Well, he did invite himself.

'Well,' said Edward, 'yes, but in a city you're anonymous; out here, if you're interested in personalities, you can really get to know what a person's like, know them through and through.'

Clive said, 'Yes, if you want to observe people. But there's a limit to the use of that! I prefer the chance to be something. Don't you, Marg?'

Be what? Bored stiff?

Edward said, 'Take my wife, for example.'

'I thought you said you were a bachelor?'

'My ex-wife, I should have said. She'll still be in the town, because of me, I might tell you. Her new husband's in Sydney.' He chuckled.

Clive wrinkled up his nose. 'What are you getting at?'

So Edward told him exactly what he and Margaret had been doing.

Again, this strange objectivity; he's telling him we've been very peculiar, and making him reach down for reasons, which Clive doesn't like doing.

'Well, that's a weird bloody pastime, I must say!'

'Guess why?'

'I haven't the faintest! This will, anyway. Have you got it? Do you know where it is? What's the idea?'

'It's in the binding of old Dawson's family Bible. The last place Jenny'll go looking for it.' And he gave a wide, impish smile.

Edward, you strange, funny villain, you never told me that!

Margaret said, 'Yes Edward, just what are you up to?'

'I was profoundly let down, and I'm jacking myself up again. But let's get some tea. Perhaps Clive would like a beer?'

Jenny's forceful, goes through life taking what she wants, like a child snatching flowers. She's a grown-up child in fact. Absolutely demanding; I don't care to remember my nights in bed with her. Unless a man's sexuality has menace in it—Watchett's has—he's no good to her. I wanted to glow with love, shimmer and shine like those ancient paintings of the apostles. She was my test. I said, youthful I, that my philosophy had to be able to take in everything in heaven and earth. Man of the soil indeed! Animals are of the soil and I'm not a carnal thing. Man of the soil! This Clive's a square-headed fellow, decent but dull. Marg'll throw him off even if she leaves me. I think she's going to be all right, this time next year she'll be on her feet, she'll know who she is and what she can do. If I'm only a stage, I'm proud to be it.

Edward said with a great big smile, 'I met Jim in the street. He's just so happy you haven't gone away. I think he'll follow you to Sydney.'

What was all that about?

‘Edward?’

But he was only smiling, smiling and opening the door of the fridge.

The arrangement was that they would go to the dance with Cecily. When she arrived, she had John Dutton in tow; she said in a penetrating *sotto voce* to Margaret, ‘At least he’s a pair of pants, which are going to stay firmly on.’

The hall was brightly lit. Clive stared frankly at the people round him, and their equally curious glances made Margaret uncomfortable about her part in Edward’s haunting; she suspected that everyone knew exactly what was going on, and then she didn’t, and the uncertainty about where she stood was unnerving. After half an hour or so she said to Cecily, ‘Let’s go for a drive. You and Dut come too, I don’t want to be alone in a car with Clive just now.’

They drove out the Parton road to Tom Bowler’s, then turned over the Tuckarimbah canal. Clive was going to park in the shade of a willow, but Margaret said, ‘No, on the bridge.’ It was a warm night, for autumn, and there was a moon. Clive and Cecily smoked, and John Dutton brought out a half-bottle of whisky. Margaret opened the window and threw the cork in the canal. ‘You’ll have to drink it now, John.’ ‘Right,’ he said, ‘who’s going to help me?’ So they passed the bottle round, wiping the top with the backs of their hands. John said, ‘Cecily’s getting high!’ She shouted, ‘I’m bloody not,’ and took a gulp; he made a show of wresting it from her, but put a hand on her breast; she pushed it away and took another gulp. ‘Quit it up or I’ll kick you in the balls!’

John was stupefied, Clive was amused. ‘That’s the way to tell someone something! Hey, let’s do something mad. Let’s go for a swim or something.’ Cecily said, ‘Okay, you go first. That water looks like a brass monkey job to me.’ Clive said, ‘Christ, you’ve got a thing about balls. I’d say you had balls on the brain if it weren’t anatomically impossible.’

Nervous Dutton put in, ‘That’s what Comstock does to you.’

Clive got annoyed. ‘Comstock. Comstock. And Edward. I’m sick of these characters. They might as well be the men in the moon as far as I’m concerned. I’ve driven four hundred and fifty miles to see ... and being here’s just like Margaret’s letters; there’s this Comstock and this Edward between us. Look it’s really crapping me off, you know?’

Margaret took a sip of the whisky ...

Make him wait.

... and snapped at him, ‘They’re not snippets of cardboard like the people in the office you hand your papers to. They’re quite a handful, believe me. Cecily and I are a bit out of our depth, I suppose; it wouldn’t hurt you if you experienced that, sometime.’

Snap.

Clive said, ‘Okay, we’re tired and we’ve had some whisky; do we have to fight? Where’s a restaurant; I mean, where’s somewhere we can go?’

The moon shone on the mini-waves of irrigation water, willows held the clay banks together. A cow moored, a windmill creaked. Clumps of trees were unpromising murks in the paddocks ahead of them. A car turned into a lane half a mile ahead. John burst out, ‘This is terrifying, this is a real funeral. I hate this place. I tell you, I put my application in. I don’t know how I’ll last the year out.’ Clive said, ‘That’s what I’d feel. What the bloody hell are you doing here anyway, you two?’

Cecily passed the bottle to the front seat: ‘What’re we doing here, Marg?’

‘Filling in time, Thistle. Watching a year tick away.’

‘How many years?’ They all drank some more. Clive turned on the car radio. They tried up and down the dial but reception faded on most stations. 2BL was steadiest, and they were broadcasting the dance they’d left. Clive cried, ‘Oh no, how corny can you get? Just how corny can human beings be?’ Drunken, giggling or inarticulate people were sending cheerios to various Madges, Marges, Dereks, Stewarts and Robyns in other towns or at other dances; it was the universal hope that the other was ‘having a great time tonight, like we are here’. All four of them burst out laughing, or snorting. Margaret said, ‘And poor Tom Dawson wants

to join that station. My God. Clive, if you want to get someone a job and do a bit of good, do something for Tom. He's a sensitive boy ... shut up, Thistle ... and he can, er, what can he do?'

The whisky changed hands again. 'He can write a bit, he's on the Courier. He's interested in interior decoration, he's ... he's ...'

Clive said, 'Who is this guy? Why do we have to look after him?'

Well, I had to say it.

'He's Edward's son.'

Clive couldn't stand it. 'Oh no! Not Comstock's? Or has he got a few bastards ... sorry ... a few I've got to help too?'

Cecily said, 'You needn't apologize, you might be right. And if it's driving you mad, what do you think it's like for us? We're stuck here.'

'You're not stuck, either of you. Pack your bloody bags and come back to Sydney with me. You too, John, if it's getting you the same way.'

John said, 'Is it ever!' but then there was a pause.

Why not? It wouldn't be committing myself to Clive.

The car came out of the farm drive half a mile ahead and turned their way. The oncoming headlights lit them up with increasing cruelty. For a moment the cabin was filled with harsh light and harsher shadow. Weak John Dutton tried to joke, 'It's the secret police,' and each saw the frustration on the other faces; then the car stopped alongside and the driver asked, in a farmer's kindly moan, 'Are yer all right?' Cecily said, 'No! I'm getting the bloody horrors! If something doesn't happen, I'll die.' The farmer pushed his big jaw and bowling club hat through his window. 'What's wrong, lady? You in need of help?' Cecily shrieked and passed the bottle at him: 'Have a whisky, it deadens the pain. If you aren't dead already!' The man said, 'I'll let you keep that, if you haven't had enough already. You got the jim-jams, lady,' and he drove off. Cecily roared, 'Fuck off, you old fool!' and then broke out laughing. 'Jim-jams! You're dead right, boy, that's what I've got. The jim-jams.' They all said it; it eased the tension a little. John said, 'There's a pub in Parton goes pretty well all night ...' Cecily said, 'Who cares? They'd all be sloshed

and playing pocket billiards or picking football teams. Come back to the flat.'

Margaret said, 'Wait on,' and finished the whisky. She flung the bottle in the water. It came to the surface in a swirl of bubbles on the downstream side of the bridge. Cecily said, 'Well, that's an omen, it's still floating. We'll survive, I suppose, whether we want to or not.'

I felt sorry for the bottle; discarded, cold, bobbing along on a useless journey. I felt sorry for Clive. I squeezed his hand; I made up my mind to be nice to him. As we drove back to town I stared glumly at the country; it needed Edward to bring it to life, and he needed me, or someone, and he was all hung up on half a dozen things; prospects were pretty bleak, I thought.

Myra asked Clive, 'Where are you young things off to, today?' Her voice was tender.

Because he'll be stunned and he won't know why it's gone wrong. He'll think it's some misunderstanding that a bit of talk'll fix up. Marg's worked him out too well; she's grown up a lot.

The two couples were going for a picnic. They wanted to know a good place to go, and Jim started to direct them to the Blue Lagoon, where his mill was logging: 'You go down to Tilga. You bear left at the hall, then Dooley's got a bit of a orchard there, both sides of the road; you take the next turn off right; there's a stump at the corner and a coupla old tyres lyin' around ...'

Myra said, 'They'll never find that, Jim, can't you tell them ...'

Margaret said, 'You and Myra come, Jim. Come on, we'd all like it.'

I could see Clive wasn't keen, but I was going to swamp that, thanks very much.

Jim had to be persuaded. 'Aw, you don't want me hangin' round, er, someone like me ...'

Dear, sweet Jim! He couldn't bring himself to say old!

'You go with 'em, Myra. I gotta fix the mower, carby's playin' up.'

But they pressed him and the six set off in Jim's big Chev.

Man feels like a king today!

Jim! Like a girl. I'm excited. So much to get ready.

But Jim had said, 'No, just chuck in some bread and butter, coupla plates and knives, a frypan. I'll catch some fish; that'll be our dinner. Eh?'

His steady pride and simple pleasure made Myra happy, and they were the focus the other four needed. Jim swirled down to Tilga, smiling over his shoulder when Myra told him not to go so fast. But he drove slowly once they got to the red gum forests, put an arm out the window and squinted under his hat at the familiar trees. Every hundred yards or so he pointed into the bush and made some remark.

He's got good muscles, and rolls his shirtsleeves like a dandy, my Jim!

At one stage they went for a walk, and Jim took hold of a sapling, perhaps twelve feet long, but bent to the ground. 'Poor little fella's losin' out, too many big boys round him.' Clive asked what he meant, but Jim found it hard to articulate. 'Big fellas've got a stranglehold on the ground; little fellas just die off. Like, they're all competing ...'

There was a sadness about nature he wanted to express, but Clive cut in. 'How many trees like that one there would you use for the frame of a house?'

This Clive bloke, he's out of my class, but he doesn't impress me much. I reckon Edward's better; I'd be better myself!

Jim said, 'That's a good question, now let's see. You'd get about eight thousand super feet there to that first branch; you'd get another cut after that, though usually they're not much good once they've branched ...'

Cecily had been letting John put his arm around her, but she drew away for a moment; she murmured to Margaret, 'I got a funny letter from Comstock. If Ponds doesn't send us on Rupe Larkin's trip, we'll have to go up and see.'

Me? They're going next Friday. I'd love the drive ... but what's gone wrong with him?

Cecily answered her glance by lowering her eyes and going back to John. She put her arm around him.

With contrition; as if to protect him from herself.

They drove where the mill was logging. The trees were pale shades of grey and blue; there were stands of reasonably erect ones, but near the watercourse they leaned out to cast their broken shade. They were cumbersome, irregular things, with great quantities of space between them and in their foliage, and a mess of bark and fallen leaves on the ground. The trunks were like misshapen sculptures, and they creaked when the wind blew, and there was a whispering in the air, above the picnic party. Clive said, 'Well, I must admit the place has got something,' but Margaret said, 'Did you bring Myra down here when you were first married, Jim?'

Well, it was that sort of day.

I wish Myra could read me like that; maybe she can, and doesn't think it's much.

After the fight. Did I tell her that? I don't remember ...

Jim said, 'Well, I did once. Well, actually it was Myra who brought me. I was a bit of a mess. You tell her, love.'

Myra said, 'No, you tell 'em, it's your story.'

Jim patted a horizontal branch. 'It was during the war. They hadn't posted me away then. There was this big army camp just out of Tilga. Still a few of 'em there, I'll show you on the way home. Anyhow, they had a lot of these concerts and things during the war, sort of fund-raising shows. One night they had this boxing. A lot of locals and a few blokes from the camp. They matched me with this Slugger Lewis, the name didn't worry me, we mostly gave ourselves fancy names, made us sound like bigtime pros.'

Myra put in, 'Jim was the Giantkiller; they had it on the posters!' And she drew back, watching the story for more opportunities. Jim said, 'Oh, yes, well, yeah. Well, you know Bert Gilbert in the post office? He was Barbed-wire Bertie. That's what he called himself; it never took on.'

What strange conceptions they had of themselves. What would you do if you had to put a name to yourself? For that matter, why should you think the name can change you, scare opponents? Do I have tokens like this, without knowing it?

‘Well, cut a long story short, this Slugger Lewis was the same weight as me but he really was a professional. He was the ex-lightweight champion of Queensland! He’d come up through the railways boxing tourneys and, believe me, there’s some tough boys get in there.’

The group focussed on him; he spoke more to the branch than anything else: ‘Yeah, well, I didn’t last long.’

Myra took over. ‘They had no right to match Jim with that man! He was a highly trained professional boxer; Jim was just in it because he liked a bit of that sort of thing.’ She made it seem modest, somehow more proper. ‘This Lewis, he was a real killer. He made a rush at Jim while he was still stepping back from shaking hands; he got the first blow in and it stunned Jim. Lewis just had the advantage after that, that’s all there was to it!’

Good on you, love, but I should have checked up who he was. I was too cocky, that’s all. I thought I could do him whoever he was.

Jim finished. ‘There wasn’t much more to it at all. He had me down about four times the first minute. I couldn’t see where they were coming from. He’d hit me and I’d hardly have time to cover up and he’d hit me somewhere else. I reckon it would be like gettin’ attacked by a shark. Anyhow, it was a t.k.o. in the first round. Myra brought me down here the next day and sort of looked after me. Didn’t you, love?’

Myra looked confident, composed; wide mouth well set, like a squaw. Something in her life had been justified.

Didn’t Comstock love her once, and she didn’t go on with it?

She said, ‘I told Jim it didn’t matter, he didn’t have to win fights, he didn’t have to prove anything to me.’

But he wasn’t the same man who’d swept the singer in his arms, was he?

Then she said, 'And, of course, our little boy got killed, run over by a truck.'

Jim said hastily, 'Followed me down to the mill; we were living in Tilga then. I didn't know he was there.'

Margaret said, 'It wasn't ... you ... that ...?'

Trembling from the shock.

But Jim said, 'No, no, no. One of the Quinlan boys. Wasn't his fault. Come and I'll show you where we're cutting just now.'

Chastened by years, tragedy and failure, the group went back to the Chev. Jim took an appraising look at the back tyre, gave it a kick, and said, 'It's okay. Pile in.'

What was okay? What did he mean? Jim only alludes to things, he can't say them.

But Margaret stopped Cecily. She said, 'You're always talking about drugs and abortion. You get all bound up with social questions.' Cecily said, 'What's eating you?' And Clive put in, 'What on earth made you bring up those things?'

Because I was ignoring him, and he was taking Jim too lightly.

She said, not knowing what would come out, 'Those things haven't happened to you yet. Most of them never will.' Clive said, 'So what?' and she attacked him. 'You too, Clive, you've got a mind like the front page of a newspaper. Don't you realize? You could take away all the sensational things, and life'd still be too big for us?'

All trembling because there's never any answers, only feelings and hurt.

Jim said, 'Oh gee, Margaret, I shouldn't have told you about all that, I didn't mean to upset you. Here, you get in the front between Myra and me and I'll show you the part where I'm working. I'll show you Claudy Bullock's tent; it got blown away in a gale one night; there's still about half of it left, in a tree just up here.'

So I got in between them, and it was a reassurance. I drew something from both of them; from Jim, the knowledge that you could keep cutting away the battered bits of yourself, and do it endlessly, and still

have something worthwhile; from Myra, the feeling—and she had a flood to give—that so long as you never closed off on your man, your emotions wouldn't go sour, wouldn't dry up, and this would mean sacrifices, but you'd always be healthy. Well, I'd already closed off on Clive, and I hadn't opened up to Edward, much as I liked him. So there we were, as you might say, pretty well back at square one. But conscious this time, aware and knowing about what happened to people.

'Show me this tent, Jim.'

Which he did, and set them roaring with laughter when he told them about Claudy rescuing his clothes by the light of a kerosene lantern and a family of blacks, 'all stung, all full as boots,' getting scared half to death by the sight of this naked white figure striding about the bush with a light, howling curses at the wind and the things sticking into his feet.

That's my Jim; he made the day sad, he'll bring it up again.

They drove into a clearing. The ground was in a mess, with deep tracks cut by bulldozers, and the tops of trees lying around, too green to burn. It seemed to Margaret that the sombre red timber cried out to be polished, used, made to resonate with human life instead of standing aloof. 'Could you carve it, Jim, or use it for sculpture?' Jim said, 'Oh, it'd crack as it dried out; you'd have to have it kiln-dried first. But, gee, it'd be hard. Oh, you could try. I'll get you some if you want to have a go.' But it was only a thought, and they drove to a wide stretch of the Murray with a backwater leading off it. 'They call that the anabranche,' said Jim, showing off. 'It's quite a big stream, some seasons. Good spot for fish. Claudy's got a boat tucked away up there. If he hasn't moved it.'

The boat was found, and Jim told them all to get in. With his black vest, and hat, he sat in the bows and rowed in almost silence, scarcely making a ripple, while Margaret and then Clive trailed spinners in the muddy water. It seemed that nothing would want to live there, or see the bait if it did, but soon there was a flurry and a flash of red and they had a fish to haul aboard. 'Beauty,' said Jim, while the rest chattered in excitement. 'Not too much noise now; they hear yuh, yuh know. Bitta shoosh there, Myra,' though it was Cecily and Margaret who were mak-

ing most of the noise, 'and we'll get another.' After a few minutes they had a second and a third, Murray cods this time, which Jim found pleasing: 'Just the right size, big enough to make 'em worthwhile cleaning, not so big they'd be coarse. We're doing all right! You have a go, John; see how you get on. But John caught a snag, and the old line broke while they were trying to free it. So they made a fire, and Jim cleaned the fish while Myra spread out everything for lunch. The twigs and ants were a nuisance, but they found logs or stumps to sit on, and the smell of the burning leaves was pungent, burning some record or realization of the moment into their memories. The fish, still flapping about until Jim had finished with them, disturbed the two girls, but Myra put butter and herbs in the pan and set them busy getting twigs for the sort of fire she wanted. Clive stood apart, but not impervious to the mood of the group, and John Dutton was quickly made happy; this was the sort of thing to write home about, it made country life worthwhile, or so he'd tell his friends when he got back to Sydney.

And I kept getting smoke in my eyes; wherever I sat, the wind seemed to change. But it was a good excuse. I could dab away till I looked a fright, and blame it on the fire.

Never thought she'd be moved by me.

Growing up fast. She understands me now. We'll talk a lot more; now that winter's on the way, there'll be lots of chances, before Jim gets home from work, or the club, and while we're washing up.

And it was partly the smoke, anyway; it wafted as if it had something to express, some flickering, dimly perceived thing it couldn't substantiate but knew it would have to obey. There was more than wind in human life, of course, but that would have to be faced as it came. I wanted Edward there, or, since his presence would have spoiled things just then, I wanted Edward alone.

But Edward was a little prickly when he heard that Margaret and Cecily were going on the excursion to Jingellic. 'It's on a Friday,' he said, 'does that mean you'll stay the whole weekend?' She explained that it was an

excursion, they were in charge, they had to travel both ways with the students, and he calmed a little. 'You didn't bring Clive back again?'

'No, it was a pretty ordinary weekend.'

'A good steady lad.'

Jealous Edward, trying to find out. I gave him a good, noncommittal 'Yes'.

Comstock was a surprise. He was at the gate to meet them. He led the bus into Jingellic with his Mercedes. He had a copper boiling water, and barbecue fires under sheets of iron. He was pleasant and distant with Cecily and Margaret, as if they were strangers. He was impeccable with the students, and even with Rupe Larkin, who could be obsessive when his hobbies and his teaching combined. One girl asked him if he minded her taking photos of his house ...

Anne Prescott, the sort of girl I thought he'd snatch at.

... he said he'd be honoured; and would she mind going into the kitchen and searching for the barbecue sauce? He murmured vaguely, 'I was never master of the kitchen and a great many things have been unsettled since Mrs Carter left'; there was a strange humility about him.

Then he called them all into his woolshed and drew on a tally board with chalk. He showed them where they were, and how the country had some unusual rocky outcrops, and how to get there. He told them about the river, how it could flood, and how he'd been forced to take his motorboat sixty miles downstream to get supplies from Blythe: 'We were flooded in for nearly four months, that time.' His smile was charming. A boy asked him, 'But didn't you bang into snags, or logs, or something?' Comstock said, 'Well, you can usually judge by the eddies, there's some sort of disturbance beforehand, that's how you can tell,' and he poured on Cecily a look of pain and forgiveness ...

Which amazed me! That iron man, that lustful, pressing, pursuing ...

... before going on to say: 'Oh, and I've had a few clues from old river men. There's still an old chart in the little shed on my jetty; I had it framed. It's something of a rarity, of course. And it's all a vanished era now. I can always get out by plane; the strip's on the highest part of my property.'

But when the students traipsed after Rupe with their picks and sample bags, he asked the girls to take a short flight with him. The plane was out of its shed, the wheels not even chocked. They were quickly aloft. He told them he'd show them the boundaries of his property; he flew very low, nodding occasionally as if pleased that something was as it should be, though what might have happened to disturb things was never made clear; it was more than simple reassurance; it was a sort of leavetaking, or so it seemed to the girls, who glanced at each other several times; there was something oddly caressing about Comstock's way of making the plane waver and curve about his boundaries. Then he took them higher, and they could see the Murrumbidgee running across the landscape, flanked by trees. It was a wandering, sinuous feature, a hairy belt on the body of the plain, with billabongs, feeder creeks and flood branches decorating the river's line. Then they rose higher, and Margaret began to wonder where exactly Jingellic was; the furthest horizon seemed no more distant, but their angle to it made them more remote; then Comstock made their climb steeper; he said, 'Have you ever been in a stall turn?'

No, but I didn't like that 'stall'; it almost gave me heart failure to hear a plane's engine cut out when I was on the ground, let alone aaaaaaaahhh!

The plane began to slice sideways through the air. Their feet were at the sky and the landscape about their ears. The horizon broke into pieces, which ran criss-cross of each other, refusing to join together. If the engine was still going, the girls weren't aware of it. They felt sick, and utterly disoriented, then the world began to right itself; a moment later and they were in level flight again. Comstock said, 'I did dozens of them. But after a while the effect wears off, it's no use any more.'

What on earth was wrong with him?

He landed, but not until he'd flown normally for a while, to calm them. And he seemed balanced enough, but when the students were questioning him about the rural crisis he said he was thinking of selling up; he'd had some good offers, he didn't see how a man could knock them back. He was asked what he'd do—go and live in Blythe? No, he said, there was no future in that. If he didn't become an alcoholic, they'd probably put him in one of these folk museums; they were talking of starting one in Blythe.

He was pleasant, and distant again to Margaret and Cecily, said he'd write, or call; hoped he hadn't scared them too much, but he had to communicate with someone; he was sure they'd understand.

My God! And do you know, I actually wanted him to; I had to know what was on. That man was disturbed. Cecily wasn't saying much, but I knew she'd talk her head off next time we had a bottle together. I used to hate him so much, and assume he couldn't be broken.

Her affair with Clive ended by letter, and wearily at that. He appeared to regard her life in Turrumburrah as an extended holiday; he supposed she'd be back to reality one day. He finished with:

If you're in Sydney, give me a ring. We can always pop in to Roberto's and do over the Cross again. I'm pretty tired out tonight. I think I'll just say thanks a lot and leave it there.

As ever, Clive

To which she replied:

It's hard to know where the rot set in. Myra says I outgrew you, but I don't know about that. When people have got a lot of developing left to do some growing apart is inevitable. I think the die was cast the moment I left Sydney, though we didn't say it to each other then ...

But a week later she got another letter, from Comstock, and it came from Sydney.

My dear Margaret,

I think this will surprise you, but I have to write to someone and I haven't got the heart to face Cecily, even on paper, though I will in the next few

days. I've sold Jingellic. I'm up here getting the whole thing finalized. You've no idea how much red tape is attached to land transactions. I've also sold the plane, which was much simpler. The minute I touched down a chap made me an offer. I said yes and started to walk away; I nearly forgot to find out who he was. Some parts of one's past are easily dismissed. I have a flat in Rose Bay and I would value your advice on how to furnish it. I saw you cast a very critical eye over my house in Blythe. I promise you ...

Almost humble.

... I will dust and wipe a little more often now.

She went around to Cecily's. 'He wrote to you? Look out, Marg. Just watch yourself, he's hard to get rid of.'

She was more shocked than interested, and wary too.

Cecily said, 'Can I read it? No, you read it to me. I don't want to touch it.'

Margaret read her the first part, and then, 'Here's the main bit, what do you make of this?'

I shall have to return once more to finalize a lot of things, which will mean going out to Jingellic, and that will be a cruel wrench. The purpose of this letter is to say that I'd welcome it if you and Edward would keep me company, whenever it is; I daren't face it alone, and I was so horrible to you both that I owe it to you to make amends by showing you the basis for the prideful part of my personality, which was once a virtue, but got out of control and finally broke.

Cecily burst in, 'The slimy old bastard!' It was an accusation; there was some nagging possibility in Cecily's mind.

'What is it? What do you think he did?'

Cecily dodged: 'You tell me what you make of it, that letter.'

'He sounds fairly normal, he was pretty odd at Jingellic'

Cecily said, 'That's it, that's the big change. He's been writing me letters too. I wasn't going to tell you; in fact, I've been hiding it from you. They've been very strange. Some of them had burn marks on them as if he pulled them out of the fire.'

How did he reach that calm, that resignation?

‘You know how you get shut in and you can’t think of anything but yourself? You ring up or write letters, and you’re only talking to yourself? That’s the sort of stuff I’ve been getting. He probably doesn’t know he sent it, or only half-knows. Christ, I’ve been worried, Marg. You’ve been so busy with Edward and Clive, I didn’t want to bring you into it.’

Didn’t you think I’d be any use?

She saw Margaret’s hurt; she said, ‘You couldn’t have done anything. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. I never dreamed all this’d happen.’

‘Don’t blame yourself whatever you do. It must’ve been more than you.’

‘What else does he say?’

It seemed to be another dodge ...

She wants time to think.

... but Margaret said, ‘He says a bit about he’s going to have a difficult time for a while “and even a little support will have great value”.’

‘Don’t touch him, Marg. Don’t touch him!’

‘Then he goes on; hm. Hm.’

Edward is now thought by most to be a nonentity, or a clown, but I once thought he had a glorious potential, but ruined it. I still think he’s not beyond restructuring himself to some extent, and making something good of himself. This is why I was so hard on him and why he always showed up badly when with me. But I can promise him that’s over now, and he will be as welcome as a man could be when the time comes for my return—and I hope your visit—to the old family property.

You are being very good for him, but you owe him only a limited amount. I just hope, for his sake, that when the time comes for you to return to the city, and I feel that you will, in a few months, that this conversion, rebirth, or whatever it is, is complete.

And that’s enough for the time being. I fear, since I am a burden to myself at present, that any communication from me can only be an attempt to make others share the weight, and there is too much of the old pride left to let me willingly do that.

With my deepest regard, John Comstock

She said, ‘It’s a bit embarrassing, but it’s sort of generous too.’

But Cecily was on the verge of crying. ‘He was, Marg, you know, he was generous when he wanted to be. If you didn’t try to thwart him he’d give you a lot.’ But that nagging something was there too, bringing tears very close ...

And revulsion?

... and she said, ‘I’m well out of it, Marg, aren’t I? I am out of it, aren’t I, Marg?’

I said of course she was. I tried to reassure her, but I felt she wanted me to go. It wasn’t going to be the conventional good old cry, there was something bitter to be considered. I said I’d come back later; we’d go down to the Royal; then Cecily said, ‘You’re the one with a future, Marg. I’m glad he picked you to write to. I don’t think he could hurt you.’

Was I so inexperienced that she had to build me up? Or had she really grasped something about the way her life would go? I couldn’t tell, but she was kind, whatever it meant, more generous than any Comstock; and I left. I felt she would purge herself; and she was doing it already. She’d be free of him, and ready to go on in a way that I hadn’t achieved through my little exchange with Clive, though he, as far as I was concerned, was out of my life for good.

The girls decided to live it up. They’d go to the dance at Parton, and then to the little hall at Myopa, halfway between Teddington and Boon. That would be number one in the programme; no number two had presented itself yet.

The Parton dance was run by the Young Farmers. They arrived at the same time as the Area Supervisor, Cliff Brewster. He was an ex-farmer, self-educated by reading journals and books on animal husbandry, by conferences and devoted listening to ABC Country Hour broadcasts. He had spoken at the high school several times.

‘Hello, Cecily, you’re a picture tonight. Hello, Miss Ward. Well, we are being given a treat. Our fashions are usually a little slow to catch up out this way.’ He produced his public smile. ‘Things are looking up for Parton.’

The poor man can hardly hide his dismay! What a pity we know him; you can't be too impossible.

Cecily was barefoot, wrapped in an absurd confection of red, white and blue streamers, and wearing a papier maché helmet. Her face was streaked and darkened beyond recognition—she thought; Margaret had demanded to know whether she thought she was the revolution or the republic, and Cecily had answered, 'I don't know, I can't let that frizz go uncovered. Do I look like a bloodthirsty streetgirl proclaiming an end to injustice and pimps? Do I, Marg?' And now Cliff Brewster had twigged her straight away.

It was the night of the club presentations; Cliff excused himself to bring trophies and prizes from his car. Then a youth with straggly blonde hair and unbuttoned cardigan stopped beside Cecily: 'Gee, what's this? A prizewinning chook? You want watch out it doesn't rain, yer feathers'll get a bit straggly.'

The vulgar little dog-trainer! I'd dyed my hair black and cut it specially because I was modelling myself on David's portrait of Madame Hamelin. I was going to be really outrageous and be Sargent's Madame X but Cecily said I had too much bosom. I told her I didn't but she said I had to be in period with her, and she was going to be something from the French Revolution. I told her if she wanted to go around topless, she could be Delacroix's Liberty but she chickened out, and when I was halfway through making the David outfit, she came up with this absurd rigout. Which was all great fun and she looked very brave even if I did have to hide a smile, and no one on earth but Thistle could ever dream of appearing in such a thing.

'Push off, yokel!'

Did I say that?

But the youth said, 'Jeezus! Cop the tits! Hey!' and went off to bring his friends.

The man at the door didn't want to let them in. He said, 'Er, who are you with?' and peeped out of his little ticketbox ...

Very sophisticated; you can tell by the dinnersuit.

... till Cliff Brewster came through again and gave him a nod.

‘Just a couple of the high school girls having a night out. They’re from Turrumburrah, Bob. They’re all right.’

We are? My God!

Cecily didn’t bother about tickets. She rushed through the doorway, snatching a banner which said something about the Teddington Young Farmers, and yelled, ‘Liberty. For women! Equality. For the mentally undernourished! Fraternity. Of nongs!’ And she advanced solemnly, with streamers flailing, to the centre of the hall. Fortune was with her, Parton people had converted their hall for basketball and there was a brass-encircled hole in the middle, in which she planted the banner, giving a shriek, ‘Teddington for ever!’

During which I walked down the hall as calmly as I could manage; if not an aristocrat, at least a fairly decent piece of the upper bourgeoisie. It was only Parton, after all.

Margaret’s tread was stately. It wasn’t a gown for striding in. She drew a lot of eyes as she made her way to the centrepiece, constructed immediately in front of the stage: a nose-and-two-eyes housefront of hay bales with a lacework of wool fringe draped over the verandah, a brace of old-fashioned wheat-sheaves, to remind the gathering of Victorian conceptions of rural opulence, and a folding table covered with a display of shears of last century, ‘kindly loaned by Messrs S.W. and G.B. Bourke, Banooma’.

There were some whistles for Margaret, and for Cecily that reservation of judgement, that appraising stare which is common among country people and one of the cruellest forms of exposure. If she expected them to cheer, make a demonstration of shock, or move to eject her, she was disappointed. She had made the first move, they merely awaited the second.

Cecily stumped on to Margaret and ostentatiously pulled out her vodka flask for a large gulp. She gasped at the alcohol and might have wept at the miscarriage of her entry, but she was brave, and pushed the flask among the hay bales.

The fate of people who play their cards too quickly. I meant to have more of them than that.

Cliff Brewster, after a pause while he disengaged himself from one group and signalled the band to start up again, came over to make some conversation ...

I ignored him. If Cecily was flat enough to speak, that was her look-out.

The girls sat there for two or three numbers. The cardiganed youth from the doorway brought his friends round to gape. Cecily told them, 'Push off, children. You don't know what it's all about yet.'

I ignored them.

They were unable to ignore Margaret's breasts, her soulfulness, her eyes' intensity; all they could do was make jibes of 'Easy have 'er' or 'know what she's lookin' for' while they crept off to the annexe where their grog was stored. Then a dry old councillor came up to them: 'Waa-all! I thought you were trying to be Britannia, with that helmet. You need a shield.' But all the time his eyes were on Margaret.

Who said tersely, 'This place is colonial enough, anyway. You're not a young farmer?'

He sat uneasily on a hay bale. 'I'm afraid my youth's far behind me. Or so I felt until a moment ago.'

Gay blade! Gallant! Randy little grasshopper!

He said, 'I think it's very appropriate of you to settle in there. This display's supposed to make people aware of plenty, and fecundity, and richness. I think you're very becoming.'

I said, 'So much for your Women's Lib, Thistle.'

He said, 'No, a couple of pretty girls are an adornment to the occasion,' and then, 'Ah well, I must be off, a number of things to see to before our festivities get into full swing. It's presentation night, tonight, you know. I've got to make sure the awards are all properly named for the right person. We had quite a scandal one year when they gave the prize for animal husbandry to a young lass who'd just had twins. It was all a mistake but it took quite a bit of explaining, as you can imagine.'

Oh yairs, yairs, yairs. Oy'm shore it did.

Margaret said, 'Cec? We've got to get out of here.' Cecily said, 'Just a minute, Mag-bag, we've got to make something happen first.'

For twenty minutes no one came near them, then Cliff Brewster, in a supreme effort to have them accepted, brought his wife to talk. She stood firmly, while Cliff plomped himself on a bale to appear at ease. Unwisely, they mentioned their plan of going on to Myopa; it was plain that she scorned the place. Then she took them through a stock list of questions; how long had they been in the area; did they like it? What did they teach; where did they stay in Turrumburrah; finding accommodation could be such a problem, couldn't it? She looked over her shoulder a great deal. Cliff apologized for this by saying, 'Mamie's a bit jumpy tonight. Our oldest girl Melanie's in the running for the Princess of Princesses. That's her now; we don't know who the judges are. I don't suppose by any chance they got you in on it, did they?'

The poor man, so anxious, and even Mamie unfroze a little.

Mrs Brewster didn't think it fair, who they had for judges. They were supposed to be impartial, but at Turrumburrah Young Farmers they had Mr Curran from the big department store and Wendy Willoughby who won it that night was wearing a gown she'd bought at Curran's, and a lot of people said, well, you know ... They shouldn't have got Mr Curran as a judge, and he was here again tonight and though he had assured her he wasn't judging she didn't know whether to believe him or not, he was such a shifty man ...

Margaret said, 'I think your Melanie's beautiful. Her face is a beautiful oval shape. The tiniest bit longer, and she'd be like one of Modigliani's women.'

Mrs Brewster said, 'Er, which one was he now?' very cautious in accepting the praise; Cliff put in, 'He was the south sea island fellow, wasn't he, the one who threw it all up for his art?'

I hid my smile. 'You're thinking of Gauguin. No, truly, it's a lovely face, and the haircut does wonders for her.'

Mrs Brewster said, 'I tried to stop her having it cut that way. I said the judges'll be looking for something more elaborate than that. But, you see, she went to Melbourne, and that's the way she came back.' Melanie's hair was short on top and at the front; short tresses fell in wayward curves down her slender neck. She glared sullenly at her mother; she was dressed more for a party than for a ball. On a severe black dress she wore a silver pendant. Margaret said, 'I must ask her where she got it; it's got to be the only one for miles; did she say where it was from?' But Mrs Brewster didn't know and it was plain that Melanie was under orders to have every dance till the judging was over. Cecily said, 'She's going to get the Women's Lib prize for the night, anyway. Oh, hello, there's your judges, Mrs Brewster.'

Mr Curran, three solid-looking matrons, and Turrumburrah's only male hairdresser were gathered in a huddle. The Master of Ceremonies took the microphone and said, 'Make room for the final judging for the Young Farmers Princess of Princesses, in Parton tonight. As the judges tap you on the shoulder, please leave the floor and make room for the finalists.'

Mrs Brewster said, 'That lying Herbert Curran!' But Melanie and her partner were among the first to be tapped. The partner, a soft-faced bank clerk, led her towards her parents, and Melanie seemed prepared for the confrontation; her early exclusion appeared to be a victory for her in some battle with her mother.

A silence fell on the group. Mrs Brewster showed her annoyance with a thin-lipped 'Well!' The bank clerk propped next to Cliff and stared at Margaret, who asked to see the pendant; the bank clerk couldn't take his eyes off Margaret's open bosom; Cecily made a line with her toe between the men and the women; Mrs Brewster gave some loud, deep breaths, then Melanie said, 'I hear you're going on to Myopa? Do you want to go with them, Bobby?' But Bobby mumbled, 'Bit of a rough place isn't it?' and agreed with Cliff that the club should show a good profit on the night, with doubles at eight dollars a head.

Cecily said, 'Yes, come on,' to Melanie Brewster. 'What if he doesn't want to? There's plenty more fish in the sea.' And by now they were no longer isolated. People moving off the dance floor were crowding in on them, until at last only two couples were left—Vivienne Marshall, Georgie Roberts, and their partners. Georgie was tall, with a Jacqueline Kennedy beauty, pink skin and raven hair. She had soft full breasts but narrow hips; someone said, 'Of course, she'll fill out; she'll be like her mother.' But Georgie didn't relish observation; comments were, 'She dances as if she's doing a duty,' and 'She's not giving Macca much of a time.'

Mr Curran and the hairdresser had eyes only for Vivienne Marshall, who had obviously spent some of her father's garage takings at their establishments. And she was certainly vital. Where Georgie's hand rested coldly on Macca's shoulder, Vivienne was swirling her partner along a little faster than the band wanted to take the music, pumping her elbows and moving her throat in husky laughter at every least remark of her monosyllabic man. Cecily said, 'She's just an ox, Marg, a bloody cow!' But others were not disconcerted by her breasts pressed up, or her boisterous hips; the fact that she was less beautiful, simpler, and trying harder, built up an approval of her. When the judges moved on to the floor for the final tap there was no doubt that it would be Georgie to be eliminated. Cruelly, Mr Curran tapped Georgie, not her partner, and ...

Cruelly; and yet it was spontaneous to them; what animal thing did I lack that I hated them for it?

... there was a burst of clapping as a smiling Vivienne drew her partner through some even more vigorous circuits of the floor. Vivienne was a study in victory. She waved, reached out her hand for friends to touch her, or kept her back to the crowd so friends could pat her on the shoulder. She was heard to say 'Thanks, Mum' to a mousy-haired woman in the crowd near the door; people parted to let her come smiling from the supper room, nervously buttoning and unbuttoning a cardigan.

Cecily said, 'Well, what a lot of crap!' Melanie Brewster said to her, 'You wait till you hear the speeches.' Her mother, not catching the words but recognizing the tone, frowned at her daughter, and Cliff Brewster beckoned the dry old councillor, who produced, from somewhere behind the band, a shining silk sash, inscribed in letters of gold. Holding it aloft, he moved slowly down the steps to the dance floor, as one accustomed to bestow honours on people. Vivienne brought herself up to him obediently, ready for the accolade. One of the band put down his trombone in favour of a glass of beer and called out, 'Well played, Macca!' Macca, notwithstanding his dinner suit, beefed back, 'Save one for me!' Georgie, despite the crudity of the exchange, was relieved to be out of it. She was about to sink into the crowd when Macca spotted the councillor's gesture and led her beside the triumphant Vivienne. The two couples stood before the councillor, with a beaming Cliff Brewster in attendance.

It's just not good enough!

Cecily said, 'It's like a bloody agricultural show! What say I dash out and stuff it down his neck?

But for once I knew my mind.

Margaret stood up. She said 'Are you coming?' to Melanie, who opened her mouth in surprise; it was the challenge she wanted to make, but could not. She looked from Margaret to her mother, and dropped her eyes.

I never felt so sorry for anybody.

Before even Cecily could guess what she would do, Margaret walked out, flicking some straw from her gown. Her challenging exit drew most eyes and a good deal of adverse comment. Vivienne hated her, and the councillor's scene had been stolen. A very embarrassed Cliff looked to see Cecily starting to follow, with those tricolour streamers and absurd Boadicea helmet catching all attention.

Margaret's beauty and severity protected her, and she had the advantage of surprise. But Cecily, padding behind with her outlandish

rig and her muscly legs, drew a babble of disapproval and amusement. The bank clerk moved away from Melanie.

When Margaret got to the car, she found it locked. She stopped by it till Cecily stormed up: 'Listen to those yahoos! Why didn't you tell me, you horrible bitch! You might have warned me! You could have gone out through the annexe; you didn't think about me, did you? Now where's my bloody, bloody keys? Oh, no, I tell you, if I left them in the hall, it's going to be you that goes back to get them.'

Cecily seethed all the way to Teddington. She said, 'Here's another exciting city. I suppose the pubs'll be shut. My God, I could do with a drink.'

But the hotel was still open; as they drew up, Margaret noticed that they were next to the hotted-up car she had seen in Turrumburrah, the Ford coupé with 'Love Wagon' on the side. Cecily swept past it with a dismissive 'Love! Hell's Angels version, anyway.' They went into the hallway, with its bleak and dirty lino, and peered into the bar where a veteran of footy club Sunday mornings was mopping up spilt beer and saying, 'Steady there, steady there, boys. Take it easy, we're not havin' a brawl in here. If that's how you feel, you'd better go outside and settle it.' How much a foreigner can you feel, and in your own country? Margaret said, 'Come on, Cecily! Out of here, quickly!' But Cecily whistled into the hatch and said, though not for the barman to hear, 'Yoohoo! Sessy wantsa bottle!'

Margaret went back to the car. Two youths were looking at her from the corner door. One called out 'Hello, Miss Ward!' and waved a glass of beer. The other called, 'Hello, Margaret! Margaret!'

Sick! Sick! I told Cecily the moment she came back to go straight home, but she said she'd got her grog and weren't we supposed to be having a good time? I told her to get out of this dreary Teddington, and I remembered that this was the pub where I'd parked with Edward that time, and I just wanted to be sick.

The men in the doorway were very amused. Men's voices called, 'The girls're gonna have a punch-up' and 'They'll be into it in a minute.'

Cecily revved the engine too hard. The wheels spun gravel against the Love Wagon as she reversed onto the road. There was a cry of 'Look what you're doing, you silly bitch!' as they shot off down the street.

A couple of miles out of Teddington they stopped. Cecily had a swig from her bottle of vodka. She said, in a better humour now, 'You know what? Some lucky kid's going to find my flask when they dismantle that hay bale thing. Okay My-op-ic, here we come!' Margaret said, 'Look, Thistle, there's nothing left in the night; let's go home.'

'What do you want to do? Go and get Clivey, and Johnny Comstock, and make a foursome for bridge? No, come on, let's kick on. Lantern light and gumtips. Little communities are more friendly. Honestly, they'll think it's beaut to see some strangers.' Margaret appeared to be weakening; Cecily went on, 'You should have seen that fellow in the bar when he saw my gear. He wobbled on his feet and tried to work me out, he couldn't believe his eyes. Hey, Christ, watch what you're doing!'

A car thundered past them, missing them by inches. About a quarter of a mile up the road it stopped and turned round.

Oh oh!

It was the Love Wagon. Glossy-haired boys leaned out. 'Hiya, Cecily!' 'Good evening, Miss Ward.' 'Ma-a-arg!'

Cecily said 'Shit!' and started the engine. The moment she moved off, the coupé did a tight circle and swung behind them. She drove at thirty, the coupé so close they could hardly see its headlights; she went faster, the coupé kept up; she went slower, there was a bump at the rear of the Mini. Cecily began to show the strain ...

Cold.

... she veered on to the gravel; the coupé drew back a few feet. She went the wrong side of a white post, the coupé raced ahead and did it twice as fast, in and out, in and out, then slowed to a crawl. Margaret said, 'Quick, spin around and go back to Teddington. Now, while they're

in front.’ But Cecily said, ‘They’ll head us off if we try to do that, you know that, Marg; they’re not going to let us ...’

Margaret said, ‘Let’s use our heads a bit. It’s about sixteen miles to Myopa, we must have done about four already. Is there a policeman there, do you know, Thistle?’ But Cecily had no idea. She slowed down to a crawl too; the coupé drew over. She stopped, the coupé stopped. Boys with an aggressive glint in their eye were leaning out of the passenger side door or peering through the back window at their victims. Bottles were waved at the girls, and there were two-fingers-up signs. Margaret said, ‘What did you stop for? Get going! Go on, get going, flat out!’ So Cecily flattened the accelerator and the Ford roared along behind them, horn blasting violently. Margaret said, ‘As soon as you see a side track, swing around and go back the way we came.’ But Cecily lacked the skill. When she tried to make the turn, she slewed into a boggy patch by the side of the road. The Mini came to a halt with a thirty-degree list. The Ford pulled up, lights trained straight on them. The boys got out with their bottles, and jeans tight at the loins; but they were wary, waiting for the others to make yet more moves in the chase. They said, ‘That’s a silly thing to do,’ ‘Teddy McKertich’ll take your licence off you’ and ‘How do you think you’re going to get out of that?’

Cecily cracked; she screamed abuse at them, then began to cry. One put an arm around her. ‘There, there,’ he said, patently false, ‘We’re not going to hurt you. Are we, boys?’

Cecily could suffer it and over the months could somehow spit it out of her system; she’s a day-to-day girl and would somehow recover. But for me to have forced intercourse with these thugs would be the final trauma. I said,

‘Put it on the road.’

They hauled it back on the road, facing Myopa.

I said,

‘No, the other way.’

But the boys laughed at this one. They referred everything to the darkest and largest, a man called Rex, who was older and crueller, further gone in this sado-sexual thing of night and cars. Rex said no.

I said,

‘All right, that’s your condition. Here’s mine. Which one of you hasn’t got a licence?’

This divided them, since none wanted to admit the lack of status. They eventually separated, leaving a youth called ‘Peanut’ on his own.

I said,

‘You want a contest, don’t you?’

The one closest to Rex said, ‘Yeah, a fucking contest’ but Rex put his hand out.

I said,

‘I haven’t got a licence either. Peanut ...’

Peanut!

‘... can drive your car and I’ll drive this one.’

There’s a filthy gleam in Rex’s eye which is admiration, lust and approval of my tactics. It’s the game according to their rules; now I’ve got to win.

Rex said, ‘You’re on! Get her started, Peanut. You go first; we’ll chase you.’

Margaret didn’t know how to start the engine and Cecily was beyond being able to do it. She was saying that she didn’t want to be hurt. The boy who had been standing next to Rex said, ‘Go and start their car for ‘em, Peanut,’ and, as he walked to the coupé, ‘This’ll be easy.’

An awkward, trembling Peanut did as he was told, without once looking directly at Margaret. Then he went back and gunned the engine of the lowered and hotted-up coupé. Margaret said, ‘Tell me the gears, Cecily, if you can get your wits together for a moment.’ The best that Cecily could do was, ‘They’re on the stick.’ This took time, till Margaret noticed that a diagram of the gear layout was moulded into the knob of the gearstick. Heart thudding, and flesh cold, she nearly stalled the Mini as she let out the clutch. Each time she bungled a gear change Cecily

whimpered, 'They're going to get us. You're our only hope, Marg, and you can't drive for nuts.' Margaret told her to shut up, and peered into the night. It struck her after a while that the headlights were on low beam. Fumbling around with her foot for the dipswitch nearly caused them to run off the road, but with the lights up she had a trifle more confidence.

And Peanut's task was really the harder one. He was being urged on by the other youths, who passed the bottle and reached across him to blow the horn often and loudly. They jostled him and roared at him to 'Get the sheilas! If we don't get a fuck tonight I'll bash your head in.' Peanut's steering was even worse than Margaret's. The coupé progressed by an endless series of swerves.

In the Mini, Margaret said, 'There's no trees, are there?' Cecily had no idea. Margaret said 'There's just got to be no trees or we're done.' They saw a light in the distance; they assumed it was Myopa, and Margaret drove faster, but the one light became two, the headlights of a truck. As it came close, Margaret slowed down to ten or fifteen miles an hour, with the Ford gaining ground rapidly behind. With the truck a hundred yards ahead, she turned off the Mini's lights and swung across the path of the truck. The startled driver blared his horn and veered wildly, causing his load of cattle to jostle and fall. The truck occupied the wrong side of the road, and Peanut had to veer off. Margaret switched on her lights for a moment; there was a track. Lights off again, the Mini bumping and bouncing, she drove away from the main road until the track crossed another. She headed down the right-hand turn for half a mile, then stopped. She got out and was sick. Cecily sat up, her mad garment tattered, disbelief all over her face. Two sets of headlights could be seen on the main road; the truck and the coupé were stopped.

Margaret said she couldn't drive another inch. Cecily said, 'You're a bloody miracle, Marg. I don't know how you did it.' Margaret said, 'I don't even know what I did. I wonder if any of them are hurt. It serves them right if they are.' Cecily said, 'I hope the whole bloody lot're dead

by the road, I swear to God I do. Listen to me! I'm getting my pecker back a bit, aren't I?

They sat in the dark, apprehensive when the truck headed down the road to Teddington and the coupé's lights wavered around trying to find them; terrified when it nosed down their side track, relieved when it failed to take their turn, Margaret got in the passenger seat, shivering, and Cecily managed to pull herself together to find a way back to the main road, but she kept her lights off until they were near Parton, which she skirted around.

In Turrumburrah they stopped outside the Police Station, but there was no one there. An old man walking past told them, 'I think Teddy McKertich's down in Tilga; they reckon there's a blue at the army camp.' So Cecily said, 'You sleep at my place tonight, Margy' and Margaret wanted her to go back to Myra and Jim's. Cecily said, 'Let's go and see Edward and tell him all about it. He'll know what to do, won't he, Margy?' but Margaret said no, they'd go straight back to Denham's. They dragged the mattress and bedding off the spare bed on the back porch and put it on the floor of Margaret's room, then crept into bed, feeling icy cold. Cecily said, 'I'm gonna have to get out of this town, Margy. I couldn't stay another week after that. What about you?'

But I had a strange and stupid resolve. I was safe in Myra's house, and Jim's. I would paint, and draw; there was plenty about. I felt strong! I'd been challenged to the very limit and when that limit was reached, there was a thin steel fibre running through me that the Rex and Peanut brigade couldn't snap. I was more than them, even on their own ground. I was lucky, too; and for all I knew Peanut or half their carload could have been killed or hurt and it was just too bad if they were; they wanted to play the game and they lost. I had more resource than Cecily, for all that she was tough and adaptable, because her best was already on display and I hadn't been brought out yet. Clive hadn't done it, nor Edward, and certainly not J. Comstock, despite that touching letter the other day. When would my doubting be over? I didn't know, but I was oddly optimistic, because when the trembling died down, and I'd found Cecily a

hot water bottle and I'd got my own bed warm, I sensed a great response in me to all that horror and madness. I would learn, and absorb; I would see through the inland winter, and my loneliness—though I prayed that Cecily wouldn't go away—and when it came on spring, or when I boarded the train and took the long ride back to Sydney, I felt I would come into my own. Edward had no part in my plans, my resolve; he would just be my friend, my guide, my local historian. He would teach me, and so would Myra, most of all, and Jim; and I would bear with Ponds and get Michael Bunny doing something really good. It never crossed my mind that I would see Rex and Peanut in the street and have to live with them in the same town. In my resolves I looked to a different future. I should have realized that in small communities the dirt of the past is never swept out of memory, but accumulates, making things gradually more difficult and tight. A man like Edward might break out, at his maddest, but what about me? Still a girl and still a stranger. It was nearly dawn when I got to sleep, but I was almost lively when Myra came in. She was a darling when she heard, and she brought in Jim, who clucked and tut-tutted and swore. He went off to tell Teddy McKertich and I guessed the young men were in for a thumping, but I wasn't even thinking about that; I was in a state of contradiction, a sort of trembling calm. There couldn't be any worse, things would have to get better. Sex? I'd put that by for the time being. Art? We'd see, we'd see. People? Yes, Jim and Myra's friends; if they were healthy and warm and knew who they were, I couldn't have too much of them.

3 Art and the Swan

But, of course, I had a reaction. I felt shaky. I stayed home for a few days. Myra told Ponds I had a fever; she even got Bruce Williams in to give me a doctor's certificate. Ponds asked her if he could call—as if I wanted that—but she put him off; I could hear her on the phone parrying his nosy little mind. And Jim was a darling; he kept out of my way for a few days in case I had a thing about men; then he came to the door one night while I was sitting on my bed trying to sketch the way the channels carved through Tom Bowler's place, to tell me that Teddy McKertich had got hold of the youths and Jim reckoned they'd be pretty sorry boys for a while. It was sweet of him and before I could even thank him, he'd disappeared, and I was left looking at my charcoals and sheets of blank paper; and the Tom Bowler channels thing looked hopelessly empty and I had an urge to draw Edward plunging in in the nude. That made me shriek, and I heard Jim open the lounge room door to see if I was all right or if there'd be more; and then he closed it, and I dashed in a little cherub with butterfly wings and an old man's face, going splunk in the water. And I threw it under the bed and laughed for the first time for days.

Cecily came round. She'd been at work for the first couple of days but she wasn't going back for more; she was going straight to Sydney to ask for a compassionate transfer and if they wouldn't give it to her, she'd resign there and then. She said, 'Look, Marg, I can never be myself in this place. Do you know what happened today? I was out in the yard and some slimy adolescent came up to me and said "Hey, miss. Do you know who this kid is?" I'd never set eyes on him but I might have guessed. "He's Peanut's brother, miss, You know Peanut, don't you?" I

nearly slapped the little shit; I was going to cart him off to Ponds, then I thought fuck them, on top of Lord John, that's it. I've had it. Sorry, Marg, but I really have.'

Jim offered to take them to the Saturday morning plane from Blythe, but when they reached the fork a mile north of town, he turned left on the Kyamba road. He said, 'It's not much further. I thought a bit of new country might be interesting. You haven't been up that road, haveya?' He meant he'd spare us the scene of the chase; I realized that if you made no specifications about what you wanted, Jim had a way of getting things right. I wanted to check him on Edward, I said,

'What was all this country like before the irrigation came, Jim?'

'Pretty blessed dry most of the time. Oh, we scratched along, made a quid, but no one ever got on top. Look, there'd be days you'd see this big brown cloud sittin' on the horizon ... Ohoh! ... and you'd go in and shut all the windows and stuff rags round the bottom of the doors. If it caught us when we were out in the bush we'd race in to the pub at Tilga. Other times we'd just get in the river. Just strip off and sit there till the worst of it blew over. You'd put your clothes under a log and hope to hell it was heavy enough.'

Cecily said, 'Did they ever blow away, Jim?'

'Nuh. Oh, I had to chase me hat once. The fellers used to look funny sitting in the water, little red line round here, jist where their hats used to sit.'

'I'm going to paint that! Gee, you put things in an expressive way, Jim. I can always see just what you mean.'

'Oh heck, I just say it the way it comes to me.'

Cecily said, 'What makes you want to paint that, of all things? Are you going to stay on a few years, Margy, is that what it is?'

'No, I'm not. I'm definitely having just this one year ...'

Make the most of it, Jim me boy.

'... and I'm not running out whatever happens ...'

Oh no, heavens no; why did I ever say that?

‘... no, wait on, Thistle, I’m sorry, that’s not meant to refer to you at all. Don’t you get the idea ...’

‘Oh, shut up, Marg! You said it, you meant it.’

Why don’t I go with her? I don’t really belong here,

‘Jim? How far have we come? Could we go back and get my stuff and still catch the plane?’

‘Easy turn round, Margaret. It’s not far. Be cuttin’ the plane a bit fine. You could just get the things you needed and we’d pack up the rest and rail it up to you. If that’s what you want.’

The car cruised at a steady fifty-five, with Jim neither slowing nor speeding. There was a long silence. Trees swept past them backwards; they bumped over an irrigation bridge. Margaret said, ‘No. Keep going.’ Jim’s hat dipped in a one-inch nod.

Close shave. Only show my feelings if I did any more.

After all, I had nothing to go to either.

And Cecily said, ‘You’re doing the right thing. You’ll have a good year. Write to me, Marg, and tell me how they’re all getting on. Even Ponds, stiff old prig that he is.’

Jeez, I thought she said somethin’ else. That Cecily talks like a blacks’ camp sometimes.

‘And whatever you do, send me some drawings, Marg. You’ve got to get down to doing some drawing. When you’re back in Sydney next year you’ll kick yourself if you haven’t got anything to show. You could have an exhibition; it’d be great. Marg?’

I’d be making an exhibition of myself if I spoke just then. It was going to be bad without her.

There was another long silence. The Australian countryside fits easily with gloom, or ecstasy, any mood that asks to take over everything. The mileposts flicked by—K28/T4, K27/T5, K26/T6, and then they grew the other way—K15/T17, K14/T18, K13/T19 ... Cecily said, ‘Every time one of those bloody things goes past, I see your lips move! You’re counting them, aren’t you; don’t say you’re not. You know what?’

I'm glad those thugs chased me out! I'd go mad if I stayed here any longer!

Then she apologized to Margaret, and Jim drove hunched up, as if it was him they were trying to judge.

Well, I lived here all me life, it sorta was.

Jim offered to stop in Kyamba, but they didn't want to, and he drove them through the outskirts, pointing out a few houses: 'Old Mrs Wilde used to live there. Had a houseful of cats. Wouldn't let anybody else touch 'em. They used to sleep in the house; all had separate little boxes with their names on 'em. Not shoeboxes, mind you; she got a carpenter to make 'em up for 'er. They reckon she was going to leave her money to 'em, but she didn't; she died before she got round to making a will. Poor old biddy. They're gonna pull it down, put a motel there, that's what I hear.'

It suddenly struck me that Jim had a very clear idea of the world. I began to envy him, he knew who he was, because he was what everyone said he was: Jim Denham, whose family and background were known, whose wife and job were known. He didn't worry about aesthetics or ideas, there were the people and places he knew; was that a strength or a weakness? It had to be a weakness, or else my job had no meaning, and that was all that was keeping me in this place. But if I couldn't talk to anyone, what was the good of staying? I wasn't seeing much of Edward, and Cecily was going ...

'What's the fare to Sydney, Thistle?'

'I don't know, Margy. I might have to borrow off you.'

'Jim?'

'Mm, I think it's about sixteen dollars, something like that.'

O' course me and Myra'd get another boarder, but ...

While Cecily stared glumly at the landscape emptying itself of trees, Margaret scabbled through her bag on the pretence of looking for her lipstick.

Twelve dollars. Jim'd have some money on him ...

‘I know what you’re doing, Mag-bag. Don’t try to pretend you’re not. No, go on, you stay. Look after Edward, someone’s got to.’

Blush.

I said, ‘Jim, what was Edward like when he was younger? How did he come to marry that horrible Jenny?’

‘Well, o’course, Edward was the coming man there, for a while. The water coming meant a lot of work for him. He had three or four teams on the go; he was a good organizer when he wanted to be. He flitted round Jenny; he sort of stung her into being attracted to him. She was a confident bitch, ‘scuse my French; she’d run through quite a few fellas. I’m not saying she didn’t give ‘em what they wanted but, ooh, she took it out of ‘em too. Glad I never went near ‘er. She sorta couldn’t grasp Edward, but he looked like he had good prospects just then, and he was funny ... He’s pretty cagey now but he used to be a real headlong sort of fella.’

Edward was?

‘Look, I think she was everything he wasn’t, and he was gonna be that too, he thought.’

‘What’s all this about when they turned the water on?’

Jim’s in the mood to tell me? Is he?

‘Aw.’

Blast.

‘He tried to make a big speech on how he was confident of his future, and the district too, because the water was coming on, but ... it sorta didn’t come off. He’ll tellya about it.’

Can’t undermine a man.

So they were silent for another thirteen miles, then Jim said, ‘Here’s Woggamine. Feel like one? Or it’s a bit early for you?’

Cecily said, ‘What, at ten o’clock? Oh, all right, it’s going to be my last.’

Jim parked by a row of Athel trees, and said to Margaret, ‘D’ja see that?’ He pointed to the figure of a man sculpted out of cans. ‘Been there for years, getting a bit rusty now. Fella called Kyber Jenkins did it.’

Oh Lord!

She doesn't think much of it; well, it's just a curiosity; I thought some of these modern fellas used junk ...

Cecily sniggered. The other two looked at her. She said, 'Ah, er, Jim, how many cans did he use to make it, do you know?'

Jim hung on to his dignity. 'Don't ask silly questions,' he said. 'You wait here. I'll see if Brownie's open yet. Might be a bit early for 'im.' And off he strode, leaving them firmly behind.

Cecily said, 'It was your fault, Marg, you made me laugh,' and they started to quarrel, but realized what was happening, and it was too late for any difference to run its course and be patched up; each wanted to hurt the other, and yet they didn't; they escaped the ambiguity by inspecting the figure.

On closer examination it proved to incorporate a variety of tins, from a head made of a four-gallon drum to fingers made out of anchovy tins; it even had a tiara meant to represent hair, made from sardine tin keys. Kyber Jenkins had taken as his model a comic strip robot, but instead of being right-angular, the figure had its head down, back bent and arms curving forward; one leg was flung forward, like a parody of a footballer kicking. It balanced on one anchovy-toe, which seemed impossible until they inspected more closely and discovered that a metal bar ran through the toe and leg to the tortured kerosene tin which was its lower abdomen. The two girls goggled; it had caused their difference with Jim; it was absurd; it had miles of plain in front of it ... Cecily said, for want of better, 'Who's this Kyber Jenkins?'

'How would I know?'

So they went back to the car feeling uncomfortable, trying not to look back, but the wretched figure kept making them look around; there had to be something you could say about it. But it steadfastly refused to be mysterious, interesting, or to have any hidden qualities; it was too peculiar to be corny, and too uncouth to be 'primitive'. It silenced them.

Thistle's angry.

‘Bugger it, Marg. I wish we’d gone the other way. That thing’s going to be my last impression of this place. That heap of junk! Let’s go overseas, Marg. Next year. If you don’t go mad and marry Dut or some nong-headed farmer. We’ll go to the Continent; I’ve saved up a bit and you’re rolling in it.’

But Jim was beckoning them into the saloon bar. He introduced them to Brownie, and they made small talk. Brownie said, ‘And you’re leaving us then, Cecily?’ and she said, ‘Nothing here for me.’ She pointed out the door. ‘Look, last year, before they sent me down here, I was in a flat near the Cross, people in and out all the time. It was pretty scruffy, I suppose, but I can’t wait to get back.’

That bloody Rex! And fuckin’ little Peanut! They better not come near me; they’ll get what they’re lookin’ for.

Brownie said, ‘It grows on you, you know. After a while, it’s that nothing out there that you want. People ask me how I stand the quiet. The quiet’s okay, I been in plenty of quiet places. It’s the nothing that you want though. It takes the strain off you.’

Margaret said, ‘But strain’s inside yourself, surely?’

Brownie said, ‘I suppose it is. I don’t know. Once I got out here I never looked back. I been a different man. You ask me wife.’

But they had to go, and even tactful Jim couldn’t avoid taking them past the can-man, lurching, or kicking, into the nothing. Which was a very real something; the grasses, posts and wire, the dam banks, the distant windmills every mile or two, the stations with their stockades of sugar gums and boobyalla, every bend in the road, every faintest change in the earth’s colour, all were articulated clearly in this eloquent space which was Brownie’s ‘nothing’. Margaret said to Cecily and Jim, ‘You hardly need to paint this, you know, it speaks for itself. Every little detail’s isolated!’ Cecily said, ‘See you in the flat, Mag-bag. When’re you coming down? Don’t be long, will you, and we can talk about where we’ll go. Beryl says the Persepolis is the best ship on the run. Though how you can stand a shipload of Greeks I don’t know.’

They had already passed several trucks, and Margaret noticed how long they took to come from the horizon to the moment when they almost swept the Chev off the road with their blast of wind. Then Jim said, 'Day's warmin' up. Bit of a mirage now, out in front.' Cecily asked him, 'How do you stand the heat, Jim, when it's summer and you're in the bush?'

Jim said, 'Stand it? Stand it like you stand everything. It's there—that's all there is to it.' Margaret said, with more than surprise in her voice, almost fear: 'What's that? That little dot that's moving?' Jim was amused. 'Just a truck. Didn't you notice 'em before? See 'em for miles out here.'

I hadn't noticed. I hadn't seen anybody, either, as a person in their fullness, in the round. Now there was Cecily trying to hold back her relief at getting out, but you can't do that for a hundred miles of near enough to emptiness; and Jim's good-nature had a suspicious edge to it; if anyone looks after these things, will they please not let him fall in love with me, or even show Myra that he might? Jim, old plain-Jane, mirror-back, honest Jim; he had a way of never opening up, but always being open, undefended. The other night I heard him, watching television; he said some boxer 'was all curled up in a knot, hopin' he'd last the round'; I thought it was one of those self-descriptions people unwittingly make: what do I say that reveals myself?

Wonder what Marg and I'll talk about on the way home?

Cecily stared at the dot growing larger on the mirage, like a frog's egg swelling, or a pea; she wrinkled her nose at it, and the whole business they were going through. Margaret caught the gesture; she tried to be good-humoured, but it didn't work.

'I'll draw you with that look on your face when I get home.'

Cecily said, 'Home? Home?'

A bit of a hit in the guts for me.

The pea, or dot, was taking shape; it was a glint of aluminium, a refrigerated transport taking meat, and frozen goods, across the plains. Then the road changed course by a few degrees, and it was a rectangle of

black. Margaret wanted to know how far away it would be; Jim thought, 'Oh, half a mile, I suppose, yet.' It was like a liner going out to sea; it had that same quality of moving across the edges of one's mind for minutes, then one focussed on it, and it was stately in some profound, undemanding way; it made other things, in the foreground, seem as if they had never been.

I said,

'Jim?'

... my voice trembling;

'You'll take me back to Edward's, won't you, when we get back?'

I could see he was disappointed ...

Funny she falls back on him; he's got nothin' solid.

... so I said,

'It's just that I'll need him for a little while. I'm going to be at home much more now, Jim; I'm going to need you and Myra tremendously. You'll be steady for me, won't you?'

Course, course; course, Margy. Steady for you; heck, steady's my middle name, if that's what you want me to be.

'Steady as a rock, Margy, no worries!'

I think she slipped me, there, somewhere; there sort of isn't anything doing. Jist as well, there'd be one hell of a mess if it was any different, but a man can't pretend some things don't exist.

Well, that's a turning-point, thank heavens.

Cecily lowered her eyelids. There was a trace of wry comment in the set of her lips.

I had to say something. I said,

'When these trucks pass us, Jim, why does our car blow about? It's a heavy one, isn't it?'

Jim said, 'Oh, it's those stupid flat fins they put on this model. Terrible wind traps. Gust o'wind'll shift you four or five feet before you get a grip on the wheel. Stupid design. Last model didn't have it. Just a fashion. Sorry I bought this model now.'

The truck grew larger and larger; then they could see the driver. It seemed strange that the thing housed a person, who could go to sleep, or lose control, even if he wasn't malevolent, as of course he wasn't; but the truck rushed down on them, closing the last hundred yards in a moment or two, going past with a roar and a swoosh of wind that set the Chevrolet shuddering, and the offside wheels spraying the mudguards with gravel.

Jim said, 'Bugger had enough of the road. Think they own it, some of 'em!'

Well, he nearly made me hit a white post!

So there's another I've got to be kind to; it's like Clive all over again, except Jim can cover up like an expert.

I'll ask him to take me to see him at work one of these days; he's proud of that.

Now the truck was a glint again, and then a rectangle. In a minute of silence it became a pea, and a dot; in a second minute it became a frog's egg again, swam on the rippling air for a while, and was gone ...

Like Cecily in a minute.

And me chances of recovery. I'll just plug along as usual.

... gone, like possibility itself, except it constantly renews, and people can't, unless they step firmly away from their past, leaving chunks of self behind.

Self! Is the mystery, the enigmatic non-accretion, the centreless onion, the shell that didn't form an oyster, the grit never chanced to arrive. Self! Yet Jim's hurt is as palpable as the sound of his engine or the tilt of his brim. Self! She's going and I'll know it then, when she's not around. Edward said he watched old Dawson kill a sheep and he demanded to know where the life had gone. Old Dawson was mad on religion. I suppose Edward thought he was having him on, or extending him, or whatever it is he does to people; he said old Dawson pointed at the blood on the ground and said, 'There'; Edward told me he pointed at the heart, because it was still pulsating, and said, 'What about that?' Dawson got angry and waved the knife; he said to Edward, 'It's gorn!

It's gorn out there!' And he flung his arms wide and the knife nearly cut Edward. It's not often Edward gets bested but old Dawson said, 'You'd have known where it went if I'd cut you!'

Margaret shuddered. Cecily said, 'Well, come with me, you stupid bag? Don't just go on with all that, it's getting me on edge. I'm bad enough without you going neurotic on me', and they nearly quarrelled, but Jim stopped, and brought out a thermos Myra had given him, and some cake.

Which we ate in the middle of infinity.

Hadda shuttem up somehow. Coulda got hectic.

At Blythe, the plane was on the strip, but nobody expected them to hurry. The pilot stood smoking and talking to a mechanic in blue overalls, not very far from another man who was refuelling the plane. He had his flight papers on a clipboard; when the trio came out to the Cessna, he nodded and pulled out a biro, but kept talking, occasionally fiddling with the clipboard to let them know he'd account for them in a while.

It was like the cup of tea all over again. They stood there like figures by Hopper, with no overtones, no setting they'd created, no aura, no uniform, no set procedure, no resonance; one scarcely believed they were men!

But they did their work, filled in their forms and fuelled the plane. The pilot nodded to Cecily, and the few others who'd gathered, and pushed steps to the door of the plane. Cecily began to move, but froze; then she swung round to Margaret ...

Our last contest.

... before sweeping her coat convulsively into the crook of her arm, giving Jim a cool handshake and then, thinking better of it, a brusque kiss on the cheek. She stared hard at Margaret ...

Meaning, you fool.

... and climbed the steps. She tried to rise to the occasion with a wave, but it was only a perfunctory flutter, and then she moved out of sight ...

Going to her seat to cry; well, she's out of it, and I'm every bit the fool she thinks I am, so Home James, and don't spare the Chevvy. How many months? Stop in December; May's gone now, June, July ... six; six and a half. I suppose I can stand it, I can't very well run up to the plane and beat on the door, let me in! Let me in! Let me in!

The plane took off, didn't circle, headed straight for the horizon ...

Glint, pea, frog-dot, yes, yes, yes. I felt about as big as the latter, the last, or whatever it is. And it went out of existence, with Thistle in its belly, somewhere in a cloud puff that managed to drag itself over the horizon, as if it mattered what it did, or anybody did in this God-forsaken emptiness. But I didn't follow it, unfortunately; I padded across the strip to the car and plomped on the vinyl, wishing Jim would drive in the river or some other quiet place for ending it all. Jim says, Ah, yer can't winnem all; what if there's no hope of winning anything?

Edward was standing by a mirror, trying on a coat, when I called. I said, 'Just stand there, Edward; don't do anything; just stay where you are; I need it. If you don't mind.'

She stood beside him, and put an arm around him. He blinked his eyes, and looked into her mirror eyes, which stared coolly back at him, and then at her reflected self. There was a long silence, then Edward said, 'I heard about that terrible business, but I thought I'd wait till you wanted me ...'

It angered her. She said, 'Well, what are you up to, anyway? Is that awful Jenny still in town?'

'No, she's back in Sydney.'

'What does that mean? That she's leaving the field to you?'

'No, I struck a bargain. I told her there was a new will and I knew where it was. I said I'd tell her eventually, on one condition.'

'Which was?'

'That she'd come back for the Back-to shenanigans they're having around Christmas, and do whatever Tom told her.'

'Tom? What's he got to do with it?'

‘Tom’s on the committee that’s organizing it. You have been out of things, haven’t you?’

‘Just what are you working towards, Edward?’

‘I don’t know that I’m working towards anything. I just think if you concentrate your energy on what’s bothering you you’ll get it sorted out somehow.’

‘And what are you concentrating your energies on, might I ask?’

‘I want to get back to the knot and untie it.’

She said bitterly, ‘Enigmatic to the last, aren’t you?’

He said, ‘Ah, but this is not the last, my dearest.’

She had another letter from John Comstock and felt ashamed to open it, not having answered his previous letter, despite the plea it contained.

My Dear Margaret,

Forgive me intruding again. I must have someone to speak to. Notice I don’t say ‘with’. I’m not pressing you to write to me. You have only to say so and I’ll stop sending you letters. But I put some terrible things on paper in my last days at Jingellic and I think it is better to have another person in mind, when writing; it is a necessary corrective for one in danger of bursting out. I’m held in by my suit, and my careful scrutiny of all the papers my brokers send me, and everything they tell me. I am a very pushing person—plenty of people in Blythe would say ‘grasping’—and now I have nothing to push. Various tradesmen have made alterations in my flat—a new shower, and shelves here and there—and have scampered off with cheque in hand, glad to be free of my overseeing. I’m restless. At nights, the whole city throbs, and I try to be still.

I’m in two clubs already but the members bore me as much as I bore them. Oh, those conversations! I say, ‘I used to ...’ and they say, ‘Oh! You were ...’ Were and used to! I’d do a deal with the devil to have my last thirty years again.

It’s not that I’m penitent—I’m too much of the old Comstock to kick myself for things I know to be sordid. I don’t like seeing people on their knees, and there’s something disgusting about bringing up old evils and flaunting them about. No, it’s just that I’m sick of the person I’ve become. My arrogance and overlordship were in charge of me too long.

I've looked out of the Pastoralists' Club—one of my 'used to' and 'were' retreats, you see—at young boys with their girls, lying together in the park across the road, with their jeans and long hair and their wretched transistors, and I've envied their flexibility, their malleability, their adaptability. It's hard to be nobody when you've been a laird, as Cecily once called me. When I shopped in Blythe I never took money. I never even handled the goods. I just pointed to the things and they said Yes Mr Comstock and took them out of the car. I never had to tell them the number of the car; they were supposed to know. The most I accepted was, 'Are you in the Buick today, Mr Comstock, or the Mercedes?'

It's not a pretty picture, is it. Or is it? Perhaps it'll be seen one day as quaint, or 'period', or they'll make posters out of people of my sort—my 'used-to' and 'were' sort— instead of fuzzy-headed black men and bikies in leather.

I'm in a new world, Margaret, and I'm too old to learn, and too self-critical to allow myself the same defences as my so-called friends at the clubs.

I'm in a state of anguish; I must stop. Forgive the pain of this letter. Burn it.

Yours sincerely, John Comstock

P.S.—How is Cecily? Tell me what you've been doing.

Margaret sat down straight away and wrote. She told him about the Love Wagon episode and Cecily's return to Sydney. She finished:

... if I thought my soul was a thing that could be seen if it were bared, it wouldn't upset me to talk of such things with you. You are different from the man who frightened me. You're out of your natural setting, as I am from mine. I imagine that if none of the signals that came back from people around us were recognizable, we'd go mad. The trouble for me in Turrumburrah is that only the generalized things are recognizable. I can't find an answer to myself anywhere. My inner self scarcely dares breathe, let alone step into the world. Yet I was confident enough last year. I fitted my circle too easily; that's one reason why I'm here. Perhaps we'll both find answers soon.

It was hardly enough, and she frowned, but the rest, whatever it was, wouldn't come, so she posted it. On her way back to Denhams', it came to her; she wrote again:

One weekend soon when it's getting too much for me, I'll fly up to Sydney. I would like you to meet my parents. You can have dinner with us if you would like to, or call in the afternoon if you'd prefer that. I know they'd welcome anybody who reflects anything of my life down here. I don't write as often as

I should and I don't tell them much. I certainly didn't mention that dreadful business with the cars. One mention of the Pastoralists' Club, by the way, should get my father interested in you; make what you please of that!

Autumn waned. Heavy rain fell for several days, then cold winds swept the country. After four days of sunshine, almost as if set by clockwork, tractors appeared in paddocks, turning up the fallow, ready for sowing. The towering silos took on meaning. Margaret sketched the enormous grain stores of corrugated iron that sprawled at the toes of the bank of silos, and the trucks in the station. She was happy working, and felt flattered, and very secure, when railwaymen, or farmers, stopped and asked her what she was doing. In Sydney she would have laughed at 'Aw, that's nice,' 'Gee, you're doin' a good job' or 'Makes you look at 'em, doesn't it? Never thought anybody'd want to draw them!' But standing in the railway yards after school, or on a Saturday morning, she felt in touch with what was happening around her. Edward even invited her to come out and watch him at work, and she was pleased, but said that she must first do some good work, because she wanted to feel capable of rising to the occasion.

And that was a compliment.

I'd never have forgiven myself if I took some scrappy distortion of Edward back to Sydney.

So she worked on, around the railway yards, and one day Tom Bowler stopped his utility and looked over her shoulder. She said, 'Not now, please. You can have a look in that case there, but this one isn't right yet', and didn't look at him. Tom sat on the end of the utility's seat, where the springs were weakened from getting in and out a hundred times a day, and thumbed through Margaret's sketches. There was even one of the quaint hook he used for fishing up the stop-boards from his water channel. He said, 'You been getting around a bit, Miss Ward.' She told him ...

Whoever he was ...

... 'I've got my licence now. Jim taught me and fixed it up with his policeman friend. I drive the Chev sometimes.'

She was laughing at herself, certain that whoever it was would know exactly what she was talking about, while she kept looking the other way, pretending to be abstracted. Her concentration for drawing was broken, but she rubbed in a few shadows and hid her smile. Tom said, 'By gee, I'd like to hang a couple of these, Are you goin' to have a show, or what? I'll bet there's quite a few people'd like to have the opportunity to buy one ... local scenes, you know.'

Margaret said, 'See Edward, would you, he's my agent.'

My agent! Let clever Edward handle that!

But when Tom started up, and she turned just in time to see him driving off, she was sorry she'd kept her face turned away; he was a friendly man, he seemed to understand Edward, he did want a picture. She looked at the case and found the one of his improvised hook on top of the pile. She wrote on the back 'Thank you, Tom', meaning to give it to him, but then something moved her and she wrote 'Neptune's trident', and then something more: 'Friend of the fisher of souls!' Then she scabbled it into a ball in her hand.

What a silly lot of rot to write on a drawing!

She woke early one Sunday morning. A heavy fog covered the land. There were empty beer bottles on the kitchen table, Jim's shirt from last night hung over a chair, and three ashtrays full of butts, so she thought there would be nothing to stop her having the car for an hour. She drove out the Parton road to old Dawson's, where the fog was even thicker. She parked the Chevrolet under an enormous red gum, looking very doleful in the mist, and walked to the fence. Her shoes were wet in a few yards, so she took them off and put them on top of a post, and climbed between the rusty, time-slackened wires. For a moment she wished she'd brought her sketching things, then she decided that it didn't matter, so long as she could remember the mood; she might do a painting later. So she wandered in the paddocks which Jenny had forbidden ...

... Edward and I ...

... on an earlier, harsher occasion, and gave herself over to the mist. She was still young, and the rare mists in Sydney were so much thinner, and so very different in character, with traffic always trying to do something, and the density of buildings around the Cross. But this was a blanket on the earth, a wetness that was soft and fertile. One felt that the earth responded, or would one day, when the sun was master again. Bedraggled sheep drifted past in lines, their horny feet following brown tracks to a tumbledown mushroom of hay she could discern in the distance. The trees were dolorous knights long past chivalry, scarcely capable of shielding an ant if the sun were out; but now everything was in the tonal range of grey and there was even an arm of water. She followed it and found that the paddock had a low spot, an area of twenty acres or more, filled with shallow water. Frogs croaked and drifts of fog changed the shape of all she saw; it was a remote, vaporous beauty; she felt she was eavesdropping. Suddenly, in the drifts of grey, this fen, this quag, there was a hooting, a honk; a swan came tromboning into view.

And at the same moment, I saw a man; for a second they were the same thing in my mind; then I saw the bird was black, and the man, though dressed in dark clothes, was no other than Edward; how could I mistake that sprightliness, that bounce of body, that floating presence of a man seeking rather than grasping, asking and waiting, wanting to be absorbed rather than to take possession. Now there was no doubt of myself. Why did I always think so much of what I wanted, so little of giving? If giving was the supreme thing in life—and the thought was new to me; it took Edward to bring it into my mind—if giving was the supreme thing in life—and up till then I had thought, at various times, that art might be, or sexual love—if giving was the supreme thing in life, why, here then was my moment.

But I waited.

The swan made its doleful cries, calling for a partner, or identity, or recognition, or the familiar sounds of the place it came from. Edward waded a few yards into the water, in his gumboots, and honked at it,

a surprisingly successful mimic. The swan swung its neck about and honked in reply. Edward hooted again; the swan ignored him. Edward made his sounds over and over, and sometimes the bird acknowledged him.

Really? Or a fluke, a coincidence?

No one should be surprised in such communion. Margaret moved quietly backwards, making no sound, till Edward and the swan were back in the mist. Sometimes she heard their cries, true and mimic. Once she felt she was out of observation, she hurried, hoping the mist wouldn't clear suddenly to reveal her. She took her shoes from the post and started the big Chev. Its purr was a disquieting sound after the scene she had witnessed, then it was reassuring, and normal again. She drove only slowly, even more slowly than the fog demanded, but she saw no sign of Edward's truck, which she guessed was down a lane where he often parked it in his haunting days, which seemed far back in time, in her experience; she wondered if time was always so swift, so abrupt, and if old people saw it this way. If they did, how fleeting human life was, when clocks and calendars kept drumming events past one's consciousness and whisking them out of reach; she'd promised herself a year of time out, and more recently, with Cecily, she'd half-contracted for the classic getaway of travel. Not that she thought it wouldn't be rewarding. She rather wished that what she had seen this morning had not been Edward, who was so troubling, so appealing, so downright helpless and demanding, but Cezanne, or Van Gogh; or Watteau, or anybody whose place in the scheme of things was known.

This told me something; that art, which I professed to be teaching—teaching if you please!—was an alternative to the guts of life as other people experienced it, or dodged it, or put up with it, or just went along; like cricket or sewing or gardening or baking custard, it had its ups and downs, but it wasn't all of life at all; the thought of art for art's sake, and art the religion to be spread as widely as possible, which were among my favorite themes in Sydney last year, was suddenly vanished. Art was a response to life, and it was made by people who chose it as an alterna-

tive, or opened their arms and let everything flow through them. Well, that wasn't me! Who had I been kidding? I wasn't open up to everything, or anything very much; and yet the hour I'd just spent had had its effect. Edward, in all his pettiness, his pathetic loneliness, his sheer distance from everything I'd ever cared about in the years of my life till now, was more moving than anything I'd ever known, anything I'd ever done. I went straight home and ripped up everything I'd drawn the last month, except the one Tom Bowler saw me doing. I felt I owed him something though I couldn't rightly say what; let's say that his natural response, his naked wish to own what I'd so easily thrown off, was a daunting tribute to art and a reminder to me that if I wasn't to get on next Saturday's plane and go after Cecily, I'd have a lot more to face before the whole thing I'd set myself was over.

4 Party in Sydney

Ponds was being good to Margaret. He rarely gave her extra periods when teachers were away, and he made opportunities to bring messages to her while she was teaching. He surprised her by praising the students' work, especially Michael Bunny's. One day he brought her a brochure about a state-wide painting contest for high school students; didn't she think that 'that extraordinarily talented young Michael there' should go in for it? At first she was suspicious, but Ponds was such a scrupulous man, and his motives, whatever they were, were hidden under his public service exterior; and besides, the competition was there, with its first prize of \$200. She agreed that Michael should enter.

Michael was fifteen, close cropped while most of the other boys had long hair, and he looked like the son of a military officer until he spoke. Then he was vague, and fey; he had the heightened sensitivity of adolescence without the aggression. The entry form required a parent's signature; Michael told Margaret, and Ponds, 'Oh yes, I'll go in it, if the old man'll sign it.' Questioned about parental resistance he merely said, 'Oh no, why shouldn't he sign it? He could do with the money.' Ponds wanted to find out whether the boy would be allowed any of the money if he won, but Michael went vague and said, 'It's only money; the old woman's getting shabby lately. Why not?'

Ponds said, 'Why not what?' but Michael looked over his shoulder. Margaret said, 'If I take you home tomorrow night and see your father, or mother, will that be all right?' Michael said, with no apparent enthusiasm, 'Sounds a great idea.'

So she borrowed John Dutton's Mini and took Michael home after school. Michael pointed to a paddock just beyond the front gate of Bunny's property and said, 'We're getting Edward to put some channels

in there. He said he was going to start today, don't know what happened to him.' But sure enough there was a delver and a trailerload of equipment under a pepper tree just inside the gate, and an old shirt tied to the top of the pile. Michael said, 'That's Edward's little tilt at Dad. Dad doesn't drive very straight. He's inclined to drive in the scrape there as much as the crown.'

Michael had been an almost motionless passenger, but as soon as the car stopped he made a dash for the house. The wire door was still flinging open when he disappeared in the passage. Margaret crossed the couch grass lawn slowly, trying to take everything in. It was an old mudbrick house with the pyramid roof pulled down like a bushman's hat. There were outbuildings set haphazardly around, like some temporary camp. Boobyallas and pepper trees were all that was offering as a garden, apart from some unpruned fruit trees and a few poppies growing along the edge of what might once have been a garden bed. The place was unkempt as a deserted house, except that there was family litter everywhere—broken tennis racquets, dented watering cans, an easel, a blackboard, shoes, a boy's pedal-car, a rusty gun, the bellows of a camera, the top of a windmill missing half its vanes ... The Bunnys seemed to have tested the interest in almost everything, and to have passed on with nothing tangible to show except rubbish. Margaret noticed a makeshift combination of bicycle and grindstone, with an old sword gleaming beside it. Then Michael reappeared, wearing a T-shirt and denim jacket instead of his school tie and jumper. He was barefooted, despite the wet earth. He called out, 'Hey! Miss Ward! Come and meet the mater,' and held open the bulging wire door in a parody of public school manners.

Mrs Bunny was a big woman. Her cotton print dress hung halfway between her knees and her brown golf shoes. Margaret noticed that she had no socks and wasn't wearing a bra. Her body was loose. She merely nodded to Margaret and turned to move an iron kettle on the stove. She opened it and poked in some wood. 'Just a bitta deal,' she announced, 'bitta pine makes a quick blaze,' and then, flatly, 'You'll have a cup of tea.'

She sat heavily on a shiny cottage chair near the stove and made it plain by her stare that Margaret should sit in the other. She looked her visitor up and down as if Margaret were something she had bought. Margaret felt selfconscious about having the entry form in her hand; it made her feel too official. She decided to say nothing till Mrs Bunny spoke. Mrs Bunny said nothing except 'Biscuits, Michael' and 'You'll have to give your father a hand' until the water boiled. Then she mumbled to herself, which Margaret took to be counting, because she ended with 'One for the pot!' and beamed on Margaret ...

... who wondered how this bovine thing could feel so at home. Even in her own home. In a world of human nervous systems perceiving and adapting, seeing and not-seeing. I mean, she was looking at me. I was just an object?

After the tea and biscuit ritual Mrs Bunny said, 'It's the drawing competition, I suppose, Miss Ward. I'd do my best to persuade his father, if only I could see how any good could come of it.' Margaret wasn't ready. She managed to say, 'Well I think it'd be a marvellous encouragement for Michael. He's extremely talented, you must know that. And it'd be good for the school, I suppose. And it's two hundred dollars. He really does have a good chance, you know.' Mrs Bunny's response was to look away and say, 'Go off now, Michael. Run away and help your father; he's over in the shed doing something with the machinery, for tomorrow. Off you go.'

Michael went like a model of obedience. Mrs Bunny said, 'It's no good, Miss Ward, he'll never break away; he might as well not try; there'll only be heartbreak if he does.' But when Margaret asked why, she would only answer, 'It's up to his father to decide, that's all.' And since she mostly looked at the stove and sipped her tea slowly, Margaret said, 'Then I think I'll go and see his father if you don't mind.'

And banged my cup down.

Mrs Bunny appeared not to mind. She was all resignation. She said, 'He's in the shed; you'll find him,' and moved her cup vaguely in no particular direction.

Margaret went out. As soon as she passed the chimney, she heard footsteps behind her. It was Michael, marching in step. He was grinning devilishly. 'Here's the showdown! Have you got the form? Lead on. And whatever you do, fight back; don't let him swamp you. Teachers can never argue with my old man; he beats them every time.'

Well, I gaped at that! What was I in for?

Michael said, 'Teachers pride themselves on being logical,' and he laughed again. But he led her to a corrugated-iron shed, in front of which stood a seed drill which Mr Bunny was repairing; Margaret could see boots, hat, greasy work pants and greying hairs on his chest, but nothing of his face. A heavy voice came up, 'Great ghost, I'll tear this machine apart but I'll get these cogs right!' It sounded biblical, the oath of a man who frowned on swearing. Michael said, 'Don't shame us, father; we've got a very important visitor.'

The old self-consciousness working by now, of course.

Mr Bunny said, keeping his face averted, 'If it's Bert Donaldson I'll hand him back his blessed machine and tell him he can tow it away to a tip or somewhere; it's no blessed good to me,' then he looked, and his interest was plain. Margaret was wearing blue cord pants and a burgundy jacket with a high collar and embroidery on the sleeves; it was something she'd bought at Rose Bay on her last trip to Sydney. Mr Bunny crawled out and straightened up, banging his spanner into a toolbox full to overflowing with cogs and spark plugs, nuts, bolts, harvester parts and a little museum of oil cans. He stood before her, not looking her in the eye until his hat was fixed on again; then he stared at her, his appraisal much quicker than his wife's. He was the owner of property; the woman before him might have come from some Arabian Garden of Delights; he merely said, 'Ah, the Art Woman,' as if the confrontation could be seen in a moral context only, and was likely to become an episode in some future *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Well, that was the end! He was a randy old bastard by the look in his eye, and the number of children chasing the chooks around the haystack in the corner of his yard. I thought I had him summed up. The best thing

I could do for young Michael would be to get him into this competition, and if he won it, it'd be the first step out of this barnyard.

Mr Bunny said, 'You're wasting your time, young woman, and when I say that, it doesn't mean you're unwelcome, because that's not so. No. You're as welcome as anybody coming to preach The Word. It's just that we draw a clear line between the person, for whom there is always charity, and hospitality, and the idea, which we may reject, or wrestle with, as we choose.'

Oh Lord, a nut! Jehovah's Witness or Plymouth Chook. One of *those!*

'You've had a cup of tea, I hope?'

This is going to be bad.

'Yes, Mr Bunny.'

Edward, Edward, what do I do?

'Then let's see the form.'

It sounds like the Idea made flesh.

'Hm, yes, hm. Of course, yes yes, of course. "Expected to show capacity for individual creativity ... submit folio which should not be obviously influenced by his instructor, teacher, or work of well-known artist ... intention of the judges to look for work which is clearly not derivative" ... yes yes, that's what I thought.'

'What did you say you thought, Mr Bunny?'

It was a turgid interview. Mr Bunny said the world had a religious basis and that everything one needed to know had been expressed in the Bible; that individualism was a sin against God, who had created our wills anyway; that there was no salvation in seeking our own destiny, this modern idea of 'doing one's own thing'; that the individual was totally unruly anyway, and that the only salvation lay in a community based on a religious view of life. If such a community did not shortly come into being, God might be expected to grow tired of the world he'd created and have another try.

Ho hum. Well, I mean, his views were mad, but what about poor Michael? Or me, how do I get away from this?

He said, at the end of the harangue, ‘Tell me why I should sign that form?’

‘Your wife needs some new clothes. Michael will win it; he might, you know. It would be two hundred dollars.’

Oh dear, that did lead to a burst.

‘You can’t deny your son the opportunity to try for success in something you mightn’t approve of. After all, he may not choose to carry on here living the way you think he ought to live.’

So did that. And poor Michael crumpled when he said he’d like to see any son of his break away from the Lord. I knew who the bloody Lord was. These bonds of flesh! Would I be the same, as a mother? Surely, surely never!

‘Because it’s art. Art. It doesn’t conflict with your religious ideas.’

‘Indeed it needn’t,’ he said. ‘Art is the handmaiden of religion; it’s always been so in the past, hasn’t it? Now I’ve seen young Michael’s paintings; I’ve see them, you know; you can’t fool me. If you can convince me that they’re not a denial of Christ, or some sort of diversion from Him, I’ll sign your form. I’ll sign it willingly, I’ll sign it joyfully, I’ll sign it with a gladsome heart!’

Gladsome, eh? Oh lord, I felt depressed. Michael was getting under the machine, whatever it was, as if he was accepting an enormous burden. I saw him reach for a cog his father had put on an oily rag, and start to manoeuvre it into place. I could have wept; I got in a rage; I really boiled over; I fumed at him ...

‘I forgive you, Miss Ward. You only see it your way, you don’t see the wholeness of the picture as I believe I do.’

So I drove home; a good job poor Dut wasn’t there to see the way I drove his Mini. I was in a rage, a raging, rageous outrageous rage! Dut had to calm me; I didn’t even care when he fondled me a bit and tried to kiss my neck. Well, anything was better than the bunny that lived by the Tuckarimbah Canal!

I got rid of Dut. I said ‘there, there’ to him and patted his hand, still in a rage of course, but pretending I was concerned at his indiscretion

in trying to make love to me, and smoothing it over, and I walked down to Edward's.

I said, 'Edward, you don't have to pull any punches. Am I going mad or getting hysterical, or something? I've been out to Bunny's ...'

And she told him. She glared into the fire and poured it all out; how she'd lost her temper with Bunny, and how he was wrecking his boy's life; he wasn't fit to have a talented son. When she finished, she looked up to see Edward was crying, his face all screwed up. He said, 'Well, you're lucky. The thing worrying you's outside yourself. What if you're all knotted up in yourself? You didn't look at me while you told me all that. And what about young Michael? What's he going through, or don't you know?' She felt she did; she started to answer him, but he went on, 'Oh, yes, I know you're always worrying about yourself, but if you won't dive in and grab all the bits, if you won't reconstruct all the elements of yourself, how are you ever going to be anybody, Margaret? You're not now, you know that.'

From Edward, who I thought was mild!

I said, 'I wouldn't know what you're talking about.'

He said, 'That Michael's going to come out of this all mucked up, like I am.'

He's sorry for himself! I flung it at him.

'You're a lot of help. All I'm getting is your load of worries, the ones you've been carting around for years.'

'What do you think you'll be like when you're my age? You don't know how to love; do you think you ever will?'

Will I? Will she? Will us?

Will we?

He said, 'Are you what I want? Are you what I need? If only you could give me a lead. Oh, yes, I know I'm older and it's up to me, but I'm one of these people frozen at a certain stage of development, or whatever it is they talk about in the psychology columns. You see, I'm not sure enough of myself to know if they're talking rubbish or whether they've got me taped. Silly, isn't it?'

I said, 'Well, Edward, you give a lead for once. All right, I'm being neurotic about Michael. I know he's only a boy. You give me a lead.'

So they undressed, thing by thing, slowly, and stood naked. Edward grew erect, and looked at the light; she nodded, and he turned it off. But still something was lacking.

A void, not between us, but both of us in a void.

Our personalities reaching for the other, but something fundamental lacking.

Edward got a rug, and they sat together on a plummy old sofa, the rug around their shoulders. He said, 'You've no business to be wasting your time with me. I'm the wrong generation, which is more than being too old. You should be in the swim with your own age, making the same mistakes as they do, tearing strips off each other, coming together and falling apart.'

'I've had my share of that. I came here to get away from it.'

'Why?'

'It's no good being hurt if it doesn't add anything, if you don't see yourself more clearly.'

'Always yourself!'

'That's the pot talking to the kettle, isn't it?'

Pot and kettle, spout and steam, that's all we are.

He said, 'You're really strange. Most young people have got confidence. They've got a certain number of abilities and they think they'll go through life in one triumphant sweep. They have heroes, nice black and white ideas.'

'You mean, you did.'

He said, 'Yes! Except there was no black! No black in me at all. No propensity for drunkenness, hysteria, or suicide, and precious little cruelty. I suspect I was very unusual, but you see, I didn't think so then.'

'I don't know if it's rare or not. It sounds it.'

'I really thought paradise was there for the entering. But I had to have an Eve.'

'And you got Jenny!'

And I put a hand between his legs.

Awaking pain of old fractured desires in a prickly, inquiring scrotum.

‘And thereby hangs a tale.’

‘Well, you tell it to me.’

Here goes.

He said, ‘Dawson was a go-ahead farmer, despite his mad religion, in a way that Bunny’s not. You’ve no idea how much he read about irrigation, how many experts he had out there telling him what to do. He wanted the whole of his property that could be watered ready for when the water was turned on.’

‘That was *your* big day.’

‘Ah, yes, I essayed the lyrical poet in prose.’

His buoyancy seemed false, or flippant; there was desire between them all right, but if he insisted on keeping his distance, how could she go on?

‘I vamped on a new-found theme of happiness achieved, of landscape greening, of history brought to flower ...’

It seemed so unreal, so quaint; was he serious, then? Or now? She drew her hand away, but he caught it and pressed it on her thigh.

I thought he’d pull out a hair!

But in the same movement she felt the urgency of the man, the need of the hidden person; she said,

‘You silly nut, you can leave your hand down there. Just there. And kiss me a bit. Go on, fancy having to tell an old married man like you. What are you? An old bachelor?’

‘Widower?’

‘Divorcee? What are you, Edward?’

We always get back to that, one way or another.

He said, ‘You sit round there with your legs over mine and I’ll tell you. That’s right.’

‘You’re a bit limp, Edward. Not bad for an old divorcee.’

‘That’s all right, you’ll keep. I’ll probably go off while I tell you this. It doesn’t mean we’re not in business.’

‘I wish you’d start.’

‘I’ll start on you.’

‘What with?’

‘He’ll stir himself.’

And he will!

Good!

He told her about Jenny: that she was the youngest of a large family, born years after the rest. That Dawson had been domineering, and the rest had been under his control. That Jenny from her earliest years had flared up whenever her father put pressure on; she always attacked when she was attacked. That her childhood had been a long alternation of tantrums and being spoiled. That she had been promiscuous in her teens, her name got about, and yet most boys didn’t want more of her once they’d been faced with her demands. That she turned relationships into contests, as if looking for someone to replace the father she’d conquered. That she lorded it over her mother, who hated her once this pattern became established. That she was curt with her brothers and sisters, contemptuous, however much she tried to hide her feeling, and she did try, because her contact with her family was much closer than with outsiders, most of whom shunned her. That during the war years, with an army camp in nearby Tilga, and later on, during the construction of the huge Tuckarimbah irrigation project, she had been the most vital, vulgar woman in the district. She could drink, and hold it, and flog a party back to life in the cold light of morning. Yet in all her wildness there was much strain and little enjoyment; something of Dawson’s restrictive puritanism clung to her however hard she tried to fling it off. She had no taste, and she wanted money. She was a challenge to everyone on the marriage market, those years, male or female. She was shameless in saying that old Dawson’s property would be hers, and her husband’s, whoever he might turn out to be. She was hard-driving; the Italian prisoners of war on her father’s farm came to dread ‘the shriekin’ missus’, as they called her. She

curried favour everywhere, got extra ration cards, had petrol for the family car when others were still clogging their engines with gas producers. She picked up men and put them down without falling in love. Then she fell for a shy, spectacled, quietly-spoken lieutenant in the signal corps, a man without fear, ambition, neuroses or spite. He was educated and balanced. He had a way of turning off her rages with a smile and some irrelevant suggestion, usually to do something she was bad at, or ignorant of. And she could never refuse the challenge. He was a good drinker too, at least as good as she was, but it made him quieter and more inscrutable. He left for Sydney, and then for the Middle East. He said he'd write, and he didn't. He was killed in Egypt, and Jenny seethed with her peculiar set of frustrations and aggressions. Edward was next; he flitted around her, and tantalized her. He was no mystery to her, in the sense of the circumstances of his life; she'd known him from a small boy. He had no challenge except for his damnable self-mockery which, since his self, at that age, seemed to include all the elements common to the area and perhaps the nation, was in some way a mockery of her, Dawson, Turrumburrah, the war effort—her whole world.

He said, 'She set out to catch me. To get me and break me.'

She said, 'Melodramatic'.

He said, 'All right, all right. I'll tell you. Listen. It was quite a courtship. First of all, I suppose you know, the reason we got the irrigation here is because they had to take the water through to the big soldier settlement area around Kyamba. The government wasn't very interested in us; we just got it on the way to those blokes. One of those big post-war promises, you know.'

'I don't, actually.'

They both said it together: 'Wasn't born then!'

'Everyone thought Dawson was a crank, but he'd made up his mind, since he'd be the first to get the water, that his farm'd be the showplace. He was going to be the guiding spirit for the district.'

'Like that stupid Bunny. Oh, he made me angry, Edward. I could hardly stop myself from hitting him.'

‘Do you have to interrupt?’

‘Then Dut tried to make love with me.’

‘I’m glad he failed; it means your lust’s unsated. Don’t kick me, especially not there.’

‘I will if you don’t hurry up and tell me about your whirlwind romance.’

‘Will o’ the wisp more likely. Oh, I goaded those two. I got a wedge between them and prised them apart. I stuck them together with myself.’

‘But why were you bothering with *them*, anyway?’

‘Never mind the Dawsons, let’s talk about us; we’re going to love each other like nobody’s business. We’ll have years and years ...’

But she checked: ‘I might go overseas with Cecily. I’ll probably see her this weekend.’

‘This weekend?’

‘I’m going to Sydney, I ...’

If it lessened his confidence, he refused to let it show. ‘Give my love to the Watchetts. And when you come back I’ll set you up in a little fibro cottage on a dusty street, chip heater for the bath and six feet of garden ...’

She pulled his ear. ‘You got tangled up with Jenny. And made your big speech.’

‘Ah, yes, I said this area’s dry. The rains are unpredictable. We’re at the mercy of the elements. We’re on the fringe of civilization’s outward push. We must take possession and bring an increase out of the earth.’

‘You’re raving like a Bible. Just tell me what you did.’

‘I said we are in the midst of nature, yet different. We must add something to it, yet be in harmony with it.’

‘You’re as bad as that horrible Bunny. I’m going to put my clothes on.’

‘*No, I’m not!* Bunny’s a nut! Mind you, the nuts should inherit the earth. Do you know what some men call their testicles?’ She gave a shriek of laughter. ‘You’re hopeless, Mr Rosignol.’

‘Don’t forget the “le”, if you please. If you take a man’s clothes off you must leave him his titles!’

But this was near the mark. She rubbed his chest and neck with her open hand, very seriously. She said, ‘That’s what’s with the two of us. Now look at me, Edward. Do you know this is one of the few moments this year I’ve felt properly alive? What’s that say to you? What’s it say about this Turrumburrah place?’

‘What’s it say about you?’

‘You can just be quiet. I don’t have to stay here, you know. I’m not bonded to this job. I can walk out whenever I like. I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to go the moment I feel dead and listless again. You know what? I’m nearly twenty-four. If I stay here next year I’ll be twenty-five. In this place. No, you don’t, I’m not going to fade out and die inside. I’m going to LIVE the rest of this year, or I’m getting straight on that plane and back to Sydney. You hear that?’

She was ready to fly into a rage at some stupid quip, but he merely said, ‘Right, we’ll start,’ and led her to his bedroom.

They made love, though more as friends who had been angry with each other, and were making up, than as lovers.

Though there was something to that too, and her vigorous young orgasm was a promise flooding into my life far better than anything that happened in the days before my Tom was conceived and life went wrong.

Well. I’m giving him a chance. He claims he used to be good and Comstock says the same; let’s see him prove it. He’s lively enough for forty-six and he certainly appreciates me. I’m nervous about taking on such an unknown quantity but I’d feel lousy if I went back to Sydney just now with nothing gained at all. But keep the fun flowing, Mister Nightingale, or it’s off I go. Oh, heck’.

‘I suppose I’d better get on the pill. What’s the doctor’s name?’

‘Oh, yes. I wasn’t thinking about that.’

‘Like hell you weren’t; you men are all the same.’

‘Don’t be surly, love, stay the night with me.’

‘Just an hour, Edward. I’d better go back to Myra and Jim’s. I’m not angry with you.’

He tried to chuckle. ‘I should hope not!’

‘No, don’t joke with me, Edward. Play games on everybody else, be as mad as a hatter if you like, but be dead straight with me. Now you’ve got to do that, all right? Will you?’

‘Yes.’

So they lay down and talked for an hour, and were very fond, though she could not quite keep out of her mind that all this was happening in an ill-kept town fading, through vacant blocks and dusty roads, into the western plains on which it had such an insubstantial grip, rather than in the density and wealth of her Sydney suburb with its harbourside homes, falling gardens and steps running down to the water. She scarcely knew this town which had helped form Edward, and yet, from all she’d seen so far, he offered the only hope it held for her. He was a mirror to all her problems and they had a chance to break out together; if not, there was always overseas with Cecily—something was sure to happen there. Six months was not such an enormous investment to make, and Cecily wouldn’t have enough saved up yet, so it had to be made. She said, ‘And what’s on the programme for tomorrow, Monsieur le Rosignol?’

He said, ‘I’m working out at Bunny’s.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yes, oh. You come out after work and we’ll see what we I can do.’

She said, ‘Right. You’re on.’

The next day was still, cloudy, close to a drizzle all day, but dry. John Dutton drove them out this time, and he stopped the car by the paddock where Edward was working. Michael’s brother Harry was helping Edward, and in the distance was Mr Bunny, finishing off the ploughing. It seemed natural to Margaret that Edward and Harry were having tea and fruit cake; she’d never put much effort into imagining what he might be like at work. Dut accepted a tannic brew of tea in the lid of the thermos, but she refused; Michael took off his shoes and tie. Harry

Bunny was morose to taciturn; he threw a clod at his brother's bare feet, but missed. Michael said, 'Sourpuss', sat behind Edward and close up to him, and began lobbing clods in Harry's direction. One burst; some specks fell in Harry's tea. He said sourly, 'You do that again, Michael, and see.' Michael landed more shells.

I thought Edward would move, or call for a return to work.

A second one, breaking, sent particles into Harry's tea. Harry would obviously have sworn, but Margaret's presence restrained him.

Five years older than Michael, more conscious of frustration, abnormality, the need to break out, he snarled at Dut, 'Don't grin, you weak-chinned idiot. You're only a schoolteacher.' Dut said, 'So? Where does that get us?' and Harry stood up and went through the motions of refastening his belt. One last shot from Michael landed right on his boot. Which was thick, but this was not the point. He made a dive for the younger brother, though whether to scrag him or hit him hard was not yet clear. Michael headed for the far fence, where there was a bag strung over the wires to give the tractor driver his line. He turned around when he was fifty yards away and sang out, 'Bigfoot! Clubfoot! Hammertoes! Clubfoot! Hammertoes doesn't know how to dance!' Harry flew into a blind rage. He said to Edward, 'Come on, let's get started'; at this stage it looked as if he was still intending to concentrate on the tractor and ignore Michael. He started the tractor and climbed into the seat. And Edward took the handles of the single-furrow plough they used for opening a furrow for the delver, and nodded to Harry, all this without more than a glance at the visitors; then Harry was off. Michael stationed himself in front of the tractor and went through the motions of a mocking dance. Harry was furious. He drove the tractor off line at Michael, who flitted away to a stump; Edward gave a curse and deftly forced the handles down. The plough shear nosed out of the earth like a submarine surfacing, sprayed clods left and right in a shiny, earthen wake, and then the plough slithered and kicked along the surface with Edward ...

Quite angry; enraged, in fact; professionally upset, I suppose.

... cursing at Harry and telling him to swing around and do the bit again. A stormy Harry obeyed, pretending not to see Michael's jeering. The tractor described a wide arc and regained the furrow, Edward yelled orders and the plough sank in again. This time Edward bellowed, 'And stay on line or I'll bury you, you headstrong bastard!' Though whether Harry heard it is another matter, because Michael was running barefoot to get in the way; once in line he lay on the ground, closed his eyes and clasped his hands as if holding a lily. The tractor coming closer made him grin, but something about the sound warned him, and at the last moment he twisted lithely. The tractor passed over him, with Michael wriggling outside the front pair of wheels and inside the right-hand back one. He was still laughing when the point of Edward's plough pushed the dirt up under him and flung him aside, with slices of earth on one side of his body. This only led him to give a great cry of 'I'm dead! Harry! HA... RRY!' before he lay still, pulling the smile off his face. How Edward missed him I'll never know! How he missed being killed by the tractor ...

When Harry reached the fence, he didn't continue along the wire, as the channel was supposed to; he swung back towards his brother. Edward cursed again and left the plough to drag alone behind. He ran ahead of the machine to Michael. But by now Michael was up, and Mr Bunny was off his tractor and striding across the paddock to see what was going on. The enraged Harry turned off the engine, jumped down and ran to Michael. They had obviously fought before; Michael wasn't going to let him close. He flung clods at his brother and skipped out of the way, faster on his bare feet than Harry in his boots. Harry was out of control. His father bellowed out, but it made no difference. Michael managed enough breath to yell out, 'Okay, Harry, you think you're someone. You let me do that to you? Are you game? You're not, you dirty big chicken!'

Bonds of flesh! They wanted to kill each other! At least, Harry did. And bloody Edward was just about ignoring me.

Or he was; because once Mr Bunny got near enough to make the boys hear him, Edward sat down, pulling Margaret's hand till she sat down too. He said to her, 'No regrets about last night?' She said, 'No, why should I? It was good. And we know where we stand. Aren't you going to do anything about those two?'

'They've got their father.'

It sounded callous, but I knew Edward; we could have been on a Parisian boulevard for all the notice he took of them. But had retreated to the fence while the father intervened in the slanging match. He roared at them: 'Harry! You think what you've done. You go to your room, and pray! Michael, go to that tree. Sit in the shade and cleanse yourself there!'

Even though there was no shade, the day being cloudy. Harry set off ...

At his age!

... obediently, though at times he turned and directed stares of hatred at his father and brother. And Michael approached the tree irreverently, whistling and flinging clods at it, shouting when they hit. But he sat down when he got there and stared about him as if occupied with nothing but the appearance of turned-over earth and the occasional box tree.

While Edward chatted. 'You've got to make an appointment with Bruce Williams as soon as you get home, and we've got to think about you moving in to live with me. I think you should, it's the only way to get to know each other.' He was fervent, as if the Bunnys didn't exist.

I said,

'Edward, I just can't think about that now. All this fighting. I thought Michael was going to be killed. Weren't you scared?'

He said, 'It's only life, dear girl, it has no value. It's easily replaced. Think of making love last night.'

Uh, uh!

I said,

‘Don’t you go on with that silly business! You promised me last night you’d be straight with me, you wouldn’t fool around with our relationship. Now that’s the very thing you’re doing now!’

He blazed back, ‘Yes, all right, I heard you. Do you think you’re on your own? You think I’m impervious to all these weirdos?’

Mr Bunny was approaching them.

Edward said, ‘But I’m letting them get on my nerves. I’m sorry, Margaret. You’ve wakened an old romantic thing in me. I’d like to sit in this field with you while the earth turned over and over, darkness and light, darkness and light, winter and summer, long days and short, starlight and windsleet. I know what I’m saying’s all soul-rot, but organic things are madness; look at these stupid Bunnys. You know what, I’d like to take something of our love and bury it in the earth where that stupid Michael got half-covered—you think I’m always fooling about! — and wait a season and see what grew. Oh, I could be ardent, my darling, if it quivered up the way my loveliest trembling nature does, and flowered.’

Well well well, so this was the youthful, ardent Edward of glorious promise gone off the rails! Oh, he did make me tingle; frightened me too a little. And his trouble lay in the flesh, the difficulty of believing that one’s very being was in the blood and bone, the skin and flesh! He wanted to be a permanent flower, or be the flower apart from the tree, to put it in his terms. And as for me, I had no real hang-ups, or that’s how I liked to think of myself, but I just couldn’t centre the world about myself or in myself. I was like a child, still floating through all my interests and attractions, still quite childish really, but starting to grow up now; and, heavens, how I loved this Edward squatting in the dirt, how I’d pull him into line and make him see some sense!

Bunny said, ‘Well, never mind them, let’s git on with the job.’

Never mind Bunny! I said,

‘Edward!’

... and I knelt by him, putting arms around him and feeling my strongest-ever burst of mother-woman-lover, and I said,

‘Edward, you darling, forget all that talk. It’s all very poetic but it keeps you locked in your delusions. The trouble is we haven’t told each other what we want. We have to be open with each other, open right up and not be afraid. It’ll be hard, but it’ll be worth it, you try me out and see.’

Bunny said, ‘Hem, that’s all very well; we got a job to do, Edward.’

But Edward lowered his head on Margaret’s shoulder and twined his thin fingers in hers.

Those old dams breaking, those long-important habits packing up to go away; there is such a thing as rebirth. You can’t come out fresh as you did once, but you can be ready and willing for all that’s on the way.

Edward said, ‘Margaret, it’s June, midway through our year. We’ve got plenty of time, haven’t we?’

I was still being selfish; I meant to complete the change in me.

I said, ‘We’ve got all the time that’s left, darling Edward.’

Meaning forty years, or fifty, whatever I’ve got left, or more, though of course he’s older; I never think of that.

Did she mean six months or did she mean forever?

Edward looked up, to turn his questioning eyes to hers.

‘Buggerit, Edward, I’m payin’ you to make me channels, not to go canoodlin’ there before me very eyes. What sort of example is that for a teacher to show young Michael?’

By now Harry was a stumbling, disconsolate figure at the far end of the paddock, but Michael was watching with relish.

I said,

‘Give him his pound of flesh, Edward, fix his wretched channels for him. I think we’ve shown him something.’

So Dut was cajoled into driving the tractor, while Mr Bunny went back to his ploughing, which was harder; and Edward wheedled that furrow through the earth, calling a halt every now and again while he studied the surveyor’s plans, after which he and Dut placed pegs, or moved bags on fences ...

And I went and leaned in the non-shade of Michael’s tree.

The boy kept a respectful distance at first, but after a while he asked the direct question, ‘Miss Ward, are you and Edward lovers?’

I said, smiling,

‘None of your business, Michael.’

I nearly burst out laughing. I said,

‘This tree’s not big enough for both of us; go and get in that stump over there, that can be your prison. Tell me when you’re feeling penitent.’

Obedient as ever, Michael moved away, but stopped. He struggled with himself for a while, then said, ‘I wish I was your lover, Miss Ward.’

I snorted. The Bunny boy! Though a nice kid, talented.

Michael moved to pick up a clod, but something abstracted in Margaret’s half-seeing glance quelled him. He called out, ‘You know Sue Adams? She rides home with me; she just lives down that lane. I think she’s a bit keen on me.’

I said,

‘Well, why don’t you do something about it?’

Anyway, I sent off the entry form. I signed it ‘M. Ward, art instructor, acting in loco parentis’. The Latin sounded grand. Edward wanted me to stay the night again; he wanted me to move in with him but I said I’d make up my mind after the weekend. Things were going fine; I didn’t want to rush anything, I’d probably do what he wanted but it’d keep till Monday. Or Tuesday if I took an extra day. And he said he’d drive me to the plane on Saturday morning, which he did.

I said to Edward, it’s an easier farewell than the Cecily one, as well it might be. He was very touching though; he didn’t want me to get in till the last minute because he didn’t want to see the door close and me swallowed up. Then I had one of those premonitions. People laugh at them and I tried to laugh it off, except that there must be times when people have them and they do crash, or sink, or fall down the cliff. I clung to Edward and even when the hostess ushered me in with her critical smile I had to dash back for a last embrace. He said, ‘I’m just a

bundle of nerves; I know I'm mad. You send me a telegram as soon as you arrive,' and I promised I would. Then I had to go past the hostess again and she kept her face turned away.

You know how they rev the plane up before they take off? I was sure it'd fall apart. Or it'd be weakened by the vibrations and when we hit an airpocket it'd fall to bits. We'd all go curling down held on to our seats by straps, with bits of wing floating past us and the engine hitting with a horrible thump and the petrol tanks exploding. I tried to tell myself at least we'd make a marvellous surreal painting but I couldn't laugh it off at all. And I was silly about the barley sugar she brought me, I said I hadn't long had breakfast.

Pea-dot, frog's egg, glint of wing; oh, Margy, be safe and be back quickly. Now I've got to hurry home and wait for your telegram and I've got to fill in the hours till I stand here again on Sunday, just on sundown. Drop back to me then and be safe and don't meet anyone in Sydney who's got no problems and sweeps you up and tells you to forget these funny places you've been living in. An Edward's come to judgement, darling, and your verdict makes me quite, or puts me down.

When Edward got home he found Tom on the sofa where he had sat with Margaret. Tom said he'd been to Denhams': 'She would go away the very weekend I need some help.' He'd been working on the *Unwritten History of Turrumburrah* booklet; he felt he wasn't getting anywhere; he needed new ideas; he needed someone working with him that people would respond to; they didn't like him enough to want to bother with him.

His air of failure bites deeply into me; do I have to find a way out for him as well? I ought to make him jealous; I ought to tell him about that sofa ... no.

'Well I've got a weekend to kill. I'll come round with you. Fire a few ideas at me. Where are you up to?'

His son said, 'Just about the only material I've got so far is about you. How do you like that?'

Edward said, 'You didn't get that job at 2BL, then? Who beat you to it?'

'No, I didn't. They only advertised it because it's in their charter that they've got to. They gave it to Michael Prince, silly little fop that he is. Look, honestly, he doesn't know music, he doesn't care about trends, he's just so limited. But he's sweet with Reg Crosby. And that's all there is to it. Lovely, isn't it? They wouldn't know talent if they saw it.'

I thought talent was creative, and what did my boy create since he left off Meccano?

'Okay, this booklet. What sort of stuff are we after?'

Tom threw down a shabby folder, mostly filled with jotted notes, newspaper cuttings and a few faded photographs. 'There it is, the whole lot. At least it's got the right title.'

'Come on, we'll go for a drive. It's better than sitting around waiting for inspiration.'

'Yes, it is a bit of a pigsty, isn't it? I do hope Margaret Ward moves in, she might keep it clean. For a few months.'

Bitch-man! Man-bitch, male-bitch, my-bitch, oh dear, oh dear, what shall I do with Tom?

Meanwhile Margaret was looking out of the plane. A man had sat next to her, though the two seats opposite were vacant, and she was grateful for the window. Whenever the plane bumped, or lurched, her inner trembling increased, and she needed something outside herself to focus on. The man seemed to be from a station, though he could scarcely be the manager; the bookkeeper, perhaps? The storekeeper? The tutor? Did they still have such things? He had a mousy face and a cheap tweed coat, and he made his interest plain by pointing things out to her as they circled Blythe: 'That's the gaol, not many in it these days. There's the new War Memorial Club, there, with the swimming pool. They finished it too late for last summer but it'll be really busy in a few months.' As the plane lifted and moved on its way to Sydney, he said, 'I take it you're not from Blythe. I don't think I've seen you in the streets, have I?'

She said, 'No, I'm not. It's not a town that interests me very much.'

But flying over Jingellic betrayed her. For several moments she had that disturbing feeling of having been here before, and at the very moment when she remembered the flight with Comstock when he did his terrifying stall turn, the mousy man tapped her elbow and pointed: 'That's Jingellic, down there, a very famous old station. It's up for sale, I believe, or sold, I'm not sure which.'

She said, 'Yes, I know. The sale hasn't gone through yet.'

So of course the man said, 'Oh, you know John Comstock, then?' and a treacherous little smile played round his lips.

She said nothing.

He said, 'I had some gay old times with John, John and I. I'm an accountant, I do the books for a lot of the big stations, their tax returns, all that sort of thing. I'm pretty familiar with most of this country.'

They were flying under enormous wads of cumulus, which formed a broken cover; the plain below was dappled. Just behind the wing was a spotlight patch, with the trees scattered far apart, tiny calligraphic squiggles on the worn, faded baize of Jingellic's pastures. 'Haven't had much rain out this way,' the accountant said, 'but there's a bit starting to come through now. Nice, the young grass, isn't it?' She gave no answer. 'I suppose John's got rid of all his cattle, then?' She stared at him. She said, 'I'm sorry, I wasn't looking for small talk. What caused his breakdown?'

The mousy man was pleased to get the opening. 'Well, John's a most unusual sort of man. I've known a lot of these squatter types over the years, there wouldn't be many in the area I don't know ...'

Next thing he'll be patting my knee.

'... and I'll say this for John, he was a perfect gentleman.'

Among other things.

'But he was a mixture, there's no getting around that. He could be a real devil when he wanted to be. And yet he was very generous. There's a lot of things in Blythe would never've got done if it hadn't been for John. And he was a very hard man in business, the same man.'

Woofle woofle.

‘You were wondering about the breakdown. I suppose he’s over it now?’

‘I couldn’t say.’

He stared at her. ‘I wouldn’t like to cross John, he wouldn’t be a good man to tangle with.’

She countered: ‘Are you going right through to Sydney? Or are you getting off at, where do we stop?’

‘Orange.’ He nodded. ‘Yes, I’m getting off there. Quite a bit of business to do in Orange.’

She said, ‘Then we haven’t much time to talk.’

The tale which the mousy man took pleasure in retailing to her was a sordid one. Mrs Carter, Comstock’s housekeeper, had been looking after her granddaughter, a simple-minded girl of seventeen whose mother had left the girl’s father and gone to Queensland with another man. The girl had been left at Jingellic and had lived there four or five years. She had taken to following Comstock around. This used to annoy him; later, he had taken advantage of her. Mrs Carter had guessed, and protested; Comstock had suggested the best thing she could do was leave, and take the girl, whose name was Marie, with her. Mrs Carter said she had nowhere to go and was unlikely to find anywhere where the girl would be safer, if only her employer would control himself. Comstock had said he’d try ...

I wonder if Cecily knew?

... but if anything happened, Mrs Carter only had herself to blame. Thus was created the very situation Comstock was least able to handle; there was sexual excitement with a social inferior, no self-control on the other side, and Comstock’s abandonment of responsibility. The story ended with an accident on the airstrip. The girl was hit by, Comstock said, the tailplane of his Piper Cub; she lay in Blythe hospital for several days in a coma, then she died. Comstock had told the police he had had no idea she was anywhere near the plane; she must have been on the far side of his shed when he got it out; she must have run after it when he

got the engine started; the first thing he heard was a thump and a horrible cry.

The weedy accountant left no doubt that he thought this was just a good cover-up, and that if Comstock hadn't been who he was, the sergeant would have asked a good many more questions. He said, with a knowing ...

And lecherous.

... smile, 'She was running after him, there's no doubt about that. She wanted him to take her with him, or ...'

Margaret said, 'I see. Thank you. I hope you get all your business cleared up in Orange,' and moved past him ...

Brushing his sleazy knees.

... to another seat right at the back, near the hostess's seat ...

Where I sat quivering and staring out the window, with no relief from landscape this time. We were too high; the trees were all gathered together in a jowly blur, like a man with five o'clock shadow. The earth had no colour and the clouds were leaden, starting to pack together as we got nearer the hills. Comstock! And the poor simple girl! Marie! No wonder he went strange.

I don't want to see him. I do!

I'll be sick. He's supposed to be coming to dinner with my mother and father. Tomorrow. Oh dear.

Poor Comstock, caught right out, caught in a trap that almost describes him.

I'm always worrying about personality; mine, Edward's and everybody's. Is that all we are? If you describe the trap we're in, the situation we're stuck with, the permanent props we've got to support us, have you described everything we are?

What if I'm pregnant?

Calm down, Margaret, calm down, Margaret, calm down!

The plane fell a few feet. Margaret felt she was going to be sick, but with an effort of will she was able to keep it down. Then she fingered a magazine, but it was useless, so she sat there, miserable, queasy, but

gradually calming, until the hostess said, 'Fasten seat belts, please. We'll be dropping down soon to land at Orange.'

While father and son drove round Turrumburrah. Edward said, 'You can have all my Jack o'Boon stories, if you want to use them.' But Tom was unimpressed. 'Oh yes, those. Oh yes, I suppose we should have one or two. There's a good photo in there I was going to use; I suppose there's got to be something to go with it.'

Edward said, 'Well, if you hate the place the way you seem to, why are you writing about it?'

Tom: 'If I do this well, it's my stepping-stone out. Reg Crosby knows some of them at Random Publishing, you know, the magazine people. He says he could put in a word for me, but I've got to have something to show.'

Edward: 'Bob Beazley lives just down here a bit. What about him?'

'And what's Bob Beazley's claim to fame?'

'He had eight or nine League clubs after him, not so many years ago, but he preferred to stay here. There might be something there for you.'

'Lessons in masculinity; is that the idea, father? I suppose you feel you've graduated now you've got Margaret. I wonder if she'll see Comstock in Sydney?'

On the nerve again.

'Well we'll see Bob whether you want to or not.'

Bob's drive was half a mile down the edge of a paddock, with a channel the other side of the fence. Twice they bumped over poorly made culverts where Bob had led the water through; and there was a boggy spot in the track where the car almost skidded into the grass. Tom said, 'So this is what happens to ageing football champions.' But the Southern Cross windmill was turning vigorously, its vane downwind, and Bob himself was at the gate to greet them.

He had a gumboot on the stay of the gatepost and was opening his tobacco. He called out 'Howareya, Edward?' from twenty yards away and

then, as they walked over, his chins fell in festoons as he smiled: ‘Ya got the young feller withya! You’re not out to buy a property, I suppose?’

Tom gave a thin-lipped smile. Bob kicked the gate-stay: ‘Only thing I can get to hold me up. Governmen’ subsidies not much use.’

He rolled a cigarette before starting the next phase: ‘And what brings yer out this way today?’ Tom looked to Edward, who told him of the projected booklet.

‘You wanta have a look at the skeletons in me cupboard?’

Tom told him they’d heard that in his prime as a footballer several Melbourne League clubs had been bidding for his services; weren’t there a few stories he could tell about that, and why he stayed on with Turrumburrah?

‘Like, what sort of stories?’

Tom said, ‘What we’re after will be pretty gossipy, I suppose. Over-the-bar yarning ... the sort of stories families bring up when they’re together. Nothing scandalous or scurrilous, just the sort of stuff that’s in the air and nobody’s ever bothered to write it down.’

Bob had his elbow on top of the gatepost, which was shielded from the weather by a square of corrugated iron bashed flat and nailed. He scraped a horny fingernail over the metal and frowned. ‘Aw, I dunno. I can’t think of much. There were a few of ‘em after me. But I’d just got the farm, only been on it a couple of months and I’d just got the house set up, that’s, like that’s just after Beryl and I got married. We had young Brucey on the way. There wasn’t much to take me away, you might say. I suppose it would have been good down there in town, but I dunno, we had some pretty good nights in there at the old clubrooms, one way and another. I seen your Dad in there a couple of times, when he shoulda been home lookin’ after you!’

Bob chuckled. ‘Eh, Edward? Well, never mind, you had plenty of time on the loose since then. I hear you’re doin’ all right for yourself now, anyway.’

Somewhere among these loosely allusive remarks was the thing Tom Dawson was after and the reason why the history was unwritten; the air

could, to a certain extent, be trusted; the printed word, never. That was for the official line, and the official line was best kept at a distance, if a man was to have any sort of life at all. Tom tried; 'But I heard you could have played with Richmond while Jack Dyer was in his heyday. Do you ever have any regrets about that?'

Because the clubrooms, when he was a boy, were vertical corrugated iron, with a dirt floor and cold showers; and the players, when they ran on the field, had to duck under the inch and a quarter cable, or jump it, and run the risk of being laughed at if a footy stop caught and tripped them; full backs judging in which direction to kick had to cope with swarms of hometown children jeering 'Y' animal' or 'Chewy on your boot!' And Bob could have played for Richmond, and won a premiership on the MCG.

Bob was uncomfortable, not at the question, but because of Tom, who lacked the masculinity that drew an easy response. He said, 'Well, I suppose it woulda been good. But we had a few wins in here, you know. Oh, no ...' he looked around his farm '... It's been all right.'

And that, effectively, was the interview. They had tea with Beryl, and looked at Bruce's graduation pictures; the boy was now a vet, 'doing real good he is, over at Tailem Bend in South Australia, there.' Beryl asked Tom what his prospects were; he said, 'Just to get this job done as well as I can, Mrs Beazley, and hope it leads to something.'

Bob said, 'Fraid I haven't been much use toya,' and Beryl, more or less at the same time, 'You never know, something might turn up.' But Bob's wife had heard his apology; she said to Tom, 'Did you ever see Bob play, Tommy?'

How many years since I called him that! Two when she left me, five when they went to Sydney, fourteen when he came back. The week before they took him away, I took him to the grand final at Tilga ...

Tom said no, he hadn't, but Edward burst in: 'Yes you did, Tom. Don't you remember? We sat up on the cabin of Carlo Tomasini's veggie truck. Bob was playing that day, was he ever!'

Now Bob smiled, happily, for the first time: ‘Ooohh, yes, we had a win that day! And on their home ground it was. They rigged things that year; forget how they managed it; they had two finals played on their ground that they were in themselves. Never done ‘em any good, any’ow.’ He disposed of Tilga’s footy club with a nod of the head.

Tom said, ‘No ... Did I go with you?’

Bob grew enthusiastic. ‘It’s worth rememberin’, I can tell you that. They thought they had us, but we got up. We got up!’ And now Beryl joined in: ‘That was the day I brought Brucey home from Melbourne; he’d been down to have his teeth fixed up; poor old Mr Forthright was a bit far gone by then ...’

Tom said, ‘I remember him! What happened to him?’

Beryl said, ‘Well, the drink got him in the end; he was all right for just simple things like a bit of a hole or a simple extraction, but anything complicated, you couldn’t really trust him. I took Brucey to Mr Bartholomew, in Collins Street. Vi made the appointment; he was her man. Well, the train was running late and when we came past the ground, I knew it was the last quarter. My watch had stopped but you could see by the way everyone was going on. They were all jumping and running everywhere. Tilga had white with a red V and Turrumburrah ...’

Bob Beazley roared at her. ‘You stupid female! Get a can outter the fridge. If you can’t get your facts right you better do somethin’ useful. They were in red and white stripes, up and down stripes. They were still wearin’ their prewar jumpers; it was an old set they dug up. They didn’t have any money for new jumpers those days. Go on, get a can out.’ Then he prepared to grow expansive. ‘Coupla years later, the wool boom, we were all on clover. Knocked down the old sheds ...’

Beryl dropped two cold cans in his lap: ‘Anyway, don’t spoil my story for a few lousy stripes. I looked out the train and I could see Bob take a mark. There were dozens of ‘em on to him but I could tell it was him by the way he fell. I grabbed Bruce and pulled him over, but then we went through the trees. I said, I got all excited, I said, ‘Brucey, your Dad’s going to kick the winning goal, I just know he is! I just know he

is!’ Well, there’s all those trees by the railway line where you can’t see a thing, and then we pulled into the station. Bob said he’d leave the car there for me to come on down, but he hadn’t left the key, the silly ass. I was furious! I threw all our gear in the car and then Bruce suddenly remembered he had to go to the lavatory. Well, look, we’d never’ve got there but old Mr Jensen gave us a lift ... the gates were open, we got in for nothing ...’

‘That’s the part she really likes.’

‘Shut up, Bob Beazley. When I got to the ground I found I had the spare key to the car in my purse after all, but it didn’t matter, we were there. Well! Turrumburrah were two points up and that horrible Dudley had the ball. I thought we’d lose for sure, but Bob flattened him and got the ball, and the bell went! I nearly went off my head!’

Bob ripped the ziptops off the cans. ‘I was right in the big bugger’s way; couldn’t very well squib it. By Jeez, I was sore after that for a coupla days. Any’ow, he dropped the ball, that was the main thing! Well! Whereza glasses? You expect our visitors to drink outa the cans? Young Tommy’s working on the newspaper; they don’t drink outa cans in there. Eh? And Edward ... Edward’s one of our oldest friends, aren’tya, ya old nightingale!’

Bob flashed them a tremendous smile, all effortless gold and warmth. ‘Ya remember that day, Tom, doya?’

And Tom did, a little; that Tilga were in mothbally red and white, and Turrumburrah in faded navy blue, with the TFC monograms turned pale blue from laundering; that one man on the Turrumburrah side had a peculiar knitted helmet on, like a balaclava, though of course it was in the club’s navy blue ...

‘Terry Johnson! Terry Johnson! Deformed from birth. His ear was all twisted, wasn’t it, mum? You saw it, didn’tya, that day he came out here without his jigger on? Deaf on that side. Couldn’t hear footsteps, we always used to say. By Jeez he was game! By Jeez he played a good game that day, best on the ground he’da been.’

‘They all reckoned you were, Bob.’

‘Shutup, Beryl. Get another beer out. You remember him, don’tya, Edward?’

I smiled; I did; and I remembered Tom snuggling next to me on the top of the cabin, and I warned him not to swing his legs because he’d break old Carlo’s windscreen wipers; and how Leo Edwards and his wife and three or four more of them from Parton got up on the truck and started barracking for Tilga; I suppose they were trying to tease me; but that warmth in my side was the living thing for me that day. Tom was off to Sydney the Monday after, and that was really when I lost him, this stranger-boy of mine. Now look at him sitting there; what do I give him to fix him, mend him, rebuild him, what does he need to make him right? I ought to give him Margaret, not that she wants him—I hope she doesn’t—but I need her too much myself.

Tom said, ‘Why exactly did he wear that thing? I mean, why did he have to have it to play football?’

Bob said, ‘Well, you see—help yourself, Edward, go on, thereza can—he daren’t get a knock. He was a very bad bleeder. What’s the word? Go on, you’re a newspaper man. You know, they can’t stop’em bleeding ... heema, heema ...’

Tom said, ‘Haemophilia, that’s what they call it.’

‘Yeah, heemerfeeler, I knew it was heemer-something. Yes, he dairsn’t start bleeding, especially that deformed part, or he’d be in real strife ...’

The sparkle was going out of the exchange; Tom said, ‘What eventually became of him, then?’

Bob grew sombre: ‘Well, he died of it. He had a car smash, just off the Kyamba road somewhere it was, and he was unconscious, or they reckon he musta been knocked unconscious, and he hit his head on that side. Poor bugger bled to death; he was dead before anyone found him.’

There was a silence. Bob said, ‘Wasn’t much good, was it?’ Sunlight poured through the farmhouse window. Beryl picked up the photo of her son and put it on the mantelpiece, under the phone book, as if to keep it out of harm’s way. Tom and Edward stood up; Beryl asked them to

come again, look in whenever they were out that way. Tom picked up his little folder of notes, and Bob said, 'Wasn't much good toya, I'm afraid. Anyhow, I enjoyed the yarn.'

Leaving took another ten minutes, of course; as they drove down Bob's bumpy drive, Tom said to his father, 'Let's go down to the Tilga ground, while there's still a bit of light. I'd like to.'

Margaret took a taxi to her parents' house. While not openly resentful that they hadn't met her at the airport, she felt they might at least have had the door open. She took out her key. The hallway was empty, and the lounge beyond it. She went straight to the little balcony off the lounge, overlooking an edge of harbour. In among the mahogany gums and beyond a clutch of gigantic elms, was the round house; it had been built when she was first able to crawl out to the balcony; she remembered dragging herself on to the sofa and watching the workmen, and wondering why it wasn't square, and why the roof was flat. Later, she had gathered that the house had been the centre of a dispute between the architect, his client and the Woollahra Council, and that the State Supreme Court had overruled the council and allowed the building to progress.

Looking down a row of private swimming pools, some smart, some pleasantly dilapidated, and rusty rails leading into the water from wooden boatsheds, built simply, like early garages, she felt herself welcoming, yet holding back, the rush of relief that came with being where man was master and overtopped his environment. Or did he? She went through to her parents' bedroom, which commanded the best view in the house. The languorous harbour lay underneath her, with yachts and pleasure boats, with destroyers at anchor and a grubby-sided merchant vessel moving down the bay as if drawn by a thread. The bridge spanned the back of the view and the sails of the opera house gleamed; there were Pinchgut and Garden Island docks ... She noticed another vessel anchored half a mile out from the window; seamen were hauling in the last of some scaffolding over the side; the hull was a uniform grey, and

the Blue Peter was flying from the mast. Departure! And she was home! Why was she touched by the boat's imminent going? She recalled that her father had a telescope somewhere in his drawers, and was going to look for it, and throw her attention out to the details of the scene; but it would mean looking through his things ... and she hadn't been to her room yet, or found her parents.

Behind her she heard her mother's voice: 'Hello, pet. I didn't hear you come in. I just noticed your bag in the hall.'

Home! And these simple words were all that marked it, all that could ever be needed. Her mother said, 'How brown you are, how healthy! My darling, I can see it's been good for you!'

Mother would never say how long it is since I was here, or ask; what will I say? I said,

'Is he here? Where is he?'

Mrs Ward pointed down. 'In the workshop. Doing something to the carburettor; one of the carburettors, I should say. He'd hate people to think it only had one.'

The room seemed to gain resonance, to be poised in air. Mrs Ward said, 'Your friend rang, Mr Comstock. He said that if it was all right, he'd call about five. He said he was going out later, though I think he made that up.'

If only I could tell her about poor Marie. I don't want to be alone with Comstock, yet I want to confront him with it.

'There's some salad things on the table, darling. Your father and I have already eaten. Would you like me to sit with you, or would you like to come in here with me when you've finished?'

Mother; not demanding, keeping her distance, playing cool. I said,

'No, you stay with me, mother, and I'll try to tell you some of the things I've been doing.'

Mrs Ward brought things in, and took them away; then they sat on the balcony overlooking the round house. Mrs Ward said, 'We've had some storms, the last few weeks. Did you read about them? A new block of flats just down there had their roof blown off, there wasn't anyone

in them, fortunately. I was lying down, reading, and suddenly I noticed everything was very still, and dark. These big ugly clouds were creeping over the bridge. The wind seemed to be a little way behind, then it came with such a whoooosh! All the little boats were going helter-skelter for shore when it hit them. There must have been half a dozen tipped over just out in front of us. The poor things seemed to be splashing around for ages before anyone was game to come out and rescue them.'

I said,

'Mother, did Mr Comstock talk to you at all, about himself?'

Mrs Ward, with her blue rinse and tiny hands, said, 'No. Does he often talk about himself to strangers? No, it was quite a formal conversation really, just completing the arrangement. You did tell me to expect him, when you wrote.'

Mother's lonely. 'I'll write more often in the next few months, mother, I'll really try. It's just that I seem to get caught up, and I know you don't know the people, and I'm not very good at describing them in letters so it's hard to chatter away when I know you won't be able to visualize what I'm telling you.'

'But, pet, I can visualize you. If you tell me what you're doing ...'

Blast!

Mr Ward came into the lounge; big, florid, black-haired though older than Comstock, or Edward; supremely self-confident, dextrous though heavily-built; T-shirt showing his powerful frame; hands glistening from the solvent fluids he'd been using on his car engine; carrying an elaborate carburettor wrapped in a clean piece of rag. He faced his wife; gilt beading on the rims of her spectacles, hair brushed up and back, thin gold chain at the wrist, and trailing from the arms of her glasses; boutique clothes, black shoes with a pindot pattern: 'So you got first go at all the stories?'

Strangely unpleasant, how he sees other people's experiences as conversation-fodder; it genuinely never crosses his mind that people's beings have been affected by what they're telling. He's quite overbearing to the nurses, patronizing to the other surgeons, except perhaps two or

three he regards as being comparable, if not exactly equal. I was groping for something to say that would get rid of him. I said,

‘You’re busy on the car, father?’

Edward would have got it straight away.

Mr Ward gave an explanation of what he was trying to do with the Jaguar’s carburettor—or one of them—and why it was much more difficult on this latest model than it had been, and how he was going to machine one part of it differently: it was succinct, expert, and quite boring. His fingers touched, probed, and marked imaginary lines.

Just another operation. And what does mother do? Tugs the curtain to make it hang straight, dabs at the grandfather clock with her feather duster; appraises the steel engraving of Rushcutter’s Bay, then stands near the decanter table; retreats to her style, her polished mode, which is probably all he’s left her. Has mother had any lovers? He has. He’s probably best known briefly, when everything that’s obvious is impressive. How long would it take a woman who wasn’t living with him to see what a one-track, inflexible, high-gear mind he’s got? If something can be grasped the way he grasps things, good; if it can’t, it doesn’t exist. How long? About five minutes, if they had any nous. How could they find him attractive?

Mrs Ward said, ‘We’re having a visitor at five, Brian. Mr Comstock, the man who used to own Jingellic’

‘Jingellic; where’s that?’ He barely looked up. Mrs Ward said, ‘It’s near Blythe, in what we must now call Margaret’s country. We drove past it, a few years ago.’

Expecting every room to be air-conditioned, when mother doesn’t really mind the heat; she lets out the tension in pointless complaints. He wants his creature comforts, which is really healthier than her refusal to define what she wants and demand it.

‘Who is he?’ abrupt, wanting information handed to him right way up.

‘Who is he, Margaret? What should we say?’

Here we go.

‘He’s very wealthy. He’s a retired grazier. He has a lot of stocks and shares. He used to be the second most arrogant man I know, but he seems to have changed a lot.’

‘What changed him?’ as before.

‘You’ll have to do a bit of detective work there, father, if you’re interested. I couldn’t rightly say.’

Her father preferred to put out challenges of his own: ‘Why are you interested in him?’

‘Cecily Martin was involved with him for a while.’

‘Is that the girl who’s going overseas?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you going with her? How long are you staying in that place, what’s it called?’

Bang, bang, quiz quiz quiz.

‘Turrumburrah! And I don’t know!’

‘Sounds a one-horse town. Have you got a boyfriend down there?’

Yes, and he’s forty-six and you’d think he was mad. Yes, and I slept with him last night and the night before. And he wriggled the single-furrow plough so he didn’t hit mad Michael. And a lot of other things!

‘Don’t you want to hear about Mr Comstock?’

‘I want to hear about you before I go and widen the throat of this thing. You never write to us. You on a scrip?’

No, and I must see that Dr Williams.

‘I see you’re not. I’ll get McLean to write you one. It’s about all he’s good for. We had a heart case last night, one of McLean’s patients ...’

‘I’ll manage for myself, thanks, father.’

‘You haven’t told me much, have you?’

She stared at him. He said, ‘Hmmp. When’s he coming? Five. I’d better get on to this or I won’t be finished ...’

‘He’s a member of the Pastoralists’ Club, father.’

‘Is he? They’re mostly has-beens. Did you say your friend got transferred to Sydney? Comstock’s girlfriend?’

‘That’s right—Cecily.’

‘Why did they move her?’

Margaret looked at her mother, who was facing away, fingering a superb chair with Chinese dragon arms, but listening hard for all that. ‘Do you want to hear the real story, father?’

The surgeon said, ‘I’ve got one minute if you’re in the mood to tell me,’ and he put the carburettor into the hand by his side.

Margaret said, ‘I might tell you tonight, depending on Mr Comstock’s mood—and whether you’re listening properly.’

‘Full of conditions, aren’t you? All right, five o’clock. Is he staying for dinner?’

Mrs Ward turned: ‘I fancy that will depend on how welcome he’s made to feel.’

Mr Ward said, ‘Then it’s up to you two,’ and left.

Staggering!

Mrs Ward checked her watch against the grandfather clock, and moved to open the glass face of the clock, but Margaret asked her not to.

‘Mother, why don’t you throw something?’

‘Perhaps I’ve failed him too.’

‘Oh, mother, please don’t be silly. Have you ever met anyone who could have succeeded with him?’

Mrs Ward said, ‘Before I try to answer that; Margaret, you do have a friend down there, do you? Is that why you don’t write to me?’

‘Yes, mother. He’s a strange man, a very odd man indeed, but I think I might love him, I think perhaps I do. Or I don’t know really. I want to tell you about him, but not just now ...’ and she gestured to where her father had stood, with his carburettor which he was going to alter.

Her mother said, ‘Let’s go on the balcony and look at the round house. Can you remember when they were building it?’

‘Yes, I do, those trees weren’t so high then.’

‘No, they weren’t, not by a long chalk.’

Don’t be wistful, mother, I need you strong and active.

‘You used to put sticky fingers on the sofa, so I started to leave a facewasher by the door, but you’d drop them over the edge. You were a little devil.’

Margaret was excited. ‘I can remember that, mother. I used to hope they’d go in that old man’s window, but I could never throw them far enough.’

Mrs Ward said, ‘Mr Thoreau. He went back to France. He knew what you were trying to do. He used to bring them back to me every now and again.’

Margaret said, ‘Mr Thoreau, that’s right. Another Frenchman,’ and her mother looked at her, waiting.

Mrs Ward was enchanted by Edward’s name; she imagined him to be a round-bellied, chubby, smiling man with Gallic manners, impetuous and charming, brisk but graceful; Margaret told her that he was a channelling contractor, and realized how little she knew of his work, his background, and his life between Jenny and herself. She said, ‘I’ll draw you what he looks like, mother!’ and got her old sketch pad from college days; she drew Edward on a tractor, Edward at the plough, Edward driving, Edward comforting Johnny, the mad old axeman. She drew his nose, his way of straightening his fingers and twitching them when he was excited or amused; she drew him hooting at the swan, that morning in the mist, then she said, ‘Now I’ll draw him as he looks when he’s being thoughtful and fond, because he’s really very nice, mother.’ This time she drew him as if seen by firelight, with dark around him; the view was over one shoulder, and it was only when she saw her mother smiling that she’d realized she’d drawn his neck and shoulder without a shirt. Her mother said, ‘He seems a very mild man. Anyway, I hope to meet him soon. Now what about this Mr Comstock? Has he got something on his mind?’

‘Why, what did he say to you, mother?’

‘He seemed to think he would be a burden, he kept saying that word. You don’t find many wealthy men who think they’re a burden to be with, even though I could name a few.’

‘Mother, I’m dry. Let’s get a cup of tea and come back out here again. It’s beautiful. I’m glad I’m home. And then I’ll tell you about John Comstock.’

Her mother was curious, but tried to hide the expression: ‘His name’s John, is it?’

‘Yes, mother, and don’t get any ideas. I don’t think you’ll like him much. I don’t ... oh, you’ll see for yourself. Come on, let’s get the kettle on, and we can come back.’

The Tilga oval was set among red gums, close by the river. A levee bank protected it from floods. The eucalypts were a gloomy shade, though their upper branches were tossing; even the goalposts were trembling. Driving through Tilga, Edward had turned on his parking lights; entering the arena, he turned them off, and nosed up to the paling fence. He almost whispered to his son: ‘We’re parked where Carlo had his truck that day.’

But this was too much for Tom: ‘Don’t be too oppressive, father. Can’t we go for a walk?’

They strolled—or pretended to stroll, for each was tense— across the oval. Edward said, ‘Just there. That’s where Bob crashed into that chap Dudley. Look, it was noisy, everyone was yelling and cheering but honestly, you could hear the thump when they hit. Can you remember it, Tom?’

And how much of the day do you remember? How much of the warmth of our bodies when we admitted the closeness of flesh, personalities gripping each other through a first mortgage on each other’s body. How Jenny terrified me, how she wanted me to bustle her, fight with her, kick and be kicked; how she wanted to contest her animality with mine—that’s what it was—how she sneered if I didn’t respond to her ... And out of it all, more by good luck than design—for she already had her eyes on Watchett, as I knew only too well—came this Tom. And in my arms, in his early games and crying, in my fondling and cuddling of

him, was the body-link I wanted, the unforced ownership of love. Which, of course, she had to wrestle me for ...

‘No, father, but I do remember it was a very warm day.’

‘Warm! I’ll say it was. Do you remember? I took you in the Turrumburrah rooms at halftime, and they were yelling out to see if anybody had a pair of scissors—they wanted to cut off the arms of their jumpers. Remember that. Tom?’

‘No, though I remember the top of Carlo’s truck.’

‘What do you remember about it?’

‘It was so warm under my legs.’

Edward said,

Trying not to speak of my heart; Tom’s so ungraspable now.

‘It was painted brown, it’s a colour that doesn’t reflect. You had a new mustard-brown jumper on too. I bought it at Curran’s because you were going away.’

And I didn’t know if you’d be taken care of, but I’d made it a rule not to attack her to you if I could help it, so I didn’t say anything.

‘Bob Beazley’s very confident, father; where do you think he gets it from? All right, he’s a good footballer, he was; but that was a long time ago.’

Edward said, ‘He doesn’t stop to think, Tom, that’s about the heart of it. He doesn’t stop to think. He just obeys his moods. Beryl understood this years ago. She just goes along with his moods; he’s pretty adaptable most of the time so she more or less runs the show. But when he feels like a burst, like he did this afternoon, she gives him his head. It sounds a simple recipe for marriage, but it’s pretty rare. Blokes as uncomplicated as Bob are pretty rare.’ Then he spoke more slowly. ‘And wives as generous as Beryl ... No, it’s not that she’s so generous. Bob’s masculinity is a very simple sort. It’s vain, but the vanity of it is a well-understood one, quite a pampered one in fact, so its teeth are all drawn, so to speak. No, Beryl’s on top of things, there ...’

‘Do you think Margaret will stay with you, father?’

Edward threw back his head. 'Tom, the pity of it is we recognize each other too well. We're involved, we give a lot, we tell each other what we need to know. But we haven't got the hooks in. We haven't got the grip on each other of a real make-or-break relationship. I suppose we appreciate each other. We're doing something and when it's over, we're going to let go. I see it better than Margaret because I'm older. It's no fun being forty-six and wondering if there'll ever be anything any good when the present thing's over, even if it's not the ultimate thing there is.'

It was his frankest speech in years, to his son. Tom kept his head down. Fathers find it hard to be people to their sons, and vice versa. Their feet stomped on the turf. Edward tried to fill the gap with the inconsequential: 'Tilga played away today, or the ground'd be a mess.' But Tom, in a low voice: 'What if anything would do, anything at all?'

In a colossal non sequitur, which somehow made sense, Edward said, 'Bob Beazley, Terry Johnson, and Dudley. Dudley's dead too, you know. A trench caved in, when they were putting in the water supply, the town supply at Teddington.' So flesh in its pride ruled triumphantly over their day's conversation and drive; flesh orgiastic, flesh apparently bonded, but seeking out something before moving on; flesh of the blood-thicker-than-water sort, making demands the imagination scarcely knew how to cope with; embarrassing flesh, scorning the social rules of sparing the feelings; and finally, flesh mortal, that was easily crushed, quickly buried, and had to breathe something better than trench clay.

Tom said, 'I think we could drive back now, Edward,' looking at his father at least as person to person, if not as a man; and Edward asked him where he wanted to go, what would he do? Tom said, 'There's a few of them down from Blythe tonight, they were going to have a bit of a do, a bit of a singsong at the Royal.'

Edward said, 'I'll take you there. Or do you want to go home and change? I suppose you do.'

Tom made the supreme effort, 'Would you like to come?'

But Edward: 'No, no. I'd only be a wet blanket. No thanks, Tom, I could do with the sleep.'

With Margy in Sydney and my nerves trembling all day tomorrow; at least she sent the telegram this morning; she did remember that. I didn't think she'd bother; I thought she only said it to calm me down till she got away. But she sent it: 'Edward Leon le Rosignol—she didn't forget the le—'Darvall Street Turrumburrah. Landed safely Sydney. Heard story en route. Tell you later. Arrive Blythe Sunday if no further message. Love Margaret.' LOVE! LOVE! LOVE! Though I played it down when I was telling Tom, trying to define it. I didn't believe it. I don't believe it! She said, 'Love Margaret'. Margaret loves me, mightn't go away, mightn't have a plane crash, mightn't meet anybody young and easy in Sydney; might come back to her Edward, the almost singing again never-wert bird of no promise, six months ago, bird of the dawning, now, here, tonight! I'll lie in bed and stare at the ceiling and early on I'll get up and make a long slow trip to Blythe, to be there when she comes, and ready to alter my mad, fixed-mood demands to her soon to be throbbing self!

Father and son crossed the gloomy ground to get back to the car. They scrambled across the fence just near the scoreboard, paid for by Dalgety's and carrying their sign on top. On the black face of the board, under the empty slot where the scorers and timekeepers stared at the oval, were the symbols TILGA and V, each lining up under the threefold caption G-B-P. A shiver ran through the trees; one thought of fish, sand-banks, and the clothes of drowning men on snags; Tom said to his father, 'A few grogs'd help you sleep, you'd be less anxious in the morning.' But Edward smiled, kept his nerves to himself, and started the car.

It was Margaret's fortune to be in the lounge when Comstock knocked. Her mother was dressing, her father still in the workshop. And so began a long three hours. Comstock walked in as if his joints were jolting him. He had an air of being haunted. He was embarrassed by Margaret, ashamed of himself. She threw it at him straight away. 'I flew down with a weedy little man, an accountant. He told me about Marie.' It seemed to relieve him that she knew, that she wouldn't have to be told.

Broken pride is an ugly sight. I wondered how he could recover. I didn't want him draining anything out of me.

She's come on since I left. Something's changed her.

So she didn't look at him; she showed him the house; led him round the garden. He wanted to sit in the summerhouse, but she rustled him on to look at the fish pool set in the rocks.

Harmless little goldfish; he made me think of sharks.

Turning over and over, rising and lipping the surface of the water; elegant, tail-drooping, tail-fanning things, sporting themselves in a harmless protected life.

He said,

'Margaret, is Edward any better?'

As if he were sick; well, he was odd ball enough, I suppose, but he never ever made me feel queasy, and now he made me feel fine.

'As a matter of fact, he's extremely well. He's meeting me tomorrow night, when the plane gets in.'

Which is telling him.

An end of hopes, which only flickered, but I never tried to put them out, put them down. If you've got no substance, you've got to have dreams.

He said,

'Since you're sure of each other, you won't mind keeping me company when I have to go back to finalize things. You'll be able to ward off the ghosts.'

He added,

'Sorry about the pun.'

He's sorry for himself, for having his ghosts. Well, I'm not sorry for him, and he's got to be jolted out of it.

'Where was Marie buried?'

Sick.

Steady, Margaret; shouldn't have said that; don't think I should have said that.

He said 'Blythe'; it was scarcely more than an opening of his mouth. But he managed to rally. 'It's rather difficult these days to get approval for burying people in private cemeteries.'

She remembered that there were some graves at Jingellic, on a sandy ridge not far from the river, but above the highest recorded flood.

'Besides, I couldn't bring myself to confront the Comstocks with their treason.'

Their treason? 'Their treason?'

He said, 'All my faults were handed to me, handed down.'

I despise you!

'That's taking the easy way out, surely?' To say the least!

He defended: 'Have you ever thought how many black men my grandfather degraded, or killed, to get that land? It used to be much bigger once, you know.'

So what?

'No, I haven't, and I don't want to know.'

He said: 'You know death is a part of life, don't you?'

Like a dark mist threading its way through alleys of the mind, closing off slums and bordellos, closing off cesspits and sinks, drains and the bleeding injured, breathing against the windows of the sick but conscious.

'You know that things die, barring accidents, things die when they choose to die.'

He's been thinking about suicide.

'What are you trying to say?'

'Half our impulses lead to death.'

'Oh, heavens, we'd better go up.'

His shoulders drooping, he looked at the harbour. The sun lit up the smoky part of the city, and the bridge in silhouette; but clouds made the water grey, and the wind chopped it about. She said, 'You can do better than this, surely?'

He said: 'Perhaps I'd better go home.'

'Do you want to?'

Wanting me gone.

I'm not bluffing; I won't be sorry.

He said: 'I haven't met your charming parents yet,' and smiled unpleasantly.

With the rudeness of the rich, a rudeness which Comstock would understand but not necessarily be damaged by, she said, 'Go into the workshop and make yourself known.' She pointed to the opening where he could find her father, and made her way up the other rock path, her pants licked by wet slips of grass and the trailing leaves. She passed the huge bamboo clump; it seemed healthy and positive.

She sat in her room, thumbing through prints; she kept coming to Goyas, and turning them over. Death as a part of life? She had no impulses that led that way, surely?

No. More than 'surely?': NO.

Her impulses had been charitable, but when actually faced with him she rejected him absolutely. Mankind, in the abstract, might have killing and vengeance built in somewhere, bloodlust, but she wasn't anything in the abstract, she had a visitor who was her parents' age and he was sick in the head—or so it seemed to her—and none of her impulses were going to be any use to him. But she felt she had to go out to the lounge.

Her father was quite jovial, with a large sherry in a crystal glass. 'Your friend,' he said, waving the glass at Comstock, 'is in a fix. The way he's talking, he'll be blowing his head off soon. We'd better knock some sense into him.'

For once she was glad of the cruelty of her father's two-dimensional way of seeing things. It cut Comstock off from feeling out in his sickly way to grasp for sympathy, grasp the vital thing in you and leave his dirty marks, his slime.

'How does alcohol affect you, Comstock?'

'In my case it's not a depressant ...'

'Course it is, don't be silly. You never ran a property on that sort of nonsense. I'll give you another one, and if you start to look long-faced,

I'll shunt you off. Now what are you doing next Friday night? The staff of the Prince Charles is holding a ball, we'd better get you along to that.'

'I'm like an awkward youth, Doctor Ward ...'

'Brian!'

'... I wouldn't know who to take.'

'Oooh, we'll fix that. Ring me up Thursday.'

I wouldn't put it past my father to push an ex-mistress at him.

'Are you planning something, father?'

'My dear Margaret, when men are organizing affairs, don't ask questions.'

So she left for the kitchen, but heard her father say, as she left, 'What sort of women do you like?'

As if we were stock! And the funny thing is, his crude sense is more use to that creature than I am. Thank heavens for that. I don't suppose there's an earlier plane? No, there'd only be one. Where did I put Cecily's address? I suppose it'll be noisy but anything's better than this.

Cecily's party was divided. Downstairs the cool rock connoisseurs and the Daddy Cool and Bee Gee fans were capturing and recapturing the gramophone. In one room upstairs a small group sat quietly, smoking pot; in the next, couples sat in the dark, or lay on mattresses. The music boomed upstairs, there were bottles in the passage and abandoned glasses on the landing of the stairs. The posters that had made Comstock feel uneasy and dated were prominent on the walls, along with giant reproductions of Tarot cards. Margaret wandered about, feeling out of place, jousting off men's approaches. It is hard to step back into a world when one has, however arbitrarily, rejected its *raison d'être*. She found the pushing and striving of these young people, their naked approaches, their exuberance and trying out, very wearing; their energy seemed hollow and mechanical. Cecily burst out to embrace her, the moment she heard Margaret was in the building. She was towing a man much older than herself, a bearded, glint-eyed man of forty-odd who nonetheless

had the attitudes, the flightiness, of youth. Cecily hugged Margaret, introduced Robards, and hugged her again. Margaret didn't catch the man's name; Cecily said, 'Robards. R.O.B.A.R.D.S. His name's Robert during the week but he has to affect something for Saturday night. Don't you, dearest?' And Robert said, with the cheeky grin of someone twenty years younger, 'It's the cheapest way I know of putting on a bit of side. And what about you, lass?'—to Margaret—'Did you come on your own?'

I had.

Cecily said, 'That was a bit dangerous with Robards around. Cling on to my skirts, Margy. Hey, what about our tickets? You know, our trip. Are you still on?'

Here I was escaping, and we had to talk about escape.

Cecily was in no mood for Margaret's shilly-shallying; she had to know everything holding back her friend from plunging into the party. Margaret told her about Comstock's Marie, but it only slowed her for a moment. She said, 'That's what it was? Poor kid. Poor dumb kid,' and then, 'What a swine he was.' Margaret wanted to know if Cecily had sensed what was going on, but she would only say, 'I knew he'd done something rotten,' and the party noise hardly made for analysis.

Just a lot of confusion to hide in.

'But didn't you know he had this girl on the place?'

'Oh yes, I saw her once or twice ...'

'Well, didn't you ... I mean ...'

You used to sleep with him.

'Oh, you give me the squirts, Marg, you really do! Cut your losses, girl! Cut! Don't you want to talk about our trip? Why don't you want to talk about our trip?'

Margaret tried to tell her that Comstock had been to call on her at her parents' but Cecily declared she was a fool to bother with him, and summoned Robards, calling him Robert. He had an arm around a Jewish girl, very plump, with black hair piled high, and tresses falling about her ears. 'Robert! Robert! Come here, you stupid lecher!'

‘Who are you talking to? That’s no way to talk to me on a Saturday night. Judith gives me better attention than that.’

‘Is that so! Row-bart! Sir Rowbart! Would it please you to unhand that ...’

She said ‘bitch’ under her breath.

‘... damsel a minute and do an errand for me? My squire, Sir Rowbart?’ Robards/Robert unwound himself from the Jewish Judith and presented himself for orders, somewhat anachronistically clicking his heels. Cecily told him, ‘Mistress Marg is lonely. Go and get someone out of that bedlam to look after the poor girl, will you? Anyone’ll do, she’s got a head full of Comstock.’

How crude can you get!

They had a stand-up argument, perhaps the one they’d bottled up when they farewelled each other at the Blythe airstrip. Cecily told her not to be so bloody stodgy and Margaret demanded to know what she could get out of all this noise and confusion; how could anyone’s sensibilities stand a battering like the gramophone was giving the house; how could you be yourself when you were squashed in a luridly-lit room full of boozers? Et cetera. When their voices died down a little ...

I noticed that Judith was taking it all in with relish.

... Cecily again asked Bart, as she called him this time, to plunge into the noise and get Michael; he’d do fine. Robards said, ‘Bart, you see, for baronet,’ smiled brightly, and went. Michael appeared; Robards came out only to summon the raven-haired Judith. Cecily told the newcomer, ‘Take her upstairs,’ and went after her errant man.

Strangers.

But there was another altercation. Judith swept out of the crowded front room, dragging Robards and shouting, ‘I can’t hear myself think with all those monkeys, or animals, or whatever they call themselves screaming that horrible rubbish at me. It’s just so bloody uncivilized ...’

Michael said to Margaret, ‘She’s doing final year Mus.Bac. at Sydney. The Prof, was stupid enough to tell her she’d probably top the course; she’s been insufferable ever since.’

Judith seemed to know that there was a piano upstairs. She demanded to play it; she demanded to have it placed at the top of the stairs so she could spread her influence over the whole barbaric proceedings ...

Michael said to Margaret, 'She's sort of right; actually, it is barbaric. But that's what's so good about it, isn't it? I mean, what's our civilization got to be so proud of? The atom bomb?'

No fool like a clever one; but he seemed nice, which was a relief after Cecily and the rest of them.

A faction agreed with Judith. They swept upstairs to get the piano out of the pot-smokers' room. Someone argued; didn't want to let them in. Finally they got in; the piano wasn't there. A voice was heard, 'It's in the brothel, come on!' and the argument entered a new stage; the people in the front room upstairs didn't want their loving disturbed by piano-removers. At the height of this, there was a ferocious series of raps on the front door. Robards rushed out, with Cecily in tow this time, yelling, 'The Greek bitch! I'll slit her throat! I'll snatch her maidenhood!' But when he flung the door open, there was no one there.

Michael said to Margaret, 'Come up to the balcony.'

'Come off it.'

He seemed to find it quaintly old-fashioned of her to take it that way. 'There's a bucket in that cupboard under the stairs. Grab that and I'll show you.'

She didn't like orders. He got the bucket, filled it in the kitchen, and started upstairs, slopping water on the threadbare carpet. There was another outburst of banging at the front door; Michael hurried Margaret along the upstairs passage; he said, 'Have to go through the brothel, it's the only way on to the balcony. Cover your eyes if it worries you.' And he led her through the candle-lit room to the French window, and handed her through, raising a finger to his lips as he did so. They crept to the lacework; Michael managed to lower the bucket silently without spilling much more.

Not very drunk, apparently.

He pointed to the dense camellia bush in the tiny front garden. Sure enough, there was a figure there. Michael whispered, 'Greek girl, 'bout ten. Fat as a pig. Always snooping around. She pinches things; there's always people coming and going here; sometimes there's a door open. Doesn't get much money; there isn't any, but I am sure she gets stuck into the fridge. We've had the old lady down here stirring up trouble a coupla times. Little bitch just likes to cause a row, that's why she knocks. Give us the bucket. Oh, all right.'

No orders. I've got my father's will, among other faults.

Michael balanced the bucket on the balcony. He frowned as he heard a noise behind him. It was Judith and her clique returning to make a second bid for the piano in the front room. Michael said, 'This'll stir 'em', and upended the bucket. The fat girl fled from the camellia's shadow, clothes drenched, and screaming abuse in voluble Greek. Now Cecily and Robards appeared in the garden, downstairs. Cecily told the girl to go and drown herself; she had a good start, why didn't she finish the job? The Greek girl swore in English. Robards told her to go away or he'd piss on her 'with me bloody long hose'. Michael laughed at this; Margaret gave a reluctant chuckle. The piano argument continued; the Greek girl's mother appeared, but the front door was shut by now and no one would let her in; the piano argument continued, Cecily and Robards came upstairs to be in it, then there was a loud squeal of brakes just outside. The party was too drunk to tense up; people flowed through each other; someone yelled out 'Missed 'im!' when no other sound followed; then there was the wail of a police car. The Greek woman returned, with her daughter, both banging on the door. Minutes later the police arrived, truculent at some earlier frustration. The word ran through the terrace. 'Cops! Get the pot out of it!' The pot-smokers' door was closed. Someone said, 'The bloody place stinks of it!' The door shook again to a series of knocks, heavier this time, more official.

Cecily, Robards and Michael went; Margaret, as probably the soberest person in the building, found herself pressed to face the police. The policemen weren't interested in the Greek girl and the bucket of water,

they only wanted to deliver a standard warning about not causing people to complain. Then one of them said, 'What's the smell in this place?'

That was tense. Well, I was soberest. I said,

'It's a pretty old terrace, it's damp, you get a lot of sweaty people in it ...'

But Judith came sweeping down the passage complaining about the piano business, saw the police and started to abuse them; Cecily said, 'It's this bitch! She's on heat!' and the policemen gave a dirty laugh. Then they turned serious and official, but only for a moment because the radio in their car was reporting something else, and they left with a warning that they'd be driving past in half an hour and they wanted to see all the lights out and cars all gone, and Cecily assured them that the whole thing would be over in ten minutes, and they marched off, not believing and not caring ...

And me with this Michael character. I told him he could take me home, and no funny business; I'd had enough for one day, thanks very much. And he did take me home, and we talked in the car for a while. I told him everything on my mind, the sort of thing Cecily wasn't prepared to listen to, and he said, when I was tired and wanted to go in, that he'd like to see me the next day. I asked him if he lived there where Cecily and Co. were, and he said, 'Oh, yes, on and off. More or less.' I thought that was a pretty funny answer; after all, one either lived somewhere or one didn't, but he seemed pretty footloose. He did say one thing to me as I was getting out of the car; he said, 'You're a pretty funny sort of girl, you know. You seem more strung up about the bloke you hate than the bloke you're sleeping with. We must see if we can do something about that.' That was the closest he came to any sort of overture and I was too tired to bother, so I staggered in to bed.

Slept a while and woke, looked at the harbour, lay down again, got up to look at the lights, lay down once more to stare at the ceiling and muse. Michael, did I ever hear his other name? He was sane and balanced, even if he did share the attitudes of that mad mob at Cecily's. He had

fashionable good looks but he didn't seem to care. And he shaved. His hip to shoulder proportions were a little odd; he looked as if he did body-building exercises, or a bit of weight-lifting, something like that. He'd be very direct, but he's an unhurried man, not pressing like Clive, who's no loss; funny how he never even ripples the surface these days, when I'm thinking.

I was horrible to Cecily; I'll go round there in the morning. That Michael will be there. I suppose he will: 'on and off', 'more or less'. Strange how casual they all are; it's a style I can't affect. I'm too serious, I suppose, but life's too short for second-rate, and that's all you get if you don't press for what you want.

Like mother doesn't, except inside the house. I suppose it's what they call 'a full life'; she's on the gallery committee and goes to the openings, but so what? His heart isn't in it, in the marriage.

That's the first time I've thought of that for ages. I couldn't stay down there with Edward all my life. What could I do? What on earth could I do?

I was horrible to Cecily. I was horrible to Comstock. A weak-willed mother and a strong-willed father haven't been a very good combination for me. I wonder if it's a type? Who cares? I'm not interested in the type, I'm interested in me. Five more months down there. Edward'll be at the plane. He'll have to take me back to Myra and Jimmy's. I won't get into bed with him after all this churning me up. That sickly Comstock ...

What if he committed suicide?

Well, what if he did? He's basically a feudal man; he acts like a seigneur, which includes, apparently, the rights. Urk. Not funny; strange about not burying the girl on the property. Not that I'd do such a thing, but he seems to blame the forbears ... which is a supreme act of moral cowardice ...

Don't go on; no one listening. I wish I could sleep. I wish my affairs weren't so messy. Cecily might be right. Cut your losses, cut! But I couldn't drop Edward now, and I don't even know this Michael's other name. Five months to go, isn't it? Then I'm pulling out. Of course, I'll

probably get myself in more deeply yet, and it'll be an even bigger mess when I do pull out. Aaaaah, Edward ... I think he loves Tom more than he loves me, but of course that's such a mess that a bit of me in bed is really so much easier than trying to straighten the boy out. Oh, what's the use of trying to weigh everything up, analyse everything? Why can't I just go head over heels about some bloke and never wake up to him?

Ha, ha. With my parents? Father'd say, 'Get that monkey out of this house.' Roar laughing and give the poor bloke the most expensive drink he'd ever been poured—but still manage to convey that it's what he really felt. Mother? Mother? Would be charming beyond measure to him, chat to him on sofas and balconies, and eventually manage to make him faintly sorry for her. And little Margy would be curling up somewhere - inside, for instance - wondering how she was ever going to get the initiative back.

No, five months. Funny how good Edward is at picking people's self-proving; I suppose he can pick mine, though it's all being done in his territory, remote from all this. Comstock ... If he did commit suicide, would it be my fault? No, it'd be Cecily's more than mine. If he does, I'll tell her so ... called me poor little rich girl; that's the please-be-sorry side of me. So what am I going to do? That's right, go back and push Edward like hell to keep me amused. That's daddy-boy. No, Edward and I have both got some proving, or something, to do. I'll help Tom with his wretched booklet. Pity people don't like him; if I go round with him they might be prepared to give him stuff, whatever he wants; I'm blowed if I know what's supposed to go in this thing.

My demands on Edward aren't really fair. He's got his problems. But I'm not letting him use me up just to work them out for himself. He'll never move away from there; that's for sure. I will; that's for sure too. So it's a sort of fencing match, I suppose.

No, it's not, I'm involved with him. He can get round me like he can twist everybody except that ... yes, him, Comstock. Who left his cigar-smell in the lounge, still there when I got home. I could have done without it.

That's what being in that place is like; one long exercise in doing without. Edward? No, I'll keep on sleeping at Denhams'. I'll match him card for card and play for play, and see what we spark out between us. And if I'm not a radically different mess of pottage by December, I suppose it's off with Thistle. I wish I hadn't had that row with her, but it'd been brewing ... and I'll make it up and see that Michael ...

5 Modern man? Paradise?

Margaret woke in her room above the harbour. She brought orange juice and toast from the kitchen and looked out the window, feeling an uncomfortable sense of in-betweenness; it was her room and her home, and yet the view wasn't properly hers, not a thing that existed and lived inside her.

She had grown away from the sort of people at last night's party, though they were so much closer to her than the rural types she saw in the streets of Turrumburrah. The image of Comstock, unable to bridge the two worlds, or to cope with his own decline, was disturbing, as was the thought that whatever she said or did that day, she would surely board a plane in the mid-afternoon and be lifted out of this city whose heart lay in front of her to that little aggregation of dwellings and people on the irrigated fringe of the western plains. It was just so absurd; one must belong, and she didn't. She'd be getting in that plane and floating off in the air ...

Just like the Rhinemaidens in that funny opera, like the merry-go-round horse that swings in and out, like puppets, like everything that's jerked and swung from place to place, pleading, not for freedom, but for its own volition. Like that exercise at college, when we had to do a stage backdrop; I did Petroushka. Poor puppet. They had to kill him before he proved he had a soul.

'For love of the ballerina the Moor slew him with a sword.' How unlike life, how too-deeply true; like some of Michael Bunny's paintings where he sketches in all that junk they've got lying round the house, but puts it on a ground of turned-over soil, with plough lines churning straight through the bits and pieces he's superimposed. I suppose a psychologist would say he's showing how the creations of fancy get ridden

over by the demands of a farmer father, but how boring if you can only see things that way.

Michael. Wait on, steady, Michael Bunny. I hope he wins that prize; he's put in some good ones. My favourite's the windmill bent over, drooping and elongated, with his nutty father blowing like Jehovah in the corner of the picture, dirt flying and the windmill looking coy and not bothering to revolve. I laughed when I saw that one. I hadn't met old Bunny then; I'd react differently now. I think if I was the windmill I'd turn around and tangle up his tongue so he couldn't spout that rubbish he believes in.

Michael. My father's just as egotistical, but he's a success, top surgeon and all that jazz. Like old Bunny ... but he's lucky, his egotism and determination are attached to his talent, whereas Bunny's willpower props up a laughable set of beliefs. Odd, that it should fall out like that. If you only knew how, you could reconstruct a whole personality. If you had a mind to play God, that is, which is hardly a role for single girls to play, really.

Turrumburrah. Is Edward weak? Or too strong to be trapped by the madnesses other men can't avoid? Who said that to be mad was to be too sane? Is that Edward? No, he's got his crosses, his albatross, if you like to think of Tom that way; a somewhat lumpy burden for a nightingale, a Rosignol. Sorry, Edward, 'le'! Shreeeks! That day in Baxter's store; old Baxter, the most strait-laced thing that ever was. Edward must have taken in a Weeties box with a cut-away back. I bet he did it specially; I bet he even picked a time a couple of minutes before a race. That absurd shopping list; he got them all out the back getting one thing or another, except that snickering Molly with the Irish name, whipped the radio off the shelf, turned it up full, and put it on top of the Weeties pile. He was up and down that ladder like a monkey. Baxter was red as a beet-root, that Mrs Wright came in and started sniffing, and all the urchins gathered at the door. Molly didn't let on to Baxter. Baxter didn't know where it was coming from. He said, 'That's not parliament, is it?' He could hardly have said anything more stupid; Molly would put that one

in circulation. That Jim Reid standing there with the flour bag on the trolley, pretending to be puzzled; he knew it was Edward.

Edward carried it off. You'd think he was an ambassador when he plans these pranks, he gets that poker face on. How did he get me to make love with him?

Well, it was fun; it was good. He's not committed yet, not completely. I won't do it again until I feel he is. And he can't be with Tom hanging round his neck; he knows he's failed him and I don't think he can identify exactly where the damage is, and whether or not he can ever come good, poor boy.

Round to Thistle's; some of them'll be stirring by now; we'll see what's doing. Europe in February, Turrumburrah tonight. I'm glad the plane lands at Blythe; it's on a grander scale than Tubwub. Edward's right, the irrigation made that place mean.

And Edward stirred in Tubwub, The 'burrah, home of the Blues in Bob Beazley's day, but now called The Rabbits, or more popularly, to Margaret's disgust, The Bunnies. Edward was displeased at having made his first reapproach to Tom via a memory they shared of the town's footballing activities. It seemed the corniest and most obvious approach, and Edward, who prided himself on not being these things, was annoyed with himself. The apprehension he felt about Margaret's return made him irritable. He spilt hot water on his hand trying to make tea. This caused him to burn the toast. He got shell in the fried egg.

Frustrated and half-fed, he threw billy, tea, sugar and a mug in the car and headed for Blythe, with a whole day to kill. He slowed down outside Tom's flat, tempted to go in, but decided that this would complicate his feelings too much; he'd go out on the empty plains and try to sort himself out.

North of Teddington, he stopped. It crossed his mind that this was the road where the Love Wagon males had chased Margaret and Cecily; it was an unpleasant stain on his consciousness of the place. He turned

down a side road to make a detour around Myopa, then slowed down; was this a treason against Margaret? Should he not attempt to identify the places, and relive her fear, and courage? He stopped, and got out of the car. The plain smelt of sheep, though there was no wind blowing and there were none in sight. The smell was heavy, as though it was in the earth, a part of original nature and not an importation of the white man.

Original nature; it seemed a peculiar vanity of the white Australian to think of the landscape sitting in a state of mystical calm, instead of balancing, evolving, decaying and renewing, as everyone knew nature did; life meant life and death, and ecological balances, and if the process had been an unspectacular one, it was no less urgent. And yet the coming of Edward, Jack o'Boon, the people buried at Jingellic, and the rest of them, was an interruption which gave people, when they bothered to think of it, an ambiguous feeling. On the one hand, why not bowl in? It was there for the taking. Civilization needs confidence, and great civilization great confidence, which sometimes requires great heedlessness of damage done while the goals are achieved. On the other ... on the other? It was unthinkable to back out; should we dither on, without the pioneering confidence? Many people were starting to feel this way about damaging the environment, but if you continued to think this way you had to come up with an entirely new view of man, fitting humbly into nature's cycles, or else you had to stand aside and watch others blunder on in their simple dynamism born of ignorance, but containing all the animal basics of man—his sexuality, his ambition, his creativity, his dependence on habit, his urge to attack, his wish to be left alone ... the whole lot.

Watch others blunder, that's me; I lack their basic urge to be a simple, complete, animal person. Why should I rip up the earth for channels; why not leave it alone? But then, why not rip the earth? I belong to the mob that does it. It brings grass and wheat, the meat on the plate, the morning toast ... which I cleverly managed to burn ...

Edward fretted, fretted. The reason why Margaret liked him so much, and the reason why she loved him only so far, were bound up with his peculiar half-and-half relationship with the little sub-group of the human race he found himself living among.

It was the reason, much more than the difference of physical type, why he had failed Jenny, and it had played merry hell with Tom, who couldn't get from Edward what a boy-child needed from his father.

Mess.

Yet the plains were glorious, with acres and acres of white and yellow daisies giving the earth a shimmer of colour. He drove to a thick clump of box trees, then noticed a house not far off the road. There were sheep in evidence this time, grouped on the verandah, going in or out the open front door.

He wandered over, annoyed that the sheep should scramble out of his way. Some of them almost broke their legs where verandah boards were missing, or rotted. He searched the house moodily. It was made of mudbrick, and was of imposing dimensions. A vast roof sat solidly over all. There were five front rooms, two of them having small ante-rooms which he took to be dressing rooms. The ceilings were pine, the centre one vaulted, and still very impressive in its parquetry, despite the activity of swallows. The floor was covered with dung. The proportions of the rooms were the high square ones of Victorian times, though the wooden verandah decorations were later in style by ten or fifteen years.

He stepped out the back door of the central reception room. The house now entered its second stage; he stood under a covered walkway, facing a lower, humbler building. This was the kitchen, pantry and workaday eating room. The mess here was even greater, with weeds growing near the doorways, or inside where cracks in the walls gave them light and moisture.

Next came a skillion bathroom and laundry, in utter ruins, a tumble-down of twisted corrugated iron.

The lowest of the body's functions had been performed in a wooden outbuilding which now lay on its side under a huge pepper tree, poking

its seat hole at the viewer in a way which might have been cheeky if there had been any life in the place at all. A brand new hayshed beyond the trees seemed quite arrogant, its uprights painted rusty red and its iron roof gleaming silver.

A new view of man; why not? Man was the same in all ages, a complex of unutterable mysteries, yet each generation found a style of presenting themselves, a formalization of things they chose to present and things they chose to hide, an arrangement, an order to be imposed. So long as you believed in the style, the arrangement, you could have the sense of order and all it brought you. But if you doubted yourself, or felt sceptical of the current mode, what place was there for you ?

Edward leaned on the lean-to and put a hand to his forehead. Someone coming on him might have thought of a Victorian illustration—'Revisiting the old family home, he finds nothing but ruin'—something of that sort. But, characteristically, it was himself he was sorry for. It was the Margaret thing again. He just had to have something to offer her, something solid; her year in Turrumburrah ...

The only one?

... was already more than half-way through; time was running out and something decisive had to be done. He drove back to the main road, travelling fast, and was entering Myopa when he realized he'd not even thought of the car chase business, which had caused him to diverge.

This fickleness, if that was what it was, annoyed him further, and he glared sourly at the buildings of Myopa, which numbered four—the hall, two symmetrically placed toilets at the rear, and a tiny shed at the side of the tennis court, to shade the spectators. On the doorway of the hall, which was wide enough to take a piano sideways, someone had painted in brown 'You beauty' and someone else, in white, '1966'. The only other architectural feature on the face of the building was a ticket window, probably never opened and now sealed forever by careless painting.

Margaret, come out of that sky!

Half-way to Boon the road crossed a low spot where there was a windmill to water travelling stock. Edward remembered that this water had less of the artesian taste than most bores, and stopped to fill his billy and make a small fire. It was half past ten, and there were six more hours before the plane would land.

So I lay on the land, the western land, and thought if I had anything to offer. I had my odd sense of being part of the place, not in the restricted way of old Dawson, say, or Bunny, doing their work and not looking past their boundary fences, but in the way of reaching for the spirit of the whole place. Which is odd, because my parents never had it. They never understood it; it was Jack o'Boon who gave it to me. Jack, long past his time, still using horse and wagon when trucks were commonplace; but master of his trade and still getting work, especially in the back country, especially when there was rain about and the black soil country was greasy and most of the truckies unreliable. Jack could tell you the hour he'd roll up to load, and the hour he'd deliver at the station in Blythe, or Parton, and he'd be there, right on the tick. I've seen him kill half a day under a tree, like me here now, rather than be early; I asked him why. He said, 'Be consistent. Do what you said you'd do. Don't try'n' be flash, always breakin' records. Ay? Jist be on the dot.'

Frog's egg, pea. She'll come from the east there, and Des Carrington'll come out of the control shed with his little trolley for the cases as if he was at Mascot Airport, and he'll stare in that blank way of his at the empty sky as he waits for the plane. He tells tourists he can hear it coming; he makes a big thing out of telling them he's got very sensitive hearing. They don't realize he's got the radio in that little shed; the antenna's away over in the paddock next to the strip.

Empty sky, no rain, no Marg. Jack used to say, 'Always be a bit in front, lad, then you can lose a bit o' time. Always be a bit in front, and when you're within striking distance, sit down and 'ave a spell, get in on the dot!' But what's the good of that to me? It was Jack who was on the move, and the station or the shearing shed that was waiting.

He didn't like me asking questions. 'Keep the leader's head down,' he used to say. 'Keep 'em working. You give 'em oats to pull, not to think.' And that's all he'd say. If I said we were different he'd get a bit sour and say 'Yer reckon?'

There's the rub, consciousness. No matter how conscious you are of what you're doing and why, it's still the same you that's acting. There's no escaping yourself, one might as well come to terms. Consciousness can thwart that inner driving self, can refine it a little perhaps, but what can it add to it? Nothing.

The land, the western land, this dung-scattered, grass-sprouting dirt I'm lying on. The windmill's creaking. The trough's rusty and I'm forty-six. If she married me I'd die when she was middle-aged. Middle-aged; equals on or over the hump, facing downhill, next stop the bottomless.

So what? Everyone slides out one way or the other, even if they've got as much God in them as Dawson. Jenny. There's something I've got to do to her when she comes back at Christmas, and I don't know what it is. It'll need guts, facing up to her, and I might be a bit low with Margaret going. If only that weren't inevitable ... but it's right; if I were her I'd do the same.

That's the fatal slip I make. I choose against myself, I take the other person's view instead of grasping what I want, and I never get it. Hey, well, big empty western land, what have you got for me then ?

Same as I had last year, and all the years since Jen. Let's itemize. Item, a bloody big space; item, x thousand people in it; item, an abatement of confidence; item, the old body not getting any better and the spirits drooping, been knocked about too much. Any other items? Truck, tractor, ploughs, trayload of junk, shed full of tools ... this, dear friends, is the last will and testament of Edward Leon le Rosignol, lately departed this earth, our dearly beloved, sadly misunderstood brother in dirt, our fellow-ripper of the soil; alas, poor Edward, he was a merry skull and was wont to set the grocery shop in a roar with Barnie Baxter's radio hidden in a Weeties box, though between you and me, mourners, this was mainly to amuse a young girl who has since left our town, left it

visually much the poorer, I might say, since there's no shame in voicing our hidden thoughts on a day like this when death makes all our secrecy so much nonsense. The aforesaid Edward Leon le Rosignol, vanished from among us now as if he never wert at all, has bequeathed the following unto the hereinafter mentioned—his house, to whosoever want to live there. His tools of trade, to the first bastard that gets 'em.

No one leave the room! The shed's locked; it's no use trying to sneak out now and pinch 'em; I've got the key, so sit down and listen. Funny to the last, our Eddy boy.

Further items—his male glands to his son Thomas, by way of increasing his drives, as it were. His eyes, to the next blind sheep that coughs its way down Graham Street. His arse, to the council or any other official body which has need of a hole in which to stuff its collective ignorance and stupidity. His gut he wishes to be stretched, dried and hung in a public place so that members of the public desirous of ridding themselves of some troubling psychological burden may write the same upon a piece of rice paper, give it a twist—the rice paper, that is—fling it in and go their way regardless, the gut, when filled to capacity, to be taken down and burned; it is the earnest hope of the deceased, our late lamented channelling contractor, that this will give the world five minutes' respite from its woes. Item, his toes to be placed in a handy spot for tickling the pompous as they pass through this vale of veils. Item, his collected sneezes, farts, infections, coughs and throat clearings to be flung in front of the next willy-willy that they may not trouble nor infect the townspeople whom he loved so dearly, in earnest of which, this last item, his hands. These to be left permanently displayed in a public place, the fingers arranged in a gesture of surprise at the fact that his fellow Turrumburrans—call them Blues, Bunnies, or Rabbits, if you wish—can actually believe that they are whatever they believe they are.

And all this he doth seal with a dob of dry ink, a rather shapeless bit of Rorschach test, which surely can only be interpreted by the thought that the wind of his spirit, passing out of his body and over this ... not parchment, this bit of corrugated cardboard from Bernie Baxter's store

room—God bless ‘im, and may his radio never go phut—the wind of ‘is spirit, oy say, did blow the blob a bit out of shape, for which indelicacy the departing spirit begs the assembled company’s pardon and says, ‘Ya know where the loot is, ya know whatya want, go and grabbit, ya mugs!!!’

Edward sat up smiling. The fire was out, the ashes only warm. Happy as a bird, he lit another, and boiled his billy for tea. He flung in a handful of tea, swung the billy over the fire a few times, and poured himself a cup; truly the world was lovely! Clouds now occupied the fringes of the sky, though the central canopy was blue; it was one of his keenest pleasures, when out working, to watch the day-long build-up of cloud, the gradual thickening, the imperializing of sky by intruders from the west. Often there were two layers, or three, but today there was only one. A flight of galahs went rushing down the creek bed and high in the vault of heaven a crow was yacking.

Cark! Caaaaaarrrrrk!

I’m not so peaceful I wouldn’t shoot a crow!

Ov course ya know, ya can’t get near ‘em with a gun! Ya can go out with a broom handle, or a bit of pipe, you can even put it to your shoulder, they’ll just sit there and look at you, much as ter say, you can’t fool me with that, ya know. But you come out with a gun, even if you got it behind your back, and they’re off. Cunning!!!

Edward burst out laughing. Lore was law, there was no doubt about that! Why, if they even heard you talking about getting a gun they were supposed to keep their distance, everyone knew that.

What did he have to offer?

Me.

Me being?

A fairly friendly, pretty harmless character, or generally regarded as such, who had entry to most people and places in the region, most of what it had to offer.

To whit?

The shooting of pig—an ideal pastime for a sensitive young art teacher—streams full of redfin, and canoeing on the Darling, of course, if you were willing to drive that far ...

Edward slumped, his spirits gone again.

Other attractions?

Procreation, the creation of children who will shoot pig, catch redfin, canoe on the Darling, maybe even rip the earth.

He threw the contents of the billy on the fire, tossed his things in the boot of the car, and bumped on to the main road.

Boon ahoy!

Wow, Boonyboon, the nightingale's coming.

In Boon he bought sandwiches at the cafe. Mrs Martin, who ran it, was out; Edward was relieved to be served by a stranger; it was so much easier when he felt troubled. He bought a tin of bitter lemon and took it to the car; he was going to open it, but changed his mind, and drove through the thinly settled streets of the town, looking for his one-time employer's house.

This had once been the common style of cottage; one roof pitched to cover two rooms, then a gutter, which always leaked, staining the wallpaper. Then two more rooms under the second hill of roof, then the skillions, lean-tos and outhouses. But when he found it again, it was changed. It was painted a drab medium blue all over, but the out-buildings were more adventurous; these must have been painted by the children, or the wife; they were mauve, purple, white, red and black in unfair combinations. Edward laughed; Jack o'Boon would have hated it, yet have admired their dash, their flair. The husband, too, must have had a touch of adventure; in a delightful piece of practical improvization, he had removed all the skillions, et cetera, and attached another cottage like the front part, then reattached the lean-to trailers on the elongated house.

How many children's he got?

Every grain of dirt under the pepper trees had been turned over by chooks, and there were cars everywhere, most of them cannibalized

for the few that were still going. Iron bed-ends, rusted stoves, broken-handled shovels and other discards leaned against the sheds or lay about under the trees. A pert young fifteen-year-old in a nighty that barely covered her bottom moved down the side verandah, staring without embarrassment at Edward.

Well, of course, I wolf-whistled her. Of course! The girl scratched her backside and made a face at him, then went in. A moment later faces appeared at the front windows.

I doffed my hat, I doffed my hat. Not that I was wearing one, but you know what I mean.

A large passenger bus took up one side of the yard; this was apparently the driver's home. A transistor blared out top-forty music. Two rose bushes flanked the gate, hacked savagely where they encroached on the path, unpruned on the other side. A pram without wheels sat flat on the verandah. I was dying to know if there was a baby in it, when ... The baby sat up and started to cry. A man-faced woman came to the door, directed the fifteen-year-old to pick up the baby, stared hostilely at Edward, and departed the scene.

Without benefit of clergy, learning, leisure, transcendental ideas or anything but their own inner vitality.

Would Jack o'Boon have welcomed them as heirs to his house, Edward wondered, and decided he would. What about Margaret? Would she go in there, and be natural, if those people saw her, and called her in? Edward decided that she would; Margaret was no snob, despite the background. And just as well, because, if she stayed ...

To marry me ?

... she would need to be able to appreciate people like the busdriver's family. After all, natural aristocrats like Comstock were not very common, even on the biggest stations ...

And I'm strictly off the Jimmy Denham level of society, about one rung of respectability above the ... whatever they are.

Edward drove back to Mrs Martin's cafe and this time she was there, behind her enormous bulging apron, her thick spectacles casting

peculiar lights around her eyes and nose. She was happy to gossip with Edward, greeting him like the long-lost brother. She told him the people in Jack o'Boon's house were called Delaney. 'Irish as tikes, never got two bob to bless 'emselves with, but oh, they're happy, they get along, and I will say Mrs Delaney keeps the house a darned sight cleaner inside than the old man and the boys do outside. That lazy young Kevin, the good-for-nothing so-and-so, I'd get him out there with a hoe and rake! An hour's gardening every day and he could give his mother fresh vegetables, couldn't he?' Edward agreed that Kevin could, and should, 'And the old man! Well, all I can say is, it's a good job people up here aren't too fussy about times, he'd never hold down his job in the city, the way he goes on. He's that darned casual!' Edward agreed it was a shame, people should take a pride in their work ...

'But all he thinks of is drink, and chasing other women. And that young Kevin's learning off him, learning only too well. You mark my words, he'll be getting himself in trouble before very long. The pity of it is, it'll be the girl that gets in the worse trouble, won't it?' Edward agreed that it would. 'And when he has to marry her, what's he got to offer a girl with a baby? He hasn't got anything, all he knows is driving trucks, and his father's dirty habits.'

If the people brought puritan strains to the empty land, its severity and austere ways of filling in distance were unlikely to breed any lush sensuality. Edward said, 'Well, Mary, you know, we're Anglo-Saxons at heart, and eating spuds is supposed to be good for your virility ...'

She laughed: 'You old Froggy! Your country's supposed to be the slickest in the world when it comes to gettin' up to tricks, aren't they?'

My country, I've never been there!

'And, anyway, what's this I hear about you sportin' yourself a nice little girlfriend? You'll be moving up in society soon, from what they're saying. Hey?'

Nothing sacred! One's person belongs to others; one is a beach pocked with other people's feet. Edward looked out the door, past the

absurd 'No standing' sign, the hand-pump bowser and the thistles, to the space beyond. He said, 'You selling petrol still, Mary?'

She said, 'No, no, not for a couple of years now, Edward, you know that. Bill Brodribb does all that now. I just leave the pump there; I like it. You know what? A few days ago—last Sunday it was; wait on, it must have been Saturday, I was getting ready for tennis, I was getting a ride with Kevin Delaney ...'

I'll offer her trivia. I'll say, Margy, you're the educated girl, take the whole big pile and make sense out of it, please; it's my life and it's been a ragbag of days and fooling, cowardice and emotional dodging, but can't you do something with it?

'... when this chap pulled up. Well, his car wasn't much, just a Falcon, but you know what? He offered me thirty dollars for the pump. That one, Edward, the one you're lookin' at there. Thirty dollars! He wasn't lettin' on much, but he hinted he wanted to start a museum.'

You don't see us like that, Margy, do you, just a collection of exhibits?

'Makes you think, doesn't it? I could've shown him plenty more, out in the sheds, but I got rid of him. If he came back and offered it to me again I'd sell all right, but I just couldn't come at it, all of a sudden like that, It'd be like selling a bit of yourself, wouldn't it?'

Madam, there is nothing I would more cheerily give withal, unless it was my life.

'Don't look so soulful, Edward, tell us a bit about 'er.' But he preferred to go. With mock solemnity worthy of Edward himself in his more playful moods, she saw him to the door, and waved goodbye, contenting herself with the remark, 'Cleaned the car up a bit, since I saw it last.'

And then he was alone. A great wish never to be otherwise came over him. He drove to Blythe, and swept hurriedly through the town. Its order, its dignity, its air of knowing why it was there and who it was meant to serve oppressed him. He drove north-west, towards the far-off Darling. The only landmarks were artesian bores put down for travelling stock; the first was 6 Mile Tank, one of many so named in New South Wales

because of the drovers' legal minimum—six miles had to be covered in a day, or you were using the main roads as grazing grounds; 'puttin' 'em in the long paddock', as the vernacular had it. The second was Rainbow Tank; the pot-of-gold associations hurt him, the practical ones set him looking up, where big clouds were massing in the western sky. He drove a few miles further, to the One-Eye Well, where the One-Eye Well Hotel stood in forbidding isolation. Once it was one of a chain of hotels each a day's ride or coach-travel apart, but the others were all gone now, and this last was long since delicensed. Once again he looked up; there were now six enormous clouds filling half the sky, as if in some celestial drift of continents. Rain, he thought, rain after all, though probably not tonight, or perhaps there would be, the rate they were advancing ...

With Margy coming to meet them.

At One-Eye Well some humorist had put a bullock's head on the windmill; a boot-heel had been cut to plug one eye, while from the other cavity protruded the wire which held it up. Very funny, thought Edward, his teeth wanting to grate on each other, nothing like bones to level us ...

Unless it's waiting, and shitting ourselves.

Someone had planted a willow by the bore; it was a crooked stick fifteen feet high, with sickly foliage. On the skyline was a blur suggestive of a red gum. Of larger vegetation, there was nothing. There was saltbush, and some puddles. A man rode past on a bicycle, coming from the once-hotel; he made no response, though Edward greeted him. The snub made Edward desperate. Something inside him craved expression ...

I could have shot him with a broom handle!

There was rust on the hotel's roof, but it fell in a distinct pattern; the roof had once been striped. It was built in the drop-log technique, but how far had the timbers come? There was no fence, and the hotel sat on dirt. Even the saltbush gave up when it got within fifty yards. The bottle stacks were careless; there had been no attempt at gardening. Nothing hung on the line, nothing stirred but a dog; another sat on the verandah, panting. What could have caused exertion in a place like this? There was

scarcely hiding-place for a rabbit, or did dogs in this ultimate desolation chase smaller, meaner game?

Should send What-Shit here, let 'em chase him down a burrow.

The roof crushed down on the building, yet nothing pressed on it except six islands of cloud, unless it was a years-long acceptance of loneliness and heat. The building disregarded weather, fate, pride, private property, everything ...

Almost everything!

... in human endeavour. Edward recalled a tale Jack o'Boon had told him about this building and the woman who was its publican, many years ago. According to the tale, the woman had been serving a group of shearers; one of them, starved of women's company for who knows how long, had decided that he would fuck the woman behind the bar. He declared his intentions. She refused him. He wouldn't be put off. She hit him. He climbed the bar; she hit him with a bottle. This enflamed him; he chased her round the hotel. To get away from him, she fled across the plains with such speed that he finally gave up; she was ever afterwards known as 'The Scrub Turkey'. Jack loved the story and told it at every opportunity ...

But the adolescent Edward hated it, thanks very much, and still does; Christ, we hold up rape to admire? Sorry, attempted rape, misguided, miscued, misdirected, unwanted, ugly erection born of loneliness and circumstance ... in short, something rather like loving lover me?

As he stood there, two women appeared. One was incredibly old and gaunt, the other perhaps thirty, reasonably dressed, pleasantly plump, and seemingly quite cheerful for one who lived in such a place. Edward ...

Catcher of turkeys ...

... called out to them; for want of better, he said, rather foolishly, 'You're delicensed now, aren't you, er?' The old woman pointed to the shapely younger one and her harsh voice carried back, 'Since before she was born!' Her hand seemed to point backwards in time, far out of reach; could this be the original Scrub Turkey herself? Edward fumbled

on: 'You don't ... have anything then ... for travellers?' The old woman rejected him with a curt 'No!' and went inside. Edward advanced a step or two and called to the younger one, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean ...' but she also turned away, and he was left to himself, with only the dog to show interest.

In absolute misery he started the car and turned it down the first side road he came to, signposted 'Moirra Plains', a station far north of Blythe. The car ground on grimly, with Edward trying to find something positive in his dejection. Oddly enough, it came from the One-Eye Well Hotel, though he had never been more firmly shut out in his life. The building was not a ruin; ruins allow the mind to reconstruct, and so share in the original act of creation; imagining gives a grandeur the building may never have had, ennobling the mundane human activity once housed there ... No, the One-Eye Well Hotel was not a ruin. The life still flickering in it was the same life it had been born with. And he had to admit that until Margaret's advent set him questioning himself in every detail, he had been intensely proud of coming, even if near the end, in the same line of events which had produced the lonely pub.

Odd and interesting, that Mary Martin should think he was 'really' a Frenchman still, as if his passport had been printed in another land, and it was a quirk of fate that he was in a place where no one bothered to use them. It was characteristic of frontier societies that it did not matter who you were, or had been; the essential was that you should be able to cope, and survive. In this process of survival, one had to simplify; everything not necessary had to be jettisoned; one's mental and emotional luggage, brought from the centres of civilization, had to be emptied out and repacked again and again, the baggage getting lighter every time, the cases fewer with every passing year. When one was established, and settled, one could start to import some of the luxuries again, but the process of rationing, of testing everything for its worth against the next day when it would have to be carried, left its mark. One could not feel settled until the ultimates had been found. The manners of London had to be tested in the central heat, the noble savage measured against the

Wallaroo blacks, the mercury taken, as Sturt took it, to a place where it burst the tube. The extremes of austerity had to be known, the mental structure which pushed men into these places had to be eroded until it had a sparseness, a bleak power, that could answer everything likely to be encountered. Edward's Jack, his spiritual father, had taken this process right through until he was scornful of abstract thought of any sort; life was just one's daily work. This was a dehumanizing process, and a road back had to be found; Edward, with his beloved Margaret by now about to become airborne in far-off Sydney, wondered if he would be able to find such a road. The rich girl, with her honesty, abruptness and indecision, her talents and sensitivity, could hardly be expected to be the faithful dog like Jack o'Boon's black girl.

Hardly! Nor could I be Jack ... but I ... wait on, a landmark!

There was a T junction ahead. The post said, 'Moiria Plains' to the north; the other way, 'Blythe'. Behind it was a windmill bore and another sign 'Paradise Tank'.

Il paradiso, il ultimate!

There were a few reeds around the water trough, a few piles of dry dung.

Wot no cherubs?

No 'arps?

Edward felt a tremendous exhilaration. Between him and the horizon there was nothing. If he wished, he could claim everything, one enormous flat, one enormous dome, as his. Now in the sky were eight great clouds, and the declining sun. It was half past three; an hour to go. The light fell in huge shafts and fans, describing the clouds by their fringes; one had to look harder, into the tones of blue, to see the turbulence aloft. Edward hopped in his car and drove, calm for the first time that day. The enormous rafts of rain made their majestic progress above him as he went to the meeting-place. Loose grey veils trailed sidelong out of clouds, as if falling down crevices in air. Sometimes rain swept his car, and the road, and then the droplets on the windscreen glittered when he entered the next patch of light. Once out of gloom, it seemed

unthinkable that anything could ever replace the blaze of light that found an answer in the endless daisy-acres, the innumerable buttons of white. New fences gleamed. Old rusty wire dripped tiny globules from every barb. Yet when the shadow came again, and the rain swept his watertight machine, he felt a reassurance, a comfort as profound as the knowledge of night and day. Creation! He felt a guest at the process. Erosion and simplicity! What was wrong with them if they led to this ultimate turnover, this changeabout of fundamentals. Light and dark, rain and dry. In the darkest, wettest periods he felt warm and secure, ready to open with the light. Which, when it came, made everything glisten. He passed a spot where there had once been a house; now there was only a pepper tree, a remnant of fence, and some ageing fruit trees coming into bud. He wondered what bees did when they got their wings wet. Good job planes don't shake themselves! Now some movement of air threw thin silks before the sun and filtered light transfigured everything. In an ecstasy of readiness and surety he took his eyes from the miracles in the west and fixed them on the road. Darkness swept it again, turning the bitumen black, and then far ahead he saw the world's gloomy rim grow bright as the next patch of openness caught the trees along the river. Somewhere in there's Jingellic, he thought, and it didn't disturb him a bit. Comstock was in Sydney and his power to upset him gone for good. His time was past and Edward's about to come. When he hit the main road he waved to passing cars as if their drivers had just been born and he was acknowledging their entry to the world. Seeya friends, good luck!

He bought petrol on the outskirts of Blythe and drove to the airstrip. This too was dark, but just as old Des Carrington came out with his trolley, saying, 'Could be a bit rough up there, eh?' there was a cleavage in the clouds and from this act of heavenly parturition came shining down the gleam, the glint, the metal wings of Margaret's plane.

And she, having disposed of orange juice and toast, borrowed her mother's Morris to drive round to Cecily's. Passing through Double Bay, she

thought she saw Watchett and Jenny. Certainly the man was powerfully built, and the woman looked like Jenny. They were walking arm-in-arm, quite formally. Just as she would have seen their faces, they looked in a window and her only clear impression was of two people physically very close; there was something heavy but responsive in the way they turned to each other; there was a lack of separateness; it would have been hard to say which one initiated the movement.

Edward always runs her down; there might be more to her.

The group at Cecily's already included a good half of last night's company. A few were drinking on the balcony, but the main gathering was in the kitchen. They had beer cans open, brandy, dry ginger and vermouth. One stalwart was on claret. The drinking was desultory. One girl was trying, not very hard, to do some cleaning up. The empties from last night stood in rows by the gas stove. There was still a faint hint of the pot-smoking left in the air. Margaret's arrival brought 'Hello, Margaret,' from a few, nods from others; someone pushed a chair feebly. She sat, and caught Robards/Robert's eye. He said, 'Phew, never again,' though he broached a can a minute later.

Where's Michael?

Someone said, 'Stebbins surfaced yet?' Robards thought not.

Stebbins.

Someone wanted Stebbins pulled out of bed. Robards objected: 'It's a free country, isn't it? He might need a rest. He might have some floozy with him ...'

Their faces didn't tell me anything, they were too hung over and unresponsive.

'... what state's the country got to when a man can't have a little quiet intercourse on a Sunday morning without people pulling him out of it?'

A tired girl said, 'Oh shut up, Robert.'

Margaret said, 'You're Robert again this morning, are you?'

‘Aye, lass, I strip off all me titles at the witching hour. Just like Cinderella. I’d rather it was me pants but the way Cecily’s getting these days a man might as well live in a nunnery.’

Cecily’s reserves never ran out. ‘You, you scavenger, you’re getting your bit, don’t you talk. You can hardly expect me to fall in your arms when you’re trying to race off that fat-arsed Jewess!’ Eyelids lowered; she was apparently upstairs. Robert’s eyes showed a little sparkle now. ‘Just because you can see your ribcage doesn’t mean a man’s got to hate a bit of flesh when he sees it. I like a bit of the old roly-poly when it’s offering. Those women of Ruben’s. Mmmmmm. Eh, Marg?’

I was quite unready, I said.

‘Er, ah, well, they’re rather well-blown roses, don’t you think?’

Robert was getting steam up again. ‘Well-blown! I’d blow ‘em all up like balloons if I got half the chance. Don’t take a swipe at me, you prudish bitch; if God hadn’t meant us to, he wouldn’t have given us the urge!’

God!

Some of them were sick of Robert; those who knew him less were seen to smile. A disgruntled youth said, ‘Let’s pull Stebbins out of bed.’

Margaret said, ‘Where does he sleep?’ Robert said, ‘Oh, he’s got a little box room right at the back up there. And he knocked a hole in the wall and built himself a balcony. ‘Bout as big as a country shithouse but it’s handy. He’d have to do it standing up, otherwise.’ Cecily said, ‘Do you mind not being quite so foul-mouthed?’ and Robert launched into another speech, but Cecily said, ‘Come on, Marg, we’ll see if he’s awake.’ Margaret said, ‘What about a reviver for him?’ Robert, looking for every opening, pointed at a bottle of purple liqueur sitting unopened on the fridge: ‘Take him that stuff. I see no bastard touched it, I don’t blame ‘em ...’ but the cleaning-up girl had the percolator on, and they took black coffee. Margaret said, ‘I suppose he wants sugar?’ and Cecily rounded on her, ‘He can drink it straight, can’t he? God, you’re getting fussy, Marg, you’re a real old country housewife now.’

Which nearly started the row again, but ...

Robert called out merrily, 'Not fussy, lass, just clucky. Broody like all you bloody women. Anything left in that can? Me tongue's hanging out. Here, take the poor bastard a slice o' toast, and don't be such a bitch.' And he flung a vegemite-encrusted slice ...

Which I caught, and carried upstairs between two fingers, there being no clean plates in sight, and if I'd gone looking in the cupboards I'd have heard more of the broody business.

Michael's room was tiny, but he had, as they said, extended it. The balcony he'd built on was just large enough for the double bed it contained. This was a tangle of blankets, quilts and eiderdowns which appeared to have come from opportunity shops. There were two mattresses under Michael, and a suggestion of a worn-out third one squeezed between them. Panelling rose three feet from the floor, then it was all glass; the only window in the original room was tiny, and gave on to the neighbours' brick wall.

Michael stirred himself to drink his coffee, without thanking them. He had nothing on above the waist, at least. Margaret said, 'And you built this on yourself? What holds it on? I mean, what holds it up?' Michael indicated rather unclearly that it was cantilevered out by two steel girders; he'd taken up the floor of the small room, put them in place running under the inside wall of his room, then knocked holes for them in the outside wall. 'Did it all last winter. It was a bit cold for a while.' He said, 'I was a bit worried about the council. You can see the town hall from there, see. Thought they might make a fuss. So I more or less had it all built down on the ground and then hoisted it up when I was ready. Then I knocked out the rest of the wall. Place was a bit thick with brickdust for a while.'

Margaret said, 'But do you own the place? I thought you people were only renting it,'

He laughed. 'Agent never comes near the place. Wouldn't care if he did. It's all the more room to rent, isn't it?'

But...

‘How long will you be staying? It must’ve cost you a lot?’

‘No, all second-hand. Knocked it off whenever I saw them pulling down something. There’s the girders, you can see them where they run under that chair.’

Margaret looked. She had to push aside his carelessly draped clothes. When she straightened up, Cecily was gone.

She was never all that keen on Edward, for me that is.

Michael said, ‘How do you like my pictures?’

Instead of the trendy posters in the hallways, he had prints of Matisse and Bonnard. Most were taped on the wall; a couple were presented in unsuitable frames which must also have come from wrecked buildings or junk shops. She said, ‘They’re some of my favourites, actually. But couldn’t you get them framed?’

‘You can still see the pictures, can’t you?’

Challenging, no allowances made; it was very refreshing after six months where people made do with what was available in human response.

‘No, I don’t think you do. Your eye’s affected by the surroundings of a painting. You’ve got that “Early Spring” on a yellow wall; well, that’s an awful thing to do, because there’s so much yellow in Bonnard’s green, anyway.’

‘I thought it was rather inspired. I like the way it brings up the greens.’

‘Yes, but it brings them up out of balance. There’s a lot of blue-greys, and there’s the brown of the woman’s dress there in the corner. Your yellow wall affects them. They don’t feel as right, where they are, as they should.’

‘What about the nude?’

This was one of Bonnard’s ‘Nude in a Bath’ series. It should have had a shimmering, aqueous beauty about it, but the print was a poor one and lost most of the painting’s voluptuousness. She said, ‘Well ... but why have you got it there?’ The morning sun fell straight on the print. ‘Won’t it fade? It will, you know.’

‘That’s what I want it to do. The colours are too strong. I want them to wash out a bit.’

She said, ‘Yes, but they won’t wash out equally. I mean, the gold and orange tones will go before the blues, and the chequered effect will get all mucked up. You see, the different colours are printed with inks of different composition ...’

But he knew this. In fact he gave a well-informed account of the main dyes and colouring agents used by printmakers; some of it was over Margaret’s head. He had an answer for each of her doubts. He plonked his cup on the chair, and said, ‘Well! I must get up,’ and started to drag himself out. She moved out of the room ...

Furious with myself for picking up his cup ... and was a few steps down the hall when he called out. ‘Hang on!’

I stopped, but he seemed to be dressing, so I started down the stairs. He called out, ‘Where’re you getting to?’

So I put the cup on the landing and waited.

He came out in a T-shirt and jeans, feet bare. He noticed the cup and said, ‘What’s that doing there? Oh,’ and led the way down.

An interesting contest; take it quietly, Marg girl.

Robert was noisy again by this stage: ‘How’d you enjoy the room service? Couple of nice bunnies?’ But Michael only grinned, gave the coffee cup a splash under cold water, and examined the bread bin, which was empty. ‘Come’n we’ll get a couple of pizzas. I’m hungry as a horse. I didn’t have any tea last night.’

He had a green, battered Mini. They drove past several pizza or take-away food places, but he either ignored them or wrinkled his nose if she pointed them out. ‘No, we’ll go to Tonio’s.’ He stopped at Circular Quay. ‘It’s not far up here; we can walk. Let’s look around a bit.’

There was a ferry pulling out, and another pulling in, with great swirling of water when the engines were reversed. Gulls floated above them and already the harbour was beginning to liven up with small boats. She blurted out, ‘You know, I’m feeling starved.’

Not hiding his displeasure, he said, ‘You said you’d had something.’

She said, 'No, not food, I'd like to just hop on that ferry and then come back, so I could see the buildings as you come across the water.'

He said, 'Let's do it, come on,' and started to run. She ran after him but he took no notice of her, as if it was agreed between them. She caught up to him at the turnstile: 'No, I don't want to really, no, let's not do it at all, it was just an idea.'

He said tersely, to the man selling tokens in the little box, 'Can I cash this? I'm not travelling now', but the man said no, he'd have to use it 'next time'. Michael exploded, 'There won't be a next time, I never go on a ferry. Can I cash this token, please?'

The man refused; Michael was quite ready for a scene. Margaret pulled him by the hand, embarrassed. Abruptly he left the argument and walked out of the ferry terminal; the outgoing ferry gave a hoot. Michael said, 'Well, that's one trip I won't be making. Let's go to Tonio's and get something to eat.'

I could have hit him. I said,

'Look, it was just an impulse.'

'You should follow your impulses.'

'But it wouldn't have been any good. It would have taken ages. By the time we'd gone to Manly and back it would have been dinnertime and you'd have been starving. And all for a moment or two of looking at the city.'

He said, 'If it was what you wanted to do, you should have done it. Cecily did that. Just got up and walked out. That was the right thing.'

No understanding at all, just so concerned with his style of living. I said,

'Maybe I followed my impulse in staying there.'

He said, 'Oh, I was forgetting. You've got a bloke you sleep with.'

Don't cheapen it.

I said,

'I probably said too much last night. I was tired.'

'Exactly. You followed your impulse. You wanted to talk, you talked. Why hold back?'

That stopped me. I said,

‘If you just do any old thing that strikes you, you’ll finish up being nothing in particular. You have to shape yourself. You can’t wipe out self-knowledge, and if you know you just aren’t you when you do certain things, then you don’t do them. Do you know what I mean?’

He said, ‘Yes. You’re going to let a preconditioned idea of yourself rule your life. You’re mad to let it. What’s wrong with impulse? Is there something in yourself you’re afraid of?’

Yes, the possibility of you. I don’t want to fall in love with someone that annoys me. That happened with Clive. I’m not making that mistake again.

He said it again, ‘What’s wrong with impulse? Is there something you’re afraid of?’

She switched to Turrumburrah. ‘I’m a bit scared that I might lose something ... I don’t know what it is. Look at that ferry, and the boats and the bridge. Dufy could have painted that. Or Patrick Caulfield if he’d been in the mood. I can look at it and see both their views. It makes a richness. I think that’s what I’m scared of losing.’

‘You do any painting while you’re down there?’

‘I did a lot of drawings at one stage. I tore them up.’

‘That was silly.’

‘I followed my impulse.’

He said, ‘Touché Let’s go down to Tonio’s.’

They walked. The pizza parlour was shut, but Michael led her down a lane and banged on a door tucked in a little recess. He bellowed out, ‘Open up Tonio, customers!’

An unshaven Tonio appeared presently, and was introduced to Margaret. ‘Com’in, Signora Margaret.’ The pizza ovens were cold but Tonio was preparing himself lasagne and the benches of his tiny back kitchen were already strewn with the makings of a much larger meal. Tonio waved at the benches: ‘Is a family night tonight. You ‘aven’t eaten; there is plenty for you. You have the lasagne, Signora Margaret. I will make a little antipasto for Tonio and Michael.’ Margaret said no, he was

making the lasagne for himself, but he put it in front of her and said, 'It will be nice. Perhaps you will have a little of this one too,' meaning the plates he was working on.

He seemed a little preoccupied. His father, he said, was insisting that Uncle Rinaldo's branch of the family be brought out. 'I say it's too soon. We are all working like, like the devil, to pay off all the ones here already. It's too soon. This business won't support any more. I wish my brother would go and work, but mumma says he's useful here. Phhh, there's nothing I need him for, I am capable.'

Michael said, 'Send him up to Turrumburrah.'

'Is there work there? He is strong, only lazy,' he patted his belly, 'because he eats too much.' He flashed a charming smile at Margaret: 'Is good lasagne, Signora Margaret?'

Oh, he melted me; I don't mean ... Oasis, Wattle and Olympic; what a choice! The Teddington pub. I said, I almost wept,

'It's beautiful, Tonio. I think it's just being here that makes it so nice.'

Well, that wasn't very tactful about his food, but he didn't think of it that way; he positively puffed up with pleasure. I don't suppose he had all that many friends.

'You are very welcome. I 'ope you will be here plenty more times.'

Michael wanted their communication to be through him. He put in, 'And so say all of us!'

Not endearing himself to me.

When they left, Margaret said, 'Shouldn't we pay?' Michael's glance indicated that this was ridiculous, and Tonio said, 'Signora Margaret, you have been my visitor. Michael bring many friends to my parlour; he is good for my business. When you come next, perhaps you will tell me about Tubbarumbah, perhaps I send my brother there.'

As they walked back to the Mini, Margaret observed him.

He's putting on a strong-man face. Unbearable bastard.

He wanted her to drive. She said no. He said she'd got her licence in the country; she shouldn't drive in the city without having some prac-

tice. This was a good chance to get some: practice on a quiet day. She didn't want to, but he got in the passenger side, and just chuckled when she tried to push him over, enjoying the handling.

So it was drive or do more of that. I took the wheel.

He was in fact a good driving instructor and before long she was doing exactly as he said.

Yes, liking it, that's right, yes.

He said, 'Where'll we go?'

She said, 'The Gap. I'll push you off.'

So they drove there. He stood a yard from the edge. He said, 'Okay, push.' She was still inside the fence; she said, 'Whatever for?'

With Clive in the back of my mind, he had no hope, I wasn't laying hands on him.

He said, 'Come on, come on! It's a better view out here!' and grasped her wrists.

I pulled free and walked away. I wasn't going to argue with a man like that. I don't like people putting their hands on me.

He said, 'All right, back to the terrace,' and drove fast.

I wasn't going to get in for a while, but I realized he liked to put you in situations where you had to struggle with him; he wasn't a man who waited on you or gave you confidence at all. He wanted to test you out, just be himself and do things to you. I'd met his type before—and then again, I hadn't, because he knew a hell of a lot, and he could do things, and he knew the city like the back of his hand. What would my father say? 'Get that monkey out of here?' Perhaps he would; I'll bet this Michael would soon be probing him with questions and knotty cases; it's just the way to get my father in.

He said, 'A penny for 'em. Or would you prefer decimal currency?'

And he was nice; he did want to know what I was thinking. I said,

'To be honest, I was thinking about you and my father.'

'I'm not the marrying type.'

I could have jumped out of the car. A pity we weren't back at the Gap, I might have obliged him this time.

‘You are the most overwhelmingly confident person.’

‘No I’m not. I just believe in laying everything right on the line. People get on better that way.’

And he said it again.

‘What are you afraid of showing?’

I was almost at screaming pitch. I said, pretty loudly too,

‘You and your group at Cecily’s drive me mad. You seem to think that people only have to unhook their hang-ups, and they’re right for life. It’s such a simple way of looking at things. It’s naive.’

I could see he was going to say something so I kept on going, trying to shut him out.

‘People are mostly driven by things they don’t understand. They should look into these things and try to find out. But you people insist all the time on your style of living and if anyone tries to look at the personalities who are affecting that style, you go on about generation gaps, or the new generation can’t be judged by the viewpoint of the old. It’s just so blasted silly.’

‘How old are you?’

Twenty-three!’

Right, twenty-three, right?

‘Yeah, I heard you. What’d you say your father does?’

‘He’s a surgeon, heart surgeon mostly.’

Right, surgeon, okay, right?

He said, ‘You’re left behind before you start. You’ve got all the old views. You probably think like your father.’

I said,

‘Are we near the terrace yet?’

But we got into a line of vintage cars on a race, or excursion, or whatever they have, and Michael said he knew a friend who had a 1906 deDion, perhaps he’d be there. Well, he was; he’d broken down, and he did look very funny with these handlebar moustaches poking out of a red and exasperated face. We stopped too, and all the old cars that went past while we were there gave him a toot, with their klaxons and old

brass horns, all those things. He said he didn't know what it was; it was something in the drive; for God's sake did we have a towrope?; get him off the street where the rest of the club were travelling. We pushed him round the corner till he was out of sight of that road, and then Michael said his towrope was back at the terrace; he'd been hauling things up from the backyard to his balcony room. So George, that was the friend, said if we'd just wait till he got a cigar somewhere, he'd sit guard in the DeDion while we went and got the rope. Well, he wasn't long, and then he perched himself high on the seat of that lovely old horseless carriage, and puffed away as if he were waiting for his wife to emerge from the dressing room, while we went for the rope. Just as we were starting, Michael said, 'You sure you wouldn't rather sit with George?' I said, no, why? He said, 'It's just that I don't seem to take some things as seriously as you do. I think I was being a bit unpleasant.'

I told him that was all right and we'd better hurry, so he put his foot down. When we got to Cecily's I think he expected me to get out, but I sat there where I was while he found the rope. Then when he got in he said, 'You're coming then?' so he wasn't such a hard nut to crack after all.

There was a lot of technical talk I didn't understand when he got back to the deDion, but I could see by the way Michael handled the tying of the towrope and the way he drove very cautiously, without any sudden stops or starts, that he respected the car and also George for getting it in such perfect condition. They took it back to George's and there was a lot more talk I couldn't understand and I could see myself watching them pull the thing apart, but Michael said, 'I'll have to leave you to it, George. Give us a ring if you need me.' Then he said, 'When's your plane, Margaret?' and I told him I was supposed to check in at half past two. He nodded to George and said, 'I'll see you after that,' and this beefy George, who I thought was beaut, just grinned and said, 'Seeya, Romeo.'

Michael sat next to me when we got back to the kitchen. The place was livening up. They weren't drinking much but they'd all had a bit and

Robert was in full flight, but this time he didn't have it all to himself. They were trying to pin him down; they wanted him to admit his age. Well, it started from his age but then they tried to drag it out of him that he wasn't a modern man. You never heard such a stupid discussion; it was hilarious. I had a vermouth so as not to be out of it but then I had a couple more, and a couple after that and I was getting a little bit ... One of the things they were talking about was a new book just out with two thousand names for being drunk. I was 'nicely, thank you,' but Robert said I was pissed as an owl. We said all the ones we could think of and I couldn't really think of any until I came up with schicker and that was only because I'd heard Dad—my father—laugh about it; he used to hear it sometimes at the Repat. hospital. He had a very ambiguous attitude to the old soldiers, he used to think they were absolute idiots to get near the wrong end of a gun but he half-respected them for having a type of courage he didn't. We got sixty-five and then we couldn't think of any more so we started to make some up. I said that was cheating but Robert said no, the fountain of folklore should never run dry while he had a tongue in his head, and he was striking all these poses of being upper class and working class and Cecily was as happy as I've ever seen her. The fat-arse Judith was upstairs right through all this. I thought she must have a bladder like a tank, but someone told me there was a loo upstairs too. At first we just varied old words, like sozzled gave us sche-mozzled and schnozzled, which is pretty pathetic, I suppose, but we were all getting giggly and I wasn't watching my watch. I was too labelled by then (66) and by the time I should have had my case packed and been kissing parents goodbye, I was, we all agreed that we all were, just a little bit moo-moo. I forget how we arrived at that.

No, it came about because of Robards, Robert, talking about age. Just when we had him pinned about not being a modern man, he dragged the most absurd red herring across the track by saying that age was relative because at thirty a man was in his prime, like he was—we all knew he was well over forty ...

Though I didn't say anything about you know who, just then. I just squeezed my legs together and put it out of my head ...

... whereas a horse was a veritable centurion at the same age. He meant centenarian, as Cecily was quick to remind him, but he said no, he meant centurion; he was a born leader of men, like the centurion in the Bible who told Christ that he told men to go and they goeth ... wenteth ... what would you say?

Go!! Oh hell! I woke up I was going to miss the plane at the very moment there was a bang at the door. It was my father; my mother was in the car. Dad doesn't waste time on useless reproaches; he said, 'We had to ring about eight people to find out where you were. We've got minus five minutes but I've rung them up and told them to hang on.' Man of action, my father, probably told them he'd had a patient dying on the table or something ... Never knew a man more fitted for putting on pressure. Except, would you believe it, he met his match! Michael appeared and said, 'What appears to be the trouble?' I was sure the old man would say, 'Who's this monkey?' but he just pointed to the Jag. Michael said, 'That old can! I've got a real car here,' and before I could say schuppasted the little Mini-box and the shleek big Yaguar were zimming through those nasty suburbs to the airport, me in the littly, my tiny case and my teeny ticket in the boot of the big boy.

Matisse and Bonnard were far from my thoughts as we zizzed through the factories. My God, I'd like to be beautiful as Bonnard's Maria. And I'd rather have been in the bath than in that aeroplane. I didn't want to go back! Though if I had been, I suspect I'd have been thinking Roman thoughts. Not that I'd do it really; I wouldn't have the guts to cut myself. But I didn't want to go back!

They drove like madmen, the pair of them. If there'd been a cop in sight they'd have been booked for everything. The Jaguar stinks of power but Michael made his Mini squirm in and out of everything. I was hanging on and doing whatever the modern man does when he would once have prayed. I never stopped to ask why we were doing it until we got to the airport. Michael had me half-way through the barrier when my

father came up with the case and ticket. ‘You’re a headstrong so-and-so,’ he said, ‘or someone is. I don’t suppose you’ve heard. Your friend tried himself out with sleeping tablets last night. He’s okay. He’s in St Stephens. He’ll be out in a couple of days.’ Then he said to Michael, ‘You led me a merry dance, young fellow,’ and to me, ‘I don’t even know if you want to go back ...’ and I got angry. I asked why the hell they hadn’t told me earlier—which wasn’t very fair since they had no idea where I was; I’d taken the Morris without leaving a note—and then I said, well, why hadn’t he told me at the terrace? It was a bit late now if I wanted to see Comstock. He said, ‘Well, bugger the ticket. Go some other day. Do you want to go and see him, do you? After all that?’

It was just so confusing and there was one thing I was sure of, I didn’t want to see Comstock just then, lying sick and sorry for himself; it would have drained me like a slash on the wrists to look at him. And then mother tried to put her bit in about she wished I wouldn’t go back but she thought I’d be miserable if I didn’t catch the plane; I’d told her how Edward was going to drive up to Blythe to meet me.

Miserable was right! Have you ever tried a bumpy plane ride when you’re grogged up, just heard about a suicide attempt, and all the rest of it? The first climb out of Sydney wasn’t too bad but it was really rough coming into Orange. There was lightning flickering everywhere and these heavy bursts of rain; the plane felt like a sick duck. Taking off was worse. It was like trying to rise out of oil. I don’t know why they didn’t wait a while, perhaps they knew what they were doing.

Anyway we got aloft and kept running through these squalls of rain. The pilot tried to get above the clouds but all we seemed to do was probe through endless layers of blue-black and lightning. It was all very cosmic but there are times when one can do without the drama. I didn’t want to go back. I didn’t want to meet Edward all keyed up to have me tumble in his arms.

My God that man had a hold on me, and I don’t know which one I mean. It was like being alive again, and I was flying back to a long

drawn-out death. Well, not really, people did things and walked around as if they were alive; it was like a well-kept sort of limbo.

Rock. Schwoooosh. Jolt and down. My stomach was heaving; I kept getting repeats of Tonio's lasagne. Out of Orange it calmed down after a while and I managed to steady myself. I tried to run over the argument we had with Robert. It was all pretty hectic because half of it was mixed up with this nonsense about names for being drunk. And Robert wriggled like a snake—a schsnake, that is—every time he thought we had him. He wasn't coherent; he didn't know what he was saying. Paul Griffiths, the one who wanted to pull Michael out of bed, said modern man was in the process of losing his link with animal nature, that the more we progressed the further we got from the wilds, and superstition, ignorance, all that sort of thing. He said we don't have to have fear any more, or taboos. He said crime and punishment were outdated ideas, and present-day education was just a way of crushing people because we didn't know ways of bringing them into a full development.

I agreed with a lot of what he said but he went on with the idea that we didn't need to be scared of ourselves, the only thing there was to fear was fear itself. And, of course, Robert was going on about how this was right up his alley, he was afraid of nothing except other people's ignorance and prejudice and because he was prepared to tolerate absolutely everybody, he was the incarnation of modern man. Well, Cecily asked him if he'd tolerate the acid-bath murder man, or child abductors, or Nazi atrocities, and he said no, it was against his idea of love and tolerance. Michael said, 'You'll tolerate anything but intolerance, then?' and Robert half-nodded but really took no notice because he was off again. He said we have to find a new base for human activity built on love and tolerance; he got quite madly optimistic at one stage, being by now quite schuppisto, and he said that international government was rising over nationalism just as nationalism rose out of tribalism. Well, I wouldn't know, though it sounds pretty simplified to me, but some of them there are on history majors and they poured scorn on this; they said that was a

laughable idea of history and if that was all he could come up with he'd have to admit being an idiot or a very out-of-date man.

But no, he said he was in-date, he'd been updating ideas just like second-hand cars for the whole of his life ... We all roared at that because that seemed to prove his age. Paul Griffiths, who looked pretty sex-starved to me, said that modern man had real ideals, not just ones he'd adopted to keep in fashion. Michael snarled at Paul and said that was youth in every age, not modern man, and I was pleased he said that, it sort of evened the score for wanting to pull him out of bed. I threw that at him. I said, 'I took Michael a cup of coffee and you wanted to pull him out of bed; which of us is the nearer to being modern man, a modern person?' All he could say was, 'A wonder he didn't pull you in with him, then you'd have found out how modern he was.'

There's nothing modern about that, and there's nothing modern about being tangled up with two men at once. It was awful flying on to Blythe and knowing I was in for something I wasn't ready to handle. I wanted the plane to crash, and then I thought it was mad to wish your life away. I wanted it to fly on and on for hours. Like Comstock. I kept putting that one far back in my head. I'd had ideas for a while he might try something like that but they were only inklings; I still got a shock when I heard it was real. I told mother to go and see him in hospital—a pretty cheap piece of duck-shoving—and I even—and this was something for me—told my father to get him out and about a bit, to socialize. But they were pushing me on the plane by then, so we didn't get far into that. Dad's got an ex-mistress who runs a private hospital. I'll bet Comstock finishes up with her.

He's welcome. Coming into Blythe the sky grew calmer. There were these tremendous clouds, just a handful of them filling the whole sky. I imagine they must have been very beautiful if you were in the mood to appreciate them. They were quite orderly after the turmoil we'd been through, quite stately, in fact; a sort of sub-stratum, a foundation, a layer between me and reality, while I was wrestling with the things I'd have to face. Then the pilot dipped the nose into a crack between two clouds and

I could see we were nearly there. The river was snaking along with its half-mile belt of trees, and the odd station homestead nestling in close. I could see Jingellic; I knew it straight away this time; thank God that weedy little accountant wasn't there to pester me. I was sick as a dog just out of Orange and a man spoke to me. For a moment I thought it was the accountant because he was thin and had a tweed coat too, but he was really very kind. He had a bag of barley sugars and said he never flew without them, and a lot of pills beforehand. So I had one or two and tried to answer him but by then I was thinking of Edward. It seemed a pretty mean sort of double game, to be going back to him. If I'd had any guts I'd have followed my impulse and just not boarded the plane.

But Michael had got me there and I'd been delighted to see someone best my father at something he prided himself on doing; that bashed-up little car! So I sort of had to get on, it was all there was to do. I'll bet mother's kept those sketches I did of Edward. I don't suppose I've given her much for her labours ... ooh, what a horrible one that was. Though some of the grog name things were worse. There was kabunkus, methylated, chutneyed—that was Paul Griffiths —anaesthetized, sloshed, full as the prostitute's ...

When I saw Blythe I sank. It sat in a pool of light, then the light went. There it was, with its un-Kremlin towers, to which and to whit, the water tower, the Catholics', the absurdly pretentious railway station and the mast of 2BL. The rooftops were speckled and the plain all round was dotted; actually it looked cosy, in a non-exciting way, as if it were resting in a crook of the river's elbow. And that's about it, of course; oh, they work, they get up at all hours and drench sheep or thunder down the road with stock transports, but mentally they sleep. They see too much of each other; there's no mystery, no wonderful new things opening up.

Modern, aren't I? But an hour with Tonio did more for me than a month in, what did he call it, Tubbarubba? I must write to Michael and tell him to tell Tonio for heaven's sake not to let his brother go there, it'd be the death of him. After all, Blythe is big, there are three men and a dog there, but Turrumburrah ...

Edward gets inspiration there.

I wonder what he said that day, that speech?

Back to Myra and Jim, Anzac biscuits and Fosters tins, great enormous deal.

Back to sponges and the tennis club roster.

Back to Ponds and Mr Bunny.

At the height of the fun when there just wasn't another thing to say, Judith the Jewish girl banged a great chord at the top of the stairs. They must have moved the piano while we were all shrieking at each other. She said, 'Barbarian bastards, music hath power! Now listen to this!' She got a bit of heckling, but she launched into something, nobody knew what it was, except Cecily woke up after a bit. Cecily would, of course, have to let everyone know that she knew more about it than Judith. She was mumbling away in a loud sotto voce, 'She's taking it too fast or too slow; she's not keeping strict time,' or 'She's too ambitious; she should play things within her range.' It sounded good to me. It was very rhapsodic at the start but I sensed the movement of it after a while. It went on for ages. She didn't tell us what it was, she just announced 'Adagio sostenuto, you'll know what it is.'

It went on and on, but it gripped us. It was the most desolate music. He seemed to be rowing quietly over an ocean of misery; at one stage the notes reminded me of paddling, and ripples.

Edward would have thought of redfin. Or Jimmy would.

Back to Jim's Club habits, shutting the door without letting it slam, so you won't notice when he's gone.

When it was over, Cecily said to me, 'Beethoven. Hammerklavier. She's not up to it yet but it wasn't a bad try.'

I thought it was a marvellous try. She didn't stop once, though a couple of times she had a second go at some part. I liked that, it seemed to make her handling of the music more intimate. Poor Beethoven must have been like Edward, having the courage to face his misery and somehow rise above it, mastering the thing because he expressed it.

No, that's not Edward. He's not an artist, unless it's at manipulating life to make it show him what he wants.

It was the quiet spot in the party. Every party needs one, but there hadn't been one the night before. When Beethoven was finished, we were all silent in the kitchen. Michael called out, 'Something else, Jude,' and she started on some Chopin thing but it sounded showy after Beethoven and we called out to stop. So then she did some hamming. She played a Schumann song called 'The Two Grenadiers'. It's all terribly patriotic and 'Dying For The Emperor' sort of stuff. You've got to be a man to sing it, of course; well, Judith walloped away on the piano and tried to sing the man's part, growling and whooping. She sent the thing sky-high; it was hilarious. Robert got going again then; he said, 'Exactly!!! You mock those sentiments today. Patriotism is dead! And a good thing! The world's changing, there's a new breed coming in to take over and they just won't accept that eyewash!' We all jeered at him, but it started the party rolling again. Judith and her group came downstairs, someone got the gramophone and we started dancing. It was fantastically crowded in the kitchen but we squeezed in somehow and it was fast and furious. I stayed with Michael though I liked them all by now, and I did ask Judith her address, because I'd love to get to know her properly and I told her I wanted to hear her play again and she said she wanted to see some of my drawings. I told her I'd torn them up and she pleaded with me to do some more.

If I were an artist and wanted to fully express myself I'd have grabbed the door of the plane and stepped out.

Modern man's a thing I don't care about. What does it matter when everything's hopeless? I promised Tom Dawson I'd help him with his wretched booklet. He thinks it's his ladder to get out; why am I climbing down into all that again?

Crashed, smashed, sherploshed, shermozzled, pissed as a newt, three sheets in the wind, tiddly-diddly, molo or mumpus, what's it all matter? Let's go flop!

But the pilot made no mistake. He banked as he crossed the Murrumbidgee; light caught the wings, reflecting in Margaret's eye, and she cried. The touch-down was impeccable. Gloom swept the airfield as the plane pulled up. Des Carrington pushed steps in place; the hostess handed people out; reminded them of hats and bags. Edward waited; Margaret dragged herself up. Five feet six and five feet four, they stood at bottom and top of the steps. Des said, 'Down you come, lady, they won't wobble.' As soon as he saw her, Edward knew. Her first glance told her he'd seen. She said weakly, 'Nothing to hide then, is there, Edward?' and he said, like a drained-out corpse, 'Your car is waiting, Miss Ward.'

6 Melbourne

I shouldn't have made love with Edward.

If I hadn't met that mad Mr Bunny ... That drive back was awful. He tried to hide how bad he felt. He didn't even lift out my case, not that I wanted him to. I haven't seen him for a week. I know how low he feels. I had a day at home but I'm better off going to work; there's something to occupy my mind. I see Michael Bunny holding Sue Adams's hand, I suppose that's something. If he wins that competition it'll be my sole achievement for the year, and not very much of it mine. I asked Myra about that the day I stayed home. I said, 'Myra, do you look at a month or a week and say it's got to give you something, you've got to have something definite come out of it?' She said she just tries to make the best of each day, which was too Reader's Digest for me; but then she looked into the washing up, which seems to be her main place for confidences, and said, 'There's no big upheavals in my life, now.'

Come to think of it, she never makes any comments about me, or offers any advice, but when she weighs up her own life she does it so firmly and—you'd have to say—plainly, that it starts me searching myself over again, and there's been enough of that this year. I need her, though. She wants me to go to things with her. I said I would, weeks ago, but I haven't; I will, now.

I wish Michael would write to me. I've only got work to fill in the day; I haven't even been to see Tom Dawson yet. I must, I said I would. If I don't start getting some fun out of that I'm resigning. I didn't want to go back with the same headful of problems I brought here but it looks like that's how it is. I'll bet Cecily hasn't saved a cent.

Poor old Margaret's feelin' seedy, lookin' pretty low. We'll have to take her for another picnic, down the Murray. Get a decent boat. Drive down to Echuca and show her the wharves and that.

Perhaps she'll go. I hope she does, it'll only be a torment if I see her.

It's different for Margaret, she isn't settled yet. You don't break out once you're settled. Young people think they can make some big demonstration but settled means settled in yourself.

You can never break out of your ways once they're established. When I took Jim down by the river, instead of going out with Comstock, that was it, for me. I'd have some people in, for Marg, but I'm scared of boring her. She knows she's not ready to go back yet and I haven't much to offer her. She doesn't think I'm very bright; mind you, I don't think she expects it of me. She'll never fit in here. Poor Edward, poor Tom. What a combination. It's a pity Tom never stuck it out with Watchett as his father; it might have been hard but it would have made more of him in the end. The trouble with me is, I want to do something for them but I haven't got the imagination; I don't know how to help them. Who could make Edward solid, if that's what he wants to be? Who could love him, anyway? Who can change Margaret except herself? And so on and so on; you don't know the best thing to do, there isn't one. I'm an interrupted person really, since poor little Harry. I don't think any of us develop past the moment when we're most involved in our lives; we just get older versions of the same attitudes, keep fitting in with the community changes. It isn't much, is it? Tom and Margaret are the ones with hope, though I often think hope is what you have until you know yourself. Anyway, I'll ask Tom round and see if I can get Jimmy going about the war years, round here, it might help him with this book he's doing.

Edward came round to see Myra while Margaret was at work.

First time in months.

Battered; you can only take so many hits.

There was nothing said while she made tea, put biscuits on a plate. She said, 'It's black, isn't it, Edward?' pouring; it was her way of tilting at him for the seven months since they'd last sat down together. He said, 'Grim,' and she nearly laughed.

People get so bound up in their own affairs.

She told him about Comstock; he only said, 'We got married the same day, you knew that.'

He's looking for links; but you won't find Edward trying to get rid of himself.

He said, 'That Marie was only half a person, anyhow.'

Which annoyed me; she had enough feeling to run after his plane, didn't she?

'How much of a person are you?'

Edward made no attempt. He said, 'He chose the wrong way to get rid of himself. You should take the world down with you.'

'Oh now, come on, Edward. We get our affairs in a mess, we've got no one to blame but ourselves.'

'What about our circumstances, the times we live in? Don't you think you can be born in the wrong place and time?'

She said, 'How would you know if you were?'

Silly man.

He said, 'You'd feel like I do.'

'There's always failures.'

'You don't spare me, Myra.'

'You know how to be sorry for yourself.'

There was a long silence. She said, 'You finished out at Bunny's?' He said, 'All but one bit that was too wet. I'm going out there, probably tomorrow. Why?' She said, 'Just asking, that's all.'

Because you have to know what people are doing, there's got to be community, or isolation. I don't have feelings in a vacuum, which is all we are, once you take away relationships. And I'm fond of you, Edward;

we've known each other all our lives; we'll know each other to the end, I suppose. Long after Miss Ward leaves the high school.

One gets so desperate; they ask you, 'Goin' to the cricket, Edward?' or 'S'pose you'll knock off if it gets windy?' They know the answer's yes; it's as if they're looking for reassurance that you're not going to upset the bars by trying to break out.

She said, 'I'll just put the roast on; I like it to do slowly, then it doesn't matter if Jim's a bit late. From the Club.'

These are my days, Edward; you know most of their contents.

She worked unobtrusively, the vegetable peeler slicing through potato, the knife through the pumpkin. She used the wood stove, though she had a Porta-gas oven. 'It makes the kitchen more cosy, the wood fire,' she said, as if in a litany, and Edward in response, 'I'm glad I'm not outside today, it looks pretty miserable.'

It was after four before they thought of time; they heard John Button's Mini in the drive. He said, 'I'll go out the back door,' but she gestured to stay: 'She'll have seen the ute. Won't come in unless she wants to.' Margaret's feet sounded in the hall, there were noises in her bedroom. Her wardrobe door squeaked; it seemed to be opening and closing all the time. Despite their efforts, they could make no conversation; her presence dominated the house. Finally Edward leapt up and rapped imperiously on her door: 'Signora! Signora!' as if acting in a third-rate gangster film. She said, 'What?' in a quavery voice, thinking of Tonio or his brother who might be sent ...

To purgatory.

... to work in the country; but Edward had slipped one of Jimmy's hats on, and squeezed his head through the door: 'Meeta me atta da bridge, full mun; see you tonight. Arrivederci, sweetheart,' though the last word came out bitterly. She was trying on clothes, she was wriggling a new dress down her body; she looked at him, scared, then recovered: 'Oh, don't be stupid! Go on, get out! Just get out, can't you?' He nodded, as if given the name of a horse to back: 'Full mun, Signora, tonight,

da bridge,' and made a greasy kissing sound. She said, 'I'm going out!' Her voice rose: 'I'm going out! Get to hell out of here!'

Ah, we uomini are always at the service of le charme donne; oh, how rank and miserable are all my sources of emotion, every spring of feeling poisoned.

He wrecked the last pleasure I had.

Myra stayed where she was, not intending to be associated with him; he left. After a while she came out, still in the new outfit he'd seen her putting on. She asked, 'No mail?' Myra said no.

Dead phut.

After tea, she walked round to Tom's flat. The nightingale's son was extremely relieved to see her; he'd given up hope of making anything out of his project, yet was committed to the Courier and the Back-to-Turrumburrah Committee, As he said, 'They're the very people I want to get rid of, yet they're the ones I have to prove myself to, the ones I have to work with. How do you fathom that, Marg?' Then, without waiting for an answer, 'Gee, I'm glad you came.'

Well, that was something, to be needed.

Tom spread out his stuff; they looked at some photos; he told her, without zest, some anecdotes. It lacked a thread, a theme, it was all a ragbag without any meaning. Margaret turned things over, wondering if Tom knew about her break with Edward, asking herself how one could possibly make use of the material he had. She offered to do some sketches; what sort of thing would he want? He scarcely knew. She asked who he'd interviewed; there was hardly anybody. Did he have any possibilities in mind? Only one or two. They sat glumly. The only picture with any character showed Jack o'Boon with his wagon team, and the association with Edward was too strong for this to be palatable. So she told him about her weekend in Sydney; Tom's enthusiasm was intense—this was life, real life, these were real people on the move, this was what he wanted. Did she know anywhere he could flat, when he got out of Turrumburrah? She said there was sure to be a room at Cecily's place, people seemed to be moving in and out pretty frequently, she'd

put in a word for him if that was what he wanted. It was, of course; he was delighted. In a flush of confidence he said he'd make some tea; they'd be sure to get some ideas in a minute. He tipped the radiator so he could make toast ...

It made me think of Edward's fire.

... and brought out some honey in a pseudo-Grecian pot. Margaret eyed the draped figures holding Victorian poses ...

Hasn't he got any taste?

... and moved back to the booklet. Her mind was blank, but there was an irritating something that refused to surface, an inkling she couldn't quite get hold of. He said, 'Or would you prefer a sherry?' She nodded, drank it quickly and had another. He joined her, they began to lower the bottle; all he could talk about was Cecily's flat. Who lived there, what did they do? How often did they have parties like the one last weekend? Were they really creative people, were they interested in dancing, acting, music? She was wondering if anybody could live up to these expectations when he burst out, 'You know! You know what I'd like to do with this thing?'—touching the booklet.

Burn it?

'I'd like to fool 'em! I'd like to put in everything they'd like but slant it, just put a twist to it and send the whole lot sky-high. I'd like to take them apart without 'em knowing it, the whole bloody lot of 'em! Don't you think?'

There was a knock at the door. Tom said, 'Good Lord. Who's this?'

But I knew.

Edward was polished, gave nothing away, but Tom sensed an edge, or perhaps it was the sherry. He told his father what he wanted to do. There was defiance somewhere in his tone, defending his newfound link with Margaret, trying to fence his father out. But Edward said, 'It's a superb idea, it's got to be done,' and helped them finish the sherry.

The air crackling between us, of course.

A waiting game now, a long-drawn-out campaign.

Tom went outside a moment. Edward stood. ‘Atta breedge tomorrow night, Signora, full mun, arrivederci,’ and winked.

Whatever ails that man? Anyhow, he can stick his bridge; is he trying to make me come to his place because I won’t go to his Lover’s Lane, or actually trying to make me go there, or is the moon thing a way of mocking me? Which? Well, I’ve got to sort something out with him, I suppose, make some sort of clean-up, some decent break.

When Tom came back, Edward was gone, Margaret’s mouth tight. Tom said, ‘He’s a most peculiar man; is it any wonder I’m a muck-up?’

And for once I thought he had some hope. I said,

‘Okay. I’ll write to Cecily and tell her you might be down soon. Now we’ve got to think of all the things they take seriously and see how we can get at them. Haven’t we?’ Tom picked up the empty bottle, put it down again and said, ‘Yes, now what do they take seriously? Football, church, doin’ the roight thing, the weather? ... mm, let’s think, there’s got to be lots.’ Margaret scribbled down the things he said; she looked at him for more, but he was thinking. She crossed out Unwritten on the front of his folder and wrote Unwritable. He laughed. ‘We’re doing it the wrong way. Let’s think of all the people that need a pin in ‘em and work out how to do it? Eh?’

They saw a lot of each other, the next two weeks. Tom’s stocks in the town rose sharply when the much-admired, little-known Miss Ward was seen at his flat or the Royal’s lounge. They did a lot of laughing. Their booklet developed into a revue; why not put on a stage show?

Well, I couldn’t write any of this unwritten history thing, but I could do the settings and design all the costumes; I thought it was a terrific idea. I mean, why not? They were going to have this back-to-the-town nonsense; we could make it a skit on the place; anything so I could get my hooks into the town. I was pretty sour about being back. I met Edward that night; I had my guard well up and so did he. He asked me when I was leaving. I said I wanted to help Tom get out and he seemed to feel he had to do this booklet; I’d stay as long as we were getting

somewhere. If I thought we were wasting our time, I'd go. I told him about Cecily's place, and how Tom wanted to live there. He just nodded. I thought he accepted it, but he said, 'So I lose him to another woman. But I don't grudge him to you, Margaret. You take him down there, perhaps someone'll initiate him.' On the drive back from Blythe I found it hard to tell Edward about Michael Stebbins, but I got it all out that night. Edward, mind you, has as many tricks as a cage of monkeys and I didn't know if I should hand him all this knowledge; he can improvise ammunition out of anything. I said we'd see each other and we'd both help Tom ...

Rather to Tom and Margaret's surprise, the Back-to committee liked the idea of a pageant with comic relief. They were somewhat eclectic in their approach; they appeared to imagine some cork-darkened natives driven jabbering through the streets by bearded pioneers whose horse teams pulled an indiscriminate collection of American-style covered wagons, log-wheeled timber trolleys and carts piled high with hay, traction engines, T model Fords, trucks bearing floral or comic tableaux, and of course modern sports cars carrying the girls in the Queen Competition. Mrs Grope grew very expansive. She wondered if they could get one of the earliest steam trains from the railways museum, if there was one, and include that.

No one had the heart to mention rails. I could see Tom's nose wrinkle, but I was delighted. I said to him after, 'Of course it's a jumble; their minds are a jumble; that's where we come in.' And I said to the committee—Tom was roping me in to some of the meetings by then—I said, 'I think it's been a very creative discussion. Let's adjourn for a few days and see what ideas we come up with.' They loved me saying creative, that really got them in. We walked back to Tom's flat that night and as soon as we were out of earshot of everyone wanting to give us a ride to see if that was really where I was going, he nudged me on the arm and said, 'You know what? We're committed! We've got a procession to plan!' The poor thing looked aghast; it'd just hit him. I said, 'Not to worry, Tom. We'll

lead it straight out of town and up the road to Sydney. Pied Piper style!’ He said, ‘What if it flops? We’re stuck!’ but I wasn’t having any of that.

When I got him back I made him think of everything he could remember from his boyhood. He did do a flush. All he could come up with was Mickey Mouse and Minnie, Ginger Meggs and Minnie Peters. I said all right, they can lead the procession; I can remember their costumes, I think, and anyway, there’ll be people who’ve got the annuals. What else could he remember? He said he remembered Edward telling him about Bluey O’Brien taking a bagful of snakes into the bar of the Royal. I said right, a bagful of snakes and Bluey O’Brien it is; they’re in! What else? He scratched his head, he said kids used to put pennies on the train line to get them flattened, and some of the kids used to get into trouble for pinching detonators. This part of it didn’t mean much to me; he thought a while and said that Edward took him to a cricket match once at a place called The Silo, halfway to Kyamba. They’d been playing a few minutes when they saw smoke in the west, and they all dashed off the field to fight the bushfire. He said, ‘I can still remember these men sitting round when it was all over. They were all wearing their cricket caps, their whites all filthy, and this chap called Bert Lawrence said, “I think Tim Darcy musta got someone to light that fire; he knew he’d never get me out”.’ I liked that story, the cricketers turning smartly back to farmers; there had to be something we could do with that sort of material.

Tom didn’t see this. He said, ‘But, Margaret, it’s all corny. We give them that sort of thing, we’re just playing into their hands! Why don’t we hire some pop groups and stage an opposition festival?’ But my mind was starting to race. Not that I objected to a couple of pop groups—throw them in for good measure, sure—but I was starting to think how we could rearrange and combine these things. Minnie Mouse and the bushfire? That didn’t sound very good. Father Christmas and a bagful of snakes? That was pretty wet too, but I knew where I was heading, or I thought I did; if we took all their favourite characters and turned them topsy-turvy we might manage to make an occasion they’d remember

when Tom and I were gone. They were all Kelly-mad; there was a story that the Kelly gang had slept in some old hut at the end of town the night before they held up Jerilderie. Well, that was grist to my mill too; if they were all so male-struck that they had to have Kelly, then Kelly they should have, but with a difference. Who should I team him with? Theda Bara? Miliza Korjus and the Waltz King?

Someone said every artist should go into the wilderness; I think perhaps everyone should. This was my wilderness time; it hit me when I got Cecily's letter:

... I agree he should get out. I think it's the last chance he's got. When's he coming down? There's a spare room at the moment. Michael's got someone who says he might want to move in for a while. If Tom's coming down soon, write and let's know and I'll put this chap off.

And what about you? I left your letter lying around the kitchen; you know why. Sly, wasn't I? I think he read it. Maybe someone just pushed it out of the way so they could have some room.

Robert's getting funny; he's a bit of a handful. But easy enough after Mr Jingellic. And just why the hell do you tell me to ring him up? Are you really raving starkers? What sort of conscience have you got that you're trying to push on to me? He can sink or swim without little Thistle. Robert's erratic; he goes off for a day or two; he says he can't settle down; he's got to get some different work. I found him one day at Tonio's, comfortable as you please, telling this circle of Italians the ONLY way to make a meat sauce—or something. He came home with me good as gold. He raves on about not having any stability, why don't I stop worrying about him? He says I'm good for him—I think it's really the whole lot of us in the house; it's a long time since he's had somewhere that isn't lonely, or tense. I think Tom would fit in okay. Robert says he can have his room if he goes off to Queensland. Fat chance of that! But there'll be room for him ...

She's going to marry him.

The wilderness, eh; somewhere where you can try yourself out, find something, and leave the failures behind. Yes. So it's back-to-Turrumburrah for a little while longer ... a letter from Michael wouldn't hurt a bit; a lifeline, you might say?

Well, I had a lot to learn. I had the idea that Tom and I would be able to run the thing the way we liked. The trouble with our ideas catching on was that they got out of our hands. All sorts of people decided they had to be in the act. The nurses at the hospital—or someone up there—decided they had to have a float. Then the Agricultural Society said they might alter the date of the show, but they changed their minds because midsummer was too hot. Then the Courier said they'd put on a big display and they started to wrangle with the Historical Society—who were the quaintest collection of old bowerbirds you ever saw. They showed me this shed full of everything, from old bullock harnesses and a river map like Comstock had at Jingellic, to a pile of whisky and Black Tulip bottles that might have been emptied last week. I started to pick the eyes out of the collection but they insisted they had to mount the show. I could help if I liked but what they were really angling for was the council to give them a subsidy so they could buy new premises; they had their eye on an old brick place which, apparently, used to be the post office. Well, they had their stuff in an old tin shed, so I could hardly blame them, but I wasn't going to wait around while they tried to push their idea in front of a council that met once a month.

The Irrigation Commission, everyone seemed to think, was the key to it all. They'd never excited me much. They had a big solid 1940s-style building at the end of town, and most of their work was clerical these days. But everybody tried to tell me how much difference the coming of the water made to the area. Mostly they were incoherent: 'Oh look, you've no idea ...'; 'Before they brought the water—nothing. No security. Nothing'; 'Oh, you should have seen us then'; 'Made all the difference, made ALL the difference;' that was the sort of thing they said. There was talk of inviting Watchett down from Sydney, and then they wanted the Premier who'd turned the water on that day, until someone remembered he was dead. The worst of it was that people assumed that Edward must have the key to it all. They'd say to Tom and I, 'What've you and Edward got planned?' or 'Edward got something twisty lined up for us, has he?'

Edward, I suspect, was pleased, but he was lying very low. For three weeks or more I barely saw him. It was a strange feeling, rather uncomfortable; he'd infiltrated himself into my life—well, you know how far we'd got—and then he'd wisped away, and all I was left with was a flurry of activity and running around and meeting people.

It was good for her, though. Marg had no centre in her life, now she had one. When she'd come home from work, instead of staring out the window, making me assess the street just to look at her, she'd change and get out her list of things she had to see to. She was always asking me questions. 'Who's this Brian Hewitt that's supposed to know all about old farm equipment?' Or 'Tell me all the films you saw, Myra, when you and Jim were going together, and I'll see if I know any of them.' Or 'Where could we get yards and yards of hessian, Myra, or sailcloth, without having to buy it, just borrow it for a while?' It was a good time for Margaret and me, and for Jimmy too, I think. He'd often stay away from the Club to drive us somewhere. We'd take a run out to some of the dance halls we used to go to, or down to the river to some of the spots where we used to go swimming. Jim said to her one day, 'Course the canal hadn't come through then, Marg, y'understand,' and we both laughed at him; as if she didn't know that! She was quite involved. She got on well with people, too; just stayed quiet till they asked her something, then answered them freely; I was proud of her, the way she was learning to mix.

I could see I was getting keen on her again, but softer, like she was my daughter. Myra used to run us about a lot. Half the time it was her idea, not Margy's; we had to see someone, or try and find some blessed thing to go in this parade they were going to have. I liked the idea of digging up all the old equipment. I said, 'Why don'tyer get one of the big draglines they used for digging the canal? It'd look good sitting up there at the end of the street. That'd remind people.' But apparently someone'd thought of that and they'd all been scrapped years ago, according to the Commission. Pity. I got a bit sentimental at some of these old halls we went to. Myra was funny. We'd be going out to see Des

Kline, and I'd say, 'Where's he live now?' and Myra'd say, 'It's down this road, Jim. I'm sure it is' and I'd have my doubts but we'd go down there and we'd come to the old Nevertire hall and I'd say, 'This isn't the lane at all, he's half a mile west of here' but Myra'd say 'Just a minute, Jim, let's have a look around, there might be something here Margaret could get in the display.' I'd sneak a look at Marg to see what she was thinking but she'd always agree with Myra and after a while I got the idea that actually she was more interested in Myra and me than in this procession business. I don't think I ever felt so proud in my life.

Jim proposed to me at Nevertire, but I knew it was just that he was feeling amorous; I didn't give him what he wanted. But the day by the river, that time after he got beaten up in that fight, I didn't hold back from him then. Jim's a man of simple needs—but I never know if it's because I see him too simply. When Margaret's been talking about something I often see him thinking away to himself; he might go quiet for a day or two. Like that time she came home from a meeting and said, 'I don't know, everyone round here always talks about progress. How can they be so optimistic? It's not as if it's such a terribly rich place.' Well, Jim said it was, it'd turned into one of the richest dairying areas in the Commonwealth, and he tried to tell her how dry it used to be and how you couldn't depend on the rain. Well, Margaret's got a picture of her place in Sydney, right on the harbour; I saw it one day when I was doing out the house. You could hardly expect her to think we're rich when she's used to that. Anyway, a couple of days later he said to me while we were getting undressed for bed, 'You reckon we've made any progress, Myra?' That hurt me a lot. The way I see it, you've got to have faith in your own community because if you don't you've nothing to look out to, outside yourself. So what could I say to him? I said, 'Look, Jim, we're still with it, we're doing as well as most around here. You think back twenty-five, thirty years. There was a war on, we were still searching, weren't we?' meaning we weren't going together then.

Them Nevertire dances were good. It was one of the few little dances the army mob never got to. They were a boozy lot, usually started

up trouble one way or another. They put on a good supper at Nevertire, used to be a friendly dance. We all knew each other. I was skiting there one night. I pointed out Myra to Tom Bowler. I said, 'I'm going to marry that girl.' Tom wasn't so genial then; he said, 'Well, you dip your hand in the barrel, you more or less got to draw out something, haven't you?' Oooh, I was sour on him. I asked him what he meant and he wasn't saying anything. He was knocking off Mrs Corcoran from up the road and Paddy warned him off the place with a shotgun, but I didn't know about that then, I just got niggly and fought him. Didn't last long, some of them grabbed us and pulled us apart. The way I see it, you only get one time, that's why Margy makes me uneasy; she's just coming into hers. There's no one half as nice as Margy in this town; it's not what she says, it's just her being in the house; it makes me realize I've had all my choices, had'em years ago. I'm on the rails and can't get off. The funny thing is that the only bloke I know who isn't fixed one way or another is Edward, and I'd rather be me than him any day. I'll bet he does something weird and wonderful when they have the Back-to. Jeez, I'm relieved it's off with Margaret.

The days grew longer; people said the days were drawing out. The green wheat shoots quivered ankle high, then high as socks. September came in view. Margaret wrote to her parents saying she'd be up for a few days but didn't say when. Mr Ward said, 'He must be pretty good to keep her away from that young idiot with the Mini,' and her mother reflected that it was the first time she'd heard him say anything which could be construed as praise of a man interested in her daughter. Mrs Ward was lonely, went to fewer Gallery Society meetings, had to invent when people asked after her daughter. What was happening? Some process of self-definition? Some retaking of bearings from landmarks deliberately chosen to be strange? Or just getting away from being an only child? Mrs Ward had driven round to Cecily's terrace, one weekday, found the door open and the sound of a piano floating downstairs. She met Judith, and they talked, feeling close in the way of someone's else's mother

with someone else's child. Mrs Ward asked her to write to Margaret, 'Because, you see, she's like her father, very strong-willed, and I don't want her to grow so isolated that she can't join in again when she gets back.' Judith played something for Mrs Ward, and told her about her chance of winning a travelling scholarship, and Mrs Ward felt that this was what a young woman should be planning to do. Judith, unthinking, told Mrs Ward how she expected Cecily would probably marry Robards; she explained, 'It's not really love, it's complementary troubles. They'll look after each other, they're very fond of each other actually. It's probably the best thing that could happen.' She would have played her Beethoven, but Mrs Ward appeared a little distressed and made her excuses; really she'd interrupted the practice long enough, she had to go out that afternoon so she must hurry home and get ready ...

So Cecily felt she had to get married, didn't think she'd land anyone else; that's if I'm right; I think I am. Michael didn't write, for all her scheming; it's been a bitter year, pretty fruitless. There's some kids in form four want me to help them cut out costumes; they're planning a Nineties Costume Parade. The Drama Club's given up the Charley's Aunt idea, thank God; they're going to do Scenes from the Silents; it's got possibilities.

Keep looking out, that's Myra's motto, look away; it's not so far from mother's style, either. I've got to do better than that.

Keep doing things, 'work it on out', the Beatles say; no, I've had enough. I'm dropping out, Tom or no Tom. We sold them an idea, it's going to work, Tom'll get credit. I don't want to be here for their Back-to, I've got nothing to celebrate, nothing to link me with their past, except Myra and Jim ...

I'll stick it out till September. It's only three weeks. I suppose I owe Ponds some notice; he's looked after me this term.

I wonder if I can get through three weeks without seeing him?

Nine months ago ... nine months ... this place was a dot on a map; isn't it a weakness to get involved in accidental circumstances?

It's so hard to lift myself out when I don't feel right about anything. That's the moment when it ought to be easiest to go, yet I feel powerless.

As the holiday approached, she grew more determined. Without saying anything to Myra, she began to pack her suitcases ...

I was going to send a telegram from Sydney.

... and leave things folded in drawers so they could be packed as they were.

I didn't have the heart to tell them.

She still worked with Tom whenever he asked her, but there was that slackening of energy, the inability to think of new ideas. Tom, growing more confident, appeared not to notice, but he must have made some comment, because she got a note at school from Edward; it read simply, 'Plane or train this time? Nightingale Carriers would be happy to quote.'

So he'd guessed. All the same, I was going; it wasn't Edward, it was Myra and Jim that tipped it in the end.

It began with a TV weather report. The man on the ABC pointed to various highs and lows, and predicted a warm westerly airflow over the whole of south-eastern Australia. Myra said this was ridiculous, there was sure to be a fog, and it was true, there was already a haze about the town. Jim said the men in the weather bureau had balloons, and instruments, they knew what was going to happen. Myra dug in her heels; there was no harm in listening to the forecast but often they didn't know what they were talking about; you got a better idea if you just went out the front door and had a look for yourself. Jim said Myra was always telling him he'd be hot, and when he got down by the river it was cold and clammy, or she'd say it'd be cool and it'd be hot once he got in the bush. She blocked; everyone knew it was always different down by the river, but she was generally right for the town, for Turrumburrah.

Pointless opposition; or was it? I suppose personalities are icebergs; it wasn't spring yet; they had no children.

In the morning, Myra proved to be right; a heavy fog lay on the land. Jim said, 'Any shopping, Myra?' ...

Knowing there wasn't.

... and she said, 'Don't be stupid, Jim, you know we did it yesterday.'

Every mundane thing looming large.

So they were free to drive out Gogol way, not far from Nevertire; some said it was an Aboriginal name, though the Historical Society claimed it was named by a Russian surveyor; everyone called it 'Goggle'. Its claim to fame was that it had a creek with water in it most months of the year, and was once the site of a sheepwash; there was still an enormous shearing shed.

Visibility was only a hundred yards at best, often twenty, but Jim found the gate and turned into someone's property, driving through several paddocks before they stopped. With every gate an issue.

He led them down the eroded side of a watercourse, explaining, 'This here got dug out by sheep. All the stock on the Parton side used to come down here, and the Teddington side about half a mile up. Used to come from as far as Boon, once. The Goggle shed shore thousands, in its day.'

And more of the same.

Jim said, 'Jist a sec,' and went off in the mist; Myra came out straight away, 'When you get married, Margaret, you'll let's know, won't you? We'll send you something.'

I stared at her.

'We wouldn't like to just read it in the paper.'

Blunt to the point of insult, demanding, yet sentimental too.

I ...

I ...

Each glanced away, but Jim was in the mist.

I did, I liked her, she'd crept in to be part of me almost more than Edward had, it was just I was not used to being so plainly, openly, frankly, bluntly, myself.

You've got to grip this girl or she won't let you near her.

'Myra, of course I'd let you know. I'll be writing. I wouldn't dream of not telling you ...'

'No!'

I had to stop her, not what I meant at all.

No?

'What sort of man will you marry, Margaret?'

It was almost ordering me out of town, except there was another demand buried in it somewhere.

'I don't think I've met him yet, Myra; how could I say?'

'People know, deep down.'

I'm on the spot as well as her, if she only knew it.

'I might be like Cecily. She said she'd know when the right man came along, except he didn't.'

'Don't try and dodge me, Margaret. I want you to talk to me.'

And stay away a minute, Jim!

But I wouldn't know!

But Margaret tried: 'The chances are it'll be someone strong-willed and single-minded, but I don't think that's what I really want. And it might be the opposite—it could be someone unstable who goes on differently all the time, so there's always something new for me to cope with. That attracts me more. But they're two sides of the same coin and really I think I'd like someone who was just very different from either.'

And that's all I can say.

'You're very young, Margaret, aren't you? It'll be different when it happens.'

Me feeling humiliated; did she only ask me to strip me, and jeer?

It's myself I'm trying to give you, silly girl.

Then Jim came out of the mist, whistling; he'd found the shed and wanted them to see it too. Jim walked in the middle ...

Somethin' been goin' on, somethin' a bit awkward.

... and surprised them by taking both their arms; and smiling easily, as if he was twenty, and courting both. Margaret asked him, 'Why, Jim, did you work here once? Did you shear sheep?'

Sweetie girl.

Jim said, 'Nah, nah, that was long before my time. Oh, we used to cut a bit of timber here before old Drury bought the place. He hunted us off quicksmart, plenty good trees left too.' He nodded his head at a stump: 'That'd be one of our efforts, Shorty Roebourne would of knocked that feller over.' Margaret asked him how he knew.

He knew where he was; I couldn't see the side of the gully, even, and he knew where he was.

But Jim had said more than he intended: 'Ah, that'd be tellin', that'd be tellin'.'

Myra said tartly, 'Jim took his girls to very romantic spots.'

Oh. Oooooooh.

I'm not upset. Myra an' me've had some good times, though that progress stuff worries me a bit; man's not gettin' any younger, some of the blokes' kids've got kids of their own. Eh?

They were only trudging now; cattle pats made patterns on the moist pink earth, sticks had an unreal reality; a cow mooing in the misty trees sent a resonance through them. Jim led them across a rickety foot-bridge to the other side of the depression. He was about to hand them up the slope when Myra: 'Did you put the thermos in, Jim. I'd like a cup of tea.'

Well, bless me, here we are and she wants a cuppa tea!

Jim said, 'Oh, don't be bloody silly, Myra; course I didn't; we'll have one when we get home.'

Myra: 'I'll just sit here, thanks Jim; you show Margaret the shed.'

Well!

The situation would have worsened if they hadn't gone. Jim let go of Margaret and led the way up the slope, not looking back ...

Like Orpheus and Pluto; I thought I'd disappear if she saw him look at me.

... until he was on the flat again: 'Only a hundred yards,' he said, 'Over this way, it is.' The shed was huge, with big black rectangles where the doors hung open. 'Careless buggers,' said Jim. 'Old Drury's boys should never've been farmers.' It stood five feet off the ground, which Jim explained: 'Shove the sheep under there on a night like last night, they're dry to shear in the morning. If they wasn't you might be hangin' around all day waiting for the sun to come out and dry'em. Shearers're not goin' to stand for that.'

Who was Shorty Roebourne?

'Course shearers are gettin' hard to get now ...'

Jim loved his wife, his sister, who? Who?

Margaret would have gone back, but Jim was for making a circuit of the red gum walls and yards; he remembered this, remembered that ...

He was using me to mark time, while Myra calmed down, or something.

Eventually, light filling the mist but not dispersing it, they went back to Myra, standing ...

Standing.

Oh.

... with her face turned to watch them.

Good job Jim got over it, that time the truck passed us on the plain; no, it's not me she's annoyed about.

Here's a go.

Myra challenged: 'Was anyone there?'

Jim: 'No. You never had a visitor while we were away?'

Myra: 'What do you mean?'

Jim: 'Just thought I heard a car engine. Must've imagined it.'

They haven't always been faithful? Or they have, but they're not sure of the other?

Myra's feet were a foot apart, hands hanging by her hips; her voice ugly in self-exposure, she said, 'No. There wasn't any car. You're letting your imagination run riot these days.'

Answering his question.

Jim was stopped by now; apparently he needed a cue to start him; Myra said, aggressive because forced to do his work for him, 'Well, what about you? Was there anyone up there?'

'No. No one up there. No one at all.'

Which only answered the surface part of hers.

Myra's gaze hadn't shifted. 'Funny how you're always so keen on this place. You don't go to other places you used to work.'

Which isn't even true.

He said, 'I thought Margy might like the kids to come out here, sketchin'. She's taken 'em other places, hasn't she? She was talkin' about the Back-to committee were going to have this tour round all the old buildings, right?'

Very righteous, my Jim, when you poke him on a sore spot.

'Don't give me that, Jim.'

About as mean as a woman can be, but I've got to know.

Myra's always been soft with me; I'll bet Margy thinks she's a hard old squaw, but she's been good to me. I don't know if I've ever challenged her, probably never seen her at her best, 'cept the way she took the news ... Men like me are dirty and hard, all mixed up inside; just let the good bits out, can't cope with the rest, have to let 'em go mouldy down below. I reckon most of the high-ups are just the same, what you hear. She's lookin' at me.

'I never liked Shorty Roebourne. I only come out here twice.'

Some sort of brothel?

Just to know, just to have the doubt removed, took the sting from Myra's attack. If he'd denied everything she'd have disbelieved him.

Then Jim, sensing Myra's relief, was able to tell her more. With fake aggression, shamming hurt, he said querulously, 'And I don't know what made you think there's someone there. What would they be doin' up the shed this hour o'day? I'll tell you this; there wasn't a soul there but Margy.'

Pointing dramatically at me.

'Never was.'

And that clenched it. They sat, relieved, everything in the open now, Margaret's presence making it easier for them. They said she was like a daughter, she filled a gap in their lives. They said they loved each other ...

They even managed that word, Myra did, and Jim nodded when she said it.

... but it got hard sometimes; two people find it hard to be frank and open all the time, no one likes to air their doubts and grievances too openly; sometimes it was easier to show their feelings by reflecting off a third, but they had no third, nor the fourth and fifth that Myra would have liked.

She went on and on about childbirth and how it nearly wrecked her ...

They'd talked about adoption, but Jim had had his doubts, and though they knew they were irrational, Jim never pretended to be anything but instinctive in the way he reacted to people, Myra said, 'I think we were wrong, I think I was. I think I should've taken the risk. You see, I was scared we might get some little feller and Jim mightn't like him, and I knew I wouldn't be game to have him the same age as our Harry, I don't know why, I just wouldn't. I was afraid he might sense it and it'd muck him up for life, you know how people can get twisted.' Jim blamed himself and said he thought they'd made a mistake, and now they were over the age when people were allowed to adopt: 'Though, we get a lot of kids come round our place, and Myra's in a lot of things ...'

Things, things ... were never solid; nor was I, as their substitute, but they made me me, sitting there on a log, all looking out in line; I was solid, and a source, as well as their bbject; I could give back to them; I said,

'If anything makes this year a success for me, it'll be living in your house.'

I said,

'You don't know what it's like at home ...'

I paused. I said,

‘I suppose my kids’ll talk about me one day, talk about their father ...’

Then I committed myself ...

‘... my husband ...’

And the dream, which Margaret could not articulate to reality for Myra, became substantial as a dream, as they sat on their log looking at the nothing; and Margaret’s indecision, and her years and emotions not yet used, were offered to them, and they appraised them, let them play about their more time-worn minds, and loved her for being young, for being unlike them, and a visitor whose stay was limited.

That’s a-darling.

Makes a man feel weak.

Funny how I’m heavy in the flesh, no different from the log, but trembling; I wish I had a man.

Jim said, ‘You’ll see the year out, willya, Marg?’

All of us thinking sex.

Margaret nodded, moist in the eyes at their affection, but restless too; ‘I might have to make a couple of trips to Sydney ...’

And they all burst out laughing; or rather, they snickered or snorted at first, but hearing the others, they laughed, let go all their tension in one of those silly prolonged pointless laughs that leave one wiping the eyes and saying gosh I’m stupid, what’s so funny, and roaring some more, till the tension is off. Jim came out at the top of his voice, ‘By gee, you cackle, Myra, you ought to hear yourself!’

You bloody old hyena!

Myra said, ‘This is you, Jim,’ and copied him, haw-hawing, wheezing, shaking, shuddering, coughing in his throat; Jim said, ‘Oh heck, wait on, I’m not that bad ...’ but Myra’s glance had fixed him: ‘Silly old bastard!’

The Australian endearment.

... and then, ‘What about my cuppa? Can’t you bring the car down here? ‘ve I got to climb that bank again?’

While the Chev bumped down the eroded sheep cut, Myra pulled Margaret's belt round so the buckle was straight: 'I think you've healed us dearie, as much as we ever will.'

In a flood of emotion, which was all for Jim, but just to be near it made me whole ... as a girl could be, single ...

The letter came from Michael. A group of three were driving north, up to Surfers, might go on, might go up to Townsville; would she make it four?

Might be one car, might be two ...

Oh yes?

Johnson could get his father's Rover and pull a trailer, they could borrow tents, pile the gear aboard and just go, just head for the sun. Would she be in it?

They'd be leaving the second day of the school holidays; Johnson was a teacher; they could wait an extra day for her if they had to, but it was assumed she'd head out on the first plane, so hanging round in Sydney would be no problem.

No set date for return, just as the mood took them; Jill was out of a job at the moment ...

I sent a telegram: 'In Sydney September 6. Any good?' I got an answer two days later: 'Johnson says no go. In Surfers by then. Come earlier.'

Imperial Caesar himself, or perhaps I'd lived too long with Dad. I went down to Edward's. I said, 'Are you busy in September, Edward?

Well, I was, it's one of my busiest times, people getting ready for the summer watering.

Mark you, he didn't offer to wait, or come and get me, and follow the others in his car. But the nightingale was different. He was scared of Michael, scared of Cecily's terrace, scared of Judith's Beethoven and terrified, at forty-six, at the thought of meeting Dr and Mrs Ward ... I had to laugh. But he said he'd squeeze a few days one way or another ...

I wanted to put myself in her hands completely, whatever cruelty, embarrassment or display of personal ineptness might be in store.

I teased him, told him more about the people who hung around the flat, and the social occasions at our place—the gallery hangers-on, the leading surgeons ...

And me a digger of dirt.

Then I said, let's not go to Sydney at all, let's go to Melbourne or Adelaide, we'll be on neutral ground.

I said, 'Only pub I know's the Windsor.'

He knew it was the sort I'd stay at. I said, 'That's expensive, Edward!'; a pretty pointed sort of try-on. 'What do you know about the Windsor?' He said, 'Couldn't pay for a drink there once. Money'd fallen out of a hole in me pocket.'

Oh yes? I said, 'Book the rooms, Edward; notice the plural.'

I noticed many things; my Marg could give, was gracious, had a style, had jumped some hurdle she used to hit before, was making some sort of sacrifice for me, though it wasn't for me to inquire ...

We went; we said we'd stay four days; it was all he could afford; it was long enough; the arrangement was we'd drive down together, then he'd drive back and I'd go to Sydney on the train. No sticky bits.

When it was over she got the doorman to get a taxi and I went out to the carpark; we weren't going to rehearse our final farewell that had to come, some hot day in December ... or January if I could spin it out that little bit longer.

She was lovely on the way down, wearing velvet of royal blue, with a high collar front, and a yoke across the shoulderblades and neck, alternate bands of crimson/gold. I longed to reach across it and touch it, but it wasn't to be that way, I had to let her be.

I didn't know what pressure he was under till just before the end. We were in the lounge at Tullamarine, which was a bit of a risk, with the aeroplane association, but that fiasco was forgotten by then; and a plane took off, and Edward said, 'Upsy! Upsy!' His face lit up and for a moment I thought he was going to do one of his strange things, like

accost some travellers and jabber away in a mysterious language of his own invention, but he didn't. He said, 'Bye bye, bird of passage!' to the plane and nudged me with his elbow: 'Not you, beautiful,' and I was very happy; but I saw him fiddle with a tram ticket; he must have had it in his pocket; he thought I wasn't looking, and he ripped it.

At first I wanted to take her to Hair and all the Jesus/Revolution shows they had that spring, but that was just me being guilty about my age. Youth was trying to make a simple primitivism in a complex city and I should have known this was a trap not made for Marg; she wanted a complete humanity, not your period style. Her study of art made her look through cliches because everything said had been said before; the common factor was the important thing for Margy, not the difference. She took me to the gallery; how I laboured to be at ease. There were all the works of man, and I was a man of a certain sort; I never felt less substantial. I was waiting near the Ladies, trying to puzzle out the directory, when an old man in braces came to me and said, 'You a farmer too?' Old hair-grey me said yes; there was nothing else to do. The bloke said, 'Get some funny things in here, don't they?' and I agreed again; his alternative was to think he was funny because he couldn't understand them, and that would never do. But he'd more or less admitted it; it's amazing how often the opposite of a statement is really just as true. This bloke said, 'They got a thing in there like a farm machine'; I told Marg this; she said, 'Of course, of course it is, it's meant to be. Why do people put art aside like a hated religion, why can't they let it flow through their thinking and have its say along with everything else?' This sounded good to me; we were in some squatly fashionable chairs looking down into a court where there was a statue, a massive figure with enormous eyebrows shading his eyes; it annoyed me that people never have the wholeness of art. They're always cranky or different the very next minute; sitting there we had the worst moment of those four days ...

I'd torn up my drawings. Being with those works of art made me feel that old, old ache—I had to *do* instead of *being*; it only lasted a moment.

I saw the thought pass through her mind; she squirmed and went uncomfortable. I told her we'd come back to the gallery; I'd walk her into the city. Well, you must admit a young girl's shapely legs are the loveliest things there are ... I put my hand in her bottom and she let me for a stride or two before she reached round and took my hand; our happiness was pure; we walked across that dirty river.

Edward was quirky, lyrical and stupid! He had arguments with the tram conductors; he was always in the wrong. He bristled at the neons—especially the lightboards that flash the time and temperature. And I caught him baa-ing like a sheep at the traffic lights. I started to laugh and he grumbled, 'It's all instant reaction, there's nothing fundamental.' We settled in for coffee at Dianne's, and he told the girl, 'Would you ask Dianne if we could have ...?' I said, 'You're not at Curran's now, with the family hovering out the back watching the shopgirls through the peephole in the office!' He of course tried to take revenge. We were walking down this street when we heard some singing; it was an Italian on his roof, in singlet and shorts, trying to fix the tiles. He knew how an Italian tenor is supposed to sound, and he did it well—'*Mira mare quanto e bello/spira tanto sentimento/ma la luna guarda e sento/questo cuore ha da canta.*'

I looked at the man, who winked, but Edward lowered his eyes. There was a woman on the other side of the street, going shopping. She looked like she worked in a drycleaner's, and had a husband who bet; she called out in a rough voice, 'Oo's that singing? The man waved a thumb over his shoulder: 'Izza radio!' I laughed but Edward grumped, 'Isn't there anyone free down here, except Italians?' Oh, I teased him then; did he ever sing on the tractor, sing behind the plough? He said he did; I told him he wasn't game to do it in a silence, there had to be noise. I said, 'You're a bathroom lover, Edward, too, if it comes to that,' and he whipped one back on me: 'Well, why don't you shower with your husband instead of playing around with me?'

That sounds cruel but getting things out in the open was just the release we needed; my need for Edward just then was not romantic but

the attraction of truth. I didn't mind him flying into me, and I gave him plenty back. The Italian man sang out, 'Do not quarrel, signor, signora, is lovely morning,' so we stopped to talk a while.

We talk about freedom, everyone knows we're never free of our selves; the beauty of this stay was that we were free to be ourselves, at least in part. It was of course Marg's first city, not neutral ground, and it was, of course, quite antipathetic to me at times. But circumstances and personality struck sparks from each other. We saw this Chinese bowl; it stopped us both; it made us gulp. It was pure white, translucent, most perfectly patterned, and I'm sure the man's hands must have shaken when he made it. You could feel his fingers in the air yet, and the bowl that little bit imperfect by the instrument, which made it perfect to the eye. Marg got pious. I slung at her, 'You're only a childbirth factory, anyhow,' and she slung back, 'And you're a ripper of dirt.' To grow grass, to grow cows, to grow milk, to grow babies ... it's our limiting humanity we must accept, it's our poor confining selves. I know she felt the same; what else were we doing in Melbourne, sleeping on opposite sides of the corridor?

I said to him outside, 'People think art's only for museums, it's not a vital thing in life, it's only there to be looked at reverently on holy days.' He stopped me; he said, 'Okay, we pull down that great big building, what do we do instead?' He had me there. All I could think of was go and have coffee at Dianne's. In Dianne's he asked me how many children I wanted to have. I said I didn't know, what I really wanted was to want them; some girls found that easy but they were the less complicated ones I knew. We got arguing about Myra not adopting and I noticed he was looking out the window when any women passed, and I knew he was sorry he'd mentioned anything about the Bunnyland we shared—he for life, me for a year. I was happy then; I knew our idea was a good one; it was worthwhile being away together.

Sing a song of sixpence! A pocketful of dago coffee-pullers and Viennese drinkwaiters! I drank wines I'd never seen and tipped men as if I were a feudal lord or Comstock. Which got married on the very same

day as me and his wife buzzed off just about the same time as mine. Cards of fortune, dear friends; the cards of fortune were dealt and I got Margy in Melbourne—with people thinking (some of them, anyway) that she was my daughter—and poor old John lying darkly in his flat in Sydney, wondering when the blackout mood would come again, as come it surely would. There was some exultation of life in this mean and petty thought. If I couldn't get my arms round life, and you know who I mean, I wasn't as far as embracing death.

Oh, Edward's been a marvel! Sometimes he'd leave me for an hour so we'd be all the better when we got back together. We made this arrangement to meet at the corner of the Southern Cross at 3.15. I headed south but when it was time I came from the other way, sneaked up behind him. He was standing at the corner tobacconist's looking debonair with, my God, an umbrella! It was blowy, and he was twirling this thing about, then steadying himself before he took a Chaplinesque peep around the corner. I didn't have the heart to confuse him, I went back through an arcade and came the proper way. I ribbed him about it and he played the couturier: 'If madam would kindly step inside, I have something to interest her. And he took me to the shop to see three umbrellas. One was dinky, pseudo-Japanese, with the thinnest little ribs, rather small and with a handle made almost for a child. Another one had a Mexican blaze of sun at the top of the dome; it was a violent piece of colour printing, spectacular and dramatic. The third was a Brighton-beach, or olde-English cricket cap sort of thing, with thin circles of red and white. I said, 'Edward, I think they're lovely things, but none of them are me.' He was delighted. Staring pointedly at the little mid-sexual who ran the shop—I thought of dear old Tom; and the stare was as good as a wink—he beckoned me with an eighteenth century finger-flick, as if he had a fan; they sold fans there, by the way, along with pipes, male jewellery, scarves and more of that sort of thing. He pointed to the display under glass at the end of the counter. There was a butterfly brooch of a sort I thought they didn't make any more, heaven knows what country it came from. It was silver, a fine mesh of filigree, not the chunky outpour-

ings they do these days. And with it went a scarf—you didn't have to buy them both, but they'd put them together, and it was a divine idea—with a sort of abstraction on a butterfly theme; red eyes and flurring shapes of black and brown trailing over fields of silver, white, lime, lemon, pink like the earth at the sheepwash, and blue, the blue of smoke. The middleman beamed to make the sale, Edward raised his hands and I stood stock-still. What made it for me was that I was just about to step away while Edward paid over lord knows how much, but the man was wrapping it and they were gleaming at each other like conspirators; it was already picked and paid for. Later we sat down, unwrapped it and I put them on; Edward gave the pavement a tap with the point of his new-got broly and I think it was the most affirmative sound I'd heard that year. Plock! I went on with a lot of nonsense about I was very old-fashioned really and I'd only been teasing him with all the stuff about Cecily's flat ... but he wasn't bothering to listen. He waved his hands grandly and a man who looked a bit like my father was standing outside a theatre glaring at us as if he'd seen a mistress given a gift. Well, that's just what it wasn't; you must try to understand what I mean. Edward's flattering at this stage had no guile, he absolutely had to get it right. It was a personal triumph for him, not an enticement. Nor repaying.

I felt like a man in a film half the time. You must realize that I had not done such things before! Not done such things before! I'll spare you a talk on the courting mores of Bunnyland because I know you'll understand. Not done such things before! Oooooowwah, Margy was me darling, me darling, me darling, Margee was me darling, the ONlee GIRL for me! You see she was growing every hour, coming into herself, inheriting a territory of heart. And I Edward knew her need and knew she'd let me have my way which was to give her all I could in Melbourne and all the rest in the inland; I knew now for sure that she'd see the year through. If she wanted to explore me I would lie open as a book; it was in some ways better than love. Oh, I surely wanted to bed that girl some more but the mind has drives as strong as the body's; I wanted us to

know each other through and through, to lead each other through all the rooms, keeping nothing closed.

We talked and talked those whole four days; you've no idea. We'd ring for room service about half past twelve when we were dry and then we'd talk some more. I was trying to think what I could give Edward; he'd have been insulted if I'd tried to pay the bill, or share it. The trouble was, he didn't have much in his house; he lived more in his observations than in the things he owned. There was also the problem that it would be left when I was gone. I wanted something that wouldn't hurt him, something positive that he could look at and feel he wanted to go on; he had a future and a hope.

It was a youthful idea. He'd had two-thirds of his life. What could I get? A painting? But beauty pains, or goes dull. Something old? Some curio? I didn't have much time to look, we were nearly always together. In the end I bought him two things; an art nouveau table lamp, all richly coloured and heavily leaded, and a tiny Chinese figure, a laughing Buddha. One was rich and the other had an eternal optimism; if ever he went gloomy, when I was gone, he'd have the carving there to check him, to remind him of our year, yes, but to say there was always another year, and another... and something would always turn up.

I felt young, he made me glory in it. If I walked fast, he puffed, though he was fit as a man his age could be. And he hung on tight to my hand if we passed young men in gear, young business executives, or taxi drivers with cagey eyes. There was an element of the old Edward mockery in this, but he meant it too; I felt safe with him, and happy. It was a normal, obvious reaction; he wasn't trying to fit in with everyone else the way he did in Bunny-land, wasn't trying to fill the empty spot in every situation. The communal pressure was off and he was often lost to know what to do, was often gauche and clumsy, but heavens how he tried, how he tried hard for me.

I was a mug, I felt it. On the third day Marg took me out to Toorak, people she knew when her family lived in Melbourne. I was nervous of the idea but there comes a time when you want someone besides

strangers, people you're paying to wait on you. The Cairnduffs. He was a dapper little man, decisive and dogmatic. She was a big blonde woman, hair piled in layers, opinionated, witty, and exuberant. She laughed and flung herself into everything. They had an enormous house with winding stairs in a street overhung by trees, not a parked car in sight. There was a bell-push by the fireplace; it looked as if it worked. I said, 'You rarely see these now,' and shoved it; Cairnduff looked up quite annoyed. He said, 'Friday ... Betty's on today, isn't she?' to his wife. If he was flummoxed, she was going to flummox me; she said; 'What would you like for lunch, Mr ... Mr ...' and I could think of not a thing besides a crumbed cutlet, a saveloy, a roast pig, a side of beef, a slug of gin ... Shit! What was a man to say? Then I recovered, as I thought, brilliantly: 'Why, for lunch, I think, a plate of watercress sandwiches.' I'd heard it in a play we read at school, and that was a couple of years ago. Mrs Cairnduff's eyes opened wide with an impudent delight at finding a fellow-eccentric, Marg sniggered and Cairnduff left the room. I thought he was one of Ward's medico mates but it turned out he was a director in some big drug company. He must have intercepted Betty—I'm inclined to believe she did exist—because she never appeared. Mrs C. said she'd show me 'upstairs'; she made it sound like an ante-room of heaven, but there was something about her eyebrow that said that since she owned it, one didn't have to be impressed. The moment I took my eye off her, Marg slipped out the French window to the lawn, and I was left alone with ... At the bottom of the stairs she said to me, 'A man of your age should call me Helga, but since I like very much the sound of "le Rosignol" we shall have to remain on those more formal terms.' 'Man of your age'... 'more formal terms'... I felt she was fishing about Marg and me, so I said to her, 'These are not lovers' stairs, unless one were prepared to fight a duel.' They were so grand, there would be no sneaking up and down in this sort of place, one would have to face the passions and their consequences, as I'd tried so hard to avoid. The carpet must have been an inch thick! I also took her arm. I said, 'Show me these quarters, these rooms, Mrs Cairnduff, it will be a new and valuable experience.' I'd

parody the parody she thought was me! But Mrs C. was no one's fool. She said, 'Dear man,' and took my hand: 'Dear man, you'll do no harm to Margaret, but what about you?' I said I couldn't answer. She showed me her Louis Fourteenth room, which must have cost something like half the earth, and her other rooms in other periods; an impish thing took hold of me. I said, 'Marg's just me little scrub turkey!' She smiled, but wouldn't let the point fall out of sight. She insisted, insisted I explain the term, so we sat, and talked, on a gorgeous, elaborate ... what would you call it? Conversation sofa? Where two seats faced halfside on to each other. She heard me out on the Paradise Tank and the One-Eye Well, and said, 'You are the most austere man I've met, apart from a priest who's an absolute bigot, and anyhow he reads boxing magazines. You're an instinctive nihilist; you've developed your sense of humour to the point where you don't want anything to exist except as it's humorously mirrored by you. The change in Margaret's enormous, but now you must bring her out; you mustn't be negative with her any more; you must show her everything you value even if it's only a dog kennel you made as a child. No, you must, I think you know what I mean.'

And nowhere near the menopause; rich and richly feminine. It hurt to have myself seen through like a bit of dirty glass. They had some glorious windows in this house, by the way ... If she was self-indulgent it was only in the sense that she had money and position enough never to fear truth confronted full square on. Her garden was full and blooming; I had weeds around my house. I was usually too tired after work to worry, and Margaret said she didn't care, it was the places I took her to that mattered. But I knew that though she could be blind to things like that for a little while, her background must out eventually. It wasn't slumming she was doing with me in Turrumburrah but it was something in that direction, finding out what it was like for those who didn't have it so good.

I could barely speak to Mrs C.; I was overcome. She left me for a minute, ostensibly to see about some lunch; she hoped we'd stay. But I was struggling with the pain of being exposed in all my hollowness, not by another's cruelty but by a generous understanding. I came good in a

while. I strolled down to the kitchen—about as big as half my house—and there was Helga slicing ... I didn't know, some green thing, and putting it on bread. I said, 'Helga, what is that substance? And where is Betty, your employee?' Those piles of thatch spun round to greet me: 'I sent her down the street. Do you know there isn't a single cucumber in the house; we'll have to plant some.' It was watercress by Christ! Watercress! By Christ. Man, you will say, need not deny himself! No, nor my darling Margy either; she should have whatever she needed from our year, she should pillage all my past, dig up the few shining stones in my limited experience! She should be conquistador, I'd be her native! If journeying through Bunnyland meant something to her, I'd show her all, though I committed a thousand treasons in the process! I said, 'Helga, you are kindness beyond description; now where's my Margy? We must quickly get together again. I fear I've offended your husband!' But she laughed; Simon, she said, was pompous, but it never lasted long ...

They were marvellous after that! Marg told them so many places, they said they'd take a trip. I swore I'd show them. I started on my stories; I took Jack o'Boon across the plains again; I gave the Scrub Turkey a gallop for her virtue. I invented a few so Marg would have as good a show as the others ... No, honestly, I never knew people with such a talent for opening up topics, exploring them, responding to people. Simon was a deadly, dangerous wit; he knew the state government—plenty of opportunities there—he knew politics through and through, the stock market, the export trade ...

Margaret said afterwards, 'You were gorgeous, Edward, it was your show today,' but I knew better; I said, 'No, it was Simon's; he enjoyed a little contest of wits, he decided to match my world with his.' Margaret said, with a knowing look, 'Well, whatever happened, it made for a very good time together,' and I knew she'd guessed there'd been something while Helga and I was upstairs, I said, 'You wouldn't deny a man one stolen kiss ... I ... Helga.' She should have looked away, or laughed, but she kept staring at me; I said, 'You know my opportunities,' and that was thin, thin ice.

But we were fresh again. I took her to the theatre, though there was no watercress in the play. Various persons were murdering each other for the right to be King of England. England! The bloody place would fit between Tilga and Blythe if you gave it a squeeze. Comstock owned just about that much, or rather, his grandfather did. England! But the play of course was a hotbed of humanity, the thing I tried hopelessly to deny; over coffee I said to Marg, 'Tomorrow, dearest one, is your choice. I'll follow, do whatever you say. Sorry, whate'er you say.' I mean, we'd been to see Willy Shaxper after all. She raised the old eyebrow, so, Dianne or no Dianne, I carolled a little Italian love lyric:

'Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade ...' Persons were seen to turn their pollywoddles, though I admit I was no Caruso. Or does that name date me?

'Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade ...' I nearly said, 'shit, sall'; my voice was like an Edison cylinder, it came out rusty like a tap not turned on for years.

'Where'er you tread, the blushing flow'rs shall rise ...'

And Margy was a little pink, by now, though she had nice brown hair; you can imagine how it sat with my flyspeck grey.

'And all things flourish where'er you turn your eyes.'

Sing for your supper and you might be surprised what happens. Dianne herself came out with liqueurs though the joint wasn't licensed, and she sat with us and we all drank each other's health. She had to know all about us, but there was something a little brassy that we didn't care to have investigating our real position, so we came from north of Blythe, owned half a million acres, had a tribe of blacks as stockmen, lived on rabbits, let the chooks roost in the Daimler, got up at dawn to give the cup winners a training trot, went for months without seeing a paper, had split arses from sitting sticks, missed the kids away at Grammar ... Dianne didn't like being taken in, as by God she was, for a minute. She turned very snaky and the glasses disappeared quicksmart with a bill to replace them. It said 'Thank You' in red on the back; I bet she wished she could change that wording!

The fourth day I felt we changed. For one, it was raining. I wanted to shop, he wanted a film. We saw ... I forget the name, a sexual-candid sort of thing. It didn't do anything for me. He asked me after, 'Why aren't we making love?' I said I didn't quite know, there were certainly times when I wanted to ... I said, 'It's wholeness that I'm really after ...' He spread his hands in what the magazines call an expressive gesture ...

Well! I rests me case, your washup.

But I went on; I said, 'When we did, it didn't add anything to what we've been doing with each other this year.' He butted in:

'Oh yes, yes, yes, just friends, just friends; what a lot of rot!'

I said,

'I suppose what I want is a complete involvement. I certainly didn't have it with Clive.'

He jabbed,

'Nor Michael.'

I said,

'I didn't sleep with him.'

'You will, you will, you will!'

Will I? Hardly!

He said,

'You want to be shown, you want to be told; can't you commit yourself?'

I said,

'I know I will one day. Edward, I doubt if it'll be this year. You see, Edward, it's all in how you see yourself, and that's largely a matter of who you mix with and what you do. Well, I'm not in my permanent place this year, so I won't reach anything final. But it's still good, and I'm not going to cut it short now, though I was a while back.'

He said,

... looking at her intensely ...

'Why don't we sleep together with a naked pillow between us?' And I hit his fingers with a spoon. I knew we were over the bad part when he fooled around like that. But the words had been said and we were

that little bit sombre the rest of the day. And it was our last one away together, and Melbourne on a wet day is not the most sparkling place in the world.

I took it up again later, over lunch. We were having a bite in some little place—not Dianne’s—when I put it to her: ‘You won’t have a feeling of wholeness until you’ve got children of your own, and even then only if you’re lucky.’ She said she realized that—whether she had till then or not—but that if a man gave promise of giving her that wholeness—in her response to him, not what he said—then she’d be able to give completely to him. I said, ‘Ah poop, for a couple of years, then you’ll be interested in someone else,’ and she said she’d worry about that stage when she came to it. I accused her of putting all the responsibility with the man; it was up to the man to bring her out; what would she be doing for him? She hit me then. She said, ‘I think I’ll be doing the same for him. You see, he’ll be younger Edward, and I’ll be able to. You’re giving me more than I give you. It’s got to be equal or it isn’t any good, not in the last resort.’

We looked at each other hard, rain beating down outside, not specially fond of each other then, just examining. Where was her beauty gone? What happened to my desire? Her skin was a frail shell. They were demolishing a big building just across the road; every thump made me scared for her, so you see I could still be tender, though shut out from the richest thing she’d have— would have, one day, next year ...

And I was screaming at her—mentally—that she was in fact doing just as much for me; why couldn’t she see it; why couldn’t she have the confidence to know it of herself? I’d have to find some way to show her, I supposed, before she left, otherwise she’d never know the value of our year.

We walked among the old black warehouses, the bluestone wool-stores, the ‘family’ hotels, at the railway/shipping end of town. We wore raincoats. It was a day of showers, greasy roads and dripping spouts. The traffic police looked sleek and wet. The big diesels went spraying down the roads; heaven knows how their brakes worked. Wet footmarks made the paper-sellers look painted into corners. The Yarra was revolting, a

speckled, murky grey. Trains banged through Spencer Street; we walked there for a while. The platforms were lonely, empty places at the off-peak time of day. A new Australian garbled harshly through the public address when a train came in; we couldn't unscramble one single word. Edward said, 'I never made up a language like that.'

We were reaching out for each other now, perhaps because the mood of the day drove us in. Earlier, the first three days in fact, we'd had spring weather and the opening-up feeling it brings—but in going out to the things around you you're perhaps less aware of yourself.

I wasn't afraid of that any more. I wanted it. After all, what had I gained? I'd met lots of people. I knew there were life-styles different from the groups I used to move in. Am I glad we moved from Melbourne! I might have finished up in the Women's Weekly with a sea captain on my arm.

Instead of Spencer Street, on a rainy day, with a channelling contractor from southern New South Wales, old enough to be my father. Though I had to protect him. When I looked at him in the big booming tunnel at the railway station, I sensed him feeling vulnerable; I knew I mattered to him. I didn't want the old Edward shrivelling up in pain. There was a flowerstall; I slowed down and kept on looking at it. He got the idea, bought me carnations; it made him feel good. We each wore one—we had to take off our raincoats—but we still had a bunch. We came out on the street near the man selling magazines. I saw he was blind. I asked him for the Financial Times, not because I wanted to read it, but because it was covered up and he had to shuffle about to find it. Edward put the flowers in a wire loop at the end of his rack. He knew there was something doing because he cocked a sightless eye in that direction, and Edward told him, 'Just having a look,' before we walked away with our unwanted paper. We reached the safety zone when the lights changed, so we looked back. The chap was feeling about, and we saw him find the flowers. He felt them with his fingertips and then dipped his nose to see what they were; it made me think of a duck diving. We didn't move. The tram grated away with enough noise to drown out a workshop; he

couldn't have heard us if we'd gone, but he seemed to know we were still there. Over his face came a curiously mixed reaction; it had an indelible effect on me. It seemed to say that we'd approached his weakness when no one ought to, but now his feelings were up he couldn't conceal them. He looked exposed, ashamed, doglike grateful, yearning, anxious and yet unwilling to continue the contact. I wondered what you could do to distract a man facing a firing squad, and if you did distract him, whether you would want to kill him before his thoughts returned to the moment. I thought of old Dawson's death, and the peculiar business of Edward and me walking down the street on either side of the funeral procession, till Edward joined it; of our walk back from the cemetery; of our walk through the year 1971 which was sliding out of reach as surely as old Dawson's body—not to speak of his life.

How much had Jenny affected Edward; how much was he the youth who got up to voice his confidence? No one, certainly not Jim, would tell me about that Edward. If I wanted to know, I must create the same confidence in him again, so he could voice it, parody it and mock it if he wanted to, but voice it.

If he voiced it, what right would I have to hear it? I'd be going, that sort of secret was not for me. Would Edward then remain half-opened, half-healed, worse off than before because knowing for a while he dreamed of better, but his rich little butterfly had gone?

The poor blind man! He nodded in our direction. I'm sure he knew we were there, watching. He took one flower from the bunch and poked it through the buttonhole of his ex-air force coat, then let his chin assume some confidence. She'll be right, mates, thanks for the flower, he seemed to be saying; covered up again, a little film of jauntiness hiding the confusion we'd seen. 'Ee eeruld!' he yelled out, 'Eeeeeeruld!!!' and he was part of the world again, inside his armour. Then a thought crossed his mind and he fumbled in his pocket for his dark glasses, and put them on. I looked at Edward; we both felt the same; open-mouthed, aware of touching too closely, watching too closely; as we walked the rest of the road we dared not look back.

I seethed. I wanted the world reshaped to accommodate the blind man, yet he, poor thing, would accommodate himself to it. I knew we all did the same; it was only the handicap made the realization sting in this man's case, but what an effect he had on us! We walked down Bourke Street, looking out, looking out, looking out!

I took her into Hudson's, the old station suppliers. It was a breath of a world I knew, though its time was running out; they had buckets all over the place to catch the drips—one corner was unapproachable. There were boots galore, and lanterns, farriers' tools, harness, pumps; there were grills, grates, masons' hammers, there were saddles, ropes, camp ovens and coppers; there were enormous dippers and colanders, baking trays and boilers—you could cook for a shearing shed ... I bought a hoof pick, a thing like a tiny sickle, though I knew I'd never use it. I'd have bought Margy something, but there wasn't anything there she'd use. She enjoyed the gloom and the thousands of unlabelled boxes, the delightful lack of system ... what price your supermarkets now? Yet she was patient, more than anything else, I felt she wanted to get me outside.

I hadn't told Edward about my presents. I asked him when he'd go to the post office, after he got home. He looked at me, waiting. I said he had to postpone it for a couple of days because I'd had a parcel sent to him, and the shop had promised me they'd mail it that very day, but maybe they weren't as good as their word; would he just wait those two tiny days? I wanted my presents to be the first things he got.

Presents from Margy; would they be old, or new? Made in this century, or how far back? It was a progress of a sort, the walk we made. Everything we looked at seemed to pull me forward, or back. There was no standing still with Margy, either. The blind man released something in her; she wanted to be kept on the move. We stared at a low bluestone church, and I'd have lingered; but she just nodded, and we went on. There was an 1870 police station, and in my mood even the cops were a verity worth clinging to, but Margy was scornful; I don't think police or the people they dealt with came into her world much. I'd have told her

a thing or two, but she was laughing at the Salvos' sign 'The People's Palace'. It was a contradiction in terms, to her. I was a bit annoyed; I told her there were a lot of people needed that place, but the point didn't touch her; she was already starting to look ahead for a busy part of the street.

At Pinky's they were displaying the slinkiest boots, with rag-doll heads peeping out, eyebrows very arch; and they had three-tone shoes going from lilac to mauve, just the thing to show up the ghastly stockings people were wearing in inferior purples, just the thing, walking under the new manganese towers. There was building everywhere, and some of the tall ones were commissioning sculptors, all these technological forms. One was like a scatter of building blocks, some you could see through with coloured blocks inside—rather fashion magazine, but fun; fun, but the artist following, not leading, I had to admit that; and others plated with mirror, so they gave you back yourself, and the raindrops, and whole sheets of tall building; that part was good; it said, if you want a statement, look around you.

I felt like a monument clanking down the street. These office blocks towered over us, formed canyons, poured out smartly dressed people. I just wasn't coping. I said to Margaret, 'Old Edward, attracter of pigeons'.

I told him not to be vain, and the term was 'bird'; 'chicks' had gone out years before; if he wanted to be dated he should have said that. Just because quite a few women had sneaked a look at him, he needn't draw it to my attention, I could see for myself.

We weren't understanding each other, we were losing our grip.

One girl had a blue umbrella with a ruff on the edge; I looked at Edward, but he missed it, didn't get the hint. Another girl had a clear plastic one, such a fragile membrane, covered with shining droplets. I thought of the rain on the utility window, months before; Edward didn't see it.

A lot of happiness comes in retrospect, you know. We were under one umbrella; I knew I'd treasure the moment, looking back, even though I was gloomy at the time. The emotions are a mass of contradiction.

We saw in a window a spectacles-holder. It had a black top and a gilt clip, like a purse; down the side they'd printed a view of Venice. And it had a flexible gold cord. I told Edward my mother had one just the same.

It was no good being a countryman, the world was going past me. It was becoming an economic race, and we were all way back at the start.

I don't know why, he'd never met her. I could hardly expect him to react.

Oil and insurance rule the world, the rest of us are slaves.

Still, she was important to me; he might have said something. I suppose I got niggly.

What was the most impressive thing I knew? The pub at One-Eye Well? These people wouldn't even kick it aside, they'd build on top of it.

I said, 'Those old eyes going dim? We'll go in and get you some glasses.'

It wasn't right to spoil her day, I had to give her back her moods.

We saw a man waiting to cross the street. He was in his forties, wearing an Anthony Squires suit; had a big head of hair well groomed; had a pipe clamped between nervous teeth, twitching it in eye-catching jerks; his greying hair was aided, in parts, by bleach; repaired, in others, by dye. He fixed us in a grin. The traffic blocked, we couldn't cross; he kept on grinning at us.

Executives are drones, yet he's looking down on me.

A bit skeletal for my taste, but hmmm.

Edward touched his forehead as we crossed, said 'day, guvner'; for once his humour misfired. We didn't say much more till we got down in front of Myers. There was a sudden shower and the pavements blocked up with people not wanting to leave the verandahs. It was pretty packed; I suppose we could have gone in, but I didn't want to leave the people.

Strangers breed a desperate kinship. They all shit, wear clothes, have teeth that rot; they've all got purses and parcels, and their kids wear out shoes; they push, and tell you not to shove; they stand on your toes without being sorry. They've all used their taste, and exercised judgement, and they've all bought at Myers. Clever little men make money, so they have to exploit someone else. They see opportunities in each other, and have to grab them. Why should one die, why starve? I longed for an end to the whole social system based on possession; I saw two things—landscape and love. In Australia the first accorded strangely well with the idea of the second; but we were being swamped, we couldn't control our destinies, we were in a flood and couldn't swim hard enough to get out of the current. I was glad I didn't make the world, it wasn't an artefact I'd care to put my name on. I suppose I wanted a full-time purity when in fact it appeared in glints and flashes; I was like a miner asking for a hill of gold. At least I knew it was impossible. I wasn't political, I didn't want to push anyone round.

My quiet companion attracted a lot of attention. Edward's mild eyes were Christ-like, too troubled to be benign, but full of fellow-feeling. I was happy in the crowd; I knew we'd swap observations later. There was a girl with a little black skirt, too high on her belly and too short on her thighs. Ugly thighs. She had a skinnyrib sweater, eyes black with mascara, and a bottle of coke. I used to scorn the type. But her boyfriend had a purple shirt and lots of swagger and when he asked her to cross the road she said she might. When the pedestrian lights went green he put his head down and ran without looking back; he ran straight into the crowd in front of Coles. Well—Michael Stebbins—she followed. With a clumsy, swaying run. She caught a shoe in the tram line and had to tug it out. Hair streaming—God knows what her face looked like—she hobbled after the boy. He turned around and laughed, put an arm around her and took the coke bottle.

Coke! People can't be vulgarized too far, something vital comes springing back. I'd like to run into the gallery like that. I wouldn't, but you know what I mean. Old mums had their baskets; they were a

satirist's delight, but they weren't giving in. The tram wheels made little waves and people struggled to open their umbrellas in the doorways; there was no room inside. Rainy light made the yellows come up, but their flags were limp. Australia? Why fly that? Though why not? Fly something anyway, and you could hardly have feathers on a tram.

They can paint up how they like, they can only decorate their basic urges; I never knew a girl run after me. I could call out a lot of reactions, but not that simple, direct 'I want you'.

A man had a lot of brushes, he looked like the Fuller brush man; he was trying to get into Myers. But a man with a grievance accosted him; he'd bought their brushes to paint his house and the bristles all fell out—or so he said. The man from the store tried to be sympathetic. He said they had a complaints department, why didn't he go up and see them? It was on the fourth floor, he'd take him there if he wanted to. The complaining man looked like a pensioner; he only wanted his grizzle, he didn't want to go in. I said to Edward, 'Let's stir up some trouble. What could we tell them?' Edward was short of an idea so we went in the store and wandered about. I wanted something outrageous, something that would have them baffled, without being criminal or corny. We hit the hostess/ornaments section; there were some nice candles and some pseudo-Spanish claptrap. There was a dreadful marble lion, meant to be Venetian. I said we should order one and have it sent to the old Chinese josshouse in South Melbourne; did Edward know the place I meant? But he didn't, and it didn't seem very funny when I'd said it; the day was falling flat. I had an urge, an itch, a hankering; I could have spent hundreds, but it would have been indulgence, an orgy, no satisfaction at all. We looked at shoes, and then I said, 'Let's get out!'

The rain had cleared, but it still took twenty minutes to get a taxi. We could have walked but we were obstinate; it had to come right past us. I was getting imperious myself, and Edward very withdrawn. One came; the driver asked us where. I said Station Pier, Edward said the airport. The driver was confused: 'Which do you want to go to? Both of them, or which one first? Eh?'

But we looked at each other, wondering; then Edward pinned it: 'Points of departure!' and some of my tension eased, and some strength or resolve came into me. A point of departure it should be; let him have it his way; I said, 'Just the airport.'

Edward tore up the ticket. He said, 'Bye, bye, bird of passage,' but he said that wasn't me. We stayed in the lounge, stayed away from the bar. It was better with the lounge filling and emptying, people greeting each other or breaking away from the travellers. But that wasn't all of it; he'd been lovely on the way out. He said, 'I'm detached now, I'm not limited to my little town and my channels and check-banks. You've freed me, Marg! The walk in the store!' He said, 'We're rich! We're everything! We're anything! There's no limits except in the imagination. You're going to have to tell me all about art, next term, when we're back together. You're going to tell me how to see my world afresh. You're making me, Marg, you do it how you like!'

You'd think he'd had a revelation; he'd sort of uncorked himself, or nearly. No one spins out of their basic circuits, and there was something he had still to reveal. And if he was opening up, I was closing. A woman's love is partial, and it radiates from the centre; it doesn't have to spread very far. Edward's link with people was in the understanding, not the gut, but seeing him extend his range made me see myself as hollow. I'd consumed, considered, rejected one world to observe another; now I had to commit myself, plunge in, undergo whatever happened to people when they gave up watching and joined the mob. I said, 'I rather wish we were back in front of Myers'; he didn't understand, but he stood up without saying anything. The speakers prattled on about flights to Perth, Sydney, Brisbane, but we were going down the escalators to get another cab.

Point of departure left. Or squibbed? Was there something I should have said?

We were formal in the Windsor dining room, with its acres of white linen. There was no rush, and the heaviest moment was already over, though we hadn't said so, hadn't realized it perhaps, not consciously;

the service was a relief to lean on, we were white and quiet. Time ran out, time ran away, we both knew this; things that might have been felt or said had to be squeezed in the circumstances that came along. The dining room was stable, so well managed; one flick of a cloth and we might both have vanished. The Cheshire cat left his grin in the air; if I'd been whisked out of existence there'd have been waves in the air all right, like that poor mad Johnny—you see, I'd lost my snobbishness; I was common clay with the recluse and the coke-girl—waves in the air all right, of a girl wanting a woman's power, wanting to build, settle, create, wanting to be without interruption or doubt, and—this was the change—knowing I could. He was wrong, I wasn't putting everything on the man, but there had to be one, and he wasn't sitting in front of me. Though I wasn't sure of that; if he came good he'd be marvellous, but you couldn't separate him from his circumstances, his age, his period, his town; he talked so much about spirit but they were embedded in place and period just as much with Edward as with anyone else, and the place and period weren't mine. But then I grew impatient too in Sydney, with Cecily and the rest—though I wanted to hear Judith play again, and I suppose I couldn't avoid Michael at some stage of the holiday—grew impatient, and the impatience was a deep and driving part of me, like a birth pang. People could get stuck at a stage of their development, like Robards/Robert had, but I had a feeling this wouldn't happen to me. I was too strong to be held in forever.

He sensed my aggression and stayed quiet; as dinner ended he reached around and switched our glasses. It had a peculiar power, that gesture: of apology for failure, of joy in four days shared, of putting the present into a poignant retrospect so that we seemed to be looking at each other through a film of years—and this made him so dear to me, and me to him, that I wondered if I'd ever value anyone as much. Could people still get closer? I had to believe they could, I did; but to say one could go further was not to deny what one had. I had the most generous, soulful man sitting looking love at me and my sense of inadequacy was stronger than my determination of a minute before. My eyes were

wet; I said, 'Well done, Edward, I think I'm your creation,' and my pride at most deeply touching him joined with his pride at my ... not compliment, my worship of him, and we were both too moved to speak. We left the glasses where they were, the wine looking deep green/gold, and went upstairs. I think if he'd come in while I was dressing I'd have forgotten the train, or I'd have taken him with me, or gone back in his car, or something. It would have been wrong, a mistaken idea of our profound connection, but it could have happened; I know how worked up I was. But Edward, whatever else he was, was not one to make a messy mistake of that sort. We went separate ways from the lift, just nodding as if we'd be joining each other for coffee, and I got a taxi to the train.

The sleeper was comfortable; she slept. The Wards didn't meet trains; she got another taxi to Point Piper. Her mother met her in the doorway, 'Pet, at last! He'll be so relieved.'

What?

'That Michael boy's been ringing up and calling. I don't know what else he's had time for.'

He didn't go! He didn't take anyone else, didn't go without me.

7 **Back to the wilderness**

He was right. I finished up in Michael's bed. The tension was too much; I suppose I was a pushover.

But Michael wasn't the main thing in the holiday, and I'm not covering up when I say that. I went to see Jenny Watchett.

Why?

Because I'd betrayed Edward. There were no two ways about it. I'd gone straight from Melbourne to Sydney, Edward to Michael, from separate rooms to spending hours in the little annexe he'd built himself. Oh, very capable, Michael, very capable.

It left me divided, in two separate turmoils. You could label them sex and love, though the labels don't help much. This was how I knew I hadn't fully arrived as a person—that in defining myself, even according to those two labels, I found my experience too limiting. It was true I loved Edward, but it wasn't all the love I was capable of. It was true I got stirred up by Michael, but whatever we did it didn't occupy all of my mind. I'd say to myself this is all very well and I need it, but there's a lot more than this. Particularly because he was pretty pleased with himself. I think he felt he'd taken an indefinite lease on me. We'd see about that; meanwhile, we had to unwind a little after eight months in Turrumburrah.

Cecily and Robards were a pair of ducks. Nobody was talking marriage but the whole terrace knew one day they'd put on a mad whacky party and then drag everyone off to the registry office, or some hippy type would put on his dog collar and there they'd be, happy as larks, embarrassing everyone like fury, but going on as if nothing had happened. They'd even live with the mob till the children came along; Cecily

was a natural mother; she'd even out when she had kids, I had no doubt of that.

Me? Ah, don't fret about that one; the bridge isn't in sight yet. We think we can do better than our parents, but it's doubtful. I don't blame my father. We've all got a right to be ourselves. It's only when we come to people's effects on each other that we enter the incalculable.

A lot of the holiday I went home and drew, or painted. Michael wanted me to do it at the terrace because it would have flattered him to think of himself releasing the creative in his woman — that sort of jazz. I wasn't having that. I did it in my room, very quietly, mostly watercolours, with very pale washes, of the land around Parton and Blythe. Old Dawson's farm figured a lot, with the pepper trees sitting heavily on the land, hiding all his buildings, except that from one angle you could see the roof of his house. And Dawson was dead. I'd never thought of death till this year, though sometimes my father came home irritated and we knew things had gone wrong for some poor chap. My father used to glare at his sherry for a long time, then he'd say, 'Statistically, they've got to die sometimes, but if you're any good you can beat statistics.'

I gave mother the best one; she took it straight off to be framed. It seemed a pretty mean token when I saw how grateful she was to get it.

The only comparison you could make between my mother and Jenny Watchett was that neither of them had found a satisfactory place in the world. This wasn't immediately obvious with my mother because she'd created these elegant surroundings. You could watch her for weeks without knowing she had stirrings ... She had a remarkable knowledge of what was happening behind the scenes of the Sydney City Council, and the Woollahra one too; she had a high old contempt for commercial men, unless of course they were three generations back, when they were industrious and enterprising. She just had to have a professional man for a husband, or an aristocrat. The highhanded opinions never got out the front door because she was meek and mild in public; to see her in a grocery store or on a bus you'd think she was a pensioner, she was almost obsequious. I used to rib her about this until I realized it was the

opposite side of the coin to the bourgeois-scorning duster of antiques—and neither one was quite her anyway. At a car accident one day I saw her pull open the door of the wreck and order people to get police and ambulances, send someone into a house to ask for blankets and a pillow. A lot of people gathered and she wouldn't let them close; she had that whole scene organized in a couple of minutes. The driver was pimply, unshaven, foul-mouthed, hurt like hell in the chest, and apparently quite heedless of the girl who was with him, who was unconscious. Then one of mother's errand-runners came back with blankets and a couple of cushions; the woman who'd lent them went off at mother because she got the man to lie down; she wanted to know why she didn't attend to the girl first. Mother flashed her a look that offended her and went her own way. After, she said to me, 'I had to get him down first, and quiet. How could you do anything for her with all that groaning in your ears?'

It was a simple realism she kept hidden at home, where she tried to be father's foil. It also gave away her priorities—duty to the man before your own sympathies. I wondered about that incident a lot, when I was away from Michael—and he tried not to leave me much time—was I tarred with the same brush? Or was it another case of trying to see myself with a limited frame of reference?

Michael was waiting for a picture, too. He wasn't over-pleased when I said that mother had a very good framer—and I'd do the hanging. I didn't want him putting it in the blazing sun. He said that if I insisted on going back to 'that place' then he wanted it at the foot of his bed, where he could look at it every morning before he got up. Maybe I was hyper-critical. I felt he wanted it as a trophy more than anything else. I gave him one of the swan in the mist—the one Edward hooted at. I was rather pleased with it. I felt I'd managed the tones of mist and the suggestions of almost-hidden trees rather well, and the curves of the swan.

Michael sensed that there was a reason why I'd given him the swan picture. I said I couldn't define the reason. I suppose I was trying to tell him he was too practical, too concrete and definite, too clearcut. I wanted him to learn from my more evanescent friend. Who was not, of

course, in the picture, but Michael had an inkling that someone else lay behind it. He'd talk about how rare it was to see a swan; I must be building up quite a store of local knowledge by now. I wasn't biting.

I saw Jenny in Double Bay. I was in an antique shop with Michael, looking at some brasses. Or he was; I was next to him, but eyeing off a Tiffany lamp, not as nice as the one I gave Edward, though dearer. So I had a somewhat ambiguous feeling anyhow, and then I saw these two people looking in the window. Watchett and Jenny. We looked each other full in the face, but she didn't recognize me. They were very close again—if it was them I saw last time I was down. She was contemptuous, yet abject, as if she was a perpetual outsider in a world of taste, and hated what it did to her, but desperately wanted the secret. Watchett had a fat, serious face and an animal heaviness; his sensuality was different from my father's because my father felt the world owed him what he wanted, whereas Watchett—as far as I could judge—felt he'd come out of it well to have Jenny. He had an air of satisfaction not taken for granted. I thought they were lucky. Was that another treason against Edward?

So I had to see them. Not then. I looked up the phone book; they lived in Edgecliff, not far away. I didn't ring, just drove up unannounced. It was a 1920s brick house, a good sixty thousand dollars worth; either Watchett knew how to handle money, or Jenny had been getting some from Dawson all those years. It was a hired gardener's garden, not a woman's. Jenny's personality hardly touched the outside.

At the door, she didn't recognize me. I could see a messy hall, nothing hung straight, mats askew. She stared at me, I realized she wouldn't even be saying 'Yes?' It was up to me. I knew it was no good being forceful, nor mild; I tried surprise. 'I'm from Turrumburrah.' She wasn't interested; still looked at me—a severe face, hair black, eyes black, bones unpleasant but the skin rather striking in a sallow way; it was an immobile face, but sullen enough to give warning even if you hadn't seen her angry, as I had.

Well, why had I come? To find out about Edward? Her? Or me?

I started to tell her about the parade Tom was organizing for the Back-to celebrations. She still hadn't recognized me; seemed too self-concerned to be interested in other people. She interrupted: 'I'm going to it. What do you want?'

To reassure her, make amends for condemning her when I knew nothing about her? I said, 'I know the conditions on which you've been forced to come back ...' and then she recognized me. Her face went suspicious.

She walked away.

The house had a long hallway. It was a spring day with promise, but the porch had a clammy feeling, and I could see an oil heater burning at the end of the passage. From the room beyond it her voice came sharply: 'Tell him he's got to hand over the money.'

The money? The will, surely? Her voice made me think of a body full of blood and anger.

Was she neurotic? No, Watchett's face showed they satisfied each other. What was wrong with her? There were cricket bats and a blazer in the hall; did her children go to a public school? Perhaps she didn't cope outside any better than in, with anyone but him? I thought I heard her crying, I walked down to the kitchen. My feet boomed out on the wooden floor. She was gasping, but it was from anger and the humiliation of someone with no basis for her pride except a tremendous, unreasoning selfishness. She said bitterly, 'Are there any other conditions?'

I wanted to do something for her, I really did. I told her she had no need to worry, her father's will was safe, and it was still in the house. She said, 'So what? He can go and get it, can't he?' I told her as far as I knew he hadn't been near the place for months.

She said he'd go out whenever it suited him and take it, wouldn't he?

Why was she frightened? That she wouldn't get it? She was scared she was going to be involved in some public scene where Edward mocked her; she knew his cunning. It was the fact of the parade, with

the whole town, past and present, there to witness whatever happened or was said.

She turned horrible. I was Edward's agent, he'd twisted her son into a dirty conspiracy ... But she didn't order me out, and I didn't go. While she repeated herself, I looked around: expensive, tasteless fittings and crockery, a laminex, chrome and vinyl dining setting. Through the window, a littered backyard without much grass, not so very different from the mess at Bunny's, but without the whimsy that redeemed it. I saw her as a person trapped; she would hate herself but wasn't capable of self-examination. She turned the hate out. How did Watchett manage it? He must make a queer separation between his engineering and his woman? There was no wholeness in this house, though a couple of nasty lessons to be learned. I supposed her Watchett-sons disliked their mother? Or did they make another clean break between school and home? Did she iron their cricket clothes? Or send everything out to be dry-cleaned?

What could she do? Was she any good at anything? I asked her straight out if she felt she earned the money, as opposed to say, Tom, or her sisters? She said they'd all get their share, no more than she would.

But the hatred was for Edward. She had a long memory, at any rate; why didn't I ask her?

I said, 'Will you tell me about ...' I meant the events of the day they turned the water on; instead, I found myself substituting, 'the first time you got married?'

Thinking she'd tell me to mind my own business, but she said nothing. To get over the awkward bit, and thinking it might please her, I told her Tom might be coming to Sydney soon. Her face didn't show anything. I said, 'This is why he's so anxious to make a success of this parade. He seems to think he owes the town something; he can't leave it until he's a success in their eyes. Or something, I don't understand it really.'

She said, 'And he'd do anything to get that success, anything, wouldn't he?'

The humiliation-fear again. I said, 'No, I think he wants your help. I really do. You must be able to give him something.'

She said nothing, that sallow face.

I said, 'Can't you give anyone anything?'

She looked trapped in her own house. I felt I had to give her something, do something for her, even if she didn't know what gratitude was.

I said, 'Would you trust me?'

She didn't even bother to laugh.

I said, 'I'll go and get this will you're so steamed up about, and I'll hide it.'

She snorted.

I said, 'I'll put it in the bank for safekeeping, how's that?'

She said, 'Which one?'

My God! I said, 'You name it.'

She said, 'The National,' and I agreed. She said, 'And what do you want, anyway?'

For her flippin' will? I wanted a hell of a lot, and I didn't quite know what it was. I think I wanted Edward's wounds fixed up, an end of his bunny-rabbit humour, a new man in the old one's shoes, and lots of impossible things like that. You see I wasn't thinking of Michael, I was divided even between one bout of lovemaking and the next.

She said, 'It's got to go in the bank in my name, with my name on the envelope.' I laughed at her: 'If it did, I couldn't influence either of you; you'd go and get it, wouldn't you? No, it'll have my name on the envelope.'

She hated me having power over her, but she didn't want me to go. I felt her drawing closer, though she didn't move in her seat, as if for a harder contest. She was more vigorous than I realized, more forceful and much more dangerous. How could I get at her pride? She scared me. This is what she said:

'You don't know what you've got yourself into. You think he knows everything. The really strong people in a town don't have to go begging to strangers. They know who they are. He's unbalanced, the weakling.'

He's not sane and you wouldn't know because you don't know anybody else. Everything he tells you's distorted.'

Well, I had Myra and Jim ...

'You get a sense of power, interfering. You'd better keep out; you're only running away from home, anyway.'

'You've got yourself in a place where you don't belong. You'd better get right out, straight away. You don't know what you'll get mixed up in.'

She was reaching for my insecurity, trying to find the weaknesses.

'Aren't there any men in Sydney better than that old derelict? All he does is twitter. Can't you find one better than that? With all your money you're supposed to have? Or is that just another story?'

'You can buy clothes, you can't buy men, can you?'

'If you're keen on him, why are you here now? You're running round with someone else down here, aren't you? How old's he? Nineteen?'

It was contradictory, it was coming from all angles, it was getting me all tied up.

'Have you ever spent a day with Edward? How much satisfaction did it bring you? Ever spent a night with him? I'll bet you didn't go back for more.'

'He's not interested in women, or anybody, only interested in himself ...'

From her? But like all really stinging lies, there was in it that one tiny grain ...

'... perhaps you're just at that stage yourself!'

I ...

I ...

... was almost choking; there were hundreds of answers but they were no answer to the force of her, the sheer insistence on a complete involvement in which only one person could be on top. Life with Jenny would be like a wrestling match. And since I had the advantage because of my stupid offer about the stupid will, she had to get her venom in.

‘You think you can drop in and fix all our affairs, don’t you? You’d just pop out and see what makes me tick ...’

Timebomb.

‘... but it didn’t work because you’ve found out something. You’re just playing round with people; you’re an amateur fiddling around with your life. You know why? It takes guts, real guts, to be anything; you haven’t got any.’

The Love Wagon. I was all right.

‘Where do you stay in Sydney? Mummy?’

I flushed; the annexe and Mummy.

‘There is somewhere else. You brave girl. I’ll bet Edward doesn’t know.’

‘Your car is waiting, Miss Ward.’ She had me exposed by I now; she steadied up a bit.

‘I’ll tell you something. Under all his other faults, he’s a liar. He doesn’t deliver the goods. He’ll talk you blind about what he can do and what he might do and what he’s going to do ... when it comes to the crunch, he’s a coward. You get nothing.’

‘Coward’, ‘liar’, these childhood condemnations; but was she, at the bottom of it, wrong? And if she was right, what did it say about me? Know us by the company we keep ... she had me and she knew it. Of course I knew where her wretched will was, but I thought it was vulgar and common to use an advantage of that sort, a powerplay, in dealing with people. I thought everything could be sorted out in human relationships by people with enough sensitivity and respect for the other person. She sensed that weakness too.

‘You think it’s dirty to fight, don’t you? You know what? I’m where I want to be ...’

It couldn’t be true.

‘... If I hadn’t fought back, I’d have been housemaid to my father to the day he died. Have you ever known anyone mad with religion?’

Bunny. ‘Yes.’

‘All right, then, you know. I tried getting out the decent, kindly way, with him ...’

He charmed me when I met him; smiling wanly, standing up with the faintest bow ...

‘... fat lot of good that did me. Then Phil came; we recognized each other ... I’ve never looked back.’

I had to fight this queen of lies; I said, ‘But have you ever looked around you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, do you think about the world you’re pushing your children into? Do you think about the effect it’s all had on Tom?’

‘My children are at Cranbrook, and if anyone says they’re not good enough, they’ll soon prove they are!’

Bitter, embattled, struggling to pull others to her level, involve them in her personal brawl with the world ... but there was something nagging in me. I was an upper caste person; could I blame anyone else for trying to get the fruit in the orchard too? Should I be surprised if their manners were less than elegant as they battled to get in? This bitch had guts all right; what did I want? Some effete group to have pride of place by reason of their birth? Jenny wasn’t even what you could call a social climber. She was a grabber. Most people expect to adapt when they rise in status; she didn’t know how even if she wanted to, and she didn’t want to. She wanted the world to adapt to her. I found her disgusting, but again, as with the business of the will, I might feel myself better placed, but was I able to use cruelty on her, push her down? Did I have the strength? I had cousins at Cranbrook; I didn’t want them mingling with Watchetts, getting bowled out by Watchetts, having Watchetts copy their essays, singing hymns in a Watchett-occupied chapel.

There has to be cruelty at the top of any society if it’s to hold together. I wasn’t at the top, I was exiled for a year in Turrumburrah; I’d given up my advantage before I met this woman. I was on her level; we’d both got hooked on the one man. I said, ‘Can’t you forgive anything? Can’t you clean up one part of your life and say that’s over and done with?’

In a sneering imitation of Edward's light, floating voice, she said, 'In this hour of celebration, let us look to our ideals, for they show us what we will become. The paradox is that our land was born without them. But we've forgotten the convict stain and now the weakness of our start is our strength.'

She went on; she was leaving out bits and pieces, but I could get his drift.

'Turning our back on the old world—all the old worlds—let us have the courage to recreate our hearts and minds with the ingredients we choose for ourselves.'

'Was ever such an opportunity given to man?'

I was amazed she remembered it. I asked her why. She said, 'It was all reported in the Courier, they printed the whole drivelling lot.' I said, 'Was that when you tugged Watchett's belt? He said that was when you really broke up with him.'

She said, 'That was at the end of his piffing.' Then she went on with the Edward stuff: 'This flood of water, which the Israelites would have called a blessing from on high, we can regard as our own creative effort. As the land is made fruitful, so may we be, if we trust everything loving and creative in our beings.'

Those funny, dated words; but golden in her mouth, for all her jeering. Why weren't they true? What went wrong? And why did she still remember them?

'Nature doesn't demand cruelty of us if we are to survive here, nor ruthlessness. We can neglect the darker side of human nature and live in love, prosperity and fullness.' Then she said, 'Poop.'

I stared at her.

She said, 'You think I did the dirty on Edward, don't you? Don't forget I had a religious hangover; it wasn't as easy as you think to break away. I knew Phil was better than that twitterbird before I married him, but I'd given my word and I had to go on with it. I did go on with it. For three whole years—more—before I gave him up as hopeless. There; has he ever told you that?'

No.

'I used to look at his silly bloody speech for hours on end, trying to make sense of him. Everything he wrote, or said, I thought about it.'

She had me getting Shakespearean—'She hath been much wronged' or that sort of thing. But there was something treacherous and harmful in her too; I had to be wary.

'So what about your Edward now? Do you think I owe him anything?'

I said, 'He's as bitter as you are. Couldn't you both ...' I didn't know what they ought to do. I was beginning not to care. She made me harden up to protect myself; was that part of her attack?

She said, 'Was that your boyfriend, in the shop?' The almost-civility, that's where the danger lay.

'You won't be leaving him, will you? You wouldn't walk out on him now, would you?'

She read my mind. 'Well, you've got to walk out on one of them. Which one matters most?' And she parted her knees a handsbreadth; the gesture sickened me, but drove in the wedge. Without going into the rest of it she put in my mind the thought that I should forget the whole Turrumburrah business and stay with Michael. Then she almost softened; there was a dangerous, devouring charm lurking inside her; if I'd said I would, she'd have opened up a little and the next step would be that I'd write the whole thing off and she'd go down and get her father's will out of the binding of the Bible—but I didn't tell her, didn't fall in. I think I'd have held out anyway—though I mightn't—but Watchett came home unexpectedly. She tried to shovel him off but he announced he was staying for his lunch before he went off to inspect something or other, some new equipment. She didn't introduce me, but he looked hard and said, 'I saw you in a shop the other day.' She said, 'She saw us too. Edward's told her where my father's will's hidden,' and then he shifted his big bulk in his chair to stare at me: 'Then I hope she'll tell us.' I just mumbled that I didn't know, I'd have to think more about it. I

was in a hell of a stew. And then I walked out. They didn't get up. I just pushed out the way I'd pushed in, feet booming in the passage.

Why didn't they get some carpet? I nearly pranged the Morris at the end of the street.

After all, a will was a legal document; he had no right to keep it from her. No reason, except to hurt her in some way.

He'd be betraying himself if he was cruel. In a way it would be better to ring her up and tell her what she wanted. She'd go and get it, or send her sister; the whole thing'd be cleared up.

The cunning of the woman was that she'd insinuated in my mind the thought that if this was cleared up my other troubles would sort themselves out too.

What would you be like after three years of that pressure?

You get in a double position, you can't act with any integrity. There was nowhere to go but Michael's or home. I parked the car; I was driving so badly, I went for a walk. But no, there was nothing else to do, I had to go home. And Michael was at work, anyway. I suppose there'd have been someone at Cecily's, but I felt a bit jaded about that outfit. I preferred the harbour view.

What would happen if I burned their silly bit of paper? The lawyers would make a packet. And if they went by the old will, Edward'd get as much of the farm as old Dawson left to him. Half, wasn't it?

So if I want to do Edward a good turn ...

No, let him earn it.

Michael. Is a good lad. Which is pretty faint praise in the circumstances. I suppose I'm annoyed because he isn't deeply interested in human relations. I suppose he's better established and better balanced than me. He's virile and he's completely healthy. He's a child of his time, and his generation—mine—haven't yet made their Belsens or bombs. What corner will we work ourselves into? I made love with Michael because of his absolute confidence, but although that's good for a day or a week, I can't bring myself to believe in it completely.

He took me to the works. They're putting men off. He says sales are down, what can they do? And he's a quality supervisor, what can he do? It's not up to him. It's too glib, he's operating on limited responsibility. All right, you accept the whole human race and you go out of your mind, but there's got to be some sort of mean. He says we're a generation of peace, non-violence and love. I say that that's just our response to all the wars of the generation before us, but what mark will we leave on the world to be criticized by our children? But Michael's content to say that we'll avoid the major mistakes of the past; do we need to have all sorts of positive ideals? He says once you get yourself some programme of what you want, you're in danger; you'll get rigid and, in battling for the things you want, you'll hurt people.

But does he care about people? I don't think he understands them. I can't see any reason why we're less dangerous than people in the past. But Michael says you just go along with things, not involving yourself in anything that's against your principles, and you can't come to much harm. It's all too pat, but he's lucky he's not scared of himself.

He's like Clive, but a lot more fun.

He drives like hell, which comes from working in a car factory, I suppose, and he talks away like a Jewish comedian when he's got a few in. He sharpens up my wits, my nerves get keener; I enjoy myself. He can make up his amusement, too. He doesn't have to spend money. He walks into a dull room full of drab-looking student types, cracks a flagon and before we know where we are, we're laughing our heads off or having a ding-dong argument about something. I wouldn't mind having him in Turrumburrah; well ... perhaps in Blythe, to come down and see me. I don't think I could live with him.

I hope Edward likes his lamp, and his Buddha.

Sometimes I'd like to go to sleep for a year. If these painful parts of one's life could happen under anaesthetic ...

I'm a coward, of course. Can't make or break with Edward, can't go completely to Michael. Perhaps there's another man round the corner, waiting for his cue. I wish he'd fold up his paper and walk into my life.

He's six or seven years older than I am; I don't mind if he's an artist. Not too commercial; I don't mind working for a while. It's his balance I want, but based on experience, not a doctrine, like Michael.

When we undress, it's too uncomplicated, too straightforward. We answer our body's needs, he's very sure. We doze, we relax, then the quivery parts of my mind wake up again. If his confidence isn't based on a doctrine of the times, then he's a very conventional young man. But which is it, or how much of one and how much of the other? And that maddening question, the one of twelve months ago—what would it take to make me happy? Back to the wilderness.

If there was a well at Dawsons', I could tell Jenny it was down there, and shove her in. A murder would be something to my credit.

Cecily won't go overseas now. I'd love to. But I'm bugged if I'm going just as an escape. I'll go with my husband; excuse the smile. He's a defrocked surgeon, left a bottle of Dettol in a patient's bowel; must have been full when he did it, though he never drinks anything stronger than wood alcohol. Studied under Brian Ward, actually ...

Father's been quite affectionate. We've seen each other about three times, apart from passing in the passage. He said, over Cornflakes, 'You need a car down there, don't you?' meaning he'd buy it for me. And he's been talking about a Triumph 2000 in McGoffey's yards. Edward would look askance. Not to mention the racing-Mini owner. It'd be hotted up to do a hundred and fifty before I'd learned the gears.

What do I want with a car? But he's never been good at talking with me, it's to show he wants to. I told mother about Edward and the stay in Melbourne. She was pretty concerned, partly because of the separate rooms. I think she thinks I'm going wrong, somewhere. But when I ask her about her marrying father, she just laughs and says, 'Oh, I think I was his last chance.' Which is absolute nonsense, but she's got too used to avoiding truth. It would have been a social marriage, and ten to one they didn't sleep together before they married, though father at least would have had plenty of fun. Mother? One or two boys, a couple of holiday-house romances ...

I'm becoming a specialist in rejection; I seem to watch other people and not take anything from them, or not take them completely. Is it too much to ask of myself?

So Margaret took the train. Michael offered to drive her, but she said that going back—which she insisted on—would take a lot of adjustment, it'd be easier on the train. He said he'd pick her up at the end of the year, surely she'd grant him that? But she wouldn't. He wanted to know when she'd be in Sydney again, how soon? But she wouldn't commit herself. He was baffled. Would she promise him three visits before Christmas? Two? One? She could hardly refuse one visit to the capital, and promised, half-heartedly, not sure whether she'd do it or not. Michael asked her if she was genuine. She said, 'Michael, you know what? I'm going to obey my impulse. Right?' He said, 'After practically living with me for nine days?' She said, 'That was my impulse,' and her smile yielded him nothing. Michael said, 'Good for you; I might obey mine,' and that was how they left it.

8 Jingellic

Though whether she should have gone back was open to question. Crossing the divide is doubtful policy for anyone with an insecure conception of self, all the more so for a woman. The purging, simplifying process which Edward accepted at Paradise Tank has, at least, created certain male styles, even national ideals, though these are fading now. It is doubtful if rural life has done anything for the urban woman. Margaret's strengths were too strong to be broken by a year in Turrumburrah, her deficiencies unlikely to be supplied by the stay, and yet, in the end, the unlikely happened, and her year was a success; a qualified success, but enough to send her back with hope.

The divide. Is crossed between Goulburn and Yass, somewhere after three in the morning. An extra blanket is about the greatest homage paid to it, yet the crossing represents the swing of a mental compass between the inland, which makes nonsense of European culture, dilutes it, or ignores it, and the urban capitals, which cast arms to the sea and make contact with the world. To say this is to generalize crudely, because even Myra's friends' card afternoons had some self-generating power, and yet the two poles are there, scarcely to be avoided in setting one's mental guidelines.

Margaret planned to sleep ten or twelve hours, to wake up in a slowly undulating scene, to be committed by the train rather than her own will to the final flat of Turrumburrah. But the girl sharing her sleeper was from Blythe. She spent a restless night and before seven she dashed to the end of the corridor. She came back white, and wiping her mouth. Then she dressed slowly, and made herself up, consciously brave, as if the world had to be faced, she had no right to leisure or comfort. Margaret guessed she was pregnant. They had four hours together, till

the train reached Narrandera. At Junee Margaret brought her some milk and a packet of yesterday's sandwiches. They sat on the lower bunk, the other girl smoking. She worked in a grocery store, she wanted to marry a lad on the post office counter, but she'd also been involved with the manager of her section of the store, when they worked back at nights. She thought the child would be her 'real' boyfriend's but she wasn't sure. She'd been to Sydney because she had a sister there; she wanted her suspicions confirmed without anything getting out by way of the doctor's nurse.

She was sure her boy would marry her; she was sick, happy, confused, terribly scared that the child might be the manager's, and look like him ... she didn't know if it was the end of everything, the start of a nightmare, or the beginning of married life, with an assured place in the town. She said she 'loved' her boy and the other was 'just sex'. She made the distinction with simple assurance, as if pleading before a court of public opinion; she said she could work three more months, and then—she was at the cash register—it'd be 'noticed'. She said she'd heard of Marie being killed at Jingellic but didn't know the circumstances. The story hadn't 'gone very far'. Margaret didn't puzzle about the girl until she had to change trains at Narrandera; she covered the emptiness, the ache, by chattering to her. She told her about Edward, Michael, and the rest; the girl said, 'I guess you'll see it out,' and 'It sounds like you went with him on the rebound. I don't think you'll need him for very long.' Her plain, commonsense observations were like balm to Margaret—a chance to talk! And to a stranger! And, finally, a stranger who didn't judge so much by her deep-seated personal reactions as by the accumulated observations of a stable community. It was like another Myra, but more open because neither need hide anything; they wouldn't be meeting again.

The talking, which changed nothing, seemed to ease the strain in Margaret; leaving the train at Narrandera and getting the diesel railmotor, it felt like the January day she came down for the first time, her future still uncertain but—this time—a little more in her own hands;

the two terms had done something. The train from Sydney went to Blythe, but the conductor wanted to make up the beds, so the girl took her things to a carriage near the front of the train. They helped each other with parcels. And the train helped too, hemming in the platform and keeping out the light. In an atmosphere of bitumen, painted brick, Victorian girders, brass drinking fountains and curving roof iron, they looked at each other for the last time. The girl was still pale, but had used a cherry lipstick and a little too much mascara; she seemed hollow, overdrawn, uncertain, yet basically safe. Margaret felt a great emptiness now they were to part, a yawning capacity for feeling without an object to grasp; she almost envied the girl her pregnancy, but Michael had been careful, there was no chance of that. There they were; the girl was not one for extending silent moments. Margaret, rather flurried, said, 'You know these towns. How do I seem to you?'

Some disturbance, or pain of non-understanding, appeared in the girl's eye; such questions were never asked; a separate, self-occupied person was so hard to deal with. She slid around the point: 'Oh, you've been tremendous. I don't know what I'd have done if they'd put me in with some old duck, and I was trying to hide it from her,' and looked at Margaret in an uncomplicated way. So nothing came of the question. But Margaret said, 'Let's see where you'll sit,' and left her things on a bench to search in the carriages. Margaret said, 'You want to have your back to the engine, don't you?' but a man was squeezing past them; the girl waited till he was well out of sight, then reproached her: 'How do you know he wasn't from home?' But her smile was conspiratorial and drew Margaret closer.

Parting was hard. They merely said 'Good luck' and 'You too', but Margaret felt shaky as she looked for a place in the railmotor. The best place faced the engine; she took it, but felt a revulsion for herself; she hoped it wouldn't last.

The land was flat. Innumerable paddocks passed without so much as a sheep to catch the eye. How should she look at things? As a living death to be endured for three more months? A long drawn-out penance

for betraying Edward and making love with Michael? Or wasn't it better to dictate one's own terms, as she perhaps could, as the girl from Blythe could not? Come to think of it, she meant to do this halfway through the year, but somehow the intention had gone astray. Michael might say to act on impulse, but if you weren't basically an impulsive person, that didn't help. She felt that his often stated maxim was a device to prevent himself going too far in self-analysis, a means of avoiding a greater discipline in person-to-person relations. Perhaps he didn't let conscience worry him; she couldn't help it if she did. There was no getting away from Edward; the thing between them had to be taken right through, however hard at the end.

The train stopped at Just-a-bit and Gogol. A woman like Mrs Bunny stood on the tiny Gogol platform, flanked by dogs, backed by a pepper tree, with a faded yellow shed and a grubby utility the rest of her setting. She was handed a mailbag, and the train went on. Margaret watched a young man of twenty-five or so studying her; when he became aware of her returning the observation he flushed and opened the *Wagga Daily Advertiser*.

Guilt-ridden, hardworking, reliable as his favourite pump. The *Wagga Daily Advertiser*!

Yet she felt kindly towards him too. She wanted to ask him what he'd done in Wagga; perhaps he would surprise her. That much Edward had given her, the understanding that lives are led in many ways; it was only an incapacity in herself that was troubling her now. At Parton, when the train stopped, there was a jerk, and the man, who had stood up to get off, caught her case before it toppled off the rack onto an old man asleep in the sun. The young man said, 'Gottim,' as he pushed the case back. 'They don't make these things wide enough,' and he stayed close as Margaret stood up ...

... to help? Offer something of myself?

A rough chivalry seemed his best style of approach to a woman of his own age-group; he smiled as she looked at him, standing close, then, at a loss to go on, said, 'I'm sorry, I'm getting off.' Margaret said,

'I'm in Turrumburrah three more months; it's not far away,' then felt ashamed ...

... but not very.

... as she saw him blush, gather his things and nod to her as he bumped his way out.

Country boy.

On the home town platform stood Edward ...

Back in me natural habitat.

... and in his working clothes; it was half past one. She said she'd sit in his house and read. When she felt like it, she'd go to Curran's and get some things for tea.

I was back.

I'd rather have stayed with her, but she wanted to be alone, so back to the soil went Edward.

I sat under the Tiffany lamp and looked at the Buddha, laughing over my head. My depression was gone, I could afford to smile back. He didn't have the use of his legs, or a good many other things, squatting there. We might all join old Dawson, but I meant to have a good time first.

But it was Edward's chair. It was better to be at the heart of the problem rather than with Myra and Jim. They'd keep, they were steady; I was the fickle one, the floater, the drifter, the blow-in ...

I rang Myra to let her know I was back and she said she had a roast, bring Edward down as well. So we ate in the kitchen at Denhams', three of an age and me half-way. Myra seemed to think the world was doing to the dogs—she was in one of *those* moods. I asked her in what way. She said people weren't prepared to put up with a lot of things they used to put up with, once; I asked if this wasn't a good thing, She said it might be easier but it wasn't as good for your *character*.

You've got to be firm and it's knocks that toughen you. If you're not firm you go all to pieces, people don't know where they are with you.

S'pose you've got to praise the way you've done things; that or shoot yourself.

The evening was quiet ...

Like old married couples.

... despite Edward's efforts. Just before he left Margaret went to her room and wrote a note: 'I betrayed you. You were marvellous and I betrayed you. You don't have to see me any more.' As she came back she slipped it in the pocket of his coat, hanging on the door. He gave a whimsical half-smile as though this was something he'd been preparing for; she felt worse.

At school the next morning a small boy brought her a note. Half a dozen third form girls followed him in; Edward must have come to the bus stop. In the art room office she opened it to read: 'In haste, while observed by some giggling Amazons. Tell the fat one to wear bra.' On a second sheet he'd written, 'Betrayal is too dramatic a word, but what it signifies is nothing new to me. I do it to myself all the time. You owe me nothing. One of your intellectual friends says despair is the only basis to build on. But capacity without conviction is my Achilles tendon, and all the people I know with conviction don't mind being wildly contradictory. That's where I lose out. Who's being melodramatic now? Armistice till Saturday; will call at half past nine.'

It was signed 'Edward the last'. Margaret left the first sheet on the art room table as she went out; it was obviously what Edward wanted. She heard them go in as she reached the end of the corridor; for a moment she felt that she was Edward, forever balancing buckets on doors, tripping people at the obvious step. Yet there was a vast humanity there, waiting for release ...

If one could take the initiative, one of us get the other one rolling.

A man without convictions is a total freak, but everyone—everyone—has circumstances; I decided to show Margaret these.

Poor, poor man; capacity without conviction. Was that straight from the heart, and undirected, or was that, too, aimed at me? There was no way of knowing with Edward, he was so apt to take on the colour of his surroundings. If only one could get the essence, but it can never be separated from the time and its preoccupations. They talk about art for

all time. It must first live in its own. We're the same. What existence do we have outside the reactions of our nerve endings?

Punctually at half past nine, Edward pulled up at Denhams'. He made his way through the kitchen to Margaret's room. Jim was shaving, Myra down the street shopping. Margaret was already dressed, in white slacks and brown sweater, pretending to read; Edward stood in the doorway ...

Looking splattered, an eloquent mess.

... hoping she would pick up his wavelength; there was so little time left, just one short term, with the Back-to preparations clouding their relationship, or sweeping it along, whatever the case might be.

Edward was cleaning and widening channels for Tom Bowler; they drove in that direction. Margaret asked him to go to old Dawson's; she wanted to see it again. Edward was amused; he hoped Jenny's sister noted their entry. He climbed in a window of the forlorn house, then opened the back door. Once inside, Margaret asked Edward to get her some of the flowers near the tankstand. He found a basket and some rusty scissors in a drawer and set off happily; she said she wanted to study the old man's taste in pictures; she'd soon be out. When he was gone, she went to the lounge and there, sure enough, was the Bible, occupying pride of place in the bookshelf. She held it up to the light. Between the inner and outer spine there was a paper, which she took out ...

Like a practised thief.

Putting it quickly in her bag, she replaced it with a sheet of foolscap which she'd brought with her, then went to join Edward at the tankstand.

He was cutting flowers with gay abandon, piling them in profusion in the basket. Then he unscrewed the two halves of the scissors and flung them at high speed at the back door. One quivered in the wood as if flung by a knifethrower, the other fell with a clatter and slipped down a hole in the verandah. Edward gave a barbaric yell, and suggested they should look at the machinery, there might be something for the Back-to parade.

They went to old Dawson's shed ...

Not daring to think, because I'd betrayed him again, and for what?
For whose benefit, and why?

... which was much as it had been for decades. Squat wooden posts held up a pediment of corrugated iron. Inside was gloom relieved by a redbreast on an oil drum, the nose of a Farmall tractor, and nailholes in the roof dropping coins of lights on wheat and superphosphate bags. Saddles and horsecollars hung over a board, there was even an annexe with a smell of stale straw from a sagging thatch. There were three or four chooks, a hollow in the chaff full of eggs, some peacock feathers, but no peacock. There was a coil of wire, binder twine, the spiral from a dismantled header. A line of horseshoes hung on a rail above the workbench. This was piled high with boxes of copper sulphate, drenching equipment, tins of sheepdip, castrating rings and things for marking sheep—raddle, crayons, branding black, eartags. The dirt floor was thick with chaff, shavings from a benchsaw, and animal droppings. Wires slung between poles supported board-stiff sheepskins, the bloodstains darkened to brown, the wool fringe hanging in tatters.

Only the swallows saved it.

Among the rafters were clots of mud, with dung spattered on the timber and the floor underneath. Whitebreasted swallows sped to and from these nests with incredible speed and grace, dipping to avoid the wires, chip-chipping when they reached their home. Bright eyes and black heads could be seen bobbing up and down in a frantic springclean.

Edward stood still in the centre of the shed. She moved around him slowly, trying to relate him to the things he stood among. She had it in mind to do a drawing of him, but he rebelled, and said, 'If there's nothing you can use, we'll go on to Tom's now.'

She picked up a sheet of tin, much blackened from marking wool bales. Held against the light, the cutout letters read:

WARRINAH

TD

TUR

She said, 'I might take this. I suppose it's something rare.' But he was opposed. He said it was the identity of the place.

Poop.

'Don't you believe me?'

'What's it mean?'

'Warrinah's the name of the property. TD's Thomas Dawson. TUR is the railway's abbreviation of the town. That marking's the only address you need put on a wool bale.

Still poop, though mildly interesting.

Tom Bowler greeted them enthusiastically. He said he was right behind every effort to make the Back-to a great success; he wished he could do more to help. Margaret, who had had almost nothing to do with the preparations for a month, offered nothing.

What is it the bloke's loyal to?

Tom said his daughter would be home from college in time for the celebrations; he was glad she wouldn't miss it. And his son was coming up from Melbourne with his wife and family; he had a clothing shop in Caulfield, and was thinking of investing in motels.

So farmers spawn the bourgeois, and have to accept them.

Tom made much of Margaret's drawing, which had been heavily framed in blond-wood; it distracted the eye from the lines, which were slender, inclined to twine, but graceful enough. It rested on the mantel-piece of a tapestry brick fireplace, next to a 1930s clock. Tom apologized for not having it hung; as he explained, it meant drilling a hole and putting in a plug to take the nail because the walls of the house were all double brick. In the hall hung Dargie's portrait of Queen Elizabeth in yellow.

Does Edward see through this, or see past it and not notice?

But Tom, who was a scientific farmer, was not easy to get around. He had many suggestions for the parade and machinery displays he wanted to see in December, and it was obvious that he expected his visitors would follow up the leads he gave them. He told them where to locate a wooden-wheeled timber jinker, items of bullock harness, various semi-

domestic items such as butter churns, and even the location of what was left of the first stumpjump plough ever brought to the Riverina.

He had a fine mind working on a simplistic base; there were the pioneers, who appeared to be virtuous, ageing and wise, and also larger than life in their vigour, and there was everyone who came after. The latter took their place in the march of progress; this was, in fact, Tom's chosen theme for the celebrations.

Woolloomooloo terrace—Cecily's terrace—didn't exist, though surely his daughter went to places like it?

Forget him, Marg, we've got Bunnys next door!

Society was not pluralistic for Tom, even though, as a serviceman, he had seen a good deal of the world. But he had been young then, and had seen it in the ideological framework of a righteous war, fought to preserve a way of life. This way of life was not hard for him to define; it was the land, and when Margaret suggested that most people these days had little contact with the land, he smiled knowingly and explained to her that they still had to eat, didn't they? Still had to have the wheat, maize, corn, barley, pigs ...

So there was no getting around him, and he was kind, and his wife made a rainbow cake which took prizes at local shows, and kept as good a garden as could be found the whole length of the canal. Tom pointed this out with pride. Speaking in front of his wife, he waved at the Vienna Charm roses, the beds of pansies, primulas, poppies and aubergines, and said, 'You know what we had here before the water? A few old pepper trees; that whole side was lined with 'em. Berries everywhere. Oh, they're good in a dry year, but hungry! Nothing'd grow underneath. And by ghost they were hard to get rid of. They suckered on for years; I had to poison them in the end, then pull 'em out with the tractor.'

While I quietly despaired.

As they drove away, Edward said lamely, 'He's a positive man.'

I said, 'When will you see all those people he told us about?'

She's opting out; I said, 'I thought you and Tom ...'

No go.

No go.

It's a long day stretching ahead of us.

Saturday night. She'll be at her worst tonight.

I said loudly, 'You said you were going to help Tom! He's not all that talented you know; if you don't help him, who will?'

'What about you?'

'What do I know about organizing something like that?'

'Everything. It's your area. I'm the outsider.'

'It's a fact. You've never really accepted me, not deep down where it hurts.'

'You can drive me home if you like!'

It was their first quarrel. As he turned the car round, something snapped and the car ran into a boggy depression beside the road. She fumed; he got under the car.

He told her, 'It's the tie rod.'

She said, 'Can't you tie it up or something?'

He stared at her, unbelieving; then he started to shake, laughing silently at her ignorance.

Come on, we're all a bit silly.

But she flung out of the car and headed for the shade of trees by the side of the road. She was wearing sandals with high cork heels; one caught in the mud and came off. It was either hop through the prickles, stay there, or retrieve it; she managed to hook it out with a stick.

On the verge of laughing, I'll admit.

But the sight of Edward enjoying himself stirred her pride, and she hid behind the trailing foliage. He called out, 'That's a pepper tree, you know. Aw, they're good in a dry year, but terrible 'ungry, ya know!' and then looked down the road to see if there was anyone coming who could pick him up. Margaret remained hidden, a car stopped, he looked in her direction but she was still against him. The car drove off in the direction of Turrumburrah.

Leaving me to the peppercorns. Which taste horrible; they're nothing to do with salt and pepper. The taste clings; you can spit and wipe

your mouth, it doesn't go away. I even chewed a bit of grass, and that was pretty suspect.

Might make her take me seriously.

In a way it was the best thing that could have happened. It gave me an hour for sorting myself out. I didn't blame him for going—once I'd cooled down and stopped cursing him. He'd stood up to me; it was what I wanted, even from Michael, though he was rather too good at it for me to appreciate. It does you good to be powerless sometimes; I'm talking like Myra. I was so angry I whacked the tree—which sent a few ants scurrying, that was about all. But he'd put the challenge down in front of me; he wasn't hiding any more behind a mask of meek goodwill.

I was ready for her. If I was going to lose I might as well make a decent fight of it.

He came back after an hour with all the parts, and fixed the car. He'd even been to Denhams' to get the book I was reading; it was a thing on Klee. I sat in the truck and got out when he asked me to pass him things; half the time I didn't know which one he meant but I did my best and when he'd been under a while I felt mean so I stopped reading and talked to him. Then he drove me back to town. I said, 'Perhaps you'd better drop me off at Denhams'. I'll be all right again tomorrow.'

But I couldn't settle down. We both finished up at Tom's.

And it was on again.

Tom said he was organizing ...

She tried to do it for him.

... a season of films to be shown in the School of Arts—you'd think it was Athens—and over the Wagga telly. It was going to include *Blossoms in the Dust*, *The bells of St. Mary's*—to get in all the Micks, Tom said—some Tarzan films, *Forever Amber*, *Gone with the Wind* ... oh, a lot of others. *Mrs Miniver*, *National Velvet* ... oh lord ...

She knew all about it.

And of course I wanted some of the characters out of these films to be in the parade, mixed in with your pioneers, timber-jinkers et cetera.

Trying to make a skit out of it,

Tom agreed; it was just what he wanted, but Edward got very prickly.

Just mixing up things people like to keep separate.

It was only hostility towards me, of course, because it was the sort of thing he was doing all the time, but he didn't want me to think of it.

I wasn't going to let her laugh at people. She had no charity. In fact, I didn't really want her in the thing at all. She was trying to get Tom out of town; wasn't that enough?

Edward's wet.

I think I want her to love me but, damn it, you can't keep coming at the same thing over and over. Let her do her work and go.

Michael'd come if I sent him a telegram, but I've got an urge to pull Edward to pieces.

We both erupted ...

I didn't say a thing. All of a sudden she ...

I wanted to know where his sense of humour had gone; he was getting very pious for a man supposed to be a comic.

I said I don't set out to hurt people, make them look ridiculous.

I said then he could make a fool of himself; he could repeat his famous speech from the turning-on of the water; I understood it was all there in print if he needed to look it up.

Bitch! Who told her that? Who made a clown of me?

I'd gone too far; I said I hadn't read it, hadn't even gone looking for it. Tom pleaded innocence, said he'd never given it a moment's thought. I'd never seen Edward so hostile, because he was ashamed and fighting to preserve something.

Though why not?

I was really scared, for a while, and then I saw a gleam in his eye; some idea had taken root.

I had to get away on my own for a while.

He got restless, hopped about, said he'd see us at the Royal for dinner; he wished he hadn't been unpleasant; dinner was on him; he was sorry he had to dash off, he had to think.

Tom said, 'What a transformation! I think you really got him there. Do you think he'll do it? We'll make it the climax of the show, if he does, eh? Eh, Margy?'

I was very pleased with myself, but still pretty scared; it could so easily misfire, especially with the Watchetts there ... But Tom was buzzing with enthusiasm. First he said they were hoping to have the swimming pool finished in time for the Back-to; perhaps Edward could open that—which seemed pretty unlikely, local vanities being what they were—then he said the whole procession could start at the canal and go right through the streets, with Edward to kick it off, as it were. Then he wanted to have a sports meeting at an old oval out near Bowlers' and Dawsons' and do the water business at the actual site ... His mind was racing; a lot of it didn't seem very practical, but the thing that stood out was, he revered his Dad. It never crossed his mind that Edward could lose face or hurt himself in the process. I made one attempt to point this out to him but he didn't get what I was talking about so I gave up.

I went straight home and dug out the Courier with my speech in it. It'd been in the same drawer untouched for twenty-five years. At least I suppose it was untouched; she surely hadn't ... She didn't go and see Jenny?

It's rather painful to be shown your early ideals. People value wisdom and experience because they guard you from pain but there's a lot to be said for the time when you didn't have them. You feel more acutely, respond more quickly; you're effusive, is there anything wrong with that? Ah well, never mind the Ah Youth stuff, let's have a look.

How it poured from me then. I'd have given the world, in expectation there'd be another one come along. Would I have died for Jenny? Rhetorically I might have, but I didn't conceive of death; the optimistic, generous things of life were too strong in me for that.

What'll I do to Jenny. How can I get to hurt her? She's getting the will for the farm; she's got to pay a little price. Eh?

Why didn't I get the Bible this morning? I'll go out there now.

But he saw Jenny's sister's car going down the drive of the farm, and it occurred to him that he and Margaret had forgotten the basket of flowers ...

Funny she didn't think of it.

... the sister would wonder about them, which would make it harder to get in unobserved.

So Edward had an afternoon by himself; Margaret stayed with Tom; they sketched their ideas, and at half past six the trio met at the Royal. When they were settled at the table and Edward had brought the drinks, Tom led off: 'Well, first of all, we want you to be the compere. We want you to start the whole show off. We're in two minds about the way to end it yet, but we'll probably want you to do that too.' Edward beamed.

And mentally put a tick on the board.

'We thought we'd dress you up as Jack o'Boon.'

My boy, my very own boy. Positively.

Heavens, we can't go wrong!

'We'll have a big cart for you to drive. We'll be doing all this at the showground; there'll be displays all over the place, inside and outside the fence. Like, there'll be a line-up of blokes in footy uniforms right back to the lace-up and long trouser days, and you'll drive past and you'll yell out, 'Get up, Bob Beazley,' and Bob'll get up on your cart, and ... wait on, we'll show it to you in detail in a minute ... you'll end up with a cartload sort of representing ... I don't know, a mix-up, anyway; you'll have Don Bradman and Larwood, and The Phantom, and ...'

'Phar Lap pulling the cart.'

'Shut up, dad. Wait on and listen. You'll have Kingsford Smith and General Blamey; you might have Hitler and Tojo as your villains; do you get it? Sort of everybody that was ever anybody is up there on your cart ...'

'But they're all ancient history now.'

Though I adored the idea.

'That's the point. People are not going to let us get away with one great big skit, so we've got to put up a serious side. What we've been

talking about so far's the funny stuff, then we have the turning-on of the water ...'

I watched his face like a hawk. I watched; I watched every muscle; he took it like a supreme challenge, but one for long desired.

'... which you'll have to do, I think; no, Watchett can do that, but you can do your bit there, funny or serious depending how you feel it's going. And after that we go on to the March of Progress theme.'

'Tom Bowler's been in this afternoon, has he?'

Tom started to admit that he had called in for a few minutes, and I watched Edward; he had joy and pride stirring deep inside him; I was never so impressed in my life, never so pleased to be close up to another human being. He had a weird genius, I wanted to see it in the open, fully extended. The little shaft about Tom Bowler was his cover-up. I don't think he minded at all. I said that we'd have to be careful because the old-time stuff'd probably steal the show from the modern part; if you wanted some sort of hymn to progress you didn't want everyone getting wet-eyed and nostalgic. But Edward wasn't having any of that.

What's a Back-to for? And besides, my darling, I've so much to show you.

But the innumerable clubs, cliques and committees of the town continued to think of ideas of their own, and Tom found himself wondering how much, if anything, would be left of the scheme which he and Margaret had drawn up; as he said, 'I can't get a say on the co-ordinating committee; how'm I going to manage the rest of 'em?' Margaret was sorry for him, but didn't offer—as she would have two months before—to write to Cecily and get him the easiest way out.

She herself was different. Something had been broken by her second separation from Michael. Some wish to struggle had vanished. She saw herself as less than her circumstances. Michael's 'act on impulse' dictum had no power because she had little impulse. Minor things appeared as enormous obstacles. She went through a period of attachment to Myra, attended numbers of afternoons, flower shows, craft exhibits, even a

baby show and a crazy whist evening—where, with Jim as her partner, she won the booby prize, a tin of Johnson’s powder, a texta colour set and a dunce’s cap, amid shrieks from the matrons. At school she was moved by even the weakest attempts to colour or draw. Feeble lines affected her more than crisp ones, dirty hands set her asking questions. There were boys who drove old cars in their father’s paddocks, or helped fix the tractor; there were still some children who rode horses to school; there was a paddock for them during the day. Each afternoon at four o’clock she avoided the staffroom, and sat on the verandah of room 14 where she could see the half-dozen who preferred to ignore the school bus system, dragging their satchels to the horse paddock, catching their mounts and saddling them, setting off down the dirt roads behind the school. Sometimes Michael Bunny rode a horse; she wondered if it was to show some whimsical attitude to convention, or was it to impress Sue Adams? Students who rode horses had to leave their saddles and bridles in a special box-room next to Mr Pond’s door, which the vice-principal unlocked each day at two minutes past four, before dealing with the line-up of students outside his office.

So even the dry, professional educationist couldn’t avoid being involved; Margaret found herself wondering, for perhaps the first time, about man’s place in the elements. There was something very moving about the half-dozen riders putting on waterproof coats when rain threatened, or scarves when it was windy. Margaret found herself wanting the hot weather to come; for some peculiar reason she felt that clouds of dust behind the disappearing riders would make her happy.

She was neither happy nor unhappy. She felt very exposed, though subject to minor pressures only. She felt she was in a capsule of time that contained no big events or decisions and found herself alternately hoping this situation would continue, and fearing that something vital in herself had died.

Edward, too, seemed dormant. He reread books he hadn’t touched for years; he pored over his twenty-five-year-old copy of the Courier, even his own speech as often as he dared. Sometimes he sat under the

lamp Margaret gave him, other times he would sit anywhere but. He walked a great deal, after work and in the evenings, sometimes with Margaret. He reminisced. He might point to a fibro-cement cottage, all the verandahs enclosed to provide extra sleeping space, and say, 'Gil Bradley lived there. Had a tribe of kids. One of them killed himself just outside my place. In a stolen car. Gil moved up to Blythe. He was a shearer; he said the work was more regular up there, bigger sheds, less shifting around. But it was to get away from his boy's death.'

Margaret rarely questioned him about these people; she was content to take them as he presented them. She began to see his anecdotes as artistic statements; it wasn't right to load them with more than they were made to hold. Sometimes she relaxed enough to tell him about Helga and Simon Cairnduff's Toorak and Portsea circles, or the people her parents mixed with; she felt that for all Edward's perceptiveness it was as if she were talking about, say, a film projector to an admiring Kenyan. It was not that he lacked the capacity to imagine the scenes she described—the Cairnduffs had enjoyed him—but that he had grown used to living in what she could only think of as a type of poverty. Much as he mocked the people he lived among, he'd eaten the same bread for too long; the need for a more finely structured life, one that gave promise of satisfying more subtle or complex appetites, was not one he was capable of feeling any more. Yet his mystery still had its attraction; there was no dismissing him; what did he want in life? A vision answered? A redeeming moment that lit up everything else? A style of loving she didn't understand? She determined that if she could give him what he wanted, she would; meanwhile, she would see out her time quietly.

So they were companions still, as much as they had ever been; it was spring, and their mood was closer to autumnal. Wattles flowering made him happy. They drove in the country often as the days grew longer. Students began to ask her if she'd be teaching them the next year; once, when she said no, she heard one say, 'She'll be married.'

She felt it was time, yet she knew it wouldn't be Edward, When she got back to Sydney she would see Michael again, until someone softer,

more varied, came along. She had no fears of being stranded with Michael or someone neither more nor less satisfactory, yet there was a heaviness on her; it was part of being in this capsule with Edward.

She said to him once, 'You never tell me about your family.' He said, 'My father drifted out here. He said Sydney was harsh. I don't know why he came out this far unless it was to isolate the enemy. He certainly never overcame it. He never really knew what the place was about. My mother regarded English as an inferior language, not that she was so marvellous in French, mind you. She didn't have much contact.' Margaret said, 'You must speak French then? I've never heard you come out with anything in French; why don't you sometimes?' He raised his eyebrows and murmured, 'La résignation, c'est la défaite de l'âme. How's that?' She asked what it meant; the foreign sounds had thrilled her; they were an unexpected emanation from a person she felt she knew well. He said, 'They mean we must enjoy these last few weeks. They mean the opposite of your Buddha.'

So she wondered, but he was doubly friendly and responsive as they walked around the streets that evening. He said he had a sister married to a publican in Junee, and a brother a car salesman in Brisbane; they didn't mean very much to him. Yes, his parents were both dead; he offered to show her their graves in the cemetery, if she didn't think it too macabre to go there on a moonlight night, and besides, he had a torch. But she passed over this quickly. She didn't want thoughts of death breaking into the capsule; she wanted it to last the year out; she'd face the big questions next year, not now.

But a week later came the telegram from Comstock. The property sale had been finalized, he had only to go to Blythe for a few hours to see certain people and the connection with Jingellic would be severed. Would they meet him, as promised, at the property at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon?

A summons to be endured.

They can't get out of it.

They were early, but Comstock's white Mercedes was already there, and Comstock himself, sitting on the verandah. The house was in two large parts; one was built at perhaps the end of the colonial period—one room deep, seven or eight rooms long, all opening on to the verandah. The second was a somewhat adapted and extended piece of Victorian building, with bow windows facing south and east, and a kitchen added on the north in the 1940s. The original verandah had been led round much of the later building, and the use throughout of locally made bricks gave a fair degree of unity. The verandah ended with a few feet of white picket fence, and next to this were the steps where Comstock sat. He stood up and shook hands with them before he actually spoke.

Deathgrip, clang.

Well, John, what menace from you today?

I've got all the time in the world.

The visit was slow to start. Comstock appeared to be dithering. He told them the details of the sale, which was to a large pastoral company; what he'd said to the agent in Blythe who'd tried to sell the place for him, and the paltry excuses the agent had for not being quicker off the mark; how he'd been to see the agent that morning and had spelt out how much commission he'd missed by not being more enterprising.

Still the bastard of old.

But what were we supposed to focus on? The agent's incompetence, or the fact that there were spoils to be divided? Sir John wants the crash to be heard when he falls?

He led them around the parked cars to a simple brick building, which had been painted many years ago, and which now smelt of animals, and had dark stains on the walls. It had been a two-roomed dwelling once, the first building on the property, but a wall had been knocked out, and a wooden partition put in much later. The smaller part had been used for killing. A four-foot slice of red gum stood outside as a butcher's block, and there were knives, skins, a grindstone and animal bones about the place.

'This is where we strung 'em up.'

There was a wooden shanty a few yards away. A chain hung from the ceiling to hold an iron device, like a coathanger, but having two hooks at the ends. The floor was concrete, and darkly stained. The iron dangled, a menacing silhouette. Margaret tried to look past it, but couldn't ignore it; she didn't want to pass under it; she went round the shanty and saw the river.

For which relief ...

It was muddy, like all the rivers of the inland, and contained by banks a good ten feet higher than its present level.

'Looks tame enough, doesn't it? It can flood, though. We've been cut off for weeks at a time ... The house is on the highest spot.'

Grubby roots trailed and twirled down the steep slopes. Arms mottled in grey and blue reached over the water; the leaves hung in formless spatters of grey-blue colouring. The ground was thick with bark.

The mystical space we've never filled.

Gets 'em in, never fails, used to like it myself.

He's spoiling it.

'They're not all we can grow. We've got quite an orchard. I'll show you the garden.'

On the river side of the house the garden was essentially practical; almost an acre of fruit trees, widely scattered, with some decorative shrubs among them, and a large vegetable garden fanning from a water-tank. The pump was housed underneath. It was a pump, not a hose, garden. But the fruit trees were in blossom, a contrast to the sombre grandeur of the river. Comstock pointed out for them apples, peaches, apricots, oranges, lemons, mandarins, cumquats, loquats, nectarines, grapefruit ... The trees had been heavily but expertly pruned.

'Charley's still faithful. He was always more loyal to the trees than to me, of course, but then if he weren't he wouldn't be such a good gardener.'

'Does he live on the place?'

'He did until four years ago. He comes out from Blythe now whenever I want him.'

I've given his name to the company, much they care.

Margaret said, 'What about your housekeeper?' then cursed herself for the indiscretion. He turned on her a gaze which was reproachful and yet amused at her blunder.

He said, 'Do you know? It's very difficult these days to get permission for burial in a private cemetery. I wangled it, though. I made it a condition of sale.'

For anyone else, my reaction would have been sentimental—a wish to join one's ancestors at the end, sort of thing. But he chilled me.

Edward breathed a little more heavily, once, then walked firmly to the verandah. He picked up a piece of wood, pulled a knife out of his pocket, and began—whittling!

Well, some objection needed to be raised.

Split the trio, eh? Not what I meant to do.

Comstock walked nearer the house and called, 'Come on, Edward old son; what is it about me?'

Edward said, 'Have a go at your own question. What do you say?'

Just apply the screws a little, after all these years.

He said, 'I don't want to, really. Come and I'll show you the rest of the garden, and the house.'

'Lie down over here and I'll carve you about a bit.'

'You think there's something tribal about me? That's an odd opinion, surely?'

Edward was not to be diverted. 'As an aristocrat, you were strictly a brum. What sort of kingdom did you have? Mrs Carter and her simple daughter, Charley York, a couple of reliable old derelicts, and half a dozen shearers in season. Big deal, John.'

He won't miss it when he goes.

Edward pressed home his attack. 'You never looked after anybody, you never created anything, so what's the strength of you?'

'You wouldn't have said that six months ago. You take advantage, don't you?'

It's worse than last time. What makes them tear at each other? Edward seems to blame Comstock's class, more than the man himself.

For not showing a path of passion and imagination, just a hollow build-up.

'You're built around emptiness, like everyone else.'

Comstock said, 'Come down to the river a minute.'

There was a shed, a jetty at ground level, and a second jetty floating on pontoons. It was made to rise and fall on iron stanchions connected to the first jetty, and a ladder hung between them. A few logs had gathered under the pontoon, the river had sunk, and it lay there distorted, one corner pushed up by the logs. In the shed, Comstock showed them the old river chart, under glass and mounted on a table.

'Worth hundreds at one of these Australiana auctions. Have you got a place on your wall for it, Margaret?'

Too much, too much, too much.

Bugger him. Bug bug bugger him.

'But it doesn't belong to me, by any association, I mean ...'

'It belongs to whoever I give it to. I'm not giving it to Pastoral Holdings Limited. Would you?'

She challenged him: 'But you'll take it to Sydney ...'

He smiled at her again, the same reproachful, ironical one.

'Isn't there a historical society in Blythe?'

He whistled a few bars of Handel's 'He was despised'. Neither Edward nor Margaret knew the music, but the whistling sounded eerie in the shed open at both ends, with the river flowing sluggishly past, the pontoon creaking and the trunks moving heavily in the downriver breeze. They looked at each other, wanting to find a way around the impasse. Comstock said, 'There should be a screwdriver somewhere. I'll get it off.' He appeared to treat it as a simple practical task; Edward and Margaret grew apprehensive ...

'If you let me have it, I'll give it to Tom.'

Comstock could have been talking to a ghost; ‘Ah, Tom, yes, your son. I never had one. He’ll see it’s looked after; he’ll value it.’ Then the sting: ‘What an asset he is. We should have him here with us.’

Then he said, ‘See these crosses on the chart? That’s that bend out there. It was impassable for boats unless the river was unusually high. My grandfather waited for a year when it was low; he built a coffer dam and he led the water round the snags. It’s all in his diary. I’ll show it to you when we get to the house...’

As if it were Elysium, Valhalla, or one of those ...

‘He hauled them all out with bullock teams; he got down into the mud with saws and cut the bits that were hooking onto each other. He tried to get the abos to help him, but they mostly played around. They thought it was a big joke, what he was trying to do. When he got all the logs out he made a big pile; he always told my father to leave them there, never to burn them. Come and I’ll show them to you.’

Edward was still carping: ‘He grubbed in the mud like the rest of us. Where’s the big pretensions in all that, John?’ But Comstock appeared not to mind. He led them a hundred yards upstream to a pile of dun-dark logs, like a heap of slain elephants, and pointed. Margaret murmured appropriately, but Edward tossed his pocket knife as he had once flung the scissor blade. The knife fell in the long grass, leaving no mark on the log; Edward scabbled to find it again.

Wishing he could just walk away!

Even then there was something hostile in Edward’s attitude, though unspoken; Comstock said, ‘Would you like to see me get those logs from under the pontoon? I could manhandle them; we’d leave the tractor in the shed.’

Do we have to go on with all this?

But it was his last tilt at Edward; another mood took him. Without inviting comment, he headed for the house.

I wanted that chart for Tom, but I wasn’t going to ask again.

Two long trellises ran from the house on the southern side, and grapevines, now starting to put out leaves, grew all over them. They

approached the house through these arbours, the ground underfoot being sandy, mossy and moist. Margaret said, 'This must be delightful in summer. Did you ever sit out here? On hot days?' He said, 'As often as not, I worked. It's often easier. No, I'm not teasing you.' He turned off a dripping tap. 'Yes, we did when we were first married. Later, as I say, it was easier to work. There's a little of my wife left in the house. Come and see.'

Comstock's taste, though eclectic, was better than his wife's had been. She'd bought pictures by local artists, furniture most notable for heaviness or overdone carving, and had had a fondness for mirrors—wall mirrors, hall mirrors, cheval mirrors on very heavy footings. He said, 'Don't be disconcerted by these. She was fond of quoting Burns about the power to see ourselves; I don't think I ever knew anyone see so much of herself as Evelyn. Have a look around; in a minute I'll show you some things you may have missed.'

There was a shearing photo, on a dull grey mount, and a naive ink sketch of the homestead from the other bank of the river. It was signed G. V. Erhardt, 1882 ...

It would just have to be Gustav von ...

... and Margaret noticed that in the Jingellic garden, strung in a line, regular as posts, were all the members of the household—a stern, bearded father, a voluminously draped and bonneted mother, three children, slant-eyed gardener, Aboriginal women, and two humbly-clad white men.

Comstock said, 'The family. Notice the horses on either end of the line.' And it was true, the artist had included them in the household. 'He was a travelling artist, he did this sort of thing all over New South Wales, that's why he thought so highly of the horse!'

An opinion I can share, my humanity having let me down.

Comstock said, 'There's a companion piece there, from the southern side of the house. He believed in doing things thoroughly, Mr Erhardt.' But Margaret had noticed a nine by five oil, unobtrusively framed, of a gloomy sky hanging over a group of farm buildings. Quite excited, she

said, 'Is this a Tom Roberts? I think it is. Isn't it?' But Comstock: 'No, just an imitator. But I like it. We have skies like that sometimes.' She said, 'It's very good ...' He said, 'Then that's the one you must have. Yes, you must. I insist you must have something ...'

Well, just an imitator. I suppose I could ...

'... you must never deny people's right to give. It's sometimes a more urgent desire than love, or the urge to dominate.'

Who's he hitting at?

But if Edward was suspicious, it was only for a moment, because, behind the curtains which marked the middle of the long hall, was a pedestal, and on it a superb Khmer head in bronze, but black.

It was like looking at an *alter ego* which never existed, but all my life I'd wished it had. I said,

'Oh, John, where's he come from, this marvellous head?'

So much for my laughing Buddha, coming a bad last now.

John said, 'Well, that's the one really good thing Evelyn bought on our trip. We went the first year we were married. It cost us the earth, that thing, even then, had to have secret meetings with a man who knew a man "somewhere up country"; they weren't saying where.'

Above all else, it had the grace of composure—spiritual, sensual, flesh lines and bone structure, helmet and head, head and neck.

Okay, it was an idealization, not a man, but that a man should be able to see another man—even conceive of one—like that; there was the miracle for me, dejected body with the pretty name.

Now Edward, too, went through a change; I began to wonder if anything would make the day for me, or change me for the day. Yes, I had my nine by five imitation of Roberts, and very nice, too, but that wasn't the same thing ...

From his chair at the end of the hall Comstock said, 'When you marry, Margaret ...'

And I wish I could see it, though I could hardly trust myself ...

'... be careful what you put in your house.'

It sounded lame advice; she asked what he meant.

‘Your husband, my dear, will have faults. Don’t point them out to him, even obliquely. Accept him or leave him. Evelyn did the right thing, once she woke up.’

Too much for me ...

This time it was Edward who did the looking after: ‘What will you do with that head, John? You’ll take it to Sydney, surely?’

Meaning, I want to see it every day of my life, to remind me, to cut me, to shine past my shoulder ...

Then Comstock’s turn: ‘I’ve offered it to the art gallery; they’re very interested. I’m afraid it’ll be ...’

Unattainable in Sydney?

‘... in public hands.’

Margaret: ‘But, surely, you’d never let a gem like that get out of your hands? Am I just a greedy collector? I’d never ...

... give it away unless I was going ...

He said, ‘Ah, it’s good all right, but it’s got no future with me.’

Meaning the other way round.

Am I the only one with a future? Can’t I cheer them up a bit?

Comstock stood up, and went to the kitchen to make tea. He explained that the things he wanted in Sydney would be going back with him in the car that night, the rest would be offered for sale to the company’s manager; what he rejected would be sold by auction in Blythe.

It really hurt me—to think of dismembering your life ...

He said, ‘I was forgetting, the power’s off. There’ll be some wood in Charley’s hut; we’ll light the stove. It’d take ages to get the slow combustion hot.’ So Comstock helped Margaret put the Yorktown china, with its twining blue pattern, on a wooden tray, with the silver spoons, the plastic sugar canister, the Carnation milk tin and an opener, and they promenaded through the harbour again to Charley’s hut behind the many-legged tankstand. Comstock said, ‘Cobwebs!’ But there were none. Charley had been out recently, and there were paper, kindling and matches handy. They lit the fire and sat on a canvas chair, a log, and a

rolled-up mattress. Edward whistled ‘We three kings of the Orient are’ and Comstock took the reference, though again Margaret missed it.

I wasn’t worried; it wasn’t what I wanted from the day.

I was watching them. Just what, exactly, had broken down in Comstock? Just what was it about the bronze that swung Edward round, and where was he heading now?

There was a long silence while they waited for the kettle to boil ...

God, I almost said a watched pot never boils.

... then Comstock offered: ‘I think what finally broke us was my triumphal entry with Virginia.’

So what?

‘It was a big party. I told her we’d ride a calf into the hall; first we had to go and get it. Well, Virginia was a very attractive girl, not hard to persuade; we had a good time. They’d had plenty to drink; they didn’t notice us go off. I got the calf into the shed, got her up all right, then I slipped off my clothes ...’

He started to laugh at his own story.

‘... She didn’t notice; we came through the trees with me on behind; the bare arms would pass unnoticed with Virginia, who wasn’t quite what the name implied—certainly not with me—and we, ah, we rode in triumph down the hall. I’ll admit I thought Evelyn was with John—Virginia’s John, that is—but it turned out I was wrong. The dear girl got a shock; well, they both did. It was the animal part of it that got Evelyn though, the part that really galled her.’

I’m surprised to find they’re neutral.

I’d love to have seen Jenny on the calf. I’d have thrown down a palm branch, hosanna! If she was naked! She was coarsely physical, but not openly, frankly so.

What do I expect out of love? I’m too much of a backmover, the second player. I’m not so keen on these sexual encounters that I can’t do without any more self-regarding men; I want a person opened up without reserve, all barriers down. It’s surely what everyone wants; why’s it so hard to get?

Funny Comstock, John Comstock; he's an impious sort of larrikin of the body let loose in a great tradition, no matter how much I rubbished it before.

The nightingale; whoever heard his song? Not Margy, or not very importantly for her. The nightingale; still a naif, bowled over by my bronze, but I won't give it to him; he can have the chart for Tom.

Comstock said, 'You can have the chart, Edward. I'd like to think your Tom had it.'

That he hardly even knows: 'Thank you, John; it's a prize.'

Said glibly enough. But it's Margy's the prize, as we all well know. She'll award herself one day.

The kettle boiled; they made tea; all drank it black, so the surgery of metal on metal was avoided. Then Comstock said it was time to walk about the property; the day was getting on. They went past the workmen's cottages, the shearers' quarters, the big shed and its attendant yards, then they wandered down the road till they came to a spot where it crossed a billabong with a couple of feet of water in it. Comstock left the road and they went into the bush. Comstock walked slowly, with many stops, gazed about him, sometimes remembering to smile at them, or point out something, as if existing in a time of his own. And Edward, too, was no longer prickly, seemed to want the ex-squatter to go on with his mood, find whatever he was looking for.

I was wondering how far we'd walk. I'd left my jacket in the car.

Comstock said, 'When it floods, you'd never get through here. All this is three or four feet under. We'd be swimming.'

I'll buy a new two-piece this summer, a chalky-brown colour I think. Not that I'll ever be the same again but I'll be enjoying myself. Will I be petulant, or will all this put something elusive about me—there's one to tell Myra!

There were a number of thick grass tussocks spreading eight or ten feet, wiry tangles; and the acacias had spindly, curling, trailing leaves, as if they meant to make a statement only by default. Even the big trees yawed and bent with no apparent reason.

Comstock said, 'It gets misty in here sometimes; it can be very beautiful.'

I suppose so, when you're taking leave. I was still searching for the right eyes.

Margaret sat down; the men drifted ahead.

If I don't see two shows a week, look out. And I suppose I'll paint this out of my system.

It occurred to her that she would like to do sketches of the grass, but it was too far back to the house for paper; the urge would be gone when she got back.

You could weave a mat out of the wiregrass, probably.

Then she noticed that there was a certain order about the way things grew; the red gums stood where water lay, new plants grew where there was room for them; they headed for the light—a break in the foliage, change on the ground; cover overhead, stability below.

The commonplace observation affected her strangely.

I felt love for the men, one of whom I hated. Is this how nature affects Edward? Love for the men; or does it breed indifference in him, mysticism and disregard? Don't know, don't care; love for the men, one of whom I hated.

The nightingale and the squatter were sitting on a log, well ahead; Margaret stayed where she was, but almost flushing.

I'll write to Michael; it was no way to treat him. He can come down; I can manage it all. Edward won't mind; they might as well see.

My pants'll get dirty but you have to wash them every time, anyhow.

Love for the men, poor squatting figures bent over; they must be drawing on the ground?

I should've brought something for tea. I don't want to sit up at a hotel in Blythe, the three of us.

I'll hold Edward's hand when we walk—in Turrumburrah, not now, not the two of them.

Yet love for the men ... a change for me.

She walked quietly towards them, on the grass; as she came up, she heard Comstock say, 'So you'll go on next year, Edward, just ... ripping up the dirt again?'

Edward had rejected him, but fondly.

It was a monstrous thing he'd put to me; strange it didn't tempt me.

I showed him he's stronger than he thought.

The men saw Margaret and made room between them. She sat, and then there was a reaction ...

I've been jealous of him all my life. I don't know how to help him.

He gives me that chill; not him, exactly, he's composed, but the thought of him doing it.

I must lead them out further: 'Why don't you come and stay with me a while in Sydney?'

Will you last till January?

... and help me prolong things a little: 'It must be a long time since you were in Sydney, Edward, you could catch up with the world.'

'It mightn't like me.'

'As I say, you can always leave it.'

And again, having got them into a corner, he led them out, by simply standing up and walking across a dry part of the billabong, towards the box trees and the open country beyond.

The sun was low, and behind cloud; there was only gloom left in the day. Comstock led them through the box trees talking of his grandfather's diary, his father's, and his own, which he meant to give the Blythe historical society: 'I started out trying to sound like a stately old landowner, but the fun and games crept in after a while. Ah well, Miss Lewers will have fun explaining why it's on her restricted list.'

We seemed to walk forever. I said, 'Aren't you getting cold? I'm freezing.'

Comstock said, 'I just wanted you to see the saltbush. We'll head back now.'

Five minutes later I said, 'Are you sure we're going the right way?'

Comstock chuckled: 'Where's your sense of direction, my dear?' But then: 'We walked in a big curve on the way out; we're taking the opposite curve home. Truly. It's the bend in the river that's deceiving.'

I, of course, didn't even know it bent; it was all one gloomy monochrome in that direction, to me. Like the country we were in, with its pale blues lost in the dark.

Edward said, 'You've got a bit of roly-poly, John' ...

Pointing to a fence!

... and he answered, 'Not really, it blows in from McDougall's.'

Roll on, thou dark brown, wiry scrub! A health to the girl and a bit of spine in the old whinebird; someone deserves success!

Edward explained that the heaped-up twirls of grass against the fence were known as roly-poly because the wind blew them across the plains. On a blowy day, out the corner of your eye, you might think they were animals bouncing along—till they reached a fence.

This was a feature; this was something? Yes, I felt it was. They shared a common background of experience, these two men, despite their social levels, and a sense of having let themselves down. If Edward fell down on a failure of identity, he turned his disbelief out; confidently supported, I imagined he could be very confident indeed; all the worse, then, that Jenny had let him down when he was flying on his precarious bubble. Whereas J. Comstock was more honest, had fewer resources of escapism; he appeared to be in the quiet before the final storm. Walking through the saltbush to the black line of trees was like walking back to the selves we must wear for the future; time out can't be extended for ever, just a few weeks to go.

Comstock brushed the first sapling, caressing the leaves with a sensual hand. 'Myra might have loved me best. Yes, Myra Denham. She was a girl with big resources, our Myra. Coarse but cagey. She was a very physical girl, but she played it safe. Took the one that'd always need the helpful side of her.'

I had to bite. I said,

'I've never heard you use the word compassion.'

Edward murmured 'common clay'.

Comstock: 'Do you feel any for me?'

'I did, about an hour ago.'

'Reject it, put it out of your mind. It prevents you seeing your fate, your destiny, whatever's really happening to you.'

'I didn't say self-pity. I said compassion, for someone else. When you can see all too clearly what's happening to them.'

'You felt some for me?'

I did. I do.

'Thank you, my dear. If I'd had you as my goddess Athene, like some Greek hero, I'd never have fallen.'

Such pride! Such a steely self-conception! So little self-knowledge, even at the end!

Edward: 'I can hear dogs barking, John.'

Sure enough, there were; there was a fearful clamour of quarrelling dogs, somewhere by the river; throaty, vicious sounds, yelps; there was a fight going on, but no man's voice to stop them.

'Probably a rabbiter; we get a few out this way. Why doesn't he call them off, if he's there?'

But the rabbiter, if there was one, must have been in Blythe, or dead drunk; the dogs quarrelled on, then chased each other down the river, their barking becoming less strident, as they went away, but still echoing in the ear.

'What about them then, Margaret? Compassion?'

I only wanted to be home.

Edward took my hand; it was almost dark now; I was glad I had it. We went to Charley's shed first, and got the tea things. Comstock lit a match. We closed the door of the stove, and the door of the hut, and left the impromptu seats just as Charley had left them.

We started back to the house, but Comstock said we must get Tom's chart, so we put the tray down, hoping we'd see it before we kicked it, and headed for the jetty. At first I was sure there was a light, or a fire, on the other side of the river. I was positive there was someone there,

but Comstock said, 'It's the moon getting up; there's only a thin belt of trees,' and Edward, talking about him quite openly now, said, 'He had to have something to soften him.'

By the light of the moonfire, and a couple more matches, we found the screwdriver and got the chart off the table. Comstock held it in both hands and struck a presentation attitude, then smiled faintly. I suppose he smiled—it was dark—but there was something in his voice, 'Here you are, you old speechmaker.'

For the better man, he's lasting longer anyhow.

I am not used to admiration. I shun any attempt to give it to me.

Then we left, leaving that shed open both ends because there were never any doors, and made our way through the moonlit trees to the blossoming garden; how the whites blazed, the roof shone, even the old tankstand had a murky presence, standing on a shadow. We nearly tripped over the tray, Edward saw it though. I thought Comstock was getting restless as we neared the house. We'd obeyed his pace all day; was he finding it now too long? Was he sick of us, wanting to be gone? I was getting scared of goodbyes, they were going to sound ominous.

In the kitchen Comstock said we should be able to find a hurricane lamp or some candles; Mrs Carter used to have them in case the power failed. It took a while; we found them, then went down the hall. I put a candle near the bronze—Edward's bronze; I thought of stealing it—and it stared out in its ambiguous, sensuous way at us two sitting facing each other in the hall while Comstock, with his lantern, found the bits and pieces to go with him in the car.

Flickering light's no good for conversation; we just looked at each other. I took courage after a while. I said, 'Trust everything loving and creative in our beings' ... he smiled at me as if I had brought him home from a hundred years war, then lowered his lids. I murmured just a little more ... 'prosperity and fullness' ... he indicated with his eyes the room where Comstock was searching ...

Even if apart, we'll create the possibility for each other; is that what you mean, Margy mine?

I mean avoid self-destruction, even thoughts that erode confidence. I mean fancy yourself a little; you're worth it.

Thank you, darling mine.

Comstock called out, 'Now the oil for you, Margaret; would you get it down?' and she did. They carried the things he wanted to the cars, leaving the chart and the small painting at the kitchen door. The cars were ominous, dark, lifeless; their indifference to the return of their owners was disquieting. Things went in the boot of the Mercedes, which obediently turned on a light when opened, and on the back seat. Then they went back to lock up and get the two frames.

I was dreading some big emotional splurge.

Bye bye, house. They're afraid of me now; they needn't worry.

Rehearsing, rehearsing ...

They told Comstock they'd follow him out. He said, no, they could lead the way; the captain had to be the last off the ship. So Edward backed his car round and faced the way they came in. Comstock quickly brought his car alongside ...

For a farewell? I had an impulse. Michael would have been pleased to see me act without thinking. I flung the door open and ran to the shed near the killing house. I grabbed the hook thing for hanging up the animals, and I pulled and pulled. Then I realized there was another hook holding it by a link of the chain. I slipped it off and ran out the back. I threw the hook as far as I could towards the river ...

Comstock, being practised in using the space, had his car round in a moment, the lights on her action.

It's not gestures I need but thank you.

No reason but a blind urge to save.

You might as well get in, love.

Edward's car in the lead, they headed down the three-mile drive, most of it close to the river. Margaret watched for the billabong they'd walked along, but couldn't pick it in the dark. The only other thing to look at was the pair of white eyes following them a hundred yards behind.

There was no gate, only a cattle ramp, no compulsion to stop ...

And it took an effort; it was then, that moment, that my loneliness hit me.

My absolute aloneness from now on, the last few days.

At least let's see him, or hold him, Edward!

The two cars stopped alongside each other. They saw Comstock reach across to open the passenger side window as if he would say something to them, then he changed his mind ...

Words change nothing.

... and sat straight behind the wheel, watching them.

Powerless, powerless in two cabins.

After ... ten seconds? Half a minute? he fumbled about on the top of the dashboard and got himself a cigarette. He lit it awkwardly.

Scared stiff, poor bastard.

He took one puff, seemed unable to gather the resolve for a second; the glowing cigarette end was twitching, he was breathing out of the other side of his mouth, that or his lips were moving, yet he wouldn't talk to us.

Comstock gathered himself for a wave, then they saw the same hand operate the gear lever on the steering column, and the cars were going opposite ways, to Blythe and to Sydney.

9 **Did she have to bring the problem back to us?**

I don't read the death columns. Johnny was buried when they told me. I don't suppose I'd really have gone to the funeral, but I think I might've been told.

Apparently he had his wish; they buried him on the property. It seemed a waste; he was still a fit man. His sister did well out of it anyway, and Evelyn—not that she needs it now, poor thing, but it'll keep her looked after. The historical society got a bit, and the rest went to the cancer research people. I bet they rubbed their hands.

Funny he gave it to them. I mean, giving your money to science is very generous and all that, but ... cancer? It's such a deadly thing; it had me puzzled for a while that he put his money in that direction. It was like an offering. Johnny had the most mixed-up motives of any man I ever knew. He was all the proud squatter on the outside, yet he'd do anything that struck him; he did some pretty disgraceful things,

He said to me once you should never be ashamed, there's nothing you can think of that isn't part of ninety-nine per cent of all the people round you. Trouble was, he went for the unpleasant things, not the nice ones, the things that separate people, not the ones that unite them. I think most of us are pretty cruel at bottom; we've got to keep a good firm hold on ourselves. It doesn't hurt you; you come out better for it in the end.

Anyhow I'm not preaching over Johnny's grave; I suppose they found someone to do that. He went out rich and unsung; basically he was a lonely man, the last ten years anyway, probably always. Maybe

that's what made him grip people in that desperate way, to wring some sort of contact out of them apart from social palaver.

Me, I think you knock on any door; there's someone there; they'll come out in their own good time if they want to. At least Jim's not an isolate, anything more than I am; we'll never be alone.

Till the very end. I wonder if he left a letter? I suppose the true suicide wouldn't, but you can't help getting your nose out of joint if someone goes out without looking at you.

Something in me died too. I'm middle-aged now. I can't see anything's going to improve much; it's a matter of keeping it as good as it is. I'm trying to find the meaning in his death. I think it's because it's taken away my last alternative. Not that I wanted him back as a lover; I haven't thought of him that way for donkey's years. It's just that no matter how settled you are, it's hard to stop yourself keeping some little gate open, some little funkhole prepared if you ever want it. Not that I ever admitted it to myself, but now he's finished himself off I can see that's what I was doing. Now I know what I've always said is right; you can't get away from yourself; you haven't got any real alternatives; we're all just what we are.

Margy'd say, what are we? But that one doesn't worry me. I don't think it's bothering her so much now; I think she'll soon be right. As far as everything that matters goes, we're just how we seem to everyone else.

Which is nonsense. I don't think about Jim like that. But you can't be bothered about everyone like you are about your husband.

So he had a couple of goes with Shorty Roebourne's girls. I don't mind now. I'd've been furious then if I'd known. It was only physical. I suppose he had to prove he had a way out if he wanted it, just like me, or near enough; so I can't blame him.

Why did Johnny do it? God, I've heard a lot of rubbish this past week about that. Thelma Lincoln says he was overburdened by guilt; she gets it out of magazines; a pity she doesn't use the vacuum occasionally, her house wouldn't be the dirty mess it is. Reverend Carmichael's the only

one who connected me with John; he said he was set on that path from the start; he was trying to tell me I was lucky. ‘Set on a path’; isn’t it a typical thing for a clergyman to say? There’s no one on a path; there aren’t any. It makes me annoyed; they’re paid to stand up and spout out all that rubbish; what do they know more than anyone else?

No one knows anything about death. Like accidents. Why do they happen? No one knows; it’s just some people are more prone to them than others. Like falling in love, or being lonely all your life; some people are built that way. That’s all it is—some people are built that way. I wish I could get all these people that think they know what makes us tick, and get ‘em in a paddock ... I’d shoot ‘em; they’re just a curse to the human race! They don’t tell anybody anything; they just talk and confuse you! It’s confusing enough without people babbling away and mucking you up when you want to work out what you feel yourself. That bloody Mrs McConchie started going on about how he ought to’ve given all his money to community projects, so he could have his name remembered. It’s her name she wants remembered; she’d love someone to leave the hall committee some money so she could tear down the perfectly good hall we’ve got and make up to all these architects as if she knows something about it ... She’d get her name on the foundation stone, that’s for sure.

What’s the use of that? They can cremate me. I don’t care if there’s no grave to look at. I’ve told Jim he can chuck my ashes in the back garden; it’s all the same to me.

Why did he do it? I don’t know. I think he just ran out of things he wanted to do. It’s all very well honouring the pioneers and all that, like he did with his grandfather, but that’s only a prop. No, he ran out of things to do. That girl killing herself brought him down with a crash, and he couldn’t get up again. There wasn’t really anything to get up for. Having sex with that girl wasn’t just some silly thing he did, it was him. He’d say, here’s a wild silly bitch, a bit of fun. She wouldn’t put his pot away in town, or try to get anything out of him.

Well, she wouldn't have held back; he'd have had his bit of fun. That's about all his life amounts to, when you strip away the big land-holder stuff. It ran him into a dead end, and he knew it. Myra wanted to cry, but couldn't.

What the hell's wrong with me? I cried for days when Harry got run over.

I never said much to Myra about Comstock. Evil sort of bastard, I thought he was. Not that he ever took any notice of me. I'd've just been there to order round; that's if I'd ever worked for him. He had no time for the little man. If you didn't have the money to keep up with him, you were no use to him; that's what I hear.

I don't know about Myra; she was pretty broody for a couple of days. Young Tom Dawson came round, behalf of the Back-to Committee; wanted her to help organize the fashion parade; they were going to model all the styles of this century. Well, she did snap at him! Make me feel old, she reckoned. But after he'd gone I could see she was thinking about it; she started asking Margy all sorts of questions; she was trying to find out without letting on she was interested.

Margy got the hint; Tom came round again. He knew how to handle her this time. He said they'd be getting all the young girls to do the actual modelling but they wanted someone to advise them what they should have. They wanted to concentrate on the period just about the end of the war, up to the irrigation coming. Well, Myra hummed and haahed; said she didn't know much about it; she'd have to think ... I gave Margy a wink and she went out of the room; she was afraid she'd laugh.

I was out to enjoy myself those last few weeks. Often of a night Edward and I'd take our tea out to some place; I'd make a salad and we'd light a fire for some chops or steak. We took wine or some tins of brandy, lime and soda; Edward used to imitate the stuffy drinkwaiter we had at the Windsor; it was good to have things to look back on. Tom often came with us; Edward used to talk a lot. We'd be out by The Silo, or Nevertire hall, and he'd get talking; I think Tom learned a lot about his father in those few weeks.

Yes, I was the great raconteur. I showed them the old pub at Nevertire and told 'em about the early race meetings; they used the verandah as grandstand and winning post. First to tie up his horse and breast the bar won the race. How the booze-ups ended in bottle-breaking. How they caught the chap who pinched all his mate's money and put him on trial; how they condemned him and strung him up with a rope round his neck from the rafter, and two boxes under his feet; someone kicked the boxes away and he'd have died only one chap wasn't as drunk as the rest and he woke up what was happening; held the bloke up and made them untie him ... watching Margy all the while to see the effect ...

I knew it was common coinage in the area, these tales; he was trying me out to see what I'd accept and reject. I thought it was all very sad, those poor men trying to be men. I suppose, despite the bit of lynch law, it was better than the wild west men with their guns as phallic substitutes, killing instead of mating ... But I knew Edward was rejecting too; all this happened long before his time; he was groping for the essence of his life's experience, not realizing, perhaps, that I could see him better than he could see himself; he didn't need to make the effort. After all, I'd stayed with him, not gone back to Sydney.

I wondered if Margy got letters; it was an insecure grip I had. I suppose the other fellow felt the same or worse.

I never tried to force Marg to define herself or her feelings to me; I knew she was doing it for herself. I felt she wanted it that way; it was the best thing between us, and the limits of our love.

He was a basically disinterested person, and having turned his back on real passion, he was just a commentator, a raconteur, a whimsical man, and often a clown. He flew in a rage at the radio repair man one day, and when the chap got angry back again, Edward started to laugh; one person mightn't be able to stop himself getting annoyed, but two people—it was just ridiculous. The man seemed to know Edward pretty well, because as soon as he started laughing the chap looked sheepish and said, 'Ya just came in to stir me a bit, y' old bastard.'

He hadn't, he'd lost control for a minute, but that's how people saw him; the perennial gadfly on their weak spots, and he accepted the role.

I said to him one night, 'Edward, you've never taken me to a dance!' and we agreed we'd go to one, but I didn't know if he was genuine. But he rang me at school a few days later and said we were going to a hop—as he called it—at The Silo next Saturday night. Well, Dut was giving a party at the place he had near the school, and I didn't know whether to let Edward in on it or not, then I thought, damn it, we'll go to both.

The Silo hall had a sign out—50/50 dancing, mixed old-time and modern. Well, modern? At first it was like one long set of the lancers to me. I thought the saxophone was so far out it was almost in again, but the band had one at The Silo. And another would-be variety artist pulled a tea-chest out of the supper-room for a dixieland number—whether that was modern or old-time, I'm not too sure. I will say this, there's something quaint being led backwards round a polished floor among three generations of rural people, most of whom seem to have some vestigial respect for ballroom dancing as the master's art. Even when it was by Edward, who danced neither well nor badly but with enough competence to keep me somewhere near the steps. I was longing to get back to Dut's.

Not that free expression without rules satisfied me much either; I couldn't tolerate it in art, where I was much more at home than dancing, so why should it suit me in physical movement, which was far from my forte? I lacked grace and I knew it; years of training wouldn't have made me any real good, and my whole style of ... being courted? Courting? ... was too much of a slow apprehension to make dancing more than a thing one did. I liked it just for a fling, like the wild burst we had at Cecily's that day I had to fly home, probably my all-time low for the year.

I will say there was something good about the warm night flowing into the hall, and the door open—you could see the stars if you looked out, though not through the windows, unless you ignored the wire netting.

It made my heart ache, this backwater in time. You know what? I danced a Schottische, a Fox Trot, and heaven help me, the Lambeth Walk. A Lambeth Walk! Oy! Then I said to Edward, ‘Edward baby, get the car started, lover’ and then I felt stupid because I can’t parody like he can. I get the slang wrong. I get gangsters mixed up with society dolls ... I’m a here and now girl; it was coming home pretty hard to me with the farmers beaming on their son’s girlfriends and the ladies making tea in urns. I couldn’t stand the thought of having supper there; one woman heard me say it to Edward—Help, I was embarrassed—and she apologized bitchily, ‘I’m sorry it’s not a carved supper, we only have that for balls.’

Balls! Well, what can a girl say to that? You’re living in another age? The trouble is, since the irrigation, they think they’re living in the same age.

Edward thought he was all right, prancing around in some version of himself, but I’d had enough; back to Dut’s. The funny thing was that after being very quiet for fifteen minutes, the old bastard came alive! God knows what he’d have been like at Cecily’s. It was really a liberation to him. He was expansive; he danced in and through the whole crowd of them, and I mean danced; it was creative. Talk about modern man! He shook and shimmied; he made most of what the rest of us were doing look like silly gyrations. Yet even then it was more a comment than a real participation; it was like an Indian or Indonesian doing rock, if you can imagine what I mean, and it somehow sent us up, but only if you thought he was making a fool of himself too.

The others didn’t think that; he was the star of the occasion. They’d all heard of him but hardly any of them knew him, and did he give them a crash course! Nightingale jokes and nightingale stories were going everywhere. I tired before he did. I wanted to give it away, but he said no, we hadn’t had supper. I made a sour remark about him not getting a carved supper there; Dut wouldn’t have a crust in the place; he wasn’t an organized person. But Edward said we’d turn it on, and the whole lot of them went back to his place.

Dee-lishus! Dee-lishus! I saw them looking at the lamp and the Buddha, and I orf-hairndedly informed them that they were presents from my admirer, Miss Ward, well known to them all as a respected colleague in the art faculty. The feast we prepared was only Nescafe and toast but Marg's familiarity with where everything was kept was not lost on her friends and I saw them answering the question wheeech had, sans doute, perplexed them; mistress, lover or friend?

Friend. I was/am a dated old bird with a half-empty nest, a head full of imprisoning memories that are the anecdote collection called my life so far, and a heart heavy with desire to be burdened with the slavery of marriage. Once more, yes, and all previous failure notwithstanding. I was completely in love. I will describe my Margaret to you; perhaps you will see her and know me; it's all I ask, having nothing else to hope for.

If I begin at her thighs you'll know what I mean. She had a way of sitting on one hand that made me want to take it out and put in my own, except she balanced so, and swung her head from person to person, her shoulders barely moving; taking them in, taking them in! This was her air of absorption; she seemed to be soaking up so fast there wouldn't be any time to say anything. Then when she spoke, it was a surprise. Not that she suggested a statue, far from it; it was just her establishment air, which never really left her, that left you wide open when she came at you with a commoner's commonsense. Of which she had plenty; she was penetrating, but one felt it wasn't the point of the exercise at all, that was to lay bare the real person, the other feelings and ideas supporting the one expressed.

I loved to watch her draw, that was when she was most natural. She didn't bite her lips or tap her pencil, she did the whole thing with practised ease, like folding a sheet—yes, she'd be domestic enough when her time came. But the lines came twirling out of her crayons and little stubs of Conte carbon, you'd think she was stitching them on a fabric a millionth of a centimetre above the paper. That was her touch; I remembered all the times she'd touched me—not so very many, apart from our two nights of making love—not Marg at her peak, not yet—and the all-

over sensation it brought me, because when she touched with a finger, or hand, it was her whole body made contact, and to be touched on the wrist by Margaret was to be ... what shall I say? Raised one degree all over!

She didn't go in for your magazine cover sex; she had balance. Nothing was allowed to exceed anything else; she'd put a thing down for a while if she felt she was doing too much of it. Sometimes I wanted her to draw like fury, but—perhaps two nights, or a session one Sunday afternoon, and then there'd be no more for ages. She'd say, I don't want to be an artist, Edward, I want art in me; I love to draw and paint, but it's to affect the me that doesn't paint that I do it, not to have a lot of stuff to show.

So rich and so un-vain! Yet this was part of the trouble. She'd dismissed so many class-attitudes she felt hollow and not completely formed, not having stock answers and responses; often she didn't know what to make of something; it was merely there before her to be looked at. You could make enemies like that but there was nothing challenging in Marg's glance.

Except for Edward! It was caveat the would-be emptor, with poor old me; I had to face the scrutiny she poured on herself; she could be pretty frightening when she blandly stated her mind. Ah well ...

If I go on from her clothes you'll know what I mean. She didn't have any figure faults to hide. She liked wearing jackets and blouses over pants; it both hid and emphasized her supple waist; I'm sure she could have touched her knees with her head. Except one couldn't imagine her doing exercises or any conscious self-improvement. Except that's why she'd come to Edward's domain in the first place.

Except, except, except ... one can't describe a character; consistency's not bearable in a person if it's too obvious; it's stiffness then, rigidity, a fault. Margaret had lots of faults; it was her right! I was often afraid that if she went too far in understanding, she'd be coarsened. I didn't want her giving up her natural refinement. I didn't want her to be too general; what was wrong with doing a lot of one thing, even till people

said you were out of your mind? She was tidy at home and messy at my place; I often had to speak to her. She used to stare at me then; I think she thought my house was a mere shell for me like body for spirit, and wondered why I worried about neatness. Well, I'm a neat person; I like it! I used to tell her, because a person is something or other, it doesn't mean that's what they want to be; you've got to listen to the frustrated desires in their talk, that's where you get your best leads.

She calmed people sometimes when I wanted them excited; was that a fault? She read slowly; if it didn't answer her need of the moment, she didn't bother. Then she'd get involved and she wouldn't want to talk, or go for the drive we'd arranged, or anything, anything at all. She didn't seem to care much about heat and cold; I'd say, you're not wearing enough and I'd get busy lighting fires. She'd look up from her book a moment as if observing some quaint custom of the countryside, then go back to her reading. I'd say, damn it, I'm only doing it for you, don't you care? She'd say, thank you, Edward, it's nice, I think it's nice of you; and I'd be left wondering if I was being humoured, or if she really did agree.

She'd say, then, it doesn't matter either way, truly Edward, you do just as you please; and I'd be left with the onus on me when, as you can plainly see, it was my wish to have her make a request so I could release some of the urgent pressure in my desire ... desire to please, to satisfy, to content the dear thing curled on the sofa with its springs hooked in the carpet, the glowing colours of her lamp on her hair and face.

Her face and hair! Ah, dear God, I only had a cheap camera, I was no photographer. How I wished I could handle charcoal like she could. I used to say to her, 'Do me a self-portrait for the love of Christ, please, Margy, even if it's just a sketch and you don't think much of it; just chuck it on the floor and forget to pick it up.' She'd joke with me then, the bitch, and draw ferocious huns, or pigs, or eyes peeping through holes in a fence, anything but her face. I used to keep these things because I felt that if I could recapture, in years to come, the torment she'd caused me, I might be able to recall the face that caused it.

Once I nearly trapped her. She told me about this cardigan she'd bought and I asked her to sketch it. Later in the evening, she did; it was like a drawing for a fashion magazine, but beautifully done, and so very much her; the pose—a seated figure, with that lovely waist, and hands on the sofa beside it, those hands that picked up things softly, without force, determination or ambition. She'd say to me, 'Edward, I don't want to be noticed, or noticeable, I want to be me. I just want to be me. I don't want people to approach me by my clothes, my cooking, my furniture or what have you and say that's her; I don't want to leave any knobs for them to grab, any signposts to tell people how to come at me. I ask nothing of anybody except they be themselves, and I'm going to have it that way for myself.'

I was telling you about her drawing. It was her, it was her! And then she realized, and she left the head unfinished, hardly started. There was nothing there except a certain way of looking down and to the right—I always sat that side of her whenever I could; sometimes she woke up to me and moved. I used to get annoyed and amused all at once! The face was blank; the only thing I could grasp in the miserable years to come was the way her hair felt—her brown hair, which she sometimes darkened; it had a crimped, sort of criss-cross feeling at the top; it was something about the way she brushed it. She didn't want a sleek, fat gloss; it lit up only dully, even under a lamp; there were undercurrents. Then it simplified as it fell, and she brought it in to her neck. She said she liked it short in summer, but she didn't cut it from the day we went to Comstock's; I think she did that for me.

Comstock! When she threw that hook down the riverbank, I sensed then the heart of her, that was when my love rose to the full. It was then I sensed the inmost thing in her that would integrate all the rest, in time, in time.

Oh heck, I didn't see her, I just saw what I wanted to see. It's no use telling you she had an apricot skin because she didn't, it was whiter than that. There was a girl at the high school with Marg who had swarthy skin

and got round in big dark glasses, she looked like the kept woman of a yacht-owning Italian; whenever I saw her near Margaret, I laughed.

Margy laughed at me. When she came down from Sydney the first time, and each time she came back, she used this Indian soap she'd bought, and when it ran out she'd get Arpege from the chemist's. I had to know what brand it was. I worked my way through every brand in the shop and when I got to it I was going to stick to it, but the very first day I came round after a shower with the Arpege, she picked what I'd been up to. She said, 'I thought you were a bit odd with your soaps!' and she ... well, she didn't laugh, exactly, she shook. Made no noise, and shook. I said I had a good mind to put her in the back of the truck and let her get a decent earth smell, but it didn't stop her laughing. And the girl in the chemist's had her bit of a snicker too, when I went back to me old pink Camay, but it was only that stupid little trollop of Rita Walker's, I wasn't caring. I stayed away from the railway houses for a while, though, because Walker's got a deadly wit, I might make a fool of myself, I didn't see I had to amuse that lot.

Comstock! If I say the word compassion it's only because I've got to start somewhere. But compassion's general, and it's a male emotion as much or more than female; in a woman it's more likely to be the aftermath of something she mightn't even want to feel, a disturbance deep down, a turbulence which is the start of falling in love, the getting ready for the pregnancy-childbirth-motherhood business which would demean them if it weren't that they—the best of them—can—most of them—turn it into the central thing in life.

I'm not creative, just a good inventor of pranks.

Margy was all stirred up when she got back into the car that night, so different from the last time we drove that road together. That was grim. All stirred up, she was embarrassed; she thought she should be ashamed of feeling it for Comstock, with me there, because she'd often told me she didn't like him. Why should I mind? It was natural, and that, at the last, is all I can say about Marg, she's basically a natural; a few more years and she'll know it, she'll let that part of her control the rest.

I wish I could give you the peculiar, particular, personal flavour of that turbulence as I sensed it because that would be the essence of the girl I was in love with. Words fail. If we're all the same—ninety-nine per cent of us, as Comstock used to argue when he was justifying his latest bit of devilry—then it should be easy to answer Marg's start-of-the-year questions—When is she? When is a person? Oh, I lie down gasping sometimes for the means to tell her not to define, but merely to act, to operate. She said—a few weeks before the end of the year—'That's what Michael says.' I shied away from that. If he'd seen it, and I'd seen it, surely it was obvious enough to her?

I wasn't going to sing his praises when I'd seen it myself, long before he came on the scene.

So there she was, handing round coffees to a pretty pissed mob of teachers and their friends, and bringing sugar and all these piles of toast on a tray ... Have you ever tried it? Tried holding a loaded tray in front of you, and you're standing up, and you get down to a squatting position on the floor, without making the cushion go ploompf? No, well, there you are; she could do it; none of the others could.

As I say, I didn't see her. I just saw what I wanted to see.

I didn't want them to go home. We saw the first couple off and the others suddenly got terribly tactful; they assumed she'd be staying with me; they all discovered they'd be going too.

We didn't go inside from seeing them off; we sat on the porch of his little wooden house. I said, 'I'll get us another coffee, Edward; let's have it out here?' and he agreed.

I couldn't kiss him; we'd have had to go inside. I couldn't make love with him; he was on the verge of asking me to marry him. I couldn't go home; I was too fond of him for that. You'd have to be pretty heartless to break away from that yearning. We sat on the porch, and after I came out with the coffee, the step. He understood.

I was limp. Edward was flagging. It seemed pretty pointless; we'd had the best of the night. I said, 'Won't we get dew on us, or something?' but he wasn't interested in moving. He said, 'When I was a child I stole

a packet of chewing gum. There was a man camped down the road in a tent. I went through his things. My mother sent me back with a penny to pay for it. I told a good lie in those times. I got him to sell me another chewy for my penny.'

There was something funny about it; I said, 'I think you made that up, Edward; it doesn't ring true.'

He said, 'You're right. I cried my eyes out. He didn't understand why I was giving him the penny.'

I know we were worn out, but I just couldn't see any significance in it. I said, 'Well, go on, what happened then? Did your mother ask you if you'd paid the penny?' But he didn't answer me, just looked like something scabbling in the ashes. After a while he said, 'It's no use looking back, is it? There's nothing there.'

I didn't know what he meant. I was starting to panic; he was beginning to sound like you know who.

The stars were paling, the night fading, the fire dead inside. There were morning noises in the air—dogs and roosters. Myra said when they lived at Tilga it was the sound of the big ripsaw at the mill that meant the day had officially started. Well, was the night over? I looked at Edward; he looked drawn and hollow; he'd done a lot that night; it was hopes of me had kept him going. He looked washed out; he hadn't given in. He had guts. I thought of Judy's desolate music. I wished there was somewhere I could take Edward, something I could do for him. But all I really wanted was to be home in bed. I had a sore tail and I was cold. He stirred himself; he went inside and came out with two blankets to wrap around us. I said no, I'd have to go home. He said he'd drive me. I said I'd rather walk; he said he'd walk with me. I said no, he should get into bed. I'd be all right, it wasn't far. He said he couldn't let me go by myself, it wasn't right for me to be on my own. I said that if he came with me, he'd be on his own when he walked home, wouldn't he?

That was the state we were in.

Eventually I gave in and we walked the quarter of a mile to Myra's, wrapped in his blankets. A truckie gave us a toot. I don't think the milk-

man saw us. I stumbled in the back verandah with my main thought being to find a hot water bottle, I was frozen, when I took a look at Edward. He was absolutely done.

I'd given him nothing; he wasn't complaining; he was more loyal than anyone deserved.

I was reduced to doggy-love by then; it was a state she didn't know. You stop thinking, you just grip and hang on.

He couldn't have walked home, he absolutely couldn't. Myra had a spare bed on the back verandah; it was enclosed, and it got the morning light; it'd soon be warm. I took off his shoes and put him on it, still wrapped in his blanket, and I put the quilt on top of him. He managed a feeble smile; my God, I could never be a nurse! Then I fell into bed myself. I thought I heard Jim come out for a look at what was going on. I didn't really know ... pathetic, weren't we?

I thought she was sleeping with him. It don't look so good.

Jim got Myra. She rearranged the quilt without making any improvement, and lowered the sun blind so the light wouldn't be in Edward's eyes.

I was wishing she'd gone long ago. It was cruel what she was doing to him. Looking all grey and drained.

I was wrapped in Margy and I kept asking meself what she wanted with Edward. He was too old, you'd reckon. I was wrapped in Margy. I was dreading the empty house when she'd gone, but what was she doing? I was scared the old nightingale'd blow up when she was gone. Still, no blame on her; if it hadn't been her it'd've been someone else; you can't stop people getting keen on someone.

I dreamed about that penny. I dreamed I was crying so hard that the tent blew down and the bloke went crook at me. Then we tried to build a house out of chewing gum, and we couldn't, and I cried some more.

Gives herself airs! Well, she doesn't, but she ought to! She's the sort that could. Doesn't she know she's got a tragedy on her hands; you'd think Comstock would have taught her something.

I dreamed about Margy, too. I dreamed I was flying a plane and she was only a passenger. Each time I went back to sit with her she'd say, 'But shouldn't you fly the plane? We'll crash if you don't.'

I only slept a couple of hours. I thought I'd sleep all day. But I woke up feeling uneasy. I was still cold, and shaking a bit. I couldn't settle. I remembered you're supposed to concentrate on something, so I listened to the noise of the birds. Myra had a special place for her ferns and pot plants at the side of the house and round the back. She had stands for all the multicoloured plants, and ferns hanging in wire baskets, and bigger plants in everything she'd been able to lay her hands on— half-barrels, paint tins, terracotta pots, four-gallon drums, even a cactus growing in an old laundry trough. It was a haven for birds, mostly sparrows. They chirped and twittered, you couldn't guess how many there might be, it was like listening to a banquet of elves, the rattle and chatter of thousands. It soothed me.

But Myra's house was on the edge of town, right next to the wheat-fields, and next I heard some magpies going quardle quahdle in the sugar gums behind the next-door neighbours'. And last, somewhere in the far distance, where the wheat was drying out for harvest, the heads of grain going hard and bristly, I heard a solitary crow—the lambkiller, the ugly, greedy loner, the cruel, suspicious bird of great heights and great distances, the inhuman one.

Look out, keep your eyes outwards; it'd worked for me before. But this time I couldn't. I lay huddled in bed and thought of my victim, and what a disaster I'd been.

Did she have to bring the problem back to us?

10 **Going back, going forward**

Margaret had her wish; the horses cantering away from the school threw up puffs of dust. Summer spread himself. The wheatfields went brown and surfy-blond. Farmers took a trial cut round the perimeter of their paddocks, then did repairs on their machines. Round wheat bins appeared in the paddocks; a few men stuck to sewing up bags. At the silos, elevator gear was oiled in readiness. Margaret looked at the storm gathering in the little picture Comstock had given her, and compared it with the cloudless skies of early December. The school year wound down, she started to put things away, collect some students' work to take back to Sydney. Sue Adams was away a few days, there was a rumour she was pregnant.

She came back, she went home on horseback with Michael, she couldn't be very sick.

Margaret kept the will she'd taken without Edward's knowledge. She saw no reason to keep her promise to put it in the bank. She sometimes stared at it, still sealed, and wondered what it might force her into, but dismissed misgivings immediately.

Sufficient unto the day—or I'll act on impulse.

Michael wrote to her twice; when would she be up? Or would he come down to see her? The letters wrung her. Was Michael only an interlude, and one that was over? She wasn't quite sure. And if she wanted to test him out, Turrumburrah was hardly the setting. Then again, how could she put another strain on Edward? He'd handled Clive easily enough, but this was different. She already had a sense of guilt about Edward; she didn't want this deepened, nor did she want to explain to Michael how deeply entangled she was. So—well intentioned, though less than

honest—she told Michael about Clive’s weekend in Turrumburrah and how it had driven the last nail into that affair. She finished:

... so you see, it wasn’t fair. I’m a bit ashamed of it now, but at the time I had few compunctions because I felt it was all washed up anyway. If there’s anything important going to develop between us ...

Still as hard as ever but I’ve got to do it.

... it can’t possibly be in this place where I’m a stranger, guest, or whatever, and you’d be a complete outsider. No, please, Michael, let’s leave it as it is for the time being. I’ll be in Sydney straight after the New Year ...

Michael was amazed. According to his friend Johnson, the schools broke up on the 17th. What the hell did she want to stay an extra fortnight for? He sounded hurt and suspicious, and for all the verve and confidence which had won him the grudging respect of Mr Ward, she knew there was a tender side which she had scarcely begun to explore in their brief relationship of September, that he was building hopes on her, that she’d been enthusiastic enough those few days, that she hadn’t showed him her doubts and misgivings. If only time would stop in Sydney, move on in Turrumburrah. She posted him a drawing Michael Bunny had done, a bizarre assemblage of assorted farm machines and implements in the shape of a gigantic human figure sitting on the edge of a wheatfield, somewhat after Goya’s ‘Panic’; in the wheat were the figures of two lovers, faintly drawn and faces averted. It was only when she was rolling the picture up that Margaret noticed a horse in the foreground of the picture, rump towards the lovers, gazing idly.

Very witty! At that moment, of the two Michaels, I preferred the boy.

She also included a ‘self-portrait’, a teasing one she’d meant for Edward. It showed her with her hands together in front of her face, as if praying. When she went to the post office, she felt very guilty ...

They were men of Edward’s age.

These efforts to stave him off, to buy time, had the opposite effect. Michael wrote again; why wasn’t she coming on the 18th? If she wanted to be out of the place, why not let him be the transport? He’d be glad to

come and rescue her. If she wasn't anxious to leave, why the present? If she had to send him pictures, how come the lovers? Did she think he'd enjoy that when she was four hundred and fifty miles away? Did she think maybe he had a lot of other girlfriends on tap? Well, he didn't. Not that Michael wrote with quite the same hectoring tone as Clive ...

But he laid it on the line. I gave up. I'd said all I had to say. He could wait three weeks,

I heard Myra ask her if she knew who was coming to take her place. Fat chance of that.

Well, on with the motley. I got a waistcoat like Jack o'Boon's, and a funny moustache, and went round with Tom Bowler, getting a wagon, team and harness—not as easy as you might think after twenty-five motorized years. We had a rehearsal—can't leave anything to chance, I told Tom Bowler, who loves preparations more than events. I thought I looked the part, I told him, and the wagon didn't break down, though it creaked and strained ... like an old lady making love, I told Tom, who didn't appreciate the remark because his ageing mum was known to give voice to her occasional tremors of desire, and he thought I was ribbing him.

Well, I was; Tom thinks he has a special relationship with me, and is the only one to appreciate the 'real' me; how I long to mock him! I sometimes dream of Tom stepping on to a special Edward weighing-machine, all weighty and serious, and watching the pointer go dwindling back through the little numbers to zero, and round again in minus, and a Bowler balloon go floating through his native skies, crying to the out-of-distance land, 'Help, help, I'm a nobody.'

Pop! For all such! And on with the motley. It was a time of crisis. I wasn't sleeping well. I was buoyed up on my imagination, my memories—not things that point to the future, note! Alas alacky, she went swimming one day. I couldn't bear to go, though I was hot as a dog. She came back shaking her head. Why didn't they have shady trees planted near the pool? If they were worried about leaves in the pool, plant them back fifty yards, but make a dense shade; why did we have to live our

lives in this perpetual glare? Why were they chopping down trees in the street?

I didn't know. I'd lost my grip. I was practising with the team and wagon another night, getting the feel of them, remembering how Jack held the reins, how he stretched his neck to call at the horses—'Gee orrf the lot of you, gee orrf Strap, gee orrf Teddy, gee orrf Blowfly, damn you gee orrf!! Whooooaaaah! C'm'ere, c'm'ere, whooooaaaahh!!!' I picked a night when Marg had some farewell function to go to. I thought she was miles away. Then I saw her by the exhibition shed, an old iron thing painted red. It was almost dark, she had a jacket and shorts and white boots, and the jacket had bands of lime green ruled off with black, and white spaces ...

She was in the dark lee of the shed. I thought I was imagining her. I felt like an apparition myself in my corny rig. Like a mummy driving out of the past with no person operating it, unless it was the shrivelled-up apple core called Edward's will. I called 'Whooaahh, c'm'ere, c'm'ere, whooaahh!' and got off, pretending to look at the offside rear wheel; it was one way of getting to my knees. I prayed I might survive the next month.

Someone you love turns into a fiction ... or reality turns into a film—and you're off the screen. He was no longer himself. Would modern man Robards call it damnation, or madness? Human personality is too fragile. There's no building on earth that can't be exploded; our structure's too flimsy, just a web of nerve ends. I went to run on the field where he was, I frightened the horses ...

They backed off; the bloody wheel nearly ran over me.

I couldn't approach him. I'd broken and been broken. Why should love do what the Love Wagon couldn't? It was like running hot and cold, freeze and flush.

You reach a point where, having been so long denied, you can't take the thing you want even when it's offered. The hurt is more than the healing power. You'd rather limp than take the crutch. You've adapted to cope without; you don't know how to cope with. You don't want the

thing you want; you just want to want it. I calmed Strap, Blowfly, Teddy and the rest; they were pretty worn-out old nags; they weren't really jumpy. She was still there, not moving.

I said, 'Edward, put your horses away; don't be long.'

I said, 'They've got to go back to Donovan's dairy.' He still had a stable, though he wasn't using it any more.

I said, 'I'll come with you.' I got up.

I drove to the dairy. She said it was unreal. She said she wouldn't go to the function; there were six others leaving; she'd only been here a year; she didn't matter. Or she'd go later and say she'd been feeling sick. Then she said she wouldn't say that, they'd make remarks about being pregnant; there'd been a lot of that sort of talk in the staffroom lately; even Ponds liked to know the sexual statistics. I drove the horses; a couple of cars went past with their lights on. She said, 'Shouldn't we have a lamp or something? In case they might hit us?' I told her they'd see her because her clothes were so light.

That was his mind; he felt more exposed than he could bear.

She put a hand on my leg. I said, 'I'm starting to feel normal again; don't touch me.' She said, 'We've reached the extreme; it's going to be all right now.' I wasn't sure. I half-expected the sky to fill with bats and black me out completely, but she was there, right enough, the car lights showed me. I suppose we were a great lumbering lump of black that frightened them; we couldn't have looked real, just a light woman's outfit lurching on nothing. She said, 'Is it very far?' That was when I was going to turn in. She said, 'Is that your car?' It was. She said, 'Can't we leave the horses; wouldn't they be all right for an hour?'

He said, 'They're not well adapted for modern living, are they?' He wanted to joke again. I killed that; I told him brusquely, 'Well, hurry up.' He had a torch. I shone it around. The place was full of dusty bags and a pile of spotty bricks; there was nothing doing there.

Kevin Donovan came out to ask how the team was shaping. I asked him to take them for a turn around the block. In his slow, deliberate way

he said, 'Sure, I'll come with you. But we'll need a light; someone'll run into the back of us.'

I was close to breaking-point; why not hit a nice old Irish milkman on the head?

I said, 'Well, I really haven't got the time, Kevin. You see, my friend here's got to go out tonight. To a farewell.'

This Kevin man shone his torch on me. He took one great big bloody long look at me. As if I had no feelings. Why not hit a prying old Irish milkman on the head?

Not so much a passionate girl as one that wanted to be released from the effects of her sharp sight and strong will; one that was more stable than she cared to be, but had nonetheless rejected much, and wanted acceptance now; very nervous from guilt about me—and I'd given up thinking I could matter to anyone but my Tom.

I'd seen someone with a greater need than my own.

He'd given me back myself.

Kevin said, 'A farewell? Edward, you haven't got dressed yet ...'

Undressed!

Naked man, naked personality, caught at last, like me in the light!

'... you haven't got time to be muckin' around with the horses. I'll fix 'em up. You get off to this thing you're going to, this function.'

I wanted to kiss the old bastard! He pointed the torch at Edward's car and said, 'Don't hold her up any longer, Edward, she'll be too late for the present they're sure to be giving her.' Edward started to thank him, so garbled it was a dead giveaway, but the old chap said, 'What are you doing all this talking for? Can't you find your keys?'

As lovemaking it wasn't so marvellous, I was too pent-up, but the aftermath was a glow. We made it to the function—the function!—for an hour, then scuttled out while my old adversary Ponds was talking. I didn't need anyone else to sing her praises! We got straight back to bed. She said she'd go down to Denhams' in the morning and get all her things; she'd move in with me these last few days. I must've been delirious. I said, 'Are you sure? It might be inconvenient ...' Convenience! She

said she'd been using me up, I said what's the use of living if we aren't used up by someone or something. She just nodded, and nodded, and put her head in my neck and nodded a bit more, which made my teeth go clack together. She said, 'That's more sense than you usually go on with,' and I said, 'You're starting to joke like the nightingale,' and that was the only blemish on my happiest hours in years. Why?

Dare I answer? Is it risking another tumble into analysis, introspection, imbalance between looking out and looking in?

I knew he was thinking. I said, 'The nightingale, you see, is an institution. He can't act unless others give him the lead. It's Edward I've got here.'

And she gripped her legs around me, a captive in paradise!

Then I knew that all his madness came from too much confidence realized too early; confidence that hadn't found an equal, and had gone in on itself, turning itself inside out in weird convolutions to match the lesser confidences, assurances and credos of people building on shakier, less assured foundations, people of, perhaps, greater complexity than the Edward in my arms, not to mention vagina.

Love was good this next time!

Ditto, ditto, ditto!

There was of course the matter of his former wife; was he cured? Was he whole and himself again at last? That was too much, that would have to wait till the appointed day for an answer; I was going by impulse now with a vengeance; the Watchett problem would have to wait till the morning, some other morning, no morning at all for all I cared just then.

Such generosity! That she ever doubted herself!

I went to the bathroom to clean up. There was a calendar in the cupboard. I could look, without him knowing. We had seventeen days to go.

In the morning I dropped my bombshell at Denhams'. Well, you'd think I was their only child running off with an Afghan cameldriver.

It'll be the end of Edward! Absolutely. The stone end of him!

Heck! Makes a man gulp, sort of can't swallow.

I never dreamed they'd be so dislocated by it. I found myself thinking, it's none of your business. I might have said it to Myra, but Jim sitting there goggling shut me up.

After the way we've looked after you ...

I just wasn't ready. I thought I still had a few days to prepare myself

...

'How'll he get on when you go? This is only going to make it worse. Have you stopped to think of that?'

'It's been going on so long. It had to come to a head some time. We've skirted round each other. I suppose I've been playing with him ...'

Said to their hostile, uncomprehending stares.

'... even if it blows up in our faces it's better than prolonging the agony. It was getting unbearable for both of us; it was spoiling what had been good in our year.'

Our year she calls it, our year.

Suddenly I realized it was their year too. With the arrogance of my twenties, I imagined people who were settled stayed settled of their own accord, didn't need to make new meaning of their lives every day—as I told myself I did. I had no right to walk out, I was something to them too. But if I went back on it now, the mess would be even worse. Forward was the only way.

Jim was nearly crying. I wanted to kiss him. I couldn't with Myra there. She said, 'Have it your own way. Pack your stuff then. I'm going down the street. I'll be a while ...'

If she'd only told me; if we could only have worked something out ... she could have found a way to make us happy ...

I told Myra not to go. I wanted to make her understand why I thought it was a good thing; she was very curt.

'It isn't any of my business. You're free to come and go as you please.'

I was crying too, but there was no fixing it then. She went shopping, closing the back door the way Jim did. I knew she was seething. He went out the back and chopped wood. I packed two cases before I felt I couldn't go on with it; I'd have to come back for the rest. I heard Jim drop a load in the woodbox. I sat quietly, but he called down the passage.

'Runya round with your stuff if you like.'

I said no, I'd walk. I didn't want Myra blaming him for me.

'Can't let you do that.'

He drove me to Edward's gate and lifted the cases out of the boot.

'Myra goes to these Red Cross dos on Thursday nights, might be a good time to get the rest of your stuff,'

Jim forgave anything; Myra was more realistic.

I was crying again. I said, 'Jim, you're a darling.'

'So long's we all come out of it all right, that's all that matters.'

Thinking of Edward, who stayed discreetly inside? No, thinking of all of us; a natural humanist, Jim; rudimentary, unlettered, unprotected by thoughts and theories; somewhere between raw and mellow, prepared to concede almost anything because there was no danger he'd lose his almighty asset—that people's feelings were something he'd never hurt. Jim couldn't betray. He was always prepared to take the consequences—that, or back down gracefully. He had no ego pushing against the society he knew. I don't know if he even saw it as society—just the people he'd grown up with, and those who'd come later, and were fitting in. Whereas Myra, what did she have to cope with? Society as a set of social activities to compensate for children. A grosser, more vigorous nature than she'd been prepared to act on—that had to be accounted for. A lack of humour, was it, ebullience—creativity, I found myself wanting to say—that prevented her doing things, particularly social things, out of sheer goodwill? Society had to justify and be justified. The moral thing in Myra was a basis, whereas in Jim it was merely one aspect, floating loose in his personality and now and again you bumped against it when neither you nor he expected it. She'd hurt me, but I didn't hold any-

thing against her. If I'd thought of her before instead of after I told her it wouldn't have been so hard, because all you had to do was give her some reason to think what you were doing was 'right' and she'd back you to the hilt. She was loyal as Jim.

Two of my little form one boys came past. One said, 'Moving, miss?' I said, 'Ah, no, just giving some things to Mr le Rosignol.' The other boy laughed and said, 'He's lucky, then,' and they wandered off.

Innocent. I suppose it was innocent?

She wasn't going to live out of a suitcase; she put things in drawers next to mine; she hung her things in my wardrobe. They looked so up to the minute alongside my coats, couple of old suits, beltless gabardine.

So there we were, happy and unhappy, together and not for long. I'd never been married. I said to him, 'What did you and Jenny do when you were alone together for the first time? After you were married, I mean.' He said, 'I think we just eyed each other off, wondering what we were stuck with.' I said, 'Well, we know all that, let's do something we've never done before.'

'Curses! We can't make love.'

'What'll we do? Quick, think of something.'

'Burn a house down?'

I stared at him.

'There've got to be some compensations.'

He hadn't been broken; he was still fightable. Whether he knew it or not, he was preparing for my departure; the pain would be turned into extra animosity towards the Watchetts; my image, presumably, would be left golden and untarnished. It was impossible; it was unreal; I wasn't having it. I said, 'It's no good turning it on anyone else. If you get hurt, you've got to accept it as the price you pay ...'

Sounding very wise, I don't think; why did I have to spoil it; why did he?

'... she hasn't hurt you in donkey's years; it's no good lashing out in her direction. If old Dawson made another will it's up to you to accept

it. You're not going to be a big landowner, if that's what you want. You're going to be just what you are, the rest of your life!

He said, 'It took Jenny and I four days to work up a quarrel.' That nearly squashed me, but not quite. I said, 'We'll sort this out. Let's go out the road to Dawson's again. What's it all mean to you?' I wanted to know what glued him to the area. I don't think I wanted to dislodge him—if he said he'd follow me to Sydney, I'd have been pretty concerned, for him as well as for me—but I felt I had to find it and know. It was a parasitical love I had for him. I couldn't see that it was healthy, but we'd got thus far and had to go on. We stopped at one corner of old Dawson's property and started to walk. On the other side of the road—Bowler's, I think it was, or Bunny's—there was a paddock still to be harvested. Edward wanted to walk in there but I said no, people in films might think it was fun tumbling in the wheat but it looked too bristly and clod-ridden for this girl. So we got through the other fence and started walking towards Dawson's house again. The grass was short; there'd've been thirty or forty head of cattle in there, all eating away busily till we came. He got concerned about the property again; Jenny's sister must've let someone put the stock in; she had no right to do that; it wasn't her place—that sort of thing. It annoyed me; what the hell did he care? It wasn't his place now even if Dawson used to think he was a great guy; I had the second will, come to think of it. It was an ambiguous position I was in; it made me very irritable when I should have been, and wanted very much to be, just plain simple unadornedly happy.

'It's not your property either.'

'But it has been, Margaret, it has been, and legally half of it still is.'

'Legally my foot! What about the later will?'

'It's up to me what becomes of that.'

I could have reminded him of his promise to give it to his ex-wife. I could also have hit him with a cowpat, I was so annoyed. Deep down he thought he was a failure; he had to have some compensation—by hurting Jenny if he could think of some way, by trying to shark this place

that wasn't his ... Hadn't last night done something for him? And what did that make of me?

I had to tell him. I said,

'That will's out of your hands now. I've got it. I'm going to give it to her. Whatever happens. It's no answer to your problems. You'll have to do without that little lolly.' He asked me why I'd taken it. I told him I'd visited her in Sydney ...

So we had a row, in Dawson's paddock, with the cattle around us. At one stage I got furious. I said, 'I'll burn the silly house and they'll blame you; how'd you like that?'

And I slammed back ...

He didn't laugh, or fool, or carry on; mark!

... that she was just a young girl going through a stage, and she could be erratic and she could be dogmatic, and she could be cautious as a lousy old banker, and she could rush me off to Melbourne for no satisfaction ...

'What about last night?'

... and she could 'love' these other young men and then she could dump them for weeks or for good. She didn't know what she was doing! Didn't know what she was doing!! And as far as I could see, didn't care!!!

We calmed down; we reached a wary truce; we walked to the house. He got quite sprightly, started to imitate old Dawson's cadaverous walk and testy expositions of Christian faith; we were almost in a good mood again when we reached the verandah. This went round three sides and it had a concrete floor, except that the concrete stopped six feet from the chimney on the western side.

She wanted to know why; I told her. I did the concrete job for old Dawson, but I stopped there because Tom used to love to sit in the corner by the chimney on warm windy days, and play in the dirt, in the sun, out of the wind. I said, 'I think that might have been my closest-ever contact with the elements ...'

Did he mean nature, or mankind?

‘... and it was vicarious, note. Through my son. Sitting unprotected and not knowing things needed protection, yet protecting himself from wind.’

Isn’t it a paradox? Don’t you see, my darling? I think you don’t.

‘He was a gorgeous child. I wouldn’t go on with the concreting. I made up all sorts of excuses, jobs I had to do. The funny thing was, old Dawson guessed why I wouldn’t finish it, and despised me for it. While Tom’s mother ...’

Jenny Watchett, who pored over and over your speech ...

‘... never ever woke up.’

People bring up their emotions of other times; are they offerings, and bring us closer to them, or do they separate us? I couldn’t tell, our quarrel hadn’t settled yet.

All people have to be loved. It’s like oxygen, though the lack of it doesn’t kill, it deforms.

‘He left it like that, then? Tom must have played there after you split up with Jenny?’

‘He was too mean, when he couldn’t get it done for free.’

Again that bitterness, that crippling enmity for the Dawsons—the Dawsons as a substitute for himself?

It was up to me, half his age. I reached round, put my hand under his shirt. He responded, but he was still confused; he was at breaking-point, didn’t know how he wanted me—there in the dirt, and crying for all he’d lost? Inside the house, angry with me and its former owners? In sheer confusion, as a substitute for thought? No, I wasn’t woman enough to ease him any of those ways; I wanted the best of him, and that, as I knew long ago, meant rebuilding his confidence. I said, ‘Wait on, not yet, let’s walk around a bit.’

There was a shrivelled old snakeskin on a fence; she asked me why it was there. It was a deep question, I felt; it meant why is anything anywhere? Naturally I had to think; there’s no ready answers when you’ve got a question like that and your lips are trembling. I said,

‘To warn people there are snakes about.’

‘They could put up a sign.’

‘If it’s just coming on to summer and you see a freshly killed snake, you know to look out. If it’s an old one like this, you know the danger’s not so great.’

‘But there might be new snakes about.’

‘Silly, isn’t it?’

Was he going metaphysical, or doddery? But the snake was there all right; it must’ve been one of the last vigorous acts of the old man’s life. It was dead. I felt I’d seen enough of death that year—Dawson, Comstock, now this parched ex-menace. Like the horses and their dust-puffs, it was all bringing new elements to me, putting layers on my thinking; were there things Edward knew that I was oblivious to? I stared at him; he showed me a wasp’s nest, made of mud, stuck to a brick wall. The wasps hovered like guards, then flitted in the holes.

‘What does it say to you?’

‘I don’t know ... will they bite us?’

‘Why do sophisticated people disdain nature?’

‘I didn’t know they did. Do you think I’m sophisticated?’

‘You could be. But you’re not, or you wouldn’t be here.’

Then he told me about his day on the plains, the day I flew back to Blythe—that day. I was very moved. I said, ‘It sounds glorious, it really does. But I don’t relate to it. I believe you, every word, but I just don’t relate.’

‘Then you can go with good conscience, beloved.’

Who had the ascendancy now? He’d out-fenced me; he’d taken his pain and love inside his guard. Next minute he’d be mocking me. It’d hurt me and end all his chances. I wanted to sleep with him, but I didn’t fancy chaffbags. I said, ‘What do you think I relate to?’

‘Socially, the Cairnduffs, sexually ... No love, everything relates to you.’

So he’d made me feel central even in the most unlikely place; even in Dawson’s overgrown, deserted yard—but it was a mere compliment, it led nowhere.

It was like waking up again—though it was nice to have him beside me. I said, ‘I think it’s all aftermath now, Edward, isn’t it?’

‘But you’ll still stay with me?’

Oh, urgent that one, Margy.

‘Mmmmmmm.’

And beautifully answered, sweetest! All aftermath? Yes, I could accept that. I could take anything from Margaret; she had me in the palm of her hand. I felt one twinge. I felt she wanted it that way; was this a hangover from this father of hers who always wanted to rule the roost? I didn’t care ... And then I dropped the aftermath theory; she still had more to give me and she wanted to give it, wanted to know herself completely before she left.

I never told Marg there was a calendar in the bathroom cupboard. Every morning I checked it when I shaved; thirteen, twelve, eleven ... It’s usually a mistake to do that; you tense up waiting for the end. But not this time. They were the longest days of my life, I was so absorbed. I lived each minute instead of letting it flitter past me.

They were so wrapped in each other they hardly gave a thought to poor Tom. He came round to our place one day in a real state; he had no one to back him up; he had so much to organize and he wasn’t game to go bothering them. I thought it was a shame; the poor boy had done nothing but think about the Back-to from the moment they suggested it. I said I’d go round and stir them up to help him.

Tom said, ‘My God, Myra, don’t do that!’

So he’d heard about the row? No, I really think he wanted his father left alone. Well, it might have been all right for his son, but it wasn’t good enough for me. I went round and told him a thing or two. I was going to give Miss Ward a piece of my mind but unfortunately she wasn’t there. I said, ‘It’s a wonder you let her out of your sight.’

I patted her on the bottom.

The silly old bird! I don’t suppose you can blame him. I don’t think he put her up to it. I think she made the jump.

I made him promise he'd help Tom like he should; the thing was just about on and there were still thousands of things to be done. He said he would. I said,

'And your little girlfriend, too. Make her earn her keep.'

Aaaaahh, dear, Myra!! I put my head back and roared. Laughed in the belly like I hadn't done in years!

Indecent! He might have kept it covered.

It was like looking at a stranger. You think you know people because you live in the same town for years ... I'd known Edward all my life, and there he was a new man, not dodging, not looking for funny little contradictions to trip you up; he was a real man at last. She was doing him a bit of good, anyway. I told Jim; he said, 'Should've done it in February, silly buggers.'

'And her get pregnant? Bring her down to earth with a bump!'

'Doesn't have to if she doesn't want to.'

It struck me I was taking a risk but I couldn't bring myself to care. If I had a child it'd be in Sydney. I'd still get married; I wouldn't be interested in the sort of man who'd let that stop him. Or that was what I told myself if I ever bothered to think about it—call it carefree, careless, confident, whatever you like. I'd gone in feet first.

I was scared of course, but I knew she felt like that and I was the same. For years I'd been the wary humorist; I wanted to put my head down and accept whatever happened the way other people did.

Funny thing, Edward flagged me down one afternoon on my way home from work. Struck me he'd given himself a holiday. Called me in for a beer. Couldn't see Margy anywhere; course I was curious as hell. Turns out she was off with Tom, painting something for a float. Anyhow, after a couple of beers Edward asks me to go into business with him next year. I said, you givin' up channelling? He said he was getting too old for it. I said, what you got in mind? He said, running tours. Not motels, we wouldn't have enough capital; sort of points of interest in the area. I said, 'What's got into you? And anyhow, how long've you been feeling

too old?’ He had a grin at that one. I said, ‘Too old? You’ll have energy to spare next year, old feller, more’s the pity.’

I was really upset when Jimmy told me that. I said it would be prostituting himself; he’d finish up selling boomerangs! I said, ‘Doesn’t he think we’ve got any future here? Does he think we’re only relics for tourists to look at? Just because he’s been trotting that girl round all the year ...’

Well, so’d we, but you don’t say those things to Myra; she’s inclined to get niggly. I was dyin’ to tell her the way she was goin’ on, Marg wouldn’t even say goodbye to us, but I thought I’d better shut up about that. I mentioned Marg was off helpin’ Tom and all she said was, ‘And so she should!’ Very decided woman, my missus.

Anyhow, I wasn’t going to argue with her; the town was startin’ to look up. They’d set the Back-to between Christmas and New Year, to get as many as they could. Was a good idea. The place was filling up, Morrie Murphy never had a room left, the motel was showing No Vacancy every night.

Gee, they tell lies at a Back-to. Vin Macnamara reckons he cut a hundred and fifty sleepers out of one big log near Tilga. If he cut a hundred and fifty sleepers in his life, I’m a Dutchman. I asked him what he was doing. He said he was running a milk bar in Sandringham. Poor old bastard, no life for a man livin’ out the back of a shop.

I saw the Watchetts in town, wondered if Edward knew. She was a bitch, no doubt about that, but Watchett could handle her; pity Edward ever burned his fingers. He was gonna singe a few feathers this time too, but you couldn’t blame him; he’d have something to look back on.

Made me sad, all those happy people, sometimes. You’d meet someone and you’d start talking. After a while you’re roaring your head off about something or other; the next thing that crosses your mind—I won’t see this bloke after the end of the week. Course Margy was going then too, and I was scared of the letdown, I’ve gotta admit it. Another thing was Myra. This business of Edward’s about the tourists really stung her. She felt we had to put on a good show; it was no good having

a lot of people coming back if they went away saying they were glad they didn't live in that joint any more, that little dump. Everyone was talkin' about the rural slump; how's it affecting you? Got on me nerves after a while. I was doin' all right.

Some of them were so patronizing, you'd think they lived in Toorak. Marjorie Bridges, that's got a babywear shop in Niddrie—where's that? I never heard of it before—was going on about how small everything looked when you came back to it. Your memory plays tricks, she was telling everybody. Hers never worked at all; the things I ordered from her and never got!

I tried to do some sketches before I went, but I had to be pretty careful who saw them. A lot of what I saw I didn't like. Edward told me about the old blacksmith with charcoal all over his floor and his forge going, and horses lined up to be shod —then he showed me where it used to be. Two brothers had the block now. One was an estate agent and the other was an electrician. You know the sort of thing? A bin full of fluorescent tubes in white cardboard boxes—they were a special! Wire racks of records—specially selected by Paul Hamlyn, plus a few the owner's son thought might go. Prices as marked. Cheap and nasty light fittings, and expensive and nasty light fittings hanging from the ceiling. He also sold pictures—you know, white horses galloping through a moonlit forest of prussian blue. He said, 'You're the art teacher, aren't you?' as if he didn't know: 'See anything you fancy?' They're supremely insulting and perfectly friendly. They rush around saying 'We'll have it down in a few days, Christmas holidays, you know what they're like,' or else it's a breezy 'Can do!' The shop part had sloping glass windows, all the rage in the forties. Just down the street was an old store with the windows—vertical, thank God—set back with deep ledges, and a row of spikes so you couldn't sit there and lean on the glass. It brought back the argument we had with Robards/Robert that morning—modern man. All these people who were filling the streets—what did they see when they looked at the place. They'd gone off to the city, most of them; what did

they see? Or didn't they see the city either, the metropolitan part; did they pack in suburbia as if it was their just desserts?

I told her not to fret on it; we only had a few days. I told her most of us hadn't lifted our heads all these years; she'd made me do it right from the start but most of us were doing it for the first time that week.

Fine co-operation you get from some people! For the Fashion Parade of the Years we'd let the afternoon tea to the Parton Race Club Associates. Everyone said they'd do a better job than anyone else. I was against it from the start because they weren't Turrumburrah, they were Parton, but anyway ... All the proceeds from the Back-to were to go to charities. They set up a committee to work out how it'd all be spent. I didn't get on it unfortunately; some of the people who did were only there because they had axes to grind. Some wanted to pay off what was still owing on the swimming pool—it wasn't much, I will say that, the committee had done a good job there with all their dances and things—and they said there should be some sort of little memorial to Mr Delbridge; he was the local member when we got the water; he fought for years to get it for us. I think that was fair enough. And some of them wanted a new wing on the hospital; they didn't have any idea what that sort of thing'd cost. And others said yes, let's have a new wing, but make it for old people. Well, it's not the same thing, an old people's home and a hospital but it took a long time for some of them to see it; they woke up eventually. The race club wanted finance to repair the grandstand; they reckoned that was a project of public benefit—which was the condition for any money to be spent. For the race club's benefit more likely; people soon saw through that one.

I was getting pretty sick and tired of the way people were going on; the real spirit of the thing was getting lost. We were all squabbling instead of working together. Then these Parton people said they'd do the afternoon tea for nothing if we'd let them hold a dance in the hall the night before. They'd have all their equipment set up and they could manage the catering the next day quite easily. I said be damned they will! I said Parton's not going to cut in on this; let them hold a dance in their own

hall and see how many they get! They're just trying to cash in on our Back-to; no, we didn't want that, we'd get some of our people to do the catering. The cheek of them! I'll admit I was pretty strung-up. Jim was all right; the mill had knocked off for three weeks; he was down the street about ten o'clock, in and out of the pubs and the Club; he was having a great time; I was flat out getting the Fashion Parade organized.

I saw our dear Miss Ward there one day beside Jack Collins's; she had her little sketchbook; she'd got up a lane where people wouldn't see what she was up to.

Funny girl. There's times I've thought she's really top class, and times I haven't been so sure. I will say she keeps her room nice and tidy—she kept it tidy, before she up and marched out. And she's good around the house; she's given me a lot of help without me having to ask for it. And she seems to have a way with the kids. I see them all give a wave when they go past, those that aren't old enough to whistle, or they would if they were game. Course Jim thinks the sun shines out of her ear, but there's a lot he doesn't see. I'll admit she dresses like a band-box; she overdoes it sometimes. You make people feel dowdy, they're not going to want to get to know you. It's no good making people conscious that you're rich. If you've got plenty of money, that's your good luck; you don't want to advertise it to people who haven't. I used to ask her about her mother sometimes; she wouldn't say very much. I don't think she had a very high opinion of her; well, that's not very good. I suppose you're allowed to think what you like but I think she brushed her mother off. I think that was her real fault; she'd dismiss people she wasn't interested in. I don't know how many people I introduced her to. She was nice enough when she was with them but she never followed any of them up. People didn't invite her to their places, she wasn't the sort.

She just made me uneasy, that's what it was. She didn't make any friends, apart from Edward. And Tom, not that she was much help when he needed it most. I felt she was ... not exactly judging me, studying me, and all of us, to see how we worked. I felt there was something funny about her she wasn't going to let anyone see. After all, I know Edward.

I think he's a wonder in his way, but what sort of a person are you if Edward's the only person in the town you really get on with? There's got to be something missing, hasn't there?

I often asked myself what it was. I'm always suspicious when people come to you with a big reputation they're supposed to've got somewhere else; if they're as good as they're supposed to be, what are they doing here, that's what I always think. And going round all the time with Edward ... You'd have to class Edward as a failure, however much you like him, you can't help it. They were sort of two of a kind. But what was wrong with her? It was hard to get my bearings on our Miss Ward; she was the odd one out. I mean, when a person's one of a group you can sort of see how they fit in, you know what tag you can put on 'em, you can see who they think they are. Well, she was funny, she was strong and she was weak. She'd never talk about herself to me; I gave her plenty of chances. I always felt she was getting away from her troubles awhile; that's no way to solve anything. Then of course she made a nice mess of Edward ... but that's another matter. No, something'd gone wrong, she'd got lost somewhere, she was trying to be herself and she didn't know what she was supposed to be.

If she'd hurt Jim I'd've killed her, but she knew how to handle him all right, it was just Edward ...

Often I'd think, oh, she's just a girl, she hasn't developed yet, she hasn't matured, but she had such a knowing way about her it could get me rattled. I broke three cups this year, washing up. I haven't broken that much since the first year we were married.

It's as if she had an understanding, and her feelings wouldn't quite match up to it. Like Mary Mendelson; I used to say pity help the man who marries her, he'll have to baby her along for life; soon's she got children she changed, you'd think she was born to be a mother, dressed the kids well too, she was never that fussy before.

And I'd gone and got angry with her when I didn't want to; it might have been her fault but the trouble was, the sort of person she was, I couldn't see how we were going to have time to make it up and

I couldn't let her go away like that after she'd lived with us a year. She promised us she'd invite us to her wedding—well, I wanted to go; oh, I know, we'd be the odd ones out, the real country cousins—well, we wouldn't have to go to the reception, we could just go to the church. I wanted to see what sort of man she'd marry, and what she'd be like when she was ready to settle down, otherwise the year wouldn't be worthwhile; we weren't making anything out of her board.

She left a couple of sketchbooks. I had a look through them, of course. Why not? She never minded showing us things she was doing. Well! She had one there of one of those old white statues like they had in Ben Hur, only it was made to look like Edward, and where there should have been a figleaf there was a bird. A bird! It dawned on me after a bit it was probably supposed to be a nightingale. I went down the library later and checked up, and it was. Well, I had a bit of a giggle about it, but it wasn't very ladylike, was it? That's what I mean about not being sure ... It struck me it was the sort of humour she'd get from Edward; he must have influenced her a lot. Well, what would she think of all of us if all she had was Edward's ideas? And that bird there where it should be covered—it might be all very liberated, but what's the world coming to?

I wanted her to come and make up. I wanted to be friends, but she'd never let me be intimate; perhaps she thought I wasn't worth it. It was okay for Jim to be a timbercutter, something humble, because he was a man, but you judge your own sex differently. I thought she was a snobbish bitch when I first saw her, but she wasn't. She never put a foot wrong; she just wouldn't give me a chance.

You can't write people off when you don't know them properly; why couldn't she've spent some time with me? She never took her eyes off Edward all the year; she gave those other boys short shrift. What was so special about Edward? Didn't she want any friends? I could've guided her. I tried to ...

I took her sketchbooks down to Edward's.

She was out. I nearly cried. He said, 'She's got us where she wants us, Myra'; I said, 'When does the hammer fall, Edward?'

‘Six days to go.’

I used to ask Margaret, ‘Can you paint what you feel better than you can say it?’ I think I wanted her to paint a picture of me so I’d know what she really thought of me, but she didn’t get the hint, or she ignored it. Who was I to tell her what she should paint? It was enough if she accepted me and let me take her round. Or that’s the way I felt the first few months, then the pressure mounted till I thought I might go out of my mind. I think she came to live with me out of sheer compassion. I asked Myra what she thought about that. She said, ‘Edward, there’s just no saying. Jim’n I have our silver wedding next year, and I still get a surprise, some of the things he comes out with. You know what, Edward? I honestly think your brain’s not the best way to understand people. I sometimes think animals understand us better than we do ourselves. They just sniff and go on instinct.’

I thought he’d bark and fool around and lick my hand, but like I say, she’d made a difference. He just sat there quietly and said, ‘I lack that instinct, Myra, I don’t know.’

I saw Jim talking to Shorty Roebourne in the street and that didn’t sweeten my temper.

Shorty’s hall of harlotry he used to call it. ‘I might be a little fellow,’ he used to say, ‘but I’m big in the right places.’ He used to call ‘em woolshed dances; they didn’t last long before the cops closed it down. The way some of them talked you’d think they were real rorts. I thought they were pretty crude. Goin’ on like animals, what’s the good o’ that? Blokes try and break out; they got to come back into line eventually. Anyhow, just as well I went a couple of times; it sickened me off for good.

I spent a lot of time in the street, not always with Edward. I caught snatches of innumerable conversations: ‘Remember those Beaufighters they used to have stationed at Ky?’; ‘I see they’re sealing the back road past your place, Keith’; ‘She’d think twice if she knew as much about him as I do’; ‘He’s got the highest butterfat content in the district; you wouldn’t think it, to look at his cows’; ‘Remember that fellow tried to fly under the telephone wire where it crossed the canal? Took a while to fish

him out'. It was like being in a foreign country, and just starting to get the hang of the language, yet it was all part of the flow of their lives. What got me more was the dirt. One block back from the main street, the footpaths weren't sealed, and even in the main street there was always dust. Trucks would back out of pub yards, or bowl out of the railway station, always stirring dust. It gathered at intersections, it lay in a film on shop windows, not the clinging grime of cities, but a hazy, brown film, almost clean, but dispiriting. Wisps of grass grew round the bottom of the verandah poles, the same grass, the same dust, as surrounded the town. The whole collection—shops, houses, footpaths and roads—sat lightly on the soil. I wanted to know the source of Myra's pride; I couldn't share it. I went back to Edward's, but people called; they seemed to be in and out all day. There was a limit, for me, with these strangers. I spent a lot of time reading in the bedroom. About eight o'clock, when I needed him most, there was another knock at the door, and he went. 'Hello, Peter. Hello, Betty! My God, this isn't young Graham, is it?' I got into bed and turned off the light. I think he heard the click; he got rid of them; it only took an hour, and another twenty minutes between the door and the gate. A nervous Edward came to the door. I told him to hop in with me.

'Do you know ... I'm starting to get scared of leaving.'

'Touchy ground, Marg.'

'I'm wondering what I'll be like when I get away, whether there's been any irreversible change.'

'All changes are irreversible, they wouldn't be changes if they weren't.'

'That's the old-style nightbird, that one. I thought we weren't talking like that any more.'

'You talk about going away, I start to revert.'

It was touch and go, with compounding weaknesses trying to support each other. I said, 'Let's sleep.' We lay back to back, both of us thinking, but trying to breathe deeply, trying to sound asleep.

There were a lot of hot nights that Christmas. Jim and I would have put our bed in the hall, but we had too many visitors for that. We used to carry the mattress out just before we went to bed and we'd put it away again in the morning. It was up around the century most days, a good clear heat, but it didn't cool down much at night, and then it'd get a bit stifling. We'd open the louvres on the back verandah to get some air through, but it wasn't moving outside, so it didn't do much good, except it made you feel you were doing something. It was funny to lie down close to the floor with the fan whirring; it got so you could imagine the machine was your heart, and if it stopped you were done for.

Myra was all tensed up. She'd go on about how girls these days couldn't wear clothes the way they used to, or they had no sense of style, or they were too flighty. I'd tell her to stop worrying and start enjoying herself, she'd got them all organized; if they didn't worry how they looked, that was their funeral. But it was all tied up with Margy; she'd got this silly idea that she wasn't good enough. I don't know why; she wouldn't talk about it. She was always talking about people not getting recognition that was due to them. I could see what was on her mind.

Finally I went down to Edward's and got Margy to promise she'd look in on the Parade of Fashions, whatever they called it. I knew it was on the same day as the big parade and she'd probably be helping with that, but if she'd just make sure she was there and let all Myra's friends see her. I said, 'It'll make things a lot easier for me if you'd do that.' She was a honey. I think she guessed before I had the words out of my mouth.

People saw a difference in me; they'd say, 'The old Edward's settled down, you're not so jumpy as you were,' or 'Still get up to your pranks, do you, Edward? You look a bit quieter,' and some of them made remarks about the nightingale nesting.

I'd tell them the nightingale was dead, but Edward might survive, though his condition was critical, and they'd act relieved: 'Still the same old Edward! Remember that time you ...'

I began to watch that calendar; if I stayed much longer I'd stay for ever, till the film of dust settled without my noticing. The fact is, he was a wonderful lover. Night after night I was satisfied. I woke up in the mornings still purring. Making love with Michael was a forceful, exciting thing; with Edward it was a fluent, golden business, no convulsing, just a warmth taking me over completely. I felt I could radiate. I rather wished there'd be a thunderstorm so I could curl up in the blankets with this man of mine and feel myself pouring out a happiness to match the booming on the roof.

But it stayed hot, very hot. The last night of all we lay there with nothing on, sheet, clothes, anything, and stayed a few inches apart; it was too sticky if you touched. It was very humid. I asked Edward if it was going to rain; he said it was starting to cloud over, it would rain eventually, but it might take a day or two to work up. We had a shower, it was the only place you could touch without being uncomfortable. We lay back in bed. I said, 'Happy now?' He said, 'Completely.'

If he'd asked me the same question I couldn't have said an absolute yes; I was going. But he'd given me all he could and I knew there was no more to ask for; I was content. It was a long night, it was hard to sleep and we didn't want to. I could sleep on the train. I wasn't wishing the morning would come, and I wasn't willing it away. I was content.

She had all her cases and boxes in my room. I'd pushed my bed in the middle to get a bit more air so they were on all four sides of us. In the light from the street I could see her cardigans, sketchbooks, scarves, cosmetics, pants, panties, pencil-sharpener, pie-plates, pipe-cleaners, pillboxes ...

Oh shit!

I said, 'Don't worry. I don't think I am and if I were I'd be proud of it.'

I said, 'You wouldn't say that in six months time, though.'

I said, 'Don't fret about it; there's nothing to get excited about, is there? Lie back. Pretend you're cuddling me.'

'I'll do that tomorrow night, not to mention the night after.'

I just nodded; there was nothing to say about that.

Those cases in the dark, like caverns full of her promise, and all of them open, lids up, all of them open. I propped myself up and told her ‘No regrets.’ It was a statement, not a question, an absolute statement. Like the man in the play, I could have died then, and welcomed it, except there were hours still till morning, and still more hours till the train left; who wanted to peg out? Pas le Rosignol! Pas le vieil Edouard!

I said, ‘Put your hand somewhere, Edward, only a moment.’ He said, ‘Here all right?’ I said, ‘Mmmmmm.’

This was the time when it hurt most not having children; the house was too empty; it should have been full of toys and stockings. Even Edward had Tom, a funny old relationship but at least it was something to keep him going, that’s if the boy didn’t go away too. A couple more years and we’d probably’ve had grandchildren, but mustn’t dwell on that. I kept telling Jim to have the fan repaired, that or get a new one. He said, ‘I can sleep through it all right.’ I knew I was strung up. I didn’t need him to tell me. I couldn’t tell Jim what I wanted; it was too vague. I was just uneasy all over.

I asked young Tom to lay off her a bit; he said, ‘She’s driving herself, Jim, it isn’t me.’

It just didn’t seem to be going. They were having lots of functions, but it wasn’t coming together. There were lots of people around but they didn’t seem to click.

Saw Jim Brodie at the football reunion. He said his brother wanted to give up the priesthood; he was having trouble getting out. I said, ‘Nothing to the trouble he’ll have when he gets out, Jim. Where’ll he work when he does?’ He said his brother could get a job in a boys’ school, or he might be a fireman. I said, ‘They won’t help him get a woman, Jim, I take it that’s the trouble?’ He reckoned his brother had ‘fits of temptation’, well, that’s one name for it. You can’t help feelin’ sorry for ‘em, but they bring it on themselves. They won’t live a natural life, what do they bloody expect?

I had trouble with Mr Allen about the catwalk for the models. He was just going to put planks out on barrels. I said, 'How'm I going to get enough material to drape over those horrible things?' He said, 'Oh, Currans'd let you have some, wouldn't they, if you looked after it?' Well, I wanted proper trestle construction, but it had to be so it could be moved easily; they were using the hall the day before; we couldn't put it up and leave it there. Do you know what that man said? He said why couldn't we have it in someone's house; it'd save a lot of bother. He said the bank manager's residence has got two storeys; why didn't we have them come down the stairs and go up again? Everyone could see them then. I said, 'Have you ever tried to look smart walking up stairs?' That hurt him; he's got a stern like a barrel himself. He walked off looking very put out. Anyhow, Jim's getting Bob Bryant from the mill to do it, and I saw Currans. They said I could have as much as I wanted; they're lending me a carpet so it won't get dirty.

Well, I finished up on Myra's job meself. She got onto Tony Thompson at the mill; could she have some timber ... this is the way she put it ... on the account of the Back-to committee? Charge it to them. Tony said she could have all the timber she liked; she could have the use of the workshop, so long as I was there to supervise. So that was three days out of the pub for me. We made it in sections, one stacked on the other and when you brought them out, they were made with a lug so they locked together, two bolts at each join. And Currans said on the morning of the parade they'd send someone over with the carpet and the drapes.

Then Tom told me not to bother about the School of Arts; we'd be doing it in the pavilion at the showground; we'd be operating from a marquee. I could see he had something special cooked up, he was all excited, but he wasn't saying what it was.

I asked Edward for an orange; he got one out of the fridge. He put it between my breasts, funny man; when I sat up it rolled right down. There was a fireplace in the room; he said to throw the peel in there.

Those cases, lying open in the dark! And tomorrow, such is life, I'd have orange peel for a souvenir.

I clutched her as she sat there, sitting up, put my head in her neck, and squeezed her hard with arms that knew what they were going to miss.

I said, 'Gently, Edward ...'

I said, 'It's the only way,' and that's the way we did it. She dropped the orange.

It was a bit squashy when I got it back. It was a bit funny to have that cold thing bumping on my leg, but Edward wouldn't stop to get rid of it.

So that was another shower.

'You won't be able to pay the water bill, Edward.'

'Don't talk water to me.'

It was a little wry and rueful, but he was all right, he was sound again. I could go.

Water. It shaped my life. It brought me money for a while, when that was what I was after. It brought me Watchett. For water I walked behind the plough, I pulled the delver, I graded check-banks. In off-times I put up tanks and tankstands, I scooped out dams. I turned over miles of New South Wales. I ripped up dirt. Of a night-time, on main roads and back roads, I smelt the lush rankness of flooded lucerne as hot days began to cool. When there was nothing else to do I helped men irrigate. I tramped in my gumboots through shallow paddies of autumn feed, spring feed, summer feed. I opened stops, I checked stops, dug holes in channel banks and closed them. I pulled sticks out of gummed-up water wheels. I altered the flow. I turned it on at the main with the monkey wrench. I turned it off. I drove round with the water bailiffs when they wanted a gossip and I had no work.

Water. It brought us economics instead of rich and poor, as appointed by divine justice, with bankruptcy the moral damnation. It brought us money and our entry to the consumer society. It came with the car, and the modern world, and we were inclined to say it caused everything

that came along with it. It didn't cause communism but it caused the cold-war confidence that our affluence was the answer to any other way of life but our own; we were still the divine elect. We didn't see the contradictions in the thing we'd bought ourselves; it had taken a year of Margaret to knock that out of me. It was dawning on other people in other ways; Tom Bowler's March of Progress was becoming a retreat as far as we were concerned; most of our best and brightest were marching off to cities. We'd never become hillbillies, because you can't get that mean, hemmed-in mentality on the plains, but we were likely to become desolate if we didn't find some new confidence for ourselves. I wondered what I'd be like in Sydney; I thought of following her without saying anything about it, and getting a room and a job, and when I felt I was adjusted and could enter Margaret's world—the one her generation were taking us into—then I'd ring her up and say 'I'm here! I've arrived! I'm full of beans. I want you!' But there's only one time in your life for that; that zest never comes twice.

I looked at Margaret, the loveliest thing on earth; well, she was only a person like the rest of us, and if she had a fault it might be a slight overfulness of the cheeks and a way of frowning if something puzzled her, and going on frowning instead of thinking what to do; and she was maybe a bit blind to the way some people tried to please her, because she didn't recognize the effort they were putting into a conversation, she only saw the nerves ... But there she was, and she'd let me out of my cage, and what's loveliness apart from the effect it has on people? I didn't want a marble statue.

'Tell me about your life, Edward, everything I don't know.'

'Don't you want to sleep?'

'Not yet.'

She was lapping me in fondness; I had only to lie back and forget ... my tide was high tonight; I wanted euphoria and I wanted consciousness of it; I wanted to be drowsy and awake; it was so good I was anxious. She squeezed a drop of orange on my belly and when I propped myself

up, she kissed me; I fell back with a flop; they could have shot me then. I'd have signed the warrant.

'Aren't you going to tell me?'

'It's all in the past. I can let it go. You tell me about you.'

'I'm just arriving. I haven't got a past till this is over.'

So we lived in the present a few more hours, despite all the doings of the last few days. It was the day after New Year; train tomorrow for Margy girl. Sweep out the house for me.

There were times in the Back-to when I felt sour; little flashes of bitterness because there was so much going on and not making any meaning for me; anxiety about Michael and what I'd do this coming year. For instance, I happened to be by the state school when all these old people came out in the yard in shorts, and caps, and pinafores, holding school-bags and slates. And those knees, those knobbly knees and blue-veined legs, oh dear me; was it part of old age to make a fool of yourself? An ancient crone, all bent and white-haired, came out too, helped by two of her 'scholars'; she was wearing gown and mortar board and carrying a stick and a blackboard ruler. I could have wept. They were making a mock of everything! It hurt, it was really painful to look at. All right, we have to grow old, but to put yourself in the very position that made your ageing look ridiculous, and the ridicule be self-inflicted and fall inescapably on yourself—that was too much. They were all quite jolly; it was as if they were in their second childhood and playing school again—but I could hardly bear to look.

And yet I couldn't tear myself away either. They talk about war criminals stripping people of their dignity ... what if they deliberately do it to themselves? Create a brotherhood of the stupid? Edward told me I was being too serious; he said I made the mistake of thinking that this little act was central to their lives and was done to express a meaning; he said it wasn't so, it was just a thing they did, you couldn't draw any conclusion from it except that they had done it, it went no further than that. I said that if that was so, what was central and what did give meaning? He was just dissolving everything into things that existed for

the moment they existed in—nothing else at all, no pattern, no order, no rule of thumb, no nothing. I told him that he was a nihilist of the absolute sort ...

You know what? He said I was highly strung. That was one little brush we had.

The Mayoral Mile was the other. They had a sports meeting. We went.

As behoved all good Bunnyites.

It was terribly hot, but these men were going on with all this business of track suits on, track suits off, and jogging in front of the crowd, and meaningless sprinting—actors and narcissists the lot of them. There was a dark, inhibited-looking man in green, black and white, and a redhead in red, white and blue, who were going on with a lot of it. They were the main runners in this mile event. Well, they were sweating and gasping; one just beat the other with a final stagger at the string, and then fell flat on his face. The beaten man fell into the arms of his friends, who treated him like a fallen god. I'm afraid I just shook my head, it turned me up; Edward said, 'I know, I know, but see it their way and they're heroic.' I flashed at this. I didn't want to see it their way, and I told him the trouble with him was he'd been seeing it their way instead of finding a way of his own, all his life!

Could I go to Sydney, could I make her stay? No, I had to get ready for the platform. I had to help her close up all those boxes, and put them aboard.

McArdle and Tuck, the Scotsman and the Irishman; bloody mighty race; how they did it in the heat I dunno. McArdle tagged him all the way, then he tried to peg him in the straight. Trouble was, the other bloke had one puff left; beat him with a throw at the tape; don't often see it in a mile. Best thing of the week, it was, just about.

Jim gets emotional. He came home and told me he'd lost ten dollars on that race but he didn't mind, it was worth it, he'd had his money's worth out of it, specially the finish. He's the same in the footy season. I suppose he needs it, though if I started throwing ten dollars around like

he does ... No, I can't say that, Jim's generous. The only time he's ever jibbed was when I started talking about a trip to Japan or the islands; quite a few of them were going, or talking about it. Jim said he'd be lost, he wouldn't be in it. Well, he would, and I wasn't set on it, it was just an idea. But there's times when I could scream, the house hems me in, I go out and there's the same old people doing the same old things; it could drive you mad if you let go. A bit of knitting calms me, if I keep at it a couple of days whenever it comes on me. I wish there was some pill you could take ... No, I don't really. I don't hold with too much of those things ...

You know what? I got the feeling a lot of people who come back feel sorry for us; sort of city mouse and country mouse, if you know what I mean. Not all of 'em, but there was enough that did ...

Or else they'd say, you've still got the slow combustion, Myra? I'd say, yes, I've still got the slow combustion; when it comes summer I let it go out and I use the frypan.

They had a cricket match on Boxing Day, Bunnyites v. Visitors; that was the locals' first little victory. They had it down the Tilga ground, so people could picnic by the river; it was good.

Tom'd been working like a Trojan; he'd been going through all the old papers; he'd got all these old advertisements printed off on great big sheets the way they used to be, and people stuck them in their windows. Like, Dinny Farrow had all these fridges in his window, and a sign 'Modern Miracle—The Flame That Freezes', and right in the middle of the fridges he had an old Coolgardie safe; he'd dug it up somewhere. Gee, it took me back.

And Currans had a picture of their very first shop, poky little thing it was, and an old sign; apparently they found it in the loft; you could hardly read it but they hadn't touched it up, it looked better as it was. It said, 'The little store with the big reputation.' Well, they've come a long way since then. Kev Curran's on the board of BHP.

They had a special edition of the Courier; one old bloke said he could remember when there was nothing on the east side of main street

at all, just bullock grazing. Another bloke said his father told him how his father used to work on 'Tarook' before they cut it up for selection; that was back about 1910. He used to camp at the old Turrumburrah Hut and look after that part of the property. Course, I can remember the hut, mudbrick place; don't know why they pulled it down. We used to play there when we were kids; we used to tell each other it was haunted and dare each other to sleep in it. Frank Woollard reckoned he did one night, but none of us believed him. We couldn't think of any way he could prove he had. He said he'd write his name on the wall, but we said he might do that any old time. One night he said he was going to sleep there and a few of us snuck out and we rattled chains on the roof and threw some stones in the window. We reckoned we had him then; you know what he said? 'I was sound asleep. I didn't hearya.' Then he reckoned if we were so brave, why didn't we come in and see if he was there or not? Nearly ended in a fight about it.

... the old hut. It used to be a pub for many years; of course, it had a few rooms added by then. That's where the weddings were in the old days, and the christenings, whenever the clergyman came round. Or the eye man'd come round, or the Chinese herbalist, even the dentist, during the war when we didn't have one. Course by then they'd take a room in the Royal; there was no one using the hut by then. Pity they pulled it down. I suppose it could have been restored, but no one thought of that then.

Jim and I used to play tennis; we had a little group used to play at Teena Martin's. Mr Martin senior had the hearse. If you hit the ball through the hole in the netting at the back it'd go through the hydrangeas and into the shed; he never bothered about shutting the door. We used to get the kids to play at that end so we'd have someone to fetch the balls for us. I can remember when Harry ... ran in there and bumped his head ... he wouldn't stop crying. I held him. I had to pull out of that match ... The shed got burned one night, thank God, and the old horse hearse. They got the car one now, they're still using it believe it or not ... I wish they'd both got burned.

I told Jim I did want a trip away after all, as soon as the week was over!

I told Margaret about my tourist trips idea. I thought she'd hit me.

I told Edward if he wanted identity, he needn't use the mirror provided by outsiders; he said, 'Well then, what have I been doing all this year?' He had me there, it was typical vanity. I didn't want him ever to repeat his experience with me, however much it cost him. I suppose I'd have been happy if the news came through six months later that he'd married some old flame he'd never quite lost interest in; that's the egotism of love, a treacherous emotion, to think that the other one can't help dropping back without you. They go on, they have to; look at me.

That last night was marvellous, but you know how things are mixed. You can't have total involvement with anybody without being aware of their sadness and their problems; only people with some emotional blindness take each other to the heights and stay there. She told me she was afraid she might never love as well again, and yet she had to see me as a preparation, a stage to go through, and since I'd flung the very words in her mouth not long before, I could only nod and open my eyes that little bit wider in hope of picking up some lying signal that the moment was for ever. I loved her. This means I had capacity, an emptiness; she awakened it, she filled it. What she gave was hers; when she took it away, she was no thief. All I gave her was display. I wanted her to see, to know, to understand. At the end I had to face the fact I was not a vital person, just an observer of those who were.

Jenny was my moment of truth, twice in my middle-ageing life. The first time, when I was about to marry her, it hit me like a thunderbolt. The second time, in the Back-to, I went to water, if you'll pardon the expression; I stared in those aggressive, unforgiving eyes, and I knew myself for a weakling. I didn't believe I could shape another person for my ends. I didn't believe anyone had the right to try. Ergo, I would never have fame, fortune, or anything other than transitory relationships. I was one of the meek, and would inherit none of the earth. I got the trembles. I dropped her present. Watchett, you see, was opening a new

branch channel to water the country towards Tilga; they'd timed it to open for the Back-to. Since he was a bigwig now and he'd come all this way, et cetera et cetera, he had to get a presentation; they had a framed photo of the first turning-on of the water, twenty-five years before. There it was all right, two banks of turned-up dirt, a little stop bridge bearing the official party, with one Edward Leon le Rosignol to be discerned squeezing shoulders between the great over one side of the picture; in the background, the water running a banker, and in the foreground, inching its way through the lumps of raw clay, was a trickle of water. Like you get when you don't quite turn the hose off. Study the picture as you might, there were no sturdy natives shouting huzza, no pennons at the masthead, not even a jug of water on a table covered by a flag. There was a microphone though, and a state Premier, a brace of MLAs, various mayors, councillors, pastors, guides, mentors, friends ... and my enemy.

Seeing him again after all these years, I felt strangely fond of his burly frame and sullen eyes; he'd gone far and I'd stayed put, and yet each of us was still what we had been.

This was what weakened me, the second time; I was still the same Edward, notwithstanding my happy nights with Margaret — who was there to see me make a fool of myself this repeat occasion.

He having his good lady with him, she too had to be given a little something, some wee token for making the effort to be present, as they say—as they said a good many times, public speakers also being much as they were when I was more fluid in the joints.

I, being the sort of trickster I was, and being the father of the organizing Thomas, had pushed myself into the presentation role; Mrs Watchett, you see, was to be given a little bracelet - supplied to the committee at cost price by George Marmion. I suspect it wouldn't sell.

Margaret and I, in our nothing like Dave and Mabel capacity, had taken the bracelet in its box and wrapped it in tissue paper, having first concealed beneath the tishoo another layer—the aged Dawson's later will and testament. I tied the bow, Margy snipped the ribbon.

Watchett, as ye shall hear, did his duty, and water flowed into the new channel which had already been in use a month, and had been specially drained so it could be officially opened. He did pronounce upon his doings in weighty tones, and then it fell to the nightingale—back in the saddle for a moment, replacing Edward—to make the gifting. Jenny, also, was her former formidable self, and I got the trembles. I will confess to dropping the box, tissue, will; my thumbs, used to gripping the plough, found the ribbon a little slippery; my palm, which would never encircle anyone's fate, because I was not up to grasping people by the roots of their lives and beings, found it hard to hold the box.

Then alack! It had fallen in the canal where we stood repeating what could pass in a little town for history. Now a tissue-wrapped box of bracelet is light enough. It floated. But alack, it was going round and round the whirlpool above the outlet, and if action was not instantaneous, was like to have got sucked in the pipe and belched out in the muddy pool quickly forming in the newly (re)opened channel. Such would never do. The nightingale must dart! He darted! Alas, his footwork was not as sure as twenty-five years ago; he slipped, and got his trousers wet, and the lower right side of the coat which formality bade him wear despite the heat. His lady Margaret, she whom, sorry, she for whom he would have undergone many trials, was seen to laugh. Which I could have stood, because I could even up with her on a more intimate occasion later; but the vinegar in the wound was a former wife of mine, whose mouth plainly formed the words, 'You bloody mucker! You're as bad as ever!' Indeed, some claimed to have heard her say them, though I believe they lip-read, truly I do. It never raining but it pouring, a young man from the Courier went click with his camera at that very moment. They were kind enough to suppress it, but my son Thomas informed me, after raising the matter with suitable discretion, that the staff spent happy minutes studying the disaster, and the words were there on Jenny's lips, right enough.

What to say, what to do? Her contorted face was truly terrifying to one who had suffered beneath her passions. I took as my mentors those

at the back who cried forward, and one Pontius Pilate, who publicly wiped his hands. And did not a famous actress once say that if you want attention you must stay silent when you are silent, and when you are talking, KEEP TALKING! If she didn't say it, she should have. I talked.

I said,

'Wet pants at my age! You'll hardly take me seriously. Some of you were here twenty-five years ago on a bigger and more confident occasion when we turned on the water the first time. I had a bit to say then. I can't repeat it now.'

I shook myself.

'If we were in some modern film I'd probably take these off. Some of you were here that day, including Mr and Mrs Watchett.'

I sense he's got to do it,

'Mrs Watchett's prospered since then, her children are at public schools in Sydney, Mr Watchett's right up near the top of the Irrigation Commission. Some of us'd like to know the secrets of their success. You know the old saying, "Behind every good man there's a good woman"? But is it behind or before? Do our women lead us, or shove? In Mr Watchett's case, it's got to be behind, I was before him.'

Edward, Edward, you're sailing close to the wind!

I could see she wanted to give me a shove!

'What we've opened today is only a minor extension of the Tuckarimbah scheme. It comes at a time when earnings and confidence are falling in rural areas. I think the men down Tilga way would be the first to admit they're lucky to get this extension.'

They'd be insulted if I'd called it rural relief work, and I didn't want to upset too many people at once.

'Maybe Mr Watchett gave this scheme a push along out of sentimental reasons, if sentiment enters his decisions.'

Watchett got angry with me; he said, 'Are you making a presentation or just getting personal?'

And Jenny, the former nightingale, was on the verge of crowning me. I could see the flush rising.

‘I want to say that, regardless of personalities and former differences, I believe Mr and Mrs Watchett are right.’

To do what, Edward? Pin yourself at last!

‘They’ve moved their lives elsewhere, now they’re giving us a sop, a token if you like ...’

People were getting sick of me, disturbed, puzzled, annoyed. I said, ‘I can see I’ll have to take these pants off!’

I said,

‘Now we’re going to give them one. This mightn’t look a very valuable gift for Mrs Watchett, but I’ll tell you, it’s worth a good sixty thousand dollars ...’

People puzzled, gulped, looked round for George Marmion — who, strangely enough, was there; I suppose he thought it’d be a free ad if he let people know the gift came from his place. Poor old George blushed and went pale; I think he thought he’d let some rarity slip through his fingers and he hadn’t realized what it was. I could see him thinking, how’ll I get it back? Tell her it’s a mistake, she’s got the one Elizabeth Taylor ordered? Eh? George, poor Geordie, whose life revolved round money, was positively reeling; I said,

‘... though not because of George Marmion, Don’t worry, George, you’re not out of pocket!’ I said,

‘I see I’m confusing you! Perhaps if Mrs Watchett would like to examine this gift now she could reassure you that I haven’t taken leave of my senses.’

I knew she’d do what she was told in public; she was scared enough of public occasions to take any guidance.

‘Forgive my clumsiness in dropping the gift in the water. Look, there’s another wrapper underneath this one. I’ll just take the liberty of tearing off the wet tissue for you ... Mrs Watchett, on behalf of the Back-to-Turrumburrah Committee and the Tilga Irrigators, please accept this small token ...’

She woke up the moment she saw it. She knew it straight away. About sixty per cent of the hostility and tension dropped out of her expression, which left a slightly more than averagely dangerous human female in a state of extreme confusion. Ever one to seize the advantage, I pressed on.

I thought my heart would stop. There was always something slightly manic about Edward, now he was off and away. I'd been with him a year, lived with him a fortnight; now he was out of my reach and understanding. I could only watch and listen.

'When Mr Watchett was here, as a younger man, organizing the works which changed our lives, he rode on the wave of postwar confidence. We out here had the best of all worlds then. Like people in every nation we thought we could rebuild the world rather nearer the way we wanted it. And, as country people, we had the idea—which we were soon to lose—that we were the 'real' Australians and that our experiences would shape and guide the rest. Well, ladies and gentlemen, we may as well face it, we're the last troops left at the front, and everyone else has retreated. We have to ask ourselves all over again who we are and what our future is, and whatever ideas we come up with, we can be sure of this; no one else will be listening or caring.'

I could see some of them thought this was pretty off-putting. I pretended to be a little more genial. I said,

'Open it up, Mrs Watchett. I see I'm being too gloomy; we want to see you inspect your present. I'll give your husband his in a moment.'

With her long, hard fingernails she picked away the durex; she didn't want to tear it. She unfolded it. I wondered how many noticed that the smile was for the wrapper, not the trinket; I even had to whisper to make her open the box. It was a greedy look she gave me, but pleased; for the first time I'd properly satisfied Miss Jenny Dawson. She even nodded at me, a sort of approval; she might despise me, and think my foolishness put me beneath contempt, but even dogs had days when they pleased their masters.

Jenny shook my hand.

Always knew what to do on occasions, my Jen; if it was simple enough, and didn't call for charm, grace or generosity.

In that moment I felt I lost and gained him. I felt he lost and gained himself. All that week there'd been this struggle in him between nostalgia, pride, and other back-to emotions, and the fact that somewhere among those same experiences was the thing that had crippled him. I was the way out, and I was going; I was the ointment but not the cure—or was I?

He was at his best on the day of the parade; I think he'd cleared the block by then. Tom did a marvellous job of organizing it. We should have helped him more but he kept himself away. Like most of his type his talent was imitative rather than creative, but how wrong Edward was to say he had no talent; he read his own failings into Tom. It was crippling the boy; it had been, anyway. But that last week he came into his own. It was not that he pushed anybody. He just cared more than anyone else; his life wasn't complicated by family; he only had one channel for his energy. The organization! The planning! On the day of the big parade he had all the floats and carts and exhibits go through the town by different routes, up and down and round about. Well, there weren't so terribly many streets to go through, so by the time the thing was due to start just about everybody had had half a dozen exhibits go past their house; they rolled up by the hundreds. Tom'd had a hand in the programmes on 2BL and 2KY, and Channel 4 had shown all these films of the forties—strange how Tom had such a sense of these things. I wondered how much Edward had given him after all.

I sat up on the cart with Edward o'Boon, with the horses snorting and sweating; it was something new in my life.

She had on this long white Moroccan thing of cotton, and a wide floppy hat with a veil—her face was shaded, all you got was a suggestion. I liked it that way. If looking at people made them your property, she was no one's girl but mine, that final day but one.

He said in his Jack o'Nightingale voice, 'Flies won't trouble you, anyway,' but his eyes were almost running with affection. I squeezed

his hand. I couldn't speak just then. We drove round the streets, strictly obeying Tom's diagram. Edward said, 'Good old Tom.' He meant it was funny to be following the orders of your son; I said, 'We'll make his day, love, won't we?' not thinking how Tom wanted to step out of town on the strength of this success. Had I wounded him? No, I thought not, he wasn't possessive, or if he was, he'd suppress it, just as he'd suppressed the natural man for years. I said, 'Am I the last in a long line of girl friends, Edward?'

He said, 'I hope you're not the last, and it's not much of a line; more breaks than line, and more blots than anything else.' His smile, and his unspoken description of me, were fine. I squeezed closer to him; he turned round to kiss me but,

'That bloody hat!'

Children laughed at us and gave us cheek. Edward had an enormous whip, which he cracked way above their heads. They squealed, and ran round the other side of the cart to yell at us some more. He roared at them, 'I'll put you in a meat pie if you give any more cheek.' It wasn't funny, it was the sort of silly disoriented thing you say when you don't care what comes out.

But his pride was there. We passed a man and Edward called out 'Coming along?' The man said, 'No, I've got to go to Narrandera this arvo. It'll be on Channel 4, won't it?' My man was furious. I was used to the idea of things coming through the media, but Edward had a different sense of reality and occasion. Hadn't I seen him manipulate Watchett, his ex-wife, and a fair-sized crowd of hardbitten-looking people for his own emotional ends?

They were all older by a quarter-century, that's where I had them. And I had the picture there to prove it. The Premier was dead, the MLAs dethroned and walking on sticks. The mayors and councillors were, many of them, still mayors and councillors, but there weren't many who'd turned up for this minor extension. And it was the sides of the picture that did the damage. The smiling throngs pressing forward to get in on the act contained boys now in gaol, girls dead of cancer, the

usual bag of conservative young people become conservative old ones, and the decent who'd stayed decent. Bob Beazley was in the bloom of the manhood he's exulted in, and the younger Tom Bowler was there with the guilty and furtive thing about his Mrs Corcoran affair lurking behind his smile.

Edward was there with the glory of the innocent unspoiled; or was there a hint of doubt? Had the photo been taken before or after he became aware of Jenny and Watchett?

I held it up. I said,

'Many of you are in this picture we're giving Mr Watchett. I'm sure he'll let you all have a look at it in a second. You'll get some surprises—people you've lost sight of, people you'd forgotten, someone you used to be fond of. The trouble with a picture is, it proves there's no stability except in endless change, and it's change that kills us. The familiar world we learned to handle gets different every day and we're left groping the only way we know into a world that doesn't fit. The instincts we trusted start to fail us. We find ourselves doing, not something new, but more of the old, and not quite so well, because there's never any time like the first time. Life's got three layers; growing up, maturity, decline, and we've all moved on one since John Brownbill took this photo ...'

That was cruel or not cruel, however you liked to take it, because John Brownbill had taken over the Courier from the Hassett family, and had bought up half a dozen other country papers. He'd incorporated them, and put them out with slightly different editions for each town; he called it 'rationalization'; call it what you like, it made him money; he was the most prosperous fellow there. Personally, I thought his steadily cultivated coarseness was all over him.

It pleased Mr Brownbill, he really did light up.

'And I'm going to make a suggestion. I'm going to ask John if his photographer will take another one now, as I make this presentation. Will you, John? Could you do that?'

The man had genius, the way he affected this normal tone. Mr Brownbill was flattered; he gave a nod to 'his' man; he moved up near

the table himself. Edward grew genial, waved people closer with the false, beaming confidence of a British Prime Minister, and even pointed to the youth with the camera where he should stand for the shot. It would include the outlet spilling water in the channel like the ebbing of confidence, like the running out of time, like the expenditure of useless love. I gasped; how could he con them, cheat them, trick them? How could they be duped this way? But he was in an element created by himself which somehow included them; he was off again;

‘And if it’s a downhill run, it’s got its compensations. Since the last such occasion there’s been much good fortune come to this district. It was through you, Mr Watchett, we achieved this prosperity, and to you we must express ...’

It was utter bullshit!

He...

I glowed away about all the good things we’d done and how, on balance, they outweighed the misfortunes; none of us could expect to live for ever, but while we were here we should make the most of what we had. Make the most of what we had! This was the theme of my irrigation speech—so little water, so great an area, so much demand, such a crying need. And then came Watchett! He of course was not taken in, but he had to go along with it, and I didn’t mind sounding genuine while young Eric Young lined us up with his Leica.

And why not? I insist, why not? If other people use money, armies, laws, police et al. to shape the world, may I, Edward, not use a little linguistic duplicity to cast over it for a five-minute span the shadow of a mood which was my obsession?

I could see the old dog’s cunning. He had me next to Jenny, and then Mr Brownbill pushed in and took my other arm. And he was managing to keep Watchett well to the fore and himself half hidden while he talked; I stepped out and grabbed his arm. I linked my arm in his. I gently pulled him out of the way of Watchett. I looked at the camera lad and nodded. I could feel Mr Brownbill breathing down my neck. I think he was planning another takeover, but I didn’t have time to let him upset

me. I nodded to the lad again, quickly! Can't you work the thing, you wretch? Edward's prattle dried up; he just handed the frame to Watchett, who was wide awake to what was happening, and was slyly amused. He pointed an open hand to Edward, in the way of someone used to public platforms; it was HIS occasion.

Young Eric clicked. I was caught. Trapped by the person I loved best. It was good for me; it was like nasty medicine. I'd had my escape prepared and she'd locked me in. There I was, I couldn't wriggle off the film. I felt like diving in. I felt like chucking Margaret in. I felt like drowning her. I felt like making love with her, I felt like swapping Watchett and having years of pain with Jenny. I felt like clay. Wet, slimy clay, too sloppy to do anything but roll in.

I said, 'You treasonous, treacherous, betraying bitch. I ought to suffocate you!'

She put her head in the pillow to stifle her laughing. She knew she'd fixed me. She said, 'What did you do the first time that was so silly?' I said, 'Got so emotional they all laughed at me. And then I dropped the monkey wrench; they gave it to me to hold. It balanced on the edge and then it went plop in the water. It splashed the Premier's pants. Jenny whispered to Watchett and he said while they were getting another one would be a very appropriate time for the speech by the workers' representative. They didn't even let me finish; someone came back with another one and they hustled me off; just moved the microphone and gave me the nod to shove off.'

'And they printed it?'

'They printed it. It was the joke of the year.'

Well, I laughed. I thought it was funny, too. He didn't seem to mind. 'And Jenny?'

'Furious. Didn't speak to me all the next week. I got to the church wondering if she'd turn up. I'll swear Dawson made her; she'd have stayed away without a qualm.'

'Better if she had.'

'There'd be no Tom.'

So he loved his boy that well; how overriding, then, the sense of failure, to crush out the positive effects of a father's love for a son.

'Are you proud of him after today?'

'Absolutely.'

If he wasn't, he ought to've been shot ...

Did a mighty job, never knew he had it in 'im.

You'd hardly credit, a young boy like that, getting so many people organized.

He made Ron Jeffers sit up. Old Ron's blatherin' away on the public address; he switched it off on him. Said people had eyes, they could see without being told. Someone should've done it years ago.

When all those exhibits and floats came together, that was the highlight. They came in all the different places, and wheeled around here and there; there were so many things everywhere you didn't know where to look. Then gradually they all came into lines and entered the arena.

The old Edward sittin' up like Jack o'Boon; it was him to the life.

I suppose that was a bit of favouritism, letting his father lead, but it did look good, that great big load of bales.

Have you ever had people clap you? Not out of politeness, but real feeling? They were all crowding round the gate to the arena and when we passed through there was this burst of clapping. I've never been so moved in my life. It was a sort of dusty, creaking triumph. I say dusty because the council water cart had been going round spraying everywhere but it all dried out in a couple of seconds. I felt like an explorer coming home ...

He shouldn't have called me Dad in public. 'Go on, Dad.' It nearly broke me up. I was going to hand the reins to Margaret, but I managed to go on. Anyhow, if I had I'd've done something silly like waving, when it just wasn't wanted. No, I was the embodiment. I had to lead the way. I was never so proud in my life ...

I felt fond, possessive, yet separate; he had his moment. I could add nothing to it, I could only take away—and of course I couldn't do that. I had merely to be his lady, so he wouldn't be dehumanized and alone.

Such a line-up. They all followed us around the arena, then the procession split and half went the opposite way. We went clockwise and anti-clockwise for two more turns, then we went out by different gates ...

I thank you, I thank you, I thank you.

... to a different sort of applause; appreciative and concluding, not the same tense, hopeful feeling as before when they were clamouring for an expression of themselves ...

Which we gave; I thank you, I thank you. My boy, my son!

I thought Edward would be delirious or something, he was positively floating. I knew there'd be a reaction. I had to be ready, that was what I was there for. When the procession pulled into a big hollow square near the show pavilion, I swear he was trembling ...

I felt as if the ages were present in the dust we'd kicked up, which was plenty. As if the present moment was the last in a long molecular chain of moments lived and felt; as if the experience of the dead was in the rumble of the low-gear convoy, the creaking of the horse carts; as if time had circled our arena and settled in a flurry of coughing, clapping, icy-poles, beaming farmers, sideshow operators, professional spruikers, prigs like Ponds, and common people who would not otherwise have been elevated.

I was content. Well done, my son! I leaped off the cart and ran to a big canvas wading pool, about two feet deep. In I jumped. Over I rolled. Under I put my head. Off came my falsy whiskers. Zuzza! Zibzab! I sang out to Marg but she didn't want a swim. I explained she needn't undress. It was bloody nearly a hundred in the shade, it wouldn't take a moment to dry out.

Mad! Mad! Mad as a houseful of hatters! Absolutely mad! I don't know why I didn't jump in with him, well I do, there were hundreds of people about. If we'd been out in the country somewhere I'd have done it for sure. Stark, raving ...

I thought of undressing myself. I decided we needn't go that far in self-advertisement. Still, it would have been a fitting climax to our little ... little be bugged!! My Tom arranged it! ... display of Homo

Eastem-Australis. Another opportunity lost to science, I reflected. Marg wouldn't let me hug her, there being some reason I couldn't discern. Kept saying something about a dog that's been in a river. I couldn't see any dog that'd been in a river ...

We slept a while. I thought, after all the excitement of the day, that I'd sleep deeply when I did go off. But I was still uptight, I was only drowsing. I had this feeling that Edward was crying, or was I dreaming it? I sat up to look at him. I couldn't see. I felt his eyes; he was.

Silly! Silly! Just plain bloody silly. I said, 'I'm all right, Marg, I'm not unhappy ...'

Not yet.

'... I'm just complete. It's like a breakdown, but a happy one. I've got to start again. I've been reborn. You've filled me out. I'm not what I was because you've shown me what I am.'

So I turned him over to face me. He didn't know what I wanted; he waited for me to say something, but I didn't. After a while he woke up. He said, 'You've got your life ahead of you.' I poked him in the ribs.

'Come off it.'

He looked as if he'd had a stroke. Then the tears started running. He reached out to embrace me but I pulled back, lifted his hand away. He'd have gone on crying but I drew a hanky across his eyes, and not very smoothly. A frightening gap opened up between us.

Had it all been my delusion? But she was waiting.

'Was I right?' I meant mucking up his act at the water-opening ceremony. I meant making him give his ex-wife the will and the property. I meant leaving him the following afternoon.

'You were right, right every time.'

'Why was I right?'

'I haven't got the measure of you.'

'Why not?' I was forcing him cruelly now.

'I've got fatal gaps. I lack the ignorance to cover them.'

So he knew that much; did he really know what they were? I'd been going back over the day; it was one of the reasons I hadn't slept. Because

we'd been very close, and he'd been riding high all day, he assumed I was taking the same reactions as him; this wasn't always so. There was a man called Bob Beazley got up on the cart for a minute. He praised Edward to the skies, and put his arm round me. To listen to him you'd think he was courting Edward, but he was trying to dislodge him. The man was dripping with confidence. If you gave in to him it'd be to a reputation. He seemed to be banking on an aura which frankly I couldn't see. And I had a most peculiar interview with Mr Bunny. I was going to the marquee Myra's models were using as a dressing room when I saw him making for me. I tried to ignore him but he caught me. He was in a muddle. They'd just got word that young Michael had won the painting contest. I was thrilled, I thought it was absolutely marvellous. I was jumping for joy. At last the silly old coot would have to recognize his boy's ability. But no! He was looking for Tom Dawson to plead with him to keep it out of the Courier. Well, what a mixture of motives was there! You could see he didn't want to be proved wrong by his boy. Yet he was intensely proud of the win, so long as he could keep it hidden. He said he didn't want any publicity directed on his boy—the excuse was it'd swell his head. He didn't want outsiders focussing on his family, their abilities might be whatever they were, but their lives were to be regarded as absolutely private. Absolutely private.

I thought of Comstock, the opposite end of that scale, with his arrogant way of claiming that we were all the same under the skin. It hadn't got him anywhere and, by and large, though Bunny was an outsider and an eccentric, the bulk of these people were nearer in type to Bunny than to the dead squatter. But why the inhibition? Was it the sensuous way art worked, the fact that it wouldn't fit inside moral fences? That might be true of Bunny, but what about the rest of them? Perhaps they weren't used to having their lives reflected. I could only stare at him for a while, then:

'Buy your wife some clothes, you stupid man!'

I thought he might hit me, but I'd touched the sore spot.

‘They’re not the clothes we’ll need to be buying, the way things are going.’

Oh! So the girl was pregnant, or was it just that he was afraid she would be? It struck me it’d be best if she were, best for young Michael anyhow; if he was man enough to cope with the situation, it would eventually give him the strength to overthrow his father’s rule. I started to look about, hoping I might see him. If I had, I’d have told him to get Sue Adams and hop on the train ... For a mad moment I was filled with the wish to bundle them, and Tom, any others that couldn’t make it in this straitjacket situation, into Cecily’s terrace and give them a chance for their bodies’ freedom and the freedom of their minds. Then I was annoyed with myself; hadn’t I learned anything since January, twelve months back? But then again, the stupid Protestant prudery of the place, and the Catholics not much better, and the atheists all genial and thinking they were gay boys because they swore, played footy and gambled. Oh dear! He must have seen my exasperation, which wasn’t directed at him, only triggered off, and the poor man fled. I sang out, ‘Please congratulate them, anyhow,’ but all he did was hunch his head into his neck and jam his hat on harder. Why? Then I realized I’d said ‘them’. A Freudian slip. I was rather pleased. I started to laugh and I was really happy by the time I got to Myra’s marquee. Though what about Sue Adams?

I could feel the girls bristle as soon as she came in.

Oh, so I wasn’t very popular!

There were a few of them had a bit too much temperament. I didn’t need her coming in just then. That Sue McConchie, who would be the most impertinent little you know what I’ve ever come across, said, ‘Here’s Miss Ward. Why don’t you get her to wear it?’

Wear what?

They were just the wrong age, that was the problem. They were all born about that time or a bit after. I’d done what I was told to do. I was told to put the emphasis on the period around the end of the war, leading up to when we got the water. Well, we had a WRANS uniform, and

a WAAF's, and a Red Cross one in khaki, which I thought looked very smart; Miss McLaine from Nevertire had it put away; we had to air it for weeks to get rid of the naphthalene smell. And we had a suit, the sort of thing we wore just after the war, remember? The New Look. Skirt to the knees, high wide lapels, shoulders padded, and you had to have a big handbag, and your hair Ginger Rogers style, or Betty Grable.

The New Look. As a matter of fact, I dug that one out; everyone my age used to wear them. You wouldn't say it was such a marvellous style now but we'd had years of austerity and for the first time you could get a bit of material; we all got busy cutting and sewing even if we couldn't afford to buy one. They were thought very smart, I can tell you.

The New Look. Well, that's what we wore ... Sue McConchie said it was dowdy, she wouldn't wear it. I said she was supposed to be in the show to model, it was a parade through the years, she'd have to wear it. She said she wouldn't, some of the others agreed. Some of them didn't feel that way at all but the trouble was it wouldn't fit them. I had Sue McConchie in mind because she was about the same figure as I was. Used to be.

I looked in just to see how they were getting on, see if there was anything Myra forgot. I tellya, I looked out again pretty smart, they were just about ready to fly at each other.

I told her straight, if she wasn't prepared to wear what she was told she was going to ruin the show; she could tell Tom Dawson herself she wouldn't wear it. I wasn't going to do it for her. I said her own father was on the Back-to committee, and some of the council, and Mr Darbyshire her boss and a lot of others. I said they'd be pleased when they heard she wouldn't do what she said she'd do.

Myra was nearly in tears.

Then in comes our Miss Ward. Didn't have the guts to ask me what I was going on about; she just tried to be inconspicuous.

I told young Tom if he wanted to stop a catfight, he'd better get in there and do something.

It took me a while to find out what was wrong; most of them weren't talking to me, except to make sour remarks about Myra. She was watching me like a hawk, though pretending to be fiddling with a necklace the twenties girl was going to wear; it was broken; she was trying to rethread it; she was dropping more than she was getting on.

Well???

I was trying to say to her that I'd wear the suit if the other girl wouldn't; it wouldn't be too bad a fit, except about the shoulders. I was smaller there than Myra. But she wouldn't let me get near her. Finally she said, 'And what might you be wanting, anyway?' So I had to say it in front of everybody, and that didn't endear me to many of them; most of them were friends of the Sue girl, or they knew her and they didn't know me. Sue flared up and walked out with a good deal to say, not all of it under her breath. So Margy was in the show.

I didn't make her. I didn't care if she was in it or not. I'd have worn it myself if I couldn't get anybody else. I'd have been older than the others, yes, it wouldn't have worried me ...

I got someone to tell Edward where I was; I looked around and saw these gleaming eyes in the doorway, and his clothes still wet, though drying off. He was tickled pink; he said he'd seen the other girl talking nineteen to the dozen to her mother; he guessed there was something up.

There was Margy, circa 1946!!! I told her Jenny's taste hadn't changed much anyway.

But he was wrong. I'd seen her in the same outfit she wore at the water-opening ceremony, a deep blue and emerald silk thing, with a white blouse and the top hanging beautifully down her back; gosh, it was straight; she really did look smart. I watched her with her husband moving around the parade when it was all drawn up together. I wanted to talk to her, but Edward was hanging onto my hand and she wasn't having any. She saw me and looked away.

At the break-up of the water-opening ceremony she brushed past me with her precious parcel in her hand; she said, 'Now you're really starting to get somewhere.' Her self-interest was plain, and the element

of gloating at having her way, but was there another observation behind her words? I wanted to know; she was coarse, yes, unpleasant, yes, but basic too, and by no means to be ignored.

I stopped crying. I told her, 'I want you to forget me. I don't want you to write. Treat it as an interlude. When you get back up there, just put it down to experience.'

He might have been genuine, he might not, but I was still waiting.

'Keep going.'

I wanted him to say something that might build on the peculiar feelings I had when I was filling in for Sue McConchie in Myra's parade of fashions.

Thank God she came when she did. I'd have been stuck, absolutely stuck.

Saved Myra's bacon.

Of course I was far too tense. I thought we were putting on the show on our own. I didn't realize he was going to mix all these other things with it.

Christ, the things they did; it was a fabulous show young Tom put on. They had these pictures all round the inside of the pavilion—just about everybody that was ever on radio or in the comics ... He had Batman and Sherlock Holmes, and Donald Duck and Dad and Dave, and all the mob from Martins' Corner and these old posters for the Lux Radio Theatre, and he had all these young fellows—by Christ they were cards, some of 'em—to do acts in between the girls with the different costumes. Like, he had one bloke, young Terry Roberts from the post office it was, as the master of ceremonies, and he'd yell out which year it was, and then you'd get the clothes and an act. The big one was 1946, of course, because that was the main one where Margy did her stuff for Myra. I didn't know her at first; she had this wig on ...

Hair high, framing the face, and sleek tresses brought round to the shoulder; neck exposed, ears showing, necklace and ear rings; Myra drew thin, wide, faintly arching eyebrows on me ...

Just like a Paramount star, she was. I felt I'd made her; she was a wonderful model. I wish I'd asked her long ago ...

But of course the thing that made it was the build-up. Young Terry calls 1946 and one young fellow steps forward and croons into the mike, 'Beauty with distinction! Never before such harmony of body with interior luxury ...'

That made me squirm, waiting to go on ...

Then he yells out, 'With every feature you hoped your postwar car could have, the 1946 Vee Eight!' And in come two blokes with ropes and they're pulling an old Ford ...

The sort Jim used to have before he switched to Chevys.

Well, it was all you could get those days; Robinsons had the only big garage in town. And there's a bloke sitting up on the bonnet with a great big sign '185 miles to Griffiths Brothers Tea', and they've got a mad-looking character dressed up as Superman, and he's supposed to be steering this thing and he's got another bloke dressed up as a woman beside him ... I used to read it; I can't remember Superman's girlfriend ... anyway, there's another bloke leaning right out the back window, which hasn't got any glass, and he's waving another one of these signs, 'Dr Morse's Indian Root Pills.' Well, it brought the house down, I tell you, I could hardly stop myself. And then the sort of assistant compere bloke over in the other corner yells out. 'Or if you can't afford it ...' and in comes another. They'd got hold of this old Prefect; remember them? Biggest Tin Lizzie Ford ever brought out, but by gee they'd last you if you looked after them. Nothin' to go wrong with them, that was their main advantage. Gerry Ryan had one went round the clock twice before he gave it to his kids. Fix 'em with fencing wire. Well, they didn't pull this one; the bloke in it was making it go on the starter. He'd press the button and it'd give a leap, and then it'd stop, and he'd give it another burst and it'd lurch another yard or two. Well, I don't know how long it took to get through the shed, but I tell you the whole place was roaring; they were just starting to calm down a bit when in came this bloke dressed up in sort of yellow plastic balls all round him; it took me a while to work it

out. Then I saw he had a bottle, he was the Brooke's Lemos man. Next thing I thought they'd give us the white crow. Well, the Brooke's Lemos man tried to pour whatever he had in his bottle in the petrol tank, and the bloke in the cabin'd make the car hop on the starter and the bloke was spilling the petrol everywhere, if that's what it was, so he ran round the front and tried to put it down the radiator, and the car's hopping and he'd have got it flattened if he hadn't been pretty nippy ...

Quite a point to enter on ...

Then out came Margy in Myra's old suit, not that you'd know it was Margy in ... she must have had a wig ... It froze me up, it really ripped me open. I don't care who knows what I think about Margy, and that was the suit Myra was wearing the night Slugger Lewis laid me out. First and only round it was, barely took'im a minute. Well, this was another knock-out, it really got me. You've got to be tough, you know, it's no good being soft too often, you don't know what you'll do. I ran outside; a funny thing, I saw this green Mini come burning up, I thought it was another act, but he looked so determined I could see something was up ...

I knew that sound. I was still wearing Myra's old suit. I started to go outside ...

This rude boy came up and grabbed her, just pushed his way in ...

I heard her voice in anger. I was out like a shot!

By Jeez I nearly flattened this fella, the way he was going on with a woman. But I'll say this for Margy, she gave him as good as she got. I looked around; it was sort of almost funny; there's Myra in the doorway of the marquee, and young Tom came from the far end of the pavilion, and Edward's there with his eyes blazing, and me ...

I only wanted him out. I told him to get away!

Music to my ageing ears! There was so much noise inside you couldn't hear much of what they were saying, but if ever an arm pointed Go! hers did. Go! she was telling him, and he wasn't having any of it. I knew it was the boy called Michael, and he looked tired and irritated; he'd just driven down from Sydney or wherever he stopped the night before. There he was, my second enemy of the week, my rival, and he

was being shown the road. She pointed to the gate like Jehovah in the Garden: Out! Out! And he was furious, he was waving his arms at the silly old garb she was wearing and she was trying to explain, but not caring much if he understood or not. He gave a nasty laugh and she whipped off the wig; it was a glorious moment ...

I grabbed a dressing gown. I raced it out to cover her ...

She threw off the suitcoat, she pulled the skirt down ...

Jeezus, never expected that!

Out in the open! Margaret Ward! I put the gown around her.

This fella said something nasty and hopped in his Mini. Off he went; you could hear him half a mile away. Well, if all the cops weren't down at the show, he'd have gone for everythin' in the book. Must've been doin' seventy down Bailey Street, must have!

Not naked then, not naked till much later, but marvellous in her temper! I was gloating then, thinking she'd paid me the final compliment. I didn't know she could be as hard on me. 'Keep going,' she said. 'Keep going.'

'I've done my dash, Marg, in every sense of the words.'

'Done your dash?'

'Mmm.' Well, I had, there was no two ways about it.

I felt he meant it; he was solidly present as he spoke, not a wisp any more. In that moment we pulled apart. I didn't want him as a lover any more, but I loved him as a man, much as when he switched the glasses in Melbourne, but then I was sorry for him, and now I felt he was the equal of anyone.

'Why'd you drop Jenny's present? Were you scared of her?'

'Yes.'

'Are you scared now?'

'No.'

Why the difference? I hadn't spoken to her since, I ...

Why the difference, in him as in myself? I sent Michael packing in the most furious rage I'd felt in the whole twelve months; for any reason

I could tell them, when I got back to Cecily's place in Sydney, if I ever bothered?

The thing I did after that was odd enough, too; I gave Myra back her suit, I picked it up before she could think I took it off ... oh, let that go; I said to Tom—I saw the others watching—'Put me in one of those acts, Tom. Can you put me in one somehow?' I'm not sure if he understood what I was up to or not, but he led me round to the other marquee where they were lining up all their bits of nonsense and he said, 'Get it off, Jack,' to a boy got up in a vast black robe and witch's hat, and I took off Myra's gown and got into this gear. Tom helped me onto the bike while the boy held it for me, and then he gave me a push and said, 'You're on!' The moment I entered the pavilion someone sang out Miss Turrumburrah, 1948! and one of Myra's girls came out in a knickerbocker cycling outfit while the compere team sang a commercial:

In olden times when witches flew
They sat astride a broom and knew
They'd get to where they wished to go;
But now a broom is far too slow.
Modern witches wanting speed
Find Malvern Stars are what they need.
Like all who are par-tic-ular ...
You'd be better on a Malvern Star!

'The World's super cycle,' they sang out, 'Made famous by Oppy! Available from Vercoe's Super Cycle Store, Main Street, Turrumburrah!' The compere boy waved me to a stop, I got off, he handed down Miss 1948, she pedalled out, he gave me a broomstick and I went back the way I came ...

To the arms of Edward. I was there. I alone knew what she'd done, public self-humiliation being very much in my line. Not that she'd made a fool of herself the way I did; she showed a style of comedy I didn't know she had. You try riding a ladies' bike in a witch's outfit without getting caught up in the sprocket! Marg clutched her folds of cloth, nodded, waved and smiled; it was her swansong, her exit, her finale—as far

as the township was concerned. The train trip and the platform scene were still to follow.

Why the difference, in him as in myself? Of self-definition there is no end; it's all-absorbing, it's healthy to a certain point, then it's morbid, and frustrating to those one's got involved with. I owed those people something. Their taxes paid me a wage I didn't need; they'd put up with me while I ignored them—almost—all. My only creation for the year, as far as they were concerned, was Michael Bunny. I felt that something of his confidence came from me; the talent was all his own, and he didn't need me any more now he had his success, though whether they'd ever get to hear about that depended on the old man's pleading with Tom. I hoped Tom ignored him; why not give it the splash it deserved, all over the front page? WHIMSICAL YOUTH SAYS ART HAS A PLACE. MAKES FOOLS OF US ALL TO PROVE IT. Those paintings, just laughing at all the things that should bind him, the things that were crippling his older brother and making him Father Bunny's slave. I thought the boy was marvellous; give him Sue Adams and he might do wonders, if she was strong enough to back him.

I wouldn't be doing any wonders for Turrumburrah, I'd done my dash. I'd paid my dues with my witch act. I owed Michael Stebbins nothing. I acted on an overwhelming impulse to finish what I'd started. I wasn't having him come breaking in. I'd paid my dues to the town, yes, to Myra, I suppose, by helping her; to Jim, perhaps—only if the job I did for his wife was enough; and Edward? No, not till that final night.

We went straight home from the pavilion. I had to remind Marg to get her gear and give Myra back the gown. We put the car in the garage and we locked the doors because we didn't want anyone coming in. We just stayed inside till morning; left the lights off; we snatched a salad in the dark when it got about nine o'clock and we were hungry. We played the radio for a while, softly; it didn't seem to be an intrusion. At one stage they had a chap playing the piano. Marg looked at me and turned it off. I didn't ask her why.

The number of people who knocked on his door! We heard footsteps every half-hour till midnight, or later, I'll swear it, people on the verandah singing out 'Anyone home?' 'Ya there, Edward?' 'You nesting, Edward?' We just lay still, as you might as well do when everything's accomplished, or as much as can be.

Why the difference, in him as in myself? For one thing, Watchett trumped him, I felt, when it came his turn to reply. Being a man without a belief in causes, Edward could easily point to the hollowness in many of them, their limits and their contradictions. When Watchett spoke, he said, 'Thank you, Edward, for this photo. I assure you it'll find a place on our walls as soon as we get home. I must say I was surprised to find that the organizing committee had remembered your talents as a speech-maker and called on you to make this presentation ...'

Nasty, but he deserved it.

My failing talents ...

'... but I think it was a good choice, as it turned out. I think the failure of confidence as shown up by your speech, especially in the light of your memorable utterances of twenty-odd years ago, is not confined to yourself alone, but is in fact a widespread phenomenon. At the head office of our organization we employ a lot of young engineers and I can see signs of the sickness of the times in them.'

'What exactly is this sickness? I find it hard to define, but one thing I can say, they won't take a pride in any organization. They've got no loyalty to the commission, most of them, it's just a job. They've lost confidence in government and authority. Well, when you see some of the things our politicians get up to, you don't wonder, but all the same you've got to have faith in something outside yourself. The individual contains the seeds of too many dangerous and destructive things to be relied on; we have to have stable and well-founded institutions if we're to have any sort of society ...'

I could feel Jenny watching me; if Edward could make the speech she'd just heard, I'd done him no more good than she had, even if I

hadn't done him any harm. Just what was it about him? What did he want, and hadn't I given it to him?

'We moved eight million cubic yards of dirt to bring the water to this point, and we moved a lot more last year to take this new extension to you men at Tilga. If the main canal were cut for twenty-four hours, when it was in full flow, it'd cover five thousand acres to a depth of one foot. You remember what this land was like beforehand; many of you have lived here all your lives; isn't this an achievement?

'They talk about pollution and the environment. When we brought the water, we created salinity problems; we didn't completely understand the need for proper drainage. We overcame that problem. We can overcome any problem if we only put our minds to it! Not personal problems; often you can't do anything about those. The more preoccupied you become with personal problems, the worse they get. But once you get involved in some worthwhile enterprise ...'

Modern man rebuked! Or modern man well advised? Was he just a conservative, or what institutions could we believe in now? I didn't believe in many. Was he looking forward, or back? I felt Watchett had a lot of sense. I wanted to talk to him. I wished he'd been there the morning Robards/Robert and Co. were arguing ... I asked Edward what he thought of Watchett's speech and all he'd say was, 'The honours were even, I felt.' I didn't care about the honours, it was truth and reality I was searching for, even though I wasn't sure that the things I was gaining out here would apply when I got back to Sydney.

'Why aren't you scared of her any more?'

'I've had what I wanted.'

That one stopped me.

'A couple of months ago I thought you wanted me to marry you.'

'Yes.'

'Well ...?'

'Most people fit into a pattern of living. They might go on about love and a perfect partner, but their marriage fits into the pattern quite

neatly. But what they want, the moments they live for, may only take up a few seconds, or at most a few minutes, in a whole long life.'

'You really believe that?'

'I know it.'

'You know it? Heck! I mean ... Aren't you just saying that everyone's built the same way as you?'

'Aren't they?'

It was a silly thing to say, it was my last defence, the last barrier I had before my final exposure. Even to put it up was to invite its fall.

'What did you want, Edward?'

'Something clean and golden. Something that would shine, without any of the nasty, spoiling elements in it.'

It was a superlative compliment, but the person who gives compliments is the person still at a distance. I had a lot of cases to pack; it was getting on for morning.

'There isn't anything else I can give you?'

'You could walk down the passage in the morning. I love to see your bottom.'

'Anything for an old boyfriend. Do you think you'll ever marry again?'

'Don't know, don't much care.'

So now we were back to me, but I knew it was no use expecting anything more from Edward; he'd done all he could. I said, 'Maybe we'd better get some sleep.'

In the morning ...

Which came.

... we didn't talk much; we did a bit of packing; I got some breakfast. Edward looked out the window and said, 'Another scorcher.' It was so matter of fact, the way he said it, that it was easy to believe there was nothing special happening except another day of trying to keep cool and wishing the iceblocks would hurry up and freeze. I brought him his orange juice and toast; he watched me come in and go out; I knew that made him happy.

Well, well, small pleasures, and few of them, don't deny me ...

When I dressed I said I'd put on the same as yesterday. I said it was probably the coolest outfit I had ...

But she meant to remind me of the great day, and not to change her person till she was out of sight; new clothes would have been so abrupt.

I had most of my stuff in order, but some of the boxes needed cord, and we didn't have any, so we'd have to wait till the shop opened ... We just sat about quietly. He asked me to show him all my drawings; it seemed a good way to fill in time ...

I'd shown her my world, and now I found she'd seen it differently. I thought I knew all her drawings; there were lots I hadn't seen. There was a group of women playing cards; one of them was Myra. Two of them had hats on and they had whisky glasses next to their piles of chips. They looked heavy and depressed. Out the window you could see a man working on the engine of a truck. The bonnet up looked like a mouth that was swallowing him. And he was much darker than the figures you were supposed to look at.

I got my masses wrong in that one. I lightened off the women too much. But the practical background dominating what passed for an inner life was something I was getting at.

She had an Aboriginal woman wheeling a pram over the Tuckarimbah bridge, down the end of town. The woman had a jaunty look about her, as if she was of the same metal as the springs of the pram. I don't know how she did that, it must have been with the same sort of curves for drawing both. There was a nice little study of kids' bikes at school, all heaped together in a tangle, and a marvellous one of two figures riding away on a horse. They were only tiny, they weren't anyone in particular, but gosh it surprised me; the one on the back was hanging on so tightly it looked like one body. That one unnerved me, and yet I could see it was the most deeply felt. There was a satirical one of our worthy councillor Bartlett, all bottom and paunch, leaning on his shark-mouthed Dodge;

she'd got him, all right, but it didn't sting the way I think she meant it to.

I was going to do more when I got back to Sydney; it'd help me get the whole thing out of my system.

She had delightful sketches of birds, mostly galahs, swooping low over paddocks, or swallows on telephone wires. And she'd done lots of willows on the canal, but seen from far off; and the wobbly old telephone posts out past Boon, where they'd never got round to replacing the first twisty poles of local black box. And she'd done a few of weary old fences ... anything where loops and squiggles and broken little attempts at pattern tried to counter the flat horizon I loved, especially out near Blythe. She'd done one of a water wheel, such an interloper, and dozens of people—I don't know where she got the chance to study half of them; they were people she could only have seen once or twice.

These were the ones I worried about; I wondered if he'd like them.

They set me back a bit; they amounted to her summary of my world, if you took away her loyalty to me. What a mixture they were! They looked forthright, yet they seemed half-haunted. They were all weather-marked or weather-reddened. They had nothing substantial round them, though when she gave them a prop, it really meant something. She could make a shovel look like the staff of life; there was an old boat on the Murray that sat half in the water, half out. Goodness me! It looked dumpy, it looked dumped. It looked leathery like the river, it looked cheeky too, as if the next rise in the river would take it off; the mooring rope was trailing on the bank in one of those in-twinning curves Marg could do so well. Off it was going to go—but where? You could see around the next bend and it was just the same as where the artist was standing.

She'd done a glorious watercolour of Jingellic; this one wrung me. The garden was in brilliant blossom, under an ominous sky—the sky we saw the day I got her at the airstrip; the sky we saw from two sadly different positions. All you could see of the homestead was the roof, part of the tankstand, and two horses. But not a single living soul.

I worried about that one, perhaps it was unfair.

I told her it was marvellous; she'd have to have an exhibition. I wasn't any judge of art but her things seemed wonderful to me, and ... I was going to say she'd have to invite me, but then I realized ...

This was when I cracked.

... this was my—what do they call it?—private viewing.

I wished someone would come, but why should we be spared? It was all our doing.

Oh that this hour might be ... doubled in length; even to part was to feel the contact before it broke. I had nothing to look forward to.

It was Tom who came. He had sheaves of Courier photos of the parade and the show in the pavilion. He showed little of his former apprehension at breaking in on them; he was very much the successful producer. He'd had an offer to join 2BL Blythe as programmes manager; he couldn't see that it'd give him much opportunity of actually staging productions, and that was what he was mad keen on just then, but he felt he might take it. It would ...

Breaking free, finding their wings ...

... be a step into radio and after that television would be easy ...

I said, 'Tom, you've got a year, and then you'll be too old to break in.' I meant, head for Sydney now.

Tom said, 'Yes, Marg, I know. I know you're right. I think I should look at this one for a while, though, it'd be experience ...'

My son lying to spare my feelings; he'd got her message all right. Well, I thank you. I thank you. I suppose I thank you.

With Tom, it was easier to go up the street for the cord. And he drew much of the sting from looking back on yesterday, being so proud of all he'd done.

I honestly think he'd forgotten Michael Stebbins.

I said, 'That's my portrait, anyway. Can I have that one, Tom?'

This was the witch girl on her Malvern Star, her eyes still burning ...

... at fifty different things. What time's the train leave, the strain's unbearable.

Then came Jim and Myra, with a present wrapped in purple. They said, 'You're not to open it now; you can open it on the train, if you like.'

So departure was in the air, put healthily in the open; poor Edward was likely to be morbid. I was glad they'd come to see us.

The photos were the talking point.

Country people, I'd discovered, had this capacity for chatting over heartbreaks, making tea before funerals ... It was the way of life that was to be continued, not the individual. Knowing this made me want the separation, yet I admired the stoicism, even as I left.

The photos were important to Myra. She'd been busy in the marquee, she'd only caught glimpses of the goings-on in the pavilion, and heard the tantalizing roars of approval and amusement. The whole thing had to be gone over in detail. When she came to the one of Margaret on the bike, she wanted to know, 'Whatever prompted you, Marg? What got into you?'

Good question; I never provoked her to anything like that.

'I just had to let go. Suddenly I couldn't hold myself in any longer.'

Tom said, 'You were screamingly funny. I wish I'd had you in all the acts.'

'I couldn't have kept it up.'

The words had an awful finality about them. Myra suggested a cup of tea, and put the kettle on; they all moved into the kitchen, Tom gathering the photos on the far side of the table so nothing could spill on them.

His references, probably the first conscious souvenirs of his adult life; well, well, well ...

Then Jim had to go through them again, the photos glossy, his hands stained with timber sap. He started to chuckle, and hold them up, treating them as unimpeachable documents ...

The camera couldn't lie; there was no such thing as art, or illusion; he saw his own thoughts reflected. I looked at Jim with admiration and disbelief; he was no fool, but when he looked at those things it was as

if propaganda, PR, and con men had never been thought of. Talk about the believer and his faith. He said, 'Who's this dressed up as Kingsford Smith? Young Gary Hudson, is it?' The absoluteness of it left me gasping. Gary Hudson was solid, in Jim's world, as a rock, as firmly placed as the famous airman. If there were gaps and contradictions in this world, Jim didn't see them, except to fill them with compassion. The law was still the law, as Jim saw it, not an element in the class struggle, as most of them said at the terrace. The whole world was holy writ, because it was cemented together in Jim. Such humanity ...

I had another thought. The moment I was gone I'd be Margy/Margaret Ward, art teacher and boarder, 1971, and a perennial favourite in Jim's heart. I wished, I deeply wished, that my firmly built twin he carried inside his mind could live my life for me, battle with the complexities ...

Jim was aware of complexities. It was as if events and actions issued in a plastic state from the tube of time, and dried out firm and hard the moment they'd happened.

Gary Hudson. Was dressed in flying gear, padding, fur and all. Despite the heat, and he had his arm round Myra. On her other side was an older man—for a moment I thought it was Edward, but he hadn't been part of the acts, I wondered why—done out as the town's blacksmith of thirty years ago. He was filthy with charcoal, and had a black leather apron. He was making a triumphant gesture with a hammer in his left hand, and his right held Myra. She was getting her ovation. The two comperes flanked the group, leading the clapping. She looked stunned, a person who had merged her personal needs in the doing of duty, and who used public activity as a means to solitude and privacy. To be discovered, as it were, to be surprised and dragged before the judgment of the same public, must have been terrifying somewhere deep inside her. Her expression was naked; she had no face to interpose as self-protection. One hiss, one boo, could have cracked her. But of course they applauded wildly, as they did for everyone else in the show, and Myra was going to cry as soon as she got back in the marquee.

Myra said, 'You know what, Marg? Sue McConchie heard they'd asked Tom to put it on again; she came round and said she was sorry, and if I'd let her, she wanted to be in it!'

Vindication; trembling, absolute, and sweet.

I couldn't match the feeling. I said, 'Oh, that's marvellous, Myra, and so she ought to. Why, where will you put it on next time, Tom?'

And on the conversation rolled. When the tea cups were washed and dried—Myra ignoring the drying rack—and put away, the visitors said they must go because Marg had packing to do, no doubt ... but what about a counterlunch at the Royal, somewhere about one o'clock?

We closed the cases, one by one, sealed up the boxes and tied them.

We took 'em down to the station and gave them to Rob Leatham, a friend of Jim's. He assured us he'd put them personally in the van himself.

I kept one to go with me inside the carriage.

It occurred to me that it would contain the clothes she would wear tomorrow and the night things she hadn't worn last night. These things were packed and folded in the locked-up box I put in the back of the car. I was wishing I'd brought the truck. I could have put the case in the back and covered it with a tarpaulin; it would have been the last little irony of the nightingale we said was gone.

I wondered how much I loved him. One of the things Michael flung at me in our brief tornado was that if you get involved with someone that's psychologically peculiar, you'll never be capable of normal relationships again. That was what made me fling off the clothes, I wanted to be rid of the whole bloody business, particularly him. But 'normal relationship,' 'psychologically peculiar'; did these terms mean anything? They did to Jim, and I admired the strength they gave him, yet when Michael came along with the same ideas, I got angry. He was trying to use them on me; no wonder I was angry, but my anger went further than that. He'd come down from the world I was returning to, and spouting

these ideas I didn't want; as far as I was concerned, they belonged to the past, and by that I meant my past and history's,

I was glad I'd come to Turrumburra. I felt I'd touched a touchstone, and it had been good to do it, even though I was letting go and would never touch it again. While Edward was at the bar getting drinks, Myra said to me, 'When you've got kids, Margy, you can let 'em come and stay with me and Jim.' And because she was shy about the request she turned straight to her husband and said, 'How do you feel about being Uncle Jim?'

Uncle Jim clapped his hands together and rubbed his palms as if spoiling for a fight. 'I'll hand'em. I got that Callaghan tribe bluffed; I can handle Margy's. No, Marg, we'd love to, you know that. Just drop's a note, any time.'

They'd be watching the postie before the train was back from Sydney. I'd have to be very careful to write, and send them something, too; a drawing might be best, but something a little more personal, too. I'd have to think about it.

Send the kids to stay with Myra; well, I could explain the whole thing to my husband, that part would be all right. But I felt I could never come back to Turrumburra, I couldn't do that to Edward.

We stayed in the pub; we didn't drink much. I couldn't have borne it if I'd left in the same state as when I flew in to Blythe that time. People came over and chatted, and went away again. Tom was the star of the occasion, but they were kind to me and asked me if I'd enjoyed my stay. One old dear was drunk; she insisted with tears in her eyes that she'd see me at the next Back-to, if she lasted that long.

Aggy Walker. I should have spared Margaret that one, but I was powerless.

I gave a start when I heard the train whistle, but Jim said, 'That's going down to Tilga now. It'll be back in about an hour, bit more. Has to connect up with the train from Melbourne.'

An hour? How on earth could I ever stand it? But it was easier than I thought. Ponds came in with a group that had been playing tennis, and

he came over and was almost human; said he'd written a glowing report on me. I was sure of a position next year if I wanted one; did I want to go on with teaching?

No, I didn't, but I didn't have anything else in mind, and we had an easy superficial conversation, till I saw Edward getting restless, so I looked at him ...

I wasn't going to crack. I felt I could see the distance, but already I began to feel the slow disintegration of the post-Marg years in front of me, and—self-centred as ever—it was wrecking my morale. Yes, I could get through the next few minutes, but could I send her into her future with the push and the smile she deserved? I had deep reason to doubt it. But my legs stood up and my hand was pulling car keys out of pocket. Jim saved us. He raised an eyebrow at Myra and she said, 'We'll all go in your car, Edward; we'll fit, won't we?'

So five got in the Falcon, my son sitting where their son would have sat, and Margaret in the front with me. She put her handbag on the elbow rest between us, then picked it up and pushed the elbow rest back into the seat. From the back seat it must have looked like fussing, but the tiny moves spoke volumes from her to me.

There were half a dozen cars under the pepper trees at the station. The silo was enormous, the train not yet in sight. The signal light glared despite the glare of sun. The trees down south of the town were dull. Jim started fussing over Rob Leatham, who managed to convince him nothing had been broken or stolen.

I bought my ticket. Myra stood next to me in that ordeal. She said I should check it; they'd made a mistake with hers once and she had a nasty scene with the conductor. I couldn't focus on the print. I gave it to her. She started fumbling for her reading glasses. I kept staring at the grey-painted iron grate in the grey-painted wall; it was as much as my mind could manage to wonder if they ever lit it in winter. I got to the stage where the silence was so awful I was going to ask her if they ever lit it. I looked at her and saw she was staring at the fireplace too, and

tears were running onto her cheek. She gripped my hand and squeezed it hard, as if she could never let me go.

I don't think ... I don't know what would have happened, but I heard Jim say, 'Hello, young feller,' and 'Hello' in the way he had when he was talking to a girl and didn't know her name. I looked out; he wasn't lifting his hat; she must have been very young ...

It was Michael Bunny and Sue Adams.

Everything was sunlight. Light poured back from the much-washed floorboards, and the dry grass beyond the railway tracks poured light onto the platform. Wherever you looked you squinted. Michael was, for the first time in my experience with him, clumsy. He started to make a speech of gratitude. She could see he was getting it wrong but didn't know how to intervene; after all, she greeted me as Miss Ward. The whistle saved him.

We went out and stood, seven of us, looking south at the train bridge over the Tuckarimbah canal. In a dark moment it crested the bump, then, loose-backed, came rolling toward the silo.

The silo dwarfed it; it tooted its whistle; it rushed into the platform and the stationmaster went to the cabin to hand the driver the staff ...

Just another day for them.

Rob Leatham did his work. Myra moved up and down looking for a good place for me. 'There's one,' she said, 'facing the engine, and on the shady side. Take her case in, Jim. No, Edward, you take it in, you must be good for something ...'

Flustered.

'... no, Jim, you take it in.'

Tom was dispassionate; departure was an attractive idea for him.

A couple of cars rolled up late, and intending passengers and their friends hurried to get their cases on to the platform and buy their tickets.

Our group didn't know whether to go or stay ...

I was in agony now, the pain was unfreezing ...

Jim said, 'Well, we won't stand around ... Bye, bye, Marg, it was wonderful having you,' and he offered his leathery hand and of course I took it, but I kissed him on the cheek as well. I had to take off my hat and I still gave him a bump and we all laughed.

Myra's kiss was sloppy and she started to cry again. I kissed Tom. The comic element was provided by Michael trying to farewell me with a screen lover kiss which I managed to deflect onto a cheek while I gave Sue Adams what would be called in the magazines a knowing glance. I decided she wasn't pregnant; she didn't have the troubled look about her. I might have been wrong but I felt sure she wasn't. So maybe the horseback romance wouldn't last either; I felt like telling her to hang on to him while it was worth it, but I just couldn't play the Dorothy Dix role in a situation where I was much in need of help myself.

The stationmaster yelled, 'All aboard!'

They all moved discreetly away, wandered down the slope to the little steps at the break in the hedge, and got themselves ready to wave.

What should I do? Jump in with the coffin? Fall in front of the train? Or bow before the inevitable with good grace? Where was Watchett now with all his confidence? Show me the social institution ... No, I wasn't a good loser. I wasn't what they call in my town 'a sport', I felt I had to ask her—having seen the Michael boy get his marching orders—'Who beat me in the end, Margaret?'

I was prepared for anything but that. I was ready for madcap things like last-minute proposals for marriage, him wanting to come to Sydney, for both of us to go overseas ... I never thought that out of his love and kindness would come the dart that would pin me.

Who beat him in the end? Not Michael, nor Clive, whom I'd almost forgotten by now. Who beat him in the end? Me, only me, there was no other answer for it, I was the reason, I, me, Margaret.

The quintet looked away.

There was nothing now but tears, tears for the pair of us, and had we stopped to think, for the struggles of mankind. I cried till his lapel

was wet; thank God I had my hat and veil for when I was sitting in the train.

‘All aboard!’

And a porter said to the newsagent, still fussing around in the van with parcels: ‘Those that’s going!’

The quintet said, ‘Bye, bye, Marg! Write to us, Marg! We’ll see you again some day!’

That was Myra.

Edward’s lips moved.

Was it bye, bye, bird of passage, or just a helpless palpitation? I was in no state to know. I was cutting off something beautiful at perhaps its highest point; what the hell would I know of what anyone might be saying?

‘All aboard!’ and the hooting of the diesel’s siren.

He said, ‘Don’t write to me, unless you find out the answer!’ I nodded. I’d have nodded to anything. If he said he was really the fairy prince and was going to turn me into a pumpkin, I’d have nodded. If he’d said he was Lord Nelson, I’d have nodded. I was suspending every action of the mind but the thing that made me cry.

Bye, bye, Nightingbird. I think I said it, I moved my lips.

There were swallows on the telephone wire going ‘Swip, swip, swip.’ I said to my vanishing darling, ‘They’re talkative, aren’t they?’ The stationmaster had been very patient, but he gave a little whirrrp! with his whistle ...

Which was funny ...

... and, then, heavy-handed: ‘The best of friends must part,’ nodding knowingly to the group.

Silly old ...

Then the train was moving, and Marg was a blur inside a veil that was blurred pretty badly anyway, and there was a moment when the rest of them were walking to the pepper trees and not watching my face. I didn’t want to drive the car but Jim took the keys out of my pocket and put them in the ignition for me. Away out on the Parton road the diesel

was hooting again, and hooting at the second crossing just a little way past the first, and the cars were rolling away in a blur of dust ...

Did I want to go to the Royal, or back to Myra and Jim's, for a cuppa? The most inane word, the most inane substitute for real expression ... No, I'd drop them off—yes, even my son—and go home to my lamp and my Buddha and my bed in the middle of the room, where we tried to get the draught. Tomorrow I'd sweep the house, and the day after I'd get the tractor. It was the only thing I knew.

She had done a sketch of herself, she'd left it on the bed. I thought that was putting the screws on a bit hard, but I supposed it made no difference, it would still have broken me up if she'd nailed it on the fence. I turned on the lamp and put it near the window to cop the sunlight. It was a glorious thing, all the rich colours—red, blue, emerald, purple, with some bright streaks of saffron near the edge and some moderating flecks of pink. I looked at my Buddha, well, he could still manage a laugh. But the lamp. I turned it on, I turned it off, it made no difference, it glowed and winkled, it had lustre and richness, all the things she'd brought me for a while, and had taken with her.

As she was free to do. There was no development left in me—for her at least. I believed that one person didn't own another, they only made the best offering of themselves they could, and that was all. We'd done this.

When Marg came down she was worried about herself. Well, she had her answer now. She'd have absorbed a bit of me, but for the rest, whatever it was she was taking with her now in the train was the real person she'd been struggling to define. The old Buddha must have had some healing magic after all; I wished her well, and dragged a chair where I could watch the sunlight pouring through the lamp.

Who beat him in the end?

Who beat me? It didn't matter, I could accept.

The first twenty miles were only a blur. I thought I'd be carrying away my last, last ever, memories of the place, but I saw next to nothing, just an endless flat. I kept my face covered. I prayed for the first hill. I

began to think of it as a sign that I was being delivered, and to hope that my hurt would start to lull. I saw one; it turned out to be an overpass; we went under it. Then there were sheep, and, eventually, low hillocks dark with the native pine which ... had taught me to recognize.

... had taught me; so much, and so generously. I wept at my treason. Was this the last rejection in my life, or had I made for myself an anger-prone, self-centred pattern? I touched the Denhams' purple-covered parcel. So! They were 'the Denhams' already, were they? I decided not to open it just yet.

As the trip wore on, the sun got lower, but no less hot. The fiercest, most blinding light poured through our carriage; it made me think of the boat the Ancient Mariner saw, just a ribcage through which he saw the setting sun, was it? Or the moon? It didn't matter, we were all lit up, and the light to the right no less brilliant than the light inside. Light everywhere, drying my swollen eyes, and purging the very existence of the travellers in the train. We were a skeletal, metallic crew, rattling along with our newspapers swishing, swaying as we stood up to go and get a drink. When we came to roads, the siren hooted; there were never any cars. I felt myself draining away. I tried to 'occupy' my mind. What would I buy Myra and Jim? What would be the first thing I'd do tomorrow? Would I get a job ...?

None of it worked. I wrote Edward endless letters, trying to tell him why it had to be the way it was, and praising him to the skies to give his morale a lift. I knew I'd never put any of them on paper; I'd left him the drawing, not a very good one, but enough to trigger off his memories—as I was vain enough to want. Then there was the self-searching session. Why was I horrible to people? Why did I cut things off? I'd spent a year in the bush; what was I going to do now, go back to the younger set of mother's circle? Patch it up with M. Stebbins, and get back in the swim at the terrace?

No, no, and no again. Also no to the trip overseas until I was doing it from a healthy position, not as a retreat or escape. No to that and various other funkholes.

The sun touched the horizon and began to cut slices off himself. Then the madness went out of the light. We came near a town, and trees masked the sun's descent. I thought of the moon rising at Jingellic and the illusion it created of a terrible fire. This time it was almost mellow. Blue deepened in the east, the few skerricks of cloud went all the shades of pastel.

There was one stretch of flat, and then we saw some hills. Hills! I could have cried for joy. I'd never forget Edward unless I got some big barrier between us; he was adorable and knew how to love better than anyone, and yet he wouldn't involve himself, wouldn't try to twine himself in with another person, except in that peculiar, saintly, glowing way that left you wondering, when it was all over and finished. The strangest man—a normal one would have to be something out of the box to drive him back on the shelf for me. But what was normal? To hell with it. I wasn't wasting time on that stuff any more.

We came to Narrandera. I remembered the girl from Blythe and wondered how she was. I was half-expecting she'd be aboard the train to Sydney; when she wasn't, I envied her; I wished I was pregnant and sure of my man and my place in the world ... To hell with that too, things were as they were and that was that. We came to Junee, a funny place with a single-ended platform; you go out the same way you come in. You know? When the train started to move I wanted to scream, pull the stop-cord; I sat up blazing-eyed, I felt like a mad evangelist with a lot of apathetic sinners. Couldn't they see what was happening? We were being dragged back, back, back to ...

No, we weren't; the train started to take its enormous curve, and I got the man to show me my sleeper. I asked Edward to forgive that nasty, treasonous little outburst. I wondered what he'd say.

It grew dark. It struck me I hadn't cried for a long time. It also struck me I hadn't slept much last night. I got out a nighty, carefully not touching my clothes for tomorrow; I owed my man that much while I was still in his territory. Somewhere in the night the divide would be crossed, and, God willing, I'd be out like a light. When we woke up we'd

be in Moss Vale or one of those places; I could expect to see orchards, the grass wouldn't be so dry, it'd be twenty degrees cooler ...

I hoped. And that first moment of optimism in—how long? Four hours? Seventeen days? Twelve months?—gave me a sudden lift in the heart I didn't write off as treason. All dues were paid, the train was thundering downhill, sometimes we went through tunnels and roared into the light. There were cars and people; country people, true, but closer, closer every minute, to the mad, hectic city where humanity was dense and everything stirring in my heart might find an answer if I looked long enough, looked in the right places. If nature was the absence of artifice, I was happy, for the time, to be rid of it. I'd get my hair cut, I'd buy some clothes. I knew some people that liked sailing on the harbour ... I believed in myself again. I didn't mind living at home again, it was better than the pose-world and the stresses of Cecily's people. No, not to hell with them, but they would go aside too, till I felt ready.

And ready I was, ready and stable, confident of the things that made the human heart. Not aggressively so, like the late John Comstock, not skittering like my darling on the plains, not humbugged like poor Jenny Watchett, who was forceful and ashamed of herself ...

Not like any of these people, but the peculiar combination which was myself, and yet so like all the rest that it was going to be easy to live heaped with others' ambitions, talents, and desires—there was always my humour and my realism (thank you, Edward, thank you, father) to help me cut them back to size where necessary. It was going to be easy to duck the false trails, to love generously, to put all things together and in proportion. I wanted, now, harmony, balance and completeness ... and as we drove violently down the tracks I considered that if the world was, as some said, chaos, each must make in it an order for himself/herself. I had more confidence than Watchett, because he was dependent on institutions, whereas I ...

... had found it in myself. My nightingbird, my darling man, I thank you.

Who could love the Nightingale?

The time is 1971. The places are Sydney, Melbourne and the tract of land between the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers.

This is a novel about personality and how it's shaped by place and period. It is also a novel of poignant human relationships: Edward Le Rossignol, the nightingale who won't allow his personality to be squashed flat and dull. Margaret Ward, a young art teacher who has yet to develop her own personality remote from her wealthy family and associates, turns to Edward.

Their affair develops gradually - not a love relationship in the ordinary sense of the word, but an elaborate, intricate involvement. As their awareness of each other grows, the reader is carried along, not merely as observer but as participant, committed to the characters. We become aware of a richly inflected medium, full of cross references, conveying the inner and outer lives of the characters who gain their full reality and stature at the moment of leaving the action, rather like a piece of music which is completed not by the last sounds but by the echoes and reverberations left in the mind.

Design by Vane Lindesay