THE BEASTLY

BY

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FOR COLLEEN
WITH LOVE

INTRODUCTION

One day I asked myself why I enjoyed writing a number of slightly macabre ‘animal stories’ and I didn’t have a ready answer. Perhaps it had something to do with the simple fact that all human relationships with animals can never be honest, straightforward, or equal. They are always skewed and usually in favour of perceived human ‘needs’ and ‘interests’. So it might be that some of the stories are an indirect, even a strange way of making amends. Others are simple facts, simple regrets, even simple fears—or not so simple fears.

However it might be, they seem to rise up and ask to be written every so often. So I hope there may be the kind of frisson in their reading that I find at times in their writing.

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THE BEASTLY

1. FRITILLARY

Sweet bright grasses fringed about a secret cove,
With little rasping voices, softer than the waves that curl,
Softer than the winds that trill a harmony across the dunes,
    Telling tales …
Butterflies brown and white, with lead-light marks upon their wings,
With tiny cooing voices, softer than terns, softer far than dolphin gulls,
Softer than a million sand midges with their tiny beating wings,
    Telling tales …
'We saw it there', 'it was so long ago', 'they passed the story on',
'Years and countless years', 'a hundred generations, *I* dare suggest'
'It flew, our ancestors claimed, like a thing possessed'
    Telling tales …
'How it cried' — 'like a beast bled, *I* heard', 'and all the while
A flapping', 'A noise, *my* family passed to me, like a clap of thunder'
— 'In a summer storm' — They drowsed together, in lush seed-head,
    Telling tales …

Victualling: Mr. Philobert Jenkins' account

That picher, sir? A fine ship, she were, on the
Nitrate run a while—carried forty men—and Shorty Sloane—
I've been with the firm near forty years, seen the fam'ly
Come an' go—but it's the ships you remember—Yes, sir?
Biscuits?—Mr. Mullins will serve you, sir—It were port
Not brandy for Lord 'amer's yacht—Beg yours—
Shorty Sloane? I remember 'im particular—Brought bad luck,
The men said, casual-like—Couldn't see it meself—but never sailed,
No sir—Salt, sir? Nine-an'-sixpence, that'll be—
They paid 'im orf, Shorty, left 'im in this port an' that—
Poor Shorty—couldn't leave the sea alone—
'e finally got a berth in 'obart Town—'e loved that ship,
An' Shorty weren't a sentimental man—a perfect clipper—
Pine—'aven't seen the 'uon pine, sir? Luv'ly yellow wood,
Made fine ships, that it did … Loved 'er like a son, they said,

Went overboard one night, left a note—
To give the ship good luck, 'e wrote, poor bloke—
Quaffed the cap'n's best French brandy, 'fore 'e done the deed,
No rum for Shorty Sloane when 'e set out for 'eaven, like—
An' you know what, sir? Didn't do no good … that fine clipper,
Strong as they make 'em, plied the sea with perfect pitch, regal like,
Should've seen 'er, sir—an' ran before the wind, straight
Into an open shore—some said it were the skipper at that
Fine French brandy—but that weren't no comfort to poor Shorty—
… Now your rope, sir, 'awser-laid … 'emp, sir, sisal or coir?

'The way it fell, like a stricken beast'; 'great gushing gouts, they said',
'Not a story for the young' — 'And cries', 'More a bellow, in *my* version',
'A wounded roar, *I* heard … like a dragon stabbed' — 'And then the stalks broke'
Telling tales …
'It had a name, they saw, in gilt upon its head'; — 'S.S. Fri---l--' — 'It wore away
With time, a shadow of a name'; the fritillaries gather round those wormholes
In the weathered wood; a faint sweet fragrance still there about the worn-out ribs,
Telling tales …

2. THE MILIEU

"Copper prices are down. No demand for tin. Not much better for lead." Old Mr Bragg shook his head, its few greasy strands waving gently with each stroke, as his fingers deftly swept through the buckets of scrap metal. Rubbish here, copper on to the scales, a couple of decent looking taps left aside for closer inspection, a generator coil reposing under a dismal pile of worn washers and tarnished silver cutlery.

"You always say that. Markets are down. You're an old fox, Alf."

"Business is business. Can't pay more'n the market can take. Life."

Mr Bragg lifted a piece to the light. Only plate. For a moment there …

His customer watched him closely. What he thought was a blowfly buzzed about him then disappeared into the dismal shed behind them. He knew Alf Bragg sat there much of the day, did accounts laboriously at an old kitchen table, sat over strong tea in a chipped enamel mug. Another insect seemed to hover a moment, then disappeared.

"By cripies, Alf, you've got a lot of wasps around the place. Must be nesting in there somewhere."

"Yeah. Believe so. Now—" In the moment when his customer was distracted he might or might not have slipped something into the pocket of his baggy overalls. "Three-and-six for this lot, tenpence each for the taps … " he went on totting up the amount he was willing to pay.

"Beggars can't be choosers," the other man sounded resigned rather than bitter. "Got any sale for cast-iron, Alf? The wife wants to get some of them new-fangled aluminium fittings."

"Try me. But don't hold your breath." Alf looked up briefly from his line of figures and his pencil stub. Another wasp flew past and the early dusk seemed to close in around the shed.

*

"Well, me little beauties," Alf counted up the day's small takings, "youse lot were dragging the chain today, nearly had to pay the old bugger for these." One dirty finger stirred the small pile of metal taken from his pockets all mixed in with fluff and ancient breadcrumbs.

It fascinated him. The nest. Each tiny cell, each masticated dob of papery wood, each perfect choice, each egg laid. Sometimes he sat at his table chewing with his last four teeth, a

sandwich, a pie, and wondered how wasps managed with no teeth at all. A kind of mumbling action maybe.

"That'll be me in a few more years. No bloody teeth left in me head, just munching it all up with me gums. Maybe I'd best get a few tips from youse lot."

The wasps came in, never straight but with a curious dipping swirling action. He could sit for hours watching their comings and goings. Maybe their brains were too small for thought but there were days when he decided they beat most humans hands down.

His customers. All the rubbish they brought him. All the rubbish he bought in the hope the market for metals was going up, not down; the occasional bits and pieces that some antiques-Johnny was kind enough to take off his hands. His regulars. The browsers. The kids that slipped in through the fence round his paddock and climbed on old ploughs and horse-drawn rakes.

He didn't have a high opinion of their thinking. Just the usual 'let's see what the old bugger'll give us for this bucket o' junk'. And when he told them to their faces 'what the heck d'you ruddy well think I am?' they said 'you say you buy, so I'm selling'; even a wasp with a brain the size of a pin-head could do better than that.

'Those real estate-Johnnies say that, used car-Johnnies say that, auction rooms say that—gimme a break.'

He could never understand why people assumed all junk was junk and all junk was therefore saleable. You only had to call it salvage or bric-a-brac.

But business had looked up once the wasps moved in and set up shop in his shed. Strictly speaking he'd helped them move in. He'd found the nest in the back of an old buggy. He'd sawn off part of the vehicle to get the nest out but it had paid for itself many times over. At first he'd been afraid his 'help' would upset the queen but he put out a smorgasbord of delicacies, sugar, bread, flour, honey, rotting fruit, jam … and they accepted his help and went on with their lives.

By now he'd lost count of the number of people who'd said, "Looks like you're got wasps in there". No one ever said, "Looks like—" and then added "You'll want to put down some poison, quick smart". Sometimes he wondered why. Did they think he was the sort of bloke who'd know all about getting rid of wasps?

Get rid of something that was worth an extra fiver in his pocket every month?

*

Of course it would drop off in the cold months. You can't have everything.

*

Normally he closed up around dark, put a padlock on the old gate where people entered in off the rutted side road, then wandered down to his shack behind the shed. From the road the place had a neglected air, weeds grew up between rusting metal, thistles burst into bloom and seeded fiercely along the back fence where posts and crowbars and chains, even an old anchor, rested.

Some nights he turned on the light bulb over the table in the shed and worked away at accounts or counted the day's takings which he then took home and hid in a sugar bin in his kitchen. He trusted banks not one whit since the depression years. The little bit he banked was for form's sake merely, not because he trusted the bank to care for or increase his money.

You could rely on wasps to increase at a nice regular rate. Money, no. But it was important to occasionally be seen to be going into the bank. To say to someone, I'm just nipping down to the bloody bank, just so they knew his money didn't stay around, wasn't there for the taking.

Sometimes he thought he was being watched. The eyes were there outside the cracks in the shed. Delinquents. Absconding Home boys. Gangs. Louts. Bodgies. They never came in. But he knew they were out there. Somewhere.

The bulb on its cord swayed gently to and fro in the evening, it lit this part, then that part of the shed. It sent shadows flying up and down. The shed was full of draughts. But the shed was a part of his life. He didn't need to see it to know what was in it. Every pile of metal, every box of taps and washers, every carton of nails, every piece of chrome, every length of piping, every T-

bend, he felt he knew them almost by name as they crowded round him in the dark corners. Their size. Their weight. What he'd paid. What he hadn't paid.

*

Activity gradually ceased round the nest and it retreated into a shadowy ill-defined shape. But its presence was curiously comforting. He felt his age as he sat at the table flicking coins into their piles. Copper. Silver. The breathlessness. He felt the whiskers that rasped round an unkempt chin. He felt the cracks that constantly flared at the corners of his mouth. He felt the film over his eyes. He felt the draught on his balding head. He sometimes noticed his hands shake after a busy day. There were some days when he thought, no one'll care. Just me and them and they don't care two hoots. Just me. And they'll come in after me and clear this place out. Doubt they'll think it's worth keeping on. All aluminium and plastics. Me whole bloomin' life. And what's it to them?

'Them' conflated with everything which existed outside this shed.

I might put it in me bloody will. Me dough can go for the care of wasps. That'd stonker 'em. He laughed in the silence. Like some old dame and her pussies! The idea appealed and he continued to chuckle.

That's it. Put me money where me mouth is. Turn the pennies and shillings into notes. Yeah. That's the ticket.

He imagined the notes carefully laid over the outside of the nest, and plastered down with a thin film of mud. And some smart bugger would come round ('when I'm gone') and say, better get rid o' them wasps, and he'd have 'em burnt up in two ticks and with them'd go a small fortune. That's that kind of whadda-they-call-it—poetic justice?

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll get stuck into it. See what's what.

He fell back to counting the day's takings. Outside were small noises in the dark. Something bumped against a metal tank. All went quiet. Then the faint noises started up again. A slight crunch. A step on gravel. He lifted his head and listened. There it was again. Something. A possum. A stray cat. Steps. That shoe on rough ground. A sense of more than one. Of shoes. Of rubbing shoulders. Of stealth. Of cunning. Of movement. He looked down at the pile of coins. He reached over and lifted an old broom stick.

The air in here was cold and smelled of sump oil and old bread.

The front of the shed opened out. There was no closing it up. But the side door nearest his shack was also open. He could close it and bolt it. He could leave, just get up and walk down to the hut with his money in his pockets. He could sit and wait.

He looked at the wasps' nest in the gloom. Patient little buggers, the lot of them. He liked the thought. I've got all night. I can sit here. I can wait. The noise outside came again. A coat brushing against a bush maybe. Hardly more than a muffled sigh. A stone turning under a foot. I can wait.

*

The youths had no such patience. They rushed him. An old man on his own. An old man with a pile of coins on a scarred wooden table. Just an old man. He raised the broom handle. He swiped the nest. The wasps, at first sluggish, gained in fury. The old man fell under the rain of blows from a jack handle picked up from his own stock scattered about the yard. The wasps swirled and swarmed and were impervious to the hands raised to ward them off. They came in under collars and cuffs and down behind ears and into hair and got caught … and stung and stung … and followed … and stung …

*

A lot of people remembered saying to old Mr Bragg: "It looks like you've got a wasps' nest up there."

*

3. THE INSECT WORLD

Does not respect Sovereign Territory
No ants at the Treaty of Berlin,
Beetles were not consulted at Trianon,
Bees not bound by Neuilly,
Moths circled lights at Versailles, once, twice,
A thud of a wasp's body on glass as Lenin signed;
Crickets sang (or was it a child) when the guns fell—
Was that the whirr of a damsel-fly—no, too late—
November, even the last robber-fly grows sluggish

4. FILMED

The location people found the ideal house. The props manager excelled himself inside it. The actors and directors and film crew were carefully picked and asked to sign a statement: "I am not afraid of spiders. I have no problem working with spiders. Signed …… "

Several people hesitated, then signed. They felt themselves caught in a dilemma. They weren't precisely afraid of spiders but neither did they feel particularly comfortable with them. And they all had the secret fear that should a spider actually run across their skin or become entangled in their hair they might forget themselves enough to let out a gasp.

Normally this would not be a problem. Most films which include spiders require people to gasp and scream and try to brush the spiders away from their faces or off their chests. This film was scripted rather differently. It was based on a close study of the habits of spiders and was classed as a psychological thriller.

The spiders themselves were never blatant. No huge swathes of spider-web in the tumble-down house. No spiders the span of a man's hand. No large groping hairy feelers. No gleaming evil eyes. These spiders lurked in their corners and gaps and niches and hidden spaces, only emerging from their grey untidy swags of web at the sight or sound of prey. Invisible much of the time. Protruding as a couple of legs, as a sudden dart when their web felt the blundering tug of a fly or moth.

The problem for all the cast was that the film was using real spiders in real webs with real insects. Most of the filming of 'Spideery' occurred with no cast present at all.

It was all the waiting around, all this sense of deliberately heightened tension, all the mystery of what was actually going on inside the house and the other makeshift sets when no actors were permitted to be present or to see the rushes, which made everyone edgy and a little queasy. Even the scripts came in two sets: one literally for the spiders and one for the actors and which simply filled in the other segments as 'spiders on stage' …

"If they'd filmed our parts first," one actor complained strongly, "so we could've got the bulk of it over and done with … and *then* they could mess around with their spiders to their hearts' content … "

"Yes … or if the plot was clearer. We know our lines. What we don't know is how exactly it fits into the overall story-line … we're as much in the dark as … "

"As the spiders," someone said tartly.

"It's even worse than that," someone else sighed. "It's as though we're the artificial props. We go out and say our lines and put on our emotions but we're like dummies playing a part. We don't know any more than what we're programmed to do."

"That's true," another cast member nodded. "Normally the spiders are plastic or rubber props … or computer animations these days, maybe … but we might as well be clockwork toys for all we know of the climax and outcome … "

"Maybe that's the intention. Maybe that's why they made us sign that statement. Now we have all this time to sit around wondering if we were honest when we said we weren't afraid of spiders … "

"At least we're being *paid* to sit around—"

"Yes, but I don't like to have time to think about real spiders—I just want to get stuck into it and do my piece and know for sure I can take spiders in my stride."

"And they didn't really explain that they wouldn't be artificial spiders—I just assumed that."

"Well, we haven't got an out now—because a lawyer would argue that a spider is a spider, not a lump of plastic."

"More coffee anyone? I think we'd be better just to forget about what they're doing up there and get on with other things."

Several people nodded. They had other scripts to consider. And there were always card games, gossip, knitting, or a good book to while away the time. But the spiders had acquired an intrusive life of their own and the cast sat around, waiting, and trying futilely to banish them from their thoughts.

*

By the time two weeks had passed the actors were getting definitely mutinous. They had tried pumping camera-men, set designers, lighting people, even the directors, without getting anything more specific than a heartfelt "It's more than my life would be worth!" or the plain "We signed an agreement to keep the story under wraps."

"Well, it's their money," one actor with a very small part said philosophically, "so I suppose we shouldn't complain."

"That's all very well for you," was the sour rejoinder. "You're only going to be on for ten minutes. If you find yourself getting queasy you know you'll soon be finished. But I sit here wondering how I'm going to manage hour after hour with … well, who knows what? Do you know they've even got a security firm in there that usually specialises in intelligence material—"

"How do you know that?"

"I'd never heard of them so I looked them up."

"Oh! That's getting a bit drastic, isn't it?"

"That's what I thought. It makes us seem like suspects not professionals."

"Maybe we are suspects—"

"How could we be suspects? We haven't *done* anything! Isn't that the problem?"

"Yes, we have. We've all signed to say we aren't afraid of spiders."

"Well, there aren't any surveillance cameras in here—"

"How do you know?"

"Look around you. Bare walls. Not a camera in sight."

"Not a spider in sight either." Then, unaccountably, the speaker shuddered. To go from here with its clean bright walls and smell of coffee and donuts into … but suddenly she didn't want to envisage what that old house might be like inside.

*

People who prided themselves on their professionalism began to feel a little uneasy. It was one thing to know a part back to front and inside out. It was another to go on to an unknown set and …

People who had been friendly and enthusiastic and supportive began to get on each other's nerves. At first they shared something of their lives and experiences. Then they exchanged all their memories and ideas on movies which included spiders. They talked of personal moments of fear and distress and surprise. They dredged up family anecdotes which included spiders. They expressed shock, surprise, annoyance, criticism of the script and everyone involved with the film.

By the third week they had begun to hunt through their parts for evidence of what was going on. They played them out, at first casually, then going over and over every line for the smallest clue, for what might be hidden between the lines or contained in gestures and required

emotions. “We don’t even know if the spiders will actually be on stage with us at any time. I can’t find anywhere where we are required to actually respond to the creatures. No moments of fear or surprise or apprehension.”

“Perhaps that’s the point. We don’t get any prior warning? If you had a line which said ‘Spiders Enter Left’ you’d be prepared. But here, where it tells you to move towards the door … what if just as you get there—”

“No, don’t! If I thought I had to face a spider suddenly running across the door handle or dropping on a thread I think I’d find myself rooted to the spot!”

“No, you wouldn’t. You’ve said you don’t suffer from arachnophobia. You wouldn’t be able to explain your fear away.”

“It isn’t a phobia exactly. It’s the element of surprise. If you had to do a film with wolves and they never told you when the wolves would be on the set and when they’d only be on the soundtrack howling in the distance it would be two different things—”

“But maybe it would be *more* frightening to sit for three weeks knowing exactly when the wolves were going to be released on to the set?”

“But at least wolves would have professional animal trainers with them. I doubt if they’ve got any special spider trainers over there.”

“Don’t say that! It conjures up images of spiders being tempted out on cue with a bit of dead blowfly or something … uugggh … I don’t think I can bear the thought of having lunch now.”

“And it isn’t clear from my lines whether I’m supposed to have any contact with the spiders or not. Listen to this—” And he began to read his first lines over again.

*

“They’ve been there long enough to film a thousand spiders in their nests,” one of the cast complained as they went into their fourth week of waiting.

“And I find myself getting up each morning with this horrible sort of black fear over me … of coming in here … of sitting waiting … of never knowing when someone might come in that door and say ‘we’re ready for you’ … ” And suiting the action to the word he went over and glanced out. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“We could gatecrash them.”

“No, we couldn’t. Didn’t you read the small print on your contract?”

“No. What does it say?”

“That we wait until we’re called for filming.”

“That’s a strange thing to put in a contract. You *assume* that’s what you do … but I’ve never seen it put down in black and white … ”

“Don’t say black. I can’t even bear the thought of black spiders.”

“Maybe they aren’t black? Maybe they’re redbacks or funnel-webs—”

“Oh, don’t say it! It gives me a horrible shiver up my spine. It doesn’t take much to stir up a funnel-web and get them ready to attack.”

“You mean—but there’s nothing in the script to suggest the spiders are actually going to *attack* us!”

“You don’t know that. You haven’t seen the parts they didn’t give us.”

“But here, where it tells me to come downstairs … and the rooms are dark and I’m supposed to grope for the light-switch … Holy Moly! You don’t think … do funnel-webs go upstairs in houses?”

“Who knows? These are movie spiders—they probably get to do whatever the script demands—”

“Don’t say that! I won’t be able to sleep tonight, thinking of a funnel-web creeping upstairs and getting into my bed.”

“They say they like to go in bathrooms—”

“Isn’t it redbacks that get under toilet seats?”

"My mum always said the black house spiders seemed to have a thing about laundries … Is there a scene where someone has to go into the laundry?"

"I don't think so … but there's one in the kitchen. Spiders like kitchens because of all the flies that come in."

"I've got a daddy-long-legs in my kitchen—"

"They say they're the most poisonous species of all. It's just that they have difficulty piercing your skin … "

"But isn't the point of the story that the spiders gain access to something in the house, some chemical or odour or spice or something that makes them start to grow bigger?"

"God! I hope not! The only reason I can cope with spiders is that they're small and easy to squash!"

*

By the fifth week no one in the cast regarded coming to work with equanimity, let alone enthusiasm. They had begun to talk almost obsessively on spiders and what was happening in the spiders' house … because it had ceased to be a movie set and become a place filled with ever-increasing spiders … They had begun to dread the hours cooped up in one room, no matter how bright and pleasant and well-supplied with food and coffee and magazines. They knew every line of everyone else's part. They had dissected and explored every exchange, every look, every movement, every likely part where spiders might intrude. They had ceased to feel comfortable with each other. They had ceased to enjoy coming to work. They had begun to doubt their vocation as actors. They had started to wonder if they could do justice to the movie when they finally got in front of a camera. They had begun to debate whether they really had signed on for a genuine movie. They had, one by one, come to believe they could not face a spider, real or plastic, and they all felt they'd been fools to sign a contract with a stipulation about fear …

Early in the sixth week they were all paid off, thanked for their patience, and told the movie was finished and they would receive their invitations for the premiere. For a moment relief and bewilderment warred in every face. Then they all took their pay and left, half-expecting to receive a call a day or two later.

"I honestly don't know what was going on there," one actor told his girlfriend. "I think they decided it just wasn't going to work and they couldn't bring themselves to admit they had a dud script."

He didn't tell her he wasn't sure whether he could bring himself to go back again if the producer decided to give the script another go, what girl would want a man who couldn't face a spider on a movie set?

And now, with a couple of days in which spiders never intruded, he began to wonder what had taken them over, day after day there, when it was just a movie, when every actor knows waiting is a part of the life …

*

The premiere was billed as 'The Most Terrifying Movie of the Year'. All the unused cast gave in to their curiosity, spiders notwithstanding, and went along to the first showing of 'Spideery'.

Several of them could not remain till the end.

Their voices, their fears, their growing sense of unease and apprehension came it seemed from some mysterious echoing space in the house. Sometimes the spiders appeared to be listening, to be going towards the voices, to be puzzling over their never-seen human prisoners. Once a spider darted towards an apparent voice and appeared to push something into its untidy grey ball of web, below which small flakes of hard shell and detritus lay in dismal heaps. One of the cast screamed in sudden horror. Several people followed suit. *Her* voice there, echoing and muffled. Then she fell back into her seat in the dim theatre and wiped her sweating palms with a tissue …

Surely … surely … there must be … *easier* ways to make a living …

5. A CHURCHMAN WRITES OF AMPHIPODA

(To the Memory of the Revd. T.R.R. Stebbing)

Those Victorian gentlemen, with clerical whiskers and collars
Crushing necks, as they bent over specimens of the natural world;
More amenable to mounting and discussion than old ladies with
Tea and cress, clinging antimacassars, worry on the ‘state of
The Heathen’, worn kneelers in the church … Those dark-spined
Books of classification, speculation, that glass case of things
Found on country walks, caught forever on a pin, the reek of
Preserving fluid, the hushed voice outside the ‘don’t disturb’ door,
Before the knock falls. “Tea, sir?”
A white-capped maid. Our churchman looks up, startled, as his pen,
Dipped in decisive ink, scrawls across the page:—
“No panegyrist of the Amphipoda has yet been able to evoke
Anything like popular enthusiasm in their favour.”

If we, lifting leaf litter on Mount Wellington, have time to spare
For a life that drew attention to these small creatures,
It is in thanks to all who remind us that the most useful
And remarkable small animals can often be found most easily,
Can be all around us, unnoticed. Their safe haven suddenly intruded
Upon, a leaping rush for safety, we might have designs on
Tender bodies. We bend and watch; one minute and they’re
Gone but those slow in hiding are lifted gently, observed, magnified;
Antennae, tiny bead eyes, segmented bodies, gleaming brown sides,
A small but powerful tail, legs, frail-looking and vulnerable; we place
Our specimens again in the maze of decayed leaves, pellets and
Fungus threads, spider webs, and little creeping things. No pins.

Bulldozers.

6. NETHERWORLD

“We lift each lot of soil very carefully, darling, so we don’t hurt the earthworms. They do so many good things for us in the soil. And I suppose it hurts them when we accidentally cut them in half. We don’t mean to be cruel. Sometimes we just can’t see them.”

A lovely mother and daughter scene. Ruffled flowerbeds. Green lawns. And this little place beside the garage which would become a child-size garden.

Macy picked up her little trowel again and squatted down. But she only pecked away at the soil her mother had loosened with a digging fork. Each time she sliced into it a worm would appear and wriggle away. “Yes, little wormie, you run away before I come along.” In a little while she had given up on the trowel and was carefully crumbling each sod with her small hands.

“You don’t need to be quite that … careful, darling. The worms can see you coming and wriggle away.”

“Do they have eyes?”

"I'm not really sure. But they seem to know you're there. Maybe they feel the vibrations … or smell the change. They might have simple ears. We can look earthworms up in a book one day if you like."

"Oh yes, I want to know … before I go on digging."

"Well, dig enough now to put in the little pot plant nanna gave you last week. Then it can start growing down straight away."

The little girl went back to her soil preparation with greater vigour and several minutes later she had a hole large enough to put the small red-flowering geranium into. Her grandmother had wisely chosen something hardy. But the business of planting was spoiled when her renewed use of the small trowel caught a small worm midriff and left it in two pieces.

The whole afternoon was spoiled. Her mother sighed. It was nice that Macy had a tender heart and felt for small creatures but the garden idea was now undermined.

"I think … I don't like gardening." Macy stood up, the two parts of the worm still wriggling vaguely in her palm.

"You will, darling, once you see your things growing. And you will be able to give up on digging and just water and weed a bit. No more worries over … worms."

*

They went to the library the next day. A book or two on earthworms might suggest, her mother hoped, that worms were incapable of feeling pain and didn't mind in the least being cut in half. But the authors hadn't thought to deal with this vital issue. Nowhere could she find any mention of whether worms minded being cut in pieces, of being impaled, though they did seem to suggest that worms had remarkable powers of recuperation … and they were adamant that worms could be found almost everywhere there was soil; not just found but busily aiding that soil to become better and richer …

From there it wasn't hard to lead on to little mentions, stories almost, on the plots of earth by the library and along the side of the council offices. These two would be full of little worms simply and calmly going about their business of eating the earth.

On their way out of the supermarket they stopped to watch the bulldozers and machinery at work next door excavating for the foundations of the new mall. Macy watched the scoops of earth being lifted and deposited and turned to her mother with anxious eyes. "What about the worms? Where will they go?"

"In the trucks." Her mother pointed to the growing piles of soil and rocks in the nearest truck. "Then they will take it away and empty it and the worms will be able to get on with their business again."

"Where do they go?"

"Well, to the … people buy the soil to put down in places that need soil." It was a reasonable explanation and the little girl seemed satisfied. But her mother felt she had fudged it. Most of this would be dumped at the tip or used in the new landfill area which would eventually be concreted over. And these piles of dozed earth were left to bake in the sun. And every excavation was slated to be covered over with buildings, with bitumen for roads and carparks, with concrete for yards and drives and footpaths and playgrounds.

And no one, ever, came round to say, 'Got all the worms out for relocation?' and only then would the cement trucks be given the go-ahead to come in and start pouring.

No. Every 'development' was placed over worms, over beetles, over grubs and eggs. Every development was a death sentence. She drew her daughter's attention to the sparrows feasting on take-away crumbs and dropped paper bags around the nearest bin.

"It may not be very healthy food but there's plenty of it."

Macy had seen the ads on TV and was knowledgeable about what went into the burgers and buns and batters; from 'eleven secret herbs and spices' to the exact kind of mustard or mayonnaise, she could converse happily on what the little birds were gobbling down. "They'll get fat too," she said happily. "Like Tyson." Tyson was the little rolypoly boy next door. He appeared to live on such food.

Macy, in her pleasure over the sparrows, seemed to have forgotten all about earthworms. Her mother saw that as a relief. The world would grind to the proverbial standstill if earthworms had to be taken into account. There were, undoubtedly, a few remaining simple hunting and gathering societies where earthworms were not at risk. But they were not a useable model.

She parked in their drive; they carried their books and groceries inside. But Macy, having already leafed through the books at the library, was now more interested in sitting down to watch a cartoon. Her mother, though, found herself turning at the door and looking out at the midday sun as it bounced off the concrete of their drive, the roads and footpaths beyond, the shining roofs of this new development which advertised itself as a mini-care easy living community, the asphalted playground by the school, even the sports area was artificial grass over an excavated base. They had specifically bought a home with a sizeable back yard with room for several fruit trees and vegetables, and the flower beds and area of neatly curbed lawn at the front. Other, busier, people had opted for the all-concrete yard. It saved time and money.

The neatness of it all. Modern living at its best, or so the agent had described it. But now she felt a faint sense of being choked and unable to draw breath easily. Underneath these hectares of easy living …

Everywhere. The whole world being concreted over …

Taking something precious with it—and giving back 'ease of living' …

Everywhere. The slow suffocating death of worms. Oh, but they're just worms.

She moved over to the big picture window which gave on to their side fence, brick and concrete, and on to their neighbour's yard with Tyson's little pedal car standing abandoned on the hot concrete of the drive.

A massacre of the innocents. But worms were not innocent. The idea was silly. Not guilty. Not innocent. Just worms.

'I don't feel well … because, now, there is no way back. That innocent woman of yesterday who turned soil and watched a worm wriggle away.' There were, of course, alternatives like 'no till' gardening. That would save any more awkward questions from Macy.

But it wouldn't give her back her calm acceptance of a concreted, covered-over world, it wouldn't remove the sense of slow stifling death every time the bulldozers moved in, every time a home handyman set up his cement mixer, every time the council trumpeted a new development.

*

'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth' …

But only when we are gone, when we have developed ourselves into extinction, and the concrete cracks and crumbles and little plants grow up, and worms can breathe again …

Them or us? She turned away from the view, ran a tender hand over her daughter's curls as she sat absorbed in Bugs Bunny, and went to the kitchen to put away the rest of the groceries.

'I think—on balance—the Earth needs worms more than it needs us.'

7. IF NOT TO DREAM

A knitted snake, a knitted *snake*, a *knitted*—
In my dream it bit me, two small spots of blood,
Dark and slow—and I watched them, bewildered,
As this soft thing fell about my feet, its clumsy stitches,
Its lemon and lime and coral stripes …
And the blood became two beads and gleamed.
But as the snake fell, I saw the twitch of a scaly tail,
And then it sought escape. But I knew now.
I cast around. A stick. A knobbled stick from an

Older generation. I seized it in both hands and brought
It crashing down. But you can't beat knitted snakes.
Oh no! They live to bite another day.

I don't remember much and there is no family
Story of me and snakes. Me and ants. Ants and me.
Yes. But I've never dreamed of ants. No hidden memory,
No half-stirred fear. "You stood on the ants' nest
And cried," my mother said. "Silly little thing. And
A neighbour rescued you, took you up upon his horse."
I don't remember *that!* Neither ants nor horse.
"The two of you, you forced me on to an ants' nest,"
My second brother says. "I'm sorry," I say. "I don't
Remember that, I'm sorry I did that." "It wasn't you,
I know you only did it because he—" even now, I fear
There's more such memories—holed away—

I'm not afraid of snakes or ants or spiders—
Not afraid. But something deeper stirs in hot blank
Nights when the air is thick and wet and settles whining
On my face. I think I was a frightened child.
I fell into the gap that said: Children Wanted Here.
A deep pit, and over the rim stared aunts and cousins,
Grandmothers and others; "Yes," they said smiling, "a baby
Girl." And I looked up and cried. The stories of infancy
Always have me crying. The pit was very deep and dark—
Just the kind of place to breed—creatures—
"You yelled your head off, the day we had you christened—"
I listened and I *laughed*, laughed the thought away.

But was I afraid? Did I wake crying from childish sleep?
Do you remember having to stumble out of bed
To comfort me. Would you have heard—or were you
Too tired. There is no answer now. I've asked too late.
But she did say, before she died, "You were so afraid …
When the stubble fires raced through the grain … you
Saw them lapping round the house and wouldn't go to bed,
Silly little thing." Fires, not snakes? I wonder if, mesmerised,
I would see and hear a different world? It seems a drastic way
To dig out snakes from caved-in burrows—admire them
For their woollen stripes. So cheery now, so gay.

(To the Memory of P.M.)

8. A TROPIC YARN

The old man held us in the palm of his hand. "Was one bloke livin' here way back. One poor sod here, all alone." He waved a gnarled hand round at the inlet, motionless now with the tide out, with faintly sinister reflections of the timbered foreshores. "He stayed on—to see about

gettin' some timber out. The rest o' the bunnies went scamperin' over the hills there, hopin' to get to the gold before it ran out."

"Palmer River," someone in our tour group murmured. If the old man heard he took no notice.

"He built himself a jetty. Just trunks piled on trunks, here through the mud an' the mangroves, an' he had an old barge. I remember seein' it as a kiddy. On its last legs by then."

"Where did he live?" one of our party asked.

"Comin' to that." He obviously didn't like intrusions. The sun was dipping. Mosquitoes began to whine. I couldn't blame people for wanting to hurry him along. "The old fella lived up a tree. Bit o' canvas, boards across, slung things up. Bed an' all. Right there." He pointed to where the track ran up from the concrete jetty. "Know why he lived up a tree?"

"To get away from the mossies," I said. I hadn't put repellent on and I slapped my arms in futile slaughter.

"Nope." He seemed to gather us in with his beady eyes. "Crocs. Crocs by the dozen. He perched up in a little humpy in his tree an' let 'em come out an' bark at night to their heart's content."

I think we all shuddered. Such a peaceful spot. A half-dozen houses with friendly verandahs. A corner-shop. A couple of dinghies and a modern launch swinging gently in the narrow inlet. A place almost untouched by the scurry of the world.

"I've heard—" the American lady beside me began, then she didn't seem to want to spell out what she'd heard.

"Big 'uns," the old man went on loudly as though to wake every reptilian ghost. "Bigger'n you ever see these days. They've shot out the biggest. This old fella that camped here, he gave 'em names. An' the biggest of the whole ruddy lot he called Bart. Reckoned he was thirty foot from snout to tail."

We started doing sums in our heads.

"Didn't bother him. He kept out of their way an' they kept outa his. But one night when he's sleepin', a boat come into the bay an' these little fellas start jumpin' off with their pans an' shovels an' what-have-you. Yeah, plunk, plunk, off the boat, tryin' to get through the mud. Dunno why they landed here. Captain got lost … they thought this was a short-cut to the diggin's … or he was a scallywag an' thought he'd dump 'em here … "

I assumed he meant they were Chinese come to try their luck on the goldfields. We had two Japanese in our party. I don't know if he assumed they were Chinese.

"Gives the old bloke up his tree one heck of a fright, all this racket goin' on, people yellin' an' gettin' bogged in three foot o' mud." He said this with relish. "Too right it did. But he wasn't goin' to interfere. Let 'em head for the hills. But then he sees somethin' in the shadows. It's just gettin' on for sun-up, just the time for the biggies to stir … right along there," he pointed to where the shore was now in evening shadow. We shivered, imagining giant reptiles stirring like some time-warped Jules Verne monster. And who could say what might lurk in those shadows now …

"He saves them," a middle-aged woman said firmly. "He tells them to watch out."

The old man glared at her. It was his story. "He did no such bloody thing! How'd you feel if a lot of noisy bloody little—" Several people, wanting to save group feelings, burst into speech. For a moment there was a hubbub to rival those poor immigrants struggling through deep mud to an alien shore.

"An' then he sees—" His voice rose triumphant in a kind of bellow, "he sees the biggest bloody croc of 'em all start to slide towards the water an' he yells—" our storyteller suited his voice to the words, "Bart! Bart!"

Several parrots, unseen in the trees, clattered away. Even the inlet, golden under the last rays of the sun, seemed to ripple in response.

"An' you know what all them little buggers done when they heard him?"

"Ran!" several people said.

"Back to the boat," I put in.

"Course they didn't!" He clearly saw it as a rhetorical question. "Every man Jack of 'em starts to bark! You shoulda heard the racket! Up they come, right up under his tree barkin' their bloody heads off." He shook his own grizzled head. "Never heard anythin' like it! Poor old Bart, he couldn't take the noise, he just turned tail like a dog that's been given what-for … an' he slinks back to his possie on the mudbanks … didn't dare show his snout for a week or more."

I'm not sure if we believed him. One woman clasped her bag tighter and said, "But there's none here now. No crocodiles, I mean."

We all looked round. Such a quiet sleepy place, humid in the tropical evening, children squealing, our bus …

"No crocs?" The old man looked at us all in astonishment. "Course there's crocs here! There's Little Bart an' Medium Bart an' Cousin Bart an' Missus Bart an'—"

And there we were standing on the muddy shore! You've never seen a tour group move so fast. We didn't stop moving till we were way up the main street! And I'll bet the local people were all sniggering away behind their hands … funniest thing they'd seen in weeks …

But I've sometimes thought, since then, a nice little tree house …

9. DISSERTATION ON THE OLD STYLE BOARDING HOUSE

Perhaps it is being self-indulgent, second childhood, I don't know, but I wondered if a little piece on the old seaside boarding house would be suitable, just a small piece of nostalgia? I was thinking back to the place I went to a couple of times as a small child. Brick and stucco. 1921 on its front. Like a little bit of transplanted England. It must've seemed quite natural to people looking out over the small bay, the jetty, children building sandcastles. It was only when you turned and looked from the beach that it began to look strangely out of place with gum trees and scrub behind the row. As other houses and shops were built I imagine people no longer noticed so much. We had a landlady called Mrs Grindle or that's what I always thought but my brother said later he thought it was Greenall. I don't know if she was typical but she dressed and sounded the part and she had an unmarried daughter called Faith who was perhaps thirty, I wasn't good at guessing the ages of adults then. My mother asked her if she'd thought of having a Hope and a Charity but she only pursed her lips and said she'd had a Robert. I don't know but I think it's possible he died in the War.

Perhaps now that it is all motels and caravan parks and serviced apartments—

I wouldn't want to pretend that places like it were a better alternative or that we've gone down the wrong road. Mrs Grindle wouldn't let us boys go out or come in the front door, she didn't want sand all over her front steps. We went out the back way down past some vegetables and the old outside dunny which I don't think was used any more, or only by Faith and herself. She was very proud of what she called her 'porcelain set' upstairs. And the food wasn't marvellous. All that boiled stuff. I suppose the smell did hang around. But people in those days came for the 'ozone', of course it wasn't real ozone, just fresh sea air, but it was in the advertisements—a whiff of ozone and you'll feel a new man—

Or a new woman?

Even a new child, yes, but it was usually mothers who brought their children, leaving their menfolk back on the farms and shops. I'm not sure whether the fathers resented missing out or whether the mothers felt they had it easy. So often you'd see the houses with all the nappies on the lines. Mrs Grindle had a young schoolteacher there as her regular as well as another family down from the country.

Did you make friends?

Not really, I had my brother Bill and they had a pack of little squealy girls. We were all upstairs and there were some steep steps down to the front hall which was very dark, all that

brown paint round the skirting boards and everything. And there was a big brass pot full of, I suppose it was pampas grass, and it was always shedding, and there was a little dining room with one window to look over the beach, but it was always kept tightly closed, almost as though people advertised sea air but didn't actually want it inside. Perhaps it made the starched cloths and napkins limp. My mother liked it there because it was cheap but Mrs Grindle kept up what she called 'standards'. Everything was very neat and clean. We had to leave our shoes at the back door and go upstairs in socks, no thongs around then, and she probably would not have approved anyway …

And the beach? Was it a good one?

We thought it was. Little rock pools, lots of periwinkles and crabs and starfish and everything. I was disappointed when I first saw places like Bondi years later. It seemed to have no character. But I suppose that would be seen as the grossest slander now. We liked climbing on the rocks and pretending to be marooned sailors or lighthouse keepers. And we would build the most gigantic castles and moats. There must have been plenty of space. It was always our aim to make something the sea couldn't destroy …

And other seaside activities?

They had a little fair there in the summer evenings. A coconut shy. Icecreams. A little merry-go-round. Now, when I look back, I think it was very much geared to families, to parents and small children, yet there must've been teenagers … though children left school at twelve or thirteen then and went out to work or an apprenticeship if they could find something … it was as though we went from being children to being working people with a little wage …

What years are we talking about?

Thirty-seven, thirty eight, between the worst of the Depression and the War, it doesn't seem much of a childhood but I remember being a happy little fella. Perhaps more things were kept from us … I remember we heard these noises at night, little claws on the wood, scuttling and running around—and I asked my mother what they were. She hesitated and then she said it was lapdogs we could hear. I asked her what were lapdogs and she said very small dogs that people could put on their laps. She said old ladies often brought them to the seaside with them for company and let them run loose.

And you believed her?

I did. Absolutely. I heard them squeaking at night and I said something to her and she said it was a fact that lapdogs squeaked, not barked. Bill and I wondered where they were kept during the day as we never saw them. There was an area under the house, all the houses along there were joined and several of them were pretty squalid really, and there was a grate by the back steps. We tried looking down and it was very dark under there but we thought we could see little eyes. Some of the houses used the space for storage but I don't think the Grindles did. They had a big kitchen and pantry and I think mother and daughter slept in a tiny space off the laundry. They didn't indulge themselves. But it's hard now to decide whether they made a reasonable living in those years or whether they just scraped by and every penny counted. They both wore those big flowered aprons and lace-up shoes and they always seemed to be polishing …

Have you talked about that time much since then—with your mother or your brother?

I can't say I have, not a lot. But I remember telling my granddad and my uncle Harry that there were a lot of lapdogs at our seaside boarding house and that you could hear them squeaking at night—and they both sort of looked at each other—and my granddad just said, 'Were there now, lad? Lapdogs, eh?' I found out later they had nearly killed themselves keeping a straight face—and then laughing after I'd gone home. I didn't know whether to laugh or feel embarrassed. But I don't suppose any of this would interest today's more sophisticated readers of *Family Travel*, not now when kids would rather go down to the video game parlour in the mall than build sandcastles. Maybe it's time you gave me the big push or I hand in my bundle and retire gracefully to a quiet little seaside town—if I can find one.

You can, of course, but I will commission a piece—up to five thousand words plus photos or sketches and the nostalgia laid on with a trowel—provided—

That I put in more of the nuts and bolts?
No, provided you put in the lapdogs …

10. UNDERWORLD

Barley-bitten wind
Makes fine silvery waves to
Stroke its velvet nap.
    A season's passage;
    Soft rustlings, sighings, whispers,
    Secrets shared and gone.
Busy by junctions,
Loud to sharp ears just beneath
That brisk canopy.
    Grey mice, nesting birds,
    Flitting through the intricate
    Close-mapped urban spread;
A city that's built
In haste, soon sprawling over
Deep dark sown earth.
    The world above, bends,
    Ripening heads dip lower,
    Web-woven banquets.
Rich pickings, sun-bright,
Sap-filled stems turning brittle,
A change presaging …
    Warnings underfoot,
    Calm dawn and the first quiver;
    Tang of foreboding.
The aftermath, crushed,
Bruised, in a straw-tossed whirlwind
Across a ruined map.

11. THE PICKELHAUBE MOUSE

In the debris of a war—canisters: musty, jerrycans: empty, wire: barbed,
Trenches: lost—in the mud and flood and abandoned mortars—are helmets.
"See here," "Listen: ta-rat-ta-rat-a-rat!" "wouldn't want to sit on *that*,"
"No wonder they look such clowns," then set down, passed on. Left. Thrown.
As boys throw awkward balls and sounds, "pickelhaube, pickle, pickle, pick-ill,
Can't see what the pickle is, could make a soup inside!" "ha, ha," relieved,
Laughed. A moment's quiet. With the guns fallen dumb. (Or are we deaf?)
But the shells, the shells, still whistle in our heads. Lovely in the night, bursting
Flowers, roman candles, eerie sparkling rain. Then flung wide about us, the scream,

The scream, mantles, muffles, mutes minds, writhing … then quiet, thank God.

Left it there, between sandbags, a fit abode for the homeless, a welcome in,
Propped up, roomy, a fine country place, is it not, furnished with fresh straw;
Small creature, skepped about with *súgán*, that it may not hurt your little head,
The thud and ringing, not vermin now, or pest, but passer-by in some disarray.
The bridge between worlds—*things made*, steel, iron, leather, passing, but not to build
On frail bridges, this world between lives; before birth, after death, a boy's life,
A man's life. If men were mice, wee *luiche*, the sun would shine and sunflowers nod,
We would smell of must and corn; we would scamper soft and weak, born blind
And pink, with pointed teeth and fraught pink ears … *my ears ring* … fine rooms you
Have, ventilated, snug, space to turn and sing and sleep, banquets, biding time—

Cornfields, barley, wheat; ploughing, planting, threshing, milling, bread;
  Green pastures filled with Joseph's kine, fine and fat, and sheep;
Big plodding horses, white-feathered, Conquets and Brabançons … Swallows
  In the barn-eaves, a fertile earth, with groves and hedges, poplar colonnades,
Church towers to ring the angelus, grass bending to the choirs of God;
  They came, they passed, trampled down the life of fields, churned with boots,
Spent brick-dust on the air, burned good wood and sacred shapes, ploughed
  And sowed with boards and bags, vandal hordes, camp-followers, flies, rats.

In and out, out and in, biscuit crumbs, a last seed-head, a dying beetle,
  Larks' eggs crushed, a shrew dead, discarded tins yielding bully beef.
The smells, the smells, a hand abandoned; busy, busy, to and fro, a moment
  Of content in swift-passing life; a bridge between life and decay; then sit awhile;
Sit awhile upon my palm, still your restless darting … *your house is safe*.
  It will not decay, not yet, but when you're gone, *when we are gone*, and life roots
Here again, remember me, man without child, without tomorrow, remember me,
  Small mouse, as you fill this world—like dragonflies above forgotten craters—
                and your generations
                without number—

*

Notes: *súgán*: a plaited straw rope, *luiche*: mouse.

(To the Memory of George Colgan)

12. THE BAT PEOPLE

The one reporter covering the debate recorded it as 'at times fiery'; he also noted that no decision was taken. The colony of long-eared bats was 'safe' for the time being. He hesitated for a minute or two over 'safe'.

The school principal, angry that no decision had been taken, sent a letter home with all the students urging their parents to press the council for action; 'the health of your children is in jeopardy' then he moved the cursor and changed jeopardy to 'danger' and finally to 'risk'; there was no point in having parents do nothing because they didn't understand a word.

The Council despite being unable to come to a decision did take one important step; they sent away to Hobart asking the department to send them an 'expert'; the department did respond but not immediately. Long-eared bats were a rare species; but experts, it seemed, were even rarer. One was finally seconded from a quoll study and arrived in the small town unannounced on a weekday evening. It was too late then to go and meet the shire councillors so he settled into a room at the town's refurbished and heritage-listed hotel and unpacked all his paraphernalia including infra-red and time-lapse photographic equipment. He also unpacked his climbing boots and his ropes; it might be necessary to abseil into the caves. He felt a rush of excitement. It might be the job ahead. It might be the sense of heightened tension within the town.

The principal's letters had achieved their result; a deputation had waited upon the mayor in his office two days ago. The district's more active parents had taken it upon themselves to tell him the council's inaction 'wasn't good enough'; pigs in Malaysia, horses in Brisbane, viruses leaping casually over gaps between species. Where was it going to end? They weren't having any bats camping near their children and if the council wouldn't get rid of the creatures, they would.

Faced with this sense of made-up-minds, the mayor felt himself swept along with the enthusiasm, anger, and decisiveness which surrounded him. "I quite understand." He was fond of this phrase.

"Understanding," the principal reminded him tartly, "is not sufficient. We, all of us, want action. The lives and health of innocent children are at stake. We want to see the council down there tomorrow either removing those creatures to a distant location or, if that isn't possible, then the caves sealed."

"It will be a large job. I cannot take men off other urgent work. Besides—we've been promised—"

A father snorted. "Then if you won't do it, we will." The wonderful simplicity of this statement gripped the delegation.

"Please—" the mayor felt there were more caveats he should enter but stronger minds bore him along and he found himself promising "tomorrow—yes, tomorrow we'll begin trapping—" but after they had trooped out and he had his small office to himself again he agonised over the 'expert' who had been promised, who would arrive at any moment. 'Experts', he had discovered in other contexts, preferred their ground of study to be untrampled. But his deputy thought that persuading the delegation to hold off until the 'expert' had done his report seemed just too extraordinarily difficult. What they were suggesting doing to a colony of bats might be what they would do to him, metaphorically if not physically, and council elections were only six months away. Then he thought of pleading ignorance of what people had intended when he got to speak to the 'expert'; turning away from the situation, even perhaps taking a brief trip to Hobart ostensibly to consult with the Minister for Local Government, seemed a more attractive alternative …

The principal was a good judge of human nature; he had seen vacillation, equivocation, he knew action was unlikely to come as quickly as tomorrow, he wasn't sure action would come at all. But having fired people up in the good cause of student safety, he now wondered if his career would be best served by stepping back a little.

"You'll join us, no time like the present, eh, mate?" He found a large parental hand upon his shoulder.

"It's getting late—bats go out at night. Early morning might be better. And we'll need—"

"No sweat! Meet down the road. Six?"

"What should we bring? Rifles? Ten-eighty? Spotlights?"

"Bring everything. We want to get it done fast before—"

"Yeah! Before that old wimp—" Other views of the mayor got lost in the general hubbub. The principal realised that keeping people on hold, urging them to go home and sleep, to get up early and come prepared, was not good strategy. The energy and anger still boiled around him. He felt himself to be in the position of a man who holds several large black dogs on a leash. It would only be a moment's work to unclip their chains.

He thought of going home, having dinner, then going down to the caves himself with a roll of wire-netting. But the opening was probably too large to net. Maybe they should treat tomorrow as an exploratory hunt, decide how best to go in, when and where, who was bringing what, then the following morning they'd go in in earnest.

It was still dark when he turned up, a roll of rusty wire in the back of his car, but half a dozen utes and pick-ups were already there, parked haphazardly across the rocky hillside. It was hard to see the entrance to the place which, though it was called a cave, was more like a narrow winding gorge through the broken hillside. Huge trees with knotted roots made the going difficult, prickly shrubs caught his parka, there was a confused hubbub up ahead of him, then he heard several rifle shots in quick succession. The eastern sky was faintly lemon now.

For a moment a spotlight was swivelled in his direction and he yelled to the person to 'turn the bloody thing around'; with so many people tramping up the hillside he suddenly realised the chance of someone being shot accidentally was quite high. It was still dark in under the rough rocks and vegetation and he caught his foot in a tussock and nearly fell.

Something primal, he felt, in the heavy boots and rifles and lights and confused talk and people yelling instructions to other people and no one really listening, all wanting to be the one to draw first blood. A shout came up. "There they are!" Everyone, including those who had loosed off several exploratory shots in the hope of pinpointing the bats' main roosting area, homed in. Lights cross-crossed the area like searchlights in an old war movie. Lights gleamed on bat eyes, on bat wings, in the broken defiles and narrow caverns and steep eroded slopes and fallen timber, people struggled to take aim; others blazed away in the general direction.

Bat wings swooped through the tapered space. Several boys armed with sticks beat out wildly against the dark shapes. Men stumbled and grasped at rocks. Rifles were re-loaded. How long they were at work no one could say later. "Seemed like a couple of minutes," one man said to the principal. "But I think we got all the little buggers." Those that fell wounded were kicked and trampled on. One man, out of bullets, grasped a large rock and crushed several of the small creatures still wriggling underfoot.

"Phew!" The principal was faintly afraid of the lust he had unleashed. These were school parents, members of the Parents and Teachers Association, people he met round town, people who came to school with a car-load of children, men who came to parent-teacher interviews at the year's end. Someone clapped him on the back. "A good day's work. Didn't realise there were that many of the little buggers. Just as well we got 'em before their numbers got any larger. I'll bet we get more fruit this year too. They must've been swiping *tons* of it."

"Yes. Well, it's done now. We'd better get home for breakfast."

Several more people came up to say similar things to him. He felt he should feel a sense of satisfaction. "I'd better run my roll of netting across here somewhere, don't want children coming up this way for a while."

"Yeah, you do that, mate. I'd best get a move on."

And in twenty minutes all the vehicles parked were gone and a tangled mass of netting closed the hillside access.

*

When the 'expert' arrived the hillside was silent. He saw the netting, smelled the smell, still faint in the calm enclosed heat of the defile. He wriggled his way in, leaving his pack at the entrance. It was hard walking on the rough ground, harder still to avoid the carnage underfoot. Occasionally he saw a small creature struggling to rise with broken wings and feet.

It overwhelmed him. He felt the tears prick in his eyes and was glad there was no one to see him. But gradually, as he walked round, counting the corpses of dead bats, the mothers, the half-grown, he felt a terrible anger rise up. This was the only colony of these long-eared bats that he knew of in the state. *Vespadelus Coddingtoni*. Land clearing, farmers with guns, urban development … little by little their numbers had dwindled. Now he would be lucky if he could save the last half dozen which lay wounded. And if he couldn't … he thought of saying: a group of people in a small country town wiped out the last of, made extinct, destroyed a species … and

he imagined them laughing, yeah, got the little buggers … yeah, we'll have no more trouble with them spreading diseases round the place … he had heard other people say similar things …

He carefully lifted every bat he could find that wasn't dead. It took him a long time to cover the area and carry out his grisly search. And the end result was meagre.

He placed them gently into the back of his four-wheel-drive. He drove back down the rough road and into the town. School was coming out. He drew up outside it. He waited for the children to come out the gate. He yelled at the top of his voice "Come and look!" Some of the children ignored him. Some hesitated then went on. Some were running and jostling and shouting to one another and probably didn't notice him. But several children came over and looked inside the back doors he had opened. "There," he said. "That is what extinction looks like. Look closely."

"They look like dead bats," one boy said and several girls shrieked and said they were yukky. A teacher, seeing the car parked at the gate, got suspicious and came out. She asked him to move saying she would have to call the police otherwise.

"You do that. You call the police." His hot anger had been replaced by a terrible cold fury which seemed to absorb everything around him and leave only ashes. He wondered if people could go on with their lives, if he could go on with his life, after what had happened here.

The children gradually moved on. The teacher, apparently unsure of her position, had retreated. Perhaps she told staff still inside the school because a little later on the principal walked down the path and came up to him.

"I'll have to ask you to move your vehicle. We don't allow anyone to accost the students as they come out."

"But you did it for them. They need to know what you did for them."

He hadn't known he had that sort of strength. Fitness, yes. But not this terrible strength which could lift another man off his feet and hold him suspended before dropping him roughly to the pavement. "What a pity I didn't put on my heavy boots. I could crush you the way you crushed these creatures."

At that moment the principal believed him. The face. The voice. Something about the man that wasn't quite sane. Afterwards he shrugged the memory off. The children will thank us, he thought more comfortably, when they understand *we* only did it for *their* safety and their health.

13. A GOTHICK HOUSE

"Never been in a place that creaks so much … you should hire it out, Chay, for spook weekends." Hugh was holding a slide-rule and notebook in one hand.

They were all in the big shadowy front room. All day the wind had been gathering cloud and now that it had died away, the late afternoon hung heavy and dark and oppressive round the old station homestead.

"It's too big," the girl who had been prowling ever since she arrived said suddenly.

"Too big for us now, certainly." Chay had decided he didn't like her but it didn't really matter; she would be gone again soon. It was her partner Hugh who mattered more. Hugh was here to look over the building and decide if it could be restored or whether the structural damage was too far gone and a new house was the only answer. Irene was small and slim and there was something about her that seemed sly; the way she seemed to edge sideways into cracks in their conversation. Perhaps she existed in Hugh's life in a narrow opening he hadn't thought to close in time. And she touched things.

Chay had mixed feelings about this place. He had invited his cousins Eric and Nancy. If there were decisions to be made about demolition then he would like them, as the only immediate family left, to be involved in the decision.

They too had wandered from room to room all afternoon. "I've never been in your attic," Nancy had said. "Are there old heirlooms in there?"

"I wouldn't think so. My father sold off anything moveable. And it's pretty cramped. But you can look if you want to trust the floor."

She had given a stifled squeal and said no, she wasn't that determined to find something to make the long drive worthwhile.

That was it, Chay thought now, they were all seeing it in terms of its value to them, its potential, its costs, its disposable secrets. Only Irene … he had no idea what she was thinking about it. She had admired the house from the front. But then many people did. It even got mentioned in guide books to the district because it was visible from the road. They possibly yearned and envied and made snide remarks about the family which had built it a hundred-and-twenty years ago.

Hugh stood there bouncing on his soles and the wood under the worn linoleum bounced back. "Bad … very bad." Then he smiled. "But not terminal."

"Well, we can't make any decisions tonight." Eric came over to Chay. "Not until Hugh has done his stuff. So let's go in and have a drink and decide what we're going to do about dinner. The wiring is still sound, isn't it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. It is insured but not for enough to rebuild like this."

"You haven't thought of going down that road?" Hugh sounded serious.

For a nanosecond Chay thought he hated them all. They were all like him. All professional people. All white. All middle-class. All ambitious. That sense of unstated greed. All the sort of people he dealt with every day. And he suddenly felt he looked at them as an alien might look at the inhabitants of a new planet: as curious specimens. Even dangerous cruel specimens.

'Why?' But there was no answer. Instead a sudden crack of thunder still some distance away on the plains.

"I read a book once," Irene said unexpectedly in her breathy voice, "about people out on these great grassy plains. Someone was making a movie. You could make a movie here."

"About what?" Chay wondered if she could hear the tinge of sarcasm. "Family scandals?"

"Silly," she said without looking at him. "No, you get a script that suits and offer them the house for free—so long as they pay for some of the repairs."

"My little genius. She is a whiz," Hugh said to the group, "she could make a man who's been on the dole ten years into a financial whiz-kid."

Irene wasn't really listening. She had turned back to the high tongue-and-groove walls of the hall with their large tarnished mirrors and an out-of-place stag's head.

"Really?" Nancy turned and stared at Irene. "So you are rich? Maybe you could help Chay. He's never been any good at putting packages together to save this place."

"I'm not rich," Irene half-turned. "I give people—principles."

"Not many principles here," Eric laughed noisily. "Chay's old man, and mine for that matter, were gamblers. They dropped thousands every time they came to the big bad city. There is a limit to what sheep can fund. They found out the hard way."

"They never had any big wins?" Hugh sounded curious.

"They must have." Another crack of thunder came, a little closer. "But the true gambler never gets out when he's ahead. It isn't what the money does. It's the idea of that never reached pot of gold. It always exists just out of reach."

"I think we'd better cook and eat. Who knows if this is bringing anything."

"We might get stranded here," Irene shivered. "We might have to live with leaking roofs and no food for a week."

"No, it doesn't flood here. It's not low enough." Chay felt the imperative to get away from them all. It wasn't their fault that none of them, not even Eric and Nancy, cared about this place. It was a problem. Some time this week a line would be ruled under the final calculations. But he had the feeling it had been a mistake to involve other people in that final reckoning.

*

Nancy offered to cook when she had investigated the huge old kitchen more thoroughly. The cupboards still contained massive amounts of dented and tarnished pots and pans, tureens,

griddles, moulds, things she would never think of using, many of them rusting or filled with mouse droppings.

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Honestly Chay, this place is horrible. I'll have to wash before I can cook."

"Steak and eggs. There's plenty in the Esky. And I brought lettuce and tomatoes and bread and butter. There should be coffee and tea still in the cupboards. I'm sometimes surprised that people don't move in and squat."

"Out here? You're hopeful!" Eric had come in and was lounging against the huge kitchen table where young country girls had long ago chopped and mixed and pounded away in the making of meals for twenty. And now long thin pendant spider-webs swayed in the thickening dim of the coming storm.

Hugh came in carrying a box of groceries and dumped it on the scarred wooden table-top. "Where's Irene?"

"Poking her nose in everywhere." Nancy offered it as a straight statement.

"She's like that," Hugh didn't seem to see it as an unpleasant trait. "It's amazing the things she finds out about people."

"So instead of putting financial packages together for people she gives a few easy lessons on how to blackmail your way to wealth?"

"Now that, Nance, isn't nice."

"You started it." She busied herself with rinsing the lettuce and tomatoes under the tap after letting it run red with rust for a minute or two. "And you can put the meat in the pan. Only one of the rings seems to be working on the stove."

"Shouldn't I pound it first? If nothing is tender here at least the meat can be."

"If you want." She put the salad to drain. "We'll have to wash all the plates first."

"I'll do that." Chay seemed to come out of a long reverie. He had been standing by the bank of west windows watching the storm come up. A sudden wind came and whistled eerily round the massive house. The old timbers seemed to shiver under its touch. "I wish they'd built of stone or brick. Then the place would stand till kingdom come."

"What about the shearers' cottage? What state is it in? We could camp out there if you think this whole place might come down?"

"No, it's not that bad, Nance. And I doubt if the cottage is any better. It was probably thrown up by a couple of bush carpenters in a week and leaks like a sieve."

"There would be stories in all this though, wouldn't there? The sort of things we heard as kids." Nancy bundled plates and cutlery into a pan of cold water and sloshed things around.

"Then that's what we can do over dinner," Hugh had constituted himself chef and stood over the pan, "swop stories. Like Shelley and Byron and Mary telling ghost stories."

"No, we can't." Nancy was tart. "I've got better things to do than make up stories."

"Too much exercise for your brain, Nance?"

She cast her cousin a sharp look. "Of course not! But it's alright for Hugh. He probably hears all sorts of stories about old houses—"

"I thought it was the modern preoccupation, saving the past?" Chay continued to open and close cupboard doors. It was strange to think that all this tinware belonged to him. Maybe he should invite in those putative squatters. Or just remove a few family photographs and mementos and leave the house to the nation.

"You misunderstand me," Hugh said mildly. "We've all heard stories, gossip, anecdotes. It would take our mind off the roof falling in or the floor giving way."

"Yes," Nancy said acidly, "let's tell stories of houses where the roof blew off and rats chewed through the walls and a guest got stuck in his bedroom floor. Bundle of laughs."

"It probably would be." Hugh turned his steaks. "I don't suppose we've got any onions?"

"Look in there." Nancy indicated a box with her elbow.

"Stories … " Chay seemed to talk to himself. He saw Irene come out of the old summerhouse by the back fence. Again he was struck by her quality of slipping sideways through

the world. But the rising wind caught her long straight brown hair and blew it around. It seemed to return her to the human race. "Would Irene have stories?"

"I've never asked." Hugh turned away from the stove for a moment. "I don't know her … just in passing."

"Oh!" Nancy raised an eyebrow. "Not a grand passion then? Can't bear the hours spent apart?"

"Passion … and stories," Hugh seemed slightly uncomfortable, "belong in different worlds."

The bank of windows along the west side of the kitchen rattled in the wind. "I'll guarantee all the putty has dried out." Chay waved to Irene but she didn't appear to notice. It didn't matter if Nancy or Eric got struck by blowing sheets of tin, if they fell through floors or had accidents on the stairs; they knew exactly what they were visiting. But Irene …

From thinking of her as sly he suddenly found himself re-thinking and re-positioning her as an innocent in this world of theirs. And if there were stories worth telling over their scratch meal would they want to include her in their hearing? Because all the stories that came to him were linked to this place and the stories had changed over the years, grown dark with grime and patina-ed now with regret.

Yet he could clearly remember his uncle saying to his father: "You've got to laugh—" About what? He couldn't remember. And that statement always seemed to require the corollary: 'if you didn't, you'd cry'. But we weren't unhappy here. Not *unhappy*. Just …

The word which came first to mind was uneasy.

*

If they had thought to sit and chat the rain decided otherwise. It rattled windows and thudded on roofs. And the house began to leak. Water crept in warped window-frames and found its way between sheets on the roof. They left their meal to hunt out buckets and pans and old jugs and saucepans and place them under drips.

"Just as well," Hugh said loudly. "We might not have noticed them in a fine stay. But I think it's all repairable, your roof, your windows and doors, it's not about the frame or the foundations … no rising damp … "

"You cheer me up!" Chay said loudly. But he could remember his mother saying … saying … "that roof! It'll be the death of me!" Did she mean the leaks, the lost nails, the shifted sheets, the failure to get the menfolk to take her seriously? Thinking back he could remember a bucket standing to catch a drip in the front hall; it always came out in storms, almost an old friend, and yet the roof over the front of the house looked … just as it should … each sheet overlapping, nothing warped or shifted …

Maybe all the leaks were like that: no obvious genesis.

It was almost as though the house had a mind of its own, an inbuilt wish to slowly self-destruct. As though it had no intention of waiting for the gamblers in the family to come with long faces and say 'Sorry, the house's got to go, the land, the furniture, the family heirlooms … '

And the lights flickered in the storm. "I am not sure I'd want to trust your wiring—our wiring—at a time like this." Eric stifled his unease. Maybe it would be the answer after all. The cost of re-wiring out here would be … astronomical …

"Then—eat up," Nancy said briskly, "and we'll all go early to bed. Turn everything off."

"There might still be candles in the kitchen cupboards," Chay felt their answers had been made for them, "unless the mice have got at them." The house would be worth quite a bit as salvage and there were things worth auctioning. The land was rented out to a neighbour now; he sheared two lots of sheep in his own shed. It wouldn't be hard to … tidy up …

If only he didn't have this vague sense of guilt. Guilt? No. It wasn't a place steeped in love and laughter. More a sense of being remiss somehow.

Though the beds were dry and the rain eased off in the late evening none of them slept well. But it was Irene, yawning over a scratch breakfast, who said, "What a racket last night. I could hear footsteps running on the roof. What on earth was it?"

Chay shrugged. “Possums.”

Eric and Nance nodded vaguely. The possums here were notorious. They came up from the trees and scrub beyond the yards, they ate fruit in the orchard, they thundered on the roof, they annoyed the men who came for the shearing. They were never seen. But generation after generation cursed them. Their childhood visits here had been made bearable by the image of small furry grey creatures and inquisitive noses to offset the noise up above them …

Hugh was up in the attic looking for their leaks but with the morning sun pouring down, the paddocks already looking dry and white again, he might, like others before him, find it hard to pin them down.

Irene looked around the table and her look was sceptical. She lifted her coffee mug and drank. “Possums,” she said calmly and her disbelief kept them silent. All that rain on the roof, the wet tin, the overflowing gutters. Whereas, briefly, privately, Chay pictured a giant ball smashing into the house and wood and corrugated iron tumbling in a cloud of dust and there was swift satisfaction in the image. He didn’t need his cousins’ permission.

Irene smiled at Hugh when he came in to a late breakfast, spider-webs caught unnoticed in his dark hair, and said again, “Possums.” They all felt her disbelief but no one hurried to respond.

Then Nance suddenly blurted out: “So it is true!”

“What is?” Chay just wanted to pack and go.

“What I heard your mother say when I was young—that she always heard the possums before—before—” Her colour heightened.

Chay and the others turned to stare at her. And then the faint memory seemed to slip out from its hiding place. Silly words, but long caught in the cracks of his childhood. “Yes, I remember. It’s what she told your mother, when you came to visit, that she would always hear the possums on the roof before the men returned after a losing streak, she would know the worst before they came home and tried to pretend nothing was the matter, that they’d had a good trip, that we weren’t going to lose the property … ”

“Possums,” Irene said thoughtfully. She might equally have said “Gamblers”, “Lies”, “Misrepresentation”. It no longer mattered. Chay and his cousins stayed silent and busied themselves with toast and coffee.

14. FOR CECILE

First came a letter, then a phone call. But Lottie Batzloff was firm. She certainly did not wish to be interviewed about her sister’s life. The idea that a stranger would want to do a biography of Patty was disconcerting and, by turns, she was flustered, indecisive, and downright rude.

The caller seemed to draw back from her suggestion because she said mildly, “Anyway, please do get in touch if you change your mind. You know a biography is inevitable. So why not let me do it? I admire your sister’s work immensely, I’m an experienced writer, and it would save you being pestered by other people who can see the need for a book.”

Inevitable? No. Death was inevitable but her sister’s life, her sister’s *story?* Why couldn’t they be content to let Patty live on in her books and leave the woman herself to the peace of the grave? There was a nervous hammering in her chest. She had thought those old yet constant worries had finally been set to rest as the ropes gently lowered Patty’s coffin and the tape recorder had played something from Handel, she couldn’t remember what.

But this Dr Charles—who was she but a voice on a telephone?—spoke with such authority—as though she had a God-given right to descend on a tired old life, to poke and pry, to demand answers to questions, to disrupt its precarious routine. It was all made to *seem* harmless but Lottie was shrewd enough to catch the hidden questions. Dr Charles with a kind of academic arrogance would demand to know *everything*, except she was calling it ‘a life’s truth’.

So, *if* she said yes, she must prepare. It was her house now, her life, her papers, her knowledge. As her mother, long ago, had done, she would prepare the 'parlour' treatment. There would be the equivalent of gleaming furniture and silver, overflowing bowls of perfumed roses … Just as her mother had drawn the eye from the threadbare rug and the broken windows along the verandah so too would she draw the attention away from some very important omissions.

The sunny room where Patty had worked on those beautifully written and illustrated children's books (two or three each year for more than forty years) was cleaned and tidied and searched and polished till it was a fitting 'shrine'; she carried away any notes and scribbles and compromising material which did not fit Patty's careful image. She packed up bundles of unused work and posted them away (they definitely were not suitable for Dr Charles, for anyone here if it came to that), she went through family photographs and took out those which Dr Charles would be allowed to see; she had a small bonfire of material which did not seem to be of any use to anyone now.

Then Lottie drew up her bony shoulders, made firm her whiskery old chin, sensed the whiff of one last grudging battle … and told Dr Charles she might come and welcome.

*

Dr Adrienne Charles was a Reader in English at the University of Queensland, editor of several anthologies of stories and poetry for children, well-established commentator and critic of children's literature, one time member of the Children's Book Council. She had a well-regarded biography of children's author Dorothy Cottrell to her name; Patty Merriman, she hoped, would make her position unassailable. She also, in these early days of developing the canon of women's writing as an essential part of literary studies, felt deeply attracted to the idea of rescuing from possible obscurity—though Patty's publishers, not an unbiased source, had assured her Patty's books were 'ageless' and they had a respectable reprint program in hand—a woman who had overcome the many disadvantages of an inadequate country schooling, a German background when that was a distinct danger, a complete lack of knowledge of the publishing world (like Joseph Conrad she had sent her first book off as a hand-written effort in an exercise book with sketches on scraps of paper), and no acquaintance with anyone of influence.

Yet her first book, published in 1921, *The Wallabies' Christmas*, had burst through all barriers and sold and sold. Dr Charles thought a chapter using Patty as a role model would work; aspiring young writers, aspiring young *women* writers, needed women like Patty in their world view.

It was unfortunate that Dr Charles and Lottie Batzloff could not seem to find common ground. To Lottie, Dr Charles with her beautiful styled hair, her shrewd inquisitive gaze, her mildly masculine suits, her long-winded jargon-filled way of explaining what she wanted to know, her constant reference to writers and books and comparative theory, things Lottie had never heard of, was immensely intimidating. She protected herself by answering as briefly as possible and volunteering nothing. Dr Charles found Lottie with her heavy closed face, her long silences before speaking, her thick stockings, shapeless woollen dresses and clumping laced-up shoes, a deeply unsympathetic collaborator and source.

She couldn't help wondering if Lottie, with so few of the physical and mental advantages of her successful sister, had resented her, had been jealous of her success. It was not surprising that Dr Charles leaned more heavily than she'd intended on the physical evidence provided by the books themselves, the publishers' letters to and from Patty, the great bundle of fan letters, the photographs and newspaper cuttings from launches and book signings—than upon personal reminiscences provided by Patty's sister.

*

Each day she drove out from Toowoomba to the small farmhouse sited discreetly in from the road in the Wellcamp hills. New brick homes were going up on both sides but she could imagine how quiet and secluded it must have seemed when Patty and Lottie first moved in. She photographed it from several angles and planned to use the nice picture Lottie had given her with Patty standing with one hand resting on the garden gate. Once indoors, she spent several hours

carefully sifting through Patty's correspondence, unused story ideas, folders of sketches, all set out with meticulous neatness on Patty's desk or on the nearby shelves. She looked in vain for the little human foibles that would make Patty come alive for her readers. She told herself it was Patty's German heritage which enabled her to work in surroundings of such superhuman neatness, the natural clutter of the artist was not Patty's way—and of course Lottie would have tidied after Patty's death; it was the natural *hausfrau* tendency, and there was no reason to expect Lottie to have kept Patty's room as a shrine to the past, her pencils left untidily as she'd last set them down.

She even, though she could not admit it, began to find Patty a little, well, *dull*. So there was a sense of relief when she and Lottie set out to visit the childhood home. It was a sign of a thawing in their relationship; if not friendship (and Dr Charles accepted that she and Lottie would never be friends, she wasn't sure that she even wanted an elderly woman who might come to have *needs* as a friend) then a degree of acceptance. They each had a share of Patty's memory and that sharing was sufficient.

Lottie had been blunt when she made the offer. "You must realize there's nothing there now."

"There must be something surely? A tree Patty liked to climb? Any little thing I can link to the photographs of Patty as a child?" Lottie shrugged herself into a dowdy brown coat, pulled on beige gloves, picked up a worn brown handbag, and came out to the car. "Neighbours perhaps—" Adrienne Charles continued with her thoughts, "a creek where she paddled—" It would help to 'ground' the book.

As though Patty lived like a hermit, that it was *her* home instead of *our* home, the old woman thought resentfully, and why doesn't she want to see us as a *family*, aren't we good enough for her? Or is Patty not a real person to her, a kind of … of Thumbelina, complete and sitting in her rose …

They ran out the Cecil Plains road as far as Biddeston then turned left on to back roads, gravelled and rather rough. Finally Lottie said, "Turn right here," then a little way along the dirt track, "stop the car here."

This was what Dr Charles had asked for. Now it was her possession. Lottie thought of mentioning the Merrimans. But Dr Charles had not asked about Patty's marriage. Did she think that because Teddy had died forty years ago he'd had no influence on Patty's life, Patty's career? She, Lottie, was quite content to leave it that way.

"Where was the house?" Dr Charles had stepped down, her sensible walking shoes sending up a little scuff of dust, her camera unslung.

"Along there. You see that wire gate? Yes, well, the house was there in that ploughed paddock,"

"I don't see anything."

"I told you everything was gone now."

Dr Charles was taken aback. She had interpreted 'nothing' as 'no house'; old houses did get pulled down, replaced, carted away on the back of a truck, turned into barns or haysheds … but this, *this*, was a kind of literary vandalism. She felt almost as though something precious to her own childhood had been destroyed. Where were the trees she had imagined, possibly an old windmill; only the creek, dry at the moment, wound through the patchwork of ploughed and stubble paddocks. But she rallied quickly and asked Lottie about the layout of the farm, where Patty had slept, how many acres the farm had covered.

Lottie, who had loved her home here, felt the loss far more keenly than Adrienne Charles ever could. She could've named every neighbour, every farm, every animal they'd owned, each spot where something precious, funny, sad, exciting, had ever happened. Now she answered each question but without looking at the other woman. Briefly tears glittered in her rheumy old eyes then she calmly winked them back, just as she had taken control of emotions throughout her quiet self-effacing life. She had from it all she had ever asked. This loss did not matter. She had the

house forever locked in her memory, sharply etched in both summer and winter colours, in colours of early childhood and in the greater sophistication of young womanhood.

Dr Charles made several notes then walked to and fro, taking photographs to suggest the views Patty might have looked out to see in every direction, the hills they had traversed, the more open farmland in the direction of Mt Tyson, the lower hills and the Southbrook road snaking past … She brought to her writing an intrusive passion for facts rather than nuances; she knew photographs would enable her to do justice to this scene when she sat down and sought exactly the right words but it never occurred to her that the scene she would ultimately present was the one that Lottie had sketched in. She would write, "The young Patty slept on the south side of the house with a view down the gentle slope to the creek and beyond to—"

Yet Patty could not be understood through her achievements, this recital of facts, she existed as much in her failures and these Dr Charles had unwittingly made inaccessible by her nature and her assumptions.

"You will want to see where the school was?"

"Oh, definitely." Dr Charles came out of a brief reverie. If *only* there'd been the remains of a chimney, an old dray, a picturesque if tumbledown barn, a pepper tree, a row of oleanders … perhaps the school-grounds would be more productive.

"Did Patty like school, do you remember?"

"No. Country children didn't, you know. They were tired when they came and they had to sit still in a small hot room when they'd rather be outdoors, and learn things they mostly didn't need—"

"But surely Patty would've enjoyed reading and writing?"

Lottie turned slowly and looked at her without expression. Her dowdy coat hung in sharp folds and Adrienne Charles wondered at her need for warmth on this sunny morning. A flicker of sympathy—Lottie *was* old—seemed to rise with trembling insecurity, to hover, then to diminish as suddenly as it had come.

"If you say so."

"No, I'm asking you."

"Patty was no different to the other children."

"But—" Dr Charles understood her own need to believe in Patty's difference, to stamp the book, *her* book, to set Patty apart from her sister. But was Lottie's view more likely to be correct? "—she would've enjoyed reading at home, surely? Children's books?"

"We had no children's books."

"What! No books at all?"

"The Bible—in German. My grandmother brought it out with her. It had its special place and we were not allowed to touch it."

This suddenly seemed to open up an immense new vista of thoughts and memories to Lottie. Dr Charles, firmly agnostic, held the image a moment, then moved forward. The grandmother, a German peasant woman with a Bible in her wagonload of little household chattels, butter-churns and soup tureens, gave ground without regret. Adrienne Charles said, "Do you remember just when Patty began writing stories?"

Lottie could've said, "We were always making up stories, mostly about animals and birds, when we were children, long before we had paper and pencils, long before we could read and write even." But she considered the question and said precisely, "She was fourteen when she wrote her first story. It was about a koala bear. She didn't like it that people killed them for their skins."

Dr Charles liked this and made a note. "Do you think that's how she developed her ideas on conservation?"

"Probably."

What a business that had been! The two of them crying and pleading with the man who had come into this area and was denuding the surrounding farms, the piles of stinking carcasses, the crows, the tacked-out rows of pelts—the man complaining to their parents. "Yer'd best keep them

kiddies out o' me way, I don' get much for each pelt so I gotta keep at it, fast-like—before sumpin' happens yer won' want—" Almost in mid-sentence, the whole situation had suddenly been re-cast in anti-German sentiments. It was late 1914.

Lottie climbed slowly back into the car. Dr Charles wrote 'Ethel Pedley etc/compare' and her mind ran busily on the possibilities.

Lottie directed her to the school grounds and said simply, "Just the trees left." In her eyes, her heart, was a keen nostalgia not for the school itself but for her young and vigorous self, for her lost playmates, many now dead or long since lost touch with. The square paddock was grass and weeds surrounded by ancient pepper trees. Here had stood the little weatherboard Linthorpe school.

Again Patty's biographer went through the motions, she climbed cautiously through the wire fence, she photographed the trees, she stood for several minutes trying to picture the youthful Patty in this small space. There would've been a tank, an open space kept dusty by the children playing rounders or tag or hopscotch. She imagined the young girl staring out the window, bored probably with fractions or learning the mountains of Scotland. Would the school have found any room for the German identities of a number of its pupils? Probably not. And one or two ill-trained teachers trying to ram the three Rs into unenthusiastic farm children would have done little to stimulate the imaginations of their charges. So was it coincidence that almost all children's writers of Patty's era (leaving aside C. J. Dennis perhaps) had turned to the Bush for inspiration? Their schooling offered so little, their ideas of 'Home' were reduced to a few photographs and a Bible and some vague reminiscences of a winter's night, their outings were few and far between—but the Bush was always there, a vast mysterious place of interesting animals and birds, strange calls, butterflies and beetles and wildflowers and nests and unmeasured distances …

She became quite enamoured of her chain of thought. But she said to the waiting Lottie as she put away her camera, "How many children would've attended? One teacher or two? Male or female?"

*

"Would anyone still living here remember Patty, old neighbours of yours, do you think?" She settled herself behind the wheel.

"I wouldn't think so. My brothers moved out of the district in the 1920s. Patty and I left after our parents died. But we used to shop at Southbrook. You might like to see it. It hasn't changed much."

So she directed and Dr Charles drove slowly along the winding gravel road. And the house was still there. It seemed astonishing that it should be there and virtually unchanged. And yet it seemed smaller, tireder, sort of faded and pinched, the intervening years had removed something, she wasn't sure what. The verandah had been enclosed with louvres and a white-painted mail-box said WILSON.

"You might like to stop here." Her voice sounded a little shaky. And yet, it couldn't hurt, not now, not under Dr Charles' cool assessing gaze. There could be nothing of Teddy left, nothing to spark unwanted emotions. The same ironbarks still grew on the hill behind the cowbails but they seemed somehow different now with a bright silo, a red Fiat tractor, a grey utility, a pile of fresh-cut firewood in their foreground.

"This is the house where Patty spent her married life."

Dr Charles felt a moment of irritation though it was directed more at herself that the old woman by her side. Of course Teddy Merriman had to be brought into the book but she hadn't yet begun to think about him and she'd been caught unprepared, it was the unpreparedness that annoyed her.

"Who lives here now?"

"I don't know. Someone called Wilson." That struck Lottie as self-evident unless a new owner hadn't yet changed the name on the mail-box.

Dr Charles shrugged and turned into the gateway in which the footprints of countless cows made a dried pucked wilderness. Her small car crept over the uneven surface. But the old-fashioned look of the house cheered her. Even if the present owner had no memory of the Merrimans a couple of photos would certainly be worthwhile. "Do you want to come in?" she drew in alongside the backyard gate.

"No. I'll wait for you."

It didn't seem to matter particularly. Adrienne Charles went briskly up the path, did a firm rat-a-tat on the shabby door. There was a pause, then a woman in a flowered apron opened it. A conversation ensued, then the woman went back inside, though without closing the door, and Dr Charles minced to and fro between the clumps of dockweed and the cowpats and the untidy piles of rusting farm debris and put the old house on film.

Lottie sat in the warm car. This farm had been almost a second home to her. Hardly a day had gone by when she didn't come up, ostensibly to spend time with Patty. But often, because Patty was busy or irritable, she would sit a little while on the old log which did as the chopping block at the wood heap and talk with Teddy. He, for some reason, found chopping and piling wood on the barrow soothing and they would just talk, talk of all kinds of things. It depended on Teddy's state what subject they began with—because some days he was 'well' and could talk on many ordinary things and other days he was 'unwell' and she would be very careful and gentle with him and encourage him to talk of Cécile, sometimes he would have a photo to show her, other times he would give her a letter to post for him. And he would always say, "You'll put in something for her, won't you?" She always said yes. Some days he was so down even the sound of a voice was too much and she would sit and listen to the constant thump of the axe into wood. And after a long time he would say suddenly, "Come again soon", and just turn and walk into the house.

She wasn't sure what sixth sense guided her but she always seemed to know exactly what was needed. But as she would ride away home there was always a sharp sense of envy of Patty. Gradually it became easier to bear as she realized she had the 'real' Teddy', or what was left of him. Patty had fought to get the Teddy who would make her path easier; she had fought her own parents who didn't see the Merrimans as having their innate commonsense, their ambitions for their children, their determination to work their way up to prosperity; they saw, or thought they saw, something a bit sagging and shiftless in the Merrimans … and Teddy' parents also wanted something different for their son and refused to see how disastrously the war had changed him.

Dr Charles came back. "Not terribly useful, I'm afraid. She says they bought the farm from the O'Reillys. Did you know them?"

"No. But there's lots of Irish people living hereabouts."

"Mmmm. And did Patty like living here? With her in-laws, I mean."

"She didn't mind. They were kind to her, once they'd accepted the marriage. She told Teddy she must have a quiet place to write. So they gave her that little room which sticks out the back."

"As a studio?"

Lottie mulled over this description. Studio? It sounded very grand and there had never been anything grand about this place. "Maybe. Sometimes she used to sleep in there."

"While she was in the middle of a book, you mean?" Dr Charles had a husband but no children. They both tended to live their own lives.

"No. If Teddy wasn't sleeping well."

"Oh?" She turned to Lottie. Was she missing something here? But the woman she'd spoken to was still watching from the house. There was something a little disconcerting about that silent watch. "What was wrong with him? Did he have a medical problem?"

"The war."

It was strange to be talking with someone to whom the First World War was still a part of her personal history. It suggested a gap that couldn't be crossed and Dr Charles wondered if she

had given enough weight to the fact that Patty's generation had seen the world from a very different standpoint.

"In what way?"

"Shellshock."

"Oh! Was it serious?"

Lottie was non-plussed. Shellshock, though she found she could say the word quite calmly, was something which hadn't been talked about. It was as though people were ashamed of it. Certainly there had been no medical care for Teddy. She did not even know if he had ever spoken of it to anyone outside herself and the Merrimans. Was it severe? She had nothing with which to compare it. But she knew how it had damaged his life.

"Yes."

"That must've made life very difficult for Patty?"

"It made life very difficult for Teddy." For the first time the old woman snapped at her.

"How did Patty cope?"

"She didn't take very much notice."

Dr Charles raised an eyebrow but asked no more.

*

They drove into Southbrook the back way, past the school, the Catholic church, the small cemetery, and came out on to the Toowoomba-Pittsworth road. Dr Charles, unused to rough country roads, took to the bitumen again with relief. "I could do with a drink." She sounded cheerful as she drew in at the front of the hotel. But if Lottie wanted to remain in the car she knew she would not cajole. "Would you like something?"

Lottie picked up her handbag. Her heavy shoes clumped on the hotel steps. Dr Charles still looked very smart, fresh and brisk, but she was conscious of a great tiredness that made her droop and, worse, a small but persistent pain that seemed intent on burrowing through her chest.

The place was almost deserted at this time of day. "Beer? Lemonade? Sherry? A cup of tea?" Dr Charles had never seen Lottie drink anything but tea but then she knew next to nothing about Lottie's tastes.

"I'll have a glass of orange cordial. Thank you."

Lottie sank down wearily into the chair. Perhaps she would feel better with something cool to drink. The car had become a little stuffy. Dr Charles ordered and sat down neatly.

"Did you do all your shopping here?"

"Mostly. Occasionally we went to Pittsworth. Not that we bought much. Flour. Sugar." She wished it wasn't such an effort to talk, to breathe even. She took the bottle with her heart tablets from her handbag and drank one down with the cordial. She had little faith in them but she would be home soon and could lie down.

"Has the town changed that you notice? Oh! Would you care for some sandwiches—I'm sure they would do us something." Dr Charles had no reason to doubt that the hotel would provide anything she asked for. "Some fruit?"

"No. I'll eat at home." She didn't really like eating in public, her teeth had fitted, but now they seemed a little uneasy in her mouth. "The town … " It was getting harder to concentrate, to think things through, with this odd little pain creeping around. "Not too much changed, the cheese factory closed … the school seems … bigger … and they've planted … " She understood she must give Dr Charles something more, something she could take away and feel satisfied with. "Teddy had a sister … Alice … she still lives in Clifton … she's a bit forgetful but she'd have photos … "

Dr Charles made a note of the address. 'A bit forgetful' would prove to be an understatement but Alice *did* have a photo of Patty at the farm and another of her at the Pittsworth Show.

"And there's my nephew, Fred, all my brothers were older … Patty gave him signed editions of each book … he might still have them."

Dr Charles was pleased to find that Fred Batzloff did have the signed editions still, a bit battered but a nice collection. Her trouble lay more with Fred himself, a busy farmer with a Hereford stud near Jandowae, who couldn't see why she wanted to ask him about his aunt or his reading habits; of course if she wanted to write a book about Aunt Pat that was fine by him but he really hadn't had that much to do with her and so, if Dr Charles wouldn't mind, he had work waiting …

She didn't persist and, privately, she was beginning to feel this was a peculiarly unforthcoming family. None of them seemed to regard what she was trying to do as important or worthwhile. Had Patty really sacrificed 'things' to her talent or had she been equally brusque and unforthcoming? Her publishers liked her but the things they liked had more to do with her reliability, her consistent standards of work, her ability to get things to them on time, her prompt response to letters … Dr Charles began to wonder if Patty had been *likeable* … yet Lottie had assured her Patty wrote individually to every young fan who sent a letter or card …

"Thanks for that. Now, are you sure you won't have a sandwich? No? Well, could you tell me a little more about Patty's husband. Do you have any photos of him?"

"Just the wedding photo. It's a good likeness. People didn't take a lot of photos in those days." She had never looked at the framed photo behind Patty's desk without a secret pang. She did not doubt that Patty had married him as much for his surname as for himself. But then … the self … wasn't truly marriable …

Whereas she felt he deserved to be cherished for all that he had gone through, for those sad harassed years. Being German Australian and slightly ambivalent had never changed that simple belief. Teddy had done what he believed to be the right thing, he had paid a high price, and he deserved to be cherished. She had changed her mind on many things in the course of a long life but she had never changed her thoughts about Teddy.

He farmed. At least Mr Merriman often referred to "my son Ted who'll be taking over the farm from me" but it was a fiction. Mr and Mrs Merriman knew as well as Teddy himself they would almost certainly outlive him. He trembled. He sweated. He thrashed through unshareable nightmares. He longed for the peace of death. His vision was increasingly erratic. He had 'states' when he occasionally verbally or physically abused his family and suffered terrible guilt pangs afterwards.

Patty avoided him as much as possible, writing by lamplight into the late evening. She felt increasingly confident that she could succeed with her children's books. And all the Merrimans, Teddy included, though they knew nothing about writing or publishing, were proud of her success. Another daughter-in-law would've been expected to help with milking and feeding poddy calves; Patty was exempt from nearly all the house and farm chores.

But it was Lottie who sat and listened when he tried to talk of the experiences which had brought him to this state; Lottie who heard his stumbling talk of a love affair in France, who nodded and encouraged when he talked of that young woman and accepted his wistful reiteration "she was a little like you, very kind" and "I've told her all about you" … but neither of them ever spoke of this to Patty. Patty was the wife, not the confidante, Patty was not to be bothered, Patty would be famous some day … "like Beatrix Potter" Teddy said once.

Dr Charles would find the idea of Lottie as anyone's tender and loving companion hard to accept. But then Dr Charles had not tried very hard to understand Teddy. The strange thought came to Lottie that in some way Dr Charles was a little like Patty. A kind of careless selfishness. She put the thought aside.

The road home seemed very long. Lottie had grown rather pale and haggard and Dr Charles suddenly spurred into concern said, "I'm sorry I've tired you. Can I get you anything?"

"No. I get tired these days. That's all."

Adrienne Charles accepted that but fussed a little over Lottie as she helped her out of the car and held the garden gate open for her, then stood watching as the old woman went inside. Back in her motel room she wrote up her notes for the day and put through calls to both Jandowae and Clifton. But an unease persisted and she tried ringing Lottie. No answer. She

debated. The old woman was almost certainly in bed. There was no point in pulling her out of bed. Tomorrow, she'd ring again.

Lottie died some time in the late evening. Her mind drifted a little before she lost consciousness but the pain remained no more than a faint nagging trouble. She had the idea she was somewhere in France and it was the awful gluey mud that was dragging her down, making it hard to breathe, pressing on her bony chest. She tried to lift an arm, then both arms, and felt them fall back heavily. There was a sound in her ears … only a cattle truck on the road … but for a moment she thought she was hearing the guns and that was Teddy's voice and other voices and she was pinned and helpless … then she was lucid again and she found herself thinking 'I've done everything. I posted that one last package yesterday … it *was* expensive … stamps seem to keep going up … but that was the last one' … she felt she could rest now … rest … the house was …

*

Dr Charles came to the small funeral. A few people from the Lutheran church Lottie had attended, her nephew who left as soon as he decently could even though he inherited the house and contents but then he had animals to get home to, a couple of neighbours.

The minister, intriguingly, spoke of Lottie as guardian and protector of her wonderfully gifted sister, of how she had taken the mundane day-to-day worries off her sister's shoulders. This echoed something of Dr Charles' view though she had seen Lottie more in terms of a rather snappy watchdog. What she found hardest to accept was Lottie's apparent lack of gratitude. If she idealized her sister—and the spotless neatness of Patty's room, the care with which every book was kept, suggested something of this—then why had she been so unwilling to do anything that would help make Patty come alive for a new generation of readers? Was it jealousy? After all, Patty had been attractive, gifted, admired, successful, remembered. Lottie had been none of those things. Even this small circle of mourners was likely to forget Lottie quite soon.

Adrienne Charles had arranged for a large and rather ostentatious wreath. It was not precisely guilt. Yet she had tired Lottie. She couldn't pretend otherwise to herself. But the people around her seemed to think it was her way of thanking Lottie for her help with the book. She didn't mind if they thought that. She certainly wasn't going to tell anyone that Lottie's collaboration had been more in the nature of drawing teeth.

Her initial enthusiasm for the book had taken several blows but she knew she would bounce back now that she had time to sort and collate all her gathered material, set out her chapters, decide which photos were useable, incorporate several of Patty's unused story ideas (readers always liked the idea they were privy to something that had lain 'hidden' away for years), sort out quotes from some of the lovely letters sent to Patty by children from all around Australia, make notes to compare Patty Merriman's style and content with the other children's writers, contemporary or earlier, who drew on similar themes, (she disliked biographies which seemed to present a writer in isolation from the literary community and readers' responses); if anything Lottie's death had made things easier because her nephew had inherited the copyright to all Patty's published work and he didn't seem to care what she did with the bundles of old letters.

Even so, she left the graveside with an unexpected sense of regret. The end of an era. Corny but true. And if there were further insights Lottie might've vouchsafed her into that rather dour farming family, insights that might've come in time with greater familiarity and acceptance, they were now indubitably closed off.

*

Adrienne Charles felt she had produced an attractive book, a work of genuine scholarship, but she also felt an odd reluctance to even think about seeking another subject for another biography. Another set of surly senile unhelpful relations made her blanch. And she had the vague feeling that she had never captured something essential about Patty, about her way of working. It all seemed too bloodless, too devoid of struggle and triumph and despair and creation.

The responses to the book were good, though perhaps not the enthusiasm she had hoped for. Reviewer after reviewer found the book interesting, "carefully written", "set in its time and

place", "attractively presented" but almost all of them found that it lacked heart although they expressed this as "a lack of warmth", "Dr Charles does not appear to find her subject of real interest" and a variety of other cautious disclaimers. Nowhere, and she collected reviews with unusual fervency, did a reviewer write "Dr Adrienne Charles has produced a work of definitive and enduring worth". Put together the reviews were adequate; more so when she drew out sentences from each—

"A book of sustained quality"

"A useful insight into the life of a woman who became a quiet institution"

"Well-written"

"The illustrations are a delight"

—but they were often marred by death-knell words like "pedantic" or "dry". One reviewer thought she hadn't done her material justice. She was tempted to write to him to say "If Lottie Batzloff had been your main source you would understand—" But, trimmed and edited, they would come in useful when a reprint was in the offing. And, between her book and Lottie's death, it was unlikely anyone else would trespass on her territory …

*

Some two months later a story appeared, in various versions, in many French newspapers. A typical version ran: "A storm has broken over an exhibition of sketches and paintings by Australian artist Charlotte Batzloff. Many of the pictures are early sketches or unused illustrations for Mlle Batzloff's sister's famous stories for children. The collection of almost a thousand items has been loaned by Mme Cécile Fourier, a farmer's wife from Rouen, Also contained in the collection are several delightful cartoons as well as a number of portraits of Mme Fourier's father, Theodore Merriman, who served with the Australian infantry in France in World War One. He died of war-related injuries in 1929.

"Doubts have been expressed about the authenticity of the collection, particularly by Australian researcher, Dr Adrienne Charles, who insists the pictures must be the work of Patty Merriman who gave her sister many unused sketches. But Mme Fourier has pointed to the fact that the last bundle of drawings which includes several satirical sketches of Dr Charles reached her two years after Patty Merriman's death. Mme Fourier also points out that she had signed an undertaking many years ago not to publish any of the material until after both Charlotte and her sister were dead.

"Dr Charles is refusing to comment further until the collection has been checked by a panel of experts. But the exhibition has proved so popular with children in Normandy that a national tour is being considered."

15. SEALS HAVE AN EAR FOR MUSIC

I thought I heard a song above
Whose sweet sounding drew me up—
But when I poked my head above the waves
There was nothing there but the sighing of the wind
As it played about the falling sheds and rolling drums—

I thought I heard a big bass voice
Like a marching song with deep drum roll
But when I swam inshore to hear it firm and close
It was just the mighty clash of reindeer horns
Up and down and all around the tussock plains—

I thought I caught the sound of bugle calls
But when I felt impelled to find out more
I was amazed to see it was the bright honk and bray
Of a thousand penguins marching up the pebble beach
All yelling “Here I come, my pet, here I come again”—

My mother told me of times when melodies
Enticing her toward the lights along the bay
Proved to be the noise of men and metal things
But wiser counsel kept her far enough away so she’d
Live out the fearsome season, live for another day—

Yet the sounds above call me and I can’t say no,
My mother, remembering the way it used to be,
Says, don’t go, my little one, stay firmly by my side—
But I hear the sound of song, like a wind in rusting eaves—
Yet when I look there’s no one there—and I try to convince her so—

16. THE FISHING TRIP

It has been my habit to spend my holidays on the Baltic coast, enjoying a week of fishing. But this year my favoured hotel had been damaged in a fierce storm. I sought without luck for an alternative. I had almost determined to return home when I was told that a woman living to the south of a nearby village sometimes took in boarders. This didn’t sound particularly promising, the way it was put to me, but I decided I would at least see the woman.

I reached the house just upon dusk. It was a large rambling building with carved wooden balconies upstairs, set in amongst the rearward dunes with a pine forest behind it and a creek winding seaward to its south. I could hear the distant pounding of the waves upon the coast but the house had the silence of emptiness. I beat upon the door with an antiquated knocker and at last a woman came. She was inordinately tall, tall to intimidation, with golden hair wound round her head in a thick plait, her eyes were the blue of an autumn sea with just that touch of iron in the sere blue. She listened in silence as I explained my predicament. Then she inclined her head slightly and suggested I come in. She gave me a price which was modest and told me it included three meals, then she escorted me upstairs and opened a wooden door. On our way we passed the open door of a sitting-room where old men sat, some smoking, some simply sitting, silent and bent, and a small fire burnt in the fireplace with its black-painted surrounds. There was something about their immobility that I found a little disconcerting.

I carried my bags and fishing tackle and set them down where my junoesque landlady suggested. The wood under our feet jumped and creaked as we passed but the plainly-furnished room looked clean and quite comfortable. She said I could eat in half-an-hour.

Dinner, though I was hungry, was not a lively meal. The old men sat at the long wooden table with its embroidered cloth and ate soft food. White bristles sprouted round their chins and slow mastication. One had fingers missing, another a huge purple scar slashed across his face; a third had an empty eye socket; his other eye, it seemed, fixed me with a permanent malevolence. Yet when I turned and looked straight at him, his remaining eye seemed to slide away with a sickening lurch. It reminded me of a time on rough water.

I was glad to be out of their presence and went early to bed rather than seek their company in the sitting-room. Yet, sleepy as I’d felt, I couldn’t sleep. The wind died away but the house seemed full of ancient creakings, groans, muffled grunts. I wondered at its age. Once I rose and crossed to the window. The stars were hidden by a light sea mist enclosing the house and dunes.

My bed was uncomfortable with a giving softness placed over a hardness; the mattress, I thought, was too thin and insufficiently stuffed. Several times I got up to stretch and ease my aching limbs; once I opened my door and looked out on the landing. Far away was the sound of music, a fiddle playing a lively dance, and the sound of laboured feet, keeping time. It seemed an odd time to be dancing. My watch said 3 o'clock. But I have heard it said the elderly often have difficulty sleeping.

I went back to bed rather than traipse downstairs in search of those unseen revellers. I would complain to my landlady if it proved to be a nightly occurrence. And I must admit I was not cheerful when I went down to breakfast. Still, the mist was clearing, its long fingers reluctantly letting go their close embrace, the sun was a feeble glow.

There was no one in the room except a young man with blond hair and brighter blue eyes. He said hullo and indicated the table with its rye bread and bowl of pickled herrings. I mentioned my intention to fish and he said they had a skiff if I'd care to borrow it. Then he said there was a small jetty in the marshes where the stream made its way through. It was not far, I need only skirt the pines and take the path. I thanked him but he seemed not to be listening particularly.

Then he went away. I ate heartily and drank from the coffee pot kept warm by the fender round a small fire. My landlady came, some minutes later, with a packed basket and the day beckoned, utterly normal I thought, and I wondered at the unease I had felt during the night. Merely a strange bed, I told myself.

The track was rough and seemed rarely used, muddy in places. But I found the boat tied up at the wooden jetty and soon was settled in and cast off. The ale-coloured water spread out in a flat gleaming area between clumps of greenish-grey reeds. I wasn't sure about its fishing prospects but it would undoubtedly be a productive place to shoot. Wild duck, geese, snipe, other birds I heard but didn't see in the boggy distance; now and then they lifted off with a clatter of wings, but mostly I drifted between them and they ignored me.

In the end I left my rod encased, it was somehow easier to simply drift, the clear clean space and light was refreshing after long months in an office in a grey building with lists passing beneath my desk light for my signature, endless lists. The silence of the marsh suggested a world in which no one intruded. A tiredness of the mind, the heart, the life as lived in bureaucracy, seemed to collect and seep away. I felt that a world without people would be my choice upon retirement, no voices, no intrusions, no questions.

I ate my lunch which was ample and stolid and unexciting. In late afternoon I began to think about returning although the house and its occupants did not attract. But as I pulled upon the oars, seeing the ripple upon the slow-running water, my eyes were drawn to a little row of sticks in amongst the reeds. Boards they proved to be on closer inspection, with marks on them. I investigated, mildly curious. Some had a cross incised, others a star-of-david, names and dates, but the boards themselves were slowly rotting. I wondered if the estuary had expanded over the years. The script was unclear. I made nothing of the names, nor the dates, and turned away, rowing with more vigour. From here there now seemed a variety of channels and I hoped I would not lose my way but I felt that so long as I always tended north I could not become lost in the maze.

In less than half-an-hour I had sculled my way back into what seemed the main channel. But I was becoming mildly apprehensive, a soft white mist was again creeping across the surface of the water and losing itself in the marsh reeds, the few distinctive clumps were slowly disappearing and what I had thought were the tips of pine trees were soon obscured. But I wasn't worried, not yet, the jetty was some metres long, I couldn't possibly miss it, and if I did I would merely come to the dunes. But with the disappearance of the sun I had the uneasy feeling I was no longer moving straight ahead.

It was early summer, chill without being dangerously cold. And yet as I moved across the water, only the dip and slurp of my oars in this strange white world, I felt the stirrings of an irrational fear. Was it possible after all to pass the jetty, the dunes, to find myself in the greater expanse of the sea. Surely not! I berated myself. I would notice the change in water, the greater

turbulence, where in-coming tide met out-running stream. Of course I would know and I would then turn back.

The mist cocooned me and dampened my coat and woollen hat; I pulled my collar up, pulled down my hat, tucked my boots in, and eventually shipped the oars. The water itself would carry me up against the jetty. In the silence I would hear the distant roar of waves … surely …

An hour passed. A city man alone. A man who had a fondness for solitude, who avoided people who would ask 'Why', who suddenly longs for blue skies and dancing sun, and now finds a kind of creeping despair. My son was grown up and gone, my wife dead, and I found myself wondering if this should be the place I choose … it would be the work of a minute to lean too far, to slip, a splash, to feel the embrace of thick brackish water … or to let the tide, when I found the tide, take me where it willed.

I cannot say how long I drifted. Then out of the ghostly dim came a light, it seemed to swing and dip, my eyes followed it, yet there was a kind of fatalistic sense in which I moved towards it. A will-o'-the-wisp. But I drifted rather than steered. Then the boat bumped against the piles of the jetty. The light came closer, a kind of white luminescence in the greyness, and I heard footfalls on the old planking. My name was called.

I answered. Stood up. Heaved my basket and fishing tackle on to the jetty. My landlady peered down at me, then held out a strong arm to help me up and secure the skiff. I thanked her stiffly and we walked back, single file, toward the house without further talk.

She ushered me into a kitchen filled with warmth and steam and poured tea for me. Then while I sat and drank and realised how cold I was, she began carrying pails of hot water upstairs for me. It was strange really. I felt she didn't like me. Yet back here I wondered at my mood on the water. Did I *really* want to give up yet.

I asked her about the graves, for graves they must surely be, there in the reaches of the marsh.

"When the men get old, I bury them."

I looked at her. It seemed an odd way to express death. "But why not in the village?"

"They wish to be together. They do not wish to suffer any more."

I searched her face but it told me nothing. I had the odd sense of secret currents here; the sense from the night before. She said my water would get cold and I went upstairs.

As I turned to come down later, thinking to enter the dining-room, I found her standing in my way. She seemed very large, forbidding even, and she steered me, I'm not sure how, into the sitting-room. It wasn't a physical touch, a movement of her arms, more a sense that she had read my thoughts and inserted different ones that I must obey.

The old men still sat there, their thoughts turned inwards, their faces blank. The small fire smouldered slackly. There was smoke in the room.

The one-eyed man looked up at my entrance.

"My father," said my landlady.

"Oh … I didn't realise … " I felt I should say more but no more words came.

"No, he has aged." Her words puzzled me. "But you do know him. He knows you."

I stared at that horrible face which seemed to leer and squint, something not quite human. I stepped back, almost treading on my landlady's feet. I turned to apologise.

"I thought so," the old man said slowly, "that ear."

I turned back to him. "I beg your pardon. I have never met you in my life."

"Met," said the old man. "There are many kinds of meeting. So young then, so strong and vigorous." Spittle collected at the corner of his mouth.

Other old men clustered round. One put out a hand as though to touch my ear, that crumpled ear I'd always been embarrassed by, sometimes people pointed …

The young man with blue eyes stood in the door, from his hand dangled a fiddle and bow; I felt as I felt sometimes in my office, trapped, closed in by something intangible and unwanted. Another of the men put out a withered claw-like hand, extended it as though to touch my face, then drew it back.

My landlady moved calmly and massively across to poke up the reluctant fire.

"We will eat now. We will have music later. Come." She put the blackened poker down with a faint clang.

17. THE STABLE CAT

They found the cat sitting on the broad window sill of the harness room when they went out early one morning. He looked as if he belonged there. An odd cat with brindle stripes across a coat which faded from a milky chocolate through a mustardy-brown to a deep cream, finishing with dark paws.

The first thought of the Marshall family was to chase it away. They didn't want a cat. There was the occasional mouse in the horse feed but not often enough to warrant the keeping of a cat. They had considered a dog at one stage but decided it would be more trouble and expense than it was worth.

But this cat was different. When Sam Marshall waved his hands and said "Shoo, puss!" the cat merely jumped down leisurely and came over to him. He noticed it only had three legs. Afterwards, he attributed both its refusal to shoo! and his decision to let it stay to this simple fact.

The Marshalls kept six pacers in the stable block. It was very much a family affair. His wife Liz owned one, his married daughter Tina and her husband had one, his son Steve had two, his brother Bill had one, and his father had one. Although he was listed as trainer for all six, both his wife and son helped him in the stables and did some driving for him. The family rarely argued, perhaps because Liz Marshall always took the position, "Your dad is the trainer, he has the last word." But she encouraged everyone to come around every Sunday and sit down to lunch together. Her husband was inclined to think it was these frequent friendly meals with good food and a sense of relaxed chat which kept the family in amicable agreement on almost everything.

There was just one oddity in his wife's outlook that sometimes caused difficulties. She believed that the family would only remain in this pleasant state so long as there was always a horse in the stables. Most of the time this didn't create a problem. When a couple were going for a spell another was coming back.

But he had suggested years ago that they send all of them away for a spell and take a few weeks holiday. Liz, though she could see the value of a holiday, got quite upset. Something awful would happen to them as a family if the stables were left empty. She couldn't explain why she had this feeling. She just had it. Her father-in-law said it sounded like the monkeys on Gibraltar, a connection she didn't appreciate. No, she said firmly, it's just something here (she touched her midriff), I can't explain it.

Her husband had arranged with Steve to take over and left two of their horses in the stables for the two weeks they were away.

Sam helped his brother in his refrigeration business during the day. An arrangement that worked well. Bill preferred horses to fridges and freezers but accepted that there wasn't enough work at home … unless they extended the stables and took in outside horses. The family considered this seriously, as they considered everything, but finally decided there wasn't really room for expansion … and bringing in outside owners might create dissension.

The arrival of the cat was seen in the immediate light of an unfortunate stray (it had no collar) and they almost rang the Cat Centre to see if it could be accommodated and found a new owner. But then they all relented (those three legs) and allowed it to stay. It did not occur to them then that it should be regarded more in the nature of an outside owner.

*

For the first few weeks they tried it on various foods to see which brands it preferred. They put away their couple of mouse-traps, saying comfortably, "A cat beats a trap any day." They debated various names but nothing seemed to quite settle and, in the meantime, they had slipped into the way of calling it Puss. They felt it should sleep at the stables rather than inside the house. They considered having a cat flap made in the harness room door. Liz Marshall thought the shed with the float and two sulkies might be more suitable but the cat, although friendly and amenable to anything they suggested, always seemed to gravitate back to the stables. So they finally settled on a cat basket up in the small loft over the harness room, where it could get out on to the rafters over the loose boxes if it wanted to go out at night, and a food bowl on the window sill. They all felt that it was the cat which had decided on this arrangement.

"Perhaps it is the reincarnation of a horse," Tina Marshall suggested. None of her family thought much of this idea and Liz later worried that Tina's husband was encouraging her to believe in "some very odd things".

"I think she was only joking," her husband said. "But you must admit that cat does seem to have an affection for the horses."

"I don't know about affection. I always get the odd feeling he's telling them what to do."

"Now, who's being fanciful! Still, so long as he's telling them to win regularly I'm not going to object."

*

Sam Marshall, when he sat down to bring his records up to date, was inclined to think the cat had brought them luck. All the horses were racing well, eating well, exercising well. He hesitated to attribute it to the cat. After all, he had years of experience behind him and they were fortunate to have good horses …

But the good luck didn't seem to extend to the people. Tina and her husband were in a minor car accident and were both taken to hospital for observation. Liz fell over a bucket in the back porch as she was coming back from putting out the cat's food, and strained her back. Sam's father developed shingles and couldn't come down to the stables to help out. "I know they say bad luck comes in threes," Sam said drily, "but I've never seen such a lot of clumsy clots." Liz didn't take kindly to this description. But Steve only laughed. "Things happen, Dad, you'll probably be next."

"I sincerely hope not," Liz said. What would happen if they couldn't cope with the horses? And in the event it was Steve who found himself being carted off to hospital after a training accident when a wheel came off the sulky. "I don't believe this," he said to Sam as he was helped into the ambulance. "I've never had anything like that happen before."

"Neither have I." Sam was beginning to feel mildly spooked. Maybe it wasn't just bad luck. Maybe someone had it in for them. Then he consoled himself. No one could bring his father out in shingles. 'I'm getting as whacko as Tina's bloke. All that barmy New Age stuff he comes out with. You never know whether to take him seriously or whether he's just pulling your leg or seeing whether we'll rise to his bait. And I'd better see about getting that gig repaired in time for the next—'

*

If the family was all at sixes and sevens, visiting or being visited in hospital, worrying about repairs, complaining about things being where they shouldn't be, the cat remained unperturbed. He was always there to greet whoever came to the stables first. He waited patiently by his food bowl at meal times. He sometimes walked calmly along the partitions between the loose boxes. If anyone called him for any reason he responded to their 'Puss! Puss' with a leisurely stretch and an unhurried stroll up to them.

But as the family's personal problems continued to come in regular small bunches feelings about the cat changed. They had never had such an awful run of sickness and accidents till the cat came along. They almost apologised to each other for coming up with such a silly superstitious idea but weren't there cats that brought good luck (like a black cat seen on the first day of spring) and cats that brought bad luck … and when Tina mentioned witches and familiars and

broomsticks the family just looked mildly critical where once her mother would've said "Oh, come on, Tina love, that's a lot of nonsense!" or her father would've guffawed and said, "Witches!" And the whole family would have found it all rather funny. It was a measure of their changed attitudes that Sam seriously considered taking the cat to the cats' home. He wouldn't say anything about it bringing bad luck, definitely not, just that they were planning to go away and this stray they'd been looking after would need to find itself a new home.

He hesitated to mention it over Sunday lunch (weren't they getting a bit hysterical?) but finally cleared his throat and said, "I think we have a problem here. We have a cat—"

"Or a cat has us," Tina murmured.

"And ever since it arrived our horses have been winning but we can't seem to stop having accidents. Now I am quite willing to believe in coincidences but the whole thing seems to be getting beyond a joke. So we have two choices. We can keep the cat and go on doing well but wrecking ourselves … or we can take the cat round to the shelter and risk our horses doing less well. Which is it to be?"

Put like that, some of the family demurred. Sam's father thought it probably was coincidence. Liz was disinclined to give up her long-held theory about keeping the stables full in favour of one about the power of a three-legged cat. Tina looked at her father with something that fell between puzzlement (her hard-nosed *father* suggesting such a thing!) and approval. Odd things did happen. Things which no one could explain. This just seemed to be one of them. Her husband smiled at her but said to his father-in-law, "Sam, what say I take the cat for a while, Tina and I, and we can see what happens?"

Sam was sorely tempted. It would remove not only the cat but all this sort of airy-fairy nonsense that had taken root in their household. But the young couple lived in a small flat near a busy road. It wasn't the ideal place for a cat. Still, he wasn't a young or foolish cat. He would probably be perfectly safe and happy there. "Let me think about it. We'll make a decision next Sunday. With luck we'll all still be around then to decide."

Liz felt he shouldn't have added that rider. It might be tempting fate.

*

When they went out to do the evening feeds they found the cat sitting on the manger of one horse. It was probably imagination, Sam thought, but he could swear the cat was admonishing the horse. "Puss," he said it firmly, "leave Okenoke alone." For one startled moment he felt the cat looked at him with anger in its ancient yellow eyes, then its gaze fell. "You can tell my horses what you like but I am boss here. Never forget that."

The cat turned away and jumped down. It was as though, Sam thought later but hesitated to put the thought into words, the cat had bowed to his authority. He busied himself with measuring out each feed using a lifetime of experience to think through each horse's needs as he put grain and chaff into each bucket. He wondered how he could ever have entertained the absurd idea that he needed the help of a cat to bring his horses to winning form.

Several times as he went about his evening chores he thought he glimpsed the cat in the darker corners of the stable. Liz came out with some Kit-y-Kat and put it in the bowl on the window sill and called out cheerfully, "Puss! Puss!" When he hadn't turned up in a couple of minutes she left the food there and went on with other work, thinking no more about it. Stray cats shouldn't be fussy, in her opinion, but he might be off after mice or something.

Neither she nor Sam mentioned Puss over tea but when there was no sign of him there next morning and a couple of birds were pecking at the uneaten bowl they looked at each other and said in unison, "I wonder where he is?" No answer was forthcoming. Their horses continued to do well. The family recovered from their various illnesses and accidents. Liz found herself wondering if perhaps she and Sam, neither of them getting any younger, could leave everything to Steve, perhaps send the horses out for a spell together to give Steve a break too, and have a little holiday away.

Vague rumours of a stray cat turning up at other stables sometimes reached Sam's ears. He studiously ignored them. He didn't want their three-legged cat back. The cat basket gradually rotted and its padding was eaten by mice.

18. WHERE DO CATS GO?

Where *do* cats go on thunderstormy afternoons?
Do they slip away, seek out soft beds, unused?
Secret places where, despite the din outside, they can snooze?

Where *do* cats go when heavens above first unloose—
Do they keep eyes wide open for a cupboard door ajar?
Or creep beneath a muffling quilt, swaddled like a small papoose?

Where *do* cats go when icy raindrops pelt down hard?
Do they feel it's best to remove themselves, at least, until—
Protect their eyes and ears from *sturm* and *drang* set free afar?

Where *do* cats go when the rain comes teeming down to fill
The tanks and ponds and creeks and dams and earthen cracks?
Do cats, much preferring to stay safe and dry, lie statue-still,

Unnoticed, overlooked, while the tempest bays and racks
Its way up to a climax in those short demented hours,
Before it bundles up spent storm-clouds, turns its nimbus blacks

To grays, then first-glimpsed blue, and then it's merely showers …
And cats come out, yawning, stretching, their secret still intact;
'Wouldn't-mind-a-lick-of—' The mystery of these cats of ours.
Where *do* they go when it rains? It's a puzzle. That's a fact.

19. AN AUGUST FELONY

A house just after the removal van has come and gone. An empty house. Left. Bereft even. A full house arrived in. Eilis Gray felt a stranger in both. But the house she had come to was a much nicer house than the one she had just left. It had a view. Not the view perfect. But very pleasant, nevertheless. The kind a weekend artist might revel in, because it seemed to compose itself and wait, calmly, to be immortalized. She knew it was part of what had drawn her here and that she would soon set about trying to transfer the town to paper and canvas. The house, a white stucco affair, a bit grey around the gills now, still suggested style and a kind of superseded elegance without being too large and unwieldy for one person. It had a straggling neglected

garden but with several attractive old trees. She knew she would enjoy planning out new beds and landscaping. A rock pool perhaps.

It had neighbours.

The two young removalists had placed the heavy pieces in the places she had nominated. She hoped she had got it right first time. The smaller pieces, what-not tables and plant-hangers, the boxes of well-wrapped china, the few items of soft furnishings including a large carton of cushions, now circled her in a higgledy-piggledy fashion. She stood in the midst of everything and felt she should declaim something significant like 'Today is the beginning of my new life'. Instead she thought wearily, 'tomorrow', and went into her new kitchen and hunted out her kettle from its carefully-labelled box and filled it at the sink.

Shadows filled her back garden now, absorbing the dim shapes of its tumbledown shed and clustering shrubs. There was still the muted sound of birdsong. She thought she saw something move in the deepening dusk but couldn't be certain. All kinds of small creatures might have taken advantage of the lack of occupation and colonized the yard while the house stood empty; neighbourhood cats, feral cats, possums, a stray dog, even people. Children liking to have this extra space to play in, homeless people who had drifted into this little seaside town because its weather was mild and the whole town was pleasant and picture-postcard-pretty …

At last she found herself a mug, a packet of tea, one teapot, and a plastic container with biscuits. Tomorrow she would carry the chairs in from the front hall; tomorrow she would find her well-used oilcloth for the kitchen table; tomorrow she would unpack the rest of the cutlery and crockery and set them on clean paper in the cupboards. But for now she simply stood, feeling the tiredness in her legs and the stuffy feeling of inhaled dust and age and old damp corners, and with it all came a quiet sense of accomplishment. She sipped her tea and let the delicate fragrance waft up on the steam. But again, she felt sure she saw branches move and a shape loom, darker by a shade than the filtered grey between the old fruit trees and intertwining mass of old man's beard. The trees were said to be at least fifty years old and were generously stained with lichen. Yet when she'd first seen the place they had all been bowed down under apples and pears. Now she wondered who had taken all the fruit or had it been allowed to fall and rot in the long grass? Perhaps the neighbourhood children were in the habit of coming by to collect it or merely to pelt each other with over-ripe pears. Target practice. Now she would just go to bed. It wasn't late, not her normal time. But … she was tired …

"Tomorrow is a new day, everything will look cheerful tomorrow … " She turned out the hall light and went along to the room she had chosen as her bedroom.

*

The sun seemed abnormally slow to creep up over the dark-blue rim of sea and spread a path that leaped towards the town and reflected off the windows of the houses built around this encircling hillside. Mrs Gray, faced with cold water in the bathroom, realized she hadn't turned on the other switch at the fuse box to use the hot-water-system. It didn't seem to matter terribly. She washed her face in cold water and did her hair carefully. There was a stain in the bath, as though there was rust in the pipes or someone had had a bath after getting very dirty.

'A good clean through, that's what you need.' It wasn't that the house had stood empty for very long; she couldn't remember the exact statement the Harmers had made when she mentioned her choice. Two months? Less. Or perhaps they hadn't said. But even the nicest of houses soon starts to look a bit grubby and neglected. And this was a nice house. Now with the first sun catching the fanlight she could see the rich reds and greens reflecting on the hall wall. And the paint and floor-coverings were generally clean and looked quite recent. Mr O'Brien had described it as well-cared-for but with its previous owners just starting to let go in those last months.

'A good vacuum, a scrub to the bathroom, and of course the cupboards … goodness knows whether they get many mice or ants or flies here … '

The floor in the hall looked as though it had been flooded at some stage; the lino curled away from the walls slightly. She looked upwards for any sign of leaking in the ceiling but the

paintwork was a fresh-enough-white against the cream walls. Perhaps the front door had accidentally been left open and rain had blown in … or a more domestic accident, a tipped over vase, a flooded bathroom, too many people hanging up wet coats and umbrellas or leaning them against the wall … children playing with water pistols or a party perhaps … apple bobbing …

Except that she had been given the image of a childless couple here, quite elderly. There were children but they were in the house next door.

She opened the front door and looked out. The front porch was small but it would protect the house from rain coming in from the east. There might be sea fogs. She hadn't thought to ask. Or the lino was just old … older than it looked. It's a minor thing, she told herself, and bustled round making breakfast and planning her day.

To walk down the rise into the town—or take the car? It wasn't far. But it might seem steep when it came time to walk home. After tidying up inside a little and closing the door on the boxes and cases still to be unpacked she walked briefly round her new garden and then out to her car. It was a dead-end street. It had been one of the things which had attracted her. No trucks passing, no rush hour, no youngsters revving their cars at night.

The agent had cut the lawn before she decided to buy. The grass was already starting to look a bit rank and untidy again. Garden people. She would ask around. Just someone to come in and mow, perhaps remove a few dead branches; she thought she could handle any pruning necessary. And then there would be the joy of choosing new plants. She knew there was a nursery in town though she hadn't been in. Nothing expensive. But good hardy seaside perennials and shrubs. She would ask how well roses did here. Perhaps a lemon tree though they didn't always do well if there was salt …

A drift of daffodils under those old trees. She turned and looked to her side fence with the next door neighbours. The house itself was barely visible. But she could hear voices. Children getting off to school perhaps. She hoped they would be nice children. Even the most honest of real estate agents didn't necessarily open up and tell you you would be living next door to a bikie gang. But the voices sounded young. Shrill. Impatient. It was a school day, wasn't it? For a moment she felt lost. Not Saturday? No, of course she had chosen to come on a Thursday so there wouldn't be any problems with shops, tradesmen, if she found something vital missing.

Even so … it was nine. Shouldn't children be off to school? Perhaps the children were not old enough? Had lessons at home? Were recovering from … scarlet fever? She realized how remote her life was from that of families with children. That was what happened if you didn't have children of your own. Your friends were mostly other professional people. You didn't meet mothers at canteens or playgroup. Your world had a different orientation.

But it didn't matter. So long as the children weren't vandals or thieves she felt sure she could get along with them perfectly amicably. Perhaps they would like to do small jobs for pocket money? She wasn't sure of the nuts and bolts of such things these days. Did Cubs and Scouts still do Bob-a-Job requests? These days it was probably ten dollars a job and have you got insurance? But there must be a happy medium.

She backed the car out and eased it gingerly down the rise. There was a fairly sharp turn at the bottom which would take her on to the main street and straight into the centre of town. It wasn't hard to find a park. The town, although not bustling, gave the feeling of being alive and brisk and she stood for several minutes on the promenade just smelling the warming breeze and enjoying the sight of a mild sea. Several people came by with small dogs on leads and one of them said, 'Nice day!' She agreed. It was a nice day. She spent half-an-hour wandering in and out of shops to look at their stock and prices in general. Fruit and vegetables were a little more expensive than she expected but bread and milk were about the same. There were several colourful Italian-style cafés along the front and a 'gelato bar'. It had a pleasant feeling as though she had stepped into a time warp. But then the small booklet she had bought about the town said the first people here had been a couple of Italian families who had built the jetty and early homes and fished for … was it scallops … or some kind of fish? She must re-read the booklet.

Just after ten she walked along the main seafront road to the small building that housed the family history centre. Jane had been the moving force behind the local history group and her idea was a simple but very successful one. Why not create a place where anyone who wanted to research Tasmanian ancestors could come and do their searching while they had a pleasant seaside holiday? It was run as a small business with people paying to come and use the excellent library, convict records, court transcripts, information on land titles, shipping, collection of history booklets, old leaflets and posters, collections of regional newspapers for people to research family connections in this part of the world. Jane was paid a small honorarium to run the place.

Naturally she hoped Eilis would join their group, Friends and Seekers, and help out one or two days a week in return for free access to all the material.

Eilis Gray wasn't sure whether she wanted to research her own or her husband's families but she had no objection to helping out. It would be a nice way to meet people and get to know more about the town and things going on.

Jane, of course, was delighted to see her. "I was nearly going to come up last night, be a welcome party, see if you needed anything, but my daughter rang up in a state and time got away from me. I hope everything went okay? And I've got this for you as a housewarming present." She handed over a large box. "I was going to pop up later if I didn't see you here first."

The morning passed away pleasantly. But in a period when Jane wasn't helping anyone Eilis asked her if she knew anything about her new neighbours. She didn't say anything about the shape she thought she had seen. Just a cat.

Jane seemed to ponder her words before saying, "Well, I don't know that they're the sort of people you'll find as soulmates … I don't mean they're jailbait or anything like that, not thieves or vandals. Just a bit rough and noisy. I don't think they'd think twice about leaving a bit of rubbish in your yard while it was standing empty or maybe helping themselves to some firewood or something, or maybe keeping you awake with some arguing. You probably will have moments when you hope they'll move on soon but I honestly don't see them as giving you a hard time."

"Oh good. It's a lottery, isn't it? And the most important thing is liking the town as a whole. I could eventually sell that house and buy something smaller here. It probably will end up being a bit big for me."

As she said that she felt a great wave of relief flow over her, a puzzling sense of relief, because she hadn't been aware of thinking of herself as being worried, anxious, doubtful …

*

Over the next few days she got to know her garden quite thoroughly. It was a mess. Trees needing pruning, rubbish needing collecting, an old shed that was starting to lean slightly and probably needed to be removed completely. The shed had been padlocked but it wouldn't be hard for children or stray animals to climb in through the glassless window at the back. She thought the simplest thing for the moment would be to nail some netting over it. Inside it was dark and full of webs and smell of cat and nameless dark piles of rubbish and old tin cans and a few old coats or cloaks or something hanging on nails and some old tubs and a broken lawn-mower. She had heard something that sounded like cats fighting in the distance the previous night. And this would be an ideal place for a stray cat to move in and make itself at home. Several times she had felt that sense of a shape flitting, stalking, watching.

It was a little disconcerting. The sense of unwinking watchful eyes.

Should she put out a bowl of milk? A plate of chopped meat? And see if anything came out of those trees and shrubs along the boundary fence?

More importantly, should she make the effort and go next door and introduce herself, just say, 'hello, I'm your new neighbour', and see what they were like, rather than take Jane's hearsay as all she needed to know about them, perhaps more than she needed to know.

After debating on this for nearly a week, and meeting some very pleasant people in the interim, she made her way up the overgrown path next door. It would be a rather good place for children to live. They could pretend to be Tarzan or someone lost in a semi-jungle. The house too

looked pretty decrepit, not the sort of place where parents would always be saying 'don't touch' or warning children to leave their rooms tidy. She wasn't sure if she found this comforting or not. She had fairly strong ideas on the ways she expected children to behave. But there was no real sign of the children coming into her yard or making problems for her. There was rotting fruit in the grass. They hadn't come in and stripped her trees.

After waiting for a while she knocked again. She hadn't seen a man going in or out; she wasn't even sure she had heard one. Possibly the children's supposed naughtiness had more to do with a lone mother not quite coping.

Then there were faint footsteps. The front door was unbolted and jerked open. A woman of about mid-thirties stood there. "Yairs?" She didn't smile.

"I'm your new neighbour. Eilis Gray. I just came by to say hello."

The woman nodded. A child of perhaps five came up behind her and stood there silently after taking a swift peep at Mrs Gray. "Oh, well, hi there. I'm Toni Packer."

Eilis smiled and said it was nice to meet her. But she couldn't pretend she was being made to feel welcome. Possibly Toni didn't want to be friendly till she was sure her new neighbour wouldn't be bossy, intrusive, overwhelming, noisy, critical …

"I don't want to be a busybody but I wondered … would your children ever like some small jobs. I'm happy to pay them, just to do some tidying up around the garden."

"Nah, wouldn't think so. They're too busy. Homework, y'know. Chores. Sorry." She went to turn away and close the door.

"Oh, well, I just thought I'd mention it. And if they find they have more time in the holidays … the offer is still open."

Mrs Packer nodded briefly then went to close the door. Eilis managed a smile and a wave before walking back through the unkempt yard. It had been an effort to go away cheerfully. And yet … there was something there that wasn't rudeness or standoffishness. If the idea didn't seem strange she might even think it was fear.

Was there a husband who didn't want his wife and family to have any sort of social connections? No friends. There were men like that.

As she went out the gate and walked along to her own entrance something caught her eye, just something glimpsed from the corner and gone when she turned. It must be a cat.

And yet it seemed too large, too dark, too camouflaged, too … *powerful.*

'I'm being fanciful. Of course it's a cat. They were probably worried that I had come over to complain, that I didn't want their cat making messes in my yard … eating my little birds … '

*

Over the next few weeks she began to feel at home in the small town, to meet people and make friends and find where to go for the things she needed. She took to dropping into the seniors' club for a light lunch. She got to know the ins and outs of the family history centre. Her own home began to seem welcoming. She got someone in to re-mow the lawn and remove several dead branches. He promised to come back one morning and cut the shrubs back a bit and dig along the front fence and alongside the house for beds of annuals.

But the faint sense of unease never went away; as though she was being watched, as though *something* watched her. She had almost convinced herself it was merely a feral cat. They grew big, they came out at dusk and slunk through the undergrowth, it was hardly anything to lose sleep over. But as she got her garden tidied and the shed cleared out she had the odd feeling that whatever it was had retreated into her neighbours' garden and watched her with a secret resentful baleful gaze. If it was a wild cat then she could understand it not wanting to lose its territory …

It was always around dusk that she caught her glimpses. The animal always seemed to melt into the shadows but she gradually developed a sense of the creature. Something tawny, spotted, lean but powerful, and it seemed … the odd description 'short-changed' came to her …

'A Manx cat … perhaps … except I have never seen one that size … ' And what did the animal live on? Did Mrs Packer feed it? Did it take garden birds? Did it hunt out on the open hill behind these last houses? Rats, mice, rabbits, little native animals …

On one of her visits to the small local library, just up from the family history centre, she browsed in their few books on cats. Were there other breeds besides Manx cats which had short tails? She turned to 'big cats', 'wild cats', 'the cat family' in its entirety … and found herself putting a surprised hand to her mouth. 'I think … no, surely not … and how on earth could it … '

Bobcats were animals of the American West, of the Rocky Mountains, of wild places of ranching and mining; bobcats didn't exist in little Tasmanian seaside towns with old-fashioned gelato bars …

The family next door had never approached her; not for jobs, not for friendly invitations to come on over to a barbecue, not to borrow a cup of sugar. And in the face of their unfriendliness, or at least their determined guarding of their privacy, it was hard to go out her front gate and along to theirs and up their overgrown path and to knock again at their door. But if she was right in thinking … then they *must* know … something …

Toni Packer was no friendlier when she saw her neighbour on her steps. But Eilis Gray ignored the other woman's suspicious "What d'you want now?" and said straight out, "What on earth is a bobcat doing living in your garden?"

Mrs Packer stared at her. Then her uneasy frightened gaze went past her neighbour as though she expected to see an authority figure behind her. "Did you tell anyone?"

"No. Not yet. But it needs to be caught and removed before it hurts someone … " She thought but didn't add that she wasn't sure anyone would believe her.

"I can't … "

"Can't what?"

"Take it away."

"No. It looks quite powerful. But we might be able to lure it into the shed and catch it that way. I wonder how on earth it got here in the first place?"

But as she spoke she realized her neighbour knew exactly how it had come here. For a moment Eilis Gray wrestled with the need to involve other people, Council dog-catchers, Parks and Wildlife people, vets—then she said quietly, "If you will tell me where it came from I will see if I can catch it and return it, it needn't involve you … "

"It was me stupid husband!" Toni Packer suddenly blurted out. "He worked at that little zoo up the coast. They got this … animal there … an' he was lookin' after it, after the place, cleanin' an' stuff. An' it had kittens, it had six an' he was first in … an' he pinched one an' brought it home … he used to go up there an' stay in his brother's shack an' come home … an' he give it to us when he come home. I fed it with a … " She mimed an eye-dropper. "It kept growin' but he wouldn't take me serious when I said it's gotta go … " She shrugged with the kind of resignation she had probably always displayed in the face of disaster.

"And where is your husband now?"

"Got a job on the mainland, a bigger zoo. He says we can go there when he finds a place to live. He's just in the van … "

"And what were you going to do with your bobcat?"

"Nuthin'. Leave it."

"Do you feed it?"

"A bit." Something sly seemed to come into Toni Packer's face. "Maybe you could take it back, no questions, they won't know you."

The small zoo was about fifty kilometres north of here; one of those little places with a couple of devils, some wallabies and quolls, and a few exotic things, a small herd of bison, a handful of monkeys … and, so it would seem, a litter of bobcats. The library books had said they could have up to eight kittens at a time. The zoo still might not know they had lost one. And if they did they might have preferred to keep quiet rather than create alarm. Not that a vulnerable new-born kitten was likely to frighten people …

"How old is it, do you know?"

" 'bout a year."

It was August now. So a young bobcat would be in its prime, hungry, energetic, full of fight and hunting spirit. Eilis Gray quailed at the thought of trying to lure and catch such an animal. But the alternative seemed worse. This woman probably *would* simply pack up and leave without making any attempt to warn, to catch, to return, to be responsible …

*

But talking about 'luring' the animal was one thing; coming up with a realistic plan of action was another. Several times Mrs Gray sat with a hand hovered over the phone. It would only take a minute to call someone in authority, to convince them she had an unusual problem … and then what? They might simply shoot the animal. But it was too rare surely to be treated as vermin. And the zoo might be delighted to have it back. And Mr Packer, wherever he now was, could be prosecuted … which might be as well, before he loosed other dangerous cubs into an unsuspecting community …

In the end she began quietly setting out some meaty bones in the shed of an evening, along with a small bowl of beer. If she could get the animal calm about coming in then she could put sleeping tablets or something into the meat and more beer in the bowl. Then it would be possible to catch and tie the animal firmly and place it in her car and make the long journey …

That part of it was surprisingly easy. And the tawny-eyed creature slept the sleep of the tame as she tied its legs firmly and put some tape around its jaw. Whether this would be strong enough to hold it once the effects of her doctored meal wore off …

Well, she could only try …

It was well-grown but not fat and she found she could lift it on to the back seat of her car and work it into the old fertilizer bag she had found in the shed and washed out. She didn't need to call on the Packers for help. And then it was a matter of carefully easing out on to the road.

But as she drove with the sleeping animal she felt all her own unease back. In a way it had been an immense relief to know that the odd little things which had loomed over-large in her life; the wet front hall, a couple of things which she couldn't decide were merely mislaid or had been stolen, a couple of heavy-breathing phone calls, were the little upsets of life and nothing to do with the mysterious presence in her back yard; and knowing that they seemed to retreat to the level of nuisance. But perhaps she had done the wrong thing by taking on the job of returning the animal, no questions asked. She just wanted it gone. But she was compounding one felony with another …

And for a family she didn't particularly like or trust. Though perhaps with the animal gone they would appear a perfectly normal noisy not-very-neighbourly family. Not immediately likeable but not that sense of suspicion which she now realized had weighed her down. That sense of not-knowing had spread to everything and subtly spoiled her new home for her …

The people at the zoo accepted her story that she had moved into a house which had been empty for some time and found the animal living in her overgrown back garden. They thanked her. They seemed slightly bemused but grateful. She didn't try to offer any ideas on how the animal might have ended up in her yard. It trembled on her tongue: to warn them, to ask them to warn others, about Mr Packer. Next time it might be a lion cub, a hyena, a new-born tiger. Next time a child might be at risk …

But she felt her own eagerness to be gone, to put the strange, rather nerve-wracking episode behind her. They thanked her again. She said they were more than welcome. They gave her a little coloured booklet about the zoo from their gift shop. She set out on the long drive home.

Home. Would it really seem like home now with that lurking shadow gone? She convinced herself it would be the place she believed it to be. My seaside home.

The cherry plums behind the esplanade were out in bud. Another couple of weeks and spring would be all around her. She dwelt on her plans for her own garden. Now she would plan and weed and plant with an easy mind. The old woody trees and shrubs were just old and untidy. She turned up the hill road with a light heart. She drew in and parked. She unlocked the back door. Had she left that side window open in her haste to be gone? Possibly.

But her new TV set and the silver from the sideboard were gone and she thought, but couldn't be sure, that there were footsteps across the side lawn to the fence and its wilderness next door, a broken twig here and there, surely a print in the newly-dug bed that wasn't hers …

20. A MODERN MIDDEN

"—an' if you don't get those bloody dogs out—
The way you hang around the house all day—
Don't forget to muzzle them—haven't we
Had enough trouble with the blasted neighbours—"

Watch them off along the beach, their narrow hocks
An' race-ready sides, fresh an' keen an' sniffing,
In the morning air—an' when he's outa sight
I know he just sits his bloody arse down an' lets 'em go.

But if I don't tell the world out there, an' he won't
Tell, the lazy sod, an' with luck they'll come
Back fast an' panting an' it's exercise, bloody hell
It is, but not what I had in mind. Kids! They make you—

The house, the yard, the place down here with kennels
By the muddy shore they call the fancy new-name bay,
An' come around, so often, those council bods, an' talk
Of turning the shore into tracks for old bags in sandshoes.

As if—strewth—the way they carry on, you'd think they'd
Never seen a dog—an' they went haring off to snitch—
The midden there, they said, a thousand years old, an' there's
Been dogs at it. The council came an' sniffed around.

Didn't bother us, an' by crikey, they'd have got an earful
If they had … who do they think they are, putting in
Their bloody oar—like we don't pay their blasted rates,
An' keep our dogs away from the council kiddies' park.

You'd think we'd got the pox, that AIDS thing, the way they
Carry on, you wouldn't know we'd been breeding,
Training, walking decent dogs down here, since the racing club
Started all those years ago; never heard nothing then

About that old pile of shells an' stones an' bones an' rubbish,
Being *heritage*. Makes you want to puke, the way they go on
Now. As if it isn't the same old pile of stuff the wife's been
Carting up the yard for yonks to let the hens scratch through.

Get a bit o' shell-grit free, makes a well-drained surface for the yard
If the kids'd move their junk, that many busted bikes you'd wonder
What they do to 'em, an' that old car I said he'd never get the parts,

But would he listen? Not him! Thinks his old dad wouldn't know

The time o' day. No more mud, a good deep coating of the shells
Across the yard. But now they've got us sneaking down there
At night to get a bloody bucket full! An' people with those fancy
Clipboards, mobile phones, calling down an' mooching round by day …

An' churning out reports an' getting it beat up in the bloody paper!
I ask you! Don't see 'em carrying on like that about our junk!
But then it's new, just chucked away those tins last week, an' that old
Sofa I couldn't fit in the back o' me ute, gotta keep it now, looks like,

Till it's growing mould. An' that bit o' wire down along the beach,
You'd think we put it there on purpose—the way they squealed
An' yelled an' called us names an' said we were a blot upon the scene—
Pity they sent a dame to do their dirty work for them—or I'd of—

"Yeah, yeah, I know he's let them go! Can't you hear the nesting birds
Squawking fit to bloody bust!" That's the trouble with women. Got
To yell the obvious—an' I'll give him what for when he brings
Me dogs back again—but at least if they're after birds around the point

They're leaving that bloody heritage abo can't-touch-a-shell midden
To itself—least till me an' Molly can get to it again an' spread another
Layer here an' get those damn kids to move their garbage an' give
The dogs room to move. Strewth, who'd be a ratepayer these days?

Who'd be a dad, who'd think he's got a place worth having out along
This bit o' bay, not that you'd know it was a beach for every sod, not
When they're threatening to put up fences round it all, got to keep it *safe*—
That's a laugh! But I'd best get a wriggle on—me best bitch should whelp
today—

21. WILD

"I'll be back late. Don't worry—"

"Those dogs, what if they're—"

"They won't, not now. But keep the back light on if you want. I'll turn off the generator when I get back."

"Yes." She held her face up to be kissed. Then, "but turn if off now. I can light the lamps." She didn't say the noise of the engine drowned out … other noises …

She hated to stay alone but the baby was nearly due and he would only be gone an hour, two hours. She lit the kerosene lamps as soon as he'd gone. Just on dusk but the small yellow flames were company and comfort. They had eaten but why not stoke up the wood stove and make—what would he like to eat when he got back late and tired? A cake? A damper? Patty cakes? Yes, a tea cake.

She moved slowly. A kind of dragging, each step an effort, but the effort suggested a busyness, a normality. Measure and mix, grease the pan, dust it with flour, prepare the cinnamon and sugar to go on the cooked cake.

The wind had risen and the old gnarled pepper trees and woody pears swung and creaked. No moon had risen and a faint light hazing of cloud obscured the first stars. The house had been empty in the years since the old man died and his heirs had wrangled over the will.

When the two of them asked if they could rent the house—"oh, just till we find somewhere a bit closer in to town"—the heirs had taken up their offer. "You don't mind living out here, you don't mind not having the power connected—you don't mind—" Of course they didn't mind. They were young, energetic, just married, the lack of comforts and conveniences and close neighbours was all part of the fun of being together, just the two of them and the long empty house and the sweeping paddocks and the timbered hill behind and the barely-used road in front.

They didn't know then about the dogs.

The howling, when they lay in the high-ceilinged bedroom, no light but the romance of a bedside candle in an old-fashioned holder, had not bothered them, not together, not in each others' arms. But the sight of gleaming eyes caught in the flash of a torch when she had to drag herself out to the outside dunny as her pregnancy progressed was a little—disconcerting.

"I suppose there's still a few dingoes in the hills—domestic dogs gone wild, got mixed." A neighbour had said so. Didn't think it was important. But then he farmed the arable creek-flats.

Now the smell of the cake wafted through the rooms. They always said, didn't they, that things cooked in a wood-burning stove, smelled better, richer. She imagined the smell permeating the rooms, lingering tendrils up among the rafters, a secret sense that crossed the verandah and floated over the garden, caught up in the scrub beyond the fence, hung like votive offerings in the branches …

A smell that brought …

With the cake cooling on a tea-towel on the kitchen table, she went out to see if headlights might yet show along the track. Was that a faint sound? No, the wind just getting up, the branches moving, the old shrubbery against the far wall—or—

She thought it was a sound that couldn't be ascribed to the wind.

She thought she saw something move, a mere shadow; no, the moon was up, it passed in and out between the trees, the moon, yes … no, not the moon, she strained her eyes and still couldn't decide.

Such a frail gate. Such stories. Such hunger. Was that the gleam of moon upon an eye? No, of course it wasn't. She brought out a torch and shone it and it made a feeble circle around her. Dogs don't like fire. Where had she heard that? Fire. She put the torch back. There were still half-burnt sticks in the fire-box and she raked them out, trying to wrap an oven glove around them. Embers sprayed across the kitchen floor.

The sounds were still out there. She thought she saw the lights flicker in pairs. Sheep's eyes gleamed a curious luminescent green at night, or so she'd heard, but these were more of a … it was a burning yellow, burnt up with hunger and despair …

Her bundle of burning sticks dropped their heated tips across the yard.

The eyes retreated. Didn't they? No, they hadn't moved. They were there. Waiting.

Not afraid. Shadow dogs. Dogs that eat embers. Waiting.

22. LOST

The road laboured upwards, a curving querulous thing, stricken with blind bends, damped by drizzling rain, and the two passengers travelling it in a brown Jaguar saloon sat mute, talked out a long time ago. But as they crested the long rise the sun broke through and startled the land into brief bright life. Raindrops sparkled. The marshes which spread as an indefinite stain across this neglected region glimmered gold. Two large white birds, hidden among overhanging banks

and high reeds, suddenly set sail on what had been ink-black water. Then, with great flappings, they rose into the air.

"Look, Mersch! Oh stop!"

"There's nowhere *to* stop, not here—"

"Such pretty white birds! Did you see them?"

"No! I'm driving, damn it all—do you want us in a ditch?"

"I don't know if they were swans. I couldn't hear them—"

"Well, it's no good asking me. Did they have long necks?"

"Quite long. And so white! Even though that water is full of black stuff."

He thought irritably of swans with tide-lines spoiling their nice white sides, then banished the picture; Alice had no logic, no sense, and she picked away with that endless smile at all he'd been brought up to see as important.

"We're nearly there." His voice was unnecessarily gruff and she sat back again and wrapped herself in another silence. Signs appeared along the road. The border and Verstod were half a kilometre away.

"You could get our documents out of the glove-box. I don't suppose they'll hold us up for long. I hope not. I hate arriving late for dinner." She put the folder ready on her lap.

"I'm tired," he went on, a faintly fretful note creeping into his voice. "We should have stopped for the night at Kerfeld … "

His wife said nothing. She couldn't remember why he'd decided to keep going. Instead, she took a comb from her handbag, raised it to her head to comb back the small curls which clustered round her forehead, then put it away again. A comb was no use in the great mass of hair which fell down her back in silver waves.

"*Will* we be late for dinner?"

He glanced at the watch in the vigorous red hair of his wrist. "I doubt it, not unless they're cretins at the check-point. We've hardly seen any traffic on this road."

The sun was covered again. A chill wind came sighing and fussing over the rough green hillside and buried itself in distant woods of pine and larch. The marshes, left below, sank again to be the sinister undertone of their journey. The day was all but done. A stronger rain spattered the windscreen.

Less than five minutes brought them to the rear of the border queue; a couple of private cars, a lorry. A red-and-white pole barred traffic. A high-powered light fitted to the square concrete building on their right bathed them and made them blink. People in coats stood in under the broad lintel. Two uniformed men clambered over boxes in the back of the lorry. The rain beat on the vehicles.

"You wait here. No, I suppose they'll insist on seeing you. Put on your coat."

Alice Bayntor reached back to pull her white lambswool jacket from the rear seat, but merely placed it in her lap, where she stroked it absently. Her husband was a chilly person but it had to be fiercely cold before she put on warm things or rummaged for gloves.

"Put it on and hand me mine." He reached over to her and jerked up her collar so that most of her hair was hidden. For a moment she turned puzzled eyes to him, then reached back for his coat. He glanced at his watch again, then out to the lorry and the border post.

"Are you hungry?"

"A little. I'll have some soup."

"If they have it." He was unsympathetic. "More likely dumplings in dishwater. Have you got the phrasebook? I trust they'll speak English—but it might be just our luck to strike—a—"

"No. I haven't got it." She began to pick uneasily at the buttons of her jacket. "Perhaps it's in the picnic basket."

The lorry moved forward, rain streaming off its dark tarpaulin, the Jaguar crept forward a place. Now they could watch people. The shower was silver points in their headlights and gleamed in braided runnels across the greasy tarmac. The town, further on, showed as a glow in the dusk.

"You'd better get the umbrella. It's behind the seat."

Again she twisted round and brought out a large black brolly. "You get out with it," he went on. "No, give it to me and I'll come round to you. You didn't bring yours, I suppose?"

"I don't think so. I haven't seen it."

"Well, you wouldn't if you didn't put it in the car."

"No."

He shot her a sharp look. Was there ever such a tiresome woman as Alice? But there she was gazing out at the rain and the sodden verge and her small serene smile was on her mouth. He felt baffled and tired. They moved forward another car-length and found themselves opposite the door of the square grey office.

"Come on now. Got your bag? The passports?"

She opened her door and climbed out, fumbling the passports into her handbag. The words rose in his throat "Hurry up!" and he swallowed them as she clicked the door shut and stepped delicately between the puddles, watching her feet move in their neat white shoes. Not to be thwarted, he grabbed her hand and hurried her across the wet gravel. But she put out her other hand—"It's not very much rain"—and a few drops collected in her palm.

"Oh God, don't start being silly! Here, get inside while I shut the brolly!" Two men jostled past them and she turned to watch the red-and-white pole swing slowly up.

Inside the building was a counter and several chairs. Out of sight a typewriter tapped. A man with a peaked cap and red braid came towards them and the formalities were initiated with a couple of curt words, passports were handed over, declarations filled in, itinerary and hotel bookings and the car's papers in a pigskin folder produced. The room despite the rain was hot with a large anthracite-burning stove in one corner. Portraits of men, good Party men, with stone features gazed down from the white-washed walls. Information too obscure to be tackled with their phrasebook was taped here and there.

Alice took a seat and shrugged herself out of her unwanted jacket, laying it neatly beside her, and clasping her white bag on her lap. The light shone on her young face, on the glory of her tumbling hair; she looked down at her white suede shoes and found the mark of a puddle along their sides … like the swans, she thought, with the black night coming to take their shape so they would fly no longer …

The captain who'd taken their passports watched her a minute then cleared his throat. "You sit." He pointed to the chairs and went away with their documents. They heard what might be the metallic scrape of a filing cabinet, the thump of a stamp; a phone rang and was answered, incomprehensibly to their English ears. A very young man with septic spots along his chin and his jacket undone appeared from the back regions and looked out into the wet evening before pulling the door closed, all but a crack. He rubbed his hands briskly at them, shrugged, and went away again. The aroma of coffee and damp serge lingered.

"I don't like this," Merschel said after several minutes of silence.

Alice looked round the white-washed room. "It needs flowers."

He stared at her. "Flowers? Who cares about flowers! I don't trust these commie fellows. Our passports were perfectly in order. They've got absolutely no excuse for keeping us hanging round—"

"No." She looked at the closed inner door and raised her hands to her lips in an odd little gesture, as though she prayed.

"I told you to put your jacket on," he said, suddenly peevish.

"I put it off again," she said simply, and stretched both hands towards the stove.

Her husband shrugged and stood up, taking a couple of turns round the small waiting-room before looking at his watch again.

The captain reappeared, beckoned them over. "This passeport," he tapped one with a long finger, "iss koo-recket—this one—iss not."

"But—"

"No. This vissa iss fixet. You see—" he held it fleetingly to Bayntor's puzzled eyes, "iss—forge—iss wrong." The exit visa's date on his wife's passport was smudged and illegible.

"But—it doesn't matter. We went on the same day to the same place, saw the same person, and told him we were together—"

"No. No good. This iss wrong."

Merschel Bayntor was suddenly pinned by cold black eyes, as impenetrable as the marsh mud. "You did this?" The unforgiving finger indicated the smudged date.

"Of course I didn't! Why would I do something stupid like that!" His face suffused with colour. The comfort of their Verstod hotel seemed to sink beyond the horizon. He felt himself flustered and hot, and obscurely helpless. How had he not noticed the mess some petty official had made of his wife's exit visa?

"Look! Telephone the office in—er—Chuzmoid—ask them—get them to confirm what I'm saying."

The captain turned and directed a slow look at the clock. "Office close … you may go to Verstod, only there. This woman, this Alees—she stay here—"

"What! You can't do that! It's late and we're tired. We simply want to go to the hotel and tomorrow we'll go back to Chuzmoid—look … " He fumbled for his wallet. "Whatever it costs for the trouble we've caused."

The captain ignored Mr Bayntor, his proffered hand, and directed his unreadable gaze at Alice Bayntor. She was standing near, very still, but on her face was her small sweet smile as though she'd been listening to a quite different conversation, one filled with effortlessly kind words …

"You have two choice, Mistair Bayntor. You go Chuzmoid *now* or you leave you wife here."

"No, look," Bayntor flapped a couple of notes with increasing desperation, "let my wife come with me for the night. We're tired, we've had no dinner. Tomorrow we can work out this little problem."

"You have two choice," the captain repeated, remorseless, "we have bed here—for illegal person. It iss—" he drew his hand over an invisible bed, "com-for-tabble."

"Alice—" Bayntor would not normally think of asking his wife for an opinion, "this is a damn difficult situation. I don't know how you came to mess up your passport. Did you spill something on it?"

She shook her head slowly. "I—I don't think so." Her hair swung in the unshaded light, a ripple of moonshine. Her eyes showed a glimmer of fear. "No, honestly, Mersch, I don't—"

"You must have. They were quite all right. I'd swear to that. Look, you'd better stay here if you wouldn't mind. I'll be just down the road, you know." He turned back to the official. "If you're going to insist on keeping my wife here you'd better demonstrate that it *is* decent accommodation."

The captain shrugged, "Come then," and they went along cold corridors which took them into a much older stone-flagged building, through a kitchen where a samovar steamed and their feet rang loud on the uneven floor and into a wing where two small bedrooms were set up with minimal furniture and small high-barred windows and old-fashioned china jugs and basins. Everything looked clean.

Merschel Bayntor relaxed a little. "Well, this doesn't seem so bad, does it, darling … and seeing you've been a careless girl—"

"But—Mersch—I haven't—"

"All that silly polish and perfume—I should've put our passports in with the car's papers."

The captain showed no patience with this blame-laying. "You have lug-gege? You bring here now."

"All right. Come on then, Alice, and I'll get your bag."

She followed him back through the corridors. There were new people in the waiting-room who looked up with cautious red-chapped faces and glanced away again. Bayntor put up the

brolly and went out into the rain to fumble through the back seat of the Jaguar and rescue his wife's dressing-case. The whole situation was troubling but he supposed they would look after her … a pity there was no British Consulate nearer than Wenzyl at least fifty kilometres away … what else would Alice want? … she put things in the strangest places … he stumped back with her case and said brusquely, "Here, you go and get whatever else you need."

How could she have been so careless?—how hadn't he noticed?—but then she never thought in terms of cause and effect. Cause and surprise would express it better. He was tired. Driving on the right. The narrow poor roads in the mountains. The changeable weather. He stood in the doorway and saw new lights creep up the hill, come to rest behind the shining curtain of rain …

Whatever was Alice doing? … perhaps he should simply turn round and go back? … no, he had two meetings scheduled in Verstod tomorrow … it might be pleasure to Alice, this trip, but he was pressured by the need to return with orders for the plants. He shivered and went in to the stove.

Alice came back with her arms filled with clothes, damp clothes. She looked confused and stood slackly just inside the door. The captain sent his pimple-faced junior to escort her and Merschel kissed his wife on her rain-spangled hair and allowed her to be escorted away. The red-and-white barrier was raised. The Jaguar purred through and turned right into the Autonomous Region, giving up the poor tarmac for the ancient cobbles of Verstod, closed now and dull in the wet night except for a car or two and shrouded people hurrying home.

The hotel he'd booked (it was picturesque in the brochure) was deserted; his footsteps rapped irritably in the foyer, his bag hung heavily as he fumbled with brolly handle and papers and thumped on the reception desk. Were they all at dinner? There was a smell of cabbage and boiling meat. He thumped again and an elderly woman with warts and strained grey-black hair appeared from behind a dull-green curtain.

"Sir?"

"The name is Bayntor—B-A-Y-N-T-O-R—and I have a room booked—"

"Engleesh?"

"Yes. And I'd like dinner as soon as possible."

She began turning a ledger with chalky nails, unhurried in her search for the name. "Ah … Bayntor. Mistair and Misses Bayntor?"

"Yes."

"Room Twenty-three. First floor." She pointed to the wooden stairs with their narrow strip of red carpet.

"Good. Twenty-three—"

"You go up—and—" Her arm in its black woollen sleeve indicated a swing to the left. "It has wash basin. Where is—" She looked around.

"My wife?" Did he sound defensive? "My wife has been detained briefly."

Detained? Oh God! How would they see that. "Held up. She'll be here in the morning. Now, if someone could take my—our—bags … and where will I find the dining-room?"

"Your passport, sir."

"Oh? Yes, of course!" He fumbled it out and placed it on the desk, his irritation overcoming his moment of nerves. What did she expect to find in it? Salacious snapshots. It seemed minutes while she turned the pages, slowly peering at visas and stamps, turning back to the page which gave him up unvarnished to the casual gaze. Religion. Her old crumbling nail rested on it briefly, then the book was closed and passed back to him.

"You are hungry, sir?"

"Very. Starving." He tried a smile but she remained grim. "It's been a long day."

She made no response and he suddenly felt foolish. A long day. Driving a car this woman could never hope to possess, never even to experience … He picked up his luggage. "Twenty-three, you said?"

She inclined her head. Her straight part showed flakes of dandruff and in that sudden swift moment of revulsion he felt himself in control again.

"And the dining-room?" His voice had taken on its customary hectoring quality.

"The kitchen is closed, sir. I will send up a tray."

"Closed? What do you mean closed? It's—" He checked his watch and found it was nearing nine. Drat everybody! That farce at the checkpoint. Alice. This tiresome old crow. "All right. A tray it is." He stuffed his passport in his coat pocket and turned to the stairs. Twenty-three was marked, the door swung open at his touch. What sort of place was this that had no keys, no porters. His incipient annoyance, sprouted, tendrils boiled. He could blunder down … no, later … when she came with his tray … he would be firm; he sat down on the nearest chair, a heavy ostentatious thing of carved oak with a brown twill cushion. The room was high, the ceiling lost beyond the hanging lamp with its brass chains, its very height seemed to throw back his movements in faint whiffs of chilled air. The big bed was a half-tester, hung with maroon drapes and covered in heavy tasselled brocade. The pillow-slips were starched white. It was a bed to be looked at by people who'd paid their pound at the door and were kept orderly by looped ropes and the sharp eye of the guide.

'Wenceslas slept here' a sign should say.

He closed his eyes. A headache was beginning. The dropped silence was broken by a faint scuffle like naked claws on wood. He lifted a shoe, brought it down heavily. The sound ceased. Rats beyond the wainscoting.

He should have asked that crone what they had in their cellar, some awful cheap Middle European claret … but then the tokays from the Danube vineyards … the German beers …

What were they giving Alice? She must be hungry, not that she'd had the concentration of driving—appalling roads—and the map should've warned them of the narrowness, how dare they put firm lines instead of dashes—he would complain—

With an effort he lifted his bag to his knees, unzipped it and took out tablets, nightwear, his shaving bag—what one earth was Alice's tooth mug doing here—he should check his sample bag and literature for tomorrow; not that he was hopeful, not here in this backwater, what would his treasured phrases, his confident assertions of product quality and plant capacity achieve, dropping into the void of unstimulated minds, minds without vision, minds trolled in muddy talk of a vainglorious past …

But the factory was struggling.

He wasn't the right man, never had been. He could say it to these time-steeped walls. "I am not a businessman. I am not an entrepreneur. I hate selling ball-bearings, gaskets, Y-joints, piping, sheeting … I hate … " He lifted his head, stared at the heavy walnut bureau across the room, the swing mirror, the white embroidered runner. "I hate … " His head felt too big and blundering for his neck; he raised a hand and massaged behind his ears.

He was like an old bullock driven to market, stumbling across the hillside, darting small-eyed glances at the turnings off the straight lane. The slow cumbrous brain questioning—to turn here, a dash for freedom there, a hanging back on the turn—and what would such daring achieve? His life had been mapped out twenty—thirty—years ago and he hadn't even noticed the turnings, the occasional gates, the side roads. He, Merschel Bayntor, was—*blessed* with an understanding kindly father who had smoothed his way.

The little scrabbling furtive sounds began again.

He was a lost boy, handed in like a left-behind raincoat to the Occupation forces, a wild boy, unkempt, and half-starved, his red hair matted with dirt and tangled with leaves. He was 'Victor' but he had lived by his wits, not from suckling any she-wolf. He was an excitement, a novelty, their mascot like a dog to be bathed and brushed, made smart with a new collar and given titbits. But—this being beaten Germany—he must, naturally, be the child of liquidated Jews. The men showered him with ersatz Jewishness, words they'd heard, a little skullcap, one of them christened him Mini-Moses; not a basket of woven rushes but near enough. He would bring

them luck. He was petted and spoiled and his teeth rotted with a diet of imported toffees and boiled lollies.

Then it was time to go home and they campaigned to bring him with them. Whoever heard of a regiment leaving its mascot behind? Sergeant Bayntor applied to adopt him—and somewhere in the reams of paper thrown up by a nameless boy a new identity was dropped upon him like a net upon an untameable creature. Little Merschel Bayntor with his wild red hair and cheap new clothes (conjured out of Stores by the timely swap of some radio spare parts, illegally come by) would go to live in Manchester with Norman and Ivy Bayntor and old Mr Bayntor and cousin Mary. School would tame those last dangerous impulses, nervously they would make arrangements with the synagogue to undertake his social conditioning. It was never said but the Bayntors believed implicitly that their windfall child (Ivy couldn't have her own) had been born with a natural instinct for making money.

The factory, H. G. & D. O. Bayntor & Sons, had been a family concern for a hundred years; it had stood up black and solid since the days when Frederick Engels fulminated against the filth of the canal behind it. It survived because the Bayntors were frugal people and their policy of employing, for a pittance, the most desperate of those who knocked on their door in the Depression years had earned them a reputation for service and generosity. Everything was wearing down now including the reputation, the flooring was poor, the machinery constantly requiring repairs, the space dark and Victorian and difficult to light. But the Bayntors had acquired a secret weapon. Now they must hone it and train it.

Young Mersch grew into an obedient boy (those cold nights under leaves in the stricken woods) and, obediently, he followed the path mapped out for him by his adopted father. He watched them come, uneasily, to his Bar Mitzvah—his father laying aside his hat then hastily cramming it back on his head—they didn't belong yet, perversely, they were proud that he was here, that he was the centre of attention, that he had used his childhood notoriety to enter important houses and be petted by influential people.

But nothing—without capital—could rescue H. G. & D. O. Bayntor & Sons from failure. He had helped his father get loans—a new factory on a new industrial estate had risen like a limp phoenix. Now his life was the long hell of filling order books and re-scheduling loans.

The rats in the walls were growing bolder. They scampered now; he felt them jostling in the dark spaces …

A heavy knock fell on the door. His tray had come.

Alice was the child of pathetic people. They didn't understand she should be minded. He had first seen her entering Old Trafford, not dressed in red like her companions but in her favourite blue. Her hair fell in its cascade beneath a triangle of blue cotton. Rough black-coated boys surrounded her, loud with talk and stuffed with gum. What father would let a girl like that out with them?

And yet—she was untainted. She moved with them, with the red-scarfed girls, yet was not of them. She might just have been caught up in their paths as they entered. He changed his plans and rushed to follow her in, watched her closely, that sweet little smile, that waterfall of moonshine. He found the excuse to lean forward, as Sheffield Wednesday scored a goal and her companions booed loudly, and touch her hair. It was soft and smooth as silk under his lusting hand.

He followed her out, saw her climb on a crowded bus, lost it in the streets, found it again, she saw him as she climbed down, an unexpected man in his red MG, his hair oiled down, his jacket over-smart for this suburb of decaying brick. She smiled and turned away, her feet moving with the confidence of someone who has lived here a lifetime. She stopped, watched the flight of a sparrow, went on, stopped again as a cat on a brick post leant forward and thrust a friendly face into her lifted hand. She looked up to the window above, a curtain fluttered; she lifted a hand, went on, turned in the next gate. He parked and sat, weak with relief. It had been so *easy*. If life

were a book he would have sought for weeks. But now, should he simply walk up that short path, past that smutty lilac, and *knock*. And if he knocked—what would he say?

Not yet. Not yet. Prolong the delicious agony. For he never doubted that a girl who lived here, who went to the football with cheap kids, would be thrilled, overwhelmed, by the attentions of the Bayntor heir. He had been given that access of pride by his years in the pleasant solid brick of Bayntorhood, with a maid, a cook, a gardener. He had little experience of girls—and those he knew through work or the synagogue seemed uninteresting to him. But what worked with them, intrigued them, made them telephone in breathless voices, would work with the girl of the spun silver hair.

The tray had cabbage soup, meat rolls with a pale brown sauce and boiled potatoes, a bottle of cheap hock, a damask napkin with a frayed edge.

"Coffee?" The old woman looked at him with unfriendly eyes. In this dim light her warts seemed more prominent. Her face might be the face of a witch. He drew back slightly.

"Thank you. Yes."

The lines from her nose seemed to deepen in disapproval. It meant another journey up the stairs.

He thought of saying something about the rats, then retreated. What was the point? What could she do? The building was old, historic, it had probably seen the sweep of Attila (had Attila come this far?), people paid extra for a sense of history, the vermin came with the history.

The food was acceptable, filling enough, but he was left with a sense of dissatisfaction.

His mother had bought books, *Kosher Food*, *The Jewish Kitchen*, *Gourmet Meals from Middle Europe*, no, that one she'd found in a bag of jumble, with the foolish idea that food would recall him to his earliest memories, that his baby food must've been strained beetroots and his teething rusks, overcooked bagels. Nothing happened, except for building in him the vague wish that his diet could simply be left alone, that he could eat what everyone else ate. In his grown-up years he had eaten what he wanted. Mildly enjoying this food brought back that vague sense he was letting his mother down, that her sacrifice of time and effort was unappreciated.

The coffee came in a dented and tarnished pot. The old woman, black in the shadow of the unwieldy bed, seemed to feel his dissatisfaction.

"You think this food is no good? You want better this late, eh?" She thrust her face forward.

"Oh no, it's fine. Quite nice."

"This is not a palace now."

He stared at her. "You mean this place was once a palace."

Her response was closer to a hiss than a yes. "My father was a Novrodino."

It meant nothing to him. "I see. Well, my wife will be delighted when she hears … "

"Your wife?" The old woman chuckled, "What wife?"

He drew himself up, suddenly angry. "My wife, Alice."

"That one. When will we see her then?" She laughed and repeated, "That one."

"What do you mean—that one? I only have one!" Something seemed to close round his chest, like someone taking his blood pressure, tighter, tighter, they pumped till the bands threatened to suffocate him.

She knew—how could she know?—that he had left Alice behind in that stone room with the narrow bed and the china basin—

Then she shrugged her black-clad shoulders and turned away. "Put your tray there." She pointed to the open doorway. A guest passing, peered in, then looked away in sudden embarrassment; a fine old man with upstanding white hair, his gown pulled around him in crimson splendour.

Merschel Bayntor nodded, not trusting himself to speak any more.

The coffee was strong but the small jug of milk smelled slightly off; a vaguely acrid smell as though the cows in these mountains were fed on pine needles.

He drank it black, heavily sugared.

He thought he'd specified a room with a bath, this wooden cupboard with a china bowl set in it and a towel folded beside it wasn't what he'd meant. He would ask questions, demand a better room, in the morning. His own robe was blue wool. Alice had bought it at an end-of-winter sale, not because it was cheap but because it was blue. She was hopeless shopping … hopeless … his mother after her first brief admiration of Alice had warned him: don't marry that girl, she's not right for you … but he'd gone ahead; he wanted to possess moonshine, stroke it, wind it round his fingers, smell its clean fragrance …

What had her parents said to her? Take this man, you'll never do better? Of course. Or something like that. Stupid people with their little suburban minds and the foolish dithering way they treated their daughter, saying, "Go out, dear, don't be late back, dear—" without knowing where she went, who with, never asking, when she came back, what she'd done, fussing in their silly way over the warmth of her cardigan, whether she had her bus timetable in her bag—

Didn't they know girls were fair game on these streets of an evening, girls coming back from the football with rowdy skirmishing, girls in the all-night cafés, so if they didn't have the sense to keep her in he must step into the breach and take care of her. If anything happened to her. He must be mentor, protector, guide … gaoler …

"You want to marry our daughter?" Archibald Rudge stared out of his little eyes in his little pallid face. "Alice?" As if there were other daughters waiting in the wings for the same foolish parenting.

"That's what I said." He was sharp. Didn't they understand his plain request, must he dress it up in fancy phrases.

"What does Alice say?"

"She doesn't mind."

Alice sitting there, balancing a cup on her knee, while she gazed out the window. What was outside, was she listening, did she know this was the most important moment of her life—being linked to the firm of H. G. & D. O. Bayntor & Sons—or was she watching the powder-puff clouds beyond the verdigris-green of the Baptist roof?

"No—well, er, I don't suppose she does. She is only eighteen, you know." Mr Rudge looked up cautiously; he didn't want to put this man off.

Mrs Rudge came in with parkins, warm from the oven. "You must have one, Mr Bayntor. They're the best you're ever likely to eat, if I do say so myself!" She laughed and her chin wobbled.

He put on a dutiful smile, mindful of his mission. Stupid woman, did she have no conversation beyond stoves and bowls and wouldn't one of those new mixers be ducky and knowing where you could get flour a penny ha'penny cheaper. Was that the life an intelligent being should live? Of course not, and Ma Rudge was not an intelligent being. What a creature, what creatures, to put in charge of the happiness of this innocent young woman.

He sat and waited, his cup and saucer in one hand (the TV tray had a doubtful leg), and thought—'it doesn't matter what you say, I will take Alice away from this little life, let her flower and flourish where people will envy her beauty, where she can be starshine and deep blue space—and people will say, where did Bayntor find that glorious creature'—because *I* know all about making people in the chosen image. No more football, tennis perhaps, with her hair tied back under a blue bandanna and falling to the hem of her tennis frock, or golf, with the swirl of her hair as she tees off, the sun glinting upon it …

Mr Rudge was clearing his throat. "Well, if Alice would—hrrmmm, Alice pet—what do you think? Would you like to be married?"

Alice turned round, her smiling eyes rested on her visitor's hair, the sober navy of his suit, the paler blue of the handkerchief in his breast pocket, the blue and navy stripes of his tie. "If … you think … I wonder—could we have a house with room for a tortoise—"

"A tortoise?" He had arranged his face in an appropriately benevolent state, and now it fell down.

"I always wanted a tortoise. They have them in Mahon's … just a little one which could go in the garden and watch the sparrows … "

"Well, of course, I don't mind—" But he did mind. Not because a tortoise would intrude but because she hadn't taken his visit seriously enough.

"Oh thank you, Mersch! You are very kind."

"Well, hmmm—when did you think of getting married? And you realise that Alice is not—hmmm—Jewish?"

"I'm not a total idiot," he wanted to say. How many times had he been here to tea. "It doesn't matter. She must keep on being—" for one wild moment he couldn't remember what religion the Rudges espoused in their fumbling way, "Baptist."

"It's not as though we're very regular," Mrs Rudge said apologetically as if it was a failing of her health, "but we would be all at sea with something different."

"I understand."

"Another cup, Mersch?" She leant forward with the teapot.

He put the tray with the dented coffeepot outside the door and walked to the window; the heavy drapes puffed out dust when he swung them apart. The small window was runnelled with rain. Would it stop tomorrow? Such a nuisance carrying a dripping umbrella into strange offices, not wanting to risk leaving it with strange people—and hard to find the way in an unfamiliar town with the wipers busy and Alice … first thing, he would have to confront that jumped-up Johnny of an official. He hadn't checked the door of Alice's room. Could it be locked from the inside?

He let the drapes fall back. His mind saw the spartan room, the old stone floor, the high window—but the door, no, that stayed beyond the reach of his quick cursory quartering. He hadn't—he hadn't really cared—it—well, what was one night? It might be good for Alice not to have him there to tell her what to do every minute of the evening … but then it was too late to hope that Alice could change …

Should he have a bath? Would they have hot water here? Enough hot water? He imagined a coughing rusty gas-fired cistern, the sort of remarkable contraption English boarding-houses once sprang on their fumble-fingered guests. But this one would be plagued by communist shortages, the gas would flicker and die when he was well-soaped. A brief sponge, he'd been in the car all day—and that was another thing: the car. He must go down, see that it was safe, if there might be guests' parking, an ancient converted stable perhaps. People here would be envious, of his good fortune, of his place in the queue of car-buying, they would—he couldn't decide whether they would put greasy fingers on the rain-washed body or whether they would souvenir parts—

The stairs creaked going down. And he must ask that old witch for a key for his room; even now someone might be slipping in, scrabbling at his bags, hefting his briefcase for weight and worth. The echoing foyer was deserted. From other regions there was the sound of violins. Someone playing, the radio, a record; he thumped again. "Service!" The whirling dervish of the music continued unabated but a tiny wizened creature with a deformed arm appeared from nowhere and peered over the reception desk.

"My car!" Merschel Bayntor wasn't going to waste words. "Where shall I put it for the night?"

"Car?" repeated the little man.

"Car. Yes. Good Lord, surely you understand car?" He mimed steering. "Come here." He beckoned and the man crept out from behind the desk and came with him to the top of the front steps.

"My car." He resisted the impulse to speak louder. "Where shall I put it?"

The deformed arm, with the elbow pushed out like a broken wing, moved up. The other arm swept a circle.

"You have a garage?" Why hadn't he thought to bring down his phrasebook.

The deformed arm came closer, the fingers closed over his wrist and tugged him gently. Together they went down the wet steps. Now he could see the tiny cobbled lane to one side. Could he fit the car through?

"Thank you." At least it would be off the street, even if the lane only led to a yard.

He drove in very carefully, expecting at any moment to hear the scrape of metal against bulging stone. The space behind the hotel was cobbled too and stone walls rose up all around him, broken only by narrow windows with deep lintels. Was this all part of the ancient palace? Did he believe in 'palace'? He parked in such a way driving out would be untroubled, the rain had made the cobbles slippery and he put out a hand to steady himself as he locked the car door, For a moment he stood with glistening hair—was there anything he needed from the car?—then he hurried back along the lane. The old walls seemed to lean in on him, as though he was a poor creature in its tunnel, and he felt the greyness surround him. Grey with the greyness of old loss, of people taken from that lowering square to the blaze of medieval justice. Uncharacteristically, he shivered at his thoughts. That old woman in black, her ancestors would have burnt, not brought trays; the smell of wet cobbles and old drains filled his eyes and he hurried despite the uneven surface.

What was he thinking of?

Tomorrow, he would offer his shiny catalogues, he would talk of discounts on large orders, on the flexibility Bayntor & Sons could offer, they would learn they were being offered the best. He was now the Director in real terms (Norman was failing), in other circumstances the firm would've sent one of their representatives—but with him and his wife holidaying here—

Alice. Her holiday. He started in the dim alley. Her holiday.

The old woman stood, arms folded, at the foot of the stairs. Behind her the worn red runner reached up into the echoing dark of the building. Far away, along the landing, came the flushing of an antiquated toilet. A door creaked open.

"You car is—"

"The courtyard is safe?"

"This is a safe place. Our people do not steal."

Our people. "I'm relieved to hear it." He went to pass her.

"Your wife will be coming in later? We shut the door at eleven."

"No. Tomorrow, I said."

"I will shut the door then."

But by his watch it was only a quarter past ten. The impulse to say "No, don't shut it—Alice might come after all" faded.

"By all means. Is there hot water at this time of night?"

"Naturally. We are not—" She seemed to bite down hard on a word.

Savages. Primitives. "Thank you—oh, and do you have a key to my room? I am not used to leaving things unlocked."

"You are not used to living in a place like this? We do not lock doors."

"I see—well—" But he didn't want to say goodnight. Not when she aroused feelings of both annoyance and pity. Those warts. That unrelieved black on her thinness. The draught which entered and met them at the stairs.

"I'd like breakfast about seven … oh, breakfast for two. Seven or a bit later."

She looked him up and down. "Your wife."

"Yes," his irritation overflowed, "my wife will be here for breakfast."

But as he turned and hurried upstairs, away from the penetration of her eyes, he thought, 'will she?'

His suit was damp now. He stripped it off, hung it on a folding hanger, dug out his pyjamas. The lamp above seemed to throw his stomach into white relief, leaving his legs in shadow. It looked, he felt a sudden embarrassment as though others too looked upon him, like a great pale

mushroom sprouting an evil fungi growing from the forest of his thick red hair. He ran his fingers down, circled them on his middle-aged flesh, he hadn't thought of himself as overweight, the merest touch, nothing to worry about. Alice didn't seem to notice. But then Alice noticed, what did Alice notice, not the things other people noticed.

He sat down to remove his socks.

Alice, he had learnt gradually, was little better than a moron. But a very pretty one nevertheless. He felt the strange lurch that thinking of himself curled up in her hair always brought, the sudden flickering excitement in his groin. He closed his eyes. The fall of silver as he burrowed in, the rose-petal softness of her buttocks hidden by her hair, his hands busy twisting and twining it, plaiting it, letting it fall in ripples …

Her giggles. She thought (did Alice think) he was funny. The things he brought her. A painted silver shawl. A blue velvet cloak. A sheer white nightgown. She took them. She couldn't see why he should then want to take her to bed. She would giggle as he used his new prop in obscure games she, he supposed, thought of as adult; she let him amuse himself. But he didn't know what she thought. She lived her life in a world which overlapped his—she was always *there*—but what she saw, what made her smile, that was hidden from him. She was like a child in a fairy story who had no life but the one spent on the page. He drew the lines for her to follow but who was she, what was she, when he closed the book and turned out the light?

It was strange. He'd never thought about it, until this moment, that she smiled at all times, but never laughed, only those times when he took her to the bedroom. A silly laugh, babyish. Yet her smiles were the smiles of someone who—sees—beauty. He hunched his shoulders in the pyjamas (he didn't trust the hot water this late, tomorrow) because his room was cold. The rats had come back, tiny squeaks, a touch of claw on ancient beams.

What did Alice see.

The white birds in the marsh. For a fleeting second he regretted his impatience with her. But stopping on that road? Honestly.

She would be asleep now, well, it was likely she would be. Was it noisy there, all night traffic, the raising and lowering of the gate, doors opening and shutting, telephones, the thick old walls. What did the man mean by illegal immigrants, who would come here, to this triangle of unwanted mountains, this backwater of ancient history—who had spent the night in that room before Alice? Was it the room used by the border guards when they slept there—

He stepped out into the corridor with his spongebag. Somewhere a door rattled, not the front door which was now barred and bolted with ironmongery fit for ancient castles … ancient castles, what knights and barons held this stronghold, held till when—the changing times after Versailles—or later, the arrival of the Nazis, Stalin's men—what had happened here. The dusty silence seemed to ask the question.

The bathroom was painted pink and tiled. He had worried unnecessarily. It could have been much worse. The water was hot and gushed with unsuspected force. But he would bathe tomorrow. The toilet chain clanked, it would waken a dozen sleepers. And did Alice have everything she needed? Probably not. But it wouldn't matter for one night.

One night. Would he have to drive all the way back to Chuzmoid? Surely not. No, he would force them to ring. He would stand over them. He would assert … it was their fault, that blotched date, what nonsense that they would think he would want to forge something, what minds they must have, always suspecting … suspecting what? Who would come here, what would get smuggled? The idea seemed absurd.

The passports. He had taken them, he had put them away himself. They hadn't been touched till he asked Alice to … He shivered again, this time the passage was filled with a faint whistling draught which brought with it the smell of something burnt, vaguely unpleasant, feathers perhaps. He thought of giant black stoves in the caverns below, the castle kitchens, converted now for the needs of tourists, huge gaping maws eating wood from the pine forests, disposing of castle wastes. Feathers, the heavy tail and wing feathers. Here they would certainly

keep the soft down of the hens' breasts for their pillows—no, not now, not now. Old women with geese in the green hills, little girls with geese, sad old stories … wolves in the heavy oaks, wild boar, men from the castle, caparisoned horses, bugles, peasant people, fear, the clatter of hooves on cobbles, ancient carts bringing the women, old warty women, young woman with silver hair who didn't speak this language, who smiled strange sweet unknowable smiles—'why doesn't she speak, why does she smile to herself, what is her secret?'

Ah. A witch, a witch in her youth with spells in her fingertips, a witch with white feather wings to disport herself in castle windows. He was nervous now. That tiny spartan room with its jug and basin. That cell. That cold stone.

The rats were gnawing their ever-growing teeth. He flung a shoe at the wall and there was a hurried scuttle, then quiet. He retrieved his shoe and placed it neatly with its pair. He liked things neat, understood, straightforward.

His clothes were put away neatly. Did the rats actually come in to the room or were they content to remain in the walls and secret echoing passageways. Samuel Whiskers and his good wife, the trundle of a rolling pin, grubby pastry, no, old bones, secreted, gnawed, left bare, rooms bricked in, women who had loved unwisely left to fall to bones, to dust.

"Stop it!" This place, this vague guilt, was playing havoc. But if he were to return to the guardhouse, ask to see Alice—of course he would find she was sleeping peacefully in that ancient wing, while the men clustered round the stove and waited for the occasional vehicle, people stamping in out of the rain. But it would set his mind at rest.

The captain, cold eyes, asking the question. "Why?"

Or he could say, "I've come to spend the night with my wife."

Their nudges behind his back. "Can't manage without his bit of fluff"; what was that here, something barbaric on the tongue, requiring ten syllables.

He sat down and removed his slippers, readied himself for bed, moved the piled-up pillows—the light, should he turn out the light?

Were there rats in the guardhouse? Probably not, and Alice would not be frightened of their little feet scrabbling. She never said so, she probably didn't even understand that she had some sort of affinity with creatures, not perhaps hungry creatures surviving in the paucity of a stripped-down castle … he'd always avoided the question of the tortoise, buying her a cat instead. Then he'd bought himself a dog, a Dalmatian, they'd been popular at the moment of impulse and the cat had slept on her lap and the dog at her feet—and it wasn't because she fed them because he had insisted on doing so, to see they weren't overfed. Still, she wouldn't be afraid if she heard forest creatures in the night, a dog chained, the ubiquitous rats. He might as well go to sleep. Tomorrow morning he would have to argue with them to let her come here for breakfast, and if they allowed that then was it likely they would insist on the return to Chuzmoid. The drive would play havoc with his schedule.

But as his mother had been fond of saying 'there's no point in meeting trouble'. Of course it was Mary now who looked after the house, his adopted parents; Mary with her sour mind and petty jealousies, quick to find fault with Alice at every turn. She was blood, he wasn't, so why had he gained so much more from being a Bayntor. Did she understand they had both paid, coins from a secret hoard, to be a Bayntor, and she at least could be herself?

The bed was too engulfing, several times he woke believing he was smothering in his wife's hair. The shadows flickered, a draught from somewhere, the ceiling suggested a tunnel drawing him upward, a flue. He closed his eyes but his skin felt prickly as though something had settled over him—or was he sleeping on feathers? The maroon curtains were too close to his face. He wriggled himself into the middle of the bed.

There was something wrong, the prickliness was still in his hands. A heat as though the great stoves were under his room baking the morning bread, but he smelled instead an old smell of drying herbs and musty drapes.

Sleep overtook him again but when he woke in the dawn the prickliness was back. He washed briefly in the cold water from his basin. With the shadows gone he could see the deep blue scene baked in the old china, a scene of fields and forests and swans and nodding rushes and stone towers and swallows. Someone had been commissioned to paint a scene that would reflect … were they swans? He peered closer. But he couldn't be sure, bulrushes crowded them round, the fleur-de-lis heads of iris nodded on the banks.

Was the basin valuable, like the crested coffeepot. He had no idea. Bayntor & Sons dealt in the metallic new.

He dressed and folded his pyjamas neatly into their bag, walked the deserted landing to the bathroom. From somewhere came the cackle of geese. Geese were white. Geese pledged a kind of freedom … freedom from what? … surprise …

The foyer was deserted. He stood a moment looking round at the mounted heads of deer and boar, the threadbare rugs on the flags, the heavy ornate wooden chairs and hat-stands. He could call for someone but they would know he was still here if they cared enough to check his room. It took a minute or two to pull the bolts and turn the keys in the huge doors, to swing them sufficiently ajar. The street was damp but clouds were shredding under a stiff breeze, soon the sun would shine through.

Now he was aware of the height of the hotel, the narrowness of its windows and the breadth of its steps; yes, a converted castle was possible, He struggled a whistle to his lips. People were out, hurrying in coats. Alice might like to look round the shops.

He would have coffee and pastries for his breakfast. She would quite likely ask for something silly like Weetabix and they would merely stare at her. He would fob her off with toast. Unless, of course, that beast of a captain had come good with a decent hot meal—

The drive out of the inner courtyard was as fraught with worry as the drive in had been but at last the Jaguar was by the kerb. The old woman from the hotel, still dressed in black, came towards him.

"Mistair Bayntor?"

"Good morning." He felt expansive. "I'm just going to collect my wife. We'll have breakfast when we return."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Quite well, thank you." The itch was back in his hands, some allergy to last night's food perhaps, or the feather tick … "I won't be long."

Alice would be seated by the anthracite fire, her long hands held out to the warmth, the morning shift bustling round her, her hair a little tangled if she'd mislaid her brush. The captain obsequious now that he could see his games had achieved nothing. Did he harass tired travellers for amusement? Of course that visa date *had* been perfectly clear when he'd handed over their passports.

The man owed them an apology.

And Alice—should he tell her he was sorry? He wasn't—well, she did do such silly things, it didn't really seem to matter that this time she might've been in the right, it all flowed over her, she was just as likely to interrupt him to ask him to look at the flight of a swallow or a rose opening. He wouldn't bother. Not that he should've left her there last night but today, his meetings, were important. If she hadn't got a good night's sleep, well, she could sleep at the hotel.

The road seemed longer this morning, more traffic, even a farm cart or two. It must be market day. Did the communists set the prices or could the peasants still haggle to some degree. A pig in one cart, a lot of green vegetables of some kind in another—spinach? it had more the look of nettles, he had tasted nettle soup once, he couldn't remember where—then an ancient truck with crates of hens. The Jaguar excited some interest from passers-by. He preened vaguely. He wasn't the success his father had pictured—but then that belonged in the realms of fairy tales, wealth beyond avarice, gold coins used as draught counters—but he had managed. He was a

success in spite of his failure to choose a wife who could help him, entertain, listen intelligently to his plans and problems. Mary was right. Alice had the brains of a bird.

But … he thought of the Rudges giving her unthinking freedom, of Alice tagging along in that crowd of girls with their long mascaraed lashes and high black boots, those rough boys … and their casual solicitude … maybe he hadn't understood. Alice was safe with them.

The sun broke through, set a million raindrops sparkling; people turned down their coat collars.

Merschel Bayntor drew up near the guard house and walked down. Far away was a whistle, then the bay of a dog. He shivered. Some poor devil with a dog after him. He'd thought the situation in this part of the world was easing a little, *détente* and the growth of tourism, trade …

He pushed open the door and went in. The stove still burned. The smell of wet serge still clung faintly, and cheap cigarettes, coffee, mud. He called out, "Anyone here? Alice?"

His wait lengthened. Dare he follow down that passageway, calling "Alice"? He went through but the door into the hallway was locked. He turned round, puzzled. Had there been an accident on the road that had taken the men to it? He went outside again. Should he drive down? No, that would put him on the wrong side of the border—if he could open the barrier. He walked to the first curve in the road. There were men further down, beating the rough bracken, the long tangled 'bison grass' of the hillside, the motley hound strained at its leash.

What were they looking for?

How long he stood there, he didn't notice. The sun rose higher, turned the black mud and stagnant water of the marshes to brilliant colours, silver and tansy-gold and ebony-murk. The white birds were still here, he could see the faint pale touch between the rushes.

The dog was giving tongue again. Howowow-ahroooo. It chilled the morning. Its great ugly head was down, thrusting through the grass, the voices of the men followed it in shouts and unintelligible cries.

They dropped from sight behind a larch copse. He stepped on to the road, and ran. He was overweight, his feet in his best shoes hurt him on the pot-holed surface, his mouth was dry, still tasting its toothpaste faintly.

He was too late. The dog was splashing through the reedbeds, spraying its handler, the birds took flight with great angry flappings. He still wasn't sure if they were swans. They rose up from invisible banks and flats and flew south, their necks thrust forward, as the eager dog violated their space and the men bandied their questions and probed under overhangs with long poles.

His chest was on fire.

If he had been another man, if he had not wielded his petty power, if he had loved the sun and cherished the moon, if he had understood the voice which hissed, 'she is not for you, she walks in places you cannot follow', if he had cut her hair and woven it in love knots and circled their lives with spun silver—though the vigorous threads tightened on his fingers and choked round his throat and tangled in his eyelashes and cut his pale red-dusted arms …

23. AS IT WERE — A LIGHTHOUSE

Turn, flash, reflect and flash again; a light above—
My eyes are salt sore, filmed. I see, I *think* I see—
My mouth cracks and whispers, flares red at the corners,
My skin, like tunny-scales, reflects the agony of solitude—
With manic force, the great iron hooves
Strike the beams and struts of lonely stable walls
Rear and curl and fight in life-denying fury

Then break free—

A thousand nights with lowering light
By my elbow; and dark imps plucking at my
Other side; in solitude they expand and grow;
Escape a life's conditioning; hard round the highway curves
Lean in to their great creaking collars; monstrous beasts
Midnight black; with threaded hames a-jangle
Uneasy shafts ride up on rock-hollow sides
Eyes blinded—

A leaping carriage meanly clothed in draper's black
Its souls contained within, unsighted, sway and slide,
The faint whistling curlew cry of the devil's legion
In crevices of life; the beacon captures one pallid face
As the curtains shift and part, their tassels dragging wearily—
And still the great hooves thunder on;
The lash and crack of well-thonged whip, keening
High and fierce—

A cloak and mantle flung about; "a wild
Night," the Keeper says, by faint firelight, "and cold";
I have a fire, the Tempter says, great glowing boilers down below;
A quick leap—a soft-cushioned leap; do not stop to query—
It will come, I remonstrate, the quarter's ship, bringing oil,
Hard rations for the souls who warn the lost
Of great-maned beasts hereabouts—
Letters stamped …

… Books in black bindings, yet untouched, and
New sou'-westers, still with the smell of people caught within
Their folds, and thick grey jerseys knit by warm and loving hands;
Light dextrous hands—The foam from tugging leaden bit
And striving flanks, the only glimmer in the funeral dark;
And the horses—oh, the horses, stamp and toss and steam;
Three months, their stance declaims, is but a minute
In a dream—

24. A DAY RIDE

I wouldn't have come if I could help it but they insisted, Mum insisted, she said it would just be us all getting to know each other and, I should've guessed, it was just *awful*. They came to this hotel on the coast, it was all old-fashioned, sort of, you know, sort of orange brick and little bits of boards like those pictures you see on English calendars and it was out of town and it was getting old and run down and all the new places and all the fun and everything were quite a long walk away … and inside this place it was all full of these *old* people going on about how nice it was to have peace and quiet and this was just how they remembered it when they'd come here forty years ago or something—and there wasn't even a nice beach to walk down to. There were ten steps going down to a bit of sand, I know there were ten, that tells you how bored I was. Counting *steps!* And just this little beach with a lot of seaweed and some rocks and they put these tables out on this sort of patio area and so there were all these old women

looking at me all the time. I didn't even feel like going swimming with them all watching me and gossiping and I said I wanted to walk down town and go to the good beach and Mum kept saying there's nothing wrong here, it's got its own *style*, like I cared about *that* … and I don't see why a lot of people sitting round all afternoon playing bridge and canasta has anything to do with *style*, it just seemed dead to me … and then at night they'd all start dancing but it wasn't anything *fun*—just all these couples waltzing—and I didn't have anyone to talk to so I'd just go upstairs and watch TV but that got pretty boring too.

There was no one there of a similar age to you?

Nope. Not one. Just a few little kids and they took them all away to this playroom out the back—they even had a sign up there, Let our Nannies give you a Restful Holiday, it sounds a bit sick, doesn't it, and they had these women done up to look like, I don't know what, like those old stories you see on TV … and I thought I'd go crazy just hanging round there … and Rodney said why didn't I book in for some of the things the hotel offered … I know he just wanted to get me out of his hair with Mum watching and everything … he keeps saying how much he loves me, but you can see it in his face that he doesn't, but he gives me these funny looks when Mum isn't there, and he says, oh what lovely *hair* I've got, and one day he started putting his hands on it, like he's got some sort of thing about *hair*, I s'pose because he hasn't got much himself … and so I said, okay, and I looked to see what they had and most of the things were bus trips and I wasn't going to risk that in case all these old bags came along too … and there was golf and tennis but I like something where you can really get stuck into it, not run round looking all cutesy in white, like Mum is always wanting. It never mattered what I'd ask for, she'd still get me a tennis racket or ask if I'd like to have ballet lessons … I means what's the point of asking if you're not going to take any notice, not even *listen?*

Mmm ...

So, okay, I said, if I've got to do something—and Mum immediately said, oh now, you don't *have* to, darling, it's your holiday too, but I can see you aren't enjoying yourself, and I do want you to be happy too … that's what she says when she gives me something I don't want … and then she puts on this disappointed look when I say I'm not happy … she is always wanting people to be happy, she even tells Rodney that … and he gets all stupid and says how could he not be happy … they'd put anyone off being happy … but I said I'd go riding, they had this thing where you could go out in a group up into the hills behind, and there'd be someone to help with the horses and they'd carry a picnic lunch and set it up for you and everything, so I said, I'd give it a try and so they brought me this horse and there were about six others plus this man … and you wouldn't *believe* it but he even looked like Rodney and he had that same way of sort of looking at you sideways when he was talking to someone else, like he was saying aren't I the real guy, the way I keep everyone happy, like he's got you all just where he wants you … and so I let the others ride up close to him so they could hear him talking about all this stuff about the track and the history and everything … and I just rode along at the end and they had a mule carrying the lunch and some water—I've never been up close to a mule before—but my horse was pretty quiet and slow, I s'pose Mum told them to give me that kind of horse like I'm pretty hopeless … that's the other thing, you've got to be *safe* all the time, you can't take any risks, if you took risks you wouldn't be happy because you'd probably be all messed up and how can anyone be happy if they've got broken legs and everything and Rodney just stands there and smirks and says, yes, we don't want our little girl to hurt herself … and you'd think I was about ten … and he's just as bad as she is, wanting me to wear little white ankle socks and all that stupid stuff …

If he hasn't had children of his own he might not understand ...

Well, I s'pose not, but you'd think he'd have eyes in his head if he looked round a bit, and I don't see that it's any of his business anyway, what I wear.

Did you enjoy the riding?

It was okay to start off, I mean the others seemed quite friendly and there was only one girl that sort of looked down her nose like she thought she was a very superior rider and if it wasn't for us, she could really gallop along and show off … but we went up this track into the hills and it

was really steep and we all had to go single file and it got quite hard for the horses to heave themselves up over these rocky bits and we could hear the cicadas singing in the trees along the track and they were so *loud* … and every now and then you'd hear a whip bird or something, I liked that, but the others were making all this noise and they started singing and one of them said to me, come on, join in, tell us what you like to sing, and I said I don't like to sing, I just want to ride along and think … and they said was I always like this … I didn't think it was any of their business … I was *paying* to ride the horse … why should I do what *they* wanted to do?

Why indeed.

Then we stopped to have our lunch and this guy ties up all the horses to trees and there were a lot of flies around and it was really hot and still and he says how it's going to storm later but I wasn't worried. I didn't *care* about getting wet and anyway I'd be back at the hotel by then. But they didn't have anything really nice to eat, just sandwiches and some fruit and some little cakes that had got pretty dried out and some fruit juice and the others were keen to go on riding up the mountain because they said they wanted to see the view, except you could hardly see anything between the trees, only a sort of glimpse of blue, and I just wanted to keep going because I didn't want to be near that guy, Brett, that was leading us. I mean I s'pose there was nothing wrong with him, just that he reminded me so much of Rodney and I didn't even want to *think* about Rodney, about having to live with him for years and years, about having him round the house every day and telling me what he wanted me to do and everything … just like that … and the others all got on their horses and I did too, but I was starting to feel a bit stiff because I haven't ridden a horse for *ages*, not since my Dad died, and my legs were getting a bit sort of hot and chafed, but I wasn't going to say anything to anyone, I didn't want them thinking I was … you know … and they were all pretty keen to move on and I just kept riding slowly and I gradually got more and more behind them but I didn't mind because it was better that way and I could just hear the voices like a mumble in the distance and my horse just liked to go along slowly … and we came round this sort of high part where there'd been an old quarry or a dam or something, a long time ago, and it was all overgrown with grass and I couldn't see down to the bottom and it gave me a bit of a strange feeling up there, but there was a sort of fence there like you get on mountains and so I knew I was quite safe and I didn't want to keep hurrying after the others, I just wanted to stop there and pretend I was all alone in the world and the air was full of this smell from the bushes around the track and I started to think I was in another world and I stopped my horse and got off and I started to walk a bit and I could hear the cicadas all around me now, so close, it was like going through … I don't know … it was like a sort of tunnel with all these trees over the top and the feeling of this great space somewhere below me that I could hardly see … but I didn't want to look too closely and I started to get this strange feeling, I can't explain it, it wasn't like any feeling I've had before, like we would both fall into this huge pit and that would be the end of us and no one would care and we would be lying there for ever and all around us would be strange noises and I would never have to see them again and I didn't know if this was really happiness but I wanted to say things out aloud but I don't think I did. I think I was just standing there and I pushed my horse over the side into the quarry and he fell down, way down, and I had to go down to catch him and bring him up again and he was making this funny horrible noise …

It would be hard to push a horse into a pit, surely.

Oh no, it's very easy if you know how, you just move towards him and he steps back a little, and you move again and he goes a bit further and you take another step and he moves again and then he's right at the edge and he just falls and that's all there is to it, it's very easy, I didn't realise how easy it would be until it happened and it was so hot, standing there, and I could hardly breathe and I got down to look over the edge and I was sure I could see him way down below me and I said something about how I was going to climb down the cliff into the hole and I was there leaning over and I started to feel all *dizzy* and I thought I was going to fall myself and I knew it was going to be the end of me but I didn't care at all, just this strange blackness, like a … I don't know … it wasn't a cloud, but it was like something that comes down on you and it was

all around me and sort of smothering me and I couldn't hear the sounds any more and I thought this is the end of me, and I will never have to see him again and I was sort of feeling so terrible, like I was going round and round in a sort of spiral and another part of me was saying this was good, it was good to be like this and I would never have to worry about him, about anything any more …

Do you remember any more from up there on the mountain?

Not really. But I *did* feel sorry for my horse, I mean it wasn't his fault really except he had hair just the same sort of colour and I really don't like that colour, not even when it's a *horse's* hair and not any other kind of hair, and I think I thought then, but maybe it was later, that now Mum would be happy because she could see that I had been happy and I wasn't going to have to pretend any more because she doesn't want to see what's real and what's just pretend and you can't explain anything to her because she doesn't listen …

And when you woke up—what did you think then?

I didn't think anything. I mean I thought it was the end and I found it wasn't and I wanted to cry but Mum was sitting right there beside my bed and she said, oh, that's a relief, I knew I shouldn't have let you go out without your nice new hat and I said I hate … I think I said I hate hats … and she just gave her little laugh, you know, the sort of laugh she gives like, aren't you the old silly, and what a thing to say, like you are *really* stupid and it's no good taking any notice of you, no matter what you're saying …

Did you think about your horse—or ask about him?

I don't think so. It must be true, mustn't it, that I'm not nice or … that I don't care about anything … I mean I used to think I liked horses but maybe I don't … maybe I don't like anything …

Did anyone else come to see you?

Oh, *he* came. Wouldn't you think he'd stay away when I was like that, in bed, and he started telling me what an awful fright I'd given them but he didn't seem to care if I'd been frightened … except I hadn't been frightened at all … I was just sorry I was still alive … do you ever feel like that?

Not really, no. But your mother must have been worried about you, surely, to arrange for you to come and talk about it all with me.

No. She just thinks she wants to get me all, you know, thinking it's all me, that everything that happens to me is just my fault … and she was probably just sorry that I didn't fall right down … then she could go away and they could … she'd never have to take me with her … and he'd pay her more attention maybe … don't you think I'm right, that it's people that come back when they're s'posed to be dead that are a nuisance?

No. They're doing what's right for them. But now that you've done what your mother wanted what say we move on and you can talk about Rodney, whatever you'd like to talk about. There's just the two of us here.

*

He comes and sits down too close to me.

25. THE DOCTOR'S PONY

"The doctor put his bag in front of the saddle and mounted up. He always carried his bag like that because, once, long ago, when he'd tied it on behind it came loose and fell off and he didn't notice till he got to the house where there was a very sick man … so he had to go all the way back across the moors.

"His bag was tied on with thick straps. It was a black bag, like a carpet bag with two handles and a clasp and inside it he kept all the things he thought he might need and sometimes

he had to carry bits of people back with him to do tests to see what kinds of diseases they had. So it was a bag which had seen many strange things.

"His little pony too was very strong and nimble-footed. He had small hard black hooves and a mealy muzzle and he was plain brown with no white on him and he had a little stubbly mane and a little stubbly tail and his name was Master John. This was an unusual name for a doctor's pony but the man who rode him everywhere liked to be able to say to a sick person 'I'll just go and ask Master John' and they always felt that sounded sensible and it gave him plenty of time to think about what the diagnosis might be. You have to remember that this was a long time ago and doctors didn't have all the marvellous tests and laboratories and textbooks and things that they have now. Sometimes he could only guess at what might be wrong with a person.

"People smiled when he said he was just going to ask Master John but they didn't laugh because they also had great faith in Master John. It didn't matter what the sickness was, whenever the doctor came back into the room he always had a name for their trouble. Sometimes someone in the house would carefully follow him out and watch to see what he would do. They wanted to know more about the secret of Master John. But it didn't do them any good. They would just see the doctor standing there and the pony standing there and then the doctor would say out aloud 'yes, I'm sure that's it,' and he would come back inside the house and in to the sick room.

"Now on this night it was an ordinary call. He needed to ride across the moors to where a woman was having a baby. Babies have a funny habit of wanting to turn up at all hours of the night when it's cold and everyone is tired. I suppose they just want to let everyone know that they are unique and they will choose their own time … and of course they don't know that it's dark outside and in those days people only had candles to give them some light at night so it really *was* dark.

"But on this night it wasn't very late, not long after sundown when there is still a little bit of grey light in the sky and the moon is just thinking about getting up and shining its silvery light all around. The moor was wide and flat with just a few ponds here and there and little hummocks like the sort of thing a goblin might call a hill. There were little paths across the moors where the sheep had walked but sometimes at night it was hard to see them and sometimes they were all mucky and it was easier to ride across country where the ground was firmer.

"So the doctor had his bag and his big black coat to keep him warm and his pony out of the stables behind his old stone house, and his wife came out of the house to see him off and tell him to take care on the dark moor because the house where he was going was the very remote cottage of a shepherd. But he just smiled and said, "Nonsense, my dear, I know the moors very well by now. You go inside and keep warm and I am sure I will be home for breakfast." Then he rode away down the lane and turned out on to the open land where the heather and the bracken grew and he gave his pony a little chuck with the reins to go faster as it really was cold and he wanted to arrive as quickly as possible."

She had a storyteller's voice. It rose like the wind strengthening, it died away, it sighed again like the gale around the eaves, it rattled the roof and sank down the chimney so as to brighten the coals of past fires and stir the autumn leaves in a mantelpiece vase. It gathered together all the fears that children have ever felt and it smiled like the sun on the summer seashore. It trailed the reeds around the swimming swans and stirred the flat gleaming green surface of the pond to mysterious widening ripples. It held all the ways in which a child has ever felt its loneliness and its terror of the night closing round its bed and then it changed and the sinister was laughable and the fears fled and they all said 'but that's not really scary' …

"On and on they rode, the doctor's black bag jouncing up and down as the pony trotted with sure feet, and the doctor's black cloak blew out behind him in the wind that whirled across the moor and made the little silver-black ponds shiver.

"They were out of sight of his house and nothing but the wide moor stretched in front of them. But from somewhere far away, too far to be seen but not too far to be heard, came a strange

sound like wolves baying. Of course, the doctor thought to himself, there are no wolves here, perhaps I am just imagining the sound. But it came again, echoing across the empty spaces. Then he remembered people in the village talking about a pack of dogs which had gone wild and were said to roam the moors, catching rabbits and birds but in the colder months they came down close to people and attacked sheep and calves or took ducks and hens that were left out too late. He didn't like the thought but told himself they wouldn't attack a man on a horse, of course they wouldn't, not a *person*, not a sturdy *pony* like Master John, but then hadn't there been a story, he didn't know whether it was true, about a woman who'd heard a sound out near her hen house and had gone down to see if there was a fox skulking round—and these great dark panting *shapes* had leapt out at her from behind the shed! She had been carrying the heavy old crook that hung behind the back door and she swung this around. She fell to the ground but she managed to hit one of the animals on the nose and it backed off, howling.

"She told everyone she thought they were dogs but it had been a dark night and she couldn't be sure. So now the doctor thought of those hungry dogs and he became a little less sure that they wouldn't come leaping at him. Still, the sound was far away and Master John was swift and sure on his feet. 'Come on, Master John,' he said, 'there's no time to be wasting.' The pony grunted and stretched his stride but he couldn't risk going too fast in case he stumbled and fell on the rough ground.

"The sound seemed to come closer, the sound of animals breathing, of great paws eating up the ground, of an occasional half-howl as though they had the smell of warm flesh in their nostrils and couldn't hide the excitement they felt. The doctor began to feel worried. He was less than half way to the cottage and he was a heavy weight, him and his bag, for Master John to carry. The pony stumbled on a bit of rock but righted himself quickly and cantered on, but suddenly the bag in front of the doctor's saddle flew open. The things inside were rising and falling with the pony's stride. The doctor hastily pushed the clasp closed again. He swore at the bag. Maybe the clasp was loose or broken. Then he thought he heard a voice say 'Look in the bag! It has all you need'. He glanced around him, turned and looked over his shoulder. He could see black shapes moving in the moonlight behind him. They were still some distance away but the moon caught their eyes and made them glow a terrible red. But there was no one around him to be talking. He closed the bag a second time.

"But he had hardly felt the clasp click than it was open again and the strange deep gasping voice rose up again. The idea that his bag was talking to him was absurd. Bags don't talk, he thought, but Master John does. He speaks with his nose and his ears and his eyes and his tail and the bend of his neck and sometimes, even, with his hooves … but he doesn't *talk*. Yet *something* had said 'Look in the bag!' and he began to think over everything he'd packed for his journey: there were scissors and forceps and tweezers and a scalpel and needles and plenty of catgut; there were jars of pills and ointments, there were several boxes of powders, a bottle of chloroform, there were bandages of various kinds, cotton wool and pads and cloths.

"He reached down into his bag which he knew as well as he knew his own face and took out a long gauze bandage. He glanced again over his shoulder. The dogs, great dark things like mastiffs and wolfhounds, were almost within shouting distance and he could see the way their huge paws reached and gobbled up the space between them. Master John was running valiantly but he couldn't run for ever. His breath now was coming heavily.

"The doctor waited another minute then, holding one end of the bandage, he let it go and watched it unroll behind him, floating out behind his pony, in a long white strand. The leading dog reached it, he leapt for the floating white end and caught it in his teeth. The doctor let it go and it drifted back and the other dogs gathered, getting it tangled round their faces. For a moment they slowed, growling and curious at this white cloth. He reached in and took out another bandage, ready for the moment when they came on again. Three times they slowed, caught up in floating bandages, but it was only a short respite.

"What else was there? He reached down to the roll of cotton wool and began to pull off tiny round puffs and let them go so that soon he was surrounded by cotton balls floating in the wind.

The dogs seemed puzzled, some of them leaping at them, others ignoring them and jostling with their fellow hunters. It was a brief reprieve. Another minute and they would be leaping and baying round him, trying to tear at Master John's throat or leap upon his broad back.

"Once more he rummaged in his bag and tipped a little chloroform on to a pad and threw it behind him. Surely dogs would want to smell it, perhaps it would affect them, slow them a little. They sniffed—and sniffed—then they lost interest and came on again. He took out a box of powder that he used to mix for laxative drinks. He looped the reins round the bag and took his largest pair of forceps in his other hand. The dogs were close now to Master John's heels. One ranged up alongside him and he swung the forceps, the dog swerved, then straightened again. He swung the gleaming metal again and it struck the dog on the nose. He faltered, yelping. But another dog was coming up the other side of him now. He emptied the box and the powder flew out in a choking cloud. The dog ducked and sneezed and turned away. But there were more dogs and soon the bag would be empty.

"Master John stumbled again on the moorland track and his breath was coming in heavy pants and his neck was black with sweat and foam. But the doctor could not spare a thought for him as he saw another great head leaping and snapping. He leant out, stabbing with his scalpel, and the dog hesitated and dropped back, slightly. But there was another dog hard on his heels and he shouldered his companion aside, knowing his prey was tiring. The doctor unscrewed his bottle of medical spirits and flung it in the dog's eyes.

"Soon there would be nothing left except the bag itself. The doctor wondered if he could untie it and jam it over a dog's head. They knew, of course they knew, that Master John was nearly done and then they would both be at the dogs' mercy. He took up the cloth he carried to lay out his instruments and let it go as a dog leapt at his pony's heaving flanks. It fluttered into the dog's face and blinded him momentarily but a shake of his great hungry head and it was gone. The doctor took out his big jar of lanolin and hurled it at the dog and heard it crunch and bounce and the dog shook its head as though it had suddenly forgotten what it was after. At the bottom of the bag was the towel he used to cushion his instruments on rough journeys. It too went flying off into the night, wrapping itself round an animal's head and the dog had to slow, shaking his head to free himself from its strange imprisonment.

"The doctor's stiff hands began to unbuckle the bag. He felt he had almost come to the end of hope, just the bag and the scalpel still held in his teeth. The straps seemed impossible to undo and he felt his hands sweating as a dog leapt and caught his leg in its teeth. He let go the strap and reached for his knife and thrust it downwards, slicing across the dog's tender nose. He heard the dog yelp and felt it let go.

"And then—when he felt that he and Master John could last no longer—he saw the tiny pinpoint of light that marked the candle in the cottage window. He shouted and the wind whipped away his desperate cry. The bag came free in his hands and he waited for the next starving dog to come at him. He swung the bag, losing his own balance and for a minute he thought he would fall but he caught Master John's stubbly mane and righted himself and tried to jam the bag over the animal's head. It missed and fell, and the dog blundered over it.

"Then, when all seemed lost and he and Master John would be meat for the hungry animals, a rifle shot came whistling through the cold air. Somewhere in the distance came a shout, the sound of boots thudding heavily, then another shot and one dog fell, growling and biting at its shoulder. The figure of the shepherd came closer and closer, a dark shape running through the night as it struggled to reload.

"Master John, completely spent, dropped to a trot, then to a weary walk, but it didn't matter, the shepherd shot again and another great fierce dog staggered and fell, struggled up again, took several steps, then fell again. The man shot once more but missed. The other dogs hesitated, fell back, turned aside. The shepherd tried again and another dog fell. He reached Master John and the doctor."

She dropped her voice, there was the sound now of sunny skies and smiling summer days, as she looked around. "And do you know what that shepherd said to the doctor? He said the baby had already arrived and he didn't need the doctor at all! And can you imagine what the doctor said as he got off and stood standing there and Master John hung his head and could not take another step, he was so tired? What would you say if it was you? And then the shepherd laughed and said to the doctor, it was just as well you came, because I've been trying to get a shot at those dogs these months past, and they're that cunning, they never come in this close, just take a sheep that's wandered, and now—and he walked along the track—it looks like I've got two of 'em in one night. The doctor was too weary to say anything and there were still more dogs out there but the shepherd said, come in now and have a nip o' whisky and see my new baby boy—and your horse'll be wanting a drink and a rub down, I daresay. Yes, said the doctor, he'll be wanting that, a pat for Master John. Her voice was very tender, like a delicate little shoot struggling up through the tough ground, as she said 'Master John'.

"You shouldn't tell the kids scary stories at night. They'll be having nightmares if you go making up stories like that."

"Oh, but they're *not* made up. It happened, just like that, to my great-grandfather, to him and Master John."

26. PETMEAT

Sometimes the road trains merely pulled in at the front. At other times they drew off into the layby at the side and the driver would take the time to come and eat or wander round, stretching his legs and enjoying a relaxed smoke. The way station was simple, a couple of bowsers, a plain meal in the small dining room through a door with plastic strips, a few shelves of basic groceries.

On every side the land spread out, dry, with a dusty blowing gritty dryness. Just the straight strip of road through suggested a connection with … other places, other people. A young couple ran the place. Bruce and Kaylene Willis. A sign over the front door said so. They had thought of it initially as an adventure. It did not make much money. Not enough traffic. But they always saw it as a station in their life. We'll start here, we'll move on … soon. It's an experience.

They were in love.

It was this which made the place bearable.

The unbearable things. The cold clear dry nights with a million stars which made them feel puny. The sound of a south-west wind driving grit at the back windows. The desiccating sun which fought them every inch of the way in their small vegetable patch. The unpleasant rotten egg smell of the bore water. Some of the drivers who called in. Rough men. Tough. Dried of emotion and empathy. Their every word a small blasphemy against the wonder of creation. The meagre takings. *The pitiful takings*. The sense of loneliness which was almost physical when they stepped outside or stood briefly at the windows looking out. The occasional flock of birds which swirled in after rain and went again, leaving them lonelier than before. A sudden explosion of colour along the pools of runoff either side of the straight strip of bitumen that was gone almost as suddenly as it came … and hurt them with its possibilities.

The way the tin roof creaked and groaned as the temperature soared and fell …

The trucks loaded …

*

They came to know the sounds long before a truck appeared and pulled in; something about the hiss of tyres on bitumen, something about heated air and heated tar.

Kaylene would put the kettle on and go through to the small shop. He might want a meal, this next driver, or just a drink from the frig and a bag of chips. He might want to talk. Or he might be gone again in five minutes.

She never knew if she looked forward to traffic or hated it for its intrusion on their solitude. Sometimes she was afraid for her mind in the silence. She created trucks and cars which would be inhabited by cheerful kind talkative people. And they mostly let her down.

But now, with the baby coming, she often retreated even further in the long hours between vehicles and sat with the curtains drawn and moved her hands slowly to create small garments, little rugs, tiny pillow-slips. In here was life. Out there … drivers often said casually "Hit a bloody big 'roo back there!" or asked to get their windscreens cleaned of spattered feathers or a thousand tiny locust bodies. They always came bearing death. Their animals, thirsty, bellowing, crowded in.

One evening she slipped out the side door to check the toilets. Was there sufficient paper. A semi was drawn in to the lay-by. She could hear a voice in the distance. She could see the brumbies crammed in, their tails untidily scrunched between rails, the knots, the burrs … the slow drip of liquid in the dusk.

She felt a sudden great sense of pity well up. The days on the road. They wouldn't bother with watering them. Too much trouble. Only petmeat.

And the black liquid dripping down slowly. Something thick, viscous, implacable. She realised it was blood. The animals had been hamstrung. A quick slash and there was no more trouble with galloping veering darting rearing animals. They would stand now. Helpless. Hour after night hour.

There was nothing she could do for them but the driver was in there, chatting over a Coke maybe, telling Bruce his life history, complaining about the journey, the pay, the state of the roads …

She shivered in the night air and turned to go back inside, the toilets forgotten.

*

The man was leaning on the counter. Bruce was totting up his purchases. Some sandwiches in cling-film. A can of drink. A bar of chocolate.

"You'd better hurry," she came through the curtain and said abruptly. "Your animals—"

"They won't be going anywhere in a hurry." He laughed and tapped a smoke out of its packet. "Them little buggers'll stand as long as I want."

Bruce laughed too. Just being friendly, he said later.

"They can't stand, not properly." She felt her words rise up. His words. His laugh.

"That's what I mean. Saves a helluva lot o' trouble. Pity we can't do it with everything. Poking sheep up is a pain and a half. And I've had steers splinter a rail. Wouldn't mind to cut 'em meself, it saves that much agro."

"You can't! You mustn't!" Something seemed to come over her. Afterwards she thought of it as a 'red mist'. It was anger. But it was other shocking things as well. Hysteria. Fear. A sudden agonising pain in her own legs above the knee. A terrible need to hurt someone.

Before either man had fully taken in the fact that she was very upset about something she had sprung at the driver and spun him round, so that he faced out the door. But he was completely off-balance and fell against the rack of oils. He lurched himself upright again and faced the young couple, purple with anger and indignation. "What the bloody hell! Get that stupid dame outa here!" His cigarette had mashed under his hand.

Bruce, non-plussed, came to his rescue. "Here, let me—" and then his angry, "What's the matter, Kaye?" He turned back to his customer and mimed a large pregnant belly. The man only shook his head and continued to look upset. Bruce slipped the things into a bag and came round the counter. "On the house." He handed them over.

The driver calmed down a little and flicked his cigarette away. The two men went out the door, Kaylene screamed after them—"Don't you understand! Don't you see he's a monster! The pain! How can you!" Her words fell into hiccups and then into a furious burst of tears. But she

lifted the nearest thing to hand, a jar of coffee, and flung it after them. It hit her husband on the head and he staggered against the door jamb. The driver looked at him, then turned and walked away.

A minute later the engine roared, diesel smoke shot up, and the semi pulled out from beside the roadhouse. Ten minutes later the horizon was empty. The chill night wind whispered across the empty tarmac.

Bruce got up slowly and went around the side of the building and into the Men's. He didn't trust himself to speak. The side lights had come on automatically and he saw the little row of black drips in their dim illumination. His head ached. He went in and splashed his face in the basin. The smell of the water nauseated him. He hunted round for something to blot up the wetness and pulled a greasy rag from his overall pocket.

Kaylene had gone out to stand by the bowsers and watch the semi-trailer disappear. He came over to her. "There's no paper in the toilet." His voice sounded faintly hoarse and detached as though he no longer trusted himself. And the sky above them was so terribly vast.

27. THE GRID IRON CHAMPION

I began by keeping a diary but now I've decided I'll never *never* want to know what I had for breakfast on the 27th October or which way the wind was blowing or how pretty Mrs Entwhistle's jacaranda is (which it is) or how we're taking up the lino in the back bedroom because there's an awful smell. Instead I intend to treat it more like a journal in which to write down my thoughts and feelings and impressions and 'Conversations over the side fence'. Things like that. I have a lot of time on my hands but Keith keeps telling me to rest.

* * *

When we drove up I'm not sure what I was expecting. Nothing special which was fortunate. Keith stopped the station-wagon and its trailer on the verge of the dusty side road and we went in. He'd collected the key from Mr Hardacre but as there's a window broken on the west side we hardly needed it and anyway there's nothing worth stealing. It's a small weatherboard house with a verandah closed in at each end with louvres and three steps above ground level. Two broken cane chairs are going grey at the east end.

That was my first sight. My second came when Keith finally wrestled the front door open and we stepped into the hall. It smelled rather horrible but shut-up houses do.

To the right of the hall is a bedroom and a kitchen, to the left is another bedroom and a small lounge with a broken green-slatted blind. Then there's a small bathroom and a bath with rust stains from a dribbling tap. The toilet is opposite. Then there's three steps down to a small corrugated iron lean-to which houses two concrete tubs and a vintage washing machine standing on a wooden platform. I don't think I'll enjoy doing the washing particularly.

We've brought along all our ideas. We're going to make our own bread and grow our own food and keep hens and things like that. Before we came I thought of it as a new beginning yet, already, I find myself thinking of it as the way to keep my time occupied.

I wish everything wasn't so dry and brown.

* * *

Mr Cliff Barnes has lived on our left (if I face the front door) for more than fifty years. He knows everyone who's ever lived in our house. The first owner was Henry Morrison and he had a quarrel with his son so he willed it to his daughter but his son flatly refused to move out when he died.

"In the bloody shed she was." Mr Barnes has tea with me. He says he appreciates my neighbourliness. (What a clumsy word.) "She wasn't goin' to shift till he shifted. Said it was her

house right 'n' tight an' she wasn't goin' to be cheated out of it. Strewth, he tried every dirty trick in the book to get rid of her!"

"Stubborn as old mules they was." He likes the sound of himself saying that so he says it again. "But I was that sorry for her."

Keith drives up. We've put the trailer beside the house in a nest of dockweed, and we've put our furniture into the house but it has a self-conscious unbelonging look. He has a pile of cuttings wrapped in newspaper. Mr Barnes gets up, says he must be getting along, and shuffles off. Keith gives me a kiss and sits down, wiping his forehead with a hanky.

* * *

I don't care how the Morrisons behaved fifty years ago but what I don't understand is why they planted the half-hectare of back yard with nothing but asparagus. We didn't know (terrible admission) what it was when we first saw it but we identified it from one of our gardening books. There is a good selection of weeds and the ground is dried out and cracked like sunburnt lips. It looks like a weed itself—if a weed can be said to look *like* anything. We love the tinned variety and it's an experience to taste it fresh. But, if a woman really lived in our shed once, why didn't she plant something more useful if she was digging in for a long siege. Potatoes perhaps? Asparagus doesn't make sense.

Mr Barnes can't remember why but he tells me that blood used to bubble up from the ground outside the shed door. Of course I don't believe him but, all the same, I wish he'd kept that ghoulish little fancy to himself. Now I don't feel like going out there and rooting through the shed. Not that there's much in there, some tins and boxes and a broken handmower and a copper come apart at the seams and an old army greatcoat full of spiders. We plan to put our gardening tools in there when we've tidied it out.

Keith says maybe her brother brought a bucket of blood from the abattoirs (we suppose he worked there, most people do) and tipped it out to upset her. The stink of it lying on the hot ground, congealed, the flies swarming over it, the maggots swimming in its turbid depths. The thought makes me sick.

Apparently her name was Elizabeth. Not Betty or Liz or Beth. But I can't help thinking it'd be hard to live up to Elizabeth in a shed six metres by four.

* * *

Grid Iron lies sixty kilometres south-west of the rail junction at Warpett. It's here because of the meatworks, nothing else. It's a cluster of buildings placed carefully on the immensity of the plains as though someone had first pricked the nothingness with a pin. It's a picture painted by van Dyck with a three-haired brush and when he'd been painting for a while he grew tired and just dashed in a bit of grey-white around it and blue overhead and separated them with a straight line. He hung a few miniature signs: the Bungarlarlah Shire Council and Jaycees Park and Hardacre's Mitre 10 and Grid Iron State Primary. He didn't put in an elegant piece of scrollwork to direct you to 'The Grid Iron Champion' because it's nothing but a cleared-out store-room with a desk, a phone extension, a filing cabinet, a cupboard full of past copies, a few flies which enter each morning with Keith—and a tradition. It's why we're here.

* * *

The road runs straight south to the horizon but the land must dip a little because some days the mirages lie in long placid pools between the town and the lip of the world. The railway runs at a slight angle to the road till, tiring of its uninteresting company, it parts altogether and is gone, invisible except when the sun shines full on the rails.

The meatworks are the other side of the line and about a half kilometre distant. It's always there as a background noise but it's only when they're unloading cattle into the great maze of holding pens that I have to take notice. The dust mushrooms high into the air and settles thickly over our peter-into-nothing road and films the skeins of last year's bindweed on the railway fence. Sometimes it rattles against our west windows as a fine grit, like a furtive lover calling.

* * *

Mr Hardacre is sorry the house isn't in better condition but he hopes it'll do till we can find something better. As it's free it doesn't seem polite to complain. Free as long as Keith's working to resurrect the town's newspaper anyway. Nobody has asked us how long we plan to stay and to Keith it's the thrill of turning it into a viable proposition (if humanly possible) which is the only thing that matters.

I tidy the house after breakfast and set bread and plan our garden. Then I go round the corner into the town's main street and collect our mail at the post office and shop at the mini-mart or look through the garden section at the hardware store—though their philosophy is 'if it moves kill it'—or sit in the park and watch Grid Iron's people go by. It's too hot to knit baby clothes in the daytime so I wait for the evening, hoping for a breath of wind.

We eat on the front verandah but this isn't wildly successful. The kitchen, though, is even worse with the sun full on it all afternoon. The flies are still with us as we sit down at our bamboo-and-glass table. They won't go either till the Scotch Greys arrive from the cool moistness of the creek fringe. No one can accuse flies of being anti-social. 'One for the road, sip, sip,' they hover round my cauliflower cheese, 'burp … ' I think we'll have to move to the lounge as our only alternative, unless I can persuade Keith to eat his dinner in the bathroom.

"Miss Winsome Hiller had the house for donkey's years. A bit of a gipsy she was, didn't fuss about nothing. I bought it for a song when she died."

Mr Hardacre is always polite to me but I think, underneath, he's like his name, he won't do a thing to the house because he knows there's nothing else for rent. People stay because of the jobs at the abattoirs. There's nothing else to stay for. And the town stays the same because its people stay the same. The young ones work a year or two, then they go away and their places are taken by the next bunch of school leavers. Whereas the parents stay for their working lives because it's their bread and butter and rolled roast. That's the sort of town Grid Iron is and we know without saying anything to each other that certain kinds of questions aren't wanted.

* * *

"How're you feeling, Prue love? What did the doctor say?"

"Oh, nothing much. I'm in the pink. Exercise, eat sensibly, see him once a month and bring a sample."

I laugh as I repeat his instructions. Dr Grimshaw has my family history in his files now. He doesn't know it's an imaginary family. I'm not sure whether he'd be annoyed or feel sorry for me if he knew.

"Sounds okay." He eats his salad with serious concentration. I like the way Keith does everything as though his life depends upon it. Perhaps, though, it's as well I'm the one having the baby.

He's had his hair cut shorter because people here are conservative about things like that and they wouldn't like to be reminded that Captain Cook wore a wig and a hair ribbon and it isn't as though he's especially attached to his hair. He's attached to certain opinions but they haven't put those to the test yet.

I think he looks rather like those men you see in pictures from the 1920s, sleek blonde hair, serious grey eyes, a slightly decadent look. He'd look nice with a pipe but he doesn't smoke. Since we first met we've both become more health-conscious and I'm often grateful that we feel the same way about most things—because if we didn't, if we were growing in different directions, I think life would soon become unbearable.

* * *

Cliffie Barnes invites me to tea after we've been here a fortnight. I'm happy to accept because no one else has invited me anywhere although Keith's had lunch with the Shire Council bigwigs and what he calls the Chamber of Commerce.

His house is much like ours except it smells horribly of cigarette smoke. He's made a pot of tea, so strong I'm glad I don't have to drink it every day, (perhaps he counts me as two spoons for the pot), and bought a packet of gingernuts and a light fruitcake in cellophane.

I'm eager to know more about Miss Elizabeth Morrison; I've been picturing her like a Victorian governess in a tent in the bush surrounded by the squatter's children, stiff upper lip in good order.

"She gave up in the end," he says sadly. "Her mum got a bit seedy so she went to her an' never come back again." His little face rocks to and fro. On top are a few wispy hairs carefully combed across a freckled skull. "I never seen her again."

"What was she like? Was she pretty?" I really don't know why I want to see her in my mind, that governess of the garden shed, uneasy in her lonely vigil.

"Not pretty, no." He starts carving the cake into huge chunks. I've been feeling a bit queasy this last week. "Had a strong face for a woman. That sort of woman, y'know?"

A rather mannish look I suppose.

"And—did no one help her? I mean when her brother treated her so badly?"

"Weren't much they could do, I don't reckon. People said she'd be better off to go an' live somewhere with her mum but she reckoned this was hers an' she wasn't goin' to be cheated out of it."

"She must've really wanted this house. Were you fond of her?"

"Well, I was a bit." He dunks his gingernut. "But she'd been bush with old Charlie Chan an' I didn't want no bloomin' Chinaman's leavin's."

* * *

Lots of country towns had Chinese market gardeners; men who kept to themselves, worked like navvies, and finally disappeared. Then people would nod sagely and say they'd gone home to China to live out their old age in comfort. But Charlie Chan, if that was his real name, was different. It seems he was a prospector.

He had an ancient truck and he'd go bush and not be seen for months. Nobody gave him a thought. Maybe he was panning for gold, maybe he was living off the land, maybe he just liked to get away from the smell of White Australia. Cliffie doesn't think he ever made much money because he never got a new truck.

Why did the young Elizabeth go with him? To spite her father, Cliffie says. But this doesn't make sense to me. The daughter thumbing her nose at her father, the son arguing, the father agonising over his will?

Keith has the answer to it all. He simply puts a finger to his forehead and makes a screwing motion. It leaves a little red mark. I'm not sure if that's a relief or not. I don't want to believe that a woman was terrorised out of her inheritance in our back yard. I don't want to live next door to a nut case.

* * *

Lots of crows sit along the railway fence. Big glossy things with fierce yellow eyes. I've never seen a crow at such close quarters before.

Before the bridge, which takes both the highway and the rail line just north of the town, are the waterholes of Bungarlarlah Creek. At the moment they're scattered here and there under the overhanging banks with nothing between but sandbars and rattling rushes. Further along are two picnic tables but the long spiky grass is never cut and no one comes except children who sometimes paddle. Even so, I think it's the nicest place in town. The fringeing trees are full of birds whose names I don't yet know. Sometimes at night a soft sad call floats up which Keith says is a boobook owl. It makes me think of a ghost passing and re-passing, calling to someone who never answers.

The north-westerlies don't blow very often but when they do they bring the sickly cloying smell of the meatworks with them. It makes me feel so awful. I forget there's any other smell in the world and even after the wind drops it seems to stay like a residue clogging my nose. The doctor offered me something for the nausea but I was firm and said no. (Bless you, mother, says Baby Bunting.) But some days the combination of death-scented wind and my hormones is too much. I want to creep into the naphthalene dark of the wardrobe among my dresses and Keith's

jackets and forget that I exist. We could, of course, leave our acres of asparagus and move into the Diamond Hotel but the smell would come too and there'd be stale beer and piss added to it.

* * *

Keith is kind and fixes himself dinner. This is because he's been reading 'The New Fatherhood', not because he tries to enter into my feelings, and what chaos would he find if he *did* try?

He has the answer to our asparagus, why it exists in our middle distance. Exists and waxes stringily. It's in a Champion from the 1940s. The paper is yellow and feels dry and scratchy to the touch. No one has suggested microfilming. It says:

At the opening of the new canning section at the Grid Iron Abattoir Mr Jack Cooley emphasized the boost to the town's economy this far-sighted development will be.

And further on it says:

A number of residents have expressed their interest in growing high-value low-bulk vegetables such as asparagus to provide an interesting and valuable sideline to the town's main industry. So far, five contracts have been signed and a trial run of tinned vegetables will be looked forward to early next year.

"I wonder what happened? They aren't canning vegetables there now, are they?" I put the paper down and Keith fussily puts it back in its correct order. He doesn't know and he hasn't asked anyone because he's more concerned with 'his' first issue which goes to the printers this coming Friday. It's not a make-or-break issue. He's agreed to give the paper a year and try to turn it into a thriving country weekly: plenty of ads, local events, Queensland news, weather, stock prices, an investment column, a nature piece, a quick round-up of world news, an editorial, a weighty piece to be written by the secretary of the Progress Association, local sporting results, a lengthy lead-up to the Grid Iron Show in March, a children's section (by 'Uncle Bonza' *alias* Keith), a recipe courtesy of the CWA, and the only thing which makes him excited—a little historical essay along the lines of George Blaikie's 'Our Strange Past'.

I hope he won't spend the next six months in jail for libel. (Or do I mean slander? I must check.)

* * *

"There was somethin' mighty funny about that garden, y'know." Cliffie spends a lot of time looking at it, all those waving fronds of asparagus and Scotch thistles. "When the old girl was there—not Winsome—there was funny things in that garden. Little sort of balls, sort o' pearly, but if you broke 'em open they'd stink! By Christ they'd stink!"

It doesn't make the least bit of sense. Naturally Keith's told me that ten times already.

I've begun digging up the yard, first the barest parts, and so far I haven't found anything that shouldn't be there. Perhaps the Morrisons used those china eggs you put in the nest to inspire your chooks to lay—such is the theory; I, Mrs Chook, am not impressed—and, over the years, the eggs cracked and filled up with chook manure?

One evening Keith suggests we go to the yards at the meatworks with the trailer and some shovels and buckets. They also sell meatmeal and blood-and-bone 'over the counter'.

Along our south side we have the kurrajongs in the dry grubby little Jaycees park but north side, west side, east side, all is bare, so Keith's ordered enough plumbago roots to start a hedge.

* * *

The cattle yards are empty today, acres and acres of churned dust. They synchronise the arrival of the trains with the work of the staff so the animals don't stand for more than twelve hours and the animals from furthest away go through first. All very orderly. But out here there's only the smell of cattle as we skulk to and fro with our shovels. In fact other keen gardeners do it too but I feel exposed and self-conscious. The sun beats down, drying everything, all the dung, to a chapatti-like consistency. The dust fills my nose and throat.

When the trailer is full to the brim we drink from the Thermos and go home to unload it all into the compost 'pens' Keith's made from the rolls of rusty wire Mr Hardacre sold him at a bargain price; glad, I'm sure, to make something on unsaleable stock.

Another day we can be shown through the works. Today, so Keith says, there's only Kev Hardacre who's the inspector and the people working in the freezing and canning sections. I am to assume all that is very antiseptic and dull. Step this way, Your Majesty. I'm not sure, though, that I really want to see great mounds of entrails and nascent tripe.

* * *

Last night I dreamed of blood. I dreamed I was at the seaside and there were cliffs, steep precipice-like cliffs, and there were children playing on their tops. One child walked to the edge and simply fell. A little boy. He made no cry, just fell. I was unable to move for what seemed a terribly long time. But it's only in dreams that I understand what it means to be transfixed by horror.

Then I jumped, hoping the sea was deep. But there was no sea, no waves, no foam. Just great heaving billows of blood which neither break nor move forward. I am on the sand watching these great blackish goose-pimpled sun-steamed oozing ridges rising and falling slowly. Occasionally one runs a little tendril on to the sand making the sort of stain a knifing might leave behind.

There is no sign of the child, the cliffs have retreated. The dancing sun smells of death and decay. There are black rocks dotted here and there. Above are birds, lonely cawing birds.

* * *

Mr Cahill has invited Keith and me to dinner. I met his wife in my one and only visit to the hairdresser. She's rather smart, well-dressed, perhaps in her mid-forties. She speaks kindly, says I must find Grid Iron 'so dull' after the city.

"Perhaps in a while I will—but just now everything seems new and interesting."

She gives a sweet, rather sad smile. I find myself thinking of the many places she'd prefer to be.

Keith has put on his grey suit, his *only* suit. He looks more like a businessman than an alternative lifestyler. I wonder if he feels different inside? This morning I showed him the two tamarillos I've started in pots, as proudly as showing off baby's first tooth, but he just looked and was thinking of something else.

The paper was launched last week. Lots of people came to its 'christening' in St Mark's hall. St Mark's is Anglican, the Church of the Sacred Heart, Catholic, and there's a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses (will they call soon?), also the Uniting Church in Spondle Road and a small group which meets in a private house; perhaps because they are few, perhaps because they do not believe in the Church as property-owner?

Mr Cahill meets us at the door and says how well the launch went off. He makes me think of a rocket and I wonder what he expected to happen? (The Chamber of Commerce drunk and disorderly?) Mrs Cahill bustles out, says how nice we could come. Then she says "How interesting—you look like brother and sister. Oh! I hope you don't mind my saying so." Well, perhaps we are, except that Keith's family is very very respectable. They haven't had a scandal in a hundred years.

* * *

She has done a large slab of beef with all the trimmings. (Of course, Grid Ironers don't talk of 'slabs', oh-dear-me-no!)

"It looks very nice," I say as Mr Cahill begins to carve, "but we're vegetarians. I'm sorry we didn't mention it sooner."

Keith gives me a cross look and says just for tonight he'll lash out and have a slice or two.

"Is it for your health?" Mrs Cahill looks at her husband, then at us.

"Well, partly to keep our cholesterol down—and we don't like to think of animals suffering because of us—and, you know, grains and vegetables produce a greater amount of protein per acre—"

"Not out here they don't." Mr Cahill is polite but I think it's costing him an effort. He places a little bread-and-onion stuffing on my plate and passes it to his wife for roast potato, pumpkin, peas, stuffed aubergine, cauliflower. "They're ruining the country with their clearing—

the brigalow, the gidgee, the belah—" he waves his carving fork north, west, south, like a windmill sail in a fitful wind, "—and what happens when they get a dry year? Their blooming soil disappears—nothing to hold it!"

Mrs Cahill nods pacifically. "Yes, cattle make much more sense on these light dry soils."

Keith says something scientific (pseudo-scientific?) about the nature of 'these light dry soils' and the taxpayer footing the erosion bill, Mrs Cahill agrees emphatically.

When we're going home Keith says loudly, "Why couldn't you shut up and eat the roast instead of making him upset? After all, it's his livelihood!"

I don't know why he's started using that hectoring voice.

"How am I supposed to know what his livelihood is when I only met him for the first time tonight?"

"Well, he's a foreman over there." He points to the great mass of tin roofs in the moonlight. "Going on about cruelty to animals … hell, I wish somebody'd put half the world out of its misery so quickly and painlessly—"

He's had his share of drinks at the Cahills. Though, had Mr Cahill been a teetotaller, he would as easily have spent a happy hour discussing the damage done by alcohol in Australia.

"I didn't know you believed in euthanasia?"

He gives me a quick look then turns away. "I don't know that I do. Still, those cattle have a damn sight better life than your average cancer patient."

We can hear them in the night, stirring, bellowing occasionally, and in the morning they'll file through.

* * *

All is dust and chaos. I don't know if Keith wants it for background. The Progress Association has asked him to write a booklet for the town's seventy-fifth anniversary next year. He thinks this will fit in nicely with the historical pieces he's planning.

Geoff Cahill is waiting for us. The yards look a wilderness of post-and-rail but in reality they're completely planned so that cattle can be directed this way and that with the minimum of fuss. There are several stockmen, each with a blue heeler; quick and silent, a nip here, a nip there.

The cattle come through calmly and go down like ninepins. I don't know what I expected. Something out of a horror movie? Yet the very speed and silence seems horrible in a way—as though even a dumb beast should be given time to collect its self, its soul.

Then they pass on to hooks, strung up through their tendons, their lower legs and heads disappearing in different directions. Their hides are opened with one swift slicing blow, ripping down, then the great mass of shining guts, the quick selection of offal, kidneys liver heart. I look away.

Morning sickness and abattoirs don't mix but the first nausea fortunately subsides and I go on. Keith stops to talk to a man here or there in blood-spattered white overalls, his razor-sharp knives rising and falling in practised strokes. Each man has his own knives and steel hanging at his waist.

Kev Hardacre is smiling by my elbow. He's rather a good-looking man. A dark gipsyish face with curly black hair going grey. He has a wife and three grown-up children. Thus am I coming to recognise Grid Iron's people; slowly, slowly, their living and their dead. (If Keith was not so obsessed with my need to rest he might ask me to take on the Champion's Out-And-About column: Mr Hardacre and Mr Cahill took much pleasure in escorting our new editor and his wife … Regrettably the poor woman disgraced herself …)

He tells us what signs of disease he looks for, but these are big rangy shorthorn bullocks in their prime. He stamps each carcase then it moves on, most to the chilling room but some to be butchered for sale locally, or canned: camp pie, bully beef, Irish stew, chili con carne—oh, Grid Iron is up with the latest. Its cans with the horned logo are on thousands of Queensland shop shelves.

In a separate operation lard is rendered down, meat meal comes through the great boilers and into the spray driers. There's a warehouse of sacks waiting for the next train down to Warpett

and the main western line. Keith buys two bags of bonemeal and one of blood-and-bone. The smell, though, is unbearable and this time I barely make it outside.

Jim Chilcott comes out and dumps them in our trailer. I don't think Keith is very strong so he pretends he's making notes and Jim does all the work for him. "See y'round, mate." He goes back inside. I don't have to worry about an identity. We drive round by the bridge and Keith drags them along the ground and into the wash-house.

* * *

The town isn't laid out neatly on a grid; it's not that sort of grid its founder had in mind. It has the highway running almost straight through, just a little dog-leg by Gaffney's garage. And, to each side, like legs off a centipede run little side streets, some sealed, some not, with some legs connected by short through roads. Then they just peter out into the countryside, some along the creek bank, some by the showground fence, some into 'nothing'. (I find 'nothing' very hard to define.)

One leg goes to the cemetery. I thought, there, I might find a Morrison on a headstone. It's a small paddock, ecumenical baked earth with little scummy dragon's teeth thrusting up. On the far side is a huge meat ants' nest with satellite nests. (Am I, unwittingly, re-discovering Grid Iron in its graveyard? I'm not sure.) I manage to walk into the outliers without noticing and the ants swarm out fiercely, startling me.

I haven't found a Morrison, perhaps Elizabeth and her family are buried elsewhere. But under the pepper trees I find Charlie Chan, well-protected by the swarming ants. He must've accepted Christianity to be here. But he only has a small upright slab with several Chinese characters and underneath: 'Charles Chan' Died 2nd August 1947. Then in small script: 'The world is a lonelier place'.

* * *

I wonder if anyone knew, or cared, where and when he was born and I wonder what he discovered in his years of fossicking and what he did with whatever he found. I wonder too if Grid Iron remembers Charlie Chan.

It certainly remembers its founder 'Iron Jack' Cooley. The shire has erected him a fine tombstone with iron railings, a marble sarcophagus, a cherub blowing a trumpet, its plump bottom coyly visible above the cemetery fence. There are some rusty-looking geraniums planted in a large brass urn on the shady side. It says nothing about 'loving husband', 'devoted father', et cetera—were the town and the meatworks Iron Jack's substitute for a family? The whole thing is extraordinarily ugly. The Bungarlarlah Shire Council doesn't possess much taste.

* * *

The council chambers are ugly too. Red brick and grey concrete. It has a central section and two wings. One wing is a large hall where meetings and concerts and immunisation clinics are held. The other wing is the library. It's quite a large well-stocked library (so say I after fifteen minutes of browsing) and I borrow a Dick Francis and a book on growing citrus trees.

On the notice board by the door is a message about the Progress Association's next meeting, also one saying show schedules will be available at the end of this month. Perhaps we'll have vegetables ready to enter. Our carrots are up, also lettuce, beans and tomatoes.

Keith is tired when he gets home and likes to put his feet up and watch TV. We haven't decided whether it's ecologically correct to have a TV—though it's small, black and white, which sounds like plugging into a Border Collie!—so this may be his way of saying 'I've decided'. There are only two channels. Some afternoons I have the radio on, either the ABC or the local commercial station 4GI. They have one program I like, devoting an hour to hits from a different year.

The heat is intense after lunch but if I lie down I usually feel even more jaded when I get up. Mrs Entwhistle has given me some roots of parsley and mint and I've put them in by the wash-house drain where it's permanently wet. A few mint leaves in a jug of cordial are very refreshing.

But I wish there was someone I could talk to, really talk to. Not just polite chit-chat: the weather, cattle prices, would I like to go to so-and-so's Tupperware party next week. I said to Mrs Entwhistle this place reminds me a little of Henry Lawson—the sky, the far far horizon. She didn't know any Lawsons, had one lived in Grid Iron? She's only been here twenty years.

It's not really the same. Somehow, I have a memory of billowing grass, of trees and flowing women; waiting, dumb, a sense of time stood still; of horses, spindly in the heat-mirages. However … there's no billowing grass. The plains are pale-dust-brown; sometimes cattle move in the distance but the only horses I've found are half-a-dozen ponies in a burry paddock on the other side of town.

I wish I could talk to Keith, really talk, but even that seems to have changed. He's moved on into the big bad world and I, unlike Little Red Riding Hood, have stayed behind where things are safe and slow.

* * *

Cliffie knows all about Iron Jack. I suppose everyone does. Iron Jack sat on their tucker-box.

"A hard fulla, very hard. He didn't talk, he barked. Had everyone scared of him. But they stayed an' did as they was told. By crikey they did."

"Because they needed a job?"

"Too right. If there hadn't been no works there wouldn't of been no town. So he said Jump! an' you jumped."

"Did people hate him for being like that?"

A funny look passes over Cliffie's little mottled face. Then he rubs his chin which is covered in grey stubble.

"They did an' they didn't, if you see what I mean. They hated his guts but they was glad to have a job in the depression, see. Lots of other places had bloody nothin'. When other places was goin' bust Jack was expandin'. He reckoned people had to eat, like, so he'd make the food for 'em—an' because people had dough in their pockets the shops kept goin' an' the cinema an' stuff like that. So people had to be grateful. But they didn't like havin' to lick his boots—"

"No. People don't." Don't we sound wise?

"He started off small, buyin' a mob an' drovin' 'em to the coast himself. Did all right too. That's how he got his moniker, they reckon the horses'd drop under him he was that hard on 'em, but I dunno if it's true or not. I reckon he would've ridden about sixteen stone. It's a lot for a horse to carry."

Cliffie Barnes hates Iron Jack. Even now, thirty years after Iron Jack died he still hates him. I can feel it all around us.

"What did he look like?"

"They've got a mug shot in the hall." I think he's not going to tell me anything more but then he says, "The ladies seemed to go for him. Dunno why." He hadn't meant to say that so he busies himself with his tea and scratching his little scrawny neck.

* * *

I've now dug down the west side of the wash-house for perhaps fifteen metres and my rows of vegetables and herbs do look nice. Nice? I feel like Mother Ceres listening to their little plant-voices laughing and quarrelling and persevering. I wish I had a better watering system though and I wish I had more mulching material. We've put on all we brought back from the yards but it doesn't look much. Keith says it'll have to do for the time being. (I dislike that phrase; it always means someone doesn't want to do something.)

We've been invited out to Kentville Station next Sunday. It's about twenty kilometres away. Keith is keen to see the other end of the meat trade, or so he says.

"But if Iron Jack owned the works who owns it now—or did it go public?"

"He left it to the town—vested control in a company to be administered by the shire council. Very public spirited!" Keith grins. "But Siddy Armstrong told me Iron Jack fathered half

the town anyway—so he was only leaving it to his kids really." He says this with relish as though he enjoys gossiping with old Sid who props up the bar at the Diamond Hotel day and night.

"Is that true?"

Keith laughs. "Who knows—but he got a kick out of telling me."

I've been to the council chambers to look at the portrait of Iron Jack, a huge thing in a gilt frame. It's funny but he has the look of Kev Hardacre a bit. Very dark. Curly black hair. His face is all planes and angles though I suppose he was quite old by then. I'd been imagining him like the scrap-metal merchant in James Herriot; now I think of him as 'King of the Gipsies'.

It's not only Kev. But I mustn't speculate. Here, where many people are related, I might easily say something I didn't mean to. I mention this to Keith but he only says "Gosh, I don't care who their fathers are!" Would he care if Iron Jack was still around?

* * *

Kentville is off the highway to the right. A gravel road runs up a long rise and there it is: a little oasis of green. The old homestead is surrounded by pepper trees, there are passionvines twining over the verandah posts. We sit there and have a beer—well, Keith does, they look on me as a nuisance when I ask for fruit juice. Above us, the roof protests in the heat.

Mr and Mrs Dredge are old, at least sixty. They're both tall and thin and leathery-looking. They take us around but there isn't a lot to see. A couple of horses in a small paddock. A shed with a truck and some machinery. A henhouse. A cubby built up in one of the trees, its wood grey with age. There's no sign of cattle.

I don't know what I expected. But after lunch, which is salad and cold beef, we're invited to go out with Mr Dredge in the truck. We bounce along a grass track for nearly twenty minutes with the railway running distantly on our right hand, then there's a huge dam with some scrubby little trees and hundreds of cattle camped in amongst them. The sight surprises me. I've come to think of the plains as tolerating life only on sufferance. More than that, the cattle look sleek and fat.

"Herefords," Mr Dredge says for my benefit. I am the ignorant townie. Keith nods knowledgeably, as though he's lived with Herefords for the last twenty years. "They're not the best for this climate—get eye troubles—but they do well here—pity, you can't have everything—nice cattle to work with." The cattle don't take much notice as we drive on down to the muddy lip of the dam.

"You wouldn't think there'd be enough of an incline to form a catchment." Keith has on his farmer's voice. He also has a business voice and a professional voice. It's only his Prue voice which bothers me.

"Well, now, you wouldn't." Mr Dredge has begun to roll himself a cigarette. It takes all his attention and he doesn't see Keith fastidiously wiping his shoe. "But that'll hold through till the rains come round the end of January—a bit earlier if we're lucky. Depends on the cyclones up north."

"And how often would you supply to the meatworks?"

"A couple of times a year. A turn-off of yearlings—then another lot at eighteen months—the oldest of the breeding herd after the calves are weaned and if the price is reasonable."

Keith goes on asking questions all afternoon but he doesn't seem to have brought his notebook with him. When we return to the house we find Mrs Dredge has caught and saddled one of the horses. She says it just occurred to her that Keith might like a ride.

He's never ridden a horse in his life. I say I'd *love* a ride. He starts to say something about the baby then he gives a sickly grin and says "Prue just *loves* horses."

I'm not a very good rider but I scramble on and walk and trot round the yard. "He has a nice stride." This isn't the truth. What a lot of lies we're telling this afternoon! He's a big fat skewbald gelding and Mrs Dredge comes over and opens the gate and says "He's more comfy at the canter."

I wonder what Keith's face looks like as I trot out and do a long elongated circle round the house and sheds. On the way home I feel a bit rubbed and sore from the old stock saddle but I say nothing. There's a lowering look about Keith.

"Will you write about it, about Kentville I mean?"

"No point. Everyone but us knows what goes on there."

I think it irks Keith to feel ignorant about anything.

* * *

We have six hens now, all behaving very hennily in the rusted netting enclosure Keith made for them. It has a pole for a roost and a couple of wooden boxes (with a side knocked out) for them to lay in. But, so far, its roof is a thatch of weeds I've pulled from the garden, (Don't know what to do with your weeds? Try this tip from our Resident Chook Expert), and Keith doesn't know when he'll get around to a proper roof. I did think of letting them live in the garden shed but I couldn't bring myself to put chooks in what is alleged to have been a woman's home. (I see now why Keith is fond of 'alleged'.)

It troubles me to think of it as someone's home. I know Winsome Hiller lived here all those years and I don't suppose she minded using the shed. I have heard a) that she was very short-sighted, and b) that in the beginning her sister lived with her but after her sister died she lived here alone for ten years. It's strange that Cliffie never mentions them; or almost never. Maybe they didn't get along?

We've made a start on the shed, burning the coat (and, I suppose, the spiders which is the depths of cruelty; Keith has a great-aunt who never harms a spider because she says they control the flies. The trouble is—her visitors prefer flies) and given the lawnmower to Jim Chilcott who thinks he can fix it. We haven't got a lawn yet.

At some stage in its history the shed was whitewashed; I've read somewhere they used to make a good whitewash with ashes and prickly pear juice but I don't know if the prickly pear spread this far west. I must ask Keith.

* * *

I still can't decide if I believe someone really did live in our shed. There's a space between the walls and the roof but no windows. How stifling in summer and freezing in winter it would be.

"How long did Miss Morrison actually live in there? It's horrible to think of her in that little shed day after day."

"Week after week, month after month." But Cliffie isn't being poetic. I think he's counting.

"A year," he says after a while. "A year and a bit."

It's hot. How tired I get of writing that, of *thinking* that. Yet I feel a shiver pass through me.

"She got nervous at the end … I think it was the blood scared her off, see. She'd been away once or twice but next time she went—well, she didn't come back. We didn't hear no more about her. Her mum lived down the coast somewhere."

"I don't blame her. I think it's *horrible* that a brother would do that to his own sister, even if he didn't like her. But, Cliff, why didn't Iron Jack help her—I mean if he was running the town and all that. Or the police?"

He doesn't look at all well today. Beads of sweat have oozed out on his forehead and his skin looks clammy. The heat makes *me* feel a wreck but I always blame it on the baby.

"You wouldn't want the sort o' help Iron Jack'd give, see? They didn't have no cops here then. What he said was law an' you didn't bloody complain—by crikey you didn't. Not if you knew what was good for you."

"What did he do to anyone who disagreed with him?"

"He'd run 'em outa town, like. Whether you worked over there—or in a shop—he'd only have to give the word an' you'd be out of a job an' no one'd take you on an' that'd be the end o' you. He done it to a couple o' fullas, come complainin' there wasn't no union. By crikey, I don't reckon they was game to organise again. Poor buggers!"

It seems Grid Iron was a company town, a one-man-company. So, now, I can't help wondering if Elizabeth Morrison lived in the shed because Iron Jack Cooley wanted her there.

* * *

When I looked out this morning there were cattle on the horizon, beyond the railway. At first I thought they'd escaped from the yards but then I saw they were cows and big calves. I don't know what breed; red and white like the Dredges' cattle but sort of lumpy and humpy. I suppose if I live here long enough I'll qualify as a kitchen-window-expert.

I've been making and hanging curtains. They *are* pretty, light green with sprigs of daisies and autumn leaves. In the beginning I liked working to make the house nicer. But now I find myself thinking, even though I don't want to: 'Morrison washed his blood-stained overalls at these tubs', 'Morrison ate his food at this table', 'Morrison went to this toilet', 'Morrison slept in this room' … I try not to think those thoughts but they keep slinking in.

Why couldn't he have simply gone and said, "Come up and get comfy, Lizzie. We're stuck with the old man's will but we could share, couldn't we?"

Would she have come? Or was she afraid to have anything to do with her brother? Afraid of those sharp knives hanging from his belt. A little accident. Oops! You really must be more careful! She slipped, sarge. I kept tellin' her not to muck around with me bloody knives! S'pose she thought they should be hers—like every other blasted thing around the place!

But there was no sarge and I don't know if Charles Morrison worked in the boning room. But I can feel his sister hoping he'd have an accident. There was a man in Chicago fell into a tank of hot lard and his bones were found weeks later …

* * *

At the end of the school year the abattoir donates enough steaks and sausages to the school for a giant barbecue. It seems everyone goes, not just friends and relatives, and throws brooms and drives nails and eats half-a-tonne of watermelons. (I exaggerate.) Keith tries to go to everything. He pontificates over dinner on the role of the rural newspaper, how it can only survive if it has its finger on the pulse of every event in people's lives.

A year ago, six months ago even, he didn't give a hoot for the needs of the rural-newspaper-reading-community. I suggest the Champion needs some humour. Some gentle irony.

The reason he likes working here is that he's completely in control, for all practical purposes, and I suspect he'll end up doing everything bar decide on the weeks' grocery specials. He is his own reporter, journalist and editor, he does the layout and takes the classified ads, then he goes down to the printers and does most of their work too.

I call in when I'm out shopping. He says he likes me coming in but that I should wear a maternity dress rather than shorts—though there isn't any bulge to enshroud.

"They have tents for sale in Hardacre's, perhaps you'd like to wear one for a week and see how you feel?"

Keith doesn't think that's funny. He thinks less and less things are funny. Poor baby, it won't know what a laugh is.

"I've dug out a few things might interest you." He gets up and goes to his cupboard. "Now, where'd I put them?" He roots under a pile of papers and comes up with a folder containing some clippings.

"You can borrow them and read them at home." Magnanimous man. But the implication is I should be home resting. You wouldn't believe famous tennis players or gymnasts ever had babies if you lived in our house. I'm sure he wishes they could be grown in incubators. Twiddle the right dials, observe through the special window provided, add a dash of this hormone and a pinch of that vitamin, press the ejector button and—Hey Presto! Out comes a perfect miniature Keith!

* * *

Here is Charley Morrison winning the two hundred yard race at the Easter Sports. He's a bit blurry. A tall darkish boy wearing white shorts and a pale shirt. It's 1932. I wonder if they still have the Easter sports.

This one's a flooded river—no, it's Bungarlarlah Creek, twelve miles downstream. And the funny-looking truck on the far side is 'well-known Chinese fossicker Charlie Chan marooned by floodwaters on the Bilgum side of Bungarlarlah Creek'. I wonder if Grid Iron preferred him stuck on the far side.

I picture Charlie Chan as a little bow-legged man with long thin moustaches who says 'velly', and I picture Elizabeth as tall and regal with a strong face and determined mouth. An ill-assorted pair? Charlie apologises for the state of his truck. He only has an old crate for her to sit on. He lays a chaff bag—or his coat like Raleigh—over it for additional comfort.

"Oh heavens, Charlie dear, do stop fussing over little things! We've got more important work to do."

And indeed they have. Bungarlarlah Creek runs south-west. Somewhere, far far beyond my horizon, it ceases to be sand and runs over sparkling rocks. Here they set up their tent and build their campfire. Here they pan for gold.

* * *

My thoughts naturally turn to gold. It's what fossickers seek. But do they seek it out here? They seek it here; they seek it there … "Do you know what I learned today," Keith says.

"No. What?"

"Those funny things Cliffie told you about. They might be 'thunder eggs'."

Thunder eggs! What an odd description. The thunder roils and moils and it forms strange small egg-like rocks down below. "What are they made of?"

"Agate. So I've heard. And there's opal nobbies … the poor stuff."

"So are the eggs valuable?"

"Don't think so. Just curious. They're found in several places in Queensland."

So everything will make sense some day. From asparagus to eggs to blood to Elizabeth in the shed?

"If you come across any in the shed or the garden we can ask someone."

"Maybe Iron Jack picked them up on his droving trips. Souvenirs."

"Maybe." He doesn't see the sarcasm. His thoughts are on a story. "Maybe Charlie Chan found them. He doesn't seem to have found anything valuable."

"How do you know?"

He leans back, puts his hands behind his sleek head. The Patriarch Expounds. "The town paid for a stone when he died."

"You mean Iron Jack did?"

"No. The Methodists did. He went there. He left all his belongings, though he didn't have much, to Elizabeth. Or so they say."

All his bags of gold dust, all his thunder eggs, all his sapphires and emeralds and opals … and Elizabeth? What did she do with them?

* * *

Keith is measuring the bathroom. The old metal tape zips in and out. He yells "Seven feet and three inches" and I write it down. It isn't that Mr Hardacre has promised us a new bathroom, not even some old tired shop-soiled stock. It is Keith Being Prepared. This is a different status to Be Prepared. It can be mentioned to our landlord in the very next conversation. It can be put away for the future like newspapers for our winter burning. "Six feet, six inches—stop daydreaming Prue! I want to have this done before the baby comes—"

"The measuring or the re-decorating?"

"Don't be dense. We'll get a decent surround for the tub and tiles up the walls and fix these gaps in the wall … The pipes aren't too good either, very rusty … but I'd better find out more about the drainage system first."

He has a pencil professionally behind his ear, quite forgetting Little Miss Della is right to hand.

"So you'd better not dig in too close to the house, just in case you catch a drainpipe—"

"No sir. Shall I put that in writing?"

He manages a weak smile. “You really shouldn’t be digging at all.”

“It beats slaving over a hot stove.”

“I’ll see if I can talk him into some blinds for the kitchen. Some nice white venetians would smarten up the place.”

He holds out a hand for the notebook and mulls over it. Then we look at the old bath with the rusty dribbles and chipped enamel. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s worth the effort—but I haven’t heard of anything better—”

Keith *belongs* in nice bathrooms, smart suites, avant garde patios.

* * *

I must must must get back to my shed-tidying. The heat lies like a great unseen lake across the landscape. The garden wilts and hangs its collective head. There is water from the town’s small reservoir. No restrictions. Not yet. But the heat fights me every inch of the way and there is no shade, just the narrow block of shadow thrown by the shed. Inside, the tin walls have stored the sun and wrap me in it. There are piles of old Bushell’s tins which rattle when I lift them but their lids are rusted on. There are narrow treacle tins like stovepipe hats and broken preserving jars.

I think of Winsome. “Tut, tut, that really is beyond repair. To the shed.” What does she think of Elizabeth when she consigns her sad shards to these dusty piles? *Does* she think of her? *Did* she know her? *Might* they have gone to school together? And Iron Jack … *did* he come round to visit Winsome on her lonesome and did she show him the door or was she, too, beholden in some way?

Cliffie hums and haws and says Iron Jack was getting on a bit.

“A bit? He must’ve been pretty ancient by then, surely?”

He leans forward. “He come lookin’ for Elizabeth one night, this’s just after Winsome an’ her sister moved in, he says they must know where she is—”

“Why didn’t he ask Charley Morrison? He must’ve known where his sister was?”

“Charley went a bit funny and went—away, like.” Cliffie gets up and fusses with the teapot. “Me mum used to make these fancy cosies, think I’ve still got a couple put away somewhere. You might like one.”

“It doesn’t matter in this weather, but thanks.”

“She got peaky in the heat.”

“Your mum?”

“Elizabeth. The blood there—I told you how it use’ to bubble up, didn’t I—and the smell was—” he shakes his head, bob, bob, bob. “Brought the flies. Mum could never stand flies, she was always worryin’ we’d get bilious, s’pose we did too. I remember I use’ to sick up my food a lot when I was a li’l fulla … s’pose it was the heat an’ the flies—bit of a weak stomach.”

I wish he wouldn’t mention this when I’m eating his food.

“I’ll hunt out those cosies. Must be somewhere round, you wouldn’t believe the stuff I’ve got put away here … there was somethin’ I gave to Elizabeth when she was in the shed, can’t just call it to mind … ”

* * *

What an awful dream! And I lay for ages feeling the heat over me and saying to myself ‘I’m not hot, there’s rain falling, cool gentle rain, see it like a mist across the plains, across me … so cool … so soft … ’ I slept and I was a large hump like a tortoise and the land around me lay flat and limp and the dull brown of burrs. I would heave and gasp, great lumps of rotting flesh would fall away and with awful weary grunts they would extrude from under the shell and lie there and birds would gather, waiting, and all my thoughts were centred somewhere in my innermost soul and its agony.

“You were grunting a lot last night,” Keith says.

“Was I? It was very humid.”

“I’ll see if I can get a fan … or we could move the bed to the front room, it’d be a bit cooler.”

I am determined to finish the shed today. Today? No, I'm wrung out. I've brought up a wheelbarrow load of tins. I might as well sit and sort them in comfort. Keith has chiselled some of the lids off. A lot of stones and gravel. We can lay it all out on a tarp. 'Who'll buy my lovely stones, so round and sweet, come buy, come buy—'

Maybe Elizabeth kept them to hand to throw at her brother and Iron Jack. "I am a virtuous woman!" She tosses back her magnificent handsome head. There was Charlie Chan. Those were days when a little yellow baby—

Raised eyebrows? Dear me, tut, tut, whatever is Grid Iron coming to.

Iron Jack coming round. Get rid of that Chinese bastard or—or what? Yes, I think Iron Jack would be furious if a woman dared choose a different lover. But I can only speculate.

* * *

Would I like an assignment? A nice quiet doddle? Mrs Purkiss is the town's oldest resident. She is in the CWA home. I can go around there. I can ask her questions about growing up in Grid Iron, growing old in Grid Iron. She was the Methodist minister's wife many years ago. He is dead now. Her children are long since grown and gone and with children of their own.

She is a little thing with a yellow wrinkled face, yellow-white hair, shrewd blue eyes, a soft sad voice.

"Grid Iron was a hard place," she says to me and she reaches out a little gnarled hand. "Perhaps you shouldn't say so in the paper. People try to forget what it was like … or they pretend it was good because there was work … "

"Because of Iron Jack, do you mean? The hardness and the work."

"Yes. Both. But I know there were people who lived here for years without getting paid. He'd say, I'll see you through. Yes, I can still hear him saying, 'I'll see you through'. There were men on the roads in the thirties, you know, they'd hear there was work in Grid Iron and they'd come all this way—the government put the railway through in 1936 to make work—just on their poor tired feet and they'd knock on doors and Iron Jack'd be waiting for them. If he got there first—" Her eyes are bright with memory. "He broke one man's leg, said he could see what it was like walking on to the next town with one leg … we helped that poor man. Do you know, my dear, it was like a siege, our house, my husband and my daughters, asking people to bring the men straight to us … people were frightened to go against Mr Cooley. I remember an old man bringing a man to us hidden under a blanket in his sulky and he was shaking so much he could hardly drive … the horse brought them both to our gate."

"Why do you think Iron Jack was like that?"

"I don't know, Prue dear. And people still prefer not to mention those things. I don't think it's good for one person to have that kind of power."

"But you went away, didn't you?"

"Yes. Perhaps it was the wrong thing to do, people needed a man like my husband—and old Father Dwyer. But we had teenage daughters and he didn't. I'm not sure if you can understand our fears, now, when people seem so much more casual about—virtue."

"You wanted to keep your girls away from Iron Jack?"

"Yes." She is getting very tired.

"Would you like me to come back tomorrow—or another day?"

"Come tomorrow, there's a good girl. And you must ask the questions, not let me ramble on."

"I enjoy hearing your memories. But I'd like to ask you about Charlie Chan … and Elizabeth Morrison … if you knew them."

She smiles and her false teeth are straight and white in her face. "Yes, I remember them. Yes, do come and ask me about them."

* * *

"Charlie Chan was a gentleman. Do you know those lines, 'When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?' I always think of that when I remember Charlie. He delved but he was the most courteous old man, one of Nature's gentlemen, as people say."

"And—did Elizabeth go prospecting with him?"

"Oh yes. They loved each other. But when he was old and dying he stayed with us for a little while, it was safe here for him, you know—"

"This was after you'd come back?"

"Yes. It was after the war. He said to me, 'Mrs Purkiss, I never touched Liddy', he always called her Liddy, 'I loved her too much.' You see, people accused him of being the reason for her going away, they said it was a child, but I knew she was going to see her poor mother."

"Where did her mother live?"

"Right down near the river. In Brisbane. I met her there. I said, 'Mrs Morrison, I'm so glad Elizabeth's come down to be near you' and she said, 'but Lizzie is still in Grid Iron, she's never even been near me' and when she died, years later, she said she'd never forgiven her daughter for never coming—"

"What about the brother?"

"Oh, he never went either. He was too busy breeding his dogs, he said he was going to get pure blood if it was the last thing he did. But they say one of his dogs went after some of Mr Cooley's stock and that was it. He packed up and left. I don't remember him very well … but that was after his mother died, poor old soul … "

"So what happened to Elizabeth?"

But Mrs Purkiss is still pondering on something else. "They were big dogs, blue, you know, with tan patches … they said they would bring anything down, fight anything, and the men would go somewhere up past the abattoirs and there was money … I don't know but I remember my husband preached a sermon … What was that, my dear, you were saying?"

"About Elizabeth?"

"We never heard … she stayed there, with her brother, until Charlie died. I thought she went—to her mother—people said she did … but old Dick Cahill said she bought a ticket for the train and then she never came for her seat … she might've found a lift instead—"

"Maybe Iron Jack gave her a lift?" I think I am being facetious.

"No. I don't think so, Prue dear. I don't think he would've done that."

* * *

It wants to rain. I feel the clouds come up and strain but something holds them back. But I am in the shed, putting the last tins by the door. Did Elizabeth sleep on the floor, on a camp bed, a hammock? There's just room to lie out straight—and I think she put a chair against the door as there's no sign of a bolt.

Did she lie in wait. Not tonight, please God, not tonight. Let me sleep in peace. And the handle rattles and she says, the wind, it's the wind, and her heart beats faster … and there's the sound of a vehicle … and Iron Jack's voice … command, demand, brook no delay … and Charley Morrison obsequious, yes, sir, yes, sir, but sir … no buts …

I don't feel very well, a bit bloated, or it might be the heat and my imagination, but I'll finish today. Hook or crook. I *do* feel crook.

Thunder. And a little sighing wind. Maybe it will cool things down at least. Real thunder, not a far mutter.

Shall I take down these makeshift shelves or shall I leave them for Keith, not that we need the space, we've got a whole house … I'm doing it for Elizabeth, not for Keith and she sits here and listens to the thunder; a distant rolling, and in it is the longing for life. She is a tempestuous single-minded woman who wants … who wants what?

The first clatter, it might be a touch of hail. Was the horizon a pale leaf-green or wasn't it? I don't mind hail, there are no windows to break, only the little gap between walls and roof. Yes. Hail. It's really flinging—through the crack in the door I see the marbles skip and dance across the lawn, really pelting, and getting bigger, ping pong balls, hens eggs, my poor hens, cricket balls, goose eggs, emu eggs—"AS BIG AS EGGS!" the headline for Keith—and the noise, I can't get away from the noise, it's getting bad, all around me, the tin thundering, shaking, a

terrible rattling round my head, I wish my heart wouldn't speed up like this, and I can't breathe when it does—

* * *

It got unbearable yesterday. And the hens, my poor hens. You were, what is the word, lax, delinquent, irresponsible, says Jiminy Cricket, poor dumb creatures, pelted and hurt and bruised and all because you cowered in the shed.

But the piles of gleaming pale white ice have melted and my plants lie sadly in green pieces. Keith says, "Leave it, leave everything. I'll get on to these drainage pipes, see where they go, while the ground is nice and damp."

And the plains are tinged, like a strange green moss that creeps across them, too faint and low to be called *grass*.

He tips up tin after tin, lots more ochre and grey stones. Some rusted nails like a strange orange hedgehog. Some filthy rags. Something oily that's evaporated and left a blackish scum. More stones, crumbling. Some china bashed into small grit for the chooks. Did Winsome keep hens? Some dry pumpkin seeds. More stones.

"Do you want *any* of this junk? Otherwise I'll put it straight on the trailer. I wonder they bothered to keep it in the first place."

"She needed the stones to throw at the dogs."

"What dogs?"

"Charley's killer dogs."

* * *

Such a nice neat shed. "Elizabeth, where did you go? Where are you now? Where are you?" The tin walls create a faint echo, more a resonance, a timbre, not an echo. There was a beautiful girl and everything was taken from her, except her voice and the memory of her existence.

A shed for rakes and forks and hoses.

He doesn't want my interview with Mrs Purkiss. "I can't use *this!* What on earth were you thinking of? I want something about the church, the congregation, how the church has changed, fêtes, personalities—"

"That's what I gave you. Personalities."

"Well, it isn't any good. I'll have to go and see her myself. Give her a questionnaire. Honestly! You're just getting silly with this obsession—"

Keith has done some digging, a little mole line in the damp soil.

"It's very strange. There's two pipes here. One seems to go out to the road." The other one is very old and rusty, falling to bits.

It goes towards the shed.

"I don't understand," Keith says.

"You don't listen. She had hot and cold laid on."

"Oh, stop being silly."

* * *

I'm back to my own digging. I'll put caulis in along the fence near Cliffie. He hasn't come with the cosies but he does come to the fence and lean over and say, "Best not dig too close to the fence."

It's a wavering old fence, it'll fall over, soon as I look at it. But no, Cliffie says it's because his pipes go through somewhere here, he can't remember just where, but he remembers them being laid diagonally, not straight out to the road.

"I can go to the Council for their plans, they'll have a record—"

"I wouldn't bet on it," says Mr Barnes. "I wouldn't bet on it," says Keith.

And, "We've got plenty of room anyway."

"Caulis need lots of room. And broccoli. And I might try Brussels sprouts … and how about some rosella bushes right along that awful fence?"

"All right. But I'll just dig a few careful holes, not the whole area."

"I can dig—"

"No, you bloody can't! You should be resting. You're all puffy."

"That's the heat."

"It's not so hot today."

"For me it is." I don't know why my body sort of feels stifled as if it's been kept too long in the small kitchen, sort of swollen and clammy. "It's the cooking."

"I'll get the blinds tomorrow. He says he's got some wooden slatted blinds put away in his shed. We can have them for free."

"I wonder if Elizabeth snuck into the kitchen when her brother was out. Made a quick cake."

Yes, that's what I feel, sort of doughy, like something with baking powder in it.

* * *

"You missed your appointment." This is earnest Keith. I'm quite fond of him but unfortunately he only comes to visit occasionally.

"Did I?"

"Didn't you put it on the calendar? I ran into Dr Grimshaw downtown today."

"No. I must've forgotten. Never mind."

"Well, I'll make another appointment for, say, Friday, Do you know what day it is today?"

It's strange but I have these moments when I feel I've lost a little part of me. A piece of matter. A piece of time. I think of Elizabeth sitting in the shed, sitting, sitting. An anchorite upon the great sweep of plain. The hours pass in shimmering heat and there's the faint lowing of cattle, the shunt of the train, voices somewhere else—and little pieces of her fall. Leaves. They gather round her feet in crackling heaps. 'Elizabeth,' they cry, 'where are you?'

'I am here, my darlings, still here, but diminished, lonely, alone.'

* * *

"What on earth were you on about last night in your sleep? You kept saying, I think it was, 'where are you?' and I gave you a bit of a shake and you stopped."

"Where are you?"

"That's what it sounded like. And it might've been something about Elizabeth. I wish you'd forget that bloody woman. You should go out more. Join the CWA or something."

"I thought you wanted me to rest more?"

"Well, I do, but—"

"But me no buts. I'll get straight on to Mrs Entwhistle and see when their next meeting is. She thinks I'm too city to know anything about anything. But I can take my knitting—"

"You're not knitting in this weather, are you?"

"A bit."

"You're mad. Leave it till autumn."

"Yes, Baby Bunting. Sorry you haven't got booties or rugs or little pom-poms or a wee little jacket, who's a wee cold little man?"

"We'll buy things. I'll ask my mother to send some things."

"Right-e-oh. Would you like me to paint the bathroom instead?"

"He'll give us some paint next week. He's only got red and yellow to spare."

Red for blood. Yellow for Charlie Chan. Red and yellow for the rusty tin shed.

"I wonder if we could grow passion-vines over the side fence."

* * *

Cliffie objects to Keith digging holes by the fence. He and Keith shout at each other. Keith hates being told what to do by an old duffer like Cliffie. Cliffie hates being told to buzz off by a young city slicker like Keith.

I am lying on the bed and gazing at the ceiling. I can hear their voices but not the words. The ceiling is rather brownish and the old paint crackles.

I am not here today. Just my midriff which seems to rise up like a large opalescent egg, a thunder egg, pale and sickly looking with the faint suggestion of veins. Women are bovine in this state. Their memories flag, fade, feint, fall, fail. I do not remember what I did yesterday.

Oh, and I forgot another appointment. I wish I did not feel so tired. As though each limb requires a truck and crane to move it.

* * *

Sometimes hours go by and I don't notice them passing. I am dough from my head to my toes. But I feel my heart beating. It beats too fast. Thub! Thub! Thub! Elizabeth's heart beating with a fear that won't lift, a dark dense fear that is always waiting. I should go, I know, she says, should go, should should should but not until, not while Charlie … he fades, he forgets, some days he talks in Chinese and his voice goes up and down and the words are lost in the ceiling.

I go to see him at night when Charley is sleeping, I slip out, the dogs are there but I have them frightened of me, oh, I won't hesitate to drive them back with stones, ssaaahhhh, git back, and they back away, furious creatures with gleaming eyes and raised hackles—and I pass through.

Charlie is dying. When he is dead I will be quite alone. For love is matter, flesh, blood, food and drink.

I will take the train. Not a word of goodbye, not a moment's looking back. They may be pillars of salt, they may be dead leaves and ant heaps and tussocks of white wire grass.

I will be gone.

The stains on the ceiling are like railway-tracks, they wind away.

And the blot. That is Grid Iron.

And the Grid Iron Champion is fine words in Old English Script, just off here to the left.

The Social Notes: Miss Elizabeth Morrison said farewell to her many friends, relatives, and old school chums in Grid Iron last Friday. Miss Morrison was given a lovely lustreware vase by which to remember her many happy years in Grid Iron. She accepted it with tears in her eyes. "Although I am looking forward to caring for my mother now that she is not in the best of health, I will always remember Grid Iron as the place of my happy childhood and where I spent my time as a young woman. I will keep the vase on my mantelpiece and fill it with fresh red roses every day."

* * *

"I've got some potted plants to put along the fence."

"Have you?" I should be interested and instead I feel … I feel … as though I'm not here. Yesterday, I was not here. I found the blank space waiting for me. I wonder what I did. Yesterday I might've been Elizabeth.

"I suppose it'll mean another argument with Cliff but the Council says they're pretty sure the pipes wouldn't be there."

"No plan?"

"No plan. Or they haven't located it."

"Iron Jack didn't need plans, things on paper—"

"What's he got to do with anything?"

"Do you know—I think there wasn't a Mr Morrison. I think Iron Jack was their father. That's why their mother left. She was ashamed."

"I thought you said there was a will."

"Oh there was a Mr Morrison. But he wasn't allowed to do anything. And he wanted to get Elizabeth away when Iron Jack came calling because it'd be Jack's daughter having Jack's baby … so he said to Charley, make life so difficult for her … "

"You're not making sense." He frowns and puts out a hand. "You're very hot. Would you like an ice pack?"

"Am I? Yes, ice … "

He bangs about a lot in the kitchen. I can see Cliffie looking over the fence. He seems to be frowning too. The radio in the kitchen is playing that song … It's a strange strange world we live in, Master Jack … the way it dies away and rises again … Why is Cliffie frowning? Because of Keith …

* * *

One hen died. I am so sad. She just died. I am surrounded by death. Dead plants, dead people, dead … who killed Cock Robin, not I, said the town, and all the birds of the air fell a-sighing … I killed her with my boning knife … I couldn't put her in the pot, she was quite stiff by then …

Elizabeth taking her little box, was it a box like this one I put poor henny into, first a box, then a little grave by the Jaycees fence. It's hard digging, every thrust of the spade takes time. I sweat. I pant. My heart is going too fast again. And my feet as I push down on the spade look white and over-plump …

Cliffie is watching, he's always watching these days. I don't know why he doesn't work in his own yard. He has the same sort of area but there's a fence across it just beyond the house, so he has a yard and a paddock. A paddock of burr and baked brown patches. A little slap-up shed. A lemon tree with scale on the leaves.

I don't feel well.

The sun shines in a cloudless sky.

But it was winter when Elizabeth went away. She had a little box with her. She wore a pink cardigan …

* * *

I wish I felt better. I wish my eyes didn't jiggle while I'm writing this

* * *

"The heat," says Keith, "you were out too long

* * *

Another dream of blood, of pale pale blood that washes out, lapping gentle pink waves and they touch my legs and climb, splash, splash. Keith moved my journal. I wrote this on the back of a card. Why did I write it. I woke up with pink, as though it lay over my head.

"Are you feeling better?" says Keith.

"Am I sick?"

"You lost the baby. Didn't you know?"

* * *

I lie in bed because they won't let me get up. I sweat on to the sheets. But when I put words on the page my hand is cold and clammy. I must write to my mother. Tell her I'm coming soon. My hand won't stop shaking

"Don't try to write," Keith says, and then "I read your journal."

Was it yesterday he said that. I could hear Cliffie screeching beyond the window. But surely Keith should be at work. The Champion …

I read your journal. I don't know if I should get angry. I forget now what I put in it. I wish Cliffie would quieten down. It's not true about the pipes. I suppose he worries about pipes the way I worry about—what—

It was a cold night when Elizabeth went away. Iron Jack said Come and she came and no one ever saw her again.

"He actually threatened me, that little pipsqueak. I mentioned him to Mr Hardacre. He said Cliff's always been odd, ever since, well, years and years, never going anywhere, he says, maybe Prue shouldn't go next door."

Who? Who threatened you?

It was dark when she went, just a shape in the night. He came out of the night.

Who did? Who came out of the night?

"I'll make some tea," says Keith. I don't remember how we came to tea. I am lying somewhere up above the bed and looking down, the sheets are very rumpled. He has a knife in his hand. "And would you like me to cut some date loaf? How do you feel?"

It's in with the tea-cosies—

What is?

I don't know

Why does nothing make sense any more?

"We didn't know you were—if you'd kept your appointments like I told you—" Nag. Nag.

"Where is Cliffie?"

"I don't know and I don't care. The little beggar's nothing but a nuisance. And you're not to go next door—"

"He's going to give me a cosy … his mother knitted it for him … Cliffie's mother … "

"Well, we don't need a tea cosy."

The flies are very bad today. I wish we had screens. They seem to buzz, round and round. Flies. Didn't Cliffie say something about flies …

It's very quiet now, noon, hush, perhaps the creek runs, the train comes, perhaps there's cattle milling in the dust … there's something I must remember … I put the thought aside … a little lump, a pinkish lump, I saw it somewhere … in a drawer …

Hush, hush. Death comes. A very slow death like sleeping.

I must've slept and woke with Keith bending over me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand, I wasn't very … understanding." He kisses my face. "Do you feel any better?"

"I don't know."

But it's not me, it's Cliffie. "You must go," my heart has begun to go too fast again, "it's not me, it's him, go and check, you mightn't be too late."

He shrugs.

But then he goes. Did he shrug. Did he go. Part of me is up there watching and the heavy part listens to its heart, thub, thub, like a train, the train … I see it if I close my eyes

I want to cry, the tears well up, I don't know why

* * *

"It's all right, Prue." His voice comes from a great way off.

And "We found him."

* * *

Was that yesterday or the day before. "What day is it?"

"Friday."

"What did you say?"

"Friday."

"No, before that."

"Nothing."

"About Cliffie."

"He tried to—well, it wasn't nice. He cut his hand nearly off. He wrote a note for you, it was soaked. They don't know if he'll live."

"He doesn't want to live."

"I suppose not. The cops are over there now. Take it easy now and I'll make you a lemon drink."

* * *

Why? Why did he do it?

He loved her. He loved her.

All these years, she was there, near him, resting.

And all he had from beginning to end was her pink cardigan in his kitchen drawer.

"Will you put it in the Champion?" The ants swarm in the cemetery. It was ants, not flies … I forget now what it was beyond me, just there in a thought … love and hate, I felt it all around me … "Will it be news?"

"Of course. News of a sort."

28. THE PELICANS

Billed galleons they were, feeding
in the evening light;
a great raft of white birds, majestic,
and the glimmer of setting sun;
in the gullet of the bay. The calm bay,
where the water lapped a tangled shore,
a sight worth seeing, a grand thing that made
the world seem greater than its parts …

Salt, water, wind, mud, fish, crabs, birds, banks and tumbling
growth against the setting sun;
all cohered in ways that took the breath away,
and people came to enjoy them;
before there was any money in the scene.
But clear a shore line, level rough banks and hills,
lay out lawns and golf greens,
advertise the place as serenity and best practice …

Spread the retirement world, the villas,
the built-in care, the safety,
the things to do—don't be afraid of age—
there's jet-skis for the young at heart and fishing
for the more traditional. There's exploration and walking
and a few mudflats to be dredged, cut down the mozzies
and the anti-social smells; make it an easier place to walk
when tours come out to see the birds …

A dispersing, a ruffled unease;
of course they're big birds, need space,
take a lot of fish, but the few residents get aren't going
to let them starve, and of course birds like that range
widely; this is just one feeding ground, this bay
that's becoming *the* place to retire to;
the outer splendid waves and the gentle inner water
behind the causeway; hard really to find a nicer spot …

To retire and live on for another thirty years,
makes surroundings matter more;
a sense of beauty, a sense of tranquillity,
a need to clean up the bay to have the old mud scooped out,
the cost of clean sand is prohibitive, but worth it to see
these lovely man-made sandy coves, bright and light,
with cheerful beach umbrellas beckoning,
and birds aren't like creatures that can't change their habitat …

Such a lovely spot, potential residents always said immediately;
the velvet green of sprinklered lawns;
the skilled landscaping so flowers bloom all year round;
the neat white villas, with tiled roofs and yellow roses;

they entice the rich retired, give them a new lease …
a sense that life's still worth living even with an ache or two;
and the plethora of things on offer.
It's even possible, now and then, to see a pelican sailing on the bay …

The old steel mill, now that steel's made somewhere else;
somewhere where costs haven't caught up,
is a gaunt rust-red place against the sky;
too far from changing views to upset the elderly
with its indication of loss and death and failing fortunes
and redundant men and left-over-waste, and falling girders;
a place with docks and cranes and rolling drums;
curling rattling sheets of tin and chimneys leant against the sky …

A place of burnt-brown, fox-red, sienna, oil-sleeked metallic-grey;
a place of overwhelming ugliness and casual danger
as the iron comes loose and girders fall and coal dust swirls
while old wastes leak unremittingly.
Salvage companies look and go away, not worth their while;
And not much market these days;
Not within a reasonable shipping distance; and the cost of cutting,
Welding, shifting, loading … insuring for each move …

Some things are better abandoned, left, forgotten;
launches that take the retirees on day trips out can glance
back; the old mill, must've been a sight in full production!
The busy docks, the smoke, the heat, the roar.
Nice to see it gradually decaying away in peace;
Almost a picturesque ruin these days … from a distance …
And just on sundown there's a lovely sight for anyone with binoculars:
A raft of oil-slicked pelicans half-hidden in the black mill gloom …

29. 'THIS EBONY BIRD'

Hiring a bus to bring everyone together to see Cooper's Hill made sense. The old house had been left to the National Trust by the last of the Coopers, Naomi Cooper, and this visit brought together a group of members with a range of expertise. They would report on the garden, the house, the interior, and the outbuildings. The Trust was understandably reluctant to accept a house which might prove to be a white elephant or a conservation nightmare.

People climbed down with cameras and notebooks and clipboards. A cheerful mood prevailed. They might end up recommending against accepting the house. But for the moment it was a pleasant day out. The sun shone. Beyond the lower garden the small bay sparkled. The garden although showing signs of neglect was an attractive old-fashioned place with stately trees at its edges and rare single roses rambling over its arbors.

"Right," the leader of the group for the day sketched in the program, "gardeners to meet us back by the front door at about twelve for lunch, same for the outhouse group," several people sniggered, "and I'll unlock for the interior group. Sorry, it'll be a bit dim but there's extra torches

and it won't take us long to get all the doors and shutters open. Structure group to come with me." A couple of people had questions but within several minutes the groups had dispersed.

The house, everyone knew, had two disadvantages: it would take potential visitors at least half-an-hour to get to it from the centre of Hobart and was a disaster from the point of view of people needing to come by bus, and old Mrs Cooper had not done any major repairs for a number of years. A house which would continually eat into a limited budget was better leased or sold. Everyone carried with them the worries which had attended the Trust's less-than-profitable running of Entally and Clarendon houses for years past.

*

When the gardening group collected by the sandstone front steps at twelve, they were looking particularly pleased with themselves. It was true that the bottom of the garden undoubtedly turned into a brackish swamp in the times when the small creek running into the bay was swollen with rain and met a particularly high tide, bringing it in over the stone retaining wall. But that, they agreed among themselves, was a minor problem and offset by the curious mish-mash of old rose varieties and geraniums and cottage garden plants, the magnificent old elms and beeches and the poplar drive, by the delightful collection of herbs in the old-fashioned flagged and hedged kitchen garden.

As one of them said, echoing a broader feeling, "I can't wait to get my hands into it all." They had made detailed notes on pruning needed, hedges to be trimmed, broken paths, invasions of 'sticky-willy' and twitch and oxalis and other hard-to-avoid weeds, raspberries escaped into the rose-beds … but these were everyday problems.

The outhouse group were reasonably sanguine. The sheds and barns and fences were in fair condition and there were some interesting odds and ends stored which could be cleaned and repaired and displayed to definite advantage; old coppers and mangles and wooden buckets and a complete well-house and loads of harness and rows of horseshoes and an old horse-drawn hay-rake.

"Well, of course, this was countryside a hundred years ago. It's the city which has spread to meet the country."

"Yes, and now they're even going to put houses all over Droughty Point," someone said. "I wonder who owns the paddock across the creek? It would rather spoil our outlook if the council decides to allow it to be sub-divided and we have to look down on a cluster of brand-new houses with TV aerials and new 4-wheel-drives in each garden."

"Never mind. We could put in an objection to planning approval or we could insist that everyone living nearby takes responsibility to promote this house—"

"I don't trust them to listen. We objected to that funeral home near us going ahead and they took absolutely no notice of us and do you know what the people did when they moved in? They cut down *every tree on the block!"*

Several other people were busy trotting out horror stories (or thinking them out, ready) when the structural group turned up. "A few tiles missing, a leak in the verandah roof, a cracked window-pane in the kitchen. Could be a lot worse. Still, we'll see what the interior walls and floors are like this afternoon."

"What's happened to the others?" someone asked. "I'm starving."

"Probably they've got carried away by all the wonderful antiques—"

"I wouldn't count on it. I heard old Mrs Cooper sold off bits and pieces every time she found herself a bit short. There mightn't be much left."

After another ten minutes of waiting, someone said, "I'd better just duck in, they must've lost all track of the time. You might as well put the food out and start."

*

The house was strangely cool, dark and silent. It had not been closed long enough to begin to smell musty. But there was a hint of dust with faint undertones of dead mouse. Even with the doors open, the hallway was dim and it took him a minute to adjust his eyes. The space was very bare and the flooring sprang slightly under his feet.

"Yoo-hoo! Where are you!" The sound seemed to muffle and drop and he debated whether to head towards the formal rooms, the back regions which housed kitchen and scullery and maids' quarters, or away towards the bedrooms. It was a big sprawling one-storey house and it shouldn't be hard to find the group; even easier if they had split up. He turned down the narrow dark corridor leading towards the rear of the house.

At the little dog-leg corner, he was startled into a gasp. A shaft of light from the high dingy windows seemed to fall on what looked like a large parrot sitting calmly on a perch. It was the unexpectedness of it. Of course it was. A moment's inspection showed the bird to be stuffed and moulting ancient feathers. But there was a curiously malevolent look in its glass eyes. For a moment he had the horrible feeling that it was gazing at his back as he went on into the kitchen.

It was an unremarkable room with a large open fireplace and a small modern cooker. More feathers were spread across the flagged floor, some of them looking as though they had been torn from a living bird. He bent and lifted a little clump and wondered if the brown stain was old blood. Still, Mrs Cooper was quite likely a cat lover and there would have been both garden birds to catch, and seagulls and waders down along the shore.

There was a small scullery with gingham curtains and jumbled shelves of old baking pans and boxes of rusty oddments. He glanced round. Cobwebs festooned the corners. It would be a job to clean it but the walls looked solid. Then he felt another jolt. In the far corner was a large metal cage and it too held what appeared to be a parrot or possible a crow. Its dark feathers were spattered with something which looked like white paint. Its eyes, yellow at first glance, seemed to revolve slowly in its head and show a scarlet tinge, then he decided it was only a trick of the shifting shadows from the garden outside and the half-open curtain.

And still no group.

He retraced his steps through the back regions and debated which way to turn. They would probably have started on the drawing-room, dining-room, ball-room, cloak-room (if that was the best way to describe the large front rooms) and left the bedrooms to last. He turned along the passageway.

Except for a skylight there was no natural light and he wished he'd brought a torch. Somewhere in the distance a shutter banged against a wall. No doubt the sea breeze was getting up. The floor was carpeted, a very dim pattern, and the walls were covered with—he was startled to realise the pattern was more birds; these were curiously elongated birds, their heads turned to one side as though to watch the house's occupants pass. He wondered if the paper was slightly fluorescent; surely those birds *gleamed* faintly? "I wonder if old Naomi was bats?" he said it aloud. "Or birds? Or was it the fashion—in the way the Victorians loved stuffed kingfishers and what-have-you?"

Then he regretted speaking. The birds, he felt, resented … resented … his levity? Or was it the implied criticism? Then he wanted to laugh. Ridiculous. Painted birds on painted wallpaper.

'And all the while I'm hunting for the others, they've probably gone out the back door and round the house—and now they're all sitting down to lunch. But if I go back and they're not there—'

He turned the corner, a small T-shaped area, and in its corner opening on to the garden through a large casement was a built-in bird-cage. The birds perched on ancient driftwood branches, bird-seed was still scattered around their feeders and a little scummy water filled their bowl. Curious long skeins of cuttle-fish hung from the ceiling and turned ever so slightly in an unseen passage of air. The floor of the area was liberally dotted with bird droppings. The birds seemed to turn to scrutinise the intruder and for one wild moment he felt he had come upon real birds living—and then the impossibility of their living for months in a closed house struck him.

But they did turn. A trick of the light. A lightness that left them at the mercy of the air currents. These birds as elaborate as wind-up toys and still retaining a little mechanical life? He came up closer and looked in. Those other things which turned greyly alongside the cuttle-fish were surely dead mice and he imagined Mrs Cooper taking up dozens of traps every morning and

feeding the caught rodents to her pets … except these weren't pets, were they? They'd been stuffed … But a stuffed bird has been alive …

Pets …

Were all the birds Naomi Cooper's pets? Big birds with curved beaks and dark bedraggled feathers …

A door opened with a slight creak into a large bedroom. The shutters were open but the overgrown garden restricted the light. A large four-poster-bed with brown velvet hangings took up much of the room. He felt a slight unease. This must be her bedroom and the bed still lay rumpled and untidy as though she had tossed and turned in her last painful hours. A pillow lay on the floor and a seepage of feathers had escaped the ticking. No modern allergy-free foam for Mrs Cooper then. He stooped without thinking and picked it up. It left a trail of feathers. A deep slash had cut across its well-stuffed body. He wondered what had happened here.

Naomi Cooper had been eight-five when she died. Or so *The Mercury* said.

*

As his eyes became more accustomed to the shadowy room with its heavy mahogany dresser and wardrobe and the couple of chairs and an old-fashioned jug-and-basin on the cupboard by the bed (at least she had not sold off the bedroom furniture by the look of it) he realised there was a bird perched on the bed canopy, seeming to peer over. It might always have been there and the shaking of the bed as he put the pillow down had caused it to fall forward. Well, of course it wasn't *peering* over, just another stuffed bird in an odd place.

"She must've been an odd old dame alright," but his words seemed to come out not as an amused soliloquy but more a kind of nervous croak. "Either she hated birds—or she loved them, not wisely but too well … "

He became aware of another bird perched on the sill above the door. Black with a yellow beak. It was barely visible against the dark brown paint of the sill and the dim grey-blue design of the wallpaper. "I wonder how many more of the bloody things are hidden round the house to frighten the unwary visitor" … but then Mrs Cooper had not been much of a social lion. Local gossip had her a virtual recluse, so much so that no one was absolutely sure how long she'd been dead when she was found, the coroner suggested three or four days. If there *had* been unwanted visitors then—they might not have stayed very long.

"Of course with the lights on and the garden cut back … of course no one would be frightened of a few old stuffed birds … "

He said it aloud, forcefully, "A few old stuffed birds."

The bird above the doorway seemed to turn and gaze at him with a clear sense of speculation. Did you speak? Did you say 'a few old stuffed birds'? For one startled moment he thought the bird had spoken, that its beak had moved, that the something which he thought … no, it was only the way a cloud had obscured the sun and darkened the room … something faint and nebulous like a few threads torn from an old feather pillow … that it let drift down … that the eyes stared unwinking and it wasn't easy to look away … that that sleek black head had dipped and slashed … that those eyes would not leave his alone …

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After waiting a further twenty minutes, in which people had spoken about the state of the house and how it might be marketed, and whether it might be possible for the Trust to buy the paddock beyond the creek and how often very high tides might reach the lower garden and whether Mrs Cooper might be a selling point for the house in some way, 'The Hermit of Cooper's Hill' perhaps, and how hungry people were getting and what about starting lunch anyway, it was thought best to send someone else in to call the people in the house or find out what on earth was keeping them …

30. EXCERPT FROM 'THE SET OF THE SUN'

The old Timorese man there said "I will tell you a story about Portugal"; I thought he meant that he would like to tell me about his experiences there, he might have visited. But he began, "Long ago, soon after the Great Flood, there was a beautiful maiden, so beautiful that even the gods looked upon her. There were not enough young men in her village to climb the coconut trees to cut down the nuts so the maiden said she was young and agile and she would climb to the sky and cut down all they needed. The old women said "Take care, child, that Father Sky does not touch you" but she only laughed, she was so young and innocent.

She climbed and climbed; first up the tallest palm in the village, and began to slice the nuts from the tree with the *catana* she carried. The nuts thudded to the ground, far below, and everyone in the village became busy collecting them and no longer looking up to the maiden. Father Sky came low like the great blue wings of an eagle spreading over her but she was so busy with her task that she took no care to look upward to the sun, and he covered her over, touching her everywhere, her warm brown eyes, her soft child's mouth, her gleaming black hair that curled around her coronet of flowers, and she felt him as the faint brush of bird-wings, the tickle of the palm fronds moving in the breeze, the warm frolic of the sun … but when she had cut the nuts and went to climb down again to the waiting people it seemed that she could not move, that her mind had gone to sleep and she had forgotten that she had family down below.

She slept there in the tree, with the birds nourishing her, the sunshine keeping her limbs clean and sweet and content; her mind only on the sky, forgetful of Mother Earth and everyone upon it. And after many weeks she gave birth. Out flew a cockerel with bright bronze feathers, and all the people down below said: What a magnificent bird! I must have it as my fighting bird, and I will become famous and rich, the richest man in our *cnua*. And then, out flew a huge eagle with great gleaming eyes and everyone said: We must have that eagle! We must catch it and put it in a bamboo cage and it will bring us all good fortune! And so they forgot about the cockerel and began chasing after the eagle. They left their village behind and ran down the valleys and up the mountains.

And then out flew a third bird; a small brown and grey bird and no one noticed it and it flew here and there, and it laid eggs in every nest it came to, soon it had pushed all the other kinds of birds in to caring for its chicks, but the people were too busy to notice."

He sat back. I ventured to say I did not think it was a story about Portugal but a story about the habits of birds. "No, your excellency, it is a story about the habits of men. It was a Portuguese eagle, and a Portuguese fighting cock, and a Portuguese cuckoo-bird." He bowed his head gravely. "So it is a story about Portugal."

Notes: *catana* = knife, *cnua* = village.

31. EXCERPT FROM 'THE WATER BIRDS'

As I poled gently I began to toy with the idea of trying to buy a little segment of marsh for myself. Was it too late to buy and restore this land? And would it be good for me to own land which has an old … tie is perhaps too strong; this land, a link, a connection, a reason for wanting it to remain which has nothing to do with earnest people speaking of saving our environment.

Derek will come and sample water and mud and earth and plants. I will continue my slow unregulated pottering. He may ask for help with samples and bottles and instruments and writing things up. I may say yes. I may say no.

It is a sad thought but I have not seen or heard a frog since I arrived. Am I confusing this place with other places I have been—or did it once teem with frogs just as I remember it teeming with ducks, with marsh hens, with crabs, even with small flitting fish …

Memory is a selective thing.

But that idea takes hold. Is the marsh for sale? Who owns it? What would a marsh cost? I could beat the price down. Value, I could say contemptuously. Value! This place is a toxic sink. There is enough lead in that lagoon to … to supply the Army … and still have enough over for some lead sheets to protect Superman …

Look at it, I could say, look at the rubbish, the destroyed vegetation, the mess and the lack of waterflow.

You should be giving it to me. Not a sale. A gift. But I could be magnanimous. I am willing to buy it, try to restore it. The local Council could give me a cheap citation as their Environmentalist of the Year. Derek would be both puzzled and politely supportive. 'I thought you hated this place?' 'I do. That is why I have to repair it.' 'Oh well, yes, I can see that … but will you *live* here?'

That question the imagination has just thrown up is a rather good question. Would I want to *live* here?

Aren't ghosts better left in peace? I could re-stock it with duck. They could be brisk and noisy. And trees. I would replant melaleucas up the waterways. They could grow and twist and tell everyone which way has the strongest winds, and ti-trees and hakeas and boobyallas along the sandy headlands. They won't give me the beach, of course, though there is the curious question of what actually is beach here. Public land. Private land. Crown land. Yes, Mr Developer, you can have clear title …

I know that if I climb up to the southern headland through the lichened boulders and sandy grass and the tiny struggling heaths I can look south over narrow beaches, real beaches, with a patch or two of pink pigface up behind the sweep of tide-washed sand. Those have a shape. But Medway has its sense of rejecting boundaries. Things are and then they're not and tomorrow has a different feel. The faint mingling tang of mud and salt. Sometimes one predominates.

The view from the headland, not that it really gives a sense of headland, just that small rocky drop to the water, used to be like looking back on something secret. It wasn't high enough to give the maze of channels a definite mapped feel. Like those old puzzles in children's books. The maze. The fat fish. The old boot. Nothing like that. Its indeterminance was curiously exciting. I never wanted to feel anyone would have this place mapped. I wanted it to live in people's mind as a place that had no shape.

But as it shrinks people reclaim it for paddocks. I am sure the gate from the road was much further back into the slopes there. I am sure of that. But I can't prove it. Perhaps Derek can. I am sure he has old maps to show shrinkage. But I do need to map this place. It has sites that are significant to me. I don't mind the being built over. It is not the fact of being built over. It is the fact of building.

My skin has flushed a brick-red from the sun today and that sharp salty air has chapped my lips. If I stay will I end up like Clarence Carew? He thought of all this as his. Perhaps it was more his than it was ever anyone else's. Sometimes far back Aborigines came here, took ducks maybe, eggs, eels, fish, and there would've been big land animals, not cows, drinking in those pools. I can't picture that easily. Big kangaroos, emus, wombats, tigers, somewhere deep in the ringing trees was a world which has passed away.

My crimes are little ones. Other people took something eternal and choked it … and choked it … until it whimpered and went limp … and finally shrivelled away …

32. THE SEA EAGLE'S FEATHER

And when I die, ragged and blowsy by the tide,
The wind will blow and sough (in eternal sorrow)
Maat, goddess with unseen scales, may she chide
A nesting eagle, one feather let me borrow
For this poor soul … unprepared …

No mourners here to build a tomb, set a stone,
The sand will sigh and fly (in eternal motion)
My soul, set free, at first listless, sullen, lone,
Weigh me, this shrivelled thing, its only notion
To find home … remembered haven …

Hymn of the gale, now sweet as temple-flutes, sings,
The sea will sate and break (in eternal sibilance)
And I will feel my lightness, grow great wings,
Lift me to that eyrie, nestle in soft down, by chance
I may hatch in other dreams …

THE END

NOTES: 'Fritillary', 'As it Were—A Lighthouse' and 'The Sea Eagle's Feather' from 'Seashores' in *The Chalk Man*. 'The Insect World' and 'The Pickelhaube Mouse' from 'The Pickelhaube Mouse' in *Keeping Sheep & Stranger Beasts*. 'The Milieu', 'This Ebony Bird', 'The Fishing Trip', 'The Bat People' and 'Wild' from *A Book of Siblings*. 'The Grid-Iron Champion' from *Misdeeds*. 'A Day Ride', 'The Doctor's Pony', 'The Stable Cat' and 'Petmeat' from *The Land of Long Odds*. 'Lost' from *A Tristous Miscellany*. 'Seals Have An Ear For Music' from 'A Book of Seals' in *The Chalk Man*. 'For Cecile' from *Hidden Lives*. 'A Gothick House' and 'Netherworld' from *Bricks & Mortar*. 'The Pelicans' and 'Underworld' from *Travellers in Infinity*. 'Filmed' and 'A Tropic Yarn' from *Safe As Houses*. 'If Not To Dream' and 'Where Do Cats Go?' from *Nostalgia & Other Moods*. 'A Churchman Writes Of Amphipoda' from 'Old Car Bodies' in *Keeping Sheep & Stranger Beasts*. 'An August Felony' from *Bytheseashore*. 'A Modern Midden' from 'A Reconciliation Suite' in *Keeping Sheep & Stranger Beasts*. Several of these pieces have won prizes, 'Fritillary', 'The Milieu', 'The Doctor's Pony', 'This Ebony Bird' and several have been published in magazines and booklets including 'The Sea Engle's Feather' and 'Fritillary'.