

“JENNY'S PLACE”

by

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The characters and events in this novel are fictitious.

JENNY'S PLACE: PART ONE

2 Hart Street,
East Ham,
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Wendy love,

Well here I am in London and missing you one heck of a lot! I keep asking myself why the heck I came rushing over here to collect a debt I don't give two hoots about—well I do care but I know now I'm never going to collect—so I guess it's because there wasn't much reason to stay on in Sydney. It's funny me saying that isn't it? But now that I've got time on my hands I've been sort of going over things you know rehashing everything. Trouble is—I can't decide if I want to make it seem better or worse—and whichever way I still know I managed to muck it all up and make everyone hate me. Well not you and not Michael and I'm glad Jill hates me but that's not a lot of consolation.

Are you wondering why I'm all doom and gloom when I've only been here a week? I don't know that I am but of course London meant theatre ballet parties fab shops romance and whatnot to you—and you know I don't give a stuff about any of that. That's admitting we were always poles apart but there's no point in pretending now and I still miss you. And I still go over and over it thinking that somehow—I don't know how—it could've worked out for us—but I know I was the only one in love. So I won't embarrass you with that sort of maudling junk. It's in the past and I always knew nothing would work out for me. That's life and I guess it'll keep piddling along. I didn't mean to sound so bloody mournful. Sorry. But you think you'll start a new life then you find it isn't that easy to leave the old one behind. It seems to cling on like a leech stuck somewhere you can't get at—well any excuse eh?

I've been busy doing the rounds with Ann—we've hustled through Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London and Madam Whatsits and the Buckingham Palace mews (Ann thinks every Aussie a) likes horses b) can ride one—she should know better). I've been window-shopping on Oxford and Bond and around Piccadilly and got asked where was the Saudi Arabian embassy, Euston road and the Kimble Dress salon (they sure picked a dilly!) and I said "God knows" but I was tempted to say "third right—second left and straight ahead". This place is a bit like walking on a Monopoly Board but I'll be firm and not say what I was going to about my Chances—you can probably guess.

I hope you're keeping well. I hope Rod is behaving himself. I hope the kids are going great at uni and SCEGGS. I hope lots of nice things for you. You know that. And while I'm busy with soul-searching I might as well apologise for giving you the lousy table in the doorway each time you and Rod came. You knew I did it on purpose and I know that the Customer Is Always Right and all that baloney but can you imagine what it was like seeing the two of you all lovey-dovey?

Anyway if you'd like to write send it here but don't feel bad if you don't want to. I know it's sometimes better to make a clean break. I had the feeling of unplugging connections on my way over—along with thinking Whoopee! I'll never have to worry about waitresses food (apart from my own eating) and customers again!—but the minute I got here I started thinking about writing to you. I'd better end off now as Ann and I are going to see The Mouse Trap—I s'pose you've seen it?

Cheerio and lots and lots of love,
Jen xxxxxxxxxxxx

JENNY'S PLACE: PART TWO

Chapter One

It was a bright morning when the Brisbane Limited put me down at Sydney's Central Station or to be more precise I picked up my daggy little port and got off. I bunged it in a locker then went out to buy a paper and look through the Classifieds for places wanting cooks. Seeing as people go on eating—barring places like Ethiopia—come boom or bust—rain or snow—cooks can just about always walk into some sort of a job. At least that's been my experience.

I rang the first one I'd circled. Position filled. I tried the next one. The Argonaut Café in George Street. They said drop round so I asked the flower seller at the top of the ramp where was George Street and off I went. The Argonaut was a scruffy little joint and it depressed me—I s'pose because it reminded me of a railway refreshment room somewhere out West—the sort of place where you *know* a fly's swum through your gravy and is probably getting his breath back under the boiled cabbage and that the milk'll be off.

It was run by a Greek couple—Mr and Mrs Feros—and Mr Feros was filling in as their cook had scooted with the Fraud Squad close behind though they didn't know then he'd been passing dud cheques. Mrs Feros wasn't doing anything special except looking peeved as she was about eight months pregnant with what looked like a baby elephant. There were six small tables down one side and backed by mirrors stuck all over with ancient ads for Minties and Violet Crumble—though I can't say I've ever wanted to watch myself eating—and on the other were the trays of limp chips and rissoles and battered fish and Chiko rolls and sandwich fillings and the rest of the usual repertoire and there was a small counter with the till where you peered out between the sweets and cigs like a prisoner in a Hansel-and-Gretel cottage.

Mr Feros rifled through my references—pursed his lips—rubbed his fingertips together and said "Hrrmph" several times like a horse with chaff up its nose. Then he said right-e-oh the job was mine start tomorrow. His wife smiled and said something in Greek which may've been "Thank the Good Lord there's one born every day" and I went out humming a tune to myself. I bought a uniform and went into a Coles cafeteria and had a plate of tomato sandwiches and a pot of tea. Old habits die hard but I was pleased I'd come down even if it wasn't exactly a classy job. I spent the afternoon looking round estate agents just sort of getting the feel of things and about four o'clock I gave up and rang Wendy. Straight away she said "Do come on out" so at least she hadn't forgotten who I was and I was glad we could meet again on a reasonably equal footing. I went back and got my port and asked a bloke where I could catch a bus to Edgecliff and some time later I'd found the right street.

It was a nice little house—well I never thought it wouldn't be—just down from the Turkish consulate—brick with white shutters and wrought-iron garden furniture and tubs of geraniums dotted around. I rang the bell and Wendy came sailing gracefully along the hallway—engulfed me in a scented hug—said it was lovely to see me and then I was inside. It was all pretty fancy—futuristic you might say—tables with not enough legs chairs that swivelled when you weren't expecting it paintings looking like a madman's view of the dark side of the moon. She'd obviously spent a packet on it and I didn't know what to say except lie through my teeth and say it was marvellous after which she gave one of her airy little gestures and said she wasn't happy with the way it'd turned out. As a matter of fact neither was Bayside Interiors when she called them in for a consultation—but then what could you expect from that Ritzi mob they implied. Anyway that was in the future. Meanwhile I'd managed to get my bum down safe in one of those chairs and Wendy'd poured two martinis and told me again it was lovely to see me. That was beaut of course but I wasn't a June Dally-Watkins' graduate and I've never been too good at putting my feelings into words so I just said a bit sort of gruffly

(though I didn't mean it to sound that way) "Yeah it is beaut isn't it? I've missed you a lot too."

Then I told her about the Argonaut job and how I was looking for a little flat—I didn't mention the half dozen agents I'd visited—and did she have anything to suggest? Wendy cocked her sleek black head on one side—thought a bit and said "Jen you must stay here till you find what you want."

To tell the truth I'd been hoping she'd say that and she probably knew it. I agreed straight off then mumbled something about not wanting to be a nuisance but what could Wendy say except "Of course you won't be! There's plenty of room and I've been dying to see you and tell you all the news!" She then got stuck into all this news and it took quite a while and two more martinis which I wasn't used to drinking but thought might be a nice habit to get into.

She'd been very busy getting 'known'. I didn't ask what this meant or how you went about it but I made polite noises and thought it all sounded a bit ridiculous but then I had no compunction about using some of Wendy's contacts later on when I had needs of my own. I heard exactly how she'd got her kids into good schools and I soon discovered I didn't like her kids any more than I'd done in the beginning. It was probably mutual but I didn't let on to Wendy. After all she was their mother. When she'd worn out the subject of school (not my favourite subject) she suggested dinner and looked at me in a hopeful sort of way and I said I was a bit peckish but of course that wasn't what she meant. Up till then I'd sort of seen her as the essence of ... well—mystery charm style—call it what you like. Someone who inhabited a world more exciting than mine. It was disappointing to see her acting like anybody else. I needed someone to admire.

She came and sat on a pine stool and looked elegant and finished her martini while she told me where things were and I grilled some veal in white wine and chucked in some champignons and so on. I couldn't see it then—after all where I came from no one drank martinis Full Stop—but Wendy moved in a circle where gourmet cooks were admired yet she loathed cooking and went to great lengths to hide this fact by using the arts of subterfuge persuasion liberal spending at high-class catering joints and emotional blackmail. But the blackmail wasn't deliberate I don't think. She didn't understand me any better than I understood her.

The kids wandered through from the rumpus room and looked me over suspiciously. You know the sort of "what's *she* doing here?" look. I couldn't for the life of me remember their names even though I'd heard them only half an hour ago and Wendy didn't bother asking them where were their manners—maybe she knew they didn't have any—so not a moment filled with bonhomie and whatnot. I expected them to turn up their noses at my cooking and sure as eggs they did. Wendy said she was popping out for a quick drink with a friend after dinner as soon as the babysitter arrived and gave me another of her hopeful looks. I said I was sorry but I'd be working evenings and I thought but didn't say that the end result of me babysitting would probably be child murder. After she'd changed into something purple and clingy and gone out I went and sat in the black leather and white shag lounge room and watched the trots on the box and the babysitter finally got the kids into bed with a mixture of bribery and brute force. She came in and sat down looking pretty flustered and muttering about spoilt brats. Then she got out her knitting and that settled her nerves a bit. She was a girl of about nineteen big and fat and freckled but nice and we talked of this and that and she told me she'd just come down from Gunnedah and was feeling a bit homesick and I made us some Irish coffee and we had it with Wendy's expensive imported shortbread.

She didn't get back till after ten o'clock so it wasn't a very quick drink. The babysitter collected her pay and went home. And Wendy and I went to bed.

It's so much harder *now* to express the beauty of it—of loving Wendy ... because my

feelings for her have been overlaid by a lot of negative or at least pretty ambivalent thoughts since then. I don't know if it'd been in her thoughts when she asked me to stay—along with cooking and babysitting—or whether the idea came to her when her 'friend' drove off home to his wife. But the thought of refusing didn't even occur to me. I was twenty-three then and for someone who was already pretty tough and cynical in many ways—someone who had no rose-tinted views—someone who saw life a bit like a footie scrum—it opened the door to a part of me I barely knew existed. An inexpressible tenderness.

Wendy had skill and experience and a beautiful long-limbed high-breasted body golden-brown from sunbaking on the back patio. I had nothing to offer in return except an odd kind of innocence—a touching admiration—an enduring faithfulness—and none of that was enough to hold Wendy.

Working at the Argonaut was okay though I was on my feet all day and if there's one job I hate it's ladling endless rounds of chips in and out of the deep fry. The feel and smell of oil and salt seemed to get up my nose and through my skin till I felt like a walking potato chip and came out in a rash but people don't think of those things when they're guzzling chips on a winter day. Still the money wasn't too bad and to my amazement I got along fine with the Greeks. I even managed to make silly kitchy-kitchy-koo noises at the baby but she seemed to realise that was my limit and never asked me to hold it or change its nappy. I stayed there about eight months and I stayed with Wendy all that time. Sometimes I made noises about moving on—hitting the road—finding a place to suit my kinks—things like that—but she always persuaded me to stay on. After spending a lot of time and effort putting her name on everyone's lips—every social writer's lips—she'd now set up in business as a sort of real estate agent but very up-market and very private. She made arrangements for people—businessmen diplomats tourists people with more money than sense—who wanted a penthouse or a beach hideaway or whatever for a day or a week or however long with no questions asked about the company they were keeping. You know very discreet and expensive. I don't know what sort of money it made for her she was already so well off she could call it 'dabbling' but I seem to think she had a flair for it. After all her dad had made a fortune in Gold Coast real estate so she probably knew what was what.

At last I turned up the sort of place I'd had in mind. It wasn't exactly smart—that's an understatement—but it had possibilities. I could see that. So could Wendy. It was a Paddington terrace grimy and rundown as was the whole street but not yet ready for the demolition blokes. I was enthusiastic a) because the price seemed a snitch and b) because there was a small restaurant in the basement. The agent said this had been started in the first craze for vegetarian cooking and had soon flopped. I was pleased but only up to a point. Did it say something about customer flow—off-putting neighbourhood—lack of parking?

By its look the ground and first floors had been a hippy pad. A few faded posters were still pasted on the walls—a dogeared Aquarius in the kitchen—Che staring at me from one corner of the lounge room—The Lovin' Spoonful burnt with cigarette butts above the broken-down sofa. A faint smell still hung round the closed-up rooms. Chances were the previous owners'd been busted.

Wendy offered me a loan but I refused. It would've made life easier but I felt our relationship shouldn't be sullied by me being in debt to her and if I defaulted I didn't want her to be the one to suffer though I guess the suffering would've been minimal. In the end I went out armed with a list of bank managers—plunked down the deposit and did the rounds buoyed up by Wendy's offer to go guarantor. Women were seen as bad risks but I didn't have any trouble. I don't know why. Maybe it was the magic of Wendy's name and maybe it was because I had more than the deposit put by and maybe it was because I wasn't like any woman that bank manager had ever met. All those years of scrimping and saving were now going to

pay off and even better I'd tapped into the early heady days of the mining boom when Poseidon shares were going up like scalded cats helped along by a few well-placed rumours and taking the market with them. That's not to say I wasn't bloody nervous. I was. I had a lot to lose and no rich daddy to cushion my fall. But knowing Wendy was behind me and sure I'd succeed gave me the bit of extra push I needed. I got the loan I wanted repayable over ten years. And looking back I know I still appreciate what Wendy did for me even if we disagreed later over most of the details of running the ruddy business.

By the time that was in the bag I already had my second string sent off. Cheap labour. I'd written to my brothers and sister telling them my plans and saying I could fit them into the venture somewhere if they'd care to be in on it. Jamey wrote back straight away saying he liked the idea—expect him in a month. After eight years selling hardware he'd had his fill. Michael ummed and ahed and didn't say anything definite which didn't surprise me. Marilyn was working in a Brisbane TAB and said she liked the idea but Mum didn't. Well that didn't surprise me either.

Two months later the place was mine and Jamey and I moved in and camped on the first floor. We worked like the billy-oh to get it ready to open its door to the eating public which as you know is a more comprehensive term than general public. To get to the food you came down the steps from the street and into a concrete yard which we painted green and tarted up with some tubs of geraniums donated by Wendy—geraniums having given way to gardenias in wooden barrels on her front patio. We sanded and varnished the door—painted the frame and sills white—then started on the inside. It wasn't a miracle of interior decoration when we'd finished—Wendy wasn't backward in pointing that out—but it was cosy enough. It had white walls and brown lino tiles and red and white check tablecloths. On the wall opposite the entrance I hung a large print of a family somewhere in Spain having a bite to eat—so's you'd know you'd come to the right place—which I'd found in that little junk shop which used to be nearly opposite the Paddo Town hall.

The kitchen was mind-bogglingly inconvenient and looked as if the previous owners'd played cricket in there of a wet weekend. The dining room opened into a narrow dark passage which ran along to the kitchen at one end and going the other way ended up in the toots and a sort of cubbyhole which must've been a laundry going by the broken-down washing machine and piles of rotting pegs. I was surprised the Health department hadn't got stuck into it but maybe the previous occupants thought it was easier to clear out than clean out? We had a small hatchway cut through to the kitchen but left the upstairs alone except for a bit of second hand furniture. Jamey wasn't the sort to complain about dirty wallpaper or holes in the carpet or cockroaches lying in wait by the skirting boards. He was more likely to prop his feet on the arm of the sofa and spend the evening giggling over Mad cartoons or maybe he'd get a bit dressed up in his tight black bodgie pants and out-of-fashion pointy shoes and go up to the Cross and do this and that as you might say so's he'd have something to tell the blokes if he ever went West again.

I called my restaurant Jenny's Place which I knew then and ever since was a stroke of near genius. But Wendy couldn't see the beauty of it. In fact she got pretty uptight and said it was dull and lacked class. I said "So what?" and she said it was too plain and I said "So what?" and then—when I'd got her well and truly riled up—I said okay what did she fancy? The Downstairs Diner or the Park Hideaway or something French the diners could break their teeth on? I thought everything she suggested was silly and said she might like to call it Animal Farm and be done with it. We argued and argued and the names we chucked around got sillier and sillier and I said whose place was it anyway and I wasn't going to budge because I knew a good idea when I had one which wasn't often and finally Wendy gave in with good grace and said I could call the dump anything I wanted.

We'd just recovered from that lover's tiff when we fell out over the menu. I wanted the place to be just upmarket from Mick's Café—you know cheap plain and plentiful—but that wasn't what Wendy had in mind at all. Something more along the lines of The Chelsea—starched damask—hovering waiters—a menu sprinkled with bits of French. Well I don't know if that's like The Chelsea because I've never been inside but you know what I mean.

But I hadn't spent my time in exile working out menus for nothing. Every day there'd be two soups or starters—I wasn't going to call them hors d'oeuvres—two main courses, two desserts and a small selection of soft drinks and fruit juices as well as tea and coffee and a bowl of fresh fruit on each table. Then I divided the week into five days—well strictly speaking somebody did that before me—as I planned to stay closed Sundays and Mondays and loosely allocated each day to a different country to give a bit of variety to the roast-beef-and-two-veg routine which'd sent Wendy into a renewed flap.

A few weeks later Jenny's Place quietly opened its doors. We'd had a sign at the front gate giving the opening date for quite a while but that was about the limit of our advertising. But word gets round and along came customers—mostly quiet middle-aged men elderly men bachelors widowers divorcees men who didn't have anyone at home to put *their* beef-and-two-veg hot on to the table. You know it's a bit like an underground—not sinister—not very sad—just made up of men who've never had to learn to cook. Their wives their mums even their sisters have waited on them cosetting and fussing over their meals—and the colour of their ties and the shine on their shoes—then suddenly wham! crash! their little world falls to pieces. Mum dies or the wife gets fed up and leaves or sis marries and there's this poor bloke can't even boil an egg. So he eats out every night and the word gets around—which joints give a good cheap meal—which ones have upped their prices—which ones have cut out the free bread—which ones have changed management—tarted up the decor—begun to look askance at their current clientele ...

But in those early days I didn't know that. I just had ideas on what would work and what sort of people I wanted to feed but I still made plenty of blues and there were days when I managed to turn the place into something like the chariot sequence from Ben Hur minus the dead horses. Jamey was a big help and he never seemed to lose his cool—I s'pose because it wasn't his life savings on the line. Something of our old childhood friendship seemed to lurk around—enough anyway for a bit of a giggle even when things were in a right mess with a run on the cheesecake and only stewed peaches left and the urn on the blink and the old bugger in the corner refusing to pay his bill for the umpteenth time.

Michael wrote a couple of times asking for details—just what exactly did I want him to do? Surely I knew he couldn't cook for nuts? Well I just wanted him to fill in the cracks—give a hand when needed—turn his dreamy otherworldly gaze on customers demanding the presence of the cook—peel extra vegies on unexpectedly busy nights—give the house a lick and a promise on the days when I couldn't find time. But I didn't put it down that bluntly. And one cold August day Michael just turned up on the doorstep. He'd grown a soft brown droopy moustache so I didn't recognise him straight off. When he'd enlightened me he went on in his vague pessimistic way to tell me he was still trying to be an artist—he put in something there about Modigliani which didn't give me any clues—but he didn't mind giving a hand while he looked round for an attic to starve in. He found himself a part-time cleaning job he helped a bit with lunch—we offered a set price lunch between noon and two—he flirted with Susan who was our current waitress but it didn't take much in the observation department to see Michael'd drunk from that same well of faint-heartedness our Mum'd drawn buckets from.

Just before our first Christmas Susan came and told me apologetically she was leaving. I said that was okay by me—I'd just had a letter from Marilyn saying she'd decided to come down and see what Sydney was like—but was there any special reason why she was going and

she said still apologetic that she was expecting a baby. I didn't know if Michael would've found the energy so I just said Ah well bad luck—but if she wanted to stay on a while it was okay by me. She gave me a garbled story about her parents and her boyfriend who sounded a louse so couldn't have been Michael and about going to Adelaide. It occurred to me later that South Australia was the only state to have legal abortion then so maybe there was a connection. Anyway Susan left and strangely incredibly even she was almost the only decent waitress I ever managed to hire. Maybe I was a gosh-awful boss—maybe I was unlucky—but it was nearly eight years before I found someone close to Susan for friendliness and efficiency and stuff like that and by then the writing was on the wall for Jenny's Place.

I stayed open Christmas Day and offered a three-course dinner at a reasonable price. The same faces sat at the same tables but I didn't feel sorry for them for having to spend Christmas dinner alone. They mostly knew each other and anyway I needed all my pity for myself and I don't s'pose any of them gave a thought to the poor bloody cook. Wendy had gone to Surfers for a few weeks of high living. I'd made her a luscious Yule Log which she'd accepted in a distracted sort of way—I s'pose wondering whether to gobble it up now or take it with her—and she'd sent me a little opal pendant. I fingered it now and again but it only made me feel more lonely. Eventually the catch gave way so maybe it was only opal chip and it turned up in the soup of an excitable Dutchman who claimed to be a well-known portrait painter but was really a furniture salesman from Norman Ross Discounts.

I shouldn't complain because I saw Wendy nearly every Sunday and we often went out on Mondays too if she wasn't busy with clients and now and then she'd come to eat at Jenny's Place and stay and talk a while if things were quiet. I accepted the way things were—the way they'd always be—yet what we had seems so little. There was never the open happy proclamation of lovers telling the world we were happiest in each other's arms. We talked little about the future—at least of *our* future—only of our individual futures—and we never said "Someday let's ..." But I didn't really miss what I'd never hankered for.

Some days Wendy'd harp on about the menu because it stayed a sore point with her not just that I wasn't giving my 'talents' full rein—which was fine for my ego—but that I should've been doing something excitingly different with them. I told her I didn't need an excitingly different menu because I didn't have excitingly different customers but of course that was grist whatever grist is to Wendy's mill. She didn't like sitting down to dinner alongside the Scuffed Shoe Brigade although I couldn't see what her gripe was—it wasn't as if they filled the place with farts and belches or ate their peas off their knives. But even when we were only going on about food our times together were still precious—at least the times when we were alone—so I wasn't going to fritter them away. I just let Wendy know I admired her flair and imagination and went on doing things my way. I reasoned I'd got this far doing things my way though I'd started from nothing so there must be *something* going for me. But all too often Wendy had friends around. I wanted her all to myself. I was jealous but I couldn't afford to be bitchy. It seemed to me all her friends had sort of pretensions—they were writing or painting or they were in advertising—they wrote poetry with no capital letters and no full stops and which gave me a headache trying to work out—or they threw pots which made me think of something a dinosaur might've dropped and cracking open had been abandoned I s'pose with a decaying dinosaur baby inside. I struggled through Wendy's bookshelves with the idea of getting you know a bit cultured and so's I'd know what they were talking about. I read Robert Graves and Christopher Isherwood and George Orwell and Oscar Wilde and Jorge Luis Borges and Virginia Woolf and dozens of others whose names I've forgotten and which bored me to tears. But I couldn't say any of this to Wendy. How could I when it'd only point up the yawning gulf between us? Instead I struggled to talk wittily—laugh in the right places—nod sagely when someone said something which probably no one least of all that person

understood. And almost without me noticing it seemed to add on a veneer of sophistication—an awkward pretentiousness which sat uneasily on the hard-grained base beneath. It wasn't that I didn't like Wendy's friends—I remember them as being pleasant and friendly even if I didn't think much of their private school voices—it was just that I didn't fit. I knew that. And maybe what was more important I didn't want to fit. It was as if I'd discovered an inverse sort of pride in being an uncultured hick. There was never any suggestion Wendy might like to fit in with my ways—my ideas—I doubt if such a thought ever so much as occurred to her. And now so many years later I can see how our whole relationship was shaped by this unstated paradox. But I couldn't see it then. So I struggled instead to be someone I didn't want to be because I loved her and thought it was the only way to hold her. I went to the places she fancied—dressed in the colours she thought looked nicest on me—did the things she wanted to do—let her present me as the woman who cooked 'divinely'—and chump that I was I hugged the memories of our times alone and refused to ask myself where we were going and if we had a future. You know it's much more comfortable not to ask those sorts of questions. Perhaps because of that stubborn refusal to face facts I remember it as a strangely carefree and happy interlude in my life. It took nearly four years to reach a crisis point and I'd fooled myself so successfully that I mattered most to Wendy—that I was more loving more tender more unselfish—I didn't see it coming and didn't recognise it when it got here.

It was a lovely sunny Sunday and we'd gone for a picnic in Centennial Park. By then Wendy had a mother's help who lived out but came in evenings and weekends—a fortyish woman who'd been deserted and who endeared herself to Wendy's kids by stuffing them with homemade fudge when their mother wasn't round to worry about their teeth. I'd brought the lunch basket—I usually did and I usually tried to make something exotic and mouthwatering so who am I to criticise Mrs Belcher the mother's help? We were both trying to buy affection. But this particular day I'd been tired and disgruntled so I'd only brought sandwiches and coffee and Cornish pasties and mandarins.

Saturday had been a lousy day. Our waitress Ailsa hadn't turned up for the evening work and when I put through a quick phone call she just said blandly she didn't feel like coming in. She didn't even *pretend* to be sick which made me mad furious blood-vessel-bursting mad but all I said was "Right-oh young lady—but don't bother coming back at all and don't come bleating for two day's wages either if you know what's good for you!" She got the message and I felt a bit better after saying that but of course it left me in a jam. Marilyn no longer waited tables since she'd got herself a job in a dress shop down on the Wynyard concourse and anyway she was no great loss because she was the world's greatest muddler of orders but she usually helped in the kitchen of an evening in return for free board. This time though she was upstairs blubbing her eyes out because her latest bloke'd walked out on her. Jamey was away on a bit of a holiday. Though he still did a bit of fixing round the joint and helped with the marketing he now had a full-time job in a used car yard on Parramatta Road. He and his girlfriend Jill had gone down to Bateman's Bay the idea being to visit her parents. (Later I learnt her oldies lived in Rockdale—who the heck did they think was going to moralise?) So it was going to be one of those evenings. Michael came downstairs leaving the sketch he'd been working on. After a quick glance I wasn't surprised he wanted to get away from it for a while. I may've been looking at it from the wrong angle but it looked to me like a dame with her tits growing out the top of her leg. He helped a bit in his absent-minded way but it was still chaotic with me trying to do just about everything—chivvying Michael to and fro—trying to keep an eye on him through the hatch—hearing some pain-in-the-neck demanding his curried sausages before midnight.

By the time our last customer'd headed off into the starry night I felt like a dish rag and Michael wasn't much better but he wandered back upstairs and sat in front of his sketch for

about half an hour in suspended animation then he crumpled it up and chucked it in the bin. But Wendy who'd had a lovely evening at the ballet seemed to think the standard was slipping—the standard of lunch of attention and who-knows-what-else. All through lunch she was full of talk of Rod. I'd always known her 'quick drink' friends were men but she rarely referred to them by name and only mentioned them vaguely as if she assumed I had a bob each way too and would understand they didn't mean much. That was fine—till Rod came along and started to fill up her spare time her conversation her bed ... bribed her kids with outings on his yacht—won over Mrs Belcher with his oily charm ...

I just said gruffly "Heck I don't want to hear about Rod, Wendy. I don't want to know what you and him did last night—" I stuffed my great galumping sneaker right in my stupid mouth—wondered why Wendy looked cheesed off—and wished I could lie back in the warm sun and close my eyes and forget last night not think of unpleasant things just let the ultraviolet play over my tired body and turn it gently pink. I would've liked Wendy to put her arms round me and be comforting but—fat chance!—we were in a public place and anyway Wendy's thoughts were far away from me. And all of a sudden without warning everything—this park Jenny's Place even life in the round—seemed to be getting me down. Wendy wanted her chosen audience to hang on an introspective recital of her innermost feelings if that's what they were instead of going to sleep in the sun or talking drowsily about the general lousiness of waitresses customers sisters prospective sisters-in-law. I s'pose we talked of various things that day but I can't remember anything in particular. Sometimes we went back to Wendy's place after picnicking or going out somewhere but that afternoon I came home about three o'clock. Everything at home looked the same but I couldn't get rid of the feeling *something* had changed in the last few hours.

Over the next few days I tried hard to pin it down but it just stayed as a sort of vague irritating dissatisfaction with everything. Of course I'd always known Wendy was extremely self-centred—not even divorce had destroyed the touching belief that the world revolved around Wendy Morgan. Not that I can talk but there was one difference—I'd never assumed that affection and admiration were my due. So had everything worked out beautifully only so long as I loved and admired Wendy? The change I gradually realised was that I couldn't admire her any more. I thought I still loved her. I know I still saw our lives tightly linked and us going comfortably into middle age with me if not exactly by her side—well at least handy.

It never occurred to me we were hurtling down the home straight.

About six months after the picnic in the park Wendy told me she was going to marry Rod. I s'pose I sat there with my jaw hanging saying feebly "Marry Rod? Surely you don't want to marry Rod?" like a cracked record. It shouldn't of shocked me—heaven knows it was only bringing into the open the vague foreboding which'd dogged me all that time—but I've never been much good at looking nasty facts in the face.

She'd brought Rod to Jenny's Place for dinner a couple of times—and I would happily have served him up a rat poisoned dinner—and I'd run into him at Wendy's one Sunday. I guess she was trying to break it to me gently but of course I didn't see it that way. All I saw was Wendy flaunting him under my nose saying I've got my cake and I'm eating it too. But I recovered my cool and told her real sweet and sugary "Yeah well—that's beaut Wendy. I hope you'll be happy." *That* was a big lie if ever there was one. I hoped she'd be absolutely miserable. And I hated Rod hated him with a deadly poisonous hatred. He was taking what I'd thought was mine and nothing Wendy could say was going to change that. She didn't seem to realise either why Rod and I were icy towards each other. Maybe she didn't want to know? And now I think Rod never understood why I hated him—because he had me lumped under the vague heading 'Friend of Wendy' and if one of her friends didn't choose to like him well that was the friend's bad luck—he wasn't going to lose any sleep over it. Perhaps it would've

changed things if I'd put him straight on that—perhaps his egocentric little brain might've understood the things it didn't want to notice—but as far as I'm concerned it all stopped mattering a long time ago.

Wendy my beloved Wendy couldn't see how she was hurting me—how each new bit of excitement she shared so gaily was like another turn of the thumbscrew. She couldn't or wouldn't believe she was the only one who mattered in my life—the only person I'd ever loved ... ever could love maybe. (But those were the days when every second person was earnestly discussing whether bisexuality was the natural human state. The problem was *I* never saw it in that light.) And I was too stupid or too proud—‘You’re chucking me the scraps but I’m blown if I’ll sit up and beg’—to find the words to tell her “Please don’t marry Rod. I love you. I need you. I always have and I always will.” No. Instead the wedding date was set and they’d got permission to marry in church—though I don’t s’pose they’d told the minister bisexuality is the natural human state—that it fed the complex parts of each personality—the yin and the yang as it were. What a pity. The clergyman could’ve thundered St Paul at them—Wendy and Rod would’ve argued with him and with each other and life could’ve returned to its peaceful pre-Rod status. I received my gilt-edged invite put it on my mantelpiece and impressed the weaselly little bloke who came round trying to sell cutlery.

At the beginning of Wendy’s flurry of plans which she shared in minute detail she asked me to cater for her. I said No. Flat. No excuses. And as it turned out I was up to my eyeballs in other things in the weeks leading up to her Big Day. Jamey’d been bugging me for ages about the need to get a liquor licence. Nobody *needs* a liquor licence. Some people want one—others have it thrust upon them. Finally I gave in and went through all the rigmarole with the Licensing Commission and put in a pint-sized bar in one corner which if nothing else would be handy if people were waiting round for a table. But I had my doubts whether the sweat was worthwhile—whether it’d add any class to the place ... whether it was wise for me to live in such close proximity to those ruby-red and amber-gold bottles when I felt so bloody miserable.

I’d also put in two more tables under pressure from Jamey but I soon realised this was a mistake—and I should’ve realised sooner that the tail was starting to wag the dog—because it took away the cosy atmosphere and made the room just plain crowded. Now at least I had an excuse to banish those tables upstairs where one languished in Marilyn’s room covered in clothes she’d bought and didn’t like and thought she might someday do something unspecified with and the other sat primly bare as a streaker’s bum in the lounge room where it came in handy for Jamey to put his feet on.

The truth was that I didn’t much care about my customers any more—not because of familiarity etcetera but because I no longer recognised most of them. About a year after I started up Jenny’s Place got a nice write up in one of those Eating Out columns—‘One of the more recent additions to Sydney’s restaurants offers top value in a pleasant unpretentious atmosphere—blah blah ... though the menu is restricted it changes every day which has given it a devoted regular clientele ... our meal began with homemade French Onion soup which was delicious, then we chose the lamb’s fry which though plain was perfectly done. Then I had the lemon and mint cheesecake while my companion chose the jellied rhubarb with its delicate spiced cream garnish. The restaurant is BYO so we had chosen to take a 1958 McWilliams—blah blah—’

Obviously they’d struck me on one of my better days and I was pretty pleased with it which is why I’ve kept that cutting all these years. I was the smart cookie who’d done it all—well nearly all—so I bought an extra copy cut it out and sent it up to Mum. It had a clear message. She’d lavished her time and her money when she had any on Marilyn and the boys but *I* was the one going places and I was going to rub her nose in it. But she missed the point and only wrote back vaguely saying she didn’t think she’d fancy lemon and mint cheesecake

and her digestion was still giving her curry and she thought it might be her nerves that were the real problem.

But the hardest bit for me to digest was that it wasn't a blessing at all—more like a curse—because suddenly and briefly Jenny's Place became the in place to eat and our 'devoted regular clientele' got squeezed out in the rush. The phone rang hot with reservations. It got to be a bloody mad house for a while. All those pathetic old blokes who breakfasted on corn flakes and shared their lunch rolls with the pigeons and ate their dinners at Jenny's Place—they didn't get a look in let alone a table and the word must've gone round the underground because our regulars moved on quietly taking their frayed collars and egg-stained ties with them and I was sorry about that.

The new wave came and went and left me gasping like a stranded whale and after that it was anybody's guess who we'd get—some who'd obviously read the paper—some who'd at long last realised Jenny's Place was a restaurant not a bordello—some on the underground who weren't deterred by our trendy image—who knows what they were and who cares? But something seemed to be missing. The way I understood it was that its homey name no longer mattered to the people who came—they didn't need to keep up the pretence they were eating at a friend's place—perhaps they didn't struggle to keep loneliness at bay. I felt it wouldn't matter if I took the nameboard down and called it The Downstairs Diner or even The Place With No Name after all. Ah well.

(Years later Michael offered a different view—that something went wrong when our customers no longer knew each other—no longer said "Hullo Bob or Reg or Fred or Seamus or whatever" when they trundled in. Perhaps he's right.)

The wedding was set for two o'clock to be followed by a swizz tea at a fancy reception place then Wendy'd dump her kids into boarding school while she and Rod whizzed off to the States for their honeymoon and there in between doing the usual stuff people do on their honeymoons they planned to look at real estate trends which to my jaundiced mind simply means learning how to part suckers from their money quicker. Wendy wasn't like that but Rod was a different proposition—goodlooking in a sleek catlike way debonair wealthy—but underneath that Playboy-of-the-Month exterior?

I spent a bit of time thinking what to wear in between hoping something'd crop up so's I needn't go at all. Then I went out and bought a dress. It was a horrible dress. A brilliant poisonous-green silk made in an empire line which of course went out of fashion years ago except in Woop-Woop. I did my hair very severely pulling it back into a snood and I wore white patent leather shoes and carried a white patent leather handbag which I'd got in the Nothing Over \$5 shop in town. *You* know it looked revolting—me not the handbag—and *I* know it did.

I put a notice on the front door a few days before saying Jenny's Place'd be closed for business that Saturday then there was nothing more to do but mosey round to the church and get shown into a back pew decorated with a few limp lillies by a posh-sounding usher busy hustling people into their seats presumably according to class and distinction.

Then I sat numbly through the service.

Wendy'd chosen to wear pale apricot and carry white roses. She looked stunning and my heart ached with a horrible mixture of pride and jealousy. Jealousy all the more fierce and futile because there was no one anywhere I could talk to ... no one anywhere I could go and lay my head in their lap and cry my heart out.

Rod gave out sort of inane grins to all and sundry even me but well he might I thought bitterly—he was getting Wendy. If he'd walked up and slapped me in the face the effect would've been pretty much the same. And in a peculiar way for the first and only time in my life I wished I'd been born a bloke. If I *had* been would I've had to sit there watching and

wishing I was a hundred miles away? What woman invites the men who've lost the race along to see her wed the tortoise?

The spread afterwards was lavish and looked tasty but I couldn't eat. It just refused to get past the lump in my throat. And not even half a dozen glasses of champagne could turn me into the life of *that* party. I wished—oh how I wished—I'd been firm and said to her “no—no way—can't shut on a Saturday. Might lose a good customer and Boy! that'd be a Tragedy!” Several of the friends and relatives of the happy couple gave me funny looks I s'pose wondering what this cross between a hick and a zombie was doing there. At one stage I saw Wendy's mother discreetly easing herself between me and a photographer. Even Wendy looked hurt. Well a bit hurt. Or maybe she was regretting she'd been too busy to oversee my choice of outfit and now had to suffer the evidence of my appalling taste? But she was so busy playing the radiant bride—her laugh tinkling gaily round the reception room every few minutes—she didn't have much time for anything else.

They left about six o'clock for the drive to Mascot. Wendy's lips cool and faint brushed my cheek. She must've said something but it didn't register and anyway what was there to say? She threw her bouquet. I don't know who caught it. Then she was gone.

There wasn't any reason for me to stay on so I slipped out and walked home. There was no point in getting a taxi because there was no reason to hurry. I know I thought and acted that way but I was in a sort of suspended misery. There was the knowledge I was putting one foot after another yet in that deadening sense of loss which clouded everything even to say 'I walked home' sounds too positive. The house was silent. No doubt the others were enjoying the day off. I went in and made myself a cup of tea and forced myself to drink it. I don't know how long I stayed sitting there. Just sitting. Something had got left behind in that reception room. A sort of tantalising hope—a reason to butt life head on—the ambition to make Jenny's Place a success. And now everything had withered up. I didn't want to admit that in a roundabout sort of way I'd done it all for Wendy—that somehow I'd always known I must succeed if I wanted her friendship her love—because now I knew I'd succeeded and still lost. I had no answers to the ending of that part of my life except to know nothing could ever be the same again but I couldn't even begin to grapple with it all. Instead I poured myself a large glass of sherry and carried it up to bed. Sunday dawned. The house was quiet. I lay in bed a long while feeling grey and hopeless and wondering if the headache thumping away in my brainbox was real or imagined. Perhaps it didn't matter the result was the same. Perhaps like my Mum I could cultivate and medicate a whole range of doctor-baffling ailments. There were faint sounds of birds—traffic in Oxford Street—the sun was streaming in—my clock said eight-thirty—but there didn't seem to be anything to get up for. Just a long dull day.

Because there wouldn't be any more picnics in the park or Sunday matinees or drives to a quiet beach or lazy afternoons in Wendy's garden ... not ever.

Chapter Two

Somewhere in the grey hours of Saturday night I made one decision. I'd open Jenny's Place on Mondays so that'd only leave me with Sundays to get through.

At last I got up—put on a frock—went downstairs and got a bite of breakfast. Then I picked up my handbag which was still lying on a kitchen cupboard and went out. I had nothing special in mind. I just didn't want to have to face anyone. But about half way to town I decided I'd go to church. I don't know why—being in church the previous day maybe. I had nowhere special in mind and I wandered into Christchurch St Laurence. Next Sunday it was St Mary's Cathedral and the following Sunday a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses then there was the Quaker Meeting House in Devonshire Street and the Greek Orthodox in Burke Street. I didn't say anything at home and no one there took any notice. When I got where I was going I went in

with the crowd and slipped away as soon as it was over. If anyone said wouldn't I stay and have a cuppa take a leaflet come to a Bible study before I made my getaway I always had an excuse ready—a sick Mum a birthday relatives coming you-name-it. I didn't want to get caught up in anything and I had no idea what I was looking for. Some way to cope with the poverty of my inner life I guess and some way to get through each lonely Sunday.

Soon after Wendy went away—literally and symbolically—Marilyn had a big bust up with her guy Jason. It must've been about her tenth since coming to Sydney and each time was followed by a fortnight of tears and then she'd slowly get round to thinking what a useless slob that bloke was and he'd finally get off the airwaves and we'd heave a sigh of relief and wait for the next one. But Jason looked like being the last in the line because Marilyn moped and wouldn't eat which was a saving and finally said mournfully she was going home to Mum who was welcome to her. She got mostly packed up then she just seemed to stay hanging round. I didn't know what was keeping her till Jamey threw out a few hints—my little sister was hoping to tap into a bit of a bonus a sort of profit sharing. No wonder those blokes didn't hang around long. She'd been getting bed and board in return for an hour in the kitchen most evenings which I reckoned was fair enough but Marilyn knew the place was doing okay and Jamey kept on at me to give the little twerp something extra so I gave in with bad grace—gave her an extra hundred dollars and bought her train ticket and gave her a cute little clutchbag. It looked like the poor old dog was now being taken for a ride by its fleas. Everyone else seemed happy but I decided I didn't like my sister much.

I'd just got rid of Marilyn when Michael 'rowed his boat ashore' with a vengeance. He'd got himself a second hand motorbike and he came home one night—mounted the pavement and crashed into our front railing. He got up from the scene of carnage—went in the gate—up to the front door and rang the bell like a no-nonsense hawker. He was stoned to the eyeballs. We hustled him inside and put him to bed—I don't know why—I s'pose we thought he must be concussed or something. But amazingly he didn't have a scratch on him which was more than you could say for the bike or the fence. Of course the news whizzed round and didn't do the place's reputation any good—'Maniac Bikie Holes up over Restaurant'—and worse still—two days later he got busted. Jamey and I'd gone early to the markets in his ute and Michael just wandered down let the cops in and wandered back to bed. I s'pose you have to admire his cool. They searched the place from top to bottom and left it in a right mess. I thought of suing them but it wasn't the sort of publicity I wanted even though they didn't find a thing not even a fug which struck me as incredible considering what Michael's room could smell like. I thought that was the end of that but obviously they weren't satisfied—too many rumours flying round I guess—because they were back a week later but again they failed to get him 'in possession'. I didn't ask Michael if he was hoing joints out the back window every time he heard the doorbell but it was starting to get on my nerves—all the bloody hassles and arguments that seemed to be going on round the place.

This wasn't all Michael's fault though there *were* times I wished he'd pack up and hit the road. It was also because Jamey wanted to marry Jill who already stayed with him most weekends and was like a semi-permanent unwanted guest. Their idea was to turn the top floor into a selfcontained flat. I didn't like Jill and I didn't like the idea so I told him "Forget it. I'm selling out as soon's the place's paid off which'll be *soon* thank God." Jamey said "So what?" if and when I sold they'd move out. Simple as that. Of course it wasn't as simple as that—nothing ever is—but I wasn't quick enough with my arguments to nip that nasty little idea in the bud—or maybe a tiny scrap of affection for Jamey still lurked somewhere inside me? I don't know.

They decided on a Registry Office wedding. I was invited along with Michael and our current waitress Denise and some of Jamey's mates from work and some of Jill's family. I

noticed her parents didn't figure on the guest list so I assumed they didn't approve of a) Jamey b) marriage and c) registry offices. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to see Jill's smug airs of ownership. I was scared it'd bring back too many recent painful memories. But I couldn't think of a way to get out of it without making Jamey upset.

It wasn't that Wendy and me weren't still friends. We were. But friendship when you thought you had love is a bit sickly. And now that she'd sold her house and moved into Rod's place in Killara I saw her less and less and when I did visit she was annoyed that I still had it in for Rod as though he was some sort of innocent party which must not—absolutely and irrevocably must not—be exposed to anything which might dent his fragile little ego! So I ended up with next-to-nothing but you don't give up loving just like that and I seem to think the School of Hard Knocks doesn't teach you how to bow out gracefully. Ah well.

Jamey and Jill planned a Friday afternoon 'do'. I didn't have the green silk anymore. I think some poor old thing who patronised the City Mission might be wearing it these days so it was back to a blouse and skirt my usual kind of unforgettable outfit. Jill wasn't going to have any competition. She turned up in a brilliant turquoise caftan her hair floating in the breeze under an electric-blue headband and a couple of dead orchids pinned to one shoulder. When I saw her I was sorry I didn't have the green silk after all. We could've run neck-and-neck in the Worst Dressed Woman stakes.

Afterwards we came back to Jenny's Place where I'd prepared a buffet supper and things weren't too bad I s'pose because there wasn't anyone to make boring speeches or say how they remembered the first time the bridegroom got his bottom spanked and what a long way he'd come since then or snicker 'Don't do anything on your honeymoon *I* wouldn't do'. Then they went on down to a Paddo pub to finish the evening with grog and jazz and Denise and I rushed round and got Jenny's Place open only a few minutes late. We would've been faster if Denise hadn't gone all maudling over how 'gorgeous' Jill'd looked and didn't I think they'd be happy? I was too busy thank goodness to have time to think of an answer to this gosh-awful soppy junk.

Then Jamey and Jill were off and away in his ute for two weeks up the coast at Byron Bay. I didn't envy them yet I spent Sunday thinking it'd be nice to close the doors and know I needn't open them for two weeks. I hadn't had a holiday for close on ten years and in a way I'd never wanted one simply because—what would I do with myself? I had no one to go with. Nothing special I waited all year to do. But the desire to get away from this place even for a few days was suddenly overwhelming.

It didn't work out too good having Jill living in the house—that's an understatement—I may be a lousy judge of human nature and human fidelity but I'd known just how it would be. She worked in a small handbag factory in Stanmore and when she got home she wanted Jamey all to herself which was fine by me but then she started hinting I should have my meals downstairs and leave the upstairs kitchen to her. I said maybe she'd care to take her meals in the handbag factory but she missed my point. And then it seemed to be one thing after another and Jamey started to get more and more critical of everything—of course I knew she nagged him—she could nag him to death if that's how he got his kicks for all I cared—but he just ducked his head and slid it on to me. But what the heck had she expected when she married him—a goldplated Rolls and a Point Piper penthouse for heaven's sake? It didn't make for good vibes that I can tell you and Michael took to muttering dark threats under his breath because she'd had the cheek to suggest he get his hair cut. (It was now down to his waist and he wore it in a long ponytail.) I couldn't care less what he did with it and it was more my responsibility than hers seeing I sold food on the premises. It wasn't long before we were having flaming rows regularly. They'd start out of any little thing then we'd be off and running and of course Jamey always came down on Jill's side. I wished I could tell her to get out and

stay out but I was stuck with her. Sundays became I think a sort of search for peace. Peace of mind. Just peace. It didn't need to be analysed. Just to sit down in a back pew and forget about Jenny's Place Jill police raids customer complaints the price of eggs and you-name-it became my idea of bliss.

One Sunday I was doing just that when a girl in a wheelchair parked herself at the end of the pew beside me. The end of the service came—I remember the sermon was on 'Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted' because I felt I could do with some comforting though I s'pose I brought most of it on my own head—and she turned and said "Wasn't it a lovely sermon?" I said "Yeah I guess it was" and we chatted a bit. I s'pose she was in her late twenties with a nice face—not like Jill's pinched in mug or my own for that matter but round and open—but more than that it was a happy face. I couldn't see her having much to be happy about so I said "I guess you feel pretty restricted?" and she said "Yes—it nearly drove me crazy at first but I've come to terms with it now. In the beginning I was terribly upset at losing my independence and having to ask people for help all the time ... but in a way that took me a long while to understand it has its blessings too. People really seem to enjoy doing little things for me—I think maybe they're grateful for an opportunity to show they care—"

I s'pose I must've looked pretty sceptical through this Count Your Blessings homily because she smiled her lovely smile—obviously she'd found something in life that'd passed me by—and murmured "You'll have to take my word for it because you know I wouldn't want you to have to find it out the way I did." I nodded. Who knows—maybe she was right? She smiled again and said "Perhaps I'll see you next week?" I said "Maybe." I felt a heel when I got home because I hadn't responded in a nicer way—because I hadn't accepted the friendship being offered—but she probably believed I came there for—oh I don't know—goodness perhaps renewed faith Christian love and all that stuff and I couldn't even *begin* to explain.

I never went back to that church yet thinking back all these years later brings a sort of melancholy feeling. It's a bit like running into an old acquaintance after you've pretty well forgotten what a nasty piece-of-work she really was.

As a matter of fact my ecumenical tour began to falter. I started to talk about opening the restaurant on Sundays—'people have to eat Sundays same's any other day' 'might bring back some regulars' 'may as well seeing I'm here anyway'—and so on. Nobody else showed any enthusiasm. Around about then Denise gave notice saying she was going to hitch-hike to Melbourne. I'd never in my life wanted to go to Melbourne and there's no accounting for people's tastes but I wished her luck—except for having a memory like a sieve she hadn't been too bad—and hired Freda. I was getting sick of the endless hiring just when I'd got someone broken in to my ways they'd be up and off again. And the more I thought about the whole business the more I started to dream of doing something crazy. Entering a convent—jumping off the harbour bridge—something—anything to end Jenny's Place once and for all or at least my involvement with it.

Freda didn't work out too good. In fact I soon realised I'd made a gigantic boo-boo. She must've got her references from one-eyed drunks and it served me right for not checking. She was a big lazy slob and left everything in a mess so I couldn't take my eyes off her for a minute. She stuffed herself endlessly with the bits and pieces that were meant to go in the lunch salads and if you've ever seen anything more revolting than Freda with her big fat cheeks bulging with secreted bits of olives and asparagus spears and slices of ham and pretending we hadn't ordered enough when I said we seemed to be short then I haven't and I doubt if the customers had either. I would've preferred to gaze at the back end of a hippopotamus.

I ended up giving her a week's notice. She didn't seem upset and only gave a sort of nasty smirk when I told her. I couldn't wait for Saturday to come round. But just as she was packing up in the kitchen at knock-off time—taking off her frilly apron—stuffing her final pay

in her bag—the phone rang. Not the business phone downstairs but the private one in the room above which Jamey and Jill had got installed ostensibly so's I could use it for non-business chats but in reality so their telephone bills could be foisted on to me. They always went out of a Saturday night and Michael wouldn't notice if World War Three had begun. I usually didn't hear it or ignored it seeing it was usually their friends ringing but now I shrugged and went up. I said Hullo and a man's voice said was that such-and-such number and I said No and he said what number is it and I told him and he apologised for bothering me and I put the receiver down feeling cheesed off and walked back down. Freda was gone—the hatch was closed—and I was about to get on with the tidying up thanking heaven I'd never have to see her again when I realised something was missing. In fact quite a few things. I ran a quick eye round the kitchen and raced through to the dining room. Some of the marble vases Wendy'd given me when she moved house—and which I assumed were worth a few bob—were gone and there were gaps in the bar shelves. I hated to think what sort of state the till might be in but I didn't stop to try and do some arithmetic. Instead I hurtled out the front door just as Jamey and Jill were about to come in and down the street. There was no sign of Freda so I whizzed round to the address she'd given me when I'd put her on my payroll. It was only two blocks away but the girl there—who met me in a see-through negligee probably thinking I was a customer—said Freda didn't live there any more and she didn't know where she'd gone. From her tone I gathered she didn't care either and I understood that feeling perfectly.

I went out again. Hoo Boy I said wearily. But I wasn't beaten by a long shot. Freda might think she was a smart cookie but she wasn't smart enough. One day I'd seen her and a bloke holding hands down at the Paddington Fiveways. After a minute or two she'd gone into the supermarket and he'd wandered up the street and into a terrace house with a yellow gate and a hydrangea for a garden. So—elementary my dear Watson—I went round to the house with the yellow gate and simple tastes in gardens. An unknown bloke wearing army fatigues and a scowl opened the door. I don't know who he was expecting but it obviously wasn't me. I said "Is Freda's bloke in?" and he blinked and mumbled "Yeah. They're upstairs. First door." I trundled up and walked in without knocking. The partners in crime were sitting on an unmade bed with the bag and the loot between them and it was an even better haul than I'd guessed but even if she'd only pinched two teaspoons I would've gone after her. The creep. I said calmly and authoritatively I like to think "I'll have that stuff."

Freda blustered and said No way it was her stuff and the bloke just sat there with his mouth open staring at me as though a little green lady from Mars had popped in and I guessed he hadn't cottoned on to the idea they were 'hot' even if the dummy *had* helped her set it up—well I assumed he had—surely Fate couldn't have treated the slob so nicely? I told her to get a wriggle on and pack the stuff back. You could've heard a pin drop while this battle of wills was going on. Then slowly very slowly she began to put the things in the bag and I stood there with my unwavering eye—I didn't want them to disappear into the ripples—till the operation was finished. "The money," I said coldly. I knew I was skating on thin ice. Freda sat there looking sulky and I stood over her thinking what a lousy slob she was and her bloke sat there looking dim and I guessed he'd been having a smoke while he waited for his heart's desire to come home. I s'pose she realised she'd picked the wrong goose to pluck because she put her hand in her coat pocket and drew out a roll of dough. I took it picked up the bag and said "I'll put it outside my front door." You might like to insert a little sermon here but I didn't waste my breath. I went out leaving Freda purple-faced and knowing she was going to give that bloke hell for sitting there doing nothing. I did put the bag outside my fence but I don't know and I don't care whether it was Freda or the next passing derelict who took it.

Jill was downstairs having a cup of something when I went in. She was also manicuring her nails. Perhaps she didn't want her dear hubby to witness this intimate operation? I couldn't

think of any other reason for her to be down at this hour of the night. Except curiosity. She wanted to know why Freda had hightailed it out of the place and why I'd gone pelting down the road after her. I told her. But then my precious sister-in-law had the cheek to tell me I'd handled the whole situation real bad and I'd only have myself to blame if they came back and burnt the place down. I'd never heard so much drivel in all my life but I said cheerfully Well in that case she'd get frizzled so that'd be someone else out of my hair.

As you can guess she didn't exactly fall on my neck with kisses when I told her that—in fact she got mad as a poddy with its head stuck in a bucket and started calling me all sorts of names including 'a bloody dike' and said I didn't know how to treat anyone like a human being but as she couldn't guarantee Freda belonged in this category and as I had a few home truths I'd been dying to blast her with this seemed as good a time as any. When I'd run out of insults—I don't know if she had—I walked out and went up to bed. I felt quite good after getting that off my chest. But I'd just got nice and snug when a funny feeling started to grow on me. The upstairs number wasn't listed yet and although Freda might've ducked up when I wasn't looking and of course coincidences do happen—but then how did she know it wasn't listed and it was funny it was so perfectly timed and come to think of it Jill had looked sort of annoyed when I told her about Freda caving in so quickly. A lot of nasty suspicions wandered in and out of my thoughts that night but I'd come out on top so I hoped that was sticking nicely in Jill's gob.

It didn't get anything out of Jamey's system when he heard Jill's garbled version. Quite the opposite. Next morning I got confronted by a furious brother. And he laid it on thick. "Y'know you may be my sister but y'know something? You're nothin' but a bloody bitch! All *you* want is everyone runnin' at your heels like a bloody cattle dog—"

"Rubbish!" I tried to butt in. "The day I want Freda at my heels is the day they take me away to the looney-bin—"

But he just ploughed on "—and all you can bloody well think of is how much work you can squeeze out of everyone for nothin'!" (here he sort of snorted.) "And you're the one that reckoned you'd got religion! *You!*" (Another snort.) "The only God you got was dollars and cents!"

I was almost enjoying this. Fantasy before breakfast you might say. "Sounds great. Maybe you'd like me to give Freda the kitchen furniture too eh?"

That set him back but then he remembered the hurt feelings of his little pet upstairs so he changed direction. "You haven't even got the bloody guts to come and say it to me! You'd rather be a sneak and do your best to hurt Jill and make her feel like she's not wanted around here!"

"She isn't."

Anyway you wouldn't want the details because they're pretty corny and repulsive. This row went on for a while with Jamey accusing me of using and taking advantage of just about everybody including Marilyn and Michael which I thought was pretty rich considering the facts you know already. Jill's poison was obviously the intravenous variety because it resulted in several more debilitating rows which seemed pretty pointless but I realised they were worth suffering when she and Jamey started packing up and as I watched her get in the ute with all her bags and junk and broken-down hairdryer and stuff like that I felt better than I'd felt in a heck of a long time.

Then it was back to just Michael and me. But I thought What the heck—I'll run this joint *my* way—even if I have to do it single-handed! First off I closed down the bar—Michael was a lousy barman—and we worked our way through the surplus stock pretty fast and I gave a few small gifts of the more exotic stuff to Wendy who was suitably grateful. I hired a new waitress Jane and I put the place on the market. Things were looking up.

Jane was rather nice if a bit absent-minded but I was used to that. Nothing ever seemed too much bother and she was always pleasant and cheerful. One day after she'd been there about a fortnight she came into the kitchen and whispered "There's a woman crying out there. What'll I do?"

I was a bit taken aback but after considering it I said—irritably because I'd had more than my share of scenes lately—"Well I don't know if we need to do anything at all. It's a free country—maybe she just feels like a bit of a cry? Or we could give her a tissue?" Jane looked at me in a peculiar way. She hadn't had time to learn what sort of woman she was dealing with. "But I s'pose I'd better go and check." I went through to the dining room which was empty except for this woman I s'pose in her late twenties sitting with tears plopping down and her hands clasped round her tea cup. It wasn't the sort of situation I shine in—whatever sort of situation that is—but I walked across and said "Is something wrong? Can I help?" The first question was stupid—the second insincere—but what can you do in a case like that?

She looked up and gulped and wiped her eyes. "I'm so sorry. You're wanting to close aren't you?"

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter. There's no hurry. Would you like a fresh cup of tea?"

She finally said she would if I really meant it. That question wastes an awful lot of time. I simply picked hers up went out and poured two more and whispered to Jane "I've got a horrible feeling she's going to *cling*." She looked non-committal. "It's probably nothing much. A row at home or something."

I had no inkling then that this plump mouse-haired woman busy dabbing her eyes and trying to repair her face with a cracked compact was going to change my life so drastically. Well how could I?

After beating about the bush she poured out her big sob story. She and her hubby had got married (obviously) and come out here from London but only a month later her bloke spied a greener paddock or a prettier bird—I didn't press for details—and simply walked out never to be seen again and leaving this poor woman with almost no dough—knowing nobody except their landlady who was understandably worried about where the next lot of rent was coming from and without a clue in the world what to do next. I'm not usually a sucker for hard luck stories but I decided this one was genuine and I could see she wasn't the efficient cope-in-all-weathers type like myself and that she was pretty miserable and it did sound a lousy rotten deal to hand anybody especially the one you'd promised to love and cherish so I said "Well what do you want to do now?"

She fiddled with her hands for a while and her eyes started swimming round again then she said she wanted to go home to London but unless she applied to the High Commission to be repatriated she couldn't see how she was going to get there and didn't I think that'd be a shameful thing to do? I didn't follow her reasoning. After all it wasn't going to make all *that* big a dint in the Exchequer's liquidity. I shrugged and went on with my tea. Then for someone said to be so mean and slave-driving I did an unusual thing. I told her to finish her tea and I told Jane to finish in the kitchen and lock up and then I took this woman whose name was Ann Henry and we went out all pally like long-lost buddies and down to the nearest travel agency and I booked her a ticket to London in a week's time. I felt like Elvis handing out Cadillacs to starry-eyed window-shoppers.

All through this Ann just sat there with her eyes popping but when it was in the bag so to speak I told her bluntly "There you are and if you're stuck you can stay at our place and eat there for nix but when you get home and get a job I want the fare paid back. Okay?" She spent half an hour thanking me give or take a few minutes. Charity gets to be pretty tiring though it wasn't charity strictly speaking but it still got boring. She moved into Marilyn's room and a week later she went home to her mum and dad and they probably told her they'd always known

he was a useless so-and-so. Within a couple of months I'd received two small cheques then there was a long pause then another small dribble and I began to think it'd take her a lifetime at that rate and finally—after a lot of thought—I wrote and said forget it. It's a gift after all. Then I got another round of thanking but only on paper which was less of a strain. After she'd dredged the bottom of her heart or wherever she ended by saying if I ever came to London please would I regard her home as mine for as long as I wanted. Considering the price of accommodation in London—something I'd never done—it was a generous offer. Who knew I might fancy moving in and never budging? But up to that moment the thought of going to London had never occurred to me.

About a month later Jenny's Place changed hands and I began the job of packing up and moving out. Jane seemed genuinely sorry because she told me with great earnestness she'd enjoyed working there—which was more than I could say—and had been glad to learn something from the kitchen angle. It was a long time since I'd received anything similar to a compliment and somehow it reminded me of something from long ago so I gave her a tip-top reference. It wasn't any trouble to me—"I have found Jane Farley conscientious, tidy, pleasant, willing to learn, punctual—" (I laid it on thick but I think it was all true.) "I would have no hesitation in recommending her for similar work—blah blah—"—and I hope it took her far in this world.

Then it was only Michael and me. Poor washed up brain-fuddled Michael. He seemed to have no idea where he wanted to go or what he wanted to do. I guess that made two of us.

Finally about a week before we were due to move out I said to him "Look why not do what you do best—go back to your technical drawing. Forget about trying to set the art world on fire. You know it's not working—just paint in your spare time—" and so on. A big sister sort of lecture which maybe I should've trotted out five years ago—not of course that he was obliged to listen and he could've said sarcastically "Yeah—don't do as I do—just do as I tell you." But Michael wasn't like that. He might be capable of driving the sanest person up the wall but he'd never hurt their feelings. He agreed with me packed up and took the next train back to Brisbane. In a way I was sorry to see him go but things *did* work out better for him which Mum attributed to him being away from my bad influence. I guess I understood better than anyone that emptiness at the core of life which Michael seemed to feel. He didn't have an answer. Neither did I.

I stayed a week with Wendy after the new owners moved in. That was Wendy's idea. Rod was away at a conference but she'd stayed home because the kids had exams. She explained all this at great length despite knowing I didn't care two hoots where they were or what they were up to—too great because I got suspicious but I just listened and didn't say anything. Only long afterwards years afterwards did I finally twig I'd missed the boat not once but twice. I'd criticised Rod when Wendy thought the sun shone out of him and I'd stayed vague and uninterested when she longed to tell someone what a two-timing money-grubbing shark he really was. Ah well. Some people never learn. But it was a nice week. We talked and laughed and reminisced a bit. Wendy suggested we make love but I said no—not because I minded cuckolding Rod if that's the right description—but because I felt in a corny way that faithfulness counts for something and deep down I couldn't get rid of the feeling Wendy only wanted me because the silver-plating had worn off this marriage too. It was that old old feeling that I'd been second-best all my life and I wasn't going to get back into this situation just for the fun of learning it all over again.

We took the kids—well they were hulking great teenagers by then more worried by acne and failing exams than who their mum was sleeping with—for a picnic at Palm Beach and another evening dropped them at the Hordern pavilion for a rock concert while we went to see Glenda Jackson in 'Women in Love'. I got along okay with them—they were full of anti-Rod

sentiments which of course were right up my alley.

The following Monday I moved into a small flat in Crown Street and began to think about work again but I felt a sort of lassitude—a total lack of enthusiasm for getting stuck into something new. I was sick to death of cooking but I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to try. I tidied up my finances and got my bundle securely invested so money wasn't a problem. Then all of a sudden just like I'd done with Ann Henry I trotted down to the travel agent and booked myself a ticket to London. I'd made the break with Jenny's Place and all it'd been in my life but there were other things I wanted to cut myself off from ... memories ... people I didn't want to run into ...

And maybe those tourist posters of Big Ben and beefeaters and Bodice or whatever her name was that drives the chariot had got to me in a kind of subconscious brain-washing? There wasn't much to do to get ready. I'm not one of those people who hoard things or get misty-eyed over gosh-awful family photos or need to be farewelled with great fuss and bother. I'd lived here for nearly ten years but I was going to leave with as little as I'd come with. Only a new port.

On my last day in Sydney I walked out past Jenny's Place. My sign—my beautiful sign—was down and the house was being painted blue. It looked pretty sickly though I've heard blue soothes chooks. I stood there a while lounging by the gate post. No one took any notice of me so I guess the idly curious are a dull lot.

Then I kissed my hand in its direction and said Goodbye you lousy slave-driving joint—long may you break some other poor fool's back. I didn't mind what happened to it because I was rich now richer than the wildest dreams of that skinny little kid who'd believed if only she had money she need never cook another disgusting meal or wash another greasy plate.

I guess I'd proved my point but no one was interested.

JENNY'S PLACE: PART THREE

Chapter One

We came up and down the Western Line as kids but most of the places have faded from my memory. A few stick there. Like some of the whistle stops—little sad sidings with their name-boards banging listlessly in the wind—Dulbydilla and Pickenjinnie—Bongo and Baking Board—little forgotten places whose people knew a train passing through was the only excitement the day was going to provide. I remember the brigalow country then the miles of open plains that stretch into mirages round Roma and on into the gidgee country nearing Charleville. I s'pose it all had its own beauty—the spell of space and freedom and shimmering heat—but I left the West without a moment's regret and I've never been back because even now it's still too tied up with the things about my childhood I've tried to forget.

Even after I shuffle those memories in to some sort of order I'm not sure where to begin. Perhaps where success caught up with my dad—the success he'd been angling for since he'd started out as a fourteen-year-old kid on the Queensland Railways—and he got to be Stationmaster at one of those little places half-hidden in a belt of dusty grey scrub. There he heaved on a near-empty bag of mail and pulled off a near-empty one—loaded a couple of dozen full cream cans and hauled off a couple of dozen empty ones—talked to the driver and

the fireman and the guard then watched them go and maybe wondered if being Stationmaster was all it was cracked up to be? And after filling in some forms he'd come back to the old worn-out house behind the siding where nothing but ant heaps and little tufts of dry grass flourished in the cracked brown yard. I can't think of its name offhand—not that it matters because to my Mum's relief he was soon plucked from obscurity and bumped up the ladder. Obviously he had some quality we never discerned or maybe he used his evenings to toss off letters to people in high places—Dear Minister I write to inform you that manning the Baking Board siding is both a waste of government money and my demonstrated talents for administration and handling staff—

He was quite a big man with a florid face handsome enough if that's what you fancy in faces. His brown hair was thinning and his hazel-grey eyes were prominent. My Mum on the other hand was a wisp a pale sick whingeing shadow of a woman. Her voice was high and petulant and it disturbed our sleep when she got going at him for his drinking or his swearing or any of the other hundred faults she saw in him. We didn't know it then but topping her list was his unfaithfulness but I can't help wondering where he found all the women he was credited with having. He didn't take any notice of her yelling—treating it with the nuisance value of a midge on a warm night—perhaps even enjoying it in a roundabout way. She was sort of reaffirming his virility—dusting off his he-man image.

She didn't love him. I know that for sure. I wonder if she ever had. But because she was desperately afraid of being left she managed to be permanently sick. Maybe I exaggerate but that's the way I remember it. Her asthma her ulcer other things which came and went according to the doctor she was seeing at the time—but to us kids sick was just sick and it's hard even with hindsight to decide which ailments were real and which grew out of a lonely morbid imagination. And I still find it hard to be fair about the man who didn't seem to care tuppence about his eldest daughter and say that maybe my Mum's whining—she hated the country and lived for the day when he'd be promoted to Toowoomba or Ipswich—drove him into the arms of other women. She was into hospital every so often and when I was about ten she was away for a long time with a perforated ulcer. Of course we weren't told the details and if anyone was kind enough to ask which wasn't often my stock answer was "Mum's sick as usual but I don't know what's wrong with her." This time though there was one big difference—this time I was expected to take over the care of home and family. I s'pose my dad was sick of looking for and paying for casual help though I suspect many of the women who helped him out over the years were also the ones who warmed his lonely bed.

Jamey was eighteen months younger than me a lively rowdy kid my dad sometimes bawled out with a ferocity that scared us all witless and sometimes doted on saying he wished he had four Jameys instead of what he'd been saddled with. Then came Michael and in a way he was the lucky one because he was so quiet he rarely got noticed and last of all was Marilyn who was plump and cute but whinged a lot. It seemed like months Mum was away but I s'pose it can't have been. Some days I went to school and some days I stayed home because Mrs O'Sullivan was too busy to give me a hand and my dad was too tired after doing his paperwork and talking to a few blokes and whatnot. Mrs O'Sullivan became my saviour—my guardian angel poetically speaking—and when I heard a minister talk about guardian angels years later conjuring up a picture of a lovely creature in shining white hovering overhead I couldn't help grinning. Mrs O'Sullivan would've crushed to death whatever *she* hovered over. She was an enormously fat old woman who always wore gingham aprons and dirty slippers. Several times a year she'd go to the town's only hairdresser and get her grey hair tortured into a frenzy of tiny curls which took about three months to return to looking like a worn-out mop.

We hadn't been long at that particular station house and I hardly knew anybody. I made Mrs O'Sullivan's acquaintance the first morning I did the washing by myself. I struggled out to

the line with the basket of wet clothes plonked them down got my breath back shifted the pole to its lowest and put the peg apron on. Only then after meticulously recreating my Mum's washday ritual did I realise I couldn't reach the line. I turned round to fetch a kitchen chair to stand on and came face-to-face with Mrs O'Sullivan's moon face looking over the paling fence.

"There there lovey—that's much too high for you."

Mrs O'Sullivan was obviously both perceptive and practical—a rare combination—because she opened the gate—lovey handed over the peg apron—she whipped a dozen pegs into her mouth and next thing was striding down the line heaving wet sheets and towels up and over her massive biceps making them look like hankies. If I'd been a demonstrative sort of kid I might've hugged her. Instead I asked her in for a cup of tea. I'd never invited anyone in before and a strange story soon whizzed round town to the effect she was keeping me home from school to do her housework! I didn't care what people said. Nor did she. Nor did my dad or the school inspector. She was good at giving tips for use round the house like how to cook a roast and when to put the vegies in the fat and how to turn leftovers into shepherd's pie. I hung on her words as if they were pearls of wisdom to be collected and stored. She had no use for such ladylike refinements as saucers or flowers or table napkins or polished floors or starched tablecloths or jam dishes. So neither did I. As a matter of fact I still don't. She had ten grown-up kids and a husband who was a boozing little no-hoper so all attempts at elegance had probably been crushed out of her long ago. In theory her husband worked on the railways but most days he could be found sleeping off a hangover in a remote corner of the goods shed. When he came home after the pubs closed it was well-known he'd take a few swings at his missus—for our part we thought this demonstrated extraordinary courage on *his* part as I'd sooner tangle with a 4-6-2 locomotive than Mrs O'Sullivan with her dander up.

Maybe there were other kind people round the place maybe there weren't. I only know that in all the time I struggled to cook and wash and clean and fell further and further behind at school only one person ever helped and that was Mary O'Sullivan. I learnt the hard way how ephemeral we were to the life of that town. The railway kids—snotty-nosed little things who played round the goods yard or over in the pepperina trees or up and down the banks of the dry gully beyond the tracks. Kids who were nobody's business not even our dad's most of the time. Kids who didn't get invited round to birthday parties but whose dad was hail-fellow-well-met with every scrounger at the pub.

Jamey was always full of ideas for games—"Today we'll—" not "How 'bout we—" and Michael always agreed and followed him around like someone a million miles away and Marilyn'd bring up the rear blubbing because her little fat legs couldn't keep up and we were mean and didn't wait for her but I guess she got her own back years later. We'd play bushrangers or cowboys or maybe build a bit of a cubby out of old boxes. Sometimes we'd walk up the gully to the waterhole to go yabbing with hunks of gristly mutton but Mum if she was home when we were in luck and brought some back rustling fiercely in the bottom of the laundry bucket would look as if she was going to be sick and say "How could you be so cruel to the poor things?" I thought she was sorry for them but it was just her weak stomach. Even so I can't say life was ever really fun because I always felt sort of tired—I s'pose because I was small and skinny and the work was heavy. We had a single-tub Hoover a frig and a radiogram. There was a wood stove in the kitchen and a chip-heater in the bathroom and I had to use Mrs Potts irons until I was earning a wage and could buy Mum an electric one. But the cooking was the worst. No matter how hard I tried something'd be burnt or runny in the middle or sunk or black round the edges and uncooked everywhere else. I'd forget to put more wood in the stove in time to save what was meant to be a sponge cake or I'd have it too hot and the porridge'd be burnt black at the bottom. One evening I can still remember my dad looking at the burnt chops

on his plate. "What's this?" he demanded. Anyone'd think he didn't have eyes in his head. "Chops—" I quavered at about two decibels. He stood up. With one magnificent sweep of his hand the chops went into the scrap bucket and his plate sailed across to the sink like an avenging UFO slid down into the old enamel tub spattering gravy and mashed potato (with lumps) all over the place and shattered with an almighty crash.

"I'll eat at the bloody Royal till you can come up with something fit to eat!"

It was pretty much like a slap in the face. He thundered out like Cobb and Co departing and Jamey started to giggle "Wow! Dad sure is mad tonight!" I started yelling and crying at the same time and he shut up but Marilyn started crying too not in sympathy but because she didn't like lumps and dad'd scared her. He stayed away for two dinners then he was back again worse than a nit-picking diner at the Ritz determined to get his money's worth.

I was coming up to fourteen when he deserted our Mum for keeps. The woman who enticed him away was said to be a Korean war widow. I don't know. The only things I remember about her were her bright-red lips and bright-red fingernails. Probably she had her worries too—who doesn't—and I'd very much doubt whether my dad did anything to help her solve them. I was glad to see him go but it seemed to be the end of the world for my Mum yet going by the number of times she'd hinted that men only want one thing I would've thought she'd be jumping up and down yelling Yippee! I couldn't offhand see the point of having one around if that one didn't like kids skinny women or paying bills. And now added to her humiliation in that small town was the perpetual fear of an order from the Railways telling her to vacate the premises. When six months of waiting'd gone by without a peep her nerve snapped and she moved out voluntarily. She spent those six months not packing and planning for the future but lying in bed in her stuffy room with its curtains drawn tight against the harsh sunlight—a futile attempt to shut out the noise and shouting from the goods yard or the shunting of the Wednesday Mixed from Cunnamulla—and from her claustrophobic domain she'd complain of headaches or the constant buzzing of a stray blowfly.

The five of us moved into a small fibro house on the edge of town—a miserable ugly blot on the landscape. It had four rooms and a wash-house in the yard with the toot tacked on the south side—and sitting in there with the frost thick on the yard or the wind whistling through the cracks level with your bare bum was no fun at all. Not of course that sitting in the toot at the best of times is exactly *fun*. The fibro walls were peppered with holes and the kitchen windows were broken and when we got up the courage to question our landlord about the extra ventilation he told us a family of blackfellas had wrecked the place. Later on we found it'd been done in a bad hailstorm and the old skinflint'd never lifted a finger since—and anyway the chance of him letting a black through his front gate was about one in fifty million. Our first winter was horrible. The south-westerlies found more cracks in that house than even our critical eyes. We pasted paper and stuffed rags and huddled round the kitchen stove in Mum's way and moaned and groaned and the roof banged and the windows rattled. We called Mr Wilson the landlord Mr Slimey. He was a little ferrety sort of man—fifty odd—with a permanent drip on the end of his nose. He came every week and poked into everything whether it was his business or not and my Mum's undie drawer certainly wasn't. I can remember looking up from undressing one evening to see his sneaky little face peering round my door. There was something about his look and the way he kept running his tongue round his chapped lips gave me shivers up my spine. But after a minute of standing like a hypnotised cow I managed to walk over and shut the door in his face. That made me feel good but then of course I started worrying he'd take it out on Mum and kick us out and then he'd be able to tell his next tenants that a mob of no-hoppers from the Railways had damaged his lovely little cottage. I'm sorry I didn't realise then people weren't exactly queueing up to live in his hovel.

I started work—paid work I mean—as soon as I turned fifteen and could legally chuck

school. I don't s'pose they saw their phantom student as any loss. I didn't sit the Junior exam and I don't think I could've passed anyway. So I was set forth into the world with no qualifications and a rather jaundiced view of life but it didn't bother me—I had no big ambitions but wanted to earn enough to be independent. I went to work as a housemaid at the Royal. My dad when he discovered that moved to Tatts and made it his watering-hole from then on so I was pleased about that and pleased the town had two pubs because I didn't want to see him and I guess he wasn't all that thrilled about the chance of running into his daughter with her little sharp accusing face somewhere on his route between verandah and public bar. My day began at half past six with the downstairs work—sweeping dusting mopping the lower verandah. Then after the guests'd had their breakfast I began on the upstairs—more sweeping and dusting making beds scrubbing the shower rooms straightening the easy chairs and watering the pot plants on the long upstairs verandah.

We didn't get many guests—a commercial traveller or two—people stranded by floods or breakdowns—the young bank clerk who lived there for several months. He used to pop back up for some last minute thing—a hanky or a cough lolly—after he knew I'd gone in to tidy his room. He'd clear his throat—excuse himself—tell me he wouldn't get in my way. I don't know why he bothered maybe he was trying to get his hand in but it all seemed pretty babyish to me like Marilyn coming back home saying she wanted a hanky—"You don't need a hanky. Hurry up now. I know you're only trying to get out of school"—"I do *so* need a hanky". I s'pose you either have an imagination or you don't.

With everything spick and span in theory upstairs I'd come down to help with lunch then have a few hours off in the afternoon. In the evening I had to put on a white frock like going to a first Communion and wait tables. After that I'd have my own dinner in the kitchen help tidy up then go home. There was only one good thing in this dull routine—in fact it was a piece of luck which took me years to truly appreciate—no—not the bank clerk but the cook Win Thompson. She was a tall thin angular sort of woman who always wore her grey hair in a tight bun. She looked a bit scary at first glance but it didn't take me long to learn what a nice warm person she really was behind that drab complexion and stern hairstyle. She had a huge number of funny stories things she'd seen and done all over the place and she trotted them out while we ate dinner or washed up. She'd been left a widow with two little girls but unlike someone I was personally acquainted with she hadn't given way to the futile wringing of hands. First she ran a boarding-house in Brisbane which seemed to get the weirdest most eccentric boarders anyone could imagine then she had a spell as cook on a luxury yacht cruising the Pacific and when she'd had enough of that she started a catering business which did so well she could sell out at a good profit and now close to retiring and with both her girls settled here in the West she'd carved out a reputation as the best hotel cook this side of Dalby. She deserved it too. Watching Win was an education—something despite Mary O'Sullivan I was a bit short on. She seemed to be all arms and legs in the kitchen—reaching stirring flipping putting away like a streak of lightning. Yet it was all order. A kind of moving calm. Everything managed to be done to a turn just when it was needed (I regarded that as little short of miraculous)—everything was always in its right place—Win always knew exactly what needed to be ordered—used up—stored—diluted—refurbished. Not of course that we served up gourmet meals. Just the staples. But Win's roast fowls and Win's steak-and-kidney pie and Win's steam puddings beat anybody else's.

She liked to talk about cooking and share her enthusiasm and her secrets though I s'pose these weren't secret by the time I came along. In the beginning I was wary. My own trials were still too recent and I never knew when they might suddenly descend again so I just listened and nodded and wondered how come Win could still *like* cooking after all this time. It seemed to me she should've hated it with a deadly hatred so I hardly noticed I was moving gradually

towards a budding interest while my dad and his endless criticisms were fading. Or maybe just maybe I'd found a way to prove to him I was cleverer than he thought or he was dumber than I thought. But I don't think he ever knew. Though he was in town a few more months before being transferred I only caught sight of him in the distance now and again and I didn't rush over to say "Hey dad! Waddya know? I can cook now!"

Anyway the idea started to grow—why not aim to be a hotel cook? They were always in demand.

After I'd been at the Royal for nearly two years and Jamey'd left school and started work in the local hardware store a letter came for Mum from her brother in Brisbane to say how sorry he was about the rough time she was having and could he help out a bit? Maybe help educate the kids or something? It'd taken him a good long while to feel sorry but Mum wasn't going to quibble on that score. She sat right down and wrote back asking if he would take Michael seeing as he was pretty keen on technical drawing and *she* thought he had a wonderful talent. She didn't mention he'd mainly exhibited his 'wonderful talent' by scribbling on the wash-house walls with chalks he'd nicked from school. Instead she had him packed up and despatched on the Westlander before he'd had time to cry or Uncle Bill'd had time to change his mind.

Not long after this while miserable scrawls kept coming from Michael begging to be allowed to come home something a bit odd happened. After lunch one day when I was about to whizz off home for my break—which usually meant finishing the washing because Mum'd just happened to come over 'all woozy' and thought she'd better lie down for a while—the licensee of the Royal Mrs Murphy called me into her office which was a tiny cubbyhole off the back store room where she sat like a mouse in a nest of chewed-up paper—and asked me if I'd be interested in a job in a pub in South Brisbane. I sort of gaped at her while she went on drinking her cup of tea and looking sorrowfully out of her little black eyes lost in rolls of fat at the calendar hanging on the wall. Perhaps today had a significance beyond talking to me? I pulled myself together and said "Yeah. I sure would." Then I thought that wasn't too diplomatic so I added "I've liked working here okay but I'd really like to work in Brisbane."

She nodded a few times and her little round head looked as if it was going to fly off her wobbly shoulders any minute. "Well I'll let them know when you're ready to go. I'll need a fortnight's notice so I have time to find someone else." I didn't know I only had to give her a week's notice but even if I had I wouldn't have said anything the way my mind was buzzing with images of fame and fortune. I walked out without asking a single question about who or what or pay or duties and went home and told Mum who forgot her wooziness and got cross and told me I couldn't go. She marshalled her arguments with a skill and tenacity which it's a pity she didn't put to good use in other areas. The one argument she didn't mention was the simple one—she needed the money I gave her each week. Jamey was saving like mad for a motorbike and reckoned he couldn't part with more than ten bob a week. But a real stubborn streak proved to be there when I needed it—maybe just waiting its chance to flower—and I turned a deaf ear to all Mum's crocodile tears and stories of families in such desperate straits it would've brought suspicious moisture to the eyes of a hardened crim. I knew as well as she did they'd survive.

I said "Cheerio" to Win with real regret and to Jamey with a bit less seeing we'd nearly always been good pals and I didn't know when I'd see him again. Then I told Mum I'd send her a bit when I got settled and off I went to the Southern Star Hotel to take up the grand position of assistant cook. I'd been there about a fortnight busily blessing my luck in getting the job—after all I had no qualifications—when I discovered my 'luck' had nothing to do with Mrs Murphy's kind heart or good contacts. The licensee of the Southern Star was Win's brother! I sat down and sent off a scrawl of fulsome thanks to Win. The fact I'd sent off an

equally fulsome one to Mrs Murphy the previous week couldn't be helped. Even if she thought I was a nong she probably went on thinking what a nice girl I was. Win of course didn't want to be thanked and I've sometimes wondered why she cared enough to do that for me.

The Southern Star was a big barn of a place on a busy fiveways. It had a cook Mrs Hines—a housemaid Jane—two barmaids Rosy and Sue—and a barman John as well as an old bloke who was mentally retarded (at least I assume he was) who did a few jobs around the place. The first few weeks I lived in then I moved in with Rosy and Sue and another girl called Julie who all lived together in a daggy old house which'd been divided into two flats and was a couple of blocks away from the pub. It wasn't much of a place but it was nice to get away from work and I fitted in okay. Mrs Hines was all right to work with—not Win but she seemed to know her job. Here we had a seafood counter lunch as our speciality and I really got worked hard that's for sure. It wasn't like the Royal where you might have one guest dining in solitary splendour—or the Royal's version of splendour—one night and thirty passengers off a stranded coach the next. Here the dining room was always full. Fish hadn't featured on our menus out West but now I learnt which types were most popular and which were good value and here I learnt the ins and outs of dealing with a procession of sea creatures from mullet and flounder and bream to mud crabs and Bay prawns. Here too I had my first one-sided love affair. Sandy McAllister came as barman when John got itchy feet and Sandy for reasons best known to himself fancied me. He was fat with a flabby sickly white fattiness longish red hair and buck teeth. I s'pose he was okay at his job but he gave me the creeps. He made me think of something kept away from the sunlight too long like a butter grub. For the next six months he asked me out regularly and each time I turned him down. No—I *did* give in once and agree to go to a movie with him. I think it was 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' with Danny Kaye but I only remember that night because Sandy's damp floppy hand kept creeping into mine and each time I'd loosen his grip and push his hand away it'd come creeping back. In the end I got desperate and stuck my hands between my legs and kept them there. But I think he only gave up trying because of the jokes about the Red Knight and the Iron Maiden and how the Red Knight had broken his spear and all the other stupid things the girls teased him with. Of course they thought he was hilarious but maybe with a different hairstyle and a diet and a bit of a tan he might've looked okay. I don't know. All I wanted was for him to leave me alone.

Rosy had a steady boyfriend a big dumb slob called Dan. I say dumb because he struck me that way but he was clever enough to have all those girls eating out of his hands and lustng after his great slovenly frame. Heaven knows why. And only Rosy knows what agonies of jealousy he put her through with his desire never to be seen with less than three girls hanging on to his arms. She consoled herself by noting that two of them were different girls each time. Anyway she held out and they got married ... and six months later she was back again full of sob stories and determined never to see him again—she'd been silly enough to think the surplus girls'd drop off like leeches falling off a dead bullock. I agreed with her sentiments. I was just sorry she'd had to go through such misery to discover what I could've told her within a minute of meeting him. But then I already knew men were like that.

I thought all of them made dills of themselves now and again but I kept the thought to myself and anyway I knew *they* thought I was a bit weird not to want to find a bloke for myself. While they spent ages fussing over what to wear and teasing their hair up into incredible 'beehives' and putting on pale-pink lipstick and black eye make-up I'd sit down with a cup of tea and a plate of gherkin and tomato sandwiches and study a bit of book-keeping from a textbook I'd borrowed from Julie who was secretary to an accountant. If she didn't have a date I'd ask her to check my working out of the set problems and she was always beaut about helping and accepted my statement that it would come in handy someday. Of course I was right. It wasn't the life of thrilling excitement I'd pictured back home but I assumed this was

just me—I wasn't a very exciting person and probably never would be. But then except for Win I couldn't think of anybody I knew who'd had an exciting life. It's hard to be out looking for thrills when you don't know what you're looking for—I sort of hoped nice things would just happen but it rarely works like that. Maybe the problem was that I hadn't grown up with any interests—so long as we weren't a pest nobody noticed what we were doing or encouraged us to do anything—and there'd never been any money to spend on hobbies or books or bicycles or pets. I'd never been anywhere special and there was nothing in my background I wanted to share and the things the other girls thought exciting—the dances the cuddling in the movies followed by hanging round jukeboxes and squealing over the Beatles—all struck me as a bit pointless. I liked the Beatles but to carry on as if a spider had got down your dress wasn't my style. But sometimes I had the feeling everyone else was rushing past on the highway and somehow I'd got onto a little country road which was okay—it'd probably go *somewhere* but it was pretty dull along the way. I've always found making friends difficult but Julie and I got along fine and she'd invite me out now and then to spend a day with her family at Sandgate. She refused to believe I'd never seen the sea before and she used to laugh when I stayed close to shore with my feet firmly on the sea bottom.

A year later Mum moved to Brisbane and got a Housing Commission place and she and Marilyn moved in and decorated it with lots of moth-eaten doilies and venetian blinds. I saw Michael occasionally. He didn't seem happy and Uncle Bill kept him hard at it in his spare time—mowing and gardening and hedge-clipping and washing and polishing the van and helping with deliveries and you-name-it. He was still a quiet dreamy kid not lively or aggressive or good-looking like Jamey. In fact Jamey was the only one of us with much in the way of looks and according to Marilyn he spent hours brylcreeming the wave over his left eye which all the girls thought was 'cute'. He'd stayed behind and was boarding (you guessed it) at the Royal. I wondered if he whizzed back up for a hanky each morning?

The funny thing was—gradually—I came to the conclusion I wasn't all *that* bad looking—nothing special but not too bad. Big hazel-grey eyes too big maybe for my small face with its sharp nose and chin—long light-brown hair—fair skin with a smattering of freckles—and strangely enough for a kid who'd always been skinny as a rake I blossomed out quite impressively but I never saw that as something to admire something to parade. I mean you were stuck with whatever you ended up with unless you had plastic surgery but I don't know—maybe the knowledge came too late—maybe it was the feeling that I only attracted men like Sandy—but the pattern of my life seemed set in an unbreakable mould and I was content to let it chuff along in its own way but I didn't really understand then because I still saw myself through the eyes of that scrawny sullen-faced kid who stared out of family photographs who was somehow ... undesirable? Unlovable? I really don't know.

The one thing which *did* happen and which amused me no end was that with no one to pity her and no one to gossip behind her back and now that she'd shaken the dust of the hated West from her patent-leather pumps—poetically speaking—my Mum seemed a different person. She chatted brightly with any and everybody who'd listen—of how she was *so* glad to be back in the city—she made new friends she earned a bit of money by typing at home and she started going to the races. Her hats and frocks began to grow more fashionable—she started to play bridge again. And she began to nurture the hope there was still time for Marilyn to become a 'young lady'. Poor deluded woman. I let her cling unmolested to her dreams. A young lady *might* emerge from those Housing Commission homes but I didn't think it was going to be Marilyn with her puppy-fat and spots who read nothing but books about bullying brats whose only saving grace was their pots of money so I couldn't imagine a woman with any brains wanting them for the fun of it. I had the feeling that after Mum had fussed over how Marilyn sat—how she crossed her ankles—ate her food—used her hanky—held her teacup—

Marilyn'd finally rebel and throw a vase of plastic gerberas at her. She never did. Ah well.

Mum's punting started off pretty timid—a few bob each way—but she soon grew more daring and surprised us by coming home each Saturday with a bulging purse and speaking mysteriously of her 'System'. (Years later Marilyn told us this simply involved backing number one in each race for a win and each way. If so you might like to try it. It's kept Mum in petty cash all these years.) And the more she won—it seemed—the more outrageous her dresses got but when I dared to say—diplomatically—"Mum—I don't think purple is quite *you*" she got cross and said it made her look years younger. I left it at that. Everybody deserves their bit of makebelieve. And her hats—Wow!—goodness knows where she found those monstrosities. I imagined her favourite hat shop steering her over to the ones which'd proved totally unsaleable—because my Mum my whingeing mouse of a Mum was well on her way to becoming the Gertrude Shilling of Eagle Farm! I s'pose she was determined to make up for twenty years of lost excitement.

Chapter Two

After about three years at the Southern Star I decided to leave. Mrs Hines was getting on my works more and more—I felt I knew as much as she did and I hated being bossed round all the time. Win's brother had retired and there was a new bloke—a Mr Sims—who was having a bit of hanky-panky on the side with Mrs Hines—not that I cared what they did but it was sickening to see her go all coy every time he came into the kitchen which was pretty often. Sandy'd long since up and left and gone who-knows-where probably feeling hard done by because I hadn't seen him off with tears and kisses and promises to write. I'd dated Julie's brother a couple of times but only because she'd been to such pains to bring us together. Privately I thought he was a gigantic bore. I didn't want to know exactly what he'd said to the salesman when he'd bought his Falcon and what the salesman had said back to him and how he'd put the salesman in his place by pointing out there was a half-inch dint in the right-hand-side door and got the price knocked down by I forget how much and so on. Anyway when he realised he wasn't going to get past first base with me he gave it away as a bad job.

By now I had quite a lot saved and began trying my hand at investing. I gave the book-keeping textbooks back to Julie and began swotting up the difference between debentures and unsecured notes and browsing through the financial pages of The Courier Mail and from there it was a small but nervous step to visiting a sharebroker for the first time and in case you're interested he recommended Thiess Bros and Ampol as good buys. I was discovering that in the back of my mind lurked a canny creature who *knew* money was the way to go in this unfair world which'd made a little girl scrape burnt porridge off the bottom of the pot instead of letting her play outside with the other kids. I'm sure I don't have a drop of Scots blood in me—my Mum being a Kelly and my dad I assume a Pom somewhere far back though I've never asked—but I pinched and saved with a Scrooge-like ferocity my Mum found quite inexplicable. Maybe she thought her daughter deserved to marry money and I s'pose for her the bad times were over and she was going to enjoy life and forget we'd ever lived in a fibro hut with a leaking roof and cardboard over the windows—and that Mr Slimey had propositioned her at least once a week—maybe more.

It wasn't difficult to find a new job even though I didn't have any bits of paper of earth-shaking importance. This was as assistant to a French pastrycook. Henri was a wild-eyed hard-to-understand Parisian. His bakery was a little backyard turnout built on to his weatherboard cottage and opening into a tiny shopfront facing a busy suburban road. *His* idea was that I'd help in the bakery in the early morning—serve in the shop from nine till four or until we ran out of stuff—then clean the place from front to back. I don't think it ever occurred to him that he was a slave driver—he only understood the things he wanted to understand—and that the

place was run on the most weird and chaotic of lines. But there was one good thing in the whole set-up. Henri was no mean *pâtissier*. He regularly and literally tore his hair out by the roots and I s'pose dropped it here and there (the Health Department frowns on hair in food for human consumption)—he threw things—he gave great yells of despair—he spouted enormous numbers of *mon Dieu sacré coeurs* and other things which in my ignorance I thought were also of a religious nature but I still managed to learn a lot from him. Only the best would do for Henri. He prepared his own *quatre épices*. He used genuine kirsch and curacao—generously too with a nip now and again to keep his spirits up. His croissants should've drawn people from miles around.

It was all new to me and I had the dickens of a job working out what he was on about at least in the beginning. And I guess he was sort of ahead of his time. The idea of eating anything a bit exotic hadn't really caught on in Brisbane in those days and he noticed or I s'pose he noticed an awful lot of people went past his window of mouthwatering goodies to buy sponges and jam tarts at Dodd's Cake shop two blocks over. And despite his skill in the bakery Henri was totally useless when it came to paying bills or doing up orders. His creditors were always at him and it didn't take me long to realise the reason we had *cornets à la crème* and *tartlettes aux framboises* one day then they disappeared possibly forever was quite simple—Henri had forgotten to order what was needed and was filling in with *brioches sables au miel* and empty spaces. Sometimes I speculated whether he'd left France with dozens of creditors hot on his tail and gone to ground in Brisbane in the touching belief they'd never find him there. I don't s'pose they could've—but he simply substituted a new lot. Things got so bad I offered him my talents as a book-keeper and despite the fact they'd been culled from Mitchell's Principles of Book-Keeping Second Edition he grabbed the offer like a drowning man. It wasn't that he liked me. I don't think he liked women-in-general but I didn't care whether he did or he didn't so long as he kept his hot little hands and whatnot to himself. I sort of deduced he'd been married at some stage—so the creditors might've been incidental—and that she'd disappointed him in the bakery because the only times he referred to her was when I'd made some awful blue—"It's Thérèse—*Mon Dieu* I thought I was finished—Women! Mercy! Lord! Nong nong nong! Not in zat way—" and so it'd go on. I used to ride it out but by heck I longed to tell him how much he looked like one of those monkeys dangling from a stick you used to be able to buy round the shows.

It was all too late anyway. Henri was regarded as too unreliable. His creditors and his regular customers refused to rally round and who can blame them? Next stop on his itinerary might be Madagascar. But the whole messy business taught me one thing—it doesn't matter what a smart cookie you are out the back or anywhere else for that matter if your administration's all to bits. I began to toy with the idea of deserting the sinking ship. After all it was only so long before it went down with a glug. I wasted a bit of pity on him but he soon had several job offers and I think now he was one of those people who're better employed than trying to run the joint themselves. I started to look round too. After six years in and out of kitchens I should be able to come up with something but the idea of another temperamental cook didn't appeal much.

One drowsy afternoon I was in the shop serving a woman wearing pink hair-curlers. She didn't know what she wanted and dithered up and down in front of the counter while I stood there thinking vaguely I'd nip out to the toot when this lot were finished. Behind her were two other middle-aged women talking to each other. One of them tall with a hatchet-face and scrawny biceps was saying to the other in a voice you wouldn't argue with if you knew what was good for you—"Aunt Mary really is dreadfully stubborn. You'd think she'd want to live somewhere reasonably civilised—but no! she stays on there and complains about her servants. I don't know how many times I've suggested she come here but I expect she's got so out of

touch—”

After looking hatchet-face over out of the corner of my eye I was inclined to think Aunt Mary had wisely settled somewhere between Buenos Aires and Sierra Leone to be as far away from her niece as possible. I also pictured the unknown aunt living in a grass hut complete with cup of tea and loud prissy voice for complaining about servants—and who knows probably having a ball.

Hatchet-face’s companion said something about old people being terribly set in their ways so I added grey hair and glasses to my picture and hatchet-face agreed and went on to say something about the total impossibility of finding a cook there wherever there was who could cook English food decently. “Why,” she went on imperiously “those silly little native girls don’t even know how to coddle an egg!” The other woman said apologetically she’d never coddled an egg in her life and hatchet-face said “Yes—revolting things aren’t they? I can remember them being served in the nursery as a child.” To my everlasting sorrow her companion didn’t immediately and gleefully point out the obvious. I rattled the till—the lady in haircurlers went out and hatchet-face stepped up briskly and asked for a dozen ladyfingers and a *gâteau marbre* which she merely referred to as ‘that cake’. While I slipped them into a bag I said consumed by curiosity you know—“I couldn’t help hearing your conversation and I was just wondering where your Aunt Mary lives?”

Hatchet-face looked quite taken aback and words like ‘what cheek!’ ‘complain to the management’ and ‘what’s the world coming to’ looked to be hovering on her tongue. But she recovered herself and said crisply “My Aunt Mary lives in Penang.”

I’d never heard of Penang and didn’t offhand know where it was so I just nodded. “And she’s looking for a cook is she?” I must’ve put her on the spot—though I’m still amazed she didn’t simply tell me to mind my own business—because she said less crisply “We-ell—yes—but I’m certain she wouldn’t bother to get one from here.” That was meant to put me the nosy shopgirl in my place so I said cheerily “No—I don’t s’pose she would.” I gave her her change and said to her companion “Can I help you?” The companion stuttered a bit and said did we have any lamingtons and I said “No. This place is French. Try Dodd’s in Smith Street.” She nodded and looked a bit dilly being caught asking for lamingtons in a French joint though Henri might’ve done better if he’d given Dodd’s a run for their money in that department and I s’pose hatchet-face was glad she hadn’t demanded to see the management after all. The companion turned to go but to my surprise hatchet-face hung there then asked me straight out was I interested in cooking.

I stated my experience and it sounded okay to me then I said this place was closing down soon. She asked me where she could get in touch with me and I told her and I thought that’d be the last I’d see of her (I didn’t mind) but a couple of weeks later she turned up on my doorstep—our doorstep—demanding to see my references. After hemming and hawing for a few minutes while I debated whether to help things along with a cup of tea she started telling me about the job the mysterious Aunt Mary was prepared to offer. To my popping eyes this seemed fantastically generous. Aunt Mary whatever her eccentricities grass skirt and whatnot obviously wasn’t short of the ready—unless there was a catch somewhere. Hatchet-face grilled me for a while but I was busy drawing some conclusions of my own. So to hurry things up there I was a month later installed as cook in a decaying Victorian mansion not far from Penang harbour where Aunt Mary the mysterious Aunt Mary lived in almost solitary splendour. The first week I had a job to stop myself calling her Aunt Mary not because she was like any aunt I laid claim to but I s’pose because of the insidious way she’d entered my tranquil life. In fact her name was Mrs Siddely-Williams and she had wavy grey hair and snappy dark eyes and an oh-so-refined English voice. Her husband had been something big in the colonial administration but I never found out what because if she so much as mentioned his name her

eyes would brim over and she'd have to dab them with a lace hanky. Maybe the idea of handing things over to the natives'd given him spasms—I had considerable experience with *that* syndrome—and independence had therefore proved fatal?

It was funny his widow had stayed on. Maybe there was no one to go home to except hatchet-face—maybe her blood had grown thin in the tropics—but I soon learnt that part of the reason was a lot odder. Mrs Siddely-Williams had a passion for young men. My imagination ran riot in those first few weeks. I refused to believe she saw them only as decent young fellows deserving a nice afternoon tea and some encouragement with their studies or careers. And of course her neighbours gossiped. I guess it brightened their days. Other decaying decrepit ladies who couldn't bear to sell their mouldering relics of Victoriana to rich Chinese merchants—and besides they frequently reminded each other it was so much cheaper to live here where they could still afford a servant or two. Mrs Siddely-Williams can't have been deaf to this gossip but the procession continued—young Indian arts graduates aspiring Punjabi lawyers Chinese waiters Malay bank clerks young Poms passing through lonely blokes of every colour and creed. Her 'dear brave boys'. What they ever did to deserve such a label apart from guzzling scones was beyond me but when I suggested to her they mainly looked like bludgers to me I was gently but firmly reminded of my place as cook and therefore should keep my opinions to myself. I wouldn't of been surprised to learn that every doss house up and down the country had a little notice giving Mrs Siddely-Williams' name and address and advising the stony-broke and the just-plain-greedy to get there round four o'clock provided they were male and between about eighteen and twenty-eight. But—who knows?—maybe she saw it as her contribution to international understanding?

Actually there was another servant in the house—a little Tamil girl Mrs Siddely-Williams introduced as Lassie. I s'pose by some stretch of the imagination you could pretend she was a pet. She was a little thin girl with long silky black hair and large melting brown eyes. Even so I felt pretty silly calling her Lassie and after about a week she told me her name wasn't Lassie but Lakshmi and she couldn't understand why Mrs Siddely-Williams kept calling her Lassie! I said Mrs Siddely-Williams was probably a repressed dog lover but Lakshmi hadn't heard of Freud and anyway it mightn't be Freud.

I cooked 'English' food there to the best of my ability—oatmeal and bacon and eggs for breakfast—tea with a slice of lemon—toast of palest brown—a dish of marmalade only sufficient to cover four slices. A salad lunch with delicate slices of ham—which Mrs Siddely-Williams always said reminded her of Georgette Heyer but not knowing what she looked like I couldn't comment—tastefully arranged lettuce leaves which must've been washed three times though I never discovered the mystical significance of three and stuffed eggs and I must be careful only to buy from people I knew—as I didn't know anyone I let Lakshmi buy them from her relatives. But it was afternoon tea which was the day's high point and I soon discovered that to Mrs Siddely-Williams if not to her guests elegance of presentation was at least as important as flavour or quantity. I honestly did my best to fit in with her silly little ways and I guess in the process she knocked a few rough edges off. Hard to say. I'd had to lay tables at the Royal of course but Mrs Murphy—bless her sloppy ways—had never required the attention to detail the striving for perfection the meticulous blending of flowers and silverware and lace tablecloth which characterised Mrs Siddely-Williams. I remember her beckoning me over about ten minutes before guests were due to arrive—grey-faced and sick-looking—"You have placed red hibiscus on a table which will have a pink-iced cake on it—please hurry and change it!"—"The cake or the flowers?"—"Both—either—please hurry—" She was practically having kittens as I chucked out the hibiscus and stuck some lillies in a vase. She didn't say any more but I knew I'd spoiled that tea for her.

But nice enough as it all was—and interesting that Penang was (more interesting than

Brisbane anyway)—I started to feel I was stuck in a dead-end. Not that I knew where I wanted my ‘career’ to head but Mrs Siddely-Williams certainly wasn’t going to help me work that one out. She was fossilised in her routine every day followed the same pattern only the faces at the tea table changed. Every Sunday with matching hat and gloves and handbag she went to Holy Communion. She was quite shocked when I said I didn’t bother with religion and all that stuff—though sometimes I went to a Tamil temple with Lakshmi and when I was out exploring I’d wander into various places to have a look. I remember there was a Buddhist temple with a dragon outside and another place with decorations stuck all over the roof and people waving huge sticks of incense around. But I saw it all in terms of entertainment not religion. One time when I was telling Mrs Siddely-Williams about somewhere I’d been I caught a funny look on her face—a look of envy. I couldn’t see it then and I may be way off mark now but I think she was locked into a narrow little world within a world—a little ingrown society which was as rigid in its ways as the wider society she lived in—and sometimes I wonder if her young men her ‘dear brave boys’ were her way of thumbing her nose at those conventions.

On Tuesday afternoons she went to meetings of the Society for the Protection of Distressed Amahs or so Lakshmi told me the first time I saw her buzzing off. But I suspect it was merely an excuse to get together and gossip—Tupperware parties not having reached Malaysia. “My new cook from Australia has just arrived—dreadfully slapdash—” “Really? Does she come well recommended?” “Yes. Indeed. My niece vouches for her ... ” I don’t know what happened when distressed amahs came with their sad stories. I wish I’d asked. Other days were taken up with church work—a hospital auxiliary—visiting bed-ridden old ladies—and sometimes I thought of saying “Don’t whatever you do give up your tranquil life here to go and live with hatchet-face” but it wasn’t my business and I didn’t really care what she did. Lakshmi invited me to her house quite often and they were always very nice to me treating me as if Mrs Siddely-Williams’ imported cook must be only one step down from the Queen socially speaking but without the bother of running out the red carpet. Heaven knows why. But the feeling of dissatisfaction grew—I started to believe I was mouldering away too. So after about eight months I told her I’d like to go home. She didn’t seem keen on the idea—who knows maybe I’d brought a touch of style to her afternoon teas?—but after telling me she knew the tropics took a while to get used to (I s’pose she thought Brisbane was somewhere near the South Pole) and that Malaysia wasn’t as tranquil as it’d once been (I don’t know when ‘once’ was) she said she’d like me to train a girl to take my place. It was an interesting experience—bossing someone else around instead of being bossed around. Alice Chiew was a tiny little thing who could barely see the top of the stove but she was right on the ball and I had no trouble initiating her into the mysterious rites of an English afternoon tea. If she could take Mrs Siddely-Williams in her stride she’d do fine—not that Mrs Siddely-Williams was hard to work for—she might be funny fussy eccentric she might refuse to believe Britain no longer ruled the waves or much else but if she needed to draw attention to a mistake it was always done with the sort of courtesy I’d never met before and which fell like soothing balm after Mrs Hines’ “Hey you girl!” or Henri’s spate of gibberish. Maybe it’d taken her sixty years—maybe she’d been born with it on her silver spoon like gripe water but she understood it isn’t the wrongs which rankle but the handing out of public humiliation.

I went out the gate the last time just as Hamid or maybe it was Amin or Abdul or Hafiz was coming in. I had no regrets—in my bag (even though I hadn’t kept my side of the bargain to stay a year) was a bonus and she’d paid my ticket home. Perhaps she understood I was homesick though she never asked which was just as well as I would’ve been hard put to say just what I was homesick for. It wasn’t for Brisbane—it wasn’t for family or friends—I guess it was just for Wendy but that wasn’t something I could share with Mrs Siddely-Williams. Wendy was the daughter of a Gold Coast developer and she’d come into the *pâtisserie* by

chance a couple of months before it closed and thrilled by what she discovered there she'd become a regular. (She discovered it on one of Henri's more prolific days. Strange to think how different my life might've been if she'd struck it two days earlier when Henri was throwing a tantrum out the back while I presided grimly over two trays of sick-looking *mille-feuilles*.) She asked endless questions—when she discovered I wasn't just the shopgirl but actually helped make the jolly things. She wanted to know how to make *babas au rhum* and what to serve with such-and-such and did we import our ingredients from France and did I know Mrs Vantroyen of the Alliance Française? I couldn't see the point of that—I wasn't out to Frenchify the world—but we'd become friends. Well sort of friends. I knew it was an incongruous friendship but it never entered my head Wendy might be more interested in what I did and what I knew than for myself. I felt sure the friendship would wither when I went away so the fact she wrote me lovely long letters each week seemed to prove she cared as much as I did. I loved Wendy then. Helplessly inappropriately unconventionally I s'pose. It wasn't the sort of crush girls get at school—or some girls get—following their favourite teacher round like a puppy with a bellyache. Yet my life dull and dreary as it might be had the approval stamp of convention on it. 'This woman has no habits which would preclude normal intercourse with the general public etc'. Passed. Keeper of Public Morality. Queensland Government. No. To love Wendy seemed to me to be stepping outside—cutting a frail thread—admitting I didn't want the things other girls wanted. But it was to be an enduring love.

Wendy was tall and elegant with jet-black hair and deep blue eyes and lived a life of ease and sophistication—well so far as Brisbane allowed—and went abroad whenever she felt like it. All she needed to say was "I think I'll pop over to Noumea for a week in June" or it might be Hong Kong for a bit of shopping or New York for the premiere of a play she liked the sound of. Whereas all I had to talk about was Mr Slimey and the Railways and Sandy and the Principles of Book-Keeping—all boring—or explaining the extraordinary noises coming from the bakery while she told me how she'd been to a party where they'd only served croquettes and anchovies-on-crackers and she thought that really was a *bit* poor. She wondered if we had a puppy tied up and I said it was only Henri finding we were out of cinnamon which I'd told him was nearly finished a week ago. So I was grateful to Mrs Siddely-Williams.

Wendy had two little kids—a boy and a girl—and at the time we met she was going through a very bitter very public divorce. Maybe that was the clue? I didn't know any of the people—well-known in Brisbane society maybe but not in my restricted circles—who got drawn into the charges of adultery and counter-adultery. And perhaps even more important I simply refused to believe Wendy had anything to do with the miserable mess which jollied up the pages of the Truth. Naturally Wendy'd had enough of Brisbane for a lifetime by the time her divorce came through and decided to head south and start afresh. She continued to write when I got back to Brisbane and she'd end off with "I wish you were here Jen." Maybe she was being kind—maybe she was lonely—maybe it'd become a habit—maybe she was hooked on my kind of admiration—but nobody else wished I was with them.

I longed to see her again so I started thinking—why don't I go to Sydney? There was nothing special to keep me in Brisbane and all of a sudden Sydney had become a drawcard. Fame! Fortune! Excitement! I hadn't quite given up hope.

I worked for six months after I got back from Penang at the Sunshine Café in Ann Street long since demolished for more imposing premises and just before I left for Sydney I went out to see Win Thompson retired now and living in a small cottage in Red Hill. Win was still as angular and witty as I remembered but she seemed to've aged greatly. I didn't ask after her health and she didn't say anything but I learnt eventually she was suffering from cancer of the liver and in fact died less than a year later. We reminisced about the Royal and life out West

and it seemed strange to me that Win could be missing both. I told her about my time with Mrs Siddely-Williams and how I was just off to Sydney.

When I got up to go Win put out a frail hand to hold mine and said quietly "I don't know if you want a bit of advice from me Jen ... but don't ever give up your cooking. You've got a wonderful talent and good experience now too. Use it to help make yourself a happy life." Poor Win. I'm sure she spoke from experience but even so she might as well have saved herself the bother for all the notice I took of her advice.

JENNY'S PLACE: PART FOUR

Chapter One

When I got to London I went and stayed with Ann Henry in the brick semi-detached in East Ham she now called home. I think by then she'd about put Ron Henry to the back of her mind but I had the feeling Ann was a bit light on in the grey matter department—not that I can talk—because she'd gone and moved in with a bloke called Steve who might be able to sink a pint of bitter faster than anyone else of my acquaintance but I didn't see that as much of a recommendation.

She introduced me to her girlfriends and we all went out several times to matinees or shopping but as Ann'd obviously told them I was rolling they assumed I'd want to visit the most expensive boutiques they could conjure up and have cappuccinos in coffee shops patronised by Arab sheikhs and it made for a bit of bad feeling when I made it clear that a) I didn't believe in wasting money on Number One and b) I wasn't going to waste it on anyone else either. Ann gave me instructions on how to use the Tube and which bus went where—after I'd stressed that taxis were *not* my usual mode of transport. She had a job in a supermarket so while she was at work I moseyed around usually with no fixed destination in mind. In this frame of mind I saw the Waxworks and the Tower and a bit of the British Museum (what you can see by popping your head in the door) and the Changing of the Guard. Ann suggested I put my name down to have afternoon tea with the Queen but I said it wasn't really my scene trotting round in shady hat and summer frock though I s'pose Mum would've been tickled pink. But after all those years of organisation of bloody hard work I'd now got to the point where there was no more need to plan ahead. I could go where I wanted when I wanted but there was no more reason to go here rather than there. I guess the fact I'd come to London mainly to get away from Sydney influenced my thoughts on sightseeing. Now I had enough of the ready to keep me in reasonable comfort for what might be termed my natural life. It was carefully invested make no bones about that and while I didn't go round calling myself rich and I wasn't in the same league as the Duke of Westminster I was comfortable—more so because nowhere down through the years had I developed a taste for luxury or elegance or smart dressing or rich food. Money'd spelt freedom. The chance to be free of the jobs and people and places which gave me the willies.

My life remained as austere—dull you might say—as it'd always been. Not so different from the life of that kid who'd sat brooding over the Principles of Book-Keeping all those years ago. It seemed to me Jenny's Place was the only creative spark in a sombre and

unimaginative life but I'd given up thinking that fame and fortune were just round the corner anyway and Jenny's Place was past history now. The new owners had even taken down the name and replaced it with The Kandy Den. Real cutesy eh?

I didn't need money. The last thing I wanted was to start another business. I couldn't see any point in looking for work even if the Immigration authorities should decide that people of my undoubted ability should be put to the grindstone instead of bumming round on a tourist visa. There didn't seem any point in doing anything and nothing seemed to matter very much anyway. That I think was the crux of the problem if it was a problem. With nothing to do but spend a lot of time in my own company I soon found I didn't like myself all that much—probably never had and chances were I never would. And life—the more I thought about it—wasn't much of a ball and never had been—just a dreary succession of getting meals and talking to forgettable people and going to places I didn't particularly want to see and keeping accounts up-to-date and paying bills and watching boring programs on telly and going to bed and getting up again next day ...

The few people I'd cared about were gone. Win Thompson was dead. So was Mrs Siddely-Williams. I'd lost contact with Julie long ago. Mum still cut a dashing figure but it was a tired fretful figure plagued by emphysema. Jamey and I were not likely to start talking again until he ditched Jill. Marilyn had found a bloke but even Mum thought he was a bit of a no-hoper. Michael now had a job with the Water Resources commission and spent his time drawing wavy lines across people's paddocks. I hoped he was enjoying himself.

And Wendy ...

Even now I didn't seem to be able to handle those mixed-up feelings or put them behind me—years later and ten thousand miles apart it still sometimes appeared as the betrayal of something precious. I'd sat down and written to her soon after getting here but it was such a dreary letter I'd kept it and sent a postcard instead. Perhaps if she hadn't sounded so cheerful and chatty it would've been different. If she'd sounded miserable I probably would've jumped on the next plane home so looking back I'm thankful she was too proud or too loyal or too whatever to tell me Rod was an A-grade-turd. Anyway I could've given her the answers to all her kind questions in one word. Nothing. Well strictly speaking that wasn't completely true. I'd discovered a cheery little pub not far from Ann's—I s'pose the temptation'd always been there—and now I had the time and the means to indulge it. The hours I spent in the cosy lounge of the Red Lion were the few times I felt at peace with myself and the world. Then I started bringing bottles home to be drunk circumspectly in the evenings while Ann and Steve went to visit his oldies in Barking. The first time they invited me but after that I cried off 'three's a crowd' etc. I didn't like to say his mum and dad gave me the willies or that each time his old man brought me a drink he thought it gave him the right to peer down the front of my blouse or paw away at imaginary spilt drops on my thighs. After staying with Ann about six weeks I decided to move. It wasn't that I felt I was bludging—after all she owed me more than I owed her—or the business of smuggling out my empties. It was Steve. And it wasn't as if I'd ever given the creep any encouragement. I think you know me well enough to believe that. If I sat down to watch telly he'd come and sit down too all crammed up against me. If I was standing in the kitchen doing something non-sexy like drying dishes he'd brush past suggestively though he stopped doing *that* when I said was he wanting to take over the tea towel. The first time I went to the movies with them I found his hand wandering vaguely up my leg like a lost centipede. The next time I made damn sure Ann was sitting in the middle. The worst of it was the twerp was clever enough to do it while Ann was nearby. I s'pose he realised I wouldn't say anything to alert her to what her blue-eyed boy was up to but I see now that was misplaced philanthropy. He reminded me of a book I'd read out of Wendy's shelves by a Frenchman where the poor heroine has to put up with those sorts of disgusting advances from her brother-

in-law all the time and *that* qualified as famous literature! Steve I s'pose was like a lot of Ann's friends—he thought he might tap into something like a gigolo titillating a wealthy dowager.

Ann seemed sorry when I said I was moving out—she seemed to think it must be to do with her hospitality. I said it'd be easier on my own as I planned to do a bit of travelling round. As she'd demonstrated the wisdom of a chook in picking her next bloke I wasn't going to be the one to entice her empty-headed gold-digging de facto out of her arms. But I couldn't tell her that. I moved into an upstairs flat down the road in Forest Gate. It was all right with a view of a passable backyard. Downstairs it had two of those people agents love—a quiet business couple—and the fact they were Nigerian didn't matter to me and I never found out their business if any because I never heard them and I almost never saw them which says a lot about the lazy habits I was getting into. The months I spent there were months of slowly deepening and deadening depression mixed up with vague feelings on the futility of everything. My life seemed to have lost all sense of purpose all sense of direction. I couldn't find any reason to keep to a routine or make the effort to do things or go anywhere or try to make new friends. If I saw a travel poster and thought 'That looks nice' another thought'd swamp it 'Yeah but what'll you do when you've looked at the view?' and the whole idea'd begin to look completely pointless. Why bother with packing bags and making reservations and getting seasick—and with my luck it'd probably rain all the time anyway.

Of course it wasn't clear in the way I've just put it down—rather it was a sort of numbness which paralysed each small flicker of pleasure.

No one called except Ann—occasionally—and she always asked me how I was liking London and what had I been to see and when was I going to do a bit of travelling around? It never occurred to me I could use some help or that talking really talking to someone or making an effort to go somewhere or do something might help. I'd run my own life and I was blowed if I was going to admit to some busybody that things didn't seem to be going all that well. I wasn't going to admit it to myself.

Then—quietly—the idea got started. I don't really know how but it seemed to just be *there* when I needed it. Why not end this miserable farce once and for all?

I didn't feel sinful or guilty or mean or that I was letting someone down. Who was there to let down? I hadn't failed life it'd failed me. For one of my ideas few and far between as they've been it sounded fantastically good—practical sensible easy or relatively easy and beautifully inexpressibly final. It didn't even require much planning and certainly less than a week in the Lake District or Scotland. I'd simply go to a little pub where I'd been once or twice and which I knew wasn't that far from the Thames and there I'd have my last nightcap a couple of bottles of port—I s'pose I caught that prejudice from Wendy—slobs drank beer—people who weren't (openly) slobs drank port or sherry or sipped in a dainty way at a Grand Marnier or a crème de menthe and I'd got in the habit of putting myself in the second category.

I got to work tidying up the flat and packing my belongings—which brought home to me how little I mattered to anyone or they to me and it wasn't the time to think of Wendy or to ask myself what her reaction would be. Relief? Regret? Instead I put the neat pile of my things on the table and beside them I left a note giving Ann's name and address and asking for them to be given to her. Then with a final burst of generosity seeing I wouldn't be needing it where I was going wherever it turned out to be (I devoutly hoped there wasn't an afterlife—the thought of having to start over made me feel tired) I made up a list of my financial assets and left them to Oxfam. I wasn't certain it would be seen as a legal dispersal of assets—'Exchequer Snatches Bequest Slap in the Face for Hungry'—I don't s'pose that'd cut any ice—but frankly I'd got to the point where I simply didn't care.

It was a cold night when I went out for the last time closing the door but not locking it. I took a bus then walked a few blocks to the place I had in mind. I was well rugged up in a

brown overcoat and woollen scarf—just one of my snazzy outfits—but by the time closing-time came round I was pretty well impervious to the cold with a couple of bottles of ruby port sloshing round in my innards. Obediently I stood up and went out—I was a bit unsteady on my pins but the cold air in my face set me back and braced me up a bit just enough to remember I still had a job to do tonight and after dithering to and fro for a while I set off in what I thought was the right direction. I was so under the weather I wasn't any too sure where the Thames was. Nobody came to my aid—‘Madam may I offer you my arm?’ that'd be the day—and I don't think anyone took the slightest notice of me. Drunks'd been lurching out that door for more than a hundred years and this one with its mousy hair blowing round in the wind and its face bright pink didn't look like a fare to a cruising cabbie or a pick-up to the men on the corner. And soon there was the possibility I wouldn't need to bother with a river as I crossed the first street that got in my way and against the lights I seem to think. There was the rushing of a bus—the blast of a horn—shrieked abuse from the driver of a small sedan ... and then I heaved up against a concrete railing.

There was the river dark and silent in front of me reflecting the city lights along its banks. I s'pose it looked quite pretty. Anyway I stumbled down some steps to a landing below. A small tug was tied alongside. Don't of course take any of this as gospel—the bus might've been a brewery lorry or even the London-to-Edinburgh express the tug could've been the Britannia—as I wasn't at my best and brightest and my eyesight was playing up. I stood there swaying gently and contemplating the river below. Well it was undoubtedly *a* river—and I wasn't in the mood to be fussy about its name. So somewhere in the plump brown mud in company with discarded bottles and rusting tin cans the one time proprietor of that new and exciting addition to Sydney's restaurant line-up—blah blah—could find a peaceful resting place—unless I refused to sink scientifically speaking. Not that it was the moment for deep philosophical musings on chains of events the metaphysical workings of human destiny or whatever (I don't know what that means but it sounds quite good doesn't it?) It wasn't really the time and place for anything and instead I just stood and looked and sort of rested against the railings and maybe a minute passed and maybe half-an-hour passed. I don't remember climbing the railings but I s'pose I must've unless all this was mere delusion and I was hanging over the pond in St James Park—though I don't know how I would've got there—then maybe I jumped and maybe I fell and maybe I just sort of flopped like flopping into my bed at home. The feeling was quite nice but the water came as a nasty shock—not enough of a shock though because I went down and came up and started to go down again yet I don't remember struggling. I've heard babies instinctively try to swim when dropped into water but then babies haven't usually been boozing beforehand.

There was a God-Almighty splash. The oily water heaved and surged around me and then—horribly! disgustingly!—somebody had me by the hair!

I'm not clear what I did then—if I struggled or told them to get lost or tried to poke their eyes out or thought I was only dreaming and this was an experience all drowned people go through on their way to wherever a sort of purgatory I hadn't bargained on. Then that someone—that crazy stupid brave interfering someone—I s'pose with a good deal of floundering and struggling and cursing and messing around managed to get me out of the water and somehow up to the landing again and then with a lot of heaving and heavy breathing and whatnot pulled me up the steps like Christopher Robin pulling Pooh Bear up by one leg and if that wasn't enough for one night I then got held up and pressed down and turned over and pumped up till I felt my head was going to part company with the rest of me. I almost wished it would and be done with it. Anyway I think I'll skip all that. It was totally revolting but I was beyond retaliation and all that was left of my beautiful plan was a soaked brownish lump on the footpath with rivers of dirty water running away into the gutter then there were voices around

me and the voices worse luck belonged to legs and torsos and called for an ambulance instead of saying sensibly "Wot's this? Wot 'ave we got 'ere? No use to man or beast by the look uv it. Best 'eave it back in the drink!" No. Now I *knew* I wasn't on the road to heaven. Instead I was off to a blooming hospital and I'll spare you the details mainly because I don't remember much except being treated like a charwoman's mop and then I ended up in bed and that poor little thing who'd so unluckily lost her footing was saved! The big sort of craggy shape that'd done the saving and asked questions in double-Dutch was I s'pose thanked by someone and then I s'pose buzzed off.

In the morning sadly I had to wake up and there I was in a ward full of you know the cast-offs and the prostitutes and the old woman derelicts and the sort of people I knew I despised yet at the same time I felt a queer sort of affinity with them (if affinity doesn't mean *liking* them). I was fed something which nearly made me gag—my bed was remade—my head threatened to split and spill whatever brains I had on to the pillow. I felt vile. But saddest of all I was still right here and looked like going on being that way and I could've murdered the nurse who attributed the fact to luck. I s'pose I must've slept for most of the morning but sometime in the afternoon someone came to see me. I'd just been lying there like a limp rag and with about the same IQ—after all I wasn't expecting anyone to whizz in with flowers and Milk Tray and 'How're you feeling love—peck peck'—and trying not to think about anything and certainly not my future. I didn't recognise him. He introduced himself. I didn't bother. It was too much effort and I'd decided to use a false name anyway. Maybe he'd come to receive my thanks live? An overpowering demonstration of my gratitude? If so he was going to be disappointed because I hated him really hated him and I hated the thought I was back to Square One ...

I don't know why but my memory of him if I can call it that was of an old bloke. But now in the light of day I saw he wasn't. Maybe in his twenties. A big hulking sort of bloke with craggy brows—messy brown hair—lopsided sort of features and deep-set blue eyes in a weather-beaten face. He would've weighed in at well over the eighteen stone mark but it didn't seem to be fat—I didn't pinch him to find out—and if he'd said he was a heavyweight boxer I would've believed him. Not that I cared what he was. But he turned out to be a Polish seaman by the name of Stanislaw Ziminska-Sygietynska. I didn't pick *that* up straight off. He repeated it a few times but didn't have much else to say for himself. When he asked "Iss you feel okay?" I grunted and said something about feeling lousy. He looked at me in a startled sort of way I don't know why maybe he took it to be a literal ailment. There was a long silence then he said he was going back to his ship and that he was sailing next day and somehow half an hour or so had gone by not memorable for its scintillating conversation or the amount of factual information exchanged. He got up and said "I muss goin now."

"Yeah I guess you must" I said feeling a bit cheery. "Well tootle-oo and have a nice trip."

Still I couldn't bring myself to thank him. It wouldn't have taken much but I couldn't seem to do it. He stood there as though he couldn't make up his mind to go or stay then sort of sheepishly as though he expected to be rapped over the knuckles he fished a card out of his pocket. It said Happy Birthday. I stared at it. Then at him. He was looking at me waiting for me to say something—'How lovely and it isn't even my birthday!'—but to my own amazement I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He'd bought me a card and the great galoot obviously couldn't read English and for some unknown reason that little thing had thrown me completely. With an effort I reached over and stood it on my bedside locker ... I looked at it for a while ... then I said "Thanks. It's kind of you." I even managed to give him a smile not a very winning smile I guess but still a smile and he smiled back. It was a mistake. Instead of going the way he'd said he would he started asking if I had someone to look after me. I thought of inventing a fairy godmother and sticking her in the Nigerian flat but it didn't seem worth the effort. I said I

lived alone. He asked me where I lived. *That* made me suspicious. The last thing I wanted was him coming hanging around but I wouldn't be home before tomorrow at the earliest and he'd be off and away on the briny deep so it didn't seem to matter if he knew. He went out after that and I heaved a sigh of relief—being nice in my present state of mind was a real trial and it isn't all that easy at the best of times.

The hospital sent me home next day. The doctor who ordered my 'release'—I s'pose thinking what a funny fellow he was—said seeing as the Thames was no longer dangerous to porpoises it wasn't likely to've done me any long-term damage. "I doubt you'd care anyway mate" I told him as I went out the door. I'd left the flat unlocked but nothing'd been touched and no one'd noticed my absence. All those dramatic headlines I'd spent the previous deadly dull evening thinking up—'Wealthy Aussie Vanishes in Heart of London'—or more enigmatically—'Where is She?'—or the conventional 'Mystery Disappearance Police Baffled'—were wasted. Ah well. I went in—found enough small change to pay the cabbie—tore up the piece of paper disposing of my wealth and lay down on the bed.

I could—I reasoned gloomily—try again but at a different location. The Serpentine? Gravesend? the bath tub? But strangely the desire to do it seemed to've evaporated. Not that there was anything in its place. Just a sense of the total futility of life. I wish I could say that point marked rock-bottom—if only to spare you more morbid reflections—but that wasn't the case. The little flat seemed to get on my works—the second-hand mis-matched furniture the scungy puce-painted walls the silence. Of course I could afford to change it but instead I took a trip down to Brighton to get away from it. It didn't help. As soon as I got away from the flat I knew even if I didn't intend facing it that it was myself I most wanted to get away from. But myself followed myself like a bad smell all the way to Victoria station where I picked a name at random off the board—and I guess Brighton rang a sort of bell—and down to the seaside on the train then it insisted on following me along the beach and window-shopping and for a walk through an aquarium and past the Pavilion and up to my hotel room. I felt so utterly bored and dispirited sitting there looking out at scudding grey clouds and shops and prams and cars and grey streets and grey water that I began to think about going home again because I thought maybe it was here that was getting me down but there was no tug—no homesickness—no one waiting for my return—nobody saying "I hope Jen comes home soon"—nothing waiting to be done when I got there.

Looking back it's tempting to see that little jaunt as a turning point the moment when a light suddenly blazed—like a stray sheep's eyes in your headlights (just before it goes down to posterity as strawberry jam)—changing the whole direction of my murky thoughts. But I s'pose that's wishful thinking. The flat was the same when I got back. Life seemed much the same. I took the carton of bottles of Dow port I'd bought before my trip—I'd only drunk two—out of the cupboard and stood them lovingly along the sideboard in full view of myself propped up in bed on a few pillows. They were a friendly sight. At least I thought so. The months passed by in a dreary fog. I don't know why but that part of my life seems even more confused than the episode by the river. I know I saw Ann now and then but we didn't have much to talk about. One day I made an effort and went to the zoo and I seem to remember a couple of movies. I s'pose I did other things—well I must've or I would've been found weeks later like some poor old pensioner—but they don't stand out in that downhill slide. I couldn't see what was happening to me in that rush to break the world record for leaving the ranks of the sober and joining the company of booze artists. I couldn't see that anything was the matter with me—at least nothing that a glass of port couldn't fix. Headaches blurred vision trembling hands you-name-it—I didn't but I blamed them all on delayed shock and they all had the same cure. There are times—well now and again—when I like to think I'm a smart cookie and times when I know I'm pretty dumb but either way I couldn't see I'd jumped on a skateboard. There

was even a sort of inverted pride in that desperate attempt to drink the cellars of Vila Nova da Gaia dry.

About eight months after my stay in hospital I came down with a bad bout of flu and went to bed and stayed there for a week shivering and shaking and sniffing and feeling sorry for myself. There wasn't anyone to notice or care that I wasn't out and about. The Nigerians had been away I s'pose on holiday and anyway I had the feeling they avoided me. I didn't blame them. I wasn't the most convivial of neighbours. But I didn't feel sorry for myself on that account. I've always hated people fussing and bothering me with brainless questions. You know—"How are you?" "Fine." "You don't look too hot." Why ask. It was late afternoon at the end of that week of seclusion—well getting on dark not that that means much on a raw autumn day—when there was a knock on the door. I stayed in bed. I wasn't expecting anyone and I didn't feel like getting up anyway. There was more knocking even louder as if the knocker saw the door as a mortal enemy. I decided it wasn't the Jehovah's Witnesses. I already had a pile of The Watch Tower which I hadn't read to prove they always knocked quietly. There was another thundering round while I went on with the process of elimination. Finally wearily I dragged myself out of bed—put on my dressing gown and went through to the loungeroom—obviously I wasn't going to get any sleep with some madman pounding away! As I got to the door I thought 'What say it's a gang of punks or skinheads or something?'

Ah well—I decided—if you've gotta go you've gotta—and it'd probably save me a lot of worries getting it over and done with now. So I opened the door—slowly and cautiously mind you—and blinked in amazement. There on my step was Stanislaw smiling and nodding as if he'd just sighted a long-lost-buddy! I just stood there—nerveless—struck dumb—mouth gaping—while I tried to decide whether the flu was giving me hallucinations or my vision was packing up on me.

At last—I don't know how long after—I managed to say "What're you doing here? I was trying to sleep." It was only five by the wall clock but it'd probably packed the job in too. Anyway I was feeling more and more awful by the minute. My legs from want of use were shaky. My hands began to tremble. I don't know if that was the flu. I didn't stand round analysing it. He continued to hang in the doorway like Santa Claus waiting for the first bar of Jingle Bells smiling and smiling as though his mouth was stuck. Then he said "I com veeseet you."

I gave a hollow sort of laugh and said "You sure pick your times."

He looked puzzled but showed no sign of taking the hint and buzzing off.

"Well" I said after a long pause "what d'you want? Now you've seen I'm still alive."

He smiled again. "I iss—happy you not hav—" There he seemed to be stuck so I said grumpily "An accident perhaps?"

He beamed and nodded and I groaned inwardly Hoo Boy this was going to be one of those days. But aloud I said (it was cold standing in the door) "Well come in. Sit down. Tell me how's life on the ocean waves?" Maybe I thought I could drive him away with drivel? If so I'd picked the wrong bloke. He followed me in—sat down on the chair I pointed to and said kindly "You iss seeck? I iss—vere sad."

"Yeah—well—sort of." I sat down and closed my eyes. I just couldn't cope with this. I didn't want to *have* to cope with it. I wanted to crawl back into bed and forget he existed.

"Yas—you seet down—eh? An I mak you som food. You iss vere tsin."

Then—to my horror!—he sprang up again obviously wanting to do something about my weight though I couldn't imagine what. Whizz down the road for some fish and chips? He hustled into my kitchen and started bumbling round looking in the frig opening and shutting cupboard doors. What a nerve! I got out of my chair with an effort and hurried after him.

"You get out of my kitchen this instant!" I raged from the doorway. A fearsome sight

with blotchy red face and messy hair and patched old dressing gown but it didn't seem to scare him. Either he was deaf or pretending to be. I thought of barricading myself in my room till he gave up and went away. I thought of calling the cops but I didn't think they'd come. He put a chair for me to sit on—obviously—though I s'pose I could've attacked him with it—and took a carton of eggs from the frig and a skillet off the hook. He took out some tomatoes expensive Canary Island tomatoes but they'd grown whiskers and he quietly put them aside all the while trying to keep his eyes off the pile of bottles in the corner and the stack of unwashed cups in the sink. He turned on the gas and put the kettle on.

"Please! Get out of my bloody kitchen! I don't want it messed up! I don't want to eat your messes—I don't want to eat! Just go away and leave me *alone!*"

His forehead creased. He looked hurt. But he went on whisking the eggs saying blandly "I iss vere good cook." I s'pose he could've added it'd be hard to make that kitchen any messier. "Yeah I'll bet." Then I just subsided into silence feeble worn-out silence. I didn't have the strength to do anything else.

He didn't seem in any hurry to say why he'd popped in and frankly I didn't believe he cared two hoots about my health and wellbeing. He suggested I sit up to the table. I felt like a naughty kid being put in its place—any minute he'd run at me and strangle me with a bib. I did as I was told and he put an omelette in front of me and sat down himself. I grimaced and started to eat—and would you believe it? It was the lightest fluffiest omelette I'd ever tasted. I couldn't have done better myself. He watched me eat and there was something in his expression suggested he'd just scored a goal.

"Okay. Fine. You can cook an omelette. So what? Anybody can. Now you can get on with telling me why you're here."

He ate a slice of stale bread—finished his food—wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and got up to make a pot of tea. He handed me a cup of this brownish-blackish brew. I continued to wait. Then he said very slowly and carefully "I leeve my sheep."

"So what?" It seemed self-evident. "When d'you go back to it? Soon I ruddy-well-hope."

"No—" still very slowly "I leeve—for ever. I not go back."

When this terrifying pronouncement finally sank in I stared at him in horror. Just what I needed to make this a red-letter day! And how long before the Polish secret police or whatever they kept handy for this sort of occasion came pounding on my door?

"Tse 'Bialystok' vill leeve tsis night an I vill stay here—vit you."

"That's what you think bud" I said grimly.

"No? I halp you—you halp me?"

"Very neat but you're forgetting one thing mate—I didn't ask you to help me."

When the implications of this at last got through he looked at me shocked. "You vant dron youself?" Obviously he didn't want to believe the evidence of the key witness. I nodded wearily. It wasn't something I wanted to discuss. "Yeah I wanted to drown myself. Simple as that."

He opened and shut his mouth a couple of times but nothing came out. Now I s'pose he understood my lack of gratitude and now the one person in London who might've been expected to go out on a limb for him was preparing to shut the door literally and figuratively in his face. At last he said with a sigh "Tsat iss bad—"

"Yeah—well—maybe it is" I said without interest "but don't start telling me the Lord giveth life and the Lord taketh it away. I can't *stand* it! So just look at it this way—I was giving Him a helping hand." I went on sipping tea and Stanislaw sat there looking pretty down-in-the-dumps. Then a thought occurred to me and I fixed him with an accusing look and said "Anyway cut the crap. You saw me jump."

He went on looking gloomy. "No." He shook his head. "You seet tsere an seet tsere an

seet—”

“Alright. I heard you the first time.”

“—an tsen—” He gave quite a good imitation of someone suddenly falling off a chair and added “Sposh!” for good measure. He pulled himself up again. “—an I com run an—Sposh!” I don’t s’pose it was an amusing subject and I couldn’t remember *sitting* on a railing—perhaps he was thinking of someone else?—but it struck me as being funny. However Stanislaw just stayed sad. He looked round the kitchen—he finished his tea—he looked at me. Maybe he was looking for inspiration? Finally I couldn’t stand it any longer. “Okay you can stay tonight. Just don’t get any ideas into your head.” I put my things in the sink alongside the hill already there and went back to the loungeroom. He seemed to think I was a bit of a slob or maybe he was trying to impress me because he got up and got busy at the sink before trundling through to the other room where I’d rustled out a spare pillow and a few blankets though I wasn’t flush with such items—hospitality not being my forte you know—and the ones I had smelt pretty musty. My better nature was kind enough to hope he wouldn’t freeze—the rest of me hoped he’d be so bloody uncomfortable he’d soon get the message. I dumped the stuff on the sofa and went hunting for a bath towel in case he believed in bathing.

By some sleight of hand he produced a small shabby zippered bag. I s’pose it’d been with him all along like a faithful dog. He put it beside the sofa and I carefully closed my bedroom door and left him to it—not that there was much for him to get at only one bottle with maybe a finger of port left. I got into bed and Boy! was I glad to lie down again. But then I simply couldn’t get to sleep. I kept waiting for a knock. Though I couldn’t decide what to do if one *did* come. Should I say I’d never seen a bloke answering to that description—while he hid in the toot? Should I deliver him up with great relief to Polish justice? Or should I stay in bed and let ‘em knock till their knuckles wore out? I don’t know how long I spent debating it but then I turned to thinking—‘I’ve got a Polish sailor on my sofa. Why is he here? And more important how’m I going to get rid of him?’ And while I lay awake restless and feverish and everything the ‘Bialystok’ put out to sea its destination the South Atlantic its crew reduced by one—and that one slumbered away peaceful and noisy and seemingly without a care in the world on my old sofa.

Nothing happened. I woke about seven. I felt a bit more like myself whatever that means but I didn’t honestly feel like confronting my uninvited guest and telling him to scram. I got up finally because I could smell something cooking. I hadn’t been shopping for ages so I couldn’t imagine what he was feeding himself on but I thought I’d better check. He greeted me like visiting royalty—drew out my chair and put another omelette in front of me. I was a bit hungry so I ate it then I told him it was time to think about moving on. Maybe he did think about it but he certainly didn’t *do* anything about it. Instead he hustled round tidying up then offered to go shopping for me. I didn’t like the domestic sound of this but I ended up giving him dough and directions. I reasoned he’d either pinch the money and buzz off in which case I’d be rid of him or he’d save me having to go out in my feeble state but I’d still have to find a way to get rid of him. Either way he’d probably botch up my list when he got down the high street and was confronted by the mix of Jamaican and Pakistani and whatnot shops. After about two hours he came back with a bulging bag so I guess that was an achievement. (I didn’t tell him so.) He put the groceries away—he stashed my empties in the dustbin (the Nigerian dustbin)—he left the place cleaner and tidier than it’d been in a long while. Maybe he thought of it as earning his keep but I was secretly impressed. I couldn’t remember ever meeting a Pole before—I’d never even thought of wanting to meet one—but if they were all that handy round the place? Of course I was doomed to disappointment. Polish men are no different to other men when it comes to giving a hand round the house. Stanislaw I was to discover was unique.

He stayed three days not talking much—which was a relief—sometimes going out for a

walk now and then contemplating my kitchen wall thoughtfully. On it was a calendar of grey kangaroos and Bondi beach and the usual stuff and a nostalgic flyspotted reminder of my past (they were probably bits of gravy)—a menu. He looked cheerful when he discovered why it was there though I only told him the unremarkable bones. He was still looking cheerful when I went to put on my overcoat and while I was at the pub he moved out too. I was pleased about that. It saved me chucking him out which I still hadn't worked out how to manage. My joy was shortlived though. I found his bag tucked in behind the sofa. I dragged it out—cross with myself for being so gullible—furious with him. Then I opened it up. If I was going to learn why he'd jumped ship it didn't look as if I was going to hear it from him so I felt justified in doing my own bit of sleuthing. All in all it was a pretty poor collection of clues. A couple of changes of clothing including a pair of electric-blue underpants, his shaving-gear and soap, a paperback called *Taksowki* which had a sleazy blonde on a corner hailing a horrible leering cabbie—it didn't take much to work out the nature of *that* book—a couple of letters addressed to him which needless to say I didn't read—two photos—one of a pleasant-looking woman with grey hair and slightly lop-sided features which I assumed was his mum and the other a group of men who might've been shipmates—and last of all I found a newspaper cutting which I looked at carefully and decided might be some sporting results but on the other hand might have some sinister significance. So if there was a clue in all that I wasn't clever enough to find it which didn't surprise me. I stuffed everything back in what I hoped was the original order then I thought of putting the bag outside the door with a little sign propped up 'Gone to China' and going to Ann's for the weekend but after tossing up between Stanislaw and Steve I decided Stanislaw was the lesser of two evils. I wouldn't make much of a fortune teller.

Stanislaw stayed away all night and I started to hope he'd got so completely lost in Greater London I'd never see him again and could give his things to the Good Samaritans when I had the energy. To my infinite sorrow he came back next morning. I didn't greet him with open arms. In fact the whole business depressed me as if I wasn't depressed enough already. If he was going to treat my flat like a hotel coming and going as he pleased I'd move—go somewhere else—find another home—leave him to face the landlord with the unpaid rent. Not that I had anywhere special in mind. The Riviera maybe or Corfu? The Isle of Arran or the Bahamas? But nowhere struck a sympathetic chord and wherever I went I was still me and hard as it was to admit then I knew I was a loner a prickly chip-on-the-shoulder dreary loner. However he was in a good mood whistling as he prepared lunch while I sat grumpily in front of the telly which was showing—if I remember rightly—a thing for kids on life in the hedgerows. If it'd been about life on skidrow it might've done me some good but I doubt it.

"I hav good idee" Stanislaw said as I came in and plonked down in front of my plate. "I start rastaurant." He beamed at me.

"Hoo Boy! This beats anything I've heard so far! But sure—" I shrugged "you can start a restaurant. You can start a whole chain of 'em for all I care. Just leave me out of it."

He looked hurt. He was good at it. "But—you cook. I cook. You hav money—yas?"

"Look mate—" I was stunned at his cheek "let's get one thing straight!" I ticked it off on my finger. "My money is none of *your* bloody business!" Then I added the clincher to end this nonsense once and for all. "Two—I know about running a restaurant. You don't. So if you think I'm going to be saddled with paying and cooking and running a blooming joint you've got another think coming!"

He continued to look hurt. "But—I cook all so—an so ve hav two cooks."

"You cook!" I yelled. "What—omelettes till they run for cover?"

"I iss good cook" Stanislaw was getting upset. "I iss—I vass—" he corrected himself "cook on 'Bialystok'. An so I cook. Ve rent tsis place in Eest London own by tsis Polish man—iss cheep—an many sailor com tsere."

“Yeah—and when they see you in there they’ll put you on the first boat back to Poland.”

“No—tsey not see me. An so I not Polish man. I was borned in Czechoslovakia.”

“Same difference. They’ll put you on the first boat back to Czechoslovakia.”

“No.” He contradicted that hope. “Boats not go to Czechoslovakia.”

I shrugged. I wasn’t interested in the shipping services to eastern Europe and we weren’t getting anywhere and I for one didn’t want a bar of the whole crazy business so I put on my coat and scarf straight after lunch and got my bag ready for a quiet hour or two in the cosy lounge of the Red Lion. Stanislaw put his coat on too and said brightly “Good! Ve go now an see tsis place.”

I stared at him. Obviously he had the hide and perception of a rhinoceros! Then—wearily—beaten only temporarily—no not beaten—I said without interest “Okay I’ll look. Nothing more.” He smiled all over his big lumpy face and we went out into a horrible drizzly afternoon and he managed to hail a cab and after about three tries got over where he wanted to go. I sat back and closed my eyes wishing I was somewhere else with a bottle of cream sherry and a glass in front of me. We drove west we drove south we drove round in circles (maybe)—I didn’t care where we went. It was all a wild goose chase anyway. We drew up by a smutty rundown brick building only a cooee from the docks.

The place gave me the willies. It was definitely a restaurant but had been closed a long time by the look of it. The tables and chairs and kitchen fittings were there—but to me it looked like a greasy tomb inhabited by nasty smells and nastier insects. A grave for the last tenant’s tenuous hopes. The owner who lived in the rooms above showed us round. This was for my benefit. I assumed Stanislaw had been over it already. Who knew perhaps he’d helped break the chairs which stood in a dismal row in the back storeroom? After we’d poked about a bit we went up to the owner’s hangout. I trailedd up the narrow dark staircase behind him and came into a small but quite cosy loungeroom. The curtains were drawn tight to hide the fog which’d begun to blanket the view such as it was. A small heater with imitation coals had several threadbare armchairs drawn up round it. The owner brought out a bottle of Jarzebiak and three glasses and some little biscuits and before I realised what he was up to I had a glass of neat vodka in my hand and he was wishing us “*Na Zdrowie*”. We sat down. Mr Leon Michnik sat down—a little sad stooped figure of a man a Polish Jew who lived all alone in this awful old building and dreamed of ... I didn’t know what then.

He and Stanislaw sat and drank and talked in Polish and I just sat and drank. I was bored. The whole set-up appalled me and I wished the omnipotent They had seen fit to pull the place down long ago and put up council flats. But the drink was rather nice even if I couldn’t put my finger on its flavouring. Halfway through their conversation Stanislaw turned to me and said “He say you vere pretty. I tsink so too.” I was going to say “Flattery’ll get you nowhere” but he’d gone back to his conversation and at the end of it figures neat rows of them in Mr Michnik’s shaky handwriting were placed in front of me like an unwanted offering. “This is the rent per month—this is for six-month lease—for one year I make a big reduction.” He showed me his estimates for gas and power and phone then he went on to some figures he’d apparently culled from his previous lessee who’d tried to make his fortune from fourteen tables and traditional Pommy tucker. Maybe that was where Mr Michnik thought he’d gone wrong maybe the tables had a habit of going the same way as the chairs? It seemed he’d kept an eye on the way things were going downstairs yet there was something vague and dispirited in the manner he put it to me as though he’d stopped caring about anything. In the end he offered us a week to decide whether we wanted—or more correctly *I* wanted the lease. Obviously prospective tenants were few and far between—perhaps he realised I was there under duress—certainly he couldn’t help noticing the bottle was about empty and that he hadn’t emptied it. Whichever way it was he turned to me at the door and said sort of wistfully “It would be nice if you take

it."

Perhaps—wishful thinking—he saw some innate respectability under this uncompromising exterior which would turn the junkyard of broken chairs into a haunt of the genteel? Perhaps he was tired of people who came to look but didn't stay to sign on the dotted line? (I didn't blame them. I saw myself as one of them.) Perhaps he just liked us? It was strange but when I came to think about it later I decided he was likeable in a funny sort of down-and-out way.

We set off 'home' but we hadn't gone more than half a mile—and hadn't sighted a taxi in the foggy streets—when Stanislaw steered me into a little cubbyhole of a café with half a dozen greasy tables hiding in its dim interior and goodness-knows-what hiding in its kitchen and said we'd have dinner there. It was a gesture I s'pose. Funny. Sad. I don't know really. He wanted to do the right thing or maybe the gallant thing but mainly he wanted to make up my mind for me. The trouble was he couldn't afford to pull all stops out.

After we'd finished eating and pushed away the coffee cups he looked at me straight—but there was a kind of lurking desperation in his eyes.

"Yas—iss good eh? Ve tak it?"

Good it wasn't but there were a few—well one or two—things which could go on the plus side. The terms seemed very reasonable. Lack of customers didn't seem to be the problem. I had only one against. I couldn't be bothered. All the work the worry the hassles over staff the effort at 'front' the complaints. Maybe Stanislaw knew a bit about that—maybe when the South Atlantic gales and the boredom and the stink of fish got to the men—then maybe the cooks kept their heads down. I didn't know.

I leant back thoughtfully in my chair. I didn't have to be here. I didn't owe Stanislaw anything. Only my life. Instead I imagined myself strolling along a golden beach in the West Indies—the waving palms—the deferential waiters—the loaded drink trolley. Yes madam. No madam. Another Bloody Mary madam? Or it might be a Planter's Punch today and a Pink Gin tomorrow or something I hadn't tried yet ... and all of a sudden—overwhelmingly—I was swamped by a feeling of panic a sort of shaky frightened feeling. I needed another drink not coffee not juice something to warm me calm me carry me away—and there was no way—just no way!—I could run a restaurant ever again. Not now when I couldn't get through a day sober.

Chapter Two

"I can't do it. I can't run a blooming restaurant."

It was a statement of fact. It was also a bleak and bloody awful moment. As soon as I said it I hated myself for demonstrating such weakness in front of Stanislaw. He took out his hanky and blew his nose noisily and stuffed it back in his pocket. He had on hand a lot of arguments to prove taking the lease'd be a ducky idea but he'd forgotten to prepare one to prove a drunk could run it. It looked as if that had him beat. He sat there in silence—and maybe he was thinking of all those piles of empties and maybe he wasn't—and finally he made me an offer. If I'd put up the dough to get things rolling he'd do all the work.

I don't remember how long I sat chewing this over but in the end I said okay. It wasn't an enthusiastic okay but it seemed to me if he kept his side of the bargain—and I had no idea if he would or he wouldn't—then I could do alright out of it. I couldn't see anything in it for him but that was his lookout. We left the café and walked for a while in the cold dank air. It wasn't walking weather but he was obviously feeling a bit sentimental. After about ten minutes he tried to hold my hand. "Keep your bloody hand to yourself!" I snapped. I wasn't going to have that sort of nonsense 'partner' or no 'partner'. It brought back nasty memories of Sandy's horrible hand sneaking into mine in the dark. Stanislaw put it back in his coat pocket and left it

there. I s'pose he realised he wasn't in a position to upset the applecart.

With much doubting and grumbling I took out a six-month lease. There was no mention of Stanislaw in all the negotiations. He might as well not've existed. I wished he didn't. Nor would he let me put anything on paper regarding our agreement. I was suspicious. Who wouldn't be? The whole things was fishy with a capital F but getting anything out of him proved just about impossible. In between polite nonsense—telling me I was pretty which I didn't believe—and the sort of gibbering English a one-year-old might use we never got anywhere and I gave it up as a bad job. This left me with all the hassle of taking out insurance—finding out my obligations as an employer—checking the building—making notes of equipment needed—calling in plumbers and pest-exterminators and whatnot ... in other words doing all the things I had absolutely no desire to do and sandwiched in between visits to the Red Lion it took its time but Stan worked I'll say that for him. He cleaned and polished and painted and scrubbed and organised that place with a zeal which made me feel old and limp. He named it the Restauracja Polska which seemed to show a disastrous lack of imagination. But I said nothing. It was his show he could call it anything he liked. He worked away on his menu then stuck it up in the window beside the entrance to save prospective diners the bother of coming in. When he'd finished I went out for a squizz. It started off with things like *pieczarki w smietanie* and *szczawiowa* and *barszcz czerwony* and went on to *kotlet schabowy z kapusta* and ended up with delicacies like *gruszka w czekoladzie*.

After I'd stared at it for a while I said "Are you planning on offering *food* in this joint?"

Stan got pretty upset seeing he'd put so much work into making it sound mouthwatering but he finally admitted I had a point. (Or he remembered who was calling the shots.) With some help from me and a dog-eared phrasebook he got a menu into English and stuck it up beside the original. Almost single-handed he hunted up wholesalers and placed firm orders in my name. This—the hunting not the paying—was quite an achievement for someone who didn't read or write English and didn't speak it any too hot. Not that I went round there much. I couldn't see any point in keeping an eye on him—if he was going to make a mess he'd probably manage it whether I was supervising or not. In a few weeks he was ready to open for business. He hired a Polish-born girl Agnieszka to waitress and from his hints I gathered he thought he had a spare cook waiting in the wings. Time enough to disabuse him of *that* little idea. It was strange—because I hadn't advertised the place and I don't think Stan had I don't know about Mr Michnik—but when he opened the doors there were actually people waiting to come in. (Strictly speaking Aggie opened the doors the proprietor was keeping a low profile.) At least it saved me the bother of going round with flyers—Polish off a Polish meal Today!—which I had no intention of doing anyway.

My routine remained almost unchanged. I let him get his own breakfast and get himself to work and in fact I rarely got up before nine. He asked no questions about how I spent my time except for his all-inclusive "Did you hav nice day?" I always said "Yes". Most days I'd dress and whatnot and have a bite of brunch in front of the telly before toddling down to the pub or buying a couple of bottles and sitting in the park if the weather was okay and if I spared him a thought it was 'Better him than me slaving away worrying about nit-picking customers etc.'

One evening my routine got a bit of a jolt. I came home pretty much under-the-weather hail-fellow-well-met and noisy you know and plonked down in an armchair and must've fallen asleep because I woke up in the early hours of the morning to find a blanket wrapped around me and a pillow under my head. I was cold and shivery and trembling like a leaf—I don't know why but for the life of me I couldn't stop the shakes. My head felt awful. My feet were freezing. I didn't know what was wrong but thought it might be a bad dream where I thought I was awake when I wasn't—scary as heck. Not scary because of Stan and the sleazy blonde and

the fact he was six feet away from me or because ... but I couldn't see cause and effect. I was in a cold sweat and struggling with a blind feeling of panic ... and there was no one I could blame for my misery. I tried to think of someone in case it'd make me feel better. I've always been good at shuffling the blame for the things which have gone wrong in my life but it wasn't Wendy's fault for not loving me enough and it wasn't Mum's fault for preferring Marilyn and I couldn't even blame my dad because I was sitting there bleary-eyed and shaking and deathly sick in an armchair at three o'clock in the morning.

Eventually I managed to lever myself upright—stumble across the room and fall into bed. There was a sour smell around me but I didn't know if it was me or the bed or my imagination. I must've gone back to sleep because next time I woke up Stan'd gone I think without twigging anything was wrong. If he'd given it a thought he probably just thought I'd fallen asleep in the middle of a boring program. Maybe I had. The panic of the night was gone but I still felt lousy so after cradling my head for a good long while—which didn't make any difference—I got up gingerly and had a drink at the cupboard.

In the back of my pounding head was a thought—to call it an idea let alone an inspiration would be going too far. I don't know what put it there but after dithering round for more than an hour and shuffling through Z before it occurred to me that it might be more useful to look under A I finally went out and shut the door. If nothing else I needed to be out of that place—away from that armchair—and eventually I found my way to an office in Redcliffe Gardens. The woman I spoke to was kind and helpful and I came away with a bundle of pamphlets. I browsed through them on a park bench while a sun without rays hung overhead and a few brave sparrows twittered in the trees above mounds of disgusting looking snow and I wondered why I'd bothered to come. After a while I got up and dumped the leaflets in a litter bin. One called 'A Message of Hope' pressed up against the wire. Well who knew who might come this way and draw forth that inspiring title? But my own resolve which had seemed so urgent had begun to fade and anyway the leaflets weren't written for me. I couldn't find myself or my life-history in them.

I didn't want to go home. I could of course be the one to disappear in Greater London never to be seen again but instead I took the train to East Ham and made a little detour and was soon back in the lounge of the Red Lion. Everything was back on track and by the time I walked in my door I felt okay or what passed for okay. So life went on bearable but with occasional bad days.

One evening I went to the restaurant to see what it was like. All was rush and bustle. Stan was too busy to talk. So was Aggie. (Not that I'd gone there to talk.) It didn't take a lot of noise to see an extra pair of hands'd come in handy and that I was the legal proprietor of a pretty rough-house sort of joint. Still that wasn't my worry. I didn't have to hang round outside at closing time. I didn't even have to do more than peer round the kitchen door. I also thought if Stan could keep his accounts under control he'd probably do okay but we hadn't discussed that side of things because my main thought was 'So long as I get my dough back I don't care any more' which I s'pose was quite a turnaround for me.

After looking the patrons over I went upstairs. I was feeling curious and thought Mr Michnik might have some answers. He came to the door—he beamed all over his little thin dark face and invited me in but something seemed to be puzzling him—had Stan told him I was going to do the cooking? He offered me a drink and a slice of rye bread with cheese while he explained he usually went downstairs for his meal. I didn't ask whether he usually ate gratis or not. While I chewed he sat back and began telling me a bit about his family not that I'd been wanting to know. All gone he told me sadly. I asked where they'd all gone though I assumed he meant to heaven. In Auschwitz he said still sadly. I felt I'd stuck my foot right in so I just nodded sort of sympathetically and let him ramble on about his thirty-odd-years of exile in

London. I felt sorry for him (I don't know if he wanted my pity) and in an odd way he made me feel sorry for Stan. Maybe he was starting a thirty-year exile? But as he wouldn't tell me *why* I wasn't going to let my pity get out of hand. In the end I didn't ask Mr Michnik what he knew about Stan it didn't seem to matter and I thought instead I'd ask him sometime about what goes on in a synagogue to add to my ecumenical ragbag.

When Stan got home each night he looked dog-tired—not that I sat up waiting for him!—and sort of depressed as well. I wondered if Aggie was telling him not to get fresh? He was tickled pink by the place's success but as he couldn't draw a salary I s'pose it depressed him knowing he couldn't make his fortune from it. But the more I thought the more I decided he was just lonely—he wanted someone to talk things over with—someone to go out with in his spare time—maybe someone to boast to. But I felt I'd kept my side of the bargain and I was terrified of gradually being drawn into it like a worm being pulled from its hole by a greedy bird and finding nothing to cling to. Well worms poor things can't cling.

Nevertheless I relented one morning and came down with him and helped bring in the deliveries *and* set the tables *and* give him a bit of a hand with the lunch preparations. Aggie turned up running late and looked a bit flustered when she saw me—'eagle eye' comes to visit etc—but I said nothing and Stan just worked away looking gloomy while Aggie fussed round rearranging her hair and sticking a bunch of yellow daisies in a bowl. After getting in their way for a while I went home. Stan stayed. In fact he stayed most afternoons. Maybe he went upstairs—maybe he had something going with Aggie—I didn't care but I could see his problem. Though it wasn't all that far it meant two changes of buses or one bus and a fair hike to get home. So I wasn't surprised when he suggested we get a flat nearer the restaurant. I was only surprised he'd put up with my place for so long. I s'pose because it was free.

"No" I said "I've got a better idea. *You* get a flat near the restaurant or move in with Mr Michnik. *I'll* stay here."

I hated the forced intimacy of sharing a bathroom and kitchen and loungeroom with him. But he wasn't the bloke to take no for an answer and he went in search of a flat. I hoped he'd find himself a minuscule bed-sit too small even to invite me round for a cup of tea (should he want to) but next thing I was being chivvied across town like a chook which refuses to roost in the fowl yard of a night to see the place he'd 'discovered'. It was only about a block from the restaurant but down a little cul-de-sac and around a sort of blind corner and up stairs and there it was—a place as gloomy as Mr Michnik's. No—twice as gloomy as it didn't have any bright colours or imitation coals.

It had a sizable kitchen, a large loungeroom, a bathroom and two bedrooms. One of these looked over a medley of roofs and chimney-pots and sooty sparrows not what you'd call a view to inspire a budding poet but you *could* see the sky. The other didn't even have that. It just looked on to a blank wall of a warehouse—which Stan told me was where the Port of London kept its seized contraband which I didn't believe when I'd finally grasped what he was saying. Maybe it was his idea of a joke or maybe he thought I'd like living next to illegal French brandy but it turned out to be a dépôt for waste paper but as I rarely read a newspaper it wasn't much use to me. The kitchen had a close view of more bricks and a distant view of a runty tree. Downstairs was the storeroom for a wholesale stationers. Frankly I thought the whole conglomerate would've been better left undiscovered.

"Yas—iss nice eh?" Stan looked pleased with himself. "Only twenty poun tsis veek."

"And how much next week?" I asked.

He looked puzzled. "Tsis veek an tsis veek an—"

"Okay I get you." Obviously it wasn't a discount special.

I ummed and ahhed. Strictly speaking it could be tidied up, redecorated, made a bit more cheery. It was convenient for Stan and it wasn't that the other flat was particularly nice. It was

simply that ... well I knew it wouldn't be a good idea to move. But if I didn't move Stan wouldn't want a two-bedroom flat in which case we'd be back to Square One and I still hadn't worked out a way to get rid of him. So finally like the Queen being bugged for just one more piccy I said okay and once again I had to go through a whole rigamarole on his behalf—giving up the old flat—putting down a bond—signing a lease—packing and moving. And all for what—to make life easier for him—when I didn't care if his life was easy or hard? Madness!

He refused to put his name to anything which looked remotely like a legal document—and not because they didn't allow enough room—so this was more coals to the fire of my suspicions so to speak. I assumed he'd applied for political asylum—not that I had a clue how to go about it—and given the mutters of sympathy then being expressed for Poles I thought he might have a chance. Just for good measure I tackled him one morning just after we'd moved (well I'd done most of the moving seeing he was still pretty light on in the personal effects line though he'd bought a few things not notable for the taste or sense of fashion they displayed). Naturally I took the room with the view. It had a stretcher bed a wardrobe with a door on one hinge and a stackable chair with 'Jim woz ere' scrawled on its seat. Frankly I preferred that Jim and his germs and his graffiti wozn't. I told the landlord (who was an agency) to take the chair away and paint over the graphic descriptions of Jim's private parts on the bathroom door. They weren't pleased but sent a man around with some leftover paints—I s'pose after doing some kiddies' playground equipment—and he splashed fireman red and cobalt blue here and there.

"If" I said point-blank to Stan "you're living in Poland and sailing on a Polish ship but born in Czechoslovakia—then are you a Pole or a Czech—or maybe even a checkered pole?" I added in a rare attempt to be funny. Stan didn't see anything funny in it. He just looked at me cautiously for a while then with a long-drawn-out sigh like they do on stage he said he wasn't either. I waited. Enlightenment sometimes comes to those who wait.

At last he heaved another sigh and said "I am Russian man."

"Ah so!" I said caustically and with a nice little dramatic flourish. "Now the cat's out of the bag! So when does the KGB come calling eh?"

"No—tsat iss not ... possible."

I got nothing more out of him. Well nothing useful. Not even when I fixed him with an intimidating eye and said in that case I must assume *he* was the KGB agent. Instead he tried to sidetrack me into a literal definition of 'cat out of the bag' and eventually I gave the whole thing away as a bad job. To tell the truth I didn't know what to think about him—whether I should press on nagging and pecking away till his facade if he had one cracked. It did occur to me that a restaurant'd be the ideal cover if he wanted to keep an eye on the eastern European diners of London—you know bugs under the plates and two-way mirrors in the kitchen—but then why stay hidden away beside the stoves? Was that to lull me into—what? Bucolic acceptance of his oddities?

I think deep down I really preferred to remain in ignorance. I didn't want to learn any awkward truths in case anyone came asking awkward questions. I wanted to remain in a state where I wouldn't need to take refuge in alcoholic amnesia. When I'd sort of thought it through I decided it wasn't my worry anyway. I could only get deported if I turned out to be an accomplice—the reluctant sort—of Stan being on the wrong side of the law ('Wealthy Aussie aids Russian Refugee—Deported'—that'd put egg on their faces) and if I did get deported I didn't particularly care so I stopped worrying what he might be up to.

Stan seemed to have a different worry and this worry seemed to be me. A couple of times he tried to lead up to what he saw as the problem. "You drink too much. Iss not good." Tact obviously wasn't his strong point.

"Probably not but it's none of your business."

Maybe he thought I was drinking the profits he sweated to make? Maybe he thought I'd

let the cat out of the bag as I stumbled merrily home from the pub? I don't know. But each time he raised the subject he got the same short shrift.

Whenever I felt a bit bored I'd come down and give him a bit of a hand not that I was much help as I knew next to nothing about Polish food and I wasn't all that keen on taking orders either. I'd been the boss for too long. But often I felt too lousy too headachey too shaky to do anything energetic so I'd stop home. Sometimes I'd stay in bed half the morning and sometimes I'd lounge in the loungeroom—where else?—and watch telly and sometimes I'd go out for a walk or window shopping or a movie matinee. I s'pose it didn't take any great intelligence—if it did I would've had a bona fide excuse—to see something was very wrong but all through those months I shied away from looking it in the face. Once or twice I thought of those pamphlets in the litter bin ... but how do you explain it even to yourself your unwillingness to confront the truth especially when it's so obvious so blatantly obvious to everyone else?

One evening a month or two after the last bout I was horribly sick. I didn't get it diagnosed so maybe it was the accumulative effect of too much alcohol and not enough food but I remember thinking it might be food poisoning. I don't know why. Stan'd gone to the laundry to do his clothes so I was by myself sick and trembly and gosh-awful and scared. He came back with his clean clothes in a bag—dumped them down and came and hovered over me—begging me to go to a doctor—anything—anywhere—he'd take me—he'd call a taxi—and all the while his great galumping shape stood over me blocking out the light the air till I couldn't *stand* it any more. I managed to mutter I'd do something—anything—but not anywhere)—so long as he'd move away from me. Go out of the room. Leave me alone. Finally he *did* go to his room and leave me alone but that wasn't much better. I still had that awful panicky feeling—that I'd lost control and didn't know why—and I just felt so incredibly miserable I wished I could expire right there and then stuck right in my chair.

I must've gone to bed and slept then because I felt a bit better next morning. Stan hung round not wanting to go to work and I stayed in bed and he brought me a cup of tea and a slice of toast and I told him to stop fussing and buzz off and at last he did. After a long while I got up carefully—as if I expected a few bits to drop off as soon as I left the safety of the bed—and wandered into the kitchen and had a drink and wandered back to the loungeroom and sat down and after another long spell of suspended animation I picked up the phone book. I should've known where to look but I shuffled to and fro trying to get my eyes into focus and after what seemed like hours but can't have been I thought I'd found what I was looking for and dialled. A voice said "Missen Hydraulics. Can I help you?" I put the phone down and tried again. This time I was in luck and got a nice-sounding woman (maybe the one I'd got months ago) who gave me an address and a day and a time without fuss. Perhaps she knew the long and thorny way perhaps she understood the burst of reckless courage—except it was only various shades and degrees of misery. But then Tuesday seemed awfully close. Perhaps I could go Tuesday next month after a month's concentrated thought if I was capable of concentrated thought. After a bit of lunch I wandered slowly down as I knew Stan'd be about finished. I still felt awful but I passed it off as lack of exercise and in fact being out in the air if it could be called fresh seemed to liven me up a bit like the ancient stable pony coming out and wondering why the rest of the neddies are bucking and carrying on.

I went in by the delivery door as Aggie went out the front door. Stan was still messing round in the kitchen and seemed pleased to see me or maybe was just glad he could postpone finding out which hospital offered the best drying-out-drunks service. I sat down. He handed me a glass of orange juice and offered some leftover *bigos*. I turned them down. I wasn't hungry. All those months I'd been losing weight without really noticing and I s'pose I looked pretty awful. Pasty-faced. Dull stringy hair. But whatever my various faults vanity's never been

one of them though I s'pose you can go to the other extreme and become a blot on the landscape.

Now I was here I couldn't think why I'd come. In some sort of roundabout way Stan was meant to make my mind up for me. "Of course! Just the thing for you. You'll feel a new woman. A new something anyway!" He didn't know that. He just sat there talking about some changes he was planning to make in his menu. I didn't listen partly because I'd just had a brainwave. He fixed me with a stern eye and said well what did I think? I guess he knew I hadn't been listening. I just mumbled "It's your joint—" (which wasn't strictly true) "you can do what you like." That wasn't much help so he stood up and said he was coming home now. He locked the door and we walked back through what sunshine penetrated the alley and he said we needed to hire casual help for the evenings. I saw this as a veiled hint—either I could come and do more work—or maybe I should say some work—or I could part with the ready to hire someone. I muttered if the place was making enough to pay their salary fine he could go ahead.

He dropped the subject and went into his bedroom to lie down for a while. It occurred to me he looked tired not sleepy but sort of haggard as though he had something big on his mind. I don't know why but I suddenly felt certain he hadn't applied for asylum after all and therefore he was an illegal immigrant who would get caught and end up in the Scrubs or get deported and end up in Siberia. Either way his future didn't look too rosy. I sat round in front of the telly most of the evening and tried not to think of anything. Next morning I came down to the restaurant with him. He was a hard bloke to please in the kitchen. Elsewhere he allowed himself to be bossed around but he had an unexpected streak in him—a sort of perfectionism which manifested itself in his cabbage rolls but didn't extend to his socks for example. He looked over my shoulder while I attempted to put those blooming things together with shaky fingers then he picked one up which I must admit did look like something a prehistoric omnivore might've dropped and said "You call tsis—cabbarge roll?"

"No mate. I call it a hot dog. Can't you guess?"

"Vat iss tsis—hot dog?"

He knew. And he knew it was my fingers that weren't behaving. Well I s'pose he did. He'd had enough demos. But for the first time—faintly—I was aware of something existing under the sarcasm the futility the banal jokes. A tiny seed of something. I don't know what to call it. Friendship perhaps but I'd never looked on men as potential friends. Strictly speaking I didn't look on anyone as a potential friend. I knew perfectly well Stan needed me or more precisely needed my money a place to stay someone's company specially someone who didn't ask many questions or expect many answers. But that didn't seem to be enough for him which was his bad luck.

It wasn't far but I took a bus on Tuesday night. I thought of going on to the terminus instead but it'd probably be full of drunks too. The chundering kind. I found my way to the back of a church hall where I knocked and went in. I don't know why but I was feeling sort of queasy as though I'd been eating fatty mince. Nerves I thought or my eight-hour-drought.

There were about a dozen people there—three women and nine or ten men. One of the girls was West Indian another a very brash very artificial blonde. The third was a woman maybe in her mid-forties a gentle tired-looking person with greying hair and a refined sort of voice. They said hello and someone explained what went on and handed me a card with the 'Twelve Deadly Ways to a Virtuous Life' on it. (That's not its name—that's how I felt about it then.) When they gave me a chance to say what'd bought me bumbling into a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous I gave 'em a stirring rendition of the Li'l Aussie Battler all stops out. It sounded pathetic. Would've brought tears to the eyes of a hardened crim. And instead it just got accepted and they passed on to someone else and I ended up feeling a bit of a dill. Not that it wasn't the truth but I s'pose you could say it was a carefully edited version.

We had tea and sweet biscuits afterwards and the woman with the refined voice came over to talk—maybe she thought I was her generation and seeing I was coming up to thirty-five I s'pose I was—maybe she was just being sociable. I don't s'pose she thought we had much in common. Audrey Beetson was a minister's wife. I don't know why that shocked me—I thought I was unshockable—but in a way it did. For me to be there wasn't surprising. For her it was an almighty fall from grace. Her story was quite simple. Two family crises one on top of the other—the death of their daughter in a road accident—the news their son'd been caught in an attempted hold-up to support a drug habit—and next thing her sherry before dinner was a mid-afternoon one then a pre-lunch sip then something after breakfast to settle her nerves which were all to pieces. I could see the similarity between that and the stories of several others but offhand I couldn't see any similarities between hers and mine. She'd told us about the struggle to keep up a normal life (carrying peppermints in her bag to suck before going out in public) and trying to pretend to herself and everyone else that nothing serious was the matter.

She offered me a lift home afterwards. I wasn't keen—not because I cared whether she drove us into the back of a bus but because I wanted to remain aloof not get drawn in. Mistaking my reason for not rushing her offer she sighed and said "Don't worry. I'm alright at the moment ... and with the Lord's help I'll beat it. At last I'm sure of that." What could I say? I shrugged and got into her Mini and told her where I lived. Five minutes later she pulled up at the entrance to the laneway—just as Stan was coming home from work. I thought he must've knocked off early—while the cat's away etc—but a glance at my watch told me it was late. Ah well—time can fly even when you're not having fun. He saw me get out of the car and ambled over. I couldn't think what to introduce him as—my chef? my business manager? a visitor from eastern Europe?—so I just mumbled "This is Stanislaw ... Mrs Beetson."

Audrey shook hands and said "How do you do?" very nicely as though she'd just been introduced to (minor) Royalty. After a few more pleasantries she said goodnight and drove away. Stan looked at me in a curious way but didn't ask any questions. Maybe he was thinking how nice I'd found a friend? We stood there a minute then turned into the dark recesses of the lane the chill wind snapping at our legs like a blue heeler on the job.

I felt very tired not because I'd done anything except talk and eat and anyway it was a sort of emotional tiredness—a fraying of the nerves—a dryness in the throat—a dizziness in the brain. I flopped into a chair and thought of a mellow port. Stan flopped into another one. I don't know what he was thinking of but he reminded me of an overgrown teddy bear with his brown jumper and his hair in a floppy mess on his forehead and not for the first time I thought you certainly wouldn't pick him out of a crowd on account of his looks. In fact you wouldn't pick him out of anywhere for anything except his size though when I came to think about it later he *did* have nice white teeth. Well he's still got them. It didn't matter what he looked like really—I didn't plan to enter him in Playboy of the Month. The main thing was he was undemanding company and he worked hard. All other qualities were superfluous.

"Did you hav nice time?" he asked conversationally.

"Oh luv-er-ley. Great. A real treat. Best night out in ages."

He obviously longed to ask me where I'd been to have such fun and finally I put him out of his agony. "I went to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. You know—for drunks like me?" I sat back and closed my eyes. Then after a long silence I opened them and added "Maybe I can kick it. *If I want to.*"

"Yas. Ver you keek it luv?"

I didn't like that luv business. He'd picked it up somewhere and now used it regularly. I thought if I ignored it sooner or later he'd drop it. Anyway he didn't understand I decided so it wasn't worth the effort of trying to explain things like 'one day at a time'. I evaded his question—stood up—yawned loudly—went off to bed. But in that along with a number of

other things I think I underestimated him. He had that sort of canniness I s'pose I'd got from somewhere too except that his seemed to be directed into less destructive channels. It turned out he had a bloody good idea what I was trying to do and how I intended to go about it. But not why. I didn't really know that myself ... and the conclusions he drew belong only in male fantasies. But I might as well record here and now that he was beaut. I didn't appreciate it at the time though—my commitment wasn't very strong a step or two up from non-existent maybe—and I was always on the verge of giving in. In fact I did just that next morning—“Can't let all this madeira go to waste ... the Red Cross won't want it ... might as well finish it off etc ...”

Stan seemed to treat it as a secret battle of wits between us though that never occurred to me then—in which he unearthed bottles of port and cream sherry and madeira and poured them down the kitchen sink or sold them on the blackmarket or had nightcaps with Aggie or stored them away against a rainy day. I never learnt their fate because I couldn't ask because that'd be admitting I'd bought them in the first place.

He seemed to make a point of having lots of non-alcoholic drinks on hand and he tried to get me to drink all sorts of weird tissanes which might've struck joy to the heart of a Pole but which I refused point blank to try. Cleverest of all he set in motion a campaign—well I think he did—to try and make me take more interest in the RP. Very carefully he began asking my opinion on all sorts of silly little things—and refusing to be put off by my standard answer “It's your joint. You can do what you like.” I didn't twig what was going on. I began to feel vaguely uneasy about the business. For some reason I couldn't put my finger on it seemed to be going downhill fast.

Perhaps I'd been a trusting fool after all to put up all that money just because he'd pasted on his lost-dog look. Maybe it was a conman's trick of the trade? Maybe bankruptcy was staring me in the face? And *he* was base enough to think I'd jump into the fray if I thought my hip-pocket was going to suffer. I s'pose he was right. Yet in a funny way that old belief'd been crumbling away almost without me noticing. I knew now money'd never been the key to the Secret Garden ... but that didn't mean I had a clue what was.

One day when Aggie and I were alone for a few minutes I discreetly brought out the brainwave I'd had a while ago. Perhaps I wasn't very tactful but I thought the idea might intrigue her with its appropriateness if not its sheer originality. I was keen to play Cupid and she and Stan were to be my raw material—so at one blow I could get rid of Stan yet still keep the business ‘in the family’. Aggie looked at me. She looked and looked and finally and beautifully and tactfully she pointed out she'd been under the impression Stan was already ‘taken’. My eyes must've gone a bit poppy. I know I frowned and looked suspicious. I could hardly believe he'd been playing round right under my nose and me not knowing a thing about it! That was men for you I s'pose my Mum would've said. Still it was his business and strictly speaking there was no reason for him to tell me unless he was squandering the profits on some fast customer he had tucked away—though if that *was* the case surely I could persuade him to move in with her and be done with it?

Several hours later while I was having a bath the truth suddenly struck me like a cold wet washer chucked in my face. Of course! How could I be so incredibly dumb?! Aggie and probably everyone else simply believed Stan and me were shacked up and she couldn't understand why I'd been making such a stupid suggestion! I felt hot and embarrassed. And angry. Angry with myself—angry with Aggie—angry with Stan for putting me in that position. If I could've closed down the restaurant that minute and sent them both flying to the nearest dole queue with fleas in their ears I would've. And when those feelings died down I just felt sort of worn out and washed up—and I wasn't all that keen on ever seeing Aggie again. But there was nothing to be done but stay away from the RP for a few weeks.

I went to AA each Tuesday. Sometimes there were new faces but Audrey usually came and ran me home afterwards. I don't know why she wanted to and I never asked. One night she said rather sadly as we nipped through the late traffic "If only John could've *understood* ... instead of thinking I was just being difficult on purpose or that I was trying to embarrass him. All he could tell me over and over was to pull myself together ... it's strange when I think of all the people with drink problems he's counselled over the years—and now I wonder what help he could possibly have been? He couldn't bring himself to see—let alone admit—that I needed help and he couldn't give it to me." I wished she'd put the radio on—to hide the hurt in her voice. I didn't want to think about other people's problems or get all churned up inside. I thought maybe it's better not to have anyone to care—that way you aren't made to feel guilty about the mess you've made of your own life or the shame you've dumped upon your nearest and dearest.

Another time she told me about her son Peter and the one-year-sentence he'd copped and what it was like visiting someone in prison and how she felt she'd failed him and—more discreetly—how her husband tried to keep his distance from the whole mucky business—"Not now dear—you *know* the Bishop's coming to dinner"—oh yes I could just see him copping out. I guess a whole lot of emotion got chucked round in that little car and none of it was mine and I don't know why I ended up feeling sorry for that eel of a parson—not that he'd want my pity—but I think it was because Audrey'd faced up to things asked herself difficult questions done a real couch-job (she asked me some tricky ones too but I didn't pretend to have any answers) but her husband had obviously done the old Blame-Shuffle-Hop-be-Bop.

To me Audrey was a lovely person gentle and affectionate always interested to hear about the RP. She even came and ate there one night—and got stared at non-stop—and I couldn't help thinking it might've done 'dear John' a bit of good to've come with her. One day—I forget how—I got talking about Jenny's Place and of course she found that very interesting. Too interesting. I realised too late I should've kept my big mouth shut. Because she asked me to cook for a weekend gathering a sort of retreat for twenty pregnant teenagers at a large house just north of Waddington on the way to Cambridge. Audrey might like to regard this as part of her cure. I didn't want it to be part of mine. So I told her without any expressions of regret that I was going to be extra busy that weekend. I didn't even bother thinking up a reason why it was going to be so frantic. But if Audrey was disappointed or dubious or both she kept it to herself. But then slowly very slowly I got round to feeling a bit of a louse. After all I knew perfectly well Stan could manage Saturdays without me—well to be honest he could manage every day without me—and the joint was closed Sundays. He treated it as his day of rest only going to a church in Islington (that's where he *said* he went) so's he could hear Mass in Polish and then he might do a little gentle sightseeing like a load of senior citizens on tour or he might go for a walk and feed a few leftovers to the pigeons. I don't know what the pigeons thought of their diet of stale *szaszlyk* or *pyzy*—because I stayed in bed or flipped through a Sunday paper or occasionally vacuumed the floor—well I don't know if pigeons think.

At last I gave in and told Audrey I thought I could come after all. She seemed pleased. So two weeks later we set out with another woman called Diane who'd probably also been bludgeoned into it with mute appeal to her better nature and inborn kindness. We drew up outside one of those places which are called stately homes and carried in a few boxes of donated lettuces and apples like a family of rabbits coming to stay. 'Stately' it might've been though 'large' would be nearer the mark (apart from two fancy columns out the front it was pretty dreary-looking) but home-like it certainly wasn't. The plumbing was lousy—the rooms echoed coldly—the kitchen had the frigs next to the giant old range and also though I didn't find this out till next morning provided board and lodging to a tribe of starving mice.

I shared a room upstairs with Audrey and Diane but the other rooms up there seemed to

be full of boxes of paper. I don't know whose. The recorded history of the Church of England? Junk left by the previous owner? Space rented to Britain's bureaucracy drowning in its own mess? I've never asked and it's still there. Downstairs slept the mums-to-be who were dumped at the front door around 3 pm and dumped sometime before that by creeps who said "If you loved me you would."

I didn't feel love for any of them but worked stolidly in the kitchen preparing steak-and-kidney pies and butterscotch puddings. Audrey seemed to be everywhere making them welcome encouraging this one to rest and that one to go for a walk in the fresh air. There was a good deal of noise and swopping gossip and isn't so-and-so pop star gorgeous and how did you get into this mess (aw the usual way you know) and isn't morning sickness the pits and can we watch telly and "Audrey can we have a coop o' tay" and so on. I was glad I was safe in the kitchen. After dinner they had a bit of a singalong and played some tapes then they sat round in the loungeroom which Diane kept calling 'the parlour' as though we were a lot of ruddy spiders and they had what were thought to be (by Audrey anyway) very earnest discussions about the future. I've heard the sight of a pregnant woman makes others feel clucky but they didn't have any effect on me because I'd always known I wasn't the maternal type. Still the weekend passed off okay and several of them thanked me before getting back into the coach for the return trip to London and one kid who looked about twelve asked me for the recipe I'd made for Sunday smoko which was a watered-down version of a *Charlotte à la Valentin*. On our way back to London Audrey frightened me and maybe Diane too by saying she hoped to arrange such weekends regularly. Her idea being if the girls could have a quiet (not literally) unstressful weekend in the country away from all the people who might be putting on the thumbscrews they'd find it easier to decide what they wanted to do—keep their babies or give them up for adoption. I don't know—it wasn't exactly my field of expertise—but maybe she had a point. Although she didn't put the question there and then I knew she was well not exactly counting on me but hoping. I didn't give her any encouragement and I was jolly glad to get home and put my feet up.

I'd only told Stan I was going cooking for a kids' camp so he had a few questions waiting about the 'kids'. I got the sneaking suspicion he had a soft spot for kids and I s'pose many people have—when their only contact with them is walking past a schoolyard with the kids safe inside the railings or seeing them speed through the supermarket securely strapped into pushchairs. So before he could get all misty-eyed about those poor little deprived kids from the slums I told him not to get carried away because the 'kids' were unmarried mums. That didn't stop him getting all mournful about deprived kids. No. He just put their ages back to zero. After he'd said gloomily "Iss sad!" about three times I said "Heck! Come off it Stan! Anyone'd think you'd never been a sailor! And how many kids did *you* leave behind eh? Just tell me that?" He got upset and tried to intimate he wasn't that kind of bloke and I said that in my experience for what it was worth if there was another kind then I hadn't met any of them. He got annoyed stood up and marched out of the room like the Red Army in thundering retreat so that question never got answered.

I went several more times to the house in the country and finally and very reluctantly committed myself to one weekend per month. I continued to go to AA. I got to know Leon pretty well—it was hard not to because he nearly always had dinner downstairs and sometimes he left home and hearth and imitation coals to come round of a Sunday afternoon and have dinner with us. After dinner we would—shades of Mum!—sit round and play bridge. I wasn't keen and anyway I didn't have much of a clue how to play it but I got shoved in because they needed a third player and gradually got round to enjoying it. If I wanted to watch telly they'd sit in the kitchen and drink coffee and talk nostalgically about—well I don't know what they talked about. The Bug and the Wista and the Warta. Poland in Spring. Strange and mocking

Polish jokes. I didn't know and I didn't care.

One day I forgot when I learnt how Leon'd come to England. He'd gone to sea on a small collier—I don't know how he wangled this as he had no seafaring background but from what he told me I wouldn't of been surprised if every Jew in the place hadn't shipped out even before Hitler marched in. I thought I could see a sympathetic chord between him and Stan except for the minor detail I still didn't know why Stan'd wanted out. Nor for that matter did Leon.

I felt sort of privileged when Leon shared his secret sorrow—I don't know why just the thought he'd never told anyone else I s'pose. In his little snuffly voice he said he could forgive and forget but he still harboured the gnawing regret that he had no children or grandchildren no one to follow—the glorious name of Michnik it seemed would go to the grave with him. With what was a lot of tact for me I asked how come he'd never married anyone since he'd come to England? His childhood sweetheart had perished and it was many years before he could reconcile himself to her death. In his sailing days he'd used his shore leave in the desperate attempt to find a country which would accept his family. He got turned down again and again until Denmark accepted both the Michnik and Barcikowski families en masse. Getting from Warsaw to Copenhagen was another saga which took him an hour to relate. Denmark got most of its Jews safely to Sweden but these new arrivals were out of luck—they were rounded up and plonked on a train for Germany and they all got killed except Leon. He didn't know why he was the one to survive but he grew extremely emotional telling me all this. Family feeling doesn't run strong in my veins but I patted his hand and made clucky noises and looked sympathetic. At war's end he'd been allowed to come to England to start again. But he was broken-hearted and by the time his memories had begun to fade if they really had I s'pose he was just a drab little middle-aged bloke without much money and without the sort of personality to attract people—women—to him and so he'd mouldered away in his mid-Victorian hideyhole.

But all this explained one strange thing—the procession of rolled-up washed-out sozzled Danes who took advantage of Leon's sofa his kitchen cupboard his bathroom—or put the bite on him for a few quid. He was repaying an old debt. Except I think it'd long since been repaid and was just a habit now. I can think of habits I'd prefer to acquire.

Stan seemed a bit restless as if things weren't going the way he hoped. To my way of thinking things were jogging along okay. He'd kept his side of the bargain and somehow I'd started talking about 'our' place and 'our' eating joint. Just when I'd got pretty well reconciled to having him around he started to talk about moving. I said "Sure. Go ahead. Don't let me stop you." (As if I would!) I wondered vaguely if he'd found a girl. It wasn't an intrusive sort of curiosity because I couldn't imagine a girl specially wanting him unless she hoped to give up cooking for life but after thinking this over I decided I was barking up the wrong tree. Stan was trapped. Simple as that. Not that he hadn't made his bed and was now stuck with lying on it but he couldn't run off with a girl unless he didn't tell her he wasn't s'posed to be here and if she wasn't already gone on him when he whispered that interesting bit of news—well for sure that'd put her off. Nor could he leave the restaurant after putting so much sweat into it poetically speaking. It might provide him with bed and board but it wasn't any jam in his pocket. I officially employed Aggie and our casual Lisa but Stan was the phantom cook. He did the work but he didn't exist.

Funnily enough one thing did change. After keeping a low profile for so long he started to show himself. Sort of testing the air perhaps? If I was there or things were extra slack he'd amble out and have a bit of a chat in Polish or Czech or Russian or even English with some of his customers. He was a gregarious sort of bloke really and I s'pose the months of semi-silence were affecting him. His great rolling guffaws'd echo round the place at what were probably

pretty revolting jokes. You might say he added the sort of Mine Host touch the joint'd been lacking. It had an unfortunate sidelight as far as I was concerned—apart from being stuck with more of the chores—because word'd got round somehow that he was a soft touch—and even worse it proved to be spot on! That blighter was prepared to part with money—mine naturally—right left and centre mostly left of centre. I preferred life when he stayed securely hidden in the kitchen like a socially revolting relative. Those blokes came to Stan with their sob stories and even *I* got dragged in to offer advice—on how to send flowers to a wilting girlfriend somewhere on the Baltic and where to buy certain items of lingerie preferably in black satin. I said I didn't know. But Stan directed them around London in their search for this and that mostly disreputable and handed out advice with as little understanding as John Beetson counselling drunks.

Deep down though I had the feeling he was scared. Well—worried. I couldn't imagine Stan being scared of anything. Somehow things were going too smoothly and it couldn't last. So I began to wonder if his new policy was a rehash of his old one—You halp me I'll halp you. Building up credit so someday he could ask a favour back if need be. Eventually I discovered I did him an injustice with that suspicion. His hospitality was genuine. He was as ready to part with his own money as he was to part with mine and I think I can say that all the help he's handed out over the years was done with no thought of repayment. But it all came to the crunch the day he said he'd move out and that he was real grateful to me. I said that was big of him and he nodded and looked gloomy. I don't know why. Then he said would I like to close down the restaurant because he knew I hated it and had only done it for him? Or words to that effect. His offer'd caught me off-guard so I just mumbled something about how would he manage? Did he have something else lined up? He said he'd manage okay but he went on looking glum.

So that seemed to be settled as simple as that.

Of course nothing in life is ever that simple—anyone can tell you that particularly if they've been asked to answer Yes or No. I thought he probably had plenty of contacts by now and that one of them had offered him a job in which case he was going about it in a very devious way. He was the sort of bloke who always falls on his feet—who else could've conned me into doing the last thing I wanted to do?—so if he left the flat and I gave up the two leases (apart from having to face Leon but I could disappear into a luxury suite at the Savoy and need never see him again) I was certain Stan'd find another backer. He had the runs on the board. I was still thinking it over when I went to bed that night lying there with the smudgy grey-black sky and its anaemic horizon for company ... and slowly the knowledge crept up on me. Sure Stan'd muddle through somehow. But what about me? What would I do? All through those months of getting things started moving house learning to cope with him around the place upsetting my solitude—there'd been a sort of comforting hustle and bustle. (I'd never thought of it as comforting before and the thought surprised me.) Things were happening whether I wanted them to or not—I was living life not just plodding along in the grey fog of depression. But without the restaurant without Stan ... alone in the flat this or any other flat ... would I be as vulnerable—as much a prey to those feelings of futility and despair as the me who'd staggered down to the river that night? Once the thought was there it refused to go away and stop making me miserable.

Of course I could go and swallow my pride and say "No. Stay. I like this set-up." But I wasn't so mean I could pretend to myself it was the ideal domestic arrangement for a normal or fairly normal red-blooded man even if he didn't mind living with a well-stocked pin-cushion—I was going to say hedgehog but I've heard they're sweet little creatures who like drinking milk and eating snails. Still I hung back from the most obvious step—the idea of trying to develop some sort of relationship with Stan—because the thought of him fumbling over me quite frankly gave me cold shivers. His big rough red hands touching me ... his big lop-sided face

near mine ... I put those thoughts aside quick smart I can tell you! And anyway he probably wasn't interested—not now—not after I'd told him where to put his straying hands and buttered tongue and that was a perverse kind of relief. He liked my money he praised my cooking—sometimes—he thought I wasn't bad looking but that happily didn't add up to love. So I was back to Square One.

I got out of bed dressed and went through to the loungeroom—I knew I wasn't going to sleep with all those awful thoughts churning round and there didn't seem much point pacing up and down the room like Hercule Poirot reaching a climax and waking Stan while I was at it. I'd go out for a walk. With a bit of luck the cold air'd blow some of those dreary thoughts away. I thought I was being pretty quiet with my little nocturnal outing but I'd just reached the door and put my hand on the latch when Stan suddenly loomed over me. For such a hefty bloke he was pretty light on his feet like that boxer bloke who claimed to move like a butterfly but if Stan tried to pretend he was a bee he'd get what-for. His huge paw closed over mine. He was wearing pyjamas of a horrible bilious-looking green which is sometimes misleadingly called lime-green. Their colour made me feel ill and—all of a sudden—I knew just how Wendy'd felt all those years ago. His big hairy chest showed above the top button and the feel of him so close was stifling.

“Ver you goin? Iss vere cold out tsere—”

I shrugged. “I'm aware of that mate. I do have a brain.”

“Vy you vant to go out? Are you seek?”

I didn't follow his reasoning but I just said curtly “I'm going for a walk.”

“No. You can valk in morning.”

I was already upset and having him tell me what I could or couldn't do really made me mad. I yelled at him to get out of my way but he refused to budge. Then he started pulling out stupid reasons why I should stay home. I might get knocked down (he meant mugged)—I might get robbed (I said I wasn't worth robbing for a door key)—I might get raped (he didn't know the word he wanted and I won't repeat his description). I gave up then—shrugged—turned away without looking at him and went back to my bedroom. I slammed the door and got into bed clothes and all after taking a good swig from the bottle of madeira hidden under my singlets. (He didn't know about that one—the great galoot.) But then I don't know why for some stupid reason I felt like crying. I hate women who blub at the drop of a hat but at that moment life seemed like a terrible burden crushing my shoulders turning my brain into a porridgy lump of misery. I finished the bottle but it didn't do much good.

You might say Heck why all the fuss? But I s'pose one of the hardest things I've ever done is to face the simple fact I was fond of Stan—life without him would lack something. But I couldn't tell him that and I couldn't offer him anything except an oddball sort of friendship so I didn't know where to go next. I had no practical experience of relationships and no wish to acquire any. Of course I'd observed Wendy and Rod together—Jamey and Jill—even Ann and Steve but I was blowed if I was going to start acting all coy and lovey-dovey or telling him what cute ears he had. I didn't want *their* relationships but I didn't know what *I* wanted. I was nearly asleep when the solution came to me. I'd return to the Thames but this time I'd have my will drawn up properly and leave everything to Stan and Leon and maybe a bit for Ann and that'd be that. They'd remember me with kindness and nostalgia. They'd sit over their vodka saying “Ah yes we didn't appreciate her when she was around. There's nothing for it now but a Restauracja Jenny” and they'd raise their glasses with red-rimmed eyes “To Jenny!” Clink. I felt quite good by the time I slept.

But I felt rotten next morning. I stayed in bed. I could hear Stan clattering round making breakfast and I guess he waited a while but when I didn't show up he came and knocked. I said “Go without me. I'm not coming down today.” Owner's prerogative. That didn't satisfy him or

maybe he thought owners didn't have a God-given right to slack off. Anyway he opened the door and came in and walked over to the bed and looked down at me in an anxious sort of way. I didn't want to look at him or catch his eye so I turned away and stared out the window. There wasn't much to see only two sparrows hopping and fluttering from chimney-pot to chimney-pot their minds it seemed on love and courtship. I closed my eyes instead. They felt gritty.

There was a long silence while Stan tried out (I s'pose) a variety of questions which might suit the occasion. I wasn't surprised when it was his usual. "Are you seek?"

"No."

"Hav you been drinkin?"

"No."

I heard him sniff but at least I'd had enough sense to put the bottle under the bed where it'd spilt the dregs into my slippers.

"Tsen vat iss tse matter?"

"I'm being miserable. Just bloody miserable. Does that satisfy you? Now buzz off."

He didn't do what he'd been told to do. Instead he sat down on the bed which sagged horribly and sent me rolling downhill to bump into him. Maybe he thought that was me being affectionate because he put his arms around me very gingerly. The bed tipped lower and I wondered when it'd give up and drop us on the floor. The whole thing struck me as ridiculous with Stan sitting there not knowing what to do next. Well strictly speaking I imagine he'd had a bit of practice here and there but it wasn't doing him much good.

Finally he said slowly "Jen—luv—ve go now yas? If you not feel so bad?"

I sighed. I knew I was just being bloody-minded so I pushed back the blankets. After all there was a limit to how long we could remain like '101 Positions You've Never Considered' in a Swedish manual. If he was surprised to see me fully dressed he gave no sign beaming instead like someone who's just achieved a major victory of mind over matter. He still had his arms round my shoulders so I s'pose he thought seeing he'd got that far he might as well go the whole hog. He leant forward and kissed me on the mouth.

It was horrible. I wiped my mouth. "Okay! Quit your slobbering."

He looked hurt and a bit angry. I guess he was entitled to and I s'pose I smelt like something found lurking round the Red Lion's dustbin.

"Vat iss tsis—slobberin?" he asked slowly and ominously.

"Oh—well ..." I thought of trying to come up with a diplomatic explanation but he knew already or if he didn't it wasn't hard to make a bloody good guess. "You go on down. I'll be there in five minutes." I sounded calm and businesslike.

He went away and I kept my word or near enough but all through the day there was a sort of unspoken tension in the air. I felt pretty awful and retreated to the toot pretty often to take an aspirin and sponge my face and tell myself I was the blooming owner wasn't I so why was I putting myself through this purgatory?

I grew more and more depressed. The morning had shown me what wasn't the answer. I hadn't got past first base. I never would. I had no answers. Only retreat. Even if he made excuses for me I knew I'd hurt his ego and he wouldn't forgive that in a hurry. But I couldn't explain my side of things. Maybe there was a way to return everything to its previously bearable state. Maybe it was better for him to leave and I'd cope as best I could. But all my thoughts depressed me and that evening I returned to the Red Lion for the first time in months.

Chapter Three

I was a wreck next day. Sick miserable dejected. Stan was still upset and made no attempt to cajole me into doing anything. He went off and left me in bed. By the time I got up I'd come to a tentative decision—I'd put aside my pride my obsession with secrecy and go and

talk it over with the one person I knew would listen—even if she had no advice to give or no advice I was willing to take.

I rang and asked if we could meet somewhere. Audrey agreed sounding a bit nervous. Did she see me with a bottle in one trembling hand and a glass in the other? I didn't tell her I'd only be bringing my hangover. I had a cup of coffee then went and gargled with Stan's mouthwash. It was the first time in all our months of sharing I'd ever used anything of his. I went down the alley past the back entrance of the RP along the road to the bus stop and joined Audrey at a small café in Stepney. She looked me over discreetly as we sat down. Maybe she didn't think much of the face I'd seen in the mirror that morning but she said nothing. We ordered coffee and cheesecake.

Of course the trouble then was—how to get started? How to find the words to explain to someone even someone as sweet as Audrey that you've loved only one person in your life and that person was another woman? And how do you explain why—when you don't understand it yourself? We chatted of this and that and I couldn't get on with the real reason for dragging Audrey all the way here. She waited patiently ... and at last I sort of gulped and said "Audrey—it's about Stan. No. It's me. What I mean is—" I floundered round "I mean I care for him—did you know that?"

It came out like a question on a quiz show—"You too have the chance to win this super washing-machine! Just answer this one easy question!" Audrey nodded cautiously. She'd come to our flat once for a brief visit but I had no idea what conclusions she'd taken away. I think she liked Stan but then it was her British duty to welcome the humble immigrant and her Christian duty to try to like said immigrant.

"Audrey—you know—well I think you know Stan cares for me a bit?" I was tempted to say he used to. She looked surprised. I s'pose I can't blame her. She'd come for coffee and been confronted by peculiar questions instead.

"Well yes Jen. That's what I've always thought."

"Mmm ... I s'pose you're right" I said gloomily. "It's just me. I don't want him to—*touch* me. That's all. It gives me the creeps."

Audrey's expression changed from surprise to astonishment. That was understandable. I expect she thought along with Aggie we had a cosy little thing going.

"Why do you feel that way?" she asked slowly after chewing it over for a minute or two I s'pose in an effort to come up with something diplomatic.

"Because—I'm—" I stopped and looked at her helplessly. I could—shades of Jamey's horrible wife—say 'a bloody dike' but I'd never identified that way and there was no adequate label I could pull out and stick on myself. I often found other women tiresome silly impractical—I'd seen them race goggle-eyed after big boring slobs—while Wendy raved over 'The Female Eunuch' I'd only been bored—I couldn't see the point of all that soul-searching—women were simply better off without men in their lives. Full stop. "I'm—oh heck I don't know what I am—"

There was a long painful pause.

"Do you remember that time I said a bit about my dad?"

Audrey nodded but kept her forehead in a pucker.

"I s'pose you shouldn't blame other people. But I did. I hated him. I still do when I think about him—and I s'pose I grew up believing that deep down every man was a bastard like him—"

I sat there staring into my cup seeing again that skinny little kid who looked out of the family album. I wasn't that I *wanted* to see her—with her sour expression and accusing eyes and pinched face ... and her secret anger against him against the world. There was nothing loveable about her—nothing I could see anyway and my dad certainly hadn't and if he couldn't

love her who was his own—then how could anyone else? And how could she love him back in the face of all that sarcasm and indifference?

With an effort I managed to go on calmly like an investment broker discussing trends on ‘Your Money’ “I just never wanted a boyfriend. I’ve always avoided men. I hated the thought of a man wanting to touch me ... I can remember someone holding my hand when I was young—and I couldn’t wait to get home and wash it—” There was another pause before I added “I don’t really know why I felt like that.”

Audrey nodded again but still said nothing.

“I’ve only ever loved one person. She was beautiful and it was beautiful—sweet and tender and ... soft ... ” I felt like crying—remembering what I still saw as a betrayal by the one person I’d let come so close to me. The only person. “She married again. I think she only wanted me while she was feeling hurt and disillusioned. But I don’t really know.”

Audrey’d begun to look embarrassed. Poor Audrey. She was an affectionate person often patting my arm or giving my hand a squeeze. And now she wondered—if I’d been thinking?—if I’d been seeing something in it which wasn’t there? I felt vaguely sorry for her.

“It all finished a long time ago. There’s never been anyone else.”

“Except Stan?” she said quietly.

“I don’t know. I thought I’d try—you know—be nice and loving. But it’s no good—even the thought of it gives me the creeps. If only things could go on—friendly but nothing more. Nothing ... physical.”

“Yes.” She sounded rather sad. “But Stan’s not satisfied with leaving things as they are?”

“No-o I don’t think so.” How could he be when he’d just offered to move out and give up the restaurant? But I didn’t tell Audrey that. What’d be the point when I didn’t know if he was offering because of me—or in spite of me?

“You know sometimes I’m frightened for him. I don’t know what I’m scared of exactly—that he’ll be deported I s’pose. But if I didn’t care at all I wouldn’t care what happened to him would I?”

I pushed away my cup and looked up. The startled expression was back on Audrey’s face and my hungover brain struggled to think what clanger I’d dropped this time. Then it dawned on me. Audrey knew nothing of Stan’s status. But she only said “Yes I expect you’re right. But if you were to marry him he’d be safe?”

Of course she shouldn’t have been encouraging illegal immigrants to stay—not with people already squashed in like sardines.

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought of marriage.” I felt tired—tired of thinking about it all. “I still don’t know why he jumped ship. I don’t think it had anything to do with me.”

There was silence. Audrey seemed to be deep in thought. I wasn’t thinking of anything in particular just the general dreariness of life. I was sure now there was no help Audrey could give and I began to wish I’d never tried to bring the subject up. It stirred so many memories which came pouring out filling the present with gloom. What perverse Providence had sent Stan to pluck me out of the Thames? How much happier I would’ve been if he’d gone cheerily on his way thinking it was a porpoise frolicking. What Fate had made Ann Henry cry into her teacup? Why hadn’t we left her to find out if a human being could literally fill a cup with misery?

At last Audrey looked up and said softly “Couldn’t you go on trying? Don’t give up too soon Jen. You’ve had bad experiences but it needn’t always be like that. Perhaps your love isn’t meant to have an extra dimension. I’m not the one to say. But—please—don’t give up yet.” She paused. I knew she’d go away and pray for me. I wasn’t sure I liked the thought. “Perhaps you could set yourself a time limit—that you wouldn’t give up within a month—or better still—six months?”

I nodded without feeling any enthusiasm. Only later it registered she'd said 'love' not 'like'. I wondered why.

"I remember" she went on in a vague way "the first time I went out with a young fellow. He was a friend of my brother's. I'd been brought up very strictly—and he wanted to put his arm round me on our very first date! I was terribly shocked—and sure if I let him I would've gone beyond the pale. Everyone would guess. I'd have crumpled written all over my face—"

She smiled but rather sadly. So did I.

"It sounds so silly now ... but it was a pity in a way because I felt the only thing to do was not go out with him again. So I didn't. I only saw him at cricket matches and things like that. Poor man—he was very nice really." She paused then added hurriedly before I could think what I'd been thinking all along. "Not that it matters of course. John's been a good husband all these years."

But she'd opened the door and shut it too late—in the cupboard was the ghost who'd wanted to put his arms around her.

Time was getting along and the café was filling up with the lunch rush so I paid our bill and as we went out I said "Thanks Audrey. You've been a help. And I'll give it a go—that's a promise—"

"I know it sounds corny but try to think of Stan—of his happiness and what he'd like—"

I guess I pulled a face my usual kind of wry sarcastic face but I didn't say the obvious.

I can't pretend I felt happy about that promise—"a promise is sacred—you must never break a promise—cross your heart and hope to die"—what if my promise made me chunder? Was that an automatic release? But on my way home I gritted my teeth and said I'd give it a month. The first part and I nearly choked on it even though I'd picked up two bottles of tawny port on the way home was to apologise to Stan for what'd happened the previous morning by telling him in a roundabout way I hadn't been feeling myself—and then trying to give him the message without actually saying so that if he ever felt like kissing me again I was game to give it a go.

Fortunately he didn't get my meaning straight off and given the fumes following me round I s'pose that wasn't surprising. For about two days he ignored the bottles I'd plonked smack-bang in front of his eyes in the loungeroom. Then all of a sudden they were gone and I discovered them—empty—in the kitchen tidy.

It was a strange month. Horrible really. But I did try. One day I went and had a facial which involved getting myself smeared with some revolting blue mud and when they'd cleaned that off they plucked my eyebrows to look like Sophia Loren's (I would've preferred them to stay messy like the Queen's) then they talked me into buying some expensive pots of stuff which made me think of someone setting up in business as a circus clown. After that I bought a red and white frock with a white bolero which shows every mark. I felt jolly silly going home in it but I kept telling myself it was time to smarten up a bit. Poor Stan. I can still see the look on his face when I came up the stairs looking like something which'd mislaid its garden party.

He didn't have a clue what was going on but he told me I looked pretty and stopped talking about moving. So if it was an elaborate and devious plot to make me face up to things I guess it was working but neither then or since has he been prepared to admit he was angling for a showdown. In his own way he was a generous and affectionate person. I don't know why this surprised me. Just the feeling I s'pose that anyone from that part of the world must be about as chilly as a Russian winter. Not that I had any previous experience to go on. I was the cold one. Withdrawn and unresponsive. I couldn't remember demonstrating affection in public and there was nothing in my memories which made it seem something open and sweet and natural. Even with Wendy it'd been sort of furtive. A secret best kept hidden. I couldn't remember my parents showing affection. I know they ended up hating each other. I knew they used and

manipulated each other. So if they'd ever loved it must've died before my memories begin.

Stan when he'd got his confidence back wanted to kiss and cuddle every moment like a farce set in a kitchen. But sometimes I felt I was being stifled—that I couldn't breathe. He couldn't seem to watch telly or read a book or talk about the restaurant without wanting to have me tucked into his ample lap like a naughty baby which has to be pinioned by its mother so it doesn't do any more damage. And when he'd get me there he'd be stroking my hair or tickling my neck or something. It made me wonder if a cat's life is all it's cracked up to be.

But each time I'd make myself think of Audrey and pretend I was enjoying myself when in fact I felt more and more desperate. Because how long could I go on pretending? What should I do when Stan decided he wanted to move on from petting and cuddling? Would I break down and have to be carted away? I began getting spasms and made myself sick worrying about everything—which of course sent me back to the Red Lion on regular binges which made Stan upset and only made me feel worse.

One morning Leon came in before opening time. I thought the smell of the 'hunter's stew' must've brought him down but no he asked us to come up later as he had a proposition he thought might interest us. I hoped it was a good offer from a demolition company but after he'd got us settled into armchairs—but without any vodka and I guessed why that wasn't forthcoming—he told us his other tenant who occupied the southern half of the building was closing down his upholstering business and didn't want to renew his lease and would we like first option if we could get permission to expand? It hadn't escaped Leon that the place was a going concern and we had to turn customers away some nights. He was pleased not because he got more out of us but I think because he liked the feeling of life and bustle downstairs.

We talked it over on and off during the next few days and finally I said—because I knew Stan was keen on the idea—I'd go through all the rigamarole with council and health inspectors and bank—the whole caboodle—on one condition. Stan must tell me the truth. He dithered round thinking I'd find it dull but in the end he agreed and said he'd tell me everything (at least the juicy bits) that evening after work. Maybe it'd been preying on his mind. Maybe I had him over a barrel. But as the day wore on I began to grow more and more queasy. Did I really want to know his deep dark secret? Wasn't my life simpler with my head in the sand? It was easier—wasn't it?—when I just thought vaguely he'd left for political reasons whatever political reasons might mean. But sailors are always jumping ship and for all sorts of reasons and some of them aren't nice reasons. So what to say—what to do—if I didn't like what Stan told me? The more I thought about it the more scary and disgusting the possibilities seemed to become. I remembered a book I'd read out of Wendy's shelves about a great big hulking bloke who'd *petted* a woman to death! It gave me shivers up and down my spine because I understood now just how that could happen—what a kick he might get out of it ... the unsuspecting victim lulled and soothed—the vicelike grip closing—the big hands tightening—the murmured endearments ... I'd lived all this time in the same house ... he'd just been biding his time—the lonely woman without relatives or friends to make enquiries over her mysterious disappearance ...

Yes. Who was to say the man wasn't a murderer—a crook—a pervert—a Sunday rapist—the Stroking Monster of Baillie Lane—I'd always known I was a lousy judge of human nature. Why on earth hadn't I had the brains to demand to know what he was up to the minute he poked his nose round my door? I made myself sick. I considered going away for the evening and not coming back.

After all that his story was an anti-climax. I won't put it down word for word for the simple reason that putting Stan down word for word is tiring even if I could remember it that well. I s'pose it loses something in the telling but you can always drop round and ask him for his version.

After the small freighter he'd been on—which took him round the Baltic and to Hamburg and London and Bordeaux and places like that—was sold for scrap he signed on to the 'Bialystok' for a stint in the South Atlantic. It was a fish-processing ship. He'd been home on leave and was due back in Gdansk next day. I already knew his mum was (is) Polish and his father'd been a lieutenant in the Soviet army and he had a married sister Ewa living in Gdynia. It didn't sound much of a family set-up but he thought they were quite happy. Since then I've learnt a lot of Poles got left behind after the war when Poland got new borders in the east. I s'pose they liked it or lumped it and his father was one of them. Anyway after his dad died the family came back and settled in Poland for good and Stan went to Technical College and then to sea and he and Ewa put in for their mum's nationality which hasn't got anything to do with this story except Stan'd obviously blown his chances there. So on his last evening with his mum he went out for a bit of a stroll along the river—I forget which river and anyway Polish geography has never been my strong point—and according to him he'd come upon a little girl and a soldier in a bit of a huddle and the girl was wanting to go home and the bloke was wanting her to stop a while. So Stan put on his shining armour—wandered over—and told the bloke to push off. Well I know for a fact seeing Stan loom out of the mist like an escaped gorilla wouldn't encourage anyone to stand round and argue the point—unless you were already on friendly terms and even then you might think twice if you knew what it was like to be pinned between his lap and his big hairy arms.

It didn't surprise me the bloke did as he was told. The girl too jumped up and scooted. Stan strolled away along the river enjoying the peace of the twilight and feeling sentimental about home and whatnot. Next morning he got on his train after his mum'd kissed him raw and travelled down to the coast but when he got there he found his sister waiting for him because she'd been contacted by their mother who had some awful news for Stan. He dwelt on this point for quite a while I s'pose because he knew I was impatient for him to keep going—or maybe he wanted to reassure me the telephones in Poland *do* work—or even to tell me if there's one thing reliable in this shaky world then it's that he can count on his family.

The point of all this excitement was that the soldier'd been fished out of the river that morning and rumours were flying round the place suggesting Stan'd been responsible for his last resting place being a wet one. Stan didn't do anything—well what can you do in that situation? Grin and bear it?—and the 'Bialystok' was away on sundown standing out to sea through the Bay of Hel which sounds poetic but everyone treated it as ho-hum. Stan didn't appear worried—but then the murderer never does—does he?—and everyone else was soon preoccupied because the ship ran into storm after storm coming out into the North Sea—equinoctial gales or something—and no one cared what the cooks were up to but then the ship had to put into port to repair some storm damage and the port was London—Gravesend to be exact—and Stan along with most of the crew took advantage of the grant of a few hours shore leave but with one crucial difference. He jumped into the Thames and pulled me out.

And then he went south and he, according to him, kept wondering about me if not that soldier in the river. I took this with a large grain of salt. He knew I was safe in hospital. And no one had ever worried about me so I didn't believe this man was about to be the first.

They took processed fish to sell in West Africa and then they found themselves back here for more repairs so it doesn't say much for Polish shipbuilding—and this time when he went on shore he didn't come back. Well for all I know half of 'em didn't. Though I s'pose it would've been in the papers—'Poles Disappear! Diplomatic Row Brewing! Thatcher Blamed!' And eventually he managed to find his way to Forest Gate and as you know he didn't find a warm welcome there.

Having reached the end of his story he sat back and waited for my verdict. He looked me over carefully. Wistfully. Like looking at the judge and wondering if he's having a good day.

I could see his point in staying away but now he'd made himself look twice as suspicious and telling people he had a little cutie-pie tucked away in Forest Gate as a reason for his behaviour wouldn't cut any ice—especially if they put cutie-pie in the witness box.

I sat and thought about it for a good long while. It helped me understand some things better. Why Stan put up with my company—why he didn't like to be left alone with his thoughts—why he used me as a front in his dealings with the world. Even so—did I believe him or didn't I? Had he just threatened the other bloke or had he given him a little nudge like a driver behind a bicycle? I didn't want to have to make a decision. I was sorry I hadn't decided to run my empire from my suite in the Savoy after all. But there was no help for it.

Either I believed ... or I didn't.

Chapter Four

Stan was sitting at the other end of the kitchen table. I got up slowly and went round and put my hands on his shoulders huge in his thick green sweater. I sighed and said "I believe you Stan—but still I'm sorry about it all. What're you going to do now?"

"I don know. Vat can I do? I tsink I vait here an somday I vill get som news."

What sort of news did he have in mind? I couldn't make him out. But it was something else which bothered me. "Are you scared?" I asked him straight out. He chewed on it and finally said "No." That figured. After all I knew he'd jumped forty feet or whatever it was into a cold disgusting river *and* in a thick overcoat *and* in his best shoes. So I fixed him with a beady eye and said I wanted to know why he'd *really* jumped ship. He ummed and ahed and obviously regretted his no and eventually said it was because of me that he'd wanted to see me again. Of course I didn't believe that load of guff and told him so and of course he said if I believed his first story how come I didn't believe this one? So I reminded him of what he'd seen in the hospital. A blotched bloated face with rats' tails growing out the top. Red-eyed and sharp-nosed. Charming.

With a complicated combination of word and mime he drew a very different picture—large sad appealing eyes in a gamine face—a fragile Audrey Hepburn sort of creature. Heart-wrenching. He sounded so sincere that for a moment I actually believed his picture! Then my commonsense got up again and chucked it right back in the storeroom. He pulled me down saying something about my 'sveet littel chin' and started kissing me. I had the suspicion he thought he could stop me asking any more tricky questions—like the blokes in those books Marilyn liked reading—every time the stupid girl'd try to say something the bloke'd stop her with a 'hard bruising kiss'—but and this still seems strange to me—for the first time I found I didn't dislike it—maybe because my mind was on everything else. I don't know.

The next few days were pleasant enough maybe in reaction to all the worry I'd been doing. On Sunday Stan seemed to be feeling a bit adventurous and suggested we go out (or maybe the flat was getting on his works) and after a bit of argument—we've never done anything without 'a bit of argument'—we picked on Kew Gardens as neither of us had ever been there. Of course that'd apply to lots of places. After an hour or so on the train then a short walk we were inside the gardens and wandering up and down and round lily ponds and the pagoda and houses with orchids and cacti and stuff and through patches of scrub. It was a calm day but a bit nippy so I suggested we go into one of the houses and it had a few trees and shrubs from home in it.

I don't see how Stan could've angled this unless he'd been secretly studying a map but when we were inside he asked me to marry him. It wasn't crowded but after gaping at him like a chook choking on a pumpkin seed I looked round furtively to see if anyone was looking. Finally I said something caustic like "Yeah—that's what I always wanted—a name I can't say let alone *spell!*" because he'd truly caught me on the hop. It was one thing to hope we might be

getting to the point where we could work out some sort of friendly ‘arrangement’—but *marriage*? Stan looked a bit hurt and I s’pose regretted rushing in like that. He said I could practise a bit. I thought of saying I could but I doubted whether my bank manager insurance agent and supplier of green beans would be willing but that wouldn’t wash. Stan ordered the beans and so far as I knew they always turned up. At last I said “Okay Stan—I’ll give it a go.” And if it didn’t work there was always the Bahamas. To offset my lack of enthusiasm I added a cheesy grin and Stan looked like a bloke who’d just won the world heavyweight title—punchdrunk but happy. We walked away down an avenue stopping briefly to admire a magnificent maple which for some reason seemed to make him feel sentimental. Eventually we found our way out and back to Kew Gardens station and caught the 4.15 from Richmond and around about sundown we were on our last lap but Stan suggested we go and walk for a while. It’s not much of an area for Sunday strolling with many vessels only coming to the container terminals and things looking a bit ratty and rundown but we walked for ages and passed the ‘Argus Leonides’ and the ‘Chikako Maru’ and then a small Polish vessel the ‘Tadeusz Kosciuszko’ coming up behind a tug and I couldn’t help thinking of long ago when I knew each train coming through.

The sky grew red and grey and angry-looking and the wind off the water was cold and smelt of mudflats and garbage. But we stood there a while with the breeze whipping our hair around and I guess each in our own way felt a bit homesick. Two drab sort of emigres standing there thinking of other places. The colour gradually left the river and the ships and cranes and warehouses stood out blackly against the fading sky and lights began to twinkle along the banks and Stan pressed my hand into his huge hairy paw where it felt nice and warm I s’pose like putting it into a muff and said “I love you *kochana*.”

That was okay—even if I wasn’t sure I believed him—but I didn’t know what to say in return. Would the words choke me or my nose start to grow if I said anything about love? I managed something sickly like “You’re sweet” which didn’t sound convincing to me but seemed to make him happy. Then we went home and warmed a bit of potato soup and half a pork-and-vegetable pie and it was much like any other Sunday evening except for the smirk on Stan’s face.

He started in on a long story about his sister’s wedding which sounded more like riotous living and debauchery to my austere way of thinking and half way through his thrilling reminiscences—thrilling to him—I suddenly remembered Leon. Stan didn’t look me in the eye when he said he’d told Leon not to come today because we might be back late. I said “Why should we be late?” He got cagey mumbling something about he thought I might be hard to convince and it turned out he’d been thinking of taking me somewhere nice for dinner. I looked at the bit of pie on my plate and told him he was despicable. He hadn’t heard the word before and wanted to know what it meant. I said ‘nasty’ and he got upset. But the thing which upset *me* was the fact he’d discussed his strategy with Leon. By this time he realised he’d put his foot in squarely and started backpedalling assuring me he hadn’t said a word to Leon but I refused to believe him and cleared away and went to bed. Actually I was glad to lie down as I was dog-tired but once I’d got snug I started to think what an awful mistake I’d made. For some reason I’d briefly gone berserk in Kew Gardens.

Yet he seemed so *happy*. That was the worst part. No one else had ever looked at me like that and I couldn’t imagine why he should—unless he was thinking of getting his mitts on all that money though as he didn’t exist I could see problems for him in achieving that hope. So perhaps he felt sorry for me? I guess there are worse reasons for proposing marriage. I spent the next week trying to avoid any thought or mention of it hoping it would go away like the smell of winter damp. I was so-o-o sorry I was in a rush when Leon tried to offer his congratulations. I made a point of going to the newsagents when Stan sat down to write to his

mum and came back with a copy of 'Woman and Home' which completely absorbed me but which I've never read before or since.

One time I'd asked him if they might put the thumbscrews on his mum to discover his whereabouts. He didn't like my blunt question—I s'pose he had his own worries—but said he had his ways of reassuring her which I've since come to believe involved several of his customers but I didn't ask any more questions. He couldn't understand when I said I didn't think my family would want to know what I was up to—I hadn't yet worked out how to break it all off without hurting his feelings—because in his book I should've been firing off a telegram or better still considering my supposed wealth a transworld phone call. I told him they didn't have a phone and telegrams are upsetting to old people—Mum would've been about fifty-five then—because they always think it's a death in the family. But there was one person I couldn't tell lies to. I s'pose you think I shouldn't tell lies to Stan either? Maybe not. But I seem to think he prefers them to my unvarnished truths. The next weekend was to be one in the country and I'd been wondering what to say to Audrey—that I was getting married but with a bit of luck I could keep stalling till Stan got tired of me? Soon after we'd stowed the inevitable greens Audrey said to me "You seem different Jen—though I'm not sure how to describe it. More relaxed perhaps? I'm so glad things are working out for you and Stan."

That was nice of her but not very perceptive. "Yeah well—" there didn't seem much point in beating about the bush "you're invited to the wedding Audrey—when we set a date ... but I've got a heck of a lot of doubts about the whole business."

Audrey started to look worried. "Jen dear—don't rush into it if you're not sure."

"I'm not rushing really—" (I wasn't rushing at all) "and I s'pose getting married can't be worse than jumping in the Thames?"

I hadn't meant to say that and I could've kicked myself. Not even in the bonhomie of Tuesday nights had I let *that* cat out of the bag so I added hurriedly "Generally speaking" but I hadn't fooled Audrey so I grimaced and sketched in a few details—alcoholic depression suicidal mania—and Audrey accepted it in that spirit regardless of any religious scruples she might feel. She even thought Stan was marvellously brave. Then she said as we shared so much in common she was sure we'd make a success of it. I stared at her because not even for a single minute had I ever thought of myself sharing anything in common with Stan. Later I wondered if she meant I was brave too. It didn't seem likely.

Just then she was called away. Thank goodness! I couldn't *not* discuss my engagement with her but I could think of an awful lot of topics I'd prefer to talk about. And now—all of a sudden—I looked at those pregnant kids with different eyes. The thought of being like that made me feel queer in the stomach. Could I marry but avoid motherhood? Would Stan believe me if I told him I was too decrepit? Would he cancel the engagement? Was it worth trying? I knew I'd make a lousy mother so why inflict myself on some innocent baby?

After the charter coach'd gone on Sunday arve I found one kid'd been left behind. Apparently someone was coming to pick her up. But when I saw the someone I thought she would've been better to've gone with the others and disappeared forever. They were her mum and her mum's boyfriend and after looking at these gems of British man-and-woman-hood I thought Stan was getting a pretty good deal. While they were talking to Audrey I found myself chatting with this poor kid who stood there looking miserable and said she still didn't know what to do as she had no money and her mum spent all hers down the betting shop and the boyfriend got fresh after a few drinks and sometimes she wished she was dead. I thought about it all then I put my hand in my bag and took out a roll of notes. She sort of goggled and said feebly she couldn't take them. I said "Well you know if I had a daughter she'd be about your age now but I don't have anyone so I'd like you to have it." She put it furtively into her shoulderbag.

Strictly speaking we weren't s'posed to influence the girls one way or the other—they were the ones who had to live with their decision—but I suddenly leant forward and said confidentially "When I was your age I was working as a housemaid in a hotel—now I own my own restaurant." Which wasn't true but Leon wouldn't object. "Why not have your baby adopted and concentrate on getting a skill? Time enough for a family ten years from now." She looked at me and her face lit up with a big grin and I stood there feeling all pompous and respectable and hoping Audrey hadn't overheard any of this. I don't know if it was my advice or my dough which gave her that sudden carefree look.

I was still thinking it over when Audrey dropped me off ... "If I had a daughter ..." It sounded funny but quite nice. And would she've ended up in a retreat for unmarried mums? My life anyway would've been very different quite impossible to imagine. I put the thought aside as I went in. Stan was lolling in an armchair watching telly and having a cup of tea. I was tempted to say something like "Didn't you always want a daughter?" (To which he would've mumbled yes and gone on watching a lot of idiots screaming and yelling on an ocean liner.) Of course I didn't.

We worked hard to turn J. Benn. Upholsterer. into the second room of the restaurant plus a small storeroom using the tiny airless cubbyhole in which J. Benn—the J stood for Jeremiah and he ate at the RP every Friday night but that's all I know of his private life—had had his years of battling unpaid accounts and unsatisfied customers and the rising price of vinyl and heavy-duty corduroy and the rest of it. Upstairs was a storeroom connected to his workshop by an ingenious chute so we suggested to Leon he turn this into a spare bedroom for his unexpected guests. He didn't take to the idea. I s'pose he saw himself being swamped by bludgers if word got around.

It meant quite a big outlay and I wasn't convinced it was worth it. Its only advantage was that it kept my mind off thoughts of weddings. The Commonwealth Bank got several visits from its favourite customer while I ordered fittings—paid two carpenters and a plumber—bought paint and wallpaper and generally kept the British economy moving. Long after the last of our diners noisy and belching had left the fugged-up dining room to head for a vessel or a bar or Soho or wherever they planned to make a night of it we'd go through to plan and measure and organise. One night we came in there and it was quiet and gloomy and cold and I stood there yawning and thinking of bed but Stan was alert and keen-eyed like a sleuth hot on the trail. The carpenters had finished removing a long section of wall for a servery hatch and above it was a high ledge. He looked at it and speculated "I tsink ve put som fod-dods up tsere."

I stared at him my mind a complete blank. Fod-dods? Was it some fashionable new word I hadn't come across in my unfashionable life? I took a punt. "Doo-dads? Gee-gaws? Knick-knacks?"

"Yas you know. Littel tsings."

Stan was keen on 'littel tsings'. I didn't know if this was a Polish characteristic or something he'd developed in his seafaring career from being cooped up in the steel innards of various ships. I being the austere uncompromising person who'd usually had to dust the blooming things wasn't keen on 'littel' anythings. But I told him he could fill the place with ornaments if he liked because this time with a bit of luck somebody else'd be keeping the place clean.

We had a second waitress engaged—Aggie's sister Jadwiga. We had a second kitchen-hand organised—Audrey's wild young son Peter who was being let loose again to destroy his parents' peace of mind and respectable status. We'd agreed to give him a go. I didn't particularly care. He could only wreck the place—lose a dozen customers in one night—set it on fire—put rat poison in the coffee as a protest against the marriage of religion and capitalism.

The trouble was Peter himself. He might've been assigned to Siberia or Maximum Security at Dartmoor. He couldn't of been less enthusiastic if he'd worked on it for a week and probably had.

As it turned out Stan was only leading up to his main theme. In an unguarded moment—I think the day I'd found Spanish sherries half price in a bottle shop—I'd told him about Henri and the *pâtisserie*. His reaction reminded me of Wendy and all her gush about La Belle Cuisine. I couldn't see anything thrilling about it just bloody hard work. But now he put it to me—what if we used the second room not simply as an overflow of the first but to offer a special afternoon tea and dinner? I told him he was mad. Clean-stark-staring-mad. More so since he seemed to expect me to be the one to get busy preparing mouth-watering *cornets à la crème* and the rest of that half forgotten repertoire. He rounded off this bout of insanity by suggesting we call the room the Kawiarnia Polska.

“Yeah” I said sarcastically “of course! Why not? Just the name for a place offering a French afternoon tea! The Frogs’ll be waiting at the door to beat you up for insulting them like that!” Then while he was looking stunned I followed up by stating he wouldn’t get a single jolly customer (and no gloomy ones either) because the sort of people who patronise such places—I had Mrs Siddely-Williams in mind—hang out in Mayfair and Kensington and Stan was left gasping.

But he'd got the bit between his teeth and refused to give up his idea. Maybe he thought he had one so seldom he wasn't going to give it up without a fight? I told him his second name should be Mule. I had no idea what it was and when I asked some other time he said something which sounded Wookash so he might've been better giving Mule a whirl. In the end I said I'd give it a month's trial—if it didn't work out it could go back to being the overflow and I could go back to my peaceful sloblike existence.

Anyway I thought there were more important things than coming up with a cute name for a tea room—in particular Stan's lack of status. I pointed out in a very reasonable way that we couldn't get legally married in Britain if he didn't legally exist in Britain. And if he *did* come out of the closet he risked coming out of the country on his ear. He saw my point and asked what he should do. I didn't really know. Whichever way I looked at it it seemed to me we had to throw ourselves on someone's mercy. The question was—whose? The man I eventually chose to be the repository of our misdeeds—or more correctly Stan's misdeeds—was an Indian solicitor who had a little stale office I'd noticed the day we went by bus to visit the Maritime Museum and were stopped at a red light. That wasn't exactly a recommendation but it had one advantage—if he proved unsympathetic we need never be seen by him again. He had a small moustache and very large bright eyes. After he'd listened with pursed lips and pressed fingertips he told us of several cases of illegal Pakistani immigrants he'd helped achieve respectability. I changed his nationality and felt more confident. He ummed and ahed and quite suddenly began to look cheerful. I was at a loss to explain this and wondered if Stan was stropping £ notes out of my sight.

Mr Ranjeeb looked through Stan's passport but didn't seem any the wiser because he asked Stan for his life story. Stan wasn't keen about this but I found it very entertaining as I'd never asked him anything so personal as his age. Still it was a bit of a shock to discover I was nearly ten years older than him. I also learnt he'd been born in Oravska Magura in Czechoslovakia—the Paki bloke had a lot of trouble with that and I didn't blame him—I imagined it as a wild and primitive place with cobblestones and white cottages with no plumbing like in that film you know where they down great quantities of slivovice and the bloke commits suicide in the end? I saw it on Late Night theatre I think. Stan got a bit cagey. I couldn't guess why but I found out much later it was because his dad was away in Hungary around about then and you can guess why—though to be honest I was so ignorant I didn't

know the Russians *had* ever invaded Hungary. Anyway I couldn't see that any of this was his fault. I didn't catch all the ins and outs (I rarely do) but apparently his mum'd been on her way home to stay with her mother when Stan'd arrived unexpectedly. Mr Ranjeeb made an appointment for next week—I s'pose to give him time to digest Stan's waffle—and said he'd see what he could come up with.

We set off home but on the way Stan suggested we pop in and see a Polish priest he knew to discuss our marriage 'requirements'. My heart sank. Father Zbigniew didn't seem pleased to see me either. Maybe he thought I'd contaminate his presbytery office with heretical thoughts? He pointed to a chair and I sat down obediently. There was a newspaper on the low table beside me but there didn't seem much point in picking it up. It was called *Slowo Powszechnne*. So I twiddled my thumbs and looked out the window instead. Not that that was any more interesting. The neighbours were only cultivating unwanted bottles and squashed cartons. Stan and the priest droned away in Polish and I didn't have a clue what they were on about. Well I s'pose that's not true—unless they'd been sidetracked into how many months since he'd been to confession or whether Gierek was likely to last. The priest kept giving me nasty looks out of the corner of his eye (unless he had a tic) but Stan wouldn't believe me when I told him.

We got home running late and in a huff and several people were hanging round looking peeved I s'pose on the point of going somewhere else and thinking out an unpleasant letter to the Tourist Board. Aggie looked flustered but Lisa obviously had everything under control. I wondered if I could promote her to Assistant Manager and retire. Stan was down-in-the-dumps at work. I thought Mr Ranjeeb and Fr Zbigniew together'd peeve anybody but maybe he was only thinking of the customers who *hadn't* waited. At home he flopped into a chair and sat staring into space and finally I said "Don't look so gloomy. If nothing works out and you've got to go back I'll come with you." He looked at me in his sad stomach-achey way and said I couldn't come to the places where he might end up like Rakowiecka and Barszewo and Strzelin and the way he said them didn't suggest a popular holiday spot and then he looked at me mournfully and said what would I do? I said I'd wait outside. He thought this was very funny and I guess it was taking everything into account. He cheered up and said I could stay with his mum or his sister—depending on which one'd have me I s'pose—and then he said he loved me.

But I think he went right on worrying. Mr Ranjeeb spread out for his contemplation the penalties for illegal entry—the way to apply for political asylum—the requirements to be met for refugee status. After that we were both down-in-the-dumps but what could we expect? He suggested we think it over and come back next week. I didn't think we were getting anywhere so I decided on a change of tactics. I arranged an appointment with a bloke at the Australian High Commission. I worked out a careful story to tell him but if I'd known opening the door to Stan would also involve me in telling elaborate lies to the Second Secretary I would've left the door shut. I finished up by saying I only wanted to know whether Stan could become an Aussie if he married me. The bloke pointed out that not even marriage—as though it's the last resort of the desperate—could confer any benefits on Stan if there was a chance he was on the wrong side of the immigration laws. It wasn't till we were outside again that I realised he hadn't answered my question. That's diplomats for you. I felt cross and was all for going back and giving him a piece of my mind but Stan said apologetically he'd decided he didn't want to be an Aussie so it was rather a wasted morning.

The tea room was due to open the following Saturday and had been giving us the usual number of headaches. Stan seemed to be suffering from wild visions of ladies sitting down to elegant rosebud teasetts Earl Grey silver monogrammed teaspoons and what-have-you which in my book simply wasn't on. The rate of breakage in the RP was terrifying—to me who paid the

bills anyway—so all china was heavy-duty toe-crunching but bouncy. However I did agree to have a flower—a plastic rose—on each table. Mrs Siddely-Williams would've had a fit. Originally we'd decided on £2 for 'all you can eat' and put this on our ads. I wasn't happy. 'All you can eat' I believe just encourages people to be piggy. But Stan thought it was too dear. I told him he didn't know how much a Pom can put away on a cold day so he changed his tune and said it was too cheap. In the end we decided on an opening special of a pound.

In the meantime he faced up to the inevitable—ie he said gloomily if he was going to be deported anyway he didn't want me to be left with a huge bill from Mr Ranjeeb and if on the other hand I left town too Mr Ranjeeb mightn't relish getting his bill paid in *zlotys*. So one day he bumbled along to see if Her Majesty's realm might care to have him as a permanent guest. He went on his own partly to keep me out of it and partly because I was busy with the finishing touches to the tea room.

It opened with all due ceremony—nothing much—and on time and all my predictions about a few slacking-off wharfies turned out to be way off mark. The place was soon crowded with women many of them with toddlers. It'd never occurred to me that so many people lived in the neighbourhood but I was glad I'd told Stan where he could put his rosebud teaset. The room filled with laughter and gossip and dropped creamcakes and squalling babies and I said grimly if this was the way it was going to go on it looked like I was stuck with it. Jadwiga didn't seem put out by this forbidding forecast. I s'pose she thought her temporary job'd turn into a permanent one.

Stan got shunted from person to person in a sort of Musical bureaucrats which would've been funny if he hadn't been so anxious about his future. They didn't seem to know what to do with him except pass him on to tell his vague and ambivalent story to a higher-up. But although we couldn't see it then things were starting to fall into place for him. I expect you remember all those stories on the strikes in the Lenin shipyards when they first hit the headlines? And perhaps you thought something exciting just might be happening in Poland? Those civil servants who watched pictures of blokes standing round in grey overalls and black berets on the evening news and commuted in to work reading the demands of the Gdansk shipyard workers thought what clever fellows they were—the bureaucrats I mean not the Poles—because *they* understood why Stan didn't know what he wanted to do. Well he did really but they didn't know about the body in the river. So I think they were more sympathetic than they might've been if Walesa hadn't appeared on the scene.

Stan was required to say where he'd been and what he'd been up to all this time which of course put me in the hot seat. I got asked some pretty personal questions and given some pretty nasty looks and they didn't seem to think much of his taste in women and I thought what chance for the poor bloody country with this mob of twits running it. There were even mutterings about deporting me—*me!*—for aiding and abetting him. Hah! That seems a pretty sick joke when you consider how hard I tried not to aid and abet him. Then he was required to report every week while they decided on his future but in the meantime they gave the go-ahead for his proposed marriage—you could see their minds thinking 'Let's chuck this whole messy business into the lap of Australia House' but I sometimes wondered if I hadn't been played for a sucker all along. I didn't jump up and down with excitement when I heard their decision but Stan looked so pleased I didn't have the heart to say the things I was thinking.

He gave up the idea of having Fr Zbigniew marry us but he told me in a lugubrious voice the only reason the priest was against the marriage was because I wasn't a Catholic. I considered this reason for a while and said finally "My Mum was a Kelly."

He looked at me in a puzzled sort of way a bit like a St Bernard with a tummyache and in the end I took pity on him. "She used to get palpitations before Mass." To be exact she used to get 'em Saturday evenings—I s'pose because my dad was at his friskiest then and Sunday

morning was the overflow. She'd go off to bed with a glass of cold water and a hanky stinking of '4711' and I don't know what exactly happened after that. Stan gaped at me stunned by this unexpected and intimate revelation then after opening and shutting his mouth a few times he said why hadn't I told him? I said he was a fine one to talk about telling things and he said if I was a Catholic why hadn't I said so when he'd asked me where was a church? (I'd said there were churches all over the place I was sure he'd find one if he wandered around.) Now I said I was only talking about my Mum and it had nothing to do with me and he said yes it did and I finally admitted I had a baptismal certificate but it didn't prove anything and I didn't know where it was—probably in Mum's sideboard under the teatowels—and no one'd consulted me beforehand but if they had I would've told them not to bother—and anyway my dad always proclaimed loudly that religion was a gigantic hoax foisted on mankind and I'm surprised he bothered either. He used to rouse on Mum for going so she couldn't win—she got palpitations if she went and got roused on and she got palpitations if she didn't go and saw herself going to hell but with luck and good management she was sick most of the time and by the time he left home I think she'd pretty well given up on her eternal soul and left it to take its chances. Thinking back over all this—things seen but not understood at the time—was quite confusing. The photo on the loungeroom wall for instance with them coming out of the church and dad with a big grin on his face—or was it only a leer?—I don't know but it suddenly seemed to me if I could understand that analyse it somehow things might make more sense in my own life.

But I just told Stan I'd prefer a registry wedding. In the end he agreed but in a wistful sort of way. Maybe he thought marrying in church would make up for other sins. Maybe he just wanted a nice photo for *our* loungeroom wall. I asked him what he'd told Fr Zbigniew. He dithered round and thought he'd go and make a pot of coffee but finally he admitted he'd told the priest I was Jewish! Poor Stan I s'pose he was at a loss to explain my lack of interest. I laughed and laughed. I simply couldn't help it. But neither could I find a way to say it wasn't a church wedding I wasn't interested in. It was any wedding at all.

Chapter Five

Stan was grumpy for the next few days. I was the cause of him making a fool of himself in front of the priest. So I had a few days peace from talk of weddings and he only decided he still loved me when I said I'd come to Mass with him sometime. Then he realised Mass in Polish wouldn't do me any good and said we'd have to go when Fr O'Brien was officiating and that he had trouble understanding him and then he got out of that mess by asking who we should invite to the wedding. It finally boiled down to Audrey and Ann but Ann—who was responsible for my current predicament—had got herself a job as a nanny in the no-man's-land of Outer Middlesex fortunately leaving Steve behind and was currently preparing to go with the family for their annual holiday on the Continent. She made up for it by sending us a set of His and Hers bath towels which Stan regularly misunderstands.

We thought of going away after the ceremony which we booked for eleven o'clock to be followed by lunch in the restaurant which'd be closed for the day and would then stay closed all day Saturday so we'd have a quiet weekend. I wasn't particularly keen on anywhere and suggested a few wild things like Slimbridge and Stratford-on-Avon and Stan countered with Brighton and the Isle of Wight both of which I knocked flat. Later on I found he'd got them from a tourist brochure in ten languages called 'Holiday in Britain'—it sounded like a command possibly due to the downward pound in which case it should've been 'Please Holiday in Britain'.

Audrey dear Audrey came to our rescue when we'd got pretty well stalemated and suggested a farmhouse. She knew a couple who'd just opened for Bed and Breakfast and would we like to be one of their first guests? Sort of guinea pigs? We discovered later the said couple

were the parents of one of Audrey's runaway girls and I wondered if they'd be like the betting shop ones but they refused to take any payment from us which seemed decent though—who knows?—maybe they planned to put on their ads 'Owners of the famous Restauracja Polska say they've never tasted a nicer breakfast than ours'. Stan clinched the offer. If nothing else he'd never been inside an English farmhouse—neither had I—and it saved more arguments.

One evening as we were wearily finishing up he said suddenly he'd been told he could be accepted as a refugee if he wished. I don't know why he'd sat on it all day and I couldn't follow their reasoning. If he'd been persecuted then that was a story I hadn't heard. As an afterthought he added "I say to tsem—no."

I was temporarily thrown by this and demanded "No—what!"

"No tsankyou," he said mildly.

"Don't be a dill! I mean why did you say no?" I couldn't see anything wrong with refugee status. He took a while trying to think up an explanation. "I tsink I always dream to go home."

I thought all refugees did?

"Then what *are* you going to be?"

A big grin spread over his face. "A bloddy tourist."

I burst out laughing. It was the last thing I'd expected but it wasn't exactly a laughing matter. "And what happens when they get tired of giving out tourist visas or if they smell a rat eh?"

He looked indignant that I should suggest he smelt like a rat but he only said vaguely "I go home an tak my medisin. Yas—you com too?" I could think of a heck of a lot of places I'd prefer to visit but I agreed and Stan beamed. But when I got into bed I went back to pondering that refugee business. The whole thing was both crazy and suspicious. What on earth had he told those suckers? That he was a poor little persecuted Russian Pole stateless to boot whose only wish was to live quietly and add to the British GNP? So what would happen when they tumbled to him?

I put this to Leon next day. He said in his little snuffly voice that I shouldn't worry because he thought they might want people like me with money and people like Stan with initiative. He also thought that deporting a Pole and an Australian might be more trouble than it was worth especially as they knew I'd take Stan away with me when I went. In that case they knew more than I did.

The registry office bit was pretty dull. The celebrant had a long mournful face and such a strong Scottish accent neither the groom nor the best man understood a word from beginning to end. There were four of us there—Stan me Audrey and a mate of his called Vladimir. And in case you're interested in trivia I wore a calflength white dress with lemon trim and white shoes. I s'pose I was entitled to clothe myself in shining white from top to toe but my mind with a strange kind of middle-aged innocence shied away from such thoughts and my Mum fortunately wasn't there to lend me her well-thumbed copy of "Thoughts for the New Bride"—that'd probably been her problem—too many thoughts and not enough action. I intended to avoid both. Stan hired a charcoal-grey suit for the occasion got his hair trimmed back so's he could see who he was marrying and bought a snazzy pair of shoes with crocodile-skin insets. He looked quite smart. I didn't think much of Vladimir who'd got washed up on our hospitality several times and always took full advantage. For breakfast he'd put away half a loaf of bread three chops and six eggs. It was like going out attended by the King and Crown Prince of Tonga or two Sumo wrestlers. I was sorry he wasn't a Dane and Leon could've had his company with my compliments.

When we got back to the RP to my amazement there seemed to be people everywhere. Obviously something'd gone wrong with our plans but if they were wanting lunch they were

going to be disappointed. But as we drew up in our taxi all these people came surging forward cheering and waving! I took a quick peep behind me—I don't know what I expected to see maybe Paul McCartney strolling past—but the road was empty. Aggie's little sister Zofia came forward shyly and presented me with a bouquet of yellow roses like those pictures of some little kid being shoved forward to give the Queen a posy. More gifts were pressed on us as we walked up to the door and a shopping trolley would've come in handy. I turned to Stan and he grinned sheepishly. "My friends an your friends—"

"I didn't know I had any," I said drily.

"Vell maybe no—in tsat case tsey all my friends." Stan it seemed had got my measure.

More surprises waited inside. With Aggie's help I'd tidied and decorated in a modest way to accommodate the twenty or so people we'd invited. But now the place was bowered under with flowers all that was missing was the coffin. The posters which'd recently sprouted on the walls proclaiming SOLIDARNOSC and I s'pose were a sign of Stan's beliefs for which the Home Office thought he'd been mashed and beaten were now hidden and the tables'd been rearranged in a sort of horseshoe shape with over fifty people milling around.

There was a short interval in which we stumbled to and fro shaking hands being slapped kissed tripped or reminded of the time we'd met that particular guest. Even so it seemed to leave a lot of people unaccounted for. Had he called up the Polish Seamen's club to say there was a slap-up meal going free if they'd care to drop round? Drinks and appetisers appeared and obviously what I'd ordered from the nearest caterer—on the grounds everyone else's cooking tastes better than mine—had been much supplemented and the thought of a whopping great bill arriving took the edge off my appetite. I don't remember everything on the menu but I know there was roast piglet and eels and herrings and chicken and dumplings in apricot syrup and pears in chocolate sauce and several kinds of fruit salad and strawberry tartlets and that's just what springs to mind. The only thing there I was expecting to see was the wedding cake because I'd made it myself. The noise kept rising which I s'pose was a sign people were enjoying themselves. Toasts got offered by various people mostly with only a slight acquaintance with the English tongue and an equally slight acquaintance with me. Stan put some sparkling grape juice in my hand (in a glass) and some in Audrey's but everyone else was busy with the stronger stuff—except Zofia Aggie and Jadwiga who remained in the kitchen. At one stage I was confronted by a bottle of Egri Bikaver which I thought I might try—next minute Stan'd reached out and sent it on its way—I thought what cheek what *ruddy* cheek—I'm not even allowed to get drunk at my own wedding!

Eventually that part of the festivities seemed to be over and the tables and a few people got pushed out of the way and three young blokes fronted up with violins and an accordion and gave us a selection. It wasn't Chopin I don't s'pose but quite classy. Then there were some Polish folk songs and after that a bloke gave what was meant to be a send-up of a Georgian dance instructor—you know *Oops!* There goes a finger! Never mind—what's a finger?—but he'd toasted us thoroughly beforehand. Incredibly even Leon came forward and sang a song in the wavering tenor of a boy who needs his adenoids out—about a little bird that'd flown away in sorrow when the young princess whose window it lived outside of was stolen away by wild Cossack herdsmen. At least that's what he told me later. I don't know why he thought that was suitable. Just when I was thinking it was a version of *Young Talent Time* and I'd better start to think what to do when my turn came (I thought I might be able to get through *Waltzing Matilda* or maybe a verse or two from 'On the Queensland Railways'—you know 'Iron rations come in handy—On the way to Dirranbandi') when someone decided that was enough highbrow stuff and it was time for the dancing. I'd never been dancing in my life but it didn't seem to matter I just got engulfed in Stan's now volatile embrace and we did a sort of zigzag round the floor then a flood of people came on to join us and no one could *see* Stan treading on

my feet any more. Those who didn't dance went right on drinking and I kept wondering who was doing the providing but ever since then I've been surrounded by a conspiracy of silence. I still don't know.

About ten o'clock we sat down to supper. I wasn't hungry but it was such a marvellous selection of cakes and pastries it seemed a pity to waste it. Then Audrey and Peter left and a few other people who may've been guests and may've been customers who hadn't noticed the CLOSED sign and thought they better nip off before their bill arrived—and then I was about the only sober person left there. It sort of put me off human nature. The uneasy feeling that Stan and I should quit the place grew on me—not that I was up on wedding protocol but I thought it might be nice for the 'happy couple' to leave before the cops arrived to separate belligerent guests. On the other hand I was none too keen to leave my investment to the ravages of the horde.

I couldn't see *how* I was going to drag Stan away. He seemed determined to stay till the bitter end or until the sun rose—whichever came sooner. But finally with Leon's help—which I have reason to believe involved poking Stan in the bum with the business end of a fork though this may've been accidental—we left amid a shower of rice and shouts and whatnot. It was an undignified exit and I wished we had a chauffeur-driven limo waiting to whisk us away in style—not least because I wasn't sure I could get him safely home. He lurched and veered and staggered and I tried to steer like trying to get a Brahman bull into a stockyard without getting trampled to death in the process. At intervals he broke into song. Stirring songs in a magnificent baritone but they only went a few bars. Whether this was because he was short of breath or didn't know any more I'm not sure because he couldn't remember a thing about it next morning.

The difficulty involved in getting him upstairs was mind-boggling and shows the danger of mixing drinks. At the top he couldn't find his key or the keyhole. I took mine out of my bag—opened the door and shuffled him inside. After a few feints he found the bathroom and then his bedroom and then like a gigantic tree just felled he landed on his bed and moved no more. I took his shoes and tie and belt off but to save the hired suit would've required the services of a crane. After a lot of huffing and puffing I got him under the blankets. Then I made myself a cup of tea. It was nice and peaceful in the kitchen—a bit nippy perhaps but it didn't seem worthwhile putting the wall heater on. Yet it was tempting to sit there for a while sipping my tea and thinking things over and yawning now and then—before going to my bedroom. Nevertheless I'd just got married so was I entitled to another night of peace or would that only make tomorrow worse? At last without enthusiasm I got into my pyjamas and crawled into bed beside him. He gave out a comforting warmth but that was all you could say on the plus side. A match struck near him would send us sky-high and I wondered vaguely if that'd be a painful way to end it all.

On his bedside table were a couple of framed photos and beside them was a parcel which had the look of a present. I couldn't see a card on it so although it was probably for me or both of us I just turned out the lamp and eventually got to sleep but somewhere in the dead hours of the morning Stan woke up. No. That is too definite a statement. Something some vague instinct suggested to his physical self it was sharing the bed with a nice soft warm something which might be worth exploring if not exploiting. He began to fumble round vaguely his eyes still closed and I stayed still hoping he'd soon go back to sleep. But he didn't and I began to feel like an earwig being attacked by a sadist armed with a pillow. And more than that I was getting mad. Furious! At last I managed to wriggle out of his suffocating alcoholic embrace—climb out of bed and hiss "You great clumsy oaf! Either you do it properly or not at all!"

I preferred not at all as I'd discovered he was built on pretty generous lines. But he didn't appear to notice I'd gone—which made me even madder! Instead he rearranged himself

peacefully—gave a couple of gusty sighs and returned to his semi-comatose state. I thought of throwing something at him but I stormed out of the bedroom and into the kitchen instead and raged around it pulling my belongings off shelves and walls in a white heat of fury and indignation all the more fierce for not having anyone to vent it on. I'd been ignored all evening by that drunken lout—treated like an I-don't-know-what (I couldn't think of a word bad enough) by this creep who wouldn't let me drink but got stinking himself! The sheer hypocrisy of it all! And to think I'd been too kind to hurt *his* feelings! The bastard didn't have any to begin with. I'd have it annulled that's what I'd do. Immediately! And if he wanted to see me in the future it'd be on *my* terms—and he could like that or lump it!

Gradually I calmed down enough to make myself a cup of coffee and sit down to drink it. Then—somehow—the sustaining heat of my anger seemed to drain away leaving me feeling so terribly tired and empty and dispirited.

I'd always known deep down it'd be a failure. That was fate—my fate—and I couldn't escape it wouldn't let me end everything it was like a cat playing with a helpless mouse. Almost in spite of me my business ventures prospered—and my private life was a miserable unsatisfying mess. It always had been. At that moment I felt sure it always would be.

After a while I found myself thinking back—for what future was there to think about? As the sex object of a drunken slob? Ugh. Thinking back to things I'd tried so hard to forget. To my dad going out the door his dinner in the chook bucket—and leaving behind that little kid who'd tried so hard and cried big blobby tears and swore vengeance and thought up terrible threats. He'd never lost a moment's sleep over it. But I had. All my feelings of rejection and anger and failure had flowed on somehow managing to warp and embitter my life. At least that's the way I saw it that night. And Wendy smiling sweetly and sort of radiant telling me she loved Rod—as if I didn't really matter just some poor dummy who'd helped fill in the in-between years. My Mum backing away from Mr Slimey making feeble excuses—"the soup's boiling over"—"it's starting to rain"—"Jamey'll be home in a minute"—the smell of fear like a trapped animal as his ferrety little face followed her smirking. Why didn't she have the courage to say "No and keep your greasy fingers to yourself!" Was this something inevitable between men and women? I felt the disgust in me like a sort of bile which can defeat the strongest antacid. And why had I kept these memories—these terribly negative memories—like a port I carried everywhere afraid to put down in case someone might pinch it. Why couldn't I bung them in a locker and lose the key instead of carting them around letting them hurt me spoiling any hope I might feel—that I wasn't a failure—that I wasn't horribly cynical—that I wasn't—

There was a sound of something bumping into the door then a tremendous tussle with the handle. Next minute Stan stood swaying on the threshold blinking in the kitchen light. He was a fearsome sight with his hair all over the place—his jaw slack—his clothes half off.

After several false starts like someone trying to jiggle their false teeth into position he managed to ask "Vat ... tse mutter ... "

I shrugged and offered him a cup of coffee a surprisingly kind and generous gesture from someone who'd just decided on annulment. He accepted wearily. I did his zip up and said kindly "You don't want him to get cold." He looked round vaguely as though he expected to see an intruder. I helped him into a chair and there he was confronted by the pile of my belongings stacked on the table. He gazed at them from about eye-level with his head cradled in his big hands. Obviously they had a reason for being there but I s'pose offhand none occurred to him. I gave him his coffee—steadied his hand and watched him suck it down noisily. I think we must've sat there for about ten minutes in near silence then I stood up and said "Come on Stan come back to bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

He didn't argue and let himself be helped up and guided back to bed through the dangerous maze of the loungeroom furniture. He pressed a moist noisy kiss on my cheek and

managed to say “I’m sorry ... I dint mean ... ” I said not to worry and he lay down again and I tucked him in. In a little while he was snoring again. I reached over and pushed him on to his side and realised I should’ve tried to get the rest of the hired suit off him. Outside the faintest touch of dawn began to show in the sky. There was the murmur of early traffic. I wondered if all our guests’d gone home and if Leon’d been able to lock up without any trouble. I sat down and picked up the parcel and opened it believing that by the time he got round to taking an interest in it our wedding’d be past history. It was a large and glossy book of photos of Poland. On the front was a picture of somewhere along the Baltic coast—sand dunes and a magnificent brooding sky and the sea below lit with shafts of sunlight. Briefly almost fancifully I s’pose it seemed to sum up Stan for me.

I opened it. Inside he’d written simply *Dla mojej zony*—To my wife.

I believed it was saying one of the things I’d known for a long time. He was homesick. Poor Stan. He sort of hoped I’d love the Poland he remembered—the one he’d walked in of an evening. He didn’t know I’d never loved anywhere. It was a sobering thought. But it helped me understand the rootlessness underneath the depression which’d dogged me for so long.

I don’t really know how long I sat there leafing through the book and thinking about things. But at last I put it back in its wrappings.

Something had changed—though I wasn’t sure exactly what. Maybe a door had been closed but I don’t think that was quite the feeling I had. Almost for the first time in my life someone had apologised for hurting me. And for the first time I think I felt wanted—not because I was useful or I could cook or they were going through a tough time ... Stan’d come through his hard times this world was now his for the asking. No—if he wanted me then—surely—it was simply because I was me?

So it was up to me now. To give it a chance.

It hardly seemed worthwhile going back to bed again. So I sat there beside him instead. He looked very young in sleep much too young for me perhaps. I stroked his hair back from his forehead. Unexpectedly it was very fine and soft. And somehow it brought a feeling of tenderness with it. Sweet and tender and ... soft ...

JENNY’S PLACE: PART FIVE

After we’d breakfasted and I’d put my things away again I packed a bag with enough stuff to see us through a weekend in the country and we set out for the farmhouse in the Cotswolds after a quick look at the mess in the restaurant. I’d been hoping some of those who’d come to celebrate might also’ve come to clean up but no such luck. Even so I felt quite carefree as we whizzed along in the coach looking forward to home-cured ham and Devonshire teas and strolls in Ye Olde English Garden. Stan dozed or watched the passing view murmuring occasionally that it reminded him of some unintelligible place. The only cloud on my horizon was the night ahead and what a sober Stan might feel like dishing up when he got to bed. It gave me a funny queasy sort of feeling.

Mr Peabody met us in the village and deferentially assisted us into the back of an ancient but highly-polished Wolseley. I think he expected us to fall immediately into a passionate embrace because he kept his eyes rigidly on the road ahead. But Stan wasn't up to anything more energetic than patting my hand and saying it looked like a nice place—the village I mean. It was. And the farmhouse was everything I'd hoped and its brochure claimed. Old oak beams diamond-paned windows braided rugs open fireplaces little pokey staircases (those weren't actually in the brochure) patchwork quilts herringbone walks through the hollyhocks.

We spent the afternoon strolling beside a little creek with rustic stone bridges and rustic wooden seats at regular intervals for the elderly and the hungover. In the evening they put on a special dinner and hovered over us while we ate it. By the time we headed upstairs to our room with its little dormer windows and big four-poster bed the only thing I felt capable of was falling Flop! into bed.

But it *had* been a nice day and I couldn't bring myself to say anything to spoil it and instead—somewhere between bed and bathroom and with a beetroot face—I told him that technically speaking I was still a virgin. (I left out the technically speaking.) He thought that was nice. I can't imagine why. Anyone with money and fresh breath who's managed to stay that way for twenty years must be suspected of harbouring some terrible secret vice. Then he tried to say he hadn't much experience of women whatever exactly that might mean. But that evening he thought everything about me was wonderful and I s'pose I needn't have spent so much time worrying but it still seems strange to me that someone so large so overpowering so sort of *engulfing* could also prove to be gentle and understanding.

All of that happened about five years ago.

Little Stanislaw was born a year after we were cheered into the RP that fateful day and our daughter Lucyna eighteen months later and for someone who *knew* she wasn't meant to be a mother I still look upon them with a kind of amazement—when I can spare a moment from mysterious rashes and swallowed buttons and piles of washing and all the rest of it. Leon got his grandkids to cosset and spoil even if they're not the genuine article. I think he forgets that sometimes because he calls them 'his'—which led one visitor to say to me wasn't it strange that such a small man should have such a large son? I don't mind. I know where to park them when I'm frazzled because they've got *Dziadzio* Leon wrapped round their little fingers. He still lives upstairs but to his imitation coals and threadbare armchairs have been added toys to break a leg on and spilt messes in dark corners.

The restaurant is still there but the whole area is being tarted up and we've been thinking of moving to a new location. The promise of that heady August when Solidarity burst into the news has paled under the austere rule of General Jaruzelski. But home to Stan is still home. Yet in a funny way the RP has become a home away from home—a gathering place for Polish and other exiles—a clearing-house for news and gossip—the place to go if you happen to fancy Stan's way with pickled herrings ... and a thing I find harder to define—a reminder that Poland is ... where Poles are. I can't explain better than that.

(It was through one of his contacts that Stan learnt the verdict on the soldier. Accidental death. He was said to be a good swimmer. I think about all that sometimes and find a secret sadness and irony in it.)

Several years ago when we were clearing out to move to a bigger flat I came upon that letter to Wendy I'd never sent. I re-read it seeing in it someone whose life had become such a burden. Was it really me? It seems strange that someone could change a life—and not know he was doing it—as much as Stan's changed mine. And I think now my affection for him grew with the realisation he was making life seem liveable again. But it was Audrey who kept encouraging me to try writing it down (me who finds a two-page letter or a menu a chore?) to help me—to help Stan—to help some unknown person struggling with depression and drink? I

don't think she knows—and I don't see how she could publish it without putting me in court for libel or something.

But along the way I've come to understand that I wanted to keep at it simply because it was a way of remembering the women who helped shape my life—Mrs O'Sullivan and Win—Mrs Siddely-Williams and Wendy—Julie and Ann and of course Audrey—because deliberately or accidentally they sent me down this road and although it's been a pretty bumpy trip I don't regret it now.

And now I believe Win was right after all. Bless her.

(1984)