

HORSEPOWER

by
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Three Mystery Novellas
featuring Bob Creighton

‘A Horse is a Horse—’
Mrs McGoohan’s Galloper
‘The Earth is the Lord’s—’

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious.

‘A HORSE IS A HORSE—’

- i -

Russ Taylor and I sat out on his balcony and wet the old tonsils and enjoyed the Gold Coast day. Kids squealed down on the beach. The sea crashed nicely on the sand. The sun shone. I had nothing more stressful on my horizon than deciding what I’d eat a bit later on.

Russ is my next-door-neighbour. There are four flats in this building, two up (Russ and me) and two down. Now he said like someone finding a forgotten name on their Christmas card list, “It’s this cousin of mine, married poor old Pete ... silly old trout really, got some bee in her bonnet that an accident in her garden wasn’t an accident ... let sleeping dogs lie has always been my motto but apparently she’s been round bothering the police, not that they seem to be taking much notice, keep telling her there’s no sign it was anything but an accident—”

“What kind of accident?” I couldn’t work up much interest.

“Seems she was having this garden party at her place and some old biddy slipped on the grass and fell into the garden pond and drowned. Well, I s’pose it might give anyone a bit of a turn—right in the middle of the afternoon with all the old folk milling round and the minister there and tea and scones and whatnot, y’know the sort o’ thing ... might’ve been a heart attack but I don’t see why she thinks it musta been foul play—unless she reads too much Agatha Christie.”

“No. Me neither. So is she in the habit of getting such ideas, this cousin of yours, about other things? A bit of a suspicious type? Always jumps on the wrong band-wagon?”

“Only a cousin by marriage, Bob. I always thought Pete didn’t have much judgement—though, mind you, she had a bit of money and she was quite a looker when he married her ... I was best man ... she looks like a Sunday School teacher now—y’know, broad in the beam and butter wouldn’t melt ... but, yeah, I think she tends to get the wrong bull by the horns every now ’n’ then.”

“Mmm.” It’s hard to get excited about the foibles of people you’ve never met.

“But what I wondered—the old trout needs someone reliable to put her mind to rest and it’s something you’re good at, Bob.”

“Here, hold on, Russ! If someone looks like taking her seriously you don’t know where it’ll end up. Just ignore her. It’ll fade away.”

Russ put on a sly sort of grin, the old bastard. "Maybe. Maybe not. But if I recommend you she'll take your word on it and leave the poor cops and the rest of the family alone ... and you're bored, mate, so why not admit it. Bit o' tennis isn't going to keep you going, now is it, so here I am offering you something to get your teeth into—and she's not badly off, she can afford to stump up a bit of the ready for having her mind put to rest."

"Thanks a million, mate. Bored? With a life like this?" My arm did a gentle proprietorial sweep over the sparkling sea, the bright white sand, two rather gorgeous-looking girls in minuscule bikinis tossing a red beach ball ...

Russ went on grinning. "Oh sure."

- ii -

As I drove over a farm grid the other side of Jondaryn I thought of Russ trotting out his excuses, each one more pathetic than its predecessor as to why he couldn't possibly get away at the moment and I'd have to tackle Mrs Wilson on my own. Ah well. It might mean I'd get away sooner. The grid and fence and gravel lane were all nicely-kept. Yes, money here. A spreading old homestead of dark green weatherboard with cream trim and wide verandahs. A windmill turning lazily in the distance. Lots of trees.

Mrs Danae Wilson met me at the garden gate, told me three times between gate and verandah how very grateful she was to me for coming all this way to put her, and her daughter's, mind to rest. She knew she was silly to be worrying the way she had been but she *was* worried about Sarah ... I didn't know how to put the daughter into the equation as she waffled vaguely on but there was nothing waffly about the efficiency with which she produced a tray with glass, a jug of cold lemon juice with ice-cubes tinkling and a sprig of mint floating, along with a bottle of XXXX, a plate of savoury biscuits, and two comfortable cane chairs on the verandah. Bee-in-the-bonnet maybe, but her feet on the ground when it came to the things that mattered. That was my snap judgement.

When we were comfortably settled I suggested she tell me just what had happened on that afternoon.

"I know it won't sound much and the police certainly seem to feel I am worrying unnecessarily ... perhaps it's just that I'm here and having to walk past, every day, the exact spot where it happened ... you know how it can prey on your mind, Mr Creighton, and knowing everyone ... well, you find yourself thinking, and when it was an old friend ... well, you want to be sure that you've done everything to be quite sure ... "

"It was your friend, not a casual visitor?"

"Oh yes ... well, you see, Elsinore and her sister Algerine had been friends of mine since the time when we'd all been friends at school—and that, Mr Creighton, is getting to be more years ago than I care to mention ... not that it was Else who was in my class ... she was a few years older, two or three, I just forget, it was Algerine ... but it was so kind of them both to come all the way out from Toowoomba for our little 'do', you know. I try to do something for the church and something for the bowls club—sort of turn-and-turn-about, you know—well, of course, I know the church *is* a more worthy recipient but—well,

Peter and I joined the bowls club and he enjoyed it *so* much, it's one of my favourite memories, so I always sort of feel I'm helping in his memory, if you see what I mean."

"Of course. But this *fête* was for the church?"

"Yes, oh yes indeed—and our rector was right here when Else was dying, I don't know why I always think of him rather than the fact that Betty Eyles was here, she was a nurse for many years ... it was a lovely afternoon, Mr Creighton, with half-a-dozen stalls and afternoon tea and lucky dips for the children and the rector had arranged for Mr Briggs to bring his little merry-go-round ... and then the Daly sisters were going to give us some music at three o'clock ... nothing very professional, you know, but people always enjoy them—and of course there's the garden itself."

She looked around and there was pride in her gaze.

"Do you remember what time your friends arrived?"

"Oh, they came early, at about 1.30. Of course there were several people here already putting things on the stalls to be ready for the 2 o'clock opening. Else and Gine had come early to see if they could give me a hand with anything—that tells you what kind of people they were—but really there was nothing much for me to do by then, so we just went for a little walk around the garden and I remember Else saying she must remember to get a cutting of the white pelargonium by the side steps ... oh dear ... and then I said I'd leave them to go on as there might be someone else needing me for something, you know how it is ... and then I didn't see them again ... though I thought I saw Gine going into the tea tent at about—oh, I don't really know, but nearly three at a guess. But in the meantime my daughter Sarah had come home. I saw her park but she went straight over to the sheds, she always does that, you know, not that she rides much these days, Mr Creighton, but she likes to say hello and give old Bindy a pat ... so I didn't actually see her till, let me see ... "

She put her nicely-coiffured head to one side as if it required long deep thought. She had mid-brown hair which looked slightly artificial, dyed or rinsed, I couldn't be sure, and she was dressed very presentably in a tailored dark-green skirt with a light-green short-sleeved jumper, stylish but not obviously so. I wondered if she gardened in this ensemble or if it was for me. There were several diamond rings on her fingers. She had rather large hands with thick wrists but her whole presentation was that of the respectable comfortably-off matron.

"... it must've been about an hour later. She is a very quiet girl, Sarah, and what with all this worry about her wedding that's coming up—well, I don't really think she had her mind on the *fête* at all."

"I see. And when is she getting married?"

"Early next month. I really don't approve of such haste, Mr Creighton, but what's a mother in these matters ... but her fiancé is doing his final law exams this month—I'm sure *he* doesn't want to have all this distraction right in the middle of it all. I tried to persuade Sarah to wait till after Christmas ... I always think January is a very *suitable* month for a wedding, don't you think?"

“Mmm.” I couldn’t remember off-hand when I’d got married. A Freudian block, that, no doubt.

“All the bustle of Christmas and end-of-year break-ups over ... and everyone can relax and really enjoy the wedding ... she’s marrying Tim Schwarz.” She looked at me fairly sharply, as if the name should convey something, impress me even, but it might as well have been Smith. “But you know what girls are like. They just can’t wait—another month or two really wouldn’t be the end of the world—but no ... still, I s’pose I was the same at that age,” she gave me a nice little smile, perfectly blending understanding of girls and apologies for their impulsiveness. “But I was lucky.”

“And this Tim—he’d agreed to her choice of date?”

“Oh yes, but Sarah can be very *appealing*, very persuasive, you know. I’m sure you’ll understand when you meet her. I don’t think Tim would be capable of saying no to her.”

I refilled my glass. “But going back to that afternoon.” I didn’t particularly want to spend the whole day here, no matter how attractive the verandah. Value, you might say, not the sort to pad his expense account, decent bloke, all that ...

She seemed to sense my impatience because she said more briskly, “Yes, of course. It’s just having so many things to do for the wedding, I sometimes don’t know if I’m coming or going—” Possibly the local cops had felt the same but preferred she was going.

“As I understand it—and I might have things a bit muddled—it was that sort of day, Mr Creighton, with people popping in and out, wanting to get more milk out of the frig, and then running into people I hadn’t seen for *ages*—but Gine apparently went looking for her sister and found her lying face down in the pond. Oh dear, there was *such* a flap then, we gave her mouth-to-mouth—and someone went rushing off to ring the ambulance, I forget who—and of course people all asking silly questions and giving all sorts of advice—and getting in the way—oh, it was such a terrible business there for a while! Oh dear ... ” she took out her hanky and clutched it to the ready. “Poor poor Else, it was all much too late to help her ... but I *think* we did all we could ... She was *such* a nice person, a little bit odd but really so kind ... ”

She seemed to dwell on the nature of the dead woman but it was hard to decide just what her thoughts were. Her face was all decorous pity, an amiable dolefulness, but she had one of those very smooth plump faces which suggested she put on her emotions and ironed them out when they were no longer needed.

- iii -

A little later she took me over to see the exact spot where her old schoolfriend had died. I could see why the parish and the bowls club liked to come here for functions. It was a brilliant garden. The flowerbeds and tree clumps were all curves, opening from one small vista into another, always drawing you on, not into the distance but around in curious circles, giving the walker the impression of moving through a much larger space than the hectare or so of garden. A quite steep grassy bank led down to the pond which had an edging of sandstone flags and was filled with artistic clumps of water lilies, and

several small willows wept neatly over the water, set between mossy boulders and Japanese iris. An attractive spot. I suddenly felt rather sorry for her. Having death intrude into this idyllic scene would spoil it for her; she would never be able to stand here and simply enjoy it, unhindered by thoughts of her dead friend.

From the pond we walked on through a small gate and found ourselves confronting a long low barn, obviously old as it'd been built of stone originally and repaired and extended with galvanised iron. Beyond it were a maze of post-and-rail yards and newer-looking sheds hosting what appeared to be a miscellany of agricultural machinery and unknown junk.

“I suppose you will have been wondering, Mr Creighton, why we were worried ... I mean, it’s quite possible that Else did slip on the bank—she was in her fifties, you know, and she could’ve bumped her head there on the stone edging, she might’ve become concussed or even unconscious when she fell in, or perhaps *rolled* in—I *hope*, really, that she was, I can’t bear the thought of her *drowning*, and us so close by ... ”

“How deep is the water?”

“Oh, only about three or four feet. But you may have noticed there’s netting under the surface of the water to stop the birds taking all the goldfish. Unfortunately the wire is a bit rusty ... and it seems that Else fell through and then she got entangled ... but the police didn’t think it was this ... and of course it was a hot afternoon, it might’ve been a little dizzy spell ... ”

We seemed to stray like wandering bullocks but I noticed that Mrs Wilson never really got away from the central point; her *non sequiturs* only appeared to be dead ends; sooner or later we were confronted again by Elsinore ... but Danae’s circumlocutions were hard to follow, I sometimes felt myself turning off ... a bit like following the curves in her garden, I felt myself just following the flow, ceasing to ask the point of it all.

“You were going to tell me why you were worried.”

“Oh yes, of course. Well, it was actually Sarah, you see. She was over there just beyond the barn, giving her old pony a handful of sugar or some little treat—and she heard someone, she didn’t know really, and she didn’t actually *see* anyone, so she just assumed they must’ve been down here somewhere,” she pointed to the end of the barn nearest us, “and she didn’t take much notice, but then she thought it was two women arguing—and she couldn’t hear the words precisely ... but then they must’ve raised their voices—because she distinctly heard someone say, “One day I’m going to kill you.”

“She is certain those were the words?”

“Well, no, not *exactly*. But that was the feeling—that someone was threatening someone else. You know how it is, the more you think it over, the more you begin to wonder if that was what you heard ... and it seems such an unlikely thing for anyone to be saying at a garden afternoon ... I tried to get Sarah to go over it as clearly as she could in her mind ... ”

“And people say things they don’t mean.”

“Indeed they do!” Mrs Wilson assented; it was almost as though I had

performed on cue. "And I'm sure your experience of human nature will provide the reassurance Sarah needs to put her worries to rest."

"But your daughter believes it was—Algerine threatening Elsinore?"

"Well, yes, yes, that's what she thinks ... but I really cannot, just *cannot* believe that—I've known them all my life virtually. They were always—well, I know it's an old-fashioned word, but really they were *chums*, if you know what I mean."

- iv -

As we walked back to the house a small green sedan was driving up through the front paddock. "This will be Sarah now." Mrs Wilson looked pleased. Like everything else here, even her smile had a well-tended sense about it, no big grins, no tight little grimaces, just neat nice smiles at regular intervals. "She'll be able to show you exactly where she was standing when she heard the voices—and you will be sure to know what is the most likely explanation ... "

Sarah Wilson proved to be a young woman of about twenty, not at all like her mother in build or colouring (bearing in mind her mother's colouring probably owed something to her hairdresser); very slender, almost ethereal, with dark hair and eyes and a graceful yet hesitant way of moving. Obviously she must take after her dead father.

She shook hands and carried a small overnight bag through to her room before joining us for a salad lunch. The sun shone down, the garden enclosed us like a gentle oasis; death in its reaches—and violent struggling death at that—seemed all wrong. Although Sarah spoke when spoken to like a good child she volunteered nothing. Her mother burbled on about the wedding—flowers, invitations—but I had the feeling Sarah really wasn't very interested in such things; which was odd given what her mother had said about her wanting a big wedding with all 'the works' *and* as soon as possible. Was it that Sarah just wanted to nip off quietly down to the Registry Office and it was her mother, here alone with time on her hands, who wanted a big wedding? Her obvious shyness gave credence to the idea. With such an amiable outgoing sort of mother Sarah might rarely have got her own views in.

Then I put on my hat again and we went out into the early afternoon and the three of us went over to the barn—I would, of course, have preferred a gentle siesta. An ancient brown pony with a grey-flecked muzzle came trotting up as soon as we hove in sight and Sarah petted him and gave him a slice of carrot.

"Well now, if you would show me where you were standing when you heard the voice." Sarah shot a swift look at her mother and then went to stand in the yard about ten metres from the far end of the barn. "About here I think."

"Mmm. Now, if you would both go down to the other end of the barn and talk normally for a couple of minutes and then begin to raise your voices as though you're getting a bit het up about something."

They both turned and walked away and I stood in the sun and the pony investigated in the direction of my pockets before giving me up as a bad job and wandering away to the shade of a pepper tree. There was the distant creak of the

windmill turning slowly; much further away was the faint rattle of a car on the gravel side road. I thought I heard voices murmuring but couldn't be absolutely certain I was hearing them or simply expecting to hear them; certainly I couldn't distinguish any words. Nor could I catch the gist of the faint conversation and a minute or two later when Sarah came along the back of the barn and said, "Well? Did that help?" I tried to find excuses. "How loud were you talking?"

"Very loud. I was nearly shouting. So was mum."

"Do you have exceptionally good hearing?" It might, of course, be that my hearing was going on me.

"Just average, I think. Why?"

"Well, I certainly couldn't distinguish any words."

For a moment Sarah simply stared at me and her pale face seemed to grow paler. If it hadn't been a ridiculous thought I would've thought that was fear in her face. I said briskly, "Well, it's all a bit odd but whoever it was you heard talking that day may have had a more carrying voice than either of you."

"I-I don't think so. Not ... if it was Algerine, I mean."

"Was there a wind blowing?"

"No-o-o ... I remember it as a very calm day."

"Sometimes it's possible to be convinced you heard voices from one direction when, really, they were coming from somewhere else. If you *expected* them to be in one direction it's not hard to convince yourself that's where they were coming from—and you would've expected people to be over in the garden area ... "

"You mean, they might've been—*behind* me?"

"Yes, or even *in* the barn."

"No. Mum padlocked the door. She didn't want children getting in. It's pretty old."

"You saw the padlock? She may've forgotten in the rush of things."

"Well, no-o ... no, I don't remember seeing it—but she rarely forgets things."

"I see. Still, I wouldn't worry."

"It was so clear—the words, I mean. But now I wish I'd never mentioned it."

Mrs Wilson arrived and said, "Do you think Elsinore did simply fall?"

"Oh yes, of course she fell! But that's not nice either—because, now, people can say—well, it was all our fault for not having the pond fenced off or something—or a wall along the bank—or steps down it—oh, I don't know—something—" Sarah sounded increasingly het up. Her mother remonstrated mildly, "It really isn't a *steep* slope."

"No. I honestly don't think you could be held liable for the accident. Was the grass wet?"

"Oh no. I watered the garden well the previous evening—but I hadn't had any hoses on that day—and you can't blame the dew at 2 pm on a sunny day."

They both looked at me: Mrs Wilson with the sort of sensible expression

that says “There, I knew there was nothing in it”, her daughter with darting eyes and puckered forehead. Her unspoken words—“but I *did* hear voices”—were almost palpable. I suddenly felt very sympathetic. One of the most nerve-wracking of life-experiences must surely be to “hear voices”.

I smiled at her and said, “Do you remember Mr Ed—you know, the talking horse that used to be on TV?”

“No.” Her eyes searched my face; was I making fun of her?

“Before your time, Sarah.” Her mother smiled. “Well, shall we go in now?”

“Who runs the farm for you, Mrs Wilson?” It had finally dawned on me it was very unlikely the two women ran everything. The garden alone would almost be a full-time job.

“Ron and Con.” Sarah spoke quickly. “I’ll take you over to their cottage if you like.”

Mrs Wilson said she wouldn’t accompany us and Sarah led me along the path, past sheds and chooks, beyond the shearing shed to a small fibro cottage. The inside was a surprise; pin-neat, bright and cheerful. Two young men were clearing away lunch debris and washing up.

Sarah introduced us and we sat down. But to the key questions they had no answers. They had helped set up stalls and marquees, then they went out for the afternoon. I was surprised. Two good-looking young men would surely be useful to have around. But as they talked I gained an inkling. Ron and Con were gay. Ron and Con were desirable as “hired hands” but Mrs Wilson thought it diplomatic not to press them on a gathering of probably elderly churchgoers ... or was it their choice to avoid those elderly churchgoers?

“Did you ask for that afternoon off?”

“We always have Saturday afternoons off. No one asked us to change anything that day.” They grinned at each other and they had very engaging grins. But it was Sarah who surprised me. She suddenly laughed and it was quite different to the laugh I’d heard before, open and frank without that muted nervous undertone.

There were currents here but they didn’t seem to have anything to do with the two middle-aged women sporting unusual names; three, if I counted Danae Wilson.

“Did you know Algerine or Elsinore?”

They both shook their heads. Sarah said, “Oh yes, I’ve always known them. Elsinore was older but it was Algerine who was the bossy one. Else was very gentle and quiet and loved music. She never married. Her sister’s husband is a bank manager in Toowoomba.”

“So can you think of any reason for Algerine to want to kill Elsinore?”

They all looked at each other; there was a sense of tension but it was more the tension of perplexity. The idea didn’t make sense. And ideas which exist but don’t make sense are somehow threatening.

Damn Russ Taylor! There was a sense of something wrong here. Not murder. I still didn’t believe that. But something. Something in the relationship

between Sarah and her mother ... I would have to go and see Algerine Parker before I could justify going home.

Sarah walked back to the house with me, silent most of the way, but as we crossed the beautiful lawn she burst out with an agonised—"It's a sign of schizophrenia, isn't it? Hearing voices?"

"Sometimes. But it would almost certainly keep on recurring in that case."

"Would it?" She sounded desperate for reassurance. "But each case must be different, mustn't it? It might start happening—then get more and more frequent—after I got married."

"Have you talked to—" I dredged my mind, "Tim?"

"Yes." She turned and gazed at me with those beautiful tragic dark eyes. "He said he would look after me."

"Good for Tim."

"Are you staying on, Mr Creighton?"

"No. I'd better go and visit Algerine—and maybe I should talk to Tim. Would that make you feel better?"

"Yes. If you would just tell him ..." She stopped walking and a tinge of colour crept into her ivory skin. "I don't know. Just tell him I'm okay."

- v -

I found the Parkers' residence at the leafy top end of Toowoomba. Currawongs called from the small gully behind the house. A large black cat uncurled itself from a seat in the garden. The Parkers did not appear to be short of the ready. I rang the bell and waited. All was quiet. I could simply walk away—and if Algerine, driven barmy by living with such a name for fifty years, had suddenly vented her frustration on her sister ... well ... I sat down on the garden seat and enjoyed the late afternoon and the black cat came back and took up a comfortable possie besides me and deigned to purr in a rusty throat. "Doesn't make sense, pussycat, does it?"

And that was the puzzle. It didn't make sense. People's motivations were at odds with their words. Danae Wilson was immensely fond of Algerine by her own admission, yet she was the one who'd taken those mysterious words to the police and given them credence. The police had done nothing—or had they talked to Algerine and dismissed the words as a misapprehension on Sarah's part? Algerine. Elsinore. Which one was richer. Algerine looked particularly well off. But that needn't stop her wanting more. Or it might all be in her husband's name. Had Elsinore left a will? No one had mentioned one. And Sarah. Strange kid. She didn't seem to belong there on that farm, in that household ... was the strangeness I felt something wrong in her mind—or was it more prosaically that she seemed such an unlikely daughter for Danae Wilson with her combination of waffle and practical good sense to have. But then, parents and children do not necessarily "fit". Who is to say my daughter Rachel looks as if she "belongs" to me. And where then would I fit Sarah ... I pondered ... I remembered seeing a clip of a pianist once ... Maria someone, from Portugal, I think, with dark sad eyes ... something about that tenderness, that almost fey sense with something sorrowful in it ...

A sleek grey Audi rolled into the drive and my reverie was broken.

- vi -

Algerine was a slight woman; her dark hair was going grey and rather than hide that ageing she'd put a blue rinse through it and given herself a Circe look. Everything about her was delicate, elegant ... the things she achieved in life would be gained by "witchcraft" not brute force. Chums she might be with Mrs Wilson but the stodgy freckled schoolkid that Danae had managed to conjure up was nothing like the Algerine who stood before me. She made tea, she put out shortbread and carrot cake. She went through that afternoon for me. Yes, she did walk around the garden with Danae and Else but Danae left them a few minutes later. Then Else had seen someone she knew so Algerine walked back to the stalls area and bought two macrame hangers and browsed among the second-hand books buying a Georgette Heyer ('Venetia') and a book of crossword puzzles. Then she'd sat down and chatted a while with two other women, both elderly and mainly about gardens, before going to have a Devonshire tea at, she thought, about 2.50 pm. She hadn't seen Else in that time but expected her to turn up ... then someone had come to tell her her sister had had an accident. No, she didn't know the person who came up to her but she'd been described by Mrs Wilson and she was the only person who fitted the description.

When she got to the pond there must've been at least half-a-dozen people there.

"I didn't actually see Danae till later. The rector and someone else had pulled Else out. She'd sort of got caught under the wire netting in the pond and we assumed she'd either drowned or the shock had caused a heart attack. It was very confusing with people coming and staring and getting in the way. I suppose I can't blame them—and as Else was already dead I can't say they caused any problems." Tears came to her eyes. "It was a terrible shock, you know. I mean it was such a *little* pond."

"Mmm. Did it surprise you that she hadn't been found sooner?"

"I wish she had been—every day I think—if only—I'm sure we could have done mouth-to-mouth or something. But no, to answer your question, you can't actually see the pond from the stalls area—and I think, because it was such a warm day, people had mostly walked round the garden then come over to the stalls and sat down in the shade ... and of course by then people were starting to think about tea ... what *I* don't understand is why Else was over there. She had already walked right round the garden earlier."

"Maybe she was interested in making a pond?"

"Oh no, not Else. She wasn't a gardener. She had a bed of geraniums in front of her unit but that was about the limit of her interest. No, it was music she loved—which was why I was expecting her to turn up in time to hear Janette and Susan Daly."

"And when you walked round the garden—did you go out the back, over towards the sheds?"

Mrs Parker stared at me. It was hard to imagine her elegant self going

where it might get dirty. “Oh no, we wouldn’t have done that—not even if we’d had a reason. If children saw us going out they might follow and I know Danae always worried about kids climbing on the tractor or perhaps getting kicked by a horse—and then their parents might sue ... ”

“She worried about being sued?”

“Well, you hear it happening all the time. I don’t suppose she worried more than average—but when you invite the public on to your property and something happens ... ”

“Has she been afraid you might sue—the lack of a fence round the pond, or that rusty netting in it?” Was I a form of insurance? I could reassure Mrs Wilson there wasn’t a realistic case. And I could dampen any thoughts, any lingering thoughts, Mrs Parker might have about negligence, and a possible benefit. She seemed surprised by the question but said simply, “No.”

I allowed her to fill my cup. If Elsinore had had dependants ... but a sister would find it much harder to build a case ... “And what about Sarah? Did you see her?”

“No. Not until well after we’d found Else. I was just going out to my car, my sister had come to the fête with me, and I was planning to follow the ambulance.”

“Did she say anything to you?”

“No. I don’t remember anything. Danae had invited us to the wedding but I can’t say I noticed Sarah particularly.”

This next bit was ticklish. Did Algerine know a degree of suspicion naturally surrounded her if ... “What did the police say to you?”

“Mr Creighton, I know you’re a friend of Danae’s—but why all these questions? I know you said Danae and Sarah have been worrying, that they might not have taken sufficient care—but the police were satisfied it was an accident and that neither Sarah nor her mother could be held responsible in any way. It really was a freak accident.”

“It isn’t quite a matter of sufficient care. Someone apparently overhead a threat made to your sister—and the Wilsons have been worrying ... It’s all very vague but they felt it couldn’t just be left hanging. My main purpose in coming to see you was the hope that I can put their minds to rest.”

Algerine looked searchingly at me. Then she sat back in her delicate pastel room, re-crossed her ankles in a way that would make June Dalley-Watkins go green with envy, and said, “Are you suggesting that *I* am suspected of doing something to my sister?”

“No. It’s not that specific. Just a voice heard making what sounded like a threat.” There was nothing unusual about Algerine’s voice. Like Danae Wilson’s it was just a pleasant middle-aged voice without any remarkable timbre or character or accent.

“So if I say that maybe Danae and Sarah are—” she hesitated, “well, I will then be suspected of moving any suspicion on to them—because *I* might have a reason for hurting my sister—but they couldn’t possibly have any reason.”

“Mrs Wilson has been at pains to point out that you and your sister and she

have always been close friends. I don't think she's suggesting anything. I think Sarah might be a little ... " I realised I couldn't decide how best to describe the kind of nervy tension I felt in Sarah, "I don't know ... unbalanced is much too strong a word."

"Sarah is a strange kid, very shy, very easily upset, very insecure—is that what you're saying—and if Sarah says she heard this—*threat*—then no one is going to take her seriously?"

"Maybe."

"So you want to know how I felt about my sister?"

"Not particularly." I know when I'm flogging a dead horse but it didn't seem the moment to say so.

"Well," she became brisk. "I will tell you, a little anyway. Else never married. Her—lover—jilted her when she was about thirty—after that she refused to have anything to do with men. She tolerated my husband, nothing more. She loved being in the company of women, old schoolfriends—Danae and myself and several others—but in general she lived very quietly. She played the violin in a small orchestra and she was very fond of Gilbert and Sullivan. She worked as a doctor's receptionist up till about ten years ago when she decided to retire early. She was planning to go overseas on a tour with another old schoolfriend whose husband died not long ago. I just cannot imagine Else annoying anyone enough for them to want to hurt her. If she found herself in even the mildest argument with anyone she would probably say that she was sure they were right—and back out."

People sometimes don't like the people who refuse to argue—but it hardly struck me as grounds for homicide.

"Do you know *why* her young man backed out?"

"Another woman." Algerine almost snapped it off. Whether or not Elsinore had forgiven him I had the odd feeling Algerine still held it against him.

"Do you remember his name?"

"John Marsh. He was the doctor she was working for at the time."

"He left town?"

"Not immediately. Else went away for a couple of years. When she came back she never spoke of him. It was almost as if that previous life had been wiped from the slate. He married a Sydney woman. We heard she was well off, well connected."

"You think that was the reason?"

"Who knows? Else never talked about it. And is any of this of any importance now? I certainly didn't see him at Danae's garden party." She let a slight sarcasm creep in.

"No. So how much older than Danae was she?"

"Oh, only two or three years, I think. I could look them up in my birthday book but I doubt they'd want me bandying round their ages."

"Mmm. You knew Peter Wilson of course."

"Yes." She seemed to let herself relax. "Danae was the first to marry. She was only nineteen. She'd been married about ten years when she had Sarah."

“Curious.”

“Why curious?”

“Sarah seems so unlike her mother. I wondered if she might be adopted.”

“No. I’m sure she isn’t. I still remember cutting the birth notice out of the paper.”

This was an odd way to put it. Why not say something like “I remember visiting her and the bub in hospital”? But after a few more questions I realised I was pretty much going round in circles and decided it was time I gave up and was making tracks.

- vii -

The following Thursday I was in Brisbane and took time out in the evening to visit Tim Schwarz in a small and rather grubby flat in St Lucia. The place was full of papers and law books and unwashed mugs. Tim himself was a tall young man, square-faced, dark-haired, bad skin. I pictured him in court stumbling over chairs, dropping files, knocking his water glass flying when he went to make his clinching points. But he was undoubtedly fond of Sarah. He said straight away he wanted to marry her as soon as possible. To a sceptical stranger like me his frankness was touching. But what he definitely didn’t want was the large wedding her mother was trying to foist on them.

His frankness showed no sign of abating. “I don’t like her mum—and I think Sarah’ll be a whole lot happier and more relaxed when she can move out of home.”

“Why do you say that? Her mother seems to want the best for her.”

“Do you think so? I don’t.”

He fiddled with the pens on the table, gulped coffee; he had a prominent Adam’s apple, an intense manner. He might love Sarah—but the two of them would make a rather frightening combination as parents. He seemed to read my thoughts. “Sarah is happy and calm here with me. She’s always tense at home. I don’t know why exactly—but it must be her mother that does that to her, mustn’t it?”

“Not necessarily. It could be something about the farm, memories of her father, lack of money—her relationship with those two young fellas—even some sort of allergy ...”

He shrugged, disbelieving. Then he leaned forward again. “No! It *is* something to do with her mum. She’s so reasonable—and somehow she always makes Sarah seem a bit hysterical. I don’t understand it—it just is—”

“Did Sarah tell you about the voices she heard?”

“Yes. And I’m sure she did hear voices ...” he faltered. “But now she tells me she couldn’t have heard them ...”

He got up and walked round the tiny flat.

“Sarah *isn’t* crazy. There *has* to be some simple explanation. She said she heard Elsinore—and then Elsinore died ...”

“I thought it was Algerine she heard.” Or did she simply hear women’s voices—and the names were imposed later?

“Oh? Well, it doesn’t matter. Maybe I got it mixed up. I’ll see her at the

weekend. I go home most Friday nights.”

“Did you ever meet them? Algerine and Elsinore? Christ, how I hate those names!”

“They did too.” He grinned suddenly. “Their father was a school principal. Yes, I know—knew—them both. Sarah often stayed with Elsinore when she came to town at weekends. Sometimes I went there. Else was teaching her the violin.”

“So why would *anyone* want to get rid of Elsinore? I haven’t heard a bad word against her.”

“No. She was rather sweet. Much nicer than Algerine, I always thought. Very gentle and kind—and a bit—” he looked a bit embarrassed as though I’d think this a ridiculous flight of fancy, “wistful almost ... as though she’d missed something from life.”

“How did Sarah feel about her?”

“Very close really. Like a sort of aunt, I suppose. Except there was a kind of friendship which seemed to cross the age gap.”

“Not like a mother?”

His gaze grew sharper; as though his self as lawyer had finally taken over from his self as man and lover. I hadn’t gained strong feelings about any of the people involved in the whole sad affair. I just wanted to hand out blanket reassurances and go home and forget them all. Tell Russ I liked doing nothing ... sit out on my sunny balcony and—do nothing. Now, I felt I was in the presence of someone with a quick mind, someone who wasn’t yet ready to say “She’ll be apples, mate,” and let me slink off.

Even so—he had no answers. I’m not sure he had the questions either.

- viii-

I had dinner by myself in a pub in South Brisbane. They do a good mixed grill. And as I chewed I asked myself for the enth time: did Sarah or did she not—hear voices?

Did someone—push Elsinore?

I thought of hidden microphones. James Bond at a little country fête. I thought of Sarah there patting her horse. I thought of her face going white when I said I couldn’t hear their voices. I thought of my quip about Mr Ed. Yes. ‘A horse is a horse, of course, of course, and no one can talk to a horse, of course, unless that horse is the famous Mister Ed.’ Something like that. And yet the jingle was wrong. *Anyone* can talk to a horse. It’s only Mr Ed who *talks back*.

So ... but my mind didn’t come up with anything startling. Even if I’d been looking at the situation upside-down back-to-front and head-over-heels, or segments of it, I couldn’t see where it got me.

And so I had an early night and got up with, I think, a clearer head. First I thought “John Marsh” then I put him away. As part of Elsinore’s life twenty years ago he was surely beyond mattering now? Over breakfast, my mind moved on. What about the post-mortem. There must’ve been one. Sudden death. Unwitnessed death. But I had no particularly useful contacts within the Queensland judicial system. I was retired. Wasn’t I? But I didn’t need contacts

... Then my tired old brain clicked and whirred like an old sci-fi movie. Of course I didn't need contacts. The results of a p.m. aren't secret—unless there's a very pressing reason to keep them so. A murder investigation or, less dramatically, insurance or family concerns. But this was the accidental death of a woman whose next-of-kin was 'only' a sister.

I left the hotel dining-room and made a call from the public phone in the hall. I'd go home later today but first ... if nothing else it'd be interesting to know what they'd fixed on as 'cause of death'.

- ix -

Elsinore King had suffered a bang on the head before drowning (that's layman's language) in a garden pond. It was assumed she'd fallen or tripped on the bank, rolled down, cracking her head on the sandstone flags at the side of the pool—and tiny sandstone chips had been found in her hair. It was not clear whether she'd been unconscious when she went into the pool. There were scratches on her—but they all might've been gained by falling through the rusty netting there to protect the goldfish—rather than by later struggles. The coroner had drawn attention to the question: why had she fallen into the water if she'd slipped on the bank or the flat surrounds. Even if she'd tripped or slipped her momentum was unlikely to have carried her into the water. If she'd been hurrying it was just possible—but women of fifty strolling gently round the grounds at a garden party are unlikely to be rushing. There wasn't even a barbecue to catch fire. Anyway that was the coroner's question (simplified) and it had been side-stepped. I wondered why. Lack of witnesses. Lack of reasons. No one had told the coroner about the supposed conversation ...

But my question was different. The file contained general information—name, age, date of birth, height, weight, general health status ... and the fact that Elsinore King had probably produced a child. The clerk, when I asked if the child's identity was known and if it had been notified, could only say she was sorry but she knew nothing. I should contact the family.

I did just that. Algerine was adamant Elsinore could not have had a baby without telling anyone by which she meant without telling her sister.

So there was a long pause, an expensive pause, on the line. Then she said, "The coroner must've been given the wrong file ... and you should not be snooping like this ... "

"I doubt it, Mrs Parker—and you yourself said your sister went away." This led to another long silence. Algerine, Elsinore, not to mention Danae—I found myself thinking of the three of them, all very ladylike, all very nice, all most polite ... all dishonest. There were things hidden. But if Elsinore chose not to tell ... had the unknown baby come back to haunt them. But I suspected the child had never gone away. "I think, Mrs Parker, it would help if you, at least, started by telling the truth. The happiness and mental health of a young woman is at stake."

"What on earth do you mean?" If she'd sounded annoyed—but it was more a kind of gasp, as if she'd been running.

"It wasn't all sweetness and light between the three of you, was it. Danae

Wilson adopted your sister's child, didn't she?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Else would've told me." So she could roar—

"Unless Danae and her husband persuaded your sister to keep it all a secret. If it wasn't a regular adoption. If Danae was put down as the birth mother. If she paid for the child ... Elsinore wasn't a teenage mum, she was a respectable thirty-year-old who'd kept her affair with an equally respectable doctor secret ... something along those lines."

Unspoken there was Elsinore's gamble; she wanted the child, she wanted John Marsh ... and Danae, dear old school chum, had taken her child with the promise she would always know how and where Sarah was ... I was only guessing but ...

"I ... I suppose something could've happened—but it seems—no, I just can't believe my sister would've agreed to keep such a thing a secret from me." (I wondered when she'd married Mr Parker and whether he'd been a bank manager then; bank managers aren't wild about scandal on the home front.) "We were always very close." It came down the line almost as a wail; the betrayal that sudden death can drag in its wake.

People disclaim. It's natural. *They* couldn't have been lied to. *They* couldn't have been kept out of a secret. *They* would've known if ...

"It ended up as a dangerous secret, didn't it, because Sarah was unhappy at home and happy in the times she was with your sister—and she started to get suspicious, maybe she asked awkward questions—and Elsinore was lonely—she wanted to claim her daughter back, if not legally which would've been difficult—then in terms of time and affection and doing things together."

"Nonsense! You cannot suggest that Danae would ... that she ... that Sarah was ..."

No. I couldn't suggest because I had no proof, only suppositions.

"Was Elsinore buried or cremated?"

She seemed to get her breath back because she said rather sharply, "I do not understand what possible interest it could be to you."

"It's a simple enough question—and I imagine it was never a secret."

"Buried." She bit it off.

"Then—would you agree to DNA testing—if Sarah is also willing—that will resolve the issue beyond doubt—and it needn't involve Danae if Sarah decides not to take it any further."

"No! This has gone quite far enough, Mr Creighton. I don't know who asked you to start asking these sorts of questions and prying into our private lives but I find your whole manner totally unacceptable! Now, you'll have to excuse me—and I do *not* wish you to call again."

There was a very definite click, then the phone burred in my ear.

No finesse, mate, but if the worst came to the worst we could probably find something else of Elsinore to test; unpleasant but possible.

- x -

I stayed another night in Brisbane after all. Was Sarah in danger. I didn't think so. The damage was already done. A terrible cruelty—or was I a senile old

fool and had it all wrong? There were other explanations. It's times like these I miss my old colleagues (some, anyway); they may've included a good share of downright bastards but that chance to chew things over, come up with a new angle, be reminded of aspects I'd forgotten or overlooked. And of course ask: "Well, what do we do next?"

At about five, Tim Schwarz rang me; not getting me at home, he'd been directed by a "young lady" to try here. Did I have any more information for them? It was an odd situation. In theory it was Russ who'd asked me to investigate and Russ really didn't care what I did or whether I came up with anything or not but it was Danae who had given me lunch and handed me a cheque for \$150 murmuring something about "my time". It was a grey area, me "helping out" rather than being a licensed enquiry agent, but the law would see Danae as my client. Should I therefore return her money?

I asked Tim when he was seeing Sarah next.

"She's coming down this weekend—rather than me going up to Toowoomba. We're going flat-hunting tomorrow."

"Then can you squeeze in time to see me. I'd like to see you both."

"Sure." He sounded enthusiastic. "We'd both like to know if you've found out anything. We could all have lunch." It made us sound like a bunch of Rotarians.

We met at a small café downtown and took an outside table. Brisbane is going a bit arty these days. And all very pleasant except I would've preferred a bit more privacy. I didn't trust Sarah's hold on herself, not completely.

"Have you had any ideas—about the voices, I mean?" She clasped her hands tightly and gazed at me out of those lovely eyes.

"Tell me, when you said you heard someone talking—what did your mother say?"

Obediently she thought it over before saying, "I don't exactly remember. She was very interested and she kept, well, she sort of kept urging me to try and remember ... "

"Leading you?"

"I—I don't know. Perhaps. A little. My mother seems a bit vague but she's really a very decisive person."

"And it gradually became clear to you—just what you'd heard, whose voice it might've been ... "

"Ye-es ... the more I thought about it ... and of course it seemed different after I heard Elsinore was dead ... and when we discussed it, well, it seemed so strange that she could've fallen there and drowned—though I know mum had been meaning to get Con to replace that old netting."

"Mr Creighton," Tim sounded curious, excited really, "what do you think? Was it an accident?"

I took my time, finished eating, lingering over my last mouthful, then sat back. "I have a theory—but not a shred of proof. And I'm not sure that my theory should be aired *without* proof."

"I see." Tim looked at Sarah then back to me. Careful, considerate,

understanding. He looked very young but I had the feeling of someone wiser than his years.

“But we would like to know,” Sarah was not constrained by legal niceties, “and we might have evidence we didn’t know we had, mightn’t we?”

“You’ve been reading too many whodunits—and you might not like my theory.”

“But having all these wild—*thoughts* in my mind isn’t nice either.” She reclasped her hands and I had her beseeching eyes on me. Her mother might’ve hypnotised her but Sarah’s gaze was also compelling ...

“Well ... it all seems to go back about twenty years. Elsinore was hoping to marry a young doctor called John Marsh but he decided against it, apparently because of another woman—but Else was expecting a baby which she then went—somewhere, I don’t know where, and had ... well, your mother, Sarah, apparently had a baby at that time.”

“So I am really Else’s daughter?” She caught my drift immediately; I suspect she’d been there long before me. “Do you know, I often wondered.”

“Why?”

“Because of my hands.” She held them out to me. “I’ve got a crooked little finger. She did too. I know it isn’t much. But she had the same colouring, little things ...”

“Yes. But however they arranged it, it wasn’t an adoption. There is no record of Elsinore having a baby here. So the baby was born as your mother’s—who arranged it and just how—and what, if anything, was paid, we can only speculate ... and there probably are no documents to tell you the truth—only your mother and Elsinore—and presumably a nurse or a doctor if you were born at home or in a private hospital or clinic ... a home birth seems more likely ... or she used the name Danae Wilson when she went in to hospital.”

“Maybe John Marsh delivered me?” Sarah sounded wry.

The thought had occurred to me.

“I see.” Tim nodded several times and put his fingers together. “And Else was getting older, she lived alone, she loved Sarah. She wanted, finally, to be able to say “my daughter” ... and Sarah’s mum is also getting older—and alone—and she was determined not to let that happen ...”

“Yes ... there’s only Rob and Con there and they’re wrapped up in each other ... she loves her garden but she needs someone to depend on her or her life wouldn’t have any more meaning ...”

“And if your mum said to Else “come for a walk”—of course Else would’ve gone with her—maybe it was an accident, one of them tripped, she bumped Else who then fell, maybe there was a bit of a push ... Else fell in and got caught in the netting ...”

“And instead of getting help ... yes, it’s most likely to have been a spur of the moment thing. There were too many variables to *plan* a death in that way ... too many people who might choose to walk over ... and if Else looked like pulling herself free, Danae had to be able to make it look as though it was all her clumsiness and that she was coming to Else’s rescue ... I’m so sorry.” I

turned to Sarah. However dispassionately we discussed what might have happened Danae Wilson had still been her mother for twenty years.

“It’s possible.” Sarah said it very calmly.

“But unpleasant to live with. We have no proof, for or against. And there is an equal possibility that it really *was* an accident, that you hearing voices was *all* your mother did ... and you’d feel less comfortable about confiding in Elsinore if you’d overheard what seemed a very unpleasant and spiteful argument ... ”

“Yes.” They looked at each other and I felt there were unspoken thoughts passing. And Sarah had already faced the dilemmas of a mother and an “aunt” both wanting her as their bulwark against loneliness, both wanting things from her, both offering ...

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it,” I put in. “You were unhappy at home?”

“I—I don’t know how to say it—but I have been terrified there the last few months, maybe a year, believing that something was wrong with me, that I really was developing schizophrenia. I said to Tim I shouldn’t marry him—it wasn’t fair to him if there was something wrong in my head. How could he have a good career if he was tied to a nutcase—and our children too—”

“And I said the sooner we got married the better—I didn’t know but I sort of had an intuition—” he gave an apologetic grin, “that it was her mother putting the idea there was something wrong with her into her head ... ”

“Mum couldn’t stop me getting married—but she could plead for a great big wedding—her only daughter, must do the family proud, she had so many reasons—she made me feel ungrateful any time I said I didn’t want that—and she was hoping we would agree to put it off at least until after Tim graduated, I felt so pressured I kept planning to say to her, no, no wedding—and by next year, who knows, maybe I really will be off my head—” She gave a sudden shrill giggle which startled me.

“It’s true, Bob.” Tim pressed his fingers together. “I’ve seen Sarah getting worse in the last few months, more nervy—and I’m sure it was Sarah telling her mum she planned to get married that was the key point.”

“Those voices—I *did* hear people talking. I am sure I did.”

“Oh, I’m sure you did. The most likely explanation is a tape-recorder in the barn. You told me your mother specially locked the barn but nothing else was locked—or even lockable. She may have taped bits of Else or Algerine or she may have done it herself but introduced their names into it. And it could be activated the same way a TV remote-control works—your mother saw you driving up, she knew you’d go straight over to give your old pony a pat because that’s what you invariably did.”

“I did think it was Algerine.”

“I doubt if it matters whose voice it was. And your mother’s voice is quite close to Algerine’s ... but you wouldn’t have assumed she was out the back having an argument instead of welcoming people into her garden ... the main thing was that she gradually convinced you that you *had* heard Algerine threatening her sister. You know how it is when you go over and over

something in your mind ... and I suppose she was gently nudging you along ... ” She nodded. “And now that you’ve pointed the finger at Algerine—if any more questions ever do get asked, which is unlikely, about where your mother was, what she was doing—well, the finger will point at Algerine—who swears she knew nothing about Elsinore ever having a baby—and without proof of a baby who could possibly draw a motive for your mother—and the cops have you down as being sure there was an argument at a time when your mother had a reasonable alibi—”

“It’s very clever.” Tim sounded grim.

“But is it *true*?” I gazed at him, not interrogatively.

“And what will we do—if it is?”

“Love each other—and take things quietly.”

- xi -

Russ Taylor provides me with a can of ale whenever I drop in; I pour him a decent dollop of Glenmorangie when he comes by. He said he always knew the “old trout” had a bee-in-her-bonnet when I told him about my experiences.

Come to think of it, I needn’t have left my peaceful balcony lounger. Russ had always known Danae Wilson not Sarah Wilson was the problem. I just hadn’t listened carefully enough. I just couldn’t pre-guess I was to be cast in the role of independent guarantor that voices existed in Sarah’s head ... but then, who could? The idea, the more I thought on it, just stayed weird. Weird and rather frightening.

“Tricky,” he said cheerily; apparently not put out by the possibility of his cousin’s wife disposing of her childhood “chum” at her garden fête. Maybe the Taylors weren’t the normal unexciting family I’d always had in mind? “So what did you do?”

“Nothing. I’ve left it with Tim and Sarah, he’s the lawyer. Unless you want to take the matter further.” You still hear of occasional cases of families committing relatives to institutions rather than face the embarrassment of their public existence; I wondered whether Tim had been reading up on the law as it attempts to grapple with the complexities of the mentally ill and those who have been persuaded to believe in their own mental illness ...

“Me! Heck no! But she over-played her hand, didn’t she?”

Yes, Danae Wilson overplayed her hand. I was meant to be her insurance, her reassurance that she was safe; that if there was a problem then it existed in Sarah’s head (and all the implications of that) ... and yet—even as I admired her skill ... I’d come so close to giving her the reassurance she wanted ... I had the uncomfortable feeling there hadn’t been much skill on my part ... it was simply the fact that I was an outsider, that her desire for a big wedding conjured up memories of a wedding I preferred to forget (my own), that I had found myself musing on horses and Mister Ed and that old jingle ... not much skill ... and I still wasn’t completely sure I was right ... I have been known to jump to conclusions ... who hasn’t? ...

A few days later I received a letter from Sarah.

“Dear Bob,

Tim did what we decided, and sent a letter. I don't know how mum will respond. But I am never going back to the farm, not even to pick up my clothes. Tim and I are going to get married, as we always wanted, in a Registry Office. No fuss and bother. (If you'd like to come you're very welcome.) The only thing I really miss from the farm is old Bindy.

And I miss Else. That is the terrible thing. I always felt so comfortable, so "at home" with her. We would talk about music and she would lend me records and tapes. She used to say to me, you were *meant* to be a violinist and I would just smile—because no one in either mum's or dad's families was the slightest bit musical. But now I understand. And I'm going to take her seriously. It's the least I can do for her. And I'm excited at the thought of really doing something with my life, not just being "Mummy's little girl" which was really all I was at home.

I went to see Algerine the other day. She asked me if I wanted to get Else exhumed. If I did, she said she would put her scruples aside and request it, but I said no. In the end, I know that justice matters. But you know, it is mum who is the one who has lost everything—because Algerine said she was so hurt and upset that she didn't want to see mum any more. So she has really lost her daughter and her best friend. She loves her garden but she always needed people too. And her place in local esteem. Just having to say the wedding is off will be hard for her. And yet, I find I can forgive, it's hard but ... I *do* understand how her desire for a baby might've driven her to her terrible subterfuges, even the things she did to try and keep me tied to her apron-strings, to deny Else any chance to ever claim me ... I could even have loved them both if I'd been told the truth ... but she wanted to keep all of me ... "

She ended off with a P.S. "Did you know about the original Danae? The one in the Greek myth. She is imprisoned so she can't have a child—but she receives one by means of magic. Yet the prison is still there."

I thought a long time. Guilt by theory. Right and wrong. Forgiveness. Sympathy. And eventually I wrote my own letter to Danae Wilson, enclosing her payment to me. I said I couldn't take it as I hadn't helped her in the way she hoped, and I said, in part, "Tell your daughter the truth. She loved Else. But there was also a time when she loved you. She deserves the truth, all children do. Exhumations are messy and start nasty rumours but she needn't go to that final step. I think you may find that Algerine will "remember" all your daughter needs to know. Tim Schwarz is a fine young man who happens to be very much in love with Sarah, regardless of her mental state, voices in her head or not."

Unlike Mr Ed, Mrs Wilson did not reply.

- end -

MRS McGOOHAN'S GALLOPER

- i -

I came home from a late session with the dentist to find a large parcel and Rachel both sitting relaxed; Rachel with a drink in one hand and listening to Gene Pitney of all people; the parcel sitting mute. I hefted it. On the back it said 'Paul—scribble ... '

"What is it?" I sat down.

"You *could* open it." She put on her don't-suffer-fools-gladly tone. I could. I did. To my surprise it was a manuscript. One of those things I'm always talking of creating myself and never doing anything about. It didn't mean I wanted anybody else's. "Must be a mistake." She merely shrugged and I fished out the accompanying letter. Paul Johnson asked if I would please read his 'book' so I would then understand the situation and could tell him what had happened to Terry Jones who'd gone missing some eight months ago so that he, Paul, who seemed to be the only person to believe something had gone horribly wrong could then convince everyone else. For an encore I pull kangaroos out of a hat.

But I did read the manuscript. It was neatly prepared and quite interesting and I had nothing more gripping to do than watch the video Rachel had picked up on her way home, called 'Volcano'. At the end of the book I was not bursting with ideas. Ideas might involve a trip to south-west Queensland and I had no wish to leave Surfers.

But, about three days later, young Paul rang me to ask if a) I'd received the book safely and b) if I could give him any suggestions about looking for Terry. Full marks for initiative, persistence, whatever. I said, "No. Your guess is as good as mine."

He sounded disappointed. "I've tried everyone I can think of. Wad found your name from someone and suggested I write but I s'pose it was a long shot."

"What about Terry's parents?"

"They still believe he ran away with Marie McGoohan and that he'll surface sooner or later and give them a call. You know they didn't approve of him wanting to be a jockey. I mean they were okay about it but they sort of blame Harry and Marie for influencing him. They think he's hanging round a racecourse somewhere down south."

"And they might be right?"

"No. I mean, even if Terry didn't want to let them know, there's no reason for him to avoid us, the old gang. We didn't care what he wanted to do with his life and if he went off with Marie we'd say 'half his luck!' I'm sure Terry is dead but I can't prove it and it's sort of getting me down, just thinking about it all the time and not knowing what to do." He seemed to wind down. "You couldn't come here, could you, sort of have a look around. Maybe you'd see

things I missed ... and people might talk to you in a different way ... ”

The assumption being people talk to old codgers.

I wanted to groan—not again!—and instead I hedged and said I’d give the book another read and think about it.

- ii -

McGoohan’s Hotel is not the most comfortable place I’ve ever stayed in, far from it; a typical ramshackle country pub run without flair, imagination, a commitment to service or hygiene, and with something else that immediately struck me: a kind of half-hearted sleaze. The books would be done badly. Female staff wouldn’t stay long. But it did appear to be at the heart of things in town. Perhaps because it had no competition.

I went round to meet Paul at his house after I’d settled in. His parents were at the surgery; his father as the local GP and his mother as the nurse/receptionist. I took the book with me, with all the notes and questions I’d clipped in. It was a curious document because Paul had chosen to tell it in an uneasily detached rather formal third-person voice. He also appeared either to be privy to some very intimate information or else he had a very vivid imagination.

He turned out to be a tall blond teenager, a bit acned, very straight untidy hair, slightly reminiscent of a young Michael York; but there was something about him which said ‘drop-out’, which said he’d ceased going anywhere, nourishing any ambition, being anyone’s golden boy. He might have brains. He struck me as having a degree of insight and honesty. We eventually sat down and began going through his story ...

MRS McGOOHAN’S GALLOPER by Paul Johnson

“Do you think he can win a race, hey?”

“Nah! Looks like an old cart horse.”

The horse was ugly. Dark brown, plain-faced, ewe-necked. He watched the navy-uniformed boys for a minute then went back to grazing in the small dry paddock behind McGoohan’s Hotel.

“Who does he belong to?”

“Marie McGoohan, I reckon. Or maybe old Harry Doyle. Dunno. Dad reckons he buys up old crocks real cheap then wins a race or two just for the heck of it—”

“Wonder what’s wrong with this one then?”

“Dunno. Dicky in the legs maybe?”

“Sleeping sickness?”

“Is Mrs McGoohan the cute little chick with the black hair?”

“Yeah. I heard someone say Trev treats her pretty bad, says nasty things to her, tries to make her cry ... you’d wonder why she married an old bugger like that.”

“Maybe she likes drinkin’ all the fancy stuff in the bottle shop when he’s

not lookin'?"

"Wouldn't be bad, hey? But—look, you guys, what say we make the old horse win just for a laugh?"

"Oh sure, an' how're you goin' to *make* him win, Johnno? Get some pep pills outa y'dad's cupboard?"

"Don't be stupid, Eyeholes! You'd get him disqualified if they found it in his piss! What we have to do is give all the other starters a big meal or something to drink just before the race so they just don't feel like running fast."

"Oh sure thing! Here, horsie, come an' eat this yummy bucket of porridge!"

"Don't be a dill, Parker. Giving 'em hay seems a bit tricky but I don't see why we couldn't give 'em all a bucket of water."

"An' no one's going to object when you come along with your bucket of water? Hey look, there's a kind li'l kid givin' the poor thirsty horsies a drink?"

"We're not going to tell them, you dope. Look, I've got an idea. You know how they have the flower show over at the CWA hall the same day? Well, all we've got to do is bugger up the pipe or the tap or something—then everyone'll be looking for water when they bring their flowers for judging so we'll offer to get buckets of water from the trough near the horse stalls so no one'll take much notice when they see us chugging past with buckets and each time we go past we'll let the horses have a slurp. You guys can be hanging round the stalls eating a hamburger or something so it'll look natural when we stop for a sec."

"Yeah. Might work. Okay, who's going to do what? Dal and I can check out the water supply and see how to fix things without making it look obvious—but how're we going to know which horses need a drink?"

"Dave can check the entries. Your old man's still on the committee, isn't he?"

"Yeah."

"What about bringing buckets?"

"Nah. Always stacks around. Terry an' me'll check out the pipes this arve. That okay with you, Terry?"

"Sure."

"Meet at Flabbyguts then? Say half-past-seven?"

They went in the front gate of the High School, dropping the subject, and Paul saying instead, "Hey, I was just reading up on this disease called hydrocele where you get water on your balls and after a while you end up looking like you've got a soccer ball inside your duds—"

"The girls'd think you were hot stuff—"

"So what do they do? Whack a great hole—"

They dispersed to their lockers and Marie McGoohan's potential winner of the R.J. Adams Plate at the town's annual race meeting (more precisely the Easter Race Carnival and Dahlia Show) wandered up to the side fence, gazed along the road to where noise came from the solid brick building and its clutch of pre-fabs. A bell rang. The nearby racetrack and showgrounds stayed empty except for a truck marked B.WILLIAMS PAINTING CONTRACTOR. Grayish

haze gathered over the dusty scrub on the horizon, the sun shone down on the flayed-red-roof of the pub and people were already saying, “Looks like it’ll stay fine for Easter.”

“*You were very casual about it all,*” I said to Paul. He nodded. “*Yeah, we never asked what might happen if we got caught.*”

“*And is the horse vital to the story?*”

“*Maybe. I don’t honestly know.*”

Wad Allee surveyed the exuberant nature strip that ran along the centre of the highway through town, almost a jungle, green and refreshing. He preferred it to his own back view of crates of empty drink bottles and some patched briefs on the hoist. But every so often someone suggested the nature strip be turned into extra parking. Then they’d find they had Wad to deal with. Wad didn’t need to do anything, just let people know his opinion.

Because the town’s parents thought Wad’s NO SMOKING NO BAD TEMPER NO SWEARING NO SPITTING NO STEALING NO CHEATING NO GUM NO DIRTY FEET fun parlour worth keeping in town. Kids called him No Nothing Wad, or Flabbyguts, or The Old Bastard. But they put up with his rules. (It was true one boy hadn’t but after being barred from the place he eventually came round and apologised; it was like being sent to Coventry.)

The Union had a different complaint: a policy which gave every kid the chance of a month’s casual work in the milkbar (if wanted) to gain experience could possibly be seen as exploitation of children. To that, Wad took the rep over the place, gave him a cup of tea, and said, “I don’t *have* to give kids work. They’re a pain and a hassle. It’d be a damn sight easier to hire a reliable woman and be done with it. But every kid deserves the chance to earn some pocket money, learn to handle a bit of responsibility and be able to put down some work experience and a reference when they go for a better job. It’s not my job to teach ‘em, you start with some brainless ninny, can’t add two and two, and at the end of the month they’re doing a decent job ... and then you start all over again.” He heaved a sigh.

The rep nodded and went away. Nothing more was said. Maybe he agreed with Wad, maybe he couldn’t be bothered to take it anywhere. He probably didn’t know that Wad liked the kids that spent their free time on his premises and would fight tooth and nail to keep his system going.

They were the only family he was ever going to have and he watched over their lives with a kind of possessive care, giving out sudden lectures of Waddish wisdom, along with sudden bursts of rough discipline. Kids grumbled but they sort of understood that Wad wanted the best for them.

“*And did you—understand that?*”

“*Wad has been good to me. He’s been the only person who really believes Terry’s gone.*”

I assumed this would involve me in a visit to Wad Allee. I said only, “But is

Wad important to the earlier story? Did he influence Terry?"

"Probably. I think he influenced us all a bit."

By seven o'clock Wad's place was always full unless there was a good movie on or it was very hot and kids'd stayed late at the Council pool. Wad mooched to and fro in a white T-shirt and grey flannel trousers held up by braces. Dr Johnson said his liver was enlarged but all his life, for some reason, he'd hated the feeling of anything nipping his waist.

The café had been a FOR SALE café when Wad rolled into town many years ago with his boxing troupe for the annual show. The troupe moved on. Wad stayed. People said he'd liked the atmosphere in town, Wad said he'd liked the nature strip. He didn't say he felt age creeping up.

He altered the place to fit his hodge-podge of ideas about kids and life: a room of video games and pinball machines, a milkbar with juke box out the back, a gym with mats and horse and parallel bars and punching bags, and a room he'd thought of as an overflow of games but which had turned into a place of board games, racks of comics, a shelf of books, a scattering of chairs. It seemed to meet a need he hadn't previously recognised: kids without money still liked a place they could come and talk and potter away from home. To feel they were *out*.

The gang conspiring to alter the history of the R.J. Adams Plate moved casually from game to game while they shared the information they'd gathered so far, peering over each other's shoulders at the games while murmuring in an ear.

A fairly representative collection of the town's young intelligence: Brad Eyles, truckie's son, Pete Giddings, barber's son, Paul Johnson, doctor's son, Dave Parker, supermarket manager's son, Dal Creighton, plumber's son, Terry Jones, stepson of 'the water man' Rhys Jones.

Terry came in the back door of his home about half-past-eight; the TV was on in the lounge, Gray and Chris were fighting in their bedroom (weren't they always), Rhys and Lulu were discussing Terry's future. They did this often because they felt he should have an ambition, a plan in life. He seemed to do just enough work to keep himself out of trouble. The screen-door squeaked.

"That you, Terry?"

"Yeah."

"Finished your homework?"

"Just about ... Mum, are you going to enter flowers in the show this year?"

"Uh-huh, I guess so. They're not too good, the sandy soil maybe, but there's no harm in trying."

No one else ever pointed out that they had the same sandy soil. She was content to garden in her own haphazard way. Other people fussed over compost and timed watering and staking and pinching out side-buds.

"Want a hand on Saturday morning?"

Lulu was surprised. Since when did *Terry* offer to help in the garden—or anywhere else for that matter. "Thanks, Terry honey, I've got to get them over

by eleven. So if you'd like to carry them—”

“Sure.” He closed the door firmly, though the warm night didn't encourage closed doors, and tiptoed into the laundry where Rhys kept various spare tools in the cupboard. There was a job waiting under the CWA hall.

“Terry told you exactly what went on in his house?”

“Pretty much. And I could guess the rest.”

“There must be something stuck in the pipe.” Mrs Parker looked at the coughing tap in annoyance.

“Run it for a minute and if there's a frog or something stuck in there it might work its way out.” Mrs Johnson came over. “Have you got it full on?”

“As far as it'll go.”

Terry and Paul strolled by, nonchalant, hands in pockets. “Don't worry about it, Mum, Terry and I'll duck over and fill a few buckets to keep you going—and if we see Mr Creighton we'll tell him you've got a problem.”

“Thanks, boys. Or maybe your dad, Terry? I saw Lulu a minute ago so he's probably around. It can't be anything serious.”

“Okay, I'll tell him when I see him.”

They rushed down the hall steps, each with a swag of buckets. “Thanks, boys,” Paul mimicked as soon as they were out of earshot. “Kiddywinks to the rescue, hey Terry?”

“Yeah—and it'll be our luck to meet Dad and Merv Creighton heading this way.”

“Well, you can do your Boy Scout stuff—hey Dad, I've been meaning to ask you if you've got any jobs waiting, wash the car or something, you can think up a few, a Flippypeno should have the gift of the gab, hey?”

“Shut your mouth, Johnson, or you'll have the gift of the sore nose—”

“Don't be so touchy, mate. We've got a ticklish job—” But the ticklish job went off beautifully. Brad and Dave were hanging round the horse-stalls eating sausages in bread and studying a racebook with professional concentration. Not precisely a racebook but a couple of stapled pages. The trucks and floats which brought the horses had to be parked away from the stalls because of lack of room so although a person here and there was busy in a stall people congregated elsewhere to have lunch and a yarn. Nobody took any notice of the teenagers, for all anyone knew they belonged to the horses which stood sleepily in the hot noon sun occasionally whisking away a fly.

Terry worried about the effect of the water wearing off by the time the races started at half-past-one. But they went on desultorily bringing buckets to and fro to feed the massed tubs and individual vases in the heat. By the time the Shire Chairman gave his welcome and a bustle began around the horses every one of the other Plate entrants had drunk heartily and who could blame them.

Harry Doyle saddled his old brown gelding. A mystery horse, Ted Eyles said to Mike Malley, given that he apparently hadn't raced for two years and Marie had only been seen trotting and cantering him on the course and you

never knew where you were with one of old Harry's crocks. Harry got 10 to 1 about his horse and felt pleased. He put fifty dollars on for Marie, poor little kid, she deserved a bit of a thrill and Trevor wouldn't give her a cent to spend even if she went down on her knees and begged.

She was there, watching keenly and excitedly as Harry threw Jim Tully up and said briefly, "Let him run his own race, Jim. Just nudge him along a bit if he's loafing." The horse walked out on to the course looking half-asleep, his ewe-neck and swayback drawing unkind comments from several of the patrons who fancied they knew something about horseflesh.

Terry watched the horses file out then turned to look at Marie McGoohan. She was pretty, much prettier than he'd imagined, with a milk-white skin, shiny black curls, and those large slate-blue eyes which all her father's family had, even Trev McGoohan. But her eyes gave nothing away. Her dress was a simple white sun-dress with lemon piping and a matching jacket and she wore a matching white straw hat with a lemon ribbon. Everything about her was cool and sophisticated and adult except for her face which still contained something young and happy and spontaneous.

Trev McGoohan came up behind her. He was a big man, jowly and paunchy, black-haired, fair-skinned except that he was very freckled and his face was florid and sour. He placed a heavy hand on his wife's shoulder. In Terry's imagination she seemed to shrink a little and her face grew still and blank. Trev stood a minute like that then moved on. Marie looked past him—at Terry, or so he thought, and her expression slowly came alive again. The thundercloud had come up but, no, it wasn't time yet for the storm. She looked out happily over the crowds to the distant start and beyond to half-hearted little whirlywinds on the horizon.

Harry Doyle watched his horse warm up with his usual calm assessment in his scrunched-up eyes. He liked the way Jim jumped him out smartly, saw nothing to complain of in his position one wide, appreciated the horse's ability to settle quickly, silently applauded the long smooth stride which brought him into the lead first time into the straight ... no chance of this old devil not running out the distance ... But as Marie's horse gradually extended his lead still moving with plenty in hand Harry Doyle's pleasure changed to mystification. Of course it wasn't much of a field but he hadn't expected them to be totally hopeless.

The horse entered the straight again five lengths to the good, past the William Creighton stand, past the secretary's office, the commentator's box—and was easing down to win by seven lengths. There was a bit of cheering and clapping from the people who'd believed it wise to put a saver on a Harry Doyle horse but the only people who found the win unremarkable were now clustered round the P & F stall treating themselves to celebratory hamburgers and cans of drink.

The trouble was, Terry pointed out the obvious as he and Brad walked home with Lulu's non-prize-winning dahlias, the fucking horse would've won anyway. They could've been playing darts for money envelopes or trying the lucky dip or chasing the rooster instead of slaving up and down with buckets—

and there was still the pipe to fix because Mrs Johnson hadn't managed to find a man willing to crawl under the hall in his best suit—and anyway people had ceased caring after the judges had been through and now Mrs Creighton was packing the best blooms into her boot to take to the hospital ... and all their hard-carried water had been tipped out on to the parched grass by the hall ...

"You poor old things ... and how do you know Terry spent so much time looking at Marie?"

"I've got eyes in my head."

"And Harry Doyle?"

"He told me—when I told him I was writing it all down."

"What does he think happened?"

"Hard to say. He thinks it was Marie who ran away and Terry went with her to protect her—and then maybe Terry decided life was more fun in the city. Well, you couldn't blame him for thinking that—but he'd let us, all his mates know. I used to tease him ... I guess I shouldn't have ... but I still reckon he'd let us know ... "

Rhys Jones was an irrigation engineer. That's why he was asked to go to the Philippines, to rescue a dam that was crumbling, and that's how he met Lulu and Terry. The earth dam had been built in the sixties. But the hills gradually got logged, the dam silted up, the storage capacity went down, and the alternate wet and dry seasons had damaged the retaining wall. Lulu and her mother ran a roadside stall, Terry sat there with them, a small sombre-eyed boy. Lulu had married, gone to the provincial capital, her husband had left her, she had come home. The two women always urged Rhys to stop and buy a bottle of something; and he did, but more for the pleasure of their company and to help them than for pleasure in the sickly coloured drinks.

When Rhys wrote to tell his mother he would be bringing home a bride and a stepson she was dismayed. She wanted her son to make a 'good' marriage. Of course men did do crazy things when they were far from home, when they got to forty, but not Rhys. He was always calm and steady. And an ultra-Catholic called Lourdes? Oh no, dear son. But Rhys did and he seemed very happy. It was good to leave behind years of tropical heat, tropical ailments, corruption, poverty, water hyacinths, minetailings and other problems so irredeemably linked to corporate failure, the failure, he sometimes thought, of the most basic of human decencies ... to dirty the water other people had to drink ...

He bought a small business selling irrigation equipment and water tanks, bought a house, arranged for Terry to start at the local school ... and discovered his new family wasn't welcome in town ...

It was Terry who picked up the letter which had blown out of the backyard incinerator. It was made up of letters YOU BETTER GET OUT OF TOWN YOU LITTLE BLACK SLUG IF YOU KNOW WHAT IS GOOD FOR YOU. As no one, surely, could be calling his mother a little black slug it must be

meant for him. Rhys asked Terry and Lulu if they'd had other letters. Lulu admitted to several but thought it wasn't possible to catch the person so she'd just thrown them away. Rhys took the matter to Sergeant Griggs who wasn't hopeful. Rhys also sent Lulu and Terry away to stay with his mother for a month. It was an uncomfortable time for them but Lulu began to hope that eventually she and Rhys would have a home as lovely as the old woman had. She didn't know it had been gained through years of privation and struggle, she simply saw it as part of being in Australia. She knew about poverty, she knew about luck, now she was going to learn about comfort.

The letters kept coming a little longer but Lulu was so busy furnishing and decorating her house and gaining a reputation as a person who spent most generously on Tupperware and other party plan products that she rarely had time to wonder about the person who didn't like her. And maybe the person thought she was an asset in a country town? Who knows. The letters finally stopped coming.

Rhys worried but her rampant consumerism was so artless, so happy, that he did nothing about it. Terry found her devotion to family and shopping took her attention away from him; he wasn't sure if this was good or bad, his troubled thoughts could not be spoken of. Rhys worried vaguely about his stepson, there was something more than shyness there, but he was too busy establishing his business, living with his volatile wife, dealing with the many emotions that came with new fatherhood. Sometimes he felt he'd missed something important in his relationship with Terry, some clue to his past, but it was too late now.

Terry repeated a year at school so he could deal on an equal basis with the other children. It didn't seem to matter. Terry was small. While he was catching up with schoolwork he would also have the chance to grow a little more. Sometimes Rhys wondered if he'd put too much stress on these two factors. And when it became clear that Terry was never going to shine academically or grow much larger, it was Terry who felt he had failed.

"I see the Jones family has been confiding in you."

"So so. I go round quite often to see if they've had news from Terry. It's not hard to see that they sort of feel Terry's let them down."

"So he's never been listed as a Missing Person?"

"I wouldn't think so. They always talk as if he'll come home sooner or later."

"And the letters—did they keep them?"

"Don't think so."

"Did they have any ideas on who might be sending them?"

Paul shook his head. "I think Lulu thought it might be Rhys's mother, maybe that's why they went there to stay—to see if they'd stop."

"And did they stop during that period?"

"Mmm ... no, not really. I think they just got less and less and finally stopped."

Terry was in two minds whether to go round to Wad's for the post-mortem. What was the point? And he'd rather just sit and dream about Marie McGoohan. He came late but it didn't matter. Paul and Dal were playing games, Dave sitting stuffing himself with Twisties. There was no sign of Brad and Pete. Terry looked round for an unoccupied machine but without luck. He came and leant over Paul's shoulder, a minute later Dal breathed over the other one. They were absorbed in Paul's progress when there was a heavy tap on their heads. Wad was standing over them. He jerked a stubby finger. "Got a minute, youse guys?"

"Er—yeah, sure, Wad." It wasn't time to do up next month's roster. Anyway, Wad never put mates on together. He reckoned that was a fast way to screw things up. They let themselves be shepherded into the empty gymnasium.

"Your pals not in tonight?"

"Dunno, Mr Allee. Haven't seen 'em."

"Okay, never mind. Youse fellas can give me a little info." There was something not quite nice in the way Wad said it. But he was enjoying himself and in no hurry to enlighten them. At last he went on casually, "It's a crime to nobble a horse, y'know, so youse'd best do a bit o' talkin' before I have a little chat with Sergeant Griggs."

"We haven't been nobbling a horse, Wad." Paul's defence came out too fast and he put too much emphasis on 'a horse'.

"You haven't? Could've fooled me." Wad waited. Little devils but he hadn't had so much fun in a long time. "Well, I'll just nip along an' do a spot of phonin'—"

"No, don't do that, Mr Allee. It wasn't anything. We just gave some of 'em a drink of water. They looked thirsty." Dal put on his choirboy look but Paul was annoyed with him. They could've bluffed their way through. Wad was only guessing.

"How many looked thirsty?"

"Dunno. Five or six."

A grin sprang up from somewhere and landed on Wad's face but his tone stayed forbidding. "Let me get this straight, boy. You gave every horse except the winner a bellyful?"

"Something like that."

Wad finally gave up and laughed. "First time I ever heard of the whole bally field—heh! heh!—" He reined himself in. "Who put youse lot up to it?"

"Nobody. We just thought it might be a laugh."

"Y'see anyone laughin' round the bookies?"

"Nah ... well, not exactly ... "

"But the horse would've won anyway." That was Terry's sole offering and it was the closest they were ever going to get to an ethical defence.

"Well, in that case, youse'd best find a way to let Harry Doyle know his horse isn't as good as he might be thinkin' he is. Okay, now scoot!"

But as they turned away Wad stopped Paul and handed him a couple of

coins to re-start his interrupted game.

Terry played one more game but his heart wasn't in it. He went home before the others. There, he hunted through his bag for paper and a biro and wrote in large anonymous capitals DEAR MR DOYLE, YOUR HORSE ISN'T AS GOOD AS YOU THOUGHT. THE REST OF THE FIELD WERE NOBBLED. He folded it over. Funny word, nobbled, and he ran it off his tongue a couple of times.

Chris put his head round the door. "What you doin', Terry. Wanna play Guess Who?"

"Nah. Go an' ask Gray." Then he closed his door and lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. It wasn't likely Wad'd come round bleating, that wasn't Wad's way ... so he put aside those thoughts and dreamed of Marie, Marie who looked at him, through him, no, at him ... and the thought made him excited.

But life was easier now, those thoughts were easier now, that Lulu had grown lax in her religious ways. Now, she was as like to sleep in on a Sunday as go to early Mass. And she no longer insisted the boys go to confession, she wasn't even sure about Sunday School or Confirmation for the boys. And yet—didn't Marie go to early Mass? She was never seen out on the streets shopping, having friends round—but she was, yes, he was almost sure she was strict in her observance. It was the one place where Trev wouldn't be, the one place where Trev wouldn't be watching. But gossip might get back to him.

Terry imagined a large meaty hand on his shoulder, a sneering loud voice: STAY AWAY FROM MY WIFE IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU, YOU LITTLE BLACK SLUG.

"You're getting rather melodramatic, aren't you? Or did Terry think Trev had sent those letters?"

"I-I think he was sort of scared of Trev, the more crazy he got about Marie. It's hard to explain—the way Trev was always watching Marie, like a cat watching a mouse, knowing it's going to try and get away, but always ready to pounce."

"You don't think he loved her?"

Paul was sure he didn't. "Trev just liked sex, but rough—you know what I mean—"

"Rough trade?"

"I think so. And the more Terry thought about having sex with Marie the more he got scared that Trev would somehow see this, guess what was going on in his head ... "

Not many horses used the racecourse any more. The Turf Club after years of simmering ineptitude and scandal had been wound up and its racing dates allocated elsewhere. The Show Society had stepped in and gained permission to run the Easter Carnival as a fund-raising event. But all attempts to resuscitate the Turf Club had come to nothing. Those unresolved feuds went deeper than anyone realised.

Nat Palmer kept half-a-dozen horses in training (and was annoyed by the loss of local races), Ian Summers occasionally brought his quarter horses in from his stud ten kilometres away to work them in different surroundings, the local Pony Club used the showgrounds for their weekend gatherings and occasional gymkhanas, Ed Bryce had trained his pacers there until the day he suddenly dropped dead during a morning workout, well, not precisely *dropped*—

It was rather a waste of a good facility.

Normally there was no one around to watch the comings and goings of Marie McGoohan and her old galloper. It was only luck that Terry caught sight of Marie returning her old gelding to the hotel paddock one afternoon. It seemed an odd time to work him but maybe it was the only time she had free. He usually stayed after school for soccer training but what if he skipped once or twice—would he be able to meet her, really say Hi? No harm in trying. Next afternoon he simply slipped away while the others were messing round in the locker room. Out the school gate, in the showground gate, fingers crossed. There was no sign of the horse in his paddock but he might've gone home to Harry Doyle's where, maybe, Harry was puzzling over an anonymous letter, maybe even a stack of anonymous letters.

Terry whistled as he walked in, scuffing the dust. And if someone accosted him—‘Hey! Whatcha doin’ kid?’ ‘Studying’ ‘Studyin’? My gosh, I wish my kids’d do a bit of it!—or would it be better to say he just liked horses? He wandered on past the animal sheds DOGS SHEEP POULTRY and the CWA Hall and the toilet block, through the open space which would become sideshow alley. Would the MARVELLOUS MRS HODDLE with her hundred chins and her WONDERFUL GIFT OF SEEING YOUR FUTURE be back this year? He hoped so. Paul had talked him out of it last year, saying it was a load of crap, but then Paul wasn’t Lulu’s son and didn’t know a fortune-teller had told her, only a week before she met Rhys that she’d meet a handsome foreigner. Rhys was too bluff and solid to be handsome but he was definitely a foreigner.

“So did you track down Mrs Hoddle to see what her crystal ball would tell you?”

“She didn’t come this year. I guess she’s getting pretty old. Anyway, she reads your palm so I don’t see how that could tell me Terry’s future.”

The place had a forlorn sort of feeling now and he hurried on, dumping his bag on a ringside seat and shading his eyes. Yes, there was a horse on the far side. Was it the right one? He sat down, narrowing his eyes against the sun. It seemed to be going at a snail’s pace but as it came closer he saw it was trotting briskly; its rider rising and falling with a relaxed rein. He left his bag and went down to the gate. The horse slowed to a walk, turned by habit towards the gate. Terry swung it open with a slight flourish.

The rider smiled. “Thanks.” A tentative smile because Marie had no idea who he was or what he was doing here at this hour. She knew a few men in

town but they were all Trev's mates, not kids too young to be drinking; not that Trev worried too much about proof-of-age. 'Start 'em young' might well be his motto if Sergeant Griggs wouldn't poke his nose in.

Terry, who'd thought out several smart things to start a conversation with, found himself standing there sort of tongue-tied and dumb. "Er—he's a pretty good horse, isn't he? I mean—I saw him at the races." Brilliant! He cringed inside.

"Yes, he's not too bad but I don't know how come he won so easily that day. I s'pose because he was used to working in the heat and the others weren't."

The truth trembled on Terry's tongue but he managed to swallow it back. "Has he won since then?"

"Yes, he's won two small races but he was odds on both times so Uncle Harry couldn't do much good there."

"Do you train every afternoon?" Would she get suspicious?

"When he's with me. Sometimes he's at Uncle Harry's place. It's harder to keep old horses fresh and interested in what they're doing." She turned to walk along the track to the gate, the horse's big hooves thudding in the thick dust. Terry hesitated, then walked alongside. He could come back later for his bag, no one was likely to steal his bag and no big deal if they did.

"My name's Terry Jones." There. That was the first thing he'd said in a normal voice. "And you're Mrs McGoohan, I know."

Marie looked down and wondered why he was interested. But she said nothing, just looked at him, and finally said, "You can call me Marie if you like. Are you interested in horses?"

Terry smiled. "Yeah, I am." He'd passed through the first sticky patch, where a girl turns and says, in one way or another, 'Nothing doing'. "I'm not much of a rider but I like watching ..." Watching what exactly? He let it hang. Marie smiled again, that little hesitant smile as though she expected to be rebuffed.

"If you like I'll try and come a bit later tomorrow?"

"That'd be great!"

"I'd better keep going."

"Sure. I'm sorry if I've held you up."

"That's okay."

He watched her out of sight, the small rider, the large horse. Then he shot back and grabbed his bag. Somehow he got through his homework, stopping every now and again to stare into space, his expression blank, as he pictured Marie ... the way her smile developed so slowly and timidly, the little dimples in her round cheeks ... that she was older, married, had her own life, was irrelevant that night. He simply wanted to get to know her and put her into his fantasies and dreams ...

"Move over, Barbara Cartland."

"Yeah, I know it's a bit corny but it's hard writing that sort of stuff."

“You’re doing very well. So I assume this is all from the ‘horse’s mouth?’”

“Terry told me a bit but I had to make up what Marie was thinking.”

“Let alone the horse?”

At last, he seemed to relax a bit; thank heavens, it’s not easy reading and thinking with a spring coil at your elbow.

Next afternoon he did the same. Sooner or later someone at school would ask why he’d skipped so many training sessions. Let ’em ask. He’d think up an excuse. Anyway it was giving Brian Perry as first reserve a chance to prove he was good for something more than mucking round with that stupid Matty Harmsen—

No sign of Marie or the horse. He sat down, pulled out his biology textbook, read a couple of pages. A snorting made him look up. Then he ran down to open the gate for Marie and the horse. “Hi there.” She smiled at him but said nothing.

“Do you work him to a routine?”

“Not really. I try to do things a bit different each time. Do you really want to know?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. Does your watch show seconds?”

“Uh-huh. Would you like me to time him?”

“Not exactly.” She provided him with a brief explanation of how the track was marked and what times she should take to cover the distances at different paces. He left his homework with alacrity and moved down to the rails, wishing he had a pair of binoculars. He’d never given a thought to how long a horse might take to trot five hundred metres or gallop a thousand and he found the exercise fascinating—and found himself wishing he was up there galloping instead of down here watching.

The question both worried and exhilarated him. How did Marie stay on that little scrap of an exercise pad with only the reins and the mane to cling to—and yet, how marvellous to be up there with the world rushing by at more than fifty kilometres an hour!

“Why do you call him Mad Maloney?” Terry asked when they were together again.

“It’s a mad name, isn’t it?” She smiled at him, her cheeks stained pink, a faint film of dust on her boots. “But I didn’t name him. Mad Maloney was a bushranger ... well, not exactly a bushranger. He lived in the bush but he was only a flasher. He didn’t carry a gun or hurt people. When he heard the stage coach coming he’d jump out into the middle of the road in his overcoat and boots—and when the driver pulled up and everyone was stickybeaking out the window—well, then—he’d toss back his coat and he’d have nothing on underneath and everyone’d squeal and yell!”

Terry laughed and laughed. “Hey, what a life!” But he realised Marie didn’t like the story, didn’t want her beloved horse connected with some sun-struck weirdo. He couldn’t help it though and he was still grinning when he left

her. He'd give up soccer, no one'd care, and he was no Maradona, no Vidmar even—and a nice sort of friendship would grow up and he would use Marie in his dreams. Phil Brady wouldn't care, he wanted bigger beefier players, and, speak of the devil, here he was whizzing by in his little MG and if he was watching out for his errant player—

She'd finished trackwork the following afternoon when he came by and she said quickly, "I'm sorry, Terry, but I'm in a bit of a hurry today."

He couldn't hide his disappointment. "I was looking forward to timing you again."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps another day."

Possibly she *was* in a hurry but why should that make her look so worried and glance involuntarily over towards the pub? He carried a lot of morose thoughts home with him. Because—it was more than a worried look, it was a scared look. So had Trev McGoohan seen the two of them together—and didn't like what he saw?

"Well, I don't know that I'd care to be in the estimable Mr McGoohan's bad books. Bloke looks like he knows how to cut up rough."

"You're not kidding. But I don't think Terry took him all that seriously in the beginning—I mean, he wasn't planning to do anything with Marie, run away or anything like that—"

When Marie's father, Joe Murphy, died he left a mountain of debts behind him. How could he have got in such a mess, his disbelieving widow asked. There must be some mistake. Sure, Joe's ideas didn't always work out but that wasn't his fault and he certainly didn't intend his family to starve. Joe was one of those who always believe there's gold at the end of the rainbow. Beryl Murphy didn't mind. She liked a man to have ambition. In the beginning they had sheep. Then Joe thought cattle would be more profitable and, maybe, less work. Joe then was converted from cattle-in-general to Brangus, placid on the Angus side, tough on the Brahman side, perfect. But they didn't make the money Joe expected. Maybe one of the big European breeds becoming popular? He read the brochures and went to sales and finally he 'traded in' his stud for a Charolais herd. But they had more trouble calving. They tended to carry their calves over term, he explained to Beryl, got too big. He lost a couple of gold-plated calves and got down-hearted.

But, fortuitously, he came upon an article about big money in oil seeds in a cholestrol-conscious society, 'There's gold in them thar seeds' the article trumpeted. And Joe was hooked. He contracted to get eight hundred hectares cleared. A bank loan would cover the cost of fencing, machinery and seeds. And there'd be the sale of his 'Quality Charolais Herd' ...

It was a pity Joe died just then. The herd had been sold off at bargain basement prices (Joe was in a hurry to get the new money-maker under way), the paddocks were churned up messes with piles of drying scrub waiting to be burnt, and there was a large loan to be repaid with several bright yellow items of

machinery and several hundredweight of fertilizer ... which depreciated in value as the bank manager gazed at them.

Beryl had always accepted that Joe knew best—and if she asked a question Joe was always in a rush, just time for a peck and ‘aren’t I the lucky sod with a wife like you’ before he got back on to the tractor ... Beryl genuinely believed she was a lucky woman ... so long as Joe was alive.

Her bank manager said simply, cut your losses, sell out, go somewhere cheaper and easier. She was first shocked, then indignant. Sell Joe’s dream? Not while she had breath in her body! It didn’t matter that Joe’s dream, the kid’s heritage, was heavily mortgaged. Her brother, Harry Doyle, when she mentioned ‘heritage’, said, “Piffle! The only people who can babble on about heritage are the blackfellas. You’ve lived there twenty years, not twenty thousand. You’re just bein’ a bloody snob, Beryl, thinkin’ it shows class to own the horizon instead of havin’ your boundary fence ten yards from your kitchen-bloody-window!”

But this only confirmed what Beryl thought about Harry, that he was a no-hoper in a gungy little shack, hanging his washing on bushes in the backyard, doing the dishes in an old enamel basin ... nothing but a bit of cut-up newspaper hanging in the toilet. She always made sure she never went to the toilet at Harry’s! And the spider-webs! She wasn’t going to forgive Harry for coming to live nearby and telling everyone they were related—

And Harry didn’t think much of her puffed-up ideas of where the Murphys came from and where they were going. He wished Joe had told her some of the harsher facts of life instead of treating her like a baby.

He poured her a cup of tea (she always inspected the cup to see if it’d been washed properly) and said in his inconsequential way, “I remember Keith Noud tellin’ the story of how he’d just begun a race call when a fly flew into his mouth. The interviewer said ‘Cripes! What did y’doo?’ Noud says, ‘What do you think I ruddy did? I just carried on of course!’” But Beryl couldn’t see the point of the story. And trust Harry to talk of flies over tea. She left straight after. Harry watched her go and shook his head. If she wouldn’t take his advice then she’d just have to face up to the fact of Joe’s gambling, because Joe had gambled away his family’s future as sure as if he’d haunted the local TAB.

But he was cross with Beryl. Hadn’t he been like a father to her? Didn’t he have the right to expect a bit of respect and consideration? They’d been poor as church mice, his father a railway-fettler, himself living hand-to-mouth through the Depression years, starting as a fourteen-year-old apprentice with a small-time trainer, the family with six kids to keep. Good horses raced through the Depression years, the mighty Phar Lap, Peter Pan, Hall Mark, Talking, Veilmond, Mollison and many more—but none came Harry Doyle’s way. But he was tough and he was reliable. ‘Lacks strength in a tight finish but horses run well for him’ was the general verdict. Owners with difficult horses, dodgy horses, frightened horses, hopeless horses, asked for Harry Doyle.

He gave it up when his dad died. Came home to the little orchard the family had settled on. Did Beryl, did any of them, realise he’d given up his

career just when he was getting somewhere? And then there was the war. Then he tried to make a comeback but he'd got too heavy. A ten stone lump of muscle and sinew. He worked on a stud for a while, then for a country vet, then he took jobs that allowed him to train a couple of horses on the side. The boys grew up, Beryl the 'baby' grew up. They all got married. And slowly they all started to sort of look down on 'old Harry'. Bit of a drifter, you know, funny old coot, pity he never married, seems happy enough but no one should live like that ...

"I assume this is Harry's version of events, not Beryl's?"

"Sure thing. But I believe him. And everyone knows what Joe Murphy was like—"

"Everyone except his wife and family?"

"S'pose so. My dad reckons you only had to sound enthusiastic and you'd have Joe Murphy hooked."

"But Harry Doyle would have to be rather old for a horse trainer, wouldn't he?"

"He must be in his eighties. But he's pretty tough, sort of spry, you know?"

"Mmm."

When Beryl was at her wit's end, Joe's second cousin (or something like that, maybe first cousin twice removed, or second cousin once removed—) Trev McGoohan called in one day. He was sorry to hear about Joe and what a hard time Beryl was having. She shouldn't have to handle all those worries on her own, no sirree. Yes, banks were lousy when it came to putting their money into a good cause. Yes, it'd be tragic if the boys couldn't inherit their dad's farm. And yes, (this was a bit later), Marie was the sweetest girl he'd ever seen.

Trev knew he was in with a chance. He dropped round regularly with a bottle of something, maybe a box of chocs. And every so often he mentioned how well he was doing with the pub he'd taken over, it was only twenty-five kilometres away, and already he knew it was the best investment he'd ever made. Pity he had no family of his own, pity he'd never met the right gal, and, sure, he wouldn't mind looking to see if there was any way he could give them a bit of a hand.

Couldn't lend them money. Pity, but that'd be illegal. You have to be licensed to do that. Nor a partnership. He was busy with the pub and wouldn't be able to put the necessary time and decision-making into the farm. No, what he'd do was buy the land and give the boys first option on buying it back at market price when they reached their majority or felt ready to take it over. Prices looked likely to rise but they'd likely peak then fall again before the boys need start looking round for bank loans ... and in the meantime they'd have this money to pay all their debts. He had his lawyer draw it up. Beryl signed it after a quick glance through. It wouldn't have taken much for her to get another lawyer to check the agreement. But she trusted Trev. Wasn't he family? It never occurred to her that Trev McGoohan would happily do the dirty on his own

family.

And all he wanted in return was Marie. He was thirty-eight. Marie was eighteen. Beryl may have worried a bit about the gap in their ages. Maybe she didn't really like Trev. Maybe she saw how crude he could be, she couldn't avoid seeing that beer belly. And Marie had been educated at a strict Ursuline convent. It wasn't *quite* what she'd hoped for her daughter. But he had taken all her worries off her shoulders. So she played her part and gently pushed and nudged and resorted to a kind of motherly blackmail to get Marie married off to Trev. She harped upon their happy years on the farm, on how blood is thicker than water, on how Marie wouldn't be far away from them all ... and hadn't Trev promised to get her a little car of her own as a wedding present, so she could pop home anytime ...

It was a pity Beryl didn't do a bit of popping. Just pop into town in the farm ute and spend a while sitting in the pub. Just sitting in the little-used Ladies Lounge, maybe, just watching Mine Host. Just thinking 'this is my son-in-law' ...

"I gather Mr McGoohan was never flavour-of-the-month with you?"

Paul looked up briefly and I thought what sad eyes the lad has. "No. I hate his guts, if you really want to know. But still I go there sometimes for a drink, just to listen to the talk—"

"He doesn't ask for proof-of-age?"

"Trev? That'd be a laugh! He'd sell beer to a baby if he thought he could get away with it."

"Yes. I don't doubt it. But what about your Sergeant Griggs? Does he turn a blind eye?"

"Reckon so. He goes in every Saturday night. So we avoid Saturdays. That's all there is to it."

Trev and Marie had a week's honeymoon on the Gold Coast, staying at the South Seas Serviced Apartments only a block from the beach. They were neither of them beach people, having that very white skin that freckles and burns, and Marie wasn't very keen to be seen beside Trev with his great paunch well-covered with wiry black hair. His way with his shy young bride, he liked to say, was the old horsebreaker's: 'Break her in quick an' work her till she's too tired to lift her head. You won't have no trouble that way.' Not that many virgins had come Trev's way. And knowing she had married him for her mum's sake seemed to give it all an extra zest—and then putting her over his knee to give her a good wallop for 'sooking'—Trev was having the time of his life.

He took her to a nearby beer garden most afternoons. It was there he ran into an old mate.

"Perce! Come on over, mate, an' meet Marie." A fat man in a bright beach shirt and leather thongs detached himself from two middle-aged bottle blondes and carried his beer over.

He ended up inviting them to dinner that night. Perce White had a nice

modern apartment, cane furniture and bright colours, and his idea of entertaining was to send out for pizza. Marie sat and listened to them reminisce and she learnt things about her new husband that probably weren't quite what her mother complacently called 'wild oats'. Then Perce said he'd picked up a couple of videos recently. "Got these from Dink Jones the other day. You'd remember Dink?"

"Sure. Still on the wharves?"

"Nah. But he has his contacts—an' you know old Dink, he can sniff out the hot stuff a mile away." Then he hesitated. "Not quite the sort of stuff your missus'd fancy, I don't reckon."

"Ah, no worries there, mate. Sooner she gets the hang o' things the better, eh, love?"

If Marie thought they were referring to what reviewers call 'steamy' or 'torrid' or 'explicit' she was totally unprepared for what came up on the screen. She had no idea what language it was in, not that language mattered much, but she felt trapped, stifled, embarrassed, horrified, as she sat there bolt upright, imprisoned under Trev's heavy hand.

In the end she could watch no more, got up unsteadily and stumbled out of the room. She stayed in the bathroom until Trev was ready to go back to their apartment. The video made her feel dirty inside and out. How could *anyone* force a young girl to have sex with a pig—*a pig!*—how could they sit there, avid greedy eyes on the screen, not wanting to miss a moment, how could Trev *want* to watch something so degrading; only three days ago he'd stood up all spruce in his best suit and promised to love and cherish ... She stayed in there till Trev banged on the door and yelled, "C'mon, quit sookin' in there, it's only a bloody video—" She came out, but she felt her legs didn't want to carry her.

And Trev made it all worse by endlessly talking about what he'd seen, what he'd like to try with her ... 'only a video' ... only ...

She stood on the balcony and looked down at the traffic on the highway and tried to block out all the noise Trev was making in the bathroom as he left one lot of beer in the toilet bowl before starting in on a new tinnie ... It was cool out here, with the sea breeze on her hot cheeks. But she was afraid of going back inside, afraid now of Trev, afraid of being married. She watched the cars whirl by on the highway, light and roaring. She grew dizzy and disorientated looking down and wished she could bend over and let go, fall down, down. Would it hurt much. Oh, Mary, Mother of God, would you lend me your loving arms. She thought of the white plaster arms in their niche in the school chapel, of the quietness and sense of rest ... hold me, hold me, hold me ...

"Hoy! Marie! C'mon in here—"

He reached out, one large powerful arm, and drew her inside and shut the balcony door.

I looked over at Paul. "You were the fly on the wall, I take it?"

"No. It was Bobby Ransome ... and Trev ..."

"Trev tells you what he did on his honeymoon?"

"He likes to talk about it, he says he got Marie when she was fresh, then he says 'that little black poofter only got my leftovers', meaning Terry, y'know, because he doesn't like to admit she left him."

"And Beryl? What does she think?"

"She always agrees with Trev ... I s'pose she has to, seeing that he's got her land."

I sat back and said, "Well, I dropped round to the South Seas after reading your stuff, and dropped in to the beer garden. They didn't remember Trev and Marie, though they still had a record of the booking ... but Perce White and Dink Jones, I hear, are facing charges of importing obscene materials."

"So I got it right?"

"I can't speak for Marie—but yes, there's some pretty sick stuff that comes in from places like Thailand."

Terry, disconsolate in not having any place he could naturally meet Marie, took to jogging past the hotel in the hope of catching a glimpse of her on his way home from Wad's. Maybe it was Rhys's fault that the obvious solution, getting up and going to early Mass, occurred to Terry, then he dismissed it. If there were people out on the verandah of the pub he simply kept going. If the front was deserted he slowed down but he rarely glimpsed more than a shape against the frosted glass.

But he learnt one interesting thing. No matter what other lights were on, the big room in the south-west corner always lit up at about half-past-nine. Neither Mrs Wicks, the cook, nor Bill Bayley, the barman, lived in—and Bobby Ransome had long ago been banished to the filthy caravan with its lean-to shed that was permanently parked out by the back fence. Town gossip had it that Bobby only washed when Trev turned the hose on him. So Terry naturally drew the conclusion that that was Marie's room.

Now and then the hotel would manage to bag a passing traveller and another room would light up but guests weren't encouraged and the honeymoon suite had long since been closed and turned into a storeroom.

So all that would be necessary would be to shin up the kurrajong growing at the end of the verandah. For someone who had learnt to climb a coconut palm, carrying a small machete, a kurrajong was simple enough. But was it right to go looking in her window, a sort of Peeping Tom, and would she be very upset if she saw him outside her room? The last thing he wanted was to hurt or embarrass her—but just a quick glimpse? She need never know.

Tuesday nights the place was pretty dead. A half dozen cars and utes parked out the front. He jogged past once, then round the block again. The corner light was on and there was no one out the front, just a dull hum from the bar. Kurrajong bark isn't nice to climb but Terry wasn't complaining. He was up in a couple of silent minutes and ensconced in a handy crook of a bough. He eased himself back into the shadows and looked in.

Marie was there. So was Trev. That was the thing he hadn't bargained on. He thought Trev stayed in the bar till closing each night. He must've decided

Bill could manage and come on up. And what was Marie doing in this unexpected intimacy. Terry leaned forward. It was horrible. Marie appeared to be licking her husband's feet. Was that the kind of abasement Trev got his kicks from. Poor Terry! He'd been so sure he'd find her doing something graceful and feminine like brushing her hair or filing her nails or maybe reading in bed.

And Trev stood up, peeling off his singlet and briefs, and standing naked. To Terry, often and anxiously studying his own genitals, with the sort of clinical detachment anyone associating with Paul Johnson, sex doctor supreme, acquired, this was a second shock. To see Trev with his great red monster rising out of a mat of black hair, so casually available—when his own ideas were filled with worries over elephantiasis, chancres, priapism, balinitis, lymphogranuloma venereum, condylomata acuminata, tinea cruris or granuloma inguinale, it was difficult to believe something normal could look so revolting. To make things worse Trev began beating his stomach like someone limbering up on drums or a gorilla that thinks his chest is just above his hips—

Finally, Terry came to his senses. He couldn't just go on sitting here, perving, watching Marie get impaled by that gorilla, watch them—The bar door swung open and someone staggered out, tripped down the steps, fell, got up slowly and unsteadily, lifted up a voice in song—loud tuneless noise—and the window nearby was shoved up and Trev's head appeared. "Shut the bloody noise, Tilly! You'd kill a cat with that racket!"

"An' you shut yours!" Tilly Harmsen tossed back up. Then she reeled up against the tree trunk, grunted, and slid down slowly till she came to rest, her legs splayed out. Terry had frozen into immobility. Blabbermouth Tilly might be drunk, it wouldn't stop her spreading stories about him all over town ... Trev shut the window with a bang and pulled the curtains. Terry sat very still on a branch. The warm night gradually cooled. A dry south-westerly began to whisper through the leaves. But Tilly still lifted up her foghorn voice in snatches of song. He would just have to wait.

Figures came out of the pub. "Yoo-hoo, Tilly! Forgot your way home?" Tilly told the speaker to get lost. A car backed out, then another. Tilly sat on. Terry was starting to get cramped. He wanted to go to the toilet. Sounds of bar stools being put on tables drifted out, then the sound of a bucket and mop swilling through. Eventually Bill Bayley came out, his pale cold neuter face showed in the moonlight. He drove away without even a glance at Tilly.

Terry felt worse and worse. But Tilly grew quiet. Then there was a small snore. Terry waited no longer. He was down and gone as fast as his dragging leg would allow. And, a little while later, Tilly groaned theatrically, then got up carefully and went on her blundering way. As she fumbled at her front door, her back door was hurriedly opened and Brian Perry ducked out and ran through her yard, down past the chook house and empty dog kennel.

I looked up to find Paul watching me. He seemed to be waiting for a sarcastic response.

I shrugged. "No comment."

Everyone knew Wad took a keen interest in the lives of his customers. They didn't appreciate his interest.

"He's got Brian in there," Paul whispered in the corridor a few days later. The gang crept in close to listen.

"Still gettin' it off with Matty?"

"Not your business, Mr Allee." Brian sounded surprisingly calm and grown-up, nearly a match with Wad.

"Usin' rubbers?" Wad's voice suggested nothing but friendly interest.

"Haven't got none."

The admission seemed to galvanise Wad into action. The listeners could picture the scene exactly: Wad's big head suddenly shooting forward, the ferocious glare in his little piggy eyes. "Oh, you haven't eh? In that case you keep your bloody zip closed till you find some. Got it? Matty's next best thing to an idjit so it's up to *you* to do the thinkin', chum." At that point, they knew Wad's bulbous thumb would descend like a blunt spear into chest or shoulder.

"It's none o' your business—"

"None o' my business, eh?"

What happened next was seen differently by different people. Did Wad kick Brian through the door and down the corridor? Did Brian turn and run with Wad fuming just behind? Did Brian trip? Did Wad connect? Whatever way it was it caught the eavesdroppers on the hop and it was a minute or two before the pile-up in the corridor could be sorted out. Brian, Paul and Dal sat there groaning while Wad breathed fire over them. Then he got his breath back, turned to Terry and said, "A word in your ear, mate."

If Terry had had prior warning he would've been out of there like a lightning bolt. Wad's 'words' were never nice. But he followed meekly into the milkbar. Seventeen-year-old Mary Adams was behind the counter washing up. "Take a break, Mary." Mary nodded and hurried out, all sympathy with Terry but not daring to show it. Wad and Terry sat down, Wad still breathing like a steam-train.

After letting Terry stew a minute, Wad said flatly, "If you want a girl to mess around with, find a free one. McGoohan's not the man for a kid like you to play around with. He fights dirty." Wad subsided. Terry said nothing.

"How do I know?" Wad leant forward. "The whole ruddy town knows an' McGoohan's givin' Tilly free beers on the strength of it."

Wad calmly put his nose between finger and thumb and pulled it a couple of times. Terry felt more like someone who's just been socked on the jaw. So Tilly *had* seen him. He pictured the whispers, the sniggers, the talk behind his back—"Hey Terry, climbed any good trees lately?" "Got the hang of the birdies and the little buzzy bees yet?" "Take a camera next time, you old perv!" He looked up at Wad and felt physically ill.

And Wad felt the weight of his unspoken love for this boy, for all the boys and girls who came night after night and treated him as a necessary evil. Kids he watched grow up and cease coming—and he wondered if any of them would

take time out to remember. Would Brian step back and think before he found himself hounded into a teenage marriage by old Tilly Harmsen who'd let all her girls run wild then trapped some silly young boy. She'd done it twice. She'd do it again. And the young fool couldn't see he was playing with fire.

"Terry, lad, McGoohan's a dangerous man to stir up. So just stay away from Marie. Okay?"

Terry stood up. "Yeah—well—er—"

Wad put a hand out. "Sit down." Terry slumped back. What more bad news was on the way?

"Ever thought of a career as a jockey?"

If he'd been thrown to the floor or given a smacking kiss he couldn't have been more astonished. "A jockey!"

"Yeah. One o' them little fellas that dash round at seventy kilometres an hour an' get paid for it."

"No-o-o ... I mean I never thought ... I can't ride real well—"

"Soon learn. Well, give Harry Doyle a ring sometime an' ask him to give you a bit of a try-out."

Wad stood up. "Take it easy now." He went out. A minute later Terry heard him talking with someone complaining that one of the games wasn't working properly. Terry found Dal and Brian and Paul in the quiet room.

"—and this guy goes to the doctor and he says, Doc, we can't seem to have a baby. We've been trying for two years. So the doc says, oh, that's a pity. Getting it well in? And the guy says, that's the funny thing, doc, it won't seem to go in at all, maybe my wife needs a bit of an operation? So they rave on a bit and finally the doc twigs that this poor guy's spent the last two years trying to stick it in his wife's belly button!"

"By the way, have you got a girlfriend, Paul?"

"Never really wanted one. Sometimes the girls ask me," he shrugged.

"Why do you ask?"

"Sublimation?"

Paul looked at me then dropped his gaze. "I don't know. You can't talk about things like that out here. Just make jokes."

"Yes, I can understand that. You seem to understand Wad quite well—for a teenager?"

Again he said, "I don't know. I think, maybe, I understand him better now than when things happened. And writing about it all helped ... "

Terry didn't stay to share what Wad had said. Paul's stories weren't good therapy for someone in his punch-drunk state. His fantasy world had been knocked to bits, trampled in the dust. But it didn't really matter what Wad said, or what Tilly or Trev McGoohan or anyone else said. They couldn't take Marie away from him completely.

A week later, without preamble, he said at the dinner table: "I've been thinking I might like to try for a jockey." There.

Rhys and Lulu both turned and stared. Chris and Gray grinned then went back to their icecream with raspberry topping. Who cared what Terry wanted to do with his life.

“A *jockey*?” Rhys said as he might say, “A *lion tamer*?” Then, “Are you sure about this?”

“I just thought I might like to give it a try.”

“I see. And do you know anything about it?”

“Not really. But I thought I might be okay seeing as I’m pretty light.” It was hard for Terry to make that admission. Hadn’t he spent his Christmas money on a chest-expander? Maybe Lulu’s tape was wrong but he’d only put two centimetres on to his biceps and a centimetre on to his chest in six months of dedicated work. Maybe he should demand his money back? The ads showed men with big rippling muscles and from ‘only five minutes a day’.

“Wad suggested I ask Harry Doyle to give me a try.”

“Oh? Why Harry Doyle? Wouldn’t Nat Palmer be more convenient?”

Terry didn’t know the answer to that. “I guess he thought Mr Doyle might be more sympathetic to a learner.”

“Mmm, could be.”

Rhys said no more on the subject but he expressed his misgivings to his wife later. The falls, the lack of rides, the lack of security, the dieting, the men who looked old and wizened with heavy grooves in their faces by the time they were forty. Was that the way he wanted for his son? And Lulu had always pictured Terry going on to university, doing well, getting a high-paid prestigious job, maybe a doctor or lawyer. She knew nothing about racing except for going to the CWA Melbourne Cup Party at the hall each year—and she’d never yet managed to draw a horse in the sweep. Still, there was always next year. Rhys sat and thought it over while Lulu snuggled up and went to sleep. It was hard to think coolly and carefully in such circumstances but he *could* see why Wad had made the suggestion. On the surface Terry looked a natural. With those fine bones he’d never grow too heavy unless, like Lulu, he began to put on padding. He’d also probably have good balance and a natural aptitude. He might even have the grit to make a go of it—if he decided it was what he really wanted.

But was it doing the right thing by Terry to give the idea credence and encouragement. In the end, he hedged his agreement around with provisos: *if* Harry would give Terry some instruction then he’d give his permission and *if* that worked out then Terry had to commit himself to finishing high school and doing his best and after that he had to choose a back-up skill and work at it. Rhys didn’t mind what but he insisted on a safety-net. Terry accepted the package. The whole idea still had an air of unreality about it. Rhys made the call to Harry Doyle. Drop out next Sunday was Harry’s laconic response. Simple as that. Terry wiped nervous palms on his jeans and went away to mull the whole thing over.

Harry Doyle was Marie’s uncle. Harry Doyle trained Mad Maloney. Wad had to know all that. But did it fit in with his warnings about Trev McGooan?

"I think I'd better drop round to see Mr Allee when we finish here."

"Sure. He can probably tell you lots I don't know."

Wad arrived in Australia in the 1940s as a war orphan; a silent waif with a small cardboard suitcase of donated clothes and a tape round one wrist giving his name as Wadislaw Alexejewski. In a ship filled with evacuated children he was seen to be even more traumatised than the others. The English welfare staff and the Polish sailors were kind to him but he never spoke a word and showed no sign of understanding anything said to him. "Poor little chap!" was said to him and about him as he stood there looking out over the creaming sea, with sombre eyes. What terrible atrocities had this small boy witnessed as the Nazis swept into Poland? How fortunate that his parents had managed to get him away to Britain. And now he would be safely far away in Australia.

That the name and nationality tagging him at embarkation were not his was something he couldn't explain. He understood no one and there was no way to tell anyone something was terribly wrong. He couldn't understand why the kids all called him 'Wally'. Just one more mystery on top of the others.

The ship reached Sydney. The children went to relatives or family friends or foster homes. Wad was sent north to the family who'd agreed to take him. A Mr and Mrs Ritchie who already had ten children. A big brawling happy-go-lucky sort of family who simply chucked a couple more mattresses down on the verandah when visitors came, the sort of family that feature in 'human interest' stories designed to show bush folk in a good light: RITCHIE FAMILY SAYS ALWAYS ROOM FOR ONE MORE.

Mr Ritchie owned half-a-dozen timber jinkers, Mrs Ritchie kept three Jersey cows, grew vegetables, sent the kids round town delivering home-made butter or doing odd jobs. There was no chance that Wad would be left to sit silent and sad. There was school, jobs, big noisy meals, even a kitten of his own, English to learn ... What was there in his mind gradually got shoved aside. Bit by bit it slipped. The family called him Wally Allen. In the end he stopped asking himself what was his real name. Would it come back someday. Will my family come looking someday. In later years he sometimes debated whether the Ritchies were the best or the worst thing that happened to him in Australia. If the Ritchies hadn't wanted to keep him maybe he would've been sent back to England and maybe the mistake would've got fixed. If he'd stayed in Sydney with its mixed population maybe, one day, he would've heard familiar words and things would've come back to him. But in the country, busy busy busy, with only English around him there was no way back.

No mail came, no enquiries were made, the Ritchies just assumed they had him for good. They were uncomplicated people, honest and kind, and it never occurred to them to ask questions—and if he'd said 'I'm not who you think I am, please, can you help me to find my real family again' they would've fobbed him off with excuses and large slices of fruit cake as a treat.

They knew little of the outside world. They kept no books and read

nothing except the local paper and a few old National Geographics that an aunt had given the kids to cut pictures out of. They never went anywhere. They hoped their kids would marry and settle nearby. Mr Ritchie encouraged Wad to take up boxing and the solid taciturn youth took to it easily. By the time he was twenty he had a string of junior prizes behind him and he'd changed his name to Wad Allee to make himself stand out a little. He was offered a place in a troupe touring the country shows and grabbed the chance.

Wad knew his birthday didn't come in July. His memories of birthdays always had snow falling and people coming in big fur coats and hats. There too, but he didn't trust the memory, was gleaming silver and leaping firelight. If his family had money surely they would've ... But July was the northern summer so it couldn't be right. So he chose to remember his birthday on the tenth of January, he wasn't sure why, it just came to him.

When the boss retired Wad took over the troupe. It wasn't a bad life, not much money, but he liked to keep on the move and he met people he felt at home with. He didn't make friends easily because his manner wasn't outgoing but he was solid and reliable and people trusted him. Occasionally he thought of going back to Europe, wandering in search of an identity or beating up bureaucrats in England until they relented and told him the truth. Maybe there was even a real Wadislaw Alexejewski who had been forced to live as him and they could exchange identities as other people exchange coats. Not that it mattered all that much. But along with the good memories, of snow, and people shouting welcome, there were other memories that never went away: of tanks and screams, of buildings crumbling in brick dust and a sense of being smothered, of a body lying frozen on a river bank. Who, where, why, he didn't know.

The kids who thronged his rooms didn't really like Wad either. He was hard to like. He never gave anything of himself. Yet, they reckoned he was fair—and with the needle-sharp precision that grows out of family life, they reckoned fairness counted for something. And he, in his turn, loved them all. They were 'his' kids. The only family he'd ever have. He was a firm but kind father, not unlike Bert Ritchie, but with a toughness that came from his nature. He enjoyed his 'fatherhood'.

But he'd bought a paperback in a book exchange. *The Uses of Hypnotherapy*. He'd read it and re-read it. He nearly knew it by heart. At last, all these years later, he'd been given the key to unlock the past. He just had to go somewhere, find a hypnotherapist, submit. They might uncover a lot more pain but then he'd faced up to pain. They might say his earliest memories were gone beyond recall. But he'd take that chance and take what they could dig out for him.

So the machines rattled and powwed and played their stupid tinny tunes, the coins fell down the slots, and Wad collected them after closing time, the milkbar was warm and cheerful enough, bodies thumped and pounded in the gym ... and when he'd finished up for the day he'd sit back and read and wonder when he'd take a week or two away to unlock his secrets.

“Is any of this relevant, do you think?”

“I don’t suppose so. I was just interested. In the beginning I thought maybe I could get someone to publish the story as a book and that way someone might know something and get in touch so I thought I’d better put in some background about each character—”

“I don’t suppose it gets talked about much out here but there is a law of libel. Trev McGoohan’d have you for breakfast if you did find a publisher.”

“It doesn’t really matter though, does it, I’m not a good enough writer to get it published as a book—”

“I’m very impressed with your writing. Real promise, as they say, but a book takes too long to publish and get out there, by then it might be too late for Terry—”

“I think it’s too late already.” He said this with a particularly lugubrious look.

Harry Doyle’s place was fifteen kilometres away, a rutty track that turned off by a service station at a T-junction. He lived in an old wooden shack that faced an oval track and had sheds, yards and stables on the far side. It also had a mass of wattles at that time of year. Harry filled his coffers by taking occasional sheep on agistment and growing his own fruit and vegetables in the sandy soil.

Rhys looked around and didn’t mind what he saw. People called Harry Doyle odd but maybe they were confusing oddness with simplicity. Terry also looked around but he was too nervous to really take things in. His brand-new riding-boots squeaked as he walked and his brand-new riding cap made him feel terribly self-conscious.

Harry Doyle was a small man with sharp slate-blue eyes in a leather-brown face. Bandy-legged and white-haired. His age was belied by his upright carriage and brisk steps. “Come on in, an’ you can tell me what sort of ridin’ an’ whatnot you’ve been doin’.” They went into the small cottage. It had only a room each side of the short hall and a big kitchen area. Harry pushed a door open. “I thought you could camp here if you decide to stop over.” The room contained a stretcher bed, a horsehair mattress and two wooden crates marked, **QUALITY DELICIOUS**. Unpainted. Uncurtained. But full of the smell of wattle and the hum of bees.

The kitchen Harry had covered with a mural of newspaper cuttings pasted over and over each other, a kind of racing history with the oldest parts brown with age and smoke and flies.

“Take a pew.” Harry sat down on a wooden chair and propped his elbows on the lino-covered table. “Can you ride, Terry?”

“Not-not too good. I’ve had a couple of rides on Jenny Eyles’ galloway and I’ve got rides sometimes when I go out with dad to places. I’ve never had a horse of my own.” It was said without rancour but suddenly Rhys regretted never suggesting he get Terry a pony. Terry rarely asked for things. It was easy to overlook ...

"So you thought o' bein' a jock because you're small or because you like horses?"

Terry squirmed. Would Harry see right through him, see all the muddle existing deep down. "I like horses ... and I think they like me." As soon as he said it, he wished he could take it back. Just because a horse had never bitten—or kicked—well, that didn't mean ... He looked across at Harry. "I wish I was bigger. It's not all that nice being smaller than kids that are years younger."

Harry nodded and went on rolling himself a smoke, the paper stuck to his lip bobbed up and down. "I remember there was a great little jock called Billy Camer an' when he went for his ticket he could just barely see over the tabletop an' one o' the stewards says to him 'Stand up, lad, when you're talkin' to the Chief Steward' an' Camer says, 'But, sir, I *am* standing up'!"

Terry giggled and his giggle embarrassed him as being too juvenile for words. He bit his lip to stop. But he liked Harry. The thought surprised him. He'd been willing to like Harry as a possible way to see Marie. But he found he simply liked Harry for himself.

Rhys explained the promise he'd extracted from Terry in the way of study and career. This embarrassed Terry further. Maybe, before he even got near a horse, Harry would be thinking, 'This kid won't ever have his mind on his riding' ... But Harry nodded sagely. "Yeah, it's a chancy business, all right. There's plenty o' hoops never even get to ride full time an' there's more that fail to plan for retirement in their forties ... I remember Jim Pike, greatest jock you'd ever want to see, but he still ended up old an' poor an' forgotten in a Sydney nursin' home—" Harry talked on a bit about his current horses and Jim Tully. Then he ground out his butt and got up. "So we'd best go an' see what you're like, eh Terry, before we take this business any further."

Terry's mouth got even drier but he put on a keen look and followed Harry out to the stables where he was pointed to a tall rangy grey in one of the yards. "All yours, Terry," Harry pointed to a bridle and saddle (not an exercise saddle, Terry was relieved to see, but just a light poly), "an' I don't s'pose the poor old codger'll take kindly to workin' on a Sunday arve."

But Terry managed to get him ready without too much trouble, maybe because the horse stayed half-asleep. Harry came over and checked the girth and said, "Right-o, spring up." Rhys had come over unobtrusively, not wanting Terry to fail but still hoping Terry would change his mind. He watched them ride away and wondered about Terry's future. He hadn't had much of a childhood. What sort of adulthood was he going to have. He wanted the best for Terry and now he'd delivered him over to old Harry Doyle who might be decent enough but wouldn't necessarily care about Terry's life and future. There was no sense of youth here, maybe because Harry himself had been denied his youth by hard times. He might say 'I remember as a kid seein' Demon Darb ride a finish' but he wouldn't say 'I remember my first bike, my first gramophone, my mates at school ...' Did it matter? The boy who grew up here would be stamped with something of Harry Doyle and Harry Doyle lived in the past.

The horses trotted comfortably, lazily, away, and the two small brown

riders bobbed away into the distance. Harry liked what he saw of Terry's riding and did no more than throw an occasional instruction. But the grey soon felt his inexperience and took charge, breaking into a canter before Terry was ready, keeping pace with Harry's black gelding regardless, hanging heavily on Terry's hands.

"He's ridin' you, mate!" Harry bawled in Terry's ear. "Take charge!" But this was easier said than done. The grey was no old farm pony to be slapped along any-old-how. He felt the reach and thrust of the powerful hindquarters, he felt the growing ache in his arms.

"Ease him back an' come round the outside o' me an' kick him ahead. Right?"

"I'll try." He felt his words snatched away but, surprisingly, the big grey responded and he was able to switch places smoothly and accelerate again. His first feeling was relief, then a gradual growth of a sense of exhilaration as the grey lengthened stride. It was next best thing to flying and *he* was in control of the tonne of muscle and power beneath him. It was that sudden sense of magic unleashed that sustained him through Harry's long and searching trial. Harry wasn't a hermit but neither did he want to give up his peace and quiet to some smart-aleck kid unless he thought there was real enthusiasm and promise there. By the time Terry dismounted and unsaddled he was sure his arms were about to fall out of their sockets. Maybe it would get easier. Maybe the right muscles would develop. Though after his months trying to become a second Schwarzenegger he wasn't all that hopeful.

But Harry was cheerful and before he knew where he was it was arranged that he'd ride out from town every Saturday evening on his bike in time to help Harry with the evening chores, sleep there Saturday evening, ride work on Sunday morning (in the beginning, in his ignorance, he didn't realise what a sacrifice Harry was making for him) and Rhys would come out in the four-wheel-drive and pick him in the afternoon. They set a month's trial.

"Hey ho, Silver, and where does Harry Doyle come into it all? I assume you've been pumping him for every last little scrap of info but does he give the impression of knowing more than he lets on?"

"No. I just feel sorry for him. He's a bit—lonely. He's still got Mad Maloney but he's given up going to the races. He just sort of potters round there."

"Poor old sod."

It took Harry Doyle awhile to realise what Trev had done. In one of Joe Murphy's more desperate moments he'd managed to get Council permission to subdivide his creek frontage. Not that people were lining up to buy small blocks at that time. But Trev had an ear close to the ground. He knew the Council had since placed a moratorium on all further sub-divisions. Trev able to sub-divide his land right down to half-hectare blocks was sitting pretty. With people unable to buy small blocks in close to town for hobby farms and pony paddocks and

orchards they might well come looking to Trev in a few years' time. The Murphy boys might need to find gold on their land if they were to have any hope of buying back the land at market prices because the market price of a hundred hectares was rather different to the market price of two hundred house blocks with permanent water, access to power, phone, sewerage, road and rail connections. So what, Harry had said in the beginning. But Trev only had to talk some dodgy pal into coming out and doing a valuation for him and ...

Beryl sailed along in trusting ignorance. Marie, whenever she came home, always looked a bit peaky and silent but Beryl put this down to the problems of adjusting to a man who'd been a bachelor too long. She had a platitude to cope with every situation and with no more bills hanging over her she felt life truly had a silver lining. She didn't even miss Joe any more. But her complacency meant that Marie couldn't tell her what it was like living with Trev, being at the pub every day, having to put up with Bobby Ransome ... gradually she came less and less. She went to Harry's instead.

It wasn't that she could talk to Harry either. Harry would've been even more embarrassed by talk of anything intimate. But Harry knew how she'd been pushed into a marriage she didn't want and Harry with eyes in his head could see how unhappy she was. But she could find a sort of peace and calm with him. When she went back to the pub and Trev she felt a little stronger and braver. And maybe things would get better. Maybe. She had some of her father's optimism.

Marie was, in her mother's words, 'a nice little rider', and she loved horses. Harry couldn't think of a way to undo Trev's big cheat but he felt he could do something about getting her a horse to ride. He didn't have a galloper in mind, not to begin with, just a nice little horse to hack around. It was Marie who heard about Mad. And it was Harry who talked Bobby Ransome into selling him. Blokes like Bobby shouldn't be allowed to own horses, Harry reckoned. He'd been warned off another racecourse years ago but people here, all except Harry, didn't know that. A potentially good horse gone to pot because Bobby and a couple of other characters who also should have been banned for life had probably soured him beyond redemption. But he registered the horse in Marie's name and began the slow and patient business of trying to turn a rogue into a useful horse.

"Are we looking at real crooks or suspicion here?" I hadn't yet spoken to Bobby Ransome; he seemed to be keeping out of my way, just possible he was keeping out of other people's way.

"We—the gang, y'know—had a look inside Bobby's caravan one night when he was up at the pub. It's pretty foul but he had some stuff there that looked a bit suspicious. Harry reckons he got warned off because he'd fixed a battery into a whip but I've never tried to check that out. I don't mean that he rides himself, too drunk to sit up straight these days, but just sort of hanging round, y'know—"

I didn't want to have to cultivate Mr Ransome's acquaintance, let alone

investigate his caravan. With luck he had nothing to do with Marie's disappearance.

Marie learned to ride trackwork. Beryl was very upset when she found this out. A nice little ten-stone-hack was one thing, a bad-tempered galloper quite another. Her poor little girl perched up there, not even a pommel to grab, and her knees practically under her chin. Beryl threatened to tell Trev. Marie said Trev already knew and didn't mind. He'd already got what he wanted. Beryl couldn't decide how to interpret this.

Marie rode Mad without much science or experience but the big gelding responded to her style and sympathy with a zest and dash of his own. Only Terry came to understand that Mad gave her her one glimpse of freedom. A freedom that bordered on recklessness. Harry saw her riding and interpreted her enthusiasm as himself having gone some way to making amends. He hadn't saved her from being the family sacrifice but there were compensations.

Terry, of course, saw Harry and everything through different eyes. Coming out to Harry's every weekend meant putting a distance between himself and his mates. It meant too that when he wasn't rushing between school and homework and going to Wad's he was spending time with someone whose life was totally different. At first he couldn't understand why anyone would want to live without all the things he took for granted—a TV, hi-fi, freezer, video, even a washing-machine—but slowly he felt himself accepting Harry's life, maybe it wasn't a bad life after all.

Harry, even though he referred to him as a kid, treated him as a man. At Harry's he could go to bed when he liked, sit having cups of tea any time. When Harry saw him watching him roll a smoke he simply pushed his papers and tobacco tin over. "Help yourself." Lulu would've had a fit as he sat there, his socked feet calmly toasting on the oven door, while he rolled himself a lumpy tube. "Smokin's like bad temper," Harry opined. "Learn to control it when you're young an' it'll never control you. Take your time and enjoy it. Don't get like those coves y'see, lightin' the next one from the stub o' the last. No enjoyment in that. Puntin's the same. Just put what you can afford to lose an' enjoy watchin' your horse run ... I remember there was that cove took six hundred thousand dollars from some charity, Freedom from Hunger, I think it was, and lost the lot. See, it'd got a hold o' him an' I reckon he never got a speck o' fun out of his bets."

But mostly Harry talked about horses he'd seen, dropping any and everything into the vast open spaces of Terry's mind. It only came gradually to Terry that Harry was remembering horses that ran twenty, thirty, forty years ago, not what he'd seen or heard last Saturday. "I remember when old Apa won the Brisbane Cup they reckoned the syndicate owners never saw hide nor hair of the money—dunno—but that was when folk were just startin' to get keen on syndicates an' they were pretty green an' gullible ... they came up with a different idea when they put old Carioca to stud, one of the few Carbine-line horses left an' you'd think he deserved the best mares—but everyone was goin'

for speedy little squibs ... an' I never heard that that scheme worked out any too good either ... pity ... I remember this mate of mine sent a mare to Pipe o' Peace an' he always reckoned they put his mare to the wrong horse, reckoned the foal's temp'rament was all wrong. But he was the kind o' bloke that can never get a horse to settle, always gotta be nigglin', there's people like that ... I heard they had to put the poor ole fella down after a mare kicked him you-know-where, just as well the ladies don't do the same, eh Terry?" And Terry would grin and agree.

It took Terry awhile to see that Harry's views weren't up-to-date: that he still saw the world as small-time punters and small-time trainers, old ladies with pins, the sort who backed Duo to win the Melbourne Cup after breaking a double-yoker egg, the sort who keep two horses in the back yard and treat them like part of the family ... that world had gone and Harry hadn't noticed its going. He still spoke of Shadow King as though it was yesterday he'd seen him, or Winfreux as a horse that might still pop up and win another Doomben Cup. He didn't even seem to have noticed that the names of races had been changed to suit the sponsors. It took Terry a bit longer to realise Harry had pretty well dropped his bundle.

He knew little about steroids and blood counts and cardiograms and mineral supplements—and cared less—bundling up everything modern in his frequent criticism, "Speed, speed, that's all they think about these days, little squibby things that don't train on! They didn't have to ask if Phar Lap could run two miles—they only asked if he could run it carrying ten-stone-ten—" As Terry came to understand it, there was no future with Harry. His four horses would become three, then two, then there'd just be an old gelding or two enjoying retirement under the wattle trees. And Harry would sit in his kitchen, like other old-age pensioners, but seeing the champions of his past, Ajax and Gloaming and Peter Pan and Bernborough, thundering in the flames of the old black stove.

In the beginning he'd assumed Terry's family must have some interest in racing. He'd soon found it wasn't so, that Terry didn't know a weight-for-age from a handicap, a classic from a welter—and that his simple statement 'I like horses—and I think they like me' was closer to the mark. But even if Harry was near to giving it all away, that didn't mean he had nothing to offer. On the contrary. He'd seen many of the greats ride. He'd gone out as a little whippet of a kid and lined up, nervous as a cricket, alongside Billy Cook or Scobie Breasley or one of the Munro brothers. That was an era, Harry liked to reminisce, when 'a trainer could throw his colours on the floor of the jockeys' room and be content to have his horse ridden by whoever picked them up'—even if Harry was modest about where he came in the hierarchy. He had plenty to teach when it came to race-riding.

Terry never tried to express his real reason for coming—he hadn't even *seen* Marie since the episode in the tree—but, slowly, he found himself enjoying what he was doing, looking forward to coming out to Harry's.

“This was according to Terry at the time—or what Harry tells you now?”

“Terry’d talk a bit about it—I guess we didn’t really take much of it in—just Terry going out to old Harry’s, we all thought it was just to find a way to see Marie in the beginning—but I could see Terry getting keener ... I come out to see Harry now and then. He blames himself, you know.” Paul shrugged. “He still reckons Trev and Beryl know where they are—”

As Terry improved Harry got more critical. Working him with a stopwatch till he was practically counting in his sleep. “You’ve got a good seat,” Harry liked to say, first the good news, then the bad news. “An’ that’s a blessing, I can tell you—you’re born with that—but you’ve gotta *learn* to judge pace, no hopin’ it’ll just come to you—”

Some weekends, Terry would arrive to find Mad in the end yard. It was strange to find that the horse which he’d thought of as placid when he saw him grazing at the back of the hotel or Marie riding him was really a cantankerous old devil. He accepted Terry but if Rhys came close, his ears went back. “Keep your mind on your job, never take a horse for granted, not even a bloody Shetland,” Harry liked to say. Terry took notice. So did his dad—after Mad had lunged at him and nearly taken a chunk out of his arm.

But Mad was only half the equation. What if he never happened to coincide a visit with Marie. What then? Would he lose heart? Would he give in to his mum’s constant importuning that he think about doing something ‘good’ ... though her ideas struck Terry as vague and impractical.

On the night of Dal’s birthday party he couldn’t go early to Harry’s. Dal was popular. His parents were generous. There were nearly fifty from school there. And the Creightons had just put in a swimming pool. It was too cold still to really enjoy a dip. But it’d been a warm day and Mr Creighton had kept it covered with plastic so the water itself was warm. The gang had come early so they could swim before everyone else. By five o’clock they were into the shandies and chips. Paul was in top form, a whole lot of new horror stories. They had a detailed description of tertiary syphilis (madness, noses rotted away, brains showing) and were now on to chancroids (ulcers, gangrene, amputation of the rotting penis)—and Jenny Eyles and Mary Adams were listening in, avidly, when Dal’s older brother came by. “Kid’s dangerous,” he leaned towards Paul. “It’ll be your fault if they all end up with totally stuffed-up sex lives.” The girls giggled. Paul, unwilling to lose his audience to the older Oliver, said, “And there’s these two hicks go to Sydney for the first time and they go to King’s Cross and find a girl willing to have sex with them. ‘But I don’t want to have a baby,’ she says, ‘so you guys gotta wear these French letters,’ so that’s okay by them and they have their fun and go home and a couple of months later one of ‘em says to the other ‘Jim, do you care if that silly bitch has a baby?’ ‘Nah, course not, Jack.’ ‘Well,’ says Jack, ‘what say we take these bloody things off’!” The girls giggled.

Mrs Creighton, who may have been listening, came out on to the patio and said, “Terry, your dad’s here.”

“Oh ... right ... okay ... ” He was torn between everything. Then he got up. “Cool it, Johnson, and you can tell me the rest on Monday.” He took his towel, thanked Mrs Creighton for the party, and went out. Maybe it was just a big show-off session and shandies weren’t very exciting—but—Harry ...

And yet, the others sitting round, watching him leave, felt he was leaving more than a party. Things were never quite the same again.

“Did you resent Terry growing up faster than the rest of you? Did you see it that way?”

“I guess so. But I don’t think we really understood the gap then, only later on, when we talked things over.”

“Your mates have theories—about what happened?”

“Not really. Sometimes they think maybe Terry really did go because he was sick of school, sick of home, and sometimes they agree with me, that something happened ... ”

Rhys dropped him at the yard gate. There was no light and he wondered if Harry had already gone to bed even though it wasn’t late. Terry went in and found Harry sitting in the kitchen, a smoke in an ashtray, no light but a candle in a home-made holder. Harry seemed to be asleep. For a minute Terry stood there looking at him. He hadn’t realised there were things Harry did to make life more comfortable when he came out, that he hadn’t plumbed the depths of Harry’s real life.

Harry blinked and looked up. “Thought it must be you, Terry, turn on the light if you want.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind.” He sat down on his usual chair.

“I was just huntin’ through a bit of old stuff today an’ I found this. You might like to have it. The old shillelagh I used in me last race.”

Terry picked it up, felt its whippy tensile strength in his slim dark hands, “frog’s hands” Paul had once called them, then he laid it down reverently. “Did you win?”

“And now you feel guilty for calling Terry names, things like that?”

“S’pose so. We were all a bit rotten. Called him Flippypeno and things like that. He never said anything. He knew we didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Sometimes,” I said this carefully, “people assume other people know that—and don’t see the hurt or resentment that’s being hidden away.” (And the combination of slangy dialogue and old-fashioned rather pedantic narrative made a curious, but possibly insightful, mix.)

Paul took this and considered it and finally said, “No, it really was okay. There was a bit of name-calling at school—one of the teachers said she assumed Terry wasn’t bright because he hadn’t been fed the right food when he was a kid and it wasn’t his fault—but she said it in a sarcastic way.”

“So was Terry behind you in his schoolwork?”

“No, about average. I mean, he was behind me, but then he never had my

dad cracking the whip, year-in, year-out.” He sounded bitter, all of a sudden.

Sunday mornings they always worked the horses turn and turn about; that Sunday it was Ralston’s Choice and Ainaro. Next Sunday it would be Mad and Charpoy. Harry liked his horses iron-hard and thought nothing of twenty kilometres of roadwork before breakfast. At first Terry groaned inwardly, then he accepted, then he looked forward to the long rides.

But they’d finished lunch and were sitting back with Harry remembering the famous Redlock-Erbie ring-in and Terry watching a dozen zebra finches round the seed table (Harry didn’t keep cats or dogs; he preferred birds), when there was the sound of a car. “Want me to see who it is?” Terry stood up.

“Nah, it’ll be Marie. She said she hoped to get out this arve.”

Harry heaved himself up but the effect on Terry was electric. Marie! He found himself checking his clothes, running his fingers through his hair ... Sure enough Marie was lifting her saddle out of the ute before coming over and giving Harry a kiss on his withered cheek. He looked pleased. “You won’t have to ride out with this ole duffer,” he said, “you can have Terry on Char instead.” He went to introduce them but Marie said quickly, “It’s okay, Uncle Harry, we’ve met.”

Terry grinned and said, “Hi, Marie,” and secretly wondered if she’d ever heard Tilly’s story. He hoped not. And he still felt that same wretched dry-mouthing yearning. Boiling inside and tongue-tied outside. It wasn’t fair that you could rave on to brainless slobs like Matty Harmsen and when the girl of your dreams came along you sounded like a slow learner. Still, there was no time for worrying now, not with Harry stumping away towards the stables in his short bow-legged way and talking about Mad as he went.

Harry watched keenly as they rode out on to the track after he’d given his instructions. Terry, he thought, was acting a bit funny, probably not much experience with girls, shy lad, and Marie wasn’t a school-girl, pretty little thing that she was, but grown-up. He lifted his binoculars to watch, unobserved, every move they made and it didn’t take him long to realise the truth as he watched Terry. ‘So that’s it!’ he couldn’t help a grin. ‘Well, you’re a resourceful young fella, I’ll hand you that! I always wondered why you wanted to come all this way just to learn from an old codger like me!’

As they trotted away Marie said, “Why does Uncle Harry call you Weary Willie?”

“It’s his joke. He reckons I look like I’m half-asleep when I’m riding but that’s only because I think the horse knows better than me what we’re s’posed to be doing ... and I don’t feel real comfortable riding on the rails yet, I still think I’m going to bump into them—”

“I see.” It was funny really. Terry, so full of quick restless energy on the ground, was an extraordinarily *still* rider, beautifully balanced, but not quite in control, as though he sat and waited. She wondered if it would grow into a distinct and successful style as he got more confidence and a sense of timing to go with his obvious ability. And by asking the question she unwittingly claimed

a stake in Terry's future.

He always did his best to follow Harry's instructions but, as they galloped side by side, he found himself able to relax and talk to Marie. Strange. Once he'd imagined races run in total silence, because he couldn't imagine being able to ride and talk at the same time. And now he found it just came naturally. Trackwork wasn't a grim and silent business ... and today it had the element of togetherness, maybe the only time they'd ever get together. But he imagined them riding races together, coming back to scale after dead-heating, being written up in the Sunday papers together, 'Dynamic Young Duo', riding in the dawn, maybe even travelling overseas ... "Wake up, sleepyhead, Uncle is waving at you!"

If only all life could be like this! But come five o'clock she said, "I must be going. Can I give you a lift, Terry? You could put the bike in the back of the ute if you like."

He hesitated. It might get her into trouble. But he couldn't resist. They drove off, leaving Harry standing there in the late afternoon. But outside of town Terry said suddenly, "I think maybe you'd better let me out here. You might get into trouble with your husband if he knew we came together." 'Your husband' had a disagreeable sound to it. But Trev McGoohan was a fact of life. They could forget him for a little while but no more than that.

"Okay." She pulled into the verge and watched him strap on his backpack and lift his bike down. She sounded sad when she said, "Terry, thanks for understanding. I'll see you again, sometime."

"Star-crossed young lovers." I suppose I sounded dry.

Paul nodded. "I wanted to create a sense of the life they had, Terry had, waiting—so people will realise what their loss means."

"But surely, their parents ... "

"I guess so. But in a way it's like Terry was just there in the family but not really one of them. I don't mean they didn't do their best for him and everything ... but Rhys has his own kids and I s'pose Lulu would rather forget what life was like before she came here, and Terry is part of that past life ... and he sort of lived his own life, inside himself ... "

As Marie was tidying in the office by the front stairs, Bobby Ransome came in. He often followed her around. Trev didn't seem to care. He even egged him on sometimes. Bobby never knew if it was supposed to be punishment for Marie, or that Trev enjoyed seeing him all het up, or whether Trev was a secret perver, or whether he'd just started to lose interest in Marie—

"Were you wanting something, Bobby?" She hated the way he'd stand and stare.

"Waitin' for the boss."

"Well, could you wait out there while I finish in here."

"Nah, the boss don't like me hangin' round out there. I'll just stay put." Of course Trev preferred Bobby to stay out of sight. There was a smell of stale

sweat around him and his hair hung tangled and greasy.

She could say, "I'll come back and finish later," but Bobby would carry tales—"Marie didn't finish her work properly"—and then there'd be trouble with Trev. She turned her back on Bobby and worked faster. But he came up behind her. She felt his breath hot on her neck. "Go away, Bobby, or I'll never get finished."

"Give us a kiss then—an' I'll push off—" But she stepped away from him. He came after her, cornering her between the filing cabinet and Trev's desk. "C'mon, just a teensy-weensy kiss for poor ole Bobby—"

"No! Just go away!" Bobby was bad enough at a distance. Up close he nauseated. He lunged forward and planted a smacking kiss full on her mouth. She gagged at the smell of his breath. Booze and bad teeth and poor digestion. "Don't you *dare* touch me!"

"Now, now, be kind to a poor ole bugger that never gets to let his zip down—"

Trev lounged into the room, amused to find Marie desperate to get out and Bobby desperate to keep her cornered. He pushed the door shut with one foot. "Well, go on Marie, give him a kiss. Don't be mingy."

"No!"

But Bobby, taking his cue from Trev, pressed up tight and smothered her with wet kisses, grabbed her in tight to him, let his hands get down inside her blouse. You never knew with Trev. He let things run on, then suddenly called a halt, so it was a skill to get as far as you could in the fastest time possible. He was panting heavily now, his eyes glazing, as he got her blouse undone, and was struggling to get her breasts out. She tried to push him away and twist out of his hold but Trev was waiting and slapped her hands down. "I'll say when he stops, girl, not you."

Tears came to her eyes. There was no help for it. Mrs Wicks wouldn't hear her yell. Bill hadn't arrived yet and, anyway, he wouldn't interfere. Bobby had his mouth down on a nipple—any minute now Trev'd say, "Okay, that's far enough, get on back to your work outside" and it'd all be over for a week or two ... He dropped to his knees, trying to pull down her slacks. Marie had gone rigid in fright. Her skin seemed to crawl wherever Bobby touched her—

Then—"Okay, Bobby boy, that's it, that's my territory down there. Do yourself up, girl, and get upstairs." He gave Marie a heavy swipe across the backside and sent her away. "Better go an' have a cuppa—all that excitement, not good for the old ticker, eh?"

"You're a bastard, Trev, lettin' me get that far—nah, I didn't mean—" The old sycophantic Bobby came back and he slunk out of the room.

"Don't want any talk of bastards round here, not nice for the tone of the hotel." Trev grinned and went upstairs to his bedroom.

"Well, c'mon, c'mon, I haven't got all day!" Marie threw her clothes off wildly and lay down, legs apart, knowing from long experience that if she kept him waiting he was more than likely to turn her over his knee and lay into her with a hairbrush, his hand, his belt buckle, whatever was handiest. But he liked

to stand and gloat a minute over her. There was work waiting but this was what he'd bought along with a good investment in land so why not savour it—and he liked to watch her scared eyes and tense body ...

Long after he'd gone she lay there staring miserably up at the ceiling. She couldn't take any more of this. Not for her mum, not for any marriage vows, not for the sake of her brothers, not for avoiding talk and scandal and gossip, not for anything ... If only she could shed her skin which now seemed to crawl with something filthy, a self-disgust and horror—if only she could get back at them somehow. She lay there, angry tears pooling. Then she got up and put on her good frock, a slim white sheath with a wide black belt, black high heels, a black velvet band with a black silk rose for round her slim neck. She walked downstairs slowly. Her face showed nothing of her inner resolve.

Trev glanced over. A kind of smugness. Oh yes, she was a looker all right. There wasn't a man came in here that didn't envy him his cute young wife. She served lunch quietly and calmly, she helped Mrs Wicks wash up afterwards. Then she changed into shirt and jodhpurs. It was the worst time of day to be working Mad but Trev had decreed it was the only time she could have off. She took down her crash helmet and removed a wad of money from its lining and put it into a pocket. It was the money Harry had won for her in the betting ring. Now it would be her future. She put the helmet back and took a soft towelling sunhat. She took her pills from a drawer. Beryl might long for grandchildren. She had no intention of providing them. And Doctor Johnson, probably because he had no time for Trev, had provided her with a prescription no questions asked. She added a handkerchief and comb and went downstairs quietly, leaving by the back door.

“Someone told you all this—or you just wanted to create a scene awful enough to explain her decision to run away?”

“Mrs Wicks told Mrs Killen who told my mum that she wasn’t surprised Marie had gone, she said it was immoral the way Trev had been letting Bobby carry on with his own wife and he should be ashamed of himself. But I had to imagine the details. I know patient records are supposed to be confidential but I sneaked a look to see what was on Marie’s card.”

“I see.”

Terry was home and sitting in front of piles of homework when a dark green ute drove up with a squeal. Trev McGoohan got out and slammed the door and came up their front path. Rhys was just home. The boys were out in the backyard playing with their new terrier pup. He stood up reluctantly. Chances were Trev was coming to accuse him of ... Trev thundered on their front door. Maybe he saw bells as sissy. Maybe he was furious. Terry opened it carefully and a hurricane blew in.

“Okay, you bloody little perv! What’ve you done with Marie?”

“Done?” He could only gape. There were lots of lovely things he'd dreamed of doing but surely the man didn't think he'd—

Rhys came in. "And what do you think you're calling my son, McGoohan?"

"Sneaky little bastard! Always hangin' round my wife!"

"You'd better come in and explain yourself." Rhys steered him into the lounge. He didn't want his wife or the boys to overhear. "Are you suggesting your wife is ... ?" He looked puzzled.

"Marie's buzzed off an' I reckon this little creep knows where she is!"

"Come off it, mate! She's probably gone home to her mum." In thought he added, 'and I wouldn't blame her', but he said aloud, "She's certainly never been here."

"Nah? Then you'd better wise up to your pervy little kid!"

"I haven't a clue what's going on but your wife isn't here—and never has been—so I'll ask you to leave quietly—"

"Don't you go threatening *me*—now, get outa the way an' let him do his own bloody talkin'!" He turned to Terry but Rhys calmly interposed himself. Trev who'd been lashing himself into a fury for the last half hour or more suddenly hit out. Rhys was older but hard and fit. He ducked then came up with a sharp right and caught McGoohan in his diaphragm and sent him lumbering back into an armchair with a startled oomph! For a moment he sat looking winded and surprised. Rhys came in close, his big fists still up. "Okay, that's enough. Pull yourself together and get home. You'll probably find your wife waiting—though if she is I feel damn sorry for her, being lumbered with a bad-tempered lout like you."

Trev got up slowly. A bit of plain-speaking wasn't likely to sweeten his temper and he turned to Terry, a foul black thundercloud. "Go near Marie again, kid, an' she won't sit down for a month, the bloody little bitch!" He went out.

There was a painful hush, then Terry said, "Better ring Harry, dad. If Marie's gone there, they're no match for Trev—"

"Okay." Rhys went to the phone. "But I think you've also got some explaining to do."

Terry nodded but said quickly, "Ask Harry if Mad Maloney is with him."

Rhys spoke into the phone, "This may sound like a crazy question to you—but have you got a Mad Maloney staying with you?"

"Mad Maloney is Marie's horse—the one that nearly bit you, dad."

"Well, I wish he'd bite McGoohan and give him blood-poisoning."

He put down the phone a minute later and took a chair. "Marie's not there. She's probably just forgotten the time. Look, Terry, you know I don't want to interfere in your private life—but McGoohan's a very unpleasant man to get mixed up with—so is there something I should know in case we're treated to a repeat performance. *Is* there anything between you and his wife?"

Terry stayed standing. It didn't give him much confidence or sense that he had control of the situation. "I just like Marie a lot. And Trev treats her really badly—"

"And since when did you become an expert on their private lives?"

"I didn't. I mean—I just hear things—and Marie comes out to Harry's

occasionally when I'm there." He felt a sense of betraying Marie in this downplaying of all she meant to him but he couldn't very well say "I'm crazy about her", not if he wanted Rhys to drop the matter. And Rhys didn't seem to see the unspoken truth in Terry's eyes, his stance, his tone.

"Well, except when you meet at Harry's, I'd prefer you to keep your distance. Anyway, you're not helping her by getting that old coot stirred up." Rhys shrugged the matter off and went away.

Terry went to the phone and rang Paul. "Can you go an' check if Mad's in his paddock?" Paul's house was two-storeys. He had a good view from the upstairs.

"Were you planning to publish under a pseudonym? It is rather disconcerting the way you write about yourself in the third person."

"I just found it easier to be ... I don't know, clear ... impartial ... that way."

"Planning a midnight jaunt, Terry?"

"Just go an' check, will you? I'm in a hurry."

He was back in a minute. "No sign of him."

"Okay. Then can you do something else for me? Bit of tracking?"

"Me? What you need is a Blacktracker—or maybe Dal's Doberman—or failing that, a fucking Flippypeno—"

"Shut up! Just go down and pretend you've lost something on the way to school. There'll be lots of hoofprints going across to the showgrounds but see if there's any going past the school or back this way. Okay? Then ring me back. I'll wait here for you."

Paul went and searched and wandered up and down and came back and said there was nothing in the dust but the trail across to the showgrounds.

"Thanks Paul. I'll remember you in my will."

"Fun-neee."

The only other person who might know was Wad. Wad knew most things. But Wad knew things simply because he kept his little piggy eyes open. This was different. This was a matter of trying to put himself in Marie's shoes, to decide where she'd go with Mad, and equally whether she'd want him to follow. Intuition. Not observation.

Finally, circumspectly, Terry packed his backpack, took a few things from the kitchen cupboards, and then lifted down the kris that was supposed to stay, on pain of 'death', on his wall. He tested its gleaming blade, slipped it into one of the plastic scabbards from the boys' toybox, and went out to his bike. To leave or not leave a note. A laconic "Gone to find Marie. Don't worry" might send Lulu rushing out to find *him*. He did nothing.

The showgrounds were being readied for the annual show. But by this late in the afternoon the place was deserted except for the sound of Mrs Cruikshank moving round in the secretary's office. He skirted the silent stands and slipped through a side gate on to the racecourse. Another small

gate on the far side opened into the Stock and Station Agent's store paddock. It was empty at the moment and his sharp eyes detected the mark of a shod hoof cutting across. The gate on the far side was wired up but if Marie had gone through it shouldn't be too difficult. The prints led on into the scrub of Warren Clark's bottom paddock and he came presently to a cattle track which in turn brought him to a small dam. He remembered camping here when Rhys originally advised on its siting and construction. But now, with the sun setting, it seemed a grim place with none of the sense of adventure it'd had then. He rode on, sometimes the prints were clear, sometimes he had to stop and cast around. He wondered if she was headed somewhere specific or just wanting to get away from town.

It grew dark. It grew cool. He put on his headlight, a small wavering gleam through the bull oaks. They seemed menacing now in the dark and shadowed scrub. His legs began to grow tired, riding through the thick dust of the cattle track. He wondered about camping for the night. The track turned into the two ruts of a vehicle track. He followed a little more easily and came to a pile of dung. He stirred it with a stick and a faint steam still rose in the night air. The Clarks kept horses but he was certain Mad had come this way. He came to a gate in the boundary fence. It was done up with both wire and baling twine.

His torch showed a horse had stood awhile and he imagined Marie struggling with the gate. Then he was through and another faint track took him away into thick scrub. A sliver of moon rose. He was very tired now. Marie might have turned off into the scrub to camp. And his light was running down. He might miss her in the night. He stood in silence but there was no sound of another person or a horse. A mopeoke called.

Maybe she was regretting, maybe she just wanted to give Trev a fright. Maybe she knew someone out this way who would hide her away. He put on his parka, ate a handful of raisins, made himself comfortable in a sandy hollow. But sleep was hard to come by. There were strange mournful cries. Nightjars. Shuffles and whispers. Bull ants maybe. Scorpions. Trap-door spiders. Wild pigs. He thought of hungry creatures ... They had all gone camping together. Rhys snored. Lulu constantly said "What was that!" The boys talked and got silly and played jokes and giggled ... He hadn't much enjoyed it then and now he longed for them all.

The cold closed in. His feet in old running shoes began to ache. The sounds faded, then regrouped and regrew. It was the longest night he'd ever spent. He woke as tired as he'd gone to sleep. He decided he hated the bush, hated camping, longed for all the sounds and rackets that went on every evening at home. And what about Marie. Was she afraid. Was she cold. Did she even find herself thinking Trev wasn't so bad, after all. But at least she had Mad for company. He'd be warm. Cranky and snorty. But warm. Alive.

Long before the sun came up, he was on the move again, his eyes alert for prints. In about an hour of stops and starts he came out on to the gravel road that eventually came out near the junction and Harry's place. Did that

mean Marie had gone to Harry's after all? He hoped not. It would be the first place Trev would look. He hunted up and down the road verge and finally decided Marie had turned and gone in the opposite direction. So she hadn't wanted to involve Harry.

The sun came up. Birds sang. But the road stayed dull and empty with grey scrub flanking it. Now his rushed ride began to seem a bit silly, a bit futile. And if he found her—what would he do, what would he say? Come home? Let's keep going? She might even be annoyed. If she'd tried to hide her trail ... well, he and the bike had left a clear enough trail for anyone to follow.

A mailbox showed up and an open gateway. He crossed it to check. Painted on the mailbox was C.E.DUFF. The road wound in through the paddock and forded a small creek. Of course. Mad would need water. Yes, there in the soft sand by the ford was the print of a shod hoof. Did she know the Duffs? He knew nothing about them. Who was C. E. Duff? Was he maybe a friend of the Murphys? He followed up the bank and came not to Mad and Marie but to a spring and a limpid pool, still under the overhang of the bank and several fine bloodwoods. He picked up a small stone and chucked it, a soft glump and splash in the morning.

He felt strangely alone, here, with no sound or sight of people. Maybe the world had ceased in the night and he was the only person left. Himself. The birds. The dragonflies. He took off his shoes and dangled his sweaty feet. When the day grew warmer it would be a lovely place to swim ... but the water caught the sun and it was shallow. He stripped off.

It grew harder to believe Marie had come this way, now, with himself alone in the clear water. The shadows shrank back. The sun grew stronger. He couldn't stay in for ever. But he didn't know what to do next. A sound came to him and he looked up, half expecting to see a wild boar, a mob of cattle. Those fears of the night. There was a rustle on the far bank, the branches parted and Marie stood there, apparently as surprised by the sight of him as he was by the sight of her.

“Hi, Marie!”

“What are *you* doing here, Terry?”

“I came to see if you were okay. Trev's hopping mad.”

“Does he know where I am?”

“Don't reckon. Not yet. What are you going to do?”

“I was just letting Mad graze awhile. Then I'll take him to Harry and keep going.”

He wanted to bound up the bank, cry, ‘Come home with me, we'll keep you safe’ or ‘I'll come with you, we'll go away together’, but he had no clothes on ... and there was no point them going back, not if Trev was going to camp on their doorstep ... “Marie, can I do anything to help? I mean if you're needing money or anything—”

At first he thought the background noise was merely a vehicle on the road but now he knew it was worse. Coming closer, grinding over branches,

circumnavigating trees ... well, maybe he could create a diversion while Marie got away ... He raced to get out of the water, up the bank, back into his jeans. It was horrible pulling them on while he was still wet—and where the hell had he put his socks and shoes—and the pack with the kris—

It came out, gleaming and deadly in his damp hand, and the sight of it gave him courage. A dark green ute pulled up in the long grass. Doors slammed. Then McGoohan and Bobby Ransome were charging towards him. “Knew it! Knew you were lyin’! I’ll get you now, you bloody little ape!” Trev ran with great lumbering strides.

Terry swished his weapon, unconsciously taking up the stance of a kung-fu star. “Stop!” It was the first thing to come to mind and it came out thin and high. But it stopped Bobby Ransome. “Cripes! The kid’s a bloody maniac!”

“Maniac, my foot! He’s goin’ to be sorry he was ever born!”

The blade hissed and Trev stepped back. “Don’t just stand there, you bloody sook! Get in there!” But Ransome wasn’t going to go in there and disarm a wild kid with a deadly weapon. Instead he stooped and came up with a stone the size of a cricket ball. It caught Terry in the shoulder and for a moment the pain made him dizzy. Trev moved in fast. But he recovered and thrust forward. Trev stepped back. “Attaboy, Bobby!”

Wad was right. They fought dirty. The stones rained down on him. The sharp dry grass spiked his feet. His arms grew tired. His breath whistled painfully. Sweat poured. It was like cats playing. The mouse grew limp and desperate. Bobby had picked up a long branch and thrust it at him. Then something better caught his eye. A cow pat. Hard on top, wet underneath. He took aim and it caught Terry between the eye and slid slowly down. He gagged. It was the end of him. He turned and stumbled toward the creek bank, hurling the kris away so they couldn’t get it off him. But it caught in the branch of a tree and hung trembling beyond anyone’s reach. Trev grabbed him, dug his hands in hard.

“Hey boss!” It was Bobby’s voice, suddenly high and scared. Trev turned, still holding Terry in a strong hold. It was Mad, cantering, his head out, low and mean, his ears back. Bobby simply turned tail and ran for the ute. But he was too slow. The horse snaked his head out, big yellow teeth caught him, shook him, sent him flying—

“Christ! The bastard!” Trev released Terry, grabbed a stick, ran for the ute. The horse turned towards McGoohan, struck out, caught him a glancing blow on the side of the neck, Trev swerved, fell, struck his head on a stump. Bobby, in probably the only brave act in a nasty little life, caught his boss under the armpits and dragged him towards the ute. The horse circled, his ears flat to his head, giving out strange squeals, moving in an uneasy motion between a trot and a lunge.

Terry was shaking with the shock of it all. He hadn’t known a horse could act like that. And would Mad now turn on him. Maybe the horse really had gone mad—

“Terry?” He turned and found Marie behind him, her face flushed, her eyes concerned. “Are you okay?”

“He’s gone crazy!” He pointed at the circling horse. “What’ll we do? He’s not safe!”

“He’s paying them back, paying Bobby back—all those mean things he did—those batteries—all the time he tried to hurt him in the hotel paddock—he’s getting his own back—and *I’m glad—glad, glad, glad*—”

She watched Bobby manhandle the unconscious Trev into the ute. He reversed clumsily, hit a log, bounced forward, veered off, ground away in low gear. The horse watched, pawed the ground, then began to trot after them in a strange stiff-legged trot, as though he couldn’t bear to let his prey escape.

Terry reached up shakily with a stick and brought his kris tumbling to earth and put it back in his pack. He wondered what would’ve happened if Marie and Mad hadn’t crossed the creek and doubled back to help him. What would Trev and Bobby have done to him?

“I take it that this is the victim’s version of events. Do you trust it?”

“I know it’s crazy. I mean they maybe did something to Terry before the horse came. But Trev was knocked out. And I think I believe their version—if they’d done something I think they would’ve kept quiet about going out there ... they didn’t have to spread it all round town, Bobby could just have brought Trev back and put him to bed, not made a big song and dance about it.”

“But he took him to the hospital?”

“Yes. He just told them the horse got out of his paddock and Trev went to try and put him back. I don’t know what they believed. But then a few days later when Rhys came round to ask him about Terry they both told him about going out there and how Terry and Marie had run off together—and I think Rhys believed them.”

“And what about Marie’s mother? What does she believe?”

“She keeps telling Trev that Marie’ll come to her senses and come home.”

“But has she actually heard anything from Marie?”

“Don’t reckon so. But she won’t admit she doesn’t know where they are or what they’re doing.”

“Mmm.”

“And this last bit of the story,” I put the pages down, “it’s all pure speculation, isn’t it? Terry stripping off, washing himself, Marie doing the same, joining him for a swim, both of them getting out on the sandbank, having the time of their lives, romantic, rather sweet, young love, you’ve written it very well—but there’s not a word of truth in it, is there?”

“I don’t honestly know. It’s just what I think they would’ve done. Don’t you think I’m right?”

“There is still the problem. Your Mr McGoohan is the *only* person with a realistic motive for wanting to hurt them. Terry’s pinched his wife, Marie’s made a fool of him—and presumably left him short-handed at the pub. It’s her horse that’s attacked them—you haven’t come up with a credible motive for anyone else.”

“I know.” He put his head in his hands for a while.

I re-read the end of the manuscript:

“Mad Maloney was found by Harry Doyle waiting outside his gate, late that same evening. He assumed that Marie had brought him there but he doesn’t know for sure.

Because Terry Jones and Marie McGoohan have never been seen or heard from since that day.”

“So if Marie and Terry brought Mad back to Harry—why didn’t they put him *inside* the gate? And if they were still out in the paddocks making whooppee—then I wonder if the horse would leave them and come home by himself?”

“I think they didn’t want Harry to be blamed for anything.”

“Mmm.”

Paul sat watching me and finally said, “So do you think I’m right?”

“It’s possible.” I thought of myself trailing wearily round town trying to get people to give me information, going out to see Beryl Murphy, Harry Doyle, all the business that I didn’t feel in the least like doing. “There’s the crimes done, or possibly done—you lot trying to rig a race, Bobby Ransome trying to rig races, Trev McGoohan doing his legal fiddle which just might be construed as fraud ... but there’s another crime in there that perhaps we’ve overlooked ... ” I was trying to think my way into this whole case. “Not because of what anyone’s done but because of what they are ... ”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s only an outside chance. But it *is* a crime to send abusive racial threats to people. The fact that the threats stopped suggests that the anonymous sender wasn’t very serious ... but that’s only an assumption. We have no evidence. If something happened to bring the matter back to their attention ... while the Jones family just went on living quietly maybe they could be ignored ... but then Terry sort of stepped outside the family ... he wanted to become a jockey, he became good mates with Harry Doyle who just may have a little nest-egg to leave, who knows, and he got keen on Marie McGoohan and Marie McGoohan was one end of a financial bargain, wasn’t she?”

“You’re not suggesting that her mum—or her brothers—” Paul stared at me.

“Not really. Though I know nothing about her brothers, how old they are, how much do they want their land back, how do they feel about Marie, about Trev—”

“They’re about fourteen and fifteen but they’re away at school somewhere, a Catholic school I mean. They’re quite a bit younger than Marie.”

“I see.” I sat back. “Well, the next thing maybe is to visit the ‘scene of the

crime' if crime there is. So who is C.E. Duff? And what has he ever had to say for himself?"

"Well, nothing really. He's just an old guy that runs a few cattle out there and spends all his spare time shooting wild pigs. He must be a bit sick as I've seen him coming in to the surgery to see my dad a couple of times in the last month."

"Fine. It might suit me better to see his farm when he's out. So maybe you could just have a look at the appointments book and let me know if he'll be in town again soon."

"I'll go and look now." He got up and went out. I hoped he would do his looking with discretion.

He came back a few minutes later. "It's lucky. He's down for 10 am tomorrow. Can I come with you when you go out there?"

"I guess so. What about school and so on?"

"I'll just go as usual but then I'll duck round and meet you on the corner there by the chemist's. Is that okay?"

"Sure. And we can maybe drop in to see Harry Doyle on our way back."

I shouldn't be encouraging him but neither did I want to spend the next week here ...

I returned to the hotel and had a drink in the bar. Bill Bayley wasn't a talker but I managed to get a few cryptic comments out of him. He didn't really seem surprised that a girl like Marie hadn't stayed around, not that Trev was ever going to forgive her ... and he said something which suggested he blamed Bobby Ransome for her departure. I said, "Some people don't appreciate their luck" or words to that effect. Bill Bayley agreed morosely. He'd obviously had a soft spot for Marie but he didn't strike me as a man eating his heart out for a departed love.

- iii -

I picked Paul up. It was a long drive. About ten kilometres out of town an old truck passed us. "That was Mr Duff," Paul said in a conspiratorial tone.

"Good. He's a slow driver."

We wound our way in through Mr Duff's paddocks, crossed the ford, eventually drove into a wide space with a ramshackle wooden house on one side and a motley lot of sheds and yards on the other two sides. A wire pen had three large greyish-black dogs which gave fierce voice.

"Those are his pig dogs," Paul said.

I stood there a moment. "I wouldn't like to tangle with them." More than tangle. Was it possible Mr Duff had come to see what the commotion was, if he could hear it from his house, or he may have been out already with his dogs, and the dogs'd got out of control ...

It was a grim thought. "Well, I'll walk up to the house like someone come to call that doesn't know he's out. You can have a look in his shed. There's Terry's bike unaccounted for as well as two people."

"Okay."

"And look natural, for heaven's sake."

“I’ll try.”

The back verandah was covered with junk. An open door lead into a dirty kitchen. Flies buzzed round the remains of Mr Duff’s breakfast. The whole place smelled of old food and dust. A faint warmth still came from the stove.

I went from room to room. It would take a search warrant to sift through the piles of nondescript junk but no bike, not unless he’d placed it under a bed or taken it to bits and put it in a cupboard. It was a relief to step out into the sunshine again.

Paul suddenly appeared in a shed door and yelled and waved his hands. “It’s here! Come quickly!”

‘It’ was a backpack in lairy fluorescent green and black.

“Don’t touch!” He put it down hastily. I looked around the shed. No sign of a bike but there were hay bales, large boxes, piles of timber ...

Paul came back reluctantly, got in the car, still looking round him with a bemused air. “Do you think Mr Duff—”

“I don’t think anything. Mr Duff may simply have found it lying by the creek and picked it up.” I drove away slowly and parked on the far side of the creek, got out, and began to walk slowly up towards the spring. The water had cut out a gentle curve with an attractive sand spit on our side. The trees leaned slightly over the creek. It was a pleasant spot. Maybe, after all, Paul was right. Maybe the young Terry and the young Marie had lain here in each other’s arms. I rather hoped they had. I walked back down to the car.

“It’s a matter now for the police. Assuming Terry wasn’t likely to go without his backpack a search of Mr Duff’s sheds seems warranted. And his parents are better placed than you are to identify his backpack.”

“What about Harry Doyle?”

“I think we can leave Harry for the moment. I’d like to talk to your Sergeant Griggs. I don’t know whether you want to go home or what.”

“I ... I think maybe I’ll just go to Wad’s ... if you don’t mind ... just while you ... I don’t know what to do really ... ”

“Wad’s it is.” I wasn’t looking forward to talking to the sergeant. Other men’s patches. Retired busybodies. All those assumptions. And trying to explain something to a busy man.

But Griggs was an athletic man in his thirties, intelligent and energetic. “Always struck me as a bit odd. But no one claimed they were missing. So nothing I could do. You know the form.”

“Yes.”

“And you just dropped out to see Duff to get a better picture of what happened that day with Trev and all?” His look didn’t change. Just curious.

“Mmm. I took young Paul Johnson with me to show me the way. I know he shouldn’t have been poking round while I went to see if Mr Duff was home, just a courtesy to ask if he minded if I looked at his creek, but the lad was curious, I s’pose. So I haven’t met up with Mr Duff yet. What sort of man is he?”

The sergeant shrugged. “Hardly know him, as a matter of fact. Just lives

there by himself, runs a few head of stock. He must be getting on. Anyway, I don't mind to nip out and see what he has to say for himself. I'm not busy just now."

I didn't say anything about coming but he said, "Join me?"
"Okay. Thanks."

- iv -

Mr Duff was back from the doctor's by then. He came out on to his back verandah as the dogs barked. An old man, gaunt, with prominent ears and tufted grey eyebrows over indeterminate greeny-grey eyes. A big man but walking slowly. He had a thick sandwich in one hand.

"Mr Duff?" Sergeant Griggs met him at the gate. "We have received an information that you might have something belonging to Terence Jones in your shed. Would you mind if we had a quick look?"

"What sort of a something?" He had a slow raspy voice. But he didn't sound worried.

"A green and black rucksack."

He was like a man who didn't care who came, who went, who asked what—and then suddenly it was there, that little flicker that gives a man away, a suggestion of unease. The police know something that he didn't know they knew. And if they know that what else do they know. Something like that.

Sergeant Griggs caught it too. His indecision showed in his eyes. Too soon to think of an arrest. "Would you be willing to come down to the station to make a statement?"

"No. I bloody wouldn't. I fought the Japs in the bloody war and here they are, right here, having the flamin' cheek to come right on to me own bloody land! You don't think I was goin' to stand for that, do you? Well, do you!"

"What do you mean, the Japs?" the sergeant sounded very calm.

"Those sneaky little Asian bastards! Black hair, slanty eyes—"

It was all over then. It came pouring out of him. Decades of suppressed hate for what was done to him in Changi. He didn't care who knew what he'd done. He was absolutely justified. If the government, any government, was worth its salt, it wouldn't have been left to him to pay them back—

"Clarence Duff, you are not obliged to say anything unless you wish to do so but what you say may be put into writing and given as evidence."

Very proper. But Clarence Duff had already said everything necessary.

- v -

I didn't want Paul with me but I couldn't say no. It was his loss, his story, long before it became mine. Two days later we sat together on the banks of the creek in the hot sun and watched several men slowly and carefully dig in the sand spit.

They were there. Mr Duff had simply got a spade and dug out from under them so that they slipped into the sandy hollow. He hadn't touched them. They were still in each other arms. But he had come up unnoticed and shot them. The bullets had passed right through Terry and into Marie. I wondered if Marie had opened her eyes, had one fleeting moment of terror before she died.

Paul had sat beside me, rigid with tension and horror. Then as the sand was cleared and the bodies lay exposed he turned to me and burst into tears.
I held him and let him cry.

- end -

‘THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S—’

- i -

One evening an unknown woman rang me and asked if it was true I took ‘cases’. “Not usually,” I said.

“Unusually then? What does it take to tempt you? By the way I’m Pat Livermore. I can’t really offer to pay for your advice, or only at the level of petrol money, but I really don’t know who else to turn to.”

“Well, I don’t suppose we need to get picky at this stage. Just give me a quick run-down of the problem and I might be able to suggest someone you can turn to—”

“I’m a baby sister—”

“Baby sitter?”

“No. I mean I go round and do baby health clinics in various country towns. I have a routine so I don’t get to spend very long in each place but I usually come round once a fortnight, weigh the babies, talk to the mums about any problems they might be having, keep an eye on the general health of the babies, show the mums how to bathe and feed, advise on diet, things like that. I’m really quite a useful person to have around, especially these days when many new mums don’t seem to have any handy relatives and get pushed out of hospital faster and faster after the birth.”

“I’m sure you are—useful, I mean. But where do I come into it?”

“One of my clinics is in Torden, up the Brisbane valley past the Somerset Dam, Esk, that area. You probably won’t know it. But a young girl was killed there a few weeks ago on her way home from school.”

“Rings a bell. Girl of about ten? Can’t think of her name.”

“Sally Peck.”

“Mmmm. But I assume the blokes from the CIB are swarming all over the place?”

“Well, yes and no. They’ve got a young man in the frame. Lad of nineteen. A big youth but a bit what we would once have called simple but I’ve always found him helpful and decent.”

“Well, a good lawyer sounds more useful than anything I could do—”

“It’s not quite like that. The police would have him in custody, I’m sure, if they had enough evidence. But no one has been arrested and there’s a very ugly mood in town, people talking of taking the law into their own hands, of going out and ‘getting’ him, that sort of thing.”

“What about the local police? Can they give him some protection?”

“The local station was closed down a couple of years ago. Since then, there’s been a sort of local vigilante group operating, no, perhaps that’s too strong a word—but some of the locals got together, called themselves Neighbourhood Watch, and said any funny business and they’d have the perp strung up by his ears—which is definitely not what *I* understand by Neighbourhood Watch ... but there’s other things that have got mixed up with it, I’m afraid, and people are spoiling for action. It isn’t nice.”

And this poor benighted woman rings *me*. What the heck does she think I am? The Magnificent Seven?

“What kind of things? Politics? Gun lobby? Drugs?”

“No. Religion.”

- ii -

Paul was still in my flat. I hadn’t expected him to say yes when I’d casually suggested he drop by if he ever came to Surfers; I hadn’t expected his parents to at least acquiesce ... and maybe their acquiescence was all in Paul’s mind. Now I didn’t know whether to toss him the keys or say “Care for a day in the country?” He was still in a pretty fragile state, poor kid, and putting more bodies and misery on him didn’t strike me as a brilliant idea. Not that I’d been much help anyway, not being a therapist or counselor or what-have-you. But maybe sun and surf were a helpful alternative.

On the other hand he was old enough to make his own decisions. I told him what Sister Pat had told me and said I’d take a quick trip up, stay a night and try to get the feel of the place, see if I thought she was paranoid. Suggest something if anything came to me.

“Would you mind if I came too?”

I said it didn’t sound much like fun—and city slickers breezing in to town and asking leading questions might not be flavour of the month.

“I know. Don’t forget I’ve lived in a small country town all my life. But sitting here—just thinking about—about everything ... well, maybe I’d just get in your way but maybe I’d see something you missed ... or if it involved talking to other guys, young guys, I mean ... ”

“Paul, if you’d like to come I’m happy to have you along, no two ways about that.” I liked the kid and Rachel was away for a week or two.

“Okay, when do you want to leave?”

“Might as well go tomorrow. Stay the night. See Sister Pat when she’s at the clinic on Thursday, come home.”

“Do I need to take anything?”

“Your Junior Detective Kit? No, just look sort of nondescript and we’ll take it very quiet and low-key.” It still didn’t mean we’d blend in.

Torden lies casually along the edge of the river, a country town with a centre and a vague periphery which tailed off into small horse paddocks, a few large warehouse-type stores, an aerodrome with weeds in its runway, a large feed-lot with silos and acres of yards, a couple of orchards, a salvage company, a Saanan goat stud. The road cut away to the north-west and crossed the river on a long low concrete bridge. The town without a through road seemed quiet and sleepy.

We drove through and into the courtyard of the Lazy Days Motel. There was no sign of a proprietor and we crunched to a stop on some cracked asphalt and looked around. When no one came to reception we wandered round the end of the cabins into a backyard. A large man in a ragged singlet and shorts was vaguely emptying a vacuum-cleaner bag into a plastic garbage bin. He looked up but said nothing.

“Morning. Any chance of two rooms?”

He seemed to chew over my request. “Be with you in a tick.”

The rooms he showed us were hot and stuffy with cracked lino. “You two just passing through?”

“Sort of.” It’s always a problem to know whether to be yourself or come in with a cover, especially when you’re coming cold into a strange town. “Just looking round for a small property and thought we’d stop in here for a day or two.”

“Thirty-five dollars per night, per room. Breakfast between eight and nine.” He seemed to cheer up but that’s not to say he made us feel welcome.

“We saw a place just back there that looks like an estate agent. Would they be the place to try first?”

“S’pose so. The Cadwalladers have a finger in most pies round here.”

“They sound useful people.”

He shrugged fat shoulders. “Depends what you want.”

“How’s business been round town, generally speaking?”

“Not brilliant. I had a few rubber-necks in just after that little girl got socked but I’ve been empty since then.”

Strange how murder can be good for business. I didn’t say so.

“I was sorry to hear about that. Sad when your kids can’t be safe.”

“They know who done it, they just don’t seem to be in a hurry to pick him up. Evidence, I s’pose.”

“Could be.”

“But I reckon they should still bang him up while they’re lookin’. What say he goes and does another one in? Then where’ll they be?”

“Do other people round town think like that?”

“Sure they do.” Then he seemed to decide he’d done enough yarning. There was still a vacuum-cleaner sitting out the back. “Here’s your keys. You can park in the shade over there if you want.”

“Right. Thanks, mate.”

“What do we do first?” Paul managed to sound keen.

“I think we go and talk real estate, establish our credentials, give us a reason for poking round.”

“Okay.” He put a pen and a notebook in his pocket where it sat looking incongruous; I didn’t have the heart to tell him so.

There was only a girl in the Cadwalladers’ but according to their front windows they did just about everything from real estate and auctions to hiring out bulldozers and arranging agistment to being agents for a dry cleaners, a range of city hotels, and a miniature travel agency specialising in ‘Country B & B, C & W Festivals and Campervan Hire’; it sounded a lively mix. A girl who was about eighteen with dishwater blonde hair and a very large shiny red pimple on her chin directed us to their listings. As we turned the pages of coloured photographs she kept a close watch on Paul from the corner of one eye.

I made a note of the properties which looked the sort of thing we’d fancy; a newish brick unit and a hobby farm with ‘well-established orchard’. We didn’t want a newsagency, nor, throwing our net wider, did we want a bakery in Esk; ‘four hundred hectares of prime fattening country’ was definitely not us. (I wondered what they fattened but assumed cattle.)

“Still cattle out on the farms,” I said innocently, “or is it mainly feed-lots?”

“Just the one feed-lot,” she didn’t sound happy about it, “and that’s owned by some Japs, but you’re not looking for that sort of thing, are you?”

“No. Not as young as I used to be. Just a few hectares will do me.”

She looked at me, then across at Paul, obviously curious about where he came into it. And being curious, she wanted to keep us a little longer. “Now, I’ll do you a slip to take with you, the owners are still in residence, but I’ll ring them to tell them you’re coming.”

“Thanks. Now, you’d better give us some directions or we might never turn up.”

She giggled slightly but drew some rather confusing lines and said, “You turn here, and then again, and that’s just a little gravel road coming out there, and you go on just past that place with the fruit ... that’s where that little girl lived ... you heard all about it, didn’t you?”

“You mean—” My mind went blank.

“Sally Peck?” Paul spoke suddenly.

“Yes,” she dropped her voice as though to tell us something too awful for words, “it shouldn’t be allowed—”

“I’m not keen on murder, no.”

But that wasn’t what she meant. She tossed her head and turned back to Paul. “That young guy, he’s still just walking round town just like he did nothing, it really scares me. The police had their van here for two weeks,” she looked wistful, possibly she had had hopes, “but then they just packed up and were gone in the night and nothing done about him—”

“But ... why are you so sure he’s guilty?” Paul managed to look both decadent and angelic; it certainly went over well here.

“But everyone *knows* he is!” She opened her eyes very wide. “He often went down to the pool and hung around there till the kids came along after school.”

“And that’s what he did that day?”

“Well, he must’ve done, mustn’t he?”

“But ... wasn’t the little girl there with her school friends?”

“They said she was, but then her friends had to go home and she stayed a bit longer and she must’ve been there on her own, mustn’t she, and then he got her and he held her down under the water—”

Certainly the Esk Valley News said the girl had been held under the water; they said there were the faint marks of large hands round her neck. A body can continue to develop bruises after death, though not for long. There were also marks on her arms and legs and a small burn in the hollow of her throat. The burn was described as being the result of a childish prank. Her teacher described her as being “rather a tomboy, full of youthful mischief, but quite good at games”. It didn’t sound much of an obituary but then, I thought, there hadn’t been time for her to develop in any particular direction. I wondered precisely what “full of youthful mischief” meant. Uncontrollable. Truancy. Disruptive. Fond of practical jokes. I thought I would like to talk to her teacher.

“You hear of these things happening—” The girl was still hoping for something from Paul, the smallest sign, but I said briskly, “Well, thank you for all your help. We’ll go and view these places and let you know how we get along.”

The possibility of a further meeting seemed to cheer her up.

- v -

“Which one first?”

“I think we’ll take the one past the Pecks’ first, that’ll give us an idea of how far they are from the school, then we’ll go over to the other one and from there we might duck out to the commune that Sister Pat told us about. The one where the lad grew up.”

“So, if that’s the school over there,” Paul turned full circle, “and the creek’s down there, I suppose she would walk along there ... ” The school which looked large enough to have around a hundred pupils was only some two hundred metres from the creek. I call it a creek only because everyone else seemed to. It was a small waterhole of maybe ten metres in length and about six metres at its widest. But it was fringed by trees and the water looked pleasantly clean, only a faint brown sheen.

“I wonder how deep it is?” Paul put his head out and gazed almost longingly at the coolness of it. “I suppose it can’t be deep if the little kids come down to paddle.”

“No. I don’t think she could’ve drowned without help.”

On the far side, a scrubby ridge rose just above the height of the low-growing trees. There seemed to be a high netting fence around it. I wondered what was kept there. The local rubbish tip? But it looked unused and untenanted. Surprising really, as it would have quite a good view of the Esk

River beyond.

The road we had taken eventually brought us to a home-made sign. Peck's Exotic Fruit. A small roadside stall sat empty. Possibly the exotic fruit wasn't in season. "About fifteen minutes walk, I'd say, maybe twenty for a small girl."

Paul nodded. "But do you think there might be a school bus?"

"Could be. We'll keep a look out for one. But I can't really see a bus waiting round while the kids go paddling. And I think this is the ideal excuse for calling on the Pecks. I always hate calling on the bereaved but presumably they still need to keep on selling fruit if that's their livelihood—and I'm curious as to just what they call exotic."

We drove carefully over a not very safe-looking grid and a further twenty metres up to the house. A sign said 'Fruit For Sale' and directed us towards a large open shed filled mainly with empty crates. Trees grew in untidy rows but not being an 'orchardist' I couldn't guess what they were. I parked in the shade of a large tree with glossy green leaves and got out. A small terrier inside the yard yelped and a man appeared from some back region.

"I'd say he eats more than fruit," Paul said under his breath. It was a classic beer gut, held in by a very dirty white singlet and faded jeans.

"Morning." I walked across. "I was curious about your exotic fruit, what you might have for sale."

"Guavas. First melons. Mandarins. Figs." He wasn't forthcoming but I got the impression he never was; this was the father, I assumed, but he looked a sour old cuss. Unless it was people like us using fruit as an excuse to call.

"Sounds interesting." I turned to Paul. "What do you fancy?"

"Mandarins and maybe a few figs." I wanted to tell him to act natural, not keep glancing round like a swivel-stick.

"Okay. Say two kilos of mandarins, one of figs, and we'll take a melon."

"Won't be long." He waddled away and began shovelling things into plastic bags and weighing them on a big scales. A small child suddenly appeared, virtually out of the ground was my first impression, but presumably it'd been playing there. "Get back to your chores," the man said loudly. Not playing then.

A scared look flitted over the child's face—whether boy or girl I couldn't guess—and it disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

I paid for the fruit and said, "I'm looking for a place owned by a Charlie Wagner. Am I on the right road?"

"In the fruit business, are you?"

"No." I couldn't help a bit of a grin. "Just looking for a bit of land."

"Tried to buy the land off him once, wouldn't sell then, but the old sod had a stroke and now he wants the earth for it—offered him a reasonable price but he got all up in the air and said he wasn't giving it away." Mr Peck seemed surprised by his own loquacity.

"Well, if in the small chance that we do like the look of it, I'm sure we could come to some arrangement. I'd only need space for a few vegies and half-a-dozen chooks."

I hadn't taken to Mr Peck particularly but he suddenly became much more friendly. "Well, don't you forget then, mate."

"See you around ... Mr Peck, is it?"

"Yeah. Doug Peck." He reached over. "Here, have this one, it's a bit bigger." He swapped our melon for one that looked identical; not that I'd like to go out on a limb for a melon.

- vi -

"That was pretty neat," Paul said as we came out on to the road.

"It's a fact of life that people are more sympathetic to the bloke who comes round buying than the one that comes around selling. But it was a lucky break that he wanted to buy the farm we're going to see."

"I wonder if Mr Wagner'll be able to tell us anything about Sally—"

"Quite likely not. But I hope we can get him to unbutton on Doug—"

"You think ... well, that Sally might've been unhappy at home?" I'm inclined to think Paul thinks everyone is unhappy at home; not desperate just quietly miserable.

"I always like to know about the victim's background. She may have died because she just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Just sheer bloody bad luck. But people's backgrounds affect even that. Why did she stay on at the waterhole after her friends had gone home?"

"I see what you mean."

Mr Wagner dribbled a bit but he seemed quite spry. The house itself was small and unremarkable, very stuffy and not terribly clean. I wondered if he batched or if there was someone else in the offing. He took us around the garden, which looked very healthy, and down past a long shed with netting yards. These contained quite an interesting collection of game fowls.

"Bred 'em myself," Mr Wagner said in his indistinct voice.

"Very attractive. Are you taking them with you to—well, wherever you're going next."

"Bloody nursing home. My daughter says I should've gone in years ago but I've lived here all m'lfe, hard to leave it. Got m'own lines of fruit and some of 'em are pretty rare. I want someone who feels the same about 'em as I do. But she'll take the fowls for me. She's always been keen on 'em too." He looked rather sad but gradually cheered up as he took us up and down the rows, explaining as he went. Paul took out his notebook and made some notes or maybe he was using the old man's spiel as an excuse to write other things down; I didn't enquire.

"Had many people after the orchard?"

He ruminated. Trade secret. "Couple. Didn't want to pay my price."

"Mmm. Any local interest?"

"Only bloody old Peck. Wouldn't sell to him if he was the only one asking."

We both looked at him. "Any particular reason? There seems to be some sympathy for him round town ..."

"Got nothing to do with it." Mr Wagner looked away across the paddocks

and the silence lengthened. "But if I sold to him, guess who'd be doing all the hard yakka?"

I shook my head. "Don't know anything about him except that he lost a daughter."

"Well, there's five kids, four now ... and you see 'em out there in the sheds all hours—and bloody ole Doug's down in the pub. Worked hard as a kiddy meself but it's not the same thing ... I just didn't want them poor little buggers to have to do more ... "

"I see."

"What about your rare varieties," Paul said suddenly, "was he interested in them?"

The old man shook his head. "People go in there because they see his sign. If I put up a sign like that ... do you know, had a bloke in here once, said he come from Brazil ... and he took photos for some newspaper there ... what d'you think o' that?"

"Very impressive. But I'm afraid we'll have to push along. We're supposed to be viewing another place this arve. But thanks for showing us around and we'll be in touch if—"

"Yeah, they all say that."

- vii -

The newish unit was in a block of three. They had nice big yards but bare and dull with a distant view of the silos at the feed-lot. The owner was out but had left the key with her next door neighbour, a Mrs Piggott, who opened up and showed us around. It was a roof over the head but hard to say much else about it.

"When did they build the units?" I asked her.

"Oh, about six years ago." She had a lot of fluffy grey hair and was wearing a cardigan despite the heat of the day. "They're not much, are they, but cheap enough and there's room for a garden, and I can walk into town for shopping ... I don't go out much and now since ... well, I just get to thinking ... it'd be nice to have a man around the place, you know ... "

"What about the other unit?"

"Oh, that's Mrs Birkin—and she's even older than I am. I stayed on here after my hubby died, just because she was here, but sometimes I wish I'd gone ... you know, we see that lad cutting across the paddocks there when he's going home and it's not nice, just seeing him ... I don't want to put you off, of course ... and I know Gladys does need to sell—and you both being men—"

"But you've never met the lad, just seen him walking?"

"He came up behind me one afternoon—scared the daylights out of me, he was behaving that funny—" She shook her head and the curls bobbed cheerfully.

"What kind of funny?"

She looked at me, then at Paul. "It's hard to say, Mr Creighton, but I just *knew* he wasn't right in the head, and his hands were sort of—" She brought up liverish old hands and clasped and unclasped them, a kind of nervous spasmic

clasp. Sister Pat had been sympathetic about the lad but she only saw him occasionally and then he was possibly on his best behaviour; more so, maybe, if he saw her as a friend and ally.

“Well, we won’t let that influence us about the unit—” And I went on and asked her various practical questions. But I could see she was sort of yearning to return to the subject of young Jason Crombie. It wasn’t that she precisely had information, more that she needed to let off steam about the noise and smell from the feed-lots, her own worries, her feelings that all the Crombies were a bit ... a bit ...

I slipped in a question about Sally Peck but she had no knowledge of the girl, only what had been in the paper and what she’d heard other people saying, and she didn’t think the school should let the children go down to the waterhole because you never knew what they might catch.

“But it’s like that, you know, Mr Creighton, all this insurance while they’re inside the school, they fall over and it’s money in someone’s pocket or the teacher’s getting sued ... and as soon as they’re out the gate no one cares ... ”

I sympathised. It was easier to say we’d be in touch, it wasn’t her place, but she was reluctant to let us go. I said we had another place to see. Paul said as we got back in the car, “Bob, what about insurance, would the Council be responsible for what happened down at the waterhole?”

“Doubt it. Not if the parents had allowed the girl to go there without supervision ... though I wonder if the estimable Doug—”

“Yeah, you’d think he’d say, you come straight home, I’ve got work waiting for you.”

“It would make staying a bit later all the more attractive. If she didn’t mind catching it when she did finally get home. It would be good to know what her friends have to say about the whole business. We’d better keep going if we want to see this commune before lunch, then we could slip into Esk and read the back numbers of the local paper.”

“Do you think the commune’ll be—” He had obviously never thought about communes.

“Could be anything. Ageing hippies. New Age stuff. Mormons. As Sister Pat seems to think it’s the answer to something I thought it best to go in with an open mind.”

“As ourselves?”

“Mmm. But no harm in mentioning we’re looking round at properties, while we’re talking about Sister Pat ... ” I didn’t really like barging in cold like this but neither did I like the idea of coming in on the recommendation of someone I’d never met. Sister Pat was as much a dark horse as the people who farmed communally.

- viii -

We turned in a neat drive. The post-and-rail fences were hung with passion-vines. Though the lane was dusty there were trees round all the sheds and barns and a long low house with a broad verandah. There was a kind of slow sense about the place, as if we’d left modern life behind; on our left,

surprisingly, a man rode behind a large horse. A kind of reaper was cutting the long grass of the paddock. The sight was sufficiently unusual for us to stop and stare. Chooks wandered here and there and a large turkey cock came out and gobbled at us.

“Not quite what I was imagining. I wonder if they’re Amish or something?”

Paul looked round but didn’t venture an answer to my question. “Look!” He pointed and I saw more horses. They looked to be ploughing but I hesitate to be more definite. A willie wagtail came and perched near us.

We didn’t want to look nosy but as no one seemed to have noticed our arrival I said, “House or barns?”

“I s’pose we should try the house first. It’s nearly lunch time.”

As we stepped through the garden gate and found ourselves in a curious place where fruit and vegetables and herbs and flowers grew all mixed up together, a woman came out on to the verandah. She was elderly, large, buxom, and wearing an apron made out of Defiance flour bags. The effect was curiously homey and attractive. I expected her to smell of fresh bread.

“Can I help you?” She made it sound neutral. What were we selling?

“We wondered if we might be able to do anything for you. Sister Pat Livermore told us you’d been having some trouble.”

Her eyebrows went up. “I think you’ve been misinformed. We haven’t been having any trouble, only my son-in-law and grandson and they don’t live here.” She gestured to some cane chairs on the verandah. “In what way did you think you could help?”

“I’m not sure. My name is Bob Creighton and this is Paul Johnson. We came up only because Sister Pat felt she might be reading things into the situation. She wanted a second opinion, you might say, from an outsider. She has been afraid that young Jason Crombie might get lynched. She asked me if I would just quietly spend a few days in town and see if I think she was worrying unnecessarily.”

“What does she want you to do for Jason?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t met him. But if I think she is right, I will certainly urge him to leave town or the police to place him into protective custody.”

“I see.”

She seemed to ruminant on this. “And how did you come to get involved?”

“Sister Pat heard that I sometimes take on small cases like this that fall outside the normal agencies.” I realised I hadn’t asked Sister Pat how she’d come to hear of me. I put her name on a mental list for further probing.

“Well, that is very good of you. Look, why don’t you stay for lunch? It’ll be on in about twenty minutes and if there’s anyone here who has anything to tell you … no, that isn’t quite what I mean, but we are all worried about Sam and Jason … I must heat the soup but you just sit here and I’ll come and get you in a few minutes.” She gave us another speculative look and went away.

It was very restful sitting on the green-canopied verandah. Yet I was curious that she gave me no sense of the urgency of the situation. If Jason was,

in fact, her grandson why wasn't she as worried as Sister Pat?

- ix -

About thirteen people sat down at a long table on an inner verandah overlooking a courtyard filled with ferns and mandarin trees in tubs. We had soup and fresh bread rolls hot from the oven and large dishes of salad and corned meat. Someone said Grace but other than that, I didn't get the sense of being in a religious community. Curious.

I asked my neighbour, a gnarled-looking man of about sixty, maybe more, whether there was a religious basis to their community. He grinned and said, no, but they had no objection to people believing so.

“So the sort of Biblical atmosphere to the place, the horse-drawn implements, the lack of gadgets—that has no significance?”

“‘The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof?’” he chuckled. “No, we’re a mixed bag. Some believe, some don’t. I happen to. But the horses are here for quite a different reason. Like to hear about it?”

“Definitely.”

“Back in the 1930s my father, like many farmers, was looking into the possibility of buying a tractor. A lot of farmers accepted that the day of the horse was gone and it was time they saved up and bought themselves a tractor. It was rather exciting in some ways and the reps’d come round the farms, trying to get families to buy a Massey-Ferguson or John Deere or whatever they were the agent for ... my father sort of ummed and ahed ... he was very fond of his horses and tractors cost money to buy and run ... but the thing that tipped the balance was the rep saying he could trade his horses in on a tractor. The company would guarantee that the horses would be well-cared-for and that there were still farms in steep country, or small orchards, where there was a demand for top quality draught horses, that kind of spiel. Well, my dad agreed and off his horses went. He was sorry to see them go but he believed what he’d been told. About two years later, he happened to be talking to a bloke who’d done the same trade-in and this bloke said it was a pretty good deal as his horses had been on their last legs anyway and their shooting them had saved him having to do it.”

He picked up his bread and bit firmly and chewed for a minute or two.

“Well, when he asked around, he realised the tractor companies had simply destroyed the horses. Of course they didn’t want hundreds of draft horses! It was too late to get his own horses back but he sold his tractor and he went round buying up all the best draft horses he could find. He ended up with about ten pedigree Clydesdale mares, several Cleveland Bays, a beautiful Suffolk Punch stallion. These were horses that had been bred in the purple and suddenly there was no more demand for them. He bought ploughs and rakes and whatnot at giveaway prices. He invited his brother who’d come back pretty mutilated from the First War to join him. They pooled their money and bought this place and invited a friend to join them and the three of them brought their families up here. People said they were mad. They were going backwards when everyone else was going forward.”

He waved his bread in the direction of our hostess, then around the table. There was the sense of the patriarch presiding over a family occasion.

“Year after year, people told us we wouldn’t be able to make a living—but we did. There aren’t many frills but we share almost everything. The farm vehicles, the house, the cooking, the farm work. It’s a good life. I wouldn’t change it for anywhere in the world. But there are people who hate us for it. They’re in debt up to their eyeballs. We pay cash for everything. We pool our funds. We manage. There are people who resent that. That is why we’ve fostered a vague idea that we’re motivated by religious ideals, a sort of Old Testament belief in living this way …”

He turned and directed a searching look at Paul. “This is our choice. I hope you will not say anything to undermine the way people see us.”

“Of course not. And I doubt if they’d believe us anyway. Your view seems to be deeply entrenched.”

He nodded. “Maybe, Bob, but these last few weeks have been a bit nerve-wracking. Someone threw a stone at Pam when she was in town last week and we’ve had several cattle shot. We’ve now moved them all away from the paddocks near the road.”

“Because the police haven’t arrested young Jason?”

“We don’t know. We can only guess so. Sam’s wife died some years ago. Sam started to drink. He was borrowing the farm ute nearly every night to go into town to drink at the pub. Things got rather unpleasant. Finally he lost his licence. He didn’t feel he could go on living here without the means to leave of an evening. He heard they were needing a manager over at the feed lots so he applied for the job and as it had a house to go with the job he moved out and took Jason with him.”

“Do you see much of him now?”

“He eventually got his licence back but he rarely visits. It’s a seven-day-a-week job over there and he hasn’t got any friends in town so he just stays there and lives quietly. Go and see him if you’d like. Poor sod. It isn’t much of a life but it’s his life and we can’t tell him how to run it.”

“What about Jason? I assume he went to school in town?”

“Jason, poor lad, has never been what’d you call bright. In fact, Sam reckoned they tested him and he had an IQ of 71. I don’t hold with all that business but, still, he’s not the sort of kid you predict a bright future for. He’d be better off here with us, maybe, but it’s not up to us to tell Sam what’s best.”

“Do you think that’s influenced the police. That he might be seen as retarded?”

“I really don’t know. I’m not up in that sort of thing. Diminished responsibility or whatever they call it. But, still, I think the real reason he hasn’t been arrested is that he didn’t do it and there’s no one can say he did.”

“You don’t know the young girl or her family?”

“No. We know the older people in town but the Pecks only came a few years back. I’ve heard he works his kids hard … but then people used to say that about us … so I take it with a grain of salt.”

Paul went to the library in Esk and hunted through old newspapers. He wanted to get the local line on Sally Peck but he was also looking to see if there'd been anything similar in the last few years. If it was Jason then this was unlikely. But if we were looking at an older man then it was always a possibility.

I went to an estate agents; I got into a couple of brief conversations; I got the car filled at an Ampol service station. I bought a few things in the eating line.

What I really wanted was some bloke who'd lived in the district all his life and had the time and inclination to yarn. I found just such a bloke in the little triangular park the other side of the main street.

"Yeah, there's always things happening round here," he said cheerfully. "Wouldn't think so to look at it but we've had our share of goings on."

"What sort of things?"

"That little girl for starters. Not nice. Course she shouldn't have been playing round the creek. I always walloped my kids if they weren't home from school on the dot."

"I got the impression Mr Peck does the same."

"You don't say so. S'pose he thought ... girls, you know. Now if it'd been a boy ... and then there was that case of the man dragged along behind a car. That *was* nasty but they got the blokes what did it. And then there was all that business with the dump."

"What dump was that?"

"Oh, that nucley stuff, you know. Some didn't want it being dumped round here."

It took me a minute to realise he meant nuclear. It was hard to picture this sleepy little place at the forefront of a nuclear waste battle ...

"But the dumping went ahead?"

"Course. You can't say no to that lot. First they put a bit of it up on that old army firing range, you know, they used to use it for training 'em in grenades an' things like that. Long time ago, of course. Then they said they must get something more permanent. Don't know how much stuff's still up there. Heard they'd put it in those old concrete bunkers. Remember hearing that someone fell in and come out all glowing ... but I don't reckon that was true, just a yarn."

"Where is this old firing range?"

"Oh, further up. Nearly into Torden. Yeah, somewhere there, but it's all fenced round with barbed-wire now."

"Mmmm ... and what about the permanent site?"

"Y'know," he leaned over and tapped me on the arm, "I know blokes what won't fish in the Dam any more. Said the fish'd likely kill 'em now. But doesn't bother me. If I've got another ten years I'll be lucky. Funny thing. My family's always got its men to eighty, then they just keel over, just like that. Just fine one day and—boom!—gone the next. Funny really. Still, it beats hanging round with a lot of nurses telling you it's a nice day ... never could work out why they

do that ... there y'are, stuck in bed an' they tell you it's a nice day!"

In the end I excused myself. He would talk all day but I thought I'd better drag Paul out and head back for Torden. The old bloke had to have the last word though. "No point in buying land up round here, all gone to seed. Only decent place is that place where the Bible nutters live. Funny that. Must be something in the Bible about keeping your land good. Funny thing. Never found it." He suddenly slapped his skinny thighs. "Never looked, mind you!"

"It's been nice talking to you, mate."

"Yeah, you too ... and mind you don't drink the water."

He wouldn't do much for the local tourist industry.

- xi -

Paul was full of news. But he gave the sense of having scooped everything in, photocopied reams, but now didn't know what could possibly be relevant. I let him talk.

On our way back I drove down the little dirt road between trees that led to a large barbed-wire gate, padlocked, and a faded sign saying KEEP OUT UNEXPLODED ... the bottom of the sign had been hit with what looked like a chunk of wet cement. It had splattered there, then dried and faded.

I carefully backed up the lane again. It didn't look as if it'd been used for quite some time. Grass and weeds were creeping across it and ours were the only tyre-tracks.

"But, knowing kids, I'll bet they've found a way in under or through the fence."

"Do you think it's important, Bob?"

"Hard to say. But we've got to try and think our way into young Jason's shoes. Here's a teenager, left school, no career except helping his dad around the place, I'd say he likes coming into town and hanging round a bit, still knows the younger kids from his school days ... given that it took him all that extra time just to get *through* school ... now a kid like that, there's a good chance he has a place he likes to go, maybe encourages other kids to join him, makes him feel good ... the adults think he's a halfwit but the younger children maybe look up to him because he's older and he knows his way around ... "

"And you think he might have made himself a sort of cubby house or something up on the army dump where he goes and the kids from school sometimes like to come up after school ... "

"Something along those lines. How do you feel about going exploring a bit, over there past the waterhole, just to see if there's any sign of a hole in the wire?"

"Sure." He looked at his watch. "School should be out any minute. What say you drop me off now and I'll go over there and keep an eye out and see if any kids come down."

"They may not. Now that the waterhole is off-limits. But just sit and watch. I'll park up the road a bit and see what route the school bus takes."

Times like these I can almost find it in my lungs to regret giving up smoking. I gave it up with much fanfare and righteous indignation. But just

occasionally the thought comes over me again, wouldn't mind a smoke. I made up for it by parking and pulling a map out of the glovebox and making a bit of a show of unfolding it, checking routes, hunting an address in a card I took from my wallet, and so on. No one appeared to take the slightest notice.

The school bus, an ancient-looking white vehicle with a blue stripe, lumbered off with its load in about ten minutes. I let it get well past me, then drove very slowly after it. It didn't go right past the Peck's place but it would only have been a short walk for Sally. Two other children, fairly small, got off at the corner and headed for the Peck gateway. Sally's younger siblings? And had they always come on the bus, which wouldn't allow time for going to the waterhole, or had they only started taking the bus since their older sister's death? Was Sally's 'youthful mischief' expressed by going to the waterhole after school instead of going straight home to pack fruit or whatever her father demanded? I wasn't sure that I, at her age, would have had the courage to defy a father like Doug Peck. Maybe she thought he was going to be away that day. I assumed he occasionally went away to deliver fruit. Possibly Mrs Peck was milder, kinder, less of the slave-driver ...

I drove round the block and headed back to the motel. Another car had drawn up on the weedy drive and a young couple were talking with the proprietor. I hoped this would cheer him up. He saw me and went in and got my key.

"Any luck? Finding a place."

"So so. We had a look at Mr Wagner's orchard. A bit tempting. And a little unit over the other side."

The young couple stood and listened, then seemed to realise they were eavesdropping and scurried off to the furthest cabin.

"Those units aren't very good. I heard they got leaks already in them."

I raised my eyebrows. "Well, thanks for telling me. I'll keep that in mind. Bit hard on those elderly women though."

"Well, that Mrs Piggott's a right old busybody." He lowered his voice. "I reckon it's because of her that the cops didn't take that kid in."

"Oh? Why was that, do you know?"

"See, she told them she saw him cutting across the paddocks at, I dunno, but some time that meant he couldn't have been down the creek then. She reckoned she was waiting for Mrs Birkin to come home because she was bringing her something, and she was watching the clock."

"Do you think she just made a mistake?"

"Nah. Know what I reckon? I reckon those cranks out on the farm there that still use horses, I reckon they put her up to it. See it's their grandson that's the one and I reckon they said to her, you say he was walking past about this time and we'll give you something—"

"Money, you mean?"

"Could be. Or bring her vegetables and stuff."

It offered a whole new perspective on the art of bribery.

"Tricky though. If she saw him then maybe other people saw him. He

would have to walk right through town wouldn't he?"

"Nah. He could cut up the creek there and round past the back of the pub, then across that paddock where the car-wreckers used to be ... "

"I see what you mean. And the people with the horses ... that's a very unusual set up they've got ... "

"I reckon there's something funny going on there. How come they're all happy and the place always looks good, even when other places ... know what I reckon?" I shook my head. "I reckon they take water secretly from the river where no one knows what they're doing."

"A sort of illegal irrigation?"

"Yeah. Could be. It isn't natural. And then there's that kid, he's pretty weird ... I reckon he mighta done it and not know he's done it. Know what I mean?"

"You think he's off his chump?"

"Could be. Like you see him and he's all sorta shivery and jiggling round and his eyes are all funny."

"Scary stuff."

"You couldn't slip a word to the cops—you know, just pull him in and things'll get better here? They might listen to you. You're not one of us."

"I'm not sure they *would* listen to me. But I could give it a whirl."

He nodded gloomily. "You know, I thought of putting this place up for sale one time. You wouldn't be interested, would you?"

I said I hadn't thought of going into the motel business but when he had a spare minute I wouldn't mind having a chat about it with him. It didn't seem to cheer him up.

- xii -

Paul and I tucked into steak and kidney pudding and mashed potato at the café, followed by rum and raisin ice-cream.

He had found a large hole in the netting and had walked up on to the broad timbered area, following what seemed to be a bit of a walking path. This had brought him to a sort of concrete bunker with a metal door. He had opened the door without difficulty and gone down into an area containing some drums with white skulls painted on them. He had also found some cardboard boxes and a small schoolbag containing some small white packets. He had pinched one to show me.

It didn't ring a bell, the name, and written clearly on it was 'For Animal Use Only'.

I was curious but wasn't sure if it was relevant or not.

"It must mean that Jason goes there. It must be something they use at the feed lots, don't you think, Bob?"

"That makes sense. I wonder ... does his father know he's taking stuff ... "

A faint memory tickled the back of my mind. Years ago we had been called to a break-in at a vet's surgery ... and I remember the vet telling us he thought what they'd pinched could be used by ... was it weightlifters? ... I let the memory stew ...

I ordered a pot of coffee, then I took Jason back to the motel and suggested he go through all his newspaper reports and draw up a chronology and a list of every person mentioned. I could see he thought this rather a let-down. He hadn't joined me to sit at home with some homework.

"And keep the door closed. Don't open it for anyone. If I need you I'll knock like this. Okay?"

"You don't think anyone'll—"

"I don't honestly know, Paul, but I don't like the undertones. And if someone did throw a stone at an elderly woman ... I don't think they'll be fussy about us."

Then I shrugged myself into an old jacket, zipped it up, and went out to test the atmosphere in the local pub.

- xiii -

It had a central hall with 'Dining Room' and 'Function Room' on one side and a large L-shaped bar on the other. This could be divided into two but at the moment faded into dimly-lit reaches beyond the polished-wood bar with a brass rail round it.

I sat down at the bar. "Scotch. No ice."

The barman was about thirty, with straight sandy hair and the beginnings of a double chin.

"McCallum's? Hunnerd Pipers? Cutty Sark? Don't get much call for Scotch. Mostly Bitter men, occasional champers if there's a do on." He had a slight speech impediment and I thought he'd probably been born with a cleft palate.

The place wasn't busy so I asked him for crisps as well. "Barbecue? Salt 'n' vinegar? Just passing through are you, mate?"

"No. I'm looking round for a bit of land. Nothing big. I live on the Gold Coast but it's getting a bit pricey for me. I thought I might sell out and move somewhere where I can get a place and still have something in my pocket."

"What brought you up here?"

"It's an attractive area. I thought I'd try round here first, if I don't find anything I thought I might have a look round Toowoomba. Have you always lived round here?"

"Ten years. My dad bought the pub. He died last year and I took over."

"Business okay, is it? The bloke at the motel told us he wouldn't mind to sell out but I wasn't really thinking of a motel."

"I don't blame you. The people there before him kept that place really nice, nice garden, everything clean and well-painted—and now look at it! You want a decent room, mate, you move in here. I'll give you a decent room and my wife's a good cook."

"Sounds good. I'll do that if it looks like we're here longer than just tonight."

No wonder the motel was empty. This place ran rings round it in terms of service and style.

I took my drink and sat down in a quiet corner and watched the place gradually fill up. By nine it was crowded. I wondered if these were all

townsfolk or did they come in from the wider area.

Just after nine, Doug Peck walked in. Several people greeted him by name. He parked himself at the bar and, a minute later, had a schooner in front of him. It looked like he was a regular.

As time went on I noticed something that was both curious yet curiously hard to pin down. The conversation had been quiet, the occasional laugh, but nothing obvious before he came. But after his arrival the whole mood got more aggressive. By ten, I could well imagine a lynch party getting ready to barge out. And yet I couldn't precisely pin it down to what was said. It was more that Doug Peck was the focus for a kind of simmering unspoken anger ... both the focus and the engineer, I thought; he was in some way ratchetting it up ...

I took my glass over to the bar, stood a moment as though debating whether to get a refill, and listened carefully. The barman had an annoyed look on his face.

“You watch it in here, Doug.” He leaned over. “You go outside if you want to get people—” I got the impression this was for my benefit. But whether me as a potential customer, me as a potential land-buyer, or me as someone who might go away and say to someone, “Didn’t like the sound of things there, wouldn’t be surprised if there was trouble”—

If there was a vigilante group being gathered in and livened up, then it looked like it was Doug Peck’s doing ...

But was it driven by righteous anger ... I was glad to be away from his vicinity.

Paul opened his door at my knock. “All quiet?” I asked.

“A car drove in earlier on but I didn’t hear them talking. I think it must’ve parked down the far end. Did you find out anything at the pub?”

“Very interesting. Doug Peck is a stirrer. I think, if he keeps it up, it will boil over pretty soon. I think Jason Crombie may well be in danger ... and there’s just a small possibility that his father may well cop it too ... and I wondered about Mrs Piggott ... I didn’t like the way our bloke spoke about her ... it wouldn’t take much to frighten her off, poor old thing ...”

“Well, I did this for you.” He showed me some paper covered in scrappy writing. “I don’t know if it helps much. But it looks like Mrs Piggott wasn’t the only person to see him go home around that time. So if Sally was still alive then, it couldn’t be him unless he turned round and came back a bit later.”

“Possible. I suppose his father was asked what time he came home and whether he stayed home. But if he was out with his cattle I don’t suppose he was taking much notice of the time or what his son was up to.”

“And if he said Jason stayed home, people might think he was just saying that to give him an alibi.”

“Mmm ... well, let’s sleep on it and tomorrow we’ll meet Sister Pat and go out to the feed-lots.”

road. I don't like these sorts of arrangements. If they work they look natural and unobtrusive, if they don't, if one party gets it wrong, arrives late, then they look theatrical and obvious. I pulled in to the verge and Paul took out the map and began to look it up. A station-wagon drew in beside us about five minutes later and a brisk woman in her fifties got out.

She came over. "Can I help you?"

"Sister Pat?"

"Yes—and you're Mr Creighton?"

"I am. And this is Paul, my nephew." I got out of the car. "We're just on our way out to the feed lots."

"And—do you think I'm right, that there might be trouble?"

"Absolutely. I think you've got a right royal stirrer in Doug Peck and it's only a matter of time before he gets people willing to go out there and make real trouble."

"So what should we do, do you think? Call the police?"

"I'd like to get Jason away ... but until I've met him and his dad I'm not sure if that's a goer."

She nodded slowly.

"And do you have any ideas—about Sally, I mean?"

Presumably women chatted while she weighed their babies.

"Not really. Her mum used to bring the youngest child in to the clinic but that's a few years ago now, at least two, maybe more. She's not the sort of person who stays in your mind but I remember being a little bit worried ... something about the baby ... I couldn't be absolutely sure but I suspected it might be getting shaken ... it happens often enough and hard to pick up ... "

"You think the mother or the father was shaking the baby?"

"I don't honestly know and even when I pass my worries on, well, nothing happens, not out here ... it's hard enough to get action on children when they're in the city let alone out in the country ... "

"Mmm ... I haven't tried to contact any of the teachers but it would be interesting to know if they had ever noticed the kids coming to school with bruises."

"You think Sally might have been getting—well, abused—"

"It's possible. But it doesn't get Jason off the hook. Still, we'll keep going and where would you like to meet up later?"

"I always go to the hotel for a counter lunch. What say I meet you there about one? We can just appear to meet casually and if there's no one else in the dining room you could offer to share a table."

- XV -

We parked in front of the small weatherboard house overshadowed by large sheds and silos and a dusty complex of yards and hundreds of cattle whose personal details will forever remain a mystery.

We got out and stood there. A blue cattle dog came up inside the fence and barked. "What should we do?" Paul said. "I don't see anyone."

"They could be still having breakfast. There's a ute in the shed over there."

We braved the dog and went up to the front door of the house and knocked. There was a kind of crashing noise as if a chair had tipped over, then the sound of footsteps, then a man came to the door. A large man, slow-moving, tired-looking with bags under his eyes and his hair uncombed.

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Mr Crombie?”

“Yeah.”

“Your mother-in-law told me about you and that you were having a pretty hard time so we said we’d just drop in and say hullo. I’m Bob Creighton and this is Paul.”

I reached out a hand. People do shake without thinking it through and having shaken they are often more willing to give you the time of the day. “Can you spare us a minute or two?”

He shrugged. “S’pose so. Come in. I was just putting things away.”

The house was untidy. There was the smell of burnt toast. A pair of old rubber boots lay in the middle of the hall and we all stepped over them.

“Have a pew. Do you want a cup o’ tea?”

“No. Don’t go to any trouble. We won’t keep you long.”

“So what’s going on?”

“We came up here because Sister Livermore was worried about Jason being in danger. She asked me to give her an objective opinion because she was afraid that she was maybe getting things out of proportion.”

Mr Crombie had sat down and put his elbows on the table. It contained a tomato sauce bottle with dried rivers of sauce turning brown, and a salt shaker.

“Yeah. Jase said she always says hullo to him. About the only person who does. You know they all reckon he killed that little girl.”

“Yes. How do you feel about that? No. Silly question. I’d be hopping mad if they said that about my son.”

He shrugged. “They threatened to come out here and burn the house down and shoot all the cattle. I said, doesn’t bother me, I’m only looking after them. They haven’t bothered me since then.”

“When was that?”

“When the cops packed up and left. Must be nearly two weeks.”

“But I don’t think the danger to Jason has gone away.”

“No. S’pose not.”

“Do you need him here for every day work or could you send him away somewhere for a few weeks?”

“My mum and dad said they’d take him. But I don’t know if he’d be safe there.”

“Mmmm … probably needs to be farther away.”

I took out the white packet with its faded label. “You wouldn’t happen to know what this?”

Sam Crombie stared at it. It seemed to have acquired the fascination of a snake for him. “Where did you get that?” he said at last.

“Up on the old army land. Do you know what it is?”

“Course I do. I had stacks of it. It’s Clenbuterol. We use’ to use it on the cattle. Make ’em grow faster. Then they said to stop using it. I forget why. Residues, I s’pose. So I had boxes of the stuff. This is a few years ago. I told Jase to chuck it out and when I looked a few months ago it was gone and he said he’d taken it to the tip.”

“But he didn’t take it to the tip, did he, he took it up to the old bunker there and stored it.”

Jason’s father just sat there, shaking his head slowly; there was something zombie-like and defeated in the action.

“I knew there was something wrong with him, I just knew it, and I didn’t have a clue what it was. I thought he was getting that schizo-business, you know, that they’re always talking about these days. He’s always—” he started to shake his head again.

“He’s always what?”

“Heck! I don’t know how you’d describe it. Sort of all het up all the time, like cattle that’re going crazy at the smell of water. I was getting scared of him myself.”

“And when they came to question you about Jason that day—you were afraid that he just might’ve done it.”

“No, no. I was sure it couldn’t be him. He came back here, but he was sort of—sort of off the planet—I was scared the cops’d see him like that and pull him in because he was all … oh bloody heck, I didn’t know what to think!”

“But you were absolutely sure that Jason came home about four?”

“Yeah. And it takes him around twenty minutes across the paddocks. So I knew he couldn’t be responsible if the girl had come out of school the usual time. But I was that scared there was something going on I didn’t know about.”

“Did you ask Jason any questions?”

“What sort of questions? I just said, what’s got into you today, you’re like a cat on a hot tin roof … his eyes were sort of funny and he couldn’t keep still.”

“I wonder how much Clenbuterol he was taking at a time. And how was he taking it … and for how long.”

Paul looked down at the box. “You mean this is like—speed?”

“Something of the kind. Builds muscles. Like steroids. We can get it analysed. And being out-of-date it may have started to change.”

“You mean—” Sam Crombie leant forward, frowning, “my son’s a drug addict?”

“It certainly seems possible. It’s a wonder he didn’t kill himself—”

“And the little girl, was she taking it too?”

“I wonder.”

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Samuel Crombie was, I think, a decent man. He’d lost his wife, now he was in danger of losing his son. But he said only, “I’d better get on to that detective bloke that came here. I’ll tell him where the stuff is and they can check. If Jason did do anything while he was all drugged up on this stuff,” he flicked the box, “then I s’pose it’s my fault for not disposing of it myself.”

“Well, if it’s any comfort to you, I don’t think Jason did hurt the little girl. But a lot of people saw him acting strange, so you have to get that part of it resolved. A blood test would clear up any doubts. And if they’ve done the post-mortem on the girl then I’m sure it will be possible to find out if it was in her blood too. Just tell the detective—”

“But if it wasn’t Jase … then was it an accident?”

“Maybe. But I strongly suspect it was an accident that her father had a hand in.”

The man just sat there and stared. “You mean, her own dad might’ve—”

“Happens. By the way, where is Jason?”

“He’s probably nicked off to town. He does when Sister Pat is there. I think it’s having no mum of his own. He tells her stuff.”

“Town’s the last place he should be. Look, you ring—and Paul and I’ll get back to town and make sure he’s safe.”

We drove off a couple of minutes later. Whether Mr Crombie would ring the CIB was unclear but I was more worried about what might happen to Jason.

Doug Peck might be all talk and no action but I had the strong impression of someone spoiling for a good brawl.

“You didn’t see any sign of Jason out in the paddocks as we drove up, did you?”

Paul said no. He was nervous, excited, apprehensive. I needed him calm and observant.

“But it doesn’t make sense, Bob. Why would Doug Peck be going all out to make trouble for Jason if he did it himself?”

“Oh, come on, Paul. You can work that one out.”

He sat in silence for the fast trip into town.

“Now, keep your eyes peeled for Jason. He might be hanging round the clinic or he may have gone on down to the dump. If he needs another fix—”

There was no sign of him round the little clinic built on to the back of the CWA Hall and I didn’t think he’d go in and join the mothers and babies so we went on towards the creek.

“There he is!” Paul pointed. Sure enough Jason was wandering along the dusty verge just past the school. He was a big lumpy boy in dirty jeans and an old yellow t-shirt, with his feet in heavy boots. He was heading towards the waterhole and the hill beyond.

I drew up just in front of him. Got out. Said, “Jason! Hoy! Your dad needs you back at the farm. Get in the car and I’ll run you back!”

He came up to me, looked up from under a long fringe of hair and said, “Who’re you?” I thought he hadn’t yet got on to the stuff today but he looked pale and twitchy—or maybe that was my imagination now that I had convinced myself he was addicted. And I *have* seen more than my quota of people in need of their next fix …

It might’ve worked. I’ve had experience in getting recalcitrant people into cars and Jason showed no signs of hostility, only puzzlement. But—just as he came up to me, a pickup came fast round the corner and, next thing, had pulled

up with a squeal of brakes. Doug Peck leaped down and came running up to us, running as in lumbering.

“That’s him, that’s the bastard! Hold on to him while I give the bastard a taste of his own medicine!”

Peck’s eyes boiled out of his head. He was a man who could conjure a baying blood frenzy out of thin air. I’ve seen it happen when men, mostly men but women aren’t immune, transmute guilt into anger and convince themselves they are in the right.

I walked up to him and said, loudly and calmly, “Douglas Peck, I am arresting you for the murder of your daughter. Don’t try to do or say anything.”

How I longed to be able to pull out a set of cuffs and calmly click them on. Instead I was standing on a dusty street with Paul and Jason as startled spectators to this ill-considered citizen’s arrest; and not only the two young men. A car drew up and two women got out. It was Mrs Piggott and a woman I didn’t recognise.

Doug Peck looked at me, he looked at Jason and the two women. Then he hurled himself at Jason. The attack caught the boy by surprise and he went down with the older man on top of him, pummeling his face into the dirt. I stepped over and grasped Peck’s arms, pulled them up hard behind him and said, “Calm down.” And to Paul, “Get that twine out of the glove box.”

Paul obeyed me promptly. I tied Doug Peck’s wrists firmly and said, “You can get up now but no funny business.”

He stood there, furious, shaking with it. “I’ll get you for this! You sneaking bastard! If I’d known! All of you!”

Jason got up slowly. His nose was bleeding. Mrs Piggott looked horrified. “But how can you say Mr Peck hurt his daughter? It’s Jason that did it. Everyone says so.”

“If I’ve made a mistake, Mrs Piggott, I’ll cop the flak but I think you’ll find that Sally had suffered years of abuse at the hands of her father.”

By now, a little crowd had come from nowhere. All that unexplained shouting. The children had been let out of school for their morning break and dozens of curious little heads lined the fence. An older man came up to us. “What’s going on? What’s happened to Mr Peck?”

“Ring the police, would you. Tell them it’s urgent if they don’t want more violence done.” The thought of coping with the mad bull that was Doug Peck for the next half hour or more wasn’t going to be fun.

He looked as if he would like to argue but then he shrugged and turned away. The other lady with Mrs Piggott called after him, “Maybe you should ask the children to go back inside, Mr Lewis?” He turned and gave her a cross who’s-running-this-school-you-or-me look but yelled at the children, “Okay, all of you—get back up to the play area!”

I wondered if there were any Peck children in among the curious little faces.

Pat Livermore was waiting at the hotel when Paul and I finally arrived. She had heard the talk that had, no doubt, raced round town like a bushfire in mid-

summer but didn't know what exactly had happened. Mrs Piggott and Mrs Cadwallader had finally had their fill of excitement and driven away. Where to, I had no idea, but probably to tell every one of their acquaintance. Both Doug Peck and Jason Crombie had been taken into custody.

We sat down. The barman from the night before came in and said, "Just the set lunch. That do you?"

"Sure. Sounds good." As she had already ordered I said, "For two."

He went on standing there. "What's this I hear about you arresting Doug Peck? He hasn't done anything."

Despite his slight speech impediment he obviously didn't believe in mincing words. Even if we were customers.

"I think they'll find that he drowned his daughter, whether deliberately or accidentally, I wouldn't like to say for certain."

"But, Bob," Paul leant forward, "how did you *know*. I didn't like him but that's not the same as thinking he did it."

"It's out of our hands now. Guilt or innocence. But everything pointed in that direction. Even the newspapers referred to several pre-existing injuries, Sister Pat here had been worried about the last Peck child, worried enough to report it, Sally's teacher had implied that the child was a handful, we'd seen the way Doug Peck talked to one of his children and Mr Wagner had expressed his concern over the way the Peck children were overworked ... if Sally was miserable at home then it's understandable that she was reluctant to go home, that she might have been taking some of Jason's stuff to give herself Dutch courage; it would make sense that her father came down to find out why she wasn't home and got angry when he found she was down by the creek. If she was all hyped up on Clenbuterol, the same stuff that's been responsible for the reports about Jason acting funny ... then there's a good chance she may have said something to her father, cheeked him, said she wasn't coming home yet ... and he grabbed her, pushed her, or maybe she fell. We'll have to wait and find out if there was any of that stuff in her blood. It wasn't something they'd run a check on."

"You mean," the barman had listened avidly, "she'd been going up on to that old dump where they left those old drums?"

"Oh, I'm sure all the kids go there occasionally. There's quite a big hole in the fence."

"Well, of all the—*irresponsible*—" Sister Pat seemed to swell up like an indignant bantam hen. "You mean, all those children could have been contaminated—"

"They could have. But there was a different attraction up there. A large stock of unused cattle growth hormones. Jason told his father he'd got rid of them all when they stopped using them on their cattle by taking them to the tip."

She shook her head. "I wonder how many children ... it just doesn't bear thinking upon. Oh dear, oh dear, this has been just awful ... I really don't know what to say ..."

"It's out of your hands. But don't feel bad. If poor little Sally's death has

achieved anything then maybe it's that the authorities will now go in and look very closely at the other Peck children ... and the Council, with luck, will close off that area and the old bunker properly before a child really does gets hurt. And Jason will get the drug rehab he's probably in urgent need of ... you can't bring Sally back but suggest that people put up a nice little memorial for her or plant a tree or do something that the whole town can get involved in."

"There's another thing I don't understand," Paul sounded apologetic. "When you said that religion might be behind the problem."

Sister Pat smiled, there was something rather wistful in it. "Didn't you notice the resemblance? I grew up there. Sam is my cousin. But I didn't want to say anything that would bias you. If Jason really had done it then I knew he had to get help urgently but I didn't know how to say that to Sam."

"That's not religion. That's family feeling." I'm not an expert on families but they're at the bottom of a lot of things.

"Oh no. I know from my own experience that people resented us. Religion is no protection. We were called Bible-bashers and nutters and weirdos. I know what it's like to be singled out as different from everyone else. My parents thought that the Bible would protect us but in some ways I think it made things worse, that we were sort of pretending to be 'holier than thou'. If we'd just said all our family was absolutely mad about horses I think that would've been better understood. And instead we were drilled in Bible verses that we could use if anyone criticised us for not moving with the times."

"It's a lovely place though. I felt the peace."

"Yes. But you can't go back. I left to train as a nurse when I left school. Now, it seems like another world, a world where time stands still. But if Pam and the others ... oh, I don't know, I can't make choices for Sam and Jason, they'll just have to work it all out for themselves."

"Fair enough. Well, let's eat. Then we'll be getting on our way."

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We picked our stuff up at the motel then I said to Paul, "What next? Are you happy to come back with me or are you getting restless?"

"Bob, I wouldn't have missed this for anything. But I had a feeling, you know, when we went to see Mr Wagner—"

For a moment I couldn't think who Mr Wagner was. "Yes. What about him?"

"I know it probably sounds strange but I liked it there. If I go home, mum and dad'll be on my back again about getting my education finished and then trying to get into medical school and it's the last thing I want. I don't really know what I want, just some time to think things through, I just thought he might like me to stay there with him and help him look after the orchard until he finds a buyer and while I'm there I could try my hand at a bit of writing. You know you said—"

"No harm in asking. And yes, I did say you should have a go, I think you've got a lot of talent, and you need to write in the way *you* want about the things you are most interested in, not try to angle it towards older people—but it's a

hard road to hoe. And I still think you should finish your final year of school. You might change your mind about uni. I don't know if you could finish the year from here."

Paul didn't look enthusiastic at the idea but he was too bright to walk away from it all, drop out, give up, and it's easier to finish while you're young rather than going back twenty years later.

Mr Wagner seemed bemused by the idea of company, help, and being a landlord to an unexpected lodger. He clucked up and down the room saying he'd never had a son but he didn't want to leave; he said a lot else in his vague way but that was the gist of his conversation with himself, with us, with his absent daughter.

I said, "What say Paul pays you board and lodging for the first month and gives you a bit of a hand while he learns about the fruit trees ... then you both can decide if it works."

I opened my wallet and gave Paul the petrol money Sister Pat had pressed on me. It came to \$300 which was very generous of her. Mr Wagner, from being doubtful, suddenly decided Paul was an extraordinary gift from heaven. After a second cup of tea I left them to each other, wished Paul well, said he was welcome back any time, (and to ring me if he felt he was in the slightest danger of a backlash; though the town, with both Doug Peck and Jason Crombie gone, seemed already to be drifting back into a natural somnolence) and set out on the long drive home.

I hoped Mrs Peck and the remaining children would find a different kind of support from the town.

And I was glad I wasn't the one who had to break the news about Paul to Dr Johnson. I suspect the good doctor might have some strong things to say about men who blew in to town and enticed his son away from his studies if not his family ...

- The End -

