TRACKWORK

Three Mystery Novellas
featuring Bob Creighton
by
J. L. HERRERA

The Brumbies
A Danger to Herself
The Hermit of Atabrine Creek

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious.

THE BRUMBIES

- i -

My mother rang one night. After I'd asked about New Zealand, Kaye and the kids, she said firmly, as firmly as she ever says anything, "Bob, you remember Jack Hodge, don't you?"

"Jack? Yep. What's he up to these days?"

"No. He just died—"

Jack was an old army mate of my father's but I hadn't seen Jack in years, not since dad's funeral.

"I didn't know," she went on, sounding as though she'd let the side down, "because I had Liddy Price staying here for a few days so I didn't get round to reading the paper, not till she'd gone—"

"You don't need to feel guilty—"

"No, it's not really that—Jack wouldn't care if nobody turned up to *his* funeral—but he wrote to me a little while ago asking if I'd come for a visit some time, just to let him know when I could manage it, as he'd like my opinion on something—"

"Did he say what?"

"No. But I got the impression it was his will he was worrying over."

And Jack Hodge as a wealthy New England grazier no doubt had a fair whack to leave—to somebody.

"Had he been unwell lately?"

"No, not that I know of. He died in a car accident, went off the road one night. Look, Bob, why I was ringing—I can't help thinking I *should* go up."

"I didn't know you were that fond of Jack?"

There was a long (and expensive) hesitation, then she said, "No, perhaps not. Jack was a hard person to know—but I feel I owe it to Frank ... I s'pose I'm worrying for no reason but I just feel something's not quite right ... anyway, what I was wondering—do you think you could come and meet me in Armidale?"

I had no desire to go to Armidale. It'd be getting a bit chilly about now. On the other hand, when your mother is heading up to eighty, you know you'll never forgive yourself if you say no and it turns out to be the last time you would've seen her. So I said I would.

"I'll come up on the bus. I know it gets in at some awful hour of the morning—but if I book two rooms at the Imperial—I think that's where Frank and I stayed that time we went—I think it was all right—" I said in that case I'd

come up on the Thursday night and meet her off the bus.

Jack Hodge. I went to bed and tried to bring him to mind. A tall taciturn man who, despite his bank balance, always looked as though he'd swopped clothes with the nearest derro. A hard person to know? A hard person to like maybe. Born with a silver spoon but as far as I knew (and to be honest that wasn't very far) he'd never lifted a finger to help anyone else unless you counted his years in the army, unless his generosity lay hidden under layers of camouflage; yet, oddly, a man who seemed to have absolutely no interest in the material benefits his inheritance brought him.

Had my mother convinced herself something was not quite right merely because of curiosity over how Jack had disposed of his millions? No, the oddness was Jack asking for her opinion in the first place ... my mother 'collects' old men in the way some personable youths 'collect' old ladies ... but I'd always had the impression Jack Hodge didn't particularly like women, that he tolerated my mother simply because she was Frank's wife ...

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My daughter Rachel merely shrugged when I said I'd be away for a couple of days. I cramp her style. Now she could fill the flat with surfies, party every night, over-indulge in every way she could think of, short of complaints from the neighbours ... I left Surfers about three in the afternoon and was in Armidale in time for a late dinner. I hadn't been this way in years and I walked round town for half an hour before going up to my room and reading that day's Express and setting my alarm.

My mother was christened Delilah Anne, an ostentation she did her best to hide all through her growing up years, religiously telling everyone her name was Anne. But Frank preferred to call her Dell and she finally became reconciled, fond even, of her first name. I call her Dell; even Rachel calls her Dell, reserving 'Gran' for my ex-wife Barbara's mum. Dell stepped off the bus, looking surprisingly fresh and uncrushed though her hair was coming down, and clasped me in an energetic hug. "Bob, you're looking well!"

But she refused to say a word about Jack Hodge till next morning when we sat down to breakfast. Then she opened her handbag, took out a letter and handed it to me. "Now tell me what you think."

"An interim will?" I looked up from Jack Hodge's final communication.

"That's the peculiar thing about it really. Both the newspaper and his housekeeper say he died without making a will. So I got a photocopy made at the library and sent it to his solicitor here, just in case Jack had put his will away in some odd place—"

"He might've destroyed it."

She looked at me, then shook her head slowly. "No-o-o, I really don't see Jack doing that. You see, Bob, his only close relative was his niece Georgina Milne—and they, well, not to beat around the bush—Jack didn't like Georgina much—so I don't think he would've wanted everything to go to her."

"So we're here to hunt down Jack's will?"

"I don't know, Bob. It's not exactly my business, Jack's will I mean, but I

thought we could talk to his solicitor, and perhaps we could go out to the farm and see his housekeeper—"

"Could be Georgina paid the housekeeper to burn the will?"

My cynicism must've been too much for her, so early in the morning, because she said briskly, "Now, now, we mustn't start suspecting anyone. There's probably some perfectly simple explanation."

I liked her touching belief she need only beard Jack's solicitor, Gordon Hynes, and all Jack's machinations would become clear. Needless to say it wasn't like that.

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Drake and Hynes had a pleasant office upstairs on Faulkner Street, all soft mushroom and beige with some attractive watercolours of Tableland autumns. Mr Hynes fitted his office, so suave and silver and smooth I felt an immediate antipathy. But Dell seemed to see only his gracious exterior and put on something which, if she wasn't my mother, I'd have to call a simper.

"It's a most unusual letter, Mrs Creighton," he said from behind his uncluttered desk and ignoring me.

"Why unusual? It looks pretty normal for Jack," I said sharply.

He looked at me, then back to Dell, and composed his face into something which suggested gentle perplexity. "Because I feel quite sure Mr Hodge didn't write that letter."

"Didn't write—" Dell began, "but I've known Jack for fifty years—"

At the same moment I said, "That's a bit far-fetched, isn't it?"

"Let me explain." He picked up a manila folder, conveniently to hand, and brought out a couple of letters. "Mr Hodge was having a lot of trouble with arthritis in his hands—you can see how shaky he was getting in these last two letters—and he said he'd bought a word processor and would be printing out all future communications—like this one ... the other thing is that I can think of no reason, no reason at all, for him not to come to me if he wished to have a will drawn up. I've been doing his work for many many years ... "

"He might've felt you wouldn't approve of the way he wanted to dispose of his money?" I sat back in my chair and tried to give the impression of someone who has absolutely nothing to do all day but discuss the eccentricities of Jack Hodge. Mr Hynes gave me an indulgent smile; the sort he no doubt gives to old ladies who want to use their worldly goods to succour homeless guinea pigs.

Dell said simply, "But why would anyone forge a letter to *me?*"

"I have been giving that a great deal of thought since I received your letter, Mrs Creighton, a great deal—and, so far, the only explanation to occur to me is that his housekeeper might've written it. He mentioned to me, at one of our meetings, that he wasn't very happy with her as he'd found her snooping in his office several times—but it seemed she was such a good cook he was reluctant to part with her—also, her brother would go if she went—"

"I still don't understand."

"Intestacy always slows things down, as I'm sure you know, and in this case it would be likely they'd be kept on until everything was sorted out. Her

brother is retarded so I imagine he'd find it quite difficult to find another position ... and claims of a hidden will would slow everything down even further because, as you can appreciate, we would feel duty-bound to look for it before filing for—"

"Fair enough—*if* the woman knew he was going to die soon. But how could she?"

Again that indulgent smile in my direction. "Would it have mattered? If Mrs Creighton said she'd be able to visit he would be delighted—but would you," he turned to Dell, "have immediately said to him, 'now, what was it you wanted to discuss with me?' or would you have waited for him to raise the question, knowing he might have had second thoughts about referring to a personal matter—"

"Ye-es ... " But Dell didn't look convinced.

In a way, though, he was right. All those years of dealing with clients of my mother's generation had taught him something.

"But, as a matter of interest, the police *are* still looking into Mr Hodge's accident. I understand they are not quite satisfied. There was a scrape on the side of his car—which he *may* have acquired whilst driving out of the hotel car park." He let the delicate inference that Jack was driving well-tanked hang.

Dell, possibly out of loyalty to someone—Jack? Frank?—said quietly, "Jack was a very moderate drinker."

Hynes inclined his silver head graciously; he would've made a good butler. "But I'm afraid there *were* occasional times ... "

"Such as?" I was surprised no one had dumped that bowl of chrysanthemums on that tailored head. But then we were not simply accepting his words of wisdom.

"I remember one occasion," Gordon Hynes sat back, looking as though he'd had a good breakfast and would now begin to clean his whiskers, "he came in here, rather unsteady, and saying something about not having enough time. Naturally, I said 'time for what?' and he sort of put his head in his hands and said 'time to-to—can't remember the damn word—starts with A—' I made a few suggestions—alter, arrange, augment, add—but he just kept saying 'no, no'—I didn't know quite what to suggest but I said he might like to consider a Power of Attorney if he was worried about not being able to get into town when he needed something done. I'm not sure that that *was* his real concern but he agreed and I had it drawn up ... so I think you will see why I find it quite untenable the suggestion he might have considered a will and not mentioned it to me."

Dell was beginning to look a little lost, as though the solicitor's Jack Hodge was a very different man to her Jack Hodge.

"So all of Jack's money will go to Mrs Milne?" I said casually.

"It would seem likely. Though I have been making discreet enquiries as to whether there might be other relatives. But I'm sure Mrs Milne would want to acknowledge your long friendship—"

Dell looked uncomfortable. "Oh no! No, I would never have expected

anything from Jack—and I have everything I need ... but I felt ... no," she shook her head slowly, "perhaps things are best left ... "

"Felt what, Mrs Creighton?" The solicitor sounded pleasantly interested.

"I—well, it sounds ... " Was it my imagination or was his geniality hiding an increased alertness? "well, if it's necessary to be frank, Jack disliked Georgina intensely. I don't know why exactly—and I don't know what his estate might be worth but I just cannot believe he'd allow everything to go—just because he couldn't be bothered to make a will—"

The smile that could sell a thousand black umbrellas widened. "That was certainly the case at some stage of their relationship—or so I understand—but not towards the end. I have often noticed older people making the effort to mend fences ... so, whatever their earlier problems may have been, they certainly resolved them in the last year or two. Mrs Milne, I know for a fact, had her uncle to dinner quite regularly in his last—" he hesitated over the time, "year."

Dell was again wearing that slightly shell-shocked look.

We thanked the solicitor for his time and went downstairs. It was a crisp autumn day and my mother shivered suddenly and put a hand on my arm. "You see, I *was* right, Bob. There *is* something very very odd—but I haven't any idea what is going on."

I steered her into a café and ordered two cappuccinos and a plate of toasted raisin bread.

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Dell wears her hair in something between a bun and a roll which she wryly calls a French stick but now it looked even untidier than usual as she sat in silence, absently smoothing the wisps away from her face.

At last I said, "So that wasn't the Jack Hodge you knew?"

"No Bob. It really wasn't. But I kept thinking to myself—do I know Jack?— because he was such a quiet reserved man. If you got hello and goodbye and something in between out of Jack you felt it was one of his more chatty days."

"What about with Frank though? They talked—"

"You mean," she smiled, "Frank talked."

My father was a talker. It flowed from him like a creek in flood. But no one ever appeared to mind. Jokes, anecdotes, reminiscences, sketches, 'one for the road'—there were times when Dell practically had to drag him out and bundle him into the car to get the family home to bed.

"What about Jack's life in the army—didn't he ever talk about that?"

"No, not really ... he didn't meet up with Frank till—what?—'42? '43?—when they were in New Guinea. I forget where Jack was before that. Somewhere up in the islands. Singapore? No, I'm sure Frank told me one time ... but I can't just recall ... " She began on the raisin bread. "I sometimes wondered whether something had happened to Jack—something he saw—or heard—that he could never talk about to us. You remember what Frank was like? RSL—reunions—old mates dropping in anytime—he even provided more than half the stories for that battalion history Ronnie Hughes was doing—

Ronnie said Frank was the one who should be doing it—but Frank wasn't any good with a pen. Jack wasn't like that. He didn't seem to want to be reminded of the war. I once asked him if he minded listening to Frank—and he just said something like 'Frank's a good bloke' ... and I didn't like to pry ... "

"What about that bit about Georgina? Did you believe that about their reconciliation?"

"No. But I don't know, Bob, I s'pose Georgina could've changed ... I wonder if that's what he wanted to discuss with me, get another woman's opinion on whether Georgina was being genuinely nice or just buttering him up."

"So you believe his letter was genuine?"

She was silent a long time. "He was very plausible, wasn't he, that solicitor? But I still believe that letter was from Jack. There are ways to check things like that, aren't there?"

"Yes. If we have another sample of Jack's writing for comparison a hand-writing expert should be able to say yes or no."

"But why, Bob, why would a solicitor risk ... why would it matter to him? He gets his fees no matter where the money goes."

"That's the interesting thing. If not to Georgina then where did Jack want his money to go?"

"Bob, I don't know. I can't even make a guess. I've been trying and trying to think if Jack ever mentioned anything. He didn't appear to have any feeling for his family. He told Frank once his mother was such an awful social climber it made him sick in the stomach to listen to her. I don't think he ever took any interest in his sisters. He never married or even mentioned a woman's name—I s'pose he could've had an unhappy love affair when he was young ... I'm sure there *were* things he cared about ... " She shook her head and a bobby pin slipped into her collar.

"I hadn't realised he was such a misogynist." The thought came to me: was Hodge a closet gay? The idea of him wanting to give ten million dollars to, say, help keep Sydney's Mardi Gras in funds for the next decade might've thrown his niece into a fit.

"Yes, I think maybe he was—though not to me personally. Anyway, Bob, what do you think we should do now?"

"Have another plate of toast." The Armidale air had given me an appetite. "So now," when the plate was delivered, "what about his drinking—and his word beginning with A?"

"Advise? Advance?"

"Do you believe he went to Hynes at all—after drinking?"

She looked startled. "It seems such an odd thing to make up."

"All right. So he *did* go in there drunk. So it has to be a word he didn't normally use—and if we take that a bit further—he got tanked up first because whatever was on his mind was bothering him—"

"Atone then? Or apologise?"

"Mmm ... I think this calls for a visit to his housekeeper. Though it's a bit

tricky. We have no authority to go barging in. We'll just have to trust to our collective charm."

Dell gave a small sigh. "Yes. And we can't very well go and see Georgina, not when we're trying to do her out of her uncle's money, even though she probably does know—everything—"

"It's not that we're trying to do her out of it—if things did change and Jack felt differently about her—who are we to complain? Have you ever met her?"

"No ... so I really shouldn't be critical—and yet—Jack was so vehement—"

"In what way?"

"Well, he always referred to her as 'that bloody woman'." Dell looked pained. "But I can't remember him ever giving an actual reason—and I never said anything like 'why, what has she done?'—so it might just be that they somehow rubbed each other up the wrong way—and if she's very fashionable I don't s'pose she'd like her uncle driving round town looking as if he got his clothes off a scarecrow—"

"True. But the crucial thing is Jack's judgment of her. Is she part of the squattocracy too?"

"Is *that* what you call them? I really don't think so, Bob. Her husband is a professor at the university, I'm sure Jack said one time. He complained that the bloke never used words ordinary people could understand." I liked Jack's assumption that he was an ordinary person. Maybe it helped explain his long friendship with Frank and Dell. They thought of themselves as ordinary people.

"Okay—let's go on out and see what the housekeeper can tell us about the Milnes."

I paid and Dell, with a map on her lap, guided us safely through thirty winding kilometres of dry hills.

- v -

The Hodges made their money in scrap metal and put it into land, Corriedale sheep, and some clever financial doings; but Jack showed no interest in sheep and turned in a half-hearted way to cattle. Yet he followed in the family footsteps in other ways and continued to pile up a fortune on the stock market; then he added the final golden touch and won a big prize in the State lottery—the story being that Jack won with the first and only ticket he'd ever taken.

I wondered if it was the land Georgina was after (land ownership, if the parcel is big enough, still has a certain *cachet*) or the money. "Has Georgina any kids, do you know?"

"I don't think so. Jack certainly never mentioned any."

"Not the doting uncle .. " We turned off the road and Dell opened a steel gate with a burnt-wood sign saying 'Maliana' and we drove down a shallow slope to where the old rambling house was tucked in by a grove of trees turning yellow and brilliant-red and bronze. The surrounding hills were sparsely timbered and there were signs of dieback in the remaining trees. The house faced north-west down a wide valley of lucerne flats to a willow-lined creek.

There was something serene and unhurried about the scene around us but Dell broke the mood by saying suddenly, "What a lot of horses!"

A few cattle could be picked out on the hills but the flats were given over almost entirely to horses, mostly greys but a few browns and some chestnuts. I parked by the front gate and a dog began to bark somewhere.

"Why, they're only little ponies!" Dell climbed out, smoothed her skirt, and threaded her handbag over her arm. "Fancy that!" She stood a moment looking round, then turned back to me. "What shall we say to them?"

"Nee-ei-gh," I said with a grin. "No. Seriously. Who we are. Regrets about Jack. His invitation to you."

She gave me the sweet smile that, no doubt, turns old men to jelly. "All right ... thank goodness I've got you here, Bob."

I had my hand on the gate latch when a big brawny youth came round the corner of the garden fence with an old Border Collie trotting at his heels. He sloped forward, slightly hunched, his mouth hanging open. We turned back and Dell smiled at him, while saying in a whisper to me—" 'Strong in t'arm and thick in t'head'—"

"What?"

"James Herriot."

As the man came up I realised the unlined but oddly out-of-plumb face was deceptive; there was grey in the curly hair. A gauze door squeaked open behind us and there were firm footststeps on the wooden verandah. We said "Hullo there" to the man and turned round to see who'd come out. The housekeeper was short and stocky with the same unlined face but hers was regular and pink-cheeked with small eyes, as round and shrewd as those of a prey animal which depends on quick observation to survive. Did she go snooping in Jack Hodge's drawers as the solicitor had suggested? My first impression was of someone very open and genuine but I put that snap judgment on hold.

Dell reached her first and said politely, "Hullo, I'm Dell Creighton. I was a friend of Mr Hodge's. I was terribly sorry to hear about his accident."

The housekeeper held out a rough short-tipped hand. "Hullo. I'm Rose Gierke—an' this's my brother, Harvey—" She mimed something at Harvey. "It was you rang me up, wasn't it?" It sounded almost accusing but Dell said, "Yes. I was so sorry I didn't know about Jack—but I didn't see the bit in the paper till after the funeral was over or I would've come up then."

Rose Gierke seemed to accept this and we all traipsed up the front steps after her and were shown into a big bare room with old-fashioned window-seats and a very ancient piano with a moth-eaten Afghan draped over it.

"Now, sit down, an' I'll put the kettle on." Whether this was acceptance or not we sat down and Rose conjured up a small table with scrolled legs which she shoved in front of us, before whisking away.

Harvey perched on the edge of his chair and looked at us in a puzzled way. I wondered what Georgina thought when she came into this room or was she responsible for its bareness; a moving van for the best of Jack's furniture ...

Dell said kindly, "It's a very nice place you've got here—and you must like horses a lot?"

Harvey put on a grin which was made pathetic by the lop-sidedness of his

face. Retarded, Gordon Hynes had said, but this looked more like plastic surgery to me; Harvey Gierke must've sustained some horrific head injuries somewhere down the line. "Yeah," he said in his unclear voice, "like 'em a lot."

Rose Gierke was swift with our tea; probably because she didn't trust us out of her sight. Harvey moved his chair away a bit so he could gaze out the window. Rose handed Dell a cup and saucer and shoved the milk and sugar in our direction. As a tea party it was definitely unconvivial. Could we trust them. Could they trust us. I was trying to decide how to proceed when Dell snapped open her handbag and took out the letter which Jack had sent her and passed it across to Rose. The woman's face was a study as she read it, her finger going to and fro along the lines, but the almost palpable tension seemed to lessen.

There was a long silence before she turned to me and I thought they were tears which suddenly sparkled in her eyes. "You can save them then?" Harvey, too, turned and stared at me, his mouth wide open.

"Save what?"

"The ponies."

Harvey swivelled his eyes from Rose to me. "An' us?" he said with unexpected eagerness.

Dell was looking a bit lost; I knew the feeling. "You mean," I said carefully, "you've been asked to leave?"

Rose Gierke looked at me as though, despite her first impression, I belonged at Harvey's IQ level. "Yeah—an' the ponies've been sold to an abattoir. There's trucks comin' next Wednesday. We've been told to have 'em all yarded that day—an' we've been paid till the Friday."

Dell put down her cup with a clatter. "But—I thought—Jack *loved* his horses!" I was surprised by the vehemence she put into 'loved'.

"Yeah—he did—" Rose looked from Dell to me again and I had the feeling that, practical woman though she might be, things had gone beyond her ability to cope.

"Look," I felt it was time to impose some order on this meeting—to be sure we were fitting the right answers to the right questions, "I think we each better start from the beginning. As we understand it—Jack prepared a will but wanted to talk it over with someone he trusted, presumably Dell, before he had the final draft drawn up. But now we've been told by his solicitor that there never was any draft will, Jack therefore died intestate, and everything he owned will go to his niece after the government has taken its slice. That's basically all we know—so if you wouldn't mind telling us what's been happening here since Jack died it could help us understand everything a whole lot better."

Harvey stood up and mumbled (with shortbread in his mouth), "I gotta go—I got Nick in the yard."

"All right, Harve. I'll ring the bell when lunch's ready." She watched him shamble off and I had the disconcerting feeling she was trying to see him through our eyes.

I sat back and began on the shortbread. Rose, I thought, was a doer not a talker and she couldn't decide where to begin. Several times she compressed her

lips as though to prevent a false start, then she shrugged ... "I dunno. We just worked here—for nearly eight years. He advertised for a couple—like a married couple, y'know—but Harve an' me put in for it an' he said he'd give us a try an' then he said we'd do fine—an' we just stayed. He had some brumbies then an' he was gettin' more because he reckoned he was doin' this experiment to improve 'em, y'know—"

"Aren't they very small for brumbies?" Dell said. "Not that I know much—but I thought brumbies were big and fierce."

I couldn't help a grin.

"They're special ones from Western Australia," Rose said without seeming to see anything odd in the question.

We both stared at her. "You mean—he brought a mob of brumbies all the way from Western Australia?"

She put on a mulish expression. "That's what he told us. He said he wanted someone good with horses that wouldn't go blabbin' about it all round the place. An' we never blabbed to nobody ... "

"Fair enough." I could see no reason to get her off-side. "So obviously he had to have a damn good reason to get them in the first place—it must've cost him a fortune just for transport—so the last thing he'd want is to have them turned into pet meat."

"Yeah—" she leant forward, "an' they were his life really—just all the time talkin' about them, writin' up their pedigrees, y'know, an' talkin' to Harvey about which ones were to go where—an' goin' out there takin' pictures of them. I don't think he really cared about nothin' else, only those ponies."

Curiouser and curiouser. Yet it fitted. Jack had never seemed to care all that much about people. We knew he wasn't fussed on sheep or cattle. But there never was a human being, in my experience, who didn't care about *something*.

"So who has come out here since Jack died?"

"His lawyer. He come an' took a lot of stuff from the office. He told me he'd have to go through the lot to see if he could find a will—an' he took all that stuff for the computer—those disk things—an' boxes of papers an' stuff—"

I didn't like the sound of this. "Anyone else?"

"Mrs Milne. The one that was his niece. She's been here three or four times. She arranged his funeral. Then she came an' started rootin' through all his clothes an' things an' sayin' they'd only be good for the op-shop ... "

"Did she take the clothes away?" It wouldn't be the first time important documents had been found in an overcoat pocket.

"Yeah, most of 'em—an' some furniture—a set o' chairs—said they were Irish something—reminded me of that cartoon but I mightn't of heard right—didn't mean anything to me—an' a couple o' pictures off the walls. Dunno if they had any value—"

"Chippendale?" I said. If Georgina took them they had value.

"Yeah, that's it! The pictures were just sort of ships an' stuff but sort o' blurry—an' there was one of some horses, like cart horses ... but we couldn't stop her doin' what she wanted—seein' it's not our business ... but she left

something here one time—"

"Left something? What sort of thing?"

"Her photo. She left it on his desk."

"Are you sure it wasn't there all the time?"

"Course not! You'd have to be jokin'! He hated her guts. The only picture of her he'd have in the house'd be one to chuck darts at!"

"Did she come here at all before he died?" I said neutrally.

"Now an' then. She'd always be so-o-o polite—made you sick to listen to her—an' it didn't matter how rude he was. She wanted him to give some money to something she was doin'—or maybe it was her husband—she told him if he gave them a million she'd see it got named after him—an' he said she'd have to call it the something foundation—I didn't catch it ... I wasn't listenin'—" she went red suddenly, "but I couldn't help hearin' a bit—here, come on an' I'll show you—"

We both got up and followed Rose Gierke's broad back as she marched out of the room, across a hall, and into a study which opened on to the back verandah. It was a long narrow room with bookshelves all along one side, an extraordinary old desk, like the ones we had in school half a century ago, along the other, a small laminex-topped table with a couple of cheap plastic chairs in the middle and angled to the window another small table with Jack's computer. Above the bookshelves was a line of small windows with wooden slats instead of glass louvres.

"If you could stand here," Rose said to Dell, "an' just sort o' talk like you was talkin' to somebody—an' if you'd come—" she beckoned to me and I followed her out again and into the next room which was a big old-fashioned kitchen with a black-leaded stove and a scrubbed pine table in the middle with the beginnings of a pie on it. She put a finger to her lips and we could hear Dell saying to herself, "How nice to see you again, Mrs Milne. It must be six months surely since ... " It was as clear as though she stood beside us.

Rose said, "I would've heard it all I s'pose but Harve come in an' banged the door." She'd realised by now I didn't care how much she eavesdropped; I was intrigued to know what Georgina had wanted Jack's money for. We went back to the office. Dell'd moved across to the shelves and begun to work her way along.

"Is this the photo of Mrs Milne?"

"Yeah." Rose went to pick it up and hand it to me but I stopped her with a curt "No. Leave it. Have you ever touched it?" She shook her head. "I wanted Mrs Milne to see it gettin' more an' more dusty."

"Okay. Good. Bring a clean tea-towel or something and I'll wrap it up. It just might come in handy."

If anything was clear at that stage then it was the fact that Georgina Milne with millions so close was playing a very crude game to make them drop into her lap. I would've expected a woman of her probable intelligence to show a little more finesse. But then, with only the Gierkes likely to get in her way, she probably hadn't seen a need for subtlety.

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Dell had gone for more than fifty years without ever reading anything more taxing than the Daily Telegraph or the Women's Weekly; then Frank died and suddenly there were long empty evenings to get through and she turned to books. Now she couldn't go out of the house without a bag stuffed with paperbacks. She went religiously to the library every week. She had quotes for every occasion. She haunted second-hand shops and book exchanges and fête stalls. It occurred to me she might've influenced me in ways I hadn't taken into account. So I wasn't surprised to see her glued to Jack's bookshelves but there was something so even and matched and untouched about Jack's books I suspected most of them were there for show.

Beside his computer and keyboard was a printer, a large box of paper, several books with transparent plastic sleeves (all empty), and a programming guide. Though the lawyer might've taken Jack's disks might there still be something on Jack's hard drive?

Rose came and stood beside me. "Do you know how to work it?"

"Probably. How good was Jack?"

"He was only learnin' ... "

"Do you mind if I have a look then?"

"Go ahead."

But when I got through to Jack's files—or where I'd hoped to find them—there was nothing. Had they been wiped? Did Jack not save anything once he'd printed out whatever he wanted? Was he unsure how to go about opening files and saving in the first place? But if Hynes had taken Jack's disks it suggested we'd missed the start by half-a-lap and weren't making much of a show at pegging back his lead. "Damn." Jack might have some secret files but I didn't know enough myself to go looking.

By this time Dell'd worked her way along to the shelves behind the door and was stooping down to look along the bottom shelf. Suddenly she said, "That's it! That's the place that's been on the tip of my tongue all the time!"

I left the computer to its secrets and came over.

She'd pulled two books out of the shelf and straightened up again.

"Timor!"

I looked blank.

"That's where Jack was before he went to New Guinea! I *knew* it was somewhere up there!"

She handed me the books she'd pulled out—'Timor A People Betrayed' and 'Telling East Timor; Personal Testimonies 1942-1992'—and in that split second I felt the stakes had changed. Been raised.

- vii -

"By the way," I turned back to Rose Gierke and said casually, "who was it arranged to sell the horses?"

"It was the stock an' station agents Mr Hodge always used, said they'd been asked to pick up the brumbies because there was some sheep comin' on agistment for a few months. I said they couldn't do that because they were

special brumbies—an' the fella just laughed an' said in that case they'd make special dogmeat—an' I rang Mr Hynes to tell him there was a mistake an' he said, no, no mistake, he knew Mr Hodge had arranged to take the sheep months ago—an' for us to have the horses ready to go ... "

Again the tears collected in those small round Peke eyes.

"Then you mustn't bring them in, the ponies I mean—" Dell sounded so sympathetic and earnest they could've been her ponies. "Maybe we could arrange for them to go somewhere else for a while?" She turned to me but I had no ideas on where to park a hundred ponies for an indefinite length of time; if it'd been two or three ...

Rose blew her nose noisily and said she must go and get on with lunch but we might like to look round a bit more. Even after she'd gone we stayed silent. I didn't trust this room and, more than that, I needed time to get some new thoughts into order.

Dell suddenly said in little more than a whisper:

" 'He was something like a racehorse undersized,
With a touch of Timor pony—something, something, something—
He was hard and tough and wiry—just the sort that won't say die' ... "

I nodded. Neither of us would ever win a 'Know Your Ponies' quiz but it needed no expert learning: those were Timor ponies out there on the lucerne flats. Jack's special brumbies. Yes. But special to whom? And dangerous for who else?

"What do we do next?" Dell said in her normal voice.

"Jack must've been in touch with other people besides you. We'll have to try and track some of them down."

I put the titles, authors, and publishers of those two books into my notepad, checked for anything written in them, and slipped them back into the shelf.

I couldn't find any sign of a Teledex or address book. But inside Jack's old school desk, jumbled in with pens and pencils was not only the local Armidale-Gunnedah-Inverell-etc directory but two Sydney directories. "Go and ask Ms Gierke if she knows if Jack had an address book or whatever—and where he usually kept it." While she was gone I began to flip through the Sydney directories (a lot of people underline or circle numbers) starting with A-K but flipping backwards. Almost immediately I came upon a C.P. Kelly underlined and, a minute later, the firm of Harcourt and Girle in Castlereagh Street. I was about to start on L-Z when Rose Gierke came to the door, her hands floury.

"He did have a doova by the phone," she said sharply, "but someone took it."

I felt we'd lost another length on the leaders. "I see. What about his records of all his horses? That sounds the sort of place he might've put a will—"

"And it would make it harder for anyone to claim those were *just* brumbies—if they have pedigrees and everything," Dell said.

Rose Gierke walked across to the old desk and lifted the lid. Her jaw dropped and suddenly she looked as vacant as her brother. "They *were* here," she whispered. She lifted out an empty concertina file at the far end; underneath

was nothing but an unopened packet of computer paper.

"It's starting to look like a mouse plague's been through—though mice'd at least leave us a few scraps." Did it matter that they were clumsy and crude—if they had everything? "Look, I think we're going to have to assume if Jack did make a will then it's gone now—"

"But—if it's gone—" Rose looked devastated, "then Georgina'll get everything an' we—how can we stop her?"

"Does it matter so much to you? The property would be sold anyway—"

Rose put her head briefly in her hands. When she raised it again her cheeks were wet with tears. "You don't understand," she sounded as if she was choking, "he promised to leave the property to *us* ... but if he didn't make a will or someone's destroyed it—nobody'll take—they'll think we're tellin' lies if we say that ... " It was only her word. But I wondered if it was the Gierkes, not Mrs Milne, that Jack'd wanted to discuss with Dell.

"You could have the property if you'd go on caring for Jack's ponies?"

"Yeah ... it isn't as much as it sounds," she sniffled, "because he sold his other property years ago ... Mrs Milne could have his money—we don't care—so why couldn't she let us keep the farm? She's got a lot an' we've got nothing—an' it's hard for poor Harve to get a job—"

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Rose set the table but when she invited us to come to lunch I said, "If you'd just excuse me a minute, I'd like to make a couple of phone calls. Start without me." She looked suspicious but I wanted to check on this business of the ponies going—and try to stop it.

I rang the stock agents, saying I was Ivor Green from the Probate Office and that we could not allow anything, including any animals, to be removed from the property until the Inventory of Assets for Mr Hodge's estate was completed. I then went on in a testy bureaucratic way to say that several things had already been removed without permission from the farm and we would be putting padlocks on all the gates for the time being. (If they came out there was no guarantee the Gierkes would be able to stand up to them; I wanted to keep them well away.) The man at the other end sounded dubious but agreed to hold off until we gave them the green light; "but don't be long"—as though the nation was facing an imminent shortage of petmeat.

Then I tried a bookshop in town; they were sorry but they didn't have either Timor book in stock. I could try the Co-op—or would I like them to order copies? I'm always sympathetically inclined towards helpful businesses and said, yes, I'd drop in later that day and give them my address. Not that there'd be much time for reading in the next day or two.

Next on my list was Harcourt and Girle. I represented myself as a friend of Jack Hodge and asked if I could drop in for a chat on Monday. An off-putting female voice said they were not at liberty to discuss anything in regard to Mr Hodge. Goodbye.

Another officious female voice answered C.P. Kelly's phone; no, Mr Kelly was in hospital; no, no visitors. Goodbye.

I wasn't impressed with my batting average. Maybe a bit of lunch'd cheer me up. I put five dollars by the phone and went out. The pie was meat and carrots with mashed potato and peas flanking it. I complimented Rose Gierke and said I hoped Jack'd appreciated her cooking. For the first time since we'd come she laughed, though with an underlying tension. "You must be kiddin'! I could've given him porridge three times a day an' he wouldn't of noticed!" Harvey suddenly started to laugh too and continued to give off abrupt bouts of giggling all through the meal.

Neither of them knew of Jack ever going to a doctor and Rose said although it was true he had arthritis it wasn't bad; he mainly just liked playing with the new computer. Even so, I had my doubts. Jack Hodge might be one of a kind but he belonged to a generation which saw typing personal letters as not being a friendly action; he would've gone on writing his letters to Dell until his hand became indecipherable.

Before we left I got Rose to hunt round and find a big padlock and chain and polish it up as best she could. Then I got Dell to bring in my camera to take pictures of the office with the photo of Georgina *in situ* as well as the empty file and missing disk box—or at least the place where it normally sat. As we went out to the car, carrying the picture of Georgina, I said to Rose Gierke, "It's over to you now. There's a chance the will is still here—so you've got to go through *everything*—every book, every lot of old letters and Christmas cards, under his desk, behind every picture, inside the piano, under his mattress, even over at the sheds—"

"Okay ... "

I told her where to contact us then we drove away, fixing the padlock to the main gate when we were out on to the road. We were taking a lot of chances but, will or not, I didn't mind the Gierkes getting the farm and the brumbies. With a professor for a husband Georgina probably wasn't wondering where her next ensemble or her next overseas holiday was coming from. And, if Jack's golden touch hadn't deserted him in his last years, his investments would keep Georgina in whatever she wanted to be kept in for the rest of her life.

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Dell was beginning to look tired. We pooled our impressions of Rose and Harvey but then she sat back a few minutes with her eyes closed. We were in sight of Armidale again, looking unexpectedly English in its autumn tints, when she sat up and said, "What next, Bob?"

"It strikes me another solicitor would come in handy. I think there's a conflict of interest there if Gordon Hynes is acting for both Georgina and Jack."

"Or not acting for Jack?" she said quietly.

I held the car on the curving road with its gravel edges without speaking for a minute or two. "Do you know—I think we need to go round and listen to a bit of gossip? How people round here felt about Jack, about the Milnes, even about Hynes—I don't suppose many people would've had anything much to do with the Gierkes—other than groceries—"

"That'd take a while though—if you're thinking of going round the pubs?"

She smiled slightly.

"Good idea. But first I think we might call in on a more professional ear-to-the-ground—"

"Such as?"

"Millionaire grazier—missing will—faithful retainers—recluse devoting his waning years to upgrading a mob of wild horses—where would you find a better story? Not to mention the little point he may not have driven off the road under his own steam. I think we'll pay a visit to the office of 'The Armidale Express'."

"Of course! Why didn't I think of that?"

I could say: because you never do anything more drastic with a paper than read the nice stories and use it to light the fire. But I merely pulled in to the side of the road and took the copy off the back seat and flipped through the bylines; it's always more effective to ask for someone by name and I thought I'd ask for the help of Marta Bognor.

First, though, I found a park in Beardy Street and found the bookshop and said to Dell: "Won't be long." It seemed better not to put temptation in her way. Inside I asked for the woman I'd spoken to earlier, hoping she wasn't out to lunch, but there she was, right and bright and red-nosed. "Oh yes! I checked on the books you wanted. The James Dunn appears to be out of print now but we can certainly get you the Michele Turner. How many copies would you like? Just the one?"

"No, I'll take five. It looks a handy sort of book to spread around."

She looked surprised, then pleased, as I took out my cheque book and paid her on the spot and said I'd call back in a few days. She, with luck, would do the generous thing and mention my order round the place. "As a matter of fact, it was Jack Hodge who mentioned the book to me. You may have heard of him? Poor old chap died recently."

"Oh! Yes ... yes, I did hear about that. That's an awful road out that way. Was he a friend of yours?"

"Known him since I was this high." I demonstrated with one hand, full of the happy conviction I was telling the truth for once. She murmured something about being sorry he was dead; it didn't sound sincere but then the poor creature looked as though she should be home in bed and smothered in Vicks.

- x -

Marta Bognor was in too. The day was looking up. She was probably in her thirties; very red lipstick over crooked white teeth, a sharp nose, sharp eyes, sharp chin ...

I introduced us and said could we take up a few of her precious minutes to talk about Jack Hodge. She rustled up two spare chairs, then sat poised, waiting, giving nothing away. I handed her a photocopy of Jack's last letter, then ran quickly through the rest of the story, dwelling on Gordon Hynes' extraordinary claim about a forged letter, the fact that Jack Hodge had spent the last years of his life upgrading a mob of Timor ponies which someone, I didn't know who, was trying to turn into dogmeat, and ended with the rumour the police were not

satisfied Jack Hodge's death was an accident. Then I closed my mouth and sat back. Unless I'd lost my touch completely (which was on the cards) she'd now feel it was her turn to be generous with information.

"I'll check with John later—" she said, after glancing round the room, "and see if he's got anything on the police angle. I hadn't heard that about the ponies—someone, I forget who, said Jack Hodge was a bit of a—well, a bit eccentric and he was convinced his brumbies would eventually win prizes round the shows—" she made a note to herself. "How do you know they *are* Timor ponies? I never heard that before."

I glanced across at Dell and she said, surprisingly calmly for someone who'd never been inside a newsroom before, "Jack was in Timor during World War Two. He felt he owed the country something but being Jack he didn't go about it in the ways other people would. I think turning a mob of wild ponies into good quality stock again was his way of saying thanks. I don't know if it was a very *practical* way but it was Jack's way and we got a terrible shock when we found that someone was trying to destroy all his years of hard work—"

"Do you have any ideas who?" Marta Bognor's pen had been darting across the page all the time Dell spoke.

"No, we don't. We couldn't help thinking it might be Jack's niece, Mrs Georgina Milne, but so far we have nothing to implicate her," I looked at Dell with a carry-on-you're-doing-fine expression, "and we wondered if you might've heard any rumours going round town—what with Jack being so well off and dying like that ... "

Marta Bognor shook her head slowly. "I don't think I'd ever heard of Jack Hodge till he died—though I'll certainly check our files. I don't know Mrs Milne personally, Dr Milne has his say about something every so often—I'll check them both ... the only person I've heard any gossip about is Gordon Hynes."

This was unexpected. The beautiful suave impeccable Gordon?

"We don't want to put you in an awkward position ... "

"Heck, that's all right!" She gave me a grin. "If I've heard it probably half the town's heard it ... just don't ask me to print it!" Her grin widened. "He's supposed to be a compulsive gambler, runs up huge debts, has everything he owns mortgaged to the hilt, lost his wife because she got fed up with it—but he manages to keep just enough ahead for the whole pack of cards not to fall down ... he's supposed to be drinking more heavily ... so he mightn't be fussy if ... " She let it hang.

She took up the letter again. "Look, would you mind if we printed this and did a brief interview—just your memories about Jack, stuff like that," (Dell didn't think this bright young woman should be referring to Jack so familiarly but fortunately she let it pass) "a bit about Timor maybe, seeing it's in the news more these days—"

Dell began to look worried. I'm sure she's never been interviewed in her life and now she faced the sudden and horrible possibility of making a fool of herself in public. I reached over and gave her hand a pat. "Go on, you can do it.

Frank'd be proud of you for sticking up for his old mate."

It didn't stop her looking worried. But she nodded slowly. "All right. I'll give it a try."

Marta went away to get a tape-recorder which threw Dell into a renewed flutter; a shorthand pad but not this—

I said quietly, "Do you remember Jack's outfit?"

"No, I wish I did. But I know he was a commando because Frank used to say they were the top dogs, next to fighter pilots ... "

"That'll do. There can't have been that many commandos in Timor."

Marta came back to her desk and set things up. "Don't worry, Mrs Creighton. I'd just like to get a couple of nice quotes from you about the man himself, make it into a bit of a human interest story, you know the sort of thing. Now when did you first meet Jack Hodge?"

My mother clasped both hands in her lap. I saw her knuckles go white and her rings stand away from her finger. Then, with admirable calm, she started in: "My husband Frank met Jack in New Guinea after Jack had come back from his time in Timor. I think that would've been in 1943—but the Timor thing, the—campaign—was a bit hush hush, you know, and I didn't know anything about it until much later ... After the war Jack stayed in touch, always writing to us at Christmas and any time he was down in Sydney he'd ring up and come and have dinner with us. We were living in Bondi Junction then ... Jack was a very quiet man but my husband was the sort of person who gets along with everybody, you know. So then, when Frank died, Jack came down to the funeral and afterwards he said to me if I was ever in any need, if I was short of money or anything, just to say the word. I never did as Frank had left me with enough and my children were grown up—but Jack and I stayed in touch so I knew he'd got interested in breeding horses because each time he wrote he'd say how much he was enjoying his 'hobby'. I don't know much about horses so I never really asked him for any details—I just thought it was nice because a lot of men retire and don't know what to do with themselves, not that Jack was retired really ... and one time he said he'd managed to get a good couple called Rose and Harvey Gierke and occasionally he'd mention them after that. Mr Hynes said to us Jack wasn't happy with Rose Gierke because he'd found her going through his things but I didn't believe him because Jack wasn't like that—he wouldn't have cared who went through his things—he didn't have any secrets ... " She looked at us doubtfully. Should she have said that about Gordon Hynes ...

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With small misgivings I decided to tell Marta Bognor about the photo placed on Jack's desk after his death and the claim by the Gierkes that Jack'd told them they'd inherit the farm. It was probably a clumsy attempt to put a cat among the pigeons and might not help the Gierkes. But I felt our most effective way to proceed was to raise doubts in the minds of as many people as possible.

Dell disinterred the picture of Georgina from her handbag and, holding it by its tea-towel, I passed it to Ms Bognor. Her eyes lit up. "Can I print it?"

We were moving into quicksand here. I had removed it without official

permission (Rose Gierke's pleasure in seeing it depart didn't count). But who did it belong to? I could see lawyers making their fortunes out of this simple question.

"You can."

Then I laid out the various positions: "If she gave it to Jack before he died then his fingerprints should be on it and the Gierkes are lying. In that case it becomes their property if they are correct and he made a will leaving his property and all its contents to them. If he made a will not giving anything to them then its owner is unknown at the moment. If he died intestate it is currently the property of the NSW Government—and I wish them joy of it. If it was placed there after Jack died it certainly won't have any of his prints on it and Rose Gierke claims she has never touched it—in which case it would be interesting to know whose prints are on it, if any. And if Mrs Milne placed it there after his death then it is not part of his estate and continues to belong to Mrs Milne. You might like to put that to whoever provides you with legal advice."

Marta Bognor sat back and laughed out loud, making her face all cherry lips and snowy teeth. "My God! What a business! Still, I can see why it might be important. I'm pretty sure that piece we ran about his death said he was worth about $8 million—it's a lot of money going begging, isn't it?"

"Yes—and *if* it's true Jack wanted something to go to the Gierkes then I think it's about time they found a few friends ... look, we haven't had time yet to check this out but there's a rumour that Mrs Milne and her husband were trying to get Jack Hodge to donate a million dollars to some sort of foundation they were involved with—or setting up—or fundraising for—"

"Oh?" She was silent then said, "I think I know what that'd be! There was talk around town last year about them—" she screwed her red mouth to and fro, "hold on a tick—I'll just check with Maurie, he's doing a part-time degree ... " She got up and hurried away and I admired her back view, then her front view as she brought back a gangling young man with tinted glasses and a small beard jutting agressively from his chin.

She didn't introduce him, just said, "What was that thing Dr Milne was launching last year?"

He pulled up another chair, lifted a pile of folders off it on to Marta's desk where they teetered dangerously. "It was going to be an Australia-Indonesia Foundation for Cross-Cultural Studies—you know the sort of thing? Sending students from here to Indonesian universities and vice versa—publishing monographs in both languages, giving overpaid academics free trips to and fro, lobbying the government to put more money into Indonesian language courses here—they were going to endow a chair of Indonesian Studies at a uni somewhere—I suppose whichever one wanted old Milne—" he grinned. "They were asking for government money to set it up but they were also after private and corporate sponsorship."

"So where are things at now?"

"They've had some meetings—and I think they've got some money

promised—there was a thing in the uni rag saying they'd had a million promised so far from private sources as well as some business donations—and some one, not me, wrote to the editor and pointed out that nearly all the businesses putting in were ones connected with leases in the Timor Gap area and talk about vultures on a carcass! But, so far as I know, the government hasn't promised anything—though with Keating off to Indonesia in a few weeks I bet they're lobbying hard and he's pretty pro-Indonesia anyway—but maybe it has to wait till the next budget, I don't know—you'd need to talk to their fundraising committee."

"Mmm. What about Mrs Milne? Do you know if she's involved with it?"

"Sure to be. I've only seen her the once but someone called her 'The Power Behind the Throne' and she looks the sort that likes organising everything—including her old man—"

"Thanks, Maurie. I'll look into it." Marta obviously realised the danger of losing a story to someone considerably her junior. After Maurie had wandered off again—she was probably worrying needlessly—she turned back to us and said in a low voice, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Very likely. If Jack Hodge was obsessed with a secret sense of obligation to East Timor—so much so that he was prepared to go all the way to Western Australia for a mob of Timor ponies—and his niece wanted his money to launch her husband's pet project to boost his standing as an Indonesia expert with all the perks and promotions that might entail ... "

Damn Jack Hodge. If he hadn't been such a silent unsociable man, if he hadn't hidden what he was doing under the fiction of 'brumbies', if he'd told everybody where he kept his bloody will ... I could be home in time for dinner.

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What next? I'd never investigated anything in company with my mother; not that she cramped my style precisely but in some more subtle way she inhibited me. There were questions I felt reluctant to ask in front of her. Her touching faith I'd always know the right questions, no meandering, no indecision, no ineffectual stabs ... combined with a faint underlying sense that middle-aged I might be but I was still her little Bob ... I suggested another cup of tea.

As we cleared a plate of toasted sandwiches I said, "Georgina?"

For a moment she gazed at me with a 'Don't-look-at-me! You're-the-expert' sort of look, then she nodded. "Ye-es, I s'pose so. She's the most important person, isn't she—and I can't help wondering what's she like—"

"Yes. I think the best thing'd be for you to ring, offer your condolences, ask her for the whereabouts of Jack's grave—then ask if she and her husband would like to join us for dinner. If she agrees ask her if she can recommend a restaurant."

"Yes." She began to fiddle with her hands, clasping and unclasping her work-worn fingers. "All right."

I reached out and put a hand over hers. "Don't worry. You'll be just fine. And if we don't get to meet her this way we'll try something else."

But the Milne phone rang and rang. We tried it through the rest of the evening but no one answered. They could be away. I would've expected them to have an answering machine—so no response suggested a considerable time away in that case. Conferences? Seminars? Fundraising bashes? For all we knew they were currently living it up on the Gold Coast or the Blue Mountains while we fretted our time away here. The reception desk at the university would no doubt be closed this late. What about Saturday? Was there staff there then? Someone as important as Dr Milne would have a secretary—but who could provide me with a name if they were willing to give such out—and the secretary would be gone now—and I didn't want us to look to be in pursuit—

We stayed the night. I debated on trying some of the after hours numbers, the Vice Chancellor, some of the colleges. Undoubtedly, there might be people familiar with Dr Milne's whereabouts but, in the end, I let it go and rang Rose Gierke instead, telling her to get on to Marta Bognor—and the police—if any trucks showed up. I hoped I'd spiked that gun but merely said I'd be away for a few days but should be back by Wednesday and gave her Dell's phone number.

I cringed at the sight of the burnt out landscape as we swung up into the Blue Mountains; the sky above us cold and clear.

It was time for a very late lunch when I finally drove into Dell's carport. She was glad to be home; I could see it in the way she brightened—yet there was also a secret disappointment there. She'd thought I might have everything wrapped up by now; that, like Hercule Poirot, I need only sit a while and everything would become clear. I wasn't going to lecture her on dead-ends, boring checks and cross-checks, I wasn't going to tell her life isn't like that. But we'd eat, then try to find C.P.Kelly. He might have some answers for Dell.

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She unlocked the front door while I hauled our bags out of the boot and went to follow her in. But she stayed in the doorway, seemingly unable to go further.

I understood when I reached her. It looked as though a cyclone had been through her cottage: drawers opened and upended, cupboard doors off their hinges, an overturned vase still dripping water on to her rug. Dell seemed paralysed (I understood her shock) but I said briskly: "Right, don't touch anything. You ring the cops. Then we'll make a list of what's missing." She came out of her immobility and said faintly, "All right, Bob."

But as I moved lightly and carefully through her small home I began to reassess my first impression. This wasn't an ordinary breaking and entering. The television set stood untouched, also the kitchen appliances and her one piece of valuable furniture: a beautiful old grandfather clock ...

Someone had been looking for something among her papers by the look of it, someone convinced she had a copy of Jack's will? ... could be ... but there was also something mean and cruel at work here. The photo of Frank which had stood on her bedside table had been broken and something, possibly a chisel or screwdriver, driven right through. A bottle of chocolate syrup had been poured all over the kitchen, things from the bathroom cabinet—foil packets, cotton

wool, Band Aids—tipped into the toilet bowl.

Dell came and sat down on the sofa, white-lipped and close to tears. “Bob, what do you think they were looking for?” There was a tremor in her voice.

I put an arm round her. “Have you got anything from Jack in the house? Letters? Christmas cards?”

“No—I try not to keep things now ... just his last Christmas card—it’d be down in the carton in the dugout ... ”

Dell sometimes uses her backyard cellar on those burning hot days the mountains can throw up when fierce hot air comes off the western plains like a dragon’s breath—so she keeps a few things down there to work on, like catching up on letters or getting her Christmas mail ready or a bit of embroidery, not to mention her shelf of books.

“Go and look, in a tick, and see if anything’s been touched down there while I type out a bit of background—” She squared her shoulders and stood up while I slipped a sheet of paper into her ancient portable. It hadn’t been used for some time and the ribbon was very pale but I decided it was readable.

In ten minutes she was back. “There’s no sign of anyone been down there—and I found Jack’s last card.” She handed me a picture of some horses grazing in a smart white-railed paddock with two children leaning over the fence and Best Wishes across one corner.

“Good!” I didn’t take the time to read it—a car was pulling up outside—but a quick glance suggested the writing was the same as the letter or, if it wasn’t, it’d take an expert to pin down the differences. A fat cop got out slowly, slammed the car door, and plodded up the garden path between Dell’s roses. She met him at the front door, saying with her nice smile, “Thank you for coming. We haven’t touched anything.”

He nodded and compressed rubbery lips. For a couple of minutes he simply mooched to and fro. Then he turned back to her and said gruffly, “What’s missing?”

“That’s the strange thing,” Dell said quietly, “we don’t think anything’s missing.”

“Someone doesn’t like youse then?”

I gave him my summary of the Jack Hodge situation. “No. I think that—either they were looking for something and didn’t find it or they’re trying to scare us off asking any more questions about Jack Hodge.”

His hunched way of walking, his lumpy doughy face, his cretinous manner, didn’t inspire confidence—but I was inclined to think there was something shrewder behind the façade. The eyes flickered towards me, then closed down into apparent blankness again.

“You think that, eh?”

“I do—and I’d like to know who it was. The vase was still dripping a bit as we came in—which suggests it’d been knocked over fairly recently. But if it was this morning then it was someone who didn’t call attention to their presence, masquerading, say, as a delivery or repairman ... ”

I thought he was going to say ‘You want to take the case, mate?’ but he

seemed to remember *he* was masquerading as a moron and merely nodded his large head.

"Might ask a few questions meself."

Dell looked as though she'd like to say 'I should jolly well hope so' but fortunately she sat back, willing to let me handle it all, and I answered his questions as he laboriously filled in the details of the call.

He checked the locks—which would've been going to keep a baby at bay; Dell took the position she had very little worth taking, even the TV being black and white—and we piled furniture against the back door.

I'd take Dell into town, I didn't want her sleeping in this house for the time being. It must have been around four, we'd got through before the sports-hour rush, when we booked into a small hotel in the back streets there between Broadway and Central; not much of a place but convenient and, years ago, the manager had been a mate of mine. But Eddie Langford was gone and the new manager was a burly man with a Mediterranean look and a lot of pugnacious teeth.

When Dell was settled I got on the phone and started ringing the hospitals. It would be our luck that C.P.Kelly had moved into some obscure nursing home.

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But I found him straight off, in St Vincent's, and after using a sickly sentimental plea about 'old friend', 'only ten minutes', 'just down from the country', we were grudgingly told we could come in and see him briefly in normal visiting hours, providing we left as soon as the nursing staff asked us to go. Dell spruced herself up and re-did her hair then we went downstairs for a drink; a sweet sherry for her, Teacher's and water for me. If fierce nurses were going to be hanging over our shoulders ...

Dell, despite her philosophy of good posture, deep breathing, moderation in all things, as the key to a long life, looked slumped and weary when we got back in the car. I hoped we were heading down the home straight.

"It's strange, isn't it, Bob—if I was reading a story about the Case of the Missing Millions I'd probably think it was thrilling—but being right in the middle of it ... "

"I know. And you're probably suffering from delayed shock. That was a very nasty business to come home to."

"Do you think it *could've* been Georgina who did it—but how would they know about me?"

"Gordon Hynes? But it *may* be coincidence. Empty house. Bored kids. Still, we'll have a better idea when we find out where the Milnes were last night."

She nodded and fell silent and, for the first time, I found myself thinking how much she'd always depended on Frank. It wasn't that she was impractical, more that neither her education (she'd left school at fourteen) nor her life experiences had fitted her to cope with things that didn't fit neatly into a blameless and pacific routine. Except possibly for the Japanese and Sydney's professional crooks she'd been allowed to live her life and still cling to the

belief that, basically, people were nice and decent. Hard on this came a vague feeling, not quite guilt, more an unease that my sister Kaye and I'd gone our own ways and assumed that Dell was quietly and happily going hers.

We went up in the lift and followed the signs to the men's ward we wanted; even with light and bustle the long ward was a mildly gloomy place, with its rows of beds down each side. Mr Kelly was hidden behind a screen. Screens never bode well in my experience. The nurse who escorted us there was built like a female wrestler but her wide blue eyes suggested the killer instinct'd been left out. She wagged a finger like a pork sausage and said, "Now, only a few minutes, mind."

Mr Kelly was frail and parchment-thin; on his head were a few wisps of white hair, his sunken eyes were a pale plumbago-blue. I started in by telling him we were friends of Jack Hodge's and the tired old voice, not much more than the whisper of dead leaves, said, "Jack eh? What's he up to these days?"

Not a brilliant start. Now I had to leap in and tell a dying man his old mate (if he was his old mate) had copped his. I explained the situation as gently as I could and added there was a bit of a shenanigans going on because Jack didn't appear to have left a will, even though he'd told my mother he had—so we were wondering if Jack might've mentioned the matter to him.

The old eyes travelled slowly from Dell to me and back again.

"Yeah. Far as I know Jack left a will. Told me so on the phone at Christmas—or a bit before."

"Well, that's a relief. Did he happen to mention *how* he was planning to leave his bundle?"

"He asked me if the 2/2nd'd like a bit. I said we weren't really set up for receiving legacies—and I suggested a couple o' other things to him ... "

My lack of homework was bothering me—now, when this old bloke was having to struggle for every word—I should've tackled the back copies of the Express myself.

"The 2/2nd? You were in Timor?"

"I was 2/2nd—mostly West Aussies but a few from this side. We went in in December '41 ... Jack was 2/4th—mostly Victorians but a few other odds and sods ... they went in in late '42 and came out in early '43. Then there were the blokes from the 2/40th, a lot o' Tasmanians—they'd been landed in West Timor and got caught by the Japs but a few managed to get away over the hills and joined us the other side of the border ... there were a few Dutch, didn't want to surrender when their government threw in the towel ... and the Z specials—but that was later ... " He took a long time to say this but I had the feeling he was enjoying the chance to say it; could be the dragon he kept at home was keeping all his old mates at bay.

"So you knew Jack in Timor?"

"No. Never met Jack. I started writing round to all the fellas I could track down—not just 2/2nd—back in, think it was '85, might've been '86—asking 'em all to sign a letter to Hawke. This was after I'd talked to 'Steve' Stevenson, he's dead now, we're dropping like flies, eh?—he was in the Z special operation

called ‘Sunlag’ went in in ’45—and this Timorese mate of his’d been executed by the Indonesians ... made to dig his own grave ... took years for his son to smuggle the letter out ... of course Stevenson was hopping mad ... ” He lay back a while with his eyes closed but I felt it was emotion rather than talking that was draining him.

“It was what they call the Kraras Massacre now ... been that many damn massacres you can’t keep up with ’em ... ” he let out a long puffing sigh, “and Jack wrote back ... so after that I kept him in touch with anything we were doing down here ... ”

“Did he ever donate money?”

“Don’t know ... probably did.”

Again he seemed to fall back as though to regroup his mind and his energy. The nurse put her head round the screen and seeing him like that, eyes closed and unmoving, shot us a fierce look. But Mr Kelly opened his eyes again and said feebly, “Go away, pet. Not time yet ... ”

She didn’t look convinced but withdrew her head slowly like a Cheshire Cat which could be expected to reappear without warning; she forgot to leave her smile behind. But she was unimportant. The intriguing thought had come to me: Jack Hodge had got himself a herd of Timor ponies ‘about eight years ago’.

“Do you think, from your chats with him, that Jack felt guilty in some way about Timor?”

“We *all* felt guilty about Timor—every man Jack of us.” That emaciated frame could put forth a surprising amount of vehemence. “We all had Timorese boys to help us, *criados* they were called, means servant in Portuguese—they looked after the ponies and our equipment, carried messages, told us where the Japs were, found food and cooked it for us—we *all* owed our lives to the Timorese, we wouldn’t have lasted a week without their help ... and we just went off and left ’em to the Japs ... ”

Another long silence fell.

“Did you know about Jack breeding the Timor ponies?”

He moved his parchment face into a travesty of a grin. “Yeah ... ”

“Do you know if there was any special reason why Jack chose to do that?”

Again we waited patiently. But this time he directed a look at Dell, an almost diffident look. I wondered if he knew something about Jack he’d rather not say in front of Dell.

I said carefully, “We know Jack was no saint ... ”

“No ... ” Again that long puffing sigh. “I don’t like to go saying things about Jack when he’s not here, when I don’t know the truth of it ... ”

“I understand. But we might be able to throw some light on it—”

“Someone—don’t remember who it was now—one o’ the blokes—said it was Jack who raped a Timorese girl. We knew it was one of the 2/4th mob—but I never asked ... whoever it was, it was a bloody stupid thing to do ... we needed the Timorese on our side—and messing with their women was the quickest way to lose ’em ... I remember, before we went in, our CO gave us a pep talk, said, Don’t loot, Don’t mess with their women ... I always thought that was part of

the reason they did so much for us—no matter how ruddy awful things got most o' the blokes did their damn'dest to do the right thing ... "

"Could be." I didn't look at Dell and Mr Kelly'd kept his gaze on me all the time he spoke. Dell, if she thought rape was more than 'bloody stupid', stayed silent, her hands clasped in her lap. The nurse came back. This time she gave us a fair imitation of a Cheshire grin but it didn't hide the fact she was gearing up to toss us out.

"Mr Kelly, you've been a wonderful help. I wonder could we just bother you to do a very brief statement about Jack mentioning the will. It could help if the matter ever comes to court."

"Course." But he was obviously over-taxed and the nurse moved swiftly to pick up his wrist and feel his pulse. "Pen and paper," he whispered to her and she went away, grudging every moment of her absence, and brought it back on a tray, even her hands seeming to radiate disapproval. Then she lifted him very gently. There was hardly anything of him to lift. A southerly buster would've seen him airborne. He wrote very slowly and shakily, his hand barely able to obey him. When the pen fell to the sheet I said to the nurse: "Would you mind signing too as a witness? It may be needed to see that someone doesn't ignore an old man's wishes."

"A court case?" She didn't like the sound of this. "In that case, I'd better read it first."

"Yes, please do," Dell said suddenly.

The woman seemed to thaw. She signed firmly. Then she said, "Now, out you go." But Mr Kelly hadn't quite finished with us. He lifted one frail hand again. "Talk to a friend o' mine ... Dr Day ... Petra ... can't remember her number, ends in four twos ... "

Dell patted his hand gently. "Don't worry. We will. And thank you for everything."

"You didn't mind—me saying that about Jack ... " His old eyes flickered across her face and for a moment Dell faltered. She had minded. But she rose above her feelings. "It's very important that we—understand—the real Jack."

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"Shall we try Dr Day this evening?" It was after half past seven by the time we'd walked up to Forbes Street where I'd left the car and it'd been a long day. But again Dell seemed to gather herself, this time putting her tiredness aside. "Yes. You must. Then we can have some dinner."

I was doubtful about tracking down Petra Day with only four twos to go by (and was Mr Kelly's memory to be relied on?) but in fact there was only one person it could be—and Dr P. Day was at home. When I told her Mr Kelly had given us her name, she said boisterously, "Well, any friend of Cathal's is a friend of mine! How is the poor old fella this evening?"

"Very weak."

"Yes. He told me last Monday he reckoned he had a week left to him. So! How can I help you?"

"I wonder—could we talk a bit about East Timor, background etcetera,

when you've got a spare moment?"

"Of course you can! I can always find the time to talk about Timor. Look! Have you eaten?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, come on round! Is Annandale too far out of your way?"

"No. If you're sure—"

"It'll only be pot luck—but you won't starve—"

"There's two of us—"

"All the merrier! Now, do you know Johnston Street—just on the Glebe side of the Post Office but other side of the street—there's a Greek restaurant then a couple of houses—I'm upstairs—"

Dell didn't look overjoyed when I went back to the car and said we were going out to dinner. "Oh, I don't know, Bob. How can she possibly help us to find Jack's will?"

"I doubt if she can. But maybe she can throw light on the Milnes—or the sort of groups Jack might've got in touch with—or the ponies—"

"Ye-es, I s'pose you're right. We'd better take something ... "

"Yes. But look—if you'd rather go back to the hotel—it's on our way—and I can have a quick chat and come back—"

"No. I'm sure Frank'd want me to see it through."

That was the closest I got to saying "Damn Frank!"

The house was no trouble to find and I got out our pavlova in its cardboard box and we trudged up the outside staircase. A light was on at the top and we were nearly there when the door burst open and a woman stood silhouetted.

There hadn't been time to speculate on Dr Day; she must specialise, I thought, or surely she'd be busy on a Saturday night? But GP or specialist she was undoubtedly one of a kind. Her grey hair was in a long plait; she was wearing a white shirt and a khaki bib-and-brace overall and her feet were bare. Despite her loud voice (and her occasional boisterous laugh) she was thin with unusually beautiful hands. After introducing ourselves and handing over the box we were ushered into a big airy room painted white with lots of brilliant red and green cushions and nasturtiums spilling over hanging macrame containers.

"Now! Drinks first—or are you too hungry? I've got—" she turned to a white-painted shelf and looked at it as though she'd forgotten it was there, "sherry, gin, advocaat, creme de menthe—" she looked at Dell, "have you ever tried advocaat and lemonade? I find it nice and refreshing."

Dell agreed, possibly because it seemed simplest, and I said I'd have the same. Dr Day came back with our glasses and sat down on the sofa, tucking her feet under her. I could see Dell having reservations; in her book people should 'be their age'. But I was rather taken with the exuberant doctor. She struck me as the sort of person you either like or don't like but never feel neutral when her name comes up.

"Where do you practise?" I said while I debated how much to tell her.

"Oh! I'm not that sort of doctor! I lecture in Philosophy at Sydney Uni. Now! Do tell me how you're involved with Timor."

Jack's story was starting to lose its novelty value. I was tempted to add a few artistic variations. But Dr Day gave it her undivided attention and at the end said: "Well! Isn't that fascinating! The Case of the Missing Millions!"

Dell's glance was definitely severe. For this woman, pretending to be half her age, to expropriate *her* brilliant title! But Dr Day misunderstood and said apologetically, "I'm terribly sorry. Descending to levity when your friend has just died—"

"That's all right. The whole business is a mixture of the sad and the bizarre. But I wonder—have you ever met or heard of the Milnes? I don't know what he lectures in but I assume something to do with Indonesia."

"Oh yes! I know who you mean now. Old Handy-Pandy Milne!"

"I beg your pardon?" Poor Dell. She had no reason to stand up for Georgina's husband but neither did she wish to hear more seedy sexual revelations.

"Handy-Pandy?" I said drily.

"You know? One of those dreadful men who can't go past a female student without touching her? But, aside from that, he belongs to what I call the 'CSIS touts'—" I thought she was saying 'kiss' and pictured the estimable academic doing some on-campus pimping. "C-S-I-S," she said casually, "stands for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and is a Jakarta 'think-tank' with close links to the Indonesian military. It became known when Gough Whitlam went to Timor under its auspices in 1982 and claimed he'd gone there as a guest of the Red Cross. I use it to refer to those academics in the Indonesia lobby who are so dog-like and tail-waving that I suspect them of getting some Jakarta money under the table. Of course the ones who've made their whole career out of analysing and interpreting Indonesia are usually not prepared to do anything which might risk their ability to enter Indonesia—yet in fact few of them are as knowledgeable or as respected as someone like Professor Anderson in the United States who's been banned from Indonesia for several decades—so I think there's a moral in there somewhere! More?" she indicated our glasses but Dell clutched hers tight as though she daren't risk more till she'd had a chance to observe its long-term effects.

No doubt Dr Day's students enjoyed her lectures for the pithy quality she brought to everything she said but it all seemed very far away from a paddock of small grey ponies.

"I wonder if you'd be able to find out for us, then, whether Dr Milne has been doing anything this weekend—a seminar or something like that—seeing we couldn't get on to him in Armidale?"

"Can do," and, as Dell obviously wasn't going to surrender her glass, she said, "Shall we eat then? It's all ready," and we moved across to the scrubbed pine table with its red-check place mats. The 'pot luck' was an egg and fish quiche, a large bowl of salad which had odd things like capers and carraway seeds in it, and lots of garlic bread.

The surroundings were very light and pleasant but I'd seen Dell dart little looks at the dust on the chair rungs, the vase of daisies which should've gone

out yesterday, and I knew she was thinking things about women who aren't domestically minded.

"So you're involved with the—well, the East Timor supporters here in Sydney?"

"Oh! Of course. The Australia East Timor Association mainly. But there's quite a big refugee community here now—when I say big I mean a couple of thousand—and we've helped put on some cultural things—but every time I go round putting up posters at uni the Indonesian students come round and pull them down or deface them—well! I shouldn't say that seeing I've never caught anyone in the act! But there's always been various kinds of harassment—minor harassment—directed at Timor supporters—phones tapped, mail tampered with, that sort of thing—I remember one group when it started up years ago—the local ASIO rep came round and removed the number plates from everyone's cars—"

"How extraordinary!" Dell said, neatly putting down her knife and fork.

"Childish, isn't it? But it's the same sort of thing used to happen to people seen as Commies back in the fifties—and you can see their reasoning—check on identities, waste people's time, scare off anyone who isn't strongly committed ... it took most of the old Timor vets years to get up the courage to go public with any sort of support but the ones who decided to jump in, boots and all, like Cathal Kelly, have been wonderful. I hadn't heard of Jack Hodge so I can't tell you how involved he was—and I certainly hadn't ever heard anything about anyone breeding ponies—"

"He was rather a recluse," I said mildly.

"But it's a wonderful idea!" Dr Day said suddenly. "The more I think about it the more I like it."

For the first time Dell's disapproving barrier seemed to slip; Dr Day must have *some* good points if she liked Jack's idea.

"Do you? I have doubts about it. Why do you like it?"

"Hold on two ticks and I'll show you." She sprang up, still chewing—she never appeared to notice when she waved her knife like a fencer limbering up or spoke with a full mouth or dropped crumbs—and went to a bookshelf.

"This just came out—it's by an Indonesian academic as a matter of interest—and he gives these figures—" she started flipping with buttery fingers, "yes, here he's saying there were 95,000 horses in East Timor in 1979 and 23,000 in 1987—but it gets even worse when you go back to the pre-invasion years," she began on the second book she'd pulled down, " ... back in 1973 there were 139,000 horses—so even allowing for the figures not being absolutely accurate you can see how devastating the loss of ponies has been ... traditionally, every Timorese family had at least one pony—to take things to market and, in poorer families who couldn't afford buffaloes as well, to do the ploughing—and the Indonesians certainly haven't been handing out motor-bikes or tractors to make up for the loss! And, of course, the smaller your core of breeding stock the poorer your quality is going to become ... so yes, maybe it's not the most *immediately* practical way of helping the Timorese but it's going to

be a wonderful help in the long run."

Eventually I took Dell, yawning, back to the hotel and she said, as though I was either five or ninety-five, "Now, straight off to bed, Bob," but tired or not tired I lay there ages thinking 'yes, but where is that damn will? I'm running out of ideas'—

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Next morning we were slow to get going. Dell insisted, over breakfast, she must go home and start putting the cottage to rights. I was reluctant to let her touch anything; and not only because it might be the only evidence I could come up with that someone had tried to warn us off. At about half-past-nine I rang Dr Day without much hope; either she'd be an early riser and out for the day or she'd be still in bed and annoyed at being bothered. But she said, "Oh hi there! On the trail again?"

I thanked her for the very nice dinner at such short notice; no point in telling her Dell had said on the way back to the hotel, "I don't know why people always have to spoil their salads by putting things in them." And had anything come to her since then that might help me? I don't know if she recognised the plea of the desperate but she hesitated, then said, "This isn't evidence—but the Indonesians have always been fond of 'causing' car accidents when they want to remove someone without too much fuss—well, I'm sure they're not the only ones who think 'nothing like a good smash to tidy things up'—but I couldn't help wondering about Jack Hodge's accident—"

"It was our intelligence rather than the Indonesians I was going to ask you about—but I have difficulty believing Jack was a threat to anybody—"

"There's a character going round now, making claims about our lot giving her orders to kill people here and there, I've no idea how reliable any of her claims *are*—but once you have people who don't have to worry about *proving* someone is a threat—well!"

"Even so ... Jack?"

"Excuse me a tick! Must just turn off the stove ... Jack? I'm not sure. Maybe not the man himself ... but I've been thinking about Handy-Pandy ... most of the organisations with support from Jakarta are awash with money—but he still might like to be seen as being the provider of some of that money ... he's one of those people who have a high profile but never really seem to get very far up the ladder. But if we turn it round the other way—the Timorese and their supporters have never had sixpence to scratch with—it's always a matter of taking the hat round, running stalls, you know the business? So if it became known that a conservative New England grazier had left a couple of million to them, even if only in a roundabout way—the difference it could make would be mind-boggling. People naturally want to be on 'the winning side', if I can call it that—even though Indonesia's got just as much to gain by getting out—but we've always had to struggle against all those nice people who come up with a face like a month of wet weekends and say 'It's terribly sad but there's nothing that can be done—what hope do half-a-million Timorese with a few captured rifles have against a hundred and ninety million Indonesians with the latest

Western technology?'—oh yes, I like your Jack Hodge—I just wish he'd been in the habit of speaking to the media!"

I couldn't help smiling. Yet I wasn't absolutely sure I *did* like Jack Hodge. Of course things happen under cover of war that wouldn't be done in peace—but I've yet to meet a convicted rapist I'd take home to dinner ... inadequacy can be sad, it can also be damn nasty ...

"Yes. Well, thank you for that. It's been a big help."

"Can I talk you into coming along to our next meeting?" she said cheerfully.

"No. Not yet. If I have an asset in this case it's a degree of impartiality." It sounded like a cop-out and, to my surprise, I found I wanted Petra Day to like me—though I needed to ask someone about her; maybe Dr Milne for his appraisal when I caught up with him?

"I understand. Well, look, any time you've got a spare evening—I'm fairly busy this week—but try me—" Had Dr Day taken a shine to me? I didn't mind the idea at all. Dell had called her 'one of those women' by which she refers to anyone from a lesbian to a woman who gives her husband takeaway meals—I hadn't asked what she meant this time—but the boisterous philosopher had struck me as one of those rare people who get a lot out of life. Even so, background, useful as it might someday prove to be, wasn't leading me to anything, least of all Jack's will.

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Well, if I wouldn't take her home Dell felt we should visit Barbara. Barbara? I said a flat no.

"Oh come on, Bob! Don't be petty. We could have tea with her and hear her news—"

"I have not the slightest desire to hear her news—"

"I really think—"

"No!"

My dislike *was* petty—no point in pretending otherwise—but you can't turn the clock back and regain feelings that died years ago.

"How do you think Rachel feels with the two of you behaving—"

"Rachel doesn't *feel*—she's doing her best to turn into a surfing zombie." This wasn't fair to Rachel—though there *were* moments ...

"You and Barbara had all those years together—" Dell and Barbara had always got along amicably but I doubted, now, whether I'd ever felt anything for Barbara beyond a tepid affection. Maybe that was unfair.

"So where was Barbara when all that shit was being chucked at me—running full pelt for her lawyer—"

"You shouldn't use awful words like that—"

"Oh, for crying out loud! Look, I am *not* going to see Barbara. But get in the car—come on—and I'll run you straight round!"

My frustration over my lack of ideas was spilling into the wrong channel. Everything about my old life here, but especially Barbara, had ceased to matter, I think on the day I met Moira. But Dell didn't know about Moira—and Moira

was dead so she never would—so it wasn't her fault for trying to get Barbara and me together again. Dell got in the car, looked flustered and cross. I drove her to the house in Surry Hills and managed to park a short way past it. How I'd hated that house—or what Barbara had done to it: the over-heavy curtains, the closed-up feel with cigarette smoke impregnating things (had Barbara started getting on my nerves when I gave up smoking?), Barbara's collection of china cats waiting everywhere for an unwise elbow or blundering toe.

With luck Barbara would've moved a male friend in and Dell'd have to say in embarrassment, "I was just passing by and popped in for a quick hullo"—and Barbara could say, at her snappiest, "Better make it extra quick then." But Dell rang and the door was opened by Barbara still in her *dressing-gown* and the two of them walked down the path, along the footpath and, next thing, Barbara was poking her uncombed head in the car window. "Hello, Bob."

Her hair was unnaturally black. It made her pale skin look paler and puffier.

"Hullo, Barb." She hated Barb; she said it sounded like an American trying to say Bob. "Would you like Dell for an hour or two?"

Barbara didn't look pleased by the prospect. Even if there was no one sharing the house it was sure to be a mess—and Dell and mess don't belong together. "S'pose so. Do you want to come in?"

"No. I've got things to do. But Dell can tell you what's happening if she wants. I'll call back later."

In fact, I was embarrassingly devoid of things to do. I drove round by the Domain and walked across to the Botanic Gardens and eventually found an empty seat with a view of sun sparkling on the harbour and Sunday sailors out in full force.

Maybe it was as well to be without Dell for a while, seeing I had nothing to offer for when she asked, "What next?" Tomorrow I could try and pump Harcourt and Girle. No doubt there were other people I could talk to about Timor, Timor ponies (the thought of approaching 'horsy people' encouraged me to change direction), the AIFFCCS (if that was the acronym Dr Milne used), the ex-service groups Cathal Kelly'd mentioned (no doubt the RSL could point me in the right direction) ... but a will? There was this deadening sense of irrelevancy about all my ideas; probably because I couldn't put aside the belief that if there'd ever been a will there wasn't one now.

If I could somehow think myself into Jack's shoes? I closed my eyes, feeling the sun gentle on my eyelids, and conjured up Jack Hodge at Frank's funeral: a long cadaverous face, a sad Don Quixote face; a soft deep voice, the suit which hung on him with all the set and style of a set of chaff bags, the sense of invisibility caused, I think, by the way he gave out nothing—no presence, no emotion, no physical gestures, by which he might've made contact with the people around him. Though I pushed and pummelled my Sunday afternoon brain it refused to connect Jack with anyone. He truly was one who Walked by Himself. Yet, when he sat down to think about his worldly goods and who should have them, was he struck by his lack of anyone close—and had that startled him into reappraising his life? Was this the answer? Had he intended to

test the Gierkes, to see if they were sufficiently honest and decent and hard-working, to see if they cared enough about his ponies, to see if they were willing to stay on even as he descended into drunken cranky old age? And if they passed his test he would then reward them with his land and his house and responsibility for his dream?

Would he have wanted Dell to give her opinion on them? Would he have trusted her opinion?

Was his will somewhere there in his house in a place which Rose, if she was under less pressure, would sooner or later think of? Was this why the Gierkes had been given their marching orders? Because someone was afraid that, sooner or later, Rose would find the will?

Dell was in a state when I went back to pick her up. Barbara had gone out, leaving her to sit and wait without so much as a cup of tea to while away the time, and there she'd sat, thinking things less and less lawful to be uttered about the 'younger generation'. (Barbara is fifty.) I didn't say it was quite possible there was no tea and no milk in the house anyway. Instead I took her away for tea and scones but it wasn't a lot of help because, though she gave over being cross, she replaced it with a morbid tearful state which couldn't be fixed with tea and scones.

In the end I said, "Look, there isn't a great deal we can do today but tomorrow I'll go and see Jack's stockbroker. If Jack'd stopped trusting his solicitor he might've turned to his broker for advice."

"What about Mr Kelly? Shouldn't we see how he is?"

I wasn't keen on this. The nursing staff would probably have been warned not to let us in the door. But I found a place where Dell could pick out what she thought were flowers suitable for an elderly gentleman then we went in and asked at the desk, only to be told Mr Kelly couldn't have visitors this evening. Not a good prognosis. Dell passed the flowers across and we went out again. As we drove back through Darlinghurst Dell said, "Don't you feel a sort of regret, Bob? Your old stamping ground ... "

"No. There's a limit to how much stamping I can take, more so when I'm the one down—"

"But—if you'd stayed you would've been able to prove—to clear your name."

"Look, those corrupt bastards wanted it to look like they'd cleared out the rotten eggs. Last thing they wanted was an enquiry—not when the big boys were still sitting pretty. Maybe I *could* have forced their hand—and maybe I would've ended up like Jack Hodge, down an embankment. Don't ask me to want to go back to that."

"No-o-o ... " Possibly she wasn't convinced; after all, I still didn't know the truth myself. We drove in silence for a while. Then she said suddenly, "I've never seen the Aquarium, it's s'posed to be quite nice ... "

Who else would call a pack of sharks and rays 'quite nice'? "All right. The Aquarium it is."

"Yes ... Bob, I don't think I like the way Barbara has gone, she's not a bit

like she used to be ... ”

“We all change.”

“Ye-es, I know ... I’d forgotten about the smoke ... ” Probably because my last years with Barbara were a battle of wills—on my part for open windows and Sydney breezes (I won’t say ‘fresh air’), on her part for what she called ‘a cosy atmosphere’—and I occasionally won.

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Harcourt and Girle occupied a new building downtown, a chilly place of dark-tinted windows, black marble, grey carpets. The receptionist in her butter-yellow blouse was a welcome sight but it didn’t mean she was going to let me past her when I asked to speak with the broker who’d handled the business of the late Jack Hodge. So I took out one of my cards which says—‘Detective Inspector Robert Creighton (Ret’d)’—and she decided she could let me have a few minutes with Mr Robert Porley.

“Take a pew,” Mr Porley indicated a comfortable chair with a wave of one fat hand. “Thank you, Ms Simmons.” She obediently backed out and closed the door, leaving me in the ambience of cigar smoke and pigskin and the immense geniality of Mr Porley; I wondered if his subordinates called him Porky behind his back.

“Now, Inspector, how can I help you?” Was he thinking I’d been brought back into the fold for one last case requiring greater discretion than he would normally associate with the NSW Police; there seemed no harm in encouraging the idea. “You understand that I cannot reveal a client’s affairs without—” his expansive gesture was the sort which invited me to slip a couple of thousand into that repulsive hand.

I asked him if Jack had ever discussed his will with him; obviously he would’ve had a tidy portfolio to leave? “Not so much these days—” Porley looked at me over the intimidating expanse of his desk.

“He’d been selling recently?” I tried to think what the market had been doing.

“Not exactly. But we have shifted a certain percentage offshore in the last few years—”

With ponies on my mind my first thought was to wonder if Jack had been sending money, somehow, to Timor.

“Offshore?”

“The Cook Islands.” I couldn’t help a look of astonishment. “It’s a tax haven. Rather useful these days, I might say.”

“Do you have any idea what sort of amounts were involved?”

“I do. But I would not feel at liberty to give out any figures—except for the valuation of his estate for probate.”

“I understand. Did he ever talk to you about his long-term plans for those funds? I suppose you know he had no family?”

“His niece and her husband.”

“Georgina, yes. But I understand he didn’t regard her as family.”

“On the contrary, Inspector. He’d agreed to give a million or thereabouts to

some university think-tank her husband was setting up. I find that extraordinarily generous of him, especially as it would not have been tax-deductible, though of course we had not yet discussed which area of his investments would be providing the funding."

"He came in here and told you that?" I said bluntly.

"No. He was doing it through his solicitor."

"No, Mr Porley. He was not doing it through his solicitor. His solicitor was abusing his position of trust and we will have no difficulty in demonstrating a conflict of interest on the part of Drake and Hynes."

Porley seemed to draw in his soft vulnerable parts. I understood. If you are shifting funds out of reach of the tax man, legally but possibly only just, you don't want to be asked to stand in a witness-box glare of publicity.

"You are suggesting that Mr Hodge did not wish to fund this project?"

"You have to look at it from his point-of-view. He was in East Timor in World War Two. Like all the men there he owed his life to the Timorese. He'd devoted the last years of his life to upgrading a herd of Timor ponies. His niece, totally insensitive to what he saw as a kind of debt, barged in there and wanted a million dollars to send people to Indonesia to study the language and culture—completely ignoring the fact the people Mr Hodge felt an obligation towards were having their language and culture destroyed by those same Indonesians. It would be impolite to Mr Hodge's memory to say he kicked his niece out of his house—but that's about what it boils down to." I was going out on a limb here.

"But that is not really relevant now, is it Inspector? As he didn't get round to making a will all his money will no doubt go to his niece—so if he had felt so strongly about it why didn't he make the effort to have a will drawn up?"

"So far, I have two people, long time friends of Mr Hodge's, neither of whom has any pecuniary interest in his estate, both certain that he did in fact draw up a will. I am sure I can find more but I hoped you might be able to save me a lot of tiresome checking. After all, it would've been natural for Mr Hodge to have mentioned the matter to you—"

"No. I regret not, Inspector. But I wish you well in your search. A word of caution though—there always seems to be a lot of nonsense, people coming out of the woodwork with claims of hidden wills and secret trusts, when a man like Mr Hodge dies."

"Well, thank you for your time, Mr Porley. By the way, you might like to know that one of your 'people coming out of the woodwork' is my mother—and I would back her integrity before that of Georgina Milne or Gordon Hynes."

"Naturally," he murmured, unfazed. "Good day to you, Inspector."

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I picked Dell up from Abbey's bookshop and we went and had lunch.

"Could he help you, Bob?"

"Possibly. But he preferred not to."

"Oh." Her face fell. "We're not getting on very fast, are we?"

"No. But he did let slip one thing which intrigued me. Jack was putting money into, or through, the Cook Islands which, it seems, are a tax haven, and

I'd doubt he was putting it there for the benefit of either Georgina or the Gierkes." She mused over this while I ordered two helpings of shepherd's pie with apple charlotte to follow.

"I still don't understand," she said at last. "What would be the point of that?"

"Many people would think keeping the tax man out of their millions was reason enough."

"But I'm not sure Jack would've thought like that ... "

"No. Neither do I. And I have the germ of an idea ... "

For a while I ate steadily, begging it to burst forth into brilliant life but not wildly hopeful. Dell ate too but kept snatching anticipatory looks at me.

"I think it has two sides. Jack needed someone to care for his ponies in the meantime. To keep them in good health. To follow whatever breeding program he had in mind. So the Gierkes are the obvious people for that side of things. Even though they believed them to be brumbies they still cared about them. But, if Jack was going to get several hundred horses back to Timor some day, and he wouldn't know how many years it might be before he could do that—then he'd have to make provision for that. So if he set up a fund here and it took ten years before the ponies could go back—then what with taxes, inflation—and of course Georgina always looking for ways to milk it, and it mightn't be hard to sweet talk someone into believing her husband's fund would 'channel' the money ... well, in ten years' time there mightn't *be* any fund left ... " (I should've tried to find out the extent of Porley's contacts with both Hynes and the Milnes; had Jack been sober when he signed that Power of Attorney?)

Dell had followed this ramble with a small tight frown. But all she said was: "So what do we do next?"

"I think—first—I might go and see Dudley Waters." He was an old colleague of mine, a man who'd make a three-toed sloth look hyperactive, but he got away with it simply because of his reputation, undeserved he liked to tell me, as a financial whizz-bang. Even if he couldn't help at least it might help to run my ideas past a mind more cynical than Dell's. "What would you like to do this afternoon?"

"I thought—if you think it'd help—I could go to the library and read something about Timor."

"Good idea. Just don't get side-tracked." I gave her a conspiratorial grin. I parked her at the State Library and spent the next hour with Dudley. But I had, again, that feeling of marking time. He was interested in my story, he took copious notes, he promised to see if there was anything to be seen on the Milnes, Gordon Hynes, and the Gierkes; but I didn't really expect anything. Gordon Hynes might've abused other Powers of Attorney but, if so, it would almost certainly have done the rounds in a relatively small place like Armidale.

Dell, too, had made copious notes but more in the hope the activity itself would suggest she wasn't a millstone round my neck; she didn't seem to know how to organise them or what could conceivably be of use. I glanced through. She'd also made photocopies of the few pictures she had found, mostly from a

book called ‘Eden to Paradise’ (it didn’t surprise me to find it was an old book)—and for the first time something seemed to come alive for me. This pretty woman, for instance, holding a baby; I thought of Jack and didn’t know if I was thinking of the Jack of fifty years ago or the Jack who woke every morning to his ponies scampering round with frost in their hooves.

I rang Marta Bognor but she was out and it didn’t seem worth leaving a message. I thought of ringing Petra Day but it was probably too soon for her to have come up with Dr Milne’s weekend doings, if any. The awful feeling of another day gone without result almost pushed me into heading back up to Leura and asking Dell to steer me towards mop and bucket.

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We had dinner in a place in Oxford Street which had dim alcoves and candles in bottles; Dell was at first intrigued, then doubtful—what if there were black specks in our dinner? We wouldn’t see them in time.

“With a bit of luck we won’t taste them either.”

She leant forward earnestly and a pin slipped into her gravy. If she’d been about to take me to task for being facetious, cynical, or whatever, the moment passed in fishing for it.

Yet, all through the meal, I was plagued by the teasing thought: there *had* to be other strands to Jack’s life. Recluse or not, there had to be friends, acquaintances, old buddies, business cronies ... Dell was convinced he hardly ever got off the property except for coming to Sydney once or twice a year ... and maybe she was right. But, in that case, what else did Jack do when he came to Sydney? An hour or two with Robert Porley, granted, but what then? Tea with Dell. But that still left a lot of time unaccounted for. Did he seek out young female company (or male), sneak into grotty strip shows at the Cross, perve along Bondi Beach? Did he buy suits, go round car showrooms, window-shop in saddlery stores? Did he attend concerts, visit art galleries, go to the races ...

“Dell,” I felt a sudden urgency, “where did Jack stay when he came to Sydney? In a hotel or with someone?”

“Oh! I—no ... I think he stayed in a guest house—yes, I’m nearly sure he did. Why? Is it important?”

“Was it always the same place, do you know?”

She sat and chewed that one over, vaguely massaging her temples as though to stimulate memory. “Yes, I’m nearly sure it was—and I think it was somewhere out our way—Randwick or Coogee—or Clovelly ... but I’m sure he never said a name ... being Jack ... ” but after that assertion she seemed to withdraw and become uncertain again, “but maybe he *did* and it’s just my memory ... ”

“Maybe. Don’t try to force it. If it’s there, it’ll probably come back. Sleep on it. And don’t worry if he didn’t tell you the name—maybe he gave a different clue—the name of the street, if it had a view of the beach—a garden—was it big or small—the name of the person running it—some little thing that might give us a line.” If necessary I’d check every guest house between Watson’s Bay and Cronulla—but I didn’t want to. The number could run into hundreds.

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Dell came down to breakfast, heavy-eyed, and I felt a heel. I could see her there worrying at it, hour after hour, 'if only I could remember a name it'd save Bob a whole lot of checking—if only I'd listened more carefully to Jack all those times—'

"Any luck?" I said casually.

"No, I'm afraid not ... the only thing I'm reasonably sure about is Jack saying one time something about 'out Coogee way' ... " She looked like a little girl who's left her homework pad at home and can't convince her teacher the work really is done.

"Right. Well, have some breakfast then we'll see what's listed for that area. Something might ring a bell. If not, I'll pitch in and ring around."

"That'll be an awful lot of work."

I thought of those years of tedium, checking, cross-checking, re-checking, with just the occasional Eureka! thrown in. I said something of this to Dell.

"Well, I s'pose—if you say so."

She offered to do the checking. I sat and pondered on the idea of seeking an expert's advice on moving money to the Cook Islands; did they actually move *money*, how easy was it, what sort of people availed themselves of this service, were there problems in bringing funds back, did the government try and get its mitts on such funds or were they seen as effectively beyond its reach. More importantly, people other than Porley must know of the offshore account or he wouldn't have volunteered that information. Was the NSW government already working to bring the money back?

Dell suddenly looked up from the Yellow Pages, her face glowing with excitement. "Bob! Look at this! There's a place called Timor Lodge! Might that be it do you think—or would that be too obvious?"

"Come on, let's go. Obvious or not, it gives us a good place to start—and you never know ... "

"I'll get my handbag. I won't be long."

Timor Lodge wasn't on the beach, in fact quite a hefty walk away, but its residents would've had a decent view. And it was trim and trig and attractive; white-painted, almost Mediterranean in tone, with red geraniums in big white terracotta pots and red-and-white metal awnings over the windows. The lawn was green. The windows sparkled. The lobby inside the front door was comfortable if unexciting. From somewhere upstairs came the busy whine of a vacuum-cleaner. I looked round for a bell. The noise was switched off and a wispy head tied up in a pink scarf peered down the stairwell at us.

"Can I help yer?"

"Yes. Could we speak to the owner or the manager?"

"Sure. Don't go away." She turned and lifted up a long mournful cry. "Paaaat-y! You'rrre wanted downstaaairs!"

A minute later a big blonde woman with her hair done in elaborate curls and pinned up like a metallic yellow tiara lumbered down. She had the beginnings of a double chin and her massive bust was squeezed inside a yellow-

and-white frock and covered in a white apron. “Hullo there!” She was raucous, cheerful, a bit overwhelming. “Come on in.”

Like someone chasing chooks she herded us into the adjacent office and, as the vacuum-cleaner began its ear-paining campaign again, she pushed the door shut. But before she could ask what we wanted in the way of rooms Dell snatched up a photo from the shelf beside her and cried, “Why! It’s Jack!” She sounded stunned.

The woman’s smile became fixed. “You know Jack Hodge?”

“He was a friend of my mother’s for many years—”

“Was?”

“I’m sorry, yes—that’s partly why we’re here—Jack died several weeks ago.”

She went pale and collapsed into the nearest chair, like a large animal going down under anaesthetic. “Could I get you something?” I felt rotten putting it to her without preparation.

She gave a long sigh. “So—poor old Jack ... ” She lifted her head as though it’d suddenly become unbearably heavy. “Could you just pop through there and ask Birtles to put the kettle on?”

Birtles sounded like a pet canary but proved to be a very old man in a grey flannel singlet and baggy trousers. He merely nodded and I went back to support the good lady in her moment of shock. In the meantime Dell’d told her who we were and now our hostess was saying, “I’m Patty Blatter, call me Patty ... my goodness, that was a shock you gave me—and I wonder why nobody told me?”

“You didn’t see it in the paper?” It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that Georgina had confined any notices to New England papers … but had Jack’s death, as a news item, reached Sydney?

“Don’t read ’em most of the time,” she said frankly.

The tea came and she busied herself pouring cups and passing milk and sugar round. Dell joggled my elbow. I followed her gaze. Beyond the very attractive photo of Jack in uniform was another of him with a pony and a small dark boy with a very wide white grin. It was like coming home, coming at last to the real Jack—yet, despite the strength of this feeling, I felt Jack Hodge would always elude us.

“Who did you expect to get in touch with you?” I said quietly.

“Well, his family maybe—and certainly his lawyer. This place belongs to him so I’d need to know what’s going to happen with it. It’s not the money—” Her big, rather popping blue eyes filled with tears and she suddenly and endearingly lifted her apron to her face. “I’m sorry—it’s awful to be talking of such things.”

“The guest house belongs to Jack?”

“Yes. He named it. It’s not a big business—but we’re always full ... and it’d be part of his estate, after all.” (The part to be dealt with after the Gierkes and the ponies?)

“Yes. But that’s partly why we’re here. We’ve been told by Jack’s solicitor he didn’t leave a will and therefore when they sort his estate out—it’ll probably

go to his niece—but two people have told us, including Dell, that he *did* make a will—so whether it's confusion, or incompetence, or something more sinister—well, we just don't know yet."

She sipped her tea and her cheeks began to take up their gentle pink glow again. "Jack left some things here, with me, when he was down here just before Christmas—" This was news to Dell, that Jack'd been down and hadn't said hello, unless he'd rung when she was out, but it surprised me less than it would a week ago; I was learning how little we knew about Jack Hodge. "I don't know what it is, just a packet." She got up and went to a small wall safe hidden behind a cupboard door covered in a lairy wallpaper of brown stripes entwined with larger-than-life yellow roses. The room obviously doubled as office and private sitting-room.

I hoped she didn't make a habit of opening her safe in front of strangers but in normal times I suspect she didn't lack for business nouse. I'd met women like her, minus that saving humour and good nature, running a dozen Kings Cross boarding houses.

She took out a large white envelope and was about to open it when I said hurriedly, "No, don't. We need to have a couple of independent witnesses—just in case."

"Oh! Yes, I s'pose so." She put her head round the door and said, "Birtles, can you spare a minute?" He hadn't struck me as overburdened. Then she bawled up the stairs, "Tomasina! Can you come down a tick?"

Dell put down her cup and her expression, as she watched Patty Blatter, was a strange mix of the excited and the apprehensive.

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First out was a letter which Mrs Blatter read aloud slowly—to the effect that if he hadn't left anything with Gordon Hynes post-dating this document this must then be taken as the disposal of his assets.

So this was Jack's interim will?

Birtles and Tomasina both craned forward as though they knew their big moment in life had come. It was a simple document. It gave Timor Lodge and its land and fittings to Mrs Patricia Melinda Blatter; it gave Maliana, its house, farm buildings, machinery, and all stock except the Timor ponies, to Harvey Daniel Gierke and Rosemary Doreen Gierke.

In both cases there was also a short list of investments to go to the legatees.

There was no mention of Georgina Milne. But the key bit, from our point of view, was about the ponies: when East Timor becomes independent (no ifs or buts) the ponies were to be returned there and the special fund in the Cook Islands, and he gave details, was to be used to cull, vet, transport, and finally enable as many Timorese families as possible to be provided with a mare and funds to buy harness and fodder, while the stallions were to go to the agricultural college at Fatumaca near Baucau.

But (this knowledge made me nervous) there was no suggestion of how this money was to be used if anything happened to the ponies. Jack hadn't specified it to go to Timor regardless. Without the ponies it would become the residuary

estate and up for grabs—and with the Gierkes and Mrs Blatter already provided for it wouldn't be hard for Georgina to claim it.

Was this why the ponies had been booked into the abattoir? If so, it suggested someone *had* known exactly what Jack intended.

Jack's mistake was in not mentioning his niece. If he'd given her something, if he'd stated that under no circumstances was she to receive anything, if he'd insisted that any unused money was to go to a specific charity—then the ponies should be safe. But then this was only a draft will. Maybe it was this problem he'd wanted to discuss with Dell? Maybe, but somehow I doubted it.

Was there a superceding document? Jack had had six months to make up his mind.

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"I wonder—could I use your phone? I'd like to ring Jack's solicitor in case he's happened upon anything since we spoke to him. Have you got an extension so you can listen in?"

"No. I'm afraid that's a separate line out there. I know! I've got a little tape recorder—would that do?"

"Just the thing."

We set it up. It was a bit awkward but I got through to Hynes' secretary, then with talk of an emergency through to the solicitor himself. I identified myself, said I was sorry to bother him again, but I needed to check whether, now he'd had more time to think on the matter, Jack had in fact come in at any time in the last six months and discussed his will. There was a considerable hesitation (which told against the man; in my book anyway) then he said, "No, I'm afraid not, Mr Creighton. I appreciate how your mother might wish—but, you know these things happen—especially when clients are getting old and, sometimes, a little forgetful—they mean to tidy things up ... "

"Yes. Never mind. The important thing is—we've found Jack's interim will. So it looks as though it'll now become Jack's final list of bequests."

There was an audible gasp then Hynes said wearily, "Well, that will make my life easier. Would you—would it be possible for you to tell me what's in it?"

"It's very simple. Timor Lodge and fittings to Mrs Blatter. Maliana, buildings and cattle to the Gierkes. The ponies to go back to Timor. His money in the Cook Islands to be used for their travel and getting them re-established there."

"Any mention of Mrs Milne?"

"No."

"Well—thank you, Mr Creighton. Where is the will now, may I ask?"

I was reluctant to tell him anything about Mrs Blatter. (And had he been hoping to have everything securely tied up for the Milnes before he contacted Mrs Blatter?) I said coolly, "It's on its way to the Probate Office. I'll send you a copy—" (I squashed the temptation to say I was giving it to Ivor Green.)

"Could you fax it? I'll give you the number."

"All right." I could think of no real reason to say no, except it might

encourage the Milnes to take steps; unfortunately I didn't take time to think this through.

Mrs Blatter, capable woman that she undoubtedly was, opened another door and drew out a small photo-copier which, with slow jerks, coughed out half-a-dozen copies. I asked her if she'd mind a couple of copies of the photos and Jack's covering letter as well.

"If only he'd told you," Dell said wistfully.

"I think Jack wasn't like that—all these years I didn't know about you—and you didn't know about me. I don't think Jack had many friends but the few he had I think he chose very carefully. But he hardly sort of—what's the word I want?—*intruded* into their lives, if you see what I mean. He just left them to get on with life—but wanted them to be nice to him in the times when he turned up on their doorstep ... "

I suspected Patty Blatter had understood Jack better than Dell had, possibly because her life had brought her into contact with ... no, there were all those years Dell had spent in her father's corner shop ... so maybe it had more to do with personality, generation, expectations ...

Eventually we said goodbye and Mrs Blatter, even with the promise of her new status as property owner, grew tearful again.

As we drove away, Dell said with flushed colour, "I s'pose she and Jack, you know, they had an affair, do you think? It seems so strange to have known nothing about her."

I tried to picture Mrs Blatter in Jack's arms and failed. There was affection there certainly. But I was almost sure Jack had been attracted to her for different reasons: because she was capable, tidy, kind, good-humoured; because she ran the place with integrity regardless of whether Jack was there or not.

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I bought a packet of salad sandwiches, a newspaper and two cups of coffee and we sat for several minutes in the car. Dell glanced through the paper while I made a list of things still to be done.

"Oh dear!" she said suddenly. "Mr Kelly died yesterday."

I looked at the little piece she pointed out, headlined, 'Timor Veteran Dies'. Cathal Kelly had lived a busy life, training to be a lawyer after being invalided out of the army in early 1944, his first high profile case in the late forties being to act for several Indonesians from the notorious Bovun Digul prison camp in Dutch New Guinea who did not wish to be 'repatriated'—but his retirement after a prominent legal career (during which someone had dubbed him the 'Saint of Lost Causes') had been given over to writing two books 'The Law and Your Neighbour' and 'The Law on the Factory Floor" and to his support for the people of East Timor. I wondered who'd provided the information to the paper. His family? His old mates? Petra? And I thought if Jack Hodge had asked to be remembered that way then all the running to and fro of this last week wouldn't have been necessary.

At our hotel Mr Conti handed me a telephone message. "The dame said she was off to Queensland this afternoon but hoped this was the info you wanted."

The message said ‘AM. UWS campus. Fri/Sat. Seminar.’

When I’d tidied up a few odds and ends in town I took Dell home to Leura. The Katoomba police were still ‘making enquiries’. Two cars had been sighted near the house, or maybe the same car through two sets of eyes. I gave them Andrew Milne’s name and said it might be worth checking what he drove.

Then we fell to. A few things were beyond repair but in an hour the place was back to Dell’s usual standard. She made tea and got out a packet of biscuits while I arranged for a locksmith to come and do all her doors. In the meantime we left the pile of furniture against the back door.

Next on my list were the Gierkes. I told Rose about the will and said I’d be up tomorrow. “It’s such a relief to know everything is going to be all right now,” Dell said cheerfully as she bundled our cups into the sink. “I s’pose you’ll be going home tomorrow, Bob, or can I talk you into a couple more days here?”

“I think I’d like to make sure Gordon Hynes *does* act on that will. With so much money at stake—”

“You mean,” she opened her old eyes to their widest and pulled away an unwanted strand of hair, “you think he still might try to—diddle somebody? But so many people *know* all about it now.” She’d been looking cheerful. We’d done the right thing by Jack. All was now revealed. She could relax, chirp a little. And, instead, I was sloshing cold water around.

“It all seems so appallingly *clumsy*—that business with Hynes, Georgina’s photo, the claim that Jack was putting on sheep in place of the ponies. Do they really think we’re all idiots or is it to make us relax, think everything is hunky-dory now—”

“I really don’t think much of that expression, Bob, it’s very American—but what could they do *now?*”

Of course. The ponies. Suddenly I felt a twinge of apprehension. That sort of unease you feel when you can’t see the person you’ve got bailed up. I rang Rose Gierke back, rang and rang, refusing to give in, and eventually she came panting to the phone. “Look, I’m not easy in my mind about any of this. I still don’t trust them not to try some funny business with the ponies tomorrow. Is there somewhere you could *hide* the best ponies—the stallions, the best mares—till tomorrow evening?”

Rose was quick to see the problem could not be laid to rest, not yet. But a hiding place? There was a long silence and I felt her running possibilities by and rejecting them. At last she said slowly, “Yeah—I’ve got an idea ... ”

“Okay. But go about it as quietly and unobtrusively as you can. It’s just possible someone’s keeping an eye on the place.” Georgina and Gordon Hynes, so keen to strip the house of anything of value, might well attribute the same acquisitiveness to the Gierkes.

“Oh!” Rose drew her breath in sharply. “They could come in the back road an’ we wouldn’t see ’em—well, I don’t reckon we would—”

“Okay, I’ll leave it with you, but probably the sooner the better, they may try to barge in very early in the morning when you’re still asleep.” Our padlock wouldn’t stand up to an assault by a semi-trailer.

I thought she was taking me seriously but I didn't know enough about the Gierkes to know whether they were in the habit of putting off till tomorrow ...

Dell and I had dinner eventually, watched a bit of TV, talked over the day; Dell because she felt she'd earned the right to sit back and enjoy recapping a little, myself because I couldn't rid myself of the feeling I'd missed something important along the way. Dell was asleep but I'd just got into bed when the phone rang. I stumbled out to the sitting-room, wishing whoever it was could've waited till morning.

It was Rose Gierke. She could barely talk coherently. Someone, hidden up in the hills, was shooting all the ponies.

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Dell, wakened by the phone, came and hovered, her hair straggling over her nightie. I checked with Rose: yes, she'd called the police; yes, she'd call Hynes and the Milnes; yes, she'd get on to the RSPCA. Harvey and the dog had gone out. She was scared stiff he'd get shot too.

I told her I was on my way.

It was worse than being on night work. It was too late to fly into Armidale. I thought of those hours and hours behind the wheel and my energy, what little I had, seemed to seep out and trickle away.

Dell insisted on coming. She'd keep me awake on the drive, she said, so I bundled her well-wrapped into the car with the Thermos and a packet of biscuits. But by the time we flashed through Singleton she was fast asleep and didn't waken when I stopped for petrol in Scone and strong coffee in Tamworth. There wasn't much traffic but the cold grey tree trunks seemed endless, the curving highway seemed endless; my beration of myself seemed endless.

Who had I misjudged, underestimated? Who hadn't I? Was it Hynes desperate as his last chance to puddle in millions slipped by? Was it the (suspected) yobbos who'd forced Jack off the road having another go at him? Was Hynes, the compulsive gambler, staking everything on one last throw? Or was he a pathetic little man without willpower manipulated and used by people stronger and cleverer than himself? Was it the Milnes? I was gradually coming round to the view that if Handy Pandy could trash Dell's cottage then mightn't he be the one who'd run Jack off the road? But was he doing it for himself, for his wife, for his precious foundation—or was there someone more powerful, more ruthless, behind him? *Had* he trashed Dell's cottage?

I was guessing. And, in the end, I pushed it all aside and tried to think about the book I planned to write. Someday. It was going to be an appreciation of three early writers here—Guy Boothby, Nat Gould, and Fergus Hume—and I thought I'd call it 'Three Man in a Cab'; not that I really believed I'd ever get round to writing it but thinking about it, doing some haphazard research, had filled in quite a few pleasant hours.

Dawn was in the sky, chilling the air, as we turned into the gate at Maliana. The hills were turning from soot-grey to violet. The trees were stark twisting silhouettes. The padlock was hanging loose. I hoped the police had come promptly but I knew there was a strong chance they hadn't.

Magpies began a distant carolling. Kookaburras took over, rowdily drowning them out, then fading away as abruptly. Profound silence would've been appropriate as we drove slowly down the slope and gazed upon death strewn untidily across the lucerne flats.

- xxvi -

There was a car there, in fact three cars. Men in the still dim valley walked to and fro, shining powerful torches on to each inert mound. The horses had panicked and piled into the south-west fence, dragging down posts, wire, crashing over each other, garrotting themselves, bleeding to death. I felt vaguely ill.

So this, instead, was the end of Jack's dream?

A door to the verandah opened and Rose Gierke tumbled out, shrouded in a ragged army coat, and met me half way along the path. She looked about done for. I put my arms around her. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of something like this. I wish I had."

"How could you guess?" she said tonelessly.

"Maybe. Has Hynes or the Milnes come out?"

"No. I only got those machine things."

"Okay. Keep at 'em. Put messages every couple of minutes till they get fed up and answer. Oh, and ring Marta Bognor—" I handed her Marta's card. "She should be at home still. Ask her to bring a photographer with her if possible."

Rose nodded and trailed back to the house. I wondered if she'd been to bed at all. Probably not.

Dell yawned and sat up in the car and tried to tidy her hair and put on a touch of lipstick. A reflex action; there was no one to notice.

The men down on the flats gradually turned from shapes into two uniformed coppers, a man with a bag in one hand, and another with a rifle. I stood and waited as they made their way up to the house. From somewhere (I didn't see him come) Harvey Gierke with his old dog at his heels loomed up. He'd been crying. His face was wet and dirt-streaked, his nose red and dripping.

For a minute he simply stared at me then, without warning, he drew back his hand and swiped me, his knuckles half-clenched, across the face. I staggered back a step; my reflexes dulled by tiredness and cold. His face worked, a terrible heart-breaking mix of fury, confusion, and misery. He believed I was to blame for the ponies getting shot and I couldn't duck the responsibility.

The four men reached us. Harvey turned to them, blurted out something I didn't catch, and stumbled away. The dog slunk away too but not before giving us an oddly assessing look. For several minutes we stood there introducing ourselves then turned towards the house. There didn't seem anything more to be done out here. Rose met us at the door. "I got that lawyer—he said he'd bring Mrs Milne if she was at home."

"Thank you. It's important that they see—" I let it hang.

"I'll get you all some coffee," she said wearily and went away.

"What now?" I looked round the room. Dell sat down, still yawning; she made me want to start.

“There was a case Sunday night,” one of the cops said, “twenty sheep just down the road from here were shot. Looks like we got some trigger-happy bastard doin’ the rounds.”

“Was that in the paper?”

“Yeah. Tuesday.”

“Then I think you’re looking at one of two things. Someone saw that report and thought what a handy cover for getting rid of the ponies—you’d naturally think the two were connected—or the same person did both. The sheep were to blind you to the real issue.”

I had their attention.

“And what might that be? What’s so bloody important about a mob of brumbies—except no one has the right to come on your land and start shootin’.”

“Not brumbies. Those are Timor ponies Jack Hodge was breeding up with the aim of sending them back to Timor some day. He set aside several million dollars for the project—”

“You’re kidding!” the other cop said.

“Then—who’d want to shoot them?” the vet was frowning. “If we’re not just looking at shooting for the sake of killing—for kicks—”

“Unfortunately there’s been a lot of—confusion, shall we say—over Jack Hodge’s will—and if I’m reading the situation right then once the ponies were out of the way the money set aside for their care would be up for grabs—and would almost certainly go to his niece ... ”

“Any idea what sort of money we’re looking at?” This was the older cop, name of Marsh.

“At least two million, probably more.”

“Pheweee!”

“So if these other folk are on their way,” Marsh looked at his watch, probably with his stomach in mind, “then what are you aiming to do when they get here?”

“First I’d like to read out the will, watching them closely. So far as we know the Milnes are the only people who’ve got the incentive of a realistic chance of getting at Jack’s money. No one’s turned up any other close relatives.”

Rose came in with cups on a tray and began to pour out. She’d just taken a seat a little away from us when there was the sound of a car drawing up; a minute later Marta Bognor came bursting on to the verandah and into the room. She’d thrown her clothes on any-old-how but her eyes were sharp and her mouth gleaming, like a starving person thrown a food voucher. “My God! What an awful thing! Those poor bloody ponies!” Dell looked shocked. I’m always surprised by her capacity for being shocked. “John’s gone straight down to start on some pics. I hope that’s okay?”

I thought that’d be how Marta Bognor got results: act now, ask permission later. I might invite her along if I ever get stuck with another ‘case’.

The men merely looked blank, then Marsh shrugged broad placid shoulders. “No harm in it.”

"And I've been busy," Marta charged on. "I've got some news for you."

"I'll get another cup," Rose went out and one of the men gave Marta his chair and went into the hall in search of a couple more.

The dog gave another weary wooff! Too many comings and goings. But these arrivals didn't hurry. Gordon Hynes came up the path, looking strangely stooped, as though he'd aged years in the last few days.

Both Milnes had come and we all stood up, curious and cordial, and began on introductions. Georgina had something of the gaunt look which characterised Jack but in her it had been turned to fullest advantage; she might age but she would always look interesting. She wore expensive astrakhan on her head and shoulders, her slacks were tailored tweed, under them were elegant boots. Her husband was losing his hair but he'd made up for it with a neat moustache and small imperial. He had a long patrician nose and roving eyes. His bearing was autocratic but I suddenly believed absolutely in those wandering hands.

More chairs. More coffee. Rose did the honours but her mouth remained close-set and her eyes wary. There was no sign of Harvey.

"I'm sorry to drag you all out here so early," I began mildly, "but, as you can see, we have a crisis situation on our hands."

"I—" Georgina shook her head; her swept-up hair, not unlike Bronwen Bishop's in style and colour, stayed rock-firm, "Well, really, it's so ghastly—those poor little animals—I mean, I know they were only brumbies but still—"

"Well, that's the crucial point. They weren't brumbies. They represented carefully selected Timor ponies which Jack had spent years upgrading. But what I'd like to do first—" I glanced over at Gordon Hynes, he was staring determinedly at the floor, "is read out Jack's will then everyone will understand just what the situation is."

Young Gellibrand looked unconvinced. How could reading a will solve the case? But I felt the longer I could keep everyone in this room, watching each other, the better the chance of something slipping.

Nobody said "but Jack didn't have a will" or "who is Mrs Blatter?"; it might've been one of those after-the-funeral gatherings to hear a few dull sentences reiterating what everyone had known for years. At the end I looked around but everyone simply sat and looked back gravely. Harvey had come in silently and was now standing behind me, gazing over my shoulder. I didn't particularly want him there.

Dell suddenly startled everybody by saying, " 'There is something about wills which brings out the worst side of human nature. People who under ordinary circumstances are perfectly upright and amiable, go as curly as corkscrews and foam at the mouth, whenever they hear the words 'I devise and bequeath'." I think only Marta Bognor realised it was a quotation; the others put on varied expressions, mostly surprise, but no one commented.

"Well, you can see the problem." I was still gently conversational. "The Cook Islands money, in my reading of it, was linked to the ponies. With the ponies dead that amount may be up for grabs."

Rose opened her mouth, then closed it again. Gordon Hynes had gone back

to looking at the floor, possibly because he'd just realised he'd only shaved half his chin.

"It isn't very nice to be discussing money when—well, when the creatures are just lying out there," Mrs Milne said severely as though I'd been guilty of farting at one of her dinner parties.

"Yes." Marta Bognor looked round brightly. "Do you know—I thought exactly the same thing when I discovered that *someone* had arranged for Jack's ponies to go to the meatworks only two days after he'd died. I thought who'd be so *low* as to do a thing like that? But I guess it's the same sort of mentality which would come and put a photo on his desk after he'd died—even though he'd never wanted any photos round while he was alive."

"I beg your pardon," Georgina uncrossed her long legs. "This is *the* family house, there have always been photos in it."

"Yeah." Rose looked nervous but hadn't relaxed her grimness. "In a box in the back store room."

"What are you referring to?" Marsh looked as though he'd been invited to try a new ball game just imported from Central Africa and hadn't got the hang of the rules.

Ms Bognor opened her capacious shoulder-bag and took out the photo, now wrapped in green tissue-paper. She unwrapped it gingerly. "I had it fingerprinted," she gave what in another woman would've been a saucy look at the two cops, "none of Rose's, none of Jack's."

This, I realised, had to be a bluff. But I sat back and let her strutt her stuff.

"I would assume it's been cleaned at some time." Dr Milne sat back, his manner suggesting this was a remarkably trivial point.

"Not by me, it hasn't." Rose Gierke wouldn't relax till they were gone from her sight. "I wouldn't touch the thing with a bloody pair o' tongs—not with her wantin' to get us out o' the house, quick smart."

"I beg your pardon," Mrs Milne said again. "I have only learnt a few minutes ago about the request that this house should go to you—and I suspect," she shot a sharp look at Gordon Hynes, "there may well be a case of undue influence at work here—"

"Possibly, my dear." Her husband remained maddeningly calm. "But I don't think we should go into that now."

Harvey had moved slowly and silently round the circle, past Dell, past Marta Bognor, and was now standing behind his sister.

"Right," said Marsh. "Well, it'll be a matter of bulldozing a pit later on today. But just a couple of questions for now. Mr Hynes—do you own a firearm?"

"No."

"You, Mrs Milne?"

"No."

"You, Dr Milne?"

"No."

He went through their movements for the previous evening, again without

getting anything obviously useful. I wondered if the university had a shooting club.

"What about last Friday night and Saturday morning? Where were you all then?" I remained disinterested.

"Why? Nothing happened out here, did it?" Georgina, I was coming to understand, was one of those people who must comment on everything, rebut it, query it, expand it.

"No."

"There's no secret about it. We were at a conference in Sydney," Dr Milne, when he chose, had a very engaging smile. But whatever it did to undergraduate hearts it wasn't making any impact here.

"Sydney—or Penrith?"

"There's not much difference these days."

"There is—if you need to get up and back from Leura before breakfast," I said drily. "But I'll leave it to the Katoomba police to check your movements."

Harvey was behind the vet now and staring across at Gellibrand.

"Well, there isn't much more we can do here just now—we'll get all our stuff back to the lab—get a line on the weapons used—tyretracks, footprints, all the usual stuff." Marsh closed his notebook.

"I'm terribly sorry about the ponies," Gellibrand looked up at Harvey. "I know you liked them a lot."

"Yes," Georgina put on a doleful look. "But you must let us get you a couple of ponies to get started again—so you won't miss them so much."

Rose shrugged. "We've still got about fifty here. They'll do to get Jack's breedin' program up an' runnin' again."

Something in Georgina's eyes flickered and suddenly I thought I understood. That clumsiness which had lured me into believing there must be something else, someone bigger, brighter, more canny—now I saw it as the benchmark of their intellectual arrogance. Through their eyes the opposition had consisted of a half-wit, a surly uneducated housekeeper, an elderly widow briefly sentimental about an old friend, her son unenthusiastic but press-ganged into asking a few vague questions about the will—they probably hadn't known of Marta Bognor's interest—and if they'd found out about Patty Blatter she would probably have appeared to them as no more than a superannuated tart; quick off the mark if the bill wasn't paid, a streetwise grasp of small finance but nothing more.

"Oh? I didn't realise ... " Georgina sat back, gave her husband a long glance which seemed to spur him into another engaging smile and a hearty: "Well, that *is* a relief! You're quite sure? I don't suppose you've had time yet to go round the back paddocks—"

"They weren't in no bloody back paddock—you must think we're bloody morons, can't see what you lot are up to—"

Georgina said, "I beg your pardon," yet again. And, "I don't know what you're getting at."

"Yeah. You do. Harve an' me—we always knew what sort of a greedy

bitch you were—we heard you always tryin' to worm the money out o' your uncle—" Rose was becoming fiercely het up. But it was Harvey who suddenly stunned us out of our uncomfortable voyeurism. He was now standing behind Dr Milne. He leant forward and sniffed him.

The doctor, not surprisingly, jerked aside. "Here! What on earth do you think you're doing!"

"Him! It's him! Fella with the guns!" Harvey's big square hands clamped on to the academic's shoulders and almost lifted him out of his chair. Georgina leapt at Harvey and tried to claw his hands away with her long perfect fingernails. Next thing the chair had tipped over and the two men were struggling on the floor with Georgina now grabbing at Harvey's hair in her attempt to drag him off.

Her screeches pierced our ears. The two policemen got up—calmly and stolidly, not hurrying—and moved over to each take Harvey by an arm and pull him off. "Now, now, fella. Take it easy." For a minute or two Andrew Milne simply lay on the floor, then he heaved himself up slowly and scrabbled in a coat pocket for a handkerchief. Blood was pouring from his nose and Rose left the room quietly, returning a minute later with a face cloth wrapped round several ice cubes.

The unfortunate man lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. His wife snatched the cloth away from the housekeeper and pressed it to the bridge of his nose. Dell put a hand on my arm. "I've got aspirin in my bag."

I shook my head. There were more than enough people hovering and hanging over Milne. But I was intrigued to see young Gellibrand also lean forward a little and sniff.

We, that is, my former colleagues, tend to go all out in the search for visual and verbal evidence. I might write a pamphlet someday on the times we neglect the evidence of our noses. There's a limit to what you can explain to a sniffer dog.

I stood up, as though to go to his aid. Even this early in the morning and well-splashed with cologne and breath-freshener Andrew Milne was faintly permeated with that cloying clove smell I recognised as Indonesian kretek cigarettes. I thought of Harvey and Gellibrand and the old dog combing the hills for signs of the shooter, cartridge cases, a dropped cigarette, a chocolate wrapper, the faint whiff of a human being sitting awhile in one place, possibly the evidence of urination. We foul our nests, even fleeting nests.

If there was to be a resolution I was glad it'd begun by means of the man the Milnes had probably seen as the least important.

- xxvii -

Gellibrand stood over the semi-recumbent Milne, looking unexpectedly large. Marta Bognor said boisterously, "How apt!" Dell murmured something, I suppose another quotation, which I didn't catch. Marsh said, "Well, I guess we'd better check the live ponies then we'll be getting along."

Almost everyone stood up and trailed out, Marta looking like a pointer that's been waiting all morning for its master to get out of the armchair.

Andrew Milne remained seated with Marsh nodding to Gellibrand to go on with the rest of us. Gordon Hynes heaved himself up, his face still looking puffy; I wondered what he took for hair-of-the-dog each morning before heading for the office. Yet, oddly, I could feel a grain of sympathy for this wreck; a feeling I could never have aroused for the sleek man we'd met before, the one with an excuse for everything ... and I thought of Patty Blatter's belief that Jack knew how to pick people. Had he dipped out with Hynes? Was the Hynes of a few years ago a different man—before he'd been corrupted, before he'd listened to the siren song of Georgina Milne and reached out in the mistaken belief they could save him from himself? Had Jack believed that even in his vacillations and excuses Hynes still had the fundamental decency to do the right thing by his old client?

The sun was now fully up, the day was crystal clear, but I could've done with a pair of woollen gloves. Hynes walked slowly, not speaking, and I slowed my steps to walk alongside him. I felt talked out and weary myself; it'd been a long night. We all went round the track which curved along the top fence above the flats, over a small stony spur, and dropped down towards what appeared to be the old shearing shed.

The ponies piled up along the fence and over the wire and the splintered top rail and caught up with wire round their necks and legs were a hard sight to take. The vet had been at work, pony after pony had a neat hole between the eyes, but many had bled and thrashed for a long time before merciful release. One small grey animal had pulled out an eye or the bullet had exited through the eye cavity and the burst eye was plastered down its cheek. I thought of Jack and his Timorese *criado* and the little grey pack pony in the photo.

The shearing shed hadn't been used for many years, not since the day Jack decided sheep were not for him, family expectations or not, and its timbers were silver and lichened with age, the iron roof was shedding sheets. But it was a huge shed, a twelve-stand shed at least, and the stallions had been yarded in the holding pens while the big open space, devoid now of classing tables and bins and presses, was a milling sea of mares, grey backs, brown backs, multi-coloured backs, tossing manes, nipping teeth, squeals and pushes and growing hunger. Above them, in the great echoing raftered spaces huge dust-festooned cobwebs swayed gently in the rising heat.

I looked into the melee and felt a profound sense of relief.

- xxviii -

Gordon Hynes put a cold tremulous hand on my wrist. "Could I have a word with you, Mr Creighton?"

"Of course." We left the others—I was sorry I hadn't seen Georgina's face when she first looked in on the ponies—and walked back a little way, well out of earshot. He leant against the rough bark of an ancient ironbark and for a minute or more there was silence. Above the flats, circling lazily, were crows.

"Mr Hodge did make another will," he said at last, his voice lifeless, "in March. It was like the one you read out but he gave two hundred thousand dollars to Mrs Milne. He said he'd given the matter a lot of thought and he

thought everything would be safer if he removed any grounds she might use for contesting it. But she and her husband came to me and offered me—certain inducements—if I would—if I would suppress it—when Jack died—"

"How did she know about it?"

"I said—I was indiscreet." He looked miserable. "The last couple of years—I have—it's been—"

He broke off and stood there, his shoulders hunched.

"Addictions are rotten things to beat."

He glanced up again. "Yes. It's hell. Every morning you get up and see the mess your life is in—the betting, the alcohol—you know people are starting to whisper behind your back—and still you can't seem to get on top of it. I was going to retire, no point in trying to keep going any longer ... "

So the Milnes had reason to hurry. Another lawyer, one not vulnerable to their inducements, would've taken over Jack's business.

Yet, for most of us, two hundred thousand unearned dollars would come as a windfall.

The solicitor seemed to straighten up with an effort. "Jack told me once he'd done a rotten thing when he was a young man—he didn't say what and I didn't like to ask. He said he couldn't go back and make amends but maybe he could do something else that might be a bit of help. I didn't understand then. I do now. I can't undo last night ... and if it hadn't been for you ... " he stood there looking out over the flats to where the sun gleamed on the string of waterholes and maybe we were both thinking of that terrible dripping eye.

His stance suggested utter defeat, self-contempt, a great weariness with life.

I thought of Jack Hodge, a strange taciturn enigmatic man to the end, and I took the liberty of saying, "I think Jack would've—understood—the temptations—and the defeats ... "

"Amends ... to make amends," Gordon Hynes might've been talking to himself, but then he turned back to me, his eyes moist, and said, "thank you ... for coming."

- end –

A DANGER TO HERSELF

- i -

Rachel had put the accumulated mail in my bedroom. I riffled through. Nothing much except for a woman wanting me to go to Thailand as her daughter hadn't written for six weeks (she didn't mention paying any fares; if I found the energy I'd tell her to contact the embassy—that's what they're there for) and, at

the bottom of the pile, a letter in young writing addressed to: Mr Criton, Quest Court, Surfers Paradise. Full marks to the post office.

Inside, it was equally young and straightforward.

Dear Mr Criton,

We would like you to come and investigate something. Mrs Roach and her horse Bucephalus fell down the hill. Everyone said it was an accident but we know it wasn't but our parents said it was better just to leave things as they are. Mrs Roach is in hospital and may never get better. It is not that we like her. We don't. She spends all her time criticing and making you feel like an idiot. But we would still like to know who tripped her up. Maybe they just hated her. But maybe they didn't like riders, maybe they didn't like kids—and maybe they're going to do it to someone else. So you can see why we'd like to know.

If you can come up you can stay with Ian and Mark as they're at home a lot of the time on their own so nobody'll mind you coming. Their name is Hammer and they live in Meringup Road.

We hope you can help us.

Dave, Emma, Ian and Mark.

I put it away and saw to my laundry and rang the couple of people who'd left messages with Rachel. Then I told her I'd take her out for a Chinese meal if she'd like to hear what Dell and I'd been up to. She ummed and aahhed and finally said, "Not tonight, dad, okay? I sort of said I'd go out with Sam. He's buying a bike and he said he'd take me down to Palm Beach on it, see what I thought—"

I assumed 'dad' was inserted to divert me from the bike—she prefers to leave me nameless—so I said, "Well, tell him not to switch lanes. I've scraped too many bikies' brains off the damn road."

She blew her cheeks out in a dismissive way; I'm not sure whether she sees it as attractive or whether it's to put me in my place. "It doesn't matter what the subject is—you've always scraped up someone's brains!"

True. In both senses. But there didn't seem any point in arguing. I'd just have to hope Sam'd gone for a little 100 cc putt-putt. I bought myself a takeaway meal, settled back into a comfortable armchair and put a dram of The Famous Grouse beside me. All very pleasant but it didn't tell me how to respond to those damn kids.

- ii -

Was the horse or Mrs Roach a blind? Was the real problem those boys living on their own? Had they heard a mention of horses was all that was needed to bring me running? For that matter who'd given them my name? Had they been riding in that Pony Club One Day Event when, out of sight, the police were digging up a couple of bodies?

Obviously I wasn't going to expect them to plumb the depths of their money-boxes to pay my expenses (the way I was going I'd have to go job-hunting soon) but, more to the point, what did they want me to do and why. Would my presence mean the local cops'd begin to listen to what they were trying to say, take some notice if they actually *had* information? Had they come

to a dead end in their investigations? Were they too busy at school? Been punished by parents for running round looking for clues? What mystery books did kids read these days? What was the 1990's equivalent of the Hardy Boys or the Secret Seven? And were they equally good at convincing kids there were unsolved cases lying round? I didn't want to go off into the wild blue yonder for the sake of a bunch of kids with over-active imaginations. But in every such situation there comes the moment when a little voice—conscience, curiosity, call it what you will—says 'better check this out, make sure it's nothing'.

Meringup, according to my map, was just north of Toowoomba and the Hammers had the phone on. This raised a new problem: if their father was at home would the kids suffer if they were already getting a hard time from him—but if he wasn't at home the last thing I should be encouraging was two boys to go inviting strange cops into their house. Some of us have been known to take fancies to little boys ...

In the end, I said "what the heck" and rang. A deep gruff voice said, "Yeah. Carl Hammer here."

I introduced myself and said I'd had a letter from Ian and Mark.

"Yeah," the voice said again. "They told me they'd written to some old copper." I waited; I've been called worse things. "So you want to come up or not? It's pretty rough tucker—but if you don't mind—"

"Do you agree with them—about the problem they mentioned?"

"If they say so. Sharp kids. Have to be with me away most of the time."

Mr Hammer obviously wasn't the sort to advance his own opinions in a hurry. I said without enthusiasm I'd come up for a couple of days in that case. Mr Hammer said, "S'pose you usually get paid for the jobs you do?"

Honesty would require me to say no, I usually didn't. I said, "Usually. But I've never been asked to investigate anything for a group of kids before now."

"Yeah. Well, look, let me know. I'll see you don't lose on it."

- iii -

I had breakfast at a café on the northern outskirts of Toowoomba. Then headed out along the Crows Nest road, turning off eventually next to a kiwi fruit orchard and running past tracts of radiata pine and, after one wrong turn, winding down into a hamlet with a general store, a garage, a weatherboard Lutheran church with its west fence lying semi-prone, a school, and a handful of houses. The Hammer house was away from this cluster, about half a kilometre west; an ancient sprawling farm house with a sagging front verandah and a brown pony eating a plumbago hedge. To one side was a truck with a drilling rig on the back (and I understood why Carl Hammer was often away); to the other was a paddock containing some homemade jumps and two more horses. All was silent as I switched off and took my bag from the back seat except for the sound of a westerly wind cracking and flapping a line of overalls and towels in the back yard.

Then the world exploded round me as two Irish setters hurdled the front fence and began to charge round me in diminishing circles, barking their heads off. Their exuberance might make the boys feel safer; I thought it'd be pretty

wearing to live with. I went up the front path and knocked. A voice somewhere yelled "Come in!" The hallway was dim with old-fashioned dado walls. Here and there were ugly pictures in large gilt frames, much chipped, and hanging crooked. I kept walking and was met by a large red-headed man with wet hands. Washing day in the Hammer household.

"Won't be long," he bawled over the noise of the machine. "Just get this lot on the line and I'll be with you!"

"Sure. No hurry."

"Go in there and park yourself!" He pointed to the nearest door which lead into a kitchen.

It was untidy. The ceiling was grey with soot from the old-fashioned wood stove. There were piles of plates in and out of the sink. An opened tin of dog food sat beside a cold pot of tea. Yet, for all the mess, there was an essential hominess about the room. Life might be difficult at times but the jungle hadn't yet overwhelmed these people. I pulled the kettle forward to the hottest part of the stove and looked round for a couple of mugs, a jar of coffee, a bowl of sugar. I opened the frig. The interior wouldn't have gone over well with the health inspector from 'Fawlty Towers'. I fished out a jug of milk and ignored the nameless puddles of red goo on the bottom shelf. I hadn't come to do their housework. By the time Carl Hammer'd stripped off his plastic apron and lumbered upstairs the kettle was boiling and I'd unearthed a box of assorted cream biscuits. I mightn't always be able to find *out* things but I'm not too bad at finding things.

He subsided into a chair with a creak. "Sorry about that. Don't know where all the bloody washing comes from." He took his cup of coffee, slapped three sugars in, whirled it with a spoon, taking no notice when it slopped over, then took a long swig.

"Y'know, I never think of women except when I see that bloody basket waiting down there—"

"I know the feeling," I said drily.

"Got rid of yours too, did you?"

I didn't like the sound of "got rid", not when I was here to investigate a GBH, but I said mildly, "I was divorced a couple of years ago."

"I told mine to piss off one time—and she bloody did! Didn't reckon she would." He gave me a sudden grin. "Shows you should always watch what you say, eh?" My first impression, that we were heading into an unpleasantly misogynistic conversation, faded. Carl Hammer might not have got the hang of female psychology but I felt he'd turn out to be an okay bloke. "Next thing I heard, she was shacked up with some big noise that runs an icecream factory. Not bad icecreams either!" He gave a shout of laughter. "Kids never forgave me for not trying to get in good with her again. Still, we manage all right now they're growing up."

"How old are they?"

"Twelve and fourteen."

I still didn't like the idea of them being left alone for extended periods.

Though, in a community this size, there were probably neighbours who kept a weather-eye out. I hoped so.

"So you're away sinking bores most of the times?"

"Yeah. Me and Jim Macready own the rig. Mainly round the Downs but occasionally we go further south. We're the cheapest in the business so we're never short of work—and not now, not with the sort of drought those poor buggers've got—" He jerked a finger vaguely westward.

"And how do the boys manage when you're away?"

"Not bad. I used to get young Bronny from up the road to come and cook breakfast and see 'em off to school and come back about five but now she's working in the shop so I just told the kids they'd have to pull their socks up—"

"Where are they this morning?"

"Out."

That seemed self-evident. "Investigating?"

"Could be." He shrugged.

"Whereabouts did Mrs Roach live?"

From being fairly communicative he'd retreated; I didn't try to guess a reason.

"Aw—say four kilometres south of here by road. Less if you go round by the back lane. She's got a farm. You know she's in hospital?"

"Yes. How bad is she, do you know?"

"They reckon she'll never come out of the coma, not without a miracle, but I reckon she had a head like a—" He rapped the wooden table.

"That's sad. Do you know anything about her accident?"

"Wasn't around when it happened. Kids said she landed on her head."

"Mmm—and how would you describe her—as a person I mean."

He fiddled round getting us two more coffees, getting the milk out again ("what a garbage tip! I'll get the kids on to it"—did he think I'd object to eating here without a Certificate of Inspection?), finding a fruit cake in a cellophane packet; were those the toothmarks of mice on the side he kept discreetly facing him? He sat down again. "Veronica Roach, eh?" He scratched his cheek. "That's a hard one."

I waited.

"When you hear her in full cry you think, what a bitch, what a bloody carping old bitch! Then you hear on the grapevine she got this kid a pony and she lent that one a saddle and gave the other one a ride to a show in her float ... "

He scratched harder at his cheek. "See what I mean?"

"Up to a point. You think she made enemies easily?"

"Like falling off a log."

"But people felt ambivalent about her?"

"Am—what?"

"They sort of liked her and didn't like her at the same time?"

"Yeah ... well, maybe not. That's a tricky one. Maybe you could say they didn't like her but they sort of felt they owed her something."

"Mmm—was she the same with the kids, do you know?"

“Reckon so.”

“Was there anyone who seemed to like her?”

“Don’t reckon.” He suddenly looked vaguely uneasy. “Kids reckon it was someone she’d got up the nose of—you know, someone who hadn’t been round long enough to hear anything good ... ”

And he knew, or thought he knew, who his kids had in mind.

- iv -

The kids didn’t show for lunch. I wondered if they’d had second thoughts about inviting me or had just got involved in an exciting game at a friend’s place. Carl Hammer took me out to the front fence (the pony’d got tired of its diet of plumbago and wandered away to stand under a tree) and pointed to a roof in the distance and said Emma Jessup lived there; the fourth conspirator, Dave Morrow, lived back along the highway some distance. All the kids belonged to the Meringup Pony Club, started, financed and run by—you guessed it—Mrs Roach.

Carl Hammer got busy taking things off the line again, as the dry westerly was turning them into sheets of cardboard. I returned to my car and found my way back through the hamlet and along a gravel side road to the Roach farm. The land was hilly with a dry juiceless look, heavily timbered except for several paddocks between the house and the road. Beyond the house it appeared to drop steeply to a gully then rise to a pointed stony hill on the far side. The place looked neat and well-cared-for from this distance. Several large horses, suggesting Mrs Roach was a fair weight or liked to take up a commanding position, roamed the top paddocks. I wondered which one was Bucephalus.

There was no sign of anyone around and the road gate had been made almost impregnable (without the help of wire-cutters); someone, and I wondered who, had made sure Mrs Roach’s things stayed safe. Yet with animals on the place someone would need to come and go every day and this suggested someone, a relative or a neighbour, had felt sufficiently kindly towards her to do this for an indefinite length of time. I leaned on the gate post for quite a while and mulled over the little information I’d acquired so far. I was still mulling when an oldish truck came along the road with a load of hay. Painted on the headboard above the cabin was ‘J & K Singh. Quality Produce’. The truck slowed, stopped, a rather handsome middle-aged Indian put his head out the driver’s window and said “Can I help you?”

“I was just wondering why Mrs Roach’s gate is wired up. Is she away, do you know?”

Something about him, his expression, seemed to withdraw, but it was too subtle to be pinned down; a regret that he’d stopped. Now he had to answer.

“She is in hospital.”

“Oh? Nothing serious, I hope?”

“I do not know.” He had acquired a faint flatness to his vowels but it was the precision I noticed. I wondered how long he’d lived round here and what had brought him here in the first place.

I smiled. “Well, thanks anyway.”

"You are welcome."

He put his head in and the truck rattled away. No doubt the season was bringing him plenty of customers. I wondered if Veronica Roach had been one of them and whether he was another of the people 'she'd got up the nose of'—

- v -

I could go and see Mrs Roach in hospital. Not a productive idea. I could go to the police and see if they'd had doubts, if anyone had raised doubts with them, but they mightn't want me wasting their time when I had nothing to offer. I could go back and see if the Hammer boys had decided to come home.

As I drew up beside the gate and the setters hurdled the fence again I could see my 'clients' were back. Two bikes were lying under the front verandah. The boys, Ian and Mark, were big. They would've got into quite a few pubs without a suspicious glance. They both had sandy brown hair and a lot of freckles. But there was something impressive about them, Mark more so; the confidence with which they shook hands, their slow easy movements, their certainty I'd drop everything and come—and if I'd thought I'd be telling them what to do I realised I was wrong. This'd be a team effort.

If there was any ambivalence about going ahead it was in their father; he was curious but didn't really want to be involved. Probably because his times at home weren't to be squandered on other people's troubles. We all went into the lounge and sat down on chairs with the stuffing oozing out. Again there were pictures in old gilt frames, mostly mountain scenes with unlife-like cattle and deer, again there were dado walls. It was a cold room. On a small table in a corner were some school books. A set of three china ducks flew across the tongue-and-groove wall to an uncurtained window looking out into the paddock of jumps. The boys looked at me with expectant eyes.

"The best thing," I said quietly, "would be if you could tell me what you believe happened, why you got suspicious, and what you've found out since then."

They looked approving—as though they had very definite ideas on how a good investigation should be carried out and I'd just affirmed their best scenario. The older one, Mark, went over to the corner table and pulled an exercise book from under a pile of maths and physics textbooks.

"Okay," he sat back, relaxed in a way that's rare between teenagers and someone of my generation, and began to read what sounded like a cross between a list and a school essay. "One—we heard on the Saturday of the last Pony Club that Veronica had had an accident the day before and been taken to hospital. Mr Killen ran things that day. Two—we asked him about her horses and he said he didn't know but he thought the horse she'd been riding might of got hurt when it fell. Three—we went up there late that afternoon and found Ceffy back in his paddock but limping slightly. There was no one around. We caught him and he had dried blood round his nose and both his knees were a bit scraped. We brought him down to the stable, cleaned him up and put some BFI powder on him. Dave noticed a small mark on his shin. His saddle and bridle were just dumped beside the back gate into the garden. We didn't know but we thought

maybe the ambulance people might of done that. Four—we walked him round a bit because he was a bit stiff but he didn't want to go down the hill. He's a pretty cranky horse but we thought maybe that was where he'd fallen so Dave and I walked down and we could see a bit of a mark where they'd fallen on the track and Veronica's hat was still lying in the grass. We scouted round a bit thinking we might see something and Dave said, "Look, you can see by the marks in the dust just where he fell," and you could, you know."

Mark looked up from his pad for my reaction.

"Good observation. So what happened next?"

He seemed to forget all about his notes, his blue eyes gleamed and his brother perched forward on his chair. "You see—there were these two trees opposite each other, either side of the path." He held out his hands. "Medium size. We went and had a good look and you know what was there? I mean it was pretty hard to see. On each trunk—about this far above the ground—there was a faint mark like someone'd tied a wire round and when Ceffy hit the wire maybe it'd sort of cut into the bark a bit. You wouldn't of seen it if you hadn't been looking. I said to Ian to bring Ceffy down—"

"Yeah—and when I tried to bring him down he didn't want to come—"

"But it was nearly dark by then so we stuck him back in the paddock and came home and we went back early on Sunday morning and Dave brought his camera—"

"And we found a footprint behind the tree where someone had stepped in a pile of—" Ian looked across at his dad, then back at me, "a pile of horse shit—and you could see where they'd sort of wiped it off on a bit of grass."

"We were going to call the police," Mark looked casually at the page again, "but there was a bit of a shower on the Sunday night and when we looked again—well, it would of been hard to say—but Dave's photos came out. I mean, it's still hard to say. They're not very clear ... "

"Mmm. What then?"

"Well—yeah, nothing much. Emma said we should make up a list of people who didn't like Veronica—but it was sort of hard to know. I mean the people who sort of said 'one day I'm going to wring Veronica's neck' maybe were just letting off steam and then they felt okay—but maybe the ones who really hated her hadn't said anything—and then one day she said something or did something—and boom! they just exploded!"

Ian looked at his brother and grinned. "Yeah, she was always saying—don't you kids know how to do up a girth properly—hey, what's all this mud doing in this tail, you lazy little sod—didn't I tell you to put your ruddy hat on—I'm not taking you on the crosscountry unless you take those ruddy spurs off, what d'you think you are—Hopalong Cassidy!" He started to giggle, then couldn't stop. Carl said, "Take it easy, mate," and Mark swiped him between the shoulder blades but neither treatment was totally effective and he went on snickering at intervals.

"So—did you end up making a list?"

"Sort of. We put in all the people we'd heard Veronica—" (I wondered if

they called her Veronica to her face) “say something bad about—either to us or to them. We thought that’d give ’em a reason to get angry—”

“What about the people she criticised but still helped in one way or another?”

“Yeah. We know.” He said it with a sigh which I let slide past. “Look, what say I get the list from Emma and you can use it if you like.”

Did they think I might like to spend the next month running round giving the once-over to all the people Veronica Roach had criticised in the course of a long and busy life?

- vi -

It turned out Emma was on the ‘committee’ by reason of being Dave’s “you know, sort of his girlfriend”. I understood. Boys that age have real difficulty cutting loose from the male pack and allowing themselves to be linked with a girl. I don’t know but I’ve always thought girls find this process easier. She came down, at Mark’s phone call, riding bareback on a big grey horse, which she tied by the front gate—no doubt, so it too could have a go at the plumbago. She was a tall girl, strapping, with pink cheeks and thick pale hair in two plaits and wearing an old striped sweater and jeans smelling of horse. I wondered if she was content to dress with such casual unconcern when Dave was around.

The list was two grubby sheets of foolscap paper torn out of an exercise book. She handed it over after giving me a thorough look up and down. I had the feeling I should present my credentials, and any feeling I might’ve had that I was doing these youngsters a big favour by coming up—was set at bay by their certainty of foul play and their belief it was only right a few adults should get off their bums and do something about it instead of expecting them to sandwich it in between school and chores and homework. I accepted the rightness of this feeling. What I had trouble accepting was their initial assertion that they were afraid they might be next in line. Had they fallen prey to that natural instinct to learn what comes next—or, more cryptically, whodunit?—but couldn’t bring themselves to say so? And had they really thought it through? The person Veronica Roach had driven to drastic retaliation, if that was the motivation, might be someone they knew and liked. So was it this nagging realisation, this awkward underlying suspicion, which’d made them step back and think about involving a stranger. In small communities like Meringup this consideration always floated in the wings.

“You can go and see the people if you want—just don’t tell them about us—but we thought maybe you could use some forensic equipment or something, you know, to work it out for us.”

“Am I working it out *for you?*” I said mildly.

They all looked at each other. Mark shifted in his chair. “Not exactly. We just thought—”

“We didn’t want other people to get the blame,” said Emma.

“I thought the police and hospital were treating it as an accident. Nobody is getting blamed surely?”

Again they all sort of communed. “You know how people gossip a bit,” Emma said at last.

“Yes.” I waited.

“It’s like Hercule Poirot is always saying,” Mark said suddenly.

“And what is Hercule Poirot always saying?”

“You know—‘me, I believe in justice’?”

“And you believe in justice?”

“Of course.” Emma had got her second wind—or understood they were as much under scrutiny as anyone else.

“Good. In that case, I’m sure you’ll see the point of telling me who is getting blamed. It’s easier to discover one person’s guilt or innocence than to try and investigate maybe thirty or forty people without any resources.”

“Yeah. True.” Carl Hammer had sat, peacefully smoking throughout this conversation; maybe he saw it as a way to better understand his children’s thought-processes. “But the same people get blamed for everything that goes wrong around here. Probably isn’t any truth in it. Just convenient.”

I suddenly had a strong suspicion I’d already met one of the people who got the blame. But I wanted the kids, as far as possible, both to control the investigation and level with me.

“She used to have a husband,” Emma said abruptly.

“Yeah. You’re right!” Mark gave her a verbal thumbs-up. “I’d forgotten all about him.”

“He was nast-eee,” Ian chipped in, with a grin but not a lot of conviction.

“Well, he was a bit of a lazy sod,” their father said neutrally, “but he’s been gone for three or four years.”

“Even so ... did you put him on your list?” I turned to Emma and she scribbled something on the bottom of the page. A criticism about mud in a pony’s tail wouldn’t fester in the way things hurled in a marriage have an unpleasant habit of doing.

“Anyone else not on that list who might just have occurred to you?”

“She had a son,” Carl said suddenly. “Didn’t she have a son?”

Everyone looked blank.

“I never saw him,” Ian sounded almost aggrieved.

“Before your time, mate,” said his father.

“Oh, I know!” Emma almost leapt out of her chair. “But he didn’t belong to her. He was just living there.”

“You mean—adopted or fostered or just visiting briefly?”

This time she communed with the view from the window. They all sat waiting. She frowned, then shook her head. “I think he was just there for a while because his mum’d done something, I don’t know what ... my mum’d probably know ... ”

“Okay. That might be helpful. If he was being fostered then Veronica might’ve believed she could keep him—and was angry when his mother claimed him back. I’ve seen that happen.”

They all nodded and looked more relaxed.

“But, just going back to the local scapegoat, does it have anything to do with race or religion?”

It was Emma who realised their prevarication, well-intentioned or not, wasn’t achieving anything. “Yeah, I s’pose it does ... ”

“J and K Singh, whatever J and K might stand for?”

She nodded, seemingly unsurprised. “Yeah. I think they come from India.”

I didn’t say I thought that possible.

“They’re okay,” Carl said slowly, tapping another cigarette out of his packet. “But they eat goats. Some people don’t like that.”

- vii -

I sat back. The air in here was decidedly chilly. I should’ve brought more than a sweater. “People object to the eating—or the keeping—or the way they kill them—or how they dispose of the offal—”

Carl shrugged. “Eaten goat myself, out West. Not bad. Bit on the stringy side.”

The young ones all looked pensive. After a while Ian said, “You never told me you et goat, dad.”

“Knowing you—you’d probably turn up your nose at a good steak thinking I was sneaking goat on to your plate—”

“No, I wouldn’t!”

“Mmm, well,” time to be placating, “you think that’s more likely an easy excuse? Something obvious people can point to?”

“Yeah. I never thought of that.” Emma looked round the room as though to say ‘I knew it was a good idea to bring him here’.

Even so, I was hard put to believe these kids believed so passionately in justice and equality that they’d go out on a limb for a middle-aged couple of whatever background; maybe I was underestimating them but I thought I’d leave the gate open.

Emma finally went home, after saying she’d ring Dave and see if he could come up tomorrow. She’d been marvellously and coolly mature all the way through. Now she suddenly went pink. It was rather attractive.

Carl asked if I’d like to come to church with them in the morning. I said cautiously I wasn’t a Lutheran. “Doesn’t matter. With only one church you get all sorts—just want to stay in touch. Not Catholics—just about everything else. The Singhs come sometimes—”

“They’re Christians?”

He shrugged. “Don’t ask me. If the Pastor lets ’em in that’s his business. He gets after me for neglecting the kids,” he gave them a deprecating grin, “because he knows I’m not going to jump and say, that’s it! I’m off to become a Hindu or something! But I reckon he goes a bit more careful with the ones that’re just sort of testing the water.”

He stood up and stretched and it was the beginning of a general exodus; the boys out to their horses, their father off to cut up dog meat then start on boiling some mince and vegetables. I unpacked my few things in the room they’d given me at the front of the house. It was bare except for some tatty lace curtains and a

big bed with an elaborately carved headboard. There was a smell of age and dust. I put Emma's list on top of my things, not that any of the names jumped out at me.

The wind was dropping a little and I wondered if there'd be a frost; the air had a knife-edge to it.

- viii -

I've eaten better dinners but there was plenty of it. Carl Hammer told me Veronica had come to the rescue one time when he was bogged in northern NSW and had promised to take the kids to a Pony Club camp out at the Pittsworth Showgrounds. But I had the feeling the boys'd rather give Veronica a rest. I asked them about their ambitions. Mark thought he might try for the Merchant Navy. Ian was less definite but liked the idea of being a park ranger.

"Nothing to do with horses then?"

Mark appeared to think it over before shaking his head. "No, I'm not that hot on a horse. I mean I've got a few ribbons, we both have, but I'm not like Dave or Emma. They win nearly all the time."

"Mmm—and not a detective?"

They both grinned at that but again Mark was frank. "I think I'd get bored. It's okay when you read about it in a book—but in real life—I mean, say you went to twenty houses to ask if anyone'd seen anything and every one of them said no. I reckon you'd get pretty pissed off."

"And you felt like this in your own private case?"

"Yeah. A bit. I mean we got the photos and stuff. But then, when we made that list—phew! See what I mean?" I did. "That's why we thought you might have some instruments and things that might tell us something."

"A camera," I said drily, "Some plastic bags, a notebook." They looked disappointed; did they expect me to be a walking laboratory in my retirement? "But think about it—if someone came there and tied a piece of wire round two tree-trunks—when would they come, how long might they be there, when would they remove the wire, what might they have left nearby?"

"Yeah." Mark considered all this carefully. "Well, we have the picture of the foot print—"

"Maybe we can tell what kind of shoe it was!" Ian said excitedly. "*And* what size!" He was all for dashing out in the middle of dinner to look at the soles of all the shoes in the house.

"Right. What else might he or she have left?"

He sat down again.

"If the person hung around to see what would happen then he would have to be there quite a while. How would he know when Veronica would ride down the hill?"

"She might've had a routine for exercising her horses?" I put in.

"Yeah. But *I* don't know and we went there a fair bit."

"All right. So it was either someone taking a chance or someone who knew—and if they knew either they had to be able to see—say from a neighbouring house—or they'd come there often enough to get an idea of her

routine."

"Well, I s'pose her husband knew," Mark looked doubtful. I wasn't sure if the doubt was to do with Mr Roach in particular or husbands in general.

"She might of *told* somebody," Ian said, eyes gleaming. "She might of said 'I always exercise my horses at three o'clock'."

I nodded approvingly. "Did she exercise *all* her horses regularly, do you think?"

"Yeah. I reckon so. And I think she did two in the morning and two in the afternoon."

"Okay. Let's move on. Wire is tricky stuff. So the person might've brought wire-cutters, pliers—"

"We didn't see anything."

"No. But say you weren't used to handling them ... "

"Yeah. You might scratch yourself—"

"Or tear your clothes—"

"Maybe get a hair caught in it—" I helped them along.

"And where would you bring the wire from—"

"And how come neither Veronica nor Ceffy noticed? They wouldn't have been galloping down that steep bit of the track."

"Maybe someone made a noise to frighten him—or hit him with their shanghai."

"You can tell a person from their hair, can't you?" Carl put in suddenly.

"Yes. That is—if you've got a suspect to compare it with."

I felt a sudden unease in the room. Ian helped himself to more mince. Mark began tapping his fingers on the table and pursing his lips. "It was Larry Burns from next door, found Veronica," Carl seemed oblivious to any tension. "Saw the bloody horse up by the fence with the saddle under his belly."

"Is that a possibility? That the saddle slipped and Veronica came off without anyone's help?"

There was a long frowning silence then Mark said, "Y'know—that *is* strange. Why did the saddle slip? Veronica was always on at us—only an idiot goes out without first checking the girths—that sort of thing—so how come she got on Ceffy without checking, then belted off down the track like that?"

- ix -

Ian did turn every shoe and boot in the house upside down. Mark told him he was wasting his time without Dave's photo to compare them with. Ian replied, in the tone that small brother's adopt, "I'm just checking."

I watched a bit of TV with Carl; then he yawned and said, "Might as well hit the sack." It was only about nine but when in Rome ...

He dug out a hot water bottle, filled it from the kettle, and went off to bed. I wrote up my notes. Veronica was an intriguing person. Many are the people who present a charming face to the world and do dishonourable things on the sly. But Veronica seemed to be one of the rarer breed who get up everyone's nose in the most public way possible—and do good things on the sly. What an unpleasant expression that is ... I thought of Veronica in her hospital bed with

tubes up her nose, keeping her alive ... for what, for whom ... and who would benefit, and how, if she died ...

I hadn't got to the root of the boys' suspicion. Why were they reluctant to come clean? Did I have to prove myself in some way before I could be provided with damning information? Or was it the evidence of their eyes, their ears, their sense of smell, they didn't trust?

Despite the hot water bottle I couldn't get warm; was it the years of soft living on the Gold Coast, was it a particularly cold night ... in the end I got out of bed and went out to the car and got the old travelling rug out of the boot. Above, stars glittered in a black sky. Here and there round the horizon were the pin-pricks of habitation. A night bird called suddenly, a harsh eerie sound. I closed the boot with a soft thud and went indoors and spread the old rug on my bed. For several minutes I held the hot water bottle between my cold hands then pushed it back to the foot of the bed. If I'd thought to sleep in next morning I was mistaken. With the room still semi-dark I woke to shouts, the sound of a horse thudding, apparently right outside my window, and the inevitable barking of the dogs. In one of those farcical moments that life throws up I stumbled out of bed and went to pull the curtains open—only to have them disintegrate in my hands.

(Was I liable for a new set of curtains? Where around here did a person purchase curtains? Should I merely press a few crumpled notes into a Hammer palm?)

Outside, a horse was trotting round the garden, head up, tail up, his reins trailing, a saddle under his belly. I assumed he'd got away in the middle of being saddled. He passed out of sight, then I heard a shout—"Okay! I've got him!"

There didn't seem any point in interposing myself into this particular situation. I dressed, took my razor to the bathroom and plugged it in. Outside someone said, "You won't get away with that again, mate"; presumably speaking to the horse but a dog said wooff! and a radio somewhere was turned on. Sunday morning with the Hammers might be easygoing but it couldn't exactly be called peaceful. I thought of myself in bed at home lazily debating whether to give myself another half hour or go out for a walk on the beach or get up for coffee and toast.

In the hallway I ran into Carl Hammer who said, "I'll just call the kids in and we'll eat."

Coffee and toast fled; their place taken by a large pot of gluey porridge and the remains of last night's mince and vegetables heated up. Still, the boys were obviously thriving on this diet.

We listened to the news. The boys after their stirring early morning rides seemed subdued; possibly the thought of church. Carl ate in vigorous silence before sending them away to put on good clothes and comb their hair; "with water—that looks like a bloody chook's tail, mate—"

I was on my second cup of tea when they came back, in long trousers and ties, as though for inspection. "I've seen cleaner shoes," Carl said drily. "Give

'em a rub." Mark went out again and their father went on, "God knows what they look like in school but I s'pose Lina Jessup'd let me know if they get too much like tramps."

"We're okay." Ian sat down at the breakfast table again. And again I felt sure he had something burdening him. For the first time I found myself seriously canvassing the disconcerting thought these boys might've had something to do with Veronica's 'accident', a prank maybe that went wrong.

"That seems to be a naughty pony you have," I said cheerfully.

"Aw—he just doesn't like being saddled—y'know, when you pull the girths up?" I've never saddled a horse in my life but I nodded. "He takes a big deep breath and pulls back at the same time. I whack him but he keeps on doing it. He did it at a gymkhana once and ran through another pony's reins. Everyone got mad at him ... "

"Including Veronica?"

"Yeah. But she didn't see what happened and she blamed someone else for not catching him when he was running round loose. I think," he looked at me with a do-or-die expression, "she liked us better than the other kids."

"And you'd rather she treated you the same as the others?"

He looked down at the table, then away, and I wondered how well he really was coping despite his air of maturity. Carl got up. "Stick the plates in the sink, mate," he said to his son and lumbered out. Ian got up obediently and began stacking the plates and carrying them over to the sink. I put the milk and butter in the frig and picked up a swag of mugs.

"Bob," Ian turned and faced me, "you know those kids in England, those ones that were eleven and killed that little kid—"

"Yes."

"Were they sent to prison for ever?"

"No. There's what is called a non-parole period that you have to spend in prison. After that you may be released if your behaviour has been good and you appear to be genuinely sorry for what you did—or you may be sent to an open prison which might allow you out at weekends ... or you might be sent to some kind of rehabilitation centre, maybe a farm, where you have more freedom ... "

Carl, still knotting his tie, had come back to stand in the doorway. "And what was your opinion, mate, should they of been put away for life?"

"Without playing down the horror of what they did," I said carefully, (this was very important to Ian; I wished I understood why) "I think we've got it round the wrong way. If your sixteen-year-old drives the family car into a shop window, maybe mowing down a few old ladies on the way, it's the parents who're liable for damages in more and more places—yet, when two eleven-year-olds commit a crime we throw up our hands in horror and say 'little monsters! Let's put 'em inside and throw away the key'. Personally I would've sent the kids to a rehabilitation centre and the parents to prison—a, for not keeping amoral videos under lock and key, and b, for not teaching their kids the difference between right and wrong."

"Maybe they knew—but they forgot," Ian stood by the sink.

"Maybe. But your children's behaviour, good or bad, remains your responsibility until they reach whatever age we decide they can take responsibility for their own actions."

He went on standing there, his forehead creased as though it was vitally important he understand what I was saying.

"Yeah, well," Carl ran a finger round inside his collar, "I'm not the world's best parent but I reckon you could be right. We take the credit when someone praises our kids. I s'pose we have to take the blame when they run off the bloody rails." He looked at his watch. "Anyway, we'd best make tracks. Coming with us?"

I cleaned my teeth, put on my jacket, and went out. "Might as well come in my car." I unlocked the doors and they all got in.

Maybe church was the right place to be while mulling over the thorny issues of crime and punishment. The morning's conversation made me uneasy but I now felt reasonably sure Ian was worried not for himself but for someone younger—and had I reassured him that even if he was right the key'd never be thrown away? It still didn't explain why they'd tried, in the beginning, to turn an apparent accident into something more. But then, Veronica being the person she was, it was extremely likely that police and ambulance bearers notwithstanding, no one in this small community had ever really believed in her 'accident'; and I felt certain these four teenagers were learning, had learnt, that gossip and innuendo can destroy lives and livelihoods more subtly, but as thoroughly, as evidence and inquests can.

- x -

The minister, Pastor Werner, was an elderly man with a fringe of white hair and pale-blue eyes; his feet might shuffle but I felt, as time went on, his knowledge of humans and human frailties was needle-sharp. The church was packed. I looked round and saw young Emma beside a woman with the same thick pale hair plaited round her head. Further back was the man from the hay truck sitting beside a plump dark woman dressed in a twinset and lemon-coloured skirt. I avoided staring but my brief impression was of two proud people who went through the motions required of them for community acceptance yet knew they were not accepted, not yet.

The service was not difficult to follow but nothing of it stayed in my mind until the sermon. To say I was surprised is to put it mildly. I had vague memories of Luther nailing something to a church door and getting into trouble with a Pope. But this was a brilliant wide-ranging historical summary (touching on men as widely-divergent as Jan Hus, Wycliffe, and Torquemada) but never losing sight of the moral implications of each action. The church might be full because it was the only one readily available but I suspected it was also full because this was no platitudinous boring cleric but a man who, in different circumstances (and I didn't wish different circumstances on him) might've been a Niemoller or a Buber, if I've got the names right. Though I did think he might get his fence fixed …

Did he know Veronica, I wondered. Did he know *about* Veronica. Did he

know what his congregation was saying ...

People spilled into the churchyard afterwards and stood round in little groups. The sun shone but I noticed several people pulling on woolly gloves. I stood a little to one side of the throng preferring not to be connected too tightly to the Hammers for the time being and it was Emma and her mother who came over. They made a striking pair. Emma introduced me to her mother before wandering away, drawn by the mysterious beckonings of another girl standing near the corner of the church.

"Would you like to come to us for lunch?" Mrs Jessup said with a smile. "I know Carl is good on quantity but I have doubts about his quality."

I laughed at that. "It's very kind of you. I'd be glad to. You have an interesting minister. That sermon was most impressive."

"Yes. Yes, he's a brilliant speaker." I saw this as a loaded compliment and decided on a sympathetic nod. "Would you like to come home with us—or come up a bit later?" she went on.

"I'll run the Hammers home, then come back. How'll I find you?"

"We're the green house nearly opposite the school. My husband has the garage. I teach at the school."

"But Emma would be too old for school here?" I'd had no reason to think about high school since retiring but I had a vague idea the Queensland system varied slightly from the NSW one.

"Oh yes. She boards with my sister in Toowoomba during the week so she can go to Concordia and comes home Friday afternoons."

Someone passing said hello and she responded with a smile before turning back to me. "I advised the kids not to go to the police but maybe that was bad advice. I'd be glad to have your opinion on that over lunch."

"Because it would fuel the rumours going round without necessarily solving anything?"

She looked away. The Singhs were chatting with the pastor but I couldn't be sure it was them she had in view, not with other people passing and forming knots and moving on in the background. "Something like that. I must just go and catch Merle before she leaves. So we'll see you about twelve then?"

- xi -

I had no difficulty finding the green house; the others were yellow or an unattractive mauvy-pink. Mrs Jessup had changed into grey slacks and a red jumper and looked very neat and attractive.

"Will you have a drink? I've just sent Emma up with her Dad's lunch. He keeps the place open all day Sunday now. We're always afraid the company will say the turnover is too small and close us down."

I came over to the sideboard, where she was standing beside one of those kitschy wooden wagons which hold half a dozen bottles, and said half a glass of Johnny Walker'd do me fine. She poured herself a small glass of apricot brandy and handed me a bowl of cheese-flavoured snacks.

I said something about garages in small communities and she sighed, "Yes, it's almost a chicken and egg situation. To get the business to keep going you

have to stay open all hours, you have to be able to do the repairs people need even if it doesn't pay in terms of time and spare parts, you have to stock all the brands people ask for even though turnover on some of them is so small it's costing you money ... sometimes I wonder if it's worth it. And you know I come home from school and have to do everything round the house, mow the lawn, take Emma to all her things ... if she didn't go over there a fair bit Bill'd hardly see her ... "

"Yes, I can understand what a bind it must be—but maybe it'd be better if we talk about Veronica before Emma gets back—or would you rather she be here?"

"It doesn't really matter. She was the one who found out about you but I don't really think she's as interested in it as Ian and Mark. They asked me about going to the police and I advised against it. Maybe it was wrong to do that but—well, you might as well know that they suspected young Ram Singh of doing it because they'd seen him several times going down the back lane to Veronica's on his bike—and I thought if the police went to the Singhs—well, it'd be like throwing petrol on a bush fire—and if nothing got resolved, if Ram clearly hadn't done it but they had no other suspect—then a suspicion would linger—that it was just a matter of time before the police came up with enough evidence to pin it on him ... "

She sipped her drink. "I'm *glad* the kids thought of getting you!" She said it so abruptly it almost sounded like an accusation.

I smiled at her. "I have my uses. But tell me about Ram Singh."

Again she sighed. "Poor little lad. I think he must've been born under an unlucky star ... I'll always remember, the very first day he started at school here, I think he came late or something and all the other little kids had been shown where the toilets were—except him—and he was too shy to ask anybody—and he wrapped his pooh up in his hanky and put it in his schoolbag ... " She shook her head slowly. "*Poor* little boy ... I don't know that it was anyone's fault exactly—you know what first days can be like—but I still feel terrible when I think about it—and of course the kids all got to hear about it sooner or later—and some of them refused to play with him, saying he was dirty and things like that ... I tried hard to get them to be more understanding and sympathetic—and things *did* get better for him. He came over several times to ride Emma's old pony and seemed to enjoy it ... but then his parents went and bought him an expensive highly-trained pony so he could join the Pony Club. I'm sure their motives were the best but really it was the worst thing they could've done in a place where most of the kids haven't got expensive ponies and take pride in training up the ones they *have* got—like the Hammers—I think Carl picked two of theirs out of a dogmeat lot and the boys have done wonders with them."

The back door opened and Emma came in and said hello. Her mother said, "I was just telling Bob about Ram Singh—"

"Oh." A wary look appeared on Emma's face but her mother went on calmly: "That thing about the expensive pony."

The girl said "oh" again and sat down and helped herself to cheese nibbles.

“What happened then?”

“It didn’t really matter,” Emma forestalled her mother, “because he wasn’t a good enough rider to take advantage of the pony he had and win anything—so it wasn’t like anyone could say he’d got an unfair advantage ... ”

“But then there was that business with his hair and everything,” her mother said quietly.

“Yeah, they’d have to be crazy to do that to him.” Emma reached for another handful of snacks.

- xii -

We sat down at the table in the little dining-nook off the kitchen. Whether they’d gone to this trouble for me or this was their usual way I couldn’t guess. A pottery jug of wattle brightened the table. The meal was rolled roast with snow peas, broccoli, corn, potato puffs ...

They told me as we ate that young Ram Singh was going to be brought up a traditional Sikh; which meant, most obviously, he had to grow his hair and bind it up in a little top-knot, called a *patkha*, until he was old enough to wear a turban.

“I can imagine how he feels,” Mrs Jessup said, suddenly sounding indignant, “because my parents belonged to a very strict sect and we weren’t allowed to cut our hair when we were young, the girls I mean. Isn’t it strange,” she went on, “all my friends wanted to be allowed to grow long hair and I couldn’t wait to be old enough to defy my parents and cut mine off! For about ten years I went round like a tomboy with my hair practically shaved to my skull while all my friends had hair down to their waists ... but then I sort of had it out of my system and let it grow again ... though of course that was *never* as bad for a girl as a boy ... ”

“But I saw them in church—”

“Oh, the *parents*, yes. That’s what makes me so angry. I don’t know the details but apparently the grandfather is a very rich man in Malaysia and he said he wanted nothing to do with them until they agreed to return to the family religion.”

“And they don’t like to upset the people round here that do business with them—” Emma put in.

“So it’s the lad then who, willynilly, must keep the grandfather on side?”

“That’s certainly the way it looks to us. Poor little lad—as if he didn’t have enough problems as it is.”

“Mmm. Did Veronica have anything to say about any of this?” I mustn’t forget Veronica.

“Veronica had something to say about *everything*. She reminds me a bit of a character in one of the Anne books where someone says “poor soul, she always knew everything about her neighbours, but she never was very well acquainted with herself” —and yet, it doesn’t quite explain Veronica ... ”

“Did she do anything for you?”

“Yeah—” Emma put down her fork.

“I do wish you’d stop saying ‘yeah’.”

Emma flashed me a look which said plainly 'Mothers!'

Then she said, "Yessss," with a long-drawn-out hiss. "She helped me find the horse I have now. We went to see a lot of horses that were advertised in the paper or that people told us about but I couldn't find just what I wanted—or that we could afford—and I told Veronica I was still looking and she said she'd take me to see one that just might suit me—and he really *was* just what I wanted."

"But—" her mother put in.

"Yessss." Emma wasn't going to give in without a struggle. "They wanted more than we could pay. So Veronica started nit-picking, you know, saying this was wrong and that'd penalise him in hack classes—as if I was aiming for Sydney Royal!" Emma grinned. "Really—they were such little things—but it worked, because they knocked enough off for me to be able to buy him."

"That's interesting. Do you think Veronica *liked* being asked to help?"

Emma looked at her mother who said slowly, "Ye-es, I really think she did—and I think too she was convinced her criticisms were always for people's 'own good' ... "

"Mmm. And would young Ram Singh have come in for any of these criticisms?"

"Oh, of course! She said how on earth did he expect to fit his cap on properly when he had his hair done up in that ridiculous little thing—and she wasn't taking him anywhere without his cap ... some of the boys laughed when she said that and said if she wanted they could chop it off—and of course he started to cry and said his parents made him do it like that—and mum was there that day and told them to stop teasing him ... "

"Though I really should've had it out with Veronica." She sighed and put her knife and fork neatly together. "More roast, Bob?"

"No, I'd better not. That was delicious but it seems to get harder and harder to stay reasonably trim."

"Dessert then?"

"I'm easy. Just whatever you normally have."

"Get the tart, Emma, and the bowl of cream's on the top shelf in the frig."

Emma went out and I said casually, "I wonder who's looking after Veronica's place while she's in hospital."

"Oh, that'd be Larry Burns. He has the Jersey stud next door. Not that there'd be a lot to do, I wouldn't think. Veronica only had a couple of horses and some chooks."

"So how did she manage? Moneywise, I mean."

"She had money of her own. Her father was quite wealthy I believe. Of course he's been dead for years—" I wondered about the 'of course' if Veronica was only in her late forties; was he famous for marrying late in life? "but they used to say he was the largest supplier for KR."

"The largest supplier of what?"

"Pigs."

I suddenly made the connection: pigs = KR Darling Downs = bacon.

"I see. And her husband, was he well off?"

"Percy? I really didn't know him—just to say hello in the street, that's all. He used to drive a timber jinker in his early days, said he preferred that to farming ... but, at some stage, he put his back out or so I heard. I don't know where he went after he left Veronica. Somebody said it'd be easier for him to get the invalid pension that way. I think she wasn't very sympathetic, said he was faking it, but it's hard to know with backs, isn't it?"

Emma came back with a plum tart and a bowl of whipped cream. So much for keeping trim.

"And what about the boy that Veronica was looking after one time?"

"Yessss—who was he?" Emma sat down and looked at her mother. In the end the poor woman would decide 'yeah' was better than these awful hisses.

"I think she was fostering him. His mother was in prison for something ... I'm not sure what ... one of those things which used to seem so terrible—aiding a suicide or procuring an abortion or something—anyway something that got treated more leniently *after* she'd gone to prison—I'm only guessing—but the story goes she was let out on parole one day and the next day she turned up on Veronica's doorstep and took the child away. I think it'd make someone who couldn't have children of her own very bitter—to have all her care and her hope for adoption treated in such a cavalier manner ... and it must've been hard on the boy too. He was only a toddler when Veronica took him ... but this all happened well before we moved here so I couldn't tell you his name or his mother's name or what happened after that or even how long Veronica had him for ... " I wondered if Veronica's constant carping was her way of keeping the world at bay; of never again allowing anyone to creep into her heart.

- xiii -

If I was going to tackle a farmer then straight after Sunday lunch seemed a likely time to find him in, feet up, having a bit of a browse in the Sunday papers.

But Larry Burns was halfway down his lane, fixing a new chain on a gate. I pulled up and got out. In the paddock beyond were a dozen or so small fawn-coloured cows. I introduced myself and he shifted a hand-rolled smoke from one corner of his mouth to the other. His face was round and brown like a nut. A pair of old-fashioned wire-rimmed specs perched on a small beaky nose. "What brings you round these parts then?" He looked across at his cows maybe in the hope I'd come to spend lavishly.

I took out one of my cards which says 'Detective Inspector Robert Creighton (Ret'd)' and said quietly, "Keep it under your hat but I've been asked to have a quiet look into Mrs Roach's accident."

He gave a sort of dry snort. "Huh! Might as well try to keep the bloody Queen's funeral under your hat as that business!" Not a monarchist by the sound of it.

I grinned. "So it seems. Still, I'd be glad to hear your thoughts on it—if you can spare the time ... "

"Yeah." He looked back at the gate as though daring it to require more attention, then leant up against a gatepost. "It was me that found her, y'know."

"Yes. How did that happen?"

"Saw the bloody horse with his saddle underneath him an' thought 'that's funny'. Vonnie could be a cow an' a half but I'll say this for her—she looked after her place an' her stock well. You wouldn't catch her being slack with anything like that. She was good with her horses—but a bit silly if you know what I mean ... "

"In what way?"

"I've never understood it," he turned and looked at his cows as though he hadn't quite given up hope of tempting me into taking a couple home. "Had an aunt like that. Knew all about cats, had some lovely prize-winning ones—but she let 'em get away with that much nonsense. You'd be there at the table an' the bloody cat'd be walkin' round the dishes, droppin' its tail in the jam, lickin' a bit from the cream, wantin' to grab a bit off your bloody plate."

"Mrs Roach spoilt her horses?"

"Yeah. That's about it. She looked after 'em well, She trained 'em well—but she let 'em get away with a lot of nippin' an' muckin' around. Sometimes they'd be over by my fence but no way was I going to go an' give 'em a pat. Bloody things'd just as likely sink their teeth in your arm."

I felt he'd been reluctant to talk in the beginning but now that he'd warmed up he'd be annoyed if I went away too soon. The trouble was—I didn't know what to ask to keep the flow slipping along nicely.

"What about her husband—was he fond of horses?"

"Perce?" He spat out what remained of one cigarette and began, calmly, to roll another. "Not fond of anything much, old Perce, an' particularly not anything that looked like work!" He chortled at his own summing up. "An' I'll say this for old Vonnie," his bushy eyebrows came down nearly to his wire rims, "she was always on about something but at least she'd say it to your bloody face." The implication being that Percy Roach went behind people's backs.

"But she still seems to have upset people," I said mildly.

"Yeah." He concentrated on his smoke for a while. "There's a limit to what you can put up with."

I wondered if a time had come when Larry Burns reached that limit. But, as if he'd read this dangerous thought, he said, "Funny thing, y'know, I lived next door to her all these years an' we always got along fine—an' you'd meet people who'd met her twice an' they'd be fumin' away at her, just about ready to do her in—"

"Anyone in particular?"

He seemed to see this as a loaded question. A long silence fell but I was content to wait.

- xiv -

"Hard to say. She was havin' trouble a while ago with the horses—y'know, coughin' an' wheezin' a fair bit—an' the vet said it could be mouldy hay. Didn't think that was likely, not with Vonnie, but she went round sayin' it was the people that have the feed store now—"

"The Singhs?"

"Yeah. That's the name. Vonnie reckoned they were sweepin' up the

rubbish from the floor an' puttin' it in the chaff, things like that. Never heard any complaints from anyone else an' the stuff I've had's been fine—still, it wasn't the sort of story they'd want doin' the rounds, not when they're tryin' to build up the business ... " He ruminated on this very natural annoyance.

"Did the vet find out what the trouble was?"

"Not as far as I know. Thought it might be a bit of weed somewhere."

He pointed to the steep hill beyond the gully. "Things seemed to come all right again. Some plants are only poisonous at certain times, y'know, or maybe it was a bug doing the rounds ... but I don't reckon Vonnie let up on the Singhs ... I remember one time we were sendin' sorghum to Pakistan—" (I assumed 'we' meant Australia) "and it had datura seed in it—an' instead of feedin' it to their stock, it was the people that were eatin' it—killed 'em like flies."

"So you think the Singhs were getting their own back?" I said neutrally.

He laughed at that, his fag bobbing up and down merrily. "Don't know about that! Still, they mightn't pick up on something that'd got into the hay they were chaffin', not like we would ... "

Eventually I said I'd like to go over and have a bit of a walk around and could I do anything there for him, save him an extra visit.

"Yeah. Might as well let the horses out the bottom gate." He pointed. "They've pretty well cleaned out these top paddocks."

"Sure." I wasn't going to pet them but I asked him if he knew their names.

"Yeah. There's Caesar an' Rommel an' Napoleon an'—hmm—horse she said belonged to Alexander the Great. Didn't know they rode horses, thought they had chariots—"

"I think that was the Romans. Alexander had a horse called Bucephalus."

"Yeah, that sounds like it. Knew it was some odd thing."

Odd? It sounded more like someone with a power complex, someone who liked to command.

- xv -

When I opened the gate, and the horses realised it was open, a stampede erupted. All four of them came charging out and away down the hill, tails up over their backs, great tree-bending blasts of wind rending the peace.

I walked down slowly. The track curved round when it reached the gully and ran beside it before opening out into a big natural amphitheatre set up with showjumps, lines of vertical poles, lines of horizontal poles (I assumed the latter were for jumping over, I don't know what the others were), a hitching rail, even a couple of picnic tables. I could see why, tartar or not, the kids might enjoy coming here. There was a stone wall built into the little waterhole in the creekbed; on the far side was an arrangement of rustic poles. Further away up the hillside were several more jumps.

I walked on along the gully in the wake of the horses and in about five minutes came to a very dilapidated cottage with a post-and-rail fence around it. The back gate was one of those on a spring and the horses had pushed this open to get into the overgrown garden. I followed them in. Near the back fence was an old bush dunny with its floor collapsing inwards. Underneath the tree beside

it nestled a neat little turd. I thought of dogs coming this way (someone once said of rural Australia: 'you wanta take a kip, there's a turd in the way—you wanta have a picnic, there's a turd in the way—you wanta—etc etc') then I had the disconcerting memory of Mrs Jessup's story.

The house was a small fibro affair with a tin roof and a stovepipe coming through. The fibro was broken, several window panes were cracked. I couldn't get the front door to open but the back door was no trouble and I went in cautiously. The place had that unpleasant smell of dry rot and mouldering lino, damp ash and mice; several of the blinds were half off their rollers. There was some kitchen furniture, a bed with a disintegrating kapok mattress on it, a lone armchair in the small front room. I went across to it. The room was gloomy and close with its blinds down but pushed down the side of the chair cushion was a bundle of comics. I took them out. Spider Man. A space adventure. Magilla Gorilla. Several Walt Disney's. They were in good nick but there was no name on them and I slipped them back carefully.

Despite the oppressive gloom of the house I could imagine kids seeing it as a glorified cubby house but *my* one thought was to get back to the fresh air. There was a lot of broken glass in the kitchen and I wondered if older people came here for bottle parties. Though its distribution round the feet of the ancient stove in its tin alcove suggested someone'd sat back and hurled bottles at it for a satisfying evening's entertainment. I staggered outside thankfully. The horses were eating in the garden as though they hadn't eaten for a week. I walked across to see what it was they were finding so tasty.

One of them laid back his ears and gave me a dirty look. Outa my way, runt, it seemed to say.

Just some garden plant that'd spread through the tangle of dry grass and weeds. It was a sheltered spot. It might've been a pleasure to garden here. But not being a gardener myself I couldn't recognise what it was they were eating with such relish.

And the real puzzle was—if the horses regularly pushed the gate open to get in—how did they manage when it was time to get out? Had they discovered they could drag it open with their teeth or chins? Did they jump the fence? Did Veronica come down and let them out? Had the fence been down and Veronica had fixed it? I propped the gate open with a large stone and faced the long uphill walk back to my car.

- xvi -

Had Dave come to see Emma as promised? I made my way back to the Jessups' house. A car was now parked out the front. Mrs Jessup was there in the sunroom with a woman she introduced as Daphne Morrow who, though not as pretty as her hostess, was blessed with a rather enticing lop-sided dimple. I wondered if someone had married her for that dimple. They said Dave was keen to talk with me and he and Emma were out the back yard. Lina Jessup went across and opened a window and called "Da-ave! Emm-a! Bob's back!" Then she smiled and said, "I promised to get Daphne some cuttings from the garden so we'll leave you to them." I wouldn't have thought the Jessup garden was

likely to yield much but I accepted it as the sort of discretion parents rarely accord their children.

Dave Morrow was an impressive young man, for a fifteen-year-old, with a chin to make Harrison Ford gnash his teeth. It wasn't hard to see why Emma blushed when his name was mentioned; not that she was any slouch herself.

They both sat down on the sofa opposite me and Dave opened his jacket and took an envelope from an inside pocket and passed it across. True, the pictures even with magnification would probably not be acceptable as evidence. I looked at the two snaps of the mysterious sole and felt reasonably certain the treads were too far apart to be the shoe of a smallish ten-year-old.

"Next time you're photographing something like this where it's important to know the size, and you don't have a tape-measure on you, lay something alongside it that you can bring home and measure—a shoelace, even a twig. Also you need to get some background in, otherwise a good defence lawyer would claim the photo could have been taken anywhere."

They both nodded. "We were sort of serious but sort of mucking round too," Dave said casually.

"Sure. It's often hard to know what's important and what isn't."

"But you think we're right, don't you?" Emma leaned forward and gave me a very appealing look. I wondered if she'd been practising on Dave.

"I'm sure you are. But even without measurements I think that shoe belonged to a much bigger person than Ram Singh. Did you think of anyone when you first saw the print?"

"It was smaller than mine—"

"And mine too," Emma said with regret, looking down at two riding boots which went with her height and physique but wouldn't have made any prince pursue her with a glass slipper. "I think they were about Mark's size, maybe a bit smaller."

"Mmm. Does that suggest anyone?"

"Not really." They looked at each other.

"What about Veronica's husband? Was he a small man?"

"But he went away *years* ago!" Dave looked puzzled.

"Away meaning Toowoomba—or Timbuctoo?"

Again they looked at each other. Then they turned back and shrugged. "No, I don't think anyone ever said. But I don't s'pose he would've gone all that far."

"Don't worry. Someone's sure to know."

"But—you really think *Percy* might've done it?"

"I have no idea. But I have a golden rule which says if someone is hurt at home always take the time to check the spouse so I'd just like to know if it was physically possible for Percy to have come back and booby-trapped his wife or ex-wife."

"I don't know if they ever got divorced." Emma took the photos back from me and stared hard at them as though 'Done by Percy' would suddenly appear in mysterious letters. They were both nice kids but I had the feeling that, investigation or no investigation, they didn't really want to sit round with me

and try to wrack their memories for something to tell me about Percy Roach. Being young, being in love (probably for the first time) is a state which can do without the world hanging round like a dog which won't go home.

- xvii -

Ian and Mark were working their horses in the paddock next to the house as I parked. Carl was tinkering under the bonnet of his truck. I walked across to the paddock fence and watched the boys ride with a concentration which suggested they might, after all, outstrip Dave and Emma somewhere along the way. They went over the row of oil drums side by side, did a large circle, Mark's larger horse on the outside keeping nose by nose with Ian's pony; they turned and ran into a long sheet of plywood painted to resemble bricks and jumped it in impressive synchronisation. I stood for quite a while and watched but all the time something hammered gently at the back of my mind. Something I'd missed? Some connection I'd failed to make? A question I'd failed to ask?

It had something to do with the discrepancy between their belief, their firm belief, that Ram Singh was involved somehow and the unlikelihood that a ten-year-old boy could've put wire there of sufficient strength and tension, known when Veronica was likely to come by, done something to frighten the horse into charging down the hill, calmly loosened the girths on the horse, walked away from the unconscious Veronica, removed the wire and gone quietly home.

But if someone else had done that and it was Ram Singh who went to the old cottage to be by himself and read comics—then there was a chance he'd seen the person and the person had seen him. I felt a creeping unease. Their curiosity, my curiosity, the questions about Ram Singh—what might they spark off?

The boys galloped round the outside of their jumps, showing off with war whoops and flash riding, before finally slowing down and riding over to me.

"That looked great," I said sincerely. "You'll win the Calgary Stampede or the Olympic showjumping or something." They grinned without believing me.

"Ian," I went on, "I wonder if you'd come and do a little favour for me. It won't take long."

He dismounted. "Okay. What d'you want me to do?"

"Will you come in and ring up Ram Singh? I want to know if he's safe at home or not. If he's there just ask him if he'd like some of your old comics—if he's not there, just ask where he is. Okay?"

"I haven't got many old comics," Ian objected.

"It doesn't matter. If he says he would, ask him if he'd rather have Walt Disney or space ones and I'll pick some up at a book exchange for you."

Ian looked nervous but he tied his pony to the fence and came inside and did as I asked. But after a minute he said, "Can you tell me where he is?" And a minute later, "Conrad who?" Then he said, "Okay. I'll talk to him tomorrow."

He put the phone down. "They said he's gone to visit Conrad House—but I never heard of any kid with that name."

"Conrad's house then?"

He still shook his head.

There were pounding footsteps in the hallway and Carl Hammer put his head round the door. “Had a good day, Bob?”

“Interesting, thanks. Do you know a Conrad House or Conrad’s house?”

“Yeah, dad. It must be someone not at school here.”

“Konrad’s house? Of course, you muggins!” He grinned at his son. “You remember? Old Konrad Hugenberg? Lived down in the little house at the bottom of Veronica’s?” He turned to me. “Poor old sod drank himself to death. The house’s been empty for about six years, I’d reckon.”

“*I* never called it that,” Ian said accusingly. “*I* always called it Veronica’s house.”

Carl shrugged.

“Okay. It doesn’t really matter but do you want to come with me? While I just whizz down and see if there’s anyone there?”

Ian hesitated. “I—think I’d better go and fix Albie up.” I assumed Albie was the pony.

“All right. How do I get down that side lane?” I didn’t want to have to walk right across Veronica’s farm again.

“Just back up here and turn right.” Carl looked at me with raised eyebrows but I left his questions unanswered. It’d be dark soon.

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There *was* a bike lying in the long grass at the end of the lane. I hurried round to the back door and opened it. I didn’t want to scare the kid but I did want to put him off coming to this place, for a while anyway. If he was inside I’d tell him to get his comics and go home.

He was there but not curled up reading Spider Man. He was on his back on the kitchen floor. I gasped (I think) and rushed forward. By the look of it he’d tried to hang himself from the old chain in the ceiling which had probably once dangled a lantern but since then had had a flex twined through it. The whole thing had come out of the ceiling and crashed to the floor, the boy still with a piece of the flex wound round his neck. He was covered in blood where the bulb had shattered and slivers had caught him in the face and neck.

I leant over him. “Ram?”

His eyes flickered open. He tried to roll away from me.

I hope I never have to see such a rictus of fear on a child’s face again. As I said quietly, “Take it easy, lad,” he suddenly went limp. After a quick prowl through the house I lifted his unconscious form and carried him out to the car thanking foresight, hindsight, my good fairy or whatever, that I’d got myself a car phone; I laid him gently on the back seat and rang for an ambulance, asking them to meet me at Jessup’s garage. This lane was so narrow and overgrown they’d have a job to get down here in a hurry.

I opened the boot and put the bike in and drove very slowly up the hill.

It might be imagination but a vague feeling stayed with me—that there *had* been someone else in the house. Try as I did I couldn’t pin it down—a whiff of tobacco, a sound, something out of place ... nothing struck an answering chord. Nor could I think of a hiding-place. Maybe I was trying too hard to convince

myself simply because I had grave doubts about this small boy being able to reach that chain, even by standing on the table—and if he'd wanted to why hadn't he moved the table closer so it wasn't such an awkward reach? It was a light table.

I pulled into Jessup's garage and a face, big, bluff, friendly with sandy hair, appeared at my window. "What can I do for you, mate?"

"Look, can you ring your wife and ask her to come up? It'll be a familiar face for the boy if he comes to." I jerked my head towards the back seat and he obediently peered in the window. "Crumbs! What's happened?"

"I'll explain later—just do that, then ring the Singhs and ask them to come. I've called the ambulance and asked them to ring the police."

"Can do." He lumbered away without more questions and I drove the car on past the bowsers and got out.

About three minutes later Lina Jessup walked in and her husband hurried over to stand beside her.

"Bob, what on earth has happened?" She frowned at me as though I mightn't be as nice as she'd first thought.

"Either he tried to hang himself or someone tried to do it for him down at the old cottage at the back of Veronica's farm. Fortunately the light fitting came out of the ceiling."

"Good heavens! Kids playing, you mean?"

"I doubt it though I'm only guessing at this stage. Still, it'd be a good idea if, tomorrow, you tell everyone at school that old house is off-limits till we get this business cleared up."

"Yes, I don't like them going down there. They say the old man had the DTs and was always throwing things at the stove, convinced it was a bear hiding in its cave, waiting to eat him." And round about dusk would be the time when that illusion would be most vivid. I shivered suddenly. Was what I'd felt a dead presence rather than a flesh and blood one? But *someone* else had been there ...

Mrs Jessup, very sensibly, opened the back door and gently sponged the boy's face and checked his breathing and pulse. I'd loosened the flex (not that it was tied tight enough to do him any damage) and left it hanging over his shoulders; I wanted it seen by people other than me. The boy himself, seen now in the light at the front of the service bay, looked very small and vulnerable.

A police car, containing a uniformed constable, came next. He looked suspicious and unenthusiastic when I told my story; he pursed thin lips as though to say, okay, pull the other one, mate, but eventually told me to get in with him and show him where it had happened (was supposed to have happened) before night overtook us.

I've sometimes had the strange feeling of returning to a childhood haunt, meeting someone I hadn't seen in years, going to see a film I'd enjoyed thirty years ago—and finding memory has played tricks on me. But it was nothing compared to walking into that old house and finding the table neatly up against the far wall, not a sign of the chain or the flex or the broken bulb.

The young cop looked at me and shook his head. "I haven't got time for

playing games, Mr Creighton."

It was a situation made for pathetic blustering—"but, sir, he was right here, I *saw* him with my own eyes!"—and I stepped forward and knelt down to give myself time to think. (I could pull out one of my cards and say coldly "I never play games".) Instead I had the vaguely pleased feeling: so I was right, so there had been someone here all the time; so I wasn't getting spooked by Konrad Hugenberg's ghost. But had he or she deigned to leave me a sliver of evidence.

"Give me your torch a minute?"

He handed it over with a scowl. I didn't blame him. I've heard more convincing stories. It'd been a rush job—and whoever it was hadn't known it's a good idea to carry a dustpan and brush when you go out to do a homicide—I lifted several tiny slivers of glass from cracks in the lino and placed them on my handkerchief.

"I wonder whether he's gone and if so, which way?" The thought had occurred to me: how easy for someone to camp in Veronica's empty house. Larry Burns no doubt went into the barn if he was feeding the horses anything extra but he'd taken the hens across to his own fowlyard and I couldn't see him coming across to air the house or give it a bit of a vacuum now and again—and there was no guarantee he had a key anyway though, being a country house, it probably wouldn't be hard to get into.

The constable went all through the house but there was no sign of anyone and when I asked him if the comics were still there he just looked at me and said "What comics?" and walked out. I told him about Veronica's house and he merely grunted. Ungraciously, he accepted a couple of the glass slivers I put in a plastic bag for him but somehow I couldn't see him going back and labelling them Exhibit No: ... We walked back morosely to the car. I told him about Veronica's accident and the possibility the boy might've seen someone setting the booby-trap. He looked unconvinced. "Sounds the sort of nonsense kids'd get up to."

"Maybe. But you've seen the boy. I doubt if he'd have the strength ... and *someone* cleared away the evidence here after I'd left with the boy."

"A bigger kid."

I shrugged. "Possible."

He seemed to belong in that limbo world where he'd ceased to be in touch with his own childhood but hadn't yet begun to re-experience it through children of his own. We drove back up and I used Bill Jessup's office to write out and sign a brief statement for him. The ambulance had come and gone. Mrs Jessup had gone home. Mr Singh had come, disbelieving, and followed on after the ambulance.

I gave the young cop one of my cards; he peered at it, looked vaguely uncomfortable, then got back in his car and drove away without another word. Meringup's couple of street lights came on and the place reminded me of those little bits of nowhere you flash through on long night drives, the sudden leap of light in the dead landscape, the thought: what do people do in places like this at the weekend?—and the instant forgetting as the distance draws you back into a

world of solitude. I went home to the Hammers', looking forward to a hot meal and cheerful company. The boys of course were all agog to know why I'd rushed off like that and what had happened. Carl plonked a huge plate of rissoles and boiled cabbage and potato in front of me.

Then he sat down to an even bigger helping and said, "Yeah. It's a funny business all right, eh?"

But it was Mark who said, and it was impossible to miss the reluctance in his voice, "So we were wrong all the way through?"

"Did you want it to be Ram?"

"No. I don't mean we *wanted* it—but we thought we'd got it all pretty well worked out ... "

"I honestly don't know at this stage. But I think we may have been looking at it from the wrong angle. We've been saying it's because of what Veronica *does* that's made the trouble—but I wonder if it's because of what Veronica *has* that might be the motive."

"You mean—the farm or something?"

"Yes. I've been told today that her father left her quite a lot of money when he died. Of course she may have spent it over the years on her horses but if there was still enough there to be worth while—well, I wonder who would benefit if something happened to her?"

"Yeah. See what you mean." Carl shook more salt over his plate. "But I reckon the farm belonged to Percy. There's been Roaches round here for a long time. Their old man divided the farm in two and gave half to each boy. But the other one, Harold, sold out years ago. Think the woman he married was the matron of a hospital out West somewhere. Reckon he was quite happy to let her go on working while he used the dough from the farm to keep him in grog. None of the Roaches had a reputation for working if they didn't need to ... "

"That's interesting. I wonder what the arrangement was between Percy and Veronica when he left? If she went on living on his farm and I suppose paying his rates—"

"Heard he was getting a pension but it mightn't be true."

"He'd have to be careful when he listed his assets then."

"Yeah." Carl grinned. "Reckon he told 'em he was a poor old fella with nothing, now his bloody wife'd chucked him out."

"Did she chuck him out, do you think?"

"Haven't a clue. Think he more likely just got sick of Veronica telling him, do this, do that, all the time." Carl gave a grin which hinted at fellow-feeling.

"What did he look like?"

Everyone sort of shrugged. "A bit like you maybe," Mark said at last. "But he wasn't very tall, I think he was shorter than Veronica ... " And small men sometimes have uncomfortable compensatory habits.

"That's right," their dad said suddenly. "Remember seeing 'em together at something and thinking Veronica was like one of those spiders that lay their eggs after they've sucked out the male spider and just leave the husk hanging there." Next time I looked for a female companion, I thought wryly, I'd go for a

small blonde. Still, was there anything helpful in this analogy? Had Veronica been threatening Percy with ‘exposure’, whatever exposure might mean in this context, if he didn’t sell her the farm on easy terms ... or, was it the other way round, and Percy’d found a way to milk her accounts, the nice little nest egg her father’d left her?

But in a small place like this arguments leading up to his departure almost certainly would’ve become public knowledge. So it seemed more likely Percy’d come back recently, on the sly, to try and talk Veronica into changing something, agreeing to something—a divorce?—and getting no satisfaction had begun to think of something more drastic.

“If they didn’t divorce then Percy might still have benefitted from Veronica’s money—unless she’d made some stipulation he wasn’t to get any ... and I wonder if she’d ever tried to find the small boy that was taken from her that time ... she might’ve felt if he wasn’t well off then she’d rather he have her money, not Percy. If Percy heard she was looking he might’ve got the wind up.”

“But she wouldn’t have to die,” Mark said suddenly. “Larry Burns isn’t going to go on looking after the farm for ever ... ”

“You’re right, mate.” Carl suddenly slapped a big hand on his son’s shoulder. “With Veronica in hospital Larry’s going to be saying to Percy, you’d better come back and get things organised with the farm and then Percy can sell up or rent or whatever—and that’s it. He won’t get Veronica’s money maybe but he’ll have all her furniture and her jewellery and her appliances and the horses—and he’d probably get quite a bit for the four of ’em, they’re all good horses ... ”

“Except that they bite?”

The boys both thought this was marvellously funny and Ian got the giggles again. I asked them, it seemed a non-amusing subject, what vet Veronica used. They looked surprised but thought it was probably Mr Oldham who did quite a lot of the work round here.

“Why?” I could see them thinking ‘vet, vet, why a vet?’ and coming up blank.

“Veronica blamed the Singhs for selling her mouldy feed, saying it’d made her horses cough—or so the story goes—and I’d like to hear his opinion on that coughing and whether anyone else’d had any trouble and whether they’d blamed the Singhs too—”

“I never *heard* of anyone complaining but Veronica said a lot of bad things about their stuff. Maybe it stopped someone buying from them.” Mark shrugged. “I only went there the once, when dad bought us some chaff for a Christmas present, most of the time our ponies only get grass but we thought they’d do better ... ” he tailed off as though he’d forgotten what he was trying to prove. “The place looked okay to us—and they’ve still got Eric Berghofer managing it, he’s been there a long time, and I reckon he’d say something if they didn’t know much ... ”

“But—*if* young Ram Singh thought Veronica was destroying his parents’ business—what do you think he might’ve done?”

Ian looked at me with round eyes.

"I don't know," Mark looked thoughtful. "I s'pose he could've gone and hung round, trying to think of some way to tell Veronica—or do something—"

"Such as?"

"Search me?" It struck me he was acquiring a very expressive shrug. "I remember one time I had a teacher, about Grade Four, and I really hated him and I'd lie in bed and think of all the gruesome things I'd like to do to him ... is that the sort of thing you're thinking of?"

"Yes. Though Ram might not have got to the stage of thinking through something to actually *do* to Veronica and we don't know whether he ever thought of hurting her, he might just have tried to screw up his courage enough to go and talk to her—" (I thought of that hearsay inheritance; the harder things got here, the more attractive it would begin to look) "and I wonder how Veronica would've responded if he'd gone and said, please Mrs Roach, leave my dad alone ... " But it was quite possible this was speculation for a Sunday night by the fire and we hadn't even got close to understanding a lonely alienated miserable little boy living in a strange country.

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I rang Oldham next morning and found him sympathetic and interested. He admitted quite readily he'd never got to the bottom of Veronica's problem but as the horses seemed to improve he'd been able to put it aside; I read an understandable relief into this. Veronica going round telling the world he wouldn't know a spiv from a spavin ...

I told him I was curious, not pretending to any knowledge of horse ailments, and mentioned my experience of watching four apparently well-fed horses tear down the hill to the abandoned garden and set to as though they hadn't been fed for a month. He was interested enough to say he'd squeeze me in this morning.

My next ring was to the Department of Social Security in Toowoomba. No one had been sure where Percy was now living but I doubted if he'd go very far afield, not if he still owned the farm, but at the same time Toowoomba offered a slightly greater chance of anonymity than Crows Nest or Goombungee or Ravensbourne. I got past the switchboard but came up against a decided-sounding female who said she couldn't possibly give out any information on their clients without authorisation. She made her clients sound like the Crown jewels. I explained I was trying to contact a Mr Percy Roach as someone had attempted to murder a schoolboy on his farm last night. This precipitated a change of tone though I wasn't going to kid myself she'd now be delighted to contradict her first assertion. Nor did she. She said she thought the person I was looking for was unlikely to be a client of theirs.

"Mr Roach has a wife called Veronica who is currently in hospital and I understand he applied for an invalid pension some while ago when he hurt his back."

"Did you say your Mr Roach has a *farm*?" she said suddenly as she might've said "a pet *tiger*?"

"Yes. It's a very nice house and small farm at Meringup. You might like to check with the Council though I suspect it's his wife who's been paying the rates all these years, I believe she's quite comfortably off in her own right." (Or she was ...) But after that one expression of surprise she went back to being cool and correct and refused to divulge anything. I insisted on giving her 'my' phone number but knew it was quite likely she didn't bother to note it. Then I finished dressing in the silent house; silent with Carl Hammer and his rig gone (and I'd never asked about Jim Macready), silent with the boys gone and their dogs dozing and their ponies eating at the far end of the paddock ...

Oldham came at about eleven. He was oldish with a drooping grey moustache in a leathery face and wore a woollen cap with ear flaps. I got into his van and we drove slowly down the side lane.

I felt deeply uninspired; as though there were answers lying casually round the place but I really couldn't get up the energy to bend down and pick them up.

The horses were by the waterhole in the gully. We went in by the front gate and round to the back. Someone had removed the stone I'd placed against the gate and put it so the gate was now held shut. Had it been like that when I'd come down the previous evening? I thought not but memory can play tricks. And why? Was this so the horses couldn't get in again and perhaps attract attention—though it was hard to see what attention they'd attract in this secluded spot. I sat down on a stump and Oldham began to quarter the garden like an elderly terrier that regularly forgets where it's put its bones. Everything was still down here in the hollow and the sun was only beginning to take the nip out of the air. I might've sat there five minutes in a silence broken only by Oldham murmuring to himself ... "plenty of oleander but I've never seen a horse eat oleander except by accident ... touch of catsear ... " he yanked something up by the roots, "no ... thought it was ... " then, a sudden bellow, "my God! Of course! Never thought of that!"

I got up and strolled over.

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It didn't impress me at all, the small faintly furry-looking leaf he was holding between finger and thumb, and I said, "That's it? That's what caused the trouble?"

"I'd say so. Yeah. What gardeners call mist flowers—*Eupatorium Riparium*. Most poisonous plants taste foul but horses can get addicted to this one. I only ever saw one case, years ago, where a girl used to bring her pony into the garden to hose him down. She'd tie him up where he could just reach a patch of these. Got so he was spending all his time trying to get into the garden. It's related to crofton weed, same problem, damages their lungs, but in a garden it's more likely to be the cultivated variety."

"Do you think Veronica knew?"

He shrugged. "Good at jumping to conclusions, old Vonnie."

Given he was probably twenty years older than Mrs Roach ... I nodded neutrally. "But she, so I heard, blamed the people that have the feed store."

"She did." He took a pipe out of his big flap pocket and began to fill it and

tamp it; just when I thought he was all ready to light it he put it carefully back in his pocket and said, “Well, nothing more we can do here. Just keep the horses out of the garden.”

But someone had done that already. Someone who understood and knew that horses with damaged lungs were worth less?

I invited him in for a bite of lunch but he said no, he had some scouring cattle to see. I made myself a pot of tea and toasted some rissole sandwiches. Although the sun was still shining a cold wind was getting up and I stoked the kitchen fire and drew up a chair. I thought vaguely of ways of hunting down Percy Roach and putting him on the spot but I thought someone else, someone with authority, could do that faster and more productively. I set Percy aside (I suppose he just wanted to be left to lead the pleasant life of a man of leisure, funded by the government, occasionally moaning about his bad back when someone thought to check) and began thinking about my own life of leisure. What sort of jobs might be on offer to a man of my talents and age: nightwatchman? store security? Mayne Nickless driver? Maybe I could install burglar alarms or sell safes and window grills to worried widows? I felt about as enthusiastic as a hula dancer doing an open air show in a Melbourne winter.

In mid-afternoon a utility drew up and three people, two adults and a boy, got out slowly. The Singhs. I watched them walk up the path, fending off the setters, and felt a different kind of deep reluctance.

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I met them on the verandah, invited them in. No doubt I should entertain them in the untidy room with its oozing armchairs and old gilt but as it didn’t appear to have a heater I thought ‘Blow that!’ and took them along to the kitchen saying, “I’ll make a cup of tea.”

They sat down primly, obviously regarding the Hammer kitchen as being a bit below them, but offered no information on why they’d come or what they expected of me. I certainly felt pity for the boy with his face and neck haphazardly decorated with sticking plaster. I thought I should feel pity for his parents—by all accounts they’d been having a rough time with Veronica’s slurs and slings and there was no guarantee she was the only unfriendly person they’d encountered—and, instead, I felt a deep anger threatening to rise up. Because—it didn’t matter who did what—the boy was still *their* responsibility.

For several minutes we made small talk about the weather, the season, while I found mugs and made the tea and cut some of the nibbled cake, discreetly slicing from the good side.

“Tea for you, Ram?” I smiled at him but he gave no hint of an answering smile.

“Yes please.”

I passed round milk and sugar. The frig was cleaner simply because I’d cleaned it; even so I didn’t invite them to look inside.

There was something about these adults—a reserve, a pride—which didn’t invite sympathy (it didn’t invite conversation either) yet I was willing to believe it hid a profound bewilderment and unhappiness. But it was the boy who

worried me. That kind of stillness about him, I'd met it in other children who were absurdly quiet and over-good in their parents' presence, and it was sometimes a sign of a particular kind of psychological bullying. In this case I was willing to believe the parents were unwittingly putting their own stresses on to the boy.

They sipped their tea in silence and my first thought—that they'd come to thank me for finding their son—faded. In the end I pitched right in.

"I had a son myself once. He was only two when he died. From meningitis. So I know how precious sons are, children are. And I think your son has been very unhappy. He would have to be unhappy to spend time down in that horrible cottage on his own. You are his parents. You have the right to ask certain kinds of obedience from him. But you do not have the right to ask him to do something you're not prepared to do yourself. So when you go home tonight I want you to get the scissors and cut his hair so that tomorrow or the day after he can go to school and feel he's just one of the kids. Either that, or you should consider moving to a school where some of his peers will also be wearing their hair on their heads like that."

They both stared at me but no one said anything. Were they struck dumb by my impertinence? "Coming to a new school, a new way of life, is hard enough for a boy without it getting mixed up with difficult cultural and religious things. Let him have a normal childhood attending church here with you. Pastor Werner may not counsel you in your difficulties or heal you in your sickness—but he has a brilliant mind and it won't do your son any harm to listen to him twice a month. Time enough when he's in his late teens to start looking into the big questions of faith and loyalty and heritage." I stopped; this time because I had the uneasy feeling I was *enjoying* hectoring them. Like the times when you know you've got someone exactly where you want them but still there's things you've been wanting to get off your chest. A subtle abuse of power.

They all lowered their eyes and sipped their tea. I did the same. But suddenly I wished they'd go away, that this business was finished, that I could know the Hammer boys were safe, that I could walk on the beach again and feel the afternoon sun warm on my face.

Of course they'd never engage in debate with me on such a subject. No, they'd go home and I would have no influence over what they'd do or wouldn't do. But while I was debating what else to say the dogs gave a friendly wooff! there were footsteps in the hallway, something was dropped, and Ian burst into the kitchen. He stared round, a what-are-they-doing-in-our-kitchen look, then seemed to retreat into himself. He said in a subdued way, "Hi, Ram. You okay now?"

The younger boy said, "Yes," even more quietly.

"Did you see who was hiding in the old house?"

Ram nodded. "I don't know him. I never saw him before." But there was something furtive about the way he said it. He *had* seen the man before—laying a booby-trap?—but he wasn't going to tell his parents? Or his parents'd told him not to go telling anybody?

"What did he look like?"

Mr Singh stood up and he was a man of considerable grace and natural presence, and inclined his head towards me. "I am sorry we must be going now."

"Certainly." I was tempted to remind him he still hadn't told me his purpose in coming. But Ian could barely sit still with impatience. Was I going to let them go without an answer to this vital question.

"Was it an old man?" he shot at Ram.

"A bit old. He looked a bit like—" he ducked his head in embarrassment in my direction, "but he had two teeth missing." He pointed to his own mouth. Mr Singh turned and directed a long unnerving look at me. Was that the point behind this whole exercise? The hope that Ram would point a finger the minute he set eyes on me. "That's him! That's the man!" I'd felt a guarded hostility throughout the visit. Was it that Ram was unsure, that he felt intimidated in my presence? They didn't trust the police so they'd made a discreet call to learn what they could themselves.

The phone rang. "It might be for you, Bob." Ian obviously had hopes of getting more out of Ram. I thought it was more likely to be one of Ian's mates but, in fact, it was the DSS woman, not sounding more friendly but willing to give me the number of a boarding-house where Mr Roach had been staying. Was it her curiosity or my title? Had she been doing her own checking?

I said I was grateful for crumbs and she hung up.

His landlady, if that's who it was, said Percy was out and did I want to leave a message? I said I was sorry to be a nuisance but I wasn't absolutely sure I had the right Percy Roach. Was he a rather slightly built man (I gave her a smaller version of myself; by the law of averages I must look like quite a few of the characters who sail close to the wind) and did he have two teeth missing? If I was Percy I'd do something about filling those gaps.

She said, after a hearty smoker's cough, "Yeah, that sounds like old Perce."

I thanked her and asked what was usually a good time to catch him in. Outside, I heard a car start and when I walked out to the verandah a minute later it was to see the utility disappearing over the rise to our west; away to their kingdom of barns and silos and irrrigated flats.

Ian looked disappointed in me and I said mildly, "I thought he'd talk to you but he knew his parents didn't want him to talk to me."

"Was that why you—" He shrugged. "Did you have a plan?"

"No, not exactly. I was busier with giving them a lecture on cutting their son's hair and letting him lead a normal life. Parents often have two sets of standards, you know—one for themselves, one for their kids."

I grinned at him and he grinned back. "You must be hungry?" He nodded but instead of hoeing into the fruit cake he sat there with his chin propped in his hands. "What's on your mind, Ian?" I said after a while.

"Do you know who the man with the missing teeth is?"

"Yes. Do you?"

After another silence he took a punt. "I don't know. I never saw a man with

two missing teeth but you think it's Mr Roach, don't you?"

"Yes. It seems very likely."

"But Mr Roach doesn't really look like you."

"That's a relief. But tell me—how did you find me in the first place?"

"It wasn't me. Emma knew some kids who told her about a missing racehorse or something and then she rang up some man that worked on a newspaper ... "

I smiled at that. But I saw now I was doomed. Someone would always know someone ...

When Mark came home on the bus, when they'd exercised their horses and fed the dogs and done their homework, I said we'd better go along to the police and tell our story. But before we could do that Mrs Jessup drove up. She hurried past the dogs (though they could make a lot of noise they both seemed to be of a retiring disposition), up the steps, and said cheerfully, "Good news! I rang the hospital. I ring every Monday," she turned to me as though to explain this odd habit, "and they say there's a very slight improvement in Veronica's condition."

The boys didn't say Yippeee! In fact they received this news in poker-faced silence. After her damp squib—I said "Well, that's good to hear"—she told them she'd been thinking and she wondered if they'd like to sleep at her house through the week, she'd run them down morning and afternoon to look after their horses; she was lonely with Emma away all week. But I understood, and I'm sure they did too: she was worried they might be next on a hit list.

This thought had been worrying me too but the boys, sturdily independent to the last, said only that they'd think about it.

Then we went out the gate and they scrambled into my car and we drove away to present a damning case against one Percival Roach Esquire who, it would seem, had bumbled and bungled everything from farming to fraud to murder.

- end -

THE HERMIT OF ATABRINE CREEK

- i -

I stayed with Ian and Mark Hammer while the police hunted, not very vigorously, for Percy Roach. Was it that they didn't find our evidence convincing? Yet, once they had Percy Roach on the carpet (to assist their enquiries) he began to bluster. Pathetic, but pathetic people can be dangerous people.

Percy claimed he wanted to 'scare' his wife, that's all; then, afflicted with

verbal diarrhoea, he expanded to “I just wanted to get her off my bloody place for a while—so I could come back ... ” He’d wanted to sell, he claimed, but Veronica’d said, in that case, her solicitor would ask for twenty-five years of rates and repairs to be deducted from the sale price. There mightn’t be anything left for Percy. What had happened to Veronica’s inheritance? Percy said she’d spent a lot of it ‘on the bloody horses’ and, scowling, ‘on kids’; not ‘on a kid’.

Then he claimed he’d found Ram Singh already strung up and that as it was already too late to do anything for him he had merely laid him on the floor and gone home to think on who best to contact. As there was no evidence of him contacting anyone this didn’t strengthen his case. Thankfully, I wasn’t the one who had to sort Percy’s facts from Percy’s fictions.

On Thursday night, the boys and I went up to have dinner with the Jessups and Lina Jessup had borrowed ‘Kindergarten Cop’ with Arnie Schwarzenegger to occupy the boys while we sat over coffee.

Lina and Bill were intrigued by what I could tell them about Percy Roach and Lina said thoughtfully, “I’m nearly sure the boy Veronica was fostering was called Peter but I *will* ask around.” Then, changing the subject, she said with evident reluctance, “It seems an awful thing to say, I suppose, but I really don’t like the Singhs.”

“Because of the boy’s troubles?”

“Well, obviously that’s part of it—but the times I’ve been there to pick up chaff or grain for Emma’s horse—I felt ... it’s hard to describe ... as though they were perfectly happy to take my money but they held their customers in a kind of—*contempt*—that the whole business of buying and selling stockfeed was faintly distasteful, if you know what I mean ... ”

“It could be that the rest of their family are doctors and lawyers—aren’t Sikhs known for being lawyers in Asia?—and they may have bought the business simply because it was too good an opportunity to miss—or they might’ve taken it in payment for a bad debt or something like that—”

“I wish someone’d give me something in return for a bad debt,” Bill Jessup said with a rueful grin.

His wife smiled slightly. “Yes. But I really think that’s their trouble, that sort of upper class—or do I mean upper caste? no—well, that old idea of trade being rather a grubby thing and beneath a person’s dignity ... I remember years ago a CWA member telling me about a conference she’d been to with a lot of Asian delegates and the Australian women were explaining how they raised money by cooking and doing handcrafts and having stalls and so on and the Indian ladies were rather looking down their noses—because of course they all had *servants* to do the cooking and the sewing!” She smiled at the idea.

“And yet,” she went on, “when I did some reading up about Sikhs so I’d understand better what Ram was going through I was really impressed. I thought, if I couldn’t be a Christian for some reason then I thought I could become a Sikh—whereas I couldn’t possibly be a Hindu or a Muslim.”

“Is Ram back at school?” I asked.

“Yes. He came back today. I’m very worried about him. He refused to go

out into the playground at lunchtime. I let him eat his lunch in the classroom because he started to cry, poor little lad."

"Mmm ... I imagine, more than anything, he needs someone he can talk it all out with in a relaxed kind of way ... "

"Yes, and who is there? He hasn't got any close friends. If I try to help him then he risks being seen as a teacher's pet. Ian is very kind and helpful but he's in an older group, and age means a lot at that time of your life, and he's leaving for high school at the end of this year anyway."

"It's a pity Veronica couldn't have been more help to him through the Pony Club—"

"I know. Actually I think it was Ian and Mark she treated almost as surrogate sons, and other boys before them, not that they appreciated the attention and she was still strict with them ... oh, by the way, Ram's had his hair cut, he said a man told his dad to do it—I suppose he meant you?"

"Yes."

"Best thing you could've done," Bill Jessup said complacently.

I wished it was that simple.

- ii -

Ian and Mark seemed sorry to see me go. I'm not bad with a frying pan and sandwich toaster. And I was a bit of excitement in their lives. I wished them luck in everything and said they were welcome to come and stay with me in Surfers some time. Ian said "Whoopee-doo!" Mark, more conscious of his age, said, "Yeah, thanks, that'd be great."

I had one last 'engagement' left: dinner with the Morrows. They lived on the edge of Highfields, in a brick 'colonial' nicely placed along the side of a north-facing slope. I'd met Daphne Morrow very briefly at the Jessups', likewise her son, and I knew her husband had multiple sclerosis. I would've preferred to drive straight on by. Other people's problems, no matter how detached they allow you to remain, inevitably take their toll and Lina Jessup had said in heartfelt tones, "Poor Daph". Personally I would've thought it was Mr Morrow who was to be pitied.

And yet, after half-an-hour in the Morrow household, I began to understand. Leon Morrow was a pleasant man with a quirky smile and a placid way of talking. He said not a word to suggest self-pity yet he appeared to have given up, withdrawn from life, built an undemanding life round his chair, his television, his video, his bookshelf, and left the whole burden of caring for the house and the three boys on his wife's shoulders. No doubt they were capable shoulders but here, in her home environment, I felt a sharpness in her responses, a brittleness not far from the surface, something tight-lipped that hadn't shown at our first meeting. Daphne Morrow, I thought, resented her husband's opting out so easily and I wondered how well she really was coping.

The house looked spotless (I didn't trail my finger on the chair rungs), the food was excellent, the boys the sort every parent dreams of producing, and she held down a full-time job as a psychiatric nurse at Willowburn.

We sat down to dinner in a room with mahogany furniture and framed

pictures of the boys all excelling at their particular 'thing'. The Morrows had obviously encouraged each of them to take up a different sport: Dave with his show-jumper, Keir with his cricket, Leroy with his archery. Yet, for all that it was the best dinner I'd had in a while and they were all intelligent interesting people, there was an encompassing blandness about the evening; as though, by mutual consent, they only spoke of general things when they were all together—school happenings, plans for the weekend, some repairs to be done round the house. They asked me a few questions about my work and I answered as entertainingly as I could but something, I couldn't decide what, was conspiring to make the evening an occasion best done with and forgotten.

They were a family ideal for a sitcom, three marvellously good-looking boys, two attractive parents; a pleasant modern house just far enough out of town to suggest the best of country living. Yet underlying the polite exterior there was a sense of a dysfunctional family, of people not connecting in any genuinely affectionate way. Social workers might shake their heads over the Hammer boys left to fend for long periods but I'd always felt there an underlying goodwill between Carl and the boys, between Ian and Mark; something of that old musketeering attitude—all for one, and one for all. Here, I felt an unease and I didn't think I was sparking it off.

I sat a while with Leon Morrow after dinner while Daphne tidied up in the kitchen and the boys went and did who-knows-what in their rooms. Then Daphne came over and said, "Could I impose on you for a few minutes, Bob, just to ask your opinion on something?"

I had no idea what she might have in mind but I'd just eaten her food. "Sure." I came over to the now-clear table where she'd put down a notebook and an old school exercise book.

We both sat down, Daphne saying, "It's not important—and I don't want you to *do* anything—but I thought if you wouldn't mind just reading through this little story you might be able to tell me what to do, how to go about finding something out. I wrote the story down nearly twenty years ago—and I always meant to do some research—but then, what with work and getting married, then the boys coming along—well," she lifted her square-tipped hands slightly, "it just never got done. And yet, somehow it's always been *there*, just sort of niggling away ... can I get you another coffee while you read it?"

I didn't particularly want to read it but I'd been neatly manoeuvred into a corner. "Okay. Just a small cup thanks." Then I picked up the yellowing exercise book and read in neat round capitals: THE HERMIT OF ATABRINE CREEK.

- iii -

'My mother used to take us on the donkey when she had to go out anywhere, the three of us crammed on to the rough grey back, while she would walk at the donkey's head. I remember that part very clearly. The rough lantana-clad hills (there's something about lantana—you never forget the smell, the raspy feel against your legs), the long dry grass, the heat, the towering rocks which I was always scared would come loose one day and roll down and squash

me.

The Hermit, we called him that though his real name was Felix Lay, lived in a tumbledown wooden house high up in the hills. My mother had gone up to his house, I think, to ask him to donate to some local CWA project. My father was often away because our farm was too small and too poor and too steep so he used to take our old truck up to the Downs and get work at harvest time. I'm sure he was away that day.

My mother lifted us down to the ground, the donkey lowered her heavy head and went to sleep, and we followed my mother up the ricketty steps. I think she felt awkward asking him to donate money for paint when his own house was unpainted (I don't know if she'd offered to canvass that area or if he came within her section or whether the other ladies had said 'please' because he had a reputation for being bad-tempered and difficult).

The back door was open, I remember, and my mother knocked and then stepped inside saying "Anybody home?" She turned round and said to us. "Run down stairs and play a while till I come down. I won't be long." We didn't mind. I think we were all a bit scared of The Hermit, not knowing exactly what a hermit was, but thinking it meant something like a bogeyman. More fear than curiosity. There wasn't much under his house, just cracked dirt and some spider webs hanging down and a bit of old harness and some broken plates ...

In a little while my mother came back down, plonked us back on the donkey's back, and away we went down the hill the way we'd come. There wasn't really a track up to his house, just a cow pad, I think.

That was the memory I carried round for years. My mother never went back to his house or even mentioned his name again. I honestly don't know what sparked off a sense that I'd misunderstood or not heard something. Maybe I overheard something later on? I have no idea. Just a sort of vague nagging sense. My parents moved away from Rockmount when I was about six which would've been about a year after that visit.

Years later my brother gave my mother a photo album for her birthday and she got out a drawer of old pictures and we all clustered round to help her decide what should go in.

"Oh, there's our Rockmount house! Gosh, doesn't it look *small!*"

"And the creek? Remember playing there on the rock slide—"

"And the little silver fish in the creek—"

"And the water boatmen—"

"And the smell of mint—was it mint or watercress?"

"Both," said my mother, "and there's Portly, poor old girl." Portly was the donkey. "I don't know how I would've managed without her to cart you all around—and bring up water from the creek when our tanks ran dry—"

I don't know why I felt hot then cold as this conversation went on, as though I was coming down with something. "Do you remember," I said suddenly, the words just falling out, "the hermit in that old house, up above Atabrine creek—"

"Adabine," my mother said.

"*Was* it?" I was astonished by the idea I'd given it the wrong name in my mind all these years. And why had I?

"And do you remember *him*?" I said quickly as though to make amends.

"Yes. What about him?" Was it my imagination that she sounded curter?

"He was dead, wasn't he, that day you took us up there?"

"Yes."

"Dead for a while? Dead and smelly?"

"Not long. Why?" She looked cross and I felt guilty for spoiling her present in some way.

Yes. Why? "I—it just came back to me all of a sudden. That he made no sound that last time we went there—and yet I was sure in my mind that he had a loud voice, I don't really know why, I must've heard him yelling—"

"Well, now you know." She sounded totally uninterested and turned another album page and began sorting another pile of photos.

I felt sure there was something more needing to be said but I couldn't decide what it might be and as everyone else was talking about other things I just put the hermit out of my mind again, not just then, but for years more.

He came back the day a young woman who'd grown up in Rockmount came to visit us. She was nursing in Brisbane now and was telling my mother a funny story about Lady Cilento when I came in. I still remember I'd been lying out in the back yard trying to tan my legs—and that we had pikelets for tea that day. They talked a lot about old Rockmount neighbours and the creek, even memories of Portly and how she'd had a nasty trick of rushing at the barbed-wire fence then turning in the nick of time and if you didn't swing your legs up quickly you'd get scratched. She was an old devil really and yet I remember her with fondness. I don't know why. The night before I'd gone to see 'Half a Sixpence' and I was a bit sleepy so I just sat back and let them talk. I heard them say Adabine and I sparked up but they'd only been talking about the time someone got bogged in the gully where it ran into the main creek.

I said, "Do you remember the hermit?" and the nurse (her name was Patty Molloy) said, "Well, sort of. Just that he lived there up the hill for a while. He rented that old house from my dad, and a few acres but I don't know what he lived on. I remember dad calling him a 'rum old cove'—but I suppose he had a pension or something ... "

My mother compressed her lips and Patty looked vaguely embarrassed, I couldn't think why. "You surely wouldn't remember him, Daph?" Patty was several years my senior. "He was terribly old."

"Just—" I felt myself stymied again by something I didn't understand. There was something about him which always seemed to spoil conversation but I couldn't imagine what it might be.

It must've been another three or four years before I said to my mother in one of those rare times when there was just the two of us in the house: "It's always been in my mind, I don't know why, just an awful feeling—like a movie I was too young to understand—but the hermit—he killed himself didn't he?"

"Shot himself, yes." I understood now why she'd never wanted to think

about it. To remember the mess she probably came upon quite unprepared.

"Suicide?" I needed to be quite sure.

"Yes."

"He was old and sick?"

My mother nodded cautiously. "And with nobody."

But I felt, intuition perhaps, there was something more. "There's something that bothers you, isn't there? It couldn't have been murder, could it?"

"No, of course not. Don't be silly. He left a note."

"What did it say? Do you still remember?"

She was silent for a long time and I thought she was going to say no. Then she said slowly, "It said—he said 'What is the point of going on? Hell is waiting for me. I might as well go now and know the worst. There is no forgiving. But put me by the lemon tree near the bend in the creek. That will do as good as anywhere. No point in getting put beside all the good people.' That's all."

My first thought was astonishment—that she should remember word for word after all this time. I said this.

"No. I took that note away with me—and I wrote another one. It just said 'Put me by the lemon tree. That will do. I'm tired of living.' That was the one the police took."

"But why?" I felt myself floundering around, I think because I'd always thought of my mother as a very straightforward person and now I felt that I didn't really know her at all.

"I saw—people saw—suicide as a terrible sin in those days. But I don't know really. I wasn't thinking clearly—and I had you three and you were only little ... " She shook her head. "It wouldn't have mattered what people thought and said—but, still, they would talk about it—well, as you said—he was old and sick and lonely ... people would've thought nothing of it except for that bit about not forgiving ... "

"Do you think he really had done something terribly bad?"

"I've no idea. He came there from somewhere else. None of us knew anything about his family or his previous life. And if he *had* done something awful—he paid for it in loneliness—so forget about it now, it's all over and done with."

But I've never forgotten.'

- iv -

The story ended there and I looked up to see Daphne Morrow watching me intently. I passed the exercise book back to her. "Interesting. I suppose it's the sort of thing which *would* stay in the back of your mind ... and you never found out anything more about him?"

"No. I brought—I bring—it up occasionally with my mother but she always sort of cuts me off. Anyway, she's getting a bit forgetful ... I'm sure she's never forgotten that ... but she wanders back to her childhood a lot of the time ... "

She put the book aside. "Bob, what I wondered was—how would I go about finding out who Felix Lay was, where he'd come from, what he might've done." She sounded in deep earnest but I wondered if she'd lived with the idea

for so long it'd just become an accepted part of her life; something which, by its eternal but undemanding presence, didn't require deep thought let alone action.

"Are you *sure* you really want to know? I've seen people set out casually on quests—and come to wish later they'd remained in ignorance, even if it meant going on feeling vaguely—" I pondered the feeling, "unfulfilled, maybe."

"I know," she said mildly, "and I've thought about it quite a lot but I don't think it's anything like—well, say you'd found out you were adopted and you went looking for your natural mother—so you'd have to relate to her in some way—even if you didn't *like* her."

She turned her intent greeny gaze on me—as though she'd look right down through me to the source of all my ifs and buts. "It's not as though Felix Lay entered into my life in any real way ... and he's dead ... I suppose it's being a bit nosy to want to satisfy my curiosity but I can't see that it'd be *bothering* anybody. As you say, it probably wouldn't be a very nice truth, he wasn't a very nice man ... "

"Well, I can give you some ideas—but it's up to you whether you decide to follow through." It was quite likely she wouldn't if faced with a very definite plan of action; that comes somewhere in my version of Murphy's Law.

"Do you know which police would've been involved?"

"No. But Helidon I suppose."

"Mmm, and your mother—if you went to her and said, Look, I'd really like to get this cleared up once and for all, is there anything else you can tell me?—would she be willing to help, do you think?"

"I'm not really sure she knows any more. I think, in all these years—and in her ramblings—though I don't think she ever talks about life after she got married—I don't know if that's significant—but I think *something* would've come out. I think she'd be glad to get me off her back once and for all."

"What about your father?"

"No. He died fifteen years ago. But they were never very close. And he was," she looked, almost furtively, over to where her husband's head was visible above his armchair; he'd turned the television on and didn't appear to be taking any interest in our conversation, "well, I think you could call him a rolling stone. I was fond of him in a sort of casual uncle-type way but we were never close."

"I see. Well, what say I give you the address of a man I know in Brisbane. He charges, but very reasonably for the sort of knowledge and contacts he can offer ... that way you can decide whether you feel it's worth going on with it—and if he can't find it out for you—well, then I suspect nobody can. If you write to him and tell him all the facts you can put together about Felix Lay—full name, approximate age, whether he might've come from interstate, the date of his death, the name of the man he rented from, whether he ever mentioned a career of any kind—everything you can dredge up. If he was using his real name it shouldn't be too hard to track him down through old electoral rolls and suchlike ... and what about your brothers—do you think they'd remember anything about him?"

Daphne Morrow shook her head slowly but decidedly. “Hilton is in Canada, Jackson is an oil driller—I don’t really keep up with him though his wife would know where he is at the moment.”

For someone so professedly keen to find out the truth I sensed an odd reluctance in her; had her family been untactful, even downright rude, in their attempts to persuade her to forget Felix Lay? I was willing to make suggestions but I had no intention of lifting a finger beyond that. If she felt strongly enough to pay for information then there was a good chance she’d finally get it resolved or as resolved as it ever could be.

About half-an-hour later I said goodnight and thanks for dinner and Daphne said earnestly she’d let me know as soon as she got somewhere in her quest. I said she needn’t bother; so long as she was happy with the resolution.

As it turned out, it was Lina Jessup who wrote to me—a long chatty letter to let me know she’d discovered that Veronica’s ‘foster son’ was a Peter Booth and she’d learnt he was doing time in a Correctional Centre down in the Hunter Valley for a ‘car scam’; she didn’t explain it. Veronica continued to improve very slowly and she wondered if it would be a help if she contacted this Peter and asked for his support for Veronica. What did I think? I thought Veronica had more than her share of troubles already but I put the question on the back-burner for the time being.

- v -

It was a windy day, flying spume, sand-in-your-eyes, when Daphne Morrow came to see me. I’d put her out of my mind and didn’t really want to put her back in. Whether it was the wind or excitement at seeing me or just spring-in-general, she had a healthy pink tinge to her cheeks and looked prettier than the picture I’d carried away with me.

I opened a packet of biscuits and made a pot of tea. (Rachel had got herself a job with a travel agent in the new Pacific Fair complex; not that it made much difference to our eating habits, Barbara had never managed to teach her to cook.) I shut the wind out on the balcony and asked how things were with her and her family.

“Oh,” she gave me a quick sideways glance, “much the same as usual. I’ve taken a fortnight off work and a cousin of mine is minding the boys to give me a little break.” She sat back and some sort of tension in her stance seemed to ease away. “Your friend came up with a lot of information on Felix Lay, so I thought I’d take a week and see ... and what I wondered was—would you like to come with me?”

“That sounds like a loaded question.” I gave her my wryest grin. I didn’t mind doing things for Dell or maybe people like the London sisters—they weren’t likely to let their sex get in the way. With Daphne I wasn’t so sure.

“It is.” She gave me an equally quizzical look. “When you don’t know what I have in mind.”

She hunted in her handbag and unearthed a big envelope containing a computer print-out and handed it to me. I read slowly and carefully downwards: the life of Felix Donaghue Lay. (I didn’t ask what all this had cost her.)

Born 1905 on a property called Burdon Mile in the Brindabellas (so he wasn't particularly old when he died). There was no record of his schooling so he may have been taught at home or gone to a school since closed down. He worked with his father and two brothers on the farm. One brother, Captain Atkin Lay, was killed in France in 1917. The other brother, Horace, became an auctioneer but was killed in a car accident in 1928.

Felix married a Miss Jessie Carter in 1925 and his father built him a house on the family property. Both parents died in 1930 and Felix's daughter, Margaret, was killed in an accident in 1932. Felix's hitherto orderly progression through life seemed to nose-dive. He appeared here and there, right across the eastern states, with travelling shows. Then he dropped out of sight for a while before re-appearing briefly in army records as training remounts for six months before disappearing again until, in 1948, he began renting the old house at Rockmount from its owner, Patrick Molloy. Felix died, according to the police report, from accidental gunshot wounds in 1958. There was no record of Jessie Lay's death which suggested she was still alive in her nineties, her death had not been recorded, or she had changed her name.

When I got to the end, Daphne said quietly, "It's interesting, Bob, isn't it, and yet I felt as though I was prying into someone's private life."

"Ah well, now you know why cops get cynical. All the prying society asks them to do."

"Ye-es, I've never really thought about it ... but I can see how it'd sometimes be hard to stay on the level when you know that all around you are respected citizens with nasty little things in their private lives ... " she laughed lightly. "But what did you think about Felix? I suppose he abandoned his wife but I don't think that would've driven him to suicide, do you?"

I sat back and put my fingertips together as a poor substitute for a glass in my hand; Daphne had said no to anything but tea. "No. Interesting that, despite the note, they still chose to see it as an accidental death. Less trouble maybe. But I think your question is—does the answer lie in the facts—or does it lie in the gaps?"

She leant forward as though to study the paper again though she probably knew it off by heart. "Is it both? I mean—it looks as if, when things went wrong, he'd drop everything and go away—but that sort of avoidance behaviour rarely solves the problem—"

I was forgetting she was a psychiatric nurse.

And Daphne Morrow wanted me to take a week off to look for Burdon Mile and the past of Felix Lay. She offered to pay all expenses—it didn't take much to see I wasn't enthusiastic—and drive and do any organising necessary. I need only relax and be conveyed to and fro like a sack of potatoes and give out advice when asked.

"It'd be a nice few days away for you, Bob," she said seriously. Away from what? Nine to five dullsville? A chain gang? My nagging wife and five brats?

I found Daphne Morrow, so earnestly and solidly *here*, an oddly difficult person to sum up. And yet, in an odd way, I felt vaguely sorry for her.

We were talked out by Grafton; had we, apart from the boys, Percy, and Felix Lay, ever been talked in? A deep melancholy settled on me (it may have had something to do with the vegetable pie I'd had at our last stop) and I wondered gloomily why I'd allowed myself to be talked into this nonsense. Let Daphne Morrow have as many bees in her bonnet as she wanted, it wasn't my business. It wasn't even, I sidled up to the intruding thought, that I liked her all that much.

Her profile was neat and regular, her driving sensible without being over-cautious, her voice was nicely modulated and quite pleasant to listen to—but, somehow, thoughts of days in her company depressed me in a way that I didn't think days in Lina Jessup's company would. Could I simply set her on the trail, a disastrously cold trail admittedly, and slip away to bus home. Why on earth had I agreed to come in her car—so the wear and tear was her business?—because, now, I had fewer escape options.

She asked me if I was working on anything at the moment, other than her problem, and I said, "Yes, I'm writing a book about three early Australian crime writers—not that they spent all their lives here, that wasn't the way things worked in those days ... "

"Who are they? I don't think I know any ... well, Arthur Upfield, but I don't know if you'd call him 'early'—"

"You like him?'

"I suppose they're rather dated now—and I don't see how, genetically, Bony could've had blue eyes if he was half-Aboriginal and if he was brought up in an orphanage I don't know how he learnt to track, it's something Aboriginal children do by constant observation and instruction ... but, yes, I love some of his descriptions—'you would come to the Land of Melody Sam', I love the sound of that—I even called the first pony I bought for Dave, when he was about five, Melody Sam—but I'm getting you off the track, aren't I?"

I smiled. One of the puzzles of life—that someone who appeared to be so easy to talk to wasn't relaxing. "My three are going to be Guy Boothby, Fergus Hume and Nat Gould, though I've been re-thinking Nat Gould—and in two years I've jotted down about twenty pages of notes. I reckon I'm like the man who was going to write the definitive social history of World War One and in twenty years he hadn't got past Anzac Cove ... "

"I suppose he'd made himself so depressed he couldn't go on?"

"Maybe. But I can't use that excuse."

"So what did they write?"

"Guy Boothby had a hypnotic character called Doctor Nikola and what they used to call a 'gentleman crook' called Simon Carne, a sort of Raffles character except he pre-dated Raffles—Fergus Hume wrote the nineteenth century best-seller called 'The Mystery of a Hansom Cab' and went and sold the copyright for £50 and I suppose never stopped kicking himself when it went on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies. He got rather over-shadowed by Conan Doyle—though I suppose you could say, who didn't?—and Nat Gould wrote

more in the line of Dick Francis—a lot of racing mysteries though they often weren't very mysterious—and reportedly was much disliked by Banjo Paterson who also wrote racing stories though I suspect that had something to do with professional jealousy. Gould was incredibly prolific. When he died he still had twenty-six books waiting to be published. It makes me wonder why I'm making such heavy weather with one."

"Incredible really! A whole world I knew nothing about."

"Mmm ... and there were several well-known women writers including one who called herself Waif Wander. The problem is partly that we've been spoilt by Agatha Christie. We expect to be kept guessing till the last chapter, the last page even—and the early mysteries tend to be rather transparent. They were written for a less educated and sophisticated audience which is something I have to keep reminding myself—and all the tools of the trade I take for granted just weren't around—even fingerprints were only being discussed as an idea ... "

This kept us going another hour, then I took over the wheel and Daphne slept for several hours. We had a very late breakfast in Canberra and looked at the map; we knew the approximate whereabouts of Burdon Mile from an old Lands Department map but either way the roads looked like back roads. I left the decision to Daphne, put my headrest back, and closed my eyes.

- vii -

I must've dozed for nearly an hour because when I opened my eyes we were flitting through trees, hundreds of them, with the hillside falling away sharply on my left hand.

Daphne gave me her quick sideways look and said cheerfully, "I asked at the last service station and according to them it's one of those places you just can't miss—that is if you're on the right road to start with!"

I dredged up a bit of a grin. Somehow, I'd thought I'd wake to blue ocean—wishful thinking—and the Brindabellas struck me as a poor dry substitute.

"It was somewhere round here that Miles Franklin was born, and set 'My Brilliant Career' ... "

"What did you think of it?"

"To tell the truth it's the only thing of hers I've ever read—but, yes, I quite enjoyed it. There never seems to be much time for reading."

"I can imagine. Never mind, you can be like my mother, retire and turn into a true-blue bookworm." She shrugged slightly but didn't respond and I thought of her retirement, ministering to her increasingly incapacitated husband, and I thought of Lina Jessup saying "Poor Daph".

It took us nearly an hour of wrong turnings and asking fruitless questions of fruitless persons (all, it would seem, just driving in the Brindabellas for the fun of it that day). Then an arched gateway suddenly reared up with Burdon Mile painted in clear white letters overhead. It was so unexpected I needed a moment to re-orient myself. At some level I still didn't believe in the existence of the place, the Lays, Felix.

Daphne drove in very slowly. The road was gravel and in need of grading

but I understood that even more profound doubts might be her reason for keeping us to walking pace. “What shall we say to the people here? I suppose we should’ve rung? It’s not going to sound believable if I ask for the Lays, is it?”

“Well, first of all, wait and see if they know that the Lays lived here. If they’re young people recently moved in it might be more productive to ask if they ever found any old papers, things like that, dating from the time of the Lays—and ask if we can see over Felix’s cottage if it’s still in existence.”

“Okay. And keep your fingers crossed that they’re old people, been here since the thirties and remember the Lays ‘as if it was yesterday’.”

I wondered if she was naive enough to believe we’d simply walk in and solve the mystery of Felix Lay, why he turned into a trigger-happy recluse, or whether this was to keep our spirits up.

“Of course. But don’t be disappointed if they look at you blankly—or, worse still, treat you as some kind of nut wasting their time with stupid questions.”

“I suppose it *will* sound strange. But we can’t help that. If only he’d been a bit famous it would seem more natural—but he was a nobody ... ”

“No. No one is a nobody. We all have something worth remembering about our lives—”

This time she gave me one of her long intent looks. “Maybe. But sometimes I have trouble believing in things like that—and you might too if you’d been involved with some of my patients.”

“Mmm.” I had trouble believing it myself.

She turned her gaze back to the road and a rambling old weatherboard house began to show between the stringybarks. The hilltop was sparsely grassed and well-sprinkled with granite boulders. The trees were less thick up here.

“It’s a bit like Rockmount without the lantana,” Daphne said as the road curved to and fro across the slope.

“Except it doesn’t snow in Rockmount. I’ll guarantee this had snow on it not long ago.”

“Yes.” She gave an exaggerated shiver. “Perhaps hard country makes hard people?”

I didn’t try a comment on that, thinking instead a chance for a wash and brush up would go over well. I’d begun a beard a few weeks ago—curiosity—and was in two minds whether it made me look distinguished or just plain old. Still, it was a help now.

There was a thin drift of smoke from the house but otherwise it suggested a faint air of age and neglect. The old paling fence around the garden was gap-toothed and dribbled with lichen; the garden itself was choc-a-bloc with dog roses and crab apples but even they couldn’t hide the weeds, maybe they were there as weeds.

An elderly lurcher came silently out of the scrub and stood watching us, his ears pricked. Daphne took a minute to comb her straight hair and check herself in the small mirror she drew out of her handbag. I wondered why someone so

lacking in natural colour was chary about using cosmetics; was her pallor sufficiently offset by her neatness and the odd sweetness of her one-sided dimple …

While she was busy an old man came out of the house to stand at the head of the steps and look at us with undisguised suspicion. There was something about him, the braces, the sagging hat, the slow clump of his step, which reminded me of someone left behind by the Beverly Hillbillies—I didn't waste time wondering how he saw us—but as soon as he spoke the image was dashed in a hundred pieces. Faint but clear was the soft burr of the Scottish highlands.

"Now, can I be helping you? Lost your way, have you?"

Daphne gave him her sweetest smile but I think it was our absence of briefcases, literature, sample bags, the works, which lowered his guard.

"No. We've really come to ask you if you ever knew someone called Felix Lay who, we understand, used to live on this property with his parents and his wife."

There was a long pause, as though he was sifting through words to choose the kindest way to disappoint us, then he said quietly, "Aye, we ken the young Felix. What did you be wanting him for?"

"No." Daphne's shoulders seemed to slump but whether from relief or some more complex emotion I couldn't decide. "Felix shot himself many years ago. It was my mother who found him."

The old man shook his head slowly. But there was another long pause before he said, "Then you might like to be taking a cup o' tea with us and be telling us all about it."

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Daphne certainly told Angus and Mary MacLeod the story of Felix Lay but I was sure she'd left out some of the crucial bits, including the bit about hell waiting for him. (Was this a crucial bit?) The old couple listened with great intensity but then not a lot of storytellers would come this way.

When it came time for them to respond they seemed to acquire a greater reticence. They'd bought the farm from Felix's father, Felix by that time having left the place and his cottage had remained untenanted ever since except for brief use as a barn. They'd met Felix on only two occasions, in the late thirties or early forties, they couldn't remember—when he'd come back to visit the grave of his daughter.

"Do you know how she died?" Daphne said carefully.

The MacLeods looked at each other and Angus MacLeod said, "Aye, we've heard the story—anyone'll be telling it to you—"

"But whether it's the truth," Mary MacLeod looked faintly distressed, "we never heard it from Felix himself, you understand."

"In those days, so I'm hearing," Angus MacLeod took the story out of her hands and I think she wasn't sorry to see it go, "there were thousands of wild horses, brumbies, running in these hills. The farmers'd be killing them every while to keep their numbers manageable—and Felix and his father would be doing the same as their neighbours. They'd built what you might call a long

paddock shaped like a funnel—it was there over the hill—and they'd be driving the wild horses into it so they'd be reaching the narrow part—and the men'd be using these long poles with sharp shears on the end to drive into the jugular of the horses, you see, and then the horses'd be galloping off into the hills again, bleeding all the while—till, at last, they had no more strength and then they'd be falling down and dying and the crows'd be picking their bones ... "

"If only they had shot them," Mrs MacLeod said brusquely, "not left them to suffer out there."

"Well, the wee lass, Felix's little daughter, would be celebrating her fifth birthday the day after a big killing—and, you see, no one had seen her climb down from the fence rail where she'd been sitting and come round to the place where they let the horses come out ... and the horses, wild with the pain and the fear o' men, ran all over the poor wee thing ... "

"But it was even worse than that," Mary MacLeod said into the aftermath of Daphne's gasp, "because she wasn't dead, no, but she was so broken about, her little head crushed and the bones and the blood ... and in those times the doctor was hours away ... and Felix went over to his cottage and took out his gun and came back and shot the little lass through the back of her head ... "

"Oh no!" Daphne, always pale, had gone a ghostly white. Mrs MacLeod dabbed her rheumy old eyes with a cotton hanky.

"Such a sad old story ... he *had* the guns there ... if he'd shot the *horses* his little girl might be alive now ... "

"Maybe he wasn't a good shot," I said neutrally.

"Oh, but he was." Mr MacLeod leant forward. "When he left the farm it was to become a shooting act with a show—"

"That's right!" his wife said swiftly as though more words would stave off the threatening tears. "With Lance Skuthorpe's Wild West shows—Felix'd be dressing himself as the cowboy with the silver guns—the holsters on his hips like in those old movies—the Fastest Gun West of the Great Divide, I think he called himself. People say he could shoot the flame out of a candle and the stem off a wineglass without spilling the wine."

"What about his wife? Did she travel with him?" Daphne had begun to frown.

"We never met his wife. The old man told us she blamed Felix for little Margaret's death. It always seemed strange to us that she never came back to visit the little grave but perhaps she'd arranged for something somewhere else—and I think a woman would not be minding to say goodbye to these hills if she'd been unhappy with her husband. It can be lonely, you see." She turned and gazed at her husband and I had the sudden sense that these two could never be lonely, together, but they both knew one must go soon.

"Would you be wanting to see the wee grave—and, maybe, what's left o' the cottage?" Angus MacLeod pushed away his cup.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"No trouble. We've nothing but the few cattle running now." He heaved himself up and his wife bundled our cups and plates on to the doily-covered

trolley beside her. For all that this was hard country and a rough life in many ways these two seemed to have kept a certain graciousness around them like an aura.

We walked slowly across the stubby hillside to the cottage, now nothing but a free-standing brick chimney and a tangle of fallen-in timber and iron. Daphne bent down and drew out what proved to be a rusting poker. A couple of iron hooks still hung inside the chimney.

"It's strange they didn't build a more modern house in the twenties. This is more like a settler's cottage from last century," I said.

"Perhaps his father didn't *build* it, perhaps he *renovated* it, just until they could afford something better." Daphne didn't seem to find this a puzzle but I felt something else was gnawing at her, something she'd carried away from morning tea with her.

"We did hear," Mary MacLeod said apologetically, "that the old man was touched." She lifted her hand to her forehead in a fleeting but significant gesture. "He'd been so terribly fond of his first son, the one that died in France, and he could not forgive the younger boys for being the ones to survive. Sometimes ... " She shook her head slowly and fell silent. We waited for her to go on. I'm sure it wasn't what she'd been going to say but she felt our unspoken prompting and said, "When we knew him he was a very dour and taciturn man—and very dirty. It was so sad."

"But—I thought he died before—well, before Felix went away." Daphne looked to me for confirmation.

"We had certainly been given to understand that he died in 1930."

"No. We bought the farm from him in 1936, everything was in order with the deeds ... "

"Then perhaps the son was named after the father?" Daphne said.

"He used often to be speaking of 'my son Felix' ... " Mary MacLeod stood gazing into that long dead fireplace. "But it is all so long ago. Does it really matter now?"

"No. No, of course not," Daphne smiled at the older woman. "Our curiosity got the better of us. But it *is* an intriguing story."

"Aye, it's the tragedies of the past that won't be letting us go, I'm thinking." Angus McLeod took his hands out of the pockets of his tatty greatcoat. He wasn't old enough but his coat certainly had a Great War look about it and there was an indomitable ramrod quality about him as he stood on that granite-topped hill. "But come now and see the wee lassie's grave. It's just here, on the other bank of Atabrine Creek."

"Atabrine Creek?" Daphne's eyes grew wide with shock. "Did you say *Atabrine* Creek?"

"That's the name Felix put to us once but it's no more than a bit of a gully. You won't be finding it on any map. He called it that because of the yellowish lichen on the stones, you see."

We tramped along a convenient cow track and down into the waterless gully and scrambled up the far side. Far down below us, where the gully

flattened out a little, I could see a shallow spring puddle circled round with uncurling ferns and the brightness of little yellow flowers. The boulder strewn gully then disappeared into a starved land of thin timber and grey rock. A hard place yes, but possibly no harder than what the MacLeods had known in their earlier lives.

Little Margaret's grave was a narrow boulder, chipped and sanded and chiselled to make space for the scratched "Margaret" and the date of her death. Lichen patched the stone but I'd be willing to bet these people kept the face of it clear, not some vagary of mountain wind and weather.

We stood there for several minutes before turning back; Daphne was the last to turn away. It didn't explain why Felix Lay believed he was headed for hell but I could imagine the pain and anguish gnawing at him in the solitary life he'd chosen ... I had grieved for my son for years. That old ache could still be resurrected by the glimpse of a child's face which seemed to contain something of little Paul's look ...

Daphne came up beside me and said: "What do we do now, Bob?"

"You could check when the father *did* die, I suppose."

It struck me as the sort of history, vaguely recollected and inadequately documented, which could ramble in every direction without any guarantee of ever finding what had driven Felix to end his life.

"Yes." But she looked unconvinced. "There is one thing which doesn't make sense to me though."

"Only one?"

She conjured up a faint smile. "For the time being. But if Felix was a crack shot why did he make such a mess of his suicide? As far as I know he bled to death. One of the shots was under his arm—"

"Are you *sure*?" It was my turn to look bewildered.

"Well—reasonably."

"How did you learn that?"

"I—" she shook her head, "I—don't know ... someone must've said something and it stayed in my mind ... "

"You never heard the result of the autopsy?"

"Me? Oh no, I wouldn't think so. Though it might've been mentioned if people were talking over his death. And I suppose it could've lodged in my mind. Is that likely, do you think?"

"Possible." I was neutral. Most things are possible.

"I've seen patients who swear they don't know how or why something happened—then some small incident, a word, even a smell, triggers off a memory. Maybe thinking about Felix with guns on his hips ... " Her voice trailed off and a troubled look came into her eyes.

"Well, your own memory is probably more reliable that any hearsay stories we might pick up—"

Mrs MacLeod turned back to us and said cheerfully, "Would you care to have lunch with us? It's only a pot o' soup but there's enough to go round without any worry."

The lurcher again appeared out of the scrub with soft feet and paced silently along beside us.

The old woman said “Bobby” and the big dog came up behind her and thrust a cold nose into her palm.

I’d been on the verge of saying, no, we’d taken up enough of their time, but the fact of my namesake pacing companionably alongside us illogically changed my mind. “It’s very kind of you. If you’re sure it’s no trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Mary MacLeod said. “We don’t get many visitors up this way, just a neighbour or two and the occasional traveller.” I assume she meant commercial traveller though the route we’d come by hadn’t looked promising.

- ix -

“Have you ever heard the Selkirk Grace?”

“No. How does it go?” Daphne turned her intent green gaze on her hostess.

“We say it—now and then—

‘Some hae meat that canna eat,
Some hae nane that want it,
But we hae meat and we can eat and may the Lord be thankit’ ... ”

The soup was hearty and filling and they pressed vast quantities of bread, cold meat and pickles on us, followed by mugs of tea. As we filled the remote corners they told us something of their life here, their family, what the house had been like when they first came. Daphne asked diffidently if they had any idea where the other Lays might be buried.

“Oh, in the churchyard, about five miles away. They moved the church away many years ago but the land is still enclosed ... ” They told us how to get there and how long it would take us; they refused Daphne’s offer to wash up and I felt it was time to go. Not that anything changed the serenity of their faces.

But Mrs MacLeod drew me a little to one side as Daphne got in the car and straightened her skirt and put her bag on the back seat.

“I am thinking ... ” the old lady spoke with something which approached reluctance, “that your lady friend is a very—a very—” she shook her curly grey head as though uncertain what to do with the words, “a young woman who carries a sorrow with her ... ”

“In what way?”

Did Mary MacLeod lay claim to second sight? I hoped not.

“I don’t quite understand—but we both remarked on it, when you came ... she has the look of Felix Lay about her ... it is not quite canny ... ” She seemed to straighten up and square her shoulders. “But I’m sure you’ll take good care of her.”

She stepped back, lifted a hand to Daphne in a gentle gesture of farewell; her husband said, “Good luck with your—” then he seemed not to know what to call it; a search, a journey, a holiday, a quest. Instead he clapped his ancient hat back on his head and stepped back so that man, woman and dog stood calmly in line and watched us go.

The dust rose behind the car. Daphne was driving too fast for the rutted

rocky track. But just before we reached the road she slowed jerkily then pulled up and I saw her hands were shaking as she pressed them against the wheel.

"Would you like me to drive for a while?"

"I'll—I'll be all right in a minute. I just—the way they kept looking at me, it was a bit—unnerving."

"Mmm." I didn't know what else to say. Was I meant to tell her she had the look of Felix Lay about her? Was it meant to warn me? Was I supposed to interpret Daphne's confusion in the light of this revelation? In the end I said nothing. It was something to be mulled over in bed.

The route described to us by the MacLeods took us down narrow hilly roads to a sign defaced by shooters, then into a hamlet containing a couple of houses, a garage-cum-general store, and a pub called the Blue Mountain Hotel.

"The Blue Mountain!" Daphne exclaimed. "Why that's the pub down the road from us!" Whoever had named this one had angled it wrongly for views of blue mountains but we pulled into the courtyard and parked beside a row of poplars in delicate spring leaf. She turned to me and said, "What now? Do you want to stay here the night—or just have a quick look round?"

"Both, I'd think." Through the wire fence I could see what appeared to be the old churchyard, maybe half a hectare of neglect. "We could both do with a decent night's sleep and we can have a poke around the graves then see if there are any ancient locals worth chatting to."

"All right." She didn't sound enthusiastic and it wasn't hard to see why. The whole place, pub and all, spoke of loss and departure. We were the only car in sight except for a small pickup outside the store. Obviously people from Canberra didn't come here for 'a weekend in the country'.

There was no difficulty with getting rooms for the night. The middle-aged woman in slippers who took us upstairs seemed surprised we should want to spend an entire night there. "You can have this one, Mrs Morrow," she thrust open a door which protested sourly, "and you here, Mr Creighton. Gents that end, Ladies the other—that door leads out on to the verandah—" (should we want to loll on easy chairs admiring the view) "and dinner'll be ready about seven. What'll you have—the roast beef or the chicken fricassee?"

"Beef, thanks," I said.

"That will do me too." Daphne gave her a smile as though to disarm any suspicions our hostess might have.

"Right you are then. Give a yell if there's anything—" but her no-nonsense departure suggested she'd rather we didn't think of anything.

My room was spartan but clean and from up here I had a good view of the churchyard; the random jumble of old graves, the encroaching blackberries, the oblong of stumps which had once held the church, the sagging barbed-wire fence, the unexpected splash of colour provided by an urn of red geraniums placed on a grey granite pedestal. In the steep paddock beyond, a large red and white bull kipped beneath a gnarled and leaning tree. Peace of a kind.

It was a relief to clean my teeth, change my shirt, take out my flask and treat myself to a therapeutic nip; strange that the MacLeods' had not had the

‘water of life’ in evidence, they hadn’t suggested the stricter sort of Scot, or was I merely turning into an ageing lush and wanted to take everyone else along with me?

I tapped on Daphne’s door and we went downstairs. The pub was dim inside with dull green and brown lino and dark green curtains at the windows. From somewhere came the squark of a hen. Someone wanting the fricassee? Then we passed out into the hard white light of the front gravel and Daphne said with sudden fervence: “How I would *hate* to live in a place like this!”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I could afford to be complacent; there was little likelihood of being put to the test. “It probably has its good points. Little noise, minimal pollution, hardly any crime, passable views, a slow pace. What more do you want?”

“Are you always so *reasonable*? Can’t you see how it would become a living death?”

“Well, it’s isolated certainly. But if I lived here I might actually get round to *writing* my book instead of only talking about it.”

She stood at the churchyard gate looking in. “I would go crazy!”

“No. You’re coming at it with the upset of the little girl’s death fresh in your mind. If you drove through here on a pleasant day and on your way to somewhere else you’d probably see it with different eyes.”

“Maybe.” She sounded unconvinced. “But all day I’ve been feeling as though something’s walking on my grave—not just walking but marching up and down, ta-rum, ta-rum, ta-rum-ti-dum!” She gave an embarrassed laugh. “And it’s not because I’m psychic or something because I definitely am *not*.”

“No, but it’s quite possible that hypnosis could bring out buried memories to explain the reason for your unease—”

“Oh no! I’m not letting anyone start messing round with *my* mind, thank you very much!”

This suggested, uncomfortably, that Daphne was *au fait* with messing round with other people’s minds and didn’t think much of the result. We climbed through the barbed-wire gate and stood on the remains of a gravel path.

“Well, if you like to start that end and I’ll start this side and we can meet in the middle ... ”

She opened her mouth as though to say something, then nodded and walked briskly away. Her absence brought with it a faint sense of freedom and I ambled gently to and fro, enjoying the afternoon sun, bending now and again to peer closer at a disappearing inscription.

We found the cluster of Lays at our meeting point, close by the back fence.

- x -

Felix Arthur Lay, Miriam Alice Lay, both buried in 1930, then the auctioneer brother Horace and a child’s grave ... there is something infinitely depressing about superceded graveyards, a kind of pointlessness to all the effort and money that went into granite and gilt and marble and iron railings, now rusting. Our sacred places turn into “I wish someone’d clean up that old churchyard, it’s getting to be such an eyesore” ...

"Bob," Daphne suddenly placed a hand on my sleeve, "why isn't Margaret here, with the rest of the family?"

I'd wondered about that myself. That little lonely grave on the bank of the gully; not that the dead need the company of the dead but there had to be a reason behind that decision and if we could discern that reason it might illuminate Felix and Jessie. "Your guess's as good as mine. But we know now it was the son who both lived on the property and came back later those couple of times after the MacLeods bought the property—"

"Ye-es, unless someone else was masquerading as the old man—but doesn't that all strike you as strange, Bob? I mean, the MacLeods not knowing it was the same person—and why was he there—*if* he was there—"

"It'd depend how much contact they had before they took the place over. If they came out with an estate agent say, they might only have had very brief contact with Felix—and if he made a point of talking of 'my son Felix'—and it's possible they were just introduced to him as 'Mr Lay' ... and, of course, it's a heck of a long time ago—the MacLeods may have confused things or telescoped them in some way—"

"I don't believe *that*." Daphne was unexpectedly sharp, as though I'd muffed an easy shot in mixed doubles. "They struck me as being very clear in their minds." Unfortunately they'd struck me the same way.

"Well, maybe we can get some ideas about this Lance Skulthorpe they mentioned, whether it was likely to have been full-time employment—"

"Skuthorpe," she corrected.

"Whatever. Maybe they had an off-season or something and friend Felix'd come back to the farm for a bit of a rest—"

"What about his wife? Where was she, do you think?"

"Search me. Probably run off with the Rawleigh Man."

"You make it sound like a—like a farce or something."

I shrugged. "I'm not being callous, Daphne, but I honestly see no good reason to take on board someone else's troubles and tragedies."

But the minute I said it I realised I wasn't going to be able to duck out that easily; not while I still clutched to me the knowledge that Daphne Morrow might be Felix Lay's daughter, and I hoped that the old lady had misinterpreted whatever had sparked her thought, and the accompanying grim thought—what should I do with this potential stick of dynamite.

She seemed to slump a little, as though she'd been handed a kitbag of old tin helmets and marching boots. "I suppose you're right—so you think I should simply leave it and go home?"

The minefield had come to me.

"Well, it's your quest, my feelings don't really come into it," I stepped cautiously, "but I can't help thinking you're harrowing yourself up to no purpose. Even if Mrs Lay's still alive and we could find her I think it's very unlikely she could tell you much about the years leading up to Felix's death. We know Margaret's dead but I think you should try not to dwell on it—the longer you spend with Felix's—" I hunted for the word, "his ghost—the more you're

going to be reminded of her."

"I know. But she isn't the sort of thing you can just put away in a box and forget again. I need to somehow work through it all and get it into perspective."

"If you say so."

She gave me another of her sharp looks but said nothing; maybe because the obvious response was to thank me for my trouble and say she'd keep on looking around herself. For whatever reason she wasn't yet ready to dismiss me.

We climbed through the wire gate again and walked wearily back to the pub. Daphne said, slumping again, she'd lie down a while and meet me for dinner. After re-reading what I had on Felix Lay's life and jotting a few notes, to see if there was anything more I'd feel honour-bound to investigate before going home, I went down to the public bar.

- xi -

The place wasn't humming, the whole hamlet, kids, pets and all, would've fitted in and left room for a game of tennis, and I strolled over to the bar and asked how they were off for Highland Queen. "Sorry no," said the weedy youngster who had the look of the beef and fricassee woman; he also had the look of underage but they might be short-staffed. He looked round vaguely as though he'd got into the bar by mistake. "Johnny Walker, Vat 69, Black and White."

"Black and White."

"Ice?"

"Straight, thanks."

There were two men, fortyish, with an impermanent look about them, candidates for the fricassee, seated on bar stools—and three old men over by the bank of north-facing windows. I wandered over to see what was claiming their attention.

The woolly red and white bull had come down the fence and was now staring in the window with a look which I was tempted to call hopeful though what a bull might hope for beyond willing cows and plentiful tucker was a mystery.

One of the old men said with a nod in my direction: "How old d'you reckon that bull is?"

"How old?" How the heck do you tell a bull's age? By his teeth? By the hairs in his tail? The length of his hooves? I looked blankly at Guess-my-Age and he looked back wistfully. Then it struck me the hollows above his eyes were definitely pronounced.

"Well, he's no spring chicken," I began cheerfully, but how old was old for a bull? Similar to a dog? A cat? A pet tortoise? "Twenty at least." Then I waited for my guess to be hooted down.

"Not bad. But he's twenty-five if he's a day—an' we'll show you something else."

He turned and beckoned to the barman. "Got his bucket, Russ?"

The old fellow at my right elbow chuckled, "I'llbetyervneverseenthlikes."

I'd never heard the likes either; he seemed not to be able to open his mouth

properly, maybe because his false teeth'd fall out if he did. I could hear them clattering away inside there somewhere like castanets.

Russ came over with a half pail of what looked and smelled like beer, opened the side door and walked briskly across to the fence. The bull charged up to him with a goofy bellow, Russ lifted the bucket over the fence, and the bull thrust his head joyfully into its depths. Great slobbering noises seemed to fill the air, his tail wiggled from side to side. In about a minute flat the bucket was licked clean and lifted back over the fence.

"Loves his beer, ol' Ernie does," said the third old man.

I couldn't help laughing. Ernie obviously didn't have a head for booze; he'd turned away slowly and was now gently weaving his way across the slope. Then his front legs seemed to fold under him and he went down with a thump. For a minute his bony back end continued to stick up in the air then it too followed. Ernie stretched out his neck and closed his eyes.

I thought of Daphne upstairs and was sorry she was missing out on seeing how the locals amused themselves. It was easy after that. We gravitated to the nearest table, I shouted a round and they would've shared the intimate details of their own grannies' lives if I'd asked. (I suppose beer for Ernie was a bit of a drain on their pockets.) Unfortunately none of them had any clear recollection of any of the Lay family though they told me Jessie Carter had been one of the Carters who'd had the local store before the war and they thought there was still a brother somewhere in the district, not round here, they knew everyone round here.

"Do you remember his name?"

They tossed around a lot of names, shooting down each other's suggestions. Then Clenched-Mouth said, "Ossie! Thassit!"

"By gummy! You're right, Clem. I never would've got that one. Ossie," he turned to me, "short for Oswald, you know."

"Thanks. That's a big help. There can't be that many Oswalds around." I'd already palmed Daphne off as my cousin and luckily they didn't ask why she was wanting to track down distant family connections but letting me do the legwork; keeping in touch tends to be seen as 'women's work'.

Asking about Lance Skuthorpe was pushing my luck and, at first, I only got blank stares. Then the old man in the blue cardigan who'd told me Ernie loved his beer suddenly smote the table a puny blow. "Of course! Man who rode Bobs! 'member my ol' dad saw him in Sydney."

"Thassright—anwenoverGordon'sLeap."

"And is it true that Felix Lay worked for him at some stage?"

"Reckon so—but that would've been in the twenties more likely. The thirties were hard on travelling shows an' I reckon Skuthorpe went bust at one stage." This was the first old man with his long drooping nose and oddly tented eyebrows. "Wouldn't think his wife saw too much of him."

"And he went on travelling in the thirties, after his little girl died, even if it wasn't with Skuthorpe?"

"Could've. Yeah, I'd forgotten all about his little girlie. Sad business all

round ... but I was only a young 'un then an' he wasn't the sort of fella'd talk to kids. I knew him by sight an' you'd hear bits of gossip now an' then—pity, I reckon, him being like a real cowboy, you know, Hopalong Cassidy an' them fellas—an' growling at us kids ... "

I checked the phone books in the hall by the Red Phone before I went upstairs to see if Daphne was awake and ready for dinner. The Canberra book yielded up an O.Carter in Queanbeyan and one in Brindabella. I thought what-the-heck, might as well give 'em each a quick buzz.

O.Carter in Queanbeyan turned out to be an Olivia Carter; so it was with the feeling of putting my entire stake on Number Two and watching the wheel spin. The phone rang and rang and I was about to give up—away, dammit—when a querulous voice said, "Hello".

I felt stupid asking if that was Oswald Carter who had (had had?) a sister named Jessie. There was a long silence and I waited for the click which would end contact with this nut. Then there was the faintly diffident clearing of an old throat and the voice said, "I am. Who are you?"

A good question and not one to be compressed into one succinct sentence. I told him about Daphne and me and that Felix had shot himself, his death having been discovered by Daphne and her mother.

The old voice said: "Good. Good that the blaggard's dead, I mean."

Was it my imagination or did his voice ring with greater vim?

"You didn't care for your brother-in-law?" It struck me as an almighty stupid question.

"That's putting it mildly, mister. You'd go a long way before you'd find a more callous blighter than old Felix. You sure he shot himself? Would've thought it was more likely to've been someone shooting *him*."

"I have no idea but I understand the police were satisfied it was suicide." (Strictly speaking, they were satisfied it was an accident, if Daphne had it right.) "But when you say callous—do you mean because he treated his wife, your sister, badly?"

"Oh, he did that all right. It was a sorry day when she married *him*. But I was only a kid then—well, so was she, only sixteen when she married him, and thought he was a flaming hero with his silver-plated guns and his hand-tooled boots and all the rest of his get-up. She ran away from him several times but he always got her back, the blaggard."

I'd never heard anyone called a 'blaggard' outside a book and it intrigued me—what sort of man was Ossie Carter? "So what happened, if you don't mind me asking?" There was another long pause and I accepted there was no reason why he should tell a stranger on a telephone anything more.

Then there was a kind of shuddering gasp like something going down the wrong way and he said, "Sorry about that. I don't know what happened to Jessie and it's not for want of trying to find out, I can tell you. He told me Jessie'd run off with Don Paton, fella was quite a good buckjump rider and I chased up and down three states trying to catch up with 'em and make sure she was all right—and all he could tell me when I found him was that Jessie'd spent a week with

him, then she'd disappeared. He thought she must've changed her mind and decided to go back to Felix but he never saw either of 'em again so he didn't know for sure what'd happened. I knew Felix had got her back and I went up to that farm every day I could, hoping to find her there—but I never did. And Felix'd just say she's not here and scram before I—and he'd finger his guns. He always wore 'em, day in, day out—"

He only got through all this with difficulty; now he broke down completely and sobbed. There wasn't any comfort I could offer. I had no idea what might've happened to Jessie. "I'm sorry. This must be very distressing for you."

"No, no ... poor Jessie ... you find out anything, you just let me know ... that's all I ask. Just to know what happened."

I thought Damn and Double Damn! It was one thing to brush off Daphne's curiosity as a rather morbid exercise and not of any major importance, it was less easy to do the same to an old man when it was his sister.

"I'll do my best, and I'll let you know about anything I turn up, even if it doesn't seem important to me. But could I ask you if you remember the little girl, little Margaret?"

"Yeah, course I remember her. Felix shot her."

"Because the brumbies had knocked her down and trampled her?"

"No. He did that later. So the police'd think it was an accident."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Sure as I'm standing here. Jessie told me and my sister never told a lie in her life."

- xii-

Daphne and I went into the hotel dining-room, a gloomy place decorated with some dusty dried-flower arrangements on the mantelpiece over the unused fireplace and crowded with tables and chairs like an auctioneer's rooms but with only two laid for dinner.

The two youngish men from the bar came in, nodded at us and sat down. Daphne spread her napkin and said quietly, "How did you go in the bar?"

"I saw a bull drink a bucket of beer," I said drily, "and I learnt that Jessie Carter had a brother—and I've just been speaking to the brother—"

"Really?" She opened her water-green eyes very wide. "Where does he live?"

"Mr Oswald Carter appears to live in Brindabella."

"Can we go and see him?"

I didn't think much of this idea; not if Daphne had "the look of Felix Lay about her". And we had no joy to offer him.

"He told me all he knew. He believes Felix did something to Jessie but he doesn't know what or how or when. And he also said he believed Felix shot Margaret first then ran the brumbies over her."

"Surely not!" Then she seemed embarrassed by her exclamation, glancing furtively over her shoulder and lifting her napkin to her face. But, at length, she looked at me again, a deep frown between her pale brows. "Maybe it's true. I was puzzled by the idea the little girl hadn't tried to avoid the horses as they

came out of the race—and even if she'd fallen, a horse will usually try to hurdle someone on the ground—but if she'd already been dead or unconscious then Felix could've placed her in a way that the horses couldn't avoid her ... " She gave a long shuddering errhhh sound with her mouth pulled down. "I wish—"

"That we hadn't come?"

"I—oh, lord! It's all so horrible—and yet ... what do *you* think happened to Margaret's mother?"

"In the beginning I thought Felix might've buried Margaret there out of love, so she'd be close to them—and it's possible that if his father had put all his affection to the other sons Felix may have resented it and not wanted to be associated with the rest of the family ... but if he didn't like children or hadn't wanted a daughter ... then, maybe, putting the child there was his way of hurting his wife, by refusing to give the child a proper burial in consecrated ground and so on—and by forcing his wife to be reminded of the whole tragic business every time she—"

"She would've been anyway. But is it possible his wife is also in that grave, do you think?"

"I wondered that myself. Or that odd little depression in the bed of the gully. But if her brother was constantly coming round asking for her it would've been a risk. Not impossible of course. But it's quite likely Oswald took advantage of Felix's absences to open that grave and check ... still, I'm more inclined to think that if Felix did anything he did it well away from home. It would work both ways—Jessie probably took the opportunity to go away with him when he was travelling with shows because it'd be easier to leave him and less reason for Felix to harass her family—but it'd also make it easier for Felix to get rid of her in a lonely stretch of country."

"I'm not sure I want to eat now. I seem to have nothing but horrible pictures in my mind, a shallow grave alongside some lonely country road—or the dingoes at her ... I remember when I was little we would sometimes hear the dingoes howling up in the hills. It used to make me scared to go to sleep—though they say the dingoes keep the fox numbers down. I don't know if that's true ... "

I wasn't too keen on shallow graves in lonely places either—for if she was right then I could see Ossie Carter never knowing what had happened to his sister. And Daphne, worse luck, had one of those minds which constantly circle morbid thoughts waiting to dive in on them and drag them out again, like a pelican grabbing crabs from the mud. Over our beef (I wondered if it came from Ernie's progeny, also beer-fed) she dredged up dismal fates for Jessie Lay. I began to understand why she'd clung to her vaguely-grim memories of Felix all these years.

"Did you ever see 'The Man from Snowy River'? Didn't that have brumbies in it?"

"Yes. I quite enjoyed it—but I couldn't see a herd stallion enticing away a young colt so as to provide himself with a potential rival—and it was strange—although it was spring none of the mares had foals or appeared to be in foal—"

"They should've had you advising them." But my compliment fell into the gully between us and Daphne left it there.

- xiii -

This hamlet, re-christened R ⋰.Y.⋱, went to bed early. I said goodnight to Daphne and sat down in the bare reaches of my room and pondered: when did I tell her Felix Lay might be her father? Did I tell her? She'd come to unearth a past but I was the one with some knowledge and now I wasn't keen to hand it over. The problem lay on me like a slab of raw beef on a bruise. Maybe I'd tell her when we were coming down the home straight; that way, if it sent her off the planet (it wasn't information I'd care to have myself)—well, I could shuffle her on to Leon. It might be just the sort of challenge he needed.

But the more I wandered to and fro with this the more I began to wonder: is that her problem, *the* problem? If her mother had been raped or at least coerced into an unwanted relationship when her husband was away then she would've had to be very special to look upon Daphne with love. Though the 'memoirs' Daphne had shown me didn't suggest an unhappy childhood exactly there was a sense of Daphne always held at arms' length, treated fairly and kindly but not with affection. And if she'd never been loved it raised the thought she'd never really given or accepted love in her marriage. Her husband's retreat from the hurly-burly of life might have more to do with Daphne and the state of their marriage than I'd originally thought. Daphne, as an unloved child, might've bent over backwards to fuss over her children, leaving her husband out of the equation.

All surmise. I went to bed but despite half-a-night's driving sleep was slow in coming. *Had* Felix Lay killed his daughter—and why?—or had Ossie Carter got it all wrong?

The next morning, a Wednesday, saw us wrapped in a thick cold mist. Downstairs, sounds were muffled. A bellow rose up from somewhere, Ernie needing a spot of hair-of-the-dog maybe, and sounding as though his mouth was plugged with cottonwool. I didn't hear Daphne until she tapped on my door. "Are you coming down for breakfast, Bob?"

Another day. I gave myself a long sardonic look in the mirror. A pity, but my beard gave me more the look of an upmarket derro than a retired ambassador.

"I'll meet you downstairs in five minutes."

She agreed and went away as soft-heeled as she'd come. I had no plan of action—she would probably expect one—and merely dwelt with homesick fervour on sand and sea and fresh salty breeze.

We breakfasted on dull platitudes and re-hashes of yesterday's news; then there didn't seem to be much else but to pay for our rooms and creep away in the mist. I hadn't one iota of proof that Jessie Lay had come to a sticky end. And if her brother hadn't been able to stir the local constabulary into poking and prying and asking blunt questions of her husband I didn't see myself getting anywhere, even if I stirred myself enough to ask. The mantle of disappointment hung round Daphne. 'What was the point' her shoulder seemed to say 'in

tracking down a man with a reputation, buttering him up, feeding him and driving him and providing him with a room of his own—if he doesn't *do* anything?'

It'd be stretching things to say there was tension between us but neither of us felt like talking and not only because these steep roads in the mist required my full attention. The sense of anti-climax finally spurred Daphne into saying sharply, "So you think it was a waste to come all this way?"

"Well, it was you who said a change would be good for me," I said neutrally.

"Did I say that?" She sounded amazed.

"Something along those lines."

"I must be crazy. People like saying psychiatric nurses end up as crazy as their patients, don't they?"

For some reason, frustration maybe, she was spoiling for a good knock-down drawn-out fight.

"Are your patients crazy?"

"No." Her tone would've put a lot of inquisitive people in their place. "Just addicted, the poor mutts."

But she'd started me on an unpleasant line of thought. I'd put Felix Lay's nastiness down to his resentment over his father's possible attitude to him (it seemed convenient) but what if Felix had something more serious, something inheritable? I turned to discussing the weather, the countryside or what little we could see of it: flitting trunks, where we might stop for lunch. But Daphne was not to be sidetracked for long.

"You know something, don't you Bob? Something the brother told you that you're not telling me?"

She leant towards me, touched my arm—I was surprised how cold and tremulous her hand was—and said huskily, "You've got to tell me everything! That's why I came."

A kind of weariness crept up on me. "I don't know, Daphne, it's just something Mary MacLeod said—and it may not be true—"

"What?" Her hand closed tight on my wrist. "What did she say?"

"She said—you reminded her a bit of Felix Lay."

Her reaction on a different stretch of road might've killed us both. "What! I don't believe it!" And her hand closed like a vice, dragging my hand off the wheel—the car slewed. I braked. We ran into the verge. "What the hell do you think you're doing! You could kill us on these bloody roads!" I was furious.

She thrust my hand from her as though it'd grown eight legs and a red stripe. "How dare she! How *dare* she! That *monster!*" She flung open the passenger door and stumbled out. Next minute she'd disappeared through the grass and into the ghostly trees and I thought of her tumbling down unseen cliffs. But it wasn't the moment to go after her.

Times like these you need something and I'd gone and put my flask in my overnight bag in the boot. No one, I thought angrily, would tempt me away from home again, wouldn't matter if they looked like Sophia Loren and Britt Eklund

combined, wouldn't matter if they had the world's most powerful sob story, wouldn't matter if they waved wads under my nose. Let 'em. I don't know how long I sat there, my head back, my eyes closed, vaguely expecting to hear cries of pain and anguish rising to the hidden sun. Instead there was the sudden soft crunch of steps on gravel then Daphne slipped into her seat and clicked her seat belt.

She said nothing. Hard to know what to say on occasions like that. I drove on down the slope and said I thought an early lunch in Canberra would be a good idea. She remained silent.

- xiv -

It was a rotten drive, a rotten lunch.

We took the first café we came too, ordered sausages and chips and I was surprised they had something so simple and old-fashioned on their menu, a pot of tea. Daphne showed every sign of being miles away in her own world of sudden turmoil, her hands clenching and unclenching on her cutlery, her lips moving on something unsaid; I wasn't unsympathetic. She'd had her world turned upside-down; what was underneath wasn't comforting. Even so, I wished I was somewhere else. "Did you say something?" I leant forward.

"Not to you. But to that bloody mother of mine—my God, I'll kill her when I get home! I really will kill her!"

Several people turned and looked at us, their faces that blend of avid curiosity and uneasiness—does she *mean* what she's saying?—then turned back to their food.

"Don't you think she may have been a victim as much as you—"

"You must be joking! Every time I asked—always some stupid excuse, some way to worm out of a real answer—the bloody sneak—"

"You mean—you knew?" I admired my calm. My impulse was to give her a good shake.

"No, I didn't *know*! Can't you see that! I never *knew*—I just had this feeling all the time—that I was different, that she treated me different—all those bloody lies!"

She was obviously intent on working herself up into a fury. I should've opted for a bag of sandwiches in the park. "Well, eat what you want of that and we'll go and find a park for a while." It was not unlike having a very young Rachel on the verge of a tantrum yet I couldn't picture Daphne Morrow ever throwing a tantrum. Maybe that was the trouble. She'd always kept everything inside.

She pushed away her plate still containing enough to feed two Rwandans. "I'll pay," she said curtly. It wasn't the paying that mattered. I would've preferred to finish my lunch in peace, stroll out, get a copy of The Canberra Times, a seat in the park, enjoy the sun now the mist had rolled back to the most secluded valleys.

Daphne refused to *sit* anywhere, to even consider a bit of sight-seeing, and in the end we drove out through leafy suburbs and parched lawns, Sydney-bound. And when we got there I'd plead people to be seen and leave Daphne to

take herself home. I didn't like leaving her but I didn't think I was the support she needed—and what should she do now? Arrange tests to see if she had a different father? Accept Felix and get on with life?

Virtually all the way to Goulburn we sat in silence, penetrating tiring silence. I tried to ease things by saying, "By the way, what *was* the funny story to do with Lady Cilento you mentioned in your account?"

"It was about a jug of hot water—oh, I forget! And how can it matter now, for heaven's sake!"

I shrugged. If only her mother had told her long ago, breaking it gently, long before she knew anything bad about Felix. To learn it hard on the heels of the possibility that Felix killed his first daughter, Daphne's maybe half-sister ...

I thought of therapies I might suggest and laid them aside. What did I know that Daphne didn't know?

We came into Goulburn and I said, "Care for a glass of something? I feel a bit parched." She shook her head vehemently.

"Well, if you don't mind—I'll just park here. Won't be long."

She gave me a quick sideways look then slumped back in her seat and closed her eyes. I got out. But I spun out my moment of respite to twenty-five minutes before sighing out loud and returning to the car. At some level, I think I'd been hoping she'd take the wheel and disappear. I could manage without two sets of clothes in the interest of peace and quiet. But of course she was still there.

I asked her what she wanted to do in Sydney, stay overnight or go on home. She was silent a long while like President Clinton trying to decide whether to invade Haiti.

"I don't know," she stayed slumped. "What does it matter? Why do one thing instead of another? But I suppose I might as well go on home." She sounded like someone at the end of their tether. "If I'm going to be Felix Lay's daughter wherever I go ... but if I break out and murder someone, possibly my mother, you'll know I wasn't responsible."

"It's not an inheritable condition," I said mildly. "Did you ever read that story about Mr Maybrick supposedly being Jack the Ripper?"

"No. Who was Mr Maybrick?"

"His wife Florence went to prison allegedly for poisoning him with arsenic—though it's possible he overdosed himself, people used to take small amounts of arsenic in medicines and tonics. Still, if both husband and wife had done murder—and yet, so far as I know, their children grew up to be perfectly nice normal people."

"It wasn't what he might've passed on!" She spoke like a slap on the wrist; I had a headmaster like that. "No, I *feel* so angry I could do murder. Easily. All those *lies* she told me—I always thought it was her *husband*—my dad—she hated so much! My God," she suddenly buried her face in her hands, "I told him I didn't want anything to do with him when he was dying—because he'd treated my mum so badly ... and he said—he said—" she started to cry, "he was sorry—sorry!—he knew he hadn't been the world's best husband! Oh my God!"

She broke down completely and began to cry in great heaving horrible sobs.

- xv -

I don't know who it was who promoted 'a good cry' as therapy, not someone with Daphne Morrow in the car with them. And poor Daphne didn't have the right colouring for that therapy. Her nose shone a painful red in her pie-coloured face, her eyes swam like anaemic leaves floating in red algae.

But, at last, she put her hair back with a determined effort and took a pair of sunglasses out of her bag and slipped them on. She faced straight ahead and said wearily, "You want to stay in Sydney, don't you Bob?"

"We might as well—or you can drop me off if you want to keep going. My mother won't forgive me if I don't call in—and there's a few things about Felix an old mate of mine just might like to check up on when he has time."

"If you want to go to a hotel—I'll pay. I dragged you all the way down here—it's the least I can do."

I felt she was saying, obliquely, she didn't want to be left on her own. Though Dell would accept whoever I brought and not complain I thought Daphne was too volatile to be thrust on anyone Dell's age. There was Barbara but she was a non-starter. I shuffled through various old friends, their wives, a cousin or two. Then I thought: what about Petra Day? And the more I thought on this the more I liked the idea. Cheek, certainly, when I hardly knew her—but 'faint heart etc etc' ... and she might even enjoy the challenge presented by Daphne ... and she could always say no.

It took me a lot of messing round with a public phone in Liverpool to track Dr Day round Sydney uni at this hour of the afternoon—but when I finally got hold of her and she dredged her memory for Bob Creighton she nearly split my ear—"Bob! Good to hear from you again! Are you on another—case?"

"Sort of. And I'd value your opinion if you've got any time to spare this evening—an impartial third person—"

"Love to! Where are you now?"

"Liverpool."

"Well, look, I'll be home in—say, forty minutes—so I'll probably beat you home anyway—"

"I've got someone with me—"

"Dell?"

"No, a woman called Daphne Morrow and she's in a bit of a state—"

"Not to worry! Look, I must fly—but I'll look forward to seeing you both."

I wish more people had her quick grasp of the essentials.

Daphne accepted the fact of the invitation without comment and I said, "If you see a bakery give a yell and we can get something for tea." We'd only just drawn up in front of her house, bag of offerings on Daphne's lap, when Dr Day came charging along on her bicycle, her long plait flying from beneath her crash helmet.

"This is Dr Day?" Daphne said in a surprised whisper.

"It is. Dr Day is unique." And in her unique way she had us introduced,

settled into chairs in her airy upstairs flat, drinking coffee, eating our mixed pastries and Petra's hot wholemeal muffins, and behaving in such an amicable way it seemed a pity to spoil it by bringing in Felix Lay. Nevertheless, Daphne, still red-eyed, set to, womanfully, and told the story from beginning to end.

No doubt Petra Day could overwhelm; she also had an enviable capacity to listen with absolute attention—which made people feel that what they were saying was gripping. Under this treatment I could see Daphne beginning to relax, become expansive even. When she finally trailed off with "and that's really all we know about him," Petra said, "So what do *you* think happened?"

"I don't know. I remember he had a bill, a poster, tacked up somewhere, just inside his door I think—a picture of him reaching for his guns—so I suppose it was advertising one of his acts ... maybe it's just the association of ideas but I've always felt very sure he went everywhere with those guns even though I can't really bring to mind a picture of him actually *out* somewhere."

"Is it possible," the idea had been with me quite a while but I hesitated to voice it, "he'd been harassing your mother again and she managed to get a gun away from him and shoot him—and she went up to his house a day or two later, knowing he'd gone away severely injured. She'd want to see if he'd died—and if so she could bring back his gun or guns and set the scene as a suicide ... "

"I've never thought of her as a brave person." Daphne seemed to take the idea and turn it over carefully, run a finger round it, like a shoe back from the cobbler.

"A desperate person then?" Petra suggested.

"Not even that. I mean—I'm sure she didn't want Felix coming near the house but I have no memory of her behaving in such a way that I could tell she was frightened."

But if her memories were heavily overlain with a sense of her mother's deceit was it possible that other things had been pushed aside or buried much deeper?

"So we have the puzzle that Felix was shot under the arm—difficult but not impossible to do yourself but an extremely ineffective way to try and commit suicide ... and the note—which is strange really the more you think about it. The image of her calmly removing one note so people would think well of Felix and then writing another for the police. Why? Why should she care what people thought of Felix? None of them had any reason to care particularly. And she was running a big risk if anyone else there was familiar with his writing—"

"Maybe that—what she said about the notes—was all one big lie," Daphne said abruptly. "She lied about other things so why not that?"

"Is it possible that someone *else* had come there, had an argument, maybe wrestled a gun away from Felix and shot him ... and your mother, when she came next day, wrote the suicide note because she thought she knew who might've done it?" Petra raised an eyebrow at us. "Very Agatha Christie I know—but to proceed—she may've been afraid—if murder was suspected—her own relationship with Felix would be investigated and even if she was completely the victim it still wouldn't be the sort of thing she'd want made

public knowledge, leading to trouble with her husband, gossip, bad feeling ... if Felix was dead she may have acted impulsively so as to put the whole nasty business behind her—and then later she felt guilty and her story about the notes reflects her own sense of guilt and cover-up ... ”

An explanation worthy of the most convoluted Mind of the Murderer genre.

“The Molloys,” Daphne mused then shook her head. “No, I think they—well, not liked him but so long as he paid his rent—they tolerated him. And who else would rent that old place and a few acres of useless land?”

“Then perhaps his wife was still alive and came after him?” Petra smiled. “No, it’s beginning to sound like a farce, isn’t it? The Case of the Avenging Wife. So you have no idea what happened to his wife?”

“None at all. But it certainly looks as though she must be dead or surely she would’ve contacted her brother. Though of course the feelings he expressed about her *now* may be very different to the feelings he expressed then—he may have told her it was her own fault for marrying someone like Felix—whereas—now—he’s old and lonely.” We didn’t seem to be getting anywhere with our speculations but Daphne had got herself well in hand. To my relief.

“Where are you staying tonight?” Petra looked from Daphne to me and back.

“We haven’t decided. Bob was going to go and see his mum—”

“Look! I’ve got a spare room if that’d be any use. Save you hunting round for a hotel room or whatever.”

“It’s very kind of you—but, really, I couldn’t.” Daphne sounded nervous. “I don’t know you—and there’s no reason for you to—”

“It’s absolutely no trouble. Bring your things up and I’ll make the bed. I’ve got something on tonight, a book launch, you’re welcome to come, it’s a buffet so an extra person or two won’t put the arrangements out—otherwise, I can leave you a key.”

She caught my wry look. “Bob, I’m not as fluffy-headed and trusting as your look suggests!”

“I hope not. What’s the book about? East Timor?”

“No, not this time. It’s what you might call a Melanesian philosophy of child-rearing. An ex-student of mine who did field-work in Vanuatu. She asked me to write a foreword for her.”

Even the offer of free food didn’t tempt Daphne, maybe she thought she’d feel obligated to lash out on a Melanesian philosophy of child-rearing. She shook her head slowly. “I think, if you wouldn’t mind, I’ll have an early night.”

After Daphne had gone downstairs to retrieve her bags from her car I said to Petra, “I’ll just duck down the road and see about getting a room at the pub.”

“Nonsense! There’s room here.”

I looked at her sofa, a flimsy affair of cane and cushions, and hoped that wasn’t what she had in mind. She saw my expression and laughed, the sort of laugh that would’ve done a toystore Santa proud. “Oh Bob, even if I’m old and skinny I do have a big comfortable bed—go and take a quick bounce—and you’re welcome to share it—and I promise I don’t kick, snore, or grind my teeth

in my sleep—”

We turned and looked at each other. I’m not much of a one for skirting round the issue and Petra Day was very nice to kiss. Though I didn’t promise her anything about being a paragon in bed.

- xvi -

Daphne and I went out and had a Chinese meal at a small place in Booth Street, then decided on a movie (‘The Secret Garden’, her choice); we’d reached a peaceful plateau, or so I kidded myself, and I wasn’t going to risk it. Maybe I should’ve kept pushing Daphne to talk about the past but, frankly, I’d rather face chairs and bottles flying round a pub than an over-emotional woman.

Petra was already home when we came in so we all sat down to a small snack and superficially shared our evenings. Her flat had a big living space with a small corridor leading to the bathroom with the kitchen on one side and a bedroom, Daphne’s, on the other. Petra’s room opened directly into the corner of the living area but she’d turned the rear section of it into a study with a big desk, her computer and files, and lots of book shelves; the shelves next to the sofa only contained her light reading matter and she was obviously fond of a lot of authors I’d never heard of with names like Moravia and Kielly and Kosinski and Soyinka; Daphne came over and stood beside me before drawing one out. ‘The Liar’. She looked at it a minute then pushed it back and turned away.

Petra came up beside me and said, “Borrow anything you’d like.”

But Daphne shook her head. I had no idea what she liked, apart from Arthur Upfield, and I saw her rather like a paint-by-numbers exercise; here and there a little piece coloured in but not adding up to anything solid.

“‘You would come to the Land of Melody Sam’,” I said softly. “What do our books tell us about ourselves, about others?”

“Who was Melody Sam?” Petra said mildly.

“A rather colourful old publican in one of Arthur Upfield’s books. He wanted to own everything and he used to go on benders sitting on a keg of gelignite.” A Felix Lay? It might’ve helped if we’d been stuck for conversation in the middle of dinner but, now, Daphne said, “I think, if you don’t mind, I’ll go to bed.”

Did she know I wanted her to go, and leave me alone with Petra, or was this her normal bedtime? There was something about the three of us which generated an unease but I didn’t understand then that Daphne would’ve liked to have had Petra to herself. I was in the way. I was also a catalyst. Suddenly. She turned at the entrance to the hallway. “Goodnight.” But the look she gave us (we’d sat down on the sofa) was unreadable. Just so, might the young Daphne have looked at her parents at bedtime ...

We could hear her pad to and fro to the bathroom, cough, drop something such as a hairbrush, then all went quiet. A tension, coiled up somewhere—in my mind or, more prosaically, in my shoulders?—seemed to let go and unwind with a long sigh. I slipped an arm round Petra. “This is what I’ve been looking forward to—but Daphne inhibits me somehow, makes me tense. I think in future I’ll insist I only take on investigations that can be solved from my armchair. I’m

getting too old for all this driving and rushing."

"I think you take other people's troubles too much to heart."

"And you don't?"

She laughed at that.

"But tell me, do you always get called Petra—or do you have—"

"No, don't say it!"

"Say what?"

"A pet name! As a matter of fact, I've always insisted on the full thing. I cannot *stand* Pet for a name. My father used to call me Rose Red—Rosie—"

Privately I didn't think Rosie suited. "Why Rose Red?"

"You know—Petra—a rose-red city—'half as old as time'?"

"No. Poetry isn't my strong point."

"All right then—just tell me the rest of the story of Jack Hodge as a bedtime story—and we'll have—" She poured us two small glasses of port. (Except the Jack Hodge story, or much of it, remained in limbo; no one'd ever been charged with running Jack off the road, with trashing Dell's home—only the shooting of the ponies pending—and pending ... and they knew now they'd been shot with an Uzi sub-machine gun though the weapon remained unfound and Andrew Milne remained unlinked to the possession of one—though as Petra pointed out Asia, including Indonesia, is awash with Uzis. I wondered, as I'd wondered in the beginning, if there *was* someone in the shadows behind the Milnes.)

Then she took my empty glass away from me and took my face in both hands and I forgot all about the day I'd had and the look of—was it resentment Daphne'd thrown my way with her "Goodnight"—and we made our way to Petra's big roly-poly orthopaedically unsound bed, a surprising bed for her, but just right for rolling round in and I decided slender women with sensitive hands have a lot going for them. (That may have had something to do with Barbara growing steadily pudgier and blowsier and flabbier ...) Then I went to sleep and slept like someone after a long weary stake-out.

Whether this had anything to do with it or not I woke early. Before dawn. Petra slept on, peacefully, her hair fluffed out over the white of her pillow. For a while I simply lay there feeling warm and drowsy, lazily running the pads of my fingers up her arm, over her shoulderblades, then it struck me I'd be going home today and this was an opportunity not to be thrown away because of sloth.

"Wake up, sleepyhead. Morning. Coffee."

She opened one eye and blinked. "Morning, my fat foot." Then she opened the other and gave me a sleepy grin. "I thought you'd retired, you blighter? Ten o'clock up, gentle brunch, down to the bowls club?" She leaned over and I felt the warm weight of her on my chest, then her mouth on mine. I imagine it's impossible to make love (in such a pleasant gooey state of mind) in a silent house in a half-asleep city without making any noise. And such a state of mind and body shuts everything else out.

So I nearly had heart failure when there was a scrabbling at the door, then a screaming wildcat shape launched itself on to me, fingernails digging into my

exposed shoulders—

What happened next I'm none too sure. I ended up on the floor, entangled in a coil of sheet and quilt. The screech had turned into something like "leave my mum alone!" before descending into horrible gasping semi-hysteria. Then Daphne was gone as abruptly as she'd come. A chair crashed over, there was the sound of glass breaking. "Oh my God!" But Petra's voice was a mere whisper close to my ear. Then she threw on a dressing-gown and hurried out.

I never wanted to see Daphne Morrow again.

Wearily, I hunted round for some clothes, combed my hair with Petra's comb, thought longingly of home ...

But it seemed to prove, more dramatically than I wanted, that the young Daphne *had* come upon Felix Lay and her mother in a compromising situation and she'd been upset and frightened by the sight. And we had been the trigger for that buried memory? But! I found there were unplumbed depths of dislike and distaste in that But!

I went out. Reluctantly.

Daphne had managed to throw herself all over the place, breaking our port glasses, spilling a flower vase, gouging her face with her fingernails. Old books always recommend cold water but Petra had slapped Daphne hard on both cheeks, I could still see the marks of her hands, and pinioned her into a corner of a sofa, covered her wild hands with cushions, and was now speaking slowly and soothingly to her as you might speak to a wild horse; not that fate has ever asked me to speak to any kind of horse.

"Coffee and toast?" I said without enthusiasm.

Daphne lifted a tear-streaked face. "My God!" She gulped and fell into noisy hiccups. "I'm—sorry—hic!—I don't—oh Lord," she buried her face in her hands again and began to sob and hiccup in a horrible way. Petra gave me a small understanding nod and I hurried to the kitchen and began to clatter round looking for mugs and jugs and trays and kettles and all the rest.

I could hear Petra talking quietly to Daphne and I wished, fervently, I could sneak away and leave Petra to manage Daphne back to equilibrium and out of my life forever. Instead I trundled out with the tray and set it down. Petra took Daphne's arm, like bringing a fractious child to meals, and led her over to the scrubbed-pine table and they both sat down.

"Coffee?" I said briskly.

Daphne looked up, her gaze wavered, swam, sidled away, and she shook her head. Petra took things into her own capable hands and poured three no-nonsense cups, spooned sugar into one and set it before Daphne. "You'll feel better." But Daphne had locked her gaze into the wall above us where a black and white print of a young girl holding a baby in her arms was framed in light wood.

Her shoulders slowly grew rigid and I thought 'Hell and Damnation, here she goes again. If I don't end up strangling the woman!—'

Instead she gave a long piercing sigh like a wind that could cut right through shivering flesh, her shoulders slumped, then in an unnaturally high

childish voice she said, “I heard him come, I went in in my nighty, I took his gun.” She turned to Petra, her eyes wide, blank, staring, seeing something we couldn’t see. “I took his gun.”

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Petra looked at me and frowned. I nodded slightly. Very very softly, she said to Daphne. “Yes, you took his gun. Go on.”

“I took his gun. He had nothing on, just his socks, and his belt with the two guns was on the end of the bed and I thought he was going to kill my mum because he was on top of her.” That same high unnatural voice shrilled the words. This was the child Daphne, I understood at last, reliving the events she’d almost totally blocked from her mind for more than thirty years.

“I did what I’d seen my brothers do with their toy guns—” she lifted an imaginary revolver but with a strange deliberateness; its unfamiliar weight in her small hand—“and I shot him and he cried out and I ran out of the room ... ”

“What happened then?” Petra’s voice was still as soft as cottonwool brushing her lips.

“Nothing. I got under my bed, my arm felt strange, and I stayed there a long time—in case. I heard the back door open, then I knew he’d gone away, so I got back into bed and I put the gun under my pillow.”

She turned to Petra and her voice slowly changed, became the adult Daphne again. “That’s all I know. Next morning everything was as it usually was. No sign of the gun, just us, just mum milking the cows, cooking breakfast, telling us to feed the chooks. I tried to say something and she said, hush lovey, you had a bad dream, it’s all right now. Nothing else existed. I thought it *was* a dream.”

“So what do you think happened that night?”

Petra put an arm round her. “It’s no good asking me.” Daphne sounded tired and fretful. “Did she put him on the donkey and take him home?” She leaned forward and took a long swallow of coffee.

Petra and I looked at each other. Whatever had happened in the immediate aftermath hadn’t featured a doctor but Daphne’s mother had obviously gone to great trouble to erase that night from their lives and imprint a different picture in her daughter’s mind. She would seem to have been a woman of considerable presence of mind—but maybe she’d lacked the acting ability to carry it through when faced year after year with vague questions from her daughter. It was her evasions which had fuelled her daughter’s sense of something not quite right ...

I saw the mother labouring across the steep hillside in the moonlight, the inert body of her unwanted lover slung across the donkey’s back; the careful setting of the scene after the long struggle up the stairs with a dying man (though she must’ve been strong to run the entire farm and family on her own for long periods of time) ... and I thought of Felix Lay who’d left terrible life-long scars in the lives of all those who’d entered into his world ...

“I remember,” Daphne said suddenly, “how Portly didn’t want to go up the hill with us. She kept turning round and trying to go home and my mother kept whacking her with a stick.”

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I've never thought of myself as a physical coward but to spend days more in Daphne's company struck me as unbearable; it didn't matter that she was a victim. If Petra would talk Daphne into therapy, try to talk her into, then I'd take the train up the Blue Mountains and spend the day with Dell. Filial duty to the rescue.

The Leura cottage was tidy, spotless, cosy. Dell looked a little frailer than last time but she bustled round cheerfully finding a date-and-walnut loaf and telling me to try some peanut brittle she'd bought at a fête. When I'd finished telling her an abridged and sanitised version of Daphne's story she said, "Fancy that! It must be the ghost of the little girl who died reaching out to Daphne and urging her to uncover the truth, mustn't it? Like a medium, you know."

I didn't know anything of the sort. It wasn't the sort of explanation Daphne'd be likely to come up with, not with her understanding of suppressed memories and all the rest, and yet—mightn't she find it more soothing—if Little Margaret was her half-sister?

"And what about Jessie Lay? Is she trying to reach out to anyone?"

Dell seemed to discern my sarcasm because she was unusually sharp in response: "Of course, Bob. Her brother."

It made a kind of sense. "Well then, if her brother has no idea where to look—what do you expect me to do?"

"Oh, you'll think of something. What about that very strange idea of naming a creek after a medicine? I've never heard of anyone doing *that* before? I mean you never hear of aspirin creek or petroleum jelly river—"

"Just as well," I said with a grin. "It'd put you off fishing there."

She didn't have any other ideas to offer and, instead, I let her show me the photo album she'd been preparing with old photos of Kaye and myself and newer ones of Kaye's children and I promised I'd send her some up-to-date ones of Rachel if I could manage to pin her down long enough to point a camera in her direction.

But on the train back I found myself circling round the thought: *was* there a significance in the name? Had Daphne actually heard the Hermit call the small gully near his Rockmount house 'Atabrine' or was it a mishearing as she'd assumed? And if he'd bestowed the name twice then didn't that suggest a particular significance in his own life?

I didn't return straight to the Annandale house; I was embarrassed by Daphne's presence; more than that, I was angry. She'd managed to spoil the sweetness of whatever Petra and I had found together and I wasn't sure we'd be able to recapture it. More practically, I needed to get to a library and do a bit of browsing. See if Atabrine led to any ideas. I went into Haymarket and gathered up an armful of books and settled down in a quiet corner. The dictionary said simply: "Atabrine. See Atebrin—Atebrin or U.S. Atabrine. Trademark, proprietary names for mepacrine—Mepacrine. Brit. a drug, mepacrine dihydrochloride, one of the first synthetic substitutes for quinine, formerly widely used to treat malaria but now largely replaced by chloroquine."

This didn't strike me as wildly useful. Was I coming at it from the wrong

end, seeing (or trying to see) some particular significance in the name? Might it be a matter of free association? Atabrine = malaria = tropics = yellow skin. A leap of the imagination we'd all taken without stopping to think. What if (because I could see no real reason for Felix to be thinking of yellow skin or the tropics) he'd come at it a different way and the most obvious way was through quinine. So I read up on quinine and the thing that immediately struck me (that old suspicious mind) was that quinine if not taken in carefully-controlled doses was toxic—leading to blindness, deafness, nausea, confusion, coma, and sometimes death. Quinine was added to tonic water for its astringent flavour, it'd been used for heart disease, it was commonly used by people who suffered from leg cramps.

A lot of vague possibilities wandered in and out of my mind but I could find no fact to pin them to. If Jessie Carter had been given quinine for leg cramps it would not have been difficult for her husband to have slipped more into her food. If her life with him was unbearable she might even have chosen this way out of the situation, if she knew of quinine's toxic properties (might a doctor have warned her to take care?). But all hypotheses.

I returned to the house. There was no sign of Daphne's car and I devoutly hoped Daphne'd packed up and gone home; impolite of course but a wise woman knows when to take such a step. And she probably wanted to see me as little as I wanted to see her. I didn't have a key and no one was home so I went back down the street to while away the time in the pub on the corner.

Was there an answer to Ossie Carter's plea? Was it possible to know what had happened to Jessie after sixty years? I didn't think so and there didn't seem much point cudgelling my brain further over it. If he was around ninety then he'd meet up with his sister in the next life pretty soon and get his answers and if there wasn't a next life then he'd be at eternal peace and, so far as I knew, there was no one else left to clamour for answers.

Except Daphne? Me? I'm not averse to answers; I am also a realist ...

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Petra came home at last (I hadn't been anxious; not with a decent drop in front of me) and said she'd taken Daphne to talk to someone, a bereavement counsellor of all things, and advised her to drive home in gentle stages after the rush hour had gone home to dinner. She said Daphne *was* very grateful to me but she knew I would rather not have to go home with her and she'd left me enough to pay my ticket home. While she was saying this she kept a quizzical look on her face.

I shrugged. "Fine by me. I hope you told her to go home and talk it all out with Leon *and* her mother."

"No." She wound her plait round her head then let it fall back over her shoulder. "I just said things like—I hoped things'd be better for her now. Where does Leon come into it all especially?"

I shrugged again. "I suppose husbands and wives aren't good at talking to each other, not after eighteen years of marriage, but I think they need each other. Trouble is—I think he's afraid to ask her for anything—her time, her help, her

support—because it might seem like yet one more burden on her—and she's afraid of asking him for anything because she's grown up with a vague sense of rejection and that it really isn't any point in asking anybody for anything. They need each other and instead they keep each other at arm's length."

She looked sympathetic and regretful. Daphne was gone. A letter wouldn't be the same.

"Shall we eat in or out? I've got a student coming at about half past seven."

"In. I'll go down and get a takeaway. But I'd like to run one last idea past you and it'd be easier here."

"All right. But I've got plenty of food in the house. It won't take me long to heat something up."

So we had seafood bisque and a thing made with sausages and sauerkraut (interesting but not authentic) and when we got to coffee and rum babas I told Petra about my musings on Atabrine. She listened, giving every suggestion of fascination, but at the end she sat, unusually for her, in a long brooding silence.

"I have heard," she said at last, "one of those old wives' tales I suppose, that quinine can cause an abortion. I've had several Asian students who took quinine each month to get their periods done with faster. But whether it really works—"

This opened up interesting new avenues. "Maybe it doesn't matter whether it works or not—if Jessie had *heard* that it works and didn't want to have another baby to Felix—and I wouldn't blame her—and we know he forced himself on to women—well, she might've tried to dose herself."

"Where would she have got it from?"

"Felix may have had some on hand. His brother had been in the Middle East during the war, Felix himself had been to Queensland though we don't know how far north. He might even have got it for her if he didn't want the baby. She might've lived on tonic water. Her doctor may have prescribed it for her if she'd been troubled with leg cramps—I remember my wife having a lot of trouble at night when she was expecting Rachel ... "

"Yes. So if Felix gave it to her, with or without her knowledge, or even if she took it herself without realising the doses have to be carefully measured—Look! This must lead on to something that can be checked—her doctor, her medical records, a nurse, a receptionist, a chemist who supplied her—"

"I think Ossie would've checked the obvious things. But if Jessie went away with Felix on one of his sharp-shooting tours—" I shrugged, "she could've been abandoned anywhere. We know she went at least once. She could be—" I thought of Daphne talking of shallow graves and put my hands out, palms-up.

"*If* she killed herself. But I don't think even an overdose causes instant death. If she had damaged herself—well, what would Felix have done, do you think?"

"He would've made sure she could never come back to him. If he was going to have Ossie popping up on his doorstep he'd want to be able to say, Look, she's buzzed off with some bloke she met, so that's the end of it so far's I'm concerned. You'll have to wait till she gets in touch if you want to know

where she is and what she's doing."

"Yes—but—" She got up and took a restless turn around the room. I looked at my watch; the student would be here soon. "Would he be satisfied with that—and it sounds very cold-blooded—"

"Even if Felix did things on impulse he seems to have been utterly dispassionate when it came to covering them up—and don't forget these were the Depression years. People's compassion, ordinary people I mean, was being stretched to the limits. I don't imagine the Carter family was raking it in, not in a little shop in a hilly backwater—whatever Ossie feels now, they may not have been keen to take on another mouth to feed then—or two mouths if there was a baby on the way—and the quinine hadn't worked—"

She sat down again, closed her eyes briefly. "Then—where would *you* leave an unwanted wife?"

I was tempted to say "I left mine in Surry Hills" but I didn't think Petra would appreciate that kind of sarcasm. She believed in sisterhood. "There were *thousands* of men on the roads in western New South Wales in those days—and quite a few women ... so there's your wife suffering from quinine poisoning and what would be easier than to remove all signs of identity and leave her beside a road. Poor soul, says your Good Samaritan, and takes her in thinking her stuff has been pinched by some cad of a swaggie. So he or she looks after her a bit, hoping she'll get better and be able to tell something about herself. *If* she gets better chances are she'll be confused about the immediate past and Felix can claim she wandered off and he couldn't find her—or somesuch—if she doesn't—well, she ends up in an institution, maybe as Mrs Nobody, maybe your Samaritan is kind enough to bestow a new name on her—"

"And, *voilà*, Mrs Lay has disappeared for good! Yes, something like that *could* happen. But I hate to think—"

The door bell chimed and Petra let in a young man in his twenties and introduced him as Craig de Vries; then she said, as though I needed to be explained away, "Bob is busy digging up the past. Absolutely fascinating!"

The young man said politely, "Whereabouts?"

"Brindabella."

His politeness changed to surprise. "I didn't know they'd found anything down there! What tribe would that be?"

Petra gave her boisterous laugh. "Not that sort of digging! He's researching what was probably a murder done sixty years ago—"

The young man said, "I see," but a faint distaste crept into his face. All these amateurs picking over the bones of the suspicious dead for their best-seller? "Who was it—if you don't mind questions?"

"A woman called Jessie Lay."

"Never heard of her, I'm afraid. Still, does it matter now? After all this time? And with so many things needing to be done in the world—"

"True," Petra said mildly, "but the past has an uncomfortable way of impinging on the present. You know—'Sigh, wind in the pine, River, weep as you flow; Terrible things were done Long, long ago.' Glencoe was centuries ago

but ... Anyway, I'll just clear the table. What about you, Bob?"

"If you don't mind—I'll ring an old friend of mine, see what he can dig up in the way of Jane Does."

"Great idea! Help yourself. There's a phone on my desk."

I made several calls; Petra came in once to take several books from a shelf; I extracted a promise of quick action on unidentified and unclaimed female bodies; then I sat back and closed my eyes.

A problem for Petra's students: if I found a body which fitted the criteria should I present it to Ossie Carter? What was proof? Was he looking merely for peace of mind or something more? What would give him satisfaction?

I reached for the phone once more and rang the MacLeods at Burdon Mile. Terribly sorry to bother you, I said insincerely, but can you help me with two questions? Did Mr. Lay ever say anything which suggested his wife was already dead?

Mary MacLeod pondered it. "No, I really can't say that he did. From the way he'd be speaking of his family we understood she'd left him for another man—but we never asked."

And question number two: did they have any idea what Jessie Lay looked like? Mrs McLeod had neither seen Jessie, nor seen a photo of her, but the Carters at the store were all very tall people with tightly curled brown hair; rather striking people, she remembered. Jessie probably looked much like the others. Did she remember Oswald? No, he worked for the Railways, she seemed to think, an engine-driver or a guard.

I thanked her and hung up.

A bit of light reading before bed seemed indicated but light reading was not my new lover's strong point—or not on these shelves—and in the end I sat back with 'Protection or Punishment: The detention of Asylum Seekers in Australia'; it was about as light as I was going to get without disturbing the tutorial in the other room.

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They laughed together; they talked with deep earnestness; it was late when Craig de Vries said goodnight and went away. I wasn't jealous of the time he'd taken up but I was beginning to see things more clearly. Petra was a fascinating woman but she wasn't for me. I'd been an average copper, now I was being an average retired copper. I could find no reason to make life more complex than it was already. I never asked myself did I exist or did I only think I did. I avoided complex ethical debates not rooted in an immediate problem. I asked straightforward questions and I expected straightforward answers. I liked her, I admired her, I was happy enough to go to bed with her again—but I accepted we would never go beyond that.

The times I'd found myself investigating thefts and other problems reported by (or involving) academics I'd frequently found myself thinking 'what pompous twits! Why can't they simply say yes or no instead of answering in meaningless ten-line sentences and wondering why the poor bloody sod sent round hasn't managed to get it down verbatim.'

And I knew there was no shortage of academics who'd never forgiven the police for manhandling them during Moratorium marches and saw the lot of us as bullies from the bogs. Not that I'd thought of myself like that. Frank was the son of a boilermaker from Glasgow. So. You can like the worker so long as he's extolling the joys of labour in the good old USSR or being paid a pittance in some capitalist lackey state—but never let him run round in a blue uniform.

Petra came to bed and I forgot my musings.

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Various women of various ages and, no doubt, various tragic lives were on file. Bill Donaldson had been on the go, first thing, for me. There was no one who seemed to fit the description and age of Jessie Lay; not of course that we kidded ourselves these old files were complete. We went right through the thirties, right through the forties, fifties and sixties. There were several unclaimed with names which might've been bestowed on them—often mental patients—who'd been buried by the church or the state and their descriptions were often vague to the point of uselessness. Grey hair. Brown eyes. No height recorded. No distinguishing marks recorded. It pays to be down as unidentified. At least you get the works.

"What do you plan to do today, Bob?" Petra looked dishevelled but cheerful over her muesli.

"If you don't mind your phone ringing hot I'll try round the hospitals."

"All of them? Surely not! It really isn't worth the pain, not after all these years—and none of them are going to drop everything and rush off to the basement to look up their mouldering old files!"

She was expressing my doubts, my knowledge this was a waste of time. It made me grumpy. "It's a very long chance of course but if the truth can be dug up, even after all these years, don't you think I should make the effort?" (I didn't tell her that one final day of hard if completely useless work and I wouldn't feel any guilt about giving up and going home.) She put down her spoon and leant across the table and gave me a milky kiss. "I take back every critical rotten bloody thing I've ever said about the New South Wales Police."

"No. Don't do that."

"It'd be hard, I must admit. But you're right. What's that Bible verse people like quoting—even if they don't mean it—Oh! I know. You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. So, now, how can I help?"

"Let me see what sort of responses I get today and if it's zilch then we can go into the question of medical databases—what old country newspapers are on microfilm etc—"

"Okay." She looked at her watch. "I must fly. I've got a lecture at ten—"

Flying was one of Petra's strong points. She was tidy, organised, and down to her bicycle in ten minutes. Then I had no excuse for not going to her desk and sitting down to the phone.

It was a mad idea. If I hadn't known that a lot of harried people were soon ready to tell me. "An admission in the 1930s?!" Their combined sarcasm and astonishment flashed down the line. It took character to stick at it; to give the

basic facts, to insist on them taking down my number. Sydney might've offered Felix Lay a degree of anonymity so it seemed the place to start and I tried not to think of the closed-down nursing homes, the cottage hospitals and annexes and spare rooms in the houses of kindly retired nurses ... the shoddy record keeping, the lost files ...

I had regular coffee. I massaged my ear. (Was that the pain Petra meant?) I heard phone lines buzzing, sirens demanding, a dozen "will you hold a minute?", a hundred "no, I really can't help"; names were paged in my waiting ear, music to fill the moment blasted me, babies cried. I walked down to the post office and noted down dozens of country numbers and returned briskly, only detouring for a bottle of Highland Queen. I began on provincial hospitals, country hospitals. I knew it was a wasted day. I knew Jessie Lay, so far as I was concerned, was going to remain lost in time.

The young woman I spoke to at Bathurst said, "Hold on a tick and I'll get Flo, she's been here longer than I have." I held on. Flo wasn't likely to have been round in the nineteen thirties, not unless Bathurst General had a remarkable attitude to people over seventy.

Flo, when she came, listened to my story, asked what Jessie Lay looked like—then she said, "I wonder? It's only the slightest chance. But when I was little we lived in Wagga and my mother and my grandmother ran a little place, just four beds for country women who needed to rest up a bit before going home with their new babies—or if the babies were still needing some treatment—and a woman was brought in who'd been found at the show. We never found out who she was."

"Can you tell me anything about her? And what do you mean—the show?"

"It would've been the annual show, you know, because when they took down one of the tents, I think there'd been a magician performing, they found this woman lying under a seat, dead drunk. She wasn't an old woman but rather tatty and dirty—and I suppose they thought she'd been on the road ... and when my mother cleaned her up and fed her she found she was—well, I suppose you could say disabled. She just sort of mumbled and she seemed to be deaf—and my mother thought her family might've abandoned her there in the hope someone else would take over her care—"

"It does sound a possibility." Endless disappointment had made me cautious but a spark of excitement seemed to leap and ignite the straw. "Do you know what happened to her?"

"When my gran died my mother decided not to go on with it, times were hard and a lot of the woman were a bit like this one, they couldn't pay their bills—and I think the woman was moved to the hospital. I could find out if you like."

"I'd appreciate it very much. Do you have any idea what the woman used to mumble?"

"I think it was 'Little Meg' because my mother started calling her Meg in case it was her name—and when it was time to move her I remember my mother saying we should give her a surname as well—so she named her after our house

which was called Athlone. But—if it's the woman you're looking for—well, do you have any idea what had happened to her?"

"Not for sure. But there's a good possibility that she was suffering from quinine poisoning—"

"Quinine! Heavens! I don't suppose anyone ever considered that!"

No, it wouldn't be the first thing to spring to mind when you find a woman lying under a seat at the Wagga Wagga Show.

"How long was she with you, do you remember?"

"Oh, only a few months I think. I was only a child so I wouldn't be sure."

Mrs Ford, the sort of kindly soul who'd probably never been appreciated at her sterling worth, promised to see what she could find out during her tea break and would ring me back.

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I could've done some useful things for the rest of the afternoon, but except for sloshing some crockery through the sink I was reluctant to leave the flat, and simply put my feet up for a while. The phone rang and I jumped for it, not stopping to think it was ninety percent likely to be someone wanting Dr Day.

"Hullo. Flo Ford here again."

Probably my imagination but my breath seemed to be coming faster.

"Wonderful. Were you able to find out anything?"

"Oh yes." She sounded pleased with herself. "It was true what I'd thought—she did go to the hospital but later on she was looked after by a widow, I suppose she was no trouble and could help a bit around the house—but the thing I'd completely forgotten—or perhaps I never knew because I was too young to be told such things—was that she was taken to the hospital to have a baby, I suppose they were worried it might be handicapped too—"

This was a facer. "And the baby? Did it live, do you know?"

"Oh yes. They adopted it out in the usual way."

"And the mother?"

"She seems to have died in 1959 and the woman she'd been living with organised everything for her. I didn't ask what she died of—"

"But that's extraordinary. She was still alive then when her husband died."

"There's one other thing I remembered which just might help. My mother got my uncle to come round and take some pictures with his little Box Brownie—I suppose they thought it might help to identify her but I can't remember what happened next, I imagine his pictures would've gone to the police and probably the paper as well—that's if they came out all right."

"It doesn't matter. I'm sure I can follow that up. But you've been a wonderful help, I can't thank you enough for all the trouble you've been to."

"Will you let me know what happens? It's the only real mystery I've ever been associated with."

- xxiii -

Petra came home while my mind was busy elsewhere. "Do I smell coffee? Thanks, Bob, I'd love a cup. I'm always on the verge of giving it up in favour of dried roasted dandelion roots but I just can't seem to tip myself over the edge."

"I'm not surprised. Anyway, if you're interested, I've just discovered quinine *isn't* a reliable abortifacient—if that's the word I want."

She paused in the middle of undoing her bicycle clips and stared at me. "It isn't? How do you know?"

"There's a strong possibility I've found Jessie Lay—and she had a baby which was adopted out."

She sat down suddenly. "I wanted you to succeed—but I—"

"I know. About a thousand to one against—and, of course, it may be a false trail."

She listened in absorbed silence while I told her Mrs Ford's story.

"The baby," she said at the end. "Did it survive? Was it a boy or a girl? I wonder did they keep the records?"

"Yes. That's the sixty-four dollar question. They might've kept the records of healthy young mothers—but given the mess Jessie was in—well, they might've thought it a kindness to make sure the child could never find its mother. But I rang the cops in Wagga just now and they said they'd see if they still had a file on Meg Athlone, that's assuming they ever bothered with one in the first place—and they said they'd get back to me if they found anything. I'd better get Daphne to pay your phone bill—"

"Heavens! Forget it! I wouldn't have missed all this excitement for worlds!" Her response seemed to point up all the differences between us.

"Mmm ... so the thing now is—do we tell Ossie Carter?"

She let out a long thinking breath. "I'd hate to disappoint him. I wonder though—would it be worth talking to a group like Jigsaw—maybe someone enquired at some time. We know where the baby was born and when. We don't know the sex but there can't have been all *that* many babies born in Wagga that year!"

Petra accordingly tossed her briefcase on the table, forgetting her heartfelt desire for coffee, and got busy on the phone. I didn't have a lot of faith in the record-keeping of the Wagga police (I don't have a lot of faith in anybody's record-keeping) but I'd overlooked the very human desire to be the one to solve a mystery and write Closed on a file. Just before we sat down to dinner I had a ring from a Constable Atkins who said, yes, they did have two photos marked 'Meg Athlone' and could I come and identify them.

I couldn't of course—and I was in two minds whether to dump it on Ossie Carter. What was his eyesight like? What, for that matter, was his memory like? But it was his search more than it was my search. And he was probably inured to disappointment.

The Constable with eager young curiosity said he'd go there himself on his next day off and talk to Ossie. Devotion beyond the line of duty. But, somewhere in the haze of the past, I had an idea I'd done something similar. When I'd been young and wanting promotion.

If it wasn't Jessie ... well, I knew I wasn't going to start my research over again. As far as I was concerned she'd have to stay lost. Nor was I going to go hunting for her lost child. He'd have to stay in limbo like Peter Pan.

As Petra put it: “I don’t suppose it’s very kind to wish Felix and Jessie on to anyone.”

“You’d have Daphne for your possible half-sister and Ossie for your uncle.”

“True. Though you don’t sound enthusiastic.”

I thought of Daphne, all the trauma and angst she might succeed in resolving and might not; of Ossie, very old, who could so easily turn into a burden ...

“I’m a cynic.” Unaccountably, I felt very tired. I hadn’t done much beyond sit and phone. “But it’s out of my hands now. If Ossie identifies Jessie then the hospital might just be willing to open their records to him and let him know who adopted his young niece or nephew.”

“What about an advertisement? Something along the lines of ‘Would Meg Athlone’s child, born in Wagga Wagga, get in touch with ... to learn something of benefit’—”

“You can’t call Daphne or Ossie *benefits*—unless Ossie has something socked away under his mattress, waiting for Jessie to come home.”

“No—but I think the human desire to *know* is a very powerful and important one. It takes us beyond the animal kingdom. Even dogs and dolphins and so on are content with not knowing.”

“Mmm. So you’ll let me know what happens in the saga?”

“You’re not going home yet?”

“I think I’d better. I’ve given you enough—trouble. I’ll get the bus home tomorrow. Tonight I’ll take you out to dinner if you’re free.”

She hesitated. “All right. I’d like that. Let me get changed then we’ll go somewhere and just talk about *us*.” Which we did.

- xxiv -

To say home was *quiet* would be misleading. Rachel had a new boyfriend. A layabout called Guy who saw no need to keep it a secret that he’d washed up in Surfers because there were few jobs going here. What had happened to that old idea of busting your guts so you could support a wife in the manner she expected? Gone out with Jane Austen? Not that it mattered. No one in their right mind would want Guy as a son-in-law.

Lina Jessup wrote to tell me she’d been in touch with Peter Booth and he was being discharged in a fortnight and coming up to see Veronica Roach who was still improving, though very slowly. She hoped she was doing the right thing. There wasn’t much to say to that except ‘Good Luck’ so I said it.

I applied for a job assessing the security arrangements at a new shopping complex. I didn’t get it. They thought I was a bit old. I thought I was too when I met the obnoxious little brat doing the interviews. I drifted back into my gentle slothful sand-between-the-toes regime and asked Rachel to check what travel specials were on offer to cheap places to live; my only requirement being that horses weren’t a feature and the government was such that dead bodies weren’t likely to be deposited on the beaches.

- xxv -

One quiet evening (Rachel was out with Guy) I had a visitor, a nondescript man of sixty or thereabouts, who asked diffidently if I was Mr Creighton. He was neatly, even stylishly, dressed but still managed to give off the suggestion of someone more at home in a dark raincoat and soft hat pulled well down.

"Yes. What can I do for you?" I said it without bonhomie.

"Oh no, nothing at all. I just came to thank you ... My name is John Heywood." He saw this pronouncement rang no bells and hurried on, "I believe you know my uncle, Oswald Carter?"

He smiled a smile with a peculiar lop-sided sweetness and great carillions clashed in my head. "Good Lord! Are you Jessie's son?"

He didn't seem surprised by the familiarity with which I tossed out her name. "I understand that to be the case."

He was a tall man, hair thinning but mildly curly, face unexciting, but it was his attitude of self-effacement which seemed to diminish him and bring the word 'slight' to mind. He sat down gingerly on a chair, said yes, he'd be glad of a glass of something, brandy and soda was his usually indulgence, but whatever I had on hand. He gazed mildly upon my shelf.

"To be exact, Mr Creighton, my uncle found me. You see, although I was adopted, I had always known that Meg Athlone was my mother. I expect," he looked a little embarrassed, "my adoptive parents did what they felt was the best for me but they were quite prepared to accuse me of taking after my real mother any time they felt I had been naughty, not that I have memories of doing anything particularly bad, but they were a childless couple who'd grown rather finicky and rigid in their ways."

"Yes, that can happen." He seemed grateful for the unoriginal interjection.

"I'm afraid it wasn't a particularly happy childhood. My health was never good—" I'd noticed he was burdened with both bifocals and a hearing aid but had put them down to age, "and both at home and school I was subject to a degree of bullying. In fact, when I was about sixteen, my mother told me I was a sickly child because my real mother had tried to have an abortion which had failed. I don't know how she had discovered that—certainly not from my real mother ... but I remember being quite upset at the time—though many years later I wondered how someone so handicapped as Meg undoubtedly was could've understood ... well, my mother was very fond of reminding me that the sins of the parents *are* indeed visited on the children."

He took a long swallow which brought a little colour to his cheeks.

"I was not sorry to leave home when I had managed to save a little and I went to Canberra where I began at the very bottom rung of the public service and worked my way up in the Department of Transport."

He seemed to expect me to say 'Congratulations' but a lifetime in the Department of Transport struck me as a fate only marginally better than death.

"It has been rather a lonely life, Mr Creighton. As you will understand I never had any great desire to return to my adoptive parents, and I was such a shy—" he waved what he'd been away with a deprecating hand, "well, the less said about all that the better. And I shouldn't complain. I have always been in

pleasant work and I have had several interesting holidays overseas, one or two at the department's expense." He gave a modest little laugh. I wondered if this was meant to be a joke.

But the unreal feeling grew on me. Could this mild apologetic precise *dull* man really be Felix Lay's son, the swashbuckling Felix with his silver-plated revolvers on his hips who'd outed candle flames at sixty yards, the callous Felix who'd trailed death and misery in his dust-clouded wake. Mr John Heywood looked as though he'd faint at the sight of a cut finger.

"You never married then?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I was tongue-tied with the opposite sex and not good at making friends—and knowing about my real mother—well, there was that unease about the genes I might pass on. I know now that my fears were groundless, thanks to your efforts. My uncle asked at the hospital for the name of the couple who had adopted me, then he simply began ringing every Heywood he could find. He said if you could do it for a man you'd never met, then he could do it to find his sister's child."

"Well, it's not too late to find a wife," I said cheerfully, "not that I'd recommend it—but still ... "

He put down his glass and, embarrassingly, clasped both hands as though there was still a favour to be asked. "It's like beginning a whole new life, Mr Creighton, believe me. Right this moment I'm on my way to visit Mrs Morrow who I understand may be my half-sister."

The right-this-moment was obviously an exaggeration; he wasn't the sort of person to leave half a glass. Again I was stuck for a truthful reply but I struggled up to the occasion with, "Well, please give my best wishes to Daphne and Leon and their boys. I'm sure you'll enjoy meeting them. Oh, and by the way, you must call in and see a Mrs Ford who works at Bathurst General on your way home. It was her mother who took your mother in."

He took out a notebook and carefully entered the name and thanked me again. With encouragement he probably would've stayed to talk longer but I thought he'd better save it up for a good old chinwag with Daphne; not that 'chinwag' quite fitted the two of them. They were defeated people at some level, defeated by things beyond their control, and they looked at life through dark-tinted glasses. I thought again of Lina Jessup saying "Poor Daph" but together they might be stronger ...

As I saw him out I said, "Have you been to Burdon Mile?"

"Yes." He seemed to falter like a horse coming into a tricky jump. "The MacLeods showed me my little sister's grave. But I decided to leave everything as it is. I felt she, at least, is in good hands."

I wasn't sure if he meant the MacLeods or whether this was a sentimental reference to Little Meg now being in heaven.

But again I trotted out all the right things and saw him on his way to his reunion, the sort of touching thing I'd expect to see next time I turned on Ray Martin (and why not, my less cynical self murmured); then I put John Heywood out of my mind, there were still dozens of unanswered questions but we'd done

better than I'd ever expected, and bent my intelligence to schemes for detaching Rachel from Guy in the very near future. I didn't like the way he eyed my personal possessions; my grog and my electronic gadgets anyway, not my cacti.

- xxvi -

I'd thought of the story of John Heywood and Daphne Morrow as being happily ended, or as happily as circumstances would allow, so I was unprepared for the gilt-edged card which landed in my mailbox a few months later inviting me to the approaching nuptials of Florence Ford and John Charles Heywood in the Bathurst Baptist, I wouldn't want to say that twenty times a day, church.

Rachel, gazing upon the loutish Guy as though he was The Scarlet Pimpernel and Young Australian of the Year all rolled up in one exciting package instead of something best left outside the door, couldn't see anything romantic in my news.

- THE END -