MISDEEDS

A Collection of Nine Mystery Novellas

Part One: If Death Be Gentle
Part Two: Dust
Part Three: Innocent Until–

By
J.L. HERRERA

"Take heed, misdeeds there be
o'er which the grass ne'er grows"

(Johann Peter Hebel)

For Sue

Part One: If Death Be Gentle

1. On Holiday with the Children
2. Changing Times
3. Found

Part Two: Dust

1. Once Upon a Ravished Town
2. Milk and Thistles
3. The Grid Iron Champion

Part Three: Innocent Until—

1. '—fell asleep'
2. 'the wind fell—'
3. '—fell among thieves'

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious. Some of the places exist.

PART ONE

IF DEATH BE GENTLE

ON HOLIDAY WITH THE CHILDREN

~ 1 ~

"Miss Soames!—oh, do take that child away and wash her hands! Heaven knows what she's been touching! And they'll be here any minute and I can *not* find my parasol. Are you *sure* none of the children have been playing with it?"

"Quite sure, madam."

Miss Soames took the erring Sophie by one arm and dragged her away. With the mistress in this sort of fluster to be near her was to be asked all sorts of unanswerable questions. She hadn't seen the children with their mother's parasol but that didn't mean they hadn't taken it. None of them were in the least trustworthy. She primmed her mouth; if *she* had the disciplining of them—but all she was, really, was a glorified maid, fetching and carrying, trying to find lost things in the chaos of the house. A bloodhound would be more useful. But she hadn't found gaining employment easy and, no matter how difficult things here might become, she knew she would grit her teeth, be as polite as she knew how, and stay on.

Her room was small, and cold in winter, but the food was ample. She knew that wasn't always the case. A nursery governess was expected to have the appetite of a bird in some houses.

She scrubbed Sophie's hands till the little girl tried to pull away. "You're hurting me, nannie!"

"No, I'm not. What *have* you been doing to get so dirty I cannot think. Were you out in the garden?"

"No." But the hesitation told Miss Soames she almost certainly had been. All the children were transparent liars and she took it as a point in their favour. The children who could lie and look you brazenly in the face, those were the children for whom there was little hope. Miss Soames had garnered quite a wide experience of children in her thirty working years.

"What did you touch in the garden?"

"Nothing."

"Paint? Oil? Did you go in the garden shed?"

"No."

"Did you pick something?"

"No."

"The carter is here, Miss." Mrs Malvern, the housekeeper, put her head round the door. "Are the children's trunks all down?"

"Yes. My fine lady was looking for her parasol—"

"Take more than a parasol to get 'er back in the master's good books!" The housekeeper seemed to believe Miss Soames was an ally and a confidante. The governess disliked the assumption but was unprepared to do anything about it. Mrs Malvern could always be relied upon to send up a nourishing tray.

Miss Soames made a gently depressing movement with her long thin hands. The children's ears were always flapping. But Sophie, released from the purgatory of the basin, had run away, her long socks slipping down her stick-straight legs and wrinkling round her ankles.

"I'll come and see that everything is there. Perhaps you would call her back—and the boys are still upstairs. Gerald wanted to take his blocks but there simply isn't room. I imagine he's still playing with them. I'll bring the baby down as soon as the bags have been stowed."

"I've put the tongue in—though the Lord knows if it will keep in this weather—and whether Mrs Drewe will have the house ready for you all ... " She waddled off to find Sophie.

The children knew the household was in an emotional turmoil and they were all being unusually difficult, tantrums, nonsense over their meals, bed-wetting. But there, if people didn't believe in keeping their marriage vows ... and now with this terrible business with the banks ...

The wagonette was piled high with household linen, children's belongings, Mrs Tadporth's steamer trunk; the luncheon basket and several smaller dressing cases had been kept back to go with those who would come later in the buggy. Charity and Chrissy went with the carter, glad to be out of the house, and glad that theirs was not the responsibility for the children on the long dusty drive south-west from Melbourne. It would only be an hour or two before they would be bored and the mistress and Miss Soames would wear themselves out trying to keep them reasonably quiet. The boys would quarrel, the baby would cry; it had been terribly fractious lately, the summer heat most likely; the two women would be polite to each other but the drive would take its toll on their nerves when they hated each other like poison; Miss Soames in her straight-browed petulant tight-lipped way; Mrs Tadporth wishing she had never met Henry Armitage ... well, a lot of people were wishing they had never met Henry Armitage ...

The two girls enjoyed the drive, the freedom, the chance to show off their hats, the late November sun warm on their arms (not for them any worrying over the delicacy of their skin; a smile, a pretty frock, did more to get the men in their view than Mrs Tadporth's sickly whiteness had ever done), the two big horses pounding away, the glossy brown rumps making the miles pass; the carter, Joe Grundy, sitting up cheerfully and whistling and thinking what a fine fellow he was and wouldn't everyone notice him today. They probably did.

James Tadporth saw the buggy off an hour later. He might ride down in a day or two, he told his children, but he made no promises. He kissed each child solemnly (he did most things solemnly), he told Miss Soames to take good care should they go down to the beach. What he said to his wife no one heard but they both had closed angry faces. He told young Billy Malvern to drive carefully—the bay was not entirely over his stone bruise—and make sure they got a bran mash when they were stabled for the night—

'We should have had better horses for the journey,' Mrs Tadporth thought resentfully. 'What if the bay breaks down along the way and leaves us stranded? But James wouldn't care, he never has and he never will now, and I feel so terribly sick, jolting along like this—why should I be expected to travel, Miss Soames could've taken the children down ... oh, I wish I could simply lie down and die, I feel so miserable ... and Miss Soames keeps looking at me with those horrid little peering probing eyes of hers—what business is it of hers anyway! But she believes she has the right to judge—when she, ugly old thing, has never been faced by the slightest temptation in the whole of her narrow little life! She believes she is showing strength of character (how I hate those words!) if she so much as refuses a second slice of bread and butter—horrid frowning beanpole of a woman ... ' She went on thinking about Miss Soames who sat with straight back and hair bound beyond the slightest possibility of escape in hairnets and platoons of hairpins under her skimpy black straw hat.

Miss Soames spoke occasionally, sometimes to reprove the children, sometimes to urge them to notice something along the road—but spoiled it by reminding them she would expect them to remember and write about it later in the exercise books bought especially for their time away.

Young Billy took the master's words to heart and it seemed to take forever even to reach the outskirts of Melbourne. Mrs Tadporth dozed after a while, her lace handkerchief still clutched in one gloved hand, its eau-de-cologne faintly perfuming the air around her. Hilda Soames looked at the passing landscape and felt her own boredom. She withdrew her gaze and looked down at her employer, the bulge already showing beneath her travelling cloak; she wondered if the children had noticed.

Had they been told anything? It didn't seem likely. But with the baby in the basket only eight months old they probably knew more about babies than their elders gave them credit for.

And how *could* a woman seek out a lover when she still had a baby at her breast? Or had the affair with Henry Armitage, as it was being whispered, started long before that? Was little Louise his child? Miss Soames disapproved with the unbending sense that judgement comes to

the weak as surely as it comes to the venal and Emily Tadporth, she believed, was weak rather than wicked. It would change nothing. And this coming baby would be rejected by James Tadporth. It was rumoured that he had already begun divorce proceedings—that would be a scandal!—yet James might have ignored it all, even forgiven his wife, if it had been left to Emily. She was silly and scatter-brained and found her husband over-earnest and dull but at heart she was still fond of him. But Henry Armitage, it seemed, had made certain such a sensible solution was no longer possible.

~ 3 ~

All journeys come to an end though this one, with lost horseshoes and wrong turnings, had begun to behave as if cursed. Mrs Tadporth had even begged to be left at their last hotel to rest; the children could go on under Miss Soames' supervision. But Hilda Soames was driven by the twin beliefs that Mrs Tadporth could not be trusted to do anything as sensible as resting and that Henry Armitage was somewhere behind them on the road.

The man, if Mrs Malvern's view was to be trusted, was moderately mad—the things she had heard!—and he obviously had no concern at all for the proprieties, even in the hurly-burly world of colonial society. The Tadporths, Miss Soames had once believed (and it was one reason for seeking the position with them years ago), were 'quality'. But whether or not Henry Armitage was mad a madness had certainly entered the house.

Their offside horse had been limping for the last ten miles. It was a painful progress, made worse by the appearance of a red rash on the baby's neck and chest. The twins were quarrellers rather than fighters but they had descended to taking surreptitious swipes at each other. "You will get down, George, Gerald, and *walk*. If you have enough energy to fight you have enough energy to walk and save the poor beast a little." They got down ungraciously and dawdled along beside young Billy.

"Let me drive, Billy," said Gerald after a while. It looked superbly simple to sit up there and handle the reins.

"Daren't," Billy muttered.

And a bit later, "Leave me alone. I got a job to do."

"It's not a job, Billy," George too liked the idea of being up there, flicking the whip. "It's just sitting there—and you're bigger 'n' heavier than us, so you'd take more weight off if you got down."

This was true but Billy was more in awe of their father than either of them realised. James Tadporth might see little of his sons but he held Billy's advancement in the palm of his not-so-solvent hand. Billy was clear about the advancement, he didn't pretend to understand the intricacies of solvency. And so he said firmly to the boys: "You gotta walk an' that's all there is to it." Then he closed his mouth and refused to be drawn into saying anything more; sitting like a sphinx, except for his occasional running out of the whip, more to remove the flies than to hurry the horses.

They knew their agony was done when the gate appeared by the roadside and said in faded paint 'Kenilworth'. The track through the paddocks was long and the house so low it didn't come into view till they topped the grassy rise. Then it was all laid out before them; the long stone house with smoke rising from the kitchen chimneys, the little cluster of outbuildings, and further away the sand dunes and the great heaving blueness of the ocean. In a trice the children had forgotten their complaints and were seeing themselves sporting in the sheltered cove below the house.

~ 4 ~

The Drewes, Stanley and Margaret, had managed 'Kenilworth' even before James Tadporth decided it was a worthwhile place to put money. They were untidy chaotic people who survived in their position because few people wanted to live along this windy lonely shore. They believed they worked hard and did an excellent job. Their isolation may have fostered this delusion. The letter to say when the family would arrive and how many to plan for had sent Mrs Drewe into a frenzy of dusting and tidying and worrying over the pantry shelves.

Her husband scythed grass and trimmed the wild hedges and replaced part of the roof of the blacksmith's shop. The farm had a shabby air but he felt, quite rightly, that after a day with children running wild no one would notice the little neglected places.

The arrival of the maids and their baskets of food transformed the kitchen and pantry and Mrs Drewe refused to accept their pleas of tiredness, sending them to put linen on the beds and fresh runners on the bureaus; she even found time to send them out into the garden to cut roses from the woody ramblers. A multitude of small lacks could be hidden by the immediate sight of flowers. She placed the vases with a considering eye; 'Mrs Tadporth will enter through this door, the master will stop here to hang his hat and coat ... '

Charity and Chrissy were exhausted by the time they were allowed to retire to their narrow hard beds in the maids' room. It wasn't fair, they both thought, Mrs Drewe had nothing to do but prepare. Emily Tadporth, consumed by a natural nausea, might not notice but they'd seen the untidy shelves with mice droppings, the greasy tin bowl for washing up, the cups stained by strong tea, the poorly-ironed tablecloth, the spiders' webs in the hall; they were too well-trained not to notice. They laid aside their dusty clothes, washed their grubby hands and faces, and snuggled wearily into bed, ignoring the patched sheets and scratchy blankets.

These things did not matter but Chrissy, at least, knew it was worthwhile to notice.

They were sleeping heavily when Billy and the buggy finally drew up in the yard and the children tumbled tiredly down. Both Mrs Drewe and Miss Soames were annoyed that neither of the girls was on hand to help them carry bags and baby into the house. Billy was more sanguine, there might be a chance for a quick word, a kiss even, at breakfast and before his long weary return to town. Mrs Tadporth was beyond caring. All that mattered was to reach her bedroom and close the door upon them all. But she had only removed her hat from her aching head and her shoes from her aching feet when Miss Soames was there with the changed and sweet-smelling baby, a howling baby, needing to be fed. Mrs Tadporth took the infant without a word.

"I will return in half an hour, madam."

Mrs Tadporth looked up. "She may as well sleep with me."

"Very well, madam." Miss Soames disapproved of infants being taken into their mother's beds; they might be smothered and it was a poor start to the necessary discipline of childhood. But she was tired herself and, where little Louise and her doubtful paternity was concerned, she could not see that the child would be much loss.

~ 5 ~

The house grew quiet, the sound of horses in the stableyard ceased, the children's voices died away; only the faint distant sea intruded and Emily found it soothing rather than frightening. She had grown up not far from the sea in Dorset. A gentler sea usually but still ... and briefly, as she unbuttoned her bodice and slowly brought one large white breast towards the wailing mouth, she found herself walking again on that distant shore, a pretty pink-and-white girl with a fluffy cloud of pale daffodil hair, a shy orphan child but loved by her elderly aunt and uncle. Why had there been so little of that comfortable kind of love in her life since? Was it that she had simply never done anything to deserve it? She had used her small portion of that gentle loving acceptance and now the only kind of love she could expect was in the strange enticement of Henry Armitage and the tight-lipped gravity of James and the casual childish affection the children sometimes gave.

Little Louise, smelling the milk that still rose abundantly to the nipple, seized hold with fierce hunger and Emily felt that strange disconcerting tug that seemed to emanate from somewhere deep and mysterious within her and flow upwards till her bosom was warm and loving, flow downwards and turn her secret places hidden in pale fluff into something moist and unsatisfied. A lady never asks, a lady never complains, so her aunt had instructed her on leaving home, but her childless aunt had not known that there were strange feelings that ask and ask ... her gentle aunt with her large soft pansy eyes gazing benignly out upon a neat and ordered world that in memory was always green.

What did she know of this land, of its raucous search for wealth, of its great brown immensities and summer dust. And *its* children, *her* children, were those who would belong. She could never quite suppress her longing to go home. Only now with the sea and the baby and the candle left burning on her bedside table could she forget—the things that were best put out of mind.

But Henry Armitage refused to be put out of mind. Where James was the grey of a sodden autumn day, enlivened only by the shafts of a weak sun, Henry was all brilliant orange and rich chestnut-brown and fiery sunrise. She did not know how she had met Henry. One day she had not known him. The next he had invaded her life and removed her peace of mind forever. But why her? There were younger, prettier, cleverer, bolder, richer, more exciting women in Melbourne. So why did Henry confess when they hardly knew each other that he was in love with her, why did he press her for an assignation, why did he sigh over her hand and pay her extravagant compliments? Why her?

He was friendly, almost deferential, towards James who described him later as a "bumptious fellow" but added cautiously, "they say he has money to invest" and the bank of course was in need of such, now especially when there had been a run on several of the smaller banks and one at least had not survived. Was Henry Armitage's optimism the element which would keep the Colonial & Trading solvent, safe, reliable, trusted? If it was, then the man was worth cultivating, even inviting to dinner.

It was hard to keep her distance when James brought him right into the house and sat him at her right hand.

~ 6 ~

Even tiredness could not keep the children abed next morning. Long before Mrs Drewe had dressed and begun her ponderous preparations for the family's breakfast the Tadporth children had swarmed into the yard, their hair unbrushed, their clothes thrown on without the help of Chrissy. A new wild world waited. They ran right round the house, then through the back gate and down to the stables. In the distance, Mr Drewe was sitting milking a large yellow cow. A black and white dog was chained near the door of the blacksmith's shop. Hens clucked to and fro in their small run. Apricots and peaches swelled greenly in the orchard. Sophie ran with the boys, only occasionally stopping to pick a flower in the untended garden or pat the dog or pick up horseshoes from the pile beside the anvil.

"Who's for the beach?" Gerald shouted into the morning sunshine.

"Hadn't we better wait for breakfast before we go down?" Sophie was always hungry.

"Yes." George was the younger in hours but the older in wisdom. He knew that to go without Miss Soames' permission was only to make for later trouble. She was quite capable of ordering them to stay indoors and do pot-hooks and simple sums in their new exercise books.

"First one back to the house—" The two boys were gone, their city-white legs carrying them across the yard. Sophie followed more slowly. She didn't want to go inside. Miss Soames, she felt sure, picked on her more than she watched the boys. Who would want to be a lady when it only brought dullness and unhappiness. Didn't she see her mother occasionally wiping away a furtive tear with a lace-edged handkerchief? She turned aside to the little lean-to beside the blacksmith's shop. It contained shears and garden rakes, shelves of stockholm tar and castor oil, washing soda and neatsfoot oil and other mysterious tins and bottles. Beyond were the hooks for the horses' harness and extra bridles and straps and beneath them a barrel full of saltpetre and another of molasses. A mounting block waited beyond the stone trough. She wondered if the promised pony was here yet. Her curious nature led her to poke and pry among the things in the shed.

A bell began to ring, a large clanging cow-bell. She turned and ran for the back door.

~ 7 ~

"Will the pony come, will it, mama?"

"I expect so. Mr Drewe is seeing to it." Mrs Tadporth had almost no memory of her promise that there would be a pony. She wondered vaguely if there were other promises that

would come back to haunt her. “Don’t bounce, Sophie. Just finish your toast then you may be excused.” There was a lot to be said for a tray in bed; she was beginning to feel tired already, the children were so *boisterous*, but she knew Miss Soames watched her constantly for things to criticise. Sloth loomed large in her list of sins.

With the children ordered to walk tidily round the garden for half-an-hour after breakfast and before Miss Soames would take them to the beach, peace descended on the house for a little while. Louise, fed and bathed, lay replete in the cradle and sucked her knuckles. Mrs Tadporth spoke with Mrs Drewe about menus and meal-times. And Mrs Drewe occasionally glanced out the window to see if there was any sign of her husband bringing the promised pony from a nearby farm.

She felt sure it would only mean more work and worry and tears with children, city-bred children, falling off. But at least they would be out from underfoot. Mrs Drewe did not like children and was thankful she had none. They might care for a body in its old age but even that was uncertain. Hadn’t she and Mr Drewe abandoned their families without a backward glance to make their fortune on the Victorian goldfields? She agreed to all Emily Tadporth’s suggestions and remembered herself and Stanley as young and hopeful.

“As you wish, ma’am. And should we expect Mr Tadporth at any time? Gentlemen always like larger portions of meat, I’ve found.”

“I-I don’t think so. He was very vague. The bank, you know, keeps him in town rather ... he mentioned that a friend of his might be travelling in this area and might call ... but I do not think we need make any extra preparations. It was all left rather undecided.” She hoped that was sufficient preparation for Mrs Drewe. But, of course, it wasn’t the housekeeper she need concern herself with, it was Miss Soames.

The pony was seen being led from a larger cob at about half-past-eleven. The children had abandoned their hope for the moment and walked to the sand with Miss Soames. The neighbour rode along cheerfully, whistling and chucking the reins occasionally. The flies were heavy now and settled in clusters. He turned towards the stables and climbed down. “There y’are, Stanley. One small pony. Can be ridden. Will pull a bath-chair should the ladies so desire.” He chuckled.

“Nothin’ like that here.” Stanley looked at the pony. Its eyes were rather sore looking and long runnels of weeping had darkened its pale dun face. “Flies been botherin’ ’im somethin’ fierce by the looks of it.”

“He’s been down the bottom of the run for six months. You’d best give him a trot round first, bit of a brush, smarten him up.”

Stanley looked sour. He was no keener than his wife on elbow grease. Joe and Billy had taken the wagonette and set out for Melbourne again, leaving all this to him. But the Hennesseys had money and two lads to help them so why couldn’t they—

“I’ll put some castor-oil on his face. I find it’s best for flies.”

He took the pony’s rope. “The missus might manage a cuppa if you’re dry.” He didn’t see it as his business to thank Frank Hennessey for the pony. He led it away. Maybe the children could brush it later.

~ 8 ~

Miss Soames reasserted her authority after the light luncheon the mistress had requested. Children appreciated their freedom more if they came to it from regular lessons and small duties. She’d had to speak to Sophie severely as she combed the knots out of her hair with fierce drags of the comb; didn’t she know better than to hurl her nightdress off and leave it lying on the floor? Now she sat them at the empty table in the dining-room and requested silence. “We brought our books,” she said calmly, “for reading. So you will sit quietly, no wriggling, no whispering, and read for half-an-hour. If you come to a word you do not know, you will climb down quietly and bring your book to me.”

The children obeyed but Sophie continually scratched the warm pink skin of her arms, George put his head in both hands and stared at the page. ‘A Knock at the Door’. Surely it must

be the world's dullest book and the print was very small and cramped. Why couldn't they have a Boys' Own Adventure? His brother worked conscientiously down each page. But in all their thoughts was the same longing—the pony. Their holiday was already a morning over and they had not even been near him.

Miss Soames was feeling her age. The long rough drive, the sun and dry air, her constant need to watch over and reprove the children. She wished, though she could never say so, that the maids had been given charge of the children and she'd been left behind to spend a few quiet days with Mrs Malvern for company and the master coming and going in his solemn way. There was mending she could have done, sorting cupboards; she would not have objected to some light dusting and polishing ...

Finally she allowed them to rise, to walk neatly and quietly to their rooms for their hats then through the back garden. Mr Drewe was currycombing the pony. He had trimmed the long burry forelock and smeared castor oil round the fly-choked eyes. Not a *smart* pony by any means but stolid and good natured. One minute he groomed the creature in peace, the next the children had swarmed on to the wooden gate and were demanding to know was it a girl or a boy and did it have a name.

He said grumpily he didn't know its name and they could call it what they liked. Then he relented and said it was a boy and if they would come over he would let them pat it while he fetched the saddle.

When Sophie returned to the house with the boys she smelled strongly of horse and her hands and face were brown with dust and grease. The boys were no better but Miss Soames felt boys should have a little more leeway as she supervised their scrubbing and washing. Then she called the two boys into her room to put vinegar on their sunburned arms and legs. "And as for you, young miss, you are a disgrace! Your mother should be ashamed to have such a little hoyden! You can have castor oil when I've finished here. We'll see if that curbs your wildness—"

She upended the vinegar bottle on to a cloth and rubbed the boys firmly. As George made faces and wriggled under her assault, Gerald picked up the hat-pins that lay on Miss Soames' bureau, their long points, their beaded ends, and he felt the fleeting desire to feint and stab—at Miss Soames with her sour down-turned mouth, at his mother who had so little time for them, at his father with his over-critical humourless nature ... he put the pins down and waited his turn.

Dimly, the boys perceived that Miss Soames liked them more than she liked Sophie but that did nothing to endear her to them. They felt sure she must have an ulterior motive. The idea of affection seemed too remote to be contemplated.

Miss Soames herself had never questioned her preference. Who could like a child like Sophie? She saw the underlying independence of the child's nature, the strength of her curiosity, her inordinate and unfailing curiosity in the world around her, her vigorous desire to touch and taste and feel and smell the world—and found these attributes unnatural and to be suppressed and destroyed in a little girl. Poor Sophie who longed for a word of encouragement received instead endless doses of castor oil (Miss Soames believed she was making sure none of the things the child tasted stayed long enough in her system to harm her), complaints, slaps and strictures. She didn't know how Miss Soames longed for her previous charges, two angelic golden-haired girls who kept their pretty white frocks spotless and could sit for hours with their hands folded in their laps and their ankles neatly crossed; Miss Soames saw their 'goodness' as reflecting well on herself and her methods with children.

At last Miss Soames released the boys and hunted in her portmanteau for the needed bottle. To her horror it had leaked and her spare nightgown was damp with a huge oily stain. By the time she caught up with the rebellious Sophie her mood was at its lowest ebb.

"Open your mouth!" she snapped and thrust the spoonful in. "Don't you dare!" Sophie threatened to gag but swallowed in the face of Miss Soames' fury.

"Hateful stuff!" she said defiantly. "I'll tell mother you gave me too much."

Her mother came to the door. “Too much what, dear?”

“Castor oil, madam,” Miss Soames said grimly. “Until this child learns to stop touching and tasting everything she must be prepared for her medicine.”

“Yes, Sophie dear, you must try harder to stay clean. Can you spare any,” she turned to the governess, “I’m not feeling ... ” The long hours sitting, the effort of feeding her big baby, her dislike of seeing the maids openly going to and fro with the ‘Auntie Annies’ from their bedrooms to the rough lavatory beyond the yard not with the discretion of the dim corridors at home ... but she couldn’t bring herself to say it more openly in front of her daughter.

Miss Soames raised her bottle. “I’m afraid the bottle leaked. There’s only a little left.”

“There’s some in the shed,” Sophie said. Knowing made her feel important; though she wasn’t sure it was wise to say so. The thought that Miss Soames’ bottle was almost empty—

“Thank you, dear, I’ll get a clean jar tomorrow from Mrs Drewe and you can fetch me a little. Now we’ll go and sit down quietly and you shall tell me what you’ve been doing this afternoon.”

While Sophie basked in one of the rare moments when her mother gave her some attention—Emily Tadporth felt a secret sense of pity for her little daughter that she had taken after her father and had James’ long nose with a slight bulb at the end and his vague weak chin—James Tadporth was making the decision to open the black-bordered envelope.

It was addressed to his wife but he justified his action: he needed to know which of Emily’s relatives had died so he could send a message if necessary. If it was her aunt it would not help much, perhaps a little jewellery or some household items left to her niece; if it was her uncle it might mean a bequest of some stocks and bonds. Charles Pluckrose was quite comfortably circumstanced and he might have divided it between his wife and his niece.

~ 9 ~

Emily Tadporth lay a little while waiting for sleep in the quiet house. A night bird, a sudden neigh from the pony in strange surroundings, the faint shurring of the sea. Tomorrow she would ask Miss Soames to mind Louise and she would walk to the shore.

She thought of home, of the gentle lane that wound down through hedgerows and soft chalk verges to the sea. It was dangerous to remember home. It had been her undoing when Henry Armitage came ... when he spoke of home, when he said he knew her family, her home ... the ready tears had come to her eyes ... he had been so comforting, so kind, so *understanding* ... She had found excuses to spend a little time in his company. James had even *encouraged* her to invite him, to take short drives with him, to bestow her blessing as a hostess ... She knew it had something to do with the bank, with Henry’s wealth ...

What James didn’t know was that she had visited Henry at his small rented cottage to see his postcards and photographs of Dorset ... *his pictures of her home, the garden, even her uncle’s old setter* ... James didn’t know that Henry had a nice male smell, comforting arms, an understanding way of stroking her soft thin hair ... James didn’t know that she felt safe after Louise’s birth ... she hadn’t fallen while nursing the other children, she felt she was safe with Louise still at the breast, to let Henry ... his hand was very gentle on her large full breast, his mouth was very soft and tantalising on her lips, his words fell like soothing balm on her long-held and sorrowing belief that not even with the latest corsets could she hope for an hourglass figure ... for such a well-set up man, nothing of James’s bony stooped figure, he was amazingly thoughtful ...

A divorce would destroy any reputation she might have. But would James divorce her when he knew or would he quietly accept this baby as his own and life would go on, not as normal, it had long since ceased to be normal, but outwardly serene. Yet each time she returned home to her husband she felt a kind of disbelief take over. Henry could not want her, not really, not mousy little Emily with her four children and a husband. She returned to Henry, she sometimes felt, not because James was sure Henry was a gentleman but because she liked those moments when she could put her disbelief aside, find that her commonsense had played her false ... Henry did care for her ... astonishing ... but his actions were those of a man deeply in

love ...

James, too, lay awake but his main feeling was disappointment. Emily's aunt had died. So if he could not inherit money he must return to his hope of charming it into his shaky bank. He would invite Henry Armitage to dinner. Two men in quiet discussion over one of Mrs Malvern's best dinners ... he might broach the tawny ...

And Henry Armitage sat comfortably at his club. It was a nice change to be welcomed, fêted, invited ... the honeymoon period was sweet satisfaction ... and it might continue indefinitely if he played his cards carefully, patiently ... And it was strange ... if people believed you were wealthy it somehow seemed to attract wealth, luck, good fortune, worthwhile opportunities ... He had won on the track every Saturday for the last two months even, remarkably, on the mudlark Glenloth, the cards had fallen his way, he had been offered a small factory and two shops at knock-down prices ... 'Henry, old chap,' he said to himself regularly, 'keep your feet on the ground, wealth comes to the wise, good fortune to the man who can get up from the table while he's winning' ... and Emily ... little Emily ... what shall I do when I have Emily as my wife ...

~ 10 ~

Sophie was careful next morning, careful to leave everything tidy, careful to comb her hair, careful not to give Miss Soames reason for complaint. Mrs Drewe gave her the required jar and she went obediently to the shed. It was a fascinating place, all kinds of mysterious labels, strange smells, unusual names ... her curiosity caught her and she climbed on a wooden box and began her exploration. It was a fascination that no one would ever nurture, ever understand. Her quick intelligence and deft curiosity merely annoyed everyone.

There was only a drop left in the castor oil bottle with its grubby label. Mr Drewe had been lavish with the pony. She hesitated, then another bottle caught her eye, also a pale amber. A clean bottle. She couldn't be sure of the bad writing on the label—Mr Drewe had little education but as he was the only one to use the shed he had not seen this as a problem—but it definitely was 'oil' and it started with 'C'. She carefully decanted enough to half fill Mrs Drewe's jar and set it aside to take over to the house later. Now, to follow the boys to the beach—

Miss Soames watched them work on a sandcastle for some minutes then took her tapestry frame out of her bulging reticule. The breeze tugged at her hat, seagulls swooped and turned, far out across the bay a small vessel ploughed its way. She could feel a kind of peace stealing over her. If only this *arrivé*, this upstart, this 'new chum', this Mr Armitage, this so-called investor, this *trickster*—she could not think of a word bad enough—had never come. He was a threat to her safety, her job, her future. A divorce was a shocking thing. But she could not blind herself to the way Henry Armitage looked at Mrs Tadporth ... or the way Mr Tadporth *seemed* oblivious to what was happening under his own nose ... She felt she should say something before it was gone beyond repair ... but what ... and how ...

And Mrs Tadporth took the quiet hours while the baby slept to write letters. She had been somewhat hesitant about writing, such little scrappy letters she'd sent, and her brevity blamed on Louise, but she must write at greater length ... to tell her aunt that another child was on the way, to tell her uncle of meeting Henry Armitage—Henry was vague about the date, "some time ago, my dear, they may already have forgotten such a short visit"—to ask them, to ask ... yes, to ask ... but she had put off mentioning Henry in the belief he would disappear with the same suddenness he'd come ... and if she mentioned Henry she must mention James ...

She tried sentence after sentence in her head. What could she say about James to hint at his aloofness, his constant carping, the sense that she could never please him; what could she say that was warning, hint, but not ingratitude. She dipped her nib and wrote slowly and thoughtfully.

Chrissy took the letter with the promise of seeing to its posting; she accepted the coins, the statement, "I know I can rely on you, Chrissy, not to forget," with "yes, ma'am, that you can," and bided her time. She and Billy, eventually ... she thought of them here, the freedom,

the power ...

~ 11 ~

Miss Soames made no objection to minding the baby through the afternoon. She knew, none better, that she'd minded Louise while her mother had left the house to run to the arms of Henry Armitage. She felt her complicity like a bitter taste in her mouth. But a woman in her fifties with few accomplishments had to walk a careful line between her conscience and her common sense.

It was quiet in the bedroom and Louise was a placid baby, now that the rash was clearing, and her smile was very sweet. For a little while Miss Soames worked at her tapestry, her mind darting to and fro, then she felt a kind of secret excitement creep up. A sense of discovery. It was Henry Armitage who most threatened her peace. Therefore she must devise a way to rid the family of Henry Armitage.

No ideas leaped immediately to her rather slow and laborious mind which had been taught to admire gentility more than expediency but she knew an idea would come soon enough. She must simply wait and receive.

She sat back and watched the child sleep. Just so had women down through history watched over children and felt their own powerlessness. And if they could not wield power themselves then they must do it through their sons and if not their own sons then other people's sons. Gerald and George. She thought of them with a strange mixture of feelings, even a passing sense of regret ... She might have married, had sons of her own, women were always sought here, even homely women such as she had been in her marriageable years ... But she had not wished to travel to a remote farm and struggle with life amidst heat and dust and flies and loneliness.

She napped in her chair and woke with a half-formed idea ...

~ 12 ~

James and Henry spent a very pleasant evening together. James tried to lead, several times, in the direction of how best Henry might invest his money. Henry spoke of the business proposals he had received and appeared to be asking James' advice. (James had heard stories of rash gambling forays by the other man; he hoped they were untrue.) He mentioned the family in passing and hoped they were enjoying their holiday. He thought James probably found the time restful.

"I'm afraid Emily will come home to bad news," James knew, or thought he knew, when to push and when to step back a little. "Poor thing. News has just come of her aunt's passing. They were very close, you know, in fact, poor Emily has almost no family."

"Yes. I knew the family quite well. Her aunt was a very pleasant woman and I believe she had been virtually a mother to your wife."

"Quite so. Yes. Emily was very reluctant to leave them in their old age but I was able to persuade her. Perhaps, when the economic situation is a little brighter, we may be able to return home for a visit. Her uncle, I know, is quite comfortably off and was always particularly fond of Emily ... "

Henry watched the other man closely. "Yes, an unusually small family."

"Emily will inherit from her uncle eventually. I believe land prices there have also fallen somewhat but it is still a very attractive little estate." Then he realised that presenting it in this way might suggest to Henry that he had no need of an injection of new funds, not if he and his wife might soon inherit and choose to return home. "The difficulty is always capital. I understand everything is tied up in the estate and it has become rather run down of late years."

"And Emily has no other relatives?" His scrutiny of the other man, as he spoke, was careful.

"No. Almost none. I believe her uncle has a couple of elderly relatives in Bristol, retired people. Trade ... not land ... I don't think I've ever heard Emily mention them so they may be deceased now ... "

"Yes. I believe I heard someone mention a little shop, I think it must have been her

uncle."

The two men sat companionably over their port and not by a flicker did Henry Armitage give away his knowledge. The prosy conventional backward-looking old fool. Trade!

~ 13 ~

Emily presided over afternoon tea. The children were each allowed two slices of bread and butter and fresh milk from the Guernsey Mr Drewe milked with much grumbling. For a little while Emily felt life was sweet. She was in charge. The children seemed happy. Miss Soames was lying down with a headache. Outside the breeze carried the smell of the ocean and bent the long rippling grass to its passing. It had been a wet spring. Sophie had brought a pile of shells up to the house, some smelling rather rank, but Charity had helped her wash them and they now sat prettily on the window-sill. And the pony had behaved with all due decorum and carried the children sedately around the horse yard.

If only she didn't have to return to Melbourne, to James, to the dilemmas of life. She pictured herself asking Henry to take her and the children away somewhere, she wasn't sure where, somewhere near the sea ... home ...

She had nothing now, it was all dependent on James, even her little expenses ... but someday she would be rich ... when her uncle died ... perhaps then she could assert herself a little and ask that they go home ... and there were her other relatives, Uncle Charles' cousin and his wife, in Bristol ... she remembered them coming to her wedding, little dumpy dark people in old-fashioned coats, the wife in a bonnet thirty years out-of-date.

James had laughed at them later. "Are they really relatives of yours?"

"Yes." Her first impulse had been to apologise for them. But why? They were kind to her, they always had been, and their plain clothes had more to do with their religion and their childlessness and their age than a lack of money. She could say to James "They are very rich, sugar I think, and I believe they intend to leave most of it to me because I am the only child in the family—isn't that strange—so I will have money from both families ... " and he would stop laughing; money was the one thing James respected. But she did not want to have him see her family only as a future milch cow. If he could not see their good qualities then silence seemed more decent ...

"Eat up now and then you can have a little longer out-of-doors before supper—"

"And I don't need to have any more castor oil, do I, mama? It's so nasty. And nannie gives so much."

"I'll tell you what we'll do, what my dear Aunt Sarah did when I was young and needed it ... she would make some very strong sweet cocoa for me and she would put just a little spoonful in my cup ... I really didn't mind it, that way ... so I'll have Mrs Drewe make us a jug of cocoa and we'll do that." Yes, she'd been loved—and she had responded with love. She looked down at her plain little daughter, touched her hair with soft strokes ...

"I put the jar on my cupboard." A great wave of anxiety seemed to roll from Sophie's shoulders. Her mother was often too tired, too preoccupied with her own thoughts, to take much notice of her but now she felt it didn't matter. Deep down she knew she was loved.

~ 14 ~

The sun set in a blaze of hot light in the west. A mosquito or two buzzed but the flies had gone. Emily watched over Mrs Drewe as she boiled the milk and stirred the cocoa and sugar in. The woman was very slatternly but for their few weeks a year here it surely could not matter. Overseeing Mrs Drewe seemed to demand an energy she didn't have.

Sophie handed her the clean jar. The oil didn't seem to smell as much as usual. 'It might be a different brand ... or more pure ... ' She stirred it in carefully.

Miss Soames saw them, mother and daughter, and thought sourly: like mother, like daughter. She resented the sense of usurpation of her control yet was thankful not to have Sophie to discipline, to tidy. Emily Tadporth saw Miss Soames watching and it seemed to her she'd spent years trying to be the woman Hilda Soames expected her to be as James's wife—not because James' happiness was paramount to the governess but because she cared for him

herself.

The brief moment of revelation passed. What did it matter if Miss Soames liked James, James was not going to run away with Miss Soames ... and yet it would be nice to have a nursery governess who was young, cheerful, apple-cheeked, kind ... could she ask Miss Soames to leave ...

She poured Sophie's cocoa into a beaker and took her own cup to her room. Louise would be waking. Sophie, unwilling to leave her mother in this new happier mood, came with her. "I can nurse her for a little while, can't I, mama?"

"Of course, dear ... "

Stanley Drewe finished watering the carriage horses and the small pony and made his slow way up to the house. He must see if his wife had more oil to anoint the horses' faces, he was nearly out. He took the castor oil bottle from the shelf and noticed in the fading light that someone had helped themselves to his bottle of croton oil. It didn't matter. He'd only used it once, in a very bad colic, and he didn't think it helped. But it had been a matter of kill or cure.

Miss Soames helped herself to the jar left standing on the kitchen table, all this silly coddling with cocoa and sugar ... tomorrow it would be a straight spoonful and no complaints ... She put the jar away calmly in her bureau and wondered who that was screaming ... screaming and screaming ... running ... voices ...

THE END

CHANGING TIMES

~ 1 ~

"Miss Wyngate-Smith? Do take a seat." Miss Downie had begun to rise, her visitor inspired that kind of response, but controlled the impulse and gestured to an upright chair with one delicate hand. Agnes Downie, too, was an imposing woman but the qualities she possessed came more from inner convictions than any outward impression she made on her surroundings. She was small with masses of soft lustreless brown hair puffed out evenly round her pale face and drawn into a knot on top of her head. Her high starched collar hid a neck that was overly thin and beginning to scrag. But her eyes, the colour of water-worn pebbles, were all that mattered.

Dorothea Wyngate-Smith sat. The chair gave out a sigh as though its plumped-up leather seat had collected, and now returned, a host of unsaid things. Despite Miss Downie's appearance of someone settling down for a long conversation the room suggested a repository of secrets. Lithe young whippets of elms and oaks tapped at the big bow windows. The grate contained a dusting of charred flakes as though Miss Downie was in the habit of burning uninvited correspondence. A heavily-framed portrait of the school's founder, replete with sepia whiskers, gazed unblinkingly down upon this newest staff member.

Miss Wyngate-Smith cleared her throat, preparatory to talking about the programme she'd prepared with painstaking thoroughness but she was forestalled by Miss Downie.

"It is undoubtedly a measure of the changing times," Miss Downie spoke at her softest and most modulated, yet with the suggestion in the set of her shoulders of the ratting terrier moving in, "and my dear father would have felt his vision mocked if he were to know that such measures might have become desirable. He was a great believer, Miss Wyngate-Smith, a great believer—in the development of a stoicism proper to the female condition. My dear mother—never a word of complaint—she was a wonderful example to us all."

"I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure—"

"Naturally not. You tell me you have only been back in Toowoomba some months? But you must excuse me if I speak often of her." Miss Downie made to fold her spindly hands below her bosom in respect to her mother's saintliness but changed her mind and picked up a pen.

"I will just take your particulars down, Miss ... you won't mind if I call you Miss Smith? I didn't think you would—" the soft hypnotic voice led the way through hours, numbers of girls, which room it might be most appropriate to use (the front lawn still being too exposed to the gaze of passers-by; when the trees grew perhaps), but still without saying exactly what she expected of the new programme.

The pen was laid down, unused. Somewhere a bell rang.

"On your first day I will come and observe that you have achieved the balance we seek between decorum and the exercise of the body, Miss Smith."

"I'm sure you will find it of interest, Miss Downie. There are so many exciting new advances in physical culture and the understanding of the body's needs—"

Miss Downie raised a hand. "I'm sure you are quite right to believe so. But please do not lose sight of the reason I am employing you. The complaints of cramp of course may be of hysterical origin—but first we must see what a course of gentle exercise will do."

Gentle exercise? But how gentle was gentle? Club swinging? Ball games? Dorothea accepted that was all the information she was going to receive. Miss Downie had a reputation locally for believing passionately in the intellectual advancement of her pupils. But did she believe in the equal need to exercise the body and learn good posture and deep breathing?

Miss Downie rose, a small meaningless smile on her lips, and moved towards the door. "I will see that there is a room ready for you by Monday, Miss Smith."

~ 2 ~

The room provided for her use was absurd. Dorothea paced to and fro, ten steps across, thirty steps along; it was a corridor, not a gymnasium. The girls at the back would be able neither to see nor hear her.

Should she insist on a different room? The lawn? Or insist that her classes be divided into very small groups?

There were voices, the rush of solid shoes on wooden floors then girls in the doorway, dozens of them. So they were all to come at once. She moved towards the front of the room, her tall willowy figure moving with grace and ease, then turned to face her new pupils. Their long blue serge skirts swirled just above their ankles, their cream blousons puffed over the tight waistbands, neat blue and gold ties swung with their movements. Most had their hair plaited in two long plaits tied with blue ribbons. Miss Smith smiled at them. They were the future—and what would the new century offer them?

"Girls! Are you all here? Yes? Now, I know it is a small space so I want you all to draw these muscles in—" she placed a large hand on her diaphragm, "and your shoulders up and back and let your arms hang restfully by your sides. Very good. I am Miss Smith and I will be encouraging you to develop bodies that are well-exercised without being strained. We will work from the head downwards so that you feel comfortable and relaxed with every part of yourself. Whether you become a secretary or a teacher when you leave the school, whether you help your family on their farm, whether you become a wife and mother, whether you live in hot climates or cold places, whether you travel far afield or remain at home I trust you will take from these lessons many useful exercises and ideas to enable you to have good health, good posture and a sense of well-being."

She became aware of a small movement behind her and knew Miss Downie was there, observing, listening, gazing upon the girls who stood frozen into their original posture. "So I will divide you into smaller groups to allow for greater freedom of movement and we will also use the tennis court for some exercises."

The next ten minutes were spent briskly forming four groups of girls. At the end there were still three girls standing aside nervously, their disabilities precluding normal games and exercise. Miss Smith took their names and suggested they come to her after dinner to arrange special times and programmes. If exercise was good for the body then it must also be good for children with infantile paralysis or club feet or an elbow in plaster. She felt rather than saw the headmistress's departure. Miss Downie exuded a kind of aloof confusion as though each decision, each movement even, must be the result of determined prayer. Perhaps it was the result of growing up as an archdeacon's daughter.

When she finally dismissed the girls she made her way calmly to Miss Downie's study. She needed this work, this small income, but she would not let the other woman perceive that need. Rather it must be presented in such a way that it appealed to Miss Downie's ambition for the school she had inherited. Even with the girls divided into smaller groups that room was unsuitable.

It was the first time she and Agnes Downie clashed; it would not be the last. But the casual eavesdropper would not have known that two inexorable wills were battling for the bodies and souls of ninety-five girls, nor did Dorothea Wyngate-Smith know it then. The headmistress was caught, as in a web of the most delicate lace, in a nineteenth century of the 'woman question', of dilemmas of education and clothing, of the body and what freedom it might ask, of sexuality that must be suppressed, hidden, covered and convinced of its innate fragility, and of a mind that must be exercised but not burdened. Miss Smith saw the bodies that emerged from centuries of heavy stifling clothes as being a gift. The snares of the 'world, the flesh and the devil' she saw as a perversion of the beauty and brilliance and genius of the human body. Wasn't that an essential part of the Christian message, the importance of the fact that God had chosen to be clothed in flesh. If flesh was evil or, at least, diminishment of the soul then he would have come solely as spirit ...

"I wish the girls to be able to run, to bend and leap, to begin active games such as hockey

and lacrosse and tennis. They must have room, one from the other, and that simply isn't possible in that small space. I would like them to do a brisk walk around the grounds—ten minutes perhaps—to enable the circulation of the blood to be improved. Between breakfast and their first class of the day would be a suitable time. And I believe we could use the area beyond the laundry on the days when—"

"That would be most unsuitable, Miss Smith. You know as well as I do that drays and carts are constantly passing along that lane on their way to the saleyards ... men would be able to see across the hedge—"

"Does it matter? What will they see except girls learning to catch and throw large leather balls. Improved co-ordination is nothing to be ashamed of—in girls just as in boys—"

"You must not forget, Miss Smith, that you were employed because Matron expressed her concern over the number of girls complaining of cramps and indigestion. Throwing and catching balls can have no effect whatsoever on the problem."

"There I beg to differ, Miss Downie. I have been making a study of the literature on health and well-being and it seems vital to exercise the whole body and to encourage girls to feel relaxed and comfortable with the changes in their bodies as they grow from girls to women."

"You will have them all turned into noisy unpleasant tomboyish hoydens if you depend on the new literature, Miss Smith. Now, I must ask you to remember that *I* am in charge here and *I* have only asked you to oversee a programme of gentle exercise."

~ 3 ~

Dorothea Smith took her midday meal at the school but returned home for her evening meal. After hearing her description of school food her mother had discreetly taken to increasing her daughter's portion. Miss Downie might be well-regarded, her school might be desirable, her reputation unassailable—but she did not seem to be feeding energetic growing girls enough food. In this Mrs Wyngate-Smith was unknowingly influenced both by her husband's belief that it was easier to be good if you were well-fed and her daughter's ideas on good nutrition and healthy exercise. And now her daughter was trained in the best institution Sydney had to offer. That must mean something, that certificate on the wall.

The girls came to breakfast at 7.30 to enjoy a small plate of porridge followed by a boiled egg. They received an apple at eleven. Their midday meal was a slice of boiled mutton with potatoes and cabbage. Another apple was handed out at 4 pm and they trailed into a supper of vegetable soup and a glass of milk at 6 pm. At all meals a large pitcher of water was available. Miss Downie believed water as the drink most mentioned in the Bible was the drink for children. Of course wine *was* mentioned but not in connection with schoolgirls ...

To this end she did not trust the town's water supply and had added to the row of tanks on high platforms that ranged along the side of the two-story building. The school, she believed, should be self-sufficient in rain water. Pure water, God-given water, the water of life. The pitchers held this water and no girl, even in dry years, was ever refused a second glass. But there was considerable grumbling among the older girls who believed that they should be allowed to drink tea. Younger girls, brought up on dairy farms and taught to believe that milk rather than water was the stuff of life, felt the boredom of the endless glasses of water. Miss Downie, believing that milk was the main purveyor of tuberculosis, was adamant that only a glass of milk per day and a tiny portion of milk for the porridge, and always thoroughly boiled, should be permitted.

She often sat over a small glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice in the late afternoon but had been told by a doctor many years ago that oranges were too acid to be suitable for children, apples were always preferable. She felt her juice was almost wickedly delightful and went to great lengths to make sure it wasn't common knowledge in the school. Only Miss Harris, who taught mathematics and history, was allowed to share the little cache of oranges. She was sixty so surely could not be affected by the acidity. And Miss Harris had the special advantage that she absolutely agreed with her headmistress on the dangerously *new* ideas that were creeping

into education.

The little study where Dorothea was destined to battle fruitlessly for the bodies of her girls was dim and closed in the late afternoon. Here the spirit of the late-lamented archdeacon still sat in the cushioned wing-chair and pressed back the seductive ideas of women who believed that girls should receive a boy's education, that they should *compete*, that they should press forward into realms of knowledge that would forever destroy the very qualities of innocence and fragility which set them apart. Miss Downie felt his presence in the quiet times when the girls had gone to bathe and change for dinner. Sometimes it was a comforting presence, at other times it oppressed her spirits.

She felt herself fighting a rearguard action against almost everyone except Miss Harris and her elderly housekeeper (who was understandably supportive of the water regime; it helped keep the running expenses down); the younger women seemed to rush to embrace the new century, the rising hemlines, the new opportunities for voting and speaking. It had been a mistake to seek out younger teachers. Certainly they were better-educated but what was education when it came to teaching? The natural gift of teaching could not be learned in new colleges and institutions—and there they learned subversive ideas of philosophy and change that undermined the verities of religion and natural order ...

Sometimes, Miss Downie found herself with an aching head. She was glad of the shadows and the quiet. She could not resolve all the dilemmas that enfolded themselves in her role. She saw Miss Smith hovering over her, so large and lanky and *energetic*, and asking yet again for changes. She dismissed the vision. She could dismiss the woman. For a moment she toyed with the thought. But the Wyngate-Smiths were modestly prominent in the church. The school was not self-supporting, there was still a gap between fees paid and expenses no matter how carefully she and Mrs Paine went over the household costs. The church and several wealthy benefactors bridged the gap.

But it all came back to the girls. Girls, loud noisy country girls from farms, who ate vigorously and expected to be fed and taught for so little. Parents who came late with cheques because the weather had been too dry or too wet or too hot or the banks had foreclosed or ... She thought of her father and his experience gained in quite different circumstances. Even after twenty years here he still somehow expected Australia to be England and felt hurt and disappointed and lost when it wasn't.

"I do not like parents," she said aloud and drained her small glass. "Some of them are rude, some of them are *always* late with paying, most of them do not know what they want from their daughter's education, *none* of them appreciate the difficulties in my position ... "

She thought of young Miss Taplin saying carelessly, "Surely we are educating girls for their own sake—and *they* would much rather learn to type than spend extra hours on a sampler." She had provided the sharp rejoinder: "Unfortunately, it is parents who choose the school and pay the bills ... or don't pay as the case often is."

She walked quietly upstairs, her neat small feet tapping on the bare boards. Her room was still hot from the sinking sun. Hot, and close. A few flies buzzed in impotent fury on the fly-paper. She had insisted they be installed in all the rooms. Matron was certain that flies spread disease—infantile paralysis, typhoid, bilious attacks—Matron was a worrier. But then, the deceased Mrs Downie had always found something very un-English in flies.

The headmistress stood and watched the helpless beating of tiny wings against the sticky paper and watched the strip turn lazily under the energy expended. It came to her in a strange way that she was a fly caught; day after day, week after week, year after year, she would struggle with all the conflicting demands made upon her and it was too late to choose another life—and she didn't know what she would choose if she could.

She sat in memory upon her father's lap, a little thing in starched white with a full two inches of crochet round her pantaloons. Her father had mixed feelings about those little legs encased in their frills; such plump pink legs, and he would lower his bushy whiskers to her cheek and bury his gaze. "Children," he would say, "the innocence of little girls—and how

quickly we destroy that innocence by the world, by *education* ... by knowledge ... and yet we cannot take our children back. An ignorance of things is rustic."

And in her mind, her father said, "What a clever daughter I have—but I wonder if cleverness is the most desirable attribute for a girl. Cleverness on the family hearth ... cleverness with a babe in arms ... there is something unwomanly about mere cleverness ... " He seemed to muse and she felt in his musings an unspoken criticism. She was not the daughter he wanted.

"What a remarkably far-sighted man the Reverend Edwin Downie was!" That had been said at his funeral. "When other men were not concerning themselves with the education of girls and did not see that as something with which the church must busy itself, he was already laying out a carefully-designed prospectus for the parents of girls to peruse. He brought his considerable intellect and ability to organise to this question of our country's future womanhood—and his answer was unequivocal. There must be good educational establishments for girls. Today we see the fruits of his vision—"

The flies still buzzed and to that was added the noise of girls passing to the front corridor to go down to supper. She opened her door and looked out. "Quiet, girls! A lady doesn't *plod!* What is the matter, Gwendolyn, aren't you feeling well?"

"No, Miss Downie." The last girl in the bunch, a shy slow girl with indifferent health, flushed under her headmistress's question. "It is just—" her colour deepened, "I need the bathroom all the time and my ... " She couldn't decide on the words to use to the awesome dignity of her headmistress, "It is not exactly my—" She laid a careful hand vaguely in the direction of her stomach.

"Well, go and see Matron before supper. She may be able to help."

"Yes, Miss Downie. Thank you, Miss Downie." The girl turned away, embarrassed but grateful. She was always wanting to go to Matron but did not know how to explain her symptoms—and Matron was strict with the not-seriously-ill.

Miss Downie turned back and took down the fly-paper and hung another from her stock in its place. She dropped the old one in her basket and covered it with a sheet of tissue paper. The buzzing faded.

~ 4 ~

Matron was puzzled by Gwendolyn's symptoms but gave her a spoonful of ipecac syrup. It couldn't hurt and might help. She was a stolid unimaginative woman with a degree of common sense making up for the lack of any nursing qualifications. Cleanliness, a careful diet, a lack of excitement and an avoidance of the sun at its hottest, summed up her philosophy and it had worked very well for most of her life. (And if all that failed she could send a patient by way of the school's covered sulky to see Dr Alexander.) She also encouraged girls to avoid straining their eyes and disliked the use of tight corsets but beyond a faint admonition, every so often, "Not *too* tight, girls, be sensible and moderate in this as in everything else," she did not know what else could be done.

Over the next two weeks, hot weeks of late summer, more girls came to her with other vague symptoms. They felt faintly bilious and one or two developed a mild rash. Matron went over the menus very carefully and asked Mrs Paine to make sure the maids were washing all the kitchen utensils very carefully.

"I'm sure it's all these flies about," Miss Downie said. "We must put up yet more papers. Will you see to that, Mrs Paine. And order more if needed. I purchased some of the sweeter-smelling ones for my room last week but I must admit they seem unnecessarily expensive."

"It's all the exercise them girls have been doing," Mrs Paine said dourly, " 'taint natural for girls to be throwing them big skittles around."

"You're probably right." Mrs Paine's speech always grated on the headmistress but she never said anything; the housekeeper's belief that Miss Downie was the next best thing to an angel was soothing and sweet. "I'll talk to Miss Smith, see if the girls might be allowed to have a week without exercises."

This being cast in the role of suppliant annoyed Miss Downie. But she was not deaf to the rumours that Miss Smith was good for the girls. She'd even had several letters from parents saying they were pleased the school did not have their daughters bent over books or embroidery all day long now; one father even rubbed salt by saying his daughter looked much healthier and happier since Miss Smith's arrival.

"A few exercises!" Miss Downie thought contemptuously. No, it wasn't the exercises, she felt sure, it was the position Miss Smith enjoyed; but then *she* had been the one to employ her, *she* still held Miss Smith's future in her hands. Miss Smith's future? She felt an odd little nip of regret. She would pass. New pushing insolent ideas, pushed by big untidy women, taken from new books dealing with new thoughts on what went on inside women, mentally and physically, would reach out and fill this new world. These women would call her "quaint" ... she felt a kind of sullen anger.

"Until the girls are all well again, we won't give them any exercises. You may take an unscheduled holiday, Miss Smith. We will allow the girls to spend these next few weeks in the most gentle of pursuits, perhaps just their morning walk before the heat ... "

"If they had lighter clothes, cotton, and if they need not wear ties and long sleeves ... if we could shorten their skirts a little ... and it's surely not necessary for them to be wearing petticoats—"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Smith! Have you taken leave of your senses! Would you have them all turned into little hussies!"

Dorothea uncrossed her legs and sighed. "Have you ever thought how constricted their growing bodies are and how unnecessary so many garments are?"

"I grew up with myself decently and modestly clothed, my mother and my mother's mother and generations of ladies before her. I did not give way to cramps and pains and mysterious aches—"

"Perhaps you didn't—but a great many women did. Fainting, swoons. And I'm sure much of it had to do with too many clothes and not enough exercise."

"Well, *you* have been exercising them and now we have a level of poor health unseen before. I think *that* suggests your new regime of exercise is not as beneficial as you claim." Miss Downie kept any sense of superiority from her carefully-modulated voice. It was her moment of victory. Both Matron and several members of the Board had expressed their belief that gentle exercise—gentle exercise!—that she should never have invited Miss Smith into the school—

"Yes. I know there is some—*upset*—going around ... it may be some meat that has turned in this hot weather—or the milk not keeping ... but I am certain it has nothing to do with the amount of exercise the girls are doing."

"Nevertheless, I will excuse all the girls from physical education for the next fortnight." Miss Downie rose. The interview was at an end.

But the sense of illness and lethargy showed no real sign of dissipating in the fortnight and for Gwendolyn it took a turn for the worse. Matron felt the girl was seriously unwell and asked Dr Alexander to come. He found the child soaked in perspiration and the almost constant urine that dribbled from her; Matron, pathetically frightened, constantly changed the child's sheets and nightdress but felt there was no longer any hope.

She had purged the child and personally overseen all the food allowed, small custards and strained fruit, a tiny bowl of gruel and a smidgen of boiled vegetables; she had gently bathed her hot skin and given her extra glasses of water. The girl had a rash on her face and legs, she was constantly needing a bed pan, her lips were dry and she complained of pains in her stomach that were more than she could bear.

The doctor asked about her history of illness. It sounded very much as though the girl was diabetic. He deeply regretted that there was no cure. But these additional symptoms, surely it must be some form of food poisoning, despite Matron's care. He reduced her diet to plentiful water and a slice of dry bread whenever she complained of hunger. The bread might help

absorb the toxin.

But Gwendolyn complained of nothing more that evening, slipping into a coma around 11 pm. She died soon after midnight. Matron took the poor little thin hand. “She wasn’t long for this world, poor soul, but I wish I knew what was the matter, what it is we’re giving her that caused the trouble.”

~ 5 ~

Gwendolyn’s death sent fear through the school. Girls who had believed it was the heat—or who believed Miss Downie’s assertion that they had been exercising too hard—now saw it as something deep and insidious waiting for them all. Mrs Paine escorted Dr Alexander through every possible part of the school. He found the bathrooms with their tin baths and basins shining and spotless. He found clean towels hanging on the racks. He found the dormitories neat and fresh-smelling. He poked and pried into every aspect of the pantries and kitchens. He oversaw the washing of the dinner dishes. He saw the extra precautions Mrs Paine had made to keep the flies at bay and the meat and milk cool in the big ice-chests.

He sat with Matron upstairs and went over every aspect of her treatment of Gwendolyn and the other girls who’d come with vague stomach pains and a need to leave class at frequent intervals. He checked the laundry tubs and coppers. He called the prefects together to ask if anyone had been found bringing sweets or other unnecessary foods into school. He was wise enough to know that day-girls occasionally brought small treats to share with friends who were boarders.

At the end he expressed himself puzzled. If only all schools and other public institutions maintained this standard of care and hygiene how much easier his work would be. He thought of the many places where flies buzzed over meat, and milk stood sour and uncovered and people with unwashed hands thoughtlessly touched and served ... and for it to happen to Miss Downie of all people. Such a careful fastidious woman! And a woman who had given her life to this school, to achieving this standard for her girls ...

Miss Downie remained convinced the girls had been over-exercising. From her description he thought it was possible that a form of heat exhaustion might’ve contributed to the symptoms—but it didn’t explain—

“By all means, Miss Downie, if you think they should do nothing more than their morning walk—” But he was preoccupied.

Should he ask to have an autopsy done? Would it show some form of food-poisoning or perhaps an infectious bacteria ... the girl might’ve accidentally swallowed something ... there’d been a case where a nail had been found in a bag of flour ... and he remembered a girl who’d taken to eating charcoal in her adolescent years ... girls occasionally became hysterical and odd at the onset of the menarche ...

And the girl he felt sure did suffer from diabetes. Would an examination throw new light upon this insidious disease? He saw himself writing a monograph, being fêted ... ‘a hard-working country doctor has provided new information where greater scientific minds have failed’ ...

The body of Gwendolyn Frith was removed from school. Nothing was said. Miss Downie felt it would be quite inappropriate for the girls to learn that Dr Alexander had taken her away to cut her open and examine her. The very idea was terrifying and indecent! But the news leaked out somehow. It sent many girls to bed with horrible vaguely-realised visions of knives cutting, of blood and mysterious tubes and gushing things ... Gwendolyn had few friends but the girls who’d found her gentle and quiet felt a kind of anger on top of their fears ... it didn’t seem right that men could do this to her, poor Gwennie, how she would hate being undressed and ...

Girls gathered in little knots, they tried to laugh it off, they shared bad dreams. Within days, a dangerously frightened and hysterical mood had spread. Their very ignorance of what was involved heightened their fears. And if it was infectious, then might not other girls grow sick and die. Miss Taplin, the English mistress, suggested the setting of extra essays and

reading to take girls' minds off their fears. Miss Downie had kept to her room the last couple of days. She said she was very tired. But she laughed when Miss Taplin made her suggestion and said "Why not! But it will soon grow cooler and we will forget this horrible interlude."

"Do you think it was the heat?" Miss Taplin did not like Miss Downie. She felt that girls needed to do more than pore over embroidery. She wanted to encourage them to write verse and vigorous essays. She greatly admired George Eliot.

And it did not make sense to keep all information from the girls. After all, many of them had seen farm animals being killed and skinned, they'd helped cut up meat and skin brains and stuff hearts for their own families' meals. Why treat them like shrinking violets. All this delicacy and evasion was not healthy. And she hoped Miss Smith would be back soon. Miss Smith was full of enthusiasm and good nature and she felt sure the girls had seemed less round-shouldered and listless since Miss Smith had come.

"The heat, *and* over-exercising in the heat. I have decided that Miss Smith can begin her exercises again in autumn."

"Oh? Not before then?"

Miss Downie had thought it was Miss Smith who was the sole challenge to her ways; now she saw it as a conspiracy of women, all younger, all with ideas that would destroy her, destroy the delicate balance she had sought for so long.

"Not before then. Perhaps a reading group might be suitable but do urge Anne Biggins not to bend over and squint at the page."

"She probably needs spectacles."

"Then you may write and tell her parents so."

Miss Taplin hesitated. Why her. Had not Miss Downie always taken such letters in her stride? What was happening? She gazed at her superior and it seemed that there was something different about Miss Downie, something brittle and unhealthy.

But of course it had been a terrible shock to her when a pupil died—and she might be blamed. She was naturally a little overwrought. After all, she had dedicated herself to the school.

~ 6 ~

Yes, the school. Miss Taplin had come to visit Miss Smith on her afternoon off. Sunday afternoons were usually given over to quiet pursuits at the school but there was nothing to prevent the mistresses going out if they had friends or family in town.

The Wyngate-Smiths lived in a rambling weatherboard house on the south side of town. A big cheerful cluttered place with a large mildly overgrown garden, trees with swings in them, lots of golden spaniels, inviting chairs, shady nooks, sleepy cats ... Anne Taplin walked in as though she entered a strange and possibly hostile land. As she sat down to wait for Dorothea to appear she decided she liked bright still-lifes of fruit and kittens on house walls; the pictures in the dim corridors of school were few and all of grey grim castles or grey grim seascapes or grey grim mountainsides, pictures brought out from the Old Country by the Reverend Downie and left to moulder on dado walls for the next forty years.

Here, there was a spill of books and flowers, of family photographs, and pipes and a half-finished tapestry in a frame; as though the family did things together. She heard footsteps in the distance and remembered the only personal pictures at the school were the old man in Miss Downie's study and a couple of small studies upstairs in her room. It was strange that Miss Downie had become so secretive lately, spending more and more time in her room, only opening the door a little to anyone who knocked; presumably a maid swept and dusted ...

"Anne," Dorothea came in; she was so tall she stooped slightly under the lintel and Anne understood why Miss Downie regarded her physical education teacher as overbearing ... but that wasn't the right word. There was a warmth and enthusiasm about Dorothea that had nothing to do with bossiness. It was instead the feeling of someone who felt herself to be fully alive and enjoying it.

"You must be tired from that long walk. Would you like a cup of tea now—or would you

like a glass of water?"

"Oh, just some water would be lovely. Do you know, this is the first time I've been out of school this year—except for church, of course."

"The escape from the tower," Dorothea laughed.

"It does feel rather like that. I didn't realise until I sat down here how—I'm not quite sure how to describe it—almost claustrophobic, as though we're shut away behind hedges like Sleeping Beauty except it's business enough, no sleeping allowed, except for one's eight hours."

"I'll just get you a glass." Dorothea went out and Anne sat back. She was tired and that vague sense of unease she'd felt, none of the mistresses had been exactly ill but they'd all felt a sense of discomfort. She wondered if Miss Downie had felt it too. It did suggest something in their food—because here was Dorothea, who'd only ever eaten a midday meal at the school, looking so exuberantly healthy. Perhaps it *was* the meat, after all.

"Is everyone feeling better now?"

Anne sipped her glass of water. "Well, a little. But we really haven't got over poor Gwendolyn dying like that. It was terrible. And they say now that she had this sugar disease. I suppose the poor little thing was much worse than Matron realised. She was always thirsty I remember, always needing to leave the classroom, poor dear. Perhaps it was a blessing if she was going to suffer all her life—"

"But they might find a cure ... or a prevention ... like smallpox."

"Yes. I think it must have been the combination of her illness and whatever has been bothering us."

"More water?" Dorothea leaned forward and refilled Anne's glass. "I'll take you for a walk around the garden when you're rested. It is a long walk—and I'm sure Father will drive you back to school in the buggy. He is going to visit some one out that way later."

Dorothea's father was retired but he'd been a dispenser at a hospital for many years and people who could not afford a doctor or did not like to bother one occasionally asked him for advice.

"This is very nice water. Is it your own?"

"Yes. Just tank water." Dorothea looked surprised.

"It tastes the same but it somehow—" Anne blushed, "I know it sounds silly but it has a different *feel*. It's hard to explain and I'm probably imagining it."

They walked in the garden. Anne saw Dorothea's brother's geese, their two buggy horses, the spaniels came and escorted them. It was a peaceful and pleasant afternoon and it ended with tea and scones and fruitcake presided over by Dorothea's mother. As Anne climbed into the buggy beside Mr Wyngate-Smith she decided it was a very *sane* afternoon. As they drove into the school grounds and she climbed down, the school seemed to reach out to her, to absorb her, to diminish her and remove something vital.

Dorothea believed that Miss Downie cared about the school as a place, an idea, an institution. Her father had created it from nothing, and he had bequeathed it to his only child; it was a sacred obligation. But that didn't mean she cared about the girls. The school existed, solid and immutable. The girls came and went and were forgotten. Miss Downie's ideas on education existed. Teachers with new ideas, different ideas, governments with examinations and set subjects, all came and went. Miss Downie continued to sit in her study under the portrait of the archdeacon.

"I don't think it was quite right, from what I've heard," Dorothea said to Anne in the garden. "The way he fed her mind with his ideas but allowed her no access to experience of other schools, other ways and people. There was something unhealthy and inward about it."

"But he must have cared about her a lot. They say he tutored her in a dozen subjects when she was still a small girl. *My* father wasn't even sure whether he should waste time educating his daughters at all. 'You'll only get married,' he was always saying, 'so cooking and sewing is all you'll need'. He only relented when his sister who had no children offered to

have us live with her in town while we went to school so it didn't cost him anything."

"Yes. I am very fortunate. I did not have to persuade my family I needed an education. My father said, 'times are changing and you must have the wherewithal to use those changes wisely'. He is a very sensible man."

As Anne thanked Mr Wyngate-Smith and walked towards the dim portals of the front entrance and heard the far away clatter of supper being prepared and the girls upstairs changing and tidying themselves she had the odd fancy she walked into a cave, a dark and dangerous place. The world was bright and fresh, all full of talk of Federation and Suffrage and a new century; the school was turned inward, turned back to the sorrows of the old ways, to pain and its stoic acceptance, to the discretion of black silk and sedentary women …

All that the archdeacon had brought with him, along with his big black nail-studded trunks and his little pale black-clad wife ... he had bequeathed his daughter more than a school.

~ 7 ~

Dorothea sat by the open window enjoying the scent of honeysuckle and warm earth after Anne had gone.

Her Bible, accepted Sunday reading, lay open on her lap but her thoughts were far away from the second chapter of Mark. She thought of Anne going back to school, the narrow stuffy rooms and corridors, the boiled milk in the big jugs, the sense of a place closed in and cloistered and too intent upon itself. And the odd thing Anne had said about the water. Was that the trouble with the girls. Something in the water? Of course things did get into water tanks. Birds, frogs ... she'd even heard of a dead goanna found in someone's tank. It had rather put her off water—for a week or two.

Or something spilled into the gutters or pipes ... she couldn't think what ... but the upstairs windows along one side all looked out over the line of tanks. What if a girl had thrown something out; or a maid perhaps, while she was cleaning. Or something from Matron's room. It seemed unlikely.

But Dorothea had developed an affection for her girls. After the first couple of days of caution they had decided they liked her and they liked their new lessons and they showed it in their enthusiasm.

(Was their enthusiasm the reason Miss Downie had seemed to develop a dislike for her; that she wanted the girls to regard their teachers with respect rather than affection. Miss Downie never sought the girls' liking; she would find that a strange idea ... even perhaps a threatening idea.)

She wanted her girls to be happy and healthy.

Well, she would return to the school tomorrow and ask Miss Downie to set the date for the resumption of physical education classes—and she would take a small clean jar and fill it with water.

"That school is a gloomy old place, right enough." Her father came in. "You must be glad to be away from it for a while."

"It's not so old, you know." Dorothea smiled.

"No. Just seems old. Needs a coat of nice cream paint."

"Do you remember Miss Downie's father?"

"A little. He used to like to say 'my daughter is very clever' but I don't think he meant it as a compliment. If he'd had a son maybe ... They say he was a good man and I suppose he was ... in some ways ... "

As she scalded out her jam jar and dried it over the stove and wrapped it in a clean cloth the idea of taking it to school began to seem more and more ridiculous. For a moment she was tempted to simply put it back in the cupboard then she resolutely placed it in her handbag.

~ 8 ~

Miss Downie reluctantly agreed to set a day to resume classes for the girls. Dorothea thanked her warmly. She could manage without this work. She had begun evening classes for young women who enjoyed the idea of exercise and another school had invited her to come and

teach the girls how to play tennis—and she lived at home. She did not need to be obsequious. But she found she missed the girls.

Then she went along to the downstairs cloakroom and filled her jar from the tap there. A maid with a broom stopped. “Was you wanting a glass of water, miss? I can get you one.”

“It’s all right, thanks, Maggie. I just like to carry some water with me. It’s a long walk home.”

“Be better in a bottle, miss, easier to drink.”

“I know. But the jar fits more easily into my handbag.”

Maggie nodded. “I always bring me own bottle too.”

“Do you?” Dorothea couldn’t help showing her surprise. Maggie lived at the end of the street. She would hardly need it for walking home. “Don’t like the water here, miss, sometimes there’s things in it. Bea and me, we always bring a bottle now.”

“Things? What sort of things?”

“Dunno, miss. Looked like bits of flies to me. Must of got in the tank.”

“Mmm, that’s possible. Well, I’d better be going home.”

Maggie and her broom departed and Dorothea put her jar carefully back into its cloth and went out. She wondered if she should ask the gardener to bring his ladder now and climb up to check the top of the tank. She stood undecided for several minutes, then went out.

Her father when asked to test the water for things that shouldn’t be in it merely laughed. “What sort of things, Dottie?”

“Well, you know there’s been so much sickness at the school—and one of the maids said she found bits of insects in the water. I just thought—well, you know, something might’ve been washed down ... the cover might’ve been—” She shrugged. If it wasn’t for that conversation with Maggie she knew she would let the matter drop.

“No harm, I suppose. But I think we’d soon see if there were bits and pieces in it—” He held the jar up to the light.

“I wondered if there might be something else—”

He looked at her more closely.

“Well, we could try but it’s hard to find anything unless you know what to test for.”

“Yes. But so many of the girls were unwell ... I wondered if, well, a rat that the gardeners had poisoned ... or something ... might’ve fallen in.”

“I think it’d be much simpler if someone would just climb up and have a look. And a lot cheaper.”

“I know ... but it would be very public ... and if there’s nothing ... and the girls might not feel easy about drinking.”

“It wouldn’t take long. I’ll talk to Dr Alexander about it. He could have a look while the girls were in the dining-room—”

Dr Alexander was tempted to treat the suggestion with mild scorn. Hadn’t he searched that school from front to back for ideas on why the girls had been sick, still were unwell if it came to that, not seriously unwell, a lingering sense of poor health. But he hadn’t thought of the water. The school was very particular about its water, he remembered. Too particular. Not particular enough. The tanks.

Donald held the ladder steady while the doctor heaved his bulk up the rungs. Really he was getting too old for this kind of thing. Mrs Paine had told him they were using the front tank for drinking water at the moment. “And whose room is that next to it?” “Oh, that’s Miss Downie’s.” If it had been a dormitory he might’ve suspected the girls of throwing things out the window but Miss Downie with her careful and fastidious nature?

Just a quick look. He was sure there wouldn’t be anything.

He lifted off the strainer-cover and looked in.

~ 9 ~

Dr Alexander, in later years, was honest enough to admit to himself and a couple of close colleagues that, despite a tough and varied career, that was a time he came close to vomiting.

He climbed down hurriedly and shakily.

"Don't whatever you do use this tank, Mrs Paine. It is filthy. I'll arrange to get it properly cleaned."

"Are you all right, Doctor?" Mrs Paine was a phlegmatic soul but she saw he was paler now than when he'd begun the climb up.

"Yes. Yes. Quite all right. Just be absolutely certain no one—and I mean *no one*—uses this water. In fact, it might be best if you used town water for a week or two until we get every tank properly checked."

"Miss Downie doesn't approve of town water."

"It doesn't matter what Miss Downie thinks! No wonder that poor child died, drinking that foul brew."

"The water *looks* all right." Mrs Paine wondered uneasily if she'd missed something she should've noticed.

"Yes, possibly. Now, just remember what I've said. And where will I find Miss Downie? Will she be in the dining-room?"

"I'll ask her to come—if you would take a seat in her study."

The doctor turned to Donald. "You can put the ladder away now. But make sure they all know not to drink tank water till we get it cleaned."

"Don't you want me to clean it, sir?"

"No. I'll make arrangements."

He sat nearly ten minutes beside the portrait of the Reverend Downie and prayed that his stomach would gently subside.

"Ah! Miss Downie! Sorry to call you away from ... it's rather a serious matter, I'm afraid. Your tank."

"My tank?" She looked blank.

"Your tank is poisoned."

"Poisoned?" She was polite rather than astonished.

"Someone has been filling it with used fly-papers. Some brands contain arsenic."

He wondered if the idea was beyond her; he'd felt as he looked in and shone his torch to and fro that it was beyond him too. That great seething soaking mass, some of the curled up papers still buzzing with black insects, other soaked clean ... *and it could not be an accident ...*

"I'm afraid it is a police matter, Miss Downie. I'm sorry, but someone has been trying to poison you and your entire school."

She continued to stare at him. "Really? How extraordinary."

"No wonder your pupils have been suffering from ill-health—and that girl—" Yes. Gwendolyn Frith had died because she, unfortunate child, was a diabetic and drank almost constantly. She had ingested more of the poison from the water. She *had* died because of her condition but she had died because someone here wanted to hurt and upset the school.

"Does anyone have a grudge against your school, Miss Downie? Someone who might have chosen this way to bring bad publicity?"

She closed her eyes briefly. "I don't think so, Doctor. Not my poor little school that I've worked so hard to keep to a high standard, my poor little school, my father's dearest dream, and now turned sour."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure the police will find the culprit and be as discreet as possible."

He picked up his bag. He wanted to be away from here. Her pale little face and intense eyes made him feel guilty. Her dream, yes, and it might never recover from this. Parents would take their daughters away and who could blame them. There were other schools, more lively modern schools, Government schools, church schools, private schools. Miss Downie would not be able to keep going, the school only just made ends meet. "I'm sorry," he said again, and meant it.

~ 10 ~

Members of the School Board debated over taking down the portrait of the archdeacon.

Now that Miss Downie was gone they opened the windows and let the fresh air fill the little study. They wondered if they or the church had been remiss.

Sometimes Dorothea and Anne went in to see Miss Downie, taking flowers, (they remembered her as having a fondness for pink roses) and sat a while. She, perhaps out of deference, did not have to share a dormitory. They thought, though perhaps they were wrong, she had no idea who they were. They always came together. She always sat alone.

THE END

FOUND

Chapter One

~ 1 ~

The pressing crowds, the thin grey rain, all combined to slow and finally stop the cab. The man inside leaned out to engage in conversation with the driver; a wet and puzzling conversation so far as the other passenger was concerned but her greatest disappointment was that no one bothered to tell her why so many people were on the streets or that it was the wait to see a dead king passing to Lie in State.

She was a very small child with a vee for a chin and a thin sharp nose, much freckled. Her feet could not touch the floor of the cab. She was set back too far to see more than a cut-off view of London and a lot of grey sky. By her feet sat a small tin trunk which, if she'd been reared on storybooks rather than sunshine, she might have said contained all her 'worldly goods'. She wore a very plain but clean calico dress and a navy-blue broadcloth coat and a straw hat with a length of navy ribbon as its only adornment. There was about her a vague sense of the ragged urchin; not because of her clothes which were unexceptionable but may have had something to do with the choice of colours and the fact that her small black-strap shoes were scuffed (although the man beside her would have been hard-pressed to know when and how this could have occurred); then there was her abundance of freckles and the hint of a tangle in her hair which was of that blondeness which suggests it will soon become an unexciting mouse-brown and which had never provoked even the kindest of female relatives into saying "What pretty hair the child has!" Though in this particular case female relatives were in short supply.

In the interminable minutes while the cab waited and the old grey mare in the shafts hung her head and rested a hind leg, the man 'indoors' remained silent. He was doing his duty by this Antipodean waif and he felt no need to actually ask the sort of questions she would be sure to be peppered with as soon as he delivered her safely to her door. Perhaps this was a pity as he and his wife were childless and occasionally regretted the fact.

The door, when the old mare had trotted up and down a number of grimly proper and unexciting streets and finally been pulled to a halt, was closed and forbidding. But while the mare again snatched a quick respite in the gutter both the child and the trunk were lifted down, the bell was rung, the knocker clanged, and a general air of annoyance grew on the face of the waiting man.

The child looked round her and didn't like what she saw. There were no trees, no flowers, no birds. How could 'the greatest city on earth' have none of these things? But of course Mrs Holloway had not been further than—well, further than—the child couldn't decide the limits to Mrs Holloway's experience. But as she'd thumped and starched and ironed and cobbled a little wardrobe together she'd talked of how she saw London in her mind. And Mrs Holloway's mind was surely an extension of her surroundings. She saw trees and flowers and birds every morning from her kitchen window while she put up Mr Holloway's lunch in waxed paper. Therefore London must have all that and more because it never occurred to Mrs Holloway that the view from her kitchen window might be nicer than anything the child would see in London.

The door creaked and was thrown open with some difficulty; possibly it was the sort of door only opened for weddings and funerals and this particular house in Elbrave Square had not seen very many of either.

The man raised his hat to the fresh-faced white-aproned girl in the doorway and pushed the child forward. "Here she is, miss—and her luggage."

"Oh! Is that all she has?"

"It's enough for one wee girlie," the purser replied repressively.

“Oh!” the girl blushed. The ladies of the house were out and she wasn’t sure what honours the occasion called for. “Thank you. Thank you very much for bringing her to us.”

His dutiful mind wasn’t proof against such blooming cheeks and he unbent enough to say, “It was a pleasure, miss.”

The child looked up at him in wonder. She had not thought he was enjoying himself. Perhaps he just liked riding in cabs? She thought she would too once her legs were long enough to touch the floor. He turned to her and put on the same smile he gave to disembarking women; it was virtually the only smile he knew and it was composed of the knowledge of being married, an awareness that he was entitled to a degree of respect, the relief that he would probably never see these passengers and their annoying demands ever again, and the secret wish that someone at some time might remember his nondescript face.

“Goodbye, miss, I’m sure you will be very comfortable here.”

She wasn’t sure of this at all. Nor had she ever been told how he should be addressed. So she smiled the smile of someone who is vigorously shedding teeth and doesn’t know whether to be proud or dismayed by this fact. About most things in life she was confused by the expectations of others. If they would just take the time to say—

Her escort backed out of her life, the weary nag was whipped up, the maid grasped the small trunk in her strong young arms and a moment later the door boomed shut.

~ 2 ~

The nursery on the third floor had not been used for so long that dustpanfulls of rat droppings had to be gathered up and taken away and the curtains, taken down for washing, fell to bits.

The new curtains were of a weighty brown material chosen not specifically to keep the sun out, though they achieved that admirably, but to wear indefinitely. The ladies of the house, Miss Evie and Miss Letty, were ignorant where children were concerned and had had great difficulty in deciding what the nursery would need. Would a child of approximately five (they were as hazy as she was on this matter) be likely to fall out of bed? A truckle bed was unearthed in an attic and set up. Beneath it was placed a pink china chamber-pot (which disturbed the new inmate; why couldn’t she be like everyone else, she asked innocently, and go outside). A small painted cupboard was brought upstairs to enclose the meagre contents of the tin trunk.

The resident rocking horse had been drawn forth and painted; so that the child who knew a great deal about horses and very little about toys had puzzled over its vacant eyes and its mouth which continued to bare itself no matter how the reins were manipulated and its skin which remained cold and hard despite the most strenuous patting. Two dolls had been discovered in an attic trunk and laid out upon the single nursery armchair with its threadbare brown seat. They had the faces of rag moons, adorned with a blob of wax for a nose and a wire handle in their side to raise and lower their unnatural wax eyelids and they were dressed in poorly made shifts of black silk.

This was thought by Miss Evie and Miss Letty to be sufficient for any child. They would not have demeaned themselves to ask a current mother for the most up-to-date ideas on keeping children out of mischief. This had been good enough for them. They, after all, had been reared on bread pudding and:

“Speak when you’re spoken to,
Come when you’re called,
Shut the door after you,
And do as you’re told”—and believed it was the way to create women of great moral strength and personal decorum who could take anything from the Loss of the American Colonies to the Black Hole of Calcutta in their stride, incorporating along the way a father who had taken twelve years to die and a brother who had taken to spending an inordinate amount of time at his club (if indeed it was his club; they had not yet decided if it was wise to enquire whether a woman was also involved).

Both women preferred to dress in blacks and browns with trims of sable for best and jet for second-best. Their dresses, despite what was spent on them, tended to acquire a nightdress quality, perhaps because the shapes under them were something in the nature of bolsters. They had with reluctance given up bonnets for large concoctions of black straw and plum silk flowers. Bonnets had possibly done more for their sallow milestone faces. Instead of long thin noses and wide thin mouths and narrow blue eyes overweighted by thick sandy brows they should have borne the more useful message 'London XIV'.

They made it clear to the new arrival at their first meeting that they were not aunts but second cousins twice removed; almost anyone could see that they were not aunts and never could be aunts. But the child said wistfully she would like an aunt.

This was seen as impudence and Miss Evie pronounced from her magnificent black-shrouded height, "If you haven't an aunt it is foolish to pine for an aunt." An admirable philosophy. But it fell on deaf ears as far as this small orphan was concerned; she had even less sense of family and kinship intricacies than the Tichborne Claimant but she did long for someone, if not an aunt then a something else who would take the time to explain a lot of mystifying things to her. Not least why, even when she drew the curtains wide, the sun still didn't seem to shine in. Was there perhaps *no* sun on this side of the world?

Miss Evie and Miss Letty had discussed one important matter while they patted and primped before going down to dinner.

"It's a scandalous name to give a child," Miss Letty dropped her voice as though to admit to a secret vice, "Hera. We cannot allow it to be said within the house." This would mean it wouldn't be said at all as they had no plans to take the child outside the house.

"For the moment she need only be Miss. She will not know better."

"Quite pagan," Miss Letty pursued her own thought. "I can't think how they ever came to think of such a name let alone bestow it upon an innocent child ... "

"Innocent? Dear me no, Letty. That one is as sly and mischievous as a barrel full of monkeys. We must watch her carefully and erase her faults as they appear."

"But innocent in the beginning perhaps?" Letty was not yet quite willing to give up this picture of the babe asleep; a maternal longing as attenuated as it was hidden.

"We all begin with Original Sin, sister, and who is to say whether some are more deeply and darkly affected whilst others have the merest touch. I cannot but help think that generations of pious living must have an influence in that regard—"

"But the child is of our stock. Surely that would—"

"We know so little," Evie showed no one but her brother and sister her fault of impatience. "We can only hope that her inheritance from our side of the family has not been entirely dissipated by mixing with common blood."

"We could *change* her name," Letty said suddenly. "Jane perhaps—or Emmeline or Dorothy—"

"We cannot do *anything* until Matthew tells us the contents of the will—and if he doesn't come home soon I will be extremely tempted to open the copy myself!"

"Oh no, my dear. That wouldn't be right. Matthew would be cross and I could not really blame him—"

"I could." Evie was grim around the mouth as she stood up and shook her skirts out. "Are you ready? Mrs Thornton is getting quite above herself with her hints about the time—"

~ 3 ~

Mabel Thornton had been cook in the household for twenty years; and it was a measure of the decline of Elbrave Square that she now lived at home with her brother, who was a clerk, and a widowed sister and simply walked to work each morning.

Edie combined the tasks of kitchenmaid, parlourmaid and upstairs maid and still wasn't run off her feet as the family never entertained and many of the rooms were shut up and given over to dust and the sort of furniture which if dropped on an omnibus would wreak havoc whilst remaining unscathed. She was pleased to have the little miss upstairs; it was what this

dreary house needed, in her youthful opinion.

"But they should take her out for a little fresh air—or perhaps hire a governess to take her to the park—"

"They don't know nothing about children," Mrs Thornton said weightily. "Shut up all the time like an animal at the zoo! 'tisn't right!"

"Will you—would you—tell them so?" Edie breathed.

" 'tis more than my place is worth," Mrs Thornton pronounced which, given her intimate understanding of several delicate digestions, was untrue. "But the child will get restless and naughty and they will realise they must do something."

"Ye-es ... yes, of course. But it's very strange, all the same, the way they never call her by any name except 'Miss' or 'the child'—you don't think—she might be one of those—those—"

"Those what?" There was a sudden awful majesty in Mrs Thornton's demeanour; she didn't like Miss Evie and Miss Letty but she felt a certain loyalty. And you couldn't have any chit of a maid casting aspersions or a well-ordered society would soon come crashing down around your unprepared ears.

"Well—" Edie grew red and tongue-tied, "a—a child where people aren't quite sure who it belongs to ... " This ambiguous explanation showed no sign of softening the cook.

"You are not suggesting, are you, my girl, that my fine ladies upstairs would take in a child they didn't need to? Because I can ashore you they would touch nothing without it being down in black and white and the lawyer saying 'There's no doubt about this one's being yours, ma'am'—there's nothing generous about them two and don't you go ixpicting it—" If Mrs Thornton had hoped to uphold a certain basic dignity of class she had now undermined it and trampled it underfoot.

"But—the name?" Edie faltered, wondering just where she'd stumbled off the path and on to wet and slippery grass.

"Pah! What's a name? Maybe they don't like the child's name and haven't yet fixed on a new one."

This idea pleased Edie who hadn't been long enough in the Elbrave Square house to lose a natural simple-hearted kindness. "I think Rosaline is a pretty name—"

"It'll be a fine day when they come asking *you* for a name!" Mrs Thornton was tart; and tarter still when she'd looked at the kitchen clock. "If that there lazy scamp of a butcher's boy don't turn up in ten minutes I'll have the hide off his miserubble bones—"

~ 4 ~

The snail hours passed in the nursery; but after the horse had received innumerable pats and stayed immune there was very little else to do. The dolls after being picked up and put down again suggested no means of amusement. There were no picture books or magazines. Both the armchair and the rocking horse were too heavy for a small girl to move though she spent many hours huffing and puffing in the hope that, one day, she would get one to the window and the other to the door. If she parted the feet of the curtain she could see a sliver of sky made unhealthy by the yellowing undercurtain. If she could reach the door handle, perhaps by growing another six inches, she could creep out and explore. Meals came regularly at eight o'clock, twelve o'clock and five o'clock. A small hip bath was brought in twice a week and she was told to undress so that she could be well washed with plain soap and dried with a scratchy towel.

She began to wonder if any other world existed beyond these four distempered walls and rat-eaten wainscoting. Her freckles faded and her thin sunburnt arms grew plump and pale; for whatever its failings bread pudding backed up by slices of white bread and butter, rice pudding, and stew eked out with large dumplings of flour and suet, is almost guaranteed to fatten thighs and rounden cheeks.

It was by mere chance that she came upon a portable and always-available gift. Above the bricked-in fireplace somebody had hung a painting. It was hard to see why they had

bothered themselves with hooks and wire and making sure the frame was straight and, no doubt, occasionally removing an intruding cobweb or two. So dim with smoke or dirt was the picture that it was hard to say just what was represented. A castle perhaps. The only noticeable thing about it was an eerie white shape in one corner which close scrutiny would have shown to be an invasion of mildew.

Edie noticing this one day exclaimed, "Why! Doesn't that look like a ghost in the picture! I never noticed that before!"

Her small diner turned hazel-grey eyes upon her and said "What is a ghost?"

Edie had meanwhile clapped a hand to her mouth. What if the child repeated what she'd said to either Miss Evie or Miss Letty?

"A ghost?" The question seemed to her to be an extraordinary one. What is a ghost? Ghosts just *were* in old houses. "It's a—a person who hasn't a body anymore. The body has died but something faint and white—like a—a piece of taffeta or—or lace has been left behind and is very sad but also very cross because it can't have a proper life without a body. I—" she felt herself to be floundering in a mire and neither Mrs Thornton nor the ladies of the house would deign to extend a life-saving pole; but Edie had a vague idea that children and certainly children who lived in comfortably-off houses should know about ghosts and fairies and handsome princes and witches—just as they should know about Jesus and the Virgin Mary and Pontius Pilate—and the guileless question "What is a ghost?" had disturbed her. "If you like I will tell you a story about a ghost one day. It can't be now. I don't have time."

The child, seated in the armchair with the tray across her small knees, accepted this statement. She couldn't know Edie needed to go away and rack her thoughts for any snippets about ghosts, real or imaginary.

But as she'd launched herself into a dangerous new career Edie thought she might as well take a little more courage into her hands and ask: "Could you tell me your name? We have never been told and Mrs Thornton and I would like to know."

The little girl in the armchair stopped chewing and gazed at her in stricken silence. She had a name, she knew she had a name, but it just seemed to have slipped away. It must have gone somewhere, even lost things fell down behind cushions or through cracks in the floor or were 'borrowed' by other people.

"It's Hera," she said suddenly.

"Hera?" It wasn't a name Edie had come across before but she rose to the occasion. "What a pretty name, Miss. Was it perhaps your mother's name?"

But this was beyond even the most prodigious efforts of memory. Hera had no memories of a mother and wasn't even quite sure what sort of names a mother might be expected to have. But something suggested to her that it might be worthwhile to claim a mother. People who *had* people belonging to them were less the playthings of the wind; and she was very young to have come to that conclusion.

"No." Seated with your legs sticking out and a bowl of mutton broth in front of you is not a position of natural dignity but Hera managed well. "My mother's name was Peggy Holloway."

Edie went downstairs bursting with news. Of course none of it was her business but Mrs Thornton would be all agog when they came to the washing-up and there was time to talk.

"Hera?" Mabel Thornton ran it this way and that across her generous lips. "Hera? Well, who would o' thought of that! They don't like it in there—" she nodded an imposing head towards the dining-room, "that's what the trouble is. They want her to forget what her name is and then they can call her anything they like," she added sagely.

"And Holloway?" Edie said excitedly. "Have you ever heard of a Holloway in the family?" She too inclined her head in the direction of Miss Evie and Miss Letty.

"Well no. No, I never did hear of no Holloways in the family—but she might be on the father's side—though I did think it was the mother's side when Miss Evie menshunned it."

"Then it's—"

"Now, don't you start that again, my girl. There'll be no insin-u-way-shuns in *my* kitchen, not while I've got a decent breath in my body—"

~ 5 ~

Master Matthew was very much younger than his sisters; though not so young that he could step back into his childhood. He had avoided seeing or hearing Hera. Evie and Letty were in charge. He, thankfully, had no need to enquire further.

The will might not have pleased his sisters, Evie and Letty were not easily pleased, but it came in the nature of a windfall to him; and for all of his aimless adult life he had been in need of a windfall.

The provisions which brought them the child also brought them £500 a year for her care. Her father had made money in the gold fields and wisely spread it among a variety of solid stocks. Hera was to come into her capital at the age of thirty. (Her father either did not believe in the wisdom of making young women independent or was afraid of fortune-hunters—or had simply plucked thirty from the air as a nice round number.) More to the liking of Master Matthew was the provision that small amounts of Hera's capital could be made available to her official guardian in exceptional circumstances—such as serious illness, costs of educating her, or fostering some unexpected talent such as a facility for the piano.

To take advantage of this should not be difficult, given that Hera's fortune was to be looked after by a Brisbane lawyer but requests could be channelled through a London firm who held no responsibility for the growth or diminuition of her capital but would simply pass on requests to Brisbane and funds to the house in Elbrave Square.

It was so easy, Master Matthew thought with a kind of gleeful relief. He had many outstanding debts but they would soon be a thing of his past.

"A fortunate death in the family," he said to a crony.

"Fortunate, my dear man?"

"A very distant relative. Never met the chap. So you really can't expect me to mourn his passing, now can you? And he was better-heeled than anyone expected. The traditional miser."

The Hon. David Rantleigh thought there was something feverish in the young man's manner; dipping too deep, most likely, and whoever had nominated him for this expensive club had probably done him a disservice. But it wasn't the sort of matter which could be brought up—either the windfall would be large enough to solve everything—or it wouldn't, in which case the young fool would eventually come a cropper, and disappear.

Miss Evie and Miss Letty knew nothing of conversations like this; their brother was a thoroughly unsatisfactory young man with his sly leaving of the house by the area steps, his bluster and discourtesy when asked such simple questions as whether he should be expected for dinner. But while Miss Evie had never a good word or an excuse for him, Miss Letty was inclined to put his oddness down to that mysterious process of 'sowing wild oats' and contented herself with the knowledge that people were supposed to reap what they had sown. It was in the Bible.

It was Edie who overheard the conversation about the governess; obviously they had no objection to it being overheard as the two women continued to talk whilst she scurried to and fro with their dinner. At other times they would fall into stiff-lipped silence each time she entered—and, being understandably curious, she would double her efforts to catch a whiff of their secret. (Such conversations, she had learned, were usually about the failings of Master Matthew and Edie was as interested as they were in learning the nature of his dissipations; that he came home drunk quite frequently was only half of it, she was sure.)

"Wanting 'a nice genteel woman of perhaps fifty' they are—I wonder why they want her to be fifty, Mrs Thornton?" Mrs Thornton declined to hazard a guess. "And they'd have her in three mornings a week so she could learn to read and write—"

"They should send her to school, that's what they should do, not have her cooped up there, seeing nobody. What sort of life is that for anybody but an in*val*-lid I'd like to know?"

No one told Hera about the coming possibility of a governess—which probably saved her

some disappointment, if she could have foreseen the difference a governess would make to her life. It was Master Matthew who scotched his sisters' laudable idea. Was his beautiful windfall to be squandered and lost on such things when his sisters were quite capable of teaching the child simple lessons?

~ 6 ~

The firm of Abell & Clouter was hardly fashionable, prosperous, or efficient. Charles Abell was semi-retired and Archibald Clouter though a vain and dapper little man was not in much demand. His good fortune lay in his cousinship with the Brisbane firm of Clouter, Richards & Smith. Though he would have strenuously resisted any suggestion that he gambled, his senior was well aware that some of his Saturdays were spent at Newmarket or Ascot.

As Matthew Wainwright sat in the small dark-panelled poky office, smelling its must and age and the sense of failure in curling paper and chipped deed boxes he saw what Mr Clouter might have preferred to hide: the way his mind rapidly assessed the possibilities in this situation to cream a little more than his fees would allow. The young man in front of his desk was greedy, keen to dip his fingers into the money, faster and deeper than the will allowed; in which case the opportunity ... Mr Clouter leaned forward. "Of course, Mr Wainwright, we understand the child will need clothes and shoes suitable for London, also some simple reading books ... " His finger moved down the list partly provided by Miss Evie, partly the creation of Matthew's fertile mind.

"I can write you the cheque right now. The living expenses, as you will have noted, are to come in six-monthly installments, but we can provide for other necessities that may arise, at a small extra fee."

"I thought," Matthew hid his nervousness, "the child might enjoy an occasional small excursion to the country, being a country-bred child."

"Quite so." Mr Clouter enjoyed his own excursions to the country. "Shall we say—"

"*I* was thinking of an extra £20 a month—but it might be simpler to provide a lump sum to tide us through the time until we have the governess employed and lessons begun. Would £50 ... " He managed to look very boyish and kind. Mr Clouter had no difficulty remarking to Mr Abell that Mr Wainwright appeared an ideal uncle for the small orphan girl from Australia.

It became a regular event, like a dance in which each partner understands exactly the steps required; and the conversation indulged in as their feet turn and their hands twirl is as much a form as the dance itself.

But Master Matthew did have one saving grace. He spent three shillings from his first £50 on buying second-hand books of fairytales from a barrow. The child confined to the dull nursery naturally decided Master Matthew was very kind.

~ 7 ~

Miss Letty had little to do but her fancywork, the occasional letter, and a reprimand for Edie now and then; but she deeply resented her appointment as governess to the child. What did she know of teaching, of learning, it was at least thirty years since she had taken her last lesson—and the schoolroom atmosphere brought back memories she'd thought were dead and buried.

Edie was required to turn the unused maid's room at the end of the upstairs corridor into a schoolroom. Many years ago a ladies' maid had actually used the room; she had been sent away in the aftermath of an unfortunate incident when Master Matthew's father had put her over his knee and spanked her; this had so excited him that he had attempted a different excitement, an excitement during which he had suffered a mild stroke and been found by Miss Evie.

A nurse-companion had been hired but the daughters of the house resented the expense, if not her youth and prettiness, and she too had passed from household annals. It was a credit to the old man's willpower that he survived his daughters' resentful ministrations for more than a decade. But then he had made money from the Crimean War. He always said that had taken rare skill and courage. But gradually his fortune was whittled away, the house declined, the

number of servants fell ...

When he died his young son as executor also acquired his small but interesting collection of Victoriana.

~ 8 ~

Edie mentioned it to Mrs Thornton who dared suggest it to Miss Letty. Some fresh air for the child. Once a month Edie took the 'bus across London to see her parents and family. If her employers were agreeable she could take the child with her for an outing (she did not know about the outings promised to Mr Clouter); after some discussion, Miss Evie said "Yes". It was presented as an awesome responsibility. If anything happened to the child ...

Master Matthew knew that in the event of the child's death he would not inherit. Not unless Hera was away from the house on some legitimate pretext such as school or a visit to the doctor. It didn't occur to him to wonder why this provision had been written into the will; after all, the child was perfectly safe under the care of four women. But Miss Evie knew a little about the man who had acquired the fortune which would maintain them in reasonable comfort. And if she knew about him what had he known about them? Letters had occasionally come to her father, she had read them, responded to them, known that that man in far away Queensland was dying, and known a little of that money made in the wild gullies of north Queensland. Money made men sour, suspicious, quick to see the ways in which they might be cheated.

Her father had yelled gibberish at her brother, dottles of saliva spreading helplessly across his chin. He knew the boy was a wastrel, a fool, a gambler ... but he was still the only male, the only heir ... Evie knew, none better, and she hated Matthew for being himself. But the old man's will protected the two daughters, the house could not be sold unless they both married. Did he really think they would wish to lose the freedom of the house and their mistress-ship of it for the uncertainties of marriage? And so long as they stayed, it seemed likely Matthew would stay for the advantages, the modest comforts, the solidity of it all.

Hera was so excited by her first ride on the top of an omnibus that she made herself feel queasy in the stomach. But Edie was a sensible girl and pointed out landmarks and the journey passed without incident. Her elderly father and mother and widowed sister and four children were crammed into a small house but it was lively and noisy and they all patted the child or said friendly things or gave her a drink of water and a slice of bread and butter. In the excitement her queasiness came back but Edie sat her down with some very battered alphabet blocks and the child built them into a high tower.

Edie's mother and sister took her away to show her the painful sore on her mother's leg, it was getting beyond poultices, and they were afraid it might need a doctor. Hera was left alone with the old man who came and sat beside her, then he somehow inveigled her on to his lap, then somehow had his hands in her clothing and down around her buttocks inside the newly-bought drawers—

"Da!" Edie was shocked and frightened but the old man was unrepentant. "The little lassie liked it, didn't you now, my pet—"

The child looked from father to daughter and was bewildered by the uproar. Hadn't Master Matthew come in to the nursery several times and sat with her on the armchair and done much the same thing? Mrs Holloway had given her a lot of instructions about proper behaviour but she hadn't thought to mention men. Edie hastened her away and was silent and nervous all the way back to Elbrave Square. She knew she could not risk bringing the child home with her again. But she was sufficiently thoughtful to ask for permission to take Hera for a short walk round the Square several evenings a week. She had to do it after dark when the lamps were lit but leaving much of the square in shadow. Miss Evie did not want questions being asked, nor gossip being spread, about the child's arrival in their house, long childless. But the shabby gentility of the square with its falling servant population and ageing householders, not to mention the coldness of Miss Evie towards her neighbours, meant that questions and gossip, if raised, somehow lay down again and died a natural death.

Hera became Jane and her surname and the life she had lead before her arrival were lost and Master Matthew grew ever more inventive in the ways he found to dip into her fortune; the odd thing being, he found, that that first windfall actually brought him luck at the tables and on the turf. He never took her anywhere but he brought her little things when he happened to remember: an apple, a lacy handkerchief, a book, a hair ribbon, a calendar, a pretty picture cut from a magazine, a postcard showing Brighton pier ... and Hera-become-Jane loved him unreservedly.

Chapter Two

~ 1 ~

Miss Letty was not a good teacher. She made up for lack of ideas and skills with liberal use of a wooden ruler on the child's knuckles. Nevertheless, little Jane was sufficiently keen to learn and sufficiently bright that she was soon able to read the stories Master Matthew brought home. Miss Letty naturally took the credit whilst understanding the limitations in her position. What would happen when the child needed something more?

"Something more?" Miss Evie frowned. "She is a child, a female. I don't see her needing anything more."

An eternal child. Miss Letty felt she understood. If Jane were to grow up, to see independence, to ask for school, for training, for experience of the world, for *life* ... what would happen. Was it wrong to want to keep her completely dependent on them because they were now dependent on her, on that £500 and the little extras ...

She thought back to her own childhood, its close boundaries, the lack of excitement, the rigid routine, her vague longings for something more ... but if it'd been good enough for a daughter of the house then it was good enough for this orphan child with such a tenuous claim upon their goodwill and family feeling. By such means Miss Letty battened down an attenuated conscience and the dull hours divided between school-room and nursery and brief walks in the square grew into dull months and finally into dull years.

Jane read and wrote and did simple sums; she learned to hem and tack and feather-stitch. She looked forward to the times when Master Matthew came and she listened avidly to Edie's fanciful accounts of strange apparitions seen in old houses. She retained her childhood because birthdays and growing older were never mentioned.

~ 2 ~

A life of such circumscription can endure, for many of the gentler sex it has. At fifty Miss Evie was only marginally wiser and more experienced than she'd been at thirty. But she had acquired a considerable deftness in making sure that nothing happened in the house that was not to her liking. Master Matthew might be, in matters of law and religion, the head of the household. She gave deference to his position but regarded his regular absences with contempt. She was insufficiently honest with herself to recognise that her contempt grew out of a sense of futility. The brief moments when the wider world had beckoned were windows that refused to open.

She could not give this stray child what she did not have.

But her brother was happy in these interim years. It was strange how the dice seemed to fall more kindly, the cards to deal more magnanimously, when there was money fresh-to-spend in his pockets. As the months passed, he gradually developed a confidence and a belief that only with Jane's money could he be sure of winning; and little by little, in unnoticed ways, the belief grew into an obsession.

Even in the times when he had no need to confront Mr Clouter, when his winnings bulged in the inside pocket of his best suit, when the embarrassing days of gambling 'on tick' were a miserable memory, he still drew on the orphan-child's money.

He made it up to her, he believed, with an occasional friendly chuck under the chin, a cheerful "and how's my little Janey today?", a penny'sworth of purchases, an admonition to

Miss Letty not to be too hard on the child, even the occasional flight of fancy in which he vaguely promised things and promptly forgot.

With Edie to give her a cheerful grin and tell her stories of ghosts and goblins, with Master Matthew to throw her a moment of kindness, she accepted the cold grey days, the eternal sameness of the house, the gradual loss of memories which had once seemed so full of sunshine and earth-rich colours, the petty reprimands of her 'teacher'.

It was a life that might've gone on unchanged—and she would never know how much better it might've been—except that a man remote from the limited concerns of Elbrave Square chose to go to Sarajevo and press his restless subjects' noses in the fact of their subjugation.

Matthew Wainwright announced one evening that he was thinking of joining the Army. His eldest sister said, "Nonsense! They don't need you." She gazed unreadably at his still boyish face and added, "Besides you've got flat feet and poor digestion."

"They need not know." But unwillingly he felt moved by the rare evidence of sisterly concern. He wasn't perceptive but neither could he convince himself his sisters required his presence in their lives. "But ... if you feel I shouldn't go ... "

"Of course you shouldn't go," Miss Evie said tartly. "You are the heir."

They looked at each other. Nothing more was said for the time being.

~ 3 ~

But the wastage in the trenches undermined both Miss Evie's arguments. And there were older men in his young life who expressed surprise at his continued presence in the club, on the racetrack, met casually on the street. One evening he returned home to find someone had slipped a white feather in each of his coat pockets. 'I will go,' he told himself, 'it'll be a change and they'll give me a quiet job as I'm not very strong.' That this was an illusion fostered by his sisters never occurred to him. They wanted him strong enough to be useful to them but convinced he could not cope with the hurly-burly of a family of his own (and the way it would impinge on their lives and limited income); the sisters had also believed in the illusion that young men who weren't very strong would be parsimonious when it came to the excitements of young women.

He thought he looked quite well in his new khaki and he walked with something of a spring in his step in the first weeks. It was almost a disappointment when the 'quiet job' came through and he found himself learning to fill in forms. This was offset by a certain pleasure in leaving Elbrave Square to its female occupants and moving to Dover.

Jane occasionally asked Edie where was Master Matthew and what was he doing and the young woman made up stories to suggest that he was now an heroic figure of action. Mrs Thornton grumbled about slow deliveries, the extreme youth of the new butcher's boy, the cost of everything, but Edie followed every scrap of news she could find or overhear and wove remarkably colourful stories for her own and Jane's enjoyment. It was the only colour in the house in those years.

With their brother's male foibles and demands removed from the house, the two sisters seemed to become colder, narrower, more rigid in their routine, they went out even less, found fewer things to discuss ... Letty spent less time with the child and bothered less with lessons, only bringing her downstairs to sit her in silence with handkerchiefs or tray-cloths for endless hemming. The day that she was shown how to do blanket-stitch acquired the sense of a red-letter-day. The walks in the Square were discontinued purportedly because of the danger of enemy planes and zeppelins; Evie, too, was well aware that they needed to keep the child alive and death or injury while walking in the Square might not count sufficiently as 'out'.

That Matthew Wainwright continued to find ways, with Mr Clouter's help, to maintain his flow of funds and his regular gambling forays was unknown to his sisters though Miss Evie had her suspicions. She knew him too well and the mild changes in him that her sister ascribed to army life she saw as a man who can no longer quite control himself; she had never heard gambling described as an addiction but she divined a half-hidden compulsion and blamed the army for providing him with extra opportunities and encouragement ... if men came home to

sensible right-minded sisters it kept their natural male weaknesses in check ...

But the Great War banged and blathered its weary way into an armistice and shouting in the streets, and a month later Matthew Wainwright came home. Mrs Thornton had been asked to prepare a very special dinner; as it was nearly Christmas her conventional mind had settled on a roast fowl with bread sauce and plum pudding with cream. Master Matthew had always been partial to white meat.

"I wonder if he will be very much changed?" Edie was more excited than the occasion warranted.

"Older," Mrs Thornton said after judicious thought. "Weary ... the men are weary ... "

"Oh, the poor things!" Edie had never found Master Matthew very attractive, that whining voice, that casual selfishness, but she was sure he would be different now, nicer, and her heart beat faster.

She and Jane walked in the square the evening before the 'homecoming'. It was cold and blustery but Jane accepted the weather, no matter how appalling, as the price to be paid for their moment of freedom, to walk, to talk, to gaze up at the sky, to see sparrows, lights in windows.

"It will be different with a man in the house again," Edie said with a sigh of satisfaction. Her mind these days dwelt more on men; she had met a man, she had woven small dreams around him. He drove the laundry van which called once a week. He had caused Miss Evie some soul-searching. Now they no longer sent out their laundry and a casual woman came once a week and Jane was being taught to iron with the heavy charcoal iron. All this upset because Norman had flirted ever so mildly with her ... it had required skill on his part and daring on hers to snatch further meetings and now they were engaged and she would soon leave Elbrave Square for ever. She wondered, sometimes, when she went to bed, whether she would have said yes if Miss Evie had not seen him as dangerous. It gave him an aura.

"Will he see I've grown?" Jane watched the alighting of a pigeon with fervent eyes.

Yes, to escape from the house ... Edie turned and looked back at the grey facade, the one low light visible ... anything to escape ...

"I'm sure he will. He'll see you're nearly grown up." This wasn't true. Jane, for her age, whatever her age might be, remained supremely childish in manner and dress and deportment. The war years had fined away the childish plumpness, or it might be her recent spurt of growth, and there was a sweet innocence to her gaze.

"Soon you'll be able to start wearing lipstick—and corsets—" Then she wished she hadn't spoken. Lipstick to walk around the square, lipstick to go to church once-in-a-while—the idea was absurd. Lipstick for Master Matthew ...

"Perhaps he will fall in love with you when he sees you ... "

"I did see him ... it seems long ago ... Miss Letty says she can't understand why he didn't come ... " The two women had written their brother a stern letter to say they expected him home each time he had leave; their mistress-ship of the house, unchallenged for the war years, had made them less deferential. Their brother had tossed it in the fire.

But there was another letter awaiting his arrival. It came from Australia and had been re-routed through Abell & Clouter.

~ 4 ~

Peggy Holloway had thought many times of writing to her former charge. She remembered Hera with all the affection she was capable of. But she was a midwife, the one who'd ushered the child into the world and watched her mother die days later, nothing more. The father had offered to make arrangements but Mrs Holloway said simply, "Why not leave her with me for the moment?" and he'd been glad to do so.

But it was not an ideal situation. Mr Holloway drank. And Hera's father was dying slowly. It could not be left for very long. The relatives must be encouraged to see Hera as their responsibility if blood meant anything.

Matthew enjoyed his first meal home. The thought surprised him. Possibly it was *their*

pleasure in his company, the waiting hand-and-foot, the sense of freedom. But the letter came as a cold water douche; a Mrs Holloway writing untidily to say her cousin would be visiting London and could bring news of Hera. For one long moment he could not think—Hera?—who was Hera—and then he carefully folded the letter. His sisters looked expectant. He shook his balding head slightly. This would need thought. To say yes or no.

"It can't be from her father. Who else in Australia—" Miss Evie was sharp.

"Peggy Holloway." He put the letter in his pocket.

Edie, outside in the passageway, heard those two words and stood stock still. Surely not! Peggy Holloway was dead. Her hands trembled on her tray.

What should she say to Jane? The dead walked. Hadn't she created ghosts for these very passages. But if Peggy Holloway was writing letters she wasn't dead, the child wasn't motherless, she had been cooped up here all this time ... Poor Edie took the tray in, her thoughts whirling. She looked at the family and thought, is that why they did not let Jane come down for dinner on this special night, (she had begun to eat with Miss Evie and Miss Letty almost a year ago, a mouse-like presence at their table certainly, but 'one of the family')—because there was something strange to do with her mother—

"What will you tell her?" Miss Letty spoke as Edie moved deftly round the table.

"Nothing. I don't want her cousin here." Her brother was curt.

Miss Evie frowned. "The price of meat has continued to rise." It was the first thing to come to mind.

A cousin! A cousin wanting to come here! Edie couldn't wait to share the news with Mrs Thornton.

But the cook said only. "It's none of our bizziness. Them's a funny lot and I wouldn't be serprised to hear there's—" she raised a hand to her forehead.

"You mean," Edie was a little breathless from all her thoughts, "her ma might be in an asylum, not dead?"

"Something like. Now, don't stand there with your mouth open, my girl."

But a mother, a mother with a cousin that would come ... she looked down at Jane and tried to think how she could share the news and then she knew she could not, not without admitting she had been eavesdropping. Jane was young but she wasn't silly. She would know there'd been a letter, a visitor, a telegram ...

Edie looked round the shadowy room, the chill, the dreariness of it all; she longed to say something to bring a moment of light and cheer, wasn't that what Christmas decorations and holly and candles meant. Be of good cheer. Then she said quickly, "Good night, lovey," and went out. She felt she had somehow betrayed the girl.

~ 5 ~

It was surprising how quickly they slipped into pre-war routines. The house imposed its needs. Master Matthew was away to his club next day and, except for the price of meat, the years might not have intervened. But he put off visiting Abell & Clouter until he had decided what he would write to Peggy Holloway. Something niggled faintly, a sense of the dullness of the child's life, but this was overwhelmed by the questions the cousin might ask. What if the cousin was sharp-eyed, quick-tongued; he couldn't picture a cousin for the unknown Mrs Holloway.

He went from one card table to another; losing every time. He stayed the night there, still wrestling with his thoughts. There was nothing for it, he decided over breakfast, without Jane's money he lost—so—he must put aside any lingering scruples ...

"Mr Wainwright," the war had not changed Mr Clouter, "how nice to see you home without a scratch. You received the letter I sent on?"

"Yes. I have been discussing it with my sisters. I have virtually become a stranger to them all. So I must defer to their arrangements."

Archibald Clouter wondered how someone stationed in Dover could become a stranger to his family. Matthew Wainwright suddenly realised that if he could get money for non-existent

excursions to the country he could not only create a visitor to fit the occasion but he could actually *go* to the country.

"We are planning a short holiday to Bath, my sister thinks—" He stopped. Of course the lawyer had no knowledge of the contents of the letter. "After Christmas. Now, I wonder, if there has been any change." He summoned up his most considerate manner and left the office with a cheque for £50. He won £95 at the tables that evening.

~ 6 ~

Miss Evie solved his dilemma with a firm, "We can't allow a visitor. Upsetting the child, bringing back forgotten memories, like as not making her restless and dissatisfied with her life here, having her want a different name—asking the child questions—the impertinence of this Mrs Holloway and her just some country nurse—" Unfortunately Edie did not overhear this conversation.

"Will you write and tell her so? It would sound best coming from a woman ... " Her brother felt a deep sense of relief as his sister responded with a brisk "Of course! I won't have our household routine upset!" And yet, there was something there, a vague sense that he could have asserted himself. He wouldn't in the least mind a small change to household routine. Did he not regularly escape its dullness? The quickness of his sisters to stamp out the mildest aberration. And Jane. Might she not have welcomed a visitor? There'd been no one in all her years with them.

The departure of Edie at the New Year was Jane's misery. If Mrs Thornton missed the bright-minded young woman she never said so. But Jane cried bitter tears at the loss of the young servant, no cheerful conversations, no ghost stories, no wide smiles ... and she never knew how attenuated these little attentions had been. They filled her world, crept into the long hours of sewing and reading or just sitting, waiting, yes waiting for the next small routine of the day.

Norman had acquired a better job driving for a dairy in Herefordshire; a cousin had put in a word for him. Now the cousin had in mind a decent cottage. Edie walked through it with delighted steps. Just a little London girl with no knowledge of the countryside—but how sweet and fresh the country air, how pretty the whitewashed walls and thatched roof, how cosy the kitchen fire and broad bed off the kitchen and the yellow curtains at the two front windows. She walked her three rooms and lean-to with a proprietal air. Mistress. She said it to the sink and cupboards. No one to say, do this, do that, why haven't you scoured that pot, hurry, hurry, I hear them coming down ...

And when she thought back to Elbrave Square her thoughts were of a place dead, dead people, dead air, dead memories, something heavy and cloying which stifled the people, stifled their goodness, their laughter, their very life force. She could not have put it into words but she felt herself filled with new-found energy and youth. Even the improvements she had seen, the hot and cold taps, the porcelain basin and claw-footed tub in the new bathroom (how they had rolled their tongues round the word, brought it into every conversation for a week—) somehow couldn't change the *way* of the household; nothing could, not birth or death, not the new maid, nothing ... because there was no love ...

As she laughed with her new young husband over their first dinner together, mutton and potatoes, treacle tart, she felt something half forgotten germinate, a happiness in being young, in being together, maybe it would fade bit by bit (wasn't that what happened in marriages) but she couldn't imagine its loss ... and with her happiness came the thought: '*What will happen to Jane?*' Who will make her happy? How will she find love in that house? And she had no answers.

Sometimes in the years to come she thought of calling, just saying as she knocked on the door, "I was passing by and I thought I should call to pay my respects," but she was busy and there wasn't very much money and then there were babies, one after the other ...

~ 7 ~

Matthew Wainwright took his own advice. A visit to the country; he would hire a motor,

travel slowly along the south coast, perhaps Brighton and then inland. Bath. He'd forgotten why he'd originally thought of Bath. His sisters probably. If they could be coaxed into a week away from London Bath seemed most likely. Then he dismissed the idea. Why should he not travel alone. They had not mentioned a holiday. Why should he. He would bring them back something.

He still had money from his last good evening at the tables. On scraps of paper he did small sums, an hotel in Brighton, of course it was the off season unless he put his journey aside till the Spring, the early Spring, yes, before prices rose—the hire of a suitable car—meals—he enjoyed the planning.

"Janey," she sat over her reading of ancient geography texts in the wintry window and yearned for something that had gone beyond being a precise memory and was only a vague longing for sun, "I'll bring you something from Brighton, from the seaside, what would you like?"

She looked up with a sudden smile and he thought, unwillingly, that it was a very wistful smile. Not a pretty girl even though her freckles had faded long ago, but neat and nice in her blouse and grey skirt with her plaits tied up with white ribbons. He didn't know she'd played mud pies under the pepper trees beyond Mrs Holloway's house, he didn't know she'd splashed in puddles when it rained, he didn't know that Mrs Holloway liked to say, "Run outside now, dearie, I'm busy with a bub, take your skipping rope" ...

"I'd like a ... " what came from the seaside, "a shell, I'd like a shell, thank you."

She was more prim and precise now. But then how could she be anything else. 'What are little girls made of, Sugar and spice and all things nice', but Evie and Letty had long since removed the spice.

"Then a shell it shall be, lots of shells," he sat down. "Come and give me a kiss." She did as she was told, but primly. For a moment it piqued his sense of self-worth. "Is that all I get now?" She didn't know what to say and went red. This was a different Matthew. She had no idea that the difference was in herself; that, very slowly, and with no help or encouragement she was changing, growing, ceasing to be a child. He put his hands round her chest, a casual-seeming embrace, and felt the swelling beneath the flannel blouse.

"You're growing up, Janey," and he didn't know whether to be pleased or sorry.

Chapter Three

~ 1 ~

The new maid was a lemon-faced woman called Martha Minty. She was in her forties. Mrs Thornton approved. There'd be no trouble with young men, no wasting time with the young miss upstairs, no barging into the dining-room with her hair around her face and lipstick on her lips, no cheek, no unanswerable questions, no more suggestions that ghosts inhabited the house in Elbrave Square.

Miss Minty had been brought up as a lady's maid. It was unfortunate that fewer ladies wanted maids or if they did they demanded skills she didn't have (it may be that potential employers used this as a way to let her down lightly; she had become progressively more waspish as she saw her opportunities for matrimony retreat). But she was not unhappy with her new situation. Sober and quiet was the way Miss Evie described the household. Mrs Thornton went over her duties, showed her the small room where Edie had lived for ten years, gave a thumbnail sketch of each member of the household in terms of the amount of work they generated, and said she was welcome to use the rocker by the kitchen fire after she, Madge Thornton, had departed for the night. This was a concession Edie had never been granted.

Miss Minty felt herself quite at home with the ladies of the house; they would not twit her for being an old maid, they would not ask questions about her private life, she saw them ossified in a Victorian lifestyle with which she felt quite comfortable. She was introduced to Jane as "This is the orphan child we are caring for"; this suggested they were caring for Jane on

behalf of someone else and gave Jane a transience belied by her history. It also suggested she was younger than her years.

Miss Evie saw no reason to introduce Miss Minty to her brother. Certainly she had no fears that should they meet anything unfortunate might happen. Miss Minty wasn't kissable. "A sound choice," she said to Letty as they went shopping for embroidery silks and, surprisingly, new summer hats. It was a strange thought that the advent of £500 a year could result in summer hats. They had no plans to wear them anywhere special; it was the fact of possession which was delightfully extravagant. Something to do with the ending of the War.

And Matthew was gone on some kind of wasteful jaunt, visiting, he said, some Service acquaintance. 'A woman'; his sisters shared the thought and dismissed it. They had become used to the petty power the house bestowed on them. Their brother's possible affairs no longer disturbed their quiet evenings. 'In fact,' Miss Evie thought complacently, 'it would really be very satisfactory if Matthew were to marry and leave. The child would remain in our care and thus the money—' She saw the £500-a-year certainty stretching away into a quiet comfortable future. Of course it was a nuisance having a young person in the house but the child *was* very quiet and biddable (*that* she had seen to, they both had) and was there, constantly, at their beck and call. Letty had had some vague worries over not sending her to school but now she admitted that it was all for the best, school might have put ideas in the child's head ...

~ 2 ~

On a long lonely stretch of road as Matthew thought to see a little bit of the country-side beyond Brighton, he was overcome by a dizziness and sense of feverishness; it was only with the greatest effort that he managed to bring the car gently into the small village beyond the bridge over the little river at Chidford and draw up in the sleepy High Street. The river meandered towards the sea through a pattern of low channels and reedbeds, a small accessible marsh which provided the village with its one useful influx of visitors, mostly middle-aged men who tramped to and fro with natty caps on their heads and binoculars slung round their necks.

But Matthew, drawn into the verge under a large cob tree, slumped forward over the wheel of his hire car and knew nothing until several men, supervised by a brisk woman, tapped him on the shoulder and when that got only a feeble groan, supervised his egress from the vehicle and, some ten minutes later, his welcome arrival in a bed in the small cottage hospital. His temperature was taken and his face bathed. He thought he heard someone saying something about "influenza" but he was beyond caring at that moment.

Five days later he was able to be propped up sufficiently to eat bread and broth and look out the window into a gentle luminous evening landscape; he could not have said why but almost for the first time in his life he was conscious of a sense of inner peace. Nowhere to go, nothing to do, no one to care when he came in or went out. The sense of restfulness spread and widened. "How long have I been in here?" he said to the young and buxom woman who brought his food. "Since Monday," she said with a bit of a smile. "And where am I?" She giggled suddenly. "Chidford." He was tempted to ask "and where might that be" but he said nothing more, it might come back to him.

Next morning, the doctor, an elderly man with a long sad moustache, came by. "Feeling better, young man?"

"Yes. A little."

"And what brought you to such a state that you nearly drove into our mayor?"

"Did I? The War, I suppose. It was to be a little ... " What had it been going to be. A holiday seemed too strong and there seemed no reason to tell strangers how good it felt to be away from his sisters. There was Jane, of course, hadn't he bought her something, a shell, yes, a shell, like the man who plucked a rose as a gift; the fancy struck him as strange, he must still be a little light in the head ...

"The War." The older man sat down beside the bed as though to ask more then seemed to think better of it. "Another day or two and I daresay you'll be well enough to leave us.

Where were you planning to go next?"

"Where?" Matthew lifted a hand to his head. But his mind stayed blank. "It'll come back to me."

"Well, never mind. If you'd like to come to my house for a day or two, your bed will no doubt be needed ... " The doctor heaved himself up again.

Only Matthew knew what an odd relationship it was; no one in Chidford found their eccentric doctor's invitation unusual. His house, a mile distant from the hamlet, was two stories and an attic of substantial but dull brick looking out over the estuary and long expanses of mud while its rear backed almost down to the low cutting where the railway swept through southern clay and wispy salt-racked grass. And Matthew, as he sat in the library over a small fire and made up war stories and the doctor sat opposite and listened and told with far greater fidelity to the truth stories of his bird-watching forays into Scotland and the Azores, thought that his pleasure in being there, apart from the rest it gave his pockets, was that it was a man's house. No women, except a girl once a week, intruded.

Once or twice Janey entered his thoughts but as she was always allied to vague thoughts of money it was not difficult to put her aside.

~ 3 ~

It became a habit. Once or twice a year Master Matthew went down to the coast for a week or two. His sisters asked only that he give them warning so that the kitchen would purchase a smaller Sunday joint. Once or twice Miss Letty thought of saying with passing enthusiasm, "I hope she's pretty," but she could never quite bring herself to say the words.

Jane was a little longer in the leg, a little fuller in the figure, (in fact Martha Minty was kind enough to say to Mrs Thornton, "the girl has rather a pretty figure, don't you think?" to which Mrs Thornton replied, "but no sub-e-stance; couldn't carry a child, not on custard and potatoe pie,") and Miss Evie's reluctant agreement that she walk twice round the square every evening had brought a faint touch of colour to an otherwise pasty complexion. And what lived in her mind had ceased to be a vague longing for the unreachable and had joined the other women in its triteness, a discussion of patterns and stitches, a mild interest in mealtimes and the hour at which she was allowed out to walk, a muted curiosity about the world beyond the square and the few shops the household patronised, a gentle unfocussed idea that it might be nice if she could wear some of the clothes and hairstyles that she occasionally glimpsed on other girls.

She sometimes spent the minutes between retiring at night and sleep in trying to imagine herself as a young woman doing something 'fast', perhaps attending the theatre or wearing lipstick, but she vaguely understood her innocence as the ignorance it truly was.

The years when other women dropped their waists or cropped their hair, read romances or 'walked out', imagined themselves marrying a prince or a racing-car driver, sought entry to universities or flew through the countryside in a motor with their hair confined by a gay scarf, were not for Jane. Evie and Letty had done their work thoroughly and if she sometimes longed to see beyond the greyness of her home she knew equally that the world that went unseen and unknown was a dangerous, wicked and licentious place.

Matthew had taken a photograph and shown it to Mr Clouter; it had been much admired within those fusty premises. But no one had ever told Jane that she had rights to use some of her own money, that she had rights as a person. But her life as a non-person could not be cast off.

It might have gone on forever, or at least until Evie and Letty died, if two dramatic events had not intervened.

~ 4 ~

Matthew had acquired a reputation as a gambler of considerable skill; the men who had once seen him as a bounder masquerading as a gentleman had mostly faded from his life and lively young men admired his skill at faro and baccarat, at bridge and poker and whist. He preferred cards but was not averse to mentioning his wins on the turf as though they were large

and regular. He lived the majority of his time at his club, only coming home when a losing streak undermined his confidence. But his belief that he must have constant access to Janey's money if he was to be successful had hardened into a clear certainty, an obsession.

Yet he was not blind to the woman she had become. Something reserved, painfully shy, but with a sweetness about her. His sisters had begun to talk of her as their insurance for their old age. She would carry trays, tuck in rugs over arthritic knees, empty commodes ... they had looked after her, in the years to come she would look after them. It made Miss Letty feel very safe.

But Matthew had the occasional feeling that there should be something more to Jane's life than waiting for his sisters to grow old. They had flitted through the corridors in answer to his father's irascible bell. Jane would come at their beck and call. But shouldn't she have some 'fun' first? He was unsure how he should interpret fun. An outing perhaps. Even the occasional visit to Chidford. An afternoon at the races. Everything would be new to her because she had been nowhere and done nothing. The zoo. A play. A walk in Hyde Park. There seemed such endless possibilities. But perhaps he should wait till she reached twenty-one. Then no one could complain. Or twenty-two or three perhaps as she was very young for her age. Other men had young fillies on an arm. He thought of himself with Jane.

And there was a sense that she wouldn't fit. She would look out of place.

~ 5 ~

Martha Minty had changed no one's life but she was about to influence Jane's. She fell ill with a nasty cough. Jane was deputed to take a tray with soup in to her. Mrs Thornton saw no reason to protest the order. Miss Minty might be infectious but it seemed best that Jane with youth on her side should risk infection rather than someone much older and less vigorous. Because Mrs Thornton *was* beginning to feel her age.

Thirty years ago the idea of the daughter of the house helping in the kitchen would have horrified her. Now, she saw it as rather a sensible arrangement. After all, invalid food was a special skill and if Jane, as Miss Letty had implied, would one day nurse them in their declining years it seemed a sensible skill for her to acquire.

Miss Minty did not have a particularly attractive personality but she was grateful to the girl for her quiet help and gentle ways. She unbent enough to suggest that Jane might like to have the copies of the ladies' paper she subscribed to. They were in her bottom drawer.

Jane loved these. The skilful ways hats could be refurbished. How to clean jewellery. Preparations to keep a delicate skin young. Fashions in cosmetics and frocks. Knitting patterns for bedsocks and vests. How to keep a sickroom fresh. How to stencil embroidery designs on to pillow-slips and cushion-covers. How to keep moths out of your furs. Jane poured over these fascinating little snippets from lives that seemed so far removed from her own.

And the illustrations of elegant women stepping into a motor, one long gloved hand reaching up to touch a fox-fur round an incredibly long and swan-like neck, strapped shoes showing off an instep of slim perfection. Or leaning forward to try on a hat at a long sweeping oval mirror that showed off and framed a face of knowing beauty. Or riding in neatly-feminine neckcloth and admirably-cut hacking jacket. There were trees in such pictures, trees and horses, and something long dead struggled to resurface but could not thrust its head up sufficiently to breathe air.

She poured over the magazines in all her unsupervised minutes.

Once she dared say, "Oh, Miss Minty, wouldn't it be lovely if I could go out in a car like that!"

The fervour in it startled the maid. Then she grew frightened. Would the girl see her as offering something she couldn't possibly give.

She said crossly, "You know your aunts need you. You owe everything to them."

"Yes." Jane sighed. "But just once ... "

The trouble, Martha Minty knew with her greater knowledge of the world, was that nothing stopped at 'just once', not men, not cars, not excursions, not longings ...

"Your uncle." She stopped herself and thought the matter over. "Perhaps—if you asked him nicely ... but my head is aching ... if I could have a cup of tea ... "

She felt she should take every small advantage of her lingering illness, the opportunity to be waited upon might never come again. And Jane, with an unselfishness which was partly her nature and partly something firmly dinned in by selfish relatives, said immediately, "Of course. And would you like me to bathe your temples ... they say witch-hazel ... " Her hand strayed over the latest magazine to arrive.

"Thank you." Miss Minty was not so soured that she couldn't feel gratitude for little gifts.

~ 6 ~

The Year of the General Strike passed without notice in Elbrave Square. But the Wall Street Crash was a quite different matter. Would it effect Jane's money? Matthew, on one of his occasional visits, was drawn into anxious conclave with his sisters. No one knew. It wasn't what happened in America anyway, it was what might be happening far away in Australia.

The idea of an occasional outing had been quashed by Miss Evie then she had relented and said a visit to Westminster Abbey might be acceptable if he had the child back by four. Jane had been 'the child' for so long that no one queried or even noticed the description. She might be well into her twenties but she was still 'the child'.

But Matthew though quite happy to take a quick visit to the Abbey was startled, horrified, undermined, when he realised that several young men along the way looked at Jane with eyes which showed very clearly she was no child. He sat up late that night in his bedroom at his club, he indulged in several cigarettes and brandy, he found himself feeling oddly nervous and apprehensive.

Jane could not receive her money till she was thirty but there was absolutely nothing that said she could not marry, that she could not leave the house, that they could prevent her doing what she wanted with her life.

'Janey, Janey, what can I do about you.' He sat and tapped his thighs and tried to decide what plans he might make to avoid any such awkward eventuality. That he did not need Jane's money was not the point, he was a skilled professional gambler, but he still deeply and profoundly believed that without Jane's money his whole edifice of luck would come crashing down about him. Hadn't his luck changed after that first visit to Abell & Clouter, hadn't Jane's money made the difference between his previous penury and frequent embarrassments and the degree of comfort and respect he had acquired. 'The devil's own luck' he'd once overheard an acquaintance remark. But it had nothing to do with the devil and everything to do with an orphan from Australia.

There was a very simple answer. He could marry Jane.

Then her money need never be mentioned even. As a husband he would naturally take charge and care for her assets. Over the next few weeks (in which he told his sisters he didn't think the outing had been good for Jane; she had become over-excited and several strange men had given her unsuitable looks—) he mulled the idea over.

But what if marriage removed that precarious luck and replaced it only with responsibilities, family, debts ... the risk seemed too large to take. And he didn't particular *want* to marry. Though he occasionally sought and paid for an evening with a woman who had a pleasant upper-floor apartment in Kensington, a woman who was as willing to sit and let him talk or share a simple game of cards as accept his unexciting love-making, he rarely felt the stirrings of an energetic libido, not even with the help of his father's bizarre leavings. Sex could largely be left aside as a reason to marry.

He occasionally gave Janey a 'hug' which was more an opportunity to discover how she was changing; but his wandering hands rarely lead on to a desire to do anything very definite. Letty and Evie had worried over nothing. He was aware that they assumed he was prey to frequent unmentioned 'male urges' but he was sure they remained blind to the fact that Jane as a young woman might also have vague desires for marriage and children.

If only for a secret joy in spiting them, he seriously considered taking Jane from them. The house could be sold. The money spent on a small cottage, perhaps in Kent, and the remainder invested. He need never see them again if he did not wish. The idea had a certain seductive power. But it could not overcome his superstitious belief in the fragile nature of his luck. If he was to enjoy Janey then it would have to be outside the bounds of marriage.

Chapter Four

~ 1 ~

"Marriage," pronounced the doctor, "is for young men. Youngish men. Yourself, for instance. I sometimes regret ... " But he left his regrets in the glowing red caverns of the grate. "I am considering a permanent move. A book. And sunshine."

Matthew considered these cryptic utterances and said only, "The house? You'll sell then?"

"My boy, I am open to offers. But I thought an extended lease. You have first offer." He said nothing like 'you have been almost a son to me' or 'your visits have kept an old man young', no, simply 'first offer'.

Matthew pursed his lips. "It would depend on the rent. I have a little to spare, not much, and my sisters expect—"

"Women always do." But the old man named a sum that struck Matthew as very reasonable. Did he want this house sufficiently though. Should he install Jane here. "My wife," he could tell tradesmen and casual acquaintances in the village. But why bother. If they wanted to think of her as his fancy piece from London what would it matter? "My niece." Yes. My niece. Then when he grew tired of her or if she hated the country ... nieces moved on, married, gained employment in millinery establishments or as typists, nieces excited no interest. And Jane looked very young for her age.

"My country house," he might say. Then there was his bachelor's 'digs', his club, and of course the ancestral family home to be visited on an occasional Sunday for roast mutton.

~ 2 ~

His sisters looked him over critically each time he came and didn't like what they saw. His weight had ballooned and there was a seediness about him, a puffiness, a bloatedness, a jowliness ... and yet they had difficulty in deciding just wherein these faults lay.

"Late nights," Miss Letty said judiciously.

"Women." Miss Evie's vision had always been the darker, the more suspicious. "Dirty women."

And one Sunday afternoon, when they would normally nod over centrepieces or read choice snippets from a Sunday paper (if they had decided to squander the few pennies necessary), there was a muffled squeal from somewhere upstairs and they rose and travelled lightly those steps between an ultra-respectable life and the arrival of Gomorrah.

They found their brother with his hands cupped round Janey's naked and ample breasts. His hands were cold. Her doe-like flesh was springy and warm.

She knew this could not be wrong because it was Matthew and Matthew was the person who ... but his large pale hands *were* cold ...

Evie's words came out in a vicious hiss. "Slut! Hussy! Woman!"

Letty merely stood rooted, staring, her eyes never leaving that warm white flesh, those firm nipples of a delicate wild rose, that child that was no longer a child.

But her sister saw the touch of gifted lipstick of a modern shade on her young lips, the hair released from its tight plaits that cascaded in foaming waves, and her brother's hand that lay with proprietory unconcern.

"You will both leave this house *this instant* and never come back." Thus was the princess banished for ever from the safety of the castle. And the woods beyond are dark with dank clay and rotting leaves.

~ 3 ~

A suitcase and several Gladstone bags were stowed in the hire car. Matthew drove with a certain tremble in his hands. It had come so suddenly. It had come when he felt he was the one who would choose when Janey went, *if* Janey went. And he hadn't planned to take it any further, just to look and touch.

And yet, after she had cried and sniffled for miles—to be so rudely torn from her only remembered home—she began to secretly enjoy their rush through the darkening countryside, trees, cows, fences, hamlets, the road ahead; something deeply dormant but not dead crept into her thoughts. She turned to him and put a timid hand on his arm. "It is my fault, isn't it, that they were so cross—"

"Yes." He spoke shortly. In his mind had travelled fears of money. What precisely did the will say. In the turmoil of his thoughts he could not call the exact wording to mind. But tomorrow ...

"But I like this, this *riding*—" And unconsciously she tipped her head back a little so that her hair tumbled around her shoulders and her eyes gleamed with a growing excitement.

He decided silence was wisest and he took separate rooms at an hotel for the night, saying repressively, "My niece will need a very quiet room. She is convalescing."

And in the morning he remained stiff and unbending. But not even his disapproval could quite damp her excitement. A whirl of new things on the road, the glimpse of the sea, the wheeling circling flight of gulls overhead, other cars ... Janey became over-excited as the day wore on, too full, too stimulating, till she made herself sick and they had to stop so she could leave tea and madeira cake among the willowherbs.

The house was lit up when they arrived. Luggage on the front step. A cab waiting. The doctor, fossilised in ancient black and a high collar with his oddly-knobbled walking-stick. A moment when Janey shrank back in the car and listened to the men speak, but took none of their words in. And the house behind them, rising grim in the twilight, and the ebb tide leaving a whiff of mud-flats in the still air.

Then the two men shook hands and the old doctor passed from their lives, bequeathing a house full of *things* ... and the stale closed-up smell of his pipe.

But on this her first visit, Janey was a child playing house and her joy knew no bounds. Martha Minty and Mrs Thornton had taught her a little about houses but not nearly enough. She swept and dusted, she washed less certainly, she cooked but spent more time scrubbing burnt pots and wandering how to deal with spills and broken dishes.

Matthew arranged for a girl to come from the village one day per week to teach her. Ella Bayley was a lively young woman who longed for a wider world and spent her small wages on perfume and cosmetics and stockings, and generally shocked the elderly aunt with whom she lived. She found in Jane a delighted pupil. She thought Jane must be very young. A giggly shy timid but worshipful young thing. It went to her head. Jane's hanging on her every word, Matthew's avid watching of her plump self whisking round the house.

And then—country life palled. The siren call of *money* filled his ears. He took Janey, abruptly, back to London and installed her in a hostel for young unmarried women. He came once a week to take her to a Lyons for tea. The door had opened briefly. Now it shut again in her face.

The director, an iron-faced woman, ruled her boarding-house with unbending rectitude and morning prayers. The other girls, country girls, were there for safe-keeping until they found live-in positions or, occasionally, husbands. But Janey, so her 'Uncle Matthew' said, was only there until infectious illness in the family would allow her safe return home. Janey questioned could only look blank. She was unfamiliar with the tangle of 'explanations' her uncle could provide so glibly. Miss Gibbons, faced with her blankness, could only assume the girl was mentally defective and suggested she might learn to do some minor tasks around the house. No pay was suggested. But Janey was still sufficiently in thrall to the idea of freedom that she swept and dusted and carried laundry and ironed with an alacrity which few of Miss

Gibbons' maids had ever shown.

~ 4 ~

Mr Clouter was the other factor in the new equation though he was never told so. He admired the photograph of Jane taken by some anonymous trees and in between troublesome coughs opinioned that the girl had grown up healthy and sweet.

It was only weeks after his admiration of this photo that Mr Clouter began to think about retiring. He had few clients. It was an effort to climb the stairs to his rooms. He thought that, with certain economies, he might manage the few years between retirement and death. He had no illusions about the likelihood of a long retirement. He was still thinking when he heard of events on Wall Street. He was not immediately worried. Americans, he was inclined to think, knew no moderation.

Weeks shaded into months. Then the letter came. The Brisbane firm regretted to inform him that Miss Hera Madigan's investments had been ... they used the words "deeply distressed" and "these unfortunate times" and "events beyond our control" ...

But all was not lost. Only a month or two later came another letter. A Mrs Peggy Holloway had died and in her will she had instructed that £75 was to be handed "in person" to Miss Hera. It was a mark of kindness from beyond the grave. Unfortunately she did not think to specify that Miss Hera was to be unaccompanied.

Janey in neat skirt and blouse with her plaits tied in bows and neatly pinned in loops sat tongue-tied while Matthew talked with the lawyer. That between them they took most of the money and handed her two crisp £10 notes did not strike either of them as dishonest.

As his visitors went out, Mr Clouter said to the closing door 'what a *wholesome* child'. It did not occur to him to wonder why he should have thought of her as a child.

~ 5 ~

At first Matthew believed he could ride out the gloom that gripped other sharps; he thought there would always be innocents, he thought he had the skill to win more than he might lose ... but underneath a deep fear gripped him, the fear that had always accompanied him to the clubs and tables and bookmakers. Jane's money was reduced to a woeful trickle. Soon it might end altogether. Sometimes he lay awake at night. He blamed his poor digestion but it was a kind of apprehension which could not be laid to rest.

He moved to poorer rooms, ate at cheaper places, resented the money Miss Gibbons took.

There was the doctor's house. He could sub-let it. But months of unavailing search left the house unlet. Chidford was not the place people with money chose. He could live there himself. He could take Jane there. Ella accepted her as a niece without question. No doubt everyone did. Then he wondered why he still thought in terms of respectability. 'Janey,' he thought. Yes, she deserved ... but even that crumbled under the fear of penury and loss.

They drove down one sullen winter's day as the queues everywhere grew longer. He had bought himself a Riley. It had taken the last of Jane's money. He had cut ties. There was no longer an Archibald Clouter in his life. Evie and Letty faded. He kept membership of his club. He needed it.

But in the first few months there, they were happy. They gardened. They poked through attics and upstairs rooms (and sold anything that seemed saleable). They ate corned meat and cabbage and bread and Jane drank milky tea. She blossomed. On warm days she sat in the back garden and loved the sun as it played on her unaccustomed skin. On lesser days she walked to the village where she dreamed of being one of the beautiful permed ladies that appeared in magazine advertisements.

She timidly prompted Matthew into saying he would like her to look like Mary Pickford.

She became a settled woman. The niece. Known by the village but not of it. She was still too shy and tongue-tied to either venture questions or talk about herself. She lived there but rarely impinged on the lives of others. Only Ella Bayley knew a little bit about her and that came mainly from observation.

"He is too strict with her. He says his sisters would be shocked if they knew she was

wearing lipstick and powder." What she didn't tell her aunt or anyone else was that she and Janey had developed a kind of conspiracy to turn her into another kind of woman in the times when Matthew made one of his trips to the metropolis. What for, Janey was vague about, something in the City that men do.

And the two girls, one very naive, the other not considering herself so, experimented. They did elaborate hairstyles, they varnished their nails, they even plucked hairs from their eyebrows, and lolled on the doctor's couch eating fishpaste sandwiches in the belief that women in Hollywood and Paris did the same.

One never-to-be-forgotten day Janey came with Ella to the village and had her hair permed by Ella's aunt. It was a slow, messy, smelly business and Janey's hair was too long for the process to be successful but she went away a mass of topcurls. But then, waiting for Matthew's return, she wondered what he would say, would he like her new more sophisticated look?

~ 6 ~

Matthew Wainwright returning wearily to the house on the coast hardly noticed his 'niece'. It had been a bleak weekend. To return with a profit of £5 was to face a future that neither beckoned nor enticed.

She, still loving him for what she saw as his kindness, forgetting those long dull gulfs between, brought him hot tea and toast and sat obediently to listen to his long tirade against cheats and 'shysters'; she had no idea what he referred to but she had learned to sit, quiet and attentive. He found it gradually soothed.

Though he liked to fondle and pet her, knead and twiddle her breasts, he had always resisted the idea of anything more—and Janey herself had only the vaguest idea that there was actually anything more.

But the woman who welcomed him home was subtly different from the girlish Jane of his past. He wondered what she knew.

"I am so tired, Janey." He set aside the tray and realised the tiredness was more a thing of the spirit. "Come upstairs with me." She took his arm and came with him. The blinds were drawn. The house was silent, only a faint creak or two. In the far distance was a train at the crossing. "It will soon be Christmas." He had seen the first decorations going up. "Another year. I am getting old."

She didn't know what to say in return. Christmas had meant little in Elbrave Square.

He moved across to the bed. "My shoes." And she knelt and carefully unlaced them for him. "My coat." And she unbuttoned it, loosened his tie.

"Come here." He spoke jerkily.

She came, still smelling of toast, and he pulled her down beside him and undressed her and struggled with her until he was finally and rather roughly inside her. She fought with tears. Matthew couldn't possible want to hurt her, not Matthew, and she felt the horrible tenderness of him and bit her lip. "Little Janey," he said when he heaved and sweated no longer. "Little Janey."

Chapter Five

~ 1 ~

Their relationship changed their view of each other. Matthew had never seen any need to respect a little orphan girl from Australia. Now this creature who came into his bed at his request, who had permed hair and varnished fingernails, seemed even less needful of respect. "My little hussy," he said at times. And Janey simply smiled.

As winter gave way to early spring he faced the grim knowledge that his luck had deserted him. Being a selfish man he immediately assumed this was nothing to do with him, nothing to do with his use of Janey, nothing to do with the way he had squandered his money. It must be the different Jane, the one Ella Bayley had helped create, and he slowly came to hate

this girl with her amateurish attempts to grow up, to look like a woman, to assert a kind of clumsy femininity. It was this Jane, his obsessed mind suggested, who'd taken his luck and without luck even this house, his club, the car, would become a thing of the past and he saw himself ekeing out a bleak life in lodgings and the occasional chance to fleece a country bumpkin.

And then there was the horrible dawning realisation that Janey was—

At first, he thought nothing of her poor appetite and occasional sickness, but she grew thicker round her waist, her breasts seemed a little softer and rounder, and he found himself wondering.

His first doubts hardened into an anger. How could she have brought him to this pass. The expense and nuisance, the talk, the gossip, the waste. He disliked children. Not even the idea of himself as a virile man, as a patriarch, the head of a family, not even for an heir ... an heir to what ... the mess, the constant bewling ... my niece ... oh, that would make tongues wag ... and himself getting old, he saw the greying strands he combed over, the stiffness in his hands, the way the cold days settled on a weak chest, the unease of frequent indigestion ...

He began to take one of the sticks that sat in the stand by the hall door when he went out to walk, sometimes thrusting and slashing in an excess of sullen anger.

Life had treated him very badly. The deep underlying resentment festered and fizzled.

Along the railway line the thick clay of the cutting cracked in the dry weather and became a malleable cloying substance in wet weather. Grass grew in small spiky clumps. The metal rails curved away towards the village. Here, along the line, he felt utterly alone and he knew it was only when he cut himself free again that a modicum of luck might return.

But he lingered. Not yet. Not yet. She was still, behind her attempts to be a thirties' woman, behind her pathetic little friendship with Ella and her cumbrous offer of her newly-pampered young body, still his 'little Janey'. He wasn't a monster. He knew he wasn't. But Janey had ceased to be an asset and had become a terrible liability and she had locked him into this dreadful situation. Only when she slept, her quiet breathing a background to his worried thoughts, could he again see the innocence in the soft lines of her face, and the hair that curled down her back.

"Janey," he whispered it in the deep darkness of his room, and she slept on, unknowing, night by night, as his resolve hardened into certainty. "Janey."

And then one night as she breathed softly and he felt her stomach thick and swelling beneath his hands, he said, "I'm sorry. Little Janey."

~ 2 ~

It was a doctor's house, it was a house full of everything he might conceivably need. His knowledge of anatomy was small, his usage of knives and scalpels clumsy, his vague knowledge of bleeding and staunching confused.

He washed the stick with its ebony knob carefully. He put down paper and cotton wool, he used olive oil to wipe the constant oozing. (He remembered ordering tins of it during the war.) He debated where and how to cut.

And, eventually, how to dispose ...

But somewhere in his mind was a secret desire to somehow keep himself and Janey 'alive'. Simple to dig a very deep hole. But Janey had been a nobody in life, somehow he felt she should be somebody in death. And himself. If she should never be forgotten then he too would be remembered, not for himself, but for … because he would always *know* ...

In the first few minutes he felt a great panic well up. Death in thought is very different to death as a cessation and why was blood flowing so copiously. Was he stronger than he knew. And the room in darkness smelled suddenly sharp and foul.

But as the hours passed (he lit a candle to work by) he felt a new-found confidence. His plans took on substance. He brought down the travelling trunk the doctor had obviously bought not so long ago and decided not to take with him to Pico; he chose his own plainest suitcase. He placed the torso in one and the legs in the other and quietly in the pre-dawn he slipped the

cooling arms and head into one of those unnoticed cracks in the clay of the cutting. It took some pressure before the head disappeared and he used a trowel from the garden shed to remove and replant a clump of grass. He took the blood-stained feather pillow and fed it slowly and carefully into the kitchen range. He took the little sign he used to let Ella know her help would not be needed and hung it on the gate. 'Away to London for a few days', it said. He placed a face washer over Janey's neck and then threw in the last of the cotton wool. He was quite proud of the way he had wrapped her torso and placed it almost reverently into the trunk.

He took an ancient brown tweed coat from the doctor's wardrobe and a bowler hat faintly green with age. He walked calmly through the house. Nothing seemed different. Just that faint smell in his room and it would fade.

It took a little while for the kitchen fire to burn down. Then he went out to the car and drove away. It would be a month before he came back.

His first call was in Brighton. In the coat and hat he looked years older and his sudden nervousness made his voice a little hoarse. He left the trunk.

It was Derby Day. He placed £10 on Windsor Lad. It suggested a nobility of renunciation. It suggested the arrogance of being above the petty considerations of everyday mortals. It suggested a new kind of youth, that of the untrammelled man.

He arrived in London and left the suitcase at Kings Cross Station. It was only when he reached his club and asked if a room was free that the heaviness of the word struck him. Free. Free. Free.

He sat over a brandy in the smoking room and an acquaintance said vaguely, "Mr Wainwright? Haven't seen you in a while."

"I've been out of town."

~ 3 ~

Evie and Letty missed getting the paper that broke the news. It was an extravagance they often forewent these days. Not that they would have associated anything dramatic with their brother. Failure, something underhand and sly and petty, yes, convulsing the nation with curiosity and horror and unanswerable questions, no.

Ella certainly read the paper; her aunt often liked to discuss the more lurid news items with her niece. She was very sad to hear that Janey had gone to stay with her aunts, neither of whom was in particularly good health, for an indefinite period. It never occurred to Matthew to suggest that Janey might write. Ella was, after all, just their occasional 'help'.

And Matthew Wainwright rose from the tables at his next foray some £42 and 3 shillings richer. It was odd nevertheless, he thought and felt the grey tiredness of years, that the usual sense of satisfaction was missing.

THE END

PART TWO

DUST

ONCE UPON A RAVISHED TOWN

The hill road was steep, its stones flung aside to teeter on the crumbling verge. Crowsfoot clung to the bank beyond. Parched khaki weed crept in despite the vehicles which regularly crushed its stealthy advance. The pompons of tiny prickles were the main reason for Jilly Fairweather keeping to the road proper. But her brother John, in a throwaway moment, had claimed a brown snake lived in the roadside ditch—and if they were game enough to say 'Snake' aloud they would see him …

She had to brave the prickles when Mrs Trout came by in her red tourer. Like Toad of Toad Hall Mrs Trout was deaf and blind to everything save her forward progress once she clambered behind the wheel. It wasn't that she drove *fast*. Her usual pace was not much more than a horse's trot—and she'd once been heard to cry "Whoa back!" while reversing—so no one called her a danger on the roads. But to a small girl, hopping and skipping in bare feet and being showered with pelting grit she was definitely a menace. Jilly stuck her tongue out at Mrs Trout as she passed, swooping upwards, crouched in straw hat and navy gloves over the wheel, oblivious to all but the glittering gravel ahead.

It was a very hot summer. The creek had dwindled to a string of muddy holes. The nanny goat inside the Fairweathers' gate looked up with burning amber eyes and her rough white coat rose and fell jerkily over her ribs.

"Poor Muggy! I'll bring you some more water. I won't be long."

The little girl slipped through the space between the wire gate and the post and cut across the paddock. The track looped lazily, taking the easiest line, but she was in a hurry. The old zinc bucket on the shelf by the back door could only be carried half full but it would keep Muggy alive. Jilly saw life in dramatic terms.

She put down the buttons she'd been sent for and set the bucket under the outside tap. There was a murmur of voices inside and she came closer to the open window—

"She's being very silly—but it's not my business to tell her—"

"But we don't *know*—and, really, it's not her I'm worried about—she chose him!—no, it's those littlies of hers I worry about—they're that skinny I don't like to think what'll—"

"Well, that's what *I* said to Elsie—there he is comin' round every spare minute and what for *I'd* like to know, he's never lifted a finger to help—"

Jilly was tempted to stay and listen further. It was Mrs Minnikin visiting and Mrs Minnikin, so dad said, knew everything. Jilly wondered where she'd learnt it all. "Ask that woman what the King had for lunch yesterday and she'd know!" That was what Dad liked to say—but had anyone ever asked her? Still, time was passing … poor Muggy … John should've fixed her properly.

She started back, a little tired now. "Sun, sun, go away! Come again another day!" The half bucket got heavier and heavier at the end of a skinny little arm.

A whistle sounded. She took it as an excuse to rest and look up the hill. The midday train from Stoney Creek was coming in. She wondered who might drop off the train this time though they mostly dropped off the night train. It was exciting. One day they weren't there. The next day they were. Five days later they might be gone again. She longed for that sort of freedom. No school. No ironing the hankies and teatowels and pillow cases. No feeding baby.

She picked up her bucket and went on.

*

Mrs Minnikin timed her departure nicely, sweating across the paddock—her body rigid in corsets but her big feet allowed to flow up and over her flat dusty pumps—just in time to catch the mailcar going down. "Hoo-roo! Mr Ray!"

"Oh-oh—didn't see you, madam." He pulled in.

"Didn't see me?"

"Didn't see you. That's right. Doin' a bit o' thinkin' … "

"Thinkin'? And about what, may I ask?" Mrs Minnikin was suddenly arch, not because

she wanted Mr Ray who was virtually unwantable but because she scented news.

"Blest if I know what to think … " He turned and spat tobacco juice into the khaki weed and his voice became a little clearer. "Took a dead fella off, they did. By gawd he—" He stopped.

"He what?"

The mailman had been about to say "he stank" and he cast round for a way to deflect the hound from the palpating scent. "Poor fella—he wasn't up to it, not by a long chalk … "

"Up to *what*, Mr Ray?" She leant towards him; most people tended to lean away. "Do tell." They'd be in town in another minute.

"The travel … not a good way to go … "

"Dear me! What'll they do with him, I wonder? No family, I don't suppose?"

"And they won't know, will they, where to bury him?" Mr Ray chuckled suddenly. "Well, here you are, madam. You hop out now, I'm late as it is … "

She stepped down, hot and irritated; "You miserly old devil!" she said to his dust. "You know more than you're tellin' and that I'll bet on—but I'll find out, don't you worry—they'll have to bring him down and I'll be waiting … "

*

But it was nearly a half hour before her patience was rewarded. Sergeant Beasley came past on his bicycle, peddling hard, his face red to the point of alarm. He had lost a vital argument. The stationmaster had bested him on the point of responsibility. Now he had a corpse in the van hard on his wavering back wheel. Now he had an afternoon of mental effort and form-filling. Now he had—blast the man's snoot!—Mrs Minnikin at her gate: "Hoo-roo! Sergeant! Spare me a minute of your very precious time!" The honey tone was there. But if he could've sailed past he would've. He ran into the verge where her jacaranda gave shade.

"What the devil is it, Mrs Minnikin? Can't you see I'm busy!"

"What is it? Oh dear me, Sergeant—this dreadful suggestion of an infectious death! I couldn't sit down for worrying about the safety of our little town. Why he could've come from anywhere—be anyone—we just wouldn't know, would we?"

The railway van following caught up and ground past, cresting the last rise and swooping towards the station house.

"He's nobody!" He had to be curt to disguise his puffing. Mrs Minnikin looked offended. "Died in the heat." He was tempted to mop his brow but had no handkerchief and couldn't untuck his shirt in front of this bloody old hen. "We'll send him back—where he come from! Don't you worry. Good day to you."

Anybody but Mrs Minnikin would've trembled at the suppressed venom in this. Mrs Minnikin smiled. "Oh, thank you, Sergeant. I'll tell everyone. It *will* be a load off people's minds."

She lunched as she always lunched, heartily and well. She collected her letters when the heat lessened a trifle (from a hundred down to ninety-five); she strolled (she believed it to be strolling, other people thought of it as waddling) with the peculiar air of simpering ease which marked her relationship with the town—and learned that the dead man had been riding with a young man who was now at the station, locked in the waiting-room until inspiration came to Sergeant Beasley as to how he might be made to talk and what might then be done with him. He couldn't be sent back—or on—as he said he hadn't a brum to his name. But neither did the town want him; the sergeant used the euphemism 'the town' as the King might use 'we'; it might mean 'I', it might not.

Inspiration came faster to Mrs Minnikin than it did to the good sergeant.

*

Sergeant Beasley got some basic information from the dead man's bimbo, a young man of strange almost unearthly beauty, but it wasn't very useful information. He was Frank Tyler, age about fifty, and his only known address was c/- a country pub. His pocket yielded up a letter beginning "Dear Frank" and ending "Sarah". There was no suggestion of where Sarah

might live (and letter-writing didn't appear to be her forte) and the young man would say only he thought she was a sister and that in the once or twice Frank'd spoken of her he'd dismissed her as a "silly noddle". It didn't seem likely that Sarah was worth looking for. There was also about £5 in notes and florins and the odd tanner. Sergeant Beasley appropriated the lot for "expenses".

Elsie Calder ascribed death to heat exhaustion and starvation; she didn't know about the £5 or she would've asked why it hadn't been spent on food. Not that Elsie was qualified to say—but no one was going to quibble with her diagnosis.

The young man didn't know about the appropriation and asked that Frank's things be given to him as he was really Frank's "family". "You think, do you—" the sergeant's face up close had a mottled bulging appearance, "that we're goin' to let this here fella be a charge on the town, hey? Is that what you're thinkin', son?"

"No, sir."

"No—and don't let anyone be hearin' any more of this nonsense about "family". If you can't bury the fella then he'll have to pay for it himself, won't he? I'll get a quid for that there suit of his—" He fondled the lapels, it was surprisingly good serge.

The town now boasted only two places of worship, both struggling, and Father O'Donohue didn't think a Tyler was likely to have been a Catholic, not even a lapsed one—and he had no time for lapsed ones anyway—"in for a penny, in for a pound" he was fond of saying. This left only the young Church of England rector who was vague, prematurely bald, short-sighted, and spent nearly all his time growing vegetables beside the church with the laudable idea of never being a charge on the parish. His name was Christopher Trimble but the Fairweather children called him Benjamin Brandysnap.

Faced with the sergeant and a problem, he stood over his spade biting his lips and saying yes, he *could* bury the unfortunate chap if his congregation didn't object but he didn't like to ask them to buy a coffin and he wondered if a shroud would be all right instead. He didn't know about a monument and he was even more confused after he'd met the young companion and asked his advice.

As the day wore on, an increasing petulance appeared on the young man's face, like a child whose mother has failed to return at the promised time. But for the Reverend Trimble, caught between the sergeant's frown and the young man's pout, there was the agony of constantly rearranging his face. In the end nothing was decided because the sergeant was hungry, thirsty, and angry at them both for not making his decisions for him. He'd been going to go to Minnie's for supper. But Minnie would have to wait. Do her good. His telephone rang and he suddenly found himself with someone who might be willing to take the young man away and be grateful for the chance to do so.

He might, after all, go across the creek to Minnie.

*

Mrs Annabel Trout, from her substantial house, was able to look down on the railway station. Most days she did not see this as an advantage. Dust rose in gentle brown clouds and if the wind was her way … there was shouting and swearing and bellowing when cattle were being loaded … there was whistling and shunting in the night and she wasn't as young as she'd like to be …

Today she'd seen and heard something of the commotion. She'd fetched her late husband's expensive German binoculars and trained her gaze on the activities below. She'd seen the body lifted out, she'd seen a fair-haired young man spring down, she'd seen the sergeant barging to and fro, his foghorn voice rising in irritation. She'd seen the station-master going down the wagons. She'd seen little knots of curious people gather, it seemed, from nowhere. She'd seen the station van drive away with the quick and the dead. Mrs Trout gave in, after Annie had cleared the lunch away, and fetched her handbag and went out to her car. It was a business cranking in this heat. If Annie wasn't leaving she would teach her to crank it … but Annie, tiresome girl that she was, would be gone in three days.

When Mrs Trout drew up beside the police station there was no sign of life, the station's newest inmate was lying on the stretcher-bed in the small storeroom which did duty as a cell. His gaze wandered, the window was too small to allow his escape—and why bother to escape? It might be worth staying—if there was sympathy to be milked. He listened to the rapping on the front door, he heard a peremptory voice lifted up: "Sergeant Beasley! Are you in there? I haven't got all day to waste!"

Well, the sergeant was gone and the dame'd have to come back later. Where had the sergeant gone? Curious. The way his fleshy face had put on a googly grin after he'd ticked that milksop minister off. The cop was off on … what was there to do in such a dead place of a Saturday afternoon … women—a drink early—off to see his SP man? Or just a nice nap and a slab of cake washed down with—

The dame sounded cross. The young man heard her footsteps as she marched away, heard a car door slam, heard her drive away … a car … not many people here had a car, not that smooth purr, no, something halfway decent … he lay and mused … while old Mr Plod was away someone came hunting him, someone with a spot of the ready … interesting …

Mrs Trout drove round the narrow curve that took in the town centre, the pub, the churches, the school, and debauched again on to her road home by the creek. There were children down in the gully. She recognised some of them. So I should, she thought sourly; year in, year out, she took in girls in the family way. A very apt description. Their families didn't want them. She took them in. It was her duty. Her moral duty. And they could work for bed and board. Annie was different. Annie was flying the coop with nary a sign of a baby. She would need a replacement. She drove up the side lane by the small shabby Anglican church. The minister would be in his garden out the back, he always was, and she could ask him, discreetly, if he'd heard—he sometimes did—

But no, the man was hard at work digging a grave. His crowbar and pick and spade were all to hand, along with a fair-sized pile of ochre gravel. He straightened up when he saw the car and mopped his neck. It was too hot to be digging.

"Mr Trimble!" He watched her slow and annoyed progress across the small graveyard. He should go to her but something held him back, the desire to meet on neutral ground perhaps, and his shoes were dirty and his hands sweating. Here, at least, he belonged. "A grave?" She looked down, she looked up. "So it was true, some poor gentleman on the train?"

"I'm afraid so, Mrs Trout. He seems to have been travelling, ahem, without a ticket, and the heat was too much in the wagons. It's very sad. I've said I'll do his funeral tomorrow."

"But—how do you know who he is—and his family? Surely the sergeant will want to notify … "

"It seems not. There was a younger man travelling with him. The sergeant has him locked up."

The old lady leaned forward. Even with plentiful powder on her nose it still gleamed, and something else, a faint twitch of excitement. "Foul play?" She dropped her voice.

"I-I really don't know, Mrs Trout. I expect Sergeant Beasley is doing—all that needs to be done."

"I doubt that. I doubt that very much. You see, Mr Trimble, I was just *there* and not a soul in sight. I think he is not taking this matter seriously enough."

"Well, perhaps you're right, Mrs Trout, perhaps he felt the poor man was only a swaggie and therefore … yes, it might be … or he might already have telephoned … well, his superiors." Mrs Trout was a parishioner to be kept happy. He hoped he might eventually be able to persuade her to contribute to re-painting the church. So far she'd been fond of saying "A church is mere bricks and mortar, Mr Trimble, we must concentrate on souls. I do my part, small though it may be … all those misguided girls." But he felt sure she would change her mind when 'her' church grew shabbier than the Catholic one.

He had no idea if she was as rich as townspeople said. Probably not. The whole country was groaning and her late husband, it was said, had only been a plumber. He couldn't have put

a great deal aside for her. Certainly her house was large and solid and her car was only a year or two old. Perhaps there'd been some sort of windfall as well.

"No, Mr Trimble, I think you will find that our good sergeant is not attending to this unfortunate business. I think you will find he is attending to a quite different and much less respectable business. And now, I will say good-day to you and allow you to finish your grave. Oh, what time will you hold the service?"

"I thought at eleven-thirty tomorrow, after Holy Communion. There may be several people who would wish to stay, make a small congregation to—well, to say good-bye."

"Very well. I shall be there."

He watched her pick her way back to her car. He should rush over and crank it for her. She always seemed to have a virtually flat battery; something about the way she drove it, he supposed. Instead he turned back and picked up his spade again. He had no idea what she'd been referring to but he didn't see the sergeant's business as being his business.

Mrs Trout was feeling hot and annoyed. The day had not been as productive as she'd hoped. And now to Minnie's, that dreadful washed out track from the top road. Should she even try to take her car down. And those wild children of hers. No! She would leave the car just beyond the station and walk down. The thought made her feel weary. She might go home first and change into more comfortable shoes.

Annie watched her come in, saw her go out again a minute later, noticed that her stocking seams were crooked and her face very pink. She crushed down her curiosity. It didn't matter. In three days she'd be gone from this horrible house, this horrible town. And the old lady would be off to annoy somebody else. Someday, someone would … would what … shut the door in her face … if only someone would dare …

Annie put her iron back on the stove. It was mean to ask a body to iron on such a day. She fanned herself with her apron and went through to the front of the house and looked out. The car wound down the hill, turned towards the station, ran along past the pepper trees, sending up faint swirls of dust. It drew in to the verge just beyond the level-crossing and Mrs Trout got out, settled her handbag on her arm, turned, began to walk down the hill towards the old barn where Minnie Sowden lived. Lived! That was a joke! Survived. Hand-to-mouth. People could help but they wouldn't, not now, perhaps not ever. They hadn't lifted a finger before the sergeant started going there. Now they said, he could, he would, he was, helping Minnie. Helping! That lazy selfish lump of a man. He only went because poor Minnie daren't say no. Not while he threatened her with 'no visible means of support'. Well, lots of people had no visible means and they got banged up in jails all round the country and got a free meal. Minnie'd probably give her eye-teeth for a free meal, poor soul.

And would she get it from Annabel Trout? It didn't seem very likely.

*

Minnie had sent the children to play at the creek. She longed to find the courage to keep them home, to insist they stay home, but they knew and the sergeant knew she had no power over them. She could not bribe, she could not spank, she could not threaten them with a father's anger. They did what they liked, they grew wild and insolent, they cheeked her and failed to do their little duties. She knew people talked. She cringed at the thought of being on people's malicious gossipy tongues. But there was nothing she could do about it. Sometimes she lay in bed at night and cried. If only Jim would come back. If only she could look out her only window one morning and see him strolling down the hill, whistling, his hands full of bulging bags and cases, a smile on his face.

"Go and play at the creek and let me get on with everything here. Be back by dark and don't forget to call in to Mrs Minnikin's for the tongue."

She watched them run away down the hill, their bare feet thudding on the dusty path. They were very ragged, very sunburnt. She'd run right out of soap last week and had had to send them to school, their hair unwashed, their clothes only rinsed. She'd gone to Mr Fairweather and explained her troubles. He'd been kind and asked the boiling-down people to

let her have a little of the scrapings; they had sent a tin of soap and a tin of lard on the train. She thanked God for the kindness of people like the Fairweathers.

But she would soon be desperate again. She went out to bring in a few branches for the stove and pushed the boiling of clothes on to the heat; having no copper or tubs she did the best she could with a tin on the stove. She would get them on to the line, then finish making the soup when she'd finished last week's ironing. It was very hot in here even with the window open. The children had broken the previous window, the one Mr Meredith had put in for them, and she'd been working off the cost two days a week for his invalid wife. They kept the heaviest dirtiest jobs for her days but she knew she shouldn't complain. They could have asked her to leave. There were people who said she should leave town and take her dirty disobedient children with her. If only Jim … even just a little scrawl to say he'd been sick, he was all right now, he'd be home soon … something, anything …

She heard steps on hard earth outside. Her heart sank.

"Min!" He bellowed her name even before he was at the door. "Here I am! Ready and waiting!"

His big moon face appeared in the door. She looked up from doing her one good dress, her one good threadbare fading dress. When it was gone, would the last threads of her self-respect be gone. "Leave that now, Min! I haven't got long! Got a man in the bloody lock-up today! He'll be demandin' bloody dinner before his lunch is fair gone down. Think I'll tell him to whistle for it—serve the bloody little snoot right."

"A man?" she said faintly. He always made her feel tired with his bigness, his beefiness, his noise, something about him that distressed a certain natural fastidiousness in her.

"Queer as Dick's hatband, I'd say, all golden curls an' thinks he's God's gift to someone, dunno who, but I fixed him right an' good. A few days diggin' ditches'll soon show him what's what. I don't reckon he's been on the roads for long, all soft an' fancy. He'll be cryin' when I get through with him. I reckon I'm goin' to have quite a bit of fun in the next few weeks!"

"But … what has he done?"

"Suspicious death. That's what I've got. Until I'm satisfied—satisfied!" he roared with laughter, "not a step outside the station for that sonny-me-lad. He's goin' to rue the day he ever took up with that fella the parson's goin' to bury good an' deep tomorrow."

Minnie felt it was all beyond her. "Would you like a cup of tea, Bill?"

He always demanded tea that a spoon'd practically stand up in and it meant going without tea herself once she'd drained the old leaves of their last colour and taste.

"I had something stronger in mind today, Min. So leave that bloody iron an' come on over here."

He slapped his broad chest. She still dreaded his demands and the openness of them in the daytime. It wasn't right. Well, it wasn't right even late at night, long after the children were asleep and it was dark and quiet and no one saw him coming. But he came and went as the mood took him and today he had obviously had a 'win' over someone and was feeling himself to be king-o-the-castle. She wilted at the thought. "Come on now, haven't got all day, Min, a policeman's work is never done. Get your things off an' we'll get busy." He was unbuckling his belt as he spoke and dropping his trousers. He never wore underpants and it took him only seconds to be wrestling her on to the bed, pulling away her few poor things. Everything about him was big and red and thrusting and impatient and insensitive and hurtful.

And the way he was so proud of his big tool. Sometimes she had secret horrid daydreams where she leaped upon her kitchen knife, snatched it up, just as he caressed himself with that inimical smugness that suggested he'd compared himself with every other man and decided he was bigger fatter longer heavier; she dreamed of all the lovely blood it would make and then it would be lying on her wooden floor like a big fat bursting beef sausage. The fury of her desire to destroy him frightened her. She'd been a nice person once, not well-off, not well-educated, but brought up to be decent and kind and thoughtful. Now …

"Look at him, Min, I bet your fella never had anything like him, bet he just had a little

thing not much bigger than my finger, bet you hardly felt him going in, just a little tickle and all over before he'd hardly begun, bet you wouldn't want him back if he did turn up again, now that you've had a taste of this big bastard, hey, Min?"

He had her down on her wooden bed, pushing her into the chaff mattress, slobbering a kiss on to her unresisting mouth, bucking and pushing as though she was something to be subdued and ground down and left for dead.

And then he would collapse his great weight on to her small undernourished body and pant and puff and tell her they'd thatched a fine big hay-cock and she would simply lie there and try to forget him and hope that nothing would conspire to bring the children home. Some day a storm would come up and they would run home and find her in this undignified—more than undignified!—position. Someday she would look up and there they'd be, gazing in the window, their little pinched faces pushed up against the glass, their mouths open in astonishment … what on earth were their mother and the sergeant *doing?* Why was his bottom bare, such a big fat bottom up in the air?

What did they know already? That policemen *weren't* to be trusted? That if you were lost, you just continued to muddle along the way you were going. That the law didn't really mean very much. That the law was large and red and wobbled in its rear?

The heat in the shed was intense. She had the horrible feeling that Sergeant Beasley would stick to her and she would never be able to get him or his smell or his liquids apart again. *Would* it be different if he said, "Min, I think you're a wonderful little woman and if we can't find Jim how about you get hitched up with me?" Something along those lines, all full of mention of making hay and how she'd be better off without Jim. No! Someday Jim *would* come down the track, come down whistling, come down bringing them something …

She looked out past the sergeant's solid shoulder and gasped.

*

Mrs Minnikin called her brother Tom Dallow on the party line. She'd come to depend on Tom since the death of her husband in the Great War. She received a little widow's pension, what she smiled and called 'the widow's mite', she lived in their parents' little weatherboard house, she had two acres of land with fruit trees and a dozen hens and two heifers. But it was Tom who provided the little extras. They called Tom 'The Pumpkin Man' hereabouts, she often laughed and said it was just as well his name wasn't Peter but in fact Tom disliked pumpkin no matter how well disguised. His wife Dotty wouldn't dream of serving up pumpkin in their household though she was partial to it herself. But every year Tom put down his acreage to pumpkins. They grew well here, they were easily picked and stored and sent on the train.

He provided a little employment for local youths and a few odd-bods when it came to chipping weeds and later for picking and carting. He grew some lucerne and put in a winter crop after the pumpkins. But it was about now, Mrs Minnikin thought, that he'd be looking for people to put ready on his list for chipping. Tom could use a likely young man, especially one who should be glad to take on anything and no fuss about money. Not that Tom was stingy but prices seemed to drop lower every year, soon he'd be carting pumpkins for the joy of it. It simply wasn't fair to see hard-working men like Tom struggling to make ends meet—and squeeze out a bit extra for their sisters.

"No one'll want him to be an expense on the town, you know, feeding him and probably needing clothes and next thing he'll be wanting a lawyer if the sergeant keeps him locked up because the silly old coot doesn't know what he should be doing next … " Mrs Minnikin had a very poor opinion of Sergeant Beasley's brains. "I mentioned your name to him but I made no promises."

"Well, that's an idea, Kitty. Dot was saying only the other day she doesn't know how she'll get through all the pumpkin chutney she made last year. Can't stand the stuff myself but a young fella that's been living hand-to-mouth'd probably think he's in clover."

There was a knock on the door. "Someone's coming," Mrs Minnikin said briskly,

"probably those little imps come for their tongue. But let me know what happens, Tom." She rang off and went to the door. Possibly she should suggest to her sister-in-law that she dump some of her unwanted chutney on Minnie Sowden. Chutney! No wonder she was left with it. Pumpkin was just too soft to make good chutney.

"Right now, you wait right there, you kiddies, and I'll get the tongue for you." She didn't trust them an inch. Minnie might try, she gave her that much, but four boys needed a dad and if their own was gone for good then Minnie should be playing her cards right and nabbing the sergeant. He was no remarkable catch but then beggars can't be choosers—and any day now, Minnie'd find herself up the spout again. That'd be a fine kettle of fish, Mrs Minnikin thought with a kind of suppressed smugness; if Jim Sowden did turn up again and find his little family had increased in his long absence. Well, serve him right. She took the tongue out of the meat safe and took it to the children. "Now, you run along home and no messing along the way. There's enough blowflies around this weather to catch anything." She pictured them down the creek playing, with their nice bit of jellied tongue sitting out on the ground in the heat and dust. Little wretches, played truant a couple of days a week at best … she must speak to Barney Fairweather …

"Well, what do you say?"

They stared at her with their grubby faces and uncombed hair. Then they seemed to come to the unspoken decision that she was someone worth keeping on side. "Thank you, Mrs Minnikin."

She permitted herself a grim smile. "All right. Straight home now. And if you come next Saturday you can climb for the last of the figs."

They scampered off and she permitted herself a softer smile. Not really *bad* kids, not yet anyway. But if they were hers they wouldn't have to be reminded about their manners … and what sort of manners they'd end up with if things went on as they were or if their mum kept on with the sergeant … they needed a firm hand … and Bill Beasley though he might be able to wield a strap whenever their little hides needed tanning was hardly an example for kids.

The boys were hungry. It meant cutting short an afternoon at the creek trying to catch yabbies but jellied tongue beat yabbies on the best of days and no one had caught a yabby for weeks now. Their skinny legs took them along the gully and up the hill round clumps of dry grass and over occasional logs. They were panting when they reached the shed and stopped. Voices were coming from inside, screeching querulous voices, deep angry defensive voices, pathetic sniffling voices. The barn sounded full of people. They looked at one another, hesitated, then barged inside.

*

Jilly Fairweather sat in her bedroom with her best friend Lizzie and they talked about school and brothers and babies and the hair ribbons that hung in Tilley's General Store, tantalisingly out of reach of either their envious fingers or their penny pocket-money. The window looked across the dry slope, past the back yard with its clothes-line of nappies, its wash-house and yard of turkeys, with its big mulberry tree and cubby-house made out of an old water tank, over the small paddock where Father O'Donohue kept his house cow and several goats, beyond to the slope where Mr Meredith occasionally pastured a few heifers and past the shed where he allowed the Sowdens to live for what he called 'next-to-nothing'.

"Look!" Lizzie went over and craned out the window. "It's Mrs Trout going down there!" Both girls watched the old lady stepping purposefully down the slope towards the shed. "Mrs Trout—going out—putting your snout—let's hear you shout!—ow! Ow! Out!"

"I bet though she's going there to rouse on Mrs Sowden … I bet those boys pinched something from her yard, they're always going round pinching things from people's yards."

"Did they pinch anything from you?"

"No. But Dad came out and caught them by the fence and he told them if he caught them hanging round again he'd put the fear of God into them. I don't know how but they haven't been back."

"Mrs Minnikin told mum she's going to do something about them."

"What do you think she'll do?"

Jilly shrugged. "I don't know. I s'pose she'll talk to someone." Mrs Minnikin was always talking to someone, things were always needing to have something done about them but exactly *what* Mrs Minnikin rarely spelled out.

They watched Mrs Trout step carefully round the broken gate and disappear behind the shed. They went back to their afternoon of wishful thoughts and later went and had tea with the family and Jilly and Lizzie took turns stuffing the baby in his high chair with bits of pound cake and they both asked if they could have a cup of tea. Mrs Fairweather gave in and poured very weak tea. They were still so young, she thought with a faint sense of regret, and yet they were growing up fast. Hard times touched all the children, even those whose fathers had work and a degree of respect. They saw things children shouldn't, knew things that should be hidden, heard things that were not for children's ears. Hard times made parents less careful, less kind, less protective …

"Now, you girls can wash the tea things for me and then I think you'd better run along home, Lizzie. It's starting to look like a storm later." The heat and dust had oppressed her all day; now the clouds building in the south promised some heat lightning, perhaps a little rain, a drop in temperature. She hoped so, though it wasn't the first day that clouds had built, then cleared away without relief.

Lizzie nodded. She liked Jilly's mum, sometimes she thought she liked her better than her own mum, sometimes she thought she'd rather live here where there was no arguing and shouting and accusing. But home was inescapable. "We saw Mrs Trout going down to the Sowden's shed—"

"I don't think you should call it a shed, Lizzie dear, I know it *is* a shed but it's also their home, poor things, so I think it's nicest if we call it a house now."

Lizzie bobbed her head obediently. "But we did see Mrs Trout. What do you think she wants them for?"

"Oh! Probably to ask the boys to go and chop wood for her—or something like that. I believe Annie is leaving Mrs Trout."

"Annie's getting married, my mum says, she says it's her second try and this time Annie should keep everything to herself till she's got the ring."

"Well, Annie seems a nice woman so I hope she'll be happy."

She could see Lizzie didn't understand what her mother had been referring to and she thought it best to keep it that way. No one knew what had happened to Annie's baby, perhaps she'd been mistaken, perhaps there'd been a miscarriage. Annie was older than most of the girls Mrs Trout took in, to 'save' them, as she put it, and Annie might've made some decisions of her own. Perhaps there never had been a baby. Folk were so used to talking of Mrs Trout's girls as if unwanted babies were the only bad things that ever happened to girls. "I hope she'll give those boys some work. It'll keep them out of mischief and give them a little to help their mum."

"My mum says the sergeant is eating her out of house and home, that he goes there just for the sake of his belly and his stick—"

"I-I don't think you should repeat things like that, Lizzie. Sergeant Beasley really isn't a topic of conversation for nice little girls to be repeating."

"He sweats a lot and his tummy sort of wobbles when he walks," Jilly said meditatively.

"Not sweats, Jilly. A horse sweats, a man perspires, a lady glows."

"Well, he perspires a lot." Jilly was undaunted. "I don't like it when he comes up to us and tries to put his arms round us and says 'what are all youse girls doing here', when we go up to look in the window at the dolls." Tilley's made a habit of displaying children's toys in their big front window, it lead to a lot of envy and heartache but who could blame them for trying to gain sales through the deep longings of the town's children. After all, most parents made a special effort to put a little aside for birthdays and Christmas.

"Well, he shouldn't," Mrs Fairweather was sharper than she meant. "Just move away if he tries to touch you at all." The sergeant always smelled hot and stale. The thought of him trying to embrace her daughter, anyone's daughter, revolted her. "Tell me if he keeps on doing it." She'd been brought up to respect the law, authority, anyone who had power, the good citizen did what she was told. But she would set all that aside if her children were threatened in any way.

"I wonder if he was there—at Mrs Sowden's I mean—when Mrs Trout went there? He goes there a lot. I s'pose he wants to put his arms round her too." Jilly put away the last of the plates and hung up the teatowel.

Mrs Fairweather stared at the departing backs of the two girls. *Had the sergeant been there?* A profound, yet unfocussed kind of pity welled up in her. Minnie Sowden was such a drab pathetic little thing. She could never stand up to life. So why had life played such a bitter joke on her? Four boys and an itinerant husband who'd gone who-knew-where. And the sergeant … and Mrs Trout …

*

"Barney," Mrs Fairweather said quietly when the children were in bed, their prayers said and their faces kissed and the baby asleep, "I'd like to just pop across to see Minnie. I feel worried, I don't quite know why. Can we spare a cabbage?" Her husband was a diligent weekend gardener and the children each had a little plot. They were rarely without fresh vegetables.

"It's going to storm."

"I hoped it might but I think it's moving round to the east now. I don't think there'll be anything."

"Mmm." The papers had come in on the train and he was busy catching up. "Well, take two if you like … and there's silver beet to spare."

She took her string bag and filled it with vegetables, slipping in half-a-dozen potatoes and a squash. Then she was gone across the yard and the paddocks, lighting her way with their torch.

The Sowdens had no light in their shed. The boys were sent to bed early. Maybe that was why they were so full of mischief, they went to bed too early. But Minnie often sat by the stove with the firebox open, straining her eyes to do a little mending and patching by the glow of the coals. Mrs Fairweather knocked gently on the window. "Minnie, it's me! Are you still up!"

Mrs Sowden came to the door and pulled it open. "Pat." Her voice sounded lifeless. "Come in, I was just going to bed." But she took down a small stub of candle and lit it from the coals.

"How are you? I meant to pop over earlier with some vegies but somehow the evening got away from me."

She took the old kerosene tin that Minnie used as both bucket to carry water and improvised seat.

"It's the end," Minnie had never been dramatic in her life. "She says I don't deserve children and she'll start looking for a home for them—and if there's none they should go to some institution or something—that I'm not fit, that I'm a slut, I'm too wicked … but I can't help it, I can't help it—" her soft voice rose a tone. "What am I s'posed to say when *he* comes, when he threatens to run me out of town … "

"Is that why she came today?"

"She came—I'm sure she came here hoping to find … I don't really know what she was after … " Minnie looked over towards where the boys slept on the one mattress behind a curtain of old wheat bags. She started to sniffle. "I saw her, I looked up and saw her looking in the window … it was so awful … " The tears ran down the faint grooves in her face. "I used to be, you know I used to be … I didn't have much, we never did," her crying interfered with her words, "but we tried to live proper, Jim and me, you know we did … and now … " She hiccupped. "She looked in and she saw Bill and he was—" She shook her head. "Oh Pat, I

don't know what I'm going to do, how we're going to manage … when she saw him … like that … " She put both hands up her face and her voice grew muffled, "the way she looked at him, when she came round to the door and he didn't have his trousers on … the way she looked, she was so shocked, she went so red, and she started to shout, and then she came over to me and started to hit me with her handbag … "

Minnie trailed away. The struggle to keep a little vestige of self-respect, of decency, a sense of herself as a married woman, had died under that rain of blows, the big leather bag thudding on her breasts, as Mrs Trout shouted almost incoherently, as Mrs Trout stared down at those pale thin spread-eagled legs, that little pale mound of a starving belly, at that little pool of wet spread there between her legs that accused louder than everything … Why was she so ashamed of that damp on the old sheet carefully stitched together from clean flour-bags, that little stain that said more babies when she couldn't care for the ones she had, that said she had sunk so low there was nothing left for her but loss and disgrace and departure.

And that big man standing there bemused by the sight of the old woman in her black cotton frock, hidden beneath her big black and white straw hat, belabouring those little slack breasts, those spindly little girl-shanks, that little curly mound of mouse-coloured hair, that little unfed unselfish body … that big red man standing there, angry, embarrassed, yet oddly excited by the spectacle of two women like that … that old woman turning away, her spurt of fury exhausted, and turning on that big stupid oaf of a man, suddenly plucking away the trousers he still held in his big ham hands and seeing what he'd hidden, seeing him rise with the sudden illicit excitement …

She could not say these things to Pat Fairweather. There were things that couldn't be said because there were no words to grasp their significance.

"He's a big bastard, hey, Mrs Trout, and that's what you came to see, didn't you, sneakin' up like that. Well, there he is, just tell me what you want to do with him, hey?"

Mrs Trout, never lost for words, never lost for maxims and good advice for lesser erring mortals, Mrs Trout just standing there, staring, the red blotches gradually fading from her pendulous cheeks. Then she seemed to pull herself together with a superhuman effort.

"I came," she said loudly, a little tremulously, "I came to see you this afternoon and you were not at the station." Her voice grew stronger. "The minister told me you might be here." She found pleasure in saying 'the minister'; he could've come and cranked her car for her, held open her door. "I came here. I have never been so shocked and disgusted in my entire life."

Mrs Trout heard a shuffle behind her. She dragged her gaze away from the sergeant's large and intrusive member and turned. The four Sowden boys were staring in. Mrs Trout glared at them. She turned back and rushed towards their mother. "Put your clothes on, you hussy, imagine letting your sons see you naked! Women have gone to hell for less than that!"

"And you would know, Mrs Trout?" Minnie Sowden dragged her frock over her head. Every movement was an effort. Her body ached. But she felt a strange sense that all was not lost as she said those bitter words. You *should* know, Mrs Trout. You are into everyone else's business, but you've never lifted a hand to help a soul in this town. You think I'm weak and stupid and maybe I am … but for all this, for everything you see here I'm still trying, *I'm still trying* … you can't understand that, can you, that someone who is down the bottom of the heap with nothing, with nothing to look forward to but endless struggle, can go on trying …

But she said nothing, only faced the boys and lifted a hand to say, outside, go outside. They turned and went. They sat down below the little makeshift dunny and took turns in taking bites out of Mrs Minnikin's jellied tongue.

"Boy-oh-boy, did you see the size of the sergeant's doddle?"

"Yeah, it's bigger than a balloon—"

"It's bigger than a dozen sausages—"

"It's bigger than a possum's tail—"

"It's bigger than a carpet snake—"

Pat Fairweather did not quite know how to deal with Minnie's tears but she patted her

gently on one shoulder and said, “Never mind, Mrs Trout won’t do anything, I’m sure. But I wonder why she was looking for the sergeant, what did she want him for?”

Minnie grew quiet. At last, she put her hands together in her lap and said, “She wants that young man the sergeant has locked up, she wants him to come and work for nothing. Annie is leaving. Bill says he has to stay in town in case—well, the police don’t know what happened … so she can have him for nothing … ”

*

Mrs Trout whose moral standards for others were impeccable, sat over her meal in silence. She let Annie sit with her most evenings. A maid, she believed, should eat in the kitchen and if her husband had been alive—but he wasn’t and she sometimes needed someone to talk to. But tonight she’d told Annie to serve up and have the evening off. She wanted to present it as an indulgence on her part but even that was difficult to do.

It had been a deeply humiliating afternoon. She wasn’t sure that she should dwell on it. Yet she had the sergeant’s permission. She could have the young man for as long as she needed him. She needed a pair of strong young arms around here. The house needed things doing, the garden was getting out of hand. A man to crank the car, fill it with petrol, wash it, a man to carry heavy things. She would get Annie to carry down the old army cot to the shed tomorrow and there was a little cupboard to spare in Annie’s room and a rug that’d been burnt in the middle.

She supposed he could come into the house for meals and the bathroom. She would close off the front rooms. The nice big parlour, the little room next to it in which her husband had done his accounts years ago and kept his almanacs and record books, the room at the end of the passage where her mother had died. She didn’t need them. It didn’t occur to her that someone else might be grateful for them.

She chewed her beef stew slowly and thoughtfully. Annie was a good cook. She made excellent pastry. But she did not really need her. She could have a woman in once a week to clean. The boy would be grateful for whatever he got here. She would learn tomorrow what skills, if any, he might have.

She removed the clean teatowel that was covering her bowl of custard and prunes and began to spoon it up. If she went looking for a woman … Minnie Sowden … she tasted the idea, it had a kind of lemon-sweetness to it, the woman would be grateful, just fancy, the woman who had lain there, naked, and shivered under her beating, to have that woman here saying “yes, Mrs Trout,” or, better still, “yes, Madam, no, Madam,” telling her to scrub harder, finding work for her, watching her bend over the tubs, down on her knees scrubbing, that little drab woman … and people would see it as her kindness, her Christian charity … she had seen the sink of iniquity in which the sergeant and his fancy woman had sunk, the brazenness of them openly on a Saturday afternoon, in front of the children … yes, but this was the woman she had rescued, this was the police sergeant she had magnanimously helped with the problem of the unwanted young man.

She thought of the sergeant there. His big popping eyes and sparse hair and freckled red arms hanging sheepishly, his big hairy stomach. She put down her spoon. It was so long since her husband, she could hardly remember him, he had been a small man, dry and rather precise, his bones light and, yes, he’d had light grey eyes and a rather high voice … he’d been fond of ginger steam-pudding, very fond, but he never seemed to put on any weight, he always remained light and spare … the sergeant’s flesh when put against Mr Trout’s memory seemed oddly … exuberant … oddly alive and warm … and he’d just lifted himself off that slatternly little woman who allowed him to come … that was the shocking part; them with the afternoon light shining in that window, not discreet with the lamps all turned off as decent people did … and the sergeant just standing there like that, just standing, not even bothering to put his hands there …

When the custard was spooned up, the last prune seed neatly passed from mouth to spoon to side of the bowl, she rose and went to make tea.

She could allow the young man into the kitchen, possibly she could stretch a point and allow him to eat his meals with her, some of his meals. She pondered. Not breakfast. Perhaps the midday meal. And a set time to bathe. A set day to bring his clothes in for Minnie to wash. Yes, that would be suitable. She would look at the young man, she would compare him with Bill Beasley, she would—well, a hussy like that … the two of them going between shed and shed … the sergeant impotent with anger and jealousy …

But he'd given his word, he knew which side his bread was buttered on, he could not tell her she should not employ Minnie to wash and iron and clean … every so often she could send Minnie down to the shed to tidy the boy's things, send the boy down to Minnie's with a message … or something … she felt much more cheerful as she drank her tea and treated herself to a slice of Annie's fruit cake.

*

Frank Tyler was buried with a prayer and a few words of regret. A little knot of people chose to stay on and see his body wraped in a piece of paint-spattered tarpaulin and lowered with careful ropes into Mr Trimble's not-very-deep grave. Sergeant Beasley put in an appearance and put in a request to be reimbursed for the non-existent coffin provided by him. He did not really expect to get anything so he was surprised to find himself several pounds richer some months later.

It opened some wonderful new possibilities to his slow mind and he began to cast around for other things he might seek money for. He'd put in for two weeks' food for one young man held in regard to questioning over the death of one Frank Tyler … and he was grateful that the town had no doctor … and he now began to hope he would receive reimbursement for non-existent meals as well. It made him cheerful. Paperwork was tedious *but*—

Over the weeks he'd debated on how to pay back the Reverend Trimble for sending Mrs Trout round to Minnie's; it never occurred to him to query that. He discarded the most obvious things. Then it came to him—Minnie's boys. Those young hooligans could soon make the parson's life a misery. He just needed to think up the right pretext by which to get them there. And this business of Minnie going to Mrs Trout's to work, that was a bit odd. Since when did Annabel Trout *pay* people to do her work. Was there a shortage of fallen women? And it was bad for Minnie. She might start to think she was someone. It mightn't be much but a pittance was better than nothing. She hadn't even been *there* last time he'd gone round with an itch in his groin.

Another woman? He pondered. And then it came to him. The most beautiful revenge of all. Mrs Trout!

An elderly widow living in modest comfort, an attractive enough house, some standing in the town. But alone, depending on unreliable paid and unpaid help. Not an attractive woman even in her Sunday best, but solid and clean and not all that old really. He was forty-five, she probably wasn't much over sixty-five, what was wrong with that. She wouldn't ask for much, just a bit of company, she might like him to drive her here and there and anything would be better than sweating to and fro on that bloody bicycle … she could say, "Monday and Friday are Bill's nights, I don't know how I managed before he started coming by."

Would she want anything from him. He looked at himself in the small mirror in the dirty bathroom of the station house. He smoothed down his sparse hair and screwed his face into various expressions. He slapped his big belly with his dull-grey towel. Women of sixty-five—did they want anything—he tried to imagine Mrs Trout in bed in a frilly pink nightdress. Imagination was not his strong point. But if she wanted him, well, a woman was a woman and he saw no reason to be fussy and there'd be no trouble with claims that some brat was his—whereas with Minnie, well, he'd been playing with fire there … even now there might be a little Bill growing … the thought made him queasy …

But he was the one in power, he was the one who called the shots … Minnie must be got on her way … he would talk to Annabel (already he'd begun thinking of her as Annabel) … Annabel was sternly convinced that Minnie was not a fit mother … he told himself he liked a

woman with a strong mind, not a little wishy-washy thing blown on every breeze like Minnie.

Yes, that would work well. The more time the boys spent with the reverend, the easier it would be to remove them from Minnie's care when the time was right, the easier it would be to convince Minnie she could find work if she took the train and went away to Brisbane or somewhere big. She'd be doing it for the sake of the boys and the Reverend Trimble could help him find space in a Church institution for boys. He smiled into the mirror. The cleverness of it all was breathtaking. The only thing was putting up with Annabel Trout but if he treated her as a challenge … and she was getting on, she'd pop off sooner or later, preferably sooner … possibly he could do something to shock her, shock often killed people he'd heard. She'd been shocked at seeing him, he tried to imagine himself taking her in his arms, "Sweetie," he would say, "I've longed to do this so many times," and somehow he had to sweet-talk her and get their clothes off at the same time—and while she was bemused … well, Annabel without clothes would be as putty in his hands …

"You're a clever old devil, Bill Beasley, and that's a fact," he told his reflection.

*

"It's even worse now," Jilly told the nanny-goat in her serious confiding voice. "Now she goes even faster because that boy is with her. She likes to show off, I s'pose."

"Mahahaaaa."

"Exactly. She should be put in prison just like Toad for driving like that. But the sergeant won't do anything now. Mrs Minnikin thinks he's looking for a rich wife. I wonder if Mrs Trout is very rich. She might have big chests full of jewels up in the attic. Lizzie might know. Her dad went there to put in some lamps for old trouty-wouty."

The goat began to nibble at Jilly's long plaits. The girl twitched them away to safety.

Lizzie said her dad hadn't said anything about seeing chests and she didn't like to ask him because he was a bit grumpy these days. She suggested sneaking in one day when they knew Mrs Trout and the young man were both out. It suggested danger and excitement but Jilly's conscience also got in the way. "I don't s'pose we really should—sneak in, I mean."

"Maybe she keeps them in the shed. We could look there, it's not the same as looking in someone's house."

"But—if they were in the shed, then that young man would find them. He might take the jewels and run away."

"My dad says he's not normal. He thinks he's a girl dressed up as a boy. You know, because of his hair and things like that."

"But … Mrs Trout makes him sleep in the shed because she says she can't have a man in the house."

"Well, she has Sergeant Beasley now. I've seen him getting off his bike at her gate at least three times."

"She might be afraid of robbers … yes, and she asks him to come and see that all the things in the chests are safe."

The girls lived on the edge of rumour and counter-rumour. But the idea of chests of jewels was entirely their own and they could not quite decide what was permissible to do and what not. So they took to hanging round vaguely, waiting for a moment when they could wander in, and if caught they intended to ask Mrs Trout whether she'd be interested in buying the kids that Muggy was expected to produce quite soon. Goat's milk, they'd say, is particularly healthy.

They soon discovered that Minnie Sowden came Friday and Monday mornings. But Minnie wasn't likely to be a problem. She scuttled in quietly, using the entrance on the far side. She worked quickly and, yes, almost angrily, and left as though she was glad to be gone. The strange golden-haired boy sometimes worked in the garden, raking the paths or hoeing ground for vegetables, now and then he prepared the car and drove Mrs Trout into town. Once or twice he looked straight at them but as though he saw right through them. They found this eerie. His space in the shed was merely a bed and a cupboard with a jug and basin on top. He always

seemed to wear the same clothes and his bed smelled faintly sour.

After poking around amid the junk of the shed, the old mangle, a large tub, a broken mud-guard, several chairs, some cardboard cartons and biscuit tins, they lost interest. Though they developed sufficient courage, if that was what it took, and peered in the house windows and watched the comings and goings they never learnt the secret of Mrs Trout's wealth.

"Is Mrs Trout really rich?" Jilly asked her father one evening when she found him sitting at his ease before supper.

"They say her father grew rich on war bonds but I suppose it's all relative. Apart from her car she doesn't spend much."

"It is strange that she should've bought such a powerful car," Mrs Fairweather said as she came in to draw the curtains.

"I think she enjoys the—*idea* that she has something no one else has."

"But it isn't good for her … I've heard that she was quite friendly and popular when her father first came here … and then, slowly, she grew more and more distant—"

"More and more stuck-up—"

"Anyway, that isn't something little girls need to know about."

But, later, husband and wife pondered a little more. "She couldn't bear that people said her husband was 'only a plumber', I think, and Clive couldn't bear that she looked down on him … they used to say there was something a bit suspicious about his death that night in the buggy but I haven't heard any gossip for years now."

"She's certainly not a happy woman. Perhaps that's why she's so quick to point out everyone else's shortcomings—before they can look too closely at her own."

"It might just be time on her hands. Yet she could be—what does Mr Trimble call it—a 'force for good' if she chose."

"I suppose she believes she is helping that young man—and Minnie—"

"But it's a bitter pill for poor Minnie to swallow."

"I hear Tom Dallow is arranging with Mrs Trout to borrow the young man a couple of days a week."

"Is he? I hadn't heard that. But I *did* hear that that old man who died was said to be richer than anyone knew."

"Oh, come now, he was just an old swaggie!"

"Maybe … but apparently a woman came to the station and demanded to know what the sergeant had done with all the man's money."

"Goodness! What did he say?"

"He sent her round to see the minister and *he* told her she was quite mistaken but she produced a letter in which her brother said he'd finally been able to put a little money together and he'd be coming home soon. So the minister and the sergeant went up to see the young man and the sergeant accused him—but they found no money. I think that's why they made the arrangement with Tom. He'll work on the farm and Tom will pay the money to the sergeant and I suppose he'll send it on eventually—"

"I don't see why Mrs Trout shouldn't pay him some wages. Even if people have gone off the rails a little they still deserve something in return for their work."

"Oh well, try telling that to her. I think you'll find she has her arguments well-honed."

"But it isn't good for her to be seen to be greedy, not when so many people are finding things so hard … and she's getting old."

*

"We're all goin' punkyin-picking," Lizzie said cheerfully, "me an' Tim an' Cec. Maybe you an' John could come too? Mr Dallow says he can't afford to pay grown-ups this year so we're getting thrippence an hour!" She did a little pirouette. "Three hours'll be ninepence and four hours'll be a bob and five hours'll be … "

"I'll ask Mum if we can go." The possibility of sudden riches shone like stars in the little girls' eyes and pumpkin-picking wasn't too bad as a job. Heavy and hot but you soon saw a

nice big pile of pumpkins to reward your efforts.

In all, about eleven children took to Tom Dallow's paddocks, the girls picking the big grey pumpkins and putting them in piles, the boys loading the piles on to the big dray as Tom Dallow's horse came plodding slowly along behind them. But the girls quickly discovered that the work had a unforeseen draw-back. Neatly nestled underneath dozens of the pumpkins, in the little concave circle where the last dry shred of the flower remained, were spiders, dozens and dozens of redbacks, fat ones and small ones, spiders with sharp red stripes and spiders with faded brownish stripes … the girls naturally squealed, bringing down the boys' scorn. "They're only slow, they won't hurt you," Lizzie's brother Cecil said contemptuously. "Look!" He put his grubby thumb on the slow-moving spider and squashed. "That's all you got to do."

"All right." Lizzie screwed up her face and squashed hard but Jilly found her hands shaking when she tried to follow suit. 'I think I'll just pretend,' she thought.

At mid-morning, Tom Dallow kindly brought them a bottle of milk and some slices of Johnny cake. When they'd gone back to work, they noticed Mrs Trout's young man was working on the far side of the fifty-acre paddock. He moved with unearthly speed and grace, Jilly thought—step, stoop, pile, step, stoop, pile—and all through the morning she found herself being drawn to watch his distant figure from the corner of her eye. Her eyesight was good and she soon decided he was doing something as well as picking pumpkins but she couldn't decide what, marking them perhaps.

At the end of the day, with pumpkins piled high in his shed, ready for packing for market, Tom Dallow paid all the children off and sent them home. Behind them walked the young man on his way back to Mrs Trout's but although his legs were much longer and the children were all very tired he made no effort to catch them up.

*

Sergeant Beasley was riding high. He'd managed to turn Sarah Tyler away without a hint of suspicion that he'd pocketed anything of value. The letter found in the pocket had been returned, the suit had been explained away as too soiled to be worth keeping, he'd blown his nose and sounded suitably mournful—and now he'd been asked to collect the wages Tom Dallow was paying. He hadn't yet decided how he might be able to fiddle the account but he was increasingly confident he would find a way.

Even Annabel had proved more amenable than he could've hoped. He only needed to be mildly attentive, to pay her the occasional compliment, to bring her a bunch of the pink roses that grew woodily and wild in the station garden. And Minnie … that was all rather delicious … to call in of a Friday morning and see Minnie on her knees with bucket and scrubbing-brush as he strode through leaving wet dirty marks along the clean hall. Minnie had always secretly made him feel uneasy. Now he hoped she carried home a deep and abiding sense of regret. If she'd been nicer to him …

The evening that Annabel looked at him across the corned silverside and boiled potatoes and said bluntly, "Well, Bill, you've been coming two months now, what are your plans?" was momentarily awkward. He hadn't quite decided.

"I'm not a man to rush into things, you know, Bel, an' I can't offer you what you've already got but there's red blood runnin' in my veins," he held up a brawny arm and allowed her to admire it. "But I've been thinkin' there'll come a day when I can talk you into … "

"It's been a very long time since Clive—" To his surprise, Mrs Trout became stained with an unattractive red.

"To me, Bel, you're not a day older than me, younger if anything." He wondered if he was spreading it on too thick but no, the woman was smiling.

"Well, you set the day and we can go and see Mr Trimble and I'll have to see about getting my will changed and some new clothes and a—" she grew redder, "well, a honeymoon of some sort … "

The walls seemed suddenly to rise up and trap him. Marriage! To this ugly mean spiteful old woman. And then he thought 'Will? What's in her will?' and he beat down the walls and

thought he could manage anything for the riches that would follow. There was a faint sound of a bush brushed against the house.

But her cat, a large lazy tabby, was seated by the kitchen range.

"We'll do it, Bel, and the sooner the better!" He got up and moved heavily round to her and leant over and kissed her. She felt his large wet lips on hers and remembered the afternoon at Minnie's and in her mind she saw the other woman with her swelling waist and knew she must draw back unless she could find a way to get Minnie Sowden and her boys out of town before it became obvious to everyone else.

*

Minnie saw the copy of *The Courier-Mail* lying open on the kitchen table next time she came in to work. When she found herself with a spare second she quickly turned the pages … there were positions for women … and for a moment she saw herself neat and clean and respectable, serving in a good class of hotel, or in a hospital, or someone's house … and then the dream faded. For every position there'd be dozens, perhaps hundreds of eager woman, all with more to offer.

The Reverend Trimble had come round and asked if the boys would like to help him occasionally. He couldn't afford to pay them but he could offer a meal and some vegetables. He said wistfully that he felt he should be organising something for the town's boys; Scouts, something worthwhile, but he always felt a little shy with boys. It was strange really but the boys didn't mind going there. She thought it gave them status, no matter how small, to be specially invited round by the minister. More surprising, they did as they were told and gave the diffident man no cheek. 'It's just as I always thought, they just needed a man. If only Bill had tried to be nice and fatherly' … but Bill, she knew now, was hoping to marry Annabel Trout.

Several times she thought she must find a way to tell him about the baby coming but he had eyes in his head and if he didn't Annabel Trout certainly did—and several times Minnie had felt her gaze resting speculatively on her stomach. Even if Annabel chose to say nothing the town would gossip anyway.

But Jim, what if Jim came back now, would he understand how vulnerable she'd been, still was. They said that woman who'd come to see Bill had been angry that she hadn't been told of her brother's death, that it'd taken her a month of enquiries even to find that he was dead. She'd gone into the hotel and told everyone who'd listen that she had a mind to complain to the bigwigs in Brisbane … she had a right to know her brother was dead and buried.

So what if other police in other small towns were like Bill, what if Jim was dead and no one had ever seen fit to tell her? Mightn't there be a little bit of money she could claim as a widow? She didn't know and she didn't want to think of Jim as dead but if he was she'd like to know, just know, that was all.

*

The pumpkins were all packed in crates and sent away on the train. Tom Dallow gave a few away to his sister and other people in town and his wife told him how many she'd need and he put a few aside for his old horse. People could say what they liked about trucks but a horse that would obey your voice was as good as a truck. And no one noticed that the train had an extra passenger, a passenger who didn't buy a ticket, a passenger who knew the best way to slip on board, unnoticed.

It was Minnie Sowden who rang Bill Beasley to say she'd come up to work and found Mrs Trout dead in her bed. The sergeant was a slow thinker but a lot of confused thoughts rushed through his mind. Annabel had put back the wedding date three times already. He should've been firm. Now … yes, now what … he couldn't decide but being the first on the scene would have its uses … only Minnie and Minnie didn't count.

He stood a long time over the bed, looking at the old woman. Then he asked Minnie to ring Elsie Calder who, everyone knew, had trained as a nurse. He felt an uncomfortable need to get an opinion. While Minnie was occupied he opened Annabel's little jewel box and took out

the sovereigns he found there and an attractive little brooch with a red stone in it. They slipped easily into his trousers. Then he sat down on the chair by the bed and composed his face. Everyone knew he was engaged to Annabel Trout. They would understand that his should be the major role in sorting through the house and making all the decisions that needed to be made. He tried to decide what kind of monument would be suitable. Her solicitor would know. He would ring him and ask if he could come on the next train.

That wouldn't be till Wednesday.

Elsie came. She seemed flustered. Though she acted as unofficial nurse to many people she was terrified at the idea of being called in 'officially' and for someone of the importance of Mrs Trout. Should she say immediately, "You must send her on the train … I can't possibly say what … "

The old lady had begun to rise from her bed. The lamp was still burning. No one had thought to turn it off. The curtains were drawn tightly. Then halfway up, she seemed to have fallen back and died. Her face was contorted as though she'd died calling out. Calling? Yes, she must have tried to summon the young man from the shed.

"Was the door closed when you came in, Minnie?" she said, conscious of her own helplessness. It must be heart. But should she say so?

"Yes." Minnie stood in the shadows of the hallway.

"So it's very unlikely the young man could've heard if she called?"

Both women looked at each other. "I wonder where he is?" Minnie turned and went out. The shed was empty. She could not immediately say what was missing. He'd had so little. But there was no doubt he was gone. His hat, his old coat, the shirt Mrs Trout had given him. She stood there and didn't know what to think.

Elsie took the news calmly. It didn't surprise her. That's what men did these days. Moved on. She wondered incuriously which way he'd gone and when. The train last night, she'd heard it, or the day before. And how long had the old lady been dead? Since the evening before?

She turned as the sergeant came in. "I'm sure it's her heart but I really think you should send her—to someone who knows about these things."

He nodded. "Why not?" He thought of the train then of the car sitting neatly in the shed beside an old rotting sulky. The thought of driving exhilarated him suddenly. "You can leave it all to me."

After Elsie had gone he sorted through all the papers that Mrs Trout kept in the cupboard in the corner of her room. The house, the car, old yellowing papers from the time of Clive Trout, letters, and her will. He took it out and read it. Everything passed to her cousin Charles Hibbert, everything except £10 to the local church. There were instructions on her burial. He stuffed the paper back in its envelope.

It was all irrelevant. When Charles Hibbert arrived there would be a nice tidy house but not much more. The car would be parked at the station house. He would regret it but the old lady had asked him to take care of it now that she no longer felt able to drive. He was drumming with his big fingers on the dressing-table as thought after thought passed along from idea to practical application. There was a soft knock on the door. Minnie stood there looking a little nervous. "I wonder … if there's any money in the house … I haven't had my wages … I know I haven't done much today but I was here on Friday too … "

"Well, fancy that! But don't you go worryin', Min. I'll see you get what you're owed. That's me, Bill, likes to see everything's right 'n' tight." He came over to her, put his big arms round her. "It's been a while, Min. Bit of a drought. The big bastard's just about perishin', Min." Before she could decide what to do he had dragged her through into what had been Annie's little bedroom and had her pinned on the bed. One more time, then he'd make sure that Minnie was on the train and out of town. It wouldn't be hard to spread the rumour that Minnie had taken advantage of Mrs Trout's death, even that she'd done something to upset the old lady and bring on her attack. The boys were a pest but he'd ask the parson for an address. "Minnie's

decided to go. The best thing'd be a church home till she can find a place." The main thing was to get them all gone.

And the young man had gone, it looked like, leaving his wages but taking … taking what … and would Sarah Tyler come asking …

*

When he'd told Minnie to get along home and he'd finish checking here, he went back to the papers. There was nothing about Annabel's source of wealth, only a bank account containing £13/3/6. It looked as though her solicitor must look after all that. Pity. But he felt sure there'd be opportunities. Still, the sooner he got a death certificate signed—

A thought surfaced. If only he could bribe the Reverend Trimble to sign a wedding register and back-date it but he could think of no pressure he could bring on the man, foolish, timid, stumbling and mumbling, but not somehow bribeable.

From the corner of his eye he saw something move. A spider in all these old papers. He reached out a thoughtful thumb and sent the small shape to kingdom come and wiped his thumb on his trousers.

Then he went back to the bed, wrapped the old woman in a clean sheet. Her bowels had loosened and he was conscious of the smell but he didn't feel he was called to clean her up. He would take her the thirty miles to Dr Henty. The day beckoned, the car, the autumn sunshine, and somehow, with the old lady removed from the house it ceased to have any personality as he returned to gather up the bundle of papers and her handbag. Her purse contained several shillings. He shook them into his palm and left a lonely sixpence.

Several people saw the car whisk away, the well-wrapped bundle on the back seat rising and falling with the ruts. No one happened to notice the sergeant's expression. At times he smiled. All was not lost. At other times he felt the regret. So near and so far.

*

Jilly Fairweather moved Muggy to the little patch of grass where the bath water drained. Muggy was so fat now she looked as though she'd swallowed a box. As no one had shared with Jilly the goat's visit to Father O'Donohue's billy (some things were best done in school hours) she didn't absolutely believe in the possibility of small goats. Mum said so, Mum should know such things, but Muggy *might've* swallowed a box, goats did eat funny things sometimes.

Her mother and Mrs Minnikin were talking. She stood in the back porch and listened.

"—it's what Elsie's been saying all round town—the shock she got when she saw her face, the way the eyes were staring, like the old lady had been scared out of her wits—"

"It's strange really. They say it was a heart attack but I've always heard that can be quite peaceful—"

"Contorted. That was the word Elsie used, her face all screwed up an' bulging an' her mouth open an' screaming."

"But Elsie might've exaggerated."

"Well, she *might*," Mrs Minnikin said complacently, "but do you know what I think," she dropped her voice slightly, "I think Annabel Trout had had some sort of shock that evening."

Mrs Fairweather thought of Mrs Trout peering in Minnie Sowden's window. Had Minnie paid her back in kind? Minnie bitterly resented having to accept the tiny wage on offer—and watch the sergeant pay court to the other woman.

"Well, Bill Beasley was quite capable of doing something to shock her … he is a very uncouth man … and she never tired ot telling people she was a lady … " Both women laughed gently. "But if he did, it's paid off very nicely for him. I saw him carrying out whole boxes of her things. It seems they can't find the cousin she left everything to … "

"I did think he should've given poor Minnie something." No one quite knew what had passed between Mr Meredith and the police sergeant but Minnie Sowden had been asked to vacate the old shed.

"Perhaps she'll be able to find work—and the boys might be able to get a paper round or

something."

They went on to talk of other things and Jilly grew bored and slipped away to the cubby-house. So many changes so quickly, people gone, people dead, the sergeant driving round town in Mrs Trout's car—and he was no more thoughtful of children than Mrs Trout had been. But Tom Dallow had asked her and Lizzie to come and help his wife snce she hadn't been well. He hadn't mentioned a wage but they both felt sure it'd be "thrippence an hour" which would soon add up to unimaginable wealth.

"I wonder where that young man went." She said it lazily to the clouds up above the old tank. "And I know what he was doing that day. I saw the jar in his pocket." She wasn't quite sure why but, somehow, she wished she didn't know.

* * *

MILK AND THISTLES

They drove up in the dusk. Dusk in winter is not a good time to arrive on a dairy farm. Milking's not over and can't be left to show people where to go or what to do. The car carrying the six Dowds bumped to a halt, not parked but as a sign of indecision. It was dark now in the shadow of the hill.

The Thistlewaites worked with a grunting precision; there was no need to talk, they'd been milking together for fifty years. But Bernie put a head up and bellowed over the thump-thump of the engine: "That'll be that new fella!" His sister let the cow in front of her out and glanced back at the holding yard. "Nearly done! They can wait!"

Their old cattle dog waddled with stiff limbs down to the bank by the cottage and barked. The people in the utility sat and felt the chill of the evening gather round them. A last straggle of chooks headed home to roost. Somewhere a mopoke called, its mournful sound lost in the tail-end of milking.

It was difficult to tell, with the sunset lying like a delicate lemon stole across the hills, what kind of place this was. Now, with their headlights quenched, black box trees seemed to lean at crazy angles round the car.

The children in the back tray fretted. They were tired and hungry and the long miles on ill-graded roads had sorely tested a dinned-in obedience. "Are we here, mumma?" "Can we get down?" "Will the doggy bite?" "Where're we goin' to sleep?"

Their father said: "Pipe down you lot, an' wait."

He got out and slammed his door.

*

Bernie left his sister to finish up and came out to the track to talk to his new hired man. "Just turn round, mate, and park in by your front gate over there—leave me room to get past with the truck—and you can go on in. It's not locked. Your wife and kiddies must be bloody tired."

"They're not the only ones."

Dowd was a black-muzzled pugnacious man who never kept a place long. Bernie Thistlewaite looked for honesty and hard work and was prepared to give a bloke a chance. He went back to his sister but said nothing, what was there to say yet. Let 'em settle in and Edna could go and fuss over them tomorrow if she felt like it—and she would with kids there. She'd spent the last week titivating the cottage—but nothing she could do with Bon Ami and cheap curtains and a swipe of the new Easy-Wipe paint could turn *that* place into a palace. But that was Edna, silly as a peewee in spring with news of a family coming.

The ute backed down the hill. A child could be heard squealing. Then they were barging into the cottage, pulling light cords with abandon, thundering up the wooden steps, a baby crying. The father could be heard: "Git in here an' quit that bloody muckin' round or I'll git the belt to you!"

The dairy work was finished, the cows streamed away over the flat and the sorghum stubble for the night. Edna went home to take the roast out of the oven and make the gravy. Bernie, curious, walked down via the cottage—just to say, "Everything all right? Just sing out if you need a hand," and get in a thorough look at the crowd of grubby flaxen-haired children and an untidy-looking woman with fair flossy hair and a large swelling in the midriff—so there'd be more of them if they stayed long enough? They were all very dirty—but it'd been a long day and he, himself, didn't worry too much except round the dairy. He prided himself on having the cleanest milk in the district.

To Edna he said, "They'll be a bit of a squeeze up there but not our worry, I don't reckon—he didn't tell us he had that many kids … unless, of course, we change houses?" He laughed at his wit. Edna went on dishing up. "They should've warned us, I might've been able to hunt up an extra cot or two." She closed her mouth and rattled plates.

"Not your worry, old duck. And not our fault they're starting a bloody tribe!"

*

Edna didn't go to morning milking. Bernie said, "You leave him be, I'll put him through the ropes and make sure he knows what's what." She was glad not to have to go. Her arthritis was getting worse. But *would* the young man be any good? She hadn't really taken to him, what she'd seen last night, but she believed in giving people a chance. They'd miss Herb. Herb had been with them for twenty years. But Herb had decided to join his brother who was planning to go in for pigs in a big way. It was hard to get a really good hired man these days.

"How was he?" she said curiously over breakfast.

"I think we've been sold a pup." Bernie tucked into his porridge like a starving man. "He said he'd been on a farm over Pittsworth way but I don't know what kind of farm it was. Talk about butterfingers and I had to keep reminding him to check the flow."

"I s'pose we could've checked his reference."

"Didn't seem worth the trouble."

"Mmm. Still, do you think he'll pick it up?"

"Dunno. Didn't like his manner much."

"I'll go over later and see how they're settling in." The other words stayed unspoken. It was hard to sack a man who had a young family to keep. They would hope for the best.

"I'll get him on the tractor and see what he's like."

"And we might be able to get the kiddies to do a few chores round the place—the little boy … I wonder if he's old enough for school … "

"Well, I'll leave you to find all that out. You could try him on the mower."

"Yes, and collecting the eggs … "

Edna went over later and knocked on the cottage door. It wasn't much of a place but it had an inside bathroom and toilet, it had three rooms with lino on the floor and curtains at the windows; there were many farm cottages with less. There were tubs with a hand-wringer and a copper in the wash-house. It had a reliable stove and an old Snow Queen frig. The yard was quite big and there was a loquat tree by the back gate. She decided there was no need to apologise for anything. They hadn't known there'd be four children but there was room and she could probably hunt out a spare blanket or two, if needed. It was hard to know why this feeling that the children would need her persisted. They had parents. There'd be school. They might like to go to Sunday School. A farm was a good place for children. Fresh meat. Milk. Vegies if they bothered. Something about the children … she couldn't decide and put the thought aside.

The door opened a crack and Mrs Dowd peered through. "What is it?" She had a small breathy voice, also a faint … accent seemed too strong a word, Edna decided, just something a little different, like someone with bad asthma …

"It's me. Edna. I just popped over to see if you're settling in all right and if there's anything you need."

"Yes, we're all right. Don's not here. He's gone over to the shed."

"I know. What about the children?"

"They're here." She continued to stand with the door half-closed.

"If they'd like to come over one day, there's an old swing in our garden, and they might like to see our ducks—"

"Yes."

Edna didn't quite know what else to say to this young woman with her long pale face and whitish flossy hair. There was something about her. A vague vestige of prettiness that was also somehow squalid. She reminded Edna of a girl from her long-ago school days, a girl who'd never washed yet had been proud of her long red hair … Edna herself was very particular but it was true that Herb hadn't been all that fussed when it came to his clothes … but men were different, older men … if she didn't mind Bernie he wouldn't fuss about changing socks and keeping his comb clean … but a young woman …

"If you'd like to come over one afternoon, we could have a cup of tea—"

"Yes." The young woman showed no particular emotion.

"Well, I'll leave you now to get settled in. The tank is full if you're wanting to wash or anything. We've had a good lot of wind lately."

She felt she was talking to someone who wasn't really listening yet the need to somehow keep burbling on, to seek some response, to receive some questions, make some mark … "Oh, and by the way, if the children would like to call me Edna that'd be all right. I know Thistlewaite is a hard word for the littlies to get their tongues around."

It was all empty talk. This woman's mind was elsewhere, somewhere back in the house. She might be worrying about the children. Edna said "Don't forget", in her motherly way and stepped back. The door closed abruptly. She might've seemed a bit pushy. She would leave things for a couple of days.

*

"Would the kiddies be old enough for school?" Bernie asked his new man.

"Johnny might. Haven't worried much yet, not till we git settled."

"There's a school bus now, comes by about ten past eight … though I think it must be holidays at the moment, haven't seen it this week." Bernie realized how out of touch he was, no children on the place since he and Edna had been kiddies and that was longer than he cared to remember, the bus was a new introduction, they'd ridden a pony in their day, the two of them double-banking … the bus was better … got the kiddies to school safely and fairly quickly …

"Yeah, well, after … you were sayin', about the bull?"

The farm had been called Hillsong before Bernie's father bought it and he'd kept the name but developed it as an Ayrshire stud. He'd been proud of his stock, had shown them and sold them all over southern Queensland. The current pedigree bull was Hillsong Ghillie 3rd, a fine animal, attractively marked, possibly a little too compact and burly for the purist but he threw good quality calves. "But he's a right old bastard," Bernie began to roll himself a smoke, "Just make sure the kiddies don't go in the paddocks till they know what's what. Most of the cows are nice natured and we de-horn them all, except a couple Edna and me show locally, the little ones need to know they've got horns and hooves if you haven't had anything to do with Ayrshires before now. What did Mr Pottle have?"

Bernie and Edna had ceased to believe in Don Dowd's previous employment with Len Pottle; they'd almost ceased to believe in Len Pottle as a person; either that or Don hadn't lasted more than a couple of days with him. He and Edna said a couple of times maybe they should ring Mr Pottle but as the family gradually settled in and Don got the knack of things they'd let their worries drift.

The man did have four children, a boy of about six, a girl of four and another of three, a baby just under ten months and another on the way. And people could learn. It was just, Bernie felt wearily, that he and Edna were getting older and didn't want the bother of teaching a man the things he'd claimed in the beginning to know already.

"Those black and white cows." There was, Bernie thought, a small hesitation.

"Friesians? Yeah, they're taking over, bit by bit." It was a worry. All the years they'd put into Ayrshires and in ten years no one might want them. But they'd be thinking about retirement then and it was a good farm. There should be no trouble in selling it, moving somewhere easier.

Edna also worried about the farm, about herself slowing down, about the new family in the cottage. There were days when she longed to have Herb back. Perhaps she hadn't appreciated him enough. But then, they'd always just thought of him as Herb, reliable Herb, boring Herb, just Herb … Herb who kept to himself but came over and had roast with them on Sundays. Herb who sat quietly in his cottage of an evening, smoking, reading the passed-on papers, listening to his old wireless … and now the cottage seemed to pulse and bulge with noise. Shouts, smacks, yells, crying, banging.

She often wondered why Mrs Dowd didn't let the children out into the yard. The fence was quite secure and the gate had a latch that only the boy could reach. The children could run

around and release their surplus energy.

She'd renewed her invitation for the children to come over one day. She'd offered them sixpence a week to do some small chores for her. Her offers had been ignored or received with a non-committal "yes". And what would happen when Mrs Dowd needed to go to hospital for the next baby. Edna didn't like to ask when it was due.

There were other things that puzzled her. The back yard had three lines of wire fastened between posts for the washing. It wasn't as grand as a hoist but no one round here had given up their lines and props for a new-fangled hoist. Even so, Mrs Dowd hung her washing on the rails of the back steps or in front of the kitchen stove. The house always smelled of wet clothes. With this endless fine weather they'd been having, not to use the sun and wind …

"Well, it takes all kinds, I s'pose," Bernie said vaguely. "Not our business."

"No, I know. But I can't help thinking the kiddies'd be much happier and better-behaved if they could get out of the house."

"Yeah, she's a funny little thing, almost seems scared to go outside the house. Just that once when they all went to the shop, she sort of hustled out of the house dragging all the littlies and pushed them on to the back of the ute as fast as she could and got in, like she was scared something was after her—"

"She might've lived all her life in the city. I s'pose the country can be a bit scary if you're not used to it." Edna looked out over their pleasant garden and the creek flats beyond the plumbago hedge. She couldn't imagine herself ever living in a city by choice but as Bernie said 'it takes all kinds' and Mrs Dowd was one of the others.

"I don't even know her first name," she went on, "I wondered if she might've come from somewhere else … "

"Annie, I think her husband said. And the boy is Johnny and the oldest girl is Gerda … I haven't found out the other names. They certainly seem to like to keep themselves to themselves."

"Oh well, I s'pose we should be glad. What if the kids were coming over and annoying us all the time, or pinching things or chasing the chooks—remember the trouble the Barrons had with that family—"

"Well, I warned them to keep away from Ghillie's paddock. Maybe I scared them."

*

The Dowd family seemed to fall into a routine. At five-thirty Don Dowd shrugged himself into old trousers and rubber boots and a sullen expression and mooched over to the bails; the baby would start crying almost before he was out the door and he would yell at the sleeping household, "Quit that you little bugger!" His wife would eventually rise and begin to light the stove with kindling and the old newspapers Edna passed on every so often. She was clumsy with it all and stopped frequently to slap the children as they stumbled into the kitchen with sleep-laden eyes. "Go in the other room for now!"

"It's warm in here, mumma."

"I don't care. Do as I say!" The wailing baby seemed to give wings to her hands; she slapped hard enough to bring red marks to their cheeks, she pushed and pulled and poked. Yet there was something ineffective about her chastisements. The children seemed to know what they would face and how much they could take before retreating into the cold front room with its old lino on the floor and a small table and several old armchairs. The two oldest slept on a mattress on the floor. The younger children shared their parents' room.

Breakfast would be ready when Don returned. They poured directly from his bucket of fresh milk on to the bought cereal they got by the dozen packets. Annie Dowd sat by the stove turning the bread on a wire-rack over the fire. Their toast was singed along the lines of the wire. Edna brought them home-made butter but they much preferred butter bought at the local store. And they preferred sausages to the sides of beef Bernie passed on after killing. They had never made butter or dressed meat but chose not to say so.

They said and did nothing about sending Johnny to school. Edna, after wrestling with the

issue, finally knocked on the door and said, “Mrs Dowd, I was wondering—would you like us to arrange with Mr Coles to pick up your son for school? Johnny could run down the lane and wait for him by the mail-box.”

Annie Dowd looked out the half-open door and said nothing.

“I’m rather out of touch but I think children are now s’posed to go to school when they turn six.”

Still the other woman said nothing. At last she shook her head and said, “I’ll talk to Don.”

Edna dredged up a smile. “And if you need any help with buying him a schoolbag or lunch-box I’ll be in town next Thursday, I could get—well, whatever—and I believe the children now like to take those plastic bottles full of cordial with them … ” She wondered if the problem was clothes, she’d never seen Johnny in anything but a pair of very ragged shorts and a skimpy jumper. But she had nothing on hand … though she could possibly use some of that material she’d bought for new pillow-slips … white was hardly ideal but he would look nice and fresh to begin with. “I could run up a couple of pairs of shorts on my sewing-machine if he was needing some clothes … Mr Piggott doesn’t mind if the kiddies go barefoot though there’s rather a lot of cape spinach down by the gate, he’d just need to be a bit careful.”

“I’ll … oh, there’s the baby!” Mrs Dowd turned away and Edna felt there was nothing more to be said. And the baby seemed to cry almost non-stop. Edna knew very little about babies, in books they always seemed to get either colic or croup … This one, from the few glimpses she’d had, looked rather pale but quite fat. Now that the weather was warming up, a little sunshine would surely be good for it. All the children were rather pale. Though she’d noticed the boy occasionally slip out of the house, something furtive about him, and he only ever seemed to go up to the end of the back yard where it gave on to the machinery shed. It was almost as though he was trying to get up courage to go further.

*

When the school term was already six weeks old, Edna finally took the drastic step of ringing Mr Piggott at his house behind the school (the school had no telephone) and asking him when children should start school. The school was fortunate in its Head; he was an energetic young man with an enthusiasm for education and a genuine interest in his pupils. He was interested in hearing about the Dowd children and said immediately, “What say I just drop by and meet them? They might be a bit shy. Do you think a Sunday afternoon would find them at home?”

Edna thanked him. She felt a kind of uneasy sense of doing something under-handed but, as Mr Piggott said, it might just be the need for friendly contact. She was sure Mr Piggott would put any fears they had to rest.

The problem, when Peter Piggott knocked on the cottage door, was that Mrs Dowd didn’t seem to want him to come in. Edna, watching anxiously from her back porch, felt he’d been put to rout and was embarrassed for him. Don was over past the cottage tinkering with the odd little ute the family owned, an engine and chassis with what looked more like a calf pen on the back for the children. Edna hoped Mr Piggott would now walk round and talk to Don. But he went back to his car and stood there for a moment with a puzzled frown on his face and his fingers tapping a cigarette against its packet.

Edna whistled up her old dog and went out the back gate. “Mr Piggott!” He turned and walked over to her.

“Phew!! That was a brush-off with a vengeance,” he said without rancour. “Some very choice language. I wonder who she thought I was? Someone from the government—”

“I wonder if it might not be easier to go up and talk with her husband? He’s just up there at the machinery shed.”

“I’ll give him a burl.” Peter Piggott lit his smoke and drew on it, then he turned and walked up the lane. Edna hesitated. She shouldn’t spy—but she was curious to see if Don Dowd was willing to talk with the school principal. The two men met, a cigarette was offered

and accepted, a couple of minutes of conversation ensured then Don returned to his engine and Peter walked back down.

"Well, we've got a problem but I don't suppose it'll matter too much if the lad doesn't start school till the new year. Give them time to settle in."

"Mmm … though they've been here two months now. Would you like to come in for tea, Mr Piggott, Bernie's just over at the mill. He should be back any minute and I've made a tea-cake."

"Sounds good." Mr. Piggott was a bachelor and no great shakes as a cook.

"Didn't talk 'em into sending young Johnny to school?" Bernie said when he'd washed up and sat down to tea.

"No. They told me where I could stick my school, I'm afraid."

"They're a funny lot and no mistake." Bernie stirred sugar and gazed benignly on the young man. "They've been here a while now and that dame's never yet come out of that house—"

"Except to go to the store," Edna put in.

"Yeah. And they buy all this tinned rubbish, must cost 'em a fortune."

"It was almost as though she was afraid of me," Peter mused. "I know sometimes families don't want to send their children, they need them to work at home, but usually you only have to say 'time your lad was in school' and they give in. Still, no point in starting to worry yet."

"But they don't let the children do anything, that's the funny thing, just keep 'em in the house all the time. I offered them some pocket money if they'd come and do the lawn for me with our little mower—or help with the chooks—my arthritis has been very bad this winter … but nothing happened. We invited them over for tea, the way we'd always have Herb over for dinner of a Sunday—but nothing—"

"Not good for the kiddies," Bernie added, "not getting any sun and fresh air."

"Where did they live before now?"

"They gave Len Pottle's name—but I've got me doubts." Bernie started on his second slice of warm tea-cake.

"Did you check with him?"

"No. Seemed a bit sneaky."

"I worry about the little ones," Edna said suddenly. "But I don't know what to do. You can't force yourself into someone else's house or tell them how to run their lives … "

Peter Piggott nodded slowly. It was when he'd said, after introducing himself, "I've come to see you about Johnny," that the woman had in a sense drawn into herself. Possibly if he'd said something else … he wasn't sure what …

"The lad himself, Johnny, do you see anything of him? Does he go out with his father?"

"No. But he sneaks out into the yard," Edna said, "and he goes up into the far corner and looks out. I'm surprised he doesn't go through the gate. He could go into the orchard or up to the sheds or over to the chook house—"

"Don't want him messing round out by the saw-bench or climbing on the ploughs," Bernie continued to eat steadily, "but you sort of expect boys to want to explore a bit."

"Herb had quite a decent vegie garden but they don't seem to bother at all, it's a pity. Kiddies need their green vegies—"

"So what do they live on?" Peter had grown more and more curious about the Dowds as the conversation ambled on.

"Oh … sausages, white bread and jam, those packet cereals the kiddies like these days … I've never tried 'em myself but I s'pose they're more exciting than porridge … I've been giving them some eggs so I assume they eat them."

"I knew one family, the last school I was at, lived almost entirely on tinned beetroot and bread. You'd think they'd get sick of it but apparently they were some kind of cranks that thought the beetroot juice and vinegar would stop them getting heart attacks … maybe it

would, I don't know, but they weren't in too good shape in every other way."

They finished their tea and Bernie said he'd better get a wriggle on and get up to the yards. "I don't s'pose Don'll beat me to it, he's never got there on time yet."

"Well, just let me know if they change their mind and say anything about sending Johnny to school or if they'd like to get a few lessons for him to do at home. You're far enough from the school for him to qualify for correspondence if they're really against him going to school."

Later, Bernie said robustly, "Do the lad good to get among other boys—and you won't find a better teacher than Peter Piggott."

Don Dowd responded with a shrug and a scowl.

"And you can smarten up, young man," Bernie burst out. "I've put up with your poor work for the sake of your wife and kiddies but I'm sick of your bad moods. So you can keep that in mind!"

The man stared at him then moved away.

Bernie told Edna what he'd said. He'd had time to cool off again but he didn't regret his words. "Yes, he's a pretty unpleasant piece-of-work. But with her like a balloon … I don't know … I almost wish they'd just pack up and go." It sounded ridiculous but she now felt extremely inhibited about going over to the cottage even to offer eggs, vegetables or butter. The cottage exhaled a nasty damp smell and the children (what she glimpsed of them) were always dirty and always inside.

Though the young boy had now taken to creeping out the back gate and disappearing into the shed or beyond. That worried Edna too—yet on one level she was glad he was out in the sun, not cooped up inside—but she didn't like to go telling tales. She was sure he'd get a hiding. They, both parents, were very free with their smacks. She had no objection to an occasional spanking or children going to bed without supper, it was the way she'd been brought up, but the Dowds seemed to hit out at what seemed the most trivial of naughtinesses.

"Look, why *don't* you ring Len Pottle, see what he has to say about them. I know we've never met him but there's nothing wrong about just checking up."

Len Pottle certainly had no objection to being rung up—but he'd never heard of Don and Annie Dowd. "Must have the wrong Pottle, I'd say."

"But—you're the only Pottle—"

"True. But there's a few in Toowoomba."

Except the ones in Toowoomba … well, none of the ones there were dairying.

*

The baby arrived quite unaided one night. Its thin wails filled the house. Annie spent two days lying down, telling the oldest children to mind the younger ones. They spilled hot coals on to the legs of the now toddling second-youngest. Don took off his belt and whaled into Johnny for not taking more care. He shouted at the newest baby, he clipped Gerda round the head for burning the stew. The house was in an uproar.

No one heard Edna's knock. She'd come with a bowl of mulberries. She remembered glorious times climbing in the mulberry tree as a child and wished she could share that enjoyment with these children. But if their parents said no, there was nothing she could do, yet she couldn't help a kind of pity. Childhood passed. But there should be happy times to look back on.

Still, the Dowds must love their children or they wouldn't have more—and a bit of love made up for the lack of other things. She knocked again. There was a baby crying, a very small baby. Had the new baby arrived? She felt an astonishment. Though she'd heard of babies arriving unexpectedly—in taxis, in sulkies and buses—

Well, they'd be busy and not want her pushing in. She put the bowl on the front step and went away.

As she opened her back door she spied a shadow in the Dowds' back yard. It was almost dusk. But young Johnny had obviously slipped out. It was surprising his father hadn't noticed him gone though he was likely preoccupied with his new son or daughter. The shadow slipped

over the far fence and into the paddock.

"Oh dear, I wonder if Bernie knows he's started going up there. I'd better have a word."

"Going where?" Bernie said over supper.

"Well, it was getting dark and I'm not absolutely sure but he seemed to be over towards the bull paddock."

"Then tell him I'll tan his little hide if he's getting up to monkey business over there. I've warned his father to keep his kiddies away—"

"It might be an idea to remind him. He mightn't realise … and now with the new baby … I hope they'll go to the doctor and get the baby checked."

*

Don Dowd didn't take kindly to the request that he make sure his son didn't try to cross the bull paddock. "The kids do what I tell 'em or I git the strap to 'em."

"Edna definitely saw your little lad over that way. Oh, and by the way, has your new baby arrived. Boy or girl?"

"Boy."

"Have you chosen a name yet?"

"Robert."

"Well, that's nice. Just let us know if you're needing time off to get him to a doctor or the clinic, that sort of thing. Edna could take your wife in if she's needing a check-up."

"Needn't bother. She doesn't like doctors."

"Well, I'm not fussed on 'em meself but no harm in a quick go-over—"

"Not your business, mate."

Bernie felt himself growing hot under the collar and yet—whether or not Mrs Dowd went to a doctor *wasn't* his business. And he understood how Edna felt each time her kindness and generosity was rebuffed.

"And Len Pottle—have you been in touch with him lately?" Bernie wasn't sure why he thought of saying that.

"Wasn't Len … I told you we was with Ben Pottle."

"In Toowoomba?"

"Who said anything about Toowoomba?" But then Bernie had to go to attend a cow and the conversation was dropped.

He felt old and tired these days. He seemed to be doing more not less work. Or if he was doing less in the purely physical sense he seemed to be doing more in other ways. He thought back to the days when he and Herb with some help from Edna ran the stud and the milking like clockwork, their herd calm and well-trained. Even the cows seemed to be more edgy, not milking quite as well (or was that his imagination?), it was as though they sensed something that made them uneasy, made them a little slower to let down their milk. No, surely that was being over-fanciful. He was just a sullen young man who didn't know how lucky he was to have a decent job with almost everything laid on.

"Now he's saying it was a *Ben* Pottle … maybe me hearing's on the wane but I'd bet me boots he said *Len* first time round. And it's a baby all right, says he's calling him Robert."

Edna felt pity more than pleasure in his news. And some nights she had horrible visions of the cottage somehow bursting with people. But what to do. Still, she *would* go again tomorrow and just mention about Johnny … if only they'd send the little lad to school, it was natural for a boy to get into mischief with time on his hands …

When she knocked next morning, Johnny came to the door. He peered round it. She saw he had a bruise on his neck. She wondered what he'd been up to. "Johnny, could you just give that to your mum. I'm sure she can use some extra eggs."

He reached out and took the eggs but made no move to open the door wider.

"And you must be careful not to go into the paddock where the bull is. He's very dangerous—"

"Johnny, git inside!" It was his father. "I told you to come in here an'—"

A scared look came into the boy's face and he turned and slammed the door.

*

"Bernie, I think we should … well, I'm not sure, *talk* to someone maybe."

"Like who?"

"I'm not sure. I just don't quite know what to do—yet I feel we should be doing—" Yes, but doing what? She agonised over this every day. *Doing what?*

"The boy was out the back of the shed yesterday but he was gone before I got there. I told his dad to warn him about Ghillie—I bloody well hope he did, surly little jackanapes that he is—"

"Yes, I don't really think they take any notice of us. I s'pose they know we need someone and good people are hard to come by."

"I'm getting to the stage where almost anyone'd seem better. I s'pose I could ask them to leave—"

"But then there's the new baby—"

"But we didn't tell 'em to keep having kiddies—"

"No-o-o … it's just … well, we've got to live with ourselves too."

"Well, how 'bout having another yarn with Peter?"

Edna nodded. Peter Piggot was a sensible and decent young man. But it was hard to find the words to express all these vague fears and worries and the sense that things were going from bad to worse, even admitting that the Dowds never let her in the house … it made her sound like a prying old busybody … after all, she'd never gone in there while Herb was in the cottage, only the once when he came down with a very bad 'flu …

She sat down in the office and drew a pad towards her; maybe if she tried to write it. "Dear Peter, I am writing to you because we are still worried about Johnny Dowd and really all the children are a worry. But we don't know if there's anything we can do. Them not being at school means they don't get to see the school nurse—" Was that the best way to put it? "And it's a bit of a worry the boy not doing what he's told." Had he been told? His dad admitted using the strap but that wasn't the same as getting across to a young lad that a dairy bull was a dangerous creature. "He's got too much time on his hands and we worry about him. Now they have another baby." She didn't know what she was asking for. "You know a lot more about children than we do. There might be something you can suggest."

Peter Piggott received the letter. He was sympathetic and a little concerned. An elderly childless couple probably saw problems where other people saw only natural childish curiosity and boisterousness. But they were a nice old couple and it was good of them to want the best for their hired man. There were children in similar situations who were simply seen as extra free labour on some farms and by some employers. He couldn't drop in this Sunday but he'd definitely go the following Sunday.

*

Edna was beating egg whites and didn't immediately hear the screams. She was delighted with her new electric beater and tended to think up reasons to use it. She turned it off and removed the bowl and began to drop meringues on to an oven tray. Was that someone yelling? She moved to the window. It sounded odd. She went to the back door. The sound had stopped and she stood undecided. Then a bellow rent the air. She didn't stop to ask whether the two sounds were connected. She simply shoved her feet into her old farm shoes and ran.

The bull had caught the boy in the midriff and tossed him a short distance, he'd worried the body to and fro, tearing its clothes and ripping open the stomach. She wasted precious moments grabbing up a stock-whip and getting through the gate. With her old dog and her whip she pressed the bull back from the boy, she screamed for help, she knelt beside the bloodied mangled form and felt for some sign of life. Intestines gleamed in the sun, blood trickled from a dozen places, yet she felt sure the child was still alive.

It was a terrible dilemma. Should she try to lift the boy and take him to the house? She couldn't leave him here, keep him still, unless she took time to remove the bull from the

paddock … and all the time she ran for help, for an ambulance, his life blood ran away.

She made her decision, lifting the small figure and turning to go as fast as she could towards her house. She knew he could not expect to live but whether the movement of his chest was the last beating of a failing heart or some sort of hope she didn't try to guess. It seemed to take her hours to get there, to lay the boy on her bed and cover him with a sheet and run for the telephone. The ambulance would take at least half an hour but she thought that made better sense than trying to get Bernie and the car back. He'd had to take it this morning when he went down to fix the bottom fence, taking Don and the trailer with wire and a new strainer-post, as their old truck was on the blink. She wiped the child's body gently with warm water. Though there was a great deal of blood, the bull hadn't caught an artery and the goring had missed the heart. It was a shocking mess and yet … She prayed, she begged the conventional God of her upbringing, to take pity on the little lad.

She knew she should go and tell Annie Dowd what had happened but surely the woman must've heard, surely she must've missed her son by now—and she dared not leave the boy alone.

The ambulance spun in and she saw two men leap down. Perhaps her prayer was being answered; the half-hour wasn't up and they were here and running inside.

"In here!" she hastened them in.

"Lordy! What a mess! Is he—" The man pressed a hand lightly on the chest. "Still hanging in there!"

To everyone's amazement the boy opened his eyes, seemed to take everything in.

"Look!" The men bent over him.

"Oh Johnny! You were *told* not to go in the bull's paddock!" She couldn't help her single moment of recrimination.

"Dad told me—" his voice faded, then grew a little stronger, "he told me to go that way, that the bull was old an' stupid—"

"What! But—surely—he warned you—"

"Said he was old an' stupid—"

"Not now, missus." The men carefully eased the little boy on to the stretcher and lifted him, saw the blood continue its remorseless dripping … then the door was closed and they were driving away.

"I must—I s'pose Bernie's seen the ambulance—he'll come home, he'll probably think it's me … " Now, with the boy gone she felt her own reaction begin to set in. Her legs trembled and she felt her heart fluttering. Tears filled her eyes. Such a little undersized lad, such a pathetic little form—and he must've misheard his father …

She knocked at the cottage door. "Mrs Dowd!" There was no answer. It surprised her, though the little ones must … well, it was nearly lunch … they might go down for a nap about this time of day or a bit later … She knocked again. Footsteps. Annie Dowd was still in a sweaty nightdress. It was stained and shabby.

"Mrs Dowd, I'm sorry—your son's had a bad accident. The ambulance has taken him to hospital."

"What!" The woman stared blankly. Her hair was tumbled round her face and Edna could see where her breast milk had leaked through.

"Johnny! The hospital will do everything they can—"

"Wha' happened?"

"The bull. He went in the bull's paddock."

Mrs Dowd still looked blank. "But Johnny's here—in the bathroom—"

"No. He went up to the paddock."

Edna wanted to get away. She felt faint and her legs wouldn't stop their trembling. "I'm very sorry. I hope he'll be all right—"

"Where's Don?"

"Down the paddock. He should be home for lunch any minute." She turned and walked

away. At the house she gave herself a little tot of brandy and sat down where she could watch for her brother coming home. “Bernie, don’t be late today … ”

The phone rang. It was the hospital. They were terribly sorry. The little boy was DOA … “DOA?” Edna said blankly. “Oh, you mean he—” but she couldn’t bring herself to say “died”.

*

Bernie was asked to tell the police what had happened. They didn’t think any blame could accrue … dairy bulls were dangerous, the boy had been warned …

The hospital asked the family to come. Don Dowd went in. He blamed the Thistlewaites for keeping a dangerous bull, for not dehorning him, he said they were always interfering, he said Edna was always coming over and trying to get his wife to let the children out and to go over to the house and out around the farm—he said the Thistlewaites were to blame for what had happened and should pay the funeral expenses …

Bernie and Edna did not see themselves as having any responsibility but they were decent kind-hearted people. Their hired man was not well off. They agreed to help out and a little coffin was bought and a plot and they paid for a wreath. Annie Dowd was too unwell to go out so there were only three people there to see the little boy buried.

“I wish,” Bernie said bitterly, “We’d sacked them sooner.”

“Sooner? Are you going to?”

“Wish I could. But I s’pose it would look bad.”

People around the district were saying the Thistlewaites hadn’t taken sufficient care, that they shouldn’t keep a bull so near the houses, that as they didn’t have families of their own they’d been remiss in caring for other people’s children … Then there was vague gossip that they’d kept the boy out of school so he could work on the farm … And later gossip that they’d told the boy he could cross the bull’s paddock safely so long as he didn’t tease the bull …

The Thistlewaites had always been liked and respected but they were only marginally involved in the district’s social life; having no children and getting on in years, they didn’t take part in school or Sunday School activities or play cricket or come to dances. Now that worked against them. It was easy for rumours to pass from person to person. No one knew the Dowds but they saw it as somehow Bernie’s fault that the Dowds never went anywhere. The non-appearance of the hired man and his family must be the fault of his employer.

*

Peter Piggott came on Sunday afternoon. He didn’t quite know what to say. If he’d answered Edna’s letter immediately … but he couldn’t see that it would’ve changed anything. On his way in, he detoured to the cottage. Don Dowd came to the door. “I’m sorry, Mr Dowd, we all are, to hear about your lad. It must’ve been a terrible shock—”

“And who do you think you are?”

“Oh! Peter Piggott—from the school—”

“Don’t want any busybodies from anywhere—go down and tell those two old bastards they killed my boy.” He shut the door. Mr Piggott had dealt with some difficult parents but there was something about this man which unnerved him.

Edna seemed to have lost weight. Bernie was obviously worried about her. He sort of hovered and fussed in a way that didn’t come naturally.

Peter commiserated in conventional phrases.

“People are gossiping, aren’t they?” Edna said suddenly. “Saying it’s all our fault.”

“We-ell, yes … yes, I suppose they are. But it’ll die down.”

“They say the little boy died because his rib went through his lung … it must’ve been when I picked him up and carried him down … but I couldn’t leave him there, not with the bull still in the paddock, I just *couldn’t* … ” She started to cry in a sniffling hopeless way. “But I feel it’s my fault.”

“Of course it isn’t, old duck,” Bernie tried to sound bracing. “It’s *my* fault, if it’s anyone’s fault, for taking that blighter on in the first place—and now I can’t sack him or people’ll say we’re heartless, their bereavement, all that sort of thing.” He looked intently at

the headmaster. “Do you know what I think, I think they don’t care two hoots about all those kiddies—”

“Well, I did wonder … why didn’t Mrs Dowd go to help her son? The cottage is much closer to the paddock, if you heard then surely she must have?”

“I don’t know. I s’pose the other kiddies were screaming and crying as per usual.” Edna had wondered that herself. “And you know, Johnny opened his eyes briefly and said his father told him the bull was old and stupid and wasn’t dangerous.”

“You must’ve got that wrong … he must’ve said … ”

“I know. His father *couldn’t* have told him to go in with the bull, it just doesn’t make sense.”

*

Peter Piggott sat over his lone meal. He didn’t need to waste pity on the Thistlewaites. They were tough. They’d lived through drought and flood and low prices and war and the loss of loved ones. Yet there was something oddly touching and vulnerable about them. Bernie’s worry over his sister, their understated affection for each other, their puzzlement over a family which was not like any family in their limited experience. He found himself wanting to help them and with no idea how. He had no excuse to go and try and see the Dowds again, now their school-age-child was dead, and the gossip though a bit stupid and spiteful was not damaging. The police had cleared the old people of any responsibility. But they themselves seemed overwhelmed by what had happened.

It wasn’t his business. He had a school to run. Poking his nose into other people’s lives was something he only did very occasionally and then very reluctantly if he thought a pupil had serious problems at home—and it rarely achieved much anyway. A teacher was dependent on people’s goodwill. He couldn’t demand to enter their houses or tell them how to bring up their children.

Yet there was something strange about the Dowds. It was almost as though, in that brief and rather humiliating contact with the father, he’d glimpsed a kind of triumph. He’d expected a grieving father, even perhaps an angry father … and Don Dowd didn’t fit either category. Yet it was so faint and nebulous.

Peter Piggott mulled on the problem for several days. It might achieve nothing—there might be nothing *to* achieve—but he would be very discreet.

He went to a solicitor he knew from his schooldays. He’d thought about going to the police but he felt that Eric Humble would be more sympathetic as he stumbled through a story that had few hard facts.

“What I would like to know is—just who are the Dowds? Where did they come from? There’s something not quite right about them … and yet I can’t pin it down. The woman seems to suffer from agoraphobia, though I’m only guessing, and it might be perfectly natural and just something that can’t be helped—”

“I believe counselling can help. Not that I know much about it but it does sound a bit that way.”

“Yes. It’s the man that worries me, Eric. If he did tell his son to go through the bull’s paddock—well, I’m not sure if that’s sheer stupidity or sheer irresponsibility—or a deliberate act of cruelty.”

“Well, we can see if he’s on the electoral roll, things like that, but unless he’s been up for a previous police case … I don’t suppose misrepresenting himself to a prospective employer … well, the Thistlewaites could’ve checked his reference and turned him down.”

“I think they felt they should give him a chance when they saw he had four kids and another on the way.”

“Mmm, well, don’t hold your breath but I’ll have a quiet chat with a friend of mine, see if he can have a quick squizz in police files—because if there’s any chance it was deliberate malice, then the other children may well be in danger.”

*

Edna felt she should continue to take eggs and butter across to the Dowds, heaven knew they still had four children to feed on a small wage, but she felt in herself a deep reluctance.

"Perhaps we've had an easy life, a quiet life, and we must expect our little share of worry and trouble." But the family in the cottage was more than a little share. She found herself having problems sleeping and when she did sleep it was often to have nightmares of little boys and blood and the reek on the bull's horns. She found herself in her dreams sometimes standing rooted to the ground, frozen in indecision … whether to run, whether to stay … sometimes she left the boy and Ghillie came back … in one particularly horrible dream there were more people there lying in a welter of blood, she couldn't discern their features …

It wasn't something she could put on to Bernie. He had all the upset he could handle with Don Dowd implying they shouldn't be allowed to keep a bull, that they were to blame, that he would sue … Bernie had never heard of anyone being sued. It had a nasty ring to it, lawyers, trouble, expense, bad feeling, people looking at him as though he was a monster … And he couldn't see how he could prove he'd done everything to keep the boy safe … Maybe it *was* irresponsible to keep the bull in that paddock after children had come to live on the farm. Yet he and Edna had grown up with a dairy bull, they knew there were places you didn't go and silly things you didn't do. It was Don Dowd who claimed to have been on another farm before this one … But now this business with the non-existent Ben Pottle … A slick lawyer might prove it was his own poor hearing not Don Dowd's lies … He no longer knew what to think.

"I think," he said one evening and his voice had the drabness of giving up in it, "we should think about selling up, old duck, and moving. We can get a fair return, it's been quite a good season, and there's still people that'll buy stud stock for a decent price. We can ask the Dowds to go—maybe give him a bit extra for doing him out of a job—"

"Though, heaven knows, he doesn't deserve it … yes, I think … I'll miss it all, Bern, but somehow, since the boy died, I can't find the same pleasure in things … it's still home but not the same … "

"I'll give Don his notice tomorrow."

But Don Dowd refused to be put off so easily. He'd take his dismissal, yes, but he wanted more than a month's notice. He'd had his son killed here, now he was losing his job because the Thistlewaites couldn't bear to hear people saying they were responsible for his boy's death. Well, if they wanted to cut and run—they could pay him well for all he'd been put through.

Bernie was about to say he was hardly worried about a bit of gossip—there were always people who gave out wild speculations and called them truth—then he thought, perhaps I *am* going for that reason among others … and perhaps, I'll end up paying these people just for the relief of never having to see them again …

Edna saw no reason why they shouldn't give the Dowds a little bit. "We can't take it with us and they aren't well off—though they could do more to help themselves … what were you thinking of?"

"I really don't know. It's not something we've ever had to … well, do you think £500 would do?"

"I think it's more than they deserve—but if it makes life a bit easier for the kiddies—we can spare it."

"I'll see about getting a little—dunno what, a sort of contract maybe—I don't trust that fella as far as I could kick him, if we don't have something sure as eggs he'll come back and want more."

"That sounds sensible." She sighed. "I just wish I could've done something to get those littlies out into the yard, playing like normal kiddies, and Annie … I'm sure she's not in good health … "

"You can't run other people's lives, you know, old duck. Leave 'em be and start thinking where you'd like to go if we can get a good sale for the farm."

"Do you remember when we were little and we used to ride the pony over to Keegan's

… I s'pose we didn't have much then, not till things started to go well for Dad later on … but we had a lot of fun, didn't we? It'll be hard to go away."

"Yeah, it will." Bernie had no intention of getting sentimental. It would be easy to find excuses to stay, easier than finding excuses to go, but he'd seen Edna age over the last month. And he felt tired often with a dragging tiredness. And almost anything, even living in a small flat, had begun to seem better than continuing life with Don Dowd in the offing. He'd made excuses for the man. Excuse after excuse. Now he admitted to himself that he found the man repellant. Always had.

*

Peter Piggott rang and said he'd like to bring a friend to see them. Would they mind? Of course not. Edna sounded pleased to hear from him. She thought he was about to ring off when he said unexpectedly, "You haven't paid any money to Don Dowd have you?"

"Not yet … well, all the funeral expenses … but Bernie was going to give them an extra £500, to help them get started somewhere else."

"Well, look. I haven't time to explain now. But don't pay them anything. And we'll come round on Sunday."

Bernie found the conversation puzzling when it was relayed to him but he said, "Fair enough. They can have their money and go next week."

"You got it from the bank? Or you're going to write a cheque?"

"He wanted cash but I said a farm is a business. Everything, including wages, has to go through the farm books—so it's a cheque or nothing. He wasn't happy about it but he said he'd take a cheque. After all, he knows as well as I do that he's done nothing to deserve it. He said £500 wasn't enough but I said, well, unless he wants to wait anything up to two years till we sell the farm he can whistle for anything bigger. Our capital is in the farm, not sitting in some bloody bank vault."

It had been an unpleasant interview but almost anything began to seem worthwhile with the knowledge the Dowds would be gone in a few days. Six months of bad memories would fade. He didn't tell Edna he'd almost been tempted to pay more for the freedom of next week. Instead he said, "When the farm sells, what say we take a trip somewhere we've never been, down to Sydney Royal maybe, have a look at the dairy cattle."

"Yes, I'd like that." Edna smiled for the first time in weeks.

*

"This is Eric Humble. He's a lawyer." Both the Thistlewaites were puzzled but polite. Why was Peter bringing a lawyer to see them? For one horrible moment, Bernie thought Don Dowd had followed through on his threat and Eric Humble had come to sue them.

But Edna led them through to the sitting room and made them comfortable.

"So—how can we help you," she said brightly, "Or is this just a social visit?"

"I trust we've come to help *you*. The Dowds are still here?"

"Yes."

"It's about them we've come."

Edna looked puzzled. "But the little girl'd be too young for school, I'm sure."

"Not that kind of thing. I'm afraid you're shortly going to have a visit from the police. So this is kind of a softening of the blow, if you like to put it that way—"

"So he is going to sue! The bloody bugger!" Bernie turned red.

"No. You've got a man out there who has almost certainly been responsible for the deaths of two and possibly three children. And his wife, it seems to us, most likely suffers from agoraphobia—"

"And what's that when it's at home?" His shock made him belligerent.

"Take it easy, Bern." Edna leaned over and touched his shoulder.

"It's a fear of open spaces basically. Some people become so bad they literally cannot go out at all without panicking, others have difficulty in going into certain spaces …. It's not easy to treat but there is some help available."

"So *that's* why she wouldn't put her washing on the line or let the children out!" Edna sat back. "Oh, the poor thing!"

"Well, she probably is a poor thing—but she may have known what her husband was doing." Mr Humble shrugged.

"It's going to be the very devil to prove any of this, I'm afraid. But you can see from your own experience all the aspects … a man who doesn't know his job and is unpleasant to boot but you're sorry for him, he's got young children, you give him a chance. His wife is never available. She can't be asked questions, her children are born at home because she's too afraid to go to a doctor or a hospital … so they're not registered … they don't go to school … they come and work for people like yourselves without children, getting on a bit … there's some danger, maybe as in your case you warn the father, but the father twists it round. The child goes and does exactly what he seems to have been warned not to do—"

"You mean—they've had other children gored! But that's—" Edna didn't know what it was but she couldn't disguise her shock.

"No. We're still trying to hunt down the exact sequence of events. It all seems to have begun when Don met Annie. She was a refugee from Europe. She arrived in Australia in 1945 from Holland. She came with her father. Her father died suddenly leaving her alone. She already seems to have had problems. But Don was a van driver at the time. He met her in a camp in Victoria. They went off together. She had great difficulty coping but they appear to have had a child and it died while Don was working for an elderly couple there. They moved to New South Wales. They appear to have lost another child there while, again, working for an elderly couple. It's hard to get the exact sequence and there's still a lot of guessing—because these children weren't registered. They moved to Queensland. Don worked for a few weeks in Toowoomba at the abattoir then they got the job with you. No doubt in that time he looked around at the jobs on offer, set up a bit of background, maybe even came out here and asked someone something about you … you were in need of someone, the Dowds moved in."

Bernie and Edna looked at each other. "You mean," he said after a long stunned pause, "he does it, deliberate?"

"It's beginning to look like it or else he's very clever at turning accidents to his advantage. Another day and you would hand him a cheque for £500. No doubt, after he'd gone you'd find a few things missing from the cottage and a nasty mess left behind. And in a few weeks, maybe a couple of months' time, he'll roll up to work in New South Wales or out near Dirrinbandi, somewhere no one's likely to recognise him."

"But—how do we stop him? And those poor little kiddies!" Edna had a view of Gerda being the next in line for a nasty death; she found her hands trembling with her fear and indignation.

"That is the problem. But, first, don't pay him. Just say a problem has come up, anything to put it off a few days. We've got to find enough evidence to get him taken in at least for questioning—and we've got to find a way to get the mother and children into some kind of safe place, he may well try to do something to them … we haven't had any luck so far with the Child Welfare people. We can't claim the children are being abused and they say they have to wait. And I don't know how we get Mrs Dowd out of the house—"

"She will go in a car. He sort of—" She couldn't think what to say. She'd seen it as his care for his wife; now she thought he forced her out so that her 'problem' wouldn't become too obvious …

"The police *are* working on it—it's probably just a couple of days. Just act normally."

But those were the longest days of her life. Edna went over in the evening with a cake. She wasn't sure if it was acting normally but she found herself wanting to do some little thing for the children. A cake was all she could think of. Don Dowd took it, saying belligerently, "Your brother got that cheque ready yet?"

"Not as far as I know. He doesn't have money just sitting there. He has to arrange for a transfer or something. I don't know all the ins and outs of it. But I'm sure he'll have it by the

end of the week."

"The end of the week!" He moved forward, his face darkening.

It was all Edna could do to continue to stand there looking tranquil and friendly. "We don't *have* to give you anything, you know. We checked with a friend of ours who's a lawyer this afternoon. He said it was very decent of us to pay you so much. So you will just have to wait for it."

For a moment she thought he was going to throw open the door and hit her. Then he stepped back. "You'd better. I can sue you for what you did to my little boy, y'know."

"I'm afraid you can't sue us. The lawyer was very clear on that. The boy went in a paddock where he'd been warned not to go."

"Who says? It's only your word against mine."

"No. It isn't." Edna had begun to tremble but there were things she felt she had to say herself, not leave to Bernie. "You told us you had worked on a dairy farm before coming here. We wouldn't have taken you if you'd said you had no experience. *No* one works on a dairy farm and takes chances with a bull. If they do they've only got themselves to blame. If you chose not to pass on Bernie's warning then you must take full responsibility for your little boy's death."

"We'll see about that!" He was furious. She stepped back down.

"You don't care about your little boy." She turned and walked away. She had the horrible feeling he would throw something or come after her and strike her. She closed the gate. 'I s'pose it was stupid of me but I almost feel better for saying it—but oh, those poor little mites, what sort of future are they going to have … '

She found herself unable to sleep. Their hired man refused to work and she had to go to the yards again. He said he'd finished his notice and had no intention of doing anything for them when they hadn't paid what they'd promised. Bernie said, "Sorry about that, old duck, but it's a relief not to have him here."

She dragged herself to and fro. The days seemed unbearably long, waiting, wondering what the police was doing, whether Don Dowd might do something more than refuse to work. If he could kill his own children then what about them? Several times in the night when the dog barked Edna got up and walked around, half expecting to find something set alight or broken. Would the cheque keep them safe? So long as he was waiting for his money then he wouldn't do anything?

"I think I know how the lady in Bluebeard's castle felt, just waiting and watching, hoping we'll see a car turn in the gate … and what if they don't come … if they can't find those other people … they might've died, Eric said they were old."

"They couldn't *all* have died. Cheer up, old duck."

But she heard Bernie walking up and down the verandah in the night, heard him go out and the back gate clang. It might be nothing. He just couldn't sleep. Or it might be something over at the sheds, at the bails, the hay-shed burning … she filled her mind with horrible thoughts … and Bernie wasn't getting any younger, he couldn't stand up to a man like Don if it came to a fight, a—what was the word the Americans used—a showdown … Then she heard his footsteps returning and she lay back down. But the strain wasn't good for her.

And when the police finally came they had no grounds for holding Don Dowd. It was all circumstantial. They could find nothing definite. Just gossip. The same gossip that Eric Humble had been able to track down. There were kids and they died in accidents, just sad accidents …

"And the people he worked for—did they pay him?"

"Not as far as we know—or not that they're admitting."

She thought she understood. Once the Dowds were gone would they want to tell anyone they'd paid them all that money. Wouldn't it look as though they felt themselves responsible? Better just to forget the whole sad business.

"Are you going to go and see them? He might admit to something?"

The sergeant scratched his face cautiously. “We could just drop in on ’em. Just tidy up a few things.”

“Such as?”

“Well, they don’t seem to have registered the boy’s birth. It might only be an oversight. But we’ve got the death of a boy who didn’t officially exist. So we’ll just nip round and ask ’em for his birth date.”

“What about the other children? Surely they’re all at risk?”

“Well, we can’t go round worrying about all the kids that mightn’t have the best parents, you know, lady.”

Edna felt it was like a little pond that just seems to drain and disappear overnight. If there was no case, there’d be no help, there’d be more babies, more crying children …

“You could run it past the tax department. I said I’d give the bloke £500 to help him get started again somewhere else seeing we’re planning to sell out … you could see if he admits to receiving the money.”

“We could.” The sergeant showed no enthusiasm for doing so. “Well, we’ll just mosey on over to the cottage.”

Bernie saw them out. Edna felt too depressed even to get up. They’d done what they could. But there was no satisfaction in it. And again, in her mind, she saw that little boy lying there bleeding.

The police went up the cottage steps, pounded on the door. Pounded again. They were about to turn away when the little girl Gerda came slipping through the stumps underneath the house. She peered out. The men saw her. “What’s happened to you, little girlie?” the sergeant reached out and caught her arm before she could disappear again. She squealed. “Won’t hurt you. Is your dad and mum inside there?”

She stared up with frightened eyes and said nothing.

“Look, Sarge.” The other man pointed to the back of the little girl’s head. “That should be seen to.” There was a nasty contusion, open and dirty and dark with bruising and pus.

“You’re right. I’ll give ’em another bash.” He knocked and knocked. “Can’t all be deaf surely. I think I can hear a baby crying.”

“Well, we’ll wait. I don’t think we should go till we’ve checked ’em out.”

“The door mightn’t be locked.”

The two men looked at each other. “You go round and try the back door. I’ll try again here.” He waited till his constable was in place then told the girl to sit down on the steps while he knocked again and turned the handle. The door swung open. Two small children stared at him with frightened eyes from a dirty mattress on the floor. The constable came in the back way. The kitchen set him back a bit with its unwashed plates and spilled food everywhere. There was a pile of filthy linen in the corner and flies buzzed. The two men found husband and wife and baby sitting in the bedroom. The woman became hysterical at the sight of them. Nothing her husband could do quietened her. The baby lay in an old box. Flies buzzed here too. The smell of defecation and rotting food was strong.

The two men looked at each other. Suddenly they felt helpless to cope with this kind of filth and despair and evil. “I think I’m going to be sick, Sarge.” The younger man bolted for the door.

*

“They must’ve known,” one neighbour said to another. “Those people couldn’t have lived there for six months and never let on what was going on inside that house.”

“Didn’t care, I don’t s’pose.”

“So long as the bloke came to work … ”

“I heard all the kids had to be taken to hospital, they were that knocked around.”

“And there’s Edna being all prissy about it, saying she couldn’t just go barging into someone else’s house, just an excuse if you ask me. It was her and Bern’s house, after all.”

“Didn’t want to know what was going on, I’d say. Just stick your head in the sand and

hope it'll go away."

"Well, they are getting on, you know," someone provided a modicum of support. "Bern's getting pretty deaf."

"Maybe so—but I just don't see how they couldn't *know* that anything was wrong."

"Well, they're going so let's hope we can get a nice young family there. Some kids for the school—"

"Is the district going to give them a farewell evening? We usually do when someone that's been here a fair while goes."

"Don't think so. A bit hard to say we'll miss them. A bit embarrassing to know what to say really."

"They went to school with Bob and Lorna, I remember, so we could just ask them if they want to bother with a bit of a do. I don't s'pose they will. Bob's not too well these days … "

Edna could guess at the things being said. She said things herself as she sorted cupboards and packed boxes. 'Why didn't we know, why didn't we guess … I didn't understand … ' And she found herself dropping tears into the boxes of china and wetting the newspaper she was carefully wrapping her mother's best dinner service in. 'I could've done something for Annie … something for the kiddies … something … ' And there was a bitterness in knowing they would creep away from the district they'd lived in all their lives, the only place they'd known, in knowing that people who might've come round to say good-bye now felt too embarrassed.

Peter Piggott came their last Sunday there. He brought a big bunch of flowers from the school garden and a nicely-wrapped parcel. He stayed for tea and watched them as they opened the parcel. It contained a photo album with some pictures of the school and between each two pages was a card, some drawn or painted, some cut out of old Christmas cards. They said things like 'Goodbye. We'll miss you' and 'Bon Voyage' and 'Come back sometime'.

The two old people, Bernie in flannel singlet and baggy pants smelling faintly of the dairy, Edna in shapeless cardigan with the elbows out and floral frock, looked from the book to the teacher.

"Peter, I don't understand," Edna said at last.

"I told them your story. I told them why goodness finds it so hard to deal with evil. And how, when people are good and kind and decent, it can make it easier for those with criminal intent … I didn't use just those words, of course, but the children understood what I was getting at. And they wanted to make these cards for you."

"Oh, the dear little mites!"

Edna's eyes grew moist and she dabbed at them.

'Doubt the kiddies had much to do with the idea,' Bernie thought, and kept the thought to himself.

* * *

THE GRID IRON CHAMPION

I began by keeping a diary but now I've decided I'll *never* want to know what I had for breakfast on the 27th October or which way the wind was blowing or how pretty Mrs Entwhistle's jacaranda is (which it is) or how we're taking up the lino in the back bedroom because there's an awful smell. Instead I intend to treat it more like a journal in which to write down my thoughts and feelings and impressions and 'Conversations over the Side Fence'. Things like that. I have a lot of time on my hands but Keith keeps telling me to rest.

*

When we drove up I'm not sure what I was expecting. Nothing special which was fortunate. Keith stopped the station-wagon and its trailer on the verge of the dusty side road and we went in. He'd collected the key from Mr Hardacre but as there's a window broken on the west side we hardly needed it and anyway there's nothing worth stealing. It's a small weatherboard house with a verandah closed in at each end with louvres and three steps above ground level. Two broken cane chairs are going grey at the east end.

That was my first sight. My second came when Keith finally wrestled the front door open and we stepped into the hall. It smelled rather horrible but shut-up houses do.

To the right of the hall is a bedroom and kitchen, to the left is another bedroom and a small lounge with a broken green-slatted blind. Then there's a small bathroom and a bath with rust stains from a dribbling tap. The toilet is opposite. Then there's three steps down to a small corrugated-iron lean-to which houses two concrete tubs and a vintage washing-machine standing on a wooden platform. I don't think I'll enjoy doing the washing particularly.

We've brought along all our ideas. We're going to make our own bread and grow our own food and keep hens and things like that. Before we came I thought of it as a new beginning yet, already, I find myself thinking of it as the way to keep my time occupied.

*

Mr Cliff Barnes has lived on our left (if I face the front door) for more than fifty years. He knows everyone who's ever lived in our house. The first owner was Henry Morrison and he had a quarrel with his son so he willed it to his daughter but his son flatly refused to move out when he died.

"In the bloody shed she was." Mr Barnes has tea with me. He says he appreciates my neighbourliness. (What a clumsy word.) "She wasn't goin' to shift till he shifted. Said it was her house right 'n' tight an' she wasn't goin' to be cheated out of it. Strewth, he tried every dirty trick in the book to get rid of her!"

"Stubborn as old mules they was." He likes the sound of himself saying that so he says it again. "But I was that sorry for her."

Keith drives up. We've put the trailer beside the house in a nest of dockweed, and we've put our furniture into the house but it has a self-conscious unbelonging look. He has a pile of cuttings wrapped in newspaper. Mr Barnes gets up, says he must be getting along, and shuffles off. Keith gives me a kiss and sits down, wiping his forehead with a hanky.

*

I don't care how the Morrisons behaved fifty years ago but what I don't understand is why they planted the half-hectare of back yard with nothing but asparagus. We didn't know (terrible admission) what it was when we first saw it but we identified it from one of our gardening books. There is a good selection of weeds and the ground is dried out and cracked like sunburnt lips. It looks like a weed itself—if a weed can be said to look *like* anything. We love the tinned variety and it's an experience to taste it fresh. But, if a woman really lived in our shed once, why didn't she plant something more useful if she was digging in for a long siege. Potatoes perhaps? Asparagus doesn't make sense.

Mr Barnes can't remember why but he tells me that blood used to bubble up from the ground outside the shed door. Of course I don't believe him but, all the same, I wish he'd kept that ghoulish little fancy to himself. Now I don't feel like going out there and rooting through

the shed. Not that there's much in there, some tins and boxes and a broken handmower and a copper come apart at the seams and an old army greatcoat full of spiders. We plan to put our gardening tools in there when we've tidied it out.

Keith says maybe her brother brought a bucket of blood from the abattoirs (we suppose he worked there, most people do) and tipped it out to upset her. The stink of it lying on the hot ground, congealed, the flies swarming over it, the maggots swimming in its turbid depths. The thought makes me sick.

Apparently her name was Elizabeth. Not Betty or Liz or Beth. But I can't help thinking it'd be hard to live up to Elizabeth in a shed six metres by four.

*

Grid Iron lies sixty kilometres south-west of the rail junction at Warpett. It's here because of the meatworks, nothing else. It's a cluster of buildings placed carefully on the immensity of the plains as though someone had first pricked the nothingness with a pin. It's a picture painted by van Dyck with a three-haired brush and when he'd been painting for a while he grew tired and just dashed in a bit of grey-white around it and blue overhead and separated them with a straight line. He hung a few miniature signs: the Bungarlarlah Shire Council and Jaycees Park and Hardacre's Mitre 10 and Grid Iron State Primary. He didn't put in an elegant piece of scrollwork to direct you to 'The Grid Iron Champion' because it's nothing but a cleared-out store-room with a desk, a phone extension, a filing cabinet, a cupboard full of past copies, a few flies which enter each morning with Keith—and a tradition. It's why we're here.

*

The road runs straight south to the horizon but the land must dip a little because some days the mirages lie in long placid pools between the town and the lip of the world. The railway runs at a slight angle to the road till, tiring of its uninteresting company, it parts altogether and is gone, invisible except when the sun shines full on the rails.

The meatworks are the other side of the line and about a half kilometre distant. It's always there as a background noise but it's only when they're unloading cattle into the great maze of holding pens that I have to take notice. The dust mushrooms high into the air and settles thickly over our peter-into-nothing road and films the skeins of last year's bindweed on the railway fence. Sometimes it rattles against our west windows as a fine grit, like a furtive lover calling.

*

Mr Hardacre is sorry the house isn't in better condition but he hopes it'll do till we can find something better. As it's free it doesn't seem polite to complain. Free as long as Keith's working to resurrect the town's newspaper anyway. Nobody has asked us how long we plan to stay and to Keith it's the thrill of turning it into a viable proposition (if humanly possible) which is the only thing that matters.

I tidy the house after breakfast and set bread and plan our garden. Then I go round the corner into the town's main street and collect our mail at the post office and shop at the mini-mart or look through the garden section at the hardware store—though their philosophy is 'if it moves kill it'—or sit in the park and watch Grid Iron's people go by. It's too hot to knit baby clothes in the daytime so I wait for the evening, hoping for a breath of wind.

We eat on the front verandah but this isn't wildly successful. The kitchen, though, is even worse with the sun full on it all afternoon. The flies are still with us as we sit down at our bamboo-and-glass table. They won't go either till the Scotch Greys arrive from the cool moistness of the creek fringe. No one can accuse flies of being anti-social. 'One for the road, sip, sip,' they hover round my cauliflower cheese, 'burp … ' I think we'll have to move to the lounge as our only alternative, unless I can persuade Keith to eat his dinner in the bathroom.

"Miss Winsome Hiller had the house for donkey's years. A bit of a gipsy she was, didn't fuss about nothing. I bought it for a song when she died."

Mr Hardacre is always polite to me but I think, underneath, he's like his name, he won't do a thing to the house because he knows there's nothing else for rent. People stay because of

the jobs at the abattoirs. There's nothing else to stay for. And the town stays the same because its people stay the same. The young ones work a year or two, then they go away and their places are taken by the next bunch of school leavers. Whereas the parents stay for their working lives because it's their bread and butter and rolled roast. That's the sort of town Grid Iron is and we know without saying anything to each other that certain kinds of questions aren't wanted.

*

"How're you feeling, Prue love? What did the doctor say?"

"Oh, nothing much. I'm in the pink. Exercise, eat sensibly, see him once a month and bring a sample."

I laugh as I repeat his instructions. Dr Grimshaw has my family history in his files now. He doesn't know it's an imaginary family. I'm not sure whether he'd be annoyed or feel sorry for me if he knew.

"Sounds okay." He eats his salad with serious concentration. I like the way Keith does everything as though his life depends upon it. Perhaps, though, it's as well I'm the one having the baby.

He's had his hair cut shorter because people here are conservative about things like that and they wouldn't like to be reminded that Captain Cook wore a wig and a hair ribbon and it isn't as though he's especially attached to his hair. He's attached to certain opinions but they haven't put those to the test yet.

I think he looks rather like those men you see in pictures from the 1920s, sleek blonde hair, serious grey eyes, a slightly decadent look. He'd look nice with a pipe but he doesn't smoke. Since we first met we've both become more health-conscious and I'm often grateful that we feel the same way about most things—because if we didn't, if we were growing in different directions, I think life would soon become unbearable.

*

Cliffie Barnes invites me to tea after we've been here a fortnight. I'm happy to accept because no one else has invited me anywhere although Keith's had lunch with the Shire Council bigwigs and what he calls the Chamber of Commerce.

His house is much like ours except it smells horribly of cigarette smoke. He's made a pot of tea, so strong I'm glad I don't have to drink it every day, (perhaps he counts me as two spoons for the pot), and bought a packet of gingernuts and a light fruitcake in cellophane.

I'm eager to know more about Miss Elizabeth Morrison; I've been picturing her like a Victorian governess in a tent in the bush surrounded by the squatter's children, stiff upper lip in good order.

"She gave up in the end," he says sadly. "Her mum got a bit seedy so she went to her an' never come back again." His little face rocks to and fro. On top are a few wispy hairs carefully combed across a freckled skill. "I never seen her again."

"What was she like? Was she pretty?" I really don't know why I want to see her in my mind, that governess of the garden shed, uneasy in her lonely vigil.

"Not pretty, no." He starts carving the cake into huge chunks. I've been feeling a bit queasy this last week. "Had a strong face for a woman. That sort of woman, y'know?"

A rather mannish look I suppose.

"And—did no one help her? I mean when her brother treated her so badly?"

"Weren't much they could do, I don't reckon. People said she'd be better off to go an' live somewhere with her mum but she reckoned this was hers an' she wasn't goin' to be cheated out of it."

"She must've really wanted this house. Were you fond of her?"

"Well, I was a bit." He dunks his gingernut. "But she'd been bush with old Charlie Chan an' I didn't want no bloomin' Chinaman's leavin's."

*

Lots of country towns had Chinese market gardeners; men who kept to themselves,

worked like navvies, and finally disappeared. Then people would nod sagely and say they'd gone home to China to live out their old age in comfort. But Charlie Chan, if that was his real name, was different. It seems he was a prospector.

He had an ancient truck and he'd go bush and not be seen for months. Nobody gave him a thought. Maybe he was panning for gold, maybe he was living off the land, maybe he just liked to get away from the smell of White Australia. Cliffie doesn't think he ever made much money because he never got a new truck.

Why did the young Elizabeth go with him? To spite her father, Cliffie says. But this doesn't make sense to me. The daughter thumbing her nose at her father, the son arguing, the father agonising over his will?

Keith has the answer to it all. He simply puts a finger to his forehead and makes a screwing motion. It leaves a little red mark. I'm not sure if that's a relief or not. I don't want to believe that a woman was terrorised out of her inheritance in our back yard. I don't want to live next door to a nut case.

*

Lots of crows sit along the railway fence. Big glossy things with fierce yellow eyes. I've never seen a crow at such close quarters before.

Below the bridge, which takes both the highway and the rail line just north of the town, are the waterholes of Bungarlarlah Creek. At the moment they're scattered here and there under the overhanging banks with nothing between but siltbars and rattling rushes. Further along are two picnic tables but the long spiky grass is never cut and no one comes except children who sometimes paddle. Even so, I think it's the nicest place in town. The fringeing trees are full of birds whose names I don't yet know. Sometimes at night a soft sad call floats up which Keith says is a boobook owl. It makes me think of a ghost passing and re-passing, calling to someone who never answers.

The north-westerlies don't blow very often but when they do they bring the sickly cloying smell of the meatworks with them. It makes me feel so awful. I forget there's any other smell in the world and even after the wind drops it seems to stay like a residue clogging my nose. The doctor offered me something for the nausea but I was firm and said no. (Bless you, mother, says Baby Bunting.) But some days the combination of death-scented wind and my hormones is too much. I want to creep into the naphthalene dark of the wardrobe among my dresses and Keith's jackets and forget that I exist. We could, of course, leave our acres of asparagus and move into the Diamond Hotel but the smell would come too and there'd be stale beer and piss added to it.

*

Keith is kind and fixes himself dinner. This is because he's been reading 'The New Fatherhood', not because he tries to enter into my feelings; and what chaos would he find if he *did* try?

He has the answer to our asparagus, why it exists in our middle distance. Exists and waxes stringily. It's in a Champion from the 1940s. The paper is yellow and feels dry and scratchy to the touch. No one has suggested microfilming. It says:

At the opening of the new canning section at the Grid Iron Abattoir Mr Jack Cooley emphasized the boost to the town's economy this far-sighted development will be.

And further on it says:

A number of residents have expressed their interest in growing high-value low-bulk vegetables such as asparagus to provide an interesting and valuable sideline to the town's main industry. So far, five contracts have been signed and a trial run of tinned vegetables will be looked forward to early next year …

"I wonder what happened? They aren't canning vegetables there now, are they?" I put the paper down and Keith fussily puts it back in its correct order. He doesn't know and he hasn't asked anyone because he's more concerned with 'his' first issue which goes to the printers this coming Friday. It's not a make-or-break issue. He's agreed to give the paper a year and try to

turn it into a thriving country weekly: plenty of ads, local events, Queensland news, weather, stock prices, an investment column, a nature piece, a quick round-up of world news, an editorial, a weighty piece to be written by the secretary of the Progress Association, local sporting results, a lengthy lead-up to the Grid Iron Show in March, a children's section (by 'Uncle Bonza' *alias* Keith), a recipe courtesy of the CWA, and the only thing which makes him excited—a little historical essay along the lines of George Blaikie's 'Our Strange Past'.

I hope he won't spend the next six months in jail for libel. (Or do I mean slander? I must check.)

*

"There was somethin' mighty funny about that garden, y'know." Cliffie spends a lot of time looking at it, all those waving fronds of asparagus and scotch thistles. "When the old girl was there—not Winsome—there was funny things in that garden. Little sort of balls, sort o' pearly, but if you broke 'em open they'd stink! By Christ they'd stink!"

It doesn't make the least bit of sense. Naturally Keith's told me that ten times already.

I've begun digging up the yard, first the barest parts, and so far I haven't found anything that shouldn't be there. Perhaps the Morrisons used those china eggs you put in the nest to inspire your chooks to lay—such is theory; I, Mrs Chook, am not impressed—and, over the years, the eggs cracked and filled up with chook manure?

One evening Keith suggests we go to the yards at the meatworks with the trailer and some shovels and buckets. They also sell meatmeal and blood-and-bone 'over the counter'.

Along our south side we have the kurrajongs in the dry grubby little Jaycees park but north side, west side, east side, all is bare—so Keith's ordered enough plumbago roots to start a hedge.

*

The cattle yards are empty today, acres and acres of churned dust. They synchronise the arrival of the trains with the work of the staff so the animals don't stand for more than twelve hours and the animals from furthest away go through first. All very orderly. But out here there's only the smell of cattle as we skulk to and fro with our shovels. In fact other keen gardeners do it too but I feel exposed and self-conscious. The sun beats down, drying everything, all the dung, to a chapatti-like consistency. The dust fills my nose and throat.

When the trailer is full to the brim we drink from the Thermos and go home to unload it all into the compost 'pens' Keith's made from the rolls of rusty wire Mr Hardacre sold him at a bargain price; glad, I'm sure, to make something on unsaleable stock.

Another day we can be shown through the works. Today, so Keith says, there's only Kev Hardacre who's the inspector and the people working in the freezing and canning sections. I am to assume all that is very antiseptic and dull. Step this way, Your Majesty. I'm not sure, though, that I really want to see great mounds of entrails and nascent tripe.

*

Last night I dreamed of blood. I dreamed I was at the seaside and there were cliffs, steep precipice-like cliffs, and there were children playing on their tops. One child walked to the edge and simply fell. A little boy. He made no cry, just fell. I was unable to move for what seemed a terribly long time. But it's only in dreams that I understand what it means to be transfixed by horror.

Then I jumped, hoping the sea was deep. But there was no sea, no waves, no foam. Just great heaving billows of blood which neither break nor move forward. I am on the sand watching these great blackish goose-pimpled sun-steamed oozing ridges rising and falling slowly. Occasionally one runs a little tendril on to the sand making the sort of stain a knifing might leave behind.

There is no sign of the child, the cliffs have retreated. The dancing sun smells of death and decay. There are black rocks dotted here and there. Above are birds, lonely cawing birds.

*

Mr Cahill has invited Keith and me to dinner. I met his wife in my one and only visit to

the hairdresser. She's rather smart, well-dressed, perhaps in her mid-forties. She speaks kindly, says I must find Grid Iron 'so dull' after the city.

"Perhaps in a while I will—but just now everything seems new and interesting."

She gives a sweet, rather sad smile. I find myself thinking of the many places she'd prefer to be.

Keith has put on his grey suit, his *only* suit. He looks more like a businessman than an alternative lifestyler. I wonder if he feels different inside? This morning I showed him the two tamarillos I've started in pots, as proudly as showing off baby's first tooth, but he just looked and was thinking of something else.

The paper was launched last week. Lots of people came to its 'christening' in St Mark's hall. St Mark's is Anglican, the Church of the Sacred Heart, Catholic, and there's a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses (will they call soon?), also the Uniting Church in Spondle Road and a small group which meets in a private house, perhaps because they are few, perhaps because they do not believe in the Church as property-owner?

Mr Cahill meets us at the door and says how well the launch went off. He makes me think of a rocket and I wonder what he expected to happen? (The Chamber of Commerce drunk and disorderly?) Mrs Cahill bustles out, says how nice we could come. Then she says "How interesting—you look like brother and sister! Oh! I hope you don't mind my saying so." Well, perhaps we are, except that Keith's family is very very respectable. They haven't had a scandal in a hundred years.

*

She has done a large slab of of beef with all the trimmings. (Of course, Grid Ironers don't talk of 'slabs', oh-dear-me-no!)

"It looks very nice," I say as Mr Cahill begins to carve, "but we're vegetarians. I'm sorry we didn't mention it sooner."

Keith gives me a cross look and says just for tonight he'll lash out and have a slice or two.

"Is it for your health?" Mrs Cahill looks at her husband, then at us.

"Well, partly to keep our cholesterol down—and we don't like to think of animals suffering because of us—and, you know, grains and vegetables produce a greater amount of protein per acre—"

"Not out here they don't." Mr Cahill is polite but I think it's costing him an effort. He places a little bread-and-onion stuffing on my plate and passes it to his wife for roast potato, pumpkin, peas, stuffed aubergine, cauliflower. "They're ruining the country with their clearing—the brigalow, the gidgee, the belah—" he waves his carving fork north, west, south, like a windmill in a fitful wind, "—and what happens when they get a dry year? Their blooming soil disappears—nothing to hold it!"

Mrs Cahill nods pacifically. "Yes, cattle make much more sense on these light dry soils."

Keith says something scientific (pseudo-scientific?) about the nature of 'these light dry soils' and the taxpayer footing the erosion bill. Mr Cahill agrees emphatically.

When we're going home Keith says loudly, "Why couldn't you shut up and eat the roast instead of making him upset? After all, it's his livelihood!"

I don't know why he's started using that hectoring voice.

"How am I supposed to know what his livelihood is when I only met him for the first time tonight?"

"Well, he's a foreman over there." He points to the great mass of tin roofs in the moonlight. "Going on about cruelty to animals … hell, I wish somebody'd put half the world out of its misery so quickly and painlessly—"

He's had his share of drinks at the Cahills. Though, had Mr. Cahill been a teetotaller, he would as easily have spent a happy hour discussing the damage done by alcohol in Australia.

"I didn't know you believed in euthanasia?"

He gives me a quick look then turns away. "I don't know that I do. Still, those cattle have

a damn sight better life than your average cancer patient."

We can hear them in the night, stirring, bellowing occasionally, and in the morning they'll file through.

*

All is dust and chaos. I don't know if Keith wants it for background. The Progress Association has asked him to write a booklet for the town's seventy-fifth anniversary next year. He thinks this will fit in nicely with the historical pieces he's planning.

Geoff Cahill is waiting for us. The yards look a wilderness of post-and-rail but in reality they're completely planned so that cattle can be directed this way and that with the minimum of fuss. There are several stockmen, each with a blue heeler; quick and silent, a nip here, a nip there. The cattle come through calmly and go down like ninepins. I don't know what I expected. Something out of a horror movie? Yet the very speed and silence seems horrible in a way—as though even a dumb beast should be given time to collect its self, its soul.

Then they pass on to hooks, strung up through their tendons, their lower legs and heads disappearing in different directions. Their hides are opened with one swift slicing blow, ripping down, then the great mass of shining guts, the quick selection of offal, kidneys liver heart. I look away.

Morning sickness and abattoirs don't mix but the first nausea fortunately subsides and I go on. Keith stops to talk to a man here or there in blood-spattered white overalls, his razor-sharp knives rising and falling in practiced strokes. Each man has his own knives and steel hanging at his waist.

Kev Hardacre is smiling by my elbow. He's rather a good-looking man. A dark gipsyish face with curly black hair going grey. He has a wife and three grown-up children. Thus am I coming to recognise Grid Iron's people, slowly, slowly, their living and their dead. (If Keith was not so obsessed with my need to rest he might ask me to take on the Champion's Out-And-About column: Mr Hardacre and Mr Cahill took much pleasure in escorting our new editor and his wife … Regrettably the poor woman disgraced herself …)

He tells us what signs of disease he looks for, but these are big rangy Shorthorn bullocks in their prime. He stamps each carcass then it moves on, most to the chilling room but some to be butchered for sale locally or canned: meat pie, bully beef, Irish stew, chili con carne—oh, Grid Iron is up with the latest. Its cans with the horned logo are on thousands of Queensland shop shelves.

In a separate operation lard is rendered down, meat meal comes through the great boilers and into the spray driers. There's a warehouse of sacks waiting for the next train down to Warpett and the main western line. Keith buys two bags of bonemeal and one of blood-and-bone. The smell, though, is unbearable and this time I barely make it outside.

Jim Chilcott comes out and dumps them in our trailer. I don't think Keith is very strong so he pretends he's making notes and Jim does all the work for him. "See y'round, mate." He goes back inside. I don't have to worry about an identity. We drive round by the bridge and Keith drags them along the ground and into the wash-house.

*

The town isn't laid out neatly on a grid; it's not that sort of grid its founder had in mind. It has the highway running almost straight through, just a little dog-leg by Gaffney's garage. And, to each side, like legs off a centipede run little side streets, some sealed, some not, with some legs connected by short through roads. Then they just peter out into the countryside, some along the creek bank, some by the showground fence, some into 'nothing'. (I find 'nothing' very hard to define.)

One leg goes to the cemetery. I thought, there, I might find a Morrison on a headstone. It's a small paddock, ecumenical baked earth with little scummy dragons' teeth thrusting up. On the far side is a huge meat ants' nest with satellite nests. (Am I, unwittingly, re-discovering Grid Iron in its graveyard? I'm not sure.) I manage to walk into the outliers without noticing and the ants swarm out fiercely, startling me.

I haven't found a Morrison, perhaps Elizabeth and her family are buried elsewhere. But under the pepper trees I find Charlie Chan, well-protected by the swarming ants. He must've accepted Christianity to be here. But he only has a small upright slab with several Chinese characters and underneath: 'Charles Chan' Died 2nd August 1947. Then in small script: 'The world is a lonelier place'.

*

I wonder if anyone knew, or cared, where and when he was born and I wonder what he discovered in his years of fossicking and what he did with whatever he found. I wonder too if Grid Iron remembers Charlie Chan.

It certainly remembers its founder 'Iron Jack' Cooley. The shire has erected him a fine tombstone with iron railings, a marble sarcophagus, a cherub blowing a trumpet, its plump bottom coyly visible above the cemetery fence. There are some rusty-looking geraniums planted in a large brass urn on the shady side. It says nothing about 'loving husband', 'devoted father' et cetera—were the town and the meatworks Iron Jack's substitute for a family? The whole thing is extraordinarily ugly. The Bungarlarlah Shire Council doesn't possess much taste. And later I find that the town, or at least a settlement, predates Mr Cooley.

*

The council chambers are ugly too. Red brick and grey concrete. It has a central section and two wings. One wing is a large hall where meetings and concerts and immunisation clinics are held. The other wing is the library. It's quite a large well-stocked library (so say I after fifteen minutes of browsing) and I borrow a Dick Francis and a book on growing citrus trees.

On the notice board by the door is a message about the Progress Association's next meeting, also one saying show schedules will be available at the end of this month. Perhaps we'll have vegetables ready to enter. Our carrots are up, also lettuce, beans and tomatoes.

Keith is tired when he gets home and likes to put his feet up and watch TV. We haven't decided whether it's ecologically correct to have a TV—though it's small and black and white, which sounds like plugging into a Border Collie!—so this may be his way of saying 'I've decided'. There are only two channels. Some afternoons I have the radio on, either the ABC or the local commercial station 4GI. They have one program I like, devoting an hour to hits from a different year.

The heat is intense after lunch but if I lie down I usually feel even more jaded when I get up. Mrs Entwhistle has given me some roots of parsley and mint and I've put them in by the wash-house drain where it's permanently wet. A few mint leaves in a jug of cordial are very refreshing.

But I wish there was someone I could talk to, really talk to. Not just polite chit-chat: the weather, cattle prices, would I like to go to so-and-so's Tupperware party next week. I said to Mrs Entwhistle this place reminds me a little of Henry Lawson—the sky, the far far horizon. She didn't know any Lawson, had one lived in Grid Iron? She's only been here twenty years.

It's not really the same. Somehow, I have a memory of billowing grass, of trees and flowing women, waiting, dumb, a sense of time stood still, of horses, spindly in the heat-mirages. However … there's no billowing grass. The plains are pale-dust-brown, sometimes cattle move in the distance but the only horses I've found are half-a-dozen ponies in a burry paddock on the other side of town.

I wish I could talk to Keith, really talk, but even that seems to have changed. He's moved on into the big bad world and I, unlike Little Red Riding Hood, have stayed behind where things are safe and slow.

*

Cliffie knows all about Iron Jack. I suppose everyone does. Iron Jack sat on their tucker-box.

"A hard fulla, very hard. He didn't talk, he barked. Had everyone scared of him. But they stayed an' did as they was told. By crikey they did."

"Because they needed a job?"

"Too right. If there hadn't been no works there wouldn't of been no town. So he said Jump! An' you jumped."

"Did people hate him for being like that?"

A funny look passes over Cliffie's little mottled face. Then he rubs his chin which is covered in grey stubble.

"They did an' they didn't, if you see what I mean. They hated his guts but they was glad to have a job in the Depression, see. Lots of other places had bloody nothin'. When other places was goin' bust Jack was expandin'. He reckoned people had to eat, like, so he'd make the food for 'em—an' because people had dough in their pockets the shops kept goin' an' the cinema an' stuff like that. So people had to be grateful. But they didn't like havin' to lick his boots—"

"No. People don't." Don't we sound wise.

"He started off small, buyin' a mob an' drovin' 'em to the coast himself. Did all right too. That's how he got his moniker, they reckon the horses'd drop under him he was that hard on 'em, but I dunno if it's true or not. I reckon he would've ridden about sixteen stone. It's a lot for a horse to carry."

Cliffie Barnes hates Iron Jack. Even now, thirty years after Iron Jack died he still hates him. I can feel it all around us.

"What did he look like?"

"They've got a mug shot in the hall." I think he's not going to tell me anything more but then he says, "The ladies seemed to go for him. Dunno why." He hadn't meant to say that so he busies himself with his tea and scratching his little scrawny neck.

*

I've now dug down the west side of the wash-house for perhaps fifteen metres and my rows of vegetables and herbs do look nice. Nice? I feel like Mother Ceres listening to their little plant-voices laughing and quarrelling and perservering. I wish I had a better watering system though and I wish I had more mulching material. We've put on all we brought back from the yards but it doesn't look much. Keith says it'll have to do for the time being. (I dislike that phrase; it always means someone doesn't want to do something.)

We've been invited out to Kentville Station next Sunday. It's about twenty kilometres away. Keith is keen to see the other end of the meat trade, or so he says.

"But if Iron Jack owned the works who owns it now—or did it go public?"

"He left it to the town—vested control in a company to be administered by the shire council. Very public spirited!" Keith grins. "But Siddy Armstrong told me Iron Jack fathered half the town anyway—so he was only leaving it to his kids really." He says this with relish as though he enjoys gossiping with old Sid who props up the bar at the Diamond Hotel day and night.

"Is that true?"

Keith laughs. "Who knows—but he got a kick out of telling me."

I've been to the council chambers to look at the portrait of Iron Jack, a huge thing in a gilt frame. It's funny but he has the look of Kev Hardacre a bit. Very dark. Curly black hair. His face is all planes and angles though I suppose he was quite old by then. I'd been imagining him like the scrap-metal merchant in James Herriot; now I think of him as 'King of the Gipsies'.

It's not only Kev. But I mustn't speculate. Here, where many people are related, I might easily say something I didn't mean to. I mention this to Keith but he only says "Gosh, I don't care who their fathers are!" Would he care if Iron Jack was still around?

*

Kentville is off the highway to the right. A gravel road runs up a long rise and there it is: a little oasis of green. The old homestead is surrounded by pepper trees, there are passionvines twining over the verandah posts. We sit there and have a beer—well, Keith does, they look on me as a nuisance when I ask for fruit juice. Above us, the roof protests in the heat.

Mr and Mrs Dredge are old, at least sixty. They're both tall and thin and leathery-looking. They take us around but there isn't a lot to see. A couple of horses in a small paddock. A shed with a truck and some machinery. A henhouse. A cubby built up in one of the trees, its wood grey with age. There's no sign of cattle.

I don't know what I expected. But after lunch, which is salad and cold beef, we're invited to go out with Mr Dredge in the truck. We bounce along a grass track for nearly half-an-hour with the railway running distantly on our right hand, then there's a huge dam with some scrubby little trees and hundreds of cattle camped in amongst them. The sight surprises me. I've come to think of the plains as tolerating life only on sufferance. More than that, the cattle look sleek and fat.

"Herefords," Mr Dredge says for my benefit. I am the ignorant townie. Keith nods knowledgeably, as though he's lived with Herefords for the last twenty years. "They're not the best for this climate—get eye troubles—but they do well here—pity, you can't have everything—nice cattle to work with." The cattle don't take much notice as we drive on down to the muddy lip of the dam.

"You wouldn't think there'd be enough of an incline to form a catchment." Keith has on his farmer's voice. He also has a business voice and a professional voice. It's only his Prue voice which bothers me.

"Well, now, you wouldn't." Mr Dredge has begun to roll himself a cigarette. It takes all his attention and he doesn't see Keith fastidiously wiping his shoe. "But this'll hold through till the rains come round the end of January—a bit earlier if we're lucky. Depends on the cyclones up north."

"And how often would you supply to the meatworks?"

"A couple of times a year. A turn-off of yearlings—then another lot at eighteen months—the oldest of the breeding herd after the calves are weaned and if the price is reasonable."

Keith goes on asking questions all afternoon but he doesn't seem to have brought his notebook with him. When we return to the house we find Mrs Dredge has caught and saddled one of the horses. She says it just occurred to her that Keith might like a ride.

He's never ridden a horse in his life. I say I'd *love* a ride. He starts to say something about the baby then he gives a sickly grin and says "Prue just *loves* horses."

I'm not a very good rider but I scramble on and walk and trot round the yard. "He has a nice stride." This isn't the truth. What a lot of lies we're telling this afternoon! He's a big fat skewbald gelding and Mrs Dredge comes over and opens the gate and says "He's more comfy at the canter."

I wonder what Keith's face looks like as I trot out and do a long elongated circle round the house and sheds. On the way home I feel a bit rubbed and sore from the old stock saddle but I say nothing. There's a lowering look about Keith.

"Will you write about it, about Kentville I mean?"

"No point. Everyone but us knows what goes on there."

I think it irks Keith to feel ignorant about anything.

*

We have six hens now, all behaving very hennily in the rusted netting enclosure Keith made for them. It has a pole for a roost and a couple of wooden boxes (with a side knocked out) for them to lay in. But, so far, its roof is a thatch of weeds I've pulled from the garden, (Don't know what to do with your weeds? Try this tip from our Resident Chook Expert), and Keith doesn't know when he'll get around to a proper roof. I did think of letting them live in the garden shed but I couldn't bring myself to put chooks in what is alleged to have been a woman's home. (I see now why Keith is fond of 'alleged'.)

It troubles me to think of it as someone's home. I know Winsome Hiller lived here all those years and I don't suppose she minded using the shed. I have heard a) that she was very short-sighted, and b) that in the beginning her sister lived with her but after her sister died she

lived here alone for ten years. It's strange that Cliffie never mentions them, or almost never. Maybe they didn't get along?

We've made a start on the shed, burning the coat (and, I suppose, the spiders which is the depths of cruelty; Keith has a great-aunt who never harms a spider because she says they control the flies. The trouble is—her visitors prefer flies) and given the lawnmower to Jim Chilcott who thinks he can fix it. We haven't got a lawn yet.

At some stage in its history the shed was whitewashed. I've read somewhere they used to make a good whitewash with ashes and prickly pear juice but I don't know if the prickly pear spread this far west. I must ask Keith.

*

I still can't decide if I believe someone really did live in our shed. There's a space between the walls and the roof but no windows. How stifling in summer and freezing in winter it would be.

"How long did Miss Morrison actually live there? It's horrible to think of her in that little shed day after day."

"Week after week, month after month." But Cliffie isn't being poetic. I think he's counting.

"A year," he says after a while. "A year and a bit."

It's hot. How tired I get of writing that, of *thinking* that. Yet I feel a shiver pass through me.

"She got nervous at the end … I think it was the blood scared her off, see. She'd been away once or twice but next time she went—well, she didn't come back. We didn't hear no more about her. Her mum lived down the coast somewhere."

"I don't blame her. I think it's *horrible* that a brother would do that to his own sister, even if he didn't like her. But, Cliff, why didn't Iron Jack help her—I mean if he was running the town and all that. Or the police?"

He doesn't look all that well today. Beads of sweat have oozed out on his forehead and his skin looks clammy. The heat makes *me* feel a wreck but I always blame it on the baby.

"You wouldn't want the sort o' help Iron Jack'd give, see? They didn't have no cops here then. What he said was law an' you didn't bloody complain—by crikey you didn't. Not if you knew what was good for you."

"What did he do to anyone who disagreed with him?"

"He'd run 'em outa town, like. Whether you worked over there—or in a shop—he'd only have to give the word an' you'd be out of a job an' no one'd take you on an' that'd be the end o' you. He done it to a couple o' fullas, come complainin' there wasn't no union. By crikey, I don't reckon they was game to organise again. Poor buggers!"

It seems Grid Iron was a company town, a one-man-company. So, now, I can't help wondering if Elizabeth Morrison lived in the shed because Iron Jack Cooley wanted her there.

*

When I looked out this morning there were cattle on the horizon, beyond the railway. At first I thought they'd escaped from the yards but then I saw they were cows and big calves. I don't know what breed, red and white like the Dredges' cattle but sort of lumpy and humpy. I suppose if I live here long enough I'll qualify as a kitchen-window-expert.

I've been making and hanging curtains. They *are* pretty, light-green with sprigs of daisies and autumn leaves. In the beginning I liked working to make the house nicer. But now I find myself thinking, even though I don't want to: 'Morrison washed his blood-stained overalls at these tubs', 'Morrison ate his food at this table', 'Morrison went to this toilet', 'Morrison slept in this room' … I try not to think those thoughts but they keep slinking in.

Why couldn't he have simply gone and said, "Come up and get comfy, Lizzie. We're stuck with the old man's will but we could share, couldn't we?"

Would she have come? Or was she afraid to have anything to do with her brother? Afraid of those sharp knives hanging from his belt. A little accident. Oops! You really must be more

careful! She slipped, sarge. I kept tellin' her not to muck about with me bloody knives! S'pose she thought they should be hers—like every other blasted thing around the place!

But there was no sarge and I don't know if Charles Morrison worked in the boning room. But I can feel his sister hoping he'd have an accident. There was a man in Chicago fell into a tank of hot lard and his bones were found weeks later.

*

At the end of the school year the abattoir donates enough steaks and sausages to the school for a giant barbecue. It seems everyone goes, not just friends and relatives, and throws brooms and drives nails and eats half-a-tonne of watermelons. (I exaggerate.) Keith tries to go to everything. He pontificates over dinner on the role of the rural newspaper, how it can only survive if it has its finger on the pulse of every event in people's lives.

A year ago, six months ago even, he didn't give a hoot for the needs of the rural-newspaper-reading-community. I suggest the Champion needs some humour. Some gentle irony.

The reason he likes working here is that he's completely in control, for all practical purposes, and I suspect he'll end up doing everything bar decide on the week's grocery specials. He is his own reporter, journalist and editor, he does the layout and takes the classified ads, then he goes down to the printers and does most of their work too.

I call in when I'm out shopping. He says he likes me coming in but that I should wear a maternity dress rather than shorts—though there isn't any bulge to enshroud.

"They have tents for sale in Hardacre's, perhaps you'd like to wear one for a week and see how you feel?"

Keith doesn't think that's funny. He thinks less and less things are funny. Poor baby, it won't know what a laugh is.

"I've dug out a few things might interest you." He gets up and goes to his cupboard. "Now, where'd I put them?" He roots under a pile of papers and comes up with a folder containing some clippings.

"You can borrow and read them at home." Magnanimous man. But the implication is I should be home resting. You wouldn't believe famous tennis players or gymnasts ever had babies if you lived in our house. I'm sure he wishes they could be grown in incubators. Twiddle the right dials, observe through the special window provided, add a dash of this hormone and a pinch of that vitamin, press the ejector button and—Hey Presto! Out comes a perfect miniature Keith!

*

Here is Charley Morrison winning the two hundred yard race at the Easter Sports. He's a bit blurry. A tall darkish boy wearing white shorts and a pale shirt. It's 1932. I wonder if they still have the Easter Sports.

This one's a flooded river—no, it's Bungarlarlah Creek, twelve miles downstream. And the funny-looking truck on the far side is 'well known Chinese fossicker Charlie Chan marooned by floodwaters on the Bilgum side of Bungarlarlah Creek'. I wonder if Grid Iron preferred him stuck on the far side.

I picture Charlie Chan as a little bow-legged man with long thin moustaches who says 'velly', and I picture Elizabeth as tall and regal with a strong face and determined mouth. An ill-assorted pair? Charlie apologises for the state of his truck. He only has an old crate for her to sit on. He lays a chaff bag—or his coat like Raleigh—over it for additional comfort.

"Oh heavens, Charlie dear, do stop fussing over little things! We've got more important work to do."

And indeed they have. Bungarlarlah Creek runs south-west. Somewhere, far far beyond my horizon, it ceases to be sand and runs over sparkling rocks. Here they set up their tent and build their campfire. Here they pan for gold.

*

My thoughts naturally turn to gold. It's what fossickers seek. But do they seek it out

here? They seek it here, they seek it there … "Do you know what I learned today," Keith says.

"No. What?"

"Those funny things Cliffie told you about. They might be 'thunder eggs'."

Thunder eggs! What an odd description. The thunder roils and moils and it forms strange small egg-like rocks down below. "What are they made of?"

"Agate. So I've heard. And there's opal nobbies … the poor stuff."

"So are the eggs valuable?"

"Don't think so. Just curious. They're found in several places in Queensland."

So everything will make sense some day. From asparagus to eggs to blood to Elizabeth in the shed?

"If you come across any in the shed or the garden we can ask someone."

"Maybe Iron Jack picked them up on his droving trips. Souvenirs."

"Maybe." He doesn't see the sarcasm. His thoughts are on a story. "Maybe Charlie Chan found them. He doesn't seem to have found anything valuable."

"How do you know?"

He leans back, puts his hands behind his sleek head. The Patriarch Expounds. "The town paid for a stone when he died."

"You mean Iron Jack did?"

"No, the Methodists did. He went there. He left all his belongings, though he didn't have much, to Elizabeth. Or so they say."

All his bags of gold dust, all his thunder eggs, all his sapphires and emeralds and opals … and Elizabeth? What did she do with them?

*

Keith is measuring the bathroom. The old metal tape zips in and out. He yells "Seven feet and three inches" and I write it down. It isn't that Mr Hardacre has promised us a new bathroom, not even some old tired shop-soiled stock. It is Keith Being Prepared. This is a different status to Be Prepared. It can be mentioned to our landlord in the very next conversation. It can be put away for the future like newspapers for our winter burning. "Six feet, six inches—stop daydreaming Prue! I want to have this done before the baby comes—"

"The measuring or the re-decorating?"

"Don't be dense. We'll get a decent surround for the tub and tiles up the walls and fix these gaps in the wall … The pipes aren't too good either, very rusty … but I'd better find out more about the drainage system first."

He has a pencil professionally behind his ear, quite forgetting Little Miss Della is right to hand.

"So you'd better not dig in too close to the house, just in case you catch a drainpipe—"

"No sir. Shall I put that in writing?"

He manages a weak smile. "You really shouldn't be digging at all."

"It beats slaving over a hot stove."

"I'll see if I can't talk him into some blinds for the kitchen. Some nice white Venetians would smarten up the place."

He holds out a hand for the notebook and mulls over it. Then we look at the old bath with the rusty dribbles and chipped enamel. "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth the effort—but I haven't heard of anything better—"

Keith *belongs* in nice bathrooms, smart suites, *avant garde* patios.

*

I must must must get back to my shed-tidying. The heat lies like a great unseen lake across the landscape. The garden wilts and hangs its collective head. There is water from the town's small reservoir. No restrictions. Not yet. But the heat fights me every inch of the way and there is no shade, just the narrow block of shadow thrown by the shed. Inside, the tin walls have stored the sun and wrap me in it. There are piles of old Bushell's tins which rattle when I lift them but their lids are rusted on. There are narrow treacle tins like stovepipe hats and

broken preserving jars.

I think of Winsome. “Tut, tut, that really is beyond repair. To the shed.” What does she think of Elizabeth when she consigns her sad shards to these dusty piles? *Does* she think of her? *Did* she know her? *Might* they have gone to school together? And Iron Jack … *did* he come round to visit Winsome on her lonesome and did she show him the door or was she, too, beholden in some way?

Cliffie hums and haws and says Iron Jack was getting on a bit.

“A bit? He must’ve been pretty ancient by then, surely?”

He leans forward. “He come looking for Elizabeth one night, this’s just after Winsome an’ her sister moved in, he says they must know where she is—”

“Why didn’t he ask Charley Morrison? He must’ve known where his sister was?”

“Charley went a bit funny and went—away, like.” Cliffie gets up and fusses with the teapot. “Me mum used to make these fancy cosies, think I’ve still got a couple put away somewhere. You might like one.”

“It doesn’t matter in this weather, but thanks.”

“She got peaky in the heat.”

“Your mum?”

“Elizabeth. The blood there—I told you how it use’ to bubble up, didn’t I—and the smell was—” he shakes his head, bob, bob, bob. “Brought the flies. Mum could never stand flies, she was always worryin’ we’d get bilious, s’pose we did too. I remember I use’ to sick up my food a lot when I was a lil’l fulla … s’pose it was the heat an’ the flies—bit of a weak stomach.”

I wish he wouldn’t mention this when I’m eating his food.

“I’ll hunt out those cosies. Must be somewhere round, you wouldn’t believe the stuff I’ve got put away here … there was somethin’ I gave to Elizabeth when she was in the shed, can’t just call it to mind … ”

*

What an awful dream! And I lay for ages feeling the heat over me and saying to myself ‘I’m not hot, there’s rain falling, cool gentle rain, I see it like a mist across the plains, across me … so cool … so soft … ’ I slept and I was a large hump like a tortoise and the land around me lay flat and limp and the dull brown of burrs. I would heave and gasp, great lumps of rotting flesh would fall away and with awful weary grunts they would extrude from under the shell and lie there and birds would gather, waiting, and all my thoughts were centred somewhere in my innermost soul and its agony.

“You were grunting a lot last night,” Keith says.

“Was I? It was very humid.”

“I’ll see if I can get a fan … or we could move the bed to the front room, it’d be a bit cooler.”

I am determined to finish the shed today. Today? No, I’m wrung out. I’ve brought up a wheelbarrow load of tins. I might as well sit and sort them in comfort. Keith has chiseled some of the lids off. A lot of stones and gravel. We can lay it all out on a tarp. ‘Who’ll buy my lovely stones, so round and sweet, come buy, come buy—’

Maybe Elizabeth kept them to hand to throw at her brother and Iron Jack. “I am a virtuous woman!” She tosses back her magnificent handsome head. There was Charlie Chan. Those were days when a little yellow baby—

Raised eyebrows! Dear me, tut, tut, whatever is Grid Iron coming to.

Iron Jack coming round. Get rid of that Chinese bastard or—or what? Yes, I think Iron Jack would be furious if a woman dared choose a different lover. But I can only speculate.

*

Would I like an assignment? A nice quiet doddle? Mrs Purkiss is the town’s oldest resident. She is in the CWA home. I can go around there. I can ask her questions about growing up in Grid Iron, growing old in Grid Iron. She was the Methodist minister’s wife many years ago. He is dead now. Her children are long since grown and gone and with children

of their own.

She is a little thing with a yellow wrinkled face, yellow-white hair, shrewd blue eyes, a soft sad voice.

"Grid Iron was a hard place," she says to me and she reaches out a little gnarled hand. "Perhaps you shouldn't say so in the paper. People try to forget what it was like … or they pretend it was good because there was work … "

"Because of Iron Jack, do you mean? The hardness and the work."

"Yes. Both. But I know there were people who lived here for years without getting paid. He'd say, I'll see you through. Yes, I can still hear him saying, 'I'll see you through'. There were men on the roads in the thirties, you know, they'd hear there was work in Grid Iron and they'd come all this way—the government put the railway through in 1936 to make work—just on their poor tired feet and they'd knock on doors and Iron Jack'd be waiting for them. If he got there first—" Her eyes are bright with memory. "He broke one man's leg, said he could see what it was like walking on to the next town with one leg … we helped that poor man. Do you know, my dear, it was like a siege, our house, my husband and my daughters, asking people to bring the men straight to us … people were frightened to go against Mr Cooley. I remember an old man bringing a fellow to us hidden under a blanket in his sulky and he was shaking so much he could hardly drive … the horse brought them both to our gate."

"Why do you think Iron Jack was like that?"

"I don't know, Prue dear. And people still prefer not to mention those things. I don't think it's good for one person to have that kind of power."

"But you went away, didn't you?"

"Yes. Perhaps it was the wrong thing to do, people needed a man like my husband—and old Father Dwyer. But we had teenage daughters and he didn't. I'm not sure if you can understand our fears, now, when people seem so much more casual about—virtue."

"You wanted to keep your girls away from Iron Jack?"

"Yes." She is getting very tired.

"Would you like me to come back tomorrow—or another day?"

"Come tomorrow, there's a good girl. And you must ask the questions, not let me ramble on."

"I enjoy hearing your memories. But I'd like to ask you about Charlie Chan … and Elizabeth Morrison … if you knew them."

She smiles and her false teeth are straight and white in her old face. "Yes, I remember them. Yes, do come and ask me about them."

*

"Charlie Chan was a gentleman. Do you know those lines, 'When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?' I always think of that when I remember Charlie. He delved but he was the most courteous old man, one of Nature's gentlemen, as people say."

"And—did Elizabeth go prospecting with him?"

"Oh yes. They loved each other. But when he was old and dying he stayed with us for a little while, it was safe for him, you know—"

"This was after you'd come back?"

"Yes. It was after the war. He said to me, 'Mrs Purkiss, I never touched Liddy', he always called her Liddy, 'I loved her too much'. You see, people accused him of being the reason for her going away, they said it was a child, but I knew she was going to see her poor mother."

"Where did her mother live?"

"Right down near the river. In Brisbane. I met her there, I said, 'Mrs Morrison, I'm so glad Elizabeth's come down to be near you' and she said, 'but Lizzie is still in Grid Iron, she's never even been near me' and when she died, years later, she said she'd never forgiven her daughter for never coming—"

"What about the brother?"

"Oh, he never went either. He was too busy breeding his dogs, he said he was going to get pure blood if it was the last thing he did. But they say one of his dogs went after some of Mr Cooley's stock and that was it. He packed up and left. I don't remember him very well … but that was after his mother had died, poor old soul … "

"So what happened to Elizabeth?"

But Mrs Purkiss is still pondering on something else. "They were big dogs, blue, you know, with tan patches … they said they would bring anything down, fight anything, and the men would go somewhere up past the abattoirs and there was money … I don't know but I remember my husband preached a sermon … What was that, my dear, you were saying?"

"About Elizabeth?"

"We never heard … she stayed there, with her brother, until Charlie died. I thought she went—to her mother—people said she did … but old Dick Cahill said she bought a ticket for the train and then she never came for her seat … she might've found a lift instead—"

"Maybe Iron Jack gave her a lift?" I think I am being facetious.

"No. I don't think so, Prue dear. I don't think he would've done that."

*

It wants to rain. I feel the clouds come up and strain but something holds them back. But I am in the shed, putting the last tins by the door. Did Elizabeth sleep on the floor, on a camp bed, a hammock? There's just room to lie out straight—and I think she put a chair against the door as there's no sign of a bolt.

Did she lie in wait. Not tonight, please God, not tonight. Let me sleep in peace. And the handle rattles and she says, the wind, it's the wind, and her heart beats faster … and there's the sound of a vehicle … and Iron Jack's voice … command, demand, brook no delay … and Charley Morrison obsequious, yes sir, yes, sir, but sir … no buts …

I don't feel very well, a bit bloated, or it might be the heat and my imagination, but I'll finish today. Hook or crook. I *do* feel crook.

Thunder. And a little sighing wind. Maybe it will cool things down at least. Real thunder, not a far mutter.

Shall I take down these makeshift shelves or shall I leave them for Keith, not that we need the space, we've got a whole house … but I'm doing it for Elizabeth, not for Keith, and she sits here and listens to the thunder, a distant rolling, and in it is the longing for life. She is a tempestuous single-minded woman who wants—wants what?

The first clatter, it might be a touch of hail. Was the horizon a pale leaf-green or wasn't it? I don't mind hail, there are no windows to break, only the little gap between walls and roof. Yes. Hail. It's really flinging—through the crack in the door I see the marbles skip and dance across the lawn—really pelting, and getting bigger, pingpong balls, hens' eggs, my poor hens, cricket balls, goose eggs, emu eggs—"AS BIG AS EGGS!" the headline for Keith—and the noise, I can't get away from the noise, it's getting bad, all around me, the tin thundering, shaking, a terrible rattling round my head, I wish my heart wouldn't speed like this, and I can't breathe when it does—

*

It got unbearable yesterday. And the hens, my poor hens. You were, what is the word, lax, delinquent, irresponsible, says Jiminy Cricket, poor dumb creatures, pelted and hurt and bruised and all because you cowered in the shed.

But the piles of gleaming pale white ice have melted and my plants lie sadly in green pieces.

Keith says, "Leave it, leave everything. I'll get on to these drainage pipes, see where they go, while the ground is nice and damp."

And the plains are tinged, like a strange green moss that creeps across them, too faint and low to be called *grass*.

He tips up tin after tin, lots more ochre and grey stones. Some rusted nails like a strange orange hedgehog. Some filthy rags. Something oily that's evaporated and left a blackish scum.

More stones, crumbling. Some china bashed into small grit for the chooks. Did Winsome keep hens? Some dry pumpkin seeds. More stones.

"Do you want *any* of this junk? Otherwise I'll put it straight on the trailer. I wonder they bothered to keep it in the first place."

"She needed the stones to throw at the dogs."

"What dogs?"

"Charley's killer dogs."

*

Such a nice neat shed. "Elizabeth, where did you go? Where are you now? Where are you?" The tin walls create a faint echo, more a resonance, a timbre, not an echo. There was a beautiful girl and everything was taken from her, except her voice and the memory of her existence.

A shed for rakes and forks and hoses.

He doesn't want my interview with Mrs Purkiss. "I can't use *this!* What on earth were you thinking of? I want something about the church, the congregation, how the church has changed, fêtes, personalities—"

"That's what I gave you. Personalities."

"Well, it isn't any good. I'll have to go and see her myself. Give her a questionnaire. Honestly! You're just getting silly with this obsession—"

Keith has done some digging, a little mole line in the damp soil.

"It's very strange. There's two pipes here. One seems to go out to the road." The other one is very old and rusty, falling to bits.

It goes towards the shed.

"I don't understand," Keith says.

"You don't listen. She had hot and cold laid on."

"Oh, stop being silly."

*

I'm back to my own digging. I'll put caulis in along the fence near Cliffie. He hasn't come with the cosies but he does come to the fence and lean over and say, "Best not dig too close to the fence."

It's a wavering old fence, it'll fall over, soon as I look at it. But no, Cliffie, says it's because his pipes go through somewhere here, he can't remember just where, but he remembers them being laid diagonally, not straight out to the road.

"I can go to the Council for their plans, they'll have a record—"

"I wouldn't bet on it," says Mr Barnes. "I wouldn't bet on it," says Keith.

And, "We've got plenty of room anyway."

"Caulis need lots of room. And broccoli. And I might try Brussels sprouts … and how about some rosella bushes right along that awful fence?"

"All right. But I'll just dig a few careful holes, not the whole area."

"I can dig—"

"No, you bloody can't! You should be resting. You're all puffy."

"That's the heat."

"It's not so hot today."

"For me it is." I don't know why my body sort of feels stifled as if it's been kept too long in the small kitchen, sort of swollen and clammy. "It's the cooking."

"I'll get the blinds tomorrow. He says he's got some wooden slatted blinds put away in his shed. We can have them for free."

"I wonder if Elizabeth snuck into the kitchen when her brother was out. Made a quick cake."

Yes, that's what I feel, sort of doughy, like something with baking powder in it.

*

"You missed your appointment." This is earnest Keith. I'm quite fond of him but

unfortunately he only comes to visit occasionally.

"Did I?"

"Didn't you put it on the calendar? I ran into Dr Grimshaw downtown today."

"No. I must've forgotten. Never mind."

"Well, I'll make another appointment for, say, Friday. Do you know what day it is today?"

It's strange but I have these moments when I feel I've lost a little part of me. A piece of matter. A piece of time. I think of Elizabeth sitting in the shed, sitting, sitting. An anchorite upon the great sweep of plain. The hours pass in shimmering heat and there's the faint lowing of cattle, the shunt of the train, voices somewhere else—and little pieces of her fall. Leaves. They gather round her feet in crackling heaps. 'Elizabeth,' they cry, 'where are you?'

'I am here, my darlings, still here, but diminished, lonely, alone.'

*

"What on earth were you on about last night in your sleep? You kept saying, I think it was 'where are you?' and I gave you a bit of a shake and you stopped."

"Where are you?"

"That's what it sounded like. And it might've been something about Elizabeth. I wish you'd forget that bloody woman. You should go out more. Join the CWA or something."

"I thought you wanted me to rest more?"

"Well, I do, but—"

"But me no buts. I'll get straight on to Mrs Entwhistle and see when their next meeting is. She thinks I'm too city to know anything about anything. But I can take my knitting—"

"You're not knitting in this weather, are you?"

"A bit."

"You're mad. Leave it till autumn."

"Yes, Baby Bunting. Sorry you haven't got booties or rugs or little bon-bons or a wee little jacket, who's a wee cold little man?"

"We'll buy things. I'll ask my mother to send some things."

"Right-e-oh. Would you like me to paint the bathroom instead?"

"He'll give us some paint next week. He's only got red and yellow to spare."

Red for blood. Yellow for Charlie Chan. Red and yellow for the rusty tin shed.

"I wonder if we could grow passion-vines over the side fence."

*

Cliffie objects to Keith digging holes by the fence. He and Keith shout at each other. Keith hates being told what to do by an old duffer like Cliffie. Cliffie hates being told to buzz off by a young city slicker like Keith.

I am lying on the bed and gazing at the ceiling. I can hear their voices but not the words. The ceiling is rather brownish and the old paint is crackled.

I am not here today. Just my midriff which seems to rise up like a large opalescent egg, a thunder egg, pale and sickly looking with the faint suggestion of veins. Women are bovine in this state. Their memories flag, fade, feint, fall, fail. I do not remember what I did yesterday.

Oh, and I forgot another appointment. I wish I did not feel so tired. As though each limb requires a truck and crane to move it.

Sometimes hours go by and I don't notice them passing. I am dough from my head to my toes. But I feel my heart beating. It beats too fast. Thub! Thub! Thub! Elizabeth's heart beating with a fear that won't lift, a dark dense fear that is always waiting. I should go, I know, she says, should go, should should should but not until, not while Charlie … he fades, he forgets, some days he talks in Chinese and his voice goes up and down and the words are lost in the ceiling.

I go to see him at night when Charley is sleeping. I slip out, the dogs are there but I have them frightened of me, oh, I won't hesitate to drive them back with stones, ssaaaahhhhh, git

back, and they back away, furious creatures with gleaming eyes and raised hackles—and I pass through.

Charlie is dying. When he is dead I will be quite alone. For love is matter, flesh, blood, food and drink.

I will take the train. Not a word of goodbye, not a moment's looking back. They may be pillars of salt, they may be dead leaves and ant heaps and tussocks of white wire grass.

I will be gone.

The stains on the ceiling are like railway-tracks, they wind away.

And the blot. That is Grid Iron.

And the Grid Iron Champion is fine words in Old English Script, just off here to the left.

The Social Notes: Miss Elizabeth Morrison said farewell to her many friends, relatives and old school chums in Grid Iron last Friday. Miss Morrison was given a lovely lustreware vase by which to remember her many happy years in Grid Iron. She accepted it with tears in her eyes. "Although I am looking forward to caring for my mother now that she is not in the best of health, I will always remember Grid Iron as the place of my happy childhood and where I spent my time as a young woman. I will keep the vase on my mantelpiece and fill it with fresh red roses every day."

"I've got some potted plants to put along the fence."

"Have you?" I should be interested and instead I feel … I feel … as though I'm not here. Yesterday, I was not here. I found the blank space waiting for me. I wonder what I did. Yesterday I might've been Elizabeth.

"I suppose it'll mean another argument with Cliff but the Council says they're pretty sure the pipes wouldn't be there."

"No plan?"

"No plan. Or they haven't located it."

"Iron Jack didn't need plans, things on paper—"

"What's he got to do with anything?"

"Do you know—I think there wasn't a Mr Morrison. I think Iron Jack was their father. That's why their mother left. She was ashamed."

"I thought you said there was a will."

"Oh, there was a Mr Morrison. But he wasn't allowed to do anything. And he wanted to get Elizabeth away when Iron Jack came calling because it'd be Jack's daughter having Jack's baby … so he said to Charley, make life so difficult for her … "

"You're not making sense." He frowns and puts out a hand. "You're very hot. Would you like an ice pack?"

"Am I? Yes, ice … "

He bangs a lot in the kitchen. I can see Cliffie looking over the fence. He seems to be frowning too. The radio in the kitchen is playing that song … It's a strange strange world we live in, Master Jack … the way it dies away and rises again … Why is Cliffie frowning? Because of Keith.

One hen died. I am so sad. She just died. I am surrounded by death. Dead plants, dead people, dead … who killed Cock Robin, not I, said the town, and all the birds of the air fell a-sighing … I killed her with my boning knife … I couldn't put her in the pot, she was quite stiff by then …

Elizabeth taking her little box, was it a box like this one I put poor henny into, first a box, then a little grave by the Jaycees' fence. It's hard digging, every thrust of the spade takes time. I sweat. I pant. My heart is going too fast again. And my feet as I push down on the spade look white and over-plump …

Cliffie is watching, he's always watching these days. I don't know why he doesn't work in his own yard. He has the same sort of area but there's a fence across it just beyond the

house, so he has a yard and a paddock. A paddock of burr and baked brown patches. A little slap-up shed. A lemon tree with scale on the leaves.

I don't feel well.

The sun shines in a cloudless sky.

But it was winter when Elizabeth went away. She had a little box with her. She wore a pink cardigan …

*

I wish I felt better. I wish my eyes didn't jiggle while I'm writing this

*

"The heat," says Keith, "you were out too long

*

Another dream of blood, of pale pale blood that washes out, lapping gentle pink waves and they touch my legs and climb, splash, splash. Keith moved my journal. I wrote this on the back of a card. Why did I write it. I woke up with pink, as though it lay over my head.

"Are you feeling better?" says Keith.

"Am I sick?"

"You lost the baby. Didn't you know?"

*

I lie in bed because they won't let me get up. I sweat on to the sheets. But when I put words on the page my hand is cold and clammy. I must write to my mother. Tell her I'm coming soon. My hand won't stop shaking

"Don't try to write," Keith says, and then "I read your journal."

Was it yesterday he said that. I could hear Cliffie screeching beyond the window. But surely Keith should be at work. The Champion …

I read your journal. I don't know if I should get angry. I forget now what I put in it. I wish Cliffie would quieten down. It's not true about the pipes. I suppose he worries about pipes the way I worry about—what—

It was a cold night when Elizabeth went away. Iron Jack said Come and she Came and no one ever saw her again.

"He actually threatened me, that little pipsqueak. I mentioned him to Mr Hardacre. He said Cliff's always been odd, ever since, well, years and years, never going anywhere, he says, maybe Prue shouldn't go next door."

Who? Who threatened you?

It was dark when she went, just a shape in the night. He came out of the night.

Who did? Who came out of the night?

"I'll make some tea," says Keith. I don't remember how we came to tea. I am lying somewhere up above the bed and looking down, the sheets are very rumpled. He has a knife in his hand. "And would you like me to cut some date loaf? How do you feel?"

It's in with the tea-cosies—

What is?

I don't know.

Why does nothing make sense any more?

"We didn't know you were—if you'd kept your appointments like I told you—" Nag. Nag.

"Where is Cliffie?"

"I don't know and I don't care. The little beggar's nothing but a nuisance. And you're not to go next door—"

"He's going to give me a cosy … his mother knitted it for him … Cliffie's mother … "

"Well, we don't need a tea cosy."

The flies are very bad today. I wish we had screens. They seem to buzz, round and round. Flies. Flies. Didn't Cliffie say something about flies …

It's very quiet now, noon, hush, perhaps the creek runs, the train comes, perhaps there's cattle milling in the dust … there's something I must remember … I put the thought aside … a little lump, a pinkish lump, I saw it somewhere … in a drawer …

Hush, hush. Death comes. A very slow death like sleeping.

I must've slept and woke with Keith bending over me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand, I wasn't very … understanding." He kisses my face. "Do you feel any better?"

"I don't know."

But it's not me, it's Cliffie. "You must go," my heart has begun to go too fast again, "it's not me, it's him, go and check, you mightn't be too late."

He shrugs.

But then he goes. Did he shrug. Did he go. Part of me is up there watching and the heavy part listens to its heart, thub, thub, like a train, the train … I see it if I close my eyes …

I want to cry, the tears well up, I don't know why.

*

"It's all right, Prue." His voice comes from a great way off.

And "We found him."

*

Was that yesterday or the day before. "What day is it?"

"Friday."

"What did you say?"

"Friday."

"No, before that."

"Nothing."

"About Cliffie."

"He tried to—well, it wasn't nice. He cut his hand nearly off. He wrote a note for you, it was soaked. They don't know if he'll live."

"He doesn't want to live."

"I s'pose not. The cops are over there now. Take it easy now and I'll make you a lemon drink."

*

Why? Why did he do it?

He loved her. He loved her.

All these years, she was there, resting.

And all he had from beginning to end was her pink cardigan in his kitchen drawer.

"Will you put it in the Champion?" The ants swarm in the cemetery. It was ants, not flies … I forget now what it was beyond me, just there in a thought … love and hate, I felt it all around me … "Will it be news?"

"Of course. News of a sort."

* * *

PART THREE

INNOCENT UNTIL–

‘—fell asleep’

(Luke 8.23)

“Don’t fuss about that now—come and have your breakfast—Put that *down* Kimmy!—come on now, it’s nearly eight—the bus’ll be along soon.” Molly Brown pushed the children with her voice, her hands, even reached out a harried foot to set the bouncinette going again and still the squalling of the baby. Every morning left her drained but at least, once the children were on the bus, the house quietened. She could draw breath before starting on housework, cooking, washing, ironing.

Quietness was the state she most wanted, she believed there was something almost un-Christian about noise, and her whole life was a private struggle to move from day to day, from task to task, from need to need, with a kind of serene and unchanging radiance. She saw the times when she roused and rushed not as the result of having a boisterous healthy set of children but as her own small but inevitable failures.

She pushed lunch-boxes into childish hands. She urged Pip to finish the last of the scrambled egg. She lifted Sally who’d declined to a peevish whimpering and put her over her shoulder while she soaked the porridge pot and took the teapot to the table. Her husband, missing the worst of the morning rush, pulled his boots off at the laundry door and came in, walking with slow heavy steps. She was too busy to notice that he was unnaturally pale and did not immediately seat himself.

“Kids nearly ready?”

“Yes.” She turned back to the table. “Pip, pin your hanky on properly. Hat, Micky. Come on now, off you go, it’s a quarter past.” Then they were gone, all four of them, running down the rutted lane.

“What is it?” She went to place his porridge on the table and hesitated.

“A body—in the creek … by the creek … I’d better ring now, now the kids are gone. With luck we can have it all worked out by the time they get home—so’s they don’t—”

“A *body?*” She placed a hand on his arm. “But … ”

“A man. Down there.” He waved vaguely towards where the creek curved, cutting into the bank, then out round a couple of old willows. It was a favourite spot with the children because of the permanent spring which kept water there when the rest of the creek dried up. Kept the water clearer too. He and Molly preferred them to play there rather than in the newly-built dam up the creek even though he’d helped them make several ‘boats’ from 44 gallon drums sawn in half and fastened together. These sailed reasonably well but he always kept an eye out.

“A man … ” The thought was extraordinary. “A *man*.” She sat down and handed the baby a homemade rusk.

“Looks like he’s been dead a while.”

“Do you know—who—”

He shook his head, then went through to the other room to ring the police. She too shook her head. It didn’t make sense. How could a stranger be dead in their creek and “a while” with them coming to and fro and not knowing, not seeing.

“They say they’ll be out in about forty minutes—and not to touch anything. I already touched him. I got the poor coot out of the water.” He sat down carefully. “Well, what did they expect me to do—leave him there when I thought he mightn’t be dead … that I might do … ”

“Of course. I’m sure they’ll understand. Anyone would’ve done the same.”

“Might be a swaggie. Haven’t seen one around in years.”

“Well, never mind now. Eat your breakfast.” She laid a hand fleetingly on his shoulder then went to dish up his eggs and chops. From the kitchen window she could see the cows beyond the creek, a black and white stream, with just the couple of silvery-black Jerseys they’d been advised to keep as the simplest way of maintaining their butter-fat levels. It wasn’t a very good farm but it was the best they’d been able to afford and they farmed with care and a desire

to improve both the land and their herd. She watched the cows turn in the far gate. The paddocks were green from the string of storms they'd had over the past month and the creek was still running strongly.

*

The two local police showed no obvious desire to "understand", simply walking round the body in its sodden but threadbare brown suit, squatting to converse in hushed tones, once turning the body with a casual foot and watching it thump back to earth. Then one of them walked back to the car to radio in.

The body was beginning to dry out in the rising sun and the water-softened skin seemed to crackle. They took several photos, before lifting it into the back seat of the car on a tarpaulin. "So who is he?" They turned back to Don Brown and gazed impassively at him. Their expressions suggested they didn't much care who the unknown man might be or how he'd ended up in their creek.

"I don't know." Don felt vaguely he should know, that he knew everyone round the district so he should know this unfortunate man. "Never seen him before."

"He just got into your creek without anyone noticing, not you or the missus."

"Well, I can ask her to have a look, she might've seen him around."

"Nah." One man studied his slightly dirty damp hands. "Don't want her carrying on at the sight of a bod. So how did he get in your creek?"

"Haven't a clue." Don felt the eyes on him and a peculiar kind of guilt seemed to invade him; he should know, it was his farm, he should know. Not knowing was failure.

"Don't know?"

"Reckon he must've tried to take a shortcut or something and fallen." He looked up towards the side road that ran along the north side of the farm, just a dirt road that led on up to half a dozen other farms. "Might've wanted to get across to the main road. The water's not that deep but there's been a bit of rain."

"So where's his bag, his wallet, watch, papers?"

"Dunno. Might've washed away. Mightn't of had much." Why should he have to make these guesses. If he didn't know the man's identity, how could he guess what the man was carrying. It didn't make sense.

"Or you might've helped yourself, bit of cash in the pocket?"

"Look … " He deeply resented the suggestion of theft. "I simply pulled the poor coot out of the water, thinking he might still be alive. He wasn't. I left him there and went and rang you fellers. I didn't look in his pockets."

"How do we know that?"

"Well, I didn't. Why would I think this poor bloke'd be carrying … well, he doesn't look like he had much … "

"Nothing on him now, so *someone* took it."

"You don't know that." Don felt sweat begin to bead. How could he convince these men, just ordinary country coppers he'd thought when they arrived, come to help him with the problem of the mysterious body, and now he saw them enjoying their interrogation, unbelieving, unconvinced, and he didn't know what argument to use. "Coins'd fall to the bottom, probably in the mud. Paper'd float away. Could be stuck in his pockets still or gone to pieces in the water … "

He looked down at the helpless lump of the man on the back seat, just lying, dead and brown and poor in his unmended coat and bad teeth in his slack mouth. A man no one might want, no one might claim, a man who'd go into a poor grave with a few words gabbled over him, a man who was probably just Joe or Jack or Mick, no one special … and he felt the first finger of fear. Because if no one claimed him …

The sergeant snapped shut his notebook and said, "We'll be back. But you'd better put your thinking cap on, mate. See what else you can remember."

"But—it must've been an accident. Fell, had a heart attack, bit of a fit." Then he stopped

abruptly. The need to come up with explanations for everything sounded nervous. Not his business to explain. 'That's what the police are for.'

*

"What did they say?" Molly had been watching at the window as the police car drove down the track. Subconsciously, she felt the tiniest bit more relaxed now the corpse was being conveyed away, it was no longer their business.

"Seemed to think I'd helped myself to the bloke's pockets—"

"But—why would they think that?"

"Couldn't find anything on him, they said. Nothing to say who he was. No cash. Nothing."

"He mightn't of been carrying any," she said indignantly. "What if he was just going over to visit a neighbour—and fell—well, you don't bother with your wallet."

"Don't s'pose it's anything. Just didn't like their attitude, that's all."

She nodded. Maybe police and bodies were quite different to police and "Look to the right, look to the left, look to the right again, walk straight across, don't run" or police and lost kids at the show. "Come and have a cup of tea."

"Wouldn't mind. Then I'd better get on. I meant to finish the top paddock today. This's thrown everything out."

But, seated at the kitchen table, he found in himself a curious weariness. The morning was still the morning and yet he felt he'd lived extra hours since he'd come upon the dead man. Was it death that did this to you, or the disconcerting experience of not being believed. Then he gave himself a mental shake. The man's identity would soon be learned. The police, as soon as they asked around, would learn that the Browns were ordinary decent people, went to church, paid their bills, didn't water their milk or bother their neighbours … didn't bother their neighbours …

He thought back to that stupid dispute with Frank Cullen on the farm behind, funny how fences and cows could lead to such ridiculous accusations; it wasn't that he wanted bad fences, he and Molly just couldn't come up with the money at that time for the new wire; seemed ridiculous these months later, when he'd replaced most of the posts, done most of the work, but Frank just liked to make difficulties. Frank could be a right old sod … But that was ages ago.

And he'd complained to Bill Schuter whose farm always grew a remarkable crop of Scotch thistles; he'd said to Bill he didn't want all his weeds and junk coming down the creek. Bill'd just shrugged and nothing much had changed.

"Remember when we borrowed the money to get the 'dozer in to do the dam … a couple of people said, how come we're crying poor and building that big dam." He let the memory hang.

"But we'll be paying it off for another twelve months." She wondered what had sparked off that particular thought.

"I know." He gazed into his cup. "But there's some who think if you do something they never did, you must be—" Must be what? Ambition, even the very modest ambition he and Molly shared, was suspect in the eyes of some in this small Downs community. They did things this way, so should the newcomers; to do so was to validate their habits and customs. Don couldn't have put the vaguely-sensed criticism into words … and it was only a few …

"Mmm. Did they say why the man had died?"

"No. Not to me. I don't s'pose they'll know till they get him to town."

"Old Dr Hancock mightn't know, even then. He didn't know it was appendix in the Beetson boy."

"S'pose they'll get someone in special—if he doesn't."

"Could you see any sign of, well, of an injury?"

He shook his head slowly. "Almost like the poor old coot'd just fallen asleep. Fell in … not so old, I s'pose … fifties maybe."

"It might've been concussion. Was he bald?"

"Quite a good head of hair. I didn't feel him for bumps."

"No. A heart attack or something? But I wonder when he fell in?"

"And where? He might've been washed down a little way, might've been drinking."

For a moment he wished he'd insisted Molly get to look at the man. She might've known—something—might've seen him hanging round somewhere or on the road or a neighbour might've mentioned. But someone would come forward and claim him. The police would put it in the paper. He'd be someone's hired help, an uncle, a distant cousin, a man whose car had broken down somewhere up that side road; some sensible explanation.

"Should we tell the kids when they come home? There might be gossip."

"Sure to be gossip." Don dredged up a bit of a smile. "Yeah, best just tell 'em the bare bones."

*

Within days it was all around the school, all around the district, even in the paper. "Man Found Drowned in Country Creek". Molly and Don fended off all kinds of questions, some merely curious, some vaguely worried, some spiteful.

"No, we don't how he got in the creek—"

"No, we don't know who he is—"

"No, the police haven't said anything more … "

To that, Don added in thought, 'thank goodness'.

But five days later, they were back to say the man'd been hit on the head, tumbled into the water. Suspicious. Very suspicious. What did Don Brown have to say. Don could only reiterate all he'd said before. It didn't occur to him to ask how they could be so certain the hit had come before the fall into the water. Only later Molly said, "But there was a bit of rubbish coming down the creek after the rain. You remember how it came over the dam?"

And the identity? Don must've seen the bloke. Must know who he was. Strangers don't just casually walk across a farm. Don asked if they'd been to neighbouring farms, "someone staying with a friend or relative mightn't think twice about taking a short-cut." Where was the man's wallet, not so much as a coin had been found in any of the pockets. Funny that.

"Look, I may not be well off but we're managing. We don't need to bonk some poor old bloke, probably had next-to-nothing, on the head to pay the bills."

"But every little helps, eh?"

"Well, it does—but that doesn't mean—" It was so easy for them to put him on the wrong foot just because he answered with care and honesty.

"Might like to drop in to the station and make a statement?"

"I'm pretty busy, you know, I've got cows to milk and—"

"Won't take you long."

He accepted with a sigh. They weren't questioning him, he'd begun to realise, they were nudging him, somehow putting words in his mouth. He felt a simmering heat and annoyance. But better to go and write it all out carefully and then they'd be left alone. They'd go first thing in the morning, put Sally's pram in the Mercury, go straight round to the station, get that done, do a bit of shopping.

If there was time maybe they should go and tell someone … He thought of the solicitor they'd got to draw up the papers when they bought the farm (not that the farm was paid for, wouldn't be paid for in years) but the man was … somehow it wasn't the sort of thing he would ever have dealt with. Their minister then. Mr Coates was very deaf. A fine preacher, a lovely baritone voice, Molly always said, but yelling out the story of a body in their creek into the old man's puzzled face, the "beg your pardon, didn't quite catch", the futility of it all. No, they'd be all right. Just a clear straightforward account of what he'd seen and done that day. And he'd take Molly and the baby in so the cops would know it was a family they were upsetting.

*

The children were already home and hungry when Don and Molly got back. Evening

milking was waiting to be done, the eggs to be collected, the poddy calves blaring away in sad trebles beyond the shed … and the day had been a disaster. It wasn't his statement he'd written, they'd gone over and over it with him. "You don't know that for sure." "You haven't said—" "What did you hear the previous night?" "How much rain did you say you'd had?" "How much water over the dam?" The questions came at him from every side, he began to get confused, to forget what he'd said originally, he began to doubt his own certainties: that he'd never seen the man before, that he didn't know how he'd ended up in the creek. He didn't know if he was acting on their certainty that he knew more than he was admitting, that it was his farm, he must know—*must know*—

And Molly and baby Sal had had to sit out in a dreary waiting-room, not questioned, but worrying, not able to get up and go … and after a while he could hear the slow whingeing of a fretful baby in a cold sunless room while the hours went by and he still hadn't made the admission they wanted …

As they came down the station steps he'd seen Frank Cullen drive past. He didn't know if Frank saw him. Of course no one would know how long they'd been in the station, they might've just dropped in. But two days later, the storekeeper, Bob Brannigan, said with spurious sympathy, "Seems to be a bit of a business, that bloke down in your creek. What do the cops think?"

'That I did it—' No, that was too blunt, too ridiculous. "Hard to say. I s'pose that I must know who it was—but I'm blowed if I know."

"Giving you a hard time, are they?" It wasn't clear whether this was sympathy or fishing.

"I'll say." He shook his head, suddenly reliving that frightening sense of impotence. "People always say you've got nothing to worry about if you do the right thing. But they don't realise what it's like when the cops don't know and think they've just got to pin it on some poor coot that was around. I never realised … "

He waited for Brannigan to put his things on the account but the man was looking at him, looking a bit embarrassed. "Do you mind paying cash today, Don. Till's a bit low."

He hadn't bought much. He paid over. But deep down he felt sure it had nothing to do with the till. At home he burst out to Molly, hardly caring if the kids heard, "He thinks I'll be off to prison, I bet that's what he's thinking and he doesn't want to be left with an unpaid bill!"

"Oh, surely not." Molly spoke soothingly. Bob Brannigan had accepted their account without question. He surely wouldn't leap to such a ridiculous conclusion—and so quickly—not Bob. But Esme Cullen had said something to Mrs Devlin, Dotty Devlin hadn't quite understood, but something about them spending four hours in the police station and no one, but *no one*, spends that sort of time with the police unless the matter is very serious. She put out a hand and Don,, not a demonstrative man, suddenly clutched it in his. "What are we going to do? What the bloody heck are we going to do if they never find who he is or what happened!"

"Of course they will. Someone will come forward. He *must* have relatives, neighbours … someone will miss him. They just didn't see the bit in the paper."

*

People always milled round after church, little knots forming, unravelling, in the churchyard under the shade of the pepper trees, by the beds of straggling geraniums. It was a good time to catch up on news, remind others, give out invitations, hear rumours.

"We've never had a murder here, not a single one, not until now," the voice dropped into a lull in the conversation and Molly half-turned, then told herself, 'it's natural they're all talking. I won't respond, I'll pretend I didn't hear, maybe I didn't hear, not properly,' but another voice had taken it up, "Well, we don't know that it *is* murder, it was just as likely an accident, like that time young Billy Little drove the milk truck into the creek, I don't see how the police can tell … "

"Oh, the police can always tell," the first voice came back loud and clear.

Perhaps it was coincidence but Don and Molly found themselves standing alone and oddly exposed, perhaps *they* had moved away, not that everyone else had moved … perhaps it

was time to gather up the children and be getting home. They turned towards the car parked at the bottom of the straggling row. "The police *can't* always tell," Molly said softly. "Remember the Pyjama Girl … "

"All the same … " Don wanted to take comfort but he'd ceased to believe in—anything—even his own memory was becoming suspect. He found himself lying in bed each night, thinking, I must know, it must be in there somehow, my knowledge of who he was, they must see it in my eyes, that I know … that's why they won't leave me alone … and one day it'll come to me … and they'll know they were right.

He wanted to turn to his wife and say, "I don't know, do I?"

But of course she would say, "Of course you don't. So don't go worrying now." But she worried too. He knew it. He saw it in her forehead, in her eyes. He wasn't a very noticing man, but it was there. And the kids. Other kids said things at school. Made jokes. Said things. They came home and asked, "did the police find out?" or "so-and-so said—"

He got angry. "It doesn't matter what so-and-so said. It's nothing to do with us. Just an unfortunate accident."

"That's not what—" And it would be someone different, pretending to know everything.

The police came back, said they were going to dredge that part of the creek where the spring rose. There might be possessions, money, something. They'd do it when the kids were at school, didn't want them hanging round, getting in the way. It spoilt the spring. It became churned and muddy and the men must've done something, plugged it perhaps, because it no longer flowed. A month later, it had dried up altogether. The children could not conceal their disappointment.

*

Molly found herself less interested in going to the CWA meetings at the hall. She'd always gone, taken Sally, entered into everything, offered her help. Now, it seemed, it was open session on gossip; all the old iffy things, tragedies, accidents, unexplained things, somehow seemed to come up in conversation. She found herself being asked about the previous place they'd lived. The little farm they'd rented. Had anything happened there. Maybe there'd been someone hanging round there. Maybe … well, you know how men are, they don't tell their wives everything, might've been something happen at the pub, you just never really know with men … I remember … yes, they all seemed to have stories to remember …

"Someone must know who he is!" She found herself blurting it out.

"I'm sure someone does." Was there just the slightest emphasis on Esme's 'someone'?

"We used to get quite a lot of bagmen through here when I was young," one of the older women reminisced. "But I haven't seen one in twenty years. Things got better after the war, more work and everything."

And yet, Molly remembered as she drove home, Don thought that was the most likely explanation. Except that he'd have a swag, wouldn't he? Unless he was staying with someone. Swaggies must have *some* relatives, they couldn't all be completely alone in the world, but in that case why hadn't the relatives come forward. *Because it was the relatives who'd killed the old man?* Killed him and taken his things? She found herself shivering involuntarily. Surely no one … none of their neighbours … even the ones they didn't like terribly … the ones who hadn't been very welcoming, the ones who'd found something to complain about, the ones who hadn't liked Don mentioning … But to bash an old man on his head and push him into the water … no! the idea was too terrible to be contemplated. How could they go on with normal life if they began suspecting everyone. But then life had ceased to be normal. It wasn't normal, having the police, having this gossip, all this suspicion—

Perhaps it really was an accident—*well, of course it was an accident*—and someone just didn't want to admit that the man with his threadbare clothes and bad teeth was related. They were ashamed of him. They didn't want the relationship known. Probably the man had been an alcoholic, he'd spent all his money on booze, come out from town, hoping to touch a cousin, a brother, a nephew, someone, for a loan … and there'd been an argument. Something like that.

People did lose their tempers. Hadn't she had trouble with Kimmy fighting at school, getting all het up because another boy said his father bashed up an old man. Hadn't she had Mr Grose complaining about his behaviour and she'd tried to explain that they were going through a difficult time, what with the police and gossip and not knowing … and Mr Grose hadn't thought much of her excuse. But it wasn't an excuse, it was the truth. Truth.

If only they could know the truth.

*

The police did some poking round the top culvert, stood gazing out over the half-full dam, then came in the side gate and walked right round the dam, stepping cautiously along the earth bank. The grass hadn't fully taken hold yet and the bank was still crumbly in parts. They strolled, and seemed to find it interesting. Later they walked on down the creek, past the old ford and round the small wooden bridge Don and the boys had built at weekends, past the milking yards and on down to the willows and further. They made no effort to come up to the house or to stop Don as he worked to get the silage into the pit beyond the bails. But he found himself watching them. What was going on now? But it wasn't until nearly a week later they shared their thinking.

"The dam," said the sergeant, "we'll drain it. We reckon it's possible he was caught on the top road, could've been washed down, his stuff'll be in the dam."

"But—you can't! I need that water. I've got the irrigation pipes in now, just waiting on the pump."

It was the way to get ahead, a milk quota, but it needed good year-round feed. Hay, silage, irrigation, they were nearly there. It was a layout of money they couldn't really afford, it would be hard work, constant work, no holidays, but it would be worth it. Even this small low-lying farm with its heavy winter frosts in the gully and its small cramped house and rusting fences and gaping sheds could be made to pay. They'd explained to their children what they were aiming for. Of course kids'd rather play after school than do chores but by explaining they could get their enthusiasm, their involvement. If we can do this then we can increase our monthly cheque by … when we've paid for everything there'll be more money for your futures, for a little treat now and then …

"Can't, mate? Who says we can't? You got something to hide up in that dam? A few bits that got away when you found the old bloke floating up against the bank. Afraid we'll find them?"

"Of course not! But we can't do without that water."

"It'll rain again. We'll just run a little channel round the edge there, let it run away quietly."

Don looked out over the brown expanse of water. It'll rain again. Will it? Will it rain soon enough. But if I say no, if I keep saying no … how do they know there was enough water to carry him over … I'm sure there wasn't … no, I'm the one that fished him out, helped myself, sent him on his way … but then I thought, didn't I think, it was safe now, I could call the cops, there was nothing … nothing to link him …

"We'll be here at nine tomorrow. Keep the kids out of the way."

"Couldn't you leave it till Monday? They'll be at school then."

"And give you a whole weekend to clean the bottom out?"

"If I was going to do that I could do it tonight." Then he wished he hadn't spoken.

"We'd know."

*

In after years the children still discussed 'The Day the Dam Broke' with mingled sorrow and furtive excitement. The police set about digging channels on two sides of the wall. They wanted to hurry the process and they'd brought in a small digger to help. In the mysterious way that news moves in the country a whole crowd had gathered along the side road to watch the happenings. Molly stood in the sleep-out and watched unobtrusively. The children were down by the back gate. They'd wanted to go down and watch from the little bridge but Don had

vetoed that. Kim was standing on one gate-post, Micky was up the mulberry tree. Their questions had come thick and fast until Don lost his temper and shouted at them. He lost his temper more often these days and there was nothing she could say to help, to calm him.

Their pump had arrived the previous afternoon. It now sat useless in the lean-to by the hayshed. They would have no use for it, not for months now. Lennox Walker was forecasting a long dry winter and even if he was wrong it would take good steady rain to refill the dam and what chance of good steady rain now.

She'd turned away from the window when the wall fell.

The channels that were supposed to carry the water away gently leaving the bottom mud exposed had done more than that. The trickle became a flood, the long crumbly earthen wall gave way, the torrent of turbid brown water leapt forward like a live thing. One moment it was contained, the next it had roared away down the gully snapping the bridge and hurling boards and uprights into the willows, then it was down across the bottom flats and gone beyond the farm. One of their young heifers, caught just beyond the bend, was hurled into the steaming flood and killed.

Hardly was the water gone than the police in rubber boots had swarmed on to the expanse of black slop.

Don turned away from the wreckage and walked slowly back to the house.

*

Molly, faced with the children's understandable excitement and Don's despair, responded by pulling the kettle forward on the stove and getting out a tin of oatmeal shortbread. Don sat down at the kitchen table. "Y'know, they were all there, watching, Frank and Bill and the Devlins, all of 'em."

"I s'pose it's only natural."

"Natural." He put his head in his hands. She wanted to go over and comfort him but there were no words and the kids were swarming round the biscuit tin.

"Perhaps you should ring the solicitor? They have no right to—"

"It's Saturday."

"Well, first thing on Monday."

There was the clump of boots on the front steps. Don looked up. "Here they come. Bet they'll say they found something."

His wife looked over, a quick glance, then went forward quietly to open the front door.

"Mrs Brown?"

"Yes."

"Looks like we were right. Bloke went in there, up the top. Somewhere. We'd like to see your husband."

"What did you find?"

"None of your business. Just fetch him, will you."

"It *is* my business, you know. This is my farm too, my family. So I'm asking you to show me what you found. If it's something the kids dropped in when they were paddling up there, I'll be able to identify it."

"Your kids carry key-rings, wallets, business cards, when they go paddling? Come off it, lady."

Molly paled under the sergeant's sense of certainty. Of course the kids didn't. But Don had said—

"I'm asking you to show me what you found. You didn't want me to see the man you found. Why? Were you afraid I would know something and then you wouldn't be able to pin it on my husband?" She didn't know where this strength and certainty came from, a lioness.

"It will be bagged up and sent for testing, lady. Now, stop making wild allegations and go and get your husband."

"You'd better come in. But take your boots off first."

She wondered if he would. "Nah. Just get him out here. I won't keep him long."

The spurt of anger which had carried her forward was not enough against this bovine implacable man. He had found a man he could break. Now he would hammer in another wedge.

Don came and stood beside her. "Got all your evidence now?" His bitterness smote her.

"Would've saved a heck of a lot of time, mate, if you'd been up front with us. It's a crime that, y'know, wasting police time."

"So I took all his things and dropped them in the dam? Is that what you're saying?"

"Nah. Just put back the useless bits. Kept the dough. How much was he carrying?"

"How do I know?"

"Well, think on it, mate. We'll be back."

*

The solicitor with the story put before him was not hopeful. He could ask for a list and a description of what had been found in the dam. He said the police didn't have a strong case because all the evidence was circumstantial but he also didn't think they had a case for compensation. There was no evidence to suggest the police had destroyed the dam wall deliberately and the finding of 'certain items' 'muddied the water'. He permitted himself a slight smile as he made this mild witticism.

"So you are saying," Molly put in, "that we must continue paying back the loan for a dam we no longer have?"

"It would seem so." He steepled his fingers. "Look upon it this way. If the dam could break so easily then it could've broken under the impact of a particularly heavy storm."

"They said they were only going to make one channel—but when they came they made two, plus some extra holes with a crowbar before they started digging."

"Have you got that in writing?"

"No. That's what they said to me."

"So it's their version against yours?"

Molly and Don looked at each other. "But why, I still don't understand why?" She thought her normally quiet voice had taken on a kind of dismal wail. "Why are they so determined to prove that Don had something to do with the man's death? And we *still* don't even know who he was."

"Can you prove you don't know who he was, that you'd never seen him before you found him?"

"How?" She laid her hands quietly together in her lap. "They wouldn't even let me see him. Maybe we'd seen him around the district or here in town. How can anyone say honestly they've never *seen* someone before? But that doesn't say who he was."

"No. Well, leave it with me and I'll see if I can get a photo for you to look at."

"How much will you charge us?"

"Miss Darrow will let you know our schedule of fees."

*

"No dam. One of our best heifers gone. The bridge destroyed. The spring dried up. More 'evidence' piling up against us. Solicitor's fees we can't afford."

"I know." Molly was frequently tired. Babies were tiring. Sally was still a long way from sleeping through the night. She still felt herself drained from feeding her, from the endless work of dairy and children and garden and house. There was jam to be made. A huge pile of darning. She felt all the waiting chores somehow there beyond them in the dark, all waiting, all those fears for Don, gibbering, and her leaden limbs pleaded for rest. "But we've still got each other."

He turned in the semi-dark and looked at her, faint against the white pillow, the half moon shining into their poky little bedroom.

"You mightn't have me much longer. What happens if they think they've got a case?"

"It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't have to make sense. It just has to sound good." He thought back over all his

hesitations, all the times when he'd found himself getting tangled up in words. He turned back and stared up at the dim ceiling. "They were all there watching, y'know, when the dam went. I s'pose they were laughing. Teach that smart alec a lesson."

"No, of course they weren't! They were just curious."

"It was going to be so good. Our first place. I was going to make a success of it if it killed me … they still hang people, don't they?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not unless it's something very shocking … " But if the police could plant things, they could prove things …

"It doesn't pay to do the right thing, does it? I should just've sent the poor old coot on down the creek, let someone else worry about him, shouldn't I?"

"No." She was surprised at her vehemence; some days she thought she was too tired for vehemence. "You did the *right* thing. It'll come right somehow. And to put all this worry on to old Mr Bagshaw wouldn't be right."

"And it wouldn't of stopped them trying to get me."

She put her arms out and cradled his head. "Don't talk any more. Tomorrow's a new day."

But his words stayed with her. Trying to get me. Was that the truth? But why Don, why her, why them? They were just an ordinary young couple and she could think of nothing they'd ever done to anyone here, nothing they'd ever been except hard-working and wanting to do their best with this little farm, nothing that they were as a couple, as a family, as neighbours.

Why were the police so sure there *was* money. Why should there be money if the man was as threadbare and poor-looking as Don had said. But she only had Don's word. For a moment, the horrible thought came to her. Only Don's word. For almost everything, there was only Don's word. Only Don's word about the arguments he'd had, only Don's word about where and when and how he'd found the man, only Don's word that he didn't have any idea who he was, only Don's word about how they'd treated him at the police-station, only Don's word about what they planned to do up at the dam. Suddenly she was afraid of her own thoughts and doubts.

'But I asked and they refused to show me what they found. We should've gone up, all of us, and watched. *We were so innocent*. Even now we can't bring ourselves to not trust that the police, all of them that have come, are honest and decent and *trustable*. If I were to trust the police—and doubt Don … it's the other way round, it has to be … but I wish I knew why … if there's a reason why … '

She leant across and kissed him gently. He didn't respond and she felt he'd retreated from her, from the anguish, from their hopes and ambitions. She closed her eyes. Tomorrow is a new day.

But just before she drifted into sleep the question came back. *Why were the police so sure there was money?*

*

Don considered going to his father for help, advice, money, not that the old man would be able to supply much of any commodity. He'd never been the same since he came back from the war. Turns, his mother explained those odd moments away, he'll be all right. Tomorrow. Of course the poor bloke never was all right, tomorrow, just a bit better maybe. And his mother was too gentle, too much of a worrier, to say things like "Snap out of it, Cliff". No, she just fussed and fluttered and what money there was got eaten up by doctors who tried this and that but never told her the truth, that there was no cure. It wasn't the body (which they treated assiduously and expensively); it was the mind.

Sometimes, Don had the horrible thought he'd go the same way. Every morning he woke up with this feeling of a black cloud pressing down on him, something cold and dark and smothering. And the days never seemed to get much better. Always the fear that he'd look up and there'd be a car turning into the lane, the sergeant walking towards him, a knocking at the door. And when he lay down at night he often found himself thinking, 'they didn't come today,

that means they'll probably come tomorrow.'

It was easy to take it out on the kids, Kimmy especially, because they seemed naughtier just when he needed life to be calmer and quieter. He knew he was being overharsh with them for the most minor of things: too much noise when they were supposed to be in bed, bringing the cows in a few minutes late, leaving things where they shouldn't be, throwing the chooks' scraps on the roof, silly little things that wouldn't have bothered him six months ago—was it *only* six months—and yet if he were to apologise it would only make things worse somehow. They needed to know he was the same dad as always, the same man calmly in control of his life, running the farm, heading the family … and if he wasn't, if they believed he wasn't …

If only Molly's parents were still alive but now that her Nanna had gone to Brisbane to live with her Auntie Maud and the two old ladies just muddled along, hardly able to afford to buy Christmas and birthday presents for all the kids … Other people had a bit of money somewhere they could draw on …

But it wasn't a 'bit of money'. It was everything.

Molly often gave him little worried sideways glances now; they made him feel there must be something terribly wrong with him, something that everyone else could see but which wasn't visible to him when he gazed in the little cracked mirror in the bathroom. Or did he only think he looked like himself.

*

Now that the dam was dry and the creek nearly so they were dependent on the mill below the yards—and the mill was dependent on the wind. The children had taken to climbing up far enough to see down into the tanks. They knew without being told that the level mattered more than ever now.

The rainwater tank by the kitchen provided the drinking water for the house and the bath water which had suddenly become too precious to run out on to the vegetable garden and must be saved in buckets for the washing. The old couple from whom they'd bought the farm had told them the spring was permanent, it'd never failed in living memory and, old Mrs Johnson had said, "I remember going down there with buckets one really bad year. But it saw us through. It's worth its weight in gold. And nice soft water, not like that bore … "

As Molly spooned mashed vegetables into her baby's mouth she thought back to that. Had they paid extra for the sake of permanent water—and how could they prove it was the police rather than nature which had stopped the spring?

Mrs Johnson had shown her all around the house and garden; she'd talked about the district, the church, the neighbours. Much of it had flowed over her then. But hadn't she said … what *had* she said about the neighbours … something about, "They're a funny lot up there," and she'd pointed. But at the time it'd just been a finger, an old gnarled finger, pointing up the side road. "But don't listen to anyone, there's gossip always going around" … Was that what she'd said, something about gossip … and did she mean everyone up that road or a specific person? Well, Frank Cullen had been rude enough to Don but 'a funny lot'? No. He seemed an ordinary enough person. Just not very pleasant and neighbourly.

But the old man … Of course he could've been cutting through from the Cullen's place but what if he'd been coming to see the Johnsons, not realising they'd sold out and gone. What if he'd come in, meaning to say hello. And realised something was different, what with kids around and a different car in the shed? What then? Had he walked down to the spring, thinking to sit down and rest up a bit before deciding what to do next. What if he was a relative of the Johnsons? What if he'd come to them for help in the past, what if he'd been tired, hungry, shiftless, poor … and he'd come all this way and found them gone? Gone.

They'd gone. Two old people. Two people who'd let everything go a bit. Who'd stayed too long, then gone. There'd be a small house somewhere, a few little comforts, but where? They hadn't said. We didn't ask. Molly carefully wiped her daughter's mouth with the stained bib. She'd let everything run a bit longer than she should, anything to save water, but this bib was …

They could ask their solicitor. He'd surely know where the Johnsons had gone.

Yes! That explained everything. Why the man had come, why there'd been no response to the publicity, why the police were so sure there was a connection with this farm. It didn't explain the things in the dam but then they didn't know if there *had* been anything in the dam. And would the solicitor bill them if she just asked him a question over the phone? She went and rang Dolly Devlin. No one, not even Dolly had gone out of their way to provide a friendly word. Dolly hadn't been standoffish or rude or cold; she just hadn't done anything.

"The Johnsons?" Mrs Devlin said in surprise. "Oh no, they were a funny old pair, weren't they. But I don't think they said—and he was seventy-nine, you know—and Betty was getting pretty forgetful. They had a son in the army, I think. I s'pose he'd get moved around … and I think he had a couple of kids, they'd be grown up now. Oh, that's right! He was up in Townsville, I think, but he'd just about be retired now too. Fancy that!"

"So you think they might all be up in Townsville?"

"Well, I can't say really but they might be. Not that Mervyn'd be good for much now. Not after his stroke. Could be in a home."

"A home in Townsville?"

There was a pause. "I s'pose he could be."

"Well, do you know if they had any particular friends, someone I could ask."

"They were a funny old pair, you know, and kept themselves pretty much to themselves. Only came to church occasionally and didn't have anything to do with the school. Bob might know."

Bob Brannigan, when asked politely, said he'd heard they were going to Armidale. Mervyn had a brother somewhere down that way. And Betty was, Molly could hear him tapping a pen against his teeth, yes, Betty was from somewhere in England originally. Could be London, he thought. Then he was kind enough to say he'd let them know if he thought of anything else.

"The old bloke in the creek, you think he was coming to visit the Johnsons when he fell in?" She didn't like the avidness of his question.

"Yes. It seems possible. It might explain why no one knows who he was."

"I thought you did know." She was surprised at his matter-of-fact statement.

"No. *We* don't know. Maybe someone else does and isn't saying." She hung up wearily. Maybe everyone knows, everyone except us. And for the first time in their months of tribulations she felt tears come to her eyes.

*

She knew a woman, someone she'd known years ago at school, who'd married and moved to a country town and, almost immediately, poison pen letters started coming. Someone, she never found out who, was determined to hurt and frighten and humiliate her. After two years of constant bombardment, of police inaction and her husband's apathy, she had a nervous breakdown. Some nasty person, bored, envious, selfish, jealous, an unknown person, had set out to destroy the happy young bride. *There were places like that*. Molly found herself thinking back. Catherine had gone, the marriage damaged beyond salvation, no children, no hope … and all for what? She wished she hadn't remembered poor Cathy because it made her feel so helpless. But she sat down that evening, she wasn't much of a letter writer, but she'd write to Cathy, just a few lines.

If only they were renting. They could simply move on. Would the police stop them? No, how could they? Not without laying charges surely? 'And *if* they were forced to lay charges—then at least we'd know what we're accused of doing. Whether it's the death itself or simply of stealing something … but we've put everything we could scrounge into this place … people *do* walk off properties … in droughts … do they come back, start over, or is that the end of it, *finis*, a job in town, renting a bit of a place … what if we walked off, went to Brisbane, Don got a job in a factory, we asked Nanna and Auntie Maud if we could squeeze in there just till we found somewhere … or Don's parents, his Dad would find the kids' noise difficult but they

wouldn't want us out on the street … and it'd only be for a short while … '

The idea, at first, seemed absurd. The negation of all they'd longed for, hoped for, worked for. Just to walk away. What if they put the place on the market? Paid the most pressing bills. What if—

"Don, what if we packed up and left?"

He stared at her. "But—this is ours!"

"I know. Well, partly ours. Would it look like we were guilty? Walking out?"

"Well, we are, aren't we? I went down there in my sleep and this old geezer just happened to be walking across my paddocks and I socked him one and cleaned out his pockets and dropped him in the creek and then I walked all the way up to the dam and I dropped everything in, all except the hundreds of pounds he had in his wallet and that I've been spending on you all, these past months! That's what happened, isn't it? Well, isn't it!"

He began to laugh, a noisy high-pitched laugh that filled the room and spilled into the house. "I'm a monster, didn't you know? I go out and kill people when no one's looking." His laughter took a strained turn and he began to cough and laugh at the same time.

"Stop it, Don! You know none of that's true!"

"Do I? How do I know? The cops say I know more than I'm telling! Maybe I know more than I'm thinking? Maybe I know everything and I'm just a sneaking bloody little liar—" He began to hiccup painfully.

"Stop it!" She was frightened now, frightened of his lack of control, the wildness of his words.

"That's it, isn't it! It isn't just my poor bloody old Dad that's got a screw loose! It runs in the family! You'd better watch out, Moll, I'll grab you while you're sleeping—"

She heard the children in the room beyond stirring, heard Sally wake. "Don—don't." She leant over, tried to hush him, soothe him.

"I'll tell the cops tomorrow!" He was throwing the bedclothes off, leaping out of bed. "Tell 'em it was me, tell 'em to take me away! You and the kids can go to town. It doesn't matter any more, nothing matters any more—"

He pulled the door open, stumbled out. The baby began to grizzle and Molly got up and went to her.

*

"New evidence come to hand," said the older of the cops. "Just a few questions, Mr Brown." They stood four-square at the door. Don looked pale, his eyes wild and smudgy. He hadn't come back to bed the night before. He'd already been at the bails when Molly came out.

"We've had information laid that the man was a relative of the Johnsons, came here to see them, came up to the house and spoke to you."

"No way, that bloke didn't come to the house—"

"Our information is that he did come—"

"And I'm saying he bloody didn't!"

"Don." Molly came and stood beside him.

"Yes he did, Mr Brown. He was seen entering your farm."

"He was not! How dare you come in here and tell us a bunch of lies, some bloody neighbour wanting to drop me in it—"

"No one is wanting to drop you in it, Mr Brown, you're dropping yourself. If you knew nothing you wouldn't be shouting at us—"

"I'll do more than shout in a minute!"

Molly laid a hand on his shoulder. He shook her off. "Can't you hear what I'm telling you—we never saw him before in our lives—and if you don't stop—"

"You'll what?" The calm bull-like face was thrust closer at him.

"I'll—"

Before Molly could say or do anything Don had swung at the sergeant. It grazed his chin.

"Assault on a police officer." His calmness in the face of Don's uncontrolled fury

suggested he'd been deliberately angling for that response. Molly turned away to hide her tears of frustration. There was no way back now. If Don could hit a cop he could hit an old man.

"Rubbish! I hit the bloody bastard that won't leave me and my family alone." But there was something defeated in Don's words. He knew he'd gone too far, been goaded into a response, let them needle him till his control broke.

"You'd better get yourself a lawyer, mate. You're going to be needing one."

*

To cancel their newspaper was a small thing. But Molly as she carefully cut pages into squares to put on the string in the toilet and laid more squares ready in the wood-box next to the kindling felt it was another step in their isolation. As she sliced with a sharp knife down the creases she found herself reading old forgotten bits of news.

'Police Commissioner Claims Victory'; she wasn't sure why the piece caught her eye. Nothing to do with them. The Commissioner was claiming the best crime clear-up rate in Queensland, in Australia even. "Well, they didn't clear this one up and I don't suppose they ever will if taunting Don is the best they can do." She said it aloud to Sally in the play-pen.

It would come in the mail, she assumed, or did the police deliver it in person. A summons to the Magistrates Court. Only rough bawdy undisciplined men did things like hitting policemen, she'd once thought, not decent law-abiding dairy farmers.

And if … she put down her knife and became lost in thought … *if* they knew the man had been visiting the Johnsons then they must've contacted the Johnsons and found out his name. So if they knew his name then they must have some idea whether he really did have money, keys …

At last she went to the phone—the phone would go next, she thought inconsequentially, and after that—and rang the solicitor. She explained what had happened and said the police must now know who the man was. "If we knew," she said earnestly, "then so many other things might become clear."

"The police are under no obligation to tell you his name, Mrs Brown, and I think it's far more likely that they've simply been talking to your neighbours than tracking down the Johnsons—but I'll talk to the estate agents if you like and see if I can get an address."

She thanked him. He would of course bill them and it would be a struggle to pay. But he'd know how to go about it all—and people might talk to him—

But his response a week later was that the estate agent had kept no address and the Johnsons were no longer on the electoral roll. "So—you think they may have died?"

"Either that or moved well away. I doubt that the police have tracked them down. Did you ever mention the Johnsons to anyone?"

"Oh yes, I said that was probably why the old man came on to our farm, looking for them, you know."

"And someone heard that being said? Yes, that seems the likeliest."

She put the phone down and slumped back briefly. Someone had 'laid information' … how did a person lay information? She thought of herself sending anonymous messages to the police. What would she say?

'It has come to my knowledge that the man found in the creek on Don Brown's farm was … ' What would make them drop the case? An ex-jailbird? An escaped lunatic? Someone unlikely to have any money. It was the money, not the death, she felt sure was what kept them chipping away here. So who'd told them there was money to be had? If Don was correct and the man looked poor then what was it that kept the police believing there was money somewhere in the case?

*

She became seriously worried about Don. He wasn't sleeping. He ate but in an abstracted way, gulping his food while looking out the kitchen window towards the creek. He was forgetful in the dairy and often didn't seem to hear the children when they spoke to him. Occasionally he burst out into rages which seemed to have no reason behind them. It was the

waiting, he told her one day, the waiting for the gates to close behind him, shutting him off from them. It was no good going on with anything.

The waiting was getting her down too. She'd weaned the baby. It seemed so wearying to go on trying to feed her and she was a bonny bouncing baby. Yes, all the children were still healthy and pink and lively. But something had entered the household. A kind of wariness. They played outside. They discreetly avoided their father. She'd even overheard them saying, "Stay away from Dad, you don't know what he's going to do next."

They couldn't afford to get the car fixed when it needed a new carburetor. The old farm truck wasn't registered. They were three weeks late already with the phone bill and she accepted it would have to go. Don had received a sharp 'please explain' from the factory. Their bacteria count was up. She knew he wasn't scalding the equipment as well as he should. He often stood in the dairy like a man in a trance and she had to recall him to the business of milking. The milk quota they'd planned to apply for seemed to recede into the distance. It wasn't only production and reliability. No one would want to reward a man who'd done an old man to death and stolen his wallet.

Without the car it was too far to walk to church and she missed the sense of spiritual comfort. But if they couldn't go out for it then she must provide it at home. "Things aren't going well for us," she said gently to the children one Saturday morning, "but we are a family together and with God's help everything will come right someday. So just remember that when your Dad yells at you. He's not quite himself at the moment. But things will get better and he'll be just the same Dad you remember who used to play with you and have lots of fun. So you just be quiet and good when you see him looking upset."

"*Are* the cops going to take him away?" Kimmy said abruptly. "That's what the kids at school say."

"No, of course not. But I want him to go away for a little rest. As soon as we've got the cows dried off I'm going to see if he'll go and stay with Grandad for a week or two."

She thought she needed the few day's rest from Don too. And the change of scenery would be good for him. She and the children could keep the farm going, somehow. They'd manage. And with Don gone … the police … what would the police do?

She found out the first night after Don had taken his old portmanteau and hitched a ride to town. The police were angry to hear that Don had gone without notifying them. They demanded an address. They said he had no right to leave the district while the case was still under investigation.

"And if it takes ten years, does than mean he will have to remain on the farm, not even a bit of a break, for ten years?"

She felt nervous as she said it. It was one thing to assure Don she and the children could manage. It was another thing to be a woman alone with two truculent men on her doorstep. Two men, she was increasingly sure, who'd make no bones about lying if they saw it helping them. When they suggested coming in she said quietly, "No."

She half-expected them to press it but to her inordinate relief they shrugged and said simply they'd be back. She watched the tail-lights flicker away along the curving lane. How had they known the first night Don was gone—or was it just a coincidence? But they'd never come so late before. Was it to remind her she was a woman alone on a farm? How had they known? Because they hadn't seemed the least surprised when she said "Don's not here." She had told, no, she hadn't told anyone—but the kids might've let it out at school and other kids took it home … and someone told …

'I am afraid. I don't know who to trust any more.'

And Don? Would he improve with his Mum and Dad to look after him? Or would they fuss and worry him? Would he look at his father and think 'that's the way I'm going, it runs in the family, we haven't got strong heads … '

*

He came back in two weeks but, to Molly's concerned eye, he was if anything worse.

More vague. Less sure of what he was doing and what he should be doing. His first words were, “When do I have to go to court?”

“There hasn’t been anything.”

“So they’re waiting, building it all up, then they’ll whack us with it.”

“I don’t know, Don. But I think it’s time for us to think about moving on. We’ll get a nice little house in town, new schools for the kids where there won’t be any gossip. As soon as Sally is a bit older I might be able to get a job in a shop or something, just to get us back on our feet.” She worked hard to infuse her voice with quiet enthusiasm.

“Whatever you say, love.” But something had gone out of Don. Something more than his ambition for the farm, something more than his belief in himself as a decent law-abiding man, something that reached right down into his core. Now he no longer trusted his thoughts, his eyes, his understanding of what was in front of him. Truth was no longer truth. He didn’t know what it was.

*

On the 13th September 1959, the Browns left their farm for the last time. It sold six months later for a great deal less than they’d paid for it. No charges were ever laid against Donald Brown.

* * *

‘the wind fell—’

(Mark 6.51)

“We’re moving again,” Netta Thoms put down her cup and spoke calmly.

“You poor thing! Not *again!*” Topaz put on a spurious sympathy. Netta moved every so often, it came with the territory, but she would hate it if it were herself being dragged from one dismal army base to another. “Couldn’t you talk Alan into … well, resigning … or asking for a transfer or something—”

“Something—as in going to Vietnam?” Netta’s response was wry. “I should be counting my luck, only Pidgingery … ”

“That’s bad enough! Some little dot in the middle of nowhere and every time you tell someone they’re going to say, “Oh, where’s that?” and you’re going to have to explain.” Topaz got up gracefully. For a mildly overweight woman she moved with considerable verve and style. But then Tops always had been the one with style, of the three girls she’d been first married, and if she’d now been married three times, each divorce leaving her better off, no one seemed to hold it against her, not even her ex-husbands.

Netta also had grace but it was part of a quiet serene nature. She had nothing of her sister’s colour and enthusiasm. Nor, indeed, did she share much with her other sister, Tourmaline, who often stressed her role as mother when she was with the others. Motherhood, she implied, meant more than money or style. Motherhood was sacred. Motherhood meant the rest of the family should listen with rapt attention while she spoke at great length about the miracle of children, her children.

“It’s really quite pleasant. A wheat-belt town, some sheep. A pleasant house just on the edge of town. A library, a park, a small lake, the reptile sanctuary—”

“So-o exciting! Poor Netta—reduced to looking at snakes for entertainment! Did I tell you Ben has a yacht?”

“Yes, *and* a lovely condo in Mosman!” Netta smiled. “We’ll think of you sailing round the harbour while we sit and gaze at the little mud puddle Pidgingery has the effrontery to call Hovell Lake.”

“Even so,” Topaz laughed long and joyously at this. (Alan saw her as a gold-digger but Netta believed her men forgave her her mercenary side for the sheer spontaneity and pleasure she seemed to get from their company, everyone’s company; everyone except Alan who was inclined to believe her levity, far from being spontaneous, was carefully developed for best effect.) “You really should stand up to Alan, tell him you deserve to be considered too. After all, you’ll be the one stuck in some dreary little house in a row of dreary little houses with nothing to do all day except to listen to all the wives whingeing on about their little brats and how hard it is to get them to settle in to yet another new school—”

“I really don’t mind, Tops, and it’s hard to change careers this late in the day.”

“Then he should have thought of that sooner, shouldn’t he, if he really cared about what’s best for you.”

As she spoke she rummaged in the box of things she’d brought out, then pressed a couple of pretty scarves, records, books, perfume, on her sister. “Cheer you up when you find there’s *nothing* to do of a night.” Topaz had long ago formed the opinion that her brother-in-law was probably the world’s dullest lover and he’d never done or said anything that might lead her to ameliorate her private view. Major Alan Thoms just went on being stolid and pedantic, tingeing his bluff good nature with an unstated criticism when he was in his sister-in-law’s colourful presence.

“Thanks, love. For your thoughts. I really don’t need any more scarves but I’ll try the music. And don’t forget, it’s not *that* far out. You can always pop out for the weekend.”

“Thanks but no thanks.” Topaz was tempted to add something stronger but she responded to the slightly wistful expression on her sister’s face and tempered the desire to criticise her brother-in-law.

*

Alan Thoms was the sort of officer who knows he'll continue to rise by means of seniority. The slow but steady climb. As he said to his wife every birthday, "There's one thing about growing older … " Then he would blow out his crowded candles with ponderous breath and the assembled company would sing 'For he's a jolly good fellow' and mean it; Alan, in the view of most of the men he worked with, *was* a good fellow. But if anyone happened to joke, "Did you make a wish, Alan?" he would look mildly perplexed. What was there to wish for in a life that seemed so nicely ordered?

Garnet might've liked children, women quite often did. But as they hadn't happened and she showed no sign of pining he complacently believed it was all for the best. His older brother had four sons. Life was easier as the indulgent uncle. And Garnet's younger sister was well-supplied. Garnet herself was a serene and sensible woman, not ambitious, but always knowing what to do and say in precisely the right way. "Well balanced" he'd once heard someone say and he'd taken the description for his own.

*

Pidgingery was home to wheat silos, a railway siding, an attractive small park in the centre of town, and a sprawling army base. On every side, the plains reached out, almost flat, to the horizon. But it was marked out by a little cluster of hills cupping it to the north. The hills struggled to reach two hundred feet and were dry and unappetising in their own right but they formed a natural division between the ordinary everyday business of the town and the more transient and mysterious business of the army.

Garnet was used to moving into new houses, meeting new people, learning her way round new towns. She lacked her sister's extrovert nature and spontaneous good humour but she'd developed ways and means of making each move a thing of interest, even pleasure, rather than something to worry and grumble over. Once she had her house nicely set up, her new curtains at the windows, their bedroom suite installed, the vagaries of the stove and built-in cupboards assessed, the yard carefully scrutinized for possible garden beds and where a barbecue might be planted, she turned her attention to her neighbours along the hillside road.

The Thoms had been allotted the end house of the row. It meant a steep uphill walk but gave them a view out over the sprawling base and the plains beyond. From her house she couldn't see the town which aided the sense of being a little community of their own here. She made a point of calling on the wives in the houses just down from her. She charmed them in her quiet way—or it may have been that as a major's wife they gave her the deference their husbands thought politic. She had a good memory for names and was adept at thinking of little unimportant questions that put other women at ease. She didn't feel any great need to mix but she always felt good relations with the other army families were desirable.

From her neighbours she spread her interest to the town, visiting the library, making herself known to the local Congregational minister, walking in the park and chatting with the couple of elderly ladies she met there with their dogs, going into the shops that seemed likely to suit her modest needs and asking them about accounts and deliveries.

Her sisters refused to believe she was passionate about her husband but they did believe she was passionate about her bridge. Within a fortnight she'd made friends with a little group which played two afternoons a week at the home of a retired teacher, Mr Allenby, and found herself paired with an elderly Englishman who had for many years been the Shire Council engineer. Mr Dance was a cheerful overweight little man with a rubicund face, surrounded by masses of white hair and a distinctly 'public school' accent.

Mr Allenby, who normally paired with Julie Turner, a widow in her forties with a gentle serene nature not unlike Garnet's, was delighted with Mrs Thoms as his new acquisition. She was an excellent player, she appeared to get along with everyone, she was interesting in a modest way, and she was both old enough and married enough to avoid the kind of jealousy that can occasionally be aroused in what can be a remarkably intense relationship. A bridge partner, especially where money is involved, is almost as important as a marriage partner or a

business partner.

Most afternoons two tables came together to play for three to four hours depending on people's other commitments. In the school holidays, Mr Allenby occasionally managed an extra table and moved people around and lowered the stakes. But for ten months of the year bridge was played professionally and fervently in his pleasant house just beyond the park.

Garnet usually walked down to town via the steep hillside path. It wasn't a particularly pleasant walk but she could be in town in just over ten minutes. She usually took the long road home as there were, nearly always, other wives driving past with children or groceries and she could be almost sure of a lift. Alan had offered to buy her a Mini but she'd laughed and said, "My own car for two afternoons in town would be rather wasteful, darling. I think I'll wait until I am a bit more decrepit—and, really, I enjoy the walk unless it's raining."

Her husband occasionally brought up the subject and each time she simply laughed it away. They went shopping together, they went to church together, they occasionally went to the courts for hire and played tennis together, they went to functions at the base together. Netta's bridge was the only thing she did alone and she always felt vaguely luxurious and sinful when she set out, as though she was somehow letting her hair down, doing something other wives didn't do; but the pull of the game offset any vague feeling that she was either wasting time or wasting money. Besides, she won more than she lost. Alan sometimes joked that he could retire and live on her earnings. But at $5 a rubber she felt it would be a rather insecure living. And to move into the larger league of the professional bridge circuit, perhaps in Sydney, was something she felt to be beyond her.

It was a calm and happy existence for six months. "Our first winter in Pidgingery," she said one bridge day, "I wonder if it will be as frosty as everyone says."

"There's certainly been enough wind," Alan said drily. He wasn't feeling very well, a bout of the 'flu coming on most likely, and he hoped he'd be able to spend the day indoors.

"Yes, you poor thing," Netta leaned over and kissed him. "*You* have to be out in the elements. I can be a sook and stay indoors."

He nodded. "Don't go out, not unless this wind drops a bit."

She agreed and watched him leave, well-muffled in his overcoat. He didn't look at all well and she felt sorry to see him go but it would take more than an upset stomach or a headache to keep Alan at home. He prided himself on his fortitude.

They were reduced to one table at Lionel Allenby's that day. Both the Stadlers were unwell and Mrs Denby was away visiting her newest granddaughter. Netta felt she'd let her partner down, her mind was not focused. Alan really hadn't been well. She hoped he would admit it and come home.

The day had stayed very cold though the wind's bluster was almost gone. Netta pulled her scarf round her head briskly and set out for home at half-past-four. She never arrived home.

*

When she hadn't returned home by six her husband rang Lionel Allenby and was told Netta had been gone for more than an hour. Alan was mildly alarmed but not unduly so. She might've got a lift and stopped a moment at someone's house, a moment that had grown longer than she intended. She might've gone on to do a little shopping.

He'd been lying down most of the afternoon, having given in to what was quite an unpleasant bilious attack, and now felt dizzy and unbalanced. *Had* Netta said something else and he hadn't heard, hadn't taken it in? He didn't think so. But he heaved himself out of bed. He could drive downtown, he might meet her on her way. It was twilight and there was frost in the air.

Then he remembered the Council was working on the road at the bottom of the hill, putting in a culvert. There was a considerable detour. Netta might well have chosen to walk home via the hill path. She might've fallen and sprained an ankle or something. He put his torch in his overcoat pocket and went out.

The path was stony and wound round the little patches of scrub still clustered on the hill.

He played the torch along the path and off to each side in case she'd left the path for any reason. He found her ten minutes later, fallen by a large rocky outcrop overlooking the town. She had been strangled with her own scarf.

*

Police, ambulance-men, a few hardy sightseers, a journalist from the *Pidgingery News*, all found their way to the cold dark hillside. The men with the stretcher lurched away down the steep track. The area was taped off. Signs were put up to say the path was out of public bounds.

Alan Thoms was allowed to sit in his sitting-room with the radiator full on and a cup of sweet black tea in his hands while the police asked him for his movements, a preliminary questioning, they said politely. He was a major. Police and Army did their best to maintain a good working relationship in a small town. But he'd come home early, he'd been the one to find his wife, he had presumably been the only person to know she would change her routine and walk back home via the hill path.

He answered yes, wearily, to all their questions. In two hours he seemed to have grown older, grayer, somehow stooped. His fine upright military figure seemed to fall in upon itself. But they appeared to accept his statement and went away. He certainly didn't look like a man with murder on his mind. His virus took him over; he was flushed and hot, his stomach stayed queasy, he felt increasingly faint and unsteady.

But there was no Netta to commiserate, to bring cool compresses and freshly-squeezed lemon drinks and aspirin; he could not sleep and know he was surrounded by gentle loving care. He was spoiled, yes, but he would do the same for Netta if she was sick. Her sisters didn't understand. Topaz shed husbands. Tourmaline put her children first.

The police were back in the clear chilly morning. They told him when the autopsy was arranged for. They asked him if he wanted to talk to a lawyer. He focused with difficulty. "A lawyer? Why would I want a lawyer? A doctor, maybe, if I get any worse."

"For your wife."

It came then, the knowledge he'd pushed aside. Netta wasn't here, Netta would never be back. Netta was horribly dead.

"The autopsy … do they think … was there any … " But he couldn't bring himself to say 'abuse'. "Do they think she was waylaid, that someone was waiting there?"

"Could be." The sergeant was non-committal. "How many people knew she walked up that way?"

"I knew." He wasn't sure if he shivered with his infection or with the sudden realisation that circumstances *did* point to him. "I suppose the people she was playing bridge with knew—she probably said something. Normally she came round by the road but she knew the roadworks had churned everything up … "

"Did you ever go out to meet her when she was on her way up?"

"No. She was usually home before me. If I knew she'd be late for some reason I would drive down to collect her."

They were kind enough to leave him then and he went back to bed.

*

Lionel Allenby professed himself shocked. He couldn't imagine anyone holding a grudge against Mrs Thoms. She was a very pleasant woman. They were delighted to have had her company for these six months. She added a certain *tone*. Over the next few days, the police interviewed everyone who ever went to the Allenby home. One by one they shook their heads and found her sudden death unbelievable.

"If it'd been almost anyone else," Edward Dance said, "but Netta was—" he continued shaking his head, "well, she was such a nice person, kind, quiet."

Everyone agreed she was quiet, that she was kind, that she was gracious and calm.

"Dame sounds too good to be true," one constable said to another.

But the profile of Mrs Thoms, garnered from the major's superiors, from her sisters, from the bridge group and her church acquaintances, remained intact. It was only when they began

the job of working up the hill road, interviewing the neighbours house-by-house, for any sightings of people hanging round, seen on the hill path, round people's back yards, that they had a glimpse of another woman, a different relationship.

Laurel Soames next door sat down in her untidy lounge, shooshing her three children, and answering police questions in a distracted way.

"How well did you know Mrs Thoms?"

"Not well. We had them over for a barbecue a few times. Of course Major Thoms is higher up than my husband but there's a shortage of houses at the moment."

"How well did Major and Mrs Thoms appear to get along?"

"They were always together. But they didn't get along all that well, I don't reckon. It was just that they had no kids of their own. I heard them arguing only the evening before she got killed."

"How did you hear? Were they out in the yard?"

"No, they were inside but the back window was open."

"What time would this've been?"

"Dunno really. I'd given the kids their tea and sat them down in front of the TV. I remembered I'd left some nappies on the line and I went out and I could hear her really screeching at him, like she was really mad with him. I couldn't hear what she was saying but it sounded nasty."

"What happened then?"

"I heard a door slam. Then I couldn't really hear them any more. They must've gone into one of the other rooms."

"Did she ever say anything that might suggest they had arguments?"

"Heck no, Mrs Goody-goody, always saying the right thing and making people think she was just the cat's whisker—" Later, she prepared a statement to embellish this. There was something a little vindictive in her manner. The CIB men kept it in mind.

"From the grapevine, it looks like her husband isn't going up the ladder as fast as she'd like. Not that Major Thoms was getting anywhere fast either. Bit of a plodder by most people's estimation. But he has a reputation for being a careful and reliable man, sir."

"Sort of man you'd like minding your back, eh, Sergeant?"

"Could be. But a good army man might still be jealous of his wife, wouldn't you say, sir, if she was carrying on with her bridge partner."

"Dance? Doesn't seem the type. Allenby is a possibility. She always came to his house, she might've come early or left late sometimes. All the others are married couples, aren't they?"

"All except Mrs Turner. Though she might've passed secret messages in her notebook where she added the points or whatever you do for bridge games—and I believe they changed partners sometimes."

"A new kind of wife-swopping, eh?"

"What does the p.m. say about the manner of death, sir?"

"Used her scarf, but everyone says she was wearing her scarf over her head when she left the house and knotted under her chin. It suggests more of a garrote-action—pull it back off her head and twist a stick in it."

"Must've been a strong scarf."

"Doesn't take all that much pressure. She was in her fifties, bones starting to get a bit brittle, and her sister says she'd always been mildly asthmatic."

"She didn't look her age then."

"No. But she was no spring chicken. Still, a couple of those older blokes might've fancied her."

"The sisters—do they suggest she ever had affairs, had fights with her husband, anything that might suggest a reason?"

"No. She was the quiet one. The older one," he looked at his notes, "Topaz Silverstone—

there's a name and a half for you!—says she couldn't understand why her sister stayed with Alan Thoms all these years because he was so boring but she doesn't suspect him of anything. She thinks he genuinely cared for his wife and is very cut up about her death."

"But the sister lived in Sydney, in fact, both do, sir, and admit they only saw their sister once or twice a year—and she came to see them, not the other way around, so they didn't get to see her and Alan at home together."

"True. He had the means, the opportunity, he's a big solid man, he's fit … well, he's usually fit and his sickness may have a bit of self-preservation in it—"

"Doc says there's a wog doing the rounds at the base."

"Mmm. But we haven't got to the bottom of this claim he was fighting with his wife the previous evening—or what it was all about. He says he wasn't fighting with her at all. She sometimes got cross with the cat, apparently they had a cat given to them recently, and it has a bad habit of getting on the kitchen table. She didn't like that. The neighbour says she heard them both yelling. Seems a bit rich to suggest they were both yelling at the poor bloody cat."

*

Topaz and Tourmaline had come down to see their brother-in-law and stay on for the funeral when the police released the body. Both women were shocked with the death and vaguely suspicious of Alan, not because they believed he'd killed their sister but because they felt he should've been aware if there was something wrong, some sick person hanging round, someone following her, threatening her, something she'd seen or heard …

They felt Alan should've bought her the promised Mini and simply given it to her for her birthday. Of course Netta would turn down an offer, she wasn't a person to ask for things …

The police had found nothing to suggest someone had lain in wait, no trampled grass, no cigarette butts, no scraps of material caught in the nearby bushes, no broken twigs. She would've been out of sight of both the row of army houses and most of the town. But they believed she either met someone coming down the path from the crest of the hill or someone followed her and caught up with her when they believed they were out of sight—or simply caught up and for some reason an argument ensued.

But an argument about what? The motive, if the killing was not a random act by a disturbed person, remained elusive.

"I'm sure it will all die down soon, once the police get a lead on someone. No one's blaming you, Alan." Topaz regarded it as ridiculous that she should be comforting a man she'd never particularly liked and who remained the Number One suspect.

"I blame myself. There's something I should have seen but I'm blowed if I can think what."

Certainly Alan looked in bad shape. Topaz found herself feeling a faint pity. He seemed like an old man now, getting a bit forgetful, a bit shabby. There were stains on his pullover. Netta had been three years younger, now it was as though she'd been decades younger, as though she'd kept him young, moderately lively, interested in life.

"Would you like us to sort her things, save you the trouble of deciding what to do with them."

He sparked at that. "No, of course not! She was my wife. I will decide." Then the moment of life drained. "But thanks for the offer. I'll get round to it eventually."

Tourmaline found this faintly sinister. "Was there something he didn't want us to find? He was very quick to knock you back."

"I know. But he's had days to hide bloodstains or whatever … "

'And I still don't believe it was Alan.' But she kept that to herself. Why was she so sure of his innocence. Husbands do kill wives. Husbands do have opportunities and reasons not given to people outside that relationship. But there was nothing between Alan and Netta that seemed different lately. "I suppose going through her things is almost like saying goodbye. And let's face it … almost anything begins to have sinister connotations in the aftermath … I suspect everyone, especially that woman next door who's apparently told the cops Netta and

Alan were fighting the evening before. Alan and Netta *never* argued. It's what made them seem so *boring*—"

"You mean—we never *saw* them arguing."

"Mmm … still I find the idea … no … besides, what were they arguing *about?* What to have for dinner? What to watch on the box?"

"Everyone seems to think Netta was carrying on with her bridge partner."

"Says who?" Topaz was scathing. "Netta's had *dozens* of bridge partners over the years. Why should she suddenly decide to have an affair? Because Alan got *more* boring? Because Alan was carrying on with the woman next door? Hardly."

"Well, I just hope they find the bastard responsible."

And having said that, Tourmaline began to think which day she could politely leave Topaz and return home. After all, there was nothing more she or her sister could do to help now that they'd done everything necessary, they'd answered all the questions, they'd offered Alan their assistance …

But the question wouldn't leave Topaz alone. Why? Why Netta? Why?

*

Alan knew he'd been short, rude even, to Netta's sisters but he couldn't let them go prying in her cupboards and drawers. It was his secret, his private world, his and Netta's. No one else was to know about it: their world of fantasy, play-acting, excitement. Their beautiful and fun little world in which they could be anything they wanted.

They could be Catherine of Braganza meeting Charles II for the first time; they could be Dry Gulch Dolly tackling the men from 'Bonanza'; they could be Sleeping Beauty and her Prince or the world's worst virago having a go at her 90lb weakling … They were constrained only by the limits of their imaginations. Sometimes they researched and played out historical roles, sometimes they simply came up with a spur-of-the-moment character. Occasionally they saw something interesting to wear at a fête or in an opportunity shop. Sometimes they went along quietly for weeks on end then leapt into a new role. They pretended fights and tragedies, comic roles and different ages. Boring? He and Netta had a sex life of such joy and inventiveness he felt genuinely sorry for most of his colleagues.

But he had no intention of allowing a glimpse of it to anyone.

And now it was all gone; life in the morning, death at night. He couldn't cope with the suddenness of it, the randomness of her death, the *inexplicableness* of her murder.

The house seemed duller, colder, unwelcoming, dead. Or was it him? He fed himself on tinned stuff and bread and didn't notice what he was eating. He got up and went out and came home and went through the motions of living and didn't care and wished he could die too. His request, to be sent to Vietnam, "why shouldn't I go, I don't have anyone now, other men have wives, girlfriends, children—" was turned down. The police still regarded him as their main suspect. He was to remain here.

Vaguely he moved household items to and fro, put photos of Netta next to his bed, let himself go without noticing, sometimes went to Netta's drawers and buried his face in her sweet-smelling lingerie and felt the tears in his eyes.

Life no longer mattered. Life without Netta was a desert road going nowhere, disappearing into the dull maws of death, but perhaps beyond the grave he would find her again. Several times he thought of ways to join her, a carelessness, an accident, a deliberate play … of course his death would reinforce their suspicions … guilt … the husband … but he wouldn't be here to know …

Suicide was a crime. Was carelessness? He sat every evening at the kitchen table, just sitting, trying to blot out everything, putting off the moment when he would go to bed and lie there alone. To drive off somewhere … to put a damp hand in a socket … to drink down something from the cleaning cupboard … to be careless with a revolver … to stumble on the bridge …

*

Topaz decided to stay on for another week. She wasn't sure what she hoped to achieve. To resolve her own sense of disbelief perhaps.

She went several times to the police and found them still convinced that Alan was the most likely—unless they were drawing him as a red herring along their path and if that was their stratagem then no one had warned Alan. He received regular visits from unsmiling CIB men and sent them away unconvinced that he knew nothing, had seen nothing, could suggest nothing.

She rang Lionel Allenby and asked if she could come one afternoon to meet Netta's bridge companions, *in situ* as it were. "Certainly," he was immediately kind and sympathetic, "we still haven't come to terms with it ourselves, as though we'll wake up and find it all a horrible dream."

When she came she found he'd put on a nice afternoon tea and they were all there, everyone who'd known Netta. After they'd all paid their respects and drunk tea and eaten fruit cake and meringues, she found herself left with Lionel and Edward Dance.

"We nearly always had two tables, sometimes three, but that afternoon we only had one. Myself and Eddie and Julie Turner and your sister. We had a pleasant little afternoon but Garnet told us she was rather worried about her husband, he wasn't at all well and she wanted him to take time off work. I didn't see her leave as the phone rang just as the others were going."

"Mrs Thoms went out with myself and Julie and we walked along the street, then I said goodbye and turned off and Julie went on. I was surprised that Garnet went up the hill track as she usually went home by the road but I didn't know about the roadworks then. Julie lives in the third house along from where Garnet turned across that little footbridge and up the hill."

"Would she be able to see the track from her house?"

"Just the bottom part, I would think."

"And hear … would she have heard anything?"

"Probably not. In this weather we tend to have the windows closed—"

She sat on a while with them, trying to gauge them as people, as possible lovers for her sister. That they liked Netta she felt sure but was it anything more. Two bachelors. Yet seemingly two older men completely content with their lives and hobbies. But as she came out and stood on the doorstep looking across the park and up the hill she realised Netta would've been in full view for much of her way up the hill. Only when she passed between the clusters of scrubby trees and then when the path took a small dog-leg and cut across towards the end of the road on the far side … why had no one seen … surely *someone* must've been looking out, looking up, at some time that afternoon between half past four and five o'clock. *Surely someone must've seen …*

She pointed. Lionel Allenby shook his head. Edward Dance said in puzzlement, "I never really noticed before … "

*

Laurel Soames often found herself pondering on that afternoon. If only she could catch the memory of the words. The police would be very grateful. She saw herself ceasing to be a nonentity, saw herself fêted and thanked. Interviewed. The police didn't know but she did. If only she could catch words from that noise, that screeching, that spat.

She took to lying down for a few minutes when the children were quiet, closing her eyes, willing that afternoon to come back. What sort of things would two middle-aged people argue about? She ticked off every possibility: house, dinner, money, relatives, mothers-in-law, going out, affairs … somehow she always came back to affairs … and maybe it wasn't *her* affair, maybe it was *his* … Yes, and she didn't want to divorce him and everyone thought she was such a *nice* person and if he asked for a divorce everyone would sympathise with her and treat him like a real bastard and so he decided it would be easiest to get rid of her, make it look like some maniac on the loose, and in a few years there'd be a quiet wedding, somewhere, probably after he'd been transferred somewhere else where no one knew what had gone on here …

Was there anything inside the house; something Garnet had seen—lipstick on a collar, perfume, a note by the phone (men were careless), something that made her screech at him; yes, she had been doing the yelling, he had been much lower, much more subdued—and how could she find it? Of course the cops wouldn't know what to look for. They still thought … well, she didn't know exactly what they thought … but if she could only go in there on some pretext …

Alan had taken extra time off, his CO was generous, but he wished the generosity would cease, work was the best antidote to loneliness and misery and anger. He packed Netta's things into boxes. What to do with them he had no idea but he felt he must do something. Funny eccentric things she'd bought at bazaars and opportunity shops, sweet sexy things, *grande dame* clothes (he loved her to play snobbish upper class Englishwomen and he the janitor or groom or footman, sometimes); one by one they went into the cartons.

There was a faint noise and he glanced up to see Laurel Soames in the doorway. She was nearly as startled to see him as he was to see her but she recovered herself quickly and began to apologise and explain.

"What do you mean by coming in without knocking!" His shock sparked his anger, the violation of his precious privacy with his wife, and he felt a great wave of uncontrollable heat rise in him. "How dare you come in here!"

"I knocked—you mustn't of heard me—"

"Like hell you did! Get out! Go one, get out! Before I throw you out! You bloody interfering little bitch!"

Laurel, who'd taken advantage of the never-locked back door, hadn't seen the car out the front. What on earth was he doing home at this hour! She felt a sudden jet of fear. This wasn't the calm quiet man who'd lived next door for six months. This was someone angry to the point of dementia, someone gloating over the things of his dead wife as he packed them for destruction. She backed out hurriedly.

The police must know of this development. Of his fury that threatened her. There was something here, something in the boxes, evidence. They must hurry.

The police responded to her gasping portrayal of what she'd seen and how she'd been treated. "I only went to return a packet of sugar. I thought I'd better do it before I forgot. And he—"

She stumbled over the terror of his attacking anger.

The image of Alan Thoms as a calm phlegmatic man not easily roused to anger, let alone the fury necessary to take his wife's life, was gone. Spiteful, Mrs Soames might be (for reasons that were not entirely clear but an army base with its inward-looking community could easily breed intense and unrealistic emotions among people who saw too much of each other), but she was genuinely upset.

The police took into custody the boxes of clothes and came back with a search warrant. Their reluctance to do so initially was partly due to the nature of the killing and partly to do with a sense of hands-off when it came to personnel from the base. The town needed the base and its spending power more than the base needed the town.

Alan rang Topaz at the hotel. Maybe it would be better if he rang his solicitor but he decided against it. He was guilty of nothing. Topaz as Netta's sister was a more human kind of insurance. It didn't occur to him that the police would see in it the first glimmerings of a motive. Topaz, the dead woman's sister, was the other woman in this case. Topaz was richer, more interesting, possibly even better-looking if you liked the jolly extrovert type of woman—and quiet dull men often did.

For Topaz who'd never liked her brother-in-law the awareness of the portent and slant of their questions made her angry. Alan, still thinking of her only in the role of Netta's sister, was blind to the connotations.

"And have you asked this Mrs Soames why she went next door at a time when she believed the house to be empty? Don't you find that suspicious? All your supposed evidence

about Alan and my sister fighting depends entirely on her word."

Alan heard his sister-in-law yet didn't hear her. His mind worked endlessly over the fact the police had Netta's things, the police were prying into his deepest most intimate secrets, as an intensely private man the thought was unbearable.

"Major Thoms, sir, did you order Mrs Soames out of your house?"

"Yes."

"Did you threaten her?"

"Yes."

"But—" Topaz flashed fire. "This woman was trespassing—"

"We will ask the questions, madam."

"Well, you're asking all the wrong questions!"

"Topaz." Alan leant towards her, began to reach out a calming hand, then withdrew it in sudden embarrassment, "it doesn't matter what they ask. That woman had no right to come in our house, I know, but … I suppose I shouldn't have flown off the handle at her. I've just been feeling pretty bloody miserable … " He looked up at the men watching, not watching him but watching the hand that he'd dropped to the table.

"And what sort of relationship do the two of you have?"

He looked astonished at the question but Topaz had seen the trend.

"She is … Tops is my sister-in-law. I see her about twice a year. Why?"

"Look, Alan is my brother-in-law and he's a boring old so-and-so. But I don't believe he killed my sister and all the time you're on at him you're not out there looking for the real killer. You don't want to think it's a woman. Why not? Women get jealous of women. So you're not asking that woman what she was really up to. Why?"

"I said we'll ask the questions."

"But—"

"If you don't keep quiet, Mrs Silverstone, I'll have you removed."

*

Afterwards she wondered why she'd wanted to press them into investigating Mrs Soames. Tiresome, the woman undoubtedly was, but a potential murderer? She seemed too stupid to carry out such a quick, quiet, unobtrusive crime.

And yet … if no one had been seen following Garnet up the hill then it pointed to someone coming unnoticed from the other side of the rise …

'But then—Alan is probably too stupid—ditto. He may well be able to strip down an engine in minutes flat, he may well keep his dockets and files in good order … that's not brains … so who in this whole horrible mess has brains … it takes brains to play bridge, doesn't it? But why should any of them want Netta *dead* … that doesn't make any better sense.'

At the end of the week she decided she might as well go back to Sydney; she had nothing to offer, no new ideas, no clues, no further insights into the dynamics of the bridge group. And Ben was missing her.

She invited Alan to dinner the final night. Not that Pidgingery had much to offer when it came to a night out. The Sorrento Café could offer sausages, roast or corned beef. The hotel dining-room could manage fish fillets or grilled lamb. The Shanghai had beef with black bean sauce. Alan chose the Sorrento.

She watched him eat and felt sorry for him. "I know you're feeling rotten, Alan, but don't go and do anything stupid. Somewhere in this town there's an evil person. Don't let them win."

"Some days I'm all right, other days the idea of life without Netta just seems too appalling … I know we've never liked each other much but—" Then his moment of confidence dried up and he looked at her in a floundering way.

"We don't," she said briskly, "I always wondered what Netta saw in you. But she loved you all these years so mine not to reason why. Just look after yourself. And if there's anything Ben and I can do any time, don't hesitate to ask."

"The police still have Netta's stuff that I'd packed up, her clothes and cosmetics."

"If they don't bring a case against you get your lawyer to demand they return it."

"I packed up her bridge stuff … books and card-packs … " He sat there, gazing vacantly at his half-full-plate. "Do you know, I never came across her diary. She always kept one just to make a few notes to herself about games and ways to improve and the people she played with … I wonder what happened to it … "

"Did she take it with her?"

"Not usually. She kept it in the kitchen. She'd come home, have a cup of tea, write up the afternoon's notes, then start to cook dinner."

"So either she took it that day and either left it at Mr Allenby's or dropped it somewhere or the killer took if from her bag—or else it was in the kitchen and the police or Mrs Soames or someone else removed it—or it's still here and it's just fallen down behind something."

"I'll look for it." He seemed to grow animated, then the curtain came down again and he slumped in his chair. "But I don't know what it would tell us."

"It mightn't tell us anything, you silly sod," Topaz felt a strong desire to reach out and shake him, "but if it's missing then maybe someone was *afraid* Netta had jotted down something which might point to them."

"I suppose you're right. I'll have another look."

"And ask the cops."

*

Julie Turner had often been in the habit of walking along the little rivulet that trickled out of the lake in town, under the bridge at the bottom of the hill path, along the edge of the slope and across the land this side of the willow-lined creek where people sometimes walked dogs or played French cricket. In very wet times it became a marsh. In dry times it became an expanse of weeds and dust. In the weeks after Garnet Thoms' death she couldn't bear to take her cocker spaniel out anywhere that she could see the hill path. The knowledge that the other woman had been done to death only a few hundred yards from her house disturbed her waking and sleeping hours.

Netta, she thought, was one of the sweetest women she'd ever met and she found herself several times crying for her loss and pain, she felt deeply sorry for Alan Thoms who seemed a nice quiet ordinary man and genuinely in love with his wife but then there was something very lovable about Netta. It was natural that her husband would love her.

The police got nowhere with their case but their frequent questioning of Major Thoms led to a certain amount of speculation in town. She sometimes found herself thinking over Eddie Dance's insistence, when she and Netta had discussed the possibility of partnering each other, that they should play as 'couples'. She had no objection to playing with Lionel. He was a good solid player, better than Eddie, but less ambitious. Eddie, she knew, would love to find a partner interested in travelling, competitions, making money. He believed he'd found such a partner in Netta who was so much better than him. She carried him. She was technically good but she also had an intuition that was nothing short of brilliant, almost as though she read their minds.

And she and Netta found they played extremely well together in the rare times they partnered each other. Eddie was afraid he might lose Netta. Afraid? It seemed too strong a word. But there was a huge leap from there to murder … and, anyway, it was simply not possible. She and Netta had said goodbye to Eddie and watched him turn off to go home and Netta had walked with her to her gate, then she'd seen Netta walk on. It was a very cold day and she hadn't lingered at her gate but Eddie was nowhere in sight by the time she went in.

'I'm being silly, suspecting Eddie. Eddie! He wouldn't hurt a fly. But I suppose none of it makes sense. Netta of all people! Think of all the nasty mean-minded cheating people out there who don't get murdered … maybe it wasn't murder at all, maybe she just caught her scarf in a branch and it choked her, wasn't there a woman who caught her scarf in something, I forget what, and couldn't get free in time … yes, that makes more sense … Netta was walking

along, her mind on her husband not being well or going over that last game where Eddie went three no trumps on a hand that would've been stretching a point to go two hearts—he *always* overbids—and she got caught and didn't realise what had happened and tried to pull herself free … '

Eventually she wrote a polite note to Alan Thoms. He responded in a cautious way. So far as he was aware the police had never seen it as an accident. It might be they had evidence they'd never shared with him. The last two months had been very miserable and stressful as he missed his wife very much and being the main suspect had compounded the anguish of it all. She wasn't sure whether to write back or just leave things as they were.

Six weeks later, while walking her dog, she picked up a small tattered notebook on the waste ground down by the creek. The writing was almost impossible to read and many of the pages were glued together but she was inclined to think it was 'Netta Thoms' written on the first page. She used the book as an excuse to drive up to see Alan Thoms.

The state of his house was rather grim, undusted and untidy. He had an unkempt look and appeared unwell. But his face lit up when he saw the book. "Why—that looks like Netta's bridge book! Where did you find it?"

"Down near the creek."

"But—she couldn't have dropped it there."

"Maybe she didn't drop it there. Maybe someone else did."

They looked at each other and were unsure what to do. "The police might be able to read the writing or unstick the pages but … " Julie shook her head slowly. "Is it evidence, do you think?"

He seemed to have difficulty coping with the question. At last he said, "It must be. But I suppose they'll find a way to use it to make things worse for me."

"Surely not."

"Husbands kill wives. Therefore I must've killed Netta. That dreadful woman next door has tried to convince everyone I was having an affair with Netta's sister. They can't seem to accept that I loved my wife and would rather be dead myself than see any harm come to her."

"Yes," Julie sat forward. "She was lovely, wasn't she? Just one of those rare and beautiful people that make you feel you've come into a lovely tranquil place where you can be yourself, be at peace with yourself. It's hard to describe. But I've never felt it with anyone else."

He fought back an overwhelming desire to cry; at last he'd found someone who could understand the depths of his loss. He took out a rather grubby handkerchief and blew his nose. "Yes." He got himself under control. "I'll make some tea."

She wasn't sure she should trust any cup in his kitchen but she saw his need to compose himself and thanked him for the offer.

*

Though the NSW CIB managed to read many of Netta's cryptic entries they drew no useful information from them. Nor did they appear to draw anything from the book's finding near the creek. The police put forward a strong circumstantial case against Major Alan Thoms but the Director of Public Prosecutions decided it was not sufficient to go to trial. After two years of gossip and innuendo, muted by his isolation from the town and the respect of his colleagues, Major Thoms was transferred to Townsville. Mrs Turner followed him three months later and they were married on the 26th February 1972.

* * *

‘—fell among thieves’
(Luke 10.30)

As the two women came downstairs Deirdre Rogers said suddenly, “Do you know that Elizabeth Bowen story—the one about breakfast?”

“No. No, I don’t think so … Why?”

Her companion didn’t know any Elizabeth Bowens. She didn’t see any point in saying so. After all, a principal knew lots of people and things she couldn’t be expected to know.

“Mr Rossiter is coming down to breakfast in his boarding house and he says to himself ‘Behold, I die daily’. I often think of that—”

“Oh, come on, it’s not *that* bad. I quite like breakfasts here. Where else would you get fresh Jersey cream. Not that I should be eating cream—”

“I wasn’t thinking of the food.”

“Oh? Are we that bad at breakfast then?” Kaylene gave a small laugh. Deirdre Rogers unnerved her sometimes. All those brains and earnestness packed into such a slight, beaky little woman. But she wouldn’t dream of admitting that to anyone except Justin (most people thought her quite capable and competent and not easily unnerved) and he only pooh-poohed it with “What! That dried-up old stick!”

“No-o, not you, but Abraham Notts is not my idea of pleasant breakfast company.”

Kaylene laughed again. “Those fierce eyebrows! But he really isn’t a bad old guy. He gave me a nice pair of garnet earrings for Christmas. I don’t believe what he says about all the things he says he’s found, nor Ted … ” She tailed off, suddenly embarrassed. It was likely he’d never given Deirdre Rogers anything, somehow she wasn’t a person you thought of giving presents to.

“Of course I’m exaggerating but there’s an atmosphere, I can’t quite explain it … ”

“Never mind. You’ll probably find a place of your own sooner or later.”

Kaylene planned to get married when Justin took over as manager at the feed store at the end of the year with Mr Mulligan’s retirement and she assumed almost everyone who lived in a place like this was planning to move out. In her imagination she’d furnished a dozen possible homes of varying size around the town. And Deirdre would certainly earn more than she did, quite possibly more than she and Justin put together.

She pushed open the dining-room door. Mr Notts was already inches into his cereal. He hadn’t put in his false teeth and his chewing suggested someone trying to clear a blocked pipe with a suction plunger. Ted Bischoff was gazing into space while a cup of black tea cooled.

“Paper hasn’t come.” Abraham stopped chewing and looked up. “Need to know what Bis-Brown has been up to.”

Mrs Quince came in bearing a large plate of fried eggs with a small hill of well-crisped bacon rashers on one side. Her daughter Tammy followed her with racks of toast and an extra jug of milk. “Here you are now, Ted, tuck in.” Mr Bischoff withdrew his gaze from the ceiling and said, “It’s goin’ to be a hot day. Very hot. I believe prices have risen.” He looked at Deirdre.

“Have they?” she murmured.

“Nice for all the buggers with shares,” Abraham said abruptly but indistinctly.

Deirdre Rogers looked at him with a slight frown. If he didn’t have any shares why was he always watching the share prices?

“Where is that Jenny?” Mrs Quince turned away. “Late again? I don’t know how that girl keeps her job.” Despite her constant and querulous complaints about the absent Jenny, Deirdre Rogers believed she was quite proud of the girl. It wasn’t that Jenny achieved much, never having gone beyond the check-out at the little supermarket round the corner, but there was something winsome about her.

Kaylene sat down noisily. She vaguely resented Jenny and her unthinking popularity. But

then Jenny was related somehow to Mrs Quince and Tammy. No one else here, not even crusty old Abraham, would dare say a word against her. Still, just so long as Justin's gaze never strayed in *that* direction.

And when Jenny did come down, leaping two steps at a time, everyone looked up. It was as though they'd been waiting for her to come. "Morning everyone!" she said gaily and plumped herself down. "Cereal, girlie?" Abraham passed the packet, Mr Bischoff handed her the milk. She tipped a spoonful into her plate. "Got to watch my figure!" she said with a laugh.

"Got to keep your strength up, too," Mrs Quince came in with more toast.

"Okay, okay, I know." And she added a few flakes more, making it seem she was doing it to please everyone else.

Deirdre sat and ate with her slightly prissy manner, at least so it seemed in this company, and thought, 'is it Jenny who somehow, subtly, spoils breakfast?' It wasn't that she wanted attention herself but she couldn't decide exactly what the problem was. An underlying insincerity perhaps. A girl so pretty and sweet should be *real*. She wondered why the word 'real' should come to mind. Everyone was real surely. To be unreal was to be non-existent, unalive, no, that didn't quite make sense. She cut her toast and treated herself to a sliver of butter.

Kaylene looked at her watch. "I must hurry. I said I'd unlock this morning." She hurriedly put her napkin in its ring and rose from her chair. For a moment she seemed to hover, as though she wanted Mrs Quince to urge her too to eat more, then she said, "Bye all," and went out.

Deirdre smiled slightly towards the departing Kaylene, then drained her coffee. Now the two old men would have Jenny to themselves and they would suddenly become skittish and silly and tell her improbable yarns and call her 'princess'. She rose calmly and went upstairs to prepare for school and collect her briefcase.

It was only a three-minute-walk if she took the back way across the waste ground, following one of the vague paths which skirted the pockets of burr and dock and tangled dry grass and collected litter. Not a pleasant walk but it saved time. The air was gritty and dry and she wondered if Kaylene and Justin would get to marry and buy the house of their choice. Not this year perhaps, not unless it rained soon. She thought of them kindly. Kaylene was a nice girl if not overburdened with brains and her young man was courteous and nicely-spoken.

As she turned in the back gate of the high school grounds she wondered why Jenny didn't have a boyfriend. She was prettier than Kaylene.

*

There were two garages next to the boarding-house. One housed Mrs Quince's Holden utility. The other had been given over to Mr Notts. What he actually did in there was something of a mystery. Shelves of rock samples and beakers and boxes ran away into the dark corners. Crow-bars and spades, dollypots and sieves and long lengths of wire rested against the benches. He had a grinder and polisher as well as an array of tools piled near at hand for when he settled himself on his stool. Jars of acids and metho, piles of rags, a couple of dog-eared books and an old exercise book titled 'Where Found' all added to the atmosphere. But no one ever actually came upon him cutting or polishing.

Mr Bischoff also saw himself as a fossicker, a 'rock-hound', yet the two men spent very little time together. Ted Bischoff owned several opals. He kept them inside his hat-band and showed them to anyone who expressed the slightest interest, astonishment, or disbelief.

"Nonsense!" Deirdre said, when she was first told. "In your hat! People don't put opals in their hat!" In response he swept his hat off and pointed. The greasy band had the opals inside it.

"Found 'em in seventy-four. Spent a year out west."

"Coober Pedy?"

"Nah. That's where everyone goes. I've never told anyone where I found 'em."

"And you've never thought of selling them? They look to be good quality."

He took them out and laid them in his calloused palm.

"Don't need the money, not just now. Might sell 'em someday. Just gives me a nice feeling knowing they're there, all right and tight, up top." He put them back in his hat and put the hat on his head. She knew he went down town everyday and sat on the benches on the north side of the bank. There were several other old men and an elderly woman who sat there most mornings, enjoying the sun and the life of the town passing them. She supposed he told them stories about finding opals.

"Are you sure it's safe, keeping it like that? Your hat might blow off—or get lost or stolen."

"Nah. I keep a good watch on it." How he did this was a mystery. She'd seen him sitting there, both feet planted firmly on either side of his stick, his hat squarely on his head. But it would only be the work of a second to flick his hat off, to distract him while someone helped themselves.

She thought of more things she might say but it didn't seem right to worry him. Clearly he had no intention of putting the stones away in a bank vault.

"Well, they're certainly very attractive stones." Such a simple polite *natural* thing to say. Deirdre Rogers didn't know that Mrs Quince coming in and overhearing would someday repeat that statement to the police.

*

There was no overt hostility to the first female principal in the school's history. As Mrs Lonergan, the school's secretary, put it, "Anyone'd be better than Mr Temple-Watts." Not a compliment initially though she came gradually to have an affection and respect for Deirdre Rogers. Deirdre made a concerted effort to get to know all the students as quickly as possible, to meet the parents, to talk with the Parents & Friends' Association. She knew she was on trial for both young and old. Mrs Lonergan might have no fond memories of the previous high school principal but there were boys and fathers who remembered him with generosity for his hard work in developing the school's football team, a very successful team, and a woman could not be expected to follow in the same footsteps or even understand how much this meant to an underfunded and unglamorous small school.

She knew it was unlikely any of the boys intended it as a career; she knew the girls' sport was woefully underfunded and unsupported; she knew she could find a good coach to replace Mr Temple-Watts as she came to see how cleverly he'd played off the boys against each other and used his favouritism as a carrot … But it required patience and care and a sensitive understanding of how the school community worked. Being a woman *was* a handicap. But she'd come this far by paying attention to the spoken and unspoken words, by meticulous care, by patience, by encouragement … She felt sure, with time, she could make a success of her appointment.

She made herself available after school hours for students and parents and staff and intuited that her accessibility was working to her credit. But she was often tired by the time she walked back across the waste ground and entered the gate into the backyard of the boarding-house.

Mrs Quince came out of the autumn gloom one evening as she snicked the gate shut. "That you, Deirdre? Come on into the sitting-room. The police are here."

"The police! Whatever for?" Deirdre followed her in.

"There's been a theft," Mrs Quince said grimly. "They hope you can help."

"What has been stolen?"

Mrs Quince almost flounced inside, her own irritation and impatience in her step. She'd always known it would happen—that stupid old fool!—and now there'd be endless annoyances and bad publicity. "The opals of course!" Her own temper rose like bile in her mouth. "You go on in. I've got dinner to cook."

Deirdre stepped quietly into the small sitting-room with its armchairs and a record-player and a shelf of tedious books left by previous boarders. The curtains were closed and the light

on.

"Miss Rogers? Take a seat."

"Is it true Ted's lost his opals?"

"It appears so. When did you last see them?"

She sat down carefully and smoothed her skirt as she tried to think back. "Not for quite a while, not since the last time he showed them to me, it must be three weeks at least."

"How often did he show them to people, do you know?"

"Quite often. He's taken off his hat to show me at least three times since I moved in. He had a habit of doing that. I think he'd forget that he'd already shown them off. But surely he could feel them in his hat-band to know if they were there or not?"

It seemed to her an eminently sensible question. The opals were sufficiently large to be an irritant factor against Ted Bischoff's head surely. But the two men who'd come round merely nodded. "Did you see him wearing his hat this morning?"

"No. He always goes out after I've left for school."

"Did you enter his room any time in the last few days?"

"Yes. I went in yesterday evening to return a magazine he'd lent me."

"Did you see his hat then?"

"No. His door was standing ajar and I called out, 'Ted, are you there?' As there was no response I just slipped in and put the magazine on his bed. I was only in there a couple of seconds. I would normally have waited until I saw him at dinner but I had a meeting at the school last night and I knew he wanted the magazine back."

"At what time was this?"

"Well, I can't say exactly, but a few minutes after six probably."

"Did you see anyone else in the corridor or as you went to his room?"

"No. I could hear Mrs Quince downstairs but I didn't see her until I came down at about quarter to seven. I don't know what time Mr Bischoff returned to the house. I was in rather a hurry myself so I didn't look in the sitting-room or the TV-room as I came down."

The two men communed. "Do you have any idea what value the stones might have on them, Ms Rogers?"

"No. They looked very fine stones to me but you'd need to look at them with a—you know, one of those things jewellers wear—to see if there were flaws."

"Mr Bischoff has put a value on them of $50,000. Does that sound realistic?"

"I really don't know. But if he believed they were that valuable I really can't believe he would continue carrying them round in his hat!"

"But that hardly gives someone the right to pinch them, any more than they have a right to pinch your new car—"

"Of course not!" She was sharper than she intended but she was tired and hungry. "But it seemed to be tempting fate."

"Do you have any jewellery of your own?"

"A few odds and ends. No opals."

She felt they lost interest in her with the sound of Kaylene and Jenny in the front hall. They went through the motions of reminding her to contact them if she thought of anything, saw anything, remembered anything.

*

Poor Ted sat over his roast mutton with a long and mournful face. The whole household, from Mrs Quince to Deirdre to Mr Notts, made suggestions as to places he might look and things that might've happened.

"Did you *ever* take them out, Ted?" Jenny leaned forward with a sympathetic look on her face.

"Never." Ted shook his head. "They've never left me poor old hat since the day I found them."

"You're a fool, d'you know that, Ted?" Abraham growled. "A bloody fool. An accident

waiting to happen. A robbery—" He looked round the table. "Look at all these women, give their eye-teeth for some opals to hang round their bloomin' necks—"

"I beg your pardon, Mr Notts," Deirdre said tartly.

"Well, not your neck maybe." His look said very clearly not even opals would improve her rather thin and crepe-like neck.

"You should've seen the look she gave him," Kaylene said later when she was alone with Justin. "But still it wasn't nice. Old Notty virtually accused us of pinching Ted's opals. And Ted just sat there looking like he was going to start crying any minute. I mean—honestly—when you think about it, it's all so horrible but it's also stupid, keeping them in a hat! The cops looked as though they'd entered a nut-house. I heard one of them saying to the other—well, waddya know, in a bloody hat! Where'll they be keeping their diamonds, I wonder!—I felt like telling him where to get off!"

Justin sat there, bemused, through the story. Now he said curiously, "So when did the old guy find they were missing?"

"I don't think he knows. He's always taking his hat off to show people but whether he takes them out and admires them when he's on his own, I don't know. He said he never takes them out of his hat but that's not true. He often tips them into his hand to show them off better, when he meets someone new."

"Oh well, I s'pose the cops'll have their channels, know which jewellers to contact, keep an ear out for people gossiping—that sort of thing."

"I s'pose so. But I hope they find them soon. It's not nice having people look at you like you're a thief."

"Never mind. I know you didn't pinch them." And for that Kaylene let him go a bit further than usual when it came to kissing and cuddling; not all the way, she had her big sister's grim experience with her fiancé to thank for her own caution. Mrs Quince might say gloomily to Jenny, "I'll bet she'll have one in the oven by the time she gets him to the altar," a prophesy Jenny always seemed to find both amusing and reassuring, but Kaylene had no intention of pre-empting her honeymoon.

"But … I wonder who did?" Kaylene shivered in her light blouse and skirt and blamed it on the cool evening.

*

The police certainly spoke with the group of pensioners who sat most sunny mornings with Mr Bischoff but it didn't provide them with any useful leads. Ted had been able to provide them with a photograph of the stolen stones. He had even, though extremely reluctantly, told them where he'd found his precious opals. This information had gone to all known gem dealers. A piece had appeared in the local paper. Such a theft was news. So was Ted's claim of the opals' supposed value. Apart from generating a great deal of gossip and speculation the article did nothing to move the case forward.

Mrs Quince was not pleased to have the police back. She wanted their focus to be away from her establishment, away from Tammy and Jenny, away from the possibility that the stones had gone missing from Ted's room.

"Have you remembered anything else, Mrs Quince? Anything said or done on that day or just before."

She couldn't honestly say she had. "Everything was pretty much as usual, I think." They looked disappointed.

"Perhaps if we go through the day—then through your boarders."

Although she conscientiously gave them her day-long schedule she could not think of any visitors, travelling salesmen, phone enquiries, disruptions … and so far as her boarders went …

"Mr Notts is keen on whatchamacallit—lapid-something … you know, grinding and polishing and whatnot, he's got quite a good collection though nothing valuable like Ted's opals."

"Do you think he might've been envious of Ted's opals?"

This was an interesting thought and she pondered it. "No-o-o, not really. I think Abraham is better off than he lets people know. And I think he knows more about rocks and stuff than Ted does. It makes him feel sort o' superior. He was always calling Ted a fool. You could go and look in all his stuff in the garage. I s'pose it's possible that Ted had his opals out there and they got mixed in with Abraham's stuff but I don't know how."

"Ms Deirdre Rogers then?"

"Well, we don't know her very well. She only came in January. But I s'pose she gets paid quite well for being principal and she doesn't seem to be very interested in jewellery. Though I do remember—" She tried to conjure up the words she'd overheard. The men seemed to lean forward. "Yes, she was praising Ted's opals one evening, saying how valuable they were, something like that. I s'pose anyone could be tempted."

She saw them make a note.

"Miss Kaylene Taylor?"

"Well, she's a nice enough girl. She's getting married fairly soon though I haven't seen her with an engagement ring yet. I think they're saving up to get something really nice."

The men made another note. "And your daughter Tammy?"

"I think I'd know if Tammy'd been putting her fingers in Ted's hat. That girl is hopeless at keeping anything a secret."

"And your niece, Jenny Reid," the man glanced down at his list, "no, Reith—what about her?"

"Actually she's my cousin's daughter. I can't imagine Jenny pinching anything either. And if she did she'd show it to Tammy and, soon enough, I'd get to hear about it."

She'd decided that being candid would go down better than being defensive about the two girls even though questions about them seemed to strike at her own honesty. You couldn't run a boarding-house in a country town without a reputation for honesty. She found herself hating Ted for putting her in this horrible position. He was an old fool, no doubt about it.

"And yourself? Did you ever handle the stones, see them sitting on his bureau or somewhere when you went in to change the sheets?"

"No. Never. I only do his room when he's out—and he always has his opals with him when he goes out."

"Could they have fallen, rolled into a crack, got down behind a wardrobe—something like that?"

They'd discussed all the probable and improbable places Ted's gems might've got to, the possibilities seemed endless. "That's what we all think must've happened. Ted's getting on a bit, getting a bit forgetful … I forget things myself and he's a lot older than me."

"Then it looks like we'll have to come and give this place the onceover." The two men communed; she felt their reluctance. "We could get a warrant no doubt but if you're agreeable we'll get started on it straight away. If there's any chance the stones have just been mislaid we'd like to find them, not waste more police time on it."

"We-ell, I s'pose … if you say so … but the boarders won't like it … "

"I don't suppose they like all the suspicion and gossip either," the older man said.

"We'll start downstairs and if there's nothing we'll ring each of the women, just run it past them—"

Mrs Quince watched them work through the sitting-room, the dining-room, the front hall. Then she gave up her watching and went on with the last of her jam-making in the kitchen. Abraham came in and watched for a while. "The silly blathering old fool," he said a couple of times. Mrs Quince quite agreed. Maybe she should've put her foot down right at the beginning when Ted moved in and showed her the opals in his hat.

The men invaded her kitchen and pantry, they moved on to the laundry and shed, then to Abraham's garage and her own. They'd never searched for opals before and weren't absolutely sure they would recognize them if they saw them in the raw. The tins and buckets and jars and

bowls of small chips and blocks and tumbled and water-washed stones in Abraham's workshop enhanced their doubts. Could they really guarantee to find three opals amongst all this?

Abraham when questioned about his attitude to Ted's good fortune only snorted, "Bloody amateur, wouldn't know a lump of agate from a lump o' gold. I know what I'm doing. I own a bismuth mine. I've been prospecting all my life, up until the bloody arthritis got to me."

The two men looked at each other. "Mr Bischoff's suggestion that his stones are worth at least $50,000—does that strike you as accurate?"

"The cheek of the man! Finds a few chips of opal, bit of potch, and carries on like Alan Bond! You can buy stones that good in every souvenir place for a few hundred quid. He wouldn't know good opal if it jumped up and bit him. The only person he ever managed to convince was old Rogers."

"Ms Rogers believed the stones to be very valuable?"

"So it seems. Probably was just being polite, she's that sort of dame."

"What about the young woman, Kaylene, is she interested in your stones?"

"My stones? Course she's interested in my stones. I'm making her a ring, aren't I?"

"Are you?"

"Said she'd like something a bit different."

"You're polishing and setting a stone for her?"

"That's what I said."

*

The gossip entered the high school in a variety of ways. Students heard stories at home and brought them to school. Mrs Lonergan heard from her niece who worked in one of the town's two jewellery shops that the police had been in. The science teacher, Mr Goodrick, whose father was a daytime crony of Ted Bischoff, heard that Deirdre Rogers had been asking Ted where he found the opals and was annoyed when Ted refused to give away his secret. Mrs Paige who taught Home Economics said she'd heard from Justin when she went in to buy laying pellets for her chooks that the police were sure one of the women at the boarding house was the culprit.

Justin was upset that Kaylene had been asked questions about her engagement ring. They wanted to keep it a secret. Miss Rogers said the police seemed to think the opals had accidentally got in with all of Abraham's boxes of rocks. She also admitted that the police had searched every room in the boarding house including her own. She said she found the idea distasteful, having men go through her lingerie, but she supposed it was necessary.

The police didn't tell anybody what thoughts they'd taken away from their search. There were a few small curious items found but nothing which helped them advance the case.

Mr Bischoff, when questioned again, said he'd been down to Abraham's garage that day. He'd gone down at Mrs Quince's request to tell Abraham afternoon tea would be a bit late because Jenny had had a giddy turn at work, she'd inhaled something in the storeroom apparently, and Mrs Quince wanted to go down to see if she needed to be brought home. Jenny was much better by the time Mrs Quince got to the supermarket and Mr Bischoff only put his head round the side door into the garage anyway so the opals couldn't possibly have got mixed in with anything else. The police had their doubts about the quality of his memory but Mr Notts confirmed the brevity of the visit.

"It's getting to be like living in a bloody railway-station down there," Abraham complained to Deirdre. She might be a bit scrawny and intellectual but she was the only person in the house who didn't subscribe to the easy solution that Ted's opals and Abraham's unpolished stones had somehow got mixed. "They think if they ask me every second minute I'll somehow find the flamin' things."

"I suppose they think, well, you've got a lot of stones there and you might not notice … it probably means they're at a standstill in their investigations."

"Couldn't find an opal in an opal mine, that lot. Did I ever tell you about my bismuth

mine?"

"No. That's an interesting thing to have. Whereabouts is it?" She half-expected him to get cagey in the way Ted got cagey.

"Down in northern New South Wales. Would you like to come out and see a nice piece of beryl I picked up one time—and I'll tell you—" he dropped his voice, "Ted gets narked any time I mention my bismuth, thinks a few opals he got out of his mother's old jewellery box'll make him look like he knows what he's talking about. Man's a fool. Now I know where to go for … " he dropped his voice a notch further, "and I've got the papers to prove it."

Deirdre turned and went out with the old man. She felt sure whoever it was busy laying the table for their evening meal had been listening but Abraham didn't seem to keep his business secret; they'd probably all heard about it long before he got round to telling her … So she wasn't sure why the unseen person gave her the odd sense of someone straining to overhear. Did they believe Abraham *had* taken Ted's opals and was now confiding this to her. It seemed unlikely.

Mr Notts switched on the garage light but the space was still shadowy. She wondered if all the unmarked boxes and tins contained rocks and stones. His stained fingers picked up and put down lumps of rock, beryl, yes, and jasper and gypsum and chalcedony and pyrites and feldspar and other curious names. "Gotta know what you're doing here, dangerous stuff some of these acids," he pointed to his shelf, "but I've been at it since I was a lad and that's sixty years ago. Now, this'll come up nicely. Would you fancy a brooch of this," he handed her a lump of rose-pink stone and she turned it to and fro.

"It is rather lovely. I'm not a great wearer of jewellery. I don't like the feel of metal against my skin and it sometimes causes trouble in the hot weather, something in the metal seems to leach when it touches skin that's perspiring … but a brooch would be nice. Thank you."

Mrs Quince put her head round the door. "Dinner'll be on in five minutes."

"Thank you, Mrs Quince. I must get on with some paperwork later." Deirdre thanked Abraham for showing her the stones and followed Mrs Quince out.

"I'm glad he keeps it all down here," Mrs Quince said briskly. "Gets him out of the house." She too dropped her voice a little. "Old men fart a lot, you know."

"He certainly seems to know a lot about semi-precious stones."

"It's what I think," Mrs Quince glanced back, "he wanted to make a fool of Ted, you know, give him a good scare—and then the opals'll turn up again. But I'm annoyed with the both of them. I don't like people implying that things aren't quite right in my house. It's my income. But those old fools wouldn't care how much trouble they made."

*

Mrs Quince told the police Abraham was in the habit of inviting Miss Rogers down to his workshop; she couldn't say what they did down there but she'd overheard Deidre saying "what a lovely stone". He might've let something drop when he was talking with her.

"Did you ask her about their conversation when you went down?"

Mrs Quince hesitated. She couldn't say anything that might lead to her disastrously general statement that "old men fart a lot". "Not really, I just wanted them to come for dinner. I was more worried about the roast getting over-cooked if I left it in and cold if I took it out."

"Were they particularly friendly before the opals went missing—or only since then?"

"Well … no, I'd have to say … after. In fact, I would've said they didn't like each other much before then … "

"Curious. Did they give the impression they were discussing things they'd rather you didn't overhear?"

Mrs Quince hesitated. Jenny *had* said something about them dropping their voices earlier, she'd wondered what was so secret, something about "a business" and that Ted didn't know about it. She really didn't know whether it meant anything or not. Still, the police would know if it was useful. She might as well pass it on.

Afterwards, she told the girls about it as they washed up. “But you don’t think the two of them are in it together, do you?” Tammy said. “He knows the opals really are worth a lot—and she’s got the brains to know how to hide them till they can sell them.”

“I really don’t think so, love. Abraham’s known Ted for donkey’s years. Why should he pinch them now?”

“Maybe she put him up to it,” Jenny winked. “When you get to her age, maybe you think the only thing that matters is grabbing a bloke, doesn’t matter if he’s a bit past it.”

“I believe she was very pretty when she was young. I saw a photo on her dressing-table. Probably she just never met anyone … or something might’ve happened to him … or she got sent to one school and he went to another … things do happen to men, you know.”

The girls laughed. Tammy’s own father had left when she was about fifteen. But her mother only said, “I hardly notice the difference.”

Jenny told the other girls at work that the police now believed it might’ve been a shared job, a conspiracy, one to steal it and one to get rid of it; when the girls pressed her for more details she tapped her nose and said, “You’ll have to wait, it’s all very hush hush at the moment.”

“So—who stole it from Ted’s hat?”

“Well, it’s a funny thing but on that day—the only two people that could’ve were Deirdre, because she went into his room, and Abraham because Ted went down to his workshop.” The girls stared at her, fascinated by the possibilities suddenly opened up. That Mrs Quince, Tammy, Jenny and Kaylene could all have gone into Ted’s room on one pretext or another and not mentioned it to the police didn’t seem to occur to any of the listeners. Instead they took away a whole range of new possibilities; one girl, Susie, even speculated that Miss Rogers might’ve come to the school here because she was Mr Notts’s daughter and they were keeping it all secret.

“It’s true, the school wanted another man and quite a few people complained when they heard they were getting a woman,” her father said, when she shared her idea at home, “but everyone seems to think she’s quite a good principal. Mrs Lonergan says she’s a lot more efficient than Mr Temple-Watts.”

“But it’s funny that she suddenly got friendly with old Mr Notts only after the opals were stolen. He’s the one person who’d know how to sell them.”

“Well, they say old Abie Notts is a canny old bugger but I think it’s mainly talk. He never *looks* like he’s ever made any money out of all his rocks.”

This was true but the story grew and spread; several people thought Deirdre Rogers’ profile *did* show some resemblance to the old man. Ted was credited as the source of the rumour that Abraham Notts had a secret bank deposit box. Certainly, Abraham had a deposit box—he confirmed this with police—but he said it only contained some papers and if they wanted to see them they were welcome.

A week later the police did agree to have a look but merely to put the rumour to rest. Instead, the sight of them together in the bank gave the rumour new life.

“It’s a double blind,” Justin said to Kaylene. “I read about the way you do it in a book. People expect you to put the valuable things in the bank, like they’re always saying Ted should’ve done, but really you hide them somewhere else, maybe even in another bank.”

Kaylene was skeptical. She thought she knew Abraham and Ted; she’d been at Mrs Quince’s for two years. Now, she was being presented with people who planned and conspired and behaved in sinister and complicated ways … it just didn’t make sense … and Deirdre … she found her a little daunting, to be in the company of someone so much more intelligent … but she felt that Deirdre liked her and wished her well. She couldn’t picture Deirdre as a mother yet the feeling had a vaguely maternal quality. She didn’t like all the silly gossip going round to suggest that Deirdre was the brain behind the ‘heist’ (even the use of the word ‘heist’ seemed to blow it all out of proportion) but she couldn’t see how to scotch the rumours.

“And wills,” Justin went on, “wills always come into it in books. Maybe Ted made a will

to leave them to someone."

"Maybe. But I can't very well go up to Ted and ask him."

"You could sort of mention making a will, how to go about it, and then they'd all start talking about it."

"You're too clever by half. I thought wills are supposed to be secret?"

Justin shrugged. "I don't see why. My Dad always says he'll leave me his truck and his tools and half the money he's got in the bank."

Kaylene said she'd give it a go.

But it was almost a week before she got round to it. In the meantime, Deirdre, arriving early at school, found a dead rat neatly laid in front of her door. She called Mr Hebble, the groundsman, to take it away to the incinerator. He wrapped it in newspaper. "Stiff as a board, must've been dead a while. Wonder how he got here. Cats don't usually like to go with one like this."

She wasn't sure a cat was responsible. There was something too neat in the way the animal lay across the doorstep. "Thank you, Mr Hebble, I suppose it might just be a nasty prank. One of the older boys."

"Could be. I'll make a point of checking before you come in tomorrow morning. Not a nice way to start your day."

She appreciated his thoughtfulness. It wasn't a nice way to start the day. And going back to Mrs Quince's wasn't a nice way to end some days. The girls all seemed to bring back new rumours every day. If only the police would find the stones or the culprit. The endless speculation and gossip was so unpleasant and she knew she was a prime target. She was too new, too much the outsider, not to be a target. She had even heard an absurd suggestion that she and old Mr Notts were 'in it' together.

She thought it better to say nothing about the rat, rats weren't subjects for the dinner table, yet it managed to get there before her.

"There's been a few rats around, just the occasional one," Mrs Quince said. "Benjie got one in the laundry one night." Benjie was her old tabby cat. "I thought he was just about past it—but no, he was on to it like a flash."

"Maybe I should take him into work," Jenny said. "They're supposed to keep the place rat-proof but there's holes in the netting at the back."

"Plenty of rats out at the feed sheds … " Kaylene shuddered suddenly. "Oh, that reminds me, Justin was saying something about shouldn't you make a will before you get married?"

"I would think it depends on what you own," Deirdre said. It didn't seem to have any particular inflexion so far as Kaylene could see. "I've left my goods and chattels to my sister's children—but it's hardly going to make them very excited."

"I've got a will," Ted said gloomily, "but now I'll have to change it."

Abraham looked over at Jenny and Tammy; he gave them each a nice little piece of jewellery at Christmas, and something to Mrs Quince and Kaylene, and an extra something for their birthdays … He hadn't liked to suggest anything to Deirdre Rogers, not until the other night. "You can all pick a stone when I go, one each. But don't put them in your bloody hats."

This was a low dig at Ted and the old man reddened through the unshaven grey.

"Girls don't wear hats these days," Tammy giggled.

"It's very kind of you," Deirdre said mildly, "and now, if you'll excuse me, I must go. I've got to see someone."

She went out and Jenny said cheekily, "And what about your mine, Mr Notts? Who're you going to leave that to?"

"Haven't decided yet. Whoever's nicest to me, I s'pose."

"Deirdre then? She's getting very keen on your lapid-whatever stuff," Mrs Quince said briskly. She wasn't sure whether a mine would be worth inheriting but she felt vaguely that, as Abraham's landlady for the last ten years, she deserved special consideration. He wasn't the cleanest tidiest boarder … Yes, she deserved something for all she'd had to put up with, and

for letting him use the garage …

*

Tammy and Jenny were in the habit of mildly teasing the old men; they didn't have the sort of grasping octopus-like arms of young men. And there was always Mrs Quince in the background. Ted was often good for a box of chocolates, Abraham enjoyed choosing and polishing and setting stones into a bracelet. They'd never thought in terms of wills and where the old men might leave whatever money they had. But did they have money? It wasn't their business to wonder where the rent money came from. They just assumed there were pensions and 'little extras'.

Jenny knew that both men liked her and she knew they didn't like each other terribly much—going by the things Abraham said about Ted and Ted, more mildly, said about Abraham. She felt she might be able to play them off somehow to her own advantage. It needed some thought.

Kaylene also heard the story of the dead rat at work. An exaggerated version. She was deeply disturbed by it. She felt that talk and gossip had stepped over a boundary. There was something spiteful and nasty about it though she was at a loss to understand just why she felt so upset. Surely people didn't really believe that Deirdre was in cahoots with Mr Notts? The old man had taken to inviting Deirdre down to his workplace but she felt sure the other woman went because she found the different kinds of rocks and semi-precious stones of interest.

Perhaps she should warn Deirdre, tell her what people were saying about the old man, suggest that she stay away from him … but if she faced gossip and anti-feminist feeling at the school (there were still people grumbling that women were no good with teenage boys, didn't have the firmness and respect needed) then it was understandable that she would find Mr Notts's company a change. Mr Notts blamed Ted for his loss and had no patience with his misery. But perhaps it would be better if Deirdre didn't go to the garage for a while.

Mrs Quince was not quite sure whether she should warn Miss Rogers against spending so much time with the old man. It wasn't really much time but it seemed that way now that Abraham avoided Ted who often sat gloomily in front of the TV, sometimes for hours at a time, rather than going into town or exchanging yarns out at the workshop. And Abraham's attitude to Miss Rogers had changed. When she first moved in he'd said scornfully she looked like an old washleather bag that'd been laundered and hung out to dry and whatever were they getting to run schools these days. Now he was more inclined to call her an intelligent woman with lots of common sense. People *were* talking. They were saying Abraham was best placed to steal Ted's opals and that he was buttering up the school principal … though ideas varied from there on. Did he need her advice, was he going to ask her to marry him, was he trying to compromise her in some way, was it true they were secretly related but just pretended they'd never met before she came here.

Or it might be easier to get tough with Abraham. Miss Rogers had mentioned getting a car—in which case she'd need a garage for it and Abraham would not take kindly to being asked to move out. It wasn't precisely goodness of heart that had given him that space, he paid $50 a year for it, but Ms Rogers could be asked to pay at least $5 a week to keep her car there when she got it … and that'd create bad feeling between them …

She didn't precisely want bad feeling but she was beginning to feel it would be best if Abraham left. He was more trouble than he was worth. His room often smelled and his clothes were heavy and unpleasant to wash; he really wasn't a very nice man, Ted was stacks more polite and nice … And if Abraham went it would remove suspicion from her house, it would remove police interest …

*

Abraham only occasionally went out to the garage after dinner. The light bulb wasn't strong and the evenings were getting colder. But Deirdre often wasn't available in the early evening so he gradually drifted into going later. Of course she had lots of meetings, interviews, committees and other things at the school. He tended to go to his workshop if he'd heard her

say she'd be in for the evening. He wasn't sure what he felt for her. But her interest in his knowledge and his wandering life was genuine and as his wanderings grew few and far between he found her interest a solace. Besides, she asked intelligent questions and had some knowledge of physics and chemistry for when it came to describing the different ways of bringing forth a gem in all its glory.

The girls, Jenny and Tammy, were pretty young things, full of life and giggles, and there was a certain pleasure in having them tease him but the pleasure of Deirdre's company was a more solid pleasure. Ted could have the girls, him with his face like a month of wet Sundays, and they could have him. Silly old fool.

Abraham pushed open the door into the garage and fumbled for the light switch. There was a crash and he turned with a "What the hell—" Then he was enveloped in a choking cloud of poisonous fumes. He stepped back and tripped on the lintel.

No one missed him until an hour or two later. Mrs Quince, getting ready to go to bed, went to call Benjie in and noticed the side door into the garage was open and there seemed to be something lying in it. She took her torch and went out. Though the fumes had dispersed through the open door the smell was still powerful.

"Oh, the old fool! I always knew he'd have an accident, carrying on with all those awful acids and what-have-you!" She bent down and turned him over. He was quite dead and cooling.

*

"Mrs Quince, it looks very much as though someone set a booby trap for him. I think the door was left just slightly ajar and this bottle was balanced on top. When he went in it fell and broke on the cement floor, releasing the fumes. But the doctor thinks it may have been when he fell and hit his head … Anyway, the post mortem will work that part out for us." The more senior of the police carefully took up the broken bottle with rubber gloves and scooped a little of the spilled liquid into a clean jar.

"Do you know if he ever claimed that anyone had been messing round in here?"

"I don't. Deirdre might. She came down some evenings. I didn't want him to keep all this dangerous stuff in here."

The broken jar had no label and the police were not sure what they were dealing with. There was an almost empty container marked 'HF' and several others marked 'acetic', 'cyanide', 'meth' and 'sulph'. The place would need to be sealed and investigated properly. But was it a prank, the old idea of a bucket of water on top of a door, or was it a more serious attempt on the old man's life.

"Hydrofluoric acid," Ms Rogers said when questioned. "Highly toxic. He had it out the other day to clean a lump of beryl he was planning to cut and polish for me. The fumes can kill. I'm not sure if they would've done so in the doorway though. If he'd come inside and closed the door … poor old man … he seemed to get so much pleasure from his work in here."

"You were aware that he had poisonous chemicals in here?"

"Oh yes. I think we all were. Mrs Quince used to complain now and then, that he'd blow us all up one day, that sort of thing—and I'm sure Mr Bischoff would've known what they were."

"You have a knowledge of chemistry?"

"I've never taught it but I did do high school chemistry many years ago."

The girls all claimed an innocence when it came to chemistry, what did they need to know about acids and chemical compounds, and Mrs Quince said crossly, "I always knew it, keeping all that stuff in there like that."

"But you keep dangerous chemicals in your laundry, Mrs Quince. Pesticides, weed-killers, oven-cleaners, those sorts of things. It's how carefully you use them that matters."

This reminder annoyed Mrs Quince and she said later to Mr Bischoff, "I think it's all a bit off, you know. First she says you're silly to keep your opals in your hat—then they disappear. Then she says she knows all about this acid stuff that killed Abraham—and then he

dies like that. I think the police should look into her background a bit more. There might've been something happened a bit iffy at her last place—"

"Oh, I dunno. These things happen. And really, if Abe hadn't tripped like that … I think it was just an accident. I think he just forgot where he'd put the stuff down. You know he was losing it a bit," Ted tapped his own forehead, "comes to all of us, easy to forget to put the bottle back on the shelf."

"Well, it was to clean some rock for *her* … so it's still her fault."

"Maybe." Ted felt a kind of bleakness settling over everything, first his gems, then Abraham … he didn't know what had gone wrong … he'd been happy living here, and now …

It was true what Mrs Quince said. They'd been like one happy family before Deirdre Rogers came … well, not exactly like a family … he knew the girls were only having their fun, they'd go away, get married eventually, never give him another thought …

*

"Is it true—that she was the only person who knew about the chemicals?" Justin had heard the story of the acid.

"I don't think so. The girls were talking about it at dinner and she said she didn't believe the whatever-kind-of-acid it was could've killed him. Whoever put it there, that's if he didn't leave it somewhere silly himself, maybe thought it was more powerful than it was, that just one whiff would kill him. The police say he hit his head on the step. And he had a weak heart, he told us so ages ago, so I s'pose it was all just too much for him."

"Do you think she's telling the truth?"

"Yes. And I still think it might've been an accident. He said one Saturday to Mrs Quince, where's my porridge, and she said, don't be silly, this is lunch not breakfast! So he might've left something on the end of the bench and when he pushed the door open it bumped it."

"That's not what people are saying."

"What are they saying?"

"Oh, that he'd got rid of the opals for her—so now he was a, you know, a liability. I s'pose the cops'll try and check her bank accounts but she might have a secret account. By the way, did Abraham leave his money to her?"

"I don't know what was in his will. No one's said. But apparently it was true that he really did own a mine."

"What kind of mine?"

"Bismuth. Well, it wasn't actually a mine, more like it was just waiting there for someone to mine it, but he had the lease on the land and the right to mine it and he was just waiting for some company he'd signed an agreement with to get enough money to start developing the mine for him … I don't know exactly how it was going to work … Jenny said she heard him say he had a business and that it was going to be better than Ted's opals … So if he had all this I don't see why he needed to steal the opals in the first place."

"Maybe he needed to finance the mine himself. Maybe he thought that way he'd get all the profit. Or she talked him into it."

"S'pose so. But that's not true—about them getting married. She told me one day she'd never wanted to marry but that she hoped I would be very happy."

"You don't know if she meant that."

"No. But I think she did."

Kaylene couldn't say why she felt so sure. In the face of everyone else's sureness that they knew what was going on and who had been conspiring to do what, she found herself reluctant to trust her own feelings and intuitions.

"So what's going to happen about your ring? Did the old bloke get it finished?"

"Nearly. He had it labeled in a box so the police said I could take it. I showed it to Tammy and Jenny and they just laughed and said I was silly not to go for something more valuable—"

"Like an opal?"

"I s'pose so."

*

The police had been through Abraham Notts' room for a second time. They hadn't found any opals the first time. Now, they'd put together a bundle of papers and were going through them with his solicitor, Mr Sandys. "Quite a wealthy man really," Noel Sandys said non-committally, "Bis-Brown is going ahead with the float of share options and they'd set a date for the start of work on the mine. This will set them back a bit."

"And the will?"

"All right and tight. I've been in touch with Albert Shaw. He says he'll be up on Friday for the funeral and to see us."

"Had anyone known about him?"

"Not a word. Ted Bischoff always said Abraham would only say he'd left everything to an old mate. Apparently Abraham and Albert were on the Burma Railway together and Albert did something to help Abraham, though he won't say what, and Abraham of course didn't have anything to give him there and then and he just said to him, I'll remember you in me will, mate, just like that … and he did. Rather a nice story."

"Does any of this tie in with the other case—Ted Bischoff and his bloody opals?"

"I can't see how, from a legal point of view anyway. I know people are saying the new school principal was in it with Abraham and that she had something to do with his death but I think that's just gossip. Sour grapes from the people who didn't want a woman running the school maybe … and Mrs Quince isn't too happy, says all this has got her house a bad name."

Bert Shaw when he came up to the funeral and tried to extend his condolences to Mrs Quince and Tammy and Jenny found himself cold-shouldered. He shrugged and spoke briefly to Deirdre Rogers and Kaylene who were standing together in the frosty day and looking rather mournful. Abraham hadn't been an intimate part of their lives but still it was sad to think of the old man dying in that way. There was no family to put on a funeral tea afterwards and it all had a sense of anti-climax.

The Coroner, as Deirdre Rogers said to Carmel Lonergan a few days later, had apparently decided there was nothing suspicious about the old man's death. He *might've* left a bottle of acid on the end of his bench, he *might've* opened the door with sufficient force to knock it to the floor and break it, he *might've*, in fact, he almost certainly would've handled it with gloves which would explain the lack of fingerprints … of course he might not have … but there were no other suspicious circumstances to warrant further investigation.

The beneficiary of his will could not be linked to any desire to benefit sooner rather than later. The police had not linked Abraham to the theft of the opals nor any other action which might've made someone angry. Tammy said he was a bit free with his hands but then it could be said that Tammy had given him some, well, not precisely encouragement but she and Jenny had acted as though they believed all elderly men were dead from the waist down.

"The trouble is," Mrs Lonergan was sympathetic, "People are still wanting to cast you as the villain. I know it'll soon be a nine-day-wonder and it's not as though any of them *cared* a scrap about Abraham Notts—he was just that old duffer up at Mrs Quince's who messed around with some rocks in the shed—but it's very nasty for you."

Carmel had seen Deirdre Rogers grow a little more pale and brittle and shadowy by the week; she was obviously feeling the pressure of the gossip and innuendo. And it just wasn't fair! They had the best principal they'd had in decades and they weren't appreciating her. Men! Being jealous, she supposed. And that silly old Mrs Quince wanting to make herself look important with talk of a clever murder and how awful it was for her girls to be accused of stealing when everyone knew how good they'd always been to Ted Bischoff.

Deirdre went through her schedule for the day then she said suddenly, "Are people bothering you too?"

Caught off-guard, Carmel became flustered. She was quick to the defence of Miss Rogers when people round town came out with extraordinary claims. She knew several of the

other teachers were equally partisan. But whether it was helping the principal or whether it simply looked like the school guarding its own or not wanting to admit a mistake had been made when Deirdre Rogers was appointed (not that she or any of the teachers had anything to do with the appointment) wasn't clear to her. But the unfairness and the sheer absurdity of some of the allegations distressed her.

It was as though a town and a people she didn't know lived here. And those old sayings like 'no smoke without fire' and 'throw enough mud' were damaging. Even calm sensible people like her husband believed that if the police kept going back to interview Deirdre there must be something behind it. But were they going only to interview Deirdre? Carmel didn't think so. In fact, she knew the police had been to the house at times when Deirdre was at school in a meeting. Did it mean they simply waited there until she got back—or were they interested in all the other people in the house?

Deirdre could afford to buy herself opals if she wanted. Those three young girls were far more likely to see Ted Bischoff as an old man who had something he didn't need. Deirdre had worked long and hard and conscientiously for what she had. The idea of her stealing from, let alone killing, an old pensioner was ridiculous.

But it was true that people took her defence of the principal as being disloyal. Even her husband said bluntly, "Let her fight her own battles. If the police are still interested in her they must have their reasons."

"Or they've come to a dead end. They don't know who took the opals so they're picking on the one person who has no family or friends here."

"Well, you don't need to go out of your way to be her friend."

*

Everything in the garage had been neatly boxed and labelled and carted away. Mr Shaw had really been very kind and thoughtful. He'd asked everyone in the house if there was a stone or something they'd like; he felt sure that was what Abraham would've wanted. Tammy and Jenny descended on the tins and boxes like locusts and took dozens of lovely tumble-washed stones. Mrs Quince only asked them to pick out something for her and they took the rose-pink stone Abraham had planned to make into a brooch for Deirdre. Ted hovered all the time Bert Shaw packed and organised; he still felt Mrs Quince might be right and his stones might be in with Abraham's stones. But he turned down the opportunity to take something. "When you've had opals … "

The girls sometimes went out of their way to cheer him up, Jenny especially, and Deirdre Rogers felt ashamed of her inability to like the girl. Insincerity was hardly a vice.

She herself, when her chosen stone couldn't be found, said only she would remember Mr Notts for his kindness in making the offer. Kaylene took her half-made ring to a local jeweller and had it finished.

But Deirdre's failure to take a stone told against her. "Be like blood money," someone said to Mrs Quince who agreed ponderously. She wanted Deirdre Rogers to go, for her house's connection with crime and death to be forgotten; she wanted to fill the rooms with lively young people, for Ted to go into a home, for the police to stop coming round. It was hard on the girls, she said at one visit. "People like Miss Rogers may be used to dealing with the police on a regular basis but my girls aren't." School principals have to do such things.

The anonymous letters arrived for Deirdre Rogers both at school and at Mrs Quince's; just cheap lined paper with messages written in capitals. Mrs Lonergan opened the ones at school, sparing Deirdre but harrowing her own peace of mind. The ones that came to Deirdre at home she assumed to be the same.

NO SMOKE WITHOUT FIRE
WE DON'T NEED WOMEN LIKE YOU
THE COPS'LL GET YOU IN THE END
LIFE'S NOT WORTH LIVING ONCE YOU'RE BRANDED
THIEF AND MURDERER! HIDE YOUR FACE YOU WICKED WOMAN

They came in variations on the main theme. Carmel took them to the police without bothering Deirdre. “Hardly your business, love,” she was told.

“Oh yes, it is. I am the secretary there, I open the mail, I read it. I am deeply distressed that anyone out there would be sending this sort of cruel stuff to Miss Rogers.”

They took the letters without holding out any hope the culprit might be found. And she went out of her way in the following weeks to provide unobtrusive comfort, inviting Deirdre round for dinner one evening, bringing flowers for her office whenever she could find anything in her own garden. But the change in Deirdre, though slow and almost unnoticed, alarmed her.

“You look as if you need a holiday,” she said one morning.

Deirdre dredged up a smile. “I do and I’m going to have one soon. It’s just some mornings, I wake up and it seems such a business getting up and dressed, facing everyone and wondering what they’re really thinking.”

“And there’s been nothing about the opals?”

“Not a thing. They just seem to have disappeared into thin air. I’m so sorry for Ted although I’ve sometimes wondered if they were really as valuable as he claimed. He never let anyone actually hold them. I always thought that was because of their value but maybe it was because they’d be seen for what they were, just little cheap chips. But I really don’t know. And even if they were only worth a few hundred they were still Ted’s and he got a lot of pleasure out of them. He just seems to have given up interest in life now. He’s talking of going into a Home, he says he might as well turn into a vegetable and be done with it.”

“And the police have finished with Mr Notts?”

“It seems so. He’s nicely buried, all his stuff has gone. The girls were a bit upset. Apparently he made some promise to them that he’d leave them something, I don’t know what, and maybe they misunderstood. They keep saying it isn’t fair that Mr Shaw got it all. It’s sad that wills seem to leave that kind of feeling in their wake.”

“And—” this question was more difficult, “are you still getting letters … ”

“Yes.” Deirdre sat down, it had something defeated in it. “I’ve been thinking of applying for another school. I’m not sure that it’s fair to you or the students to have this kind of focus on the principal. And Mrs Quince wants me to leave. She’s really quite open about it, nothing bad ever happened in her house before I came, it must be that I’m one of those people who bring bad luck—not exactly those words but near enough.”

“What nonsense! She was boasting all round town when you first came, how the high school principal was coming to board with *her*, she made it sound as though you’d picked her house from the dozens of places you might’ve chosen—and if you’d taken private board or a room at the pub you wouldn’t be mixed up in all this dreadful business—”

Deirdre was deeply grateful for her secretary’s support. But it was true. She wasn’t doing her job as well as she could. The constant swirl of unspoken accusations, the feeling that people were avoiding her, that her students and fellow-lodgers were gossiping about her, that the police still believed she was in some way involved, that Mrs Quince saw her in the nature of a bad luck omen, that people quite simply believed she had something to do with stealing Ted’s opals and causing Abraham’s death, distracted her. And the gossip that she’d only deflected police suspicion because she was clever enough to make the death look like an accident and she must know people from her previous positions who were willing to take a few ‘hot’ opals off her hands.

She postponed buying a car, though she longed for the freedom of being able to drive out of town, to enjoy the mirages on the flat plains or drive and drive until she came to somewhere where no one suspected her of anything, because she knew that if she made a large purchase it would re-fuel everyone’s suspicions. If only she’d bought before she came … but there had been that awful business when she’d lent her car to her niece who then had an accident in it and she’d found her niece didn’t actually have a licence. It had taken a while to sort that out. She hadn’t wanted to blame her sister for not warning her …

The police came back at regular intervals to ask them all if they’d remembered anything

further but there was a subtle sense that it was directed at her, she was the outsider, the painfully sensitive outsider … A glance in her direction, a hesitation, the way they phrased a question, an odd question that suggested they were looking into her past life (which they hadn't done), a quizzical lift of an eyebrow … And the way they joked with Mrs Quince and the two young girls, even coming into the sitting-room for a drink at one stage, whereas she was treated with the utmost gravity. You don't drink with a thief, she told herself drearily.

And it was strange. She almost began to believe she *had* spent longer in Ted's room when she returned his magazine, that she'd looked round and seen his hat sitting there, that she'd lifted it to see for herself that he really did keep opals in the hat band and it wasn't all some mysterious sleight-of-hand—their questions lingered over this, and over her relationship with Abraham. He might be dead, they implied, and they were not suggesting anything, but wasn't it all nice and convenient if they'd been in it together. And Mr Shaw, had she known Mr Shaw? Mr Shaw was an old man, Mr Shaw came from Brisbane, she came from Brisbane … "It's quite a large place, you know," she'd responded.

She'd had bouts of depression when she was younger. They'd dwindled in recent years. The grey weather, she'd believed, her slowness of promotion, problems at one school where a child had been bullied until he committed suicide; she'd blamed herself a little for that—though, at the time, she'd been neither his class teacher nor principal, but she should've noticed something was wrong … It might be that she wasn't a very noticing person … There might've been things here she should've seen …

Now she didn't have the choices she'd had in the beginning. She could move to the pub but that would look as if … and private board might be hard to come by now she'd become the butt of rumour and gossip … and there was little in the way of houses to rent and she couldn't consider buying, not when the idea of transferring was becoming more attractive by the day.

And if she moved—would the stories and the innuendo come with her? The only things she had were her reputation and her experience. They couldn't take her experience away but her reputation might not survive.

The thought of being pointed out, spoken of behind her back, perhaps police files passed along if she moved, perhaps there was a quiet decision just to keep an eye on her …

And children, teenage boys and girls, needed the best example possible. Could she be that example when their parents were willing to believe she might've caused the death of an old man?

She came back from a week's holiday hoping to find the story had died down, the case had been resolved … and found that Mrs Quince had two potential lodgers asking when they could move in. Two girls. "I don't want to hurry you, Miss Rogers," Mrs Quince had become very formal, "but you did happen to mention you'd like to get a little place of your own—so I though I might be able to accommodate Nancy and Sue. I really don't think it's very nice for young girls to be living in a pub, do you? Here, I can be next best thing to a mother to them."

"You would like me to move out?"

"Just when you're ready. I've heard the Olsen place can be rented since the old man died. He had a stroke, poor old soul, nothing suspicious."

Deirdre thought of the tumbledown cottage on the far side of town. It would be quite a walk to school and would need a lot of work done on it. "I'll let you know when I've found something to suit."

Carmel was indignant. "She went round telling everyone she would soon have two rooms available. She said you were planning to move—"

"When I first came! I think I just said I couldn't say how long I'd need to be with her as I might find a suitable house to rent. She suggested the Olsen place."

"Well, I suppose you could have a *look*, but I'm sure the roof leaks and it's really in very poor condition. He just hung on there, wouldn't go into a Home or anything, but not doing anything to look after it."

"I suppose it'd be better to live there than somewhere where I'm not wanted. And maybe

a spot of home maintenance, you know, laying floor tiles and painting ceilings would take my mind off other things?"

"It might. I really thought things'd settle down and people would forget or lose interest—but really it's as bad as it ever was, I don't know why—I feel like running naked down the main street just to give them something else to talk about!"

Deirdre laughed. "I'm sure Leonard wouldn't appreciate that."

There was something a bit ridiculous about it all; she might end up tearing out her hair and running somewhere herself. There had been several of the anonymous letters waiting for her return. They all suggested she should stay away.

'Why should I stay away? I've done nothing wrong. Why should I give up and go away with my tail between my legs?' Aloud she said, "The trouble is—there's no way to clear my name. In books, people who are wrongly accused go out and find the real thief but I haven't got any idea who might have wanted to harm Ted or Abraham. They just seemed such quiet harmless old men to me, a bit tedious, but they certainly weren't *bothering* anyone."

"I know."

*

Deirdre eventually took the Olsen place. It was cheap to rent and it did keep her busy doing small repairs round the house and cutting back the overgrown garden. She didn't know whether she'd done the right thing or not. It was on the edge of town and often seemed rather lonely at night. Beyond the fence the sweep of farmland began, the flat acres of sunflowers and canola, stretching west till they met the cotton and the Condamine. The anonymous letters continued to come, sometimes slipped into her mailbox, sometimes posted. There were nights when cars revved on the road and rubbish was thrown into her yard. She wasn't sure if that was just because she represented authority and there were always young people who were going to resent her presence—or was it more sinister? Did people believe she'd murdered an old man and got away scot free?

Carmel worried about the changes in her superior. Deirdre obviously wasn't sleeping well, she'd lost weight, sometimes she seemed less focused, a little vague, once or twice she forgot appointments. It was hard to know what to do. Deirdre was older, she wasn't the sort of woman you went up to and engulfed in a big hug. She was a quiet undemonstrative woman who'd been promoted because she was intelligent and hard-working, not because she'd curried influence. Some evenings Carmel went home and could barely bring herself to think of Deirdre going alone to that dreary cottage.

And why had Mrs Quince been so keen to get rid of her? Surely she paid her rent and didn't smoke or drink or hang around with boys or want to park an old jalopy in the yard or any of the things that make the lives of landladies such a misery. 'A quiet business woman' was surely what everyone like Mrs Quince wanted. It didn't make sense. And yet the idea of Mrs Quince, big buxom cheerful Mrs Quince, as a homicidal landlady—or even a light-fingered one—just didn't fit. And the girls—well, why should *they* want Deirdre out?

Perhaps things would get better after Christmas. But she worried more and more whether Deirdre would get through the year without a nervous breakdown. Several times she'd gone into her office and found her just staring, apparently into space. And not even her sympathy and kindness could leap the chasm that seemed to be opening up.

One afternoon, as she went into the supermarket she met Kaylene. Kaylene was to be married just before Christmas and she looked happy and confident. But after talking a little about herself and showing off her ring and talking about Justin's promotion she said suddenly, "How is Miss Rogers? I was sorry that she left but I s'pose she was getting a bit tired of us and wanted a place of her own."

"Oh, it was the other way around. Mrs Quince wanted her to go."

"Did she?" Kaylene was surprised but not vigorously interested. Her own life was moving forward nicely and she was looking forward to leaving Mrs Quince's herself—it would be nice to get away from Tammy and Jenny though she couldn't exactly say why—so she

didn't really believe Deirdre Rogers hadn't been equally keen to leave. "Only another three weeks to go and I'll be Mrs Pike. Doesn't it sound funny? But I s'pose I'll soon get used to it. I wonder how Mrs Quince felt when she got married and changed her name."

"I believe she was a Reith. I don't know if she liked Quince better."

Kaylene laughed gaily and went on home. She took off her engagement ring and her shoes and stockings and went to have a shower before dinner. She and Justin were going out with some friends of his and she wanted to look her best. She did her hair up and put her ring back on. An opal would've been nice and if she'd talked Ted into selling her one for her ring, he might've done that, he was fond of young women, then it wouldn't have got stolen. It was strange. That it should simply disappear. He shouldn't have gone round telling people the stones were worth $50,000 … It *was* a temptation …

She caught up her bag and went out again.

*

Two days after the end of the school year, Carmel Lonergan went round to see Deirdre Rogers and found her dead in her cottage.

On the 15th March 1976 a verdict of suicide was handed down.

Ted Bischoff died three months later. His opals were never found and many people continued to believe that Deirdre Rogers had taken and sold them before suffering remorse. As she grew older, Kaylene Pike sometimes found herself pondering on the words 'Behold, I die daily' and wondering if, after all, they'd been significant.

* * *