Landfall

A Novel

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And indeed I shall anchor, one day—some summer morning
of sunflowers and bougainvillaea and arid wind—
and smoking a black cigar, one hand on the mast,
turn, and unlade my eyes of all their cargo;
and the parrot will speed from my shoulder, and white yachts glide
welcoming out from the shore on the turquoise tide.

And when they ask me where I have been, I shall say
I do not remember.

And when they ask me what I have seen, I shall say
I remember nothing.

And if they should ever tempt me to speak again,
I shall smile, and refrain.

~ *Randolph Stow*

An Introduction

So many characters in contemporary novels – or so it seems to me – lack conviction. On the other hand, when writers go poking around in the grave yards of the past it often looks as if they've tried to hang enough discrepant body parts on the skeletons they've dug up to bluff an audience into thinking they're human. That doesn't work either: no wonder so many stitched-up specimens turn on their creators in movies. This is different. The main figures in this story are real, have said and done things that can't be ignored, and trying to dress them up differently would only be another kind of grave robbing. Nevertheless, history – even the legacy of their names – has left them with a burden they might not enjoy. You could argue that they deserve some freedom in what is a kind of second chance at life for them. Most of us would jump at the same opportunity.

So this is what I've tried to do.

*

Cosme 1896

Harry Gardener was working in the banana patch, scuffing the tops off weeds and mopping his face guiltily from time to time with one of the handkerchiefs his mother had monogrammed, when news of his father's death arrived. His mother's hand was firm. 'My dear son,' her letter said, 'it is with great sorrow that I must tell you that your father has passed away' – and she gave some weeks past date. 'As you know his heart had been weakened in recent years…' She was describing the way so many older people conked out then, with each year's bout of bronchitis getting worse and their excursions from the home rarer, as they wheezed their chair bound days away in a fume of *Potter's Asthma Cure* or some such panacea. 'His end was peaceful…' she said. 'He often spoke of you in his last days, and wished that he would be able see you again, though I think in his heart he knew that could not be…'

Harry's father was a radical liberal whose passion for social justice had often been pursued at the expense of his family. So perhaps the tear or two that then mixed with Harry's sweat were for himself as well as his father and mother, knowing in that moment that by dying his father had ensured that the distance between himself and his son would never be closed.

He prayed for a minute among the bananas, while his mate, though he didn't know yet of the substance of the letter, gave him space. Back at the village that night the word soon got round, but it seemed they all were waiting for someone else to be the mouthpiece of their condolences; typically, Billy Blaine was holed up in his quarters: in the end it was Hattie, Blaine's teenage niece, who broke the ice.

She came up when Harry was cutting wood for the camp oven and reminded him of her presence by saying, 'Mr Gardener, I am very sorry to hear of your loss.' Standing before

him like a doctor delivering the worst kind of news, she was almost his height, he noticed. He realised he was about to make some half-shamefaced disclaimer of his grief, or an exaggeration of it, and knew he shouldn't.

'Thank you, Hattie dear,' he said candidly instead.

She herself didn't seem to know quite what to follow her remark up with until she saw the branch he'd just propped up against a log. 'Can I give you a hand?' she asked, and stamped on it with an expulsion of breath. 'There, that's got the bugger,' she said and grinned, and Harry was taken, as he had not had the chance to be before, by the revelation of fine white even teeth in her squarish pretty face.

He had noticed her before then, of course. There were few enough females in the Colony, let alone ones her age. She and her sister were the big ones among the forty or so children that that not very pleasant man, Arthur Croser, lumped together as 'guttersnipes'. Certainly, as teenagers, but tomboys still, they threw themselves into very marginally feminine activities; if it wasn't for the duty their father sometimes imposed on them, obliging them to keep some sort of eye on the smaller children, they might indeed have run wild as all the rest.

They weren't entirely to blame. Their mother, Annie, was a blue stocking with a sense of humour; an optimist who diverted her suspicions that the Cosme experiment might eventually turn out to be a game that grown-ups should have known better than to play, by throwing herself whole heartedly into its activities. Otherwise, she cooked and kept house badly and suggested her family make the best of it; in the worst humid months of summer she would down tools at the drop of a hat to take the children off to the nearby river. At other times she took parties of them into the fringes of the forest to gaze up at parrots and tree ferns and orchids, before adjuring them to bear silent witness to some real or supposed small creature at ground level; sometimes she even led them at night into the *monte*, quelling her

own apprehension by dispelling theirs with sweeps of her lantern, before joining the group in its hysterical conviction of some terror beyond the light and racing them home.

When her children were recruited to help their mother in the kitchen it was hard to say who put up a poorer show – them playing the dutiful daughters, or her their mother – there was too much of her in them; she'd find herself grinning at what she called their nonsense and then join them in it. She could hand out punishment when tried too far, but when she adopted a little boy after his mother died, she couldn't lay a hand on him. He was already carrying such an awful burden. It was days before he joined in with the others and took on a game they called 'walking the plank', where they took turns to cross a suspended piece of timber blindfolded. He'd almost got to the end of the log before he toppled and was caught by the girls who'd shadowed him. When they wrestled for his possession for a moment all the tension went out of him, and he was better after that.

Hattie's father, on the other hand, wore rectitude like a choker chain and had already given Harry a sense of being under oblique but searching inspection when they met. It disturbed Harry then to find that after their first real meeting, Hattie, while drifting in and out of his sight, never seemed to quite desert it. Sometimes he would see her in the mornings marshalling the small children before school under whoever was their current instructor and scolding the grubbiest of faces; at other times she retreated behind that most misleading of adolescent disguises, vacancy (since it suggests there might be something else behind it) when any kind of supervision seemed beneath her. Having seen how some of the classes were run, Harry couldn't entirely blame her: one teacher's entire syllabus had been drawn from a volume of imperial weights and measures, another's concentrated exclusively on English geography: even the kids could see through that. Carrie Whitcombe's regime, when it was instituted, aimed at introducing her pupils to a wider world, only encouraged them to explore a more restricted one. Confined, they were haunted by the possibilities of dew wet grass

outside and the adjacent forest and creeks. Light and space elbowed their way in when the classroom door opened and made them ball their hands together in frustration. They knew they were wasting their time.

On fine nights Harry would also see Hattie and her sister and the rest of her family round the camp fire, sitting on the far end of one of two logs, or their springier adjuncts to listen to the *Cosme Notes*. Most of the news was not only trivial but already well aired, yet people's appetite for its reinterpretation meant that while the *Notes* were being read they were at least able to suspend the acrimony that discussions so often turned into. When a smile of Hattie's assured Harry that she had divined the nub of some irony of his, he would turn – as writers tend to do given any hint of encouragement – with fresh heart to his pen next day.

If Harry was out with a working party the girl might wave on her way past on some errand; if he was on his own she'd often stop. She almost always had the little orphaned boy, Leo, with her, a stumpy and tenacious presence who was forever studying her face for changes of mood and seeking any indication in it of a threat from Harry. When she stopped he'd sit close by and go through the motions of playing with knuckle-bones or some other oddity while keeping up a one-sided conversation with his keeper.

'I got a pet chook…Your mum said I could keep it, Hattie,' he might say, or '… Wicky Stephens cut his hand and bawled…I wouldna, would I, Hattie?' As an attempt to exclude Harry from it, his contribution to the main stream of talk was a failure, but still a half welcome one when inspiration failed the other pair. Harry would lean against a fence if there was one, and fill a pipe he had no real taste for to assist his poise, while Hattie sauntered and occasionally skipped and sometimes studied the ground. Most of the time her conversation, he had to admit, was fairly mundane. She would talk about some material her mother was making into a dress for her, or complain about the way men – apart from Harry – left their quarters, or go on about something her little sister had done to madden her. One day, though,

he discovered her ability to switch off from the trivial when right out of the blue she asked him, 'Why did you come here, Mr Gardener?'

It put him off balance. 'Why?' he asked. 'Well, for the same reason as your parents, Hattie, and everyone else. Because we want to have a go at making a new world…a better and more just world.' He wasn't quite sure how to further his argument and would have liked more time to work on it. 'Because it's the right thing to do,' he settled on; 'and we're privileged, aren't we, to be doing it?'

'I'm not sure that I always feel so privileged,' she said flatly. 'And I'm not sure that everyone has come here with the same ideals, and if they did, I think a lot of them are losing them.'

Harry was taken aback as his what-he-hoped-to-call-acolyte seemed to be revealing another character.

'Don't say that, Hattie, I' – he looked for a word and settled on a not very adequate one – 'I urge you. Really. It's only natural that this state we're in should have teething problems – it's revolutionary. But we are all working towards a common cause. We are free here in a way we could never be back in Australia. Surely you've heard – your parents would have told you about things back there – the injustice, the lack of basic….' He realised he was lecturing and tried a more indulgent tack. 'What is it you'd like to see here?'

'I wouldn't mind being able to have a decent bath once in a while,' she said. 'And I wouldn't mind some shops. And I wish I didn't have to listen to some of the ladies sniping at each other behind their backs. Mr Gardener' – she was leaning her hand on a fence rail too and looking quite levelly at him – 'I really do admire you' –

'Admire –?' he disowned the encomium.

'But sometimes,' she said, 'I think you and my uncle are pushing you-know-what uphill.' She turned to study little Leo for a moment leaving Harry gaping. He considered

reproving her but decided – since there was a fair chance she'd heard the language from her mother – that there was no point, and fumbled instead for the handle of his shovel. He managed a smile, a patient one. 'I'd better get on with' – digging potatoes he remembered, after he'd tilted his head in their direction '– perhaps we can discuss things again some other time.'

'Yes, that would be nice,' she said and looked to her charge who'd been warily following developments. She sighed, 'Come on Leo,' and for just for a moment as she turned away her stride seemed burdened, until she said, 'I'll race you' to her shadow and took off leaving him grizzling in her wake.

The Dance

The next time they met was at a cricket match. Sometimes when stories about *New Australia* only seem to only want to talk about dirt and snakes and jiggers, it's worth remembering that the land the settlers chose for a cricket field was large enough and, where it wasn't level enough, smoothed out by working bees with shovels and logs dragged over the surface by bullocks until it was quite respectable. And then it was sown with grass too, and fenced, while they erected a small marquee on the boundary for the crowd to sit under. So it couldn't have been too bad.

Harry had a reputation as a runner from school and could bat a bit as well. He was wearing his old 2nd X1 Grammarians cap for the occasion, because it was something he'd promised himself to do if the settlement ever got to this civilized stage. Someone called him his Lordship when they identified it.

Batting actually turned out to be chaotic despite everyone's best intentions. It had rained the night before and the wicket was literally sticky. The ball either sat up or skidded. Harry found he had to sacrifice his Adelaide Grammar technique and rely more on reflexes and good intentions to protect his wicket. He'd made a dozen or so but was running out of partners when Hattie came in to bat. Even though it must just have been because they were short on numbers he was still surprised, the implicit competitiveness among men meant games in the colony were usually serious. But so apparently was she. She'd put on a skirt that barely reached below her knees and the stance she took up when she got to the wicket showed real intent. That was about as far as science went with her, though: her swat at the first ball practically swung her off her feet without result; when she finally managed to make contact Harry said to her, 'Run!' with the idea of getting her safely off strike but when he looked back when he'd made his ground he saw her sprawling at the other end in a flourish of

skirt and petticoat and seemingly none the worse for it. Everything about her came to life for the rest of the afternoon. When it was their turn to field she chased everything. She swore under her breath, mouthing 'shit' and 'bugger' when she overran the ball. At some point they nearly clashed in the out-field and when she raised her arm to throw the ball in she exposed a large damp patch under the armpit of her blouse. Up close there was something un-sexily healthy about her; her skin, the down on her cheek; her white teeth displayed in an expression of relish when she managed to take a catch. It was a sitter but she still exulted, 'See that, Mr Gardener!' she said. By the end of the day he realised the game had become a sideshow for him; he was concentrating on her.

Immediately afterwards and while still elevated, he had to insist to himself not to try to accompany Hattie on the way back to camp. He hung back to talk with a couple of other men instead and was relieved when she trailed off with her family. He was vain enough at first to wonder if she was being discreet, and then assured himself that she'd probably already shrugged off the afternoon's activity anyway, and put it and him aside.

Once she was out of sight, though, emptiness replaced her. It disturbed him to realise that he was waiting impatiently for the chance of seeing her at the night's camp fire. When she started attending the Spanish lessons that Croser was running, he felt bound to go as well. Without being in a position to know that their tutor was actually making a dog's breakfast of the language, he resented Croser's apparent fluency. He wished he could wave a wand and assume a command of the tongue himself that would leave Croser intimidated and Hattie sufficiently impressed to realise that she'd be better off learning from him. He sat up late reading a grammar book by lamplight until the other men in the dormitory complained. He'd always been fastidious, but now when he washed at the end of each day he was even more thorough. He seemed to be forever trimming his beard too – and retiring behind it…When Hattie was distracted by a talk on English poetry one night he went along as well, but

stationed himself at the rear of the building so that he could make a discreet exit from it. He was dismayed when Hattie confronted him before he could leave, though. ‘Are you coming to the social on Saturday night, Mr Gardener?’ she said as the culturally enriched made their way around them.

‘I imagine so,’ he said. ‘I enjoy watching the others, if not actually dancing myself.’ He was an incompetent actually, he could have confessed; on the few occasions he’d been impressed into the activity he could feel his lips moving as he counted out the steps, while his body cramped with apprehension.

‘Mr (someone-or-other) has had his poor concertina repaired,’ she said.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘capital,’ before he could stop himself; ‘a fine musician.’

‘Is he?’ she said. ‘I don’t know; I don’t care for the instrument much.’

‘Nor do I,’ he felt like saying, before censoring the observation. ‘An acquired taste, perhaps,’ he said instead.

Outside it was nearly a full moon. Guided by it and the glow of lanterns they took the shared path that led to both her home and the single men’s quarters. They could hear the small owls that patrolled the settlement after dark, calling in a way that had had unnerved the settlers till they realized the little birds were responsible. He had a reckless impulse to offer her his arm and didn’t. He felt elated and most unhappy. Hattie, on the other hand, seemed to be quite at ease and ignorant of his turmoil. She was humming a few notes of some tune when they reached her home. ‘Well, good night Mr Gardener,’ she said, almost skipping off the path. She was at the door when she called out over her shoulder, ‘It’s my birthday on Saturday, you know. I’ll be sixteen.’

Every month when the settlement had what was called, logically enough, a Full Moon Social, they mounted oil lamps on the walls in the main hall and hung fronds of eucalyptus leaves from the saplings they’d raised over the door and sprinkled the floor with candle

drippings to give it a finish. People threw themselves into it. For a while the settlement had its own brass band and the hall bulged under the combined volume of its numbers, and when the leader's enthusiasm for the task he'd set himself of delivering a musical education to every child in the village was vitiated by rheumatism, there were replacements available that were probably always going to be more agreeable to the colonists' tastes. There were those like the accordionist who was happy to perform on his own behalf or as part of more ambitious ensembles that included a piano and for a time even a violin until someone offered to take it away for some adjustment, and in a moment of absent mindedness en-route to the repairer used it to flog his horse. Women wore scraps of mosquito netting pinned to their hair with fire-flies inside them for the occasion, inducing a most romantic sensation in everyone except the insects no doubt as their gaolers wove in and out of pools of lamp light. Children ran underfoot while grownups tackled reels and mazurkas. Some of the more accomplished male dancers' expertise was sought after, but lots of men languished on the fringes, partly in keeping with an Australian tradition, but also because there weren't enough women to go round.

There would hardly seem to have been time, but one night during the hurly-burley of a scottische one of the married men had rested his hand on Hattie's backside and made a clumsy attempt to kiss her. Perhaps the offender had been on the *cana*; there was a suspicion that some of the men, honouring another Australian tradition, had a 'plant' outside the hall. Her mother took a dim view of the breach, but for the last year or so Hattie and her younger sister had been in an awkward kind of sexual limbo; no longer children happy to tramp round the hall floor at arms' length from men who loomed indulgently above them, they'd been surprised by partners who now made a jocular public show of treating them as grown up, while actually seeming quite keen to draw them into their orbit of adulthood. It wasn't surprising, of course, but Hattie had not been at all impressed by the older, very old to her,

man's pass. She pulled back, repelled by the smell of tobacco and sweat and the implied threat in his grasp. While a part of her was wondering what she'd done to provoke it the rest of her felt like smacking her deceiver's face.

Harry would have been appalled by the man's behaviour of course. But from the moment he entered the hall on the next Saturday he was still convinced people would divine and decry his milder intentions. As he made his way around the crowd fringing the hall he felt like the master of some small craft negotiating the chop of other small boats and sharing their dread of open water, while every tack that his own or someone else's conversational sallies took seemed to bring him up short of where he wanted to go. Part of him would have loved to submerge his funk there and then in the sop of intellectual combat among chess players down at one end of the hall, but it couldn't keep him from searching for Hattie among the dancers. Her appearance, when he did sight her, was reassuring – and slightly disappointing… There was no gown for the occasion; no piled up hair or bare shoulders, just a clean white blouse and shiny boots capering through some dance with her mother that he couldn't identify and wouldn't dare tackle.

Stymied, he retired to the bonfire out the back and joined the group of men supposedly tending it. He knew them all. They were the loners he dreaded being numbered among, the seagulls at a picnic who had lost whatever zeal they'd ever had, and were now among the pot-shotting voices of discontent willing one of the rumours circulating in the village to erupt in a way that would fund their journeys home. While they were standing there one of them, in a gesture that could have meant a number of things, tossed a handful of burning gum leaves over the water being boiled up to make *mate*.

Typically, Harry made himself useful. A week earlier a wild cat or *lupo* had breached the pigpen's defences and mutilated one of its occupants beyond salvation. One of its metamorphoses had taken the form of pies that Harry helped pass round. There were

sandwiches as well – and a birthday cake. Someone had even turned up candles from somewhere, and when the cake was borne to where the guest of honour was sitting its flares competed with the pleasure on her face. When she puffed out her cheeks and dispatched every flame in one go Harry felt an instant of dismay as her face was lost – and then restored by the firelight again.

When he offered his compliments, she said, 'You must save a dance for me, Mr Gardener,' as if there was some risk of him having a book for the evening and it being full. Glad of the presence of her mother, he said, 'Well, perhaps….' as if he was a war veteran whose disabilities would be tested to the limit by the exercise…But what else could he plead? He wondered.

In the end the matter was taken out of his hands. Back in the hall after the interval the festivities reached and passed the whooping stage that accompanied one of the colonist's adaption of a sword dance as he skipped among and sometimes upon the machetes deputising for traditional weapons on the floor. The musicians, eyes puckered in a mixture of weariness and sentimentality, signified the close of proceedings by launching, if that is a kind choice of word, into a waltz. As if it had just dawned on Hattie that things were winding up, she turned from some little boy's hands that she'd been in the act of taking and almost stalked towards Harry.

'Mr Gardener,' she said reprovingly, 'my dance…'

Time had run out, Gardener knew. He went through the motions that even he could appreciate were straight forward enough, while still eyeing his feet and dreading crushing hers. For a moment then he decided his concern was irrelevant, as she was accomplished enough to seem unconcerned by whoever was partnering her, until a frown puckered her face. 'We're not going to get along very well if you keep such a distance,' she said, and drew him closer. He was astonished to find that he could feel her breasts against his chest despite

whatever impediments lay between, their hips touched when he hazarded a turn. He willed the music to end before someone intervened and forced them apart or he stumbled and brought them both crashing down into obloquy. When the music slowed still more, he felt relaxed enough and somehow licensed to draw an arm more securely around her, while keeping his gaze fixed on the chess players in the oblivious distance. As the accordion gave a gusty and conclusive wheeze he felt her lips brush his cheek.

Afterwards he was quivering as if he'd just survived some Holmes and Moriarty-like Reichenbach Falls encounter. He longed to sit and couldn't. He kept taking shallow breaths while staunched perspiration was soaking into the clothes under his arms and his toes slithered in his boots. His forehead must be glowing, he knew, while his pulse had set itself an independently hectic pace…

Otherwise, he felt enormously relieved.

Adelaide

Harry had had a sheltered upbringing, which cynically might be taken to mean that he'd enjoyed all the qualities of an ersatz English Public school education without any of the sexual complications. Adelaide Grammar's school spirit set standards in exercise and hygiene which left little room for its student leaders to indulge in Platonic or any other flirtations. It was an anomaly, then, that in Harry's time the school captain had not only smoked more or less openly and been known to enjoy a pot or two in a public house on the Norwood Parade with the sports master, but openly advertised his heterosexual encounters. He was a big, straw headed youth from the West Coast, whose parents considered they had smoothed over most of the impediments standing in the way of his successful education by an endowment to the college. Their son, though slightly bewildered by the events that had led him there, did not shirk from taking the school captain's baton when passed it; after shambling his way to the head of school assemblies and declaring, 'Righto, yous blokes,' he led by example in bawling out the school hymn. He played his football in the same way, ignoring by and large his opponents while consistently plucking the ball from the air and dispatching it well into the distance. When admitted to the inner circle of the head boy's acquaintance in his last year or so at school, Harry was horrified and transfixed by Barnes' – not boasts – they were more like record keeping accounts of his sexual experiences. 'You mean you ….?' he'd start to say, before his partner good naturedly took the matter out of his hands. 'Yeah, I done her,' he'd say, referring to some aroused, compliant or drunken partner that he'd coupled with – almost anywhere: in a lane at the back of the pub after closing, with a female assistant in the school tuck shop, behind a stack of wheat bags back on the farm, even. His indiscriminate encounters sounded as workmanlike as his attack on the football on wet days.

'What was it like?' Harry would ask, breathlessly.

‘What was it like, young feller? Well, like a go, that’s what it was.’

Whatever other life skills Harry might have received from his mentor ended with Barnes’ departure. He was left to throw himself into the mortification of cold baths and sporting activities that reached near incensed levels when parties of girls bound for nearby Torrens Girls’ School snaked their chaperoned way past the gates.

By the time he got to Paraguay he was still a virgin. And had never got close to not being one. One night, at one of the reunion dinners that celebrated his fifth form’s reluctant passage into adulthood, and after someone laced his ginger ale with scotch, he was trapped into joining a group of half a dozen revellers in a trek from a hotel opposite the Botanic Gardens to a street full of workers’ cottages near the city. By the time they got there the initial riotous mood of the group had dwindled into something much meeker. Their leader, simply by right of the others tailing off behind him, knocked without conviction on the door and took up a deferential attitude when it was answered by someone who looked less like a madam than one of the women any one of the boys might have seen plodding between the wash house and the clothes line at their homes on washing day.

‘God strike me,’ the woman said, taking in their numbers, ‘what do yous want?’ And when the boys’ representative then made an unconvincing decision to affect nonchalance while declaiming, ‘I understand, I heard, that this is a place where we might get, find, a girl…’ she cut his legs from under him.

‘Did you, Mr la-di-da? Well I tell you what, come back here when you’ve got some hair on your face or your balls and you might find one!’ she suggested, before slamming the door in his face.

In a decade or so the little troupe would be able to fabricate some sort of face-saving yarn out of the disaster, but in its immediate aftermath the expectations of women were put on hold for nearly all of them. Harry woke next day feeling besmirched. Crumbs of toast and

self-loathing made him gag at the breakfast table, causing his mother to subject him to a series of searching gazes, while his father, after some improvisatory remark: 'want to take care of yourself when you're out at night, take a coat' – retired to his study with *The Register.*

'Is there anything you wish to discuss with me Harry?' his mother asked, when they were on their own.

'No, I'm – I think there might have been something wrong with the beef last night,' Harry sidestepped. 'That's all.'

'The Reverend Goggs called last evening,' his mother said, after the girl cleared away some dishes. 'He is looking for volunteers to assist with the Mission. He is appalled by the numbers of wretched people appealing for charity who are the victims of family drunkenness….Appalled.'

Harry shook his head, suspecting that even the influence of the Reverend might not be equal to his depravity. He had been confronted once by the sight of his mother's underclothing on a part of the clothes line screened from the street and couldn't imagine, when he sanctioned the thought, how his conception could have overcome such obstacles. Now, in his meetings with anything like a legitimate member of the opposite sex, the awareness of his callowness was compounded by a sense of ignobility. His only close-to-being sexual encounter after that came at a School Social when he and his fellow prefects were directed to mingle with a group of girls from Torrens. The girls' chaperones were probably superfluous since they were already wrapped in probity; defying the temptation of dancing and its attendant dangers altogether by sitting in a tight knit group clutching non-existent corsages, while discussing past or upcoming trips Home. It was a grotesque event that Harry tried to escape by attending to the wants of a horsey looking girl who kept plying her tongue across her teeth in an effort rid them of the crumbs of pastries that Harry plied her

with, until in an expression of gratitude or relief on parting, she bared them in the shadow of the portico outside and clacked them against his.

His involvement with the so-called Single Tax League not long after wasn't so surprising, since causes are always good for suppressing other frustrations. As well as that though, it was the late 19th Century, that period when pre-existential broodings promoted a sense of obligation among at least some of the well-to-do towards the not well-to-do at all. Harry's family, in the most agreeable and discreet way that attended the locomotive workings of their class, were privy to the sort of comforts that the hands-on industry of ancestors, mixed with the judicious selection of partners for their progeny, had ensured. His parents' involvement with money rarely extended beyond Harry's father reading Elder Smiths' annual financial reports.

Harry was never going to be one those clear-the-decks radicals who saw the expenditure of human lives as a not all that troubling ingredient of their philosophy. Though he called himself a Communist he believed that the innate reasonableness of its creed should be persuasive enough: in years to come Lawson's 'blood on the wattle' call to arms distressed him as much as future generations have been faintly embarrassed by it. But where sweet reason wasn't enough he believed in it being given a leg-up by legislation. The Single Tax League presented with the beautiful and enclosed simplicity of all good theories a remedy for social ills that was bloodless and near pain-free.

They believed, among other things, that a tax on unimproved land would greatly diminish its attractiveness to speculators and ensure any number of agreeable flow-ons to the general population. By the time Harry was seduced by the theory it had been subjected to enough internal scrutiny to stop foot soldiers like him being painted into corners, and he was able to go forth with bicycle clips in hand and confidence in his heart. At meetings he

foreswore the stances of junior orators at school who were known to stick an aping thumb inside their waistcoat pockets for emphasis, and was likewise spared the precocious heckling of 'Shame!' and 'Sit down sir!' that marked school debates. People listened. His youthful fervour for justice, which so impressed the converted that he was made secretary of the Association, had originally been ignited by the minister at the Primitive Methodist Church, who took idiomatic sideswipes in a Glasgow accent at the privileged during his sermons. 'I have seen the bairns sleeping four to a bed – aye and more, in Glasgow – so many that when one ailed it was all they cu'd do to prise the corpse out from amang the living.' If Harry's mother sometimes thought the Reverend's language over colourful it did not stop her from encouraging her husband to top up their customary offering in church when stories like it were echoed locally. Her delicacy was proof against most shocks. When she descended from their outer elevated suburb of Adelaide to perform charitable work in its grubbier environs she applied extra cologne to her handkerchief, hitched up her skirts that she might sidestep the more unpleasant evidence of human and animal activities in the streets and almost always declined to pass judgment on the supplicants her work in a mission met.

At about that time an advertisement in the *Register* entered and disturbed further Gardener's already star-struck sky. Its tail, to extend the metaphor further, inviting interested parties to apply for membership of a party bound for South America, tantalised him. He wrote to its organizer, using the sort of restrained language that he thought might disguise his age, to which Blaine replied in language that he thought would reinforce his. If the first exchange of views was academic, Blaine could not resist in later correspondence imparting advice, since Harry was so obviously looking for it. He said – a bit extraordinarily, since he was talking to someone in their early twenties – 'it strikes me that you have frittered away your life in compromises.' But it struck a chord in Harry. He suddenly saw all his to-ings and fro-ings to date as proof of philosophical equivocation, and the Single Tax League, which had

yet to produce a single parliamentary candidate let alone a successful one, as the sort of well-meaning cause on which he might wear out a dozen sets of bicycle clips without finding fulfilment. New Australia looked like the real deal, a pure and unsullied experiment that its exotic setting could only help keep so. He turned, before the *Bulletin* had a chance to snidely cloud the issue, to atlases and travellers' accounts. He decided, unreservedly then, that he must go there; his letters to Blaine reflected an exuberance that Blaine sought to judiciously contain. 'It is not to be thought,' he said, 'that any of us, committed as we are, wish to excite unrealistic and unworldly expectations in someone of your years. We need hard heads and willing hands as much as enthusiasm. Enthusiasm, and that applies not only to the young, is often ephemeral. All those who join us must have a fundamental belief in the rightness of our cause. Only then can we hope to reap its Utopian rewards.' There was no stopping Harry though. Once his parents coughed up the necessary sixty pounds he was in.

As has been well documented, the actual departure of the settlers was dragged out. The authorities were determined to give them as hard a time as possible, right up to the finish when 'Red Sarah', the shipboard nurse, indulged in some imaginative obfuscation to disguise the fact that two of the children on board had measles by smearing jam on their faces. While well-wishers were warned by the captain of the *Royal Tar* to keep well off in case any contact between them and his ship contaminated it, another craft, filled, so it was said, with lunatics from Callan Park was allowed to get close enough for its leering occupants to be provided, presumably, with an object lesson. None of the Press had anything really good to say about the expedition; the tone of newspapers varied from expressions of regret to the mocking and downright hostile. Even some of the more sympathetic observers, like Prince Propotkin, suggested that they might be squibbing the real political issue; others accused them of being plain escapists; while still others, the ones who probably called themselves students of human nature, seemed to think it all a bit silly.

Some, and only some, of Gardener's romantic ideals were challenged during the two month trip. His active and willing nature was denied the opportunity to help out with the actual sailing of the craft. He'd envisaged himself scurrying up rigging to attend to sails and enjoy, even, the perilous sanctuary of crows' nests. But the master of the ship knocked that on the head from the start. 'I've trouble enough keeping count of the crew I've got,' he said, 'let alone worrying about whether some landee's dumped themselves overboard.' Harry had to work off his energies in other ways. He found that he was impervious to motion. In rough weather the deck was crowded with passengers who still had the will to leave their bunks. Men heaved over the sides where they could while calculating the odds of drowning being any worse than what they were going through, while women, those most embarrassed by their helpless displays, retched piteously into handkerchiefs until even that deception couldn't be sustained anymore and they huddled in some crypt-like nook until they were assisted below deck. Harry felt and showed no revulsion whatever; if Dickens had made him one of his humbler heroes he would probably describe him as assisting in a hundred different and tender ways and so on, without ever getting down to the nitty gritty – which in the first instance involved Harry ensuring that passengers were safely restrained in their bunks and had something within reach they could vomit into. He showed no embarrassment himself in offering to change people's bedding or in bringing them chamber pots and ensuring they had the privacy to use them. Later, he brought tea to those who could stomach it and soup for the convalescent even if the sight of its see-sawing surfaces occasioned them fresh distress.

It was on ship too, that he was to witness in finer weather the first challenge to Blaine's authority and his reaction to it. Appalled, as moralists often feel and perhaps need to be, by one of the male members of the party employing the privacy of a life boat for conversational tete-a-tetes with 'Red Sarah', he pinned a decree to one the masts forbidding the presence on deck at nights of unchaperoned members of her sex. The lady in question

ripped it down and stamped on it in front of him, and he withdrew in a huff to the cabin he and his wife were sharing for most of the rest of the trip. Harry refused to be drawn into the gossip afterwards. He knew there was not enough for people to do; the Daily Telegraph's declaration before they left that a voyage round the Horn in dirty weather 'would be calculated to drive anyone but an enthusiast to the verge of gibbering lunacy,' wasn't borne out, but the passengers were bored; they seized on anything from menus from sixpenny cafes back in Sydney to directions for safety drills to satisfy their hunger for something to read. They would bet on porpoises accompanying the boat, and albatrosses pursuing it. When they came within sight of a school of flying fish so many examples or imitations of lines and hooks were flung overboard that they looked like strings of an improvised net.

Perhaps in the not too distant future when everywhere has become so much like everywhere else that people won't even be sure which country they're in, the sense of discovery and privilege that travellers still enjoy will be lost. But there would have been no doubt about it when the Australians first landed in South America, even if, in their mostly naïve state, they would have tried to interpret what they saw in Australian terms – 'the roads,' one visitor commented – 'want seeing to' – as if whoever was responsible for their maintenance could do with a bit of good old Aussie know-how – and by viewing their first port of call from the safe haven of patronage. Without being as grating as the Americans or as patronising as the English, Australians have never been very urbane travellers.

In the near debacle that the *Royal Tar's* arrival in Montevideo turned out to be, they didn't exactly distinguish themselves. It was mostly that infuriating man, Blaine's fault, of course. After everyone had been cooped up at sea for eight weeks, he decided to go ashore with one or two mates and pay his respects to the authorities while leaving everyone else stuck on board. It must have been intolerable and makes you wonder if insensitivity is part and parcel of evangelists' makeup. Then, when he returned after a good long tea drinking day

out, he made a futile attempt to stop a party from going ashore next day and having a look round for themselves. It sounds typically and unflatteringly Australian-like that – after the Paraguayan consul came aboard that same day and welcomed everyone most courteously – the party who'd been on shore to pass judgments on the sights on their own behalf should have come back half-shickered. But perhaps the near all-in-brawl that followed shows how fragile the party's ethos already was, and what incipient divisions there were, and what private agendas many of them must have had. In the end, perhaps the individualism which teased at the party's fabric from the start might have also ensured that they were never going to be sacrificed on some whim of Blaine's when his leadership reached the despotic stage.

Typically, again, Gardener had nothing public to say about the row. His tactful record of their arrival, written for a journal back home, only suggested, 'We haven't had much time for visiting the town' – when of course he'd had no choice. Clearly, he wasn't quite intimate enough with Blaine to be included in his shore party. But while the tone of his despatch was wistful there was no trace of resentment in it. He was very much under his mentor's spell.

Not long after they first set up camp in New Australia he accepted without protest Blaine's bidding to return to Australia with the *Royal Tar* to collect a fresh lot of recruits, and perhaps his absence for the next few months helped save him from the disillusionment others suffered in the meantime. When he came back his zeal was still in near-mint condition and he got stuck into work in the village. In some ways however, though his energies and keenness could never be questioned, he was always something of a supernumerary when it came to manual work: he would step back from hacking at the undergrowth with a machete to allow someone more expert to have a go while he was studying the butterflies he'd disturbed, stand encouragingly at a bullock's head while it was being luridly anathematised from the rear, and join children in their admiration of the first shower of sparks to be flung from the blacksmith's new forge, or in a study of the saw mill's chilling workings. His enthusiasm and

good humour were infectious though. People liked having him around. If he suffered the fate of many cheerful and undemanding people of being pigeonholed, he showed no resentment. He didn’t mind husbands trusting him with their wives.

The Monte

The first relief that Harry enjoyed after the dance, as if he'd crossed some bridge or bested an obstacle, didn't last. Still wound up, he went to bed and hardly slept. He kept replaying the evening, reshooting it from every angle as film directors apparently do, conveying in, if not a hundred different ways, then plenty of them, every interpretive nuance that his mind could come up with. Sometimes his feet were lumpen, sometimes they skipped; sometimes the warmth of her body against his conveyed an eagerness he hadn't dared think of, sometimes he realised that she had been in a sense just nursing him through the dance. From some of his replays he took confidence; he reordered a half heard phrase; he saw her *fugitive* dimples – he liked that – stamped in expressions of permanent pleasure on her cheeks. At other times he was aware of the embarrassment he must have imposed on her, by his barely concealed need, his gaucheness, his pork pie breath… In a final, adrenalin-drained state he dropped off when it was nearly morning.

When the horn sounded he found that the weather had made an effort to match his mood. It was raining heavily outside, while devoting as ever part of its energies to finding weaknesses in the thatched roof over the single men's quarters, streaming down onto the clay floor– 'like horse piss' – as someone said. The men were standing in a group at the door, debating whether to wait for a break in the weather to make a run for the dining hall. None of them responded to Harry's 'Morning chaps,' with any enthusiasm. He acted as a catalyst by picking up one of the empty grain bags kept on standby for such occasions, and urging them to follow his example as he plopped across the track with a facetious 'Bags I the heel of the loaf' exhortation. It at least motivated the others, in the next minute they became half a dozen hungry young men spilling into the dining hall.

Once there, however, Harry's re-found enthusiasm dripped off him like rain-water. There was no sign of Hattie among the girls waiting on the tables. When Harry asked her younger sister for her whereabouts she just shrugged and said, 'In the kitchen.' And when he asked, 'Is she well?' all he got from her was, 'I suppose so, why?'

When he found an excuse to leave the table he found Hattie on her own, up to her elbows in a tin bath full of dishes and gazing out the window at the discouraging face of the day. Just then the water falling in gouts seemed to have picked out for special attention a settler walking past with a kerosene tin of milk on each arm. When he stumbled and went over in the mud and lay there upturned and squirming for a moment, both watchers, despite their better intentions, couldn't help but smile, but when Hattie turned and saw Harry behind her, her expression changed again. 'Oh Mr Gardener, I'm so sick of this place,' she said, flinging water from her hands. He was at a loss, he wanted to hold her but instead touched her on the underside of each soapy elbow, while his attempt at succour trailed off into, 'Perhaps it will fine up this afternoon…things will look different...'

Back in the dining room one of the men winked and said 'Hullo, young Harry's cutting out a filly in the kitchen.' The remark was quite facetious: there were other cases where the devil had proven himself an active driver of needs in the colony; when two bachelors went to meet a new party from Australia at the railway one day they returned already affianced to its two single girls, but the consensus seemed to be that Harry was an, if not dark, then very insubstantial horse. He left for work in a thoroughly miserable state. The clouds lifted but his mood didn't. His attempts to dig holes for some fencing he and another man were engaged in seemed futile; every gouge of a shovel invited more slop to replace it; his wet clothing steamed exaggeratedly when the sun came out; he was in a state that his mother, had she been there, would have assured him invited pneumonia; it wasn't till the horn sounded for knock-off time that he was properly dry. He was walking home with his off-sider

then, tools on their shoulders, extracting their boots from the mud with each sucking stride, when one of the *carretas* went past them loaded with hay for the village's penned livestock. Harry exchanged a limp salute with the driver as it passed and was then hailed by a figure pinnacled on the wagon.

'Oo-oo, Mr Gardener….' It was Hattie, waving quite happily with one hand while she was hanging on to little Leo with the other.

'What an exasperating creature,' Harry thought.

But the evening seemed full of promise after that.

The colony had a curious relationship with the local Indians. It was an anomaly that though their language was dominant in Paraguay the Guarani had no official status, and since their legal ties to the land were negligible, when the Australians were given a piece of it the Indians were invited to move on. They didn't, quite, but settled instead into a fringe-dwelling co-existence with their new neighbours who, if nothing else, were unthreatening. The relationship might have been tenuous, and Blaine might reasonably have seen them as a threat to the colony's racial purity – the women were supposed to be good looking – but it was not uneasy: generally the natives seemed amiably disposed and they were a problem left unresolved.

When the children went swimming they would often see one of the local Guarani men looking on at them with the usual male mix of curiosity and voyeurism that the bigger girls rewarded with disdain. The day Harry came upon Hattie and her sister his intrusion was quite guileless though. When he'd shot a monkey in the forest he'd been thrilled by the instant link made between the punch against his shoulder and his target, but when the creature began to scream and writhe among the branches apprehension overtook him. When it finally unclenched its grip and thumped to the ground he took it up squeamishly by a still warm arm,

avoiding the sight of its tiny palms and death mask and buried it in a bag while its companions were screeching overhead. He retreated then, but every time his cargo bumped against his leg on the way home he was guiltily reminded of it, until something else – just as primitive – started to jog him. He had shot, hunted down if you like, something the colony's diet demanded he reminded himself. They were meat starved; there was no point hiding from it. By the time he was on the last lap, rounding a corner from a clump of outriding *monte*, with the bag slung over his shoulder, he had gone some way to introducing a measure of pride to his feelings.

When he saw the girls they were standing in waist deep water in a spot concealed from the village. From only twenty yards away he could see they were both naked, their clothes discarded on the bank (following an example their mother had set no doubt). He could hardly miss that they were comparing notes. The younger sister, Alice, still with her girl's body**,** seemed to be sharing the curiosity of her sister who was looking down at her cupped breasts. In the instant Harry was aware of the naked girls the mortification he'd felt over his kill resurfaced, but then had to compete with something worse, even as turned his head and made a show of pretending that the direction he was heading had always been his preferred one. For the moment, enlisted with the memory of blood and the monkey's screams, it was as if the girls, by their exposure, represented some kind of prey, too. It was an awful sensation, but there was still more for him to stew over: along with the squeamishness he suffered when the monkey's disguised remains were served up that night amid morbid banter about its contribution to the table, he had a memory of Hattie when he'd sighted her, and the look of surprise – but not alarm – in her eyes when she'd caught his gaze.

He dodged her for the next day or so. The village was big enough for that. When he did run up against her again it was in the library. He was sitting at the table they'd decided to reward their honorary librarian with when she came in, and he couldn't decide whether he

would keep or lose his dignity by continuing to sit or by standing up to greet her. He compromised by hovering over his chair while she was having a browse along the shelves.

While her attention was taken by a stack of magazines he decided to take the plunge.

'Miss Blaine' – he dropped the 'Hattie' –'I hope you didn't, don't think – I should apologise for surprising you the other day–I had no idea of course, that you and your sister' –

She looked mildly puzzled, before she got his drift. 'Oh that…' she said, and waved a dismissive hand.

'I didn't want you to think that I go lurking around the place, to, to' – he floundered, while part of himself was actually thinking, Do I go lurking around the village?

She shook her head impatiently and said, 'I know,' and then made a wry face. 'Did you finish up eating any of that poor creature?'

He made a face, too. 'No, no…I heard it was rather gamey, though. Oh….' He stabbed out, 'The next time I go into the *monte* it won't be with a gun. Not for shooting anything, I mean, that's certain.'

'What was it like, where you went?' she asked. While he was hovering she had taken up a position near the wall and was resting a hand on its solitary window's sill. She might have been posing, only she was paying part of her attention as she spoke to the forest outside. 'It's not like the bush at home is it? Father has never allowed us to go too far.'

'No, it's nothing like the bush, not the part that I know, no.' He was on safer ground. 'Parts of it are rather gloomy, I must admit; I kept looking over my shoulder when I was there, and listening – you know how it is. But then every now and again there's a break where it's been cleared, or some of the trees have toppled over, and all the orchids and birds seem to have made the best of it, and…. I found a pool in one spot with a creek running into it. It was ….' Since he'd gone this far he decided he might as well keep going: 'quite charming, really…'

She faced him with a low key but still direct version of her grin. ‘How about taking me with you for a walk there one day?’

He waved his hands like a seabird attempting to leave the water and made disconcerted noises. ‘Well, I don’t know…’

Her manner changed. ‘Don’t make it sound so hard. I can make some excuse to get away on my own on Sunday after lunch and we can meet up, I don’t know – on the other side of the bridge?’

He knew there were things he ought to say. Like, no. Instead, after some more verbal flummery that included, ‘I can’t say’ – and – ‘I think perhaps’ – his eyes fell on the magazine he was holding and he settled on, ‘There’s a poem of Henry Lawson’s in the last *“Bullie*” sent over.’

She raised her eyebrows minimally as if there was something about the magazine’s cover that disappointed her, before shrugging. ‘Oh well, I’ll be there if it’s not wet,’ she said.

As the seeds of alcoholics’ relapses are said to be sown in them weeks before they start drinking again, so subterfuge, whatever Harry’s outward protests, had already done its work on him. He was in that state of infatuation which never stops demanding some proof of substance to account for the state its subjects are in, while at the same time ignoring whatever evidence doesn’t suit its purpose. What did he know of the girl, so far? He asked himself. Candidly, she was good looking, sturdyish – which on its own would be enough to make her appealing to any landholder back in Australia – that was straightforward enough – with a kind of, not boyish but no-nonsense look about her, a look, at least when she was not in languid mode, of a creature about to break into stride. An expectancy. Racking up the negatives, however, he asked, would the extroversion that she must have inherited from her mother stray into outlandishness? Her firmness might turn out to be opinionated too, which is

only a kind of closed-up dullness; he couldn't imagine what her real politics would be, if she had any, but from what he'd already heard he did not feel certain that she would be the sort of receptacle of social theory that he would have been prepared to idealise. He doubted, to be honest, that she would be the type of girl his mother would find agreeable, at least in her present state of development. She would be too challenging, too socially insensitive – she seemed to be not big on tact. She was still young enough to have the self-centred-ness of adolescents too. She might get the sulks. But of course her character was unformed. That was part of her attraction, which made his feelings for her, at least in part, reprehensible he knew. Then he remembered her show of concern when he had the news of his father, which trespassed beyond any boundaries his adult contemporaries had set themselves, her straightforwardness, as well as her simplicity, energy, impulsiveness, sense of fun; even, or maybe most of all, when he allowed himself to countenance the thought, her liking of him. Why had she kissed him at the dance otherwise? (If you could call the brush of her lips a kiss.) He stewed; he heard himself sighing, while knowing that it didn't matter how long his rallies of introspection went on, or how far out of his depth he felt, he was still going to see the girl on Sunday: he wouldn't be able not to.

Sunday was a designated day of rest in the colony. The declaration was purely secular, yet there was still something vaguely religious about its observation. The odd thuds of shovels – coming from the backyards of homes – had a furtive hint. The boasts of laying hens seemed subdued, as did other animals' expressions of needs. It was the silence of machinery like the sawmill that really did it, though, that made silence settle like mist; that and the half enforced restrictions placed on children which could have been designed to bring the frustrations of adolescents like Hattie to hysterical pitch.

She almost stamped out of the house. ‘I’m going, I’m going, I’m going!’ she declared callously, turning her back on her limpet’s quivering upper lip. ‘Someone else can look after him for once.’ And once she was out she kept up her resentment for another fifty yards or so, before appreciating that she really was free. It was a fine afternoon. The early morning ice that lay like floating dishes on buckets of water left out, had gone the way of the footprint riddled carpet of frost that had got her and the other children jostling to thaw their toes out in front of the fire. Hattie was old enough to appreciate that it was a fair price to pay for such a day. So she strode, admiring the homes that had established gardens out the front of them as she went, with their roses, pansies, young gum trees, while she waved to one or two faces in them; she hadn’t even got close to being drawn into the cliques of the grown up women who had made selective blindness an art. By the time she got to the new bridge over the *Pirapo* she’d worked up a sweat, and when there was no sign of Harry, she decided not to wait. She started following the track that had recently been carved out on the other side and fifty yards along came upon him sitting on a stump. He got up as she came near, smiling nervously as if their meeting was, or was meant to confess itself to be, accidental.

She put him at a disadvantage immediately. ‘Were you scared of being seen?’

‘Not at all, I just wasn’t certain if you would be coming, so I…’

‘Well, I’m here.’

Harry gestured at the track ahead. ‘As you can see, it’s rough going. But there are old pathways leading off it into the forest as well, the natives’ I expect.’

‘Can I see where one goes?’

As an aficionado of young boys’ fiction Hattie was happy enough to allow Harry to walk on ahead on a narrow path and brush branches aside, while inwardly assuming the role of explorer herself, peopling the jungle around them with hostile forces and ascending to steepling heights by way of the vines among its trees. She felt slightly disappointed as they

went deeper into the forest though; it was very quiet, not sinisterly, but the share of strange birds seemed disproportionately in favour of the village they'd left.

When she mentioned it to Harry, as she scanned the branches above them, he volunteered, 'It's the time of day. And the creatures are wary. They need to be.'

He looked at her, worrying if she was getting impatient, and whether the excursion might turn out to be a big let-down. When the path began to wind among cedars with hazardously scratchy creepers reaching out from them, he reassured her, 'It's only a little further on…' and was mightily relieved when they came at last upon the clearing he'd promised. Colour and light burst upon them as they entered what might have been an Australian's vision of a glade, with the stream that he'd talked about flanked by ferns running through it, while birds in the tall trees at its fringes filled the air with their calls…

Hattie sighed at the sight and clasped her hands and then sat down at once on a rock overhanging a pool and started taking off her boots. 'Look away, Mr Gardener. I'm going to take off my stockings.'

He waited till he heard a splash and turned to see her dangling her feet in the water.

'It's lovely,' she said.

From the height of the alpenstock-like stick he'd picked up in the forest Harry looked on, feeling somewhat but not altogether awkward in his pose as a transplanted hiker. Somehow it took voyeurism out of this first opportunity he'd ever had to study femininity, or femaleness up close. When she lifted out one foot and started kneading its toes he could appreciate the weight of her breasts pushing forward in her blouse. It was almost as disturbing, though in a different way, as watching the play of her slender fingers: women's hands really were quite different to men's, he realised; exposure made her naked feet looked rather vulnerable. She was absorbed in the activity until she became aware of his gaze and darted a look up at him.

‘Do your parents know where you are, Hattie?’ he said. He knew he had to get that over with while he was hoping to heaven they didn’t.

‘No. I said I was going for a walk, and that’s what I’ve done.’

‘They wouldn’t, nobody would, could approve of this, you know. Innocent as it is.’

‘Well they don’t have to know. Why don’t you take your boots off too?’

He squatted and then sat with one leg bent before him, restrained by his hands. ‘I think not,’ he said. And then added something that he knew to be unhelpful. ‘I hope I haven’t made you uncomfortable in any way by this… by bringing you here. I realise you have your reputation …’

She studied her feet as she dried them with a handkerchief. ‘Ah, my reputation…’

‘I would not countenance damaging that in any way.’

‘I don’t think there’s much risk of that. Do you know my second toes are longer than the big ones. I wonder what that means? Can you read toes, like bumps?’

‘I think phrenology has been pretty well discredited.’

‘Palms then? What is going to become of us Mr Gardener? Can you tell?’

‘No, although I’m naturally optimistic of course.’

‘Where do you think we’ll all be in ten years’ time then?’

‘Well all here, I trust, in a thriving colony.’

‘And us, you and me?’

‘Well hopefully you will be married by that time; you will have met a young man your age, and be starting a family….’

‘And you?’

‘I would trust that something similar will have happened to me by then as well, of course.’

‘Of course.’ She tilted her chin. ‘Do you know why I kissed you at the dance, Mr Gardener?

‘I’ –

‘I thought you needed livening up.’ Before he could respond she relieved him of the task by saying, ‘I suppose we’d better head back.’

She half stumbled as she was climbing up the bank and when he caught her he had the chance to appreciate her weight before firmly distancing himself. He allowed her to go on ahead of him then, with her boots and stockings in hand, punctuating her speech with them, until she stopped and turned back. ‘I’ve never had a real kiss, do you know that? Have you, Mr Gardener?’

He mumbled, deliberately, something unintelligible.

‘Would you like to kiss me?’

‘Certainly not,’ he started to gabble, ‘that would not be at all proper…’ She was confronting him, however. He had an absurd sense of apprehension, on top of all his other reasonable apprehension, that what was to follow might be a repeat of his experience with the poor girl at the inter-school social, but the impact of each other’s lips was almost butterfly like in this case, as if each of them was concerned not with just what they might take from it, but where it might leave them. The half shuffle he took so he could embrace her made him feel like a knight in a clanking suit. He dabbed at her mouth until he felt her relax and mould her lips to his. Up close he was aware of freckles on her cheek, the smell of soap. The hint of corn – or was it pumpkin? – on her breath as well only made her seem healthier.

Though he stepped back after not that much more than a few moments, feeling he must, she rested her hands on his waist a little longer, before impulsively squeezing him again. ‘That was nice,’ she said.

They walked back then, chattering in her case, after she'd replaced her boots. From time to time he rested a hand on her waist, as if to help her negotiate an obstacle. Once when she actually stopped to pick up a stone and picked out a tree as a target Harry was reminded that she threw – just – like a girl. Sometimes, when she skipped ahead for a pace or two, he felt like he should reach out and restrain her. She only stopped herself when they came to the edge of the *monte* and saw a pair of painted macaws discoursing above them. She gave a sigh of pleasure at the sight and drew back, allowing him to replace a privileged hand on her back until something demanded the birds' attention and they took flight in their looping, shameless way.

'They make everything seen worthwhile don't you think, Mr….?'

'I suppose it should be Harry now,' he slyly reproved, and then regretted it. The conviction that he was something of a devil was under siege again now that they were within reach of the settlement. By tacit agreement they knew they would have to split up, and when he went to kiss her again he was half offered, and accepted, her cheek. She said, 'Thank you for the afternoon,' as if they'd just taken tea and scones. He nodded and said, 'Tomorrow is another day, eh?' without knowing quite why, but thinking as he did of the expressions of shop-girls and clerks back in Adelaide, so distressed at the prospect of facing another week that they could hardly speak on trams taking them to work on Monday mornings. For the first time since he'd been in the settlement the thought of a new week made him feel gloomy. When Hattie said, 'I'll see you at breakfast,' and headed cheerfully off on the route she'd chosen, he resented it. Had it indeed been the first kiss she'd had, he asked himself? She seemed to have displayed some aplomb for an innocent. Was it in any case just a game for her…Did he really have a secret worth keeping? He swiped at an overhanging branch and dawdled home as doubt started to nag him again.

The River

In days to come Harry found himself in a constant state of arousal which he relieved shamefully in all sorts of remote situations so that attention wouldn't be drawn to him in public ones. For her part Hattie appeared to be so good at disguising her feelings that he sometimes found himself wondering if she had any, until he found her sneaking him a complicit grin from the opposite end of the communal fireside log at night. Were waves and smirks all their affair was ever going to be, though, he kept asking himself until, eventually, Hattie found a way of furthering its cause. One day when, by his own admission, he was fooling around with a railing that had come adrift on one of the newly fenced paddocks she came upon him with her little off-sider in tow.

'He wanted to see (something or other)' she said, pointing with the hand that wasn't clamping a hat to her head, before adding, 'Hot, isn't it?'

Self-evidently it was. Powder from the timber Harry had been worrying with a file was pasted to his hands and brow. Then, when he was nodding in assent, she said, 'We're all going down to the River on Sunday. Will you be there?'

'I don't know, I could be,' he replied without particular enthusiasm. The swimming parties were well attended but, in a reasonable if uneasy alliance between the sexes, once adults had retired behind separate banks of cover to disrobe they tended to amuse themselves separately, while children divided their attention between both camps.

'I'll try to get away from the rest,' she said.

In the end he waited until well after lunch on the Sunday to join her, while dithering in the library. He furtively examined himself in the small oval mirror in the men's quarters before changing into his bathing costume, while wishing he had more, or less, hair on as

much of his chest as was on view. When he went out with a towel over his shoulder he still felt exposed.

Fortunately, the atmosphere when he got to where the colonists were gathered at the river was quite innocuous. No one rose from the banks to denounce him. On one side of the shallow V of bush intruding into the large natural pool men were indulging in the usual male buffoonery in the water, using a rope someone had rigged up to hurtle themselves into mid-stream. On the other side women, mothers mostly, were gathered, with younger children. It could almost have been Australia.

There was no sign of Hattie. If she had come and then slipped away from the others he wondered what explanation if any she would have given. Perhaps she'd pleaded a headache and pretended to go home, he considered. (Perhaps she really *did* have a headache, and the whole exercise was just going to involve more frustration for him.) More practically, he then calculated that her presence was unlikely to be proven in the shallow section downstream where the water raced and where a rope had been strung to save children who lost their feet from being swept away. If anywhere she was more likely to be higher up and screened from view of the main group by a bend in the river. In the shallows of the family section then he hailed and waded past a couple of men ten or fifteen yards from the bank, and then, protégé of the Torrens River Baths, settled into one of the more discreet strokes of its graduates, the trudgen, that took him across and up the stream. No one seemed to take particular notice of him when he emerged at the small winding section of shoals that led to the higher pool; he was out of sight of everyone when he rounded a corner and saw Hattie sitting under a palm on the left bank, hands clasping one knee. She waved and he saluted her, feeling disadvantaged, and returned to water so clear he could see tiny fish nibbling at a trailing thread of his woollen costume.

When Hattie sang out, ‘It took you long enough,’ and left her bank to slide into the water, he began dissimulating. ‘I couldn’t …I needed to’ – his relief at seeing her matched by the anxiety her approach aroused. As she got nearer he called, ‘What happened to the others?’ and ‘What did you tell them?’

‘I said I’d had enough. I had a devil of a job getting rid of Leo, he’ – She interrupted herself by beginning to swim not all that expertly, but when she got nearer she blew out a mouthful of water and stood and said proudly, ‘Not bad for a Cosme girl, eh?’ before tumbling him into the water. His dignity withstood the test, but when he emerged to see her loosening the woollen straps of her costume – the water was chest deep but he could clearly see her beneath it – his discomfort was unequivocal. ‘I’ve been hanging around for ages in these stupid things…’ she said half-scoldingly, spreading her arms. He was shocked beyond belief; his response was entirely dutiful, and passive, but then as he kissed her he suffered more alarm when he felt her lips go lax and then as her whole body moulded itself against his he found himself beginning to butt – which was about what it was – at some area below her waist, until she pulled away. ‘It’s no good here,’ she said, ‘we’ll have to get out.’

On the bank, as ants were crushed or made good their escapes from under them, Harry, while passingly aware of dirt adhering to her buttocks and his elbows, realised he had no idea how to address the challenge before him. Passion was nearly stubbed out on the spot. It was more good luck than good management that saw her eventually sighing approval of his efforts, but when not all that long afterwards he imagined he had satisfied both their needs, he was only allowed a brief reprieve before he felt Hattie squirming out from under him. ‘That’s no good,’ she said, ‘I’m not finished. Give me your hand.’ Harry almost felt reduced to an onlooker then until she shuddered under their mutual touch. When she lay still with eyes closed for a moment afterwards, he hovered, wondering if she had perhaps suffered some

seizure consequent upon her exertions, until she opened her eyes again and grinned frankly before pulling him back down on her.

'We got there in the end, didn't we?' she said, before adding encouragingly, 'Next time you'll have more idea.'

Afterwards he tried to do all or some of whatever he'd read of or imagined grateful lovers doing; supporting her head to keep her hair from the ground until she decided it was uncomfortable; picking off pieces of twigs and grass that had stuck to her, propping himself on one elbow and studying her as she appeared to doze. From instinct, prudishness or embarrassment he was already using his right hand to cover himself, but when something roused her, an insect or a shaft of sunlight, he got the broadest impact of her back as she went down to the water to wash.

'Mother always told us not to be shy about our bodies,' she said before settling herself again. Now that the tension had gone out of the situation he was struck by the ordinary charm of her breasts, spilling slightly on each side of her, her round belly, the nest of hair below. As a newly enlisted student of female anatomy he tried kissing hers in an exploratory and tentative way and saw her lips curving in response, before she roused herself and shook off his attentions. 'No, there's no time,' she said. It wasn't until she began putting her wet things back on that his awareness of the finality and gravity of the situation, which had only been off-duty for a while, struck him again.

'What on earth are we going to do?' he asked.

'Well right now I'm going home.'

He began to struggle into his bathing dress. 'But what about your family' – he said in an urgent whisper – 'what are you going to tell them – what if they find out – how are you going to …?'

‘Cover up? If they’re not home when I get there I’ll pretend I’ve been lying down. If they’re there I’ll tell them I went swimming somewhere on my own. I *am* sixteen.’

‘What if – oh God’ – he scrubbed his brow – ‘what if you, you know…?’

‘I think it’ll be alright,’ she said flatly. She straightened her clothes. ‘You can kiss me again before we go. Or don’t you want to now?’

‘Of course I do,’ he protested huffily, but he would like to have been on another planet or in another dimension for reasons that didn’t, or didn’t really, include the one she’d just suggested, if only so he could re-order events. Apart from wondering what else her liberated mother had told her – even her love-making that showed up the inadequacy of his, seemed to suggest that she was benefiting from inherited experience – the situation was still impossible, surely.

She held his chin in her hands, ‘Don’t look so miserable.’

‘I’m not,’ he said uncomfortably. ‘I’m just so’ – sorry, fearful, appalled…? He ran through the options.

‘It’ll be alright, you’ll see’ – she was saying when she was interrupted by a voice from the distance, singing out Harry’s name: ‘Oh God – you had better head them off.’

He looked blank. ‘What shall I tell them?’

‘Anything you like – tell them you’ve been looking at insects or something. They won’t know.’

He felt blank too. But there was something he still had to say. It was inevitable, as anyone who feels they’ve got the best of the bargain in a relationship knows. So he said it: ‘Hattie …why’ –

‘Why what?’

‘Why did you – I mean…you know, why?’

‘Oh, I don’t know’ – she sounded almost businesslike – ‘because you’re sweet – because I’m fed up…I don’t know.’

When she’d gone Harry stood there for a moment before he started turning over rocks at the water’s edge, feeling as if his heart had been reduced to some small curio that he’d been told he could keep for the time being.

Exile

Harry went back to camp with his bachelor pals in a state of near shock. He felt a little mad; the others seemed to be speaking a language that no longer had any currency, their outbursts rattled against his ears without touching his rigid grin. He felt sure something dreadful had happened. He couldn't swallow his dinner, and went to bed and spent the night gazing at nothing. He heard the owls, whose calls had weirdly kept him and Hattie company when they came home from the dance that first night, grating on his ears, and wondered what they were preying on. Along with the conviction that he had betrayed the girl, he was haunted, despite her unqualified reassurances, by an image of an emergent pregnancy demonising them both in the village. He saw her being cast forth with Presbyterian rigor by her father while all her brothers and sisters – as well as little Leo – clung to whatever of her they could, while he himself was – what – lambasted out of the settlement across a horse?

He spent the next day on high alert and when there was no sign of Hattie at breakfast, headed off to work with a stride as self-conscious as it had been at the dance, and then applied himself to the job of clearing a paddock that most of the men were engaged in as if it might be a means to a merciful end. He kept looking, wondering, in her absence, if Hattie was already being cross-examined as the principal witness in his prosecution. He craned his head round the village on his way home, examining each near or distant skirt and gown, forced down a few mouthfuls of food at dinner, and then, using his stomach as an excuse, almost fled from the table. In the end he found her feeding the twitchy relics of a flock of poultry depleted by a recent raid from some predator. In the middle of her fairly listless dispersion of grain she saw him and dropped the basin she was carrying. They made love behind the shed the hens roosted in while the feathered creatures were settling into their muted bed time bickering next door to them.

After that they snatched at moments and each other in broad daylight. Sometimes they sneaked out after dark. One night the collision of their bodies with the wall of the single men's quarters brought someone out ready to raise an alarm. They learned to cover up or avoid bruising. Still Hattie sometimes appeared at the breakfast with drained eyes and swollen lips. She claimed to know something of birth control, which if she had got it from her mother's example, seemed hardly reliable since she was one of six children. 'Mother said that sometimes men won't wait for the right time, and that's what messes things up,' she said. He was ready to accept any sop. He was driven even though, or perhaps because, he felt what they were doing had a shadow hanging over it.

As both enthusiastic participant in, and onlooker to, their lovemaking, Hattie's attitude seemed a lot simpler; it was almost as if she enjoyed the complicity, the illicitness, even the arousal she effected in him as much as the act itself; sometimes she shocked him by her enterprise, sometimes it seemed as if sex shared the same ranking for her as a meal time treat. One day when they were sitting in a not very well secluded part of the banana plantation, she welcomed the news that the arrival of recent supplies had included molasses. Since the colonists' original river voyage from Asuncion – when a barrel of the sweetener had been consigned to the waters on suspicion that it had an alcoholic content – the fervour of prohibitionists had abated in its case at least. She curled her tongue in anticipation of it and then said, 'Do you know what I'd really like…? I'd like some bread and cream, we never have that out here, and I'd like a proper roast, with potatoes and peas.'

He played along. 'Beef…?'

'Doesn't matter. And I'd like some peaches …We used to have ice cream back in Australia on birthdays, I remember. And,' she said, drawing him to her, 'I'd like some more of you.'

Her conversational directness still surprised him even if it was generally part of the postscripts or interval chatter of their meetings. He had given up airing his social theories to her. At first, since she listened in silence, he thought he might have an acolyte, until he realised she wasn't really paying attention. And then one day she interrupted him quite bluntly by saying, 'If this is supposed to be such an advanced place, why don't women have a vote at council meetings?'

'Well, largely because they don't want one,' he explained.

'Who said they don't want one? Mother does. And I will when I'm older.'

'Well, of course, if enough women feel the same then that is something that will be addressed in time.'

'Not if my uncle has his way it won't. He started talking to me the other day about us being God's servants or something. Honestly. I could hardly keep a straight face.'

'Your uncle has been under some strain lately' –

'He's *gone* strange if you ask me. And if we are what he said we are what thanks do we get for it. I'm sick of some of these grumpy old men going around saying they're keeping us. We work as well as them and we then get to do all the messy jobs – making their beds, and doing their washing. I wish I didn't have to touch their stuff.'

'I think it's the disparity among the sexes here,' he said, sounding, he realised, like a student of livestock breeding, 'that makes some of them a bit cranky.' It made him uncomfortable to go on, 'Families must be the cornerstone of the colony's future of course. That's why Mr Blaine has agents in Australia seeking female recruits at this moment to remedy the situation. The right kind, of course.'

'The right kind. And what do you think they'll come up with? More old maids like Miss Whitcombe?'

'Hattie…'

‘Everyone knows she went to bed for a week when she realised she’d missed out on Mr Anderson.’

For a moment he resented her complacency, her conviction that she was never going to be a too tall, too bony, and too far on the wrong side of thirty woman to be able to be honest with anyone including herself. Her advantages seemed unfair. He attempted to broaden his remarks. ‘The thing is that we’re here, we have established a village, we’ve got workshops, fields planted out with crops, it is a co-operative’ –

She almost scoffed. ‘I haven’t seen too much co-operation lately. People are arguing and holding onto things they’re supposed to share. Sorry, but I’ve been listening to people like my father since I was little, and I’ve believed in all the things he does, but now it’s, do you know what it’s like here’ – she struggled – ‘it’s like a game people are getting sick of playing.’ It chilled him to hear that and he was glad when an insect distracted her and she took up her original saw. ‘Anyway, if you men were so keen to organize things on your own, why didn’t you just come on your own and send for us later?’ Cross-legged, still half naked, she seemed ready to take on anything he could come up with while he, fully dressed and squatting, felt he was teetering. When he murmured something about the colony’s ‘growing pains’, she responded disappointingly.

‘Oh yes …Ever since I started growing, the men here never stopped noticing me. Alice will be next on the list, no doubt’ –

‘That pains me of course, Hattie,’ he interrupted. ‘But aren’t you straying from the point rather?’ He was rising to signal an end to the discussion, when she forestalled him.

‘Am I? And when you’ve finished with all your speeches, what does it all come down to?’ she demanded, leaving him with the realization as she enclosed him in her arms, that the meeting had closed on her terms.

They never really discussed the future except, in her case, in a rather childish way. She would say, knowing that he couldn't countenance the failure implied in the thought, 'When we go back to Australia, we can be married, and you can write books, and I – I might write them as well. Or poems. They couldn't be any worse than Miss Whitcombe's.' She seemed to have no real plans or feel the need for them. Sometimes there was a near imperiousness about her that suggested she had been sidelined here by an accident involving a much better bred mode of carriage than one of the colony's ox-drawn *carretas*. She could do a very good version of disdain. At other times he'd seen her with her hands in the guts of a fowl without showing any distaste. She could be gleeful when he made her a gift, and sigh dutifully over the discovery of a bird's nest, and examine with due solemnity some scuff he'd suffered at work, but if he imagined her drawing up her skirts at the intrusion of a mouse inside the home, it would only be so she could give it a decent kick. Sentimentally he imagined her to be the sort of woman who might well fall victim to a revolution because of her outspokenness. In an awful moment once he saw her stuffed in a tumbril on its way to the gallows as the result of mistaken identity, or miscarriage of justice, of jealously perhaps on the part of a much less favoured party, and looking … Saddened? Perplexed? In moments like that he liked to ruffle up her hair to disturb her dignity and his image of it. Because she refused – even in her supposedly, in fact almost, full-blown womanhood – to take part in any of the village bitching, the formal exchanges within which women encouraged their vendettas to flourish, she was suspect. The married women were dying for her to fall into some sort of, and probably the usual, trap. Hanging like a sceptre over the colony was the recent history of a young girl falling pregnant to a middle aged man, leading to the precipitate sanctification of the union just before the girl's mother hanged herself in the *monte*. Shame was a game taken seriously in the colony.

In the end, however, Arthur Croser forestalled anything like that eventuality.

There would – must – have been a fair ingredient of adventurers in the numbers signing up for Paraguay. Some came full of utopian zeal and ideological certainty, but most of them had hopes of bettering themselves as well, while others, particularly the impassioned's partners, probably just had hopes for the best. Along with the idealists there would have been opportunists too, as well as seriously work-shy whingers and hangers-on and misfits who couldn't drive a nail into wood…And then there would have been those who'd been all over Australia and just wanted to see somewhere else. The last are the single edition and sole copy encyclopaedias of history; dilettantes of a kind that were so often the nameless casualties in Australia of unrealistic attempts at crossing flooded creeks or mounting half broken horses; men who on their own apocryphal say so, won and lost gold field fortunes on the toss of a coin or a barmaid's whim, or on more reliable public record, perished in in the delusive pursuit of some El Dorado. Able, energetic and almost ever hopeful men with no real work ethic or sense of commitment; distracted husbands, estranged fathers, occasionally press-ganged members of countries other than their own's militia, who sometimes, most surprisingly of all and without intent on their part, wound up as faces on stamps in countries whose natives couldn't even pronounce their names.

Croser, Blaine's lieutenant and interpreter, had knocked around a lot of South America. He was an intriguing character, if not an attractive one; quite lacking in modesty, with a pugnacity that may have been a compensation for his lack of inches, except that he was prepared to back up his words. He could handle himself, as they used to say, and still do in some circles. Since he was an adventurer at heart it's hard to see why he attached himself so readily to New Australia, unless it was because he was as much seduced by Blaine's voice – it was deep and unbroken according to witnesses – as by his dogma. Otherwise, it's hard not to suspect that he didn't always have an eye for the main chance. When he was part of the first group that sussed out Argentina for a site, he was frustrated because they turned back,

leaving him chafing over the material rewards that might still have been waiting for them. Like most adventurers he had not only enough grit to help overcome most obstacles, but the practical nous for it. It's doubtful if he would have died for a principle. He had been involved in a revolution, and wasn't shy of recounting to his brother his experience of emptying a revolver into the forces he'd decided he was in opposition to, and actually potting one or two of their members. There's no record of him losing any sleep over it afterwards. His intimacy with Blaine was mistrusted and he was never well liked, especially after he took to swaggering – and there was no other word for it – round the colony with a gun in his belt. Since his shortish-ness did not really match Blaine's 'straight-and-true' job specification he spent time covertly exercising with improvised weights as if they might elongate him, while insisting on publicly lifting and shifting burdens that could have been shared. He habitually kept his sleeves well rolled up while, as if to accentuate the near-brutal or Spartan utilitarian-ness that he aspired to, he had his hair cut short enough for it to stand up in a shock that gave him the look of some small bristly animal.

A large part of his problem when he first came to roost in New Australia might have been that he had no one to sleep with Most of the other men didn't either, but among the correspondence with his much more conservative, and by the sound of it long suffering, brother, more than one of his self-conscious letters – suggesting that he expected them to be a mine for future historians – claim, in the decline of his confidence, to have discovered almost every sort of moral lapse in the colony short of outright licentiousness. Increasingly his observations took on the air of a magistrate's in a carnal knowledge case, where the symbol of justice makes the culpable a receptacle for their own frustrations. Rectitude can be draining. When Croser used up a holiday pass to go on a river trip with his friends, he demonstrated his imperviousness to the attentions of a hefty young Indian girl by referring to her as an *animal*, while condescendingly suggesting that her behaviour was a failing common

to her sex. That might be transparently adolescent, but overall he was a stern critic of the ladies: 'Until I came to New Australia,' he confessed, 'I had a good opinion of women in general but with few exceptions here they are selfish, scandalmongering scarecrows, any one of whom can do more harm than a dozen badly minded men.'

In the end he was one step ahead of the 'carrion eaters' lumped together by him under the description of women. His nosey-parker censoriousness surpassed theirs. Tilting on his toes among the crowd at the Social he may have watched the couple dancing together and seen Hattie's and Harry's dry-run kiss. In his patrol of the settlement later in daylight hours, he may have observed them exchanging a word as they passed, or a smile, and read a graver import into them. When Hattie came into the store he'd set up to exchange coupons for groceries it may have only been the intensity of his grilling gaze that made her flustered, but it hinted at external sources to him. Probably he fancied Hattie himself, though he wouldn't have allowed that to inhibit his quizzing of her.

Adding spice or malice to his vigilance may have been the fact that the union he had recently entered into after a recruiting visit to England had not born the emotional fruit that he hoped. Far from being the sort of robust – matey-like – companion he had envisaged possessing, or inventing, her first impact with South America had left his new wife physically reeling and showing no signs of recovery. She was occasionally to be seen at the doorway of their recently built cottage in the mornings, but as a ghostly presence, her mouth pursed in a silent half closed O as if in dismay that her surroundings had refused to be transformed overnight. She spent most of her time in bed, but greeted Croser's own presence there with the same disfavour as the crisp nightly rain of insects' wings and body casings from the depredations of geckoes on the ceiling overhead.

Croser had seen Harry take off on his own that first Sunday afternoon, and noted that Hattie left her own home not long after. He saw them separately return. He saw Hattie

picking her way home through the banana patch on that swimming Sunday, and noted – in fact recorded on paper – her still damp and disordered state. He redoubled, to use a term he liked, his vigilance. Eventually he was rewarded when he caught sight of her and Harry drifting away from the settlement one afternoon: if he had not been so busy congratulating himself on his perspicacity, he might have realised they were driven. He was as appalled as they were unbridled when they'd achieved what they thought was the sanctity of the *monte*. Fifty yards into the bush they set about stripping off each other's clothes and coupling like *beasts* – that word came to him too – as he crouched, the spit drying in his mouth, while they engaged in some struggle they both seemed to want to win; if he'd stopped up his ears, which he thought of doing, he'd still not have been able to escape the language Hattie used. When it was over – or apparently over, they'd gone quiet anyhow – he backed away until it was safe to make his way home. He knew what had to be done; he spoke to no-one; he shared a not unusually monosyllabic evening meal with his wife, while he was willing it for to be time for them to retire. In bed his wife took up a crucifixion pose, arms trailing over the edges of the bed while he snorted over her. When he'd finished he left her gaping up at the ceiling while he went outside and thought about the next thing he had to do.

In some sort of normal – or as near as could be expected to it – equilibrium that had been restored to him by his expenditure of energy, he felt better able to act. He was known for his firmness in the colony, his quiet insistence on the colony's rules being observed, the inflexibility with which he defused the expectations of women who came to the store with handfuls of out-of-date coupons, the coldness with which he met wheedling. He marched straight to the men's quarters once he'd made up his mind, considered knocking and didn't, took a pace or two inside, and was saved any further cerebration by the sight of Harry sitting reading at a table. He knocked against the wall to claim his attention, and when he got it, stiffened.

‘Gardener,’ he said. ‘A word, if I may.’

‘Yes?’

‘Outside, if you please.’

Harry put his book aside, and turned down the lamp.

Outside, once Croser was assured that his hostage was safely in his keeping, he moved away a few paces to ensure their privacy. Probably Harry suspected what was up but he still enquired, ‘Yes, Croser?’ when he got near. They had never been on first names or achieved any kind of mateyness. Theirs was the sort of relationship that made Harry grateful for his old school’s habit, however cold the exchanges of surnames between little boys had once seemed.

‘Gardener…’ Croser said portentously. He would have liked in such a case to be taller than his opponent. Instead he was reduced to intruding his face into Harry’s space in a series of entries designed to keep him off-balance, while twitching his jaw sideways in an interrogative and meaningful way. ‘I may as well get straight to the point and tell you that you have been have been observed…’ he began.

‘Observed?’

‘You have been observed, you have been seen. You have been *found out*,’ he emphasized. ‘That’s about the size of it.’ Here his head pursued a parabola that included much of the colony. ‘It’s known, by me, that you have been clandestinely engaged…if your behaviour can be dignified with such a term, with a girl, Blaine’s niece. The sixteen-year old. I have witnessed both of you, it disappoints me to say, the two of you’ – he searched for the word, considered cavorting and settled on – ‘*fornicating* in the woods.’ He huffed it out and then shook his head under the weight of distaste and disbelief, before resuming his challenge. ‘Good God man,’ he exploded, ‘What do you think you’ve been playing at…?’

Now that it was out, Harry felt numb. ‘Croser,’ he attempted, ‘I have nothing to say to you.’

‘Nothing to say to me? Well, I’m afraid I have plenty to say to you, my friend. The girl is barely of an age, for one thing, whatever her shortcomings …’

‘Croser I’ll thank you not to make any further references to the young lady. And, as I said, I have nothing to say to you on a matter which is none of your concern.’

‘None of my concern? No? Isn’t it?’ Croser found that he was able to relax the sternness of a stance that had him driving both fists into the sides of his ribs, and replace it with one that went better with a smirk. ‘My dear fellow, it concerns everyone here in the settlement, it’s the sort of thing we’ve had to fight since we came here. It will concern our leader, your mentor, and it will concern her parents when they are informed.’

‘Why should they be informed?’

‘Because I have a sense of duty, Gardener, however irksome it might be.’ He was starting to bounce in his boots. ‘My sense of duty is clear. Is yours?’ What’s he going to do, pass me a revolver and lock me in an empty hut, Harry wondered: he forestalled that option. ‘Much as it might disturb you, Croser, we are not only lovers, but in love. And – and’ – he extemporised – ‘I intend to marry the young lady.’

‘Oh no, Gardener,’ Croser shook his head. ‘That won’t do. No, no, no, it’s gone too far for that. Your affair or whatever you may choose to call it has broken every rule in our book. Your continuing presence in the colony would be intolerable under any terms. If nothing else, once some of these gossip mongers get wind of what has been happening, well…’ he made a sweeping gesture with both hands, representative of, and absolving himself from any responsibility for the scandal’s dispersal… ‘You would make life untenable here for her parents. You will have to leave.’ And, using just his right forearm this time, Croser made a gesture indicating a wider world to which his opponent was inexorably bound.

‘So you can have another scalp eh, Croser?’ Harry said, injudiciously, since his candour gave Croser an advantage.

‘I don’t take scalps Gardener,’ he said. ‘Or prisoners.’ He swaggered away a pace and then swivelled back. ‘You can have tonight to think it over, and after that….’He raised his hands like a prosecuting counsel pointing out the painfully obvious. ‘After that…’

‘After that you will be able show what a thoroughly unpleasant piece of work you really are won’t you?’ Harry said, and felt slightly better for it.

In a way their confrontation had had the flavour of one of the camp’s melodramas Carry Whitcombe awarded herself leading roles in, whose sentimental restraints may have struck a chord with Croser. Harry was oddly reminded of an outdoor performance before the main hall had been built, celebrating at some point and for some reason the moon and employing kerosene lamps to represent it so successfully that for a moment the audience had forgotten about the real and full article rising above them. The actual and sinister import of this meeting transformed its props, however.

When he told Hattie she was beside herself. She had just washed her hair and its disorder complemented her despair. She tugged at its ends and ran her hands through its roots and clutched her face with her nails. ‘That bugger, that bastard,’ she spat.

‘Hattie…’

‘I don’t care, I know what he is. I’ve seen him peeping at girls, and he’s still doing it, that’s how much good his wife has done him. I’ll shoot him with his silly revolver if he comes sticking his weaselly nose into our business again.’ Resolve protected her until reality brought tears and before another flash of inspiration liberated her. ‘We’ll leave here together. We’ll run away to Australia. Damn him. No one can stop us.’

‘Hattie, I haven’t got enough for my own fare, let alone yours.’

‘Father will give it to me.’

‘No he won’t. He’d probably want to horsewhip me.’

‘Then we’ll get married. I’d make a good wife. I could learn to cook,’ she said, looking around as if the means might be on immediate offer.

‘It’s not that, we just can’t.’

‘Why can’t we?’

‘For reasons that are all my fault. You’re too young. I’m too poor. It would end in disaster. You need to make a better judgment when it comes to marriage.’

‘No I don’t. Don’t think I’m one of those pure little women Mr Dickens went on about; I’m the sort those old back-biters here love to hate. I’m the one that wanted to have you in the beginning anyway. It was all my doing… well, most of it was.’ She clutched him by the shoulders and looked up into his face. ‘Why couldn’t people just leave us alone…?’

‘I’m not sure they ever do, Hattie,’ he said. They held one another tightly then as if it might make them indivisible. He had sometimes wondered after they’d made love and were lying together if any two people could be closer. Something, temporal and temporary, had always interrupted them. But now the thought that they might never return to such intimacy as they drew apart left each feeling as if they had been betrayed by the other.

Utopia probably did its dash for Harry there, whatever subsequent noises he made about it, in those half grandiloquent, half pious essays and editorials of his, seeking in the way early 20th century writers did, particularly those whose literary sources were stuck in the previous century, for some numinous and prolix and nebulous expression of faith. It was as if his loss of belief was to be matched in future by its protestations. But really, whatever he and Hattie had done and shared had cut them off from any collective’s philosophy, particularly one in Cosme’s state. Harry was surrounded by ghosts now. He moved among them, making plans as expedient as they were contrived; airing a letter in the dining hall which purportedly showed his mother’s inability to handle her affairs without him, going to elaborate lengths to

assure other members that his absence would only be temporary, doing the round of homes to enjoy chicken dinners that almost stuck in his throat: from his emotional numbness he eventually managed to manufacture an image of his old self; a theatrical one. He clasped hands and sometimes arms fervently when criss-crossing thresholds for the last time, he nodded, chuckled, and threw himself into the bonhomie surrounding his departure that was probably vicarious on the part of those left behind. He avoided anything, even eye contact, with Croser, whose sense of virtue flourished by it. He stalked his vanquished foe up until his departure – but then never really got to enjoy the sense of self-satisfaction that Harry's absence should have created. When he suffered an attack of bronchitis not long afterwards he became convinced of consumption's onset and declaring that all toil was henceforth beyond him, passed his days voicing officious displeasure and his evenings subjecting *Cosme Notes* to a critical firelight hearing, before, and only when he felt sure that his bride was well and truly abed, taking to his own in their cottage's second room…

London

Hattie was nowhere around on the day Harry left, so he had no way of knowing how heavy her heart was, or where she was keeping it. The kind of hysteria that had attended him in the last few days, all the hearty humbuggery, lasted until the wagon had rounded the last corner, and he was able to sink in his seat. The driver spoke neither English nor Spanish and sat there for the trip to the station sucking on a cigar and inanely pointing out things Harry had already seen plenty of and accompanying them in the sort of bullying tone people use in the belief that it will break language barriers. It was oppressively hot at the small siding where he waited for the train, thankfully alone; good fortune vouchsafed him a choice of seats on it when he arrived, both facing and opposing the way he'd come. He tried both and settled on the one looking back; somehow it seemed less final, the glimpses he had, and they were lingering given the train's pace, of half-ramshackle farmhouses encouraged him for odd moments to feel that they might be waiting, enlarged and improved upon, on his return. Surrounded by a mass of humanity and their possessions on the river steamer, he felt as if they were all in flight, but their stoicism undermined his until one of a cage full of fowls escaped its gaol and flung itself over the side. Watching the owner's show of hysteria at the rooster's soon to be sodden struggles he wondered if his own jettisoning would cause as much concern.

In Asuncion there was a bank transfer waiting for him from his mother; in another week he was able to board a ship in Montevideo. He sat on deck as it edged out of the harbour, so that he might have a final view of the city that had once so excited him. When it was dark he went to his bunk and lay there all night staring at the darkness. Is this how you know your heart is broken, he asked himself, when you accept that there will never be any relief from its pain?

Somewhere between South America and home he must have regained some equilibrium; since he stayed on board. Manners may not maketh the man but at least they give those exercising them the means to get through the day, and hold out the hope that their imitation of meaning might eventually be replaced by the real thing. It is an attitude that has historically sustained men and women in public life, allowing military officers to defy native hordes with drawn sabres, women to remain virtuous in the face of dire temptation, and so on. The act becomes the deed; the means the end…Harry lived his lie as best he could. He regained some of his energy by pretending to have it, his interest in things by making himself study them. He engaged in slow and careful Spanish with the stoker, and helped shovel coal into the ship's furnace. The activity made self-immolation less attractive. You could say he baked his feelings. He even started to rationalise his parting with Hattie, to turn her ultimatum into rejection, and let self-pity serve him up some crumbs of consolation: when the corpse of some beast was dumped overboard one day, he tried to visualise it as a chapter from his life rolling away.

He reached Southampton in something like a mood that his old mentor William Blaine would have approved of. In the guise of independent Briton he rose early to have his first look at English cliffs, and take in some good draughts of nippy English air; as they came into harbour he took up an attitude forrard, one hand negligently supported on a stay, collar open, seeking in the city before him that he had only ever seen represented on the page or in sketches, a confirmation of the ties he and it shared. He was not long in waiting, everything struck him as both exotic and familiar on disembarking: from the patois of dock workers driving the cattle off board, to the fastidious reserve of those meeting friends and family, which made both their social inferiors and the accoutrements of their labour – the cows and the shit they were spraying around – seem almost invisible. He decided to hitch up his accent for the first encounters with his kind.

After the first few days in Southampton where he divided his time between committing the time-honoured Australian sin of engaging domestics in conversation, and going on long exploratory walks along the coast, he dug out a list of addresses and headed for London. It was perhaps not an ideal time to make a pilgrimage. It was late autumn and the city's streets and parks were full of worn out leaves. For a time he still found it exciting. He visited the Tate and attended the theatre. He was too late to see Gilbert and Sullivan's short lived *Utopia, Limited*, but able to enjoy a revival of one of Gilbert's early solo efforts, *Engaged*, which by comparison made the colony's production of the same work seem at least meritable, he believed. He visited the family home in Dorset and made respectful obeisance to aged relatives who commented, while he was making the most restrained conversation he could, on his Australian twang. Their interest in Australia alone was faint, their curiosity about members of their family who had joined the imperial diaspora, dwindling, and any conception at all of New Australia inconceivable. His aunt and uncle were old, the tour they took him on of a largely musty home, was perfunctory, and exhausted their capacities as hosts. Perhaps they were unsure of his motives. It was a cold day and the gestures they made out of French-windows to indicate points of interest on their property made it clear they would not be venturing there with their guest. When Harry tipped over the cold contents of his tea cup they were palpably jolted. He left amid a plethora of apologies – his – while a maid was dabbing the stained fabric of his chair.

Back in London he remembered his literary ambitions and offered an introductory reference from Blaine as evidence of them to a famous author. Gardener, whatever his soft spot for Blaine might suggest, was no hagiographer. His diary suggests that his host was initially patronising, as if his guest's colonial accent might expose his own flawed claims to being a fully paid up member of the Establishment. That he half warmed to his engaging guest is not so surprising, especially when Harry's enthusiasm for the subject made Cosme

sound like half a success. The writer was intrigued by the description of a social experiment in a world he had only ever been able to conjure up; he'd had to work too hard to get where he was to risk any such diversion. Listening to the hazards and rewards of the jungle and the life primitive might have disarmed the armchair Burton in him. He made a present to Harry of one of his publications with a strong socialist ingredient.

It was February when Gardener was able to board the ship to Australia. In between, he was more and more conscious of filling in time. The onset of winter in London unsettled him. He visited the British Museum, walked all over the city, intrigued and disconcerted by the masses in its streets which never seemed to let him to get into full stride. While accepting dinner invitations from acquaintances of second if not second-rate Australian cousins, he looked forward to the compensation of his first sight of snow. It didn't come, the weather stayed cold and dry, frost lurked on cordilleras of mud until midday in some streets, elsewhere dust and grit reasserted themselves in the air minutes after water carts had suppressed them; sometimes it seemed as if half the city's population was wincing and wiping its eyes– evoking a weird and disconcerting parallel in his mind between this city and Adelaide in the grip of a summer northerly. The first fogs of the season left him feeling marooned and blocked off from both advances and retreats. Street traffic was reduced to the muffled and anonymous, impervious to all but the threat of hoof beats. The acrid moisture stained his handkerchiefs. After the habitual few hours of sleep his temperament allowed him he woke at four in the mornings in unheated rooms, twitching with impatience. Disenchanted, or just worn out, he couldn't wait to get home, imagining that everything would come right when he got there.

The excitement of leaving the docks was replaced almost at once by ennui, however. The all-sail ship was almost becalmed on the first day out; thereafter he longed for some drama to infuse its passage. He joined other men returning from visits Home in games of

deck cricket but then had to endure long and unavailing political discussions with his cabin companion, a die-hard Conservative at twenty one. The youth, really, affecting the dress and manner of his own father's generation, and a goitre-bowled pipe that didn't quite manage to subsume his nondescriptness, applauded the fact that Australia was just getting back on its feet again after those 'damn socialists' got their come-uppance in the '90s strikes. 'Father told me they went to water when the troops were called out,' he huffed. His own poise failed the test of introduction to the feminine component of the passenger list at a concert held in their honour one night, when it retreated with its owner behind his incipient moustache. 'Never had a lot of time for this sort of thing, old chap,' he crumplingly excused himself, leaving Gardener to make forays into the enemy camp on his own. None of the young women to whom he eventually found himself being introduced even pretended to know anything of Cosme, however, nor show any interest in being enlightened; their mix of fluttering opacity and décolletage left him gritting his teeth in his bunk.

In Adelaide he was welcomed by his surviving family and reassumed a relationship with his mother marked by its banter. She was not irreverent, but the kind of mild irony which she had always employed with her son had had the effect of binding him to her perennially, while at the same time subtly undercutting the tie. When she said, 'I should tell you, our new minister devoted his sermon last week to that place in South America… *frightfully* interesting…' he knew she was both having a dig at the Congregationalist minister's presumption in preaching a sermon on the subject, and belittling her son's involvement in it. It was always to her an at-best impractical scheme, which she and her husband helped fund. Though she never mentioned it to Harry, there was an implicit awareness between them that his indebtedness was one of the ingredients of their relationship, and might continue on her uncomplaining part to be.

He dealt with a backlog of correspondence at the family home, tidied up what was left of his father's affairs, cycled wet or fine as far afield as the Barossa to attend and speak at political meetings, and attempted, in what even he must have known was a vainglorious gesture, to reinforce the faith of the thinning ranks of true believers in Paraguay, on paper… What news he got from back in the colony was not encouraging. The library and its thousand books had burnt down. The band had disbanded. 'Everything seems to be falling apart here, old chap,' one of his correspondents said. 'All the old spark has gone.' Even the 'whips of dogma, stacks of selfishness and yards of words' decried by another correspondent had been replaced by a kind of sullenness, a near tacit acceptance of the way things were headed. 'Some of the single men have teamed up with the local native women,' a writer said. 'Not openly, but you'd have to be blind not to see what's happening. They're brewing their own beer too. "King Billy" would have a fit if he was still around. As soon as I can tee up a job with one of the cattle ranchers in Argentina I'm afraid I'll be out of here too.'

When Croser delivered his ultimatum Harry had spent most of the time left in Cosme avoiding Hattie, while she'd spent much of it hunting him down. She refused to play his game. She waylaid him outside the men's quarters at night and attempted to drag him aside; a shushed interlude, on his part, resulted in her stamping on one of his feet. 'Go on then, get back inside, damn you!' she huffed.

'Hattie,' he reasoned, 'there are eyes everywhere….'

'Damn their eyes!' she said.

She'd found him when he was gouging out stumps in a half cleared paddock one day and tore her blouse open.

'There,' she said. 'Now say you don't want me.' Harry had averted his gaze, however, and said something really, and gutlessly, evasive, 'Hattie, do you want to have someone's bastard child?'

‘I don’t care if it’s your bastard. Look at me…’ she demanded, and when he relented they clung to one another like scarecrows in the middle of the half cleared field. He’d wanted to say something then, something valedictory, but she wouldn’t let him: when he tried she pushed him away. She said, ‘I warn you, if you go I’ll marry the first man I see.’

And she had. The letter concerning the matter wasn’t among the original pile waiting for Harry when he got back to Australia. He had to wait for weeks to learn that when Hattie’s family moved to Buenos Aires not long after he left to try and raise the money to get back to Australia, she had met and not all that much later married some young Englishman.

So she’s done it, Harry thought. He was not so surprised, and not all that much more hurt, he believed; she’d delivered the killer blow a long while back. The news about the colony was a lot sadder. In some ways by backing up her words or threats she had vindicated him too, even if it was in the distorted way that the principled enjoy at the expense of the compromised. He did not stagger, clutching the letter in one hand and smiting his brow with the other as principals had done in one of Carrie Whitcombe’s productions. Really, he’d been waiting for it. He did take the time to stand back from the letter once he’d replaced it on his desk, and to wonder what her new man was like, and whether or not he might be the colourless sort his background half threatened; to speculate whether in fact the girl had committed a folly, and to what sort of compromise her impetuous act might have committed her and whether she might find the yoke of her husband settling ever more tightly round her neck once she was in his keeping…but it wasn’t till he got to the point of speculating on whether she’d waited till after the ceremony to spread her legs that he picked up the letter again and tore it into bits.

Verco

Gardener hardly moved from bed for days afterwards. Pretending to be ill, he counted out the reasons he had for staying there and couldn't find one to make him get up. He had a sense of betrayal on his and Hattie's parts, a conviction of unfitness for any role he'd ever cast himself in. He engaged despair. While hours passed, time stalled. Unable to read or write he was astounded by ennui's resources. The symptoms he gave to the family doctor were sufficiently vague for him to prescribe a tonic, but not quite so nebulous for him to avoid using the term 'nervous exhaustion' to Harry's mother…possibly due, he suggested, to delayed shock from his father's death. The doctor was jealous as any of his professional probity, but his human sympathies extended to suggesting that *Fisher & Co's Phospherine* might be supplemented with a daily glass of stout for his patient. Harry's mother took care to present the ration in its most clinical form; she left it standing till it went flat, she wrinkled her nose in sympathetic distaste as her son took his first sip, before sparing herself the sight of any more of his discomfort by leaving him to knock it back in peace. Afterwards he would indeed feel strengthened, putting the odd chink of metaphorical light that intruded itself into his cell down to the rebirth of his spiritual resolve, until dyspepsia took possession of him again.

At the end of a week or so he knew he had to do something. Not about Hattie, of course. A more hot-blooded settler in Cosme had responded to the elopement of his wife with another male by pursuing them with a revolver as far as Asuncion, before returning alone doubly humiliated, without having fired a shot. Harry knew that excess was beyond him.

In the letter to a friend in which he finally got round to confessing his condition, he said, while still displaying the public stoicism of the period, 'I feel that if I can just put my energies into something, I will be able to rid myself of the discreditable sense of lethargy which, I confess, has floored me of late.' When he received and accepted an invitation, most

probably organized by his mother, to go and stay on his Uncle Raymond's riverfront property near the South Australian border, he accepted. He might have been said to be packing up his troubles and taking them with him. But in another way he was trying to reintroduce himself to his principles. The settlement had been one of a number of cooperatives established in the 90s on the river, ostensibly and at least partly, to soak up some of the unemployed, but also to provide an alternative attraction for men of small means to goldfields and places like Paraguay – the niggers in capitalism's woodpile. If it seemed like a good time to inspect and if possible get involved with one of them; he was not to know that its condition, like all the others in the scheme, was already moribund. Within a short few years most of the small means of men and women who took up the option had been reduced to infinitesimal tangibles. Some of the settlers, who were among those who'd straggled home from Paraguay, had had their ideals dealt another back hander. It was in the middle of a drought, the irrigation schemes didn't work properly, they couldn't sell what they not all that competently grew, the experience of poverty meant people were haunted even more by the apprehension that everything they were doing was in a sense for nothing since their best efforts would be subsumed in communal ownership. And how hard would it have been in those days once you'd tasted failure to begin all over again?

Harry's relations, however, had survived the regional melt down. They'd arrived in the area with that most elusive thing: capital, and had enough sense to realise how to use it to profit from others' failures. They took up other river front land and ran stock; by the time Gardener got there they were already easing into that state of semi comfort that signifies the emergence of the bourgeois; that class who are led almost reluctantly into a state of appreciation of their own acumen by the unspectacular accumulation of wealth.

His uncle had taken to changing before dinner, his arrival at the table heralded by a hint of cologne, while his still damp features and hair gave him the appearance of having just

emerged from the river, which was sometimes the case. He'd cleared sufficient snags from a waterhole near the house to make salutary plunges into it safe. The civilized if not urbane effect was spoiled one evening when a snake came out from under the cool safe and order was only restored after Harry himself found a shovel and separated the most inimical part of the intruder from its body.

After that, and while leaving his wife to reorganize what she liked to call the dining room, Raymond suggested that Harry might like to adjourn to the veranda, as if, having been outflanked by Harry in the confrontation with the snake, he could re-establish his dominance there. 'Point is, old chap,' he said – or old man, he interchanged the terms, eschewing 'mate' entirely – 'we're all in this together. But someone, a government, has got to be in charge who knows what time of day it is. Doesn't sound like your bloke over in South America had a clue.'

It was an opening Harry didn't take. For the moment his taste for debate had been well and truly dulled. The failure of the settlement around him had left no opening to deliver lectures to anyone on communism. And he had duties as a guest. He'd been left alone from his arrival to do as he pleased; the efforts he had made to help out on the property were mostly unhelpful. He could sense the exasperation in the daytime, unbathed version of his uncle, when his nephew failed to corner an obdurate sheep or allowed it to punch a hole through the fence he was supposed to have just mended.

Sometimes, as much to get out of the way as anything, he went riding on the box tree clad river flats nearby, disturbing crows pursuing their invariably dismal ends and parrots who burst into rackety florescence above him. The exercise was purely leisurely until the day he was charged with the responsibility of delivering a message to a station a couple of miles down-stream.

The circumstances of his arrival were not auspicious. It had rained, the mud flats had turned gluey and he reached his destination on platform hooves. Seeing a figure approaching on horseback a young female came to open the gate of the fence surrounding the house. Gardener had dismounted and was leading the horse in and preparing to offer his hand after she had closed the gate behind him when the animal broke wind. It was impossible to ignore and entirely to the young lady's disadvantage. While she was covering her face with a handkerchief and backing away from her visitor, Harry's embarrassment was unflatteringly translated into a half smirk. 'Something he eat on the way, perhaps,' he speculated lamely, before conceding more ground, 'An indiscriminate forager, I fear...'

'Perhaps you will come in,' she suggested.

What an ass she must think me, Harry thought. Yet he had a glimpse of a pleasant face once she'd put away her hanky, despite the unsurprising wariness in its expression. It was a look he got to know well in future however. Her father, a study in belligerence with tufts of red hair fuming in concert with it from his invariable open shirt with rolled up sleeves, had made his money on the tail end of Victoria's gold rush, and then married above himself as part of his ambition to shake the clay from his boots forever. He was as even the ever tolerant Harry noted in his diary, 'verging on uncouth,' one never tired of reminding his more genteel wife and by proxy his daughter of the circumstances that had led her family into accepting him into it. They had over invested in Victoria's land boom of the 80s and been savaged by its collapse, while he, as he relished reminding people, had hung on to his 'siller'. His efforts to burrow or ingratiate himself into Victorian society had not otherwise struck gold. After being excluded from its list of welcome guests when he got in a punch-up at Melbourne Club he became convinced that a conspiracy of better bred interests was working against him, even managing to exclude him from entry into the dress circle of grazing

properties nearer Melbourne. He'd come determined to make the riverfront station he'd ended up with workable, and flourish its success in squattocracy's face.

Once inside, in the small interval the old man allowed his wife and daughter to enjoy their guest's company without him dominating it, the girl's mother tentatively welcomed Harry to her home. Within it all the more delicate and feminine articles of furniture seemed to have dust covers, as if to protect them from the bulkier and heavier leather bound items around them, if not the masculine presence of their owner. It seemed like a case of hers being under unrelenting attack from his. The day was mild, yet in what Mrs MacNeil designated the drawing room the curtains were drawn; unavailingly as it turned out as MacNeil made a point of yanking them apart while demanding, 'Whit's it – a hearse we're expectin'?' Though she made no protest, Mrs MacNeil's flatlined responses to her husband were betrayed by an almost invisible twist to the corner of her lips. In what passed for repose she sat with her hands forming a frail cupola before her, looking not so much pale as etiolated, as if, like some once healthy plant transplanted from gentler climes, she was clinging to the hope that her daughter Eleanor's escape from the household might be the vicarious means of saving her mother from defoliation. Her daughter was nearly twenty five. With each birthday her mother's eyes were narrowing more in acknowledgment that it could be a close run thing.

Harry felt almost nothing in the house but a desire to distance himself from it while he was there, and the MacNeil's daughter, Eleanor, betrayed very little personality of her own on that first meeting. Though she went through the motions of pouring tea and offering scones to 'Mr Gardener', she seemed uncomfortable in the presence of both parents and guest. Yet, as Harry left some part of his mind couldn't help asking, 'My God, how can I leave the poor girl here?'

Without prompting from her mother, Eleanor saw him off. The old man made some abrupt gesture from the veranda that could have implied anything before stamping off across

the yard, while his wife winced on her brief exposure to the open air and inclined her covered head into the sun like an old salt bracing herself against a blow. Eleanor did the honours with the gate once more, and was going through the formalities of inviting him to call again, when Harry side tracked some of his own awkwardness by saying, with a nod at his mount, 'Well, let's hope my arrival is more propitious next time,' and grinning until he was rewarded with the slightest tremor in her lips.

'Indeed,' she said.

Harry eased his heels into the side of his horse very gently then, until they were out of ear-shot of the house when he encouraged it to canter. It seemed hardly appropriate for him to take off his hat and salute some red gums and their choirs-in-waiting of corellas with it on his way past, but he felt as if some burden had been, if not lifted from his shoulders, at least settled more equably upon them.

Marriage

In years to come, almost everyone who had anything to do with Harry, his staff, employees, associates and growers, spoke of his kindly and benevolent presence; he fitted, if the allusion does not discredit the reality, the image of one of Dickens' prototypes. Padding round his office in a tussore silk suit and sandshoes, he might have been a past his use-by date retainer kept on by his own indulgence: he took pride in others' work, he complimented them on births and unions, and his workers rewarded him with their loyalty. That was in the future of course, and his path to philosophical equilibrium was littered with distractions over which he did tend to obsess. While an advocate of conscription in the First World War – and the Labour Party did their dash with him there by opposing it – and a staunch supporter of the Allied cause, he afterwards spent money and time trying to exculpate Germany from absolute culpability in the conflict; for years he kept nagging away whenever he had an audience at the Single Tax cause.

Those most heartening characteristics of Harry though, his charity, forbearance and sensitivity, pointed to his fatherly interest in those around him. Despite his liking for solitude and his ability to utilize it, as well as the taste for adventure he'd already shown, he was one of those, and it showed more and more, who believed that for pleasure to be a pleasure it really needed be shared, and even then should not be exclusive. This may merely have been liberal muddle headedness, and his tolerance did not excuse him from didactically championing causes, but overwhelmingly his interest in them was neither selfish nor obdurate; he wanted to be heard, but he had an almost greedy interest in giving other people a hearing as well. Lenin, if he'd ever met him, would no doubt have lumped him in with the rest of 'those foreign socialist fools' who came to disseminate his sophistries, and in a

revolution he would he might have paid a price for offering shelter to whichever faction was getting the worst of things.

Most simply put, Harry was a nurturer, a giver. People tend to belong to that or its alternative camp, in lesser or greater forms; on balance most come down on the side of takers. There was something about McNeil's daughter, Eleanor, then, that touched in him what is too often called a chord. His divination of her implicit needs may not have been Archimedean; in a house dominated by her boorish father her emotional state could hardly have been otherwise; but there was something more than helplessly waif-like about her. As he got to know her better – and he visited again, of course – he realised she had a sense of humour: a refined one: she would raise her eyebrows minimally when her father's bull headed observation on some subject revealed his total ignorance of it. Irony, which depends for its success on complicity between its author and their audience, united them. She did not, could not, gush. Perhaps she'd already had too many disappointments. Nor was she bold, she restricted conversation almost entirely to matters meteorological in their first meetings, she rode a horse side saddle when they came to pursue that pastime together, and never pushed her mount beyond a trot. But once, when they had returned from some excursion, they were in time to see her father being upended by the house goat, and he couldn't help but see the small flicker of appreciation on her face until it was obliterated by the old man's apoplectic response. There was something of Harry's mother about her without, at this stage, his mother's asperity. She sometimes, and sparingly, referred with a kind of nostalgia to other, and clearly better days, back in Melbourne. While discussing them she might lightly tap her skirt with her riding crop as if reminded of more elegant dress. Otherwise she rarely complained; she appreciated the small acts of consideration he showed in lowering fence wires for her when they were out and she was a good listener. She nodded thoughtfully, or at least looked thoughtful, while he was expounding his views on agricultural cooperatives. She

was no Hattie: she was restful – except once, when they were investigating a stretch of the river and came upon a small reef of dry mussel shells, when she said with a strong hint of bitterness, 'There were some blacks camped here when we first came, but father drove them off – or he said he did.'

When Harry kissed Eleanor for the first time she leant her cheek against his chest as if in gratitude, and when he enclosed her slim body he felt a sense of possession. After that they were more at ease with each other and eventually it seemed natural to formalise their relationship.

'You will have to speak with Father,' Eleanor warned, It was nearly dusk, they were standing by a giant red gum watching a river in full spate turn ochreous when Harry made his modest proposal.

'Will he be difficult?' he asked.

She made a faintly plosive sound. '…It depends.'

Until assured of his guest's financial bona fides Mr MacNeil had been almost openly contemptuous of Gardener. He gave New Australia short shrift when he learnt of Harry's involvement in it. 'I'll tell ye this, I'd ha' give them red-raggers (he pronounced it 'rid') a one way ticket. I wouldna let them come crawling back here at all.'

'I wouldn't say all those who came back here did so on all fours,' Harry offered in their defence.

'Did they not? Didnay see some of their kind near beggin' for a bit of bread here when their communism came to nuthin'.'

'I believe some of the failures were due to things beyond their control, weren't they?' Harry said. Prices, the drought, the irrigation schemes the government had half-bakedly set up…he'd like to have started listing them.

‘You’re havering, laddie. I know some of the things that went on beyond yon ‘control’ as ye call it, with those brave boys in their kips till the day was half done and spending their money on drink.’ He nodded himself into full agreement with himself before adding suspiciously, ‘You’re no drinker, are ye?’

‘My family are very much Temperance,’ Harry assured him.

‘That’s something,’ the old man conceded. Later, when he learnt more of Harry’s antecedents, and assured himself that his prospective son-in-law motives appeared to be based on something more than hopes of gain, his attitude softened. Something of his old latent and conflicting emotions regarding the class of ‘laird’ that Harry might represent resurfaced then. ‘There,’ he’d say arrogantly, hands on hips, standing back among the reek of dust and urine to admire a flock of pedigreed but still greasy sheep he’d watched being yarded, ‘Ye’d have seen nothin’ like them in South America, would ye laddie?’ before curiously conceding, ‘Well, well, it’s a different world there, I imagine,’ after Harry’s dutifully responsive – and honest – ‘No, no, indeed,’ had satisfied him. He allowed himself to settle back on the heels of his boots for a moment before some failing of one of his station hands distracted him and he started bellowing, ‘What are ye gawkin’ at, man? Are you scart of gettin’ your hands clarty?’

When Harry came to ask MacNeil for his own daughter’s hand, he was half embarrassed by his reception. The old man stuck both hands in his pockets and fixed his eyes very briefly on the ground a pace or two in front of his boots before responding, ‘Well, well, she cud do worse. She’s no gettin’ any younger, I mind, and she’s no sonsie, either.’

Harry felt he should state his position more firmly. ‘I am in love with your daughter, Mr MacNeil,’ he reminded him.

‘Oh luve, luve, never mind that, can you keep her? That’s all that matters.’

‘I believe so, yes,’ Harry said, dignifiedly.

‘Aye, well then.’ Momentarily, MacNeil’s face wore the look of a livestock breeder who has managed to make the best possible deal at a quiet sale and is considering his chances of unloading something else on his buyer.

Eleanor’s mother looked as if she might have the vapours when acquainted with the news. She raised a hand to her throat as if to check its artery’s pace, and said, ‘Most pleased,’ several times, torn between the desire to share the news with absent friends by taking up a pen at once, and will her husband out of the house that she might enjoy the moment without him. ‘I…really,’ she said, looking round in a manner that suggested she was looking for an absent domestic, before taking the plunge herself and declaring, ‘We must have tea…will you join us, Mr McNeil?’

Her appalled husband snatched his hat up. ‘I’ll no’ – I’ve work to do. But a word – dinna think I’ll be gyting my money on one of those Melbourne weddings of your family you’re forever haverin’ about.’

A chill replaced him in the room. Mrs McNeil opened and closed her mouth experimentally and then went to see to the kettle. The young couple were left to shyly examine the process they had set in train, and speculate on whether it could recover from the shadow that had just been cast over it. In the event the wedding, by Gardener’s own insistence, was modest; the few guests were made to wait while the Presbyterian minister overseeing the ceremony arrived on a horse flogged to the point of exhaustion. He excused himself by explaining that his parish extended almost a hundred miles on all sides of his destination. The small weatherboard church seemed itself a testimony to his tenuous grasp of the territory; its handful of chipped pews, remnants of a bankrupt furniture maker’s stock, sat under a corrugated iron roof rippling disturbingly in a south westerly. The rectitude the minister conducted the ceremony with lasted until the reception back at the McNeil’s home when the host declared that he would concede to the occasion a rare dram for them both.

Harry's mother, who had arrived by a circuitous route that included trains, punts and coaches showed admirable composure. She kissed her new daughter-in-law's cheek, and patted her new sister-in-law. MacNeil, after the first introductions, she simply ignored: her sympathies for his wife were such that she looked as if she'd liked to bundle up the little lady on the spot and decamp with her. She oversaw most of the formalities of the reception, and announced after a very terminable period, 'Harry, I think you and Eleanor might be well advised to leave. Her father and the reverend gentlemen both appear to be drunk.' And they were: no diplomacy could disguise it. The taciturnity of both of them, having first been submerged in alcohol, had resurfaced in the form of mutual antagonism – 'I'll no…' 'You'll no? Why will ye no? –' 'I'll no, and nae Dumfries man'll' – as the absolute free hand alcohol had given MacNeil's belligerence was frustrated by the antagonism it aroused in its subject .

'I'm sure your mother is right. Things will end dreadfully if we stay any longer,' said poor Eleanor. 'I know what father is like.'

'They *have* been rather going it,' Harry diplomatically conceded. He stood his own ground for as long as it took to offer his salutations to his father-in-law and have them ignored. 'De'il take it man,' McNeil was in the middle of saying to his countryman, 'if ye didna have ye hat off already, I'd see to it mesel'!' when he was interrupted by his daughter. He dismissed her with the curtest of waves – 'Aye, away wi' ye girl – ' Disturbing and suggestive sounds pursued the small group to their coach, and Harry's last view of his mother-in-law, when Eleanor and his mother and sister were all seated law showed her slight form standing bolt upright at her front door, and looking straight ahead as if by doing so the events of the last few hours could somehow be outfaced.

'I am so terribly sorry,' said Eleanor, to everyone around here. She was on the verge of tears. 'He does that sometimes and then makes out it never happened – I' –

‘Don’t, dear’ – Harry’s mother urged. ‘My own outdoor reception by the Torrens was ruined, I remember. It was a drought year and we were beset by swans and pelicans who’d come into the city looking for food… My poor mother was almost hysterical.’

Harry settled his hat straight on his head and squeezed his new bride’s hand.

If he had allowed himself the indulgence of thinking of Hattie that night in the Nandurah hotel – which he would not have done – he might have been grateful for the experience she had lent him to help reduce his new partner’s distress. Eleanor was beside herself with apprehension, willing Harry’s mother’s presence with them in the hotel’s coffee room that evening to be permanent. The lady tactfully withdrew at about nine, however, and left them to it. The only thing Eleanor’s own mother ever imparted to her about sex had begun and ended with her first period, when she managed to convey that it was an introduction to messier and much more painful female rites. In privacy, and stripped very briefly of clothing’s artifices, Eleanor’s body in the mirror assured her that she would be unequal to any trial in store for her, or any of the forms of retribution her mother had hinted might be consequent upon it. She trembled under her night gown when Harry joined her in bed. Yet, in the event, nearly all her trepidation was defused by Harry’s consideration, while leaving her shocked at her own response. She was grateful for the darkness disguising her flushed condition, she kept waiting for some reproof from her lover, an outburst to confirm that their union had been stained by her lack of restraint …and felt Harry stroking her. In a moment that surprised her by its resolution she decided that if this was the road to perdition, she would take it.

Nandurah

The young couple's choice of destination for their honeymoon was not entirely fortuitous. Harry's uncle from Verco, in seeking to expand his own landed interests, had asked his nephew to investigate a number of fruit growing properties in Nandurah. The town, like so many others on the river, had staggered under the 90s Depression, but was emerging from the slump, he claimed; the right properties might still be picked up at prices reflecting their owner's or their bank's keenness to unload them. Harry spent a week on a tour of the town and its surrounds and finished up buying a property on his own: ten irrigated acres planted with lemons. The trees were still young, their future, like his and Eleanor's, was all before them, he assured her. Eleanor did not shrink from her inspection of the property; if she could not share her husband's enthusiasm she was going to do nothing that might impair it. She walked down the ploughed furrows between the rows of trees and examined the earthen channel that would bring water to them. While listening to Harry's explanation of its function she tilted her head back that she might better imagine the tall, sweet blossoming trees that would soon fill the sky above them. If she had held out hopes that Nandurah was only be going to be an interim stop on a road that eventually led back to Melbourne, she suppressed them. She looked forward to making other claims on her husband before then.

It *was* pure accident that Harry ran into the owner of the local rag, a gentleman whose proprietorial ambitions were so dedicated to leap frogging obstacles in the way of him achieving patrician status, that he'd have liked to distance his paper altogether from the human condition. In his mind Nandurah's transformation from its half knockabout, uneasily polyglot state to sophisticated urban centre depended largely on his pen; his editorials propounded networks of macadamized roads, public buildings of two and three story heights, emporiums…his references to Melbourne were almost patronizing. His own interest in

cultivation extended no further than a luxuriant full and white beard that he used to present his profile to advantage. He took on Harry as his agricultural reporter, asking only that he try to fill out a half page with more or less relevantly horticultural jottings. He was faintly annoyed when subscribers showed an interest in reading more of them, and more relevant ones. He had expected that Harry's engaging style might eventually find expression in a sort of 'heaths and hedgerows' evocation of a world he saw Nandurah becoming. Yet, even if 'The Rambler's' initial advice was disingenuous – his own horticultural efforts had so far borne limited and no more than acceptably bitter fruit – Harry's interest in reading and reproducing better qualified articles and information was reliable. His decision to blame his own setbacks on the soil was probably the most sensible thing he could do, since it allowed him, by stepping back and away from his own property, to look at a bigger picture. Unfortunately, the introduction of political theories into his journalism ultimately drove a wedge between himself and his employer.

Harry had had time to take in the piecemeal economic activity of the area, to watch while individual growers loaded up carts and drays with fruit and grapes that, if they reached a market at all, often met with deplorable prices or outright rejection from wholesalers who preyed on their clients. He had tried to rectify through his columns the purely empirical approach of growers – sturdy individualists, he conceded, whose independence often led them into inappropriate practices. He envisaged the establishment of cooperatives which would seek out best markets and prices, while offering prudent counsel and financial safety nets for growers. People, however, must be prepared in such practical schemes to sacrifice some individual rights for the collective good, he argued.

His editor was not enamoured. He did not like such talk at all, in fact. As one gentleman to another, he aired his reservations in his office. Gardener responded in kind, and at length. Initially, the editor retreated, abandoning any suggestion of pique in the face of

Harry's reasonableness. When Harry returned to his theme in print, however, Pendle privately blanched when he saw the words socialism and communism tactlessly strewn among and obliterating much gentler descriptive nouns like 'community' and 'harmony', and decided it was time to be more firm.

'I really cannot have you pursuing this theme, Gardener,' he said, drawing down on his coat lapels. 'It is anarchistic.'

'I am no anarchist, I assure you Pendle,' Harry assured him. 'I simply believe that in communities like this it is for the good of all that people should work for all.'

'I know of your involvement with that scheme in South America, Gardener, and the politics that inspired it. I had hoped you had that out of your system by now. You have a wife; I need hardly remind you, and responsibilities. I'm afraid I have had complaints over your views.'

'From readers?'

'Advertisers. Wittwer's Funerals have registered their disquiet. They have substantial other business interests, conservative ones, that they feel might be tainted by the introduction of political currency other than the one by which they've prospered.'

'Well let me assure them in print if you like, that the laws of nature combined with the lack of sanitation in this town, make it most unlikely that their major source of income will be threatened.'

'I must say, Gardener, that I appreciate neither your tone, nor your habit of complicating issues. Why drag sanitation into this?' The editor's head had begun to bob, and his incipient jowls to joggle under their overlay.

'Because I wonder if our Funeral Parlour friend, Mr Wittwer, is aware of any sense of complicity on his part when he drags his hearses past the cess-pit on the way the cemetery. As chairman of the town council, it was he who recently forbad the imposition of any rate

rise on his commercial friends in sanitation's interests, and he who placed a council imprimatur on the dumping of abattoir wastes into the river. I have seen the slops being tipped in there myself. The stench is unspeakable. God knows what it does to the water people use for washing in.'

'Gardener, I must insist that you confine your remarks to the matter in hand,' Pendle said. 'I must. I have called you in here for one purpose. I believe you are a gentleman. As another I must remind you that ultimately I am your employer, and I will not have you draping my newspaper in the metaphorical ribbons of an abominable creed. I believe you should consider your position.'

'I shall, Pendle, I assure you.'

'Do.' It was a pregnant moment, with the editor nodding judicious approval of himself, while Gardener stood before him, head high; any analogy between it and a Mexican stand-off being deprecated however by Pendle insisting on closing the interview with a remark that haunted him when consciousness recalled it to him in the early hours of the following morning.

'I might add too, Gardener,' he said, wagging a jaw conscious of its owner's rectitude, 'that local fishing has never been better.'

Mylong 1902

'Straggling, dusty and dilapidated', as well as 'hamlet', were words used by a contemporary historian to describe Mylong at about the time of Harry's first view of it. There were less than a thousand people scattered round the area, people rode their bikes on the footpath, and businesses burned off their rubbish in the street…It was all good rustic stuff. 'A sleepy hollow,' Harry himself called it, and liked it, so someone else said he said, all the more for it. His presence there was purely speculative, but not casual; in his mind his interview with the editor had made his position on the paper intolerable. The same gentleman had since taken to looming up behind him when he was at his desk as if he might catch his employee seditiously engaged. He was too young to put up with it. He had heard that down river, on the South Australian side, one of the small town's newspapers was struggling. He determined to investigate it once Eleanor gave her assent. The vision the newspaper's editor had for Nandurah seemed to be coming no closer to fruition. Stuck in a state of indeterminacy the town's avenues tailed off in wastes of mud or scrub; many of its males, stranded there by inoccupation, roamed the same streets after dark in a drunken state; offences against public property saw the lock-up crammed. A sense of futility hung over everything.

Harry's arrival in Mylong was not immediately auspicious, either. He got there after dark and during his first night in the pub was woken up by the dunny man emptying the pub's accumulated wastes into his tank and rinsing out the chamber pots and buckets in the horse trough afterwards. Still, he met fresher morning air once he'd had the courage to re-open his window, and the sound of reed-warblers plotting revolt under cover and butcher birds in open possession of the day. In his first impressions of the town he described its river as being close enough to throw a biscuit into from the main street. Perhaps he tried it when he went for a morning stroll to walk off the breakfast's cold mutton. They hadn't quite known what to

make of him in the breakfast room. He seemed too well washed and brushed and too genial, the girl waiting on him kept offering him more tea as if she thought it might water him down. Afterwards he got into conversations almost at once with people in the street. After its near collapse when the brothers that set it up went broke, the town had been given a lifeline by the government, and there was a mood of optimism about. First impressions are important; he described the population, consisting mostly of 'new chums' and almost exclusively English and Australian, as 'rattling good fellows', probably after spending an hour or two in their select company. He was impressed by the fact that the pub had set aside a saloon for the exclusive use of coffee and tea drinkers. He took his stick and saluted strangers with it on his early morning round. He looked across the river, which in normal times makes a big broad inward sweeping bend by the town, to the thick red-gum forest on the other side, a river-made island, with the distant cliffs of Verco beyond. There was a sense of containment about everything. He felt he belonged.

The very first time he saw the newspaper office he knew it was what he wanted. It was a rough and ready concern set up in not much more than a shed near the pub – wide open then and in all weathers as he found out later, because when the paper went to press the shed filled up with petrol fumes and when it got too bad the men working the presses walked off the job into the pub next door. There was less chance of a fire, too, with everything open. When Harry walked past it sounded like civil war had broken out inside, the row was deafening, but a man sitting on a chair just inside the entrance like the Duchess's footman in *Alice in Wonderland*, closely examining a copy of the latest edition, seemed for the moment oblivious to it. His attention was on the paper.

He responded to Harry's salutation with a nod and got up and came outside wiping ink from his hands. 'A fine day,' Harry attempted to convey, though the man showed no sign

of hearing. He touched a hand on Harry's arm and led him a few paces down the street. 'What was that?'

'A fine day,' Harry said, indulgently.

'I suppose it is.' The other man looked around as if the town was being presented to him as evidence of it. 'I've been struggling with this confounded issue since four this morning. Nothing wants to work.' He peered at the stranger through rimless glasses as if calculating his likely mechanical expertise. 'You are ….?'

Harry introduced himself.

'I'm the owner of this. The newspaper,' the man said, and gave his name. 'Lock stock and barrel.' There was an awful shuddering from inside as he spoke and the sound of someone swearing. 'God in heaven,' he said. 'Excuse me.'

Harry walked away in a state of repressed excitement. He was still simmering when he got to the town's wharf. A steamer had just pulled in and was loading cargo. Harry detected a smartness in the vessel and its crew which might have embarrassed the subjects of his scrutiny. The men were in fact going about their work with about as much patience as they thought the job could endure, while the owner of the vessel was standing nearby with hands on hips fuming. In his absorption in the activity Harry nearly put himself under the heels of a horse. He excused its owner's language and resumed his patrol. When he had walked off as much excess energy as he could he returned to the newspaper office and left his card. The following day he opened negotiations for the newspaper's purchase with its owner, who was too weary to even go through the motions of trying to be canny. The picture he presented of the paper's problems and future prospects would have disheartened a lesser man. Harry wasn't listening. He wrote to his mother and awaited her reply back in Nandurah.

If his mother had any qualms about advancing him the money, she didn't let on. When Harry made reference, quite unmeaningfully in his letter, to Eleanor's pregnancy she

generously replied, ‘My son, I want only what is best for you and your wife and my grandchild.’ She was getting old, her annual chats with the family solicitor revealed a portfolio of investments sheltered from the worst of the 90s crash that were now most complacently burgeoning. Sitting in his office she felt embarrassed, as the documents her adviser laid out on his leather bound desk threatened to overreach it. Though Harry wasn’t to know it, and the disciplinarian in her would not quite allow her to confess, he would have been welcome to almost the family fortune. What she was not to know was that this was the last time he would ever make a claim on her purse. Within a very few years he had not only paid back the money, but was on the way to imitating the examples of his mother’s philanthropy that her redirection of his repaid loan included.

Harry set about clearing the decks when he took over the paper. He had found his metier, his energies had at last somewhere to be fully directed and realised. He was still no hands-on man in practical matters but he had the enthusiasm to enthuse those who were, and he had a partner who was not only supportive but in possession of a surprising measure of steel. Harry had an almost overweening faith in human nature; Eleanor didn’t. Since he – really – disliked and even dreaded confrontation, she took over the study of quotations and invoices and challenged the ones she thought shonky. She pointed out other discrepancies. When she came into the office in her obviously pregnant state, she was aware of and saw through workers’ dissimulating condescension. She would say, ‘Harry, that fellow Raleigh has been drinking.’ There was no point in Harry saying, ‘I believe he may have had a pot or two at the hotel during his luncheon break,’ when the man was almost reeling.

After she had made her point she might then add, as a gentle reprimand, ‘I think you should counsel him,’ and when Harry showed signs of procrastination she would say, ‘I will do it.’ Her father’s tumbles from the temperance wagon during her upbringing, when each lapse was succeeded by unrepentant execrations against the real culprit – grog – had left her

with a sense of dread of its contamination, she recoiled from its presence and its consumption as if a recovered alcoholic herself, or as reformed smokers do in today's times when the slightest whiff of tobacco drives them from a room. In the case of employees, Eleanor would approach the example of human frailty and conclude a small lecture in which she appealed largely to his better instincts by delivering a temperance tract into his keeping. She wasn't unpleasant, but in her own way assisted in the subtle change in the office's – or shed's – atmosphere. Men began to take an interest in their work, and the paper's circulation. They were on their best behaviour when potential advertisers called. At times like that they enjoyed, as people do, being on show. Though possessed of not much more than basic literacy themselves, they pored over first run prints for typos. They called themselves *Mail* men. When Eleanor was relieved of her biological burden they queued to view the child and nudge its cheeks.

The baby, born at the end of a prolonged labour, however, while healthy, might have been seen to be carrying unconsciously a burden from its delivery, as a well as a sense of responsibility for the difficulties he had imposed on his mother. His slightly abashed appearance was succeeded by a set and serious one. He rarely cried and seldom smiled; when Eleanor presented a nipple the baby accepted the offer of nourishment, but sought no other succour. Visitors were presented with his preoccupation with circling toys above his cot, as if some clue to their movements might enlighten him on a deeper level, in the same and almost perplexed way as, when he was older, he viewed displays of energy in his father which he knew he could never match. He could not have known, or at that age had added to his burdens, that his birth was to be the last under the roof. When, two years later, a potential playmate for him was stillborn, the local doctor advised his mother that another pregnancy could be fatal for both her and baby. He hedged around the subject of sex. 'It may mean that in future, you and your husband's…activities…may need to be precluded, or at least …more

cautious,' he stumbled out, while still managing to load the last phrase with enough of an implied reproof to save face himself.

The ramifications for the young couple's relationship haunted Eleanor. Prophylactics were articles sniggered at in low circles and whispered about in more elevated ones. Restrictions took all the charm out of their lovemaking. Sometimes Eleanor saw the inhibitions that had been placed on them as retributive. Grief for her still born child became guiltful. Eventually she became passive partner, and then a resentful one as sex became a covert and, from her point of view, not brief enough act. It would be facile to suggest that she turned her surplus energies into charitable and other causes. Nevertheless, she joined and soon led the local chapter of the Band of Hope – a temperance group – in its battle with the demon drink.

Temperance has a long – and admirable in its own way – history in Australia, and may not yet have been completely bested. Certainly, drunkenness, if not alcoholism, was chronic in the 19th Century. There is a half facetious reference in an earlier version of Harry's paper, for example, to the local constabulary's enlistment of a horse and cart to collect the 'dead marines' from the backyard of the hotel. In the early 1900s a speaker at a Temperance meeting accused local growers of tipping more grog down their throats than water on their vines. Men, single mostly, nomadic and pessimistic, regularly drank themselves into insensibility. Drinking may never have reached Hogarthian depths of desperation in the town, but before Mylong was granted a licence sly grog shops flourished and, even earlier, steamers had a milk round of fishermen's long lines and hidey holes to top up with illicit cargo before they got into town.

While espousing his wife's cause Harry was never actually teetotal himself. But if he enjoyed a drink, a scotch or a glass of wine at a function, he thought of it as an indulgence – even if it was really ensuring that his motor had a chance to idle for a while.

He was an impassioned editor. It's easy now to forget how important the written word or words used to be. People devoured them once, so, in a sense, Gardener's paper was assured of an audience. That he was not a slave to it is shown in the space he often gave to subjects of little interest to many readers. His page, 'With Pipe and Book', supposedly devoted to fairly anodyne literary musings was often taken over by local and international politics and went on for pages when he had a bee in his bonnet. Some people complained; occasionally he lost readers and advertisers. Usually he won them back.

The language of his paper, even when impassioned, was still temperate, and representative of an age which shied away from journalistic overstatement, or even strictly accurate statement. If people and institutions were to be chided it was thought best to do it in a way that appealed to their better instincts, while confirming the existence of those qualities in the writer. When Gardener had to report on cases of public vandalism or disorder his columns were infused with a sense of his disappointment. Even the odd bits of seriously grave news – like the death of a man after a fall into his outhouse's feculent depths – were couched in such reticence that they sound unwittingly comic now. Reading such reports makes you wonder if the writers were dreaming of a world which might come to exist if only they were generous enough in their scrutiny of the existing one.

His was, I suppose, the true liberal spirit, which has been corrupted since into its own kind of bigotry. Harry believed in leading by undemonstrative example. From an early age he encouraged his son, Wesley, to accompany him on his inspections of the site of the *Mail's* new premises. He led him by the hand past groaning concrete mixers and their slurry, encouraging him to mount ladders with his assistance to peek at the bricklayers' work and, when machinery was being installed, defusing their looming and pungent greasy presence by simplifying their functions. The audience his son provided helped him forsee what was coming. The responses of Wesley were at best dutiful, however. It was not that he was

uninterested; from infancy, which state he was still enjoying, he had become an intuitive student of the engineering principles involved in his toys. Printing presses were well within his purview. There was something about his father that unnerved him, however. It wasn't just that he felt unequal to him, more as if he was perplexed by the relation between himself and this agitated figure springing about on planks in his desire to show off as much as he could of the work. It was as if even then, at the age of six, he was in some no-man's-land, where he could never be sure whether he wanted to hold his father's hand or not. If he retreated, which was to home, he was not absolutely at ease there either; his mother was not demonstratively affectionate, the supple ease with which she had held him when he was a baby had changed into arms' length detachment; if he hurt himself and she offered him consolation he felt its restrictions: he learned to become self-sufficient. He was happiest on his own.

When he was ten his parents sent him to Adelaide to school. It wasn't that he had outstripped the capacities of the local institution. He was going away, really, because the conservative in Harry was honouring one of the great traditions of his transplanted class. The place in waiting at his old school had outlasted any challenges from his South American adventure. There were absolutely no parallels to be drawn between his son's departure from home and his father's retreat from Villarico in Paraguay, either; once the boy had accepted a handshake from his father and a hug from his mother, he took up a seat with his back to them and the siding they were standing on. He shed a tear or two but then, in the best tradition of Corinthians put all childish things behind him.

In his absence his parents took up reins of their daily lives in a way they might have been anticipating as well, as if parting from their son was an expedient prelude to it. Since the house had never really rung to his cries silence didn't replace him; his mother tidied his never untidy bedroom and left its door ajar. She wasn't unfeeling, she had things to do.

She was no kid gloved participant in her involvement with social welfare. As president of the Methodist Church's Ladies Guild she did more than organise jumble sales; she delivered meals to the aged and indigent whose living conditions were often appalling. She steeled herself to wash those who were too ill to or had lost interest in doing so; sometimes she brought home with her women's tattered underthings which she swapped for articles of her own, before directing their general rouseabout, 'Snow' White, to stoke up the backyard incinerator. Like her husband she agitated for improvements to the local hospital and endorsed Harry's material contributions to it.

On balance, her association with the Local Temperance Society brought her most satisfaction; she sometimes returned from meetings glowing, especially when a crusade made its way to the Riverland. Temperance's influence waxed and waned over many years, but the tried and true took heart from such events. Their swollen numbers added to the fervent and at times poignant atmosphere engendered by hymns ranging from 'Oh, shun the bowl' —and its exhortative variations, to the regretful if not vindictive note of, 'Come behold the drunkard dying'. More than one sot who had come to mock stayed long enough to stagger tearfully to the front of the Institute building and throw themselves upon the company's collective bosom. Harry was not unsympathetic; he was ethically or morally caught in something of a cleft stick himself as he agitated for new – and mostly grape growing – blocks to be made available for small growers, while at the same time deploring the results of the local product's ultimate conversion. At times, and usually privately, however, he used irony as a way of defraying his inner conflict: at a meeting while sitting through the rocking-horse rhythms of - 'Farewell to the cup – we have tarried too long, Where the juice of the grape adds its witch'ry to song' – he reminded his wife of John Wesley's concession to the Devil of all the best tunes. Eleanor almost froze while reminding him, 'Harry, is this the time and place?'

It seemed a shame to Harry that his wife's commitments did not otherwise seem to bring her great joy though. Her slimness had declined into near-gauntness; she carried a rigidity and sense of strain around with her. She often presented herself to the local doctor complaining of headaches and more obscure conditions.

Young Wesley came home during the holidays – or hols – but rather brought Adelaide Grammar with him. He got off the train for the first time still wearing his school's colours, and after a half-hearted try to regain contact with boys he'd once gone to school with, resumed his school uniform permanently within his preferred four walls of home. His old playmates' passion for the life crudely masculine alienated him; they seemed to be speaking a language he was fast forgetting. To his parents – whom he started calling mater and pater – he described his new school companions as chaps who had rucked down on him rather hard to start with but subsequently proved to be quite decent. There wasn't much else he could say. Hateful, as in fact he found almost everything about the school, his sense of duty, inherited stoicism, and knowledge that he had nowhere else to go, had made him retreat and rely more and more on his own resources. It wasn't a bad, if ultimately doomed way of self-protection.

Part of the problem might have been that he was not a particularly pre-possessing little boy. A thin and circumscribed crown of hair above a slightly pear shaped, prematurely jowled face, seemed to reflect the burden of its owner's slight but habitual look of perplexity.

He was unlikely to notice the changes that were taking place in his mother. Apart from the fact that he was so young, boarding school was already well on the way to doing for him what it was designed to do: eliminate tension in the bonds between students and their parents by dissolving them. As well, his native insularity and the fact that he and his mother had never been close meant that he was hardly likely to accuse her of neglecting him now. He took her obsession with town affairs, the ruthless regime she had set herself which meant

even his greeting when he came home seemed to have been pencilled in her diary, as part of normal adult behaviour. He couldn't differentiate between her compulsive looking, and his father's impulsive seeming, activities. His father breezed in and out of the house without strain – the fact that he no longer expected Wesley to accompany him occasionally and guiltily reminded his father that he had been freed of an impediment – while his mother's movements were staccato; gestures like the one with which she put on her hat and snatched a glance at herself in the mirror before leaving the home, made her seem conscious of never being quite equal to freeing herself from some irritant.

Wesley was away at school when there was an outbreak of typhoid on the River and Mylong's hospital was unable to find room for all the patients or their nurses, some of whom had to camp out with their patients in the hospital grounds. Eleanor defied Harry and the risk of infection to herself by accompanying medical staff sometimes on their rounds. The overstretched nurses were grateful and since they didn't allow themselves to blanch from the distress of patients, she didn't either. In helping to wash a patient she gave relief to a suppressed tenderness, she could feel it; even remedying the squalid condition of beds was liberating. She was only mildly embarrassed one evening when she commented to a colleague that pea soup must be on the hospital menu, and was reminded that it was a characteristic odour of patients' faeces in the illness.

She was about to leave one night; it was late and Harry had arranged to collect her in the new Ford car he was struggling to reach an accord with, when a fire broke out in one of the tents. Someone, and it was never established who, finding that a hurricane lamp had gone out where four children were sleeping, had placed a candle next to it as a night light for them. Eleanor saw the flames blossom; there must have been kerosene still in the lamp, and ran back to see a man enveloped in the burning canvas he'd stripped from the tent the children were sleeping in. They were well awake by then. Eleanor stamped on the burning scraps

around her and then stripped off her coat and tried to swat other outbreaks with it, but she was blocked from getting near the children. She was able to see them and, like a bystander at a traffic accident, see human life in a familiar and yet utterly transformed state, as if the injured had taken advantage of the chance to abandon civility and self-restraint. It seemed almost indecorous, the patients didn't look that damaged; it was moments before their skin started to bubble and wrinkle like scorching paper and, with its stink, send a gust of horror through everyone. Then, after the four children and the man were put on stretchers and while nurses were trying to pacify the other patients, the local policeman arrived and started behaving as if he'd like to take someone in charge. When he turned to her, as the nearest and most static person in reach, and looked like starting an interrogation, she forgot her training and said: 'Oh go away, you stupid man! People are dying here!'

And they were: in a few hours everyone who'd been caught up in the fire, including the Good Samaritan who'd tried to put it out, was dead.

Eleanor shrugged Harry's arms off when he arrived and shook her head to all his enquiries: a part of him, the newspaper man, and he couldn't help it, was conscious that he had work to do. But he took Eleanor home and restrained his instincts until she had finally gone to her own bed, after insisting that he make a ball of the clothes she'd had on and dump them in the wash house. Then he went back to the hospital. He stayed up all night to bring out a special edition of the paper. As an editor, he tried to express the community's shock; as a social advocate he demanded an enquiry into the tragedy. When he got home again in the late afternoon Eleanor was still in bed. She started to get up when she heard him come in and made noises about cooking the evening meal but she couldn't seem to find her dressing gown, or recognise it when Harry did. Her eyes were glassy. Harry made her lie down again and then called the family doctor. That gentleman came almost at once and examined his patient closely before diagnosing her condition.

‘I’m afraid your wife is drunk,’ he said.

Harry was astonished. His very meagre cellar that a china cabinet housed was untouched and there was nothing other than a bottle of a well recommended tonic – ‘*It Makes Well Women Strong and Weak Women Well’* – beside her bed.

‘Have you had all of this today, Mrs Gardener?’ the doctor asked, taking her hand.

‘On and off, doctor, yes,’ she replied, sitting up straighter in bed by then. ‘I find it strengthening.’

‘Well don’t take any more,’ he suggested, and took Harry aside outside the bedroom with the empty. ‘By volume a large proportion of this is alcohol,’ he said. ‘Has she had it before?’

‘She told me you’d recommended it to her, Cuttle,’ Harry said.

‘I might have recommended a glass of stout man, not this.’

‘Alcohol she would not abide, of course.’

‘Smell it.’ Harry had a whiff. ‘It’s about forty per cent proof.’ The doctor shook his head in a way meant to be sympathetic and meaningful. ‘Naturally, the subject of my call will remain confidential.’

‘Naturally,’ Harry echoed, at a loss, really, to know what the man meant. The woman’s face on the bottle’s label was quite attractive, which seemed to Harry deceptive. By the time he went back inside Eleanor was looking very unwell and she vomited shortly afterwards. Harry took away everything she’d spoiled and washed her and brought her a fresh night gown. She looked very clean and bleak afterwards.

‘Dear Harry,’ she said. ‘I’m so sorry this happened.’

‘You have had an awful shock Eleanor. There is nothing to be sorry for.’

‘There is, though. I have to be sorry for what our son is, and for the baby I lost. I have to be sorry for those poor little creatures that died last night. They are all dead, aren’t they?’

'I fear so.'

'Perhaps it's for the better…' She was drifting when another thought recalled her: 'I'm sorry for the wife I've become, too.'

'You've been, you are, a wonderful wife. No man could ask for better.'

'Look at me Harry. I was never any sort of sonsie, as my father said. And now…'

'You are simply overwrought. You've been overdoing it, and now this has come on top of everything…'

'Overwrought?' she said wryly. 'Well, I promise you will never find me in this state again.'

It was one of those rare moments in marriages, when the decks are cleared and every bit of bad luck and disappointment and disloyalty has been put away, and couples feel as if they have just been bespoken.

Eleanor kept her word, too. It took a while for her to recognise the cure, but she learnt in future to side track nostrums and buy alcohol in arguably defensible forms from obscure sources, and to ensure that it was not until she had fulfilled her civic and social duties and was safely at home, that she soothed her feelings with it. Harry often worked late, and now did so more often, she was normally well in bed by the time he got home and since they discreetly refrained from disturbing or intruding on one another's rooms they never had to admit to themselves that Temperance's enemy had not only stolen into, but taken possession of their camp.

Old Temperance hymns so often carried a sense of dread. The godly were exhorted – 'Prepare thee for battle!' and the damned condemned: 'Vain man, on foolish pleasure bent' – but the grog was also recognised as seductive; many of Temperance's advocates had once been in alcohol's thrall; Eleanor might have been all unknowingly engaged in a battle on Temperance's and her own behalf for many years; it could have been in her genes. Her father,

whom she was never to see after her marriage, was eventually kicked to death by a horse he'd been drunkenly belabouring. She went under in the end in the full blooded way some tightly disciplined people do, to the secret pleasure of many around them.

Eventually she'd be recognised as an invalid, as living quietly in seclusion, sustained by her garden – it was Harry's – and her hobbies (she had none); half shielded by deception. When she dropped her bundle completely and gave away all her outside activities she slept late (though it never seemed to be quite late enough), occupying herself with the contents of a teapot and the city newspaper until mid-afternoon, when she dressed and then spent a near vexatious and then quite vexatious hour or two pottering under the outdoor veranda before a declining sun let her know she'd held out long enough. The first glass of whichever of the fortified wines she alternated between both horrified and relieved her; its over-sweetness, its welcome familiarity, the tardy but ever reliable coursing of warmth it brought to her, along with the lifting of the awful pall of soberness which she knew should have been achieved by other means and that could now be put off for another day. In those moments she felt briefly capable of tackling one of the dinners she'd used to host for her husband, along with the modest demands of conversation expected of her then; sometimes, when the evenings were warm she felt like tackling all the jobs the cleaning woman avoided doing, and making up a list to give to the slattern on her dismissal; she might, in fact, cruise through the house and put one or two things to rights, adjust a hangar here or there – though she avoided touching anything Harry had worn – wipe down an ornament or two…That mood would pass, hunger would replace it until she'd decided on the most expedient means of satisfying it – sometimes it would be a handful of cheese biscuits smothered with butter, or she'd spoon her way through an inch or two of a jar of pickles. In another half hour or so she knew she would be looking for relief in baking soda, but it quietened her stomach for a while. She might open a novel by someone attempting to entertain, and read a page or two before putting it scoffingly

aside. A sense of disgust might take overtake her then for all things foolish and hypocritical in the world. She would shake her head at people's obtuseness and then maybe, seeing the clock, realise she'd better make an exit from the house's common living quarters while she still could. She would take what was left of a bottle with her and go to her own bed and switch on the light next to it, before spreading her hands on the coverlet and losing herself in tears.

War

When Wesley was still at school he had been only aware that his mother seemed more preoccupied than usual on his visits home. If he ever caught a whiff of morning-after alcohol on her it was faint and disguised. She had taken to visiting her still-born baby's grave regularly, he discovered during holidays. He wasn't quite sure what she got out of it. When he accompanied her once she walked through the aisles between the graves making a vague sweeping motion with her hands, and then when they got to where the small plaque was, shook her head and snorted at it in a vaguely ironic way, before turning and heading impatiently back towards the gates. Back at home she watched and listened to him with the same look of half tolerant perplexity as Harry's aging mother did when her grandson visited her. Wesley's grandmother had never known quite what to do with him either, and felt sadly relieved when he stopped coming. The – not animosity, but feelings of dislocation or alienation – were mutual; at times Wesley looked at the faces of his parents for a clue to his heritage and, since they had become such separate people, thought of the three of them as occupying points of an obtuse triangle.

One day he decided to do something that might appease or even unite them. He told his father he wanted to be involved in the family business. It wasn't true: he really liked the idea of being an engineer; when the bridge was built over the river at nearby Melinga he was allowed to go with his father and speak with its constructors. He marvelled at everything from the bottom up; the depth of its foundations, the clay and rock that was brought up from a hundred feet down, the to-him soaring heights of its cantilevers, the way in which everything interlocked and demanded accuracy for it to bear the weight of something as heavy as a train. He was intoxicated by a discipline that such equilibrium demanded. But he knew that pursuing his interest would only drive him further from his father. For all his

enthusiasm, Harry's interest in things mechanical was reductive: when his earlier flirtation with a motor car finished with him putting both parties into an irrigation channel, he resumed his relationship with his push bike with penitent fervour; on his return from work or a jaunt he would lean it gently against the wall outside the back door with a pat on its saddle for a job well done.

Wesley left Adelaide Grammar in his Leaving year. His Physics teacher regretted it; otherwise his parting ruffled no waters. He told his headmaster, 'I intend to get stuck in, sir,' and the gentleman nodded his approval of whatever it was the boy was going to get stuck into.

'That's the spirit,' he said, 'ruck in hard.'

The headmaster was a senior, very senior, man in fact, who had been recalled from retirement's pastures when the War started claiming junior members of staff – as well as some of the senior boys. Sometimes, as in Wesley's case, he wasn't quite sure quite why boys were leaving. Students were almost jostling to get to the head of the queue to join up and be at the sharp end of a phalanx. Many of course, with their parents' connivance, faked their ages; for some the high point of their lives – since they were to be so brief – was the photograph taken of them in uniform, gazing into a very restricted distance. For the moment at least they were freed from the pangs and shames of adolescence: they were, or were about to become, men and enjoy all of the privileges of manhood. The tears were genuine when it was announced that someone had met their match in battle and a mention in dispatches was chalked-up against rival schools. The headmaster, who had wearied after forty years of alternately dinning Latin Grammar into boys and thrashing them for their recalcitrance, rather welcomed the conflict. It had brought out all, or nearly all, of the school's best intentions and ambitions, reignited, at least on the Australian side, Imperial bonds. You could mention 'Old England', at least in the circles he moved in, without having to worry about someone carping.

He found himself standing taller and straighter. At School governors' dinners, enlistment seemed for a port-inspired instant a tenable option even for him.

Wesley was just fifteen and, obsessed with the War as his father was, he was still grateful that conscription was unlikely to be an issue for his own son. He was glad too to have the liberty to be able to show him the ropes of the business. Most of the staff were already known to Wesley, the blue collar members welcomed him jovially, the more senior clerical ones with reserve. You could never tell with boss's sons.

Harry kept moving until they'd done a circuit of the building and a hand had been extended to his son from everyone. After that he took him to meet the local newsagent, and then the delivery man. Then he took him back to where they'd started in the office and while they were both standing there looking round the room and at each other, said, 'Well…'

Wesley smiled and nodded encouragingly and he said, 'Well,' too.

'I suppose the question is,' his father said, 'what you would like to try your hand at first?'

Wesley pondered for just a moment before taking the plunge. 'Actually, I was wondering if I might have a shot at reporting, Father,' he said.

The truth was that up till then Wesley had found the experience disheartening. His return to Mylong itself had been chastening; he had felt more than ever estranged by the fact that the town seemed to have withdrawn into itself since his youth, rather like his mother had, though with a complacency she didn't share. He wasn't entirely sure what the process of reporting involved, but he hoped that by taking him out and about it might give him some of his father's get up and go and, maybe, validate him – and even the town if it came to that. He was not actually immodest. Since he had already spent so much time on his own, his world had been very much created on those terms. This might be a chance to extend his boundaries, he thought. His hopes were entirely intuitive. More concrete than any other consideration of

his was the worry that if he was stuck inside all the time his failings would be more easily exposed to his father.

His duties turned out to be entirely local. His father was focused on the Great Conflict. A wall of his office was devoted to maps, pins and scribbled notes, keeping track of the ebb and flow of hostilities, which he was enough of a journalist to admit were largely static. His craft might have fallen prey to jingoism and been seduced by babies-on-bayonets propaganda, but after the first year of war had produced little more than masses of casualties, he had to concede that the Allies were in for hard slog. He chided the Labour Party for its opposition to conscription, and applauded the numbers of young local men who were joining up in articles that made the paper bulge well beyond the capacities of its advertising to fund. He was happy to surrender Wesley into the head reporter – Cudgee Moore's – hands.

Cudgee, a long term employee of the Mail and other country newspapers, had himself come to journalism by accident. Originally a typesetter, he had been so appalled by the shemozzles he had to encounter and rectify that he eventually put his hand up to do some scribbling himself. His aims were simple. 'Keep it short,' he said to Wesley, 'and leave the big words to your old man.' Cudgee himself stayed away from Fetes and Socials. He left their reporting to Church guild ladies and their kind who organized them. 'Let them work out the Messrs and the Misses,' he told Wesley. 'I do the big local stories, especially with the War on.' He took out some old issues, covering strikes, fatal accidents involving horses and carriages, drownings… 'Women float face up, men down you know,' he said. 'Bad luck if they've been in a while, it's hard to tell which is which, the yabbies get at 'em and that….Here's one – up at the saw mill, took a feller's head clean off…you don't say that, of course.'

'What would you say?'

'"A terrible tragedy occurred"…that sort of thing. "It is believed he was working alone at the time" …they reckon he put his head straight under the blade… his missus had been playing up, see…' He spread out a whole sheaf of papers on the desk with a half rueful gesture, as if censorship had denied him even finer moments.

'What will I be covering, Cudgee?' Wesley asked with a small tremor of apprehension.

'You'll be doing sport, son,' Cudgee suggested.

Which was in fact what happened; even though there wasn't that much of it to report. Hostilities between local football teams had been largely suspended due to the War and though Wesley assiduously studied the paper's style it was soon clear when he was given other events to cover that he lacked skills for the job. Shyness inhibited him from asking almost anyone anything and he had neither the skill nor the pragmatism to embellish whatever bare bones of stories he did manage to pick up. Eventually, and by the more or less tacit approval of everyone, he was delegated to deal with advertising copy. Most of it was repetitive and he became familiar with the puzzling and intriguing weekly insertion giving a discreet box number in Adelaide for ladies plagued with health problems too delicate for open discussion, and those panaceas openly promising to alleviate almost any ailment from palpitations to the condition that had originally attracted his mother to them – low spirits. In an anxious world it comforted and heartened him to think that there were such ultimate safety nets for the imperilled if only they were prepared to reach out for them. Among many other readers, men in the trenches attested to cough remedies' ability to ward off pneumonia; further armed from the cornucopia of remedies and prophylactics offered for sale in the paper he wondered how many other hazards a prudent soldier might overcome.

In a secretarial role with his father Wesley also transcribed when it was necessary recruits' letters sent home – some of them actually bewailing the fact that the *Murray Mail*

was unprocurable. Afterwards, when he was sent out on frosty mornings on errands on his bicycle he tried to relate what he thought of as benumbing cold to the descriptions of conditions he'd just read from boys in the trenches; he wondered, when he returned to the warmth of the office whether it was the sort of refuge Mother England represented to soldiers on leave. He began to go on long and covert walks – marches, really – pumping his arms to chin level when he was safely out of sight in the scrub. Heartened by his body's response he took cold baths afterwards that made his heart feel like it was leaping out of his chest. He assumed a heartiness that he felt could easily become the norm.

His father was preoccupied with recording the goings and occasional comings of local soldiers – invalided out on grounds that included shell shock – with transcribing letters home from trench bound stoics; with his own interpretation of the conflict and with calls for greater sacrifices from those members of the local population whom he believed were scabbing on their mates. He was no simple jingoist; he reproved 'the optimism that has doped the public mind… We have had Germany starving for over two years; we have had the German morale utterly broken for over twelve months. We have conjured up pictures of our aeroplanes downing the Bosche airmen like eagles among a swarm of sparrows…' Yet he did not reprove recruitment's cynical exhortations: 'Never miss a chance. Never give up hope. Many a Man is now near the Boiling Point. Do not let him cool off again' – which presented an image of the agents of enlistment combing the local area, presenting themselves with a whispered aside here, a sly prod in the ribs there, until they were encouraged to go for the jugular.

Young Wesley was not immune from such talk. At seventeen and some months he was tall enough to look old enough to be in uniform. As sporting correspondent he had been awarded the soubriquet 'Long'un' and occasionally people gave him a calculating glance in the street. Fortunately, he had not yet attracted any white feathers when a local youth

brandished a fistful of them at him one day: ‘When I get enough I’ll make up a duster and make a present of it to the old sheila that keeps postin’ ‘em to me,’ he said. When he added complacently, ‘What do we want with their blanky war anyway, Wes?’ Wesley decided to sever their acquaintance.

One day he read his father’s interview with a Salvation Army chaplain back from the Front. It was typically well written – within the confines of its time, you might say if it didn’t sound mean. Gardener said of the subject of his panegyric, ‘They have sung his hymns. They have said “Our father” after him. And when they were dying they snuggled themselves into his breast…’

It made Wesley’s mind up. He didn’t admit it to his father, which was probably just as well, since Harry wouldn’t have liked to be reminded that his article was instrumental in getting his son to enlist. And yet he had been seduced to some extent by his own and other’s rhetoric. When he asked his son, ‘Are you absolutely sure it is what you want to do?’ he took pride in knowing what the answer would be.

‘I am, father. I can’t stand the idea of being thought a lead-swinger. Besides, the way things are going it might all be over if I don’t get cracking.’

‘There is not much fear of that I’m afraid, my boy,’ Harry sighed, but he saw something in his son of his own earnestness when he told his parents he was going to South America, except that here there was an added ingredient of inescapable if self-imposed nobility.

He insisted only that his son suppress an impulse to head off immediately to the local recruiting centre. Referring to a contact in the city, he said, ‘He may be able to cut some corners for you,’ knowing that it was the best chance his son had of being found a billet suited to the peculiar abilities imparted by a Private School education.

Wesley wanted to hug his father. ‘You’re an absolute top-notcher, Dad,’ he said, dispensing with one formality at least, before looking down somewhat bashfully at his feet as if regretting the lack of fighting footwear on them to cement the occasion.

‘We must tell your mother,’ Harry said gently.

For one reason or another Eleanor was already assuming some of her late mother’s feyness, and took the news fairly well. Perhaps she had been expecting it. She nodded a few times and then said, ‘Your father and I will be quite alone soon won’t we?’ And she laughed, ‘I don’t know who’ll be left here to read the paper.’

As if realising the inanity of her remark she did hold him then, but showed her lack of practice by patting him on the back as well. She wiped away a tear after and assumed a practical air while she was saying, ‘You will make sure to take plenty of warm things,’ as if her son was going camping, and then felt as she used to do when she partnered Harry to some function and was reduced after the initial introductions to twisting a handkerchief between her hands, knowing there was no way she could impose her personality on the gathering, or take anything from it. When she said, ‘I’ll make some tea,’ she prompted a near audible sigh from her audience.

When it came to the actual parting Harry himself found he had not a lot of advice to offer his son. He tiptoed round the subject of venereal disease to the discomfort of them both. ‘Keep, keep yourself clean, old man…’ he finally ventured, wishing he could affect a heartiness that was never in his nature. It disappointed him that the clarity with which he had always been able to present an argument in speeches or debates had deserted him while he was blurting, ‘I am proud – for goodness sake be careful – no heroics – your mother will be waiting on your letters, don’t neglect your duty – the paper will be still be here for you…’ It all came out, but didn’t sound like much. He felt middle aged, more than middle aged, impotent almost, standing there pumping his son’s hand until both of them turned away,

leaving Harry at least with a knot of the unexpressed in his chest. After eighteen years what did he know or have to remember of his son, he asked himself, apart from the presence, and an intermittent one at that, of a quiet, never very adventurous little boy, who had grown up trying to please others because it didn't seem to be enough to please himself; estranged, through no fault of his own. Harry knew what it was like to grow up in the shade of a father, and he was grateful that he at least had always had his mother to turn to. But Wesley hadn't even really had that. Harry held on to the thought that this, what he dared to call adventure, might prove something to the boy on terms of his own.

When he got home he sought out Eleanor. It was still broad daylight but she was lying down in her room. She put down her *Every Lady's Journal* when he came in.

'He's gone then?' she said.

'Yes, yes, the train got away on time.'

'That's a change at least – they seem to run that service to please themselves. They need a good shake up,' she said, looking a little cross.

'Perhaps they do.' Harry twisted his hat that he'd forgotten to hang up on his way in and tried to redirect the conversation in its proper direction, while infusing it with the sort of confidence he felt was Eleanor's due. 'Yes, he was very stout about it, no, no, you know… no….'

'No tears?'

'No.'

'Good,' she said with an air of finality.

Harry didn't take his cue. He placed his heels together instead and said encouragingly, 'I know this is not a good time dear, but, well …who knows, things could turn out to Wesley's advantage – he – well, who knows, it could be the makings of him.'

When his wife failed to respond he knew he'd been hung out to dry.

Wesley's letters when he got to France were full of the optimism of new arrivals. He was grateful for the presence in his unit of other old boys from Adelaide Grammar – 'all of them first class chaps' – was bullish about their prospects – 'our unit has been raided more than any other on the line but Fritz has been worsted every time …' and made a patrol into No-Man's-Land sound a bit like a school rag.

Unfortunately, after only his second excursion into No Man's Land, the C.O. was left with the task of informing Wesley's family of his death: his addendum that he died 'without pain or suffering'– might have been dutiful but Harry liked to think it was true, of his son's life being extinguished in an instant with a bullet to the breast, say, or even better – and the images he conjured up were archaic – of some shell confirming in a moment the promise of the flesh merging with heaven and earth; as if some simple switch could terminate the business of chugging blood and jumpy nerve ends and the racket of speculation that took up his own nights for weeks to come.

He had to wake up Eleanor with the telegram. She had taken to closing the curtains at first light in the morning to signal her postponement of the day, and assist the process with a sip of Veronal to coax her back to sleep. She was in no condition to receive any news, he knew, and sounded peevish, but for all that cottoned on quickly enough when she saw what he was holding.

She would not look at him after he told her. She asked that he draw the curtains closer – 'the light is coming in my eyes' – and then raised herself on her pillows in the gloom and said, 'May I see it?' She studied the telegram almost musingly. 'Killed in Action, eh?'

'Yes.'

She put both arms at her sides then as if she was going to rise and then thought better of it and lay back against her pillows.

‘My poor boy,’ she said. ‘My poor boys…’ and closed her eyes, tugging at the bottom corners of her sleeping cap.

Harry wanted to hold her then but couldn’t. He knew he would be aware of whatever she’d drunk the night before; that her body would be tense and bony, that she was beyond receiving comfort or giving any.

He didn’t even have his mother near. He was aware of all the times she had given him solace, even if it was in the form of common sense advice. Now she was over seventy and her capacities had contracted in inverse proportion to arthritis’s demands. Suffering the slow and sad decline that is often the fate of vital people, she had withdrawn from her charitable work and become a captious presence in church; audibly tutting during the Congregational minister’s sermons and taking out her frustrations with her stick on the trailing edges of hedges and creepers on the way home.

He and Eleanor passed the rest of the day in the house barely acknowledging, let alone touching each other. He wondered, despite all his early teaching, if Hell might be something like this: an eternity spent in the company of someone you once loved.

He still went to work next day. There had always been something in him – and it might be obvious – that not only fed on his trade, but distanced him from its business. He went through so many of his days attentive to everything and everyone around him, while in a way staying remote from them. The plight of others, a personal tragedy among his employees, even this, were things that touched him deeply and to which he had to respond and yet…his ego or whatever else it was not only demanded that he overcome such moments, but insisted that he would be strengthened by the demands they made of him.

He was terse with the expressions of condolences he encountered in the street, and asked everyone at work to dispense with their black trimmings forthwith. There was no funeral, he reminded them. He tore away at his days in pursuit of agendas that didn’t finish

till late at night. It was then, however, in those very few hours respite that his body had ever demanded, that he found himself not only remaking in his mind the manner of Wesley's death, but all the years preceding it. He couldn't sleep then. I have no son; he told himself when the first roosters were trying their throats. I had no son. After a week, when he was starting to hallucinate during the day he got a scrip from Dr Cuttle for the same despised chloral hydrate that he meted out to Eleanor. For another week she and he were bedfellows of a kind then as they lay like stones in separate rooms, until, in his case, the unearthly hour of seven. He clutched at the reprieve but found he woke foul mouthed and stupid; one morning, though it was only August, he got up and decided to take a plunge into the river baths. His heart was aghast at the treatment but the rest of him declared it beneficial, and he put the sleeping mixture aside.

Weeks later he made an unusual trip home during the day to pick up some papers he'd left on his desk and found Mrs Warden, the cleaning lady, having a read through them. She flicked at them with a rag when she was caught out and then threw in an extra diversion, 'The Missus is up late today. Haven't heard a peep out of her.' She followed him into her mistress's bedroom and they shared the first sight of the corpse, hands folded neatly before her and with the empty bottle of Harry's discarded soporific on her bedside table.

Mrs Warden clutched her own hands in front of her face and clasped her cheeks and went through all the non-verbal responses that convention might expect of her before she asked, 'Is she…?'

Harry did not dignify the inquiry with a response.

The War restrictions kept no-one from the funeral. It was raining too, yet vehicles and carts were lined up right along the road leading to the cemetery, and many of those that had thoughtfully pulled off the road were down to the axles in mud. On the way in Harry was

halted by a pair of estranged dogs involved in a frothing stand up fight outside the gates until enough boots were laid into them to let him pass.

Someone once said that a funeral on a wet day is simply a matter of squalor. This one wasn't quite so, but the imperviousness of the local clay meant that the grave that had been a trial to dig for Ozzie Warmold, had left the surrounding area strewn with the gluey proceeds of his toil. People picked their way towards, and then edged back as far as practical from, the graveside, meaning that the words of the minister who stood as near to it as he dared, were often lost to his audience in the bitter south-westerly distorting them.

Cudgee Moore took up a supportive position next to Harry, ready to steady him should he yield to any extraordinary emotional or temporal gust. He gazed round approvingly before the business began and said, 'Good turn up, boss,' rather like the Mylong Football Club secretary estimating a match day crowd. There were hundreds of men and women standing with heads dripping wet or buried under umbrellas, while the Congregational minister battled to retain his place in the service as well as keep his surplice in check.

He broke from his formal script at one point: 'Let us not dwell on the circumstances of this tragedy,' he said. 'Who among us can judge Eleanor? Who can even say, in fact, if her death was not due to some dreadful error on her part?' The doctor had already felt obliged, in fact, to record the death as self-administered while the deceased was of disturbed mind, even though mortality from the same medicine often received a more charitable verdict. 'This tireless worker for causes in the town had just lost her only son on the Somme, fighting in defence of the Mother country. Who can say that she will be denied her place with God in that glorious world made for all, from the lowest' – and here, in looking around the crowd, his gaze paused on Ozzie Warmold, who was watching the rivulets running down the grave side and speculating how much extra work might be involved – before returning to Harry and concluding – 'to the highest.'

‘Who can *say*….?’ Harry muttered sourly to himself. He felt like punching his hat on his head and storming off. Naturally he didn’t, apart from anything else it would have been a nightmare running the gauntlet of wet overcoats and umbrellas, but enough of his emotional conflict transferred itself to Cudgee for him to firm his grasp on Harry’s elbow. ‘Easy boss,’ he said like a man calming a flighty horse, ‘she’ll be all over soon.’

Harry stayed to throw in the requisite gloveful of mud at the finish, and hear the donk-donk of Ozzie’s spadefuls succeeding it, before saying to Cudgee, ‘Let’s get out of this.’

‘Not going back to the Parlour for a cuppa?’

‘No.’

Cudgee took the wheel of his vehicle from its privileged place just outside the gates and ran the gauntlet, almost, of men taking off hats they’d just replaced as the car was recognised, some of them forced to do so as they were in the preliminary stages of digging out their own. The rain seemed to be redoubling its efforts under the impetus of a fresh front. Everything was dripping. ‘What a miserable day,’ Harry said.

When they got back to the deserted *Mail* Harry put a match to the fire in his office. Then he unlocked a desk drawer and took out a bottle of scotch. ‘Harry Gardener, the cupboard drinker, Cudgee…’ he said.

‘I’m with you, boss.’

‘You knew what was going on then? With Eleanor…?’

‘Knew the signs, didn’t I? My old man was the same. No one knew he drank till they saw him sober one day.’

They sat with their glasses in silence while the fire settled into a glow behind its mica portholes and rain swept down the street.

‘I did love her, you know,’ Harry said.

‘Course you did, you would, she was a wonderful lady,’ Cudgee said. ‘Used to keep the blokes on their toes round here in her day.’

‘I did. Until, when, when…things went wrong, and the other business started... We drifted apart ….and then we just seemed to, I don’t know, drift on. We were like ghosts in the finish, under the same roof.’ He looked at his legs. ‘Is that how marriages all finish do you think, with people going through the motions?’

Cudgee sighed. ‘Not the bloke to ask, am I? Never married.’

‘Did you ever get close?’

‘Oh, couple of times. Reckoned I was in love. I was working on a station once up north, and the boss had this good looking daughter. We got on alright. Finished up she was all I was thinking about though, just as well the horse knew his way round. Had that much time on my own see, for brooding. Anyhow one day I couldn’t stand it anymore and I up and asked her to marry me, said I was in love with her and all that...’ He shook his head. ‘Bad blue.’

‘Why, what did she say?’

She said, ‘If you ever come near me again I’ll make sure Father has you horsewhipped.’

‘Discouraging…’ Harry murmured.

‘Was a bit. Might have been different if I’d had something, or been someone, you know. I never had a very good track record: another time I got pretty chummy with the landlady’s daughter in a boarding house in Melbourne. *Her* old woman threatened to poison me. Since then I’ve just sort of taken things as they’ve come.’

It was, though the term wasn’t current then, an existential moment, which might have just drifted on into melancholy introspection on Harry’s part if he had put away the bottle. But he didn’t. When Cudgee asked for a leave pass so he could go down the street, he left

Harry apparently docilely alone, but when he came back he caught him in the middle of denying history a decade of the paper's records by feeding them into the stove.

Cudgee restrained him. 'Some of my best stuff's in there, boss.'

Harry looked bewildered for a moment and then said, 'Forgive me, that was inexcusable,' and locked the bottle away again and gave Cudgee the key. 'Just in case…I wouldn't know what's at home, or where it's hidden, that's one thing.'

'Headin' that way are we?'

'I might have a walk around town first, Cudgee… Just to settle myself down.'

'What about the three mile out to your place after…'

'Done it before, haven't I.'

It was the weather for reveries, or revenants. The low, unbroken clouds puffy with rain, the wind behind, the cold; all of that, with dusk coming on provided one of those rare chances country towns have to be imbued, or imbue themselves, with a sense of mystery that blander daylight hours deny. The countryside all around it was – is – flat, desert in essence with just the river to salvage it; border country sustained by the artifice of irrigation that Harry had spent so much time on in print and on boards and as part of delegations. Even the river, as contemporary photos show, was never, except when in flood, attractive; channelled as so many inland Australian waterways are between steep shelved banks littered with the clay coated sheddings of red gums above them they always look like they've been locked in some contest too long to ever emerge as winners. Elsewhere, the promises made by rain were never sustained; and yet on days like this everything was transformed by it. Rugged up in his overcoat, and under a sou'wester some visitor had left behind in the front office, he headed down an empty main street; past the recently completed Institute building with its fabled polished floor that the paper had subscribed to, the library that he had already contributed books to, the wharf that he'd first been introduced to twenty years before, the hotel where a

drunk sheltering under its first floor veranda made an exaggerated show of doffing his hat when he recognised the pedestrian as if by doing so some of the damage he'd inflicted on himself in the last few hours in the front bar might be undone. He looked out over the river flecked with wavelets running against the current to the far shore's island and its heaving bulk of knotted red gums; home to the area's last fringe dwelling blacks, and metho drinking fishermen. Musty water plopped and sucked near his feet. When the town's lighting system jittered and fizzed into life he started home.

He had stopped asking himself a long time ago why he was there. Even if the question still intrigues others. No irrigation scheme in the world could turn the country into Paraguay. This rain only helped disguise the makeshift version of paradise he'd hoped to have a hand in. For all the talk of co-operation and comradeship that he'd espoused and lauded when he first came, he knew people were now jostling for social positions. Meanness and snobbery were flourishing as the town got on its feet and the supply of acquisitive energy people were expending was being replaced with intellectual torpor. The rain cleared as he walked, and the moon that replaced it helped him pick his way around the worst potholes and puddles. He would not have consciously thought that his progress mimicked the way he had begun to run his paper, though his own nature – the native shrewdness that he knew lay under, if not behind, his transparency – meant that he had begun to instinctively defend its flourishing commercial nature by negotiating the minefield of public opinion. He had compromised himself, maybe too often. Indeed, too often, he thought. The tolerance that lay at the heart of his nature had not extended itself to non-combatants in the War; he had written leading articles half in tune with local demands for blood when it was finally over. What have I become, he wondered. Of course he was overwrought and wet through and nowhere near himself; his boots were squelching when he pushed open the gate and made his way through the garden that he had spent so much time in, without admitting that one of the reasons he'd

done it was so he could distance himself from the house. It was dark inside; there was nothing to love – or fear – there now. Almost everything else the rain had lent the evening would be gone by morning, he knew, and he would be stranded there in the desert of his heart. For the moment though, as he breathed in his garden's scents he turned to the bulk of his favourite, an ornamental peach standing out in full bloom against the lightening sky, and buried his face in its petals and thought of Hattie.

A New Home

Carrie Whitcombe called Harry, 'The most forgiving person I have ever met,' and certainly he'd extended his tolerance to her by letting her both assume the editorship of his *Cosme Notes* and subsequently take most of the credit for it. He turned to her after Eleanor had gone, seeking and finding some comfort from her response even if the space she devoted to sympathy in her letter was actually quite limited. He learnt that she was living apart from the husband she'd rhapsodized over when she first landed him, while cultivating the literary persona that would eventually challenge her actual talents. She was very much involved with *The Worker*, among other left-wing advocacies, and under different circumstances might have chided Harry over his wavering commitment to the Cause if she'd ever got around to reading the *Mail*.

Voicing her experience of the 'Paraguayan Claw' which tugged at so many exiles from the Colony, however bitter the terms of their parting from it had actually been, she said, 'I often look back to those old Cosme days and count them among the happiest of my life.' She did not appear to be in touch with any of her fellow pioneers however, and revealed a lingering disaffection for her only intellectual challenger among the colony's wives, Annie Blaine. 'As you know, I was never on good terms with her. There was something about her laissez-faire nature that repelled me. For an educated woman she was intellectually and even morally lazy, I felt. I believe her daughters are living in Sydney. One of them married some English chap – in a rush, I gather…Strange goings on. She may be able to put you in touch with some of the others however.'

Harry did not explore that option.

He built a new house instead. Even from someone so energetic it caused concern among his acquaintances, raising the 'What's he trying to run away from?' kind of question.

He explained that it was because he wanted to be nearer the paper. Its post-War circulation had continued to grow. He could afford to clean out the old home and give away almost everything of the Past's. Really and however cynically he might admit it to be, he also recognised that while the motor in him could run on almost independently of its owner, at times like this it had to be kicked into gear. The few bedroom-bound days he spent gazing at nothing after Eleanor's death were too reminiscent of other crises in his life; he could not risk prolonging them. He set to designing a building distinguished by having the only second-storey in town; a large room, really, that the builders didn't discover was inaccessible until construction was well underway. Harry laughed, or at least smiled it off, and got them to tack on an outside stairway. He said it would ensure he was distanced from distractions.

In fact he never used it. He was too used to the office, too used to squeezing out his leading articles in between meetings with clients and petitioners, while one ear was ever attuned to the human and mechanical activity going on round him.

He decided to offer the room to Cudgee instead. His senior reporter's health had been concerning him for a while. Cudgee had never admitted his age, but gave the game away when he reminisced about stories he'd covered for sometimes pre-twentieth century bush papers. Latterly, the signs he presented of his domestic circumstances weren't encouraging. His suit and he often looked as if they could both do with a press.

Harry engaged a housekeeper, too. Mrs Foley was a stocky, square gaited lady, whose searching surveillance of him on first acquaintance seemed ill-favoured until he realised it was a reflection of the career she had pursued as a small dairy farmer after her husband died. Her explanation of his passing in an accident with a pile-driver on the town's landing stage was blunt: 'He was half full and put his head where he shouldn't have.' Though the dead man's relict turned out to be one of those who had suffered too many blows of her own from life to take risks with her finer feelings, no hen paid a solitary chick more practical attention

than she her new employer. At times he left for work almost listing under the cargo he'd taken on.

She belonged to the pioneer school of philosophy – that is, whatever happened and against whatever odds, she battled on. Her father and mother had arrived in the area in the 1870s; 'Dad drove a horse and trap across the Murray, it was that low that year,' but if, in that sense, the fledgling town had laid out a welcome mat to the new arrivals, it seemed to have been its last indulgence. Of the six children her mother produced three died in infancy and in what might have been a terminal display of disappointment the lady expired herself after being presented with the evidence of her last stillborn one. 'The old man got me and my sister Muriel and young Arthur together afterwards, and said, "Well girls, your mother was our life. But she's gone now and we'll all have to do the best we can." And he took off with Arthur. That was it. I was only twelve, Muriel was fourteen. The nuns took us in for a while, but they used to just about skin us alive; we decided we'd be better off on our own, and us girls got live in jobs – housekeeping and that – until we got married. I dunno what happened to Arthur.'

Harry murmured his regrets at Mrs Foley's husband's passing.

'Well, he wasn't much of a loss. He was always full; most of the time he'd just want to sing, but the Temperance mob used to get under his skin – he'd go along to their meetings half sozzled and make out he wanted to be saved and that – in the end they barred him.'

When Harry suggested to Cudgee that he share in the advantages that his housekeeper offered Cudgee was initially wary. 'Long as I pay my whack,' he insisted. Once he'd moved in though it seemed to do him good. Though there was nothing of the old retainer in him, he used to wait up until he heard Harry cross the threshold below him at night, and rely on similar sounds of movement as a wake-up call in the mornings. Otherwise they rarely trespassed on each other's company.

Harry's new housekeeper declared her approval of the new tenant unreservedly. 'He's a gentleman,' she said, 'and he's clean about his person. And that's all you can ask.' She also decided that he wanted 'feeding up' and as a supplement to her exertions on Harry's behalf started bringing Cudgee's breakfast up to his room in the mornings. On Saturdays, after he'd had his first cup of tea she'd stand at his door and discuss the racing form with him before entrusting him to put on her bob-each-way bets.

Cudgee was in many ways self-sufficient, rather than one of the ill-fitting wrecks who haunt country towns, forming unfulfilling relationships with animals or birds in the absence of human company, and adopting the raiments of eccentricity well before the tinnitus of loneliness drives them authentically crazy.

Despite his protestations, he had run the gauntlet of enough relationships to appreciate solitude and not have to spend the rest of his life worrying about what he'd missed out on. He enjoyed his privacy without wanting to unduly prolong it. His normally overcoated figure was familiar around town both in and out of the course of duty. The sight of him moistening the tip of a pencil was often the source of ribaldry – 'look out, the body snatcher's here.' He paid for and drank four beers every night at the pub and left, unless the local copper came in for a squiz when they might share an extra one. He respected the privilege of having an informal chat with the Sergeant and did not make notes. He never allowed levity to intrude on the court reports of 'disgusting' or 'insulting' language sometimes directed at that officer in the course of his duty. He did not stop to consider whether the gentleman's innate sense of probity was excessive, or infectious: when the *Mail* was able to announce, 'On Friday afternoon last, the sorry spectacle of a number of derelict characters in the Mylong court represented a successful conclusion to a police clean-out of them from the town' – the sense of satisfaction he contributed to the report was unconscious. When the sergeant was inspired in turn by a letter to the paper complaining of dances 'which bring the bodies of dancers

together in most objectionable relation,' and broke up a gathering in the Masonic Lodge building on the strength of it, Cudgee seconded his initiative. 'No Place for Jazz', his headline resounded; even if he himself had no views either way.

Sergeant Broad – or 'Old Broady' – was an officer in the best traditions of Australian constabulary, with a strong sense of moral zeal. During the War, at another posting in the Barossa, he had been a righteous disciple and enforcer of anti-German sentiment. He never quite got round to settling back far enough on his bar stool to say, 'Great days, Cudgee, great days,' but it was obvious they'd been a highlight of his career. He had a nose for artifice, he'd seen through the Anglicization of German names – 'you can always tell a Kraut' – he had arrested a German pastor sheltering under a nom de plume and come down hard on anything approaching a social gathering in Teutonic culture's name: he was not actually obsessed with the War, but something, including his non-participation in it, had changed the landscape of his perceptions forever.

He had seen or was convinced he had, and well before Communism made its insidious presence felt in Australia, what lay behind appearances. For him there was no scene so bland that it might not be guilty of concealment, no sun so bright that a shadow might not be waiting to overwhelm it, no rose so perfect....and so on. One of the most satisfyingly resentful of German settlers that he'd helped inter, blustered to him on his arrest, 'You Australians, you think you are so tough now. But wait a bit and you might find out that we Germans are not so easily picked off.' At the time Broady had been happy to \give him a clip behind the ear for his trouble, but still the threat left an impression. Seeing, or believing that he saw or detected, any threat to it, increased his affection for the area. 'I love this town,' he was fond of saying in the mellow stage of his cups. It took on a Utopian quality exceeding Harry Gardener's original view of the town then. When the Sergeant was further gone, though, he saw the town as an outpost. Of course it was, but the real enemy was surely at its

desert gates. In those moods however his patrols of the town with an eye out for insurrection translated into him penalising townspeople for the most trivial indiscretions; he'd ping them for anything from having a horse loose in the shafts to spitting in the street. It didn't make him popular but he didn't care. In many ways he still saw Mylong as a potential victim of future subversion, for a pincer action from the German settler dominated surrounding towns. He recoiled from the very mention of sauerkraut and shuddered at memories of the sight of 'dead-dick' sausages he'd seen dangling in German homes. He regretted the resumption of immigration after the War and scrutinised all new settlers' bona fides. When he learned that a new school teacher in town had been an only very latterly repatriated prisoner of War in Germany, he lifted his head like one of the local breed of kangaroo-dogs scenting their designated prey.

Carey

On preliminary acquaintance there seemed little else about the young man to excite intense scrutiny from the Sergeant, however. His appearance was marked by a small pointed moustache which proved ephemeral and a peculiar Christian name, Carol, that soon got modified as well. He was blonde and slim with neat features made distinctive by a puckish grin which occasionally disturbed female members of staff by liberating dimples at its fringes, but his presence was otherwise quite unthreatening. He seemed, in fact, to be keen to please. He accepted that the headmaster preferred to refer to him by his surname – Wallace – and when the headmaster reminded him that he was a firm believer in corporal punishment as an aid to learning, the by-now Carey nodded his assent.

'I've been a soldier,' he assured him; to which the headmaster – who hadn't been – deferred.

His new member of staff never revealed that at least part of the secret behind his class's subsequent pursuit of excellence lay in the sense of complicity they shared. 'I will not use this stick,' he assured them early on in his tutelage, measuring its weight, 'but I know someone else who will.' Children were attracted by the invitation to collusion implied in his remark. In a way he was inviting them to enter the world of their imagination.

Sometimes, when the week drew to a close on Friday afternoons, and while elsewhere in the school the conventions were still being dragged out, he called a sneaky halt to them. He would sit on the front corner of his desk, intermittently clasping the knee he had cocked up on a chair, and talk. Initially he invited the children to take part in the conversation, but instinct soon told them that the time would pass better if they just listened in.

He never mentioned the War itself in any detail, but did tell them about the prison camp he'd been in. When he confessed that not all his relationships with prison guards had

been disadvantageous the children were astonished; when he demonstrated that he could speak the lingo they told their parents. One of them – signing himself 'Proud Patriot' – protested in a letter to the Mail: 'In the final letter I received from my son, he told me that if he had his way there would be no peace until the German cities had been knocked rotten and their army was rotting in shell holes. Yet from things I've been hearing from not a hundred miles away, stories that make a mockery of the sacrifices that my son – *and* many others in the district made – we've recently been blessed with the company of one supposed Australian who obviously spent so much in the enemy camp that he's come back here unsure which side he's on. I would suggest that if he is unable to examine his conscience and come up with an honest answer, that someone else do it for him….'

It was the first and only shadow cast over Carey since his arrival, but still the head teacher, in many ways bowed down by forty years of service to the Department, rather welcomed the chance to ease his burden.

'In future I would keep that sort of talk right out of the classroom,' he counselled, and when his junior's lips parted in mute protest, strengthened his stance: '*Right* out.'

After the War the *Mail* had initially come down hard in favour of the penalties imposed on the losing side. In defence of Harry Gardener, since he had taken no part in the conflict itself, and had not been able to separate himself from Allied propaganda completely – as well as losing a son, and maybe a wife, because of it – there was some excuse for the firm line the paper took; but a couple of incidents reawakened his sense of fair play.

When he subsequently became aware of grumblings about the ex-POW's history from some of his readers he took the chance to interview the young teacher, and make sure that his subject, whom he personally found innocuous, came across as a loyal subject of the realm.

A second and much more significant challenge to his sense of justice, however, involved the return of the same young man from Adelaide one day with a bride. A foreign one.

During and after the War smallish boys found pleasure in ganging up on kids of German descent and running a set-square across their straw-stubbled heads to confirm their heritage. The young woman in this case seemed immune to that invigilation at least: her springy dark hair was normally sheltered under a pert cloche hat. Still her arrival sent a ripple of unease through the community. The curious incident of her migration when Germans were still very much on the outer was put down to a Danish father; she'd arrived under that country's colours. Otherwise the town would have been happier if she'd gone around in plaits and dirndls. But she wore knee length skirts that seemed to have skipped ahead of the dropped waist stiles still favoured locally and her bust was apparent. Paradoxically, she was sometimes seen on weekends in mannish shirts. You could pick the sound of her high heeled shoes a mile off in the shops. She openly smoked a brand of cigarettes no one had ever heard of, and once tried to buy a drink in the Front Bar. The Manager pointed sternly at the door while giving her a firm direction – 'Out of this, missie' – but even he had some sympathy for her. 'What's her old man doin' lettin' her get around like that?' he asked, 'that's the thing.' It was a rhetorical question but a stumper. No one had an answer.

The headmaster, when staff were called on to provide proof that they had partners over morning tea one day, found the sound of her language when she exchanged a few words of it with her husband, rather chilling. Still, he extended his hand to her on that occasion and found it taken quite firmly.

'I am Anja,' she said.

'Anna?' he strained.

She smiled. ‘I expect that is close enough.’ The headmaster felt he was being patronised, but her frankness and nearness and the hint of amusement on her rosebud lips disarmed him.

‘Good-oh,’ he said.

Partly as a reaction to local speculation and partly perhaps, as part of his revisionist phase, Harry decided to do a small piece on the teacher’s new wife as well, if only so it might confirm his suspicions that the new citizen in their midst was grateful for the advantages that had been offered her. Australia was full of stories like it after all.

In the event he was rather disappointed. The immediate preliminaries to the interview were not promising. After there was no response to his restrained knock he had looked over the palings of a small side fence and been astonished by the sight of his subject basking naked on a cane lounge in the back yard. He had only a momentary glimpse before retreating, but still he made himself wait long moments before irreproachably – he hoped – shaking the front door bell.

Left to describe abbreviated half circles outside the door while Mrs Wallace was – presumably – dressing, he felt at immediate disadvantage, and when they eventually sat down together his composure was not helped by the lady’s disinclination to discuss the War or her country’s culpability for it. She said, ‘I think there are better things left unsaid. It was a terrible time for everyone.’ She responded more readily if still unsatisfyingly to questions about her new home. ‘Of course I am very happy to be here with my husband in this new country – even if there are things I miss in my old one.’

‘What sort of things?’ Harry prompted.

She smiled. ‘Berlin, for example,’ and gave a little sigh. ‘I lived there for a time before the War. It was a wonderful city. Perhaps you have been there?’ The barely

perceptible flutter of her eyelashes accompanying her enquiry made Harry take a firmer grip on his pencil while confessing that he had not.

'I have heard though,' he said gamely, 'that it was a lively place.'

'Yes,' she said, 'that is one way to describe it. And…I am afraid you may not be happy with me for saying it, that there are other things. I wish that the food here, plentiful as it is, could be a little more exciting. And of course there is the way people dress, the way of life…' She had been dangling, half absent-mindedly, one elegant shoe on the toes of a foot, when she turned her full attention on Harry. 'Don't you sometimes feel as if you are just a little far away from the real world here, from where things are happening?'

Harry felt chastened and resentful. Why was this woman sounding so ungrateful? He asked himself. Why was she bothering to half flirt with him, if it came to that? Did he deserve to be patronised? He foraged for a mask of urbanity to put on as he was leaving – and felt as wooden as he had all those years ago at that Cosme dance. It was as if the twenty years he'd put into the town had just been held up for judgment, and found wanting.

He considered getting even in print, and didn't. His 'New arrival speaks of contrasts between Australia and Germany' went close to bowdlerising a transcript of the interview. 'Mrs Anja – "Call me Anna" – Wallace, in her charming home spoke favourably of the freedoms and advantages she is able to enjoy in her adopted country, while looking back somewhat nostalgically to a way of life in Germany that the Kaiser irrevocably destroyed.'

He confessed to Cudgee, 'I had to dress it up a bit.'

'Why?'

'Not everything she had to say was…well, helpful.'

'What's wrong with her?'

'I think she might be a bit unhappy.'

'She's only been here five minutes. Can't she give the joint a go?'

Harry spread his hands. ‘It’s not always easy, Cudg.’

Cudgee was actually a little bit peeved that he hadn’t been allowed to do the interview himself. He thought, that sheila’s soft-soaped him; it wouldn’t have happened if I’d been on the job. He couldn’t help but let on a bit of what he’d heard to the Sergeant at the pub.

Broady had already had a big day, having had to a chase an itinerant ‘river rat’ for about half a mile through the scrub and then have to untangle his prey from the barbed wired fence he’d attempted to hurdle. Honesty compelled him to admit, ‘Gettin’ a bit old for this caper,’ while he was wiping sweat from his still wet brow – still, he pricked up his ears when he heard about the ‘Kraut sheila’.

‘Bugger me,’ he said, ‘Make a nice pair, don’t they? Her and her old man. In the best country in the world and they’re havin’ a whinge.’ He took off his hat and ran a finger round the inside of its brim. ‘And you reckon there was more meat on the bone than your boss let on about as well?’

Cudgee shrugged. ‘Dunno. Might be an idea to keep a bit of an eye on ‘em though…’ Cudgee’s suggestion was rhetorical, and posed with the journalistic potential of the subject in mind. The Sergeant’s reply wasn’t. ‘I’ll do more than that, don’t worry,’ he said, and clapped his hat back on his head.

When he heard that Anja wanted to open a shop he bridled.

Harry had been right when he’d divined that she had a problem. ‘I need to *do* something,’ she complained to her husband one day.

‘But you are,’ he reasoned. ‘You’re a school teacher’s wife.’

‘But I am so *bored*…The baker comes in the morning, he says hullo. The butcher when he comes once a week says hullo. The old lady next door hides under her hedge so she does not ever have to say anything to me. When I go to the shops they look at me as if I have a bomb in my purse.’ She had raised her eyebrows when he’d suggested a possible transfer at

some indeterminate time to the Barossa Valley. ‘So I can listen to those Prussians grunting at each other all day? *Nein danke*.’

Underneath she was not actually all that worldly. In her retreat to the family farm after her original escape from it she had brought a superficial polish. A self-protective guise she’d easily enough acquired because it went with her appearance. She hadn’t really had time to grow into her looks and was still young enough for her poise to be threatened. ‘What does it matter here how I dress?’ she asked once. ‘All the women go around like *hausfraus*, the men with their hair cut above their ears and their black suits, and their talk always of how many grapes they have to pick and what they will earn.’

Her husband looked at her, as if fearing that she might dissolve before him into something less than the creature he had been first drawn to. He subsequently suppressed his objections when Anja took over a half derelict shop in the main street. It had once been a bakery, even if the omens of its most recent history were not auspicious. During a downturn in business its original owner had walked off the premises at three in the morning, leaving dozens of half risen tins of dough behind him, and walked on into the river. It wasn’t until *he* rose to the surface himself days later that the landlord forced entry. The condition of the premises, overrun by that time with mice and their droppings, had deterred any future tenants from taking out a lease on them and it had been left more or less like it. It had a wood oven though, and Anja rolled up her sleeves when she saw it.

‘I will show these Australian women what it is like to clean,’ she threatened, and in pursuit of her visions of Weissbrots, Doppelwecks and Roggenbrots burgeoning upon her shop’s counter, attacked her task. The ramshackle little building was transformed with a scrub down and several coats of paint. On the evening before she opened for business Harry was passing, and on a whim knocked at the door. When he was invited in he gazed round admiringly at a display that even he recognised as fragrantly Continental.

He forgot his reserve for a moment and said, ‘A veritable feast.’

‘It is not so bad?’ Anja asked, arms akimbo. She was removing her apron. ‘I have finished here. Would you like to walk with me?’

‘Of course,’ Harry said gallantly, feeling much more comfortable in that public role than their interview’s private one. The past glimpse of her nakedness had made him shake his head, wondering if he had a predilection for such encounters and what they might say about him. It recalled his first collision with Hattie and her younger sister as well as a much more recent incident in the hotel.

He had served in various capacities on its board (in many ways the pub’s history and the *Mail*’*s* were indivisible), including several terms as president, while only very rarely taking advantage of its licensed facilities. He had long ago given the hotel’s front bar a wide berth along with its largely itinerant clientele who enjoyed knocking down cheques at its counter before looking for someone else to blame for their divestiture and knock down as well, quite often. Likewise, the terms for membership of the Settlers Bar, established early in the century that ‘gentlemen might drink in comfort and be immune from the company of those whose language was coarse and often blasphemous,’ seemed to have become open to generous interpretation. When he successfully pressed for the dedication of one of the pub’s bars to the dispensation of soft drinks, ice creams and flavoured milks, he was cheerfully ceding ground to the more amenable ghosts of Temperance’s past.

The *Mail* celebrated the parlour’s opening, while going so far as to decorously suggest that “the charming manner of the young lady dispensing the refreshments may be not the least of the reasons for its success.” Notwithstanding her and her wares’ attractions the parlour’s trade had largely dried up by the summer’s end, however. Cordials wore high tide crusts and ice-cream set like permafrost; the girl’s smart starched peaked and coroneted cap slumped, as if itself disheartened. Still, when the hotel board decided to rededicate the bar to

grog its attendant – called Ingrid – took it badly, clamping her apron to both eyes in her flight to the Ladies. She appealed to Harry directly to reconsider the next time she saw him in the street, forcing him to remind her that the matter was by then out of his hands. Then, in the housemaid's uniform that she'd been made to reassume, she waylaid him before a board meeting, telling him she had confidential information about irregularities in the hotel's takings. 'Leakages' were in fact notorious, yet when Harry acceded to her requests in good faith and met her in an unoccupied upstairs room, the girl ambushed him just inside the door.

'Give us my job back and you can have a feel of these whenever you like,' she said, pressing his hands to her breasts. Harry was appalled and snatched back his hands and his dignity as he backed out the door, but still he was left wondering how close he had gone to trespassing upon – or if he had indeed transgressed beyond – the boundaries of compromise. He was shocked by the girl's clumsiness, yet it also made him feel as if the force of past and unacknowledged sins might be herding him into a kind of retributive minefield. He was, after all, among the last of those generations brought up in Australia with the knowledge that they were not only fully exposed to God's gaze in this world but subject to His censure in the next.

The last loveless years with Eleanor had left him with only two physical outlets or options. The most radical – adultery – was unthinkable; he might admit to chinks in the armour of his morality, but while he was often amazed by the facility with which people juggled contradictory impulses within themselves, he could not join them. Subsequently, his celibacy became habitual and, even if he didn't recognise it, added to the fuel he burnt up in daily pursuits. Apart from the hotel he served in an official capacity on several local growers' cooperatives, and while chiding in print local sporting groups and charities for their dependence on "the old cash cow" of the *Mail*, he rarely withheld its patronage; at times when he dressed in the evenings he had to remind himself which meeting he was favouring with his attendance. Sometimes he had visions of addressing a prepared speech to the wrong

crowd. His days still "fizzed by" as he wrote, but at nearly fifty he was aware of something drying up in him.

The compensation he found in accompanying the young lady to the corner of her street a few minutes' walk away, was almost certainly disproportionate, then, and he recognised that, yet some of her ease did transfer itself to him, secure as he was in the knowledge that his behaviour, if only because of the disparity in their ages, was beyond public reproach.

It was spring, and on leaving the building they could hear the willy-wagtail who'd laid claim to the pepper tree just outside posturing near its tiny cupped nest almost within their reach.

'That must be a good sign,' Anja said, and Harry agreed with her.

But, as things turned out, it wasn't.

People came to look when the shop opened for business, but mostly through the window, and the majority of those that ventured in wrinkled their noses and retreated. There was nothing they could align themselves with, and so they floundered. It was a relief for someone to say they'd identified 'a dirty great hunk of dried fish hanging up there …Talk about *pong*…!' It gave them reasonable grounds for rejection.

Anja was resolute. In the manner of the trader preceding her she passed the early hours of the morning up to her elbows in flour and dough, but in a much less pessimistic state of mind. 'I will not serve them up their pies and pasties,' she swore. 'They will eat what I make them.'

But they wouldn't. In a defiant, almost last gasp fling, she spent hours preparing a giant Christmas cake – which gave Sergeant Broad a chance to finally make his move.

He had not been idle in the interim: he'd already spent hours poring over the Pure Food Act and when he strode into the premises two days before Christmas was well armed.

He shook his head more in sorrow than anger at the displays of wursts and kasersorten, but zeroed in on the Christmas cake. Anja had been giving free slices of it away to customers, he knew. He gave it a searching look.

'What's this then, missie?'

The answer was so self-evident that she did not respond, so he filled in the silence by bending over the article and having a whiff to confirm his visual assessment of the substance.

'This got grog in it?'

'Taste it,' Anja invited, and cut him a sliver.

The sergeant took the offering, so that he might detach an even tinier portion from it and rest the fragment on his tongue.

He spat the residue sideways into his palm. 'Grog.'

'It is flavoured with wine, yes. '

'Given any of it to kids?'

'Of course. They seem to enjoy it.'

'Are you aware that it's against the law to sell or supply intoxicating liquors, or any food containing intoxicating liquors to minors…? That's kids in our language.'

'But I gave it to them with their mothers' permission.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'But what harm can there be…?'

'Plenty. We don't want our kids staggerin' around half full on whatever you've tipped into it. That's an offence – you'll be gettin' a summons.'

The sergeant might have been thinking on his feet but he had chosen his moment well in more ways than one. He wouldn't admit it, but he'd actually found the sight of Anja rather intimidating in town, he'd dodged her once or twice from a distance after scraping one scuffed toe of a boot over the other and then slipping down a side street. But not only did he

have her gone for all money on this, he'd caught her at a disadvantage, with a floury apron and streaky hair. 'You're not so flash lookin' now,' he told himself approvingly, and he was still in good humour when he confided in Cudgee later, 'Best day's work I've done for a while,' he said.

Cudgee was a little alarmed at the turn of events and wondered about any part he might have been playing in the sergeant's crusade.

'What'll it mean, if she gets done?' he asked.

'Close her bloody shop down, with any sort of luck,' the sergeant said.

'What about all her stock?'

The sergeant rested his cap on the bar and tuned his back to it. 'She can stuff it where it fits for all I care.'

He was a little unfortunate that Harry was on the bench when the case came to court. The J.P.'s function in such matters was usually handled by Fern Westley, whose disinterested interpretation of the law had been so compromised by the number of times he'd been escorted home by police in an incapable state that his judgements relied entirely on prosecution evidence.

Harry had taken some time to prepare, however. He'd heard the story and his liberal soul was on alert. He responded with a sober nod to the sergeant's cheery greeting in court – 'day there, Harry' – and then, as things unravelled, took the officer to task.

'You say you attended the shop leased by the defendant?

'I did.'

And there found ….'

'One Christmas cake.'

'You examined it?'

'I did.'

‘How did it look?’

‘Not bad, I suppose.’

‘You tasted it?’

‘Yes.’

‘And found it’ –

‘Full of grog.’

‘You mean it smelt of, what, wine…?’

‘Reeked of it. Blow your head off.’

‘Sergeant’ – and Harry, despite himself, began to enjoy the moment – ‘do you know at what temperature alcohol is converted?

‘Converted?’

‘Into steam, when it boils off…?’

‘No idea.’

‘About 175 degrees.’

‘I’m not with you’ –

‘And do you know what the baking temperature of cakes normally is?’

‘I’d have to ask the missus,’ the sergeant said lamely, and looked round him for support. ‘She’s the boss in that area.’

‘Well I have it on good authority from the *Green and Gold* cooking book, that it’s about 300 degrees, give or take a few depending on the recipe. So…would you say the cake was well cooked?’

‘Might have been.’

‘Not runny at all?’

‘Not that I could tell.’

‘So would you agree that about all that would have been really left in the cake of the wine would have been the flavour.’

‘That’s bad enough, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not illegal’ –

‘Well what about the rest of the stuff in the shop. Stunk to high heaven.’

‘Clean though, was it? You didn’t take and you don’t have any samples of foodstuffs to prove otherwise?’

‘Not on me, no’ –

‘Then I think the case must be dismissed.’

Cudgee himself had to admit that his employer handled things very neatly. He put on record in the paper that Sergeant Broad was unable to substantiate the Crown’s claim, and nearly lost himself a mate in the process.

Anja

Broad's unforgiving soul was indeed incensed, even if most of the damage had been done well before he stuck his nose into things; no one in the Bush ever made money trying to educate their customers and the court publicity just helped finish things off.

Well before then, in the first optimistic weeks after Anja opened her doors, Harry had found himself not exactly loitering but timing his passing so that he might exchange the time of day with her and then accompany her often on her way home again. His behaviour was blameless; yet he often found himself lingering, if not in her company, then in its memory. He liked her easy stride, the hint of melancholy in her voice, her occasionally wry offerings which did not seem to be aimed at anyone in particular, until they parted when her smile, while aimed directly at him, suggested that he might have just been recalled to her presence. He suspected even then, though he was no sticky-beak, that she might not be entirely happy. He never asked about the circumstances under which she had met her husband, until one day she supplied the information on her own.

'I was working on my mother's farm when he came there with a work party to help with the harvest,' she said. 'And…we fell in love. We were together when the War ended, but then… we were parted…' Her last dangling phrase had the air of a non-sequitur about it. He didn't probe; instead he asked:

'Was it a very hard time for you then?'

'Yes.' She looked at him directly. 'In ways that I do not think many people here could understand.'

One day she astonished him by offering him a trailing hand as they were walking. It was a casual gesture, for the barest moment he rested his fingers on hers before realising that she might indeed have forgotten who she was with, and stuffed his offending hand in his coat

pocket. He opened his mouth to apologise and blurted out something about the weather. He went through the farcical process of tipping his hat to her on parting while actually feeling like crushing it down over his ears.

She, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed. Perhaps her gesture had been purely incidental, or Continental even, he tried assuring himself, until he recalled how she responded to his parting courtesy with the smallest hint of amusement on her lips.

He strode on to nowhere in particular afterwards, breathing hard; theatrically, he might have conceded in a more sober mood; cursing himself for many reasons, most of all because the incident had left him feeling exposed. His reaction might seem excessive to us; to him it was reason enough to dodge Anja for days.

When he did see her again it was on foreign territory. He left the office near dusk on a mission: the hotel had recently donated money for improvements to the public gardens in front of the hotel and he wanted to inspect progress. The committee's support for the gesture had not been undiluted: over the years the garden had often been blamed for the vandalism and high-jinks practised in them; a hotel guest had publicly protested on one occasion that his night's rest had been continually disrupted by the "shrieks and cries of girls tumbling all over the place with men," while a night porter dispatched to restore order there on another evening had been found unconscious in a rose bed next morning "with boot marks clearly visible upon his person." When the platform suspending a water tank some thirty feet above the garden collapsed and nearly cleaned up the gardener working underneath, some saw it as a judgement on public waste.

Harry was pleased to note that the development was nevertheless well underway. Freshly planted lawns were flourishing, while now naked wisteria had in the summer just past begun to surge over a trellised walkway. He was taken unawares by his former walking companion sitting on a bench under a lace-like spill of Spanish Broom.

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs Wallace,’ he said. ‘I hope I have not startled you…’

‘Not at all,’ she responded generously, half rising. ‘I am enjoying your gardens.’

‘Yes. They are very much a work in progress, of course, but in time…’ Harry suggested, before whatever else he was going to say trailed out of his head. He teetered on his toes until she supplied some filling to the interval:

‘I have not seen you for a little while. Have you been away?’

‘No, no.’ Harry shook his head vigorously, as if it might have been guilty of divagations of its own. ‘No, I have been rather tied up with work.’

‘Of course. You must remind me to return the book you lent me on gardening when next we meet.’

Harry raised a hand. ‘Oh, don’t bother.’ He remembered passing it on to the lady when she showed some enthusiasm for growing her own vegetables, even if the first frosts of the season had bitten the heads off almost everything she put in.

She said, ‘I was being very silly when I told you, the day you came to my home, about Berlin. I am really a *Landei*…a farm girl, you know.’

‘Oh yes?’ Harry nodded compliantly. ‘That explains your…’

‘Yes. You know I do not miss the farm life, but I miss spring and summer in my country; and I miss the snow, especially the first. There were mountains not so very far distant from where I lived, too, with many places to walk…’

Nodding, Harry started to say, ‘I’ve seen pictures…’ and then put the words away. He was going to ask in all innocence, ‘Why did you leave there…?’ but he suppressed that too, and instead he said, ‘I can imagine.’

She might have divined his train of thought. ‘Cows may live only on grass,’ she said, ‘but people…’ She shook her head. ‘You have been to my country perhaps, you have travelled to Europe?’

‘Well no, not really. I did spend some time in South America, but that was a long time ago.’

‘Oh. And what took you there may I ask?’

‘Well, it’s a little difficult to explain. We were a group of people with an idea of setting up a colony there…a Socialist dream, people said. Not always kindly. You know what Socialism is?’

‘Of course.’

‘And things were so bad here, politically, while we had a chance to take up land in Paraguay. We really had the best intentions, or most of us did, but…human nature pulled things apart; quarrels, silly things…’

‘Was the country beautiful?’

‘Some of it was, yes,’ Harry said, as if just recalling the fact.

‘And you were alone there…?’

‘Well no, I went with friends, or mates, as we used to say.’

‘And…?’

He spread his hands. ‘I came back and married and settled here’ –

‘And now – ?’ she probed gently.

He closed his hands again. ‘Things are as they are….’

It was getting dark. They were close enough to the river to hear the occasional and intriguing plops of fish rising, and the more regular slap of water against the banks. Gums on the far bank were beginning to stand out in silhouette against the sky; some late flying ducks cuffed the air above them. Harry realised it was getting chilly.

‘Mrs Wallace…’ he said solicitously, and went through the motions of loosening his jacket to offer it to her. ‘You will take cold.’

‘You are very kind,’ she said, declining his offer while getting to her feet, ‘but I must go.’ She smoothed a fold before adding, ‘I hope you are not always too busy in the future for us to have another of our little talks.’

She left him like a horse mouthing a bit. He went to resume, mechanically, his tour of the garden before halting, describing a half circle or two, and then when he was sure that the lady was well out of sight, resolutely making his own way home.

He knew he had been reprieved. He did not resume his old schedule again immediately, and then he made sure his observation of it was erratic. Their conversations when they took what became a discreet choice of route were thereafter generally restricted to trivialities, even if in their own way they took on the character of intimacies. Still he was quite unprepared for the day when they were passing the town’s abandoned stable yard and she turned to him and said, ‘Mr Gardener, may I tell you something?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, automatically, while having a presentiment that the news would not be good.

‘I am very unhappy,’ she said.

He was shocked and did not know what to say or do. Both her hands were joined most uncharacteristically in front of her, as if in an attitude of penitence. His own hands felt vestigial, until she opened her arms as she leant against him and he was forced to take some responsibility for his own. He held her while she clung and wept. For a moment he was disturbed by her proximity, until his efforts to console her repressed any other response. He stroked her back and murmured; two things he hadn’t done to anyone for years. He found himself promising that her future would be brighter. ‘Your shop…’ he began to say….

That was a mistake. ‘Oh the shop – it is not just the shop’ – she said almost angrily, pulling away – ‘it is everything. I should never have come here. I am no longer in love with

my husband, I will never be at home in this country – do you know what that feels like?' She looked absolutely wretched and then dumbfounded when Harry nodded and said, 'Perhaps.'

'You? I thought this town was everything to you.'

'Well, yes,' he conceded hurriedly, 'yes it is...' He stopped as they looked forlornly at each other and she wiped her eyes dry with a handkerchief.

'Something will turn up,' he then said gamely – or lamely.

He felt like burying himself. After she had gone adrenalin and mortification battled for possession in him as they had done all those years ago in Cosme. Elation and apprehension attended the sight of any female at any distance in the town for days afterwards and set him ducking from view. He had extreme but he felt justifiable visions of her husband waiting on him at the paper with high words and mortal challenges. It wasn't even what he'd done that had made him feel so culpable; it was the awakening of feelings in him that he'd decently disowned for years. It seemed unfair that they had so exposed him. And worst of all was their absurdity: a middle-aged man's infatuation …Dear God, he thought. His reflection in bathroom mirrors mocked his presumption; the memory of her perfume re-awoke it.

He decided to stay away from her then and did. He buried himself in his office and when he eventually did give in and revisited her chose an utterly charmless winter's day to do it. The leaves of the gums along the river stood out like strings from the trees' bony limbs, doors and windows once he got inside the shop were shuddering in their frames; when a shower of rain passed overhead it was so torn to pieces by the south-westerly driving it that it barely wet the ground.

'Why does it not at least *snow*..?' Anja said. She was standing with her hands on her counter gazing at her thinned out wares. Harry knew at once that whatever some secret reprehensible part of him might still have been dreaming of would not be coming to pass.

Was it cowardice in him that asserted it, or good sense? Everything had combined to make Anja look utterly bleak, and closed off.

He did not mention, obviously, business, or venture any sort of personal remark to his friend then, but offered up the barest of trivialities before beating a retreat. At the door they were both confronted by the river. One of the causes for which Harry was agitating, the installation of locks on the Murray, had not yet come to pass; there was a drought on and the stream was almost drained. It was like watching something die as it toiled past sandbars and the wrecks of trees.

'This is a *river*…!' Anja said, as if its pretensions mirrored her original hopes.

There was to be no comfort waiting for her at home, either. Her husband had chosen the evening to deliver an ultimatum of sorts. 'Close that damn shop's doors and get it over with,' he demanded, 'I'm sick of this.'

Ultimately, however, the impasse between them had to wait to be relieved from another source. Two men wrapped in blue suits knocked on the door the following Saturday citing irregularities in Anja's bona fides. They would not enlarge on the subject and, after at first ignoring Carey's protests, threatened on the strength of their persistence to take both him and his wife in charge.

Later Harry learnt through the offices of Cudgee that 'acting on certain information' – to employ a line he used to disguise the identities of dobbers he casually employed – that it was Sergeant Broad who discovered the inconsistencies in Anja's immigration declarations after his initial prosecution of her had been frustrated.

'Reckoned she was born in Denmark,' he told his old amanuensis, Cudgee. 'All she done was cook up a Danish surname.' Someone, he revealed, a visitor to the ill-fated shop, had found out how sketchy her command of her supposed parent's tongue was, and had passed on their misgivings to him.

‘That’s when I really cottoned on,’ he said, ‘twigged. Reckoned she’d lived there for years. Pigs arse: she paid someone for those papers; the big boys in town were onto that like seagulls, don’t worry. There’s only one thing I’m sorry about: I was going to bring her in, but someone else beat me to it. What d’ye reckon about that?’

‘I reckon you’d make a first class prick if you put a bit more work into it,’ Cudgee said, and never spoke to the man again.

Soon after the arrest Harry tried to counsel Carey but found him largely uncommunicative. He was in shock, Harry decided. He would have been shocked himself to learn that the young man’s passivity was not just a defence against the events that had overtaken him, but his way of adjusting to them. In fact, he was in a state of emotional transition within hours, or at least days, after his wife had been taken away.

Even at the railway station, the couple supplied contrasts in behaviour. While Anja waved a damp handkerchief despairingly from a carriage window, her husband’s stayed folded away. In truth they had become like soldiers facing each other over No-man’s-Land since marriage, increasingly uncomprehending and untrusting of one another, with the ties of loyalty and optimism weakened beyond relief by Anja’s discontent. Her husband made last moment promises that the break would not be permanent, but when he turned to go, his boots scuffing up a red crust of earth to meet the limited expectations of the Mallee scrub around him, a guilty part of him was giving thanks that the conclusion to their relationship had not been more painful…

Coogee

There had always been something of the chameleon in Carey. Product of a home dominated at least superficially by a mother subject to moods that included extravagant displays of affection and compensating crankiness, he had been one of three children, but somehow, through his less than ardent relationship with his brother and sister, a natural audience to her. Without peers, in a sense, however, he'd never been able to withdraw with them into any sort of union that could ignore his parents' relationship. It was not a happy one. Since his father seemed so overshadowed by his wife and so acquiescent to her demands, Carey was not to know how it pained his introvert soul. He indulged her, shrugged his shoulders when she spent money on some extravagance or declared the house unliveable: they'd actually moved several times. He'd snorted publicly and sought out the services of a removalist with whom he subsequently built up a relationship with apparently good grace. 'If that's what the missus wants….' he explained to acquaintances in a way that conceded her strength of will. It was a strain on his boiler-making purse, but he gave in to it. He found ways of repaying her however. He cultivated taciturnity, withdrawing behind the afternoon rag when he got home from work into a silence he preferred unbroken. Conversation at the dinner table was discouraged between the children. He blurred over any problems with social interaction with his wife when they were out by ignoring her and eventually, in a painful but satisfying act of self-mortification, turning his back on her in bed.

Despite his wife's robustness there was something in him that unsettled her.

The seemingly unpredictable but always to be expected way he meted out punishment to the children, for example: that moment when by some transgression that only he was capable of deciding had gone beyond tolerable limits, he was provoked into loosening his belt and, rising from the table or the armchair he'd been buried in, take the culprit into the laundry

and in a silence broken only by his hisses of breath and their gasps, lay into them. It was the efficiency and apparent lack of emotion that made his wife's skin creep. When she had challenged him once he gave her a venomous look. 'And good enough for the little *bastards*,' he swore in his flat English accent, and silenced her. It was his gift perhaps.

When their son enlisted then, his motives were selfish. He was sick of the atmosphere of home. The fact that his childhood had been disrupted so often not only meant that he had no particular loyalty to any particular address, but that most of his friendships had been temporary too. Physically, he had outgrown his father and could no longer be bluffed by him – he could ignore *him*, by then. The old man was beginning to show his age, prematurely; years of working in confined and unhealthy spaces had imposed on him a stoop and a persistent dry cough that found greatest expression on early mornings when he leant on a veranda post at the back of the house and heaved his heart up. He expressed no opinion either way when Carey said he'd enlisted, apart from narrowing further his shoelace-like lips.

Carey's mother made a scene when he announced what he was up to, but probably understood his real reasons for going. Ironically, when she crushed him against her and said, 'I wish I could go instead,' her motives might not have been entirely unselfish. And fed up as he was, or perhaps because of the demonstrations of his mother's unhappiness, a part of Carey would have liked to have taken her with him too if it could have been to somewhere other than the War.

They were living in a beach side suburb of Sydney at the time with a view of the sea. The day he left it was unpleasantly breezy, the sea grey and worried, while veils of rain inched over it.

'What a bugger of a day,' his mother said, clutching her hat to her head, as if resenting that her morning swim had been cancelled by it. 'Don't expect me to come and see you off. I'm not going to pretend you're going on a Boy Scout camp.'

Carey felt hurt, as most young recruits in his situation would. All the preparations and then attentions he'd received, sometimes from strangers, while he was on his pre-embarkation leave had more than made up for the humiliations of basic training. He was nowhere cynical enough to ignore it and had been caught up in the spirit. When his mother had asked him that morning how he was feeling while she was adjusting his tie, his 'Jolly fit, Mum,' response, though automatic, had not an ounce of irony. He was glad when he saw tears in her eyes at the end, feeling that the conventions had been restored, while at the same time being unsettlingly aware that it was a reversal of their normal roles.

'What will you do while I'm away Mum?' he asked.

'Carry on, of course,' she said abruptly, before turning her head away. When she looked back she was all business. 'All set then are we?'

'Yep.' He picked up his gear and stood there uncertainly before saying, 'Well, goodbye.'

'Good-bye, my boy.' She smoothed down his shoulders but didn't kiss him and waited until he had his hand on the front gate, before she called down the short front path after him, 'Carol…?'

He turned, 'Yeah, Mum?'

'Whatever happens, you won't come back here, will you?'

It was a big let-down. He headed off feeling like he'd done the day a kid next door had told him there was no Father Christmas.

But he never did go back.

He emerged from his basic military training with the soubriquet, 'Shiny', in recognition of the pains he took over his appearance and his application; and subsequently nothing much stuck to him. The looks and certain physical ease he'd been born with had given him a freedom that his separation from home heightened. There were no longer the

soul-sapping reminders of its constraints around him, the antipathy between him and his father that asserted family ties in the most negative way, and mocked any ideas he had of escaping them. The fact that he was subsequently wounded so early and, in the grand scale of things, lightly, did not really surprise him. In the one and only charge he made over the trench's parapet with so many to be doomed comrades, he thought he too might be on a collision course with catastrophe, but he was spared.

Incarcerated – and safe – he had gone in the last months of the War from being a day labourer on a farm outside the camp to lover of the farm owner's daughter, and when the owner – Anja's mother – died of influenza, and the mood of defeatism settling over the local population spread to the camp's administration, he got to enjoy all the benefits of living under his lover's roof. He saw no reason for things to change and when his expectations were challenged by the Armistice and the British military police who turned up at the farm one day to arrest him, he still imagined that the interruption to his and his lover's lives would be only temporary.

The British unit's commanding officer went to lengths to disabuse him. 'I have no wish to pre-empt any court's findings,' he censured, 'but as far as I can see you're nothing but a damned shirker. What do you think you were playing at, hiding under the blasted enemy's skirts? Take the prisoner away sergeant, and if you feel like giving him a box in the ears, don't let the articles of War inhibit you.'

When an aide then obliged him to add, 'Apparently, we're no longer at War…' his discomfort was only momentary; 'So you can do what you damn well like with him as far as I can see,' he said.

In the event Carey got off with nothing worse than what the sergeant forecast to be 'a good kicking,' before he was returned to his old prison. He was given a hut to himself but no

other comforts and saw no-one, and when he tried making enquiries about his "Jerry tart" he was told, 'With any luck she's got the same as what you'll be getting – a bullet.'

One day though, a letter from her was thrown in the door.

'*Mein lieber*,' Anja had written, 'I am sorry, but everything is finished here. I cannot stay. I am going to try to go to Denmark.' It closed with '*Ich liebe dich*,' but otherwise seemed short on emotion. Selfishly, he felt as if they were already in different worlds, and worse, that she was abandoning him in his.

Weeks went by, during which he was given no date for a hearing. Occasionally he still heard shots in the distance, and though they could have meant anything his new guards enjoyed attaching morbid significance to it. 'You're next,' they'd chuckle.

One day, however, his solitude was broken by an Australian officer. The English sergeant accompanying him seemed keen to linger, as if he suspected some colonial skulduggery might be afoot, but the lieutenant dismissed him.

'No need for you to hang around, sport,' he said, and shooed him off like a cat from some creature it was keen to keep tormenting.

The officer, a mature thirty something, with freckles and sandy hair – Irish descent, Carey decided – took out a sheaf of papers and observed, 'Looks like they've got you down for everything except dumb insolence,' before he introduced himself. 'Mulcahey. Where are you from in Australia?'

'Coogee, sir.'

'Do a bit of surfing do you?'

'A bit, sir.'

'Let's hope we can get you back in the water again before too long.'

'But…?'

‘As soon as I mentioned my name here the C.O. made some smart remark about the Irish Brigade. I would say his jurisdiction in matters like this is actually pretty shaky – we’ve got to have some autonomy. I outrank him anyhow. He can go and jump if he doesn’t like it.’

‘What’ll you tell them…?’

‘You were separated from the other prisoners in the confusion. It’s not as if the business has been all that orderly. We’ll get there even if we have to put a bit of a twist on the old “*Veritate e Virtute”* eh?… Sydney Boys’ High – ’ he added, and when Carey still looked blank ‘ – Truth and virtue: know it? Oh, well, never mind, one school’s much the same as another I suppose.’ He was getting dangerously close to being benign when he added, ‘Any good the young lady in question?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Half your luck,’ the lieutenant observed.

When he left Carey almost wished him well.

He felt like a coin that had turned up heads again. His rapid transfer from the camp to a ship in Holland after his meeting with the Australian officer had an air of déjà vu. He was in a new uniform, he presented papers at ports and was waved along. In London young girls flushed and older ones followed his passing approvingly. He had a neat, Bradmanesque stride, and the same look of perky optimism that gentleman was later to wear on his way to the wicket. He spent several pleasant weeks knocking about in London. It was spring, that fabled centre-piece of so much of his childhood reading. There were crocuses out in the parks, preludes to the pellucid and buttery waves of daffodils that succeeded them. He wrote dutifully to his mother: ‘I’ve visited the British Museum and the Art Gallery and seen some dashed impressive stuff; the place is a real eye-opener, actually,’ he said – without dwelling on one of the real eye-openers: the threads of ex-soldiers wandering the streets in daylight

hours with no apparent expectations and gathering in frayed knots in tea-shops. He knew her Bolshie sympathies would only be aroused.

The tone of such letters as he received when he was a prisoner had been typically angry and frustrated. 'I just wish this dreadful business was over,' she would say, 'and all these warlords and their profiteering mates could have some sense shaken into them, and you could come safely home. Though God knows what you will have to come home to…that ridiculous Billy Hughes is jumping up and down here like a cocky in a cage. He is an embarrassment.' Sometimes she went on for pages like that when she had a bee in her bonnet.

His decision to leave the ship in Adelaide was impulsive. It was a scorcher of a day the boat berthed, the heat hitting with a whoof as the water trickled to a final halt. It was a clear heat, though, the kind, though he wasn't to know it, that cleansed the city in summer, and purged its occupants of a lot of their affectations. He made up his mind to go ashore on the spot.

He found work in the city almost at once and did not even question the weirdness of circumstance that led to him re-meeting his old saviour, Lieutenant Mulcahey. The timing might not have been perfect, Carey was working in a hotel; in the precarious bonhomie of the six o'clock swill Mulcahey had to fight his way to the bar and then struggle to maintain a conversation before suggesting, 'Maybe we could get together and have a bit of a yarn somewhere quieter later on.'

Carey was surprised when Mulcahey subsequently invited him to apply for a vacancy at the school where he was teaching – he had nothing behind him but a year as a trainee in Coogee Primary before the War – but not overwhelmed.

'Just don't mention you worked in a pub,' Mulcahey advised before his protégé went for the interview, though as things turned out he needn't have bothered. The headmaster proved to be a not only kindly if slightly put-upon looking, but very much pragmatic, middle

aged man, who was relieved to interview a physically sound and apparently un-neurotic applicant for the position.

'Dreadful business, it was, of course, the War,' he said. 'But it's left all sorts of problems. We had one poor fellow here who used to dive under his desk when the bell rang. I had to suggest he take up some quieter occupation.' The headmaster's only real show of rectitude came when he asked Carey, 'You're not a Catholic are you, young fellow? Forgive me. But I'm afraid I had to ask Mulcahey to supply the strongest proof of his religious persuasion before he started. I'm glad to say he attends The Pilgrim Church in the city. Perhaps you're among the congregation?'

'Not yet, sir. I'm still new here.'

'I'm sure they'll find room for you. The Rector often delivers the eulogy at our Assemblies.' He announced the interview was drawing to a successful close by shaking Carey's hand. 'Well, all the very best. I'm quite relieved to be welcoming some new blood. We were very short handed during the War as you can probably imagine and some of the masters we hung onto or called in to fill the breach were well past it to be honest. A bit bizarre some of them. One used to boast that he'd been taken when he was a boy to see a public hanging in Ballarat. Had a rather overdeveloped faith in corporal punishment.'

Though Carey wasn't to know it, the headmaster's handshake conveyed not just a welcome to the school but, implicitly, to Adelaide's inner or upper social strata; an assisted passage across a seemingly negligible but actually impenetrable barrier raised against not just Catholics but to all those who fancied their chances of presumptuously breaching it. Within its membership almost anything was possible, while on the outer supplicants might wait for decades until the antecedents of their prosperity were decently erased. Adherents were liberal in outlook within limits, tolerant of those less benign than themselves; existing on independent incomes and codes of behaviour which, while often allowing them to pursue

leisurely life styles, also insisted that they meet bad news – like the white-out financial crash of the 1890s for example – with dignity and restraint. The defenestration of an improvident stockbroker from the highest building he could find in Adelaide, the Post Office, was considered regrettable even by those he'd fleeced.

Lieutenant Mulcahey remained a tactful and never intrusive mentor at school, and Carey remained grateful for his acquaintance, particularly when the relationship between himself and a junior female teacher was threatened by a seventeen year old girl in his class.

Gabriel Westley was half a head taller than most of her peers and at times seemed puzzled by her presence among them. She had eschewed, with or without the consent of her parents, either the tried and true plaits or the new bobbed styles, and her head of chestnut hair defied restrictions (perhaps because she shed its constraints on the way to school) by falling to her shoulders. She toyed with it – negligently, but she still toyed – while her eyes idled over books. It was both inviting and difficult to criticise her work, not because she didn't do any, she simply did unspectacularly what was required and showed no interest in his or anyone else's reaction to it. He'd have liked to prick her composure but didn't want to start a fight he might not win. When he unwisely mentioned her name to a junior female teacher, Marian, whom he'd become friends with he was not supplied with any ammunition.

'Oh *her*…' she said. 'She got up at the school concert last year to play the piano, wearing a dress that showed off half her chest. Why…?'

'Could she play?'

'Oh, she was competent enough. She didn't actually seem greatly interested once she'd made her big entrance. What do you want to know about her for?'

'I'm just wondering what makes her tick.'

'Sex, I think,' said Marianne, getting up on her toes as if rising to a threat. 'Her parents are dripping with money, of course,' she said, subsiding again while presenting a

disturbing image to Carey of the girl shedding the proofs of family wealth like trinkets at the end of a tiring day.

Once he caught her smiling in a restrained and private way in class.

'Something has amused you Gabriel?' he suggested. 'Perhaps you would like to share it with the rest of us?'

She tilted her head in his direction. 'Not really, sir, no,' she said and half smiled again.

He found himself smirking stupidly too. The other girls were watching with a kind of bewilderment, like very junior members of a female herd.

One day he caught her chewing gum in class, as discreetly as possible – that is, it stuck out a mile. The school rules hardly acknowledged that such a substance existed. Its prohibition was implicit.

Carey said, 'Gabriel, are you eating?'

She looked almost startled. 'No, why?'

'You are chewing something then?'

She covered her mouth.

'You will please transfer it to the bin. And you will remain behind after school.'

Since she showed no reaction at all to his edict he made a show of broadcasting his authority to the rest of the class: 'When the others have gone you will write 300 words on the importance of etiquette.'

When he looked up from his desk at the conclusion of the day though, the girl was gazing expectantly at him.

'Did I make myself clear?' he asked.

She nearly laughed. 'Were you serious?'

'Of course I was, why else would I keep you in?'

‘I’d better tell you my father’s collecting me at half past four. We’re dining at my aunt’s tonight.’

‘Then you’d better get started,’ he said, wondering if she’d react by sulkily going about it, but instead she shocked him more by asking, ‘Isn’t this rather silly?’

‘How can it be silly? You’ve broken a school rule, I’m imposing a punishment. It could be a lot worse, young lady.’

‘How much worse?’

‘How much worse?’ This was worse. He launched into, ‘Perhaps I should remind you that I’m authorised to use corporal punishment if needs be,’ knowing as he did that it had sunk him.

She looked straight at him. ‘You wouldn’t dare.’

He felt like clutching his forehead. He said, ‘Just-do-the-imposition.’

After that he did his best to ignore her in class, but she still seemed to be aware of and pre-empting his thoughts. He’d been confronted with a maturity at least equal to his own. His girlfriend, Marianne, railed against his abstracted mood; inaccurately, initially, divining the cause: one day she said quite bravely, ‘If you are really so unhappy, perhaps we could go away somewhere before, you know…’

‘Before what?’ he half snapped.

‘You *know*.’ She bounced in her shoes, and then relapsed. She nearly wailed, ‘I thought you would already have had a talk to Daddy,’

‘Of course, I am, I will…’ he recovered.

‘What’s *wrong* with you?’ she nearly spat. ‘Is it something to do with that slut in your class?’

Oh God, he thought, she knows, and if she’s guessed, who else has…?

When the Head called him in for a chat soon after he feared the worst, while actually feeling for that gentleman as he made his way into a clearly prepared and uncomfortable speech.

'Wallace,' he began, 'sit down, sit down,' and when he saw his guest was about as settled as himself went on, 'I'm sorry to have to bring you in here. I hope you appreciate that what I have to say to you is said in the best of faith. Have you any idea what it is about?'

'Not a clue sir,' he lied.

'Well I'll get straight to the point then. I believe; I'm aware, that Mr Mulcahey is a friend of yours.' He waved a hand. 'I know that he had something to do with you approaching the school, and providing you with a reference, and so on…'

'Yes, he is a friend sir, going back to' -

'Of course. Well I'm afraid to have to tell you that there's been a complaint laid against him, a disturbing one – suggesting that he has – and I really don't know the strength of this – that he's been involved or made approaches of a certain sort…I think you know what I mean by that, with a senior boy…'

'Good God.'

The headmaster raised his eyebrows and removed his glasses. 'Yes, indeed. It places me in an invidious position, an untenable one, really – you're not obliged to make any comment at all of course, but I just wondered – I mean I know your relationship with Mulcahey has no such unnatural basis, but have you ever suspected, do you think there could be any reason to attach any sort of credibility to the, well, charges really…'

'I've never seen any sign of that sort of thing sir, no.'

'No,' the headmaster said. 'Unfortunately, with the school just getting back on its feet again, I really can't afford any sort of scandal or enquiry even; I can't even offer Mulcahey a fair chance to state his case. I was just wondering if you had some sort of compelling

evidence – you know if you'd met a mistress or something – to discredit what I've been told. Otherwise the fact that a complaint has been made is enough on its own to stain him, unfortunately.'

Carey was thinking of Mulcahey's story about the school he left in Sydney when the headmaster himself speculated, 'I have to wonder whether he severed ties in his last appointment under some sort of duress.'

'I have no idea sir. May I ask who's raised this matter with you?'

'You can't really. But I may as well tell you it's the boy's parents. It makes a change. Usually it's a girl's people who do all the jumping up and down. I often tell young teachers, it's just not worth the risk.'

'Quite, sir. What …what's going to happen to Mulcahey then, sir?'

'Nothing, hopefully. Nothing legal anyway if he's lucky. But he'll be finished, academically, I think.' He looked disgruntled. 'It looks like I'm going to have to beard him in his lair tonight. That'll be fun.'

When the headmaster got there however he found Mulcahey had saved the headmaster the ordeal by hanging himself in the wash house.

The next day, and without explanation, Carey offered *his* resignation.

The headmaster counselled him strongly against it. (The junior teacher burst into tears when he got round to telling her. 'What am I going to tell Mummy and Daddy?' she asked. 'Tell them I'm not good enough,' he said. 'I will,' she said, 'you're not good enough – you're nothing but a bastard.')

The headmaster would not have endorsed her assessment. He reminded Carey that he was a valued member of staff. He said, 'Take some time off, some sick leave until you feel you've composed yourself again.'

'Thankyou sir, but I feel this is for the best.'

‘I’m afraid I never realised you and Mulcahey were so close.’

‘He was responsible for getting me out of prison after the War, sir. You don’t forget that, and for getting me here. I never repaid him for it, and now…well, I feel I’ve let him down.’

The headmaster almost blustered, ‘When all’s said and done he let himself down surely, whatever modern opinion might have to say.’ But when they parted he stood with hands at his sides and said, ‘This is an awful business.’

The last time Carey saw the young female teacher in the school yard she said, ‘You’ve ruined my life.’

The ice cream girl

After all that the worst of the unpleasantness was over soon enough as far as Carey was concerned. He retired to his digs for a few days for the Christmas break-up and then, after he'd opened the *Advertiser* on an advertisement calling for fruit pickers on the Murray, went out and bought another suitcase to accommodate his few extra odds and ends. The train trip was interrupted at one point by an appeal from the driver to lend a hand chopping down some scrub when the engine ran low on steam, but was otherwise uneventful, until it arrived in Mylong. There was a strike on by seasonal workers and passengers were collectively assailed by taunts of 'Scab!' when they got off the train. Carey wasn't even sure what the word meant.

He soon found out, however, after he retired to a room on the second floor of the Hotel and was able to observe the shenanigans going on in the street below. With the exception of its tea and coffee room the pub was closed in the crisis but the street outside was still a natural meeting place. There were almost daily confrontations between growers and aggrieved workers and one Saturday a crowd gathered to confront some of those who'd been on the train with Carey and already gone to work. The police arrived in a body of three and escorted the blacklegs out of town for their own protection while the crowd celebrated its part in their expulsion. In the euphoria that followed a Union man took pains to impress upon his audience that while they may have captured the attention of the world thus far they could not afford to relax. Subsequently, a horse collapsed after drinking from a tainted trough and a leading grower's vehicle suffered convulsions of its own after its insides were similarly laced. More high drama unfolded: at the base of the stairs late one night as he was on his way to the outside convenience Carey discovered a man trying to set light to the building with a handful of kerosene soaked straw. He grappled with him, 'receiving in the ensuing struggle a knife wound in the thigh from his cowardly opponent,' the *Mail* reported. Carey found himself the

centre of attention. In hospital the Matron, and only she, took responsibility for the wound in his groin, and after a visit from Cudgee More he was complimented by the paper on 'his presence of mind and pluck.'

After that he'd in more than one sense arrived. The hotel presented him with a silver tea and coffee service, and once his true vocation was elicited he was invited to fill a vacancy at the Primary school. The first day he looked out over the small assembly of more or less scrubbed ten to twelve year old faces – Grade Six and Seven were combined – they were illuminated for him by a light far greater than sun's coming in above the whitewashed hopper windows. He realised he'd made another start.

From the time he had first been set at liberty to explore the streets of London he'd had a series of relationships, some so casual they could have been called couplings. He wasn't vain, he thought it might have had something to do with the post-War scarcity of men, but success gave him a certain confidence. He rationalised his disloyalty to Anja by persisting with the deception he'd practised on himself when he was in jail; her desertion left his never nagging conscience untroubled. In any case, while he had left Anja with his old Sydney address, he never seriously expected to see her again.

It was almost immediately following her heady promotion at the hotel that he began a relationship with Ingrid, the ice cream purveyor. After he'd escorted her to the Lyric picture theatre and shared one of the 'lovers' seats' that they had at the end of each row with her, he found that while her body might betray her occupation by giving off hints of milk and maltiness, she was an undemanding companion, as if she considered the acquaintance of the new school teacher merited sacrifices on her part. She seemed naturally given to periods of introspection or vacancy – he couldn't be sure which – and said almost nothing about her history until one day she divulged that her parents were immigrants.

‘From Denmark,’ she enlarged. ‘We were supposed to go to America, but we ended up here instead.’

‘How did that happen?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Mum and Dad didn’t speak much English. Maybe they got on the wrong boat. Funny how things turn out, isn’t it?’

Though not normally given to emotion, the respect she paid to the pictures was near reverential; he was never quite sure if the shiver that met his trespassing hands during a film was a response to them or the drama being played out on screen. She was tactful too, appreciating that their relationship had to be discreet to avoid town gossip. Since the corner of the world her parents came from was credited even then with a certain sexual licence, Carey was surprised when her lovemaking, when they eventually found a haven on a secluded bend of the river to perform it, was so restrained. It didn’t seem very Scandinavian.

Afterwards she resumed the nibbling of an apple that had been interrupted, before asking speculatively, ‘If I get pregnant will we get married?’

His eyes widened.

‘I wouldn’t mind,’ she said, ‘that’s all.’

With his passion spent, at least, her partly unclad body had something – not morbid or even unattractive – but incidental about it, like the nakedness of figures in change rooms or hospitals.

Still, their relationship endured. There were so many places on the River to retire to in those times, and he explored them with her during the summer holidays. Sometimes on hot days the sky above it was such a bleached blue that the river itself seemed like an indulgence, yet it persisted, spooling, curling and in places sweeping by. It was best in early mornings when the splashes and cries of birds snapped crisply over it. They rarely saw anyone else. Paddle steamers announced themselves well enough in advance to give them time to put

something on. Occasionally some amateur fisherman toiled past, oars plopping, and once they were able to watch an old pro pulling in his long line in the distance, peeling off fish with a stoical rhythm until the line snagged. It was funny to see his small figure appealing to and then cursing whatever fates were responsible for his dancing frustration. From far across the water they could hear him exclaiming, 'Cunt of a thing!'

Their relationship was interrupted after Ingrid was reduced to the ranks at the hotel. Looking like she'd been smacked in the mouth, as someone said, she dropped her bundle and had no heart for anything for a while, including the diversions Carey provided. The break might have been scripted as far as Carey was concerned: coinciding as it did with Anja's arrival in Australia it was certainly timely; still, and typically, he was taken aback when Ingrid confronted him outside the school one day with an appalled – 'And to think I let you do those things to me!' – onslaught after he got married. He was thankful there were no witnesses; he'd assumed the transition would be painless for himself, at least – no one, or not many, was as surprised as him when he found himself drifting back into something like his old routine with his former girlfriend after Anja had been deported. There was an air of compromise in the relationship for both of them this time, though. They both knew he no longer held all the cards.

They still went through the motions of exercising discretion: declining to use the 'charming home' provided by the Education Department for Carey and his wife, they often used one of the hotel's guest rooms for their trysts since there was little risk of them being discovered: the whole top floor that had been added on during the height of the riverboat boom in the 90s was often empty in its decline, even though the Hotel Board had recently begun a campaign to arrest trading deficiencies in that and other areas of the hotel with the appointment of a new city-born manager .

The new man's sleekness had indeed boded well for the new image the Board was seeking, and his impact on the running of the hotel had proved to be immediate – and temporary… The effort he'd put in to getting himself up for the job seemed to have taken a lot out of him and once the shine of the appointment wore off it was obvious he had a problem and what its name was: grog. His appearance suffered; he often greeted the day looking like he'd been suffered a buffeting from the elements overnight, and though by lunchtime he'd revive under the impetus of a heart-starter or two, by closing time he would be visibly sagging again, collar askew, and with his trousers concertinaed as if from the strain of keeping their owner on his feet. The 'leakages' that had ever been a problem in the hotel increased to a flood as staff, with an instinct often inspired in failing enterprises, felt encouraged to get in for their chop.

Carey became aware that Ingrid was taking advantage of the situation as well; the barmen drinking on duty had taken to inviting female staff to share in a not all that surreptitious sip with them and while the girls went about their duty with a spring in their step afterwards, the longer term results weren't as happy: there were breakages; one night the hotel housekeeper demanded to know what Lodge members at their annual dinner had on under their leather aprons; once Carey and Ingrid had to make their way past a waitress being sick into a palm outside their room…Ingrid developed a taste for the harder stuff herself. The complaisance she'd originally shown in their relationship was gone by then anyway, but alcohol brought out a harder edge to her.

'Why not, why shouldn't I?' she'd demand of him, if he questioned her. 'You drink, don't you?'

He couldn't deny it. The afternoons they spent on the river, when they went swimming at all now, were always accompanied by three or four bottles dunked at the water's edge, when once he'd been happy to boil the billy. He drank to attain, not elation, but

a certain, only just simmering and teased at tranquillity; a moment when the river and trees took on a glaze. It didn't last and if he'd had enough to drink he'd have to look on then while Ingrid got seriously sozzled on her own. She hardly went in the river at all, and then never with her old sense of discovery. She'd often just sit in water up to her waist with a beer in her hand and a critical look in her eyes. It was strange to think how quickly she'd crossed the border between girlhood and the sort of adult he'd never thought of her becoming. Her body was thickening. The more she drank the sulkier she got, too. Often she'd push him away when he made approaches, 'No, I don't want to…' They would head back towards town in the second hand Ford he'd acquired, looking in opposite directions. After she'd hefted herself out the seat when he dropped her off he'd sigh and go home and flop into bed and wake up for the first day of school feeling irritable, knowing he'd wasted the weekend and wishing he wasn't waiting for the next.

One Saturday afternoon, Ingrid declared her intentions of not moving from the pub when they'd met up there. 'Stay here, and let's have a bit of fun,' she demanded. 'Unless you're ashamed of being seen with me.'

'What's up? What are we doing?' he asked.

'Have a few beers in the Lounge. Put a few bets on, my girlfriends always do.'

The afternoon worked an unholy alchemy on them. Her girlfriends turned out to be loud; Ingrid pretended to drool over the S.P. bookie every time he came through. Carey was bewildered.

'Come on,' Ingrid kept saying, 'have another drink. What are you frightened of?' and he kept complying. The climax came when last drinks were called, and Ingrid insisted he get some bottles, before wrestling with him for his cargo once they got outside.

‘Give us them here,’ she demanded. When he resisted, as if there was still a chance of salvaging something from the wreck of the day, she ripped paper bag and all from his hands and then fell over backwards in the gutter with the bottles exploding round her.

It was while she was still there with her skirt above her knees and demanding, ‘Pick me up, can’t you!’ that Carey’s eyes met Harry Gardener’s.

Harry rushed to assist. Somehow – perhaps because of the embarrassment she carried from their confrontation in a hotel room – it brought Ingrid to her senses, restored some of her dignity. She didn’t resist when Harry and Carey combined to hoist her to her feet. She went through the motions of tidying herself up, looked round to confirm that the bottles were all broken, and planted her hat on her head. Then sourness recaptured her, she said sulkily, ‘Well, I’m going,’ and gathered herself into some sort of gait to do it. Carey wasn’t concerned whether that mood would last either, whether once she got home she might bury herself on top of her bed in tears, or be sick – he was just glad she was gone.

His embarrassment was obvious when he turned back to Harry and said, ‘Sorry about that. Thanks for your help.’

‘Not at all,’ Harry said. ‘Unfortunate.’ His expression gave no clue to his real feelings, apart from his lips tightening a fraction; his eyes above them remained lively, but concerned. He looked as if he’d been interrupted, as in fact he had been, on his way to somewhere. When he held out a hand and said, ‘Well, let’s hope we meet under more pleasant circumstances next time,’ he seemed to have already disassociated himself from the implications of his surroundings. For his part Carey’s head was starting to ache under natural light; it was after six, there was nothing in the upcoming evening to look forward to. Yet he felt obliged to say, ‘I’m not sure I ever thanked you for the position you took over my wife, in the paper…’

Harry paused, visually distracted. ‘Yes. Well, I’m sorry it didn’t end more happily. She was a lady of some character, if you don’t mind my saying so.’

‘Yes, yes she was.’

‘Have there been any further – have you been able to stay in touch?’

‘No, no, not really…It seemed better to….’ He realised he had no desire to talk any more about Anja, or the capacity to. Harry seemed to understand. He said, ‘Yes, well if ever you’re passing the paper, drop in and perhaps we can have a cup of tea under more… congenial circumstances.’

‘Thank you,’ Carey said, knowing it would never happen.

Then Cudgee More died. His position at the paper had been basically honorary for a while. He had not so much breezed as drifted in as the whims of his health allowed. He still made an effort to be there when the paper went to press, poking a balding head that appeared to have enlarged as the rest of him shrunk, under the printers’ noses. Eventually, though, almost any effort greater than putting himself behind the wheel of his car was too much for him, and one day that proved to be too much too. One turn of the crank handle brought the car to life and finished his. He turned purple, so a witness said, and donged his head on the Ford’s dogbone radiator cap on the way down.

Cudgee stipulated in his will that his body be left to medical science, but when the punt that was going to be the start of his trip to Adelaide broke down, the hospital protested they couldn’t keep him on ice forever, and Harry countermanded his old colleague’s wishes by arranging a service. Identity though Cudgee may have been, fate conspired against the sort of gathering that Harry’s wife had commanded. There was a vicious northerly blowing and flies had cascaded into town with it; the back of Congregationalist Minister’s surplice was

stippled with them. As well, it was the middle of harvest and fruit was cooking on the trees; a lot of people just couldn't get away.

Carey attended on a whim of his own since it was school holidays, and shared in the atmosphere that was more stifling if possible within the church than without. As poor old Cudgee's remains were hoisted onto baking shoulders outside all eyes dried. Carey himself was feeling slightly worse than he usually did in the mornings when he met Harry among the flinching crowd. 'Good of you to come, Wallace,' Harry said professionally, extending a hand that felt almost cool. 'I must keep you to that arrangement we made to share a cup of tea one day. When would be a good time?'

Carey almost shrugged. 'Any time really. I'm on holidays.'

'Say tomorrow then, shall we, about ten?'

They parted at the gate of the church under a fuming sky. Cars were groping their way down the street; the first column Carey wrote for the *Mail* described birds dropping from the trees.

'Try your hand at it,' Harry had suggested at the interview, 'and see how it goes.'

'I've got to be honest with you, Mr Gardener,' Carey protested, 'not only have I had no training, I don't even know if I can write.'

'Well old Cudgee wasn't ever much of a writer to tell the truth,' Harry said. 'You've been here long enough to have got a feel for the town.'

Something, familiar, nagged at Carey. 'We hardly know each other, Mr Gardener, what made you think of me?'

Harry put his hands up behind his head. 'I'm used to making judgments. They think well of you at the school. It's quite impertinent of me, but I have a feeling the change might be good for both of us.' He would not admit that more than something in his offer had to do with guilt. The sentiments the younger man's wife had aroused in him seemed not just

dishonourable but incredible now; his gesture might have been intended as a way of finally closing the books.

'That day outside the hotel…' Carey began to say.

Harry waved a hand dismissively. 'Don't talk about that. Let's move on.'

And they did: once Carey got his taste of journalistic life he resigned from the Department and then at Harry's invitation took up Cudgee's old quarters. He soon laid his new housekeeper's apprehensions to rest: 'Said he wouldn't touch nothing of Cudgee's,' Mrs Foley said, graciously applauding Carey's decision to allow half a handful of trophies from Cudgee's sporting youth to stay on the mantelpiece. 'Makes his bed in the morning and tidies up.' Eventually she dissociated him from any gossip, past or ongoing. 'I wish I had a son half like him, that's all,' she declared – not all that sentimentally, since at the time her own son, 'Feathers' Foley, was serving one of his recurring prison terms for poultry theft.

Carey's break with the past, and that included Ingrid's part in it, was complete this time. Not long after he took up his new appointment she disappeared from the town completely, and thereafter his involvement with the other sex was restricted to a series of friendships with mature and undemanding women whose own emotional detachment was not likely to be threatened by his.

The day he turned thirty it occurred to him that it had been more than twenty years since he left home.

Sydney

The realisation didn't disturb him; if he had ever thought of it he might have professed that while fidelity may never have been his strong point, he'd at least been faithful to the edict his mother delivered to him when he went to war. But in fact it was time that had most to do with fraying the ties between them.

After the War correspondence between his mother and him became very one-sided. While her letters often went on for barely punctuated pages (with herself often a large part of her audience, he suspected) his own offerings were restricted to scribbled seasonal cards.

The news of his father's death when it reached him, then, might have come from another world. The old man had had a cough since Carey remembered; the emesis outside the back door as part of his morning ritual had not been extraordinary, a finely tuned ear could have detected its echoes up and down the street as smokers celebrated their first for the day. With eyes and cheeks floating it was one of the few times his father ever seemed to take an active part in life. But his half enlivened returns to the kitchen after he'd won another round had become less frequent. Sometimes he'd lean against the lintel of the back door for minutes before taking up the challenge of the day. Maybe, or more than maybe, all the years he'd spent working in a fume of flux and scorching metal in the confines of docked ships had contributed not only to his illness but to his sardonic appreciation of the greater world around him. In his last hours as he was drowning in hospital he ordered everyone away from his bed. 'Bit late to start making a fuss,' he said, 'you probably can't wait for me to die.' Which, to be brutal, wasn't far from the truth. About all that was left of his presence in the house afterwards was his smell, or the mixture of it and his tobacco's, and a brown paper parcel of clothes that his wife made a present of to the Salvos.

‘It’s no good pretending,’ she wrote to Carey, ‘after all these years I feel like I can breathe again. He was never any fun, or company, he never made any friends. I know he was never much of a father to you either, but I used to hope he’d change when the others came along…’

Her late husband had been nothing if not frugal; on Friday nights when she would have almost paid for him to stop off at the pub with his workmates and shed his moroseness for an hour or two, he reported for duty as normal at home; the sound of his steps on the front path as reliable as the sigh he gave when he pegged his hat, as if in resentment that his weariness could not be so easily shed. She should have been grateful, she knew; she was aware of the men who left the front bar on Friday nights on a wave of bonhomie which dumped them inside their front doors in a backwash of harsh words and burnt offerings that experience never taught them to anticipate. Strangely, the show of selflessness her husband put up when he then laid his unopened pay envelope on the table never encouraged her to consider the money her own. But he made sure of that. When he was first diagnosed with his illness he’d produced his – never his and his wife’s – bank book and proclaimed vaingloriously, ‘Don’t say I never provided for you! Look at that.’ She didn’t, if she had it might have given her a clue to the caches of money she kept turning up in the house after he was dead. The bank book’s final statement was considerably reduced in the last month or so of her husband’s life, when pain and resentment motivated him to withdraw more and more money, as if he thought he could put off the end by doing it or at least deny death the option of presenting his heirs with an intact estate. Reduced to a scavenger his widow had been almost weeping with frustration and bitterness of her own by the time she ran what she hoped was the last rubber-banded bundle to earth. ‘You miserable old bugger,’ she said, as if the wrinkled and faded currency wasn’t articulate enough.

Still, she felt almost humbled when she totted all the money up. But not entirely at a loss. As the country, or Sydney's part of it, seemed to be creaking its way out of the Depression, she'd become more disenchanted with her involvement with the local branch of the Labour Party – 'They're never going to let me go any further – it's all about the boys,' she told Carey in a letter once – and more concerned with what was happening in Europe: 'If someone doesn't do something about that man…'

When she began to see the want around her in the late '20s and early '30s she became involved with women's movements, distributing food to the unemployed, and picketing evictions and auctions. Some of the girls involved were almost too tough. Potential buyers at auctions got told, 'Bid for this and you'll have your guts kicked in!' Once she got arrested as part of a mob marching on the police station and only escaped being charged because the sergeant knew her from less turbulent times. She swam almost every day – 'It keeps me sane,' she said – until the winter morning she went down the beach and was caught up in a group of men with skin like over crisp chickens chiacking each other as they plucked up courage to go in. 'Joining the club are you, darling?' one old codger asked her and she abandoned the pastime then.

Now she turned to assisting German refugees, offering them shelter in her home, and then bought a couple of terrace houses close to the city and let them out to the new arrivals. Initially she visited both addresses on Friday evenings to collect the rent and take a glass of tea or wine with her hosts. There was something about her presence there in the guise of rent collector that disturbed both parties though, carrying echoes of invigilation. Her tenants often preferred to visit her home in Coogee themselves, bearing small edible gifts, before both parties were relaxed enough to agree to the money being paid straight into her bank. Almost without exception too her guests soon appeared to be making their financial way in their new

world; in a generation many of them would own homes of their own overlooking Golf Clubs they would be barred from ever joining.

Unfortunately, the same instinct that led her to mother refugees meant she made some bad choices from among the more or less common or garden battlers who replaced them; fly-by-nighters who left owing weeks of rent often and bearing anything portable they could lay their hands on.

Once she'd been part of the crowds that used to picket evictions, she knew, but something more than just the relative comfort she now began to enjoy had changed her. Being conned made her narky. She developed a harder edge. When people started calling her hard-bitten she didn't apologise. 'I've got to be hard to stop mugs getting on top of me,' she said. She couldn't afford to ask herself about her old principles.

Her Studebaker became a familiar sight around working class areas along with her fur trimmed suits and crocodile skin shoes and long cigarette holder she'd affected. At her instructions her driver, Monty Boys, followed her up stairs and stood a watchful pace or two behind her with his arms folded. He'd fought bouts at the Stadium once but generally his presence was enough to make cant dry up in others' mouths. Appeals to the landlady were in any case unavailing. 'Pay or go,' was her invariable edict. 'Don't try dudding me. I'm too old for that caper.' When one tenant said, 'I've had molls like you for breakfast,' and decided he'd make some sort of snack of her, Monty upended him at the top of some stairs and left him floundering at their foot.

There was no man in her life; if anyone asked she'd say, 'One was enough, thanks.' Still, when menopause started she said, Thanks for nothing, to it as well. Wide awake and sweating she often needed a sip of brandy to get her back to sleep. She started keeping a bottle of it by her bed after a while and banished the clock when its face looked accusing; sometimes she woke up late as a result, her appearances as well as her appearance were

affected. She'd examine her cheeks in the mirror and say, 'No more of this, you silly bugger!' but she didn't know where to make a stand.

The crunch came for her when she was trying to get the rent off some woman she suspected of running a brothel.

The woman affected outrage at the suggestion. Her cheeks bulged and she led with her chin. 'Who do you think you're accusin' of runnin' a knock shop? And who are you to talk! You're nothin' but a jumped up moll yourself. I can smell the grog off you from here, there's no need for you to knock on the fuckin' door.' And she covered a squashy nose with one hand to illustrate the point. 'Pooherrr!'

Her slanderer turned, temporarily bested, and knowing she'd suffered longer term damage. She'd looked at the hard faced old trollop in her – what, fifties? – standing there with her arms on her hips and with acres of fat threatening to topple out of her kimono, and thought, Is that what I'll become?

She fired her last and probably telling shot, 'Don't worry, the police will be hearing about this,' but knew she'd suffered a moral defeat.

Monty was supportive. He said, 'Don't worry, she'll go, she won't want to draw the crabs,' before adding reminiscently, 'Coulda been worse, my old man lost a diamond ring in a card game in one of these joints once; when he went back to try and collect it the old sheila that ran the joint emptied a piss pot on him from the balcony.'

As an attempt to lighten the moment it wasn't a success. His employer's lips barely flickered. She visited a couple of pubs with Monty on some pretext during the afternoon, looking for someone she didn't expect to find who'd passed her a dud cheque, but at the third pub she gave the search away and said to Monty, 'I just need to think.'

'Want me pick you up later?'

'No, stick around.'

Their relationship had settled into mateyness after an early hiccup, when Monty had driven her home after another long day and decided that closer attentions might be welcome from him. Hattie took his hand from one of her breasts without too much fuss and said, 'I'm not that far gone Mont, and if I was I'd still be out of your league.'

Now, after her third or fourth brandy she said to him, 'Monty, I've got to do something.'

Monty grunted and nodded. 'I'm with you.'

'You are, are you? You know what I'm talking about?'

'Well, you have been knockin' yourself about a bit lately. Not that I'm one to talk.' He was being less than fair to himself there; his nose, that innocent victim of his past career, bore florid and exaggerated witness to his consumption when it came to drink.

His companion traced the wet circle her glass had left and made a gesture with her free hand that started out being emphatic and died in the air. 'If I don't I'll turn into an old bitch. A drunken old bitch. What am I going to start doing next, running molls?'

'No, no. You got too much self-respect for that.'

Hattie was scornful. 'Have I? Get us another brandy, will you?'

While Monty was away at the bar isolation did its work. By the time he came back she was ready to confess, 'I'm unhappy, Mont, so unhappy…' as tears brimmed in her eyes. For an ignoble moment Monty wondered if there might be a possibility of them finishing in the cot after all. But she recovered, she said, almost to herself, 'I've got to do something…' before she decisively drained her glass. Whatever decision she'd arrived at then had nothing to do with him, he could see, and, in a sense, nothing to do with his boss, he reasoned, because the inspiration behind it would be lost in the light of day.

‘Do you know,’ she said, and she was addressing an audience somewhere over his left shoulder, ‘I only ever had one real love affair in my life, and he let me down. That’s not a lot, is it?’

Monty raised his eyebrows.

‘And I loved him so much. I was only a kid’ – Monty grunted – ‘not that much of a kid, but he always looked a bit lost. So I fucked him. Are you embarrassed Monty, you’re looking around like you’re lost something’ –

‘No, no, I’m right.’

‘Well, I’m not, I know. I shouldn’t be going on, but so what, it’s not going to happen again, doesn’t matter how molo I get, I promise you. This is it. The thing is, I don’t know where he went to, what he’s done – I lost touch with everyone else from that place so I couldn’t ask anyway – and I wouldn’t have – I told him…and now here I am, wondering if anything I’ve ever done adds up to much. I don’t think it does – and I’m pretty well stuffed.’

‘No you’re not, not by a long chalk,’ Monty said loyally, but he was wondering by this stage where the evening would go and wishing someone would call time on it. He’d found himself pushing the beer down after a while and drawing his lips in after each mouthful. In the end, the evening – as most of its sort do – died the death. Pauses got longer and the trains of each other’s thoughts more and more elusive. In her sentimental stage his employer had actually said to Monty ‘It might be better if you stay with me tonight, in the spare room…just in case I do something stupid…’ but in the clarity of a greater drunkenness she said, as she was gathering up herself and her purse, ‘Forget about what I said: tomorrow’ll be soon enough to see each other’s ugly mugs again.’

She flopped face down fully dressed on her bed once she got inside, wondering, in her last conscious moments whether she might be lucky enough to be smothered in the pillow, before daylight disenchanted her. She’d already been sick, she found, she staggered to the

toilet and made another attempt to rid her stomach of whatever was left in it while the top of her head was threatening to fall off. She was stripping the sheets and wishing she could get rid of herself as easily when she heard the paper land on the lawn. It was another hour before she got round to listlessly leafing her way through it.

Ghosts

The day Harry heard from Carrie Whitcombe again – 'I thought this might interest you' – enclosing a news clipping, at least teased into life memories which 'brought those dear old days all back,' unconditionally to his friend.

He smiled at the heading, 'Tribe of Australians found living in Paraguay,' and was subsequently amused by the article's evocations of muslin and moleskins and time-warped slang. It was nostalgia-driven and pardonable for that, of course. He wasn't about to be seduced though. After his eyes first lazed over the story, they returned to prosecute its solecisms and inaccuracies before the print swam momentarily in his gaze.

He wiped his eyes at once, but the story haunted him. Perversely, perhaps: he thought he had put all the echoes of Paraguay behind him. His desire to avoid joining the ranks of the Mylong Club bores in their indefatigable celebration of some solitarily singular event in their lives, had been assisted by the fact that none of the members had ever shown the slightest curiosity in Cosme, unless it was to express their disapproval of it. Now the news from Carrie added to the growing sense of exclusion he felt in his surroundings. It was as if his view of Mylong had begun to both shrink and broaden. All the minutiae that had once sustained and absorbed him in the town were becoming lost now in his flat and unremarkable view of it. He didn't know how the change to his state of mind had come about; its progress had been so gradual and so implacable. He suspected that if it wasn't for Carey he would struggle to even keep an interest in the newspaper.

After he took the younger man on a relationship had that was both formal and relaxed had developed between them, based on an appreciation of each other's needs which neither borrowed too heavily against. During working hours communications between them were almost tacit, but since the diligent role Carey had taken on meant that he often spent the

evenings after work teaching himself to type and learn shorthand, when Harry came home from meetings or functions his tenant's light was often still burning and he got into the habit of mounting the steps and sharing a nightcap with him.

Their discussions were general. Harry's scope for and tastes in conversation were still prolific; his energies never allowed themselves to be bogged down by details in case they left him stranded on doctrinaire limbs. The apostasy-like about turn he'd performed in the paper on German responsibility for the War had been painfully achieved, but if it was his natural liberalism and capacity for doubt that had stopped his political position from becoming totally rigid, the experience had made him more wary of embracing any dogma since. His loquaciousness did not stop him from being a good listener either. While he soon realised that the younger man's interests went nowhere near including politics or philosophy he appreciated that his company was stopping him from becoming too closed in.

His tact restrained him from probing too deeply into Cary's past – or present – and he waited a long time before mentioning Cosme to him. Then the subject was side-tracked in a sense. It revived memories in the young man of a visit his own father had made to South America during the 1890s slump, in his case to work in the rail yards of Buenos Aires.

'You might have known him,' Carey suggested, 'apparently there were quite a few Australian chaps working there.'

'Rather a large place, Buenos Aires,' Harry, who had never visited the city, suggested mildly, and let the subject go. He might never have resumed it if not for the news he received about William Blaine's death. They had not been in touch for years and regret on his part may have influenced the tone of the obituary he wrote for the paper. It was not a panegyric, however; he could not help but hint at some of his former leader's shortcomings. His valediction: "in the unbounded devotion which he inspired in the breasts of simple men, he was like One of whom it is recorded that at his behest His disciples left all and followed

Him," was almost entirely reserved for that phase of New Australia and Cosme, when neither he nor Blaine had had time to be disenchanted.

Yet the occasion reminded him of the doubts that had crept into his life; on the same evening that his obituary went to press he'd been begrudgingly obliged to attend an AGM at the hotel, and the tabling of trading figures during the meeting only aggravated his mood. The 'old cash cow' of the community had clearly gone dry over the past year, it was made clear. Figures showed that despite the pub's many facilities it had battled to come out in front. When the manager was invited to offer an explanation he was unable to convincingly do so. While insisting on his own industry, he was less certain of his staff's – 'Well why haven't you sacked some of 'em?' someone interjected: 'Because I'd only get another load of no-hopers,' he responded. More damningly, and less impressively, he hinted at rorts that a conspiracy of silence among the staff had so far hindered him from exposing.

When he concluded by saying, 'Never fear, it'll all come out in the wash,' Harry most uncharacteristically suggested, 'I believe it may already have done so.'

The manager's retort was curt: 'What's that supposed to mean?'

Harry was suddenly overwhelmed with exasperation at the charade that was surely being played out before him. 'Dammit man,' he said, 'everyone knows you've just bought a new motor car and you're sending your children to school in Adelaide …'

Uproar – mostly inspired by the manager – followed: 'I've worked my guts out for this place and this is all the thanks I get…Don't worry,' he threatened, 'I'll be takin' it further.' But then, instead of leaving his moral protest on the high ground where it belonged, he made the mistake of redirecting it: 'Who are you to get all high and mighty anyhow?' he taunted, 'Everyone knows you were spendin' half your time sniffin' round that Kraut sheila before she got marched out the joint.'

Harry was outraged. Frustration, injustice, and embarrassment, boiled up in him. He did something he had never even considered doing in his life. He loosened his jacket.

'Step outside and repeat that, you blackguard!' he challenged.

'Oh put your coat back on before you catch cold,' his opponent scoffed, before, having realised he'd gone too far, perhaps, starting to bluster, 'If I wanted to go outside I would, but I don't, I'm goin' – and he was when he fired a parting shot. 'And don't worry, I know half a dozen other pubs people'd be glad for me to run' –

'Yes – into the ground, I'll wager,' Harry said, unwisely, since he was doing up his jacket again at the time and the manager saw his chance to land one. When Harry grappled with his attacker it looked as if the infection might spread; not everyone there was on Harry's side after all: his 'silver spoon' tag rankled with some; drawn by the disturbance fresh and excited faces were introducing themselves to the room before wiser or meeker heads prevailed. The aggrieved parties were separated, and 'Bishop' Bailey, the oldest member of the board was able to give the manager the full old-school treatment from the shelter of his venerability: 'Pack up your traps and get out of this you scoundrel,' he said, 'and think yourself lucky you haven't had a good thrashing.'

It was impressive, even if some of the effect was lost on the manager. 'And you can get fucked too you old cunt,' he said on his way out, but in the end the outburst had been resolved satisfyingly enough for most present. From wherever the committee members stood on the matter they'd at least been distracted from the bottom-line bleakness of the books, and the year after such a blow-up things were normally different in the pub; everyone, including a new manager, would be on their toes for a while. Harry was the only one left feeling acutely uncomfortable. He'd betrayed his dignity, while the way the board had looked like splitting into separate camps during the scuffle reawakened those old feelings of insecurity and

unfitness that his father had inspired in him when he was young. He offered his resignation; it was rejected with a unanimous show of hands, but he went home feeling scarred.

When he got there the sight of Carey's light reminded him of the darkness in the rest of the house. Carey was solicitous, and intrigued; he wanted to hear more when Harry eventually surrendered an outline of the evening. Harry abbreviated the incident's discussion, however, by quite impulsively asking, 'Are you happy here?'

Carey's reaction showed that he'd been caught off guard. 'I suppose so,' he said, before adding, 'Sorry, it's not something I think about too much. I've always made the best of things wherever I've been, I suppose… but I'd say I'm happy, yes,' he said, realising as he did that when freed of responsibility it was pretty much his natural state.

'Yes.' For the moment it seemed to Harry most enviable. He said, 'I'm afraid that lately I've been thinking a good deal about the past.'

'Here?'

'Here, and elsewhere.'

'The South American place' –

'Paraguay, yes. Our poor colony. It has all come back to me since Blaine died. I wonder what happened to some of the others. It all seems rather improbable now, that's the thing. Sometimes I find it hard to convince myself that it even happened. I'm surprised you even know of it.'

'Well, I remember my father used to talk about it sometimes as if it was some sort of bolshie plot to try to bring Australia undone.'

Harry grinned dryly. 'Well we got called worse things than Communists. He never visited it when he was in Argentina, though...?'

‘No, but he got close enough, so he said. My mother was always Labour. He used to say things like that whenever they lost an election to rub salt into the wound I think.’

‘Why, where did they meet?’ Harry asked.

‘Over there. Mum was in Buenos Aires too for a while. I thought I told you.’

Harry took his drink over to the window, ‘No, no you didn’t.’

‘Well she never talked about it when I was young, didn’t seem to want to, so I never took it up with her.’

‘Of course.’ Harry nodded, and took a breath before putting the question: ‘May I ask your mother’s name?’

‘Hattie…it was, still is. She was a Blaine back then too. I don’t know if she was any relation to your man. I never met any of her family. The old man never exactly made visitors feel welcome.’

Harry shook his head slowly and said, ‘Good God...’

‘You didn’t know her?’ Carey asked.

‘I don’t know. I may have done, someone with that name, at least.’

‘In…?’

‘In Cosme.’

‘Well, I never knew anything about that. It’d be one for the books, though, wouldn’t it?’ the young man responded enthusiastically. ‘What was your Hattie like?’

Harry ran a hand over his forehead. ‘She was hardly “my Hattie,” I never knew her terribly well. She was quite a lot younger.’ He looked around for somewhere to put his glass. ‘I think I’m feeling the effects of that ridiculous set-to in the pub. It might be best if I turned in.’

His boss’s near curtness surprised Carey. Perhaps he really had known his father and their relationship had never sailed under the flag of mateship, he speculated. It rankled for a

moment but it was not in his nature to brood and as the sound of Harry's footsteps faded he turned his mind to other things.

Harry stayed away from the office for a few days after the altercation, ostensibly to give a cut lip time to heal, but really because he found it hard to leave the house. Somehow the shock of the news he'd received had widened the sense of distance that had been building between him and his world.

He remembered when the German lady, Anja, had been deported, how, after he'd discarded his first impractical impulse to pursue the train, he'd spent days trying to speak to someone from the Immigration Department, as well as contacts in Adelaide (who all seemed to regret that theirs and everyone else's hands were tied). He had turned to his pen then, and in a leader drawing on his full store of 19th Century rhetoric demanded: "Is it to be borne that the tenets of justice, liberty and universal suffrage on which our country fought in the Great War should be so flagrantly forsworn?"

Apparently, it was, and they were – the mood of protest he tried to arouse never got out of first gear. When he left his office near dusk at the end of the week and walked past Anja's twice-abandoned commercial premises, she might never have occupied them. At that hour the whole street, if it came to that, looked as if had been deserted in the face of some threat, or in the wake of it. For a moment he felt the awful inertia of country towns, that he had always tried to ignore or dispel, draining all the life out of him.

In that mood he'd seen Anja as a kind of winner; she had been freed again, however cruelly and crudely; he was still stuck, and even news he heard from Germany, long after her expulsion from Australia, could not disabuse him. He thought the unrest reported from there might be something like the strikes and lock-outs of the '90s in Australia. Hitler's appearances on the Movietone News made him look Chaplinesque well before Chaplin caricatured him.

There was a decline in business optimism in Australia before the real crash of 1930 which seemed to accompany the change in his own mood, and then, when the Depression really hit, accelerate it. Certainly there were no riots or demonstrations in Mylong, if only because there weren't enough people to start them, but Gardener got used to the sight of solitary men pushing bikes in front of them with swags on the handlebars, wearing expressions that varied between the pathetic and embittered. Bitter was better, he thought, it meant they hadn't been quite cowed. He privately suggested that police turn a blind eye to squatters and publicly established a fund that he gave generously to; he paid enough desperate door knockers to stockpile a decade of chopped wood in his back yard. He had no heart left for public or private announcements on how the crisis might have been averted or resolved by the adoption of a Single Tax.

He had relinquished most of his personal involvement with charities and societies; wincing at memories like the visit a genuine second string Royal couple had made to the hotel once when he'd helped organise a crowd of children to wave small cloth flags at them on their arrival. He still found the Depression's confrontations between unionists and police distasteful (his loathing of civil unrest was perennial), but he found himself discreetly exiting civic functions when Imperial sentiments were being aired.

Having handed over much of the day to day workings of the paper to Carey, who proved to be a tactful go-between with advertisers and suppliers, he then began to consider surrendering the editorship to Art Whitaker.

Art lived for the seclusion of his office and its low hanging light and desk that became choppy with papers until, come Thursday, they took their placid place on the printed page. He did it unassisted too, unless you counted the galah who'd been clipped by a car outside one day before it could fly properly and then been awarded space in the corner of his office, where it sat quietly for hours, lulled by Art's introspective murmurs, until every so often it

made a sauntering inspection of its patron's desk. Art liked to think it was a respecter of the Fourth Estate too. It shrieked when its owner's equanimity was disturbed.

When Harry urged him to use the paper to take aim on the town's inertia over an issue involving street trees, Art might have been thinking of his companion when he cautioned, 'You don't want to go upsetting too many people, boss.'

'But they are part of the town's heritage,' Harry argued.

The Pepper trees had been planted in the town's streets in generous numbers back in the 1860s by the town's founders, but been under assault for years from critics of their girths and viscid wastes. Harry duly insisted on inserting on his own behalf a lengthy leader on the subject but the readers' response was tepid, and when some of the town's more influential traders came straight out and said they'd had enough of the 'damn things', his cause was doomed.

A Council crew turned up early one morning and had the trees down in a day and their stumps levelled by the next, and by the time the holes in the road had been topped up the arboreal hangovers from the previous century might never have been.

Remembering the wagtails in the tree just outside Anja's shop, who had been so trusting she had been able to stroke the mother on her nest, Harry paid a final visit to Art's office and assured him that his editorship would henceforth be unfettered.

Art spread his elbows on the desk when his boss came in and tucked them back in when he'd gone.

Goat Island

In an effort to give his days some purpose Harry started venturing beyond the confines of Mylong on his bicycle, with the declared intention of reporting on new settlements that in fact barely brushed his gaze as he toiled past them. His excursions outside established areas of the river had always been limited. In a bad drought year he once travelled with a colleague to report on the effects and saw rabbits queuing up around water troughs and sheep tottering to a standstill in sight of them. At one point he saw some strange attachments to a tree that turned out to be goats perched in its branches. When he got back to his garden he soaked everything in sight.

Again, in his early days at the paper, he'd accompanied a party investigating a report of a group of aboriginals living wild north of the river. It was led by a policeman but on the first sighting of some figures in an open patch of country the volunteers took off after them at a gallop in a challenge to the law's hegemony. In the company of a police sergeant weighed down by a horse and dray Harry was still able to get close enough to witness behaviour "more reminiscent of a group of hooligans taking part in a kangaroo hunt than gentlemen engaged on a humane mission," he wrote, as the aboriginals were harried and bulldogged to the ground. He cringed as the crestfallen unit was rounded up for his inspection. The women looked at nothing as if focusing on anything might tempt fate to deliver something even worse than it had just served up, while half a dozen half grown children hung on to them. Only the one male, a legendary figure who had broken away from a mission almost twenty years before with what followers he could scrape up, seemed to have any defiance left in him. They were dressed in the rags of rags. Harry was overwhelmed more than anything, more than by their dirt and smell and dusted trails of sweat and snot, by the awful suspicion that their unequalness to the environment they had been foraging in almost challenged his own.

He declined to photograph them, although, at their insistence, took one of their captors who, "after a day's work," he suggested, "that had done little credit to anyone, wore expressions of egregious self-satisfaction."

Once he explored Goat Island opposite the town. It was not actually a real and permanent entity, but an enclosure of river red gums alienated from the mainland in high water that had intrigued him since his first day in Mylong. It had been sparsely occupied when he first arrived by people like the legendary 'Captain' Walsh, who'd come to the town claiming to be a decorated veteran of the Crimean War and retired to a humpy on the island when his bona fides started looking as frayed as his frock coat. Expecting now to meet only ghosts he was surprised when he stumbled upon a young school teacher seated in a clearing, idly funnelling sand through her hands while a group of young men lounged in a circle round her, waiting for something to happen that was too obvious for any of them to initiate it. He went further afield then and followed the cliffs in the direction of Verco from where he could look down on the river coiling in a great plain of its making to the hills on its far opposite side. It was much easier to imagine a world then that he had once had no difficulty in seeing. It was the scene of one of the failed settlements of the 90s; its tenants probably hated the sight of the place before they were finished. Yet from his leisured viewpoint he could enjoy the sight of a still largely secret valley that sometimes, if there was rain sweeping in from the southwest, was screened and transformed in a quite magical way. Then he felt anything might lie within and beyond its confines.

There were no secrets at all on the hot day he chose to ride his bike over there, however: insects itched in the stillness and flies burrowed in his eyes when, on a whim, he turned his back and walked a short distance into the mallee spattered heartland of station country. Within minutes the isolation worried him, he knew if he fell and broke something no one would have a clue where he was, and had a moment of panic when he became

disoriented; when he was able to see a horizontal pyramid of pelicans dawdling high over what must be the river he rushed back in their direction with sweat drying on him. Yet then, when he was climbing down the cliffs he disturbed a baking snake that stood up and had a go at him. Its mouth just glanced off his boot but left him shaking for minutes while he was examining himself for damage. Afterwards the encounter was always connected with his detour from the river, and made its recollection more morbid. From a modest vantage point he'd been able to see the ever so slightly undulating country tacked with scrub stretching north into, if not infinity, then to some point where it would surely only be relieved by something even more desolate. Was the ultimate joke played on explorers that at the bankrupt stage of their expeditions they could still be haunted by visions, while the closest they ever got to discovering real inland seas were salt crusted stews? He thought. He gave cycling away then, apart from odd trips to and from the paper.

By that time Carey was Harry's full time proxy; when one of his boss's last journalistic forays offended the sensitivities of the proprietor of Tschirpig's Shoes by suggesting that some of his footwear might have come from sweatshops in the eastern states, Carey had smoothed the regular advertiser's feathers by standing him lunch; elevated in Harry's absence to the Hotel board, Carey was left in the difficult position of deflecting Harry's occasional criticisms of its so-called indulgences while being a beneficiary of them: it was generally towards the Angove's full-bodied port end of dinners that most of its business was done.

As his confidence in his new career grew he began to affect a certain – not dandyish – but daring for the area style. He was still young enough to immerse himself in one of the first pair of Oxford Bags seen in Mylong, and to substitute a fawn trilby for his homburg when he thought the occasion allowed. He adopted a vigorous, near sprinting stride when exiting from

the company vehicle, trouser ends billowing, that suggested urgency even when there wasn't any.

After a decent and dutiful enough interval under Art Whitaker's tutelage to assuage that gentleman's fears that the paper might be trying to put the skids under him, he also turned his hand to journalism, adopting the house style which in the last twenty years of Harry's proprietorship had remained as undemanding as its readers demanded. Apart from sport his purview was general, while implicitly respecting the off-limits sanctity of the *Social Notes* page. Art's dedication to the feature seemed to elevate him above his normal bachelor state, even if the chaste outpourings of, 'So much chatter about city beaches, when this week at Lake Burney any photographer would have been in his element as scores of our beauties disported themselves in and out of the water' – left him with the puckered lips of someone who has drunk from a doubtful source.

While Carey had more than enough urbanity to be invited to civic functions, his grass-roots conviviality and respect for the life physical – enthusiastically resumed after his domestic trials ended – meant he was welcome at sporting clubs' meetings too, since its committees were confident that whatever blood might be spilt during the evening would be left by him on the floor to dry.

Over the years he had turned his hands and feet to almost every recreational diversion going. Though a New South Welshman and quite unfamiliar with the local code he had put his name down to play for the town's football team when he arrived, and was rewarded with an honourable mention on his first outing: "Wallace," the Mail said, "though a recent convert to the game, proved himself a force in the forward lines; continually presenting himself to receive and dispose of the ball to good effect." Later he was praised when he took the cricket field for the respect he showed for the traditions of the game, even if it was because he was the only one wearing a full set of whites.

When the most novel of sports, water skiing, was introduced to the town and Harry accepted patronage of its club, Carey told him he intended to have a go at that as well. He was blithe. The mechanical associations of the sport seemed to overcome any antipathy he otherwise felt for large expanses of open water. 'I don't mind giving it a burl,' he told his employer. In both an official capacity and as a show of loyalty, Harry attended the opening of a new season, then, for which a ski-ramp had just been installed, and which Carey and others had declared themselves ready and willing to take on. While Harry was there, however, on a glaring morning, with the sun bouncing off the water in concert with the fully armed looking machines, he found everything that was grating in crowds expressed by the mob on the banks (hoping – and they must have been – that what would happen eventually did when one of the dragonfly figures skipping after a boat took a tilt at the ramp and came twinkling down on its other side with a smack you could hear from the shore).

'He kept tellin' me to give her the gun,' the distressed boat owner kept telling anyone who would listen afterwards.

Harry studied the man's face later in a hospital room set aside for the laying out. It was unmarked: its owner had broken his neck on contact with the water. Death might have lent a merciful closure to the accident. Still an almost visual pall fell over the place afterwards in the way it does in country towns, where tragedy always strikes close to home. Grape vines ravelled and unravelled in the heat, the river wavered imbecilely, for a day everything had a kind of glaze over it as if it had been put to and failed a test.

Predictably, and commendably, representatives from just about every sporting body in town were at the funeral. And perhaps sport, Harry conceded, though he hadn't participated in or touched any of its codes' instruments for thirty years, was indeed a kind of metaphor for life, a proof of its provenance. People at the graveside could be seen as novices, practitioners …and ultimately failures at whatever game they espoused: as exposed in their expectations of

life as any Cosme-ite had been in theirs. In some ways Harry saw Carey's death as a judgment on not simply his sang-froid, but his fecklessness, the reward for a batsman playing an injudicious shot too early in his innings… But before what? He then asked himself. Before joining the ranks of grizzled and middle aged men with eyes like addled eggs hanging round the grave, for example, who had dedicated themselves in the absence of the only sort of life they ever had, to membership of sports' legion of onlookers? Perhaps life really had seen the best of Carey in a cameo.

He was surprised and disappointed to find that he shed no tears. He wondered at first if it revealed the decline in his character and chided himself for it, but then he speculated that it might be because he had reached an age where grief is more or less a constant in life, and any new death only a kind of increment to it.

It was days after the funeral that he took on the job of going through his protégé's papers. He discovered that while the son mightn't have been much of letter writer he had kept nearly all of those of his mother's, and eventually he tracked down her last forwarded address. Her letters to her son were indeed often prolix, he discovered; the wording of his telegram to her on the other hand was about as terse as the technology decreed.

'I regret I must bring you very sad news…'

Cosme 1936

She had left Australia under a sky that drew comparisons with the one that oversaw the *Royal Tar's* departure: rain pitted the harbour and spent itself on glass. 'I'm not going let it get me down,' she promised herself, however, and almost as soon as she was on board began to feel better.

It was a sign of the times that the ship turned out to be only half full; and appeared to be even less well patronised after a storm in the Tasman cleared the dining room decks. Hattie herself wasn't troubled. On the *Royal Tar* she'd often felt like a junior Circe as those around her writhed and hawked, and even on this trip there were days when she dined almost alone from crockery anchored by a wet table cloth. When the weather improved she fought shy of the company of business men who had a tendency to bring the shortcomings of absent wives to the dinner table with them. She mingled, and one night enjoyed the experience of having both the captain and his first mate rest hands in hers from adjoining seats. The captain's appearance was near impeccable, only his droopy moustache gave a clue to an inner battle he was waging with depression. 'My ship was once alive with dancing, parties,' he lamented, 'now, it is full of echoes…'

'Echoes…' repeated his junior.

'Snap,' Hattie nearly said.

In a letter to her son she recorded the sight of an iceberg after about a week. 'We saw one on the *Royal Tar*, too.' When they anchored outside Montevideo she wrote, 'It looks exactly the same from out at sea…we had to sit here for a day while silly uncle went ashore to grease up the locals. It was such a let-down.'

On the river ferry to Asuncion she slept above the working deck and was occasionally disturbed by some minor crisis below; once or twice they actually ran aground, but there

never seemed much doubt about them getting off again, and otherwise she found the noise of the motors helped lull her to sleep. The river was miles wide to start with, they could have been at sea, and the land crept by. When it got narrow enough for their passing to be an event she saw parrots and flamingos taking flight, natives, who sometimes waved, and crocodiles sheathing themselves in water as they were overtaken. Occasionally there were belligerent downpours that beat anything of Sydney's; often the silence following the boat's berthing at some small dock coincided with an abrupt sunset. Usually she passed on the meal time offerings of meat adrift in fat before the invariable bowls of mandioca were produced like ultimatums, and filled up on fruit.

She had no doubts about her pilgrimage, even though she realized she had seen everything on the first trip with the privileged omniscience of a child surrounded by adults. In Asuncion she was treated with some suspicion by Customs. While the large ingredient of natives loaded to bursting with possessions were hustled through the checkpoint as if they might be at risk themselves of spilling open, a man in a sweaty uniform initially challenged her.

'What is your reason for coming here? What is it you want to see?' he demanded. 'The tomb of President Lopez…? The Panteon?'

'No, I' – Hattie began before her invigilator gave in to his better nature and smiled, showing a lot of teeth. 'Some other National Treasures – the mother of my wife, perhaps?'

'I want to see the country again,' said Hattie. 'Where I grew up.'

'You grew here?'

'Cosme. Near Villarica.'

The man spat dryly. 'You will find nothing but Guarani there. And tigers, I believe. But good luck and good fortune in my country Senora,' he said, before adding without much

optimism, ‘perhaps I will have the opportunity to practise my English with you once more on your return.’

In Asuncion she looked up the Municipal Theatre where they had once all been billeted for a night or two. ‘Mother was terrified we’d be abducted by someone swarthy. But there were hardly any men around. Most of them had been killed in the war, and the ones that were left weren’t very exciting. I think Alice and I were in a bit of an awkward position. We’d have been happy just playing in the street with the others, but Uncle Billy thought that might be undignified because of our ages, give the wrong impression. For a Socialist he was such a conformist. And a wowser with it, of course.’

She went on to describe her ride in an open cab packed to bursting with horse hair as it jiggled over cobbled and orange tree lined streets. The very mild interest shown in her passing was only heightened among people offering things for sale. A man carrying a camera and tripod attempted to intercept as she was getting in her cab, and then broke into a gallop himself for a few strides before lapsing back in to dejection with tools of trade dangling at his sides. Indians with no apparent expectations at all didn’t even look up. The town had hardly changed. A visitor could still not be sure if it was a city built on hopes still waiting to be materialized or if its original elegance had been sabotaged beyond relief. Wrought iron balconies rusted, pillared porticos housed junk, stylish women picked their way around slops. Still she felt sure that as long as the horse kept moving that her excitement would not be lost.

She caught what looked like the same funny little train, running on the same narrow gutted gauge line, for Villarica. The grass grew so thickly between and on both sides of the line that at times the train appeared to be blazing a trail of its own through it. The small farms that appeared every few hundred yards were still surrounded by patches of maize and grazing cows. Women still appeared at stops to flog nibbles.

When she had been little in Cosme picking up Guarani had been an illicit game frowned on by elders, which had invariably drawn the children to the language's vulgarities. Listening to the voices around her she realised she had lost even them; she strained her ears for Spanish and then felt hampered when she did have a chance to use it; her brain and tongue knocked against each other like brooms in a cupboard, and when she did manage to rake up a phrase her accent often meant she was misunderstood. She felt stupid, and somewhat alienated, but not afraid. I am almost home, she kept reassuring herself.

The last part of her journey was carried out by bus and she suffered her first feelings of disillusionment when she got off. Everything was askew. The land sloped the wrong way. Tall trees stood in places into which they must have been transported. She met someone inside a dark cave of a shop with English as laboured as her Spanish who offered to take her on to Cosme on one of old high wheeled carts. She got on it and tried to forget that her nostalgic journey had ever been broken in the reassurance of motion.

'I don't know what I expected to find in Cosme,' she wrote to her son, as if it could have been anything other than the past. 'The first thing I looked for, for some reason,' she said, 'was the cricket oval. There wasn't a trace of it. There was no village left either, not really, two or three houses in a row; that was it. I looked at the washing on the line of one of them; I thought, God, a snow dropper would starve here. When I saw the old hall though, it broke my heart.' There was a cow tethered inside; most of the interior had been turned into animal pens. She nestled her face against one of the old timber uprights with great nail heads protruding from it here and there; it looked like the sort of chop-and-chance-it job that Harry might have produced before they took a hammer off him. She was running a hand over an old tongue and groove fence post outside when some little kids came to see; some of them were nearly blonde. They didn't seem to understand a word she said, but eventually one of them took her hand and said, 'Come on,' and took her up the hill to a house she had no memory of.

‘The people were already gawking at me from out the front, wondering who I was; it wasn’t till I got nearly there and this old lady came to meet me that I realised it was Mrs Ward’s home. She was supposed to have the gift of second sight, or telepathy or whatever you call it; as soon as she saw me she burst into tears the dear, and hugged me and said, “I dreamed about you last night.”

‘It wasn’t much of a house. You could see things hadn’t gone ahead. Her husband was one of those that hung on till the end when everyone cut their losses and divided up the land between them; the government was just glad to close the book on things I think. She seemed a bit self-conscious, not that I cared but the poor thing had no stockings on and she kept rubbing the calves of her legs together as if she was hoping she could hide them. Her husband was never terribly energetic, I think that’s one of the reasons he stayed. He ran a few cows or something, they grew most of their other food – he was happy with his *mate* and his *cana* ….They survived but then her baby enlisted in the British army for the Great War, the silly galoot, and got himself killed, and then her husband, Walter, died in his fifties. She was so brave, she said she still has two boys and their Paraguayan wives and children, she had a nice little garden, but her house inside – I was going to say it was like a museum, but it was more like one of those places they shoved reffos from Europe in, those German Jews, with all the treasures as well as the useful things and the bits and pieces, all on display.’

It was a typical paradox, evidence of what the displaced or never really settled people do: a way of putting down roots in their new homes while at the same trying to convince themselves it is only temporary. Mrs Ward couldn’t have settled. She had photos on the walls going back to the 1890s, there were books of Australian authors from decades past gone mildewy on a dresser, a map of Australia, a spray of gum leaves and flowers someone in Australia had carved out of wood….

Mrs Ward confessed after a time to not being well, she had something wrong with her kidneys. She said she'd never really accepted that she would grow old there. The only time she ever got a chance to speak English was when one of the old timers down the track came and visited her, so she used read aloud to herself from one of her books or an old English newspaper from Buenos Aires when she could lay her hands on one to keep in practice. She said, "I still find myself going over to the map to jog my memory about things, check up on places. Father was a shearer and he used to trail all over these places out back; I knew all their names once, it was like a jingle I could recite for him. Do you know when I'm feeling homesick I touch places on the map and I can remember everything he told me about them." The ship's prow figure that Hattie recalled of her host had settled into a utilitarian bolster shape in Mrs Ward's old age. She made her way around the house and garden with the aid of a stick, largely ignorant of the hovering and bemused presence of her grandchildren and daughter-in-law. She kept touching Hattie's wrist to draw her attention and saying, 'Now see here, dear, that was my cousin; he drowned in the *Pirana*…this silly thing, see, the stones are all sapphires, an old boyfriend sent me from Australia, after my husband died – he was a miner – he said, "This is just a taste of things of things to come if you marry me" – I said, "You'll have to do better than that sonny boy"' – she went delving into drawers – 'here's a story from Australia talking about us survivors, *The Herald*, they called me a matriarch – I'm not that damn old, am I…' When she felt she'd exhausted the possibilities of her pottering and perhaps her guest she said, 'You must be dying of thirst. How about a real cup of tea? Father used to say, "Put the billy on, Muriel," even when there wasn't any tea to put in it. See these cups; I don't know how they survived.'

On demand, Hattie gave a very restricted, garbled really, resume of her history; she looked up from stirring her tea and saw the old lady studying her, with her cup to her lips.

'I knew you two were sweet hearts. I could see it then.'

‘Who?’

‘You and that young Harry…Gardener.’

‘Oh…that,’ Hattie said dismissively. ‘That was a lifetime ago.’

You never got in touch again? Don’t know what happened to him?’

‘No, no, not a clue. No doubt the same goes for him. I wouldn’t be surprised if he made a name for himself doing something, but I never heard about it.’

Mrs Ward put her hand on Hattie’s. ‘Why did you come back here?’

‘God knows. I don’t know. I feel such an idiot. It’s lovely to see you again, but everything’s gone.’ She screwed up her handkerchief into a ball and scrubbed her eyes. ‘And – sorry – now I feel like I’ve trodden on a bit of the past.’

‘Don’t say that…’ Mrs Ward said gently. ‘I shouldn’t ask, but do you remember where you first made up? Would you?’

Hattie blinked, half laughed. ‘I should do. It was a bit of a disaster. It was down by the river.’

‘Why don’t you go back there? It might help put things to rest.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Hattie stood up and wiped her cheeks. ‘I’m behaving like a…’

‘Better take a hat.’

The track leading to the river was still there. For a while, where it branched off from what was going to be the main thoroughfare in Cosme, it seemed more determined than Hattie remembered, but after a while it fell back into its old narrow wheel tracked ways. Before then she saw a house or two; once she was saluted gravely by an Indian face.

It was a dog who broke whatever other prohibitions applied to visitors, an amiable collie-ish breed who settled into a trot behind her. He would not be put off, when she stopped and tried to dismiss him he sat, and when she turned to resume her irresolute walk actually

nudged her calf with his nose. When she looked down and asked rhetorically, ‘So, you’re my mate, are you?’ he went on ahead, as if satisfied to have got his way.

All the other signposts, the banana plantation, the maize, the paddock that had been strewn in summer with melons in their race with mildew and the wildlife that had developed a taste for them… were gone. The present insisted. Trees had closed in and withdrawn from the track at random, the track took new liberties. When she got to the river it took ages for her to find the old swimming spot. It appalled her till she realised the course of the river must have changed. The sand bank they’d made love on was overgrown or had been swallowed by the stream; she couldn’t be sure which. It was only when she looked upstream and counted four palms, much taller now, that had lined up in relief then, that she could be certain of the spot.

She looked at the dog and said, ‘Well, what now?’ and when he made the decision to go in the water on his own unfussed terms, setting off with a grave stroke that took him out into the mid-stream, she said, ‘Oh bugger it,’ and took off her clothes and went in too.

She half knelt in the water at first, feeling the current against her arms. When she cupped her hands and tasted the water, it reminded her that she hadn’t had a real drink for days. It gave her confidence in a way to be able to still see the wavering bush of hair between her legs, the water was so clear, but her first few strokes into the main stream were careful. When they were little she and the other kids had tried to scare each other with talk of *piranha*; when one of the seeming monsters of fresh water fish, the *dorado,* was taken on a line they’d conjured up images of one of its brothers emerging vengefully from the depths. The dog gave her confidence. When he’d navigated as much as he wanted of the pool they were in, he came back in and passed her, huffing intermittently. On shore he shook himself and then sat watching her. When she emerged as well, hauling herself backwards up on the rocks he came over and sniffed her in a quick show of interest before going to roll in some

dirt. Hattie sat with her hands splayed beside her buttocks on the gritty rock; shaking her hair and watching the water dry. She said to herself, Maybe it's time for a stock take, and surveyed what she could of herself. She stretched out her legs: not bad, no veins… belly, just a bit of an overlap above her waist; breasts, heavier, yeah, but definitely not lost causes like some. She stood up and crooked her arms behind her.

'We're still alive, aren't we boy?' she said to the dog.

When they reached the point on the way back where the dog had joined her, both of them seemed to know it was a parting of the ways. He sat and suffered her bending to ruffle his ears, and when she said, 'Well, you better go and do whatever it is you're supposed to do,' he turned – without a word, Hattie felt tempted to record – and went on his way.

When she got back to Mrs Ward's the old lady had made some lunch for her: 'You should have worked up an appetite if you've been in.' When she produced a bowl of her own bananas mashed up with sugar – 'that should bring back memories – except it was probably molasses then' – Hattie felt like crying again. Mrs Ward was surprised when Hattie told her she wasn't keen on visiting anyone else. 'You must remember the ….' she started: 'I don't really,' Hattie said. 'You're the one I have best memories of – you were always kind. Give my regards to anyone who remembers me and apologise. I think I should go.'

Mrs Ward said, quite prosaically, 'Well perhaps it's for the best. I'm not ashamed of my grandchildren, but they're not Australian. They don't want to know anything about what went on here in the old days. It means nothing to them. If you were to go over to see old Tom Pfeiffer, he's about the closest, he's drunk on *cana* half the time. And then after that there's Billy Wainwright's, he's gone native; walks around with knife on his belt about a foot long. Some of them have kicked on here, but the ones that haven't are more or less no-hopers. Old Mrs West used to say that the whole affair was a waste of good men…I don't know which camp I'm in. I've just tried to make the best of things.'

‘I wish I could take you back with me,’ Hattie said.

‘Too late for that dear. I’ve made my own bed – or my hubbie did, God rest him – I won’t get another one to lie in at my age.’

Hattie was almost at the door when she mentioned the dog.

‘He was a funny old thing,’ she said. ‘Followed me all the way there and back and then just took off on his own again.’

‘What was he?’ Mrs Ward asked.

‘Oh, a kind of collie…nondescript.’

‘White ruff, collar?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Ah, that’d be the Kushel’s.’

She said it so expressionlessly Hattie felt prompted. ‘The Kushel’s?’

‘Yes.’ Mrs Ward shook her head two or three times as if she was confirming something with herself. ‘He always used to go with their kids down the river, to keep an eye on them. One day he missed for some reason and their youngest boy got drowned.’

‘How awful,’ Hattie said.

‘Yes, looks like he didn’t want to take a risk with you.’

Hattie said, ‘Oh…’ dismissively and then almost as an afterthought asked, ‘When did it, the other business happen?’

‘Oh, years ago. Many years. He still turns up every so often though.’

‘But that’s – it’s not the same one’ – Hattie protested.

Mrs Ward raised an eyebrow and smiled, ‘It is…’

Hattie almost scoffed in a letter. ‘It would have to be the old dog’s grandson. The worst thing that can happen for people like Mrs Ward must be that they start being taken in

by their own reputations…I didn't say anything. I felt I owed it to my friend I went swimming with.'

To herself – and Carey – though, she said, 'I can't just turn around and go home.'

San Carlos di Bariloche

She had never seen snow before, or real mountains. She found it hard to believe in them when she took the train from Viedema, and as the journey took her further and further into the interior she stopped believing in them at all. Pampas that might have been at home in Australia gave way to near desert that wouldn't have been out of place there either; the specimens of trees were fighting the same losing battles as home's. Even the flat topped hills could have been copies of the Outback's, and solitary poplars were like punctuation points in very meagre narratives of human settlement. She'd left the city in a wooden crateful of humanity, among a babel of expectations she could not share; she smiled pacifically at any face that met hers, shook her head apologetically when anyone spoke to her, drew her proverbial and real skirts around her, and retreated into the corner of her seat. She felt like a middle aged woman who didn't belong.

When the mountains first appeared she took them, with the lining of snow on their peaks, for clouds. She still wasn't convinced when the clouds became lineaments; it took another circuitous hour or so before she felt confident. They were so startling then that she kept moving from one side of the train to the other to keep them in view. When they very slowly began to climb, not among, but towards the bare hills preceding them she kept fearing that the next turn might leave her stranded in stony disappointment: when Bariloche itself appeared fringing the Lake Nahuel Huapi, and all the vista around and behind it was laid out, she wanted to stake a claim to it before the train or its driver changed their minds. In a fever she got directions to a hotel, and as soon as she'd got inside the building and dumped her bag rushed out the room's small balcony and gazed on the view until she could take no more and went back inside and fell on the bed.

Next morning she woke to a flurry at the window, a spring shower of snow. She gazed on it greedily and ran downstairs and wandered up and down the street catching flakes and gazing up at them until she felt, as watchers do, that she was on the point of detaching herself from the footpath's bounds and joining them. When she looked around she saw passers-by gawking at her. Back inside the Italian lady who owned the hotel scolded her, 'Signora, you will take cold.'

When she went out later it wasn't with dress in mind – she wanted to see the town – but she was soon reminded of her clothing's deficiencies. Snow was no longer falling, but the wind that had replaced it, funnelling its way down and through the mountains round the town and sending those flakes that hadn't melted skipping across cobblestones, was icy; the lake bristled, the sky was a frazzled mix of grey and blue. Every growing thing, from the deciduous trees pricked with new leaves to lolling flowers gave the impression of having been incautiously caught out. Hattie wasn't sure whether to feel elated or distressed by the turbulence around her until her ears began to ache.

She gave in and went into a store and bought… a fur, from an assistant who spoke English. Then she had a coffee, a real one. The wind had dropped again and the agitation of the water modulated into a barcarollish rhythm. She gazed up at the mountains, exposed now the sun was out again, and almost flinched.

The next day was calm and clear and she was able to climb into the lower reaches of the mountains and immerse herself in pines and wild lupins and fuchsias, and meadows – she had to call them that – strewn and stippled with flowers she couldn't name like living coins, and for whom there was no one to thank.

'I'm so close to being happy it isn't funny,' she wrote to her dead son.

Mylong

As soon as seemed decent after his morbid telegram Harry wrote to Hattie: 'It was only a short while ago that I discovered the identity of Carey's mother and I had no inkling of how to react. I did not tell your son about our relationship in Cosme. It may not have been fair to him. He died pursuing a new enthusiasm of his; rashly perhaps, but his passing was immediate and he could not have suffered. With deepest sympathy…' (and so on) he closed and wondered whether he would get a reply.

If nothing else her letter dispelled any uncertainty that his telegram's reference to 'Carey' may have aroused. There was no doubt of Hattie's awareness of the true state of affairs. 'Thank you for informing me of the death of our son,' she responded.

And that was all.

Harry reminded himself that Hattie's letter only confirmed something he had long suspected and tried to deny. But even if he had been sure it would have always been too late to declare himself a father to his son. It didn't add to his sadness – though the thought, on the other hand, that he had once been infatuated with his own son's wife, made him squirm.

He did not expect to hear again from Hattie and didn't even hope to, really, but months later – after she'd had time to get over the worst perhaps – she wrote.

'Dear Harry,' she said, 'I am very sorry if my response to the awful news you sent me was so curt. I'm afraid it brought out feelings in me that I thought I had long ago buried. I imagined once you established that I was Carey's mother that you might have already done some sums, and reached a possible conclusion, but I couldn't resist trying to turn the knife. I always blamed you for the way we were split up, but then we both made a choice, didn't we? I've surely paid for it and perhaps you have too.

‘The marriage I settled for changed me as well, I know. I was never a very good mother, though I’m not sure now if I was ever meant to be one. Maybe you would have been enough for me. I didn’t like the wife I became, either, even if the husband I had did his best to crush the life out of me. You might remember that I never thought much of politics, men’s politics, and yet I went and got involved with them. Really, I wanted to do something to help people, especially women, but I finished up taking out most of my spite on everyone in the end, I think. And things got even worse afterwards; I ended up being not much more than a money grubber.

‘I’ve decided to stay here for the time being, anyway. Bariloche is beautiful. I don’t know if you can guess why I came here. There was nothing left in Cosme when I visited it but as you no doubt know this is the land the Cosme-ites could have chosen. Given my uncle’s and most of the settlers’ natures things might have turned out badly here too, I suppose. But I have made a friend of the Italian lady who owns a hotel, and have decided to stay here with her for a while and give her a hand. Sad as I am about what has happened in Australia I can’t go back now…’

Harry nodded until he got to: ‘Sometimes, Harry, I wish someone could tell me what happened to the people we once were.’ Then he couldn’t go on.

He had already begun to treat other correspondents’ requests for an audience with a standard deterrent, ‘I fear I have become a rather private person, since my health somewhat restricts me’ – preferring to pass most days in the garden with his factotum, Tubby Curren, in tow. Tubby’s own and genuine infirmity was expressed in occasional benders that saw him go missing for days. He always turned up again, without apologising for his absence yet with a refound fervour for his employment that might have been an expression of contrition. Between them they had managed to fill and encircle an acre of garden with so much growth

that from some points the whereabouts of the house were uncertain from the road. Harry did not pretend to be happy in it, but he often resented downing tools for the day.

The morning a caller successfully negotiated a path to his front door, was an unusual – and unwelcome, really – interruption to the even tenor of his days. His female caller reacted to Harry's first and delayed double-take with a nod of her own, before he could respond, 'Miss… Brunsen…?' and dutifully invite her in.

'No, I won't come in thanks,' she said, before adding, 'I'm up this way and I thought I'd pay my respects. I heard Carey had been living with you here. I was sorry to hear about what happened...'

It was ten o'clock in the morning. Mrs Foley was working down the other end of the house. Harry insisted, 'Please…'

His visitor acceded but sat uneasily. A string bag of groceries hung off her arm like a limp flag till Harry relieved her of it. He hovered before putting the kettle on and offering her some of Mrs Foley's biscuits. 'Well,' he said finally, in one those futile efforts people make to cross social barriers with small talk, 'this is a surprise.'

She grinned, sardonically and minimally. 'I'll bet…'

Harry was not malicious but if he or anyone else had speculated on the direction Carey's former lover's life might have taken since she had disappeared from the town, the exercise would almost certainly have included more towns, more men and more of the same medicine that had already seen capillaries venturing across her cheeks when she was still young. Strangest and most unsettling in the version of herself she presented now – she wasn't all that well dressed, she had on flat scuffed shoes, and her hair that she had worn in braids once was dragged back into a bun – was that she looked, if only because of the contrast it provided with the last impression she'd made in town, like one of those transfigured stooges

you see in before and after advertisements. When he offered up, 'You're looking very well, may I say,' it was as involuntary as it was sincere.

His caller's response was neither defensive nor boastful. 'Well, I ought to be in a bit better nick than the last time you saw me, I suppose,' she said flatly, and when Harry failed to respond took up the slack. 'I haven't had a drink for a while,' she added, 'that's all. Might have something to do with it.' When Harry rewarded her statement with the faintest lifting of his eyebrows, she said, 'I'll get to what I came for. One of the things I've spent a bit of time on since I tried to straighten myself out is square up with some of the people I did the wrong thing by.'

Harry held his palms out. 'You have nothing to make amends for here.'

'Yes I have. Apart from that business in the pub – I don't know what got into me that day – I was the one that went to the coppers and told them that girl wasn't from Denmark.'

'Ah,' Harry said.

'I was rotten at the time, but it was no excuse.'

'It's a long time ago now,' Harry said pacifically.

'Some things never happen long enough ago. Another thing I've got to tell you is I've got a kid: Carey's. Don't worry' – she said, as if thinking she would have to interrupt – 'I'm not looking for a handout…'

'No,' Harry said, before adding involuntarily, 'then?'

She half shrugged. 'I just thought I should tell you.…'

'Why?'

'I don't know, I just did.' She looked around, suddenly agitated, and started to get up. 'Anyhow, I've done it now so I'll go.'

Harry made no effort to restrain her. He saw her to the door in near silence and watched her walk away with an air – if such things can be detected from behind – of someone

glad to have got something unpleasant over with. As Harry came back inside he realised that he had forgotten to ask anything about his grandchild.

The day he saw her in the street with the boy the likeness to Carey was unmistakeable. Otherwise he was the prototype of any other country child with scabby knees and droopy socks. Ingrid introduced him: 'William….Mr Gardener,' before qualifying her statement. '"Whippy," that's what everyone calls him.'

When Harry bent down to shake the small boy's hand and met his not unfriendly gaze, he was reminded of Hattie's charge in Cosme. He said, 'I'll call you Will, I think,' and gave him sixpence.

He commemorated the meeting in his diary later that day with a subdued encomium. 'He seemed a sturdy little chap. And she…I continue to be somewhat surprised.'

One of the advantages or burdens of living in country towns is that people have an excess of time to pass judgment on their relatively small number of neighbours and see their generally negative expectations of them fulfilled.

In her case Ingrid might have been a disappointment to locals on her reintroduction to them. She had not been transformed into an epitome of Victorian humility: once she settled back in the town there was no evidence of her spending her days black-leading kitchen ranges or bleaching door steps, but Harry discovered that she had found employment where no alcohol was served and was sending her son to school washed and well fed.

On their own that mightn't have been exceptional; still Harry couldn't help but approve of what he saw when he ran into her in the street. She rarely smiled when their paths crossed but then customers of her ice cream bar prior to its closure might have recalled that it had never been one of her outstanding mannerisms; alcohol had misrepresented her. Harry had no real memory of that professional side of her, of course, let alone of the private one that his son had the chance to appreciate in the days when they were first together. Water had

seemed to free some latent, just undone, restraint in her when they went swimming; she would often ease her way right out into the mid-stream while her lover was occupied closer in shore and then stop when she got there, sweeping her blonde braids back and looking around her as if making a note of everything she saw; from there she would sometimes even mock the caution that tethered Carey to the shallows. It was only after she came back in that she became her blander other self again.

She had never been beautiful, even if the *Mail* had once suggested otherwise. Both her forehead and her shoulders were rather broad. Her face was square. But she had clear skin, a rush of blonde hair that fell down her back when it was free, and everything else, her blunt nose and chin and firm body, seemed to go with a person Harry had never had a chance to know.

Though she might have been physical proof of Temperance's benefits, speculation on her soul's inner workings had to remain unsatisfied in Harry's and her first meetings. The lady's expression remained level, her conversation almost monosyllabic. It was her son who seemed keen to lower his part of his family's defences. He held his mother up in his impatience to include Harry in his exploits and intentions. While declining to join him in an end to end kick in the reserve running down the centre of town, Harry provided an audience to the boy's involvement with a football one day and made approving noises. Even Ingrid's initial frown at the possibly inappropriate turn events might be taking seemed to relax for a moment.

For someone with such limited experience of parenting, or grand parenting, Harry found that it wasn't that hard, or so prolonged an exercise, either: he was soon able to resume the path that their meeting had interrupted after tipping his hat.

The untroubled surface of new acquaintance was only disturbed the day Mrs Foley fell down some steps at home and broke an ankle. It was as if fate had decided to show its

hand. Left without a housekeeper and in need of a nurse, Harry impulsively invited Ingrid to take over both jobs.

She responded warily. ‘I’ve already got a job, at Winzen’s,’ (the bakery) she said.

‘Of course. Forgive me...’ Harry looked slightly lost. ‘I wouldn’t ask except that I’m in something of a fix. Mrs Foley keeps threatening to get out of bed and resume her duties, and of course I can’t allow her…’

Ingrid frowned, again. ‘What’s the set up?’

‘There’s really just me, and the house, and Mrs Foley. Sometimes I have visits from people in Adelaide who want to see if I’m still alive,’ he said – and nominated what he hoped might be an appealing enough inducement for her to take up the challenge.

‘Well…’ she said cautiously, ‘I don’t mind having a go, I suppose. I’m staying out on Brooks Avenue, but. I’ve got no transport…’

‘There are a number of spare rooms down Mrs Foley’s end of the house…’

Ingrid’s lips flared slightly.

‘Your privacy would of course be assured,’ Harry assured.

After her initial disquiet Mrs Foley gave in to the intrusion on her terms. ‘It’s only till I get up and about again.’ She did not like the idea of William being introduced to the house at all, however. ‘You don’t know what he’s picked up wherever he’s been. He’ll be pinchin’ things, rippin’ up the garden.’ She was soon won over by a little boy, though, whose solemnity almost equalled his mother’s in his strange surroundings. The first day he was in the house he went no further than exploring its central passage, occasionally touching the walls as if to guarantee their permanence. When he went outside his behaviour was much the same; the garden, like the house, seemed immense to him. He trod carefully, looking behind as if to be sure he was not marking the surface of the lawn or losing himself in its expanses. Harry took the time to help him explore, pointing out plants and features and giving them

names; he was touched when the little boy offered him his hand one afternoon, as was his charge when he was invited to dip it in a small running fountain.

'Is he holding you up?' Ingrid asked watchfully, the first time she'd noticed William taking his grandfather's attention.

'We're just doing the rounds,' Harry said.

His de-facto housekeeper rarely came outside otherwise, or downed tools. There seemed to be something coiled up in her; whenever Harry tried to ease the burden she'd taken on she would resist it. She never sat long. Happily, after some initial fencing – on the part of Mrs Foley – the two women became allies. Once Mrs Foley had explained their employer's tastes in food and almost everything else (Spartan) and been satisfied with their continuing supply, she learned to appreciate the younger woman's tact and surprising gentleness in helping her bathe and dress; they became each other's feminine audience. Mrs Foley was unstinting, by her standards, in her praise of her to Harry: 'She's gold, that one' – if, by Ingrid's unspoken criticism, Mrs Foley's cleaning went nowhere meeting Scandinavian standards, the younger woman was tactful in repairing its deficiencies without offending her new friend.

One day, near dusk, she did leave the house for a breath of the fresh air Harry kept urging her to take. It was an autumn evening, European maples and oaks in the garden were colouring. On an open expanse of lawn to one side of the house she saw Harry and William seriously engaged with three cricket stumps and a tennis ball. When Harry took a restrained swish with a bat at a delivery of the little boy and surrendered his wicket, his grandson scolded him, 'Not like that, Pa!'

Ingrid was appalled. '*Mr Gardener*!' she insisted.

'Bit late now,' Harry said, grinning, and took guard again.

Something in the scene seemed to get to Ingrid. Her small son, and an elderly man, playing in the last of the sun, with William's intensity lacking the exultant and spiteful sense of triumph that might be expected in such an unequal competition; it was hard to say who, if either, was actually indulging the other. She did not slump, but it was as if some strain had been lifted from her for the moment. She leaned forward on the bench and lifted her hands and linked them over her knees.

Now Harry felt an extra incentive to maintain the property. He enjoyed picking sprays of early morning flowers and putting them on the kitchen windowsill for Ingrid to find. When the rose bushes were bursting with blooms he stuffed vases with them. He was rewarded when he saw her bending over their scent. He said to her one day, 'Pick some yourself, as many as you like, for your end of the house…' but she declined, almost reprovingly.

'No, they're your flowers.'

He started to protest, but stifled the words, and in future left her offerings halfway down the hall.

His defence against correspondents' importunacy had turned out to be not entirely fabricated. He had inherited some of his father's predisposition to an illness which, while he had often ignored it in the past, he sometimes found useful for papering over periods when he needed seclusion. Now, though, when he was nowhere within coo-ee of desperation, bronchitis still sought him out and genuinely laid him low.

One night when he was keeping himself awake with his coughing Ingrid knocked on the door and asked bluntly, 'Are you alright?'

Harry blinked in the light. 'Yes. Sorry, I just can't seem to settle.'

She examined him and the wasteland of handkerchiefs around him. 'Here, I'll help you sit up.' She got him into a sitting position without much effort and asked, 'Have you got a bowl?'

‘Somewhere…’

She found it. ‘Now bring some of that stuff up.’

Harry’s delicacy was offended. ‘I can’t.’

‘Yes you can,’ she insisted, and when he’d obliged she added a decongestant to some boiling water and watched over him till his breathing was more comfortable under a towel.

‘You’re very kind,’ he said as he sank back into the pillows she had resettled before she switched off the light.

The following night when he had another attack she came in in her nightgown and held him while he coughed up phlegm before manhandling him into a position where he could drain some of the fluid into a container by the bed.

She insisted on calling a doctor. Old Cuttle’s young and very much instilled with the gravitas of his profession replacement seemed to find something begrudging in Harry’s responses.

‘I don’t like the sound of your chest,’ he suggested.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Harry asked.

‘It means your lungs are awash. You have pneumonia.’

‘I doubt that. It’s just my yearly dose of bronchitis.’

‘Who’s looking after you?’

‘I have been imposing on Miss Brunsen, I’m afraid.’

The doctor snorted faintly.

Over the next few days his patient did in fact assume all of pneumonia’s symptoms. He drenched sheets which Ingrid replaced. He had delirious dreams that brought poor Mrs Foley hobbling to his bedroom door. In them he recalled his father’s distance, his mother’s irony, Hattie’s repudiation, Eleanor’s illness, Anja’s – what, mockery of him? –all his subjects had a saturnine edge. Since he was very young he’d had dreams of flight, initially

when he was excited about projects, more latterly when he felt worn down by them. In dreams he displayed a talent which should have been enough to sway any of his doubters. Yet it had always been sabotaged by disbelief in his audience, or their indifference to, or resentment of, his facility…until one way or other he was dragged back and brought to ground. Sometimes now though he seemed to soar, he felt he needed to, to escape accusing faces; he was relieved to be able to look down and see them all trivially diminishing beneath him. He knew he'd been hallucinating when gravity recalled him to his bed.

After a while he was unembarrassed by Ingrid's touch. One day as she helped him sit up she put an arm around him for support, and left it there. That same night, even after Ingrid piled the hot water bottles on he was shivering so hard that his body went into spasms and his teeth started rattling in his head. Without a word Ingrid got into bed and held him from behind till her arms cramped and he eventually settled down. Then she somehow drifted off too. When consciousness restored him to earth, though, he blamed her for it and scolded her.

'What are you doing here?' he said accusingly. 'What are you after? Why don't you let me go?' He really thought he was dying, and perhaps he was undergoing some rite of passage, a trial run: he felt absolutely lucid, though, the way people drunk on spirits imagine themselves to be.

Ingrid stirred and without even giving herself time to think said, 'You're a pain in the bum.'

It was the first time she'd displayed irritation or any other emotion with her patient. She came back later with his breakfast and helped him eat it, but when she offered a napkin and he insisted, 'There's no need,' she repeated, 'A pain,' and her brow stayed severed by a frown until his face was beached in pillows again.

Harry slowly came good. He had a fireplace in the bedroom and Ingrid made Will bring in a box of kindling every morning for the fire. It gave him a chance to talk to his

grandfather. School was full of talk of Allied derring-do; he would ask Harry things like, 'How many German tanks does it take to beat one of ours?' Harry was not very enlightening. He had been immune to the international drum beating which found expression in Australia after the Prime Minister performed his lugubrious duty of letting the nation know that it was at War. The news had brought with it an awful and inappropriate – he knew – sense of déjà vu. When the Japanese bombed Darwin he recalled Blaine's and others' invasion novels of the 1890s, where the repulsion of Asian hordes, despite most of the writers' expressed hatred of tyrannies, had usually depended on the actions of a self-appointed general backed up by the sort of no-nonsense bushmen Blaine modelled his vision of New Australians on.

When victory in this conflict was achieved by more conventional means, the *Mail* took pains to celebrate the expressions of jubilation succeeding it, even if the 'unprecedented scenes' didn't amount to a lot more than a group of ladies celebrating outside Hambours grocery when they were given the afternoon off and the Mayor doing laps of the town in his Bedford tray-top ringing a cow-bell.

Mrs Foley still saw it as part of her duty to keep an eye on her old employer, and made the trek at least once a day to his room. But it was a battle for her, one that it didn't look like she would eventually win. Some part of her – the ex-stock holder – was almost callously candid about it. 'No good carryin' a beast in my condition,' she said. At other times she was resentful and polished silver till it toxically shone. Initially Ingrid's own visits to Harry's room were entirely clinical. But he'd dug out all his old Cosme diaries and decided to edit them and sometimes he read scraps of them to her while she was doing other things. It was hard for him to say what effect it had on her. She would nod and say, 'Go on, eh?' as if surprise was succeeding polite interest whenever Harry tried to enlarge on some passage for her. One day he demanded, 'What do you think of it?'

'What?'

‘Of Cosme, New Australia.’

‘Funny goings on,’ she said. ‘I can’t imagine it.’

Harry laid down his manuscript and looked into the near distance. ‘It was wonderful for a while.’

‘Why did you leave?’

‘It was beyond my control, really….’

‘You have a girl-friend there?’ she asked.

‘What a question,’ Harry said in mock reproof.

‘She have anything to do with you leaving?’

He shook his head in disbelief.

In some ways, at least in the way of patients and nurses, there were no secrets between them. She had bathed him when he was ill despite his protests and brought him bed pans: incidentally – for her part – she had cushioned his head on her chest when he had been convulsed with coughing. It might be asked how much closer two people could get.
When Harry entered the bathroom by mistake one day and was confronted by the sight of his nurse emerging from the waves, he didn’t get much past his, ‘I hope you don’t think…I was quite unaware’ – expressions of regret, before she cut him off with her, ‘Now we’ve both seen everything.’

In other ways, though, she maintained her reserve, and its relaxation had to wait until curiosity made him ask, ‘Tell me a bit about yourself.’

‘There’s not a lot to know,’ she said and broke up her history. ‘I was born here. Went to Mylong Primary. Did a couple of years of high school. Worked at the pub…’

‘What do you think of this place?’ he pressed. ‘Now?’

She shrugged. ‘Good as any of the River towns, I suppose.’

Harry nodded and then asked, ‘Where were you living, when you…?’

‘Gave up drinking?’ She named a place.

‘Can I ask how it happened?’

‘Why not? I’d had a few beers one day and I was wondering how I was going to get home and get tea ready, and on the way past the Town Hall I saw this bloke spruiking out the front, and I went in. Must have been feeling sorry for myself. The thing is all the come-to-Jesus stuff didn’t touch me. I didn’t want anyone to come round hugging me. It was more like I said to myself: You must be going rough to be even mixing with this mob. And that was about it, really. Wasn’t that hard.’

Harry was intrigued by the way she sat by his bed with her knees half apart and her hands on them while she dropped words, so it seemed, into her apron. He pushed on.

‘Were you in love with Carey?’

She made half a face. ‘Maybe at first. After that I knew I wasn’t going to get anyone better, so I just sort of hung on…We used each other up, I suppose… I’m sorry for what happened to him, but that’s about all now.’

‘Has there been anyone else?’

‘Not really.’

‘Not really?’ Harry teased. When he went on to half chide her, even suggesting that her live-in position might be a restriction on her social life, ‘you’re still a young woman,’ she said with a sudden flash –‘I never really got onto what that other stuff was all about, anyway.’

‘What ?’

She retreated again. ‘Sex…if that’s what you mean. I could never work out why it was supposed to be so great.’

‘Is that why you feel comfortable with me?’

‘I don’t expect you to try anything.’

‘That’s flattering…’ Harry said.

He got up and about as the days turned warmer, and the garden throve in the tiny interval allowed to it by spring. He enjoyed showing young Will things and encouraging him to restrain the kind of lust that might have driven him to destroy birds’ nests, by teaching him to treasure them. ‘They’re in our care,’ he said. The sight of warm coloured eggs embedded in feathers and wool were enough to make the small boy’s mouth water, but he tried to just enjoy their discovery after that.

When it got hotter Harry sat under the pergola Tubby had put up; a rough old show that the banksia rose covering it probably helped support. In September it was swamped in sweet blooms. Once a day he fed a half tame family of magpies who gathered in stern attendance round him. Once when he was doing it a breeze got up and tiny yellow petals snowed down on all of them.

He had by his own confession lost nearly all his zip. Yet he still helped Tubby out in the garden. After he’d helped prune a Crepe Myrtle one day, though, he came inside with a stitch. ‘Over reached…done something or other,’ he assured Ingrid. The next day he had the pain in the same spot after he’d ridden his bike the half mile to the Post Office and back. He doubled up once he got in the door, despite his best intentions. ‘Might be another chill,’ he ventured.

She called the doctor again. Palpated, Harry was asked, ‘Tender?’

‘A bit.’

‘Lost any weight?’

‘Maybe the odd pound.’

‘I don’t like your colour.’

‘I’ve strained something.’

‘I can’t be responsible’ – the young man began.

‘You don’t have to be. Just give me something and I’ll lie low for a couple of days.’

When the lead laden clanking business of the X-rays was finally over they showed him the negative. ‘There appears to be a shadow, Mr Gardener…’

‘Well I can’t stay here.’

The follow-up biopsy in the city was a success from the surgeon’s point of view since he found what he’d been looking for. ‘I think it’s important that you rest as much as possible,’ he advised.

Back home Harry pottered in the garden for an hour or so each day and then came inside and worked at his desk. When that got too hard he read and wrote in bed. One day he said to Ingrid, ‘You know what the worst thing about dying is?’

‘You’re not dying,’ Ingrid clucked.

‘You can’t even pretend to be young anymore.’

In fact the worst thing about dying for him turned out to be more than knowing he was old for good. He drenched his sheets at times and cried out at night with the pain when burying his teeth in the pillow didn’t work. When pressed, the young doctor prescribed painkillers.

One day Harry dropped his bundle.

‘I don’t think I can take it today,’ he excused himself to Ingrid. ‘Usually the mornings aren’t too bad. But if I had a gun I think I’d shoot myself.’

After that his practitioner came and injected his patient with morphine on a daily basis. Harry used to watch the clock and get edgy waiting. When Ingrid tentatively suggested that the regime might be relaxed the doctor firmly quashed the option.

‘And I think I am in the best position to judge,’ he said, reproving the young woman’s presumption.

He had already, like most of the rest of the town, speculated on the exact nature of the relationship between his patient and his housekeeper. It seemed bizarre. He was startled and put off further and more complacent prognostications on the subject though, by Ingrid's impulsive interruption.

'What's the worst thing that could happen if he has more?'

'Well he could die – prematurely, young lady.' He almost smirked. 'Isn't that enough?'

She persisted. 'That's worse than this? He can't eat; he's getting skinnier and skinnier.'

The young doctor decided to cut the head off the discussion there and then. 'What you're suggesting would be a criminal breach of medical ethics and I don't intend to be a party to it,' he said, and dismissed her.

When Ingrid pursued him to his surgery he decided to give her short and ultimate shrift. 'This is beyond belief,' he said, giving the bulb of his stethoscope a tweak. 'If you've come to try to discuss that business with me again you're wasting your time. And I have other patients to worry about.'

'Well here's something else you can add to your worries,' Ingrid said. 'You're married, aren't you?'

'In so far as it's any affair of yours, yes I am.'

'Yeah, well, speaking of affairs I wonder how your wife would feel if she knew you'd been carrying on with half the young nurses up at the hospital?'

'That is a scurrilous suggestion!'

'It'll be a sight more whatever you call it if your wife finds out,' Ingrid said. She leant over him as he retreated behind his desk. 'Listen, my boss needs morphine and you're going

to give it to me and show me how to give injections. And I don't care where you get it from. What's the other worst thing that could happen to your blessed reputation anyway?'

The doctor scowled. 'I'll see what I can do.'

'You bloody-well better.'

Some in the town would have been as shocked by Ingrid's language as her diagnosis of her employer's needs: some old Presbyterians boasted how they'd refused to let medicine interpose between the ultimate judgement of the Lord and their partners in their last days. As embarrassed as Harry would have been to witness the scene, he was a beneficiary of it, however. Once the doctor had sulkily showed Ingrid how, she applied the same intent to injecting her patient as she did everything else, watching the fluid from a plunger find its way into Harry's buttocks like a sheep dog eyeballing a ratty sheep. Sometimes after the drug had just kicked in and the pain was in churlish but palpable retreat, Harry held on to his nurse's arm, feeling for a moment that his discomfort might be gone for good between the impact of her presence and the morphine's. Sometimes he clung to her, almost jealously. Will, when he saw them together in that pose, was not overly disturbed; he was more worried about his grandfather's increasingly rare appearances outside. He kept asking, 'Is Pa better yet?' until he could no longer be placated by his mother's reassurances, and made do with his grandfather as a spiritual audience to his and his friends' games.

Sometimes patient and nurse still chose to sit on a bench together in the garden, more or less in silence. When he said to her one day, 'I want to thank you for being a comfort,' she brushed his hand to cover up his clumsiness.

One day he showed Hattie's final letter to her.

'So that's her,' she said. 'Do you wish she was here now?'

'No,' Harry said, 'not now.'

'Why, she do the wrong thing?'

‘No, far from it. But when she last wrote to me she asked me what had happened to the people we were. It was a rhetorical question, of course.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘It doesn’t need an answer. I knew there was no going back when we got in touch with each other again, though. After so many years we’d have become different people...’

‘A bit like – what do you call it, reincarnation?’

‘In a way.’

Ingrid looked back down at the letter. ‘So where’s she, this lady, now?’

‘In Argentina.’

‘What about the other one, that German girl I told on?’

‘Somewhere safe, I hope. I know now the crowd of us that went to Paraguay never really belonged there, or not for long, and she didn’t belong here either, poor girl.’

Ingrid looked mildly perplexed. ‘Where’s that leave me, I wonder...?’

‘Somewhere none of us can get at you, I hope. You’ve still got time to put on a new skin if you have to, that’s the thing. I can only take this one with me.’

‘Well, don’t be in a hurry,’ Ingrid said.

Her bluntness silenced him for a moment and then he changed tack. ‘You know, years ago when I was down in the dumps I used to go looking out across the river from the top of the cliffs. I’d try to pick a wet day or a misty morning, so I could imagine things below and in the distance that I knew weren’t really there. I felt drawn…’

‘To what?’

‘I don’t know – to leaving everything behind, perhaps…’ he said and almost flinched from her retort.

‘What did you think you were going to do – fly?’

‘I know,’ he said sheepishly. ‘Years ago two teenage boys died when they fell from the top...no one knew what they were doing there – bird nesting, perhaps, I don’t suppose they were trying to fly…’

Ingrid had just topped him up, as he now called it. Still, when he lifted a sleeve from the bed’s coverlet to brush the droughty stubble on his cheeks he almost shrank from the message his exposed arm conveyed.

He said, ‘Shall I tell you something, Ingrid..? When I first knew Hattie I remember we went for a walk in the *monte* – that’s what they call the jungle over there – one day…It was a bit gloomy to begin with, but then we came to this spot where the Indians must have chopped down some trees and tried to grow something years before…there was a creek running through it then, full of ferns and – I remember Hattie wanted to take off her stockings – and when I looked up I saw this mass of butterflies, of all colours, up in the trees; almost as if they’d been waiting for us…almost as if we might join them…’

‘Did she see them too?’

‘I’m sure she would have done.’ He lay back against the pillows on the bed head and sighed and said, ‘I wish you’d promise me you won’t stay here when I’m gone.’

‘Why, were else would I go?’

‘What about Denmark?’

She looked thoughtful. ‘I wouldn’t mind, I suppose.’

‘Get away from here. It’s too sad. It’ll make you old before your time.’

Bariloche 1947

Around them people were lapping up the sunlight, but the two women on the *La Cantina's* terrace had taken steps to protect themselves from it. Bariloche's summer was brief but could be hot, above them snows winced on the higher peaks and the sun cast darts from the lake. Behind them they could hear the voices of a smattering of visitors, tourists, wandering round the piazza in front of the civic centre, while the St Bernards waiting for someone to want to have a photo taken with them occupied two of its benches in states of resignation.

The younger woman sipped her coffee. 'I think that is what first gave me the idea of opening my poor shop in Australia,' she said. 'The ersatz coffee – what was it called?'

'Chicory?'

'Yes. We had worse during the War, of course. I think it was not till I tasted real coffee again that I was really sure it was over. I was lucky, too. For a lot of the War because my husband was a Nazi of good standing we ate better than most...'

'Who was he?' her companion said. 'Can I ask?'

'The husband who was not my husband? He was very German, very correct, from an old family. He was an officer when the War started, even if he was restricted because of his age to being in the bureaucracy. I think it made him more proud of our son for enlisting as soon as he could, as if he was going in his place. He could not wait. He was a Wolf Pack leader, a member of Hitler Youth, he was accepted into the *Junkerschule* and then he died, but very bravely I was told. His father could hardly have been happier if he had lived. I wish I could have loved him more, poor *pummel*, he tried very hard to make me, but I could see too much in him of his father …

'When things began to go badly in the War though my husband showed that no matter how good was his breeding he was very afraid. We could not get away till it was almost too

late; he was made to feel that it was his duty not to. We had to attend the last public concert of the Berlin Orchestra before Berlin fell. You could hear guns in the distance, the whole *Salle* was shaking. It was very impressive; I think Wagner would have thought it befitting. Everyone was being very brave and correct, even if they were shaking inside. And then when we were leaving, there were children there from the Hitler Youth with baskets handing out cyanide pills like the sweets you have in Australia. People took them; not just to be polite: whether it was to avoid the humiliation of defeat or the thought of what would happen when the Russians got there, I do not know. My husband insisted I take one, then he took two for himself…

'He was trembling like a child the whole time until we got safely on the ship at Genoa, you know. When the War first finished he kept expecting Hitler to appear and say don't worry this is only a dream, it did not happen. But it did happen. After that, until the last moment when we left, he kept expecting to be taken prisoner. I wanted to survive too. But when my husband kissed the hand of this priest in Rome when he found out that we would be able to get away it sickened me…'

Her older companion's silence encouraged her.

'When we got here we were embraced, I must tell you. We found out some Germans had never accepted that the Fatherland lost the War. They all used to meet in someone's house and sing all the old songs and get very drunk and say what they will do to the Jews when they get another chance. My husband threw himself into it all. He was drinking a bottle of Schnapps every day before we left Germany, and here it was sometimes two…'

'What happened?'

'I came home one day and he had taken both his tablets. So perhaps he was a true Nazi. He had found out that the freedom he had here was not enough. Maybe he did not believe in it. Maybe he was waiting all the time for the knock on the door.'

‘How tragic.’

‘Is it not? And it may have happened. Who would have thought that you and I would meet in a store, even if we only recognised at first that we could both speak some English. That was a pleasant surprise, but I do not expect many more like it…

‘Do you know, before my son went away my husband took us both to Rothenburg. It was very historic. He thought it would be good for our son to have some instruction in *Kraft durch Freude*… “Strength through Joy,” you know. You could hardly move for lederhosen; there were Boy Scouts everywhere. The atmosphere was so hearty. Everyone was being very German; you could not buy anything less than a stein of beer. All the Jews had been expelled to make an example for the rest of Germany, there was nothing that could spoil things for visitors…There was a Museum where we could see things from proper history. Things for torture. We saw the puppet too, who every day drinks three litres of wine. He did it for the first time during the Thirty Years War to save the town.’

‘Honestly?’

‘Of course. He was the mayor and they bet he could not. A general was so impressed that he spared the town, and the mayor slept for three days after. I do not think he was able to do it the next time people were knocking at the gate, but at the end of our War the mayor went against Hitler’s orders and surrendered rather than see the town lost.’

‘That was brave.’

‘Yes, but afterwards I believe the *Werwolf* assassinated him, so perhaps it was not so wise.’

While they were talking their table had drawn into shadow. Hattie knew that within an hour dusk would be drawn like a blind across the valley, the peaks, wistful outcasts of the greater Andes would turn a lacerating pink and a chill would settle. It was best to be home before then. She wanted to ask something else first.

‘What do you remember about my son?’

‘Not so much. Not now. Some things I can still tell his mother perhaps. I think of him and I with the mountains around us, close together in my bed and thinking maybe the time would last and the War would go away. But it did not go away. And for me perhaps it has not ever.’

By unspoken agreement they had both got to their feet. The crowd had almost all gone. Only a trio of half shabby soldiers were still patrolling the piazza, looking – like the owners of the St Bernards – for something to get, but without any of their charges’ equanimity.

‘That’s very sad,’ Hattie said.

‘Yes, my friend. It is sad. Maybe it shows that whatever walls we try to build around our world may never be strong enough.’

Hattie checked her stride. ‘But can’t we start again?’

Her friend shrugged. ‘Perhaps. But sometimes I think all we can do is endure.’

* * *

His shrunken head lay on the pillow with two eyes staring unengagingly up out of it. When she pulled back the sheets his frame looked like something that should have already been scooped up and taken away. He muttered to her when she did it, ‘Don’t let me go on like this. I’ve had enough.’

He sighed but didn't look as she depressed the syringe into one of the last fleshy crevices in sinew and skin, and when she finished he said matter-of-factly, 'Thank God this business is over.' But when she took his hand his face relaxed as he murmured, 'Going…'

She brushed his forehead and sat and waited till his eyes closed and his breathing slowed and staggered and when she was sure it had finally stopped drew the sheet up over him and went out, leaving the door half closed behind her.

She walked down the passage with her cheeks wet with tears and she wished she could be back in her ice cream bar again.

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