



From Ashes
to Ashes

John Biggs

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by

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John Biggs was born and educated in Hobart, Tasmania. He spent his professional life as an educational psychologist and teacher educator in several countries, with particular interest in adult development over the life span. John has published four other novels and several award winning short stories. Details of these, and of his academic publications, can be seen at www.johnbiggs.com.au

Other fiction by John Biggs:

The Girl in the Golden House

Project Integrens

Disguises

Tin Dragons

Towards Forgiveness: Sino-Tasmanian Stories from Two Islands

(Back Cover blurb)

World War II has just broken out. Young Peter Morrison, confused by the word 'sacrifice', makes a bad choice that results in the death of his adored dog, Nipper. This trauma causes him to rebel against his staid upbringing but he cannot escape it. He becomes a school-teacher like his father but Peter's erratic choices about love and work lure him into dangerous places. On the edge of dementia, he revisits his childhood with disastrous consequences.

A fully functioning adult needs to get two aspects of life right: love and work.

Sigmund Freud

One bad choice in childhood may ambush us throughout life.

All characters in this story are products of my imagination; it is entirely coincidental if any characters resemble living persons. However, some of the schools and institutions, and some of the events making up this story, are taken from real life but their conjunction has been re-arranged to suit my story and to discourage unwarranted conclusions being drawn about what happened where.

I am grateful to Rosie Dub, Alison Savage, the staff of Wagga Wagga High School, and the Parish Office of All Saints Cathedral, Bathurst, for their various contributions. I am also grateful to David, Lauren and Heidi, of Interactive Publications for their insightful and very helpful feedback.

The child is father of the man.

William Wordsworth, *The Rainbow*

Life's business being just the terrible choice. Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*

How shall we go about describing and analysing the life structure? The most useful starting point, I believe, is to consider the choices a person makes and how he deals with the consequences.

Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*

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BATHURST

1939-1940

CHAPTER 1

‘It is my melancholy duty to inform you officially,’ Mr Forsyth, headmaster of Bathurst Central School said, ‘that in consequence of a persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war.’

He took out a large handkerchief, raised his glasses, dabbed his eyes and continued. ‘Children, this is of course, a solemn moment. It would be inappropriate to continue with classes today, so... er... school dismissed.’ Mr Forsyth turned and walked briskly back to the school building.

Peter Morrison was standing in the line for Sixth Class. A day off school was something to be welcomed, but ... *war?* Peter’s grandfather had fought in the trenches in the Great War and he was deaf and walked with a limp. *What if Daddy was sent to war and got shot up or something?* Peter wondered. He turned to his mate, Charlie Hawkins, behind him in the line. Charlie shrugged and looked at the ground. He looked like he was be crying.

They usually walked part way home together but today, with a subdued ‘See ya later, Charlie,’ Peter wandered out the school gate alone, up towards the top end of Bentinck Street where the elite of Bathurst lived. On their way home, Peter and Charlie passed these elaborate Italianate houses, encased behind high stone walls. The branches

of large pepper trees drooped over these walls scattering the footpath with their small leaves and berries. All the kids believed that if you stood under a pepper tree and made a wish, eyes tightly shut, your wish would come true.

Please God... No, that was a prayer, not a wish. Funny how they seemed the same, Peter thought. Try again. *I wish the war would stop tomorrow.* But as he reckoned that that wasn't very likely, he wished instead: *I wish the war would stop by Christmas.* That was more like it. He made this wish under each tree and turned for home. He was looking forward to spending the day with Nipper, his beloved mongrel pup. He thought he would take him for a long walk, maybe to see the new car racing circuit at Mt Panorama.

As he opened the gate, Nipper rushed out to meet him, his tongue seeking Peter's face. Peter bent towards him. 'Good boy! Ya didn't expect me so soon, did you? Come on. Let's see Mum.' He hugged his dog more tightly than usual.

Peter went to the kitchen. His mother would be there when he came home from school to prepare his home-from-school cocoa but he was early and she wasn't there. 'Mum!' he called.

'Peter,' she replied, 'I'm in the sitting room.' Her voice was jerky and a bit sniffly, like she might have been crying.

He crossed the passage and stood at the door of the sitting room, to find her sitting upright in front of the big walnut wireless cabinet. She was listening carefully.

'Mum ...' he started but she placed a finger on her lips, nodding towards the wireless. Her brown eyes that Peter had inherited were dark and moist. 'It's Prime Minister Menzies,' she whispered as Mr Menzies was finishing: '...Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war.'

‘Hey, that’s just what Mr Forsyth said,’ Peter exclaimed. ‘He lined us up in the playground and said all that and then he said we could go home early. He said all that before Mr Menzies did.’

Phyllis smiled sadly. ‘No, dear, Mr Menzies declared war yesterday. This is a rebroadcast.’

‘Oh.’ Peter sounded disappointed. ‘Will Daddy go to war?’

‘I don’t know, darling. We’ll have to see if they bring in conscription.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s where all men of fighting age have to join up and fight the war, except for priests, doctors and some others. I don’t know about teachers...’ She paused then smiled a little too brightly. ‘We must ask Daddy when he gets home.’

David Morrison was tall and well-built, his horn-rimmed glasses and frank gaze made a firm statement: here be a school teacher. He did not discard his teacher’s uniform even in his own home.

‘Sorry I’m late, my love. War or no war, I wasn’t going to cancel my honours class after school. Those poor kids have their exams in a month or so.’ He sank noisily into a chair. ‘My goodness, I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes. Their world collapsing around them as they start out on life.’

Peter had been listening to his favourite wireless serial, *The Search for the Golden Boomerang*, but his father’s noisy entry into the dining room had drowned it out. He reached over to the brown mantel wireless and turned it up.

‘And you can turn that tripe off, Pete. There’s a time and place for rubbish maybe, but it’s not now.’

‘Aw Dad, that’s right in an exciting bit!’

‘Tomorrow, son. I haven’t taken all this in yet.’ David sighed.

‘Davie, will they bring in conscription, do you think?’ Phyllis asked.

‘Hard to say, my love, but if they do, teachers are a reserved occupation. Of course, I could volunteer, but there’s the organ to think of. The work of The Church has got to go on too. Frankly, Phyllis, I don’t know yet where my duty lies.’ David slowly shook his head.

Feeling the tension, Peter forgave his father for making him miss his serial. He started setting the table without the usual prompt from his mother, who was in the kitchen removing the shepherd’s pie from the oven.

As she returned with the Pyrex baking dish, David said as removed his serviette from its ring and tucked it into his collar: ‘Don’t forget, dear, today’s the first Monday. Lodge night.’

‘Oh, you’d think they’d cancel lodge, today of all days!’ Phyllis replied as she served the pie.

‘On the contrary, my dear. This is exactly the time a man needs spiritual comfort and some fellowship.’

‘Davie, isn’t The Church the place to provide spiritual comfort?’

‘Now, Phyllis...’ Dad flickered a warning with his eyes and looked at Peter.

Peter knew that his mother resented the fact that women could not go to lodge with their husbands. Peter sympathised with her. Anyway, Peter thought, if today was special enough for him to have to miss his wireless serial but not special enough for Dad to miss his precious lodge night, then that wasn’t fair either. He thought he’d add his own two bob’s worth.

‘Dad,’ Peter tried his serious and interested-sounding voice, ‘why is lodge so important? Does going to lodge make bad men good, or something?’

‘No, son, the Craft makes good men better.’ With that smugly unanswerable rejoinder, David dabbed his mouth with his serviette and stood. ‘Well, my dear, no time for pud. Must get on the glad rags.’ He bent and kissed his wife on the forehead. She seized his hand and held it a moment.

‘Never mind, my love. It’ll be worse when I’m Worshipful Master, so cheer up.’ He smiled, as might a schoolmaster to a well-loved but rather slow student, and headed for the bedroom.

Phyllis went to the kitchen and returned with two bowls of apple sponge and custard, Peter’s favourite. Pudding was the highlight of the meal for him. As they ate, Phyllis said quietly to Peter, ‘I suppose you’ll want to be a Mason one day, Peter.’

‘No, I won’t, Mummy.’ He paused, still smarting from his father’s slick rejoinder. ‘Isn’t making people good The Church’s job? Like, you, me and Dad can all go and be together in church. We can’t be together in lodge, so that’s not as fair, is it?’ He grinned. ‘I’ve finished now. Can I go now? I want to see if we can get *Martin’s Corner* on Charlie’s crystal set.’

‘Of course, Lambkins. But be back before eight. You know how I worry about you after dark.’

At least, Peter thought, she wasn’t a smarty pants.

All Saints Anglican Cathedral was a brick Victorian Gothic building in Church Street, only a block or so from Peter’s home. David was the cathedral organist and Peter was in

the choir. Every Sunday the whole family, including Grandpa and Grandma, attended morning service.

Today was a special Sunday, the 10th of September, a week to the day after war had been declared. Instead of Matins, Bishop Wylde celebrated High Mass, assisted by Dean Wetherell. Father Carter, the Precentor, preached the sermon. This was unusual on such an important occasion, but Father Carter's own father had been killed at Passchendaele, one of 1,053 others from the Diocese who had died on active service during the Great War and whose names were commemorated in the Warriors' Chapel. Accordingly, Father Carter based his sermon on the theme of personal sacrifice; how families could be affected by the outbreak of war when their loved ones paid the Supreme Sacrifice. He interposed his narrative with quotes from the *Agnus Dei*.

'Grant us Thy Peace...'

That's the fifth time he's said that, Peter thought, keeping a bored tally as he dreamed away in the choir stalls.

'...the Spirit of Anzac... the Supreme Sacrifice... our ties with Mother Church in the Home Country... Grant us Thy Peace...'

Not again!

'...loyal vassals to His Royal Majesty... the foot of the Hun... the yoke of service... Grant us Thy Peace.'

From his seat in the front row of the choir stalls, Peter liked looking round the old building, trying to pick out people he recognised. Coloured sunlight, filtered by the high rose window, settled on his mother, grandfather and grandmother as they sat in their usual pew. Grandpa was sitting importantly upright, dressed formally, gold fob and chain across his waistcoat, wing collar gleaming white. Grandma looked tiny beside him, her

little round head emerging from a coil of fox fur and crowned with a dark navy hat and veil. Dad, in black cassock and surplice, sat on the organ bench, listening intently, not surreptitiously reading a book as he usually did. The cathedral was fuller than Peter had ever seen it; everyone was dressed in their Sunday best and sat upright in the red cedar pews, anxiety written on their faces. Those worried faces made Peter wonder once more what a war was really like. They talked of food shortages. He couldn't imagine that. Sunday wouldn't be proper without roast dinner at Grandpa's. Roast lamb, it should be this week...

He was brought back to earth as Father Carter signalled the sermon was drawing to a close.

'...so to conclude, let us recite together the *Agnus Dei*. Would you all stand?' With a shuffling rumble, the congregation stood. Father Carter resumed. 'O Lamb of God, That takest away the sins of the world, Have mercy upon us.' All repeated these words three times, finishing with the key to his address: 'Grant us Thy Peace.'

The service ended with the Anzac hymn, 'O Valiant Hearts'. Peter liked the jerky way his father had asked them to sing it, while he played what sounded like a muffled drumbeat with the pedals of the organ. Peter had visions of millions of ragged khaki figures marching slowly towards a big, big fire. He looked across at his father and was startled to see his head bowed, his shoulders jerking. He was crying! Peter hoped no one else had noticed.

Grandpa had built a Federation style two-storey house in the not quite so posh end of Bentick Street. Peter thought that Grandpa's house was a mansion, with all sorts of interesting things in bedrooms now abandoned by aunts and uncles who had long since

gone their various ways. Apart from David, there were four other children, now scattered across the continent from Perth to Sydney. Each year, one or other of the ex-Bathurst families would visit the old folks. Otherwise, their old rooms were unused, their drawers and cupboards still crammed with their once precious toys and books. Peter spent many happy hours sifting through this treasure trove. The large garden had been badly neglected in recent years but that only made it more fascinating to Peter, so many trees to climb, bushes to hide in. His favourite spot was the old garage at the back of the house that contained a 1911 Hupmobile. Peter spent hours going through the motions of driving what was long since undriveable.

They were at the dinner table after that solemn service in the cathedral. Grandpa was sharpening the carving knife, *click-clack, click-clack*, on the sharpening steel. Only he could perform that ritual and having completed it, he addressed the leg of lamb with the razor-sharp blade.

‘What’s a Supreme Sacrifice?’ Peter asked while Grandpa sliced the lamb with marvellous precision.

His father looked at him and said, ‘That’s the ultimate sacrifice anyone can give. His life. When soldiers get killed at the front, they pay... the Supreme Sacrifice. Like Father Carter’s own father.’ David sounded hoarse.

Peter thought a little. ‘Then Grandpa paid an ordinary sacrifice, not a supreme one, when he got deaf?’

Grandpa, who was touchy about his deafness, had heard Peter’s high pitched voice. ‘Deaf, young Peter? Yes, I’m a touch deaf. Confounded Huns. Mustard gas. The devils’ll use it again, I’ll be bound.’

‘No, Pa, no one’ll use it this war. Mustard gas is forbidden by the Geneva Convention.’

‘Prevention? Prevention poppycock. They’ll use it. Mark my words.’

Peter still hadn’t got his answer. ‘But Dad, I still don’t really understand what a sacrifice is.’

‘Well, it’s giving up something you like in order to gain something more important.’

Peter wrinkled his nose. ‘Like I give up a small piece of chocolate so I can have a bigger piece later?’

‘I wouldn’t put it *quite* like that, Peter,’ David smiled. ‘Sacrifice also means doing something painful in order to please God, as in the story of Abraham. You remember; he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac to prove his love for God.’

‘And like the Sacrifice of the Mass,’ Peter’s mother added.

‘But what do you give up in the Communion Service, Mum?’

‘Oh, darling!’ Phyllis reproached him. ‘Surely you understand that during the Prayer of Consecration, Calvary is being re-enacted? Jesus is a real presence amongst us because the elements have been transformed...’

‘Use words he understands,’ David the teacher said. ‘Peter, it’s simple really. God made the sacrifice of sending His own Son to earth, knowing He would be crucified. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb, if you like. His death made it possible for us to have eternal life. The Communion Service commemorates God’s Sacrifice.’

‘Re-enacts, David,’ Phyllis gently corrected.

David snorted. ‘Commemorates, re-enacts, makes no difference to what Peter was asking.’

But Peter wasn't listening. He was thinking about what his dad had said earlier. It didn't make sense! What did the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross have to do with him, Peter, living forever? As for God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? That was like God asking him to sacrifice Nipper to prove that he loved Him. That was dumb of God. He'd only hate Him for forcing him to make a choice like that.

After dinner, the adults usually went to the living room, while Peter went upstairs to explore the now empty bedrooms. While there, he usually heard his father playing on the old upright Bechstein in the living room downstairs. He could see the unchanging scene as clearly as if he were in the room: Grandpa fiddling with his hearing aid, this being one occasion when he'd always agree to use it; Grandma sitting in her chair, knitting and nodding her firm approval; and his mother also knitting, happy if the others were happy.

This afternoon the atmosphere was different. David wasn't playing the piano. Through the open door of Uncle Fred's room, Peter could hear his father's voice raised.

'Pa! I'd like you to turn your aid up. We should have a good talk, things being what they are... I liked young Pete's question about sacrifice. It..., well, it made a man think.'

Peter pricked up his ears, and picking up the *Meccano Magazine* he had been leafing through, moved softly downstairs to the living room.

'Will you be joining up, son?' he heard Grandma ask.

'As a teacher, I don't need to. But don't get me wrong, Ma. I'll do my duty along with the next man. But, and this is the question, what *is* my duty?'

Peter was standing in the doorway. David was leaning forward, studying first the floor then his silent audience. He noticed Peter. ‘Come in, son. I’d like you to join in, too.’

Peter sat down by the empty fireplace, flipping over the pages of his magazine, looking up now and then, to show that he was listening.

‘Yes, duty. What is a man’s duty in these trying times? Already things have quietened down. I know some are talking about conscripting for service overseas but I wonder, I just wonder, if everything won’t be over by Christmas. Meantime, my job is to push my pupils through their exams. I’ve got a couple of particularly bright girls in this year’s class who could have brilliant careers with the right push. Can’t let them down. No, that’s where I see my duty. With my most promising pupils.’

‘David, son, you always were one for doing the right thing.’

‘I hope so, Ma. My word, I hope so. We always wanted to do the right thing by you and Pa. Phyllis and I have always thought our place was here in Bathurst.’

Grandpa stirred, jerking his head as his hearing aid gave the odd soft screech. ‘Son, don’t misunderstand me, but you know Alf, Reg, all of them... they left here to lead their own lives. There wasn’t much going on here in Bathurst. Ma and I love to see them when they visit; and when they can’t, well, they’re in our prayers.’

‘I understand that, Pa. They’ve made their choices and I’ve made mine. My destiny is here in Bathurst. Our destiny, you might say. Our Sundays are beaut together.’

‘We appreciate that Davie, but we all have our own lives to lead...’ Grandpa faded out. Peter had a funny feeling that he had wanted to say something else but didn’t. He wondered what it was.

Grandma sat quietly knitting for a while before she spoke. 'Davie, now I think of it, what happened about your promotion? You've been, what is it? Science master, now for ages. We're not standing in the way of your career, are we? We'd never want that, would we, Pa?'

'Mother, please,' David looked ruffled while Phyllis bent over her knitting, which seemed to have become rather complicated. 'It's my choice. I've been offered headships of Narrabri, Port Macquarie, even Randwick... and I turned 'em all down, Ma. *This* is the place for me. Where a man was born, where a man grew up. When the Bathurst post came up, it was like a sign. What, with young Pete just starting school, and you and Pa and church and the organ. It all fitted. I mean, where would you be without us? No – Ma, Pa – I know where my place is, and that's here. With you all.'

He settled back into his chair, fumbling for his pipe and tobacco pouch.

It looked like Peter's wish under the pepper trees had come true. Christmas 1939 was a celebration of the 'phoney war', the war that had never got off the ground. In the face of probable shortages, people had stocked up with sweets, chocolate, cigarettes, petrol; there was plenty of everything for Christmas celebrations. Young men were being conscripted to undergo basic training for 'home defence' – and yet volunteers were being shipped off for active service, 'somewhere in the Middle East'. The times were confusing.

In Bathurst, people were more concerned about the spreading bush fires than the war. The previous January fires had devastated the area. Now the air had become thick with smoke again, wives were annoyed to find their laundry once again covered with smuts, while their husbands tried to put on a brave face when asked to 'deal with' the snakes that had fled the bush and were taking refuge in suburban backyards. But the scare

didn't last long. Volunteer fire fighters had acted swiftly this time and the fires were under control in a couple of days. The orange sunsets lasted, however, as bushfires were left to burn themselves out in the western plains once they were no longer any threat to the built-up areas in Orange, Blayney and Bathurst.

For Peter, this Christmas could hardly have been better. At the Christmas Eve Carol Service, Peter had sung the page's solo in *Good King Wenceslas*. He knew the other choir boys thought he'd been selected because his dad was organist, but he'd sung his solo flawlessly. Everyone had said so and Peter knew he'd done it on his own, not because of his father.

Lying in bed, he wondered how it would work out now that he'd done well enough to go to Bathurst High next year. That would mean going to the same school where Dad taught. He'd have to call him 'sir', not that his father would teach him until Fifth Year, but even to meet him in the playground with all the other kids looking on! He still used the occasional 'Daddy' but it would have to be 'Dad' from now on. And, he reminded himself, his teddy bear who he still took to bed with him would have to be relegated to the bottom drawer of his dresser: hidden but not forgotten. That would be a wrench, but such was the price of growing up.

Peter was lying on his back, with Teddy, yet to be relegated, propped on his chest. Peter manipulated Teddy's paws to mime these deep and serious thoughts. They were abruptly interrupted by the sound of the front door bell. The old neighbours from across the road, the Wilsons, were popping over for their ritual Christmas Eve drink. Peter's bedroom was separated from the sitting room only by a thin plasterboard wall and a door; he could easily listen to the conversation in the next room if he wanted to. He predicted, word for word, what his father would say.

‘What’s your poison, Fred? I’ve got beer in the icebox and a bottle of scotch in the cupboard. Ladies, what’ll it be?’

Beer it was for the men, lemonade for Fred’s wife, and shandy for Phyllis.

As usual, Peter thought. Why did men always drink beer?

Peter let the voices roll over him, on the alert for anything interesting. At first, old Fred Wilson reminisced about his early days in Bathurst but then Peter heard something interesting.

‘You know, Dave, you puzzle me; the way you’ve stuck it out in Bathurst here. I told young Bill, soon as he finished school, “Out you get, young feller, into the big wide world. No bullshit hanging round the cowsheds and gum trees of Bathurst,” and stone the crows, look at ’im now. He’s really gone up in the world. Now Dave, you could be a headmaster by now, surely to goodness...’ Old Fred’s voice rose interrogatively and then faded out. Peter could imagine him: leaning forward, elbows on knees, tattered fag hanging from his bottom lip, head on one side, watching David steadily. The old bore often struck that pose, like he was pretending to be a statue called ‘Ancient Wisdom’.

‘That’s assuming I want to be one.’ David paused. Always the schoolteacher, he used silence to feed the curiosity of his audience, a silence punctuated by the sounds of glasses refilling.

‘I did my stint of mulga-bashing at Wilcannia and at that rotten little one-teacher school at Rankins Plains. But I let the Education Department know that Bathurst was where I was finally heading so I kept my head down and did the right thing by the Department, and sure enough, they did the right thing by me: science subject master at Bathurst High. It’s what I’d worked for and what Mother and Pa had prayed for.’

David paused again, the rattle of matches saying he was relighting his pipe. ‘Fred, I’ve had oodles of offers, including head of Randwick High. But first things first: the old folk. They didn’t actually ask me to stay, not in so many words, but they don’t need to put it into words, do they? How could I refuse them that? A bloke does owe them something, doesn’t he?’

Peter was startled. He recalled the general trend of the conversation, just the other Sunday. Hadn’t both Grandma and Grandpa been telling him they wouldn’t mind at all if Dad moved from Bathurst to obtain promotion? It began to dawn on Peter that his father didn’t want to leave Bathurst, not for Grandpa and Grandma’s sake but for his own.

‘...then of course,’ he heard his father continue, ‘there’s young Pete. He’ll be able to spend his entire school career in the one locality. And that’s an advantage not all kids get, particularly teachers’ kids.’ Another pause, another satisfied slurp. ‘He might just need that advantage. He’s a good solid kid, don’t get me wrong, but you know, I doubt he’ll set the world on fire.’

Won’t he just! We’ll see about that! Peter, vowed to prove him wrong. He would get there on his own, despite his father’s lack of faith in him.

Peter swung out of bed and flung Teddy into the bottom drawer of his dresser.
Hard.

CHAPTER 2

‘Algebra!’

The topic of the first lesson on Tuesdays and Thursdays sounded like a military command. At 9.20a.m. precisely, Mr Crayshore’s fat backside contacted the teacher’s leather-padded high stool, up went the lid of the high teacher’s desk as he retrieved that dreaded blue-black textbook.

‘Out with your Baker and Bourne’s then! Look alive. You know as well as I do what we need this lesson. One, Baker and Bourne. Two – yes you, Brindley, you. What next?’ His finger pointed at Brindley, who was sitting bolt upright, his face crimson, his desktop bare. Carol Watkins, who sat next to Brindley, frowned and turned her head away. She hated seeing him humiliated by this bully of a teacher.

While Brindley sat there, blushing, she whispered: ‘A pad, tell him.’

‘Please sir, a pad, sir?’ Brindley ended each sentence with an apologetic, whispered question. He was repeating First Form.

‘A pad, sir. Did I hear correctly?’ He looked around the room as if searching for something. Then he swivelled sharply back to Brindley. ‘Yes, sir. A *pad*, sir. Then why, you blithering twerp, Brindley, have you not got your pad, sir, upon your desk, *sir*?’ Crayshore slowly got off his stool and stood beside the high teacher’s desk. On his oily, round face was his sneer. He closed his eyes, putting his palms together in an attitude of mock prayer: ‘From a *third* year of teaching algebra to the likes of Brindley, Good Lord, deliver me.’ He widened his eyes into a blank glare that he directed at random pupils in

utter silence. Finally satisfied, he laid his cane across the top of the high desk, drumming his fingers on it lightly. He spoke in a silky whisper. ‘That’s more like it. Right, open your books to page 25.’

Crayshore rarely used the cane; he didn’t need to. His sarcasm, and his elaborate demeaning pantomimes, hurt enough as it was. His pupils would do anything to avoid being a target. The girls might have been exempted from corporal punishment, but they weren’t exempt from Crayshore’s nastiness.

Peter, slackening his Christmas Eve resolve, tried to broach the subject of Crayshore with his father. David had cut him off immediately.

‘You must learn right off, son, that I cannot discuss my colleagues with you. It’s not done.’ He smiled gently. ‘It’s not easy for me either, Pete, you and I being at the same school. I’ll have to learn to treat you like any other pupil, and you’ll have to treat me like I was any other teacher. I know it’s tough but that’s the way it has to be.’

Mr Hopkins, the English teacher, had only just graduated from university. He was a slim, fair haired young man, with soft hazel eyes that melted when he smiled. But that wasn’t often in class, for his discipline was terribly weak. With the scent of blood in their nostrils, the boys became young wolves, contempt in their baying voices. As a beginning teacher, Hopkins was not allowed to give the cane, and when he lost control, as he frequently did, his eyes became those of a hunted deer as he sent his persecutors to the headmaster for punishment. The girls, for their part, treated Hopkins like the Bambi he resembled: a cute pet to be teased with mild flirtation. Neither approach did much for the teaching of poetry.

Peter felt sorry for Mr Hopkins – and for himself. Poetry, his favourite lesson, was now a write-off. He wanted to tell his father about how his favourite teacher was being undermined but after the brush-off concerning Crayshore, he wasn't game to risk another rebuff. And he couldn't tell Hopkins that the boys weren't going to the headmaster as ordered but hung around in the corridor for a while before returning to the classroom. So all Peter did was work harder for Hopkins, writing unsolicited efforts for him, usually poems, in his ordinary homework book.

On the first day of April, 1940, the class was sitting impeccably straight, waiting for their teacher. Charlie Hawkins kept nit at the door. Seeing Hopkins approaching, he hissed: 'Right fellers, 'ere 'e comes!' Charlie slipped behind his desk and a second later was sitting with ramrod back, eyes looking straight ahead.

Hopkins stopped in the doorway, looking at the class with pleased surprise. 'Now, that's more like it, class,' he murmured. He went to the teacher's high stool, sat down, and opened the desk, as he always did. Inside, he found a neatly wrapped parcel, the size of a shoebox. 'Hello, what's this?'

He took it out and saw that it was addressed to the headmaster: 'Mr. J.C. Pendleton, B.A. Esq.' Above the address were the words: 'PERSONNEL and CONFIDENTIAL'.

'I say, was the headmaster in here last lesson or earlier today? Looks like he's forgotten something.'

Charlie raised his hand. 'Oh, yes sir, please sir, Brindley said he saw him here during recess, sir. Looked like he was in a bit of a hurry, didn't he, Brindles? Well, didn't he?' Charlie glared over his shoulder.

Brindley flushed. 'Er yes sir, somethin' like that, sir.'

‘I see. Look, Hawkins, be a good chap and run it up to the headmaster’s study right now.’

‘*Me*, sir? Oh, no sir, if you don’t mind, sir. It looks important.’ Charlie leaned out of his desk, squinting at the parcel. ‘Yes sir, it looks *very* important. I think *you* should take it, sir, like we might drop it or something.’ He twisted round to face the class. ‘Do you think one of us clumsy drongos should be trusted with the Boss’s parcel?’

The girls in the class looked puzzled – there was something going on from which they had been excluded – but the boys in the class replied noisily:

‘Oh no sir, you...’

‘Hoppo should take it...’

‘Good on yer, Charlie, don’t you do it, mate...’

Charlie saw his mistake, and turning to the class, with flapping gestures quelled the uproar.

‘Sorry about that, sir. There’s some real tough nuts in this class, sir. But, er, it does seem clear to me, sir, that you should take it, you know, like to the headmaster sort of personally.’

‘Yes, yes, Hawkins, you’ve made your point, if a trifle eloquently. Let’s not waste any more time. I’ll run it up myself. No fooling around now. I’ll be back in a jiff.’ He disappeared through the door, gown flying behind him, bearing in his hands the headmaster’s parcel. What he didn’t know, and what Peter and the boys did know, was that it contained a large turd, freshly laid by Charlie that morning.

David came home later than usual, looking very serious. Over tea, he broached the subject that Peter was dreading.

‘I’m really worried about that young man. I think he has missed his calling.’

‘Dad, I don’t want to be, er, rude or nothing, but is it *right* for you, you know, to discuss a teacher...?’ He was glad to even the score.

David stared at him, anger mounting, until he remembered their previous conversation. ‘Oh.’ He cleared his throat. ‘This, son, is a very different matter. You see, at that time you brought unfounded stories to me about a colleague. Or tried to, but I wouldn’t have a bar of that. This isn’t the same at all. You see, it’s one thing for me to discuss these things with you and your mother in the trust of our home. It’s quite another for you to come to me with rumours that you’ve picked up in the playground. Let’s just not get home and school mixed up, eh?’ David beamed at Peter, man-to-man.

‘Yes, Dad, of course, Dad. Sorry.’ Peter wasn’t sorry at all. He was angry at his father’s duplicity. At least he knew where he stood.

‘What happened, Davie?’ Phyllis asked.

‘Phyllis, my dear, it seems that some tearaways in Form 1B, Peter’s class, I’m sorry to say, convinced that misguided but well-meaning young Hopkins into believing that a parcel he’d found in the desk was important, belonged to the Head, and should be taken to him only by himself. Honestly! The Head was raving after he’d opened it.’

David added primly, ‘I hesitate to tell you what was inside.’ He stopped, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘What was it, Davie?’

David looked embarrassed as he mumbled ‘Some lout had, er, defecated in it.’

‘Oh!’ Phyllis exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hand – but not before Peter had caught her smiling.

‘But the thing that’s so worrying – apart from the fact that young boys could have such filthy minds as to think of such a thing,’ a warning glance at Peter, ‘is that Hopkins didn’t take the elementary precaution of reading the front of the parcel. It was misspelt. My life! And an English teacher!’

‘But Dad, Mr Hopkins is a very good English teacher if only he’d get a fair go. Some of the kids pushed him. He didn’t stop to think.’

‘Exactly! My point precisely, Peter. A teacher should *always* stop to think. He was stampeded by a gang of louts. As I said, teaching is not his calling.’

David polished off his cup of tea, clattering the empty cup onto the saucer with a certainty that told his audience that he hadn’t missed his calling.

Peter was sitting in bed, working on a new poem, something about bushfires but it wouldn’t take shape. His thoughts kept coming back to Hopkins. Peter knew that he should have done something about it, like warning Hopkins: ‘Mr Hopkins! That parcel contains a turd! Don’t, please don’t, take it to the headmaster!’ But of course he hadn’t said that. He felt sort of like a Judas.

He heard the front gate click shut, and the doorbell ring. There was a mumble of voices, footsteps, then the voices became louder as people entered the sitting room next door to Peter’s room.

‘In here, John. Pull up a pew. We can talk in private here without disturbing Mrs Morrison. Young Pete should be asleep by now.’ It was Hopkins!

‘Well, what do you think about it all? I’m sure you know the full story by now.’

Hopkins’s light tentative voice filtered clearly into Peter’s bedroom. Careful not to make a sound, Peter switched out the light.

‘Just a minute, John.’ David walked over to Peter’s room, softly opened the door and glanced briefly inside. Satisfied that Peter was asleep, David turned back to the sitting room. ‘Well, well. I’m not sure what I can say. What’s happened has happened. I imagine the real question is what you are going to do about it. Mind you, it’s not the first time a bright young man has found that he’s not cut out for teaching.’

‘But the devil of it is, David, that I like so much about teaching! Not your bush-bastards like Hawkins... Oh God, how *could* he?’ Hopkins’s voice nearly broke, but he collected himself and went on. ‘I love literature, and to get the kind of response from pupils like young Peter! That’s what’s so rewarding.’

Peter felt his teacher’s words seep through the wall like a caress.

‘Now John, let’s get one or two things straight. First, you like your subject; and you like teaching it. Teaching, that is, to those with ears to hear. And there’s the rub, don’t you see? You’ll always find enough of the larrikin element in departmental schools to make things tough for you. Unless, that is, you develop a lot more discipline than you have now.’

David punctuated his speech a pause by carefully tamping his pipe and relighting it. ‘But even that’s not the point, not in your case, John. There’s the incident of, well, Pendleton’s parcel. Now if you’ll take the advice of an older, and we hope wiser, man, I’d look around for alternatives. Word gets around in the New South Wales Department. Such things go on your record and they’re mighty hard to live down. As a good department man myself, and one who knows your side of things too, I’d have to say that your days as a departmental teacher would be numbered.’

Peter couldn't believe his father could be so cruel, so self-righteous. Peter regarded Hopkins as the best teacher he'd ever had. But Hopkins hadn't finished. There was a different tone in his voice as he spoke.

'Thank you, David, I knew I could rely on you to be honest with me. As it happens, I'd come to the same conclusion. May I speak freely?'

'Of course, old man.'

'I've been considering alternatives. I could try for a good private school. No bush-bastards there. All nice, clean, upright Christians...'

David grunted a token protest.

'...or I could try for an academic post,' Hopkins went on. 'I was awarded First Class Honours from Sydney with recommendations to do further study towards an academic career. At least I'd have an attentive audience there.' He stopped, drew a large breath, and continued, his voice steadily rising to a near shout: 'Or I could join up! Serve King and Country! *Well*, David?'

David's voice was cold. 'Pull yourself together, man. I think your last suggestion is the best. You're young, no ties. God knows we'll need young fellows like you, with Norway about to be invaded. You've got the makings, young fellow-me-lad. Let's drink on it. I've got a good scotch in the cupboard.' Their conversation faded. A door clicked shut, announcing their departure to the whisky bottle.

Dad, thought Peter, you've probably condemned him to death! You've sacrificed my best teacher! Peter buried his face in the pillow and sobbed.

The pupils in 1B were surprised to see Mr Pendleton stride through the door at 9.20a.m. instead of Mr Crayshore. Pendleton was tall and spare, with a close-cut, grey moustache

tinted with tobacco stains. He moved quickly and noisily to the desk. He placed his mortar board on the desktop, and stood behind it, folding his arms on the sloping lid. He spent a full minute surveying the whole class, after which, ignoring the girls, he held boy after boy in a stare as deadly as that of a basilisk.

‘Class, I’m not going to beat around the bush. I assume all of you now know what I’m talking about. It was the nastiest act I’ve ever come across in all my years as teacher and as headmaster. It was a stinking, filthy thing...’

Hastily suppressed titters told him that his choice of wording had been unfortunate.

‘There’s some particularly nasty coves in amongst you lot.’ He fixed his venomous eyes finally upon Charlie. ‘The sort of element we can do without in a school like Bathurst High, with our tradition of scholarship, service, and respect for decent community standards. Bathurst High School should be where a man can stand foursquare and feel *proud*.’

He was enjoying himself, Peter could tell.

‘We have amongst us a certain teacher. A gifted man. An intellectual, in this respect. This man obtained an honours degree, First Class indeed, at the finest university in our proud country. This is the sort of man we should welcome into our midst, succour him, and share his gifts. He has many gifts, if only you lot could have seen it.’

Peter knew this to be true, and a hot lump rose in his throat.

‘Instead, you destroy this man in the very birth of a promising career. Well, all that’s on your own consciences; and you’ll know, each and every one of you, just how much blame to accept for yourselves. Anyone, any single *one* of you, could have saved that young man by standing up and speaking out fearlessly. But no one did. Not *one*.’

Mr Pendleton stood to attention, as straight as an Anzac. ‘The education of the young of this nation is an unending task that must go forward. Teaching is therefore a reserved occupation. However, there are certain teachers, brave men and true, who see that their greater duty lies in active service. Mr John Hopkins, BA, Honours First Class, conceives such to be his duty. He will therefore continue through until the end of the term, after which he will be gone from amongst us, serving this great country of ours. You are privileged to be amongst the last of the classes he will teach before going overseas. I am *sure* you will make his last weeks memorable. Pleasantly memorable.’ Mr Pendleton smiled his death mask rictus.

‘That’s all I have to say to you. Good morning, class.’ His smile vanished when he turned to Charlie. ‘And you, Hawkins, can come with me.’

Charlie’s cheerful face sagged but he put on a brave front. As he went through the door after the Boss he turned and winked cockily at the class. Six of the best, thought Peter.

It wasn’t. Charlie was next seen cleaning out his desk at recess time. And that was the last time he appeared at Bathurst High. He was sent back to Bathurst Central School where he would remain until the age of fourteen, thereafter perhaps to become a labourer in Edgell’s vegetable factory or to become a farmhand. In the logic of the New South Wales Departmental of Education, those who did not conform to community standards of behaviour, no matter how bright they were, were not allowed the benefit of a high school education.

The following Saturday, Peter was sitting morosely on the back veranda, brushing some burrs off Nipper’s fur and searching for the odd flea, while brooding on the fact that his

favourite teacher was enlisting for overseas service. The screen door behind him slammed.

David appeared. 'Father Carter just called. His car has broken down and he has to visit some parishioners out Essington way. Want to come for the ride?'

'Oh, I suppose so,' Peter said listlessly. Then after a pause he looked up. 'Isn't that where they had the real bad fires last year?'

'That's right. There was some prime timber country all burned out, but there's regrowth there now. You'll see.'

'Can Nipper come?'

'As long as you sit in the back with him, sure.' David unlocked the garage while Peter opened the drive gates. They climbed into the 1932 Ford, the first of the V8s, the engine firing with its characteristic throaty burble.

'Nice job this,' his father said, 'but a bit heavy on the juice. But not to fear, Des Carter hasn't any problem with petrol coupons and he won't let me down. Look out for him, Pete. He said he'd meet us in front of the rectory.'

A few minutes later, Father Carter dressed in his black cassock was sitting in the front.

'Interesting people, the Blacklands,' Father Carter was referring to the parishioners they were to visit. 'The family has been in the district, goodness me, it must be for seventy-odd years. Their old house has been added to, bit by bit, but the original two rooms are as they were in the 1870s. The poor devils had a bad scare last January; the fires nearly took that marvellous old house of theirs. But a good bushman like Herb Blackman knows a thing or two. He'd regularly burned back the undergrowth around the house for a considerable area. But this time the winds came from an unexpected quarter

sending the fire up to the very homestead itself. Why, the tops of the trees veritably exploded! Herb closed the house up tight, filled the gutters with water, and the plucky chap stayed out there in the heat, spraying water. It worked. He got some blisters, but a small price indeed for saving his all.'

'What's so urgent today, Des?' David asked.

'The old lady is ill, probably terminal. She wants Communion. I have the elements here.' He touched the large black box in his lap.

'You mean they're consecrated already?' David asked with a touch of awe in his voice. 'My word, Father, I'll watch my tongue.'

Father Carter laughed easily. 'Oh, not to worry, David. His eyes and ears are always with us. None the sharper for His Presence here now.'

The consecrated bread and wine did nonetheless appear to inhibit conversation. They had left the bitumen and were on a badly corrugated bush road. David had to slow right down, the corrugations dancing the Ford across the road and back again, stones striking the floor members with loud clunks, dust seeping into the car. Peter wondered what would happen if the dust got into Father Carter's black box. Would it spoil Christ's body and blood, or would the dust become sacred, sort of holy dust?

The bush track was little more than two parallel ruts, formed over the years by Blackland's farm vehicles. Long grass and rushes brushed stiffly against the sump and the floor. The track passed through an area where the fire had swept through. A swathe of blackened trees, wearing a green fuzz of tiny sprouting leaves, disappeared down the track. Amazingly, trees that seemed to have been untouched stood right next to others that had been badly burned. Peter imagined the great ball of fire bouncing across the tree-tops, like a big, blazing football. What a sight that must have been! The line of irregularly

burned trees led up to and beyond the house, as if the giant fireball had bounced right over the house leaving it untouched.

They pulled up at the house. Old Blackland, with two kelpies leaping around him, greeted them. The kelpies ran to the car, jumping and barking; they had smelled Nipper who was cowering on the floor.

‘G’day, Reverend. Glad you could come. The missus is still crook. She’ll be tickled pink you could make it but. ’Er faith means a lot to ’er, you know, Reverend.’

After being introduced, David and Peter quickly withdrew. David locked the car leaving Nipper inside. The kelpies ended their noisy assault and followed David and Peter. Peter looked back, seeing with a twinge a frightened Nipper watching them through the back window of the car.

As they walked up the track, Peter could see how the wind had fanned the fire on its erratic way to the house. ‘Jeez, it must have been a real corker back down in the main bush, eh Dad?’

‘I’ll say, Pete,’ David chuckled. ‘Remember how hot it was? We’d had a wet winter, and an early, warm spring. Can you work out what that would do?’ The schoolteacher was out in force.

‘Er, umm, well the early spring would make the grass grow early.’

‘Yes, but so too would the wet winter. Ideal in fact for fast-growing undergrowth. And then what – a long, dry, hot summer? Little rain, high winds? What happens when you hang the washing out on days like that?’

‘It dries quickly. I get it! All the undergrowth dried out. So up it went. Whoof!’

‘That’s the idea. And remember Father Carter talking about the trees exploding?’

‘Yeah, I didn’t get that. Was he joking?’

‘My word he wasn’t. You know what gum trees contain?’

Peter looked blank. He didn’t think sap would be the right answer.

‘Eucalyptus oil. When the temperature gets beyond the flashpoint of the vaporised oil, then the trees may literally blow up. Yes, explode. That, Pete, explains the jumping. The wind made the fire travel so fast that if a tree didn’t ignite straight away, the fire would go past it.’

‘So Mr Blackland wetting the house stopped it going up in flames straight away and the fire just rushed by.’

‘You’ve got it!’ David was pleased. This was the first time for ages that David had been able to talk to Peter about science and when Peter had seemed interested. David, head bowed, sucking his pipe, hands behind his back, continued. He explained how the Aborigines used fire to create rolling park-like areas so that foragers, like kangaroo, emu and possum, could graze off the freshly sprouting foliage; and be hunted that much more easily. Game was much more plentiful then, and snakes fewer. The white man hadn’t understood the effect of regular burning off, ‘As we learned to our great cost last year,’ David added.

‘When the first explorers arrived, they could see regular spirals of smoke from Botany Bay to Port Philip Bay. It’s said that Sydney right through to Melbourne was like a huge park. There’s still a lot we can learn from our aboriginal predecessors, Peter.’

They had reached the end of the burned off area. Beyond, the bush was thick and impenetrable while here it had been burned to the ground, with a few thin black-and-grey wedges sticking up from the ground. Peter wondered if they would regenerate like the less badly burned trees had done.

Something had fallen into place for Peter's poem. 'Hadn't we better go back? Nipper'll be beside himself, poor little coot.'

'Well, it's not quite ready yet, Mr Hopkins,' Peter said, 'but seeing you'll be leaving, I'd like you to see what you think of it.' He shyly held out the poem he'd been working on. It was longer than any others he had written.

'Yes, of course, Peter. Let's sit down while I read it.'

It was after the last period of the day. Hopkins, depressed and angry, was clearing out his desk while thinking of his humiliation here. He was glad that this would be the last he'd see of this classroom and of Bathurst High, but he was dead scared of the alternative that awaited him.

When young Morrison had turned up at the door of the classroom with his poem, he welcomed the interruption, pleased that at least one of his pupils seemed to value his opinion. Peter sat at a desk beside Hopkins, watching him closely, trying to match any flicker of reaction with what he thought Hopkins would be reading at that instant.

Bushfire Sacrifice

The land was dry, like a hearth ready made.

The grass was the tinder. The scrub neatly laid

As kindling.

Have Mercy Upon Us.

The gum trees, leaves drooping, sweated oil and fear,

The wattles, dry, dusty, grey – it was clear,

Their life dwindling.

Have Mercy Upon Us.

God lit His Altar, His Mass-Sacrifice to be,

And up went His creatures. Roo, snake, possum, tree

Died in pain.

Grant us Thy Peace.

But life did return. Green sprouted on black;

Grass, shoots, trees, came joyfully back

Once again.

And animals too. They ate the new shoots,

They grazed on the grass, on the new sprouting roots.

The price had been paid. They could all now grow fat.

When all's said and done, isn't war like that?

Peter Morrison

Hopkins read and reread. Some of it was corny, but then kid's writing inevitably was, he thought, as they struggled to learn how to express themselves. But it had some good points: the way the metre took off on the last line, some nice imagery and, amazing for one of young Peter's age, a double layer of meaning. He didn't believe that the young lad had understood what he had written. Conscious of Peter beside him, he played for

time, nodding, pursing his lips here and there, half-smiling, knowing that Peter's eyes were fixed on his every movement.

He finally turned and met those imploring eyes. 'I like it, Peter. Very much. But there are things I don't understand.'

Peter wrinkled his nose and grinned self-deprecatingly. 'Yeah, some I don't neither. What?'

'Why have you put the responses to the *Agnus Dei* at the end of each verse?'

'Oh that's easy. I don't think you were in Bathurst when war broke out, but Father Carter preached a long sermon, and kept repeating that last bit, "Grant us Thy Peace". When he'd finished his sermon, he got us congregation to say it, then him again – you know the way they do. It made sense. If something terrible's going to happen, then the Lord had better have mercy! Bushfires can be as terrible as war can. So it kind of links the fire with the war. And it's all a sacrifice. But that's the funny part 'cause God started the fire Himself. Or He allowed it to happen anyway. Same thing.'

'Why a sacrifice, Peter? You make a lot of that in your poem.'

'Isn't a sacrifice when you give up something for the sake of someone else? Like the dead animals, they died in a sort of sacrifice for the new season. Like soldiers who die in a war, that's the Supreme Sacrifice. That's what I mean. Kind of.'

Hopkins was about to point out that the difference was that the animals had no choice whereas soldiers did. But then what choice did he have now? He injected his own anger into the poem. 'Peter, this last line. Are you saying that war is justified because people grow fat making a profit selling arms?'

‘Oh no, sir! It’s like I said, like the next lot of animals grow fat. It’s not that badly written is it?’ Peter seemed upset, as if his poem was no good if Hopkins hadn’t understand what he had meant.

Hopkins was sorry for dumping his own take on the war onto Peter. ‘No, no. Quite the contrary. It has many meanings. That makes it a complex work.’ *Why couldn’t they all be like this one here?* he wondered bitterly. *Then I wouldn’t be going to the bloody Middle East, or Crete, or Christ alone knew where.*

‘It’s about the Supreme Sacrifice. Some die so that others might live. Like you, sir! Please don’t die! Keep the poem. I wrote it for you.’ Peter’s voice choked. ‘I don’t want you to go!’

Standing up, Peter burst into tears and threw his arms around Hopkins.

David, with Peter, had driven Hopkins to the station to catch the Sydney train. Hopkins was quiet and withdrawn, while David had the grace to seem embarrassed. Soon as he had climbed into the carriage, Hopkins turned, pulled a folded paper from his top pocket, and said to Peter: ‘I won’t lose it. Thank you so very much.’

Hopkin’s gripped Peter’s hand man-to-man, the whistle blew and he went inside the carriage and sat down. Peter’s chin was puckering, his eyes hurt, but he didn’t cry. He stood looking up at the window, where he thought Hopkin’s face might appear for one last time, but it didn’t. The whistle blasted a second time, the rhythmic clanking speeded up, hauling the train from the station and Hopkins from Peter’s life.

Then Peter cried.

A month later, Peter returned from a walk in some nearby bush country, on the foothills of Mt Panorama. He had found a clearing, away from the car racing track, with a thick patch of dry grass surrounded by gorse, its spiky greenery containing a tinder-dry heart of highly flammable material. The gorse formed a circle around the grassy centre, leaving a clear space for the path that ran down the hill. This formation gave Peter an idea. He had been wrestling with several issues that seemed interconnected in a way that he hadn't grasped.

The idea of sacrifice had become confused in his mind. Giving up something good for something better or suffering for the sake of someone else. His father had seemed to think that the last was important, with his example of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Then there was his poem. He'd tried to relate the damage caused by a bushfire to a new season of hope. And here was Hopkins possibly making the Supreme Sacrifice. Peter wondered, if he made some sort of sacrifice, would that lessen the chances of Mr Hopkins making the Supreme Sacrifice? Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, so who would he sacrifice? The answer that jumped into his mind shocked him: Nipper. He recoiled from the thought. But what if it was like play acting, as they kind of did in the communion service? Peter knew that the bread and wine couldn't *really* turn into Christ's body and blood, whatever his mother said. How gruesome that would be if it did!

So he'd do something similar. He'd do a re-enactment of a sacrificial offering he'd seen in a Tarzan film, where Tarzan and Jane, as the intended sacrificial victims, had ran through a ring of fire to make their escape. So he would make a ring of fire that he and Nipper would run through. And like in the film there'd be this gap and the escape down the path. He would offer Nipper as a make belief sacrifice for Hopkins' life.

He would take Nipper to this spot he'd found, set the circle of bushes surrounding the grass alight, and when it had taken, he and Nipper would rush down the clear path, away from the burning bushes and down the hill. It was *re-enactment* of a sacrifice, just like the communion service itself was a re-enactment. Surely God would accept that as a sacrifice, just like He did every Sunday in the Communion Service.

Peter knew he had to be careful, given the enormous fire scare of last year and earlier this year. This is where this spot was ideal: an island of low bushes in mostly cleared land. He had experimented with gorse before and knew that it took very quickly, and by the same token, burned itself out equally quickly. Anyway, Peter rationalised, after what he had seen at Blackland's place, undergrowth *should* be burnt, otherwise the danger would be worse next summer.

It had been a bright, clear day but some cloud was being blown up from the east and a wind was stirring. Warm for late autumn, but it had been a hot year all round. By the time he and Nipper had reached the spot, the sun was low in the sky and the wind had veered, now coming from the west and bringing with it the warm smell of the interior. Peter had a quick look again at the outer circle of scrub: some petered out in rocky outcrops, most melted into cleared ploughed land. And there was the outlet: their escape which led to the track home.

'Well, old boy, here we go.' Peter struck a match and placed it in some dried grass. It flared briefly then blew out as a puff of wind caught it. It was turning out to be harder than Peter had thought it would be. Peter turned around and started the other side, the wind behind him. He held a lighted match in the middle of a gorse bush. It sputtered at first, then *whoosh*, the bush caught with a fierce, spitting rush.

'Wow! That was something! Hey, this is exciting, isn't it?'

Nipper evidently didn't agree. He cowered as the bush took.

Peter went round the inner circle lighting the gorse bushes and there they were, the two of them, standing inside a semi-circular wall of flame – the downward path to Bathurst remaining open.

But the wind changed direction again. It leaned gently across the path, and with another *whoosh* the path was sealed off.

Nipper, whining and dragging his belly on the ground, lay quivering at Peter's feet. Peter squatted down, 'Hey! It's all right old feller! It'll burn down in a minute... *Jesus God!*' A cinder had fallen onto his woollen pullover, burning through onto his skin. He jumped up trying to brush it off. The wind sighed again, the wall of flame surged very close. The smoke choked Peter. The heat was as high as he could stand.

Nipper panicked when his master had jumped up. He ran in darting semicircles towards and then away from the circle of fire. The flames were now steadily creeping inwards on the dry grass. Peter felt a hot buzzing on his head. He put his hand up and found his hair was singeing. He suddenly realised just how helpless they were.

'Oh God, Oh Jesus! Save me! Pray for us, Mary Mother of God. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. Nipper, come here! *Come here boy!* Oh sweet bleeding heart of Jesus.' He babbled all he could remember of his mother's Anglo-Catholic prayers. 'Not this way, God! Not the *Supreme Sacrifice!* I *do* have faith! O tears of Christ wash me; Blood of Christ heal me; Body of Christ hide me! Nipper where *are* you?'

He was cringing at Peter's feet. Peter stooped and grabbed him. Peter's one thought was to run through the flames to safety down the track. The fire could only be a thin wall. It was only a matter of rushing it.

Peter ran with Nipper in his arms. He felt an extra searing rush of heat up his left side. Nipper yowled piteously, twisting and screwing himself out of Peter's arms. He fell onto the burning ground. Peter opened his mouth to call him, but immediately the heat dried out his saliva, his eyes. If he breathed in he would suffocate. He shut his eyes, pinched his nose, and ran.

Suddenly the blasting pressure on his face had gone. Peter could breathe again. He opened his eyes. He was through the wall of fire that by now was already dying down. But where was Nipper? Something screamed in terrible pain. Peter started back towards the dying flames.

In the burning ashes, a small bundle of flame was jerking towards him. Then it stopped, quickly becoming indistinguishable from the heaps of ashes glowing beside it.

ARMIDALE

1947-1950

CHAPTER 3

Nineteen forty-seven was an important year in the Morrison household. Despite David's earlier prognostications, Peter had done well in the Leaving Certificate to make university the next step in his career. However, as he had not done well enough to obtain a scholarship, Peter signed a bond with the State Education Department of New South Wales. He agreed to teach in the state for as many years as his training had lasted, in exchange for payment of his university fees plus a living allowance. He had decided – a decision undoubtedly influenced by John Hopkins – that if he did very well at university, he would first work off his bond, then return to do postgraduate work. And then, with luck, he would become a professional writer.

Peter enrolled at the University College of New England in Armidale, situated in bushland high on the New England Plateau. Armidale, locally known as 'the Athens of the North', sported a university college, a teachers' college and two elite private schools. This conjunction allowed a certain verisimilitude to the claim that Armidale had the highest average IQ of any city in the world. Unfortunately that claim did not apply during vacation. The university college was housed in the magnificent Booloominbah, once a huge architect-designed country homestead, around which were scattered less inspiring demountable huts that were erected as the university expanded.

Armidale was two train journeys away from Bathurst: 130 miles from Bathurst across the Blue Mountains to Sydney, then the arduous 360 miles from Sydney to Armidale. This was the reason why Peter had chosen to enrol at New England, for that

choice placed much distance between Peter and his dotting parents and the suffocating atmosphere of Bathurst.

Nineteen forty-seven was an important year for David, too. He achieved a long-cherished goal: he became Worshipful Master of Mitchell Lodge, which entailed official visits to all the lodges in the Western Districts Charter. One of his favourite visits was to Macquarie Lewis, where he discovered a spiritual affinity with his counterpart, Reg Preston, manager of the Orange Rural Bank. After the arcane ceremonies, held in the main body of the temple, the masons retreated to the South, where over supper they joined in more informal fellowship. There David had discovered that Reg had a daughter, Dorothy, who also attended the University College of New England, and that she was finding that long and complicated triennial journey nerve racking and boring.

When, at the end of second term, David suggested to Peter that he escort Reg's daughter, Peter was not displeased. He too had found the journey boring. He already knew Dorothy by sight, as they had a couple of subjects in common. She had a plain-but-sweet little girl's face, tantalisingly offset, Peter thought, by well-formed big girl's knockers. She seemed self-conscious about them, for she walked and sat with a slight droop in her shoulders, as if trying to minimise nature's gift.

Since Peter had cracked Distinctions in English I and History I, Dorothy frequently asked him to explain a poem to her, to help prepare for a tutorial or to develop an outline for an essay. While her flattery was as gratifying as her company was welcome, her innocence instilled in Peter a feeling of responsibility that he thought he could do without. Peter's social life was fully occupied in quite another direction.

His college roommate, Jim Henderson, was involved in a harmlessly disreputable group, who called themselves The Anarchists. Through Jim, Peter became involved. The

Anarchists talked a lot about freedom of expression, so they dressed uniformly: boys sprouting goatees on their chins and buttoning their tieless shirts to the neck, girls wearing one earring and odd sockettes. They occupied a couple of tables in the back bar of the Great Western Hotel several afternoons a week, always including Saturday. Peter felt that the group provided him with balance. He needed something disreputable to offset his father's school-teacherly ways, his mother's Anglo-Catholic rituals, and the invasive love of both.

Peter pushed his way through the crowd in the back bar of the Great Western to join his fellow Anarchists. His mate Jim was standing at the bar. 'G'day, Jim. How'd things go last night?'

'Pete, you missed the sight of the century!' Jim grinned down at him, tossing a hank of long blond hair back over his head. 'Braving the chill of an Armidale winter and the heat of its outraged citizenry, Jackie tossed her togs off to the tune of *Red Hot Blues*.'

Peter was incredulous. Jackie Moffatt, who did Psych and English with him, was a wild number, alright, but this was hard to believe. He was also brownd off that he'd put duty before such a treat.

'Oh shit.'

The previous night had been the opening concert of Rag Week, held in the town hall. Peter had an important assignment to finish, and as Jim had announced his intention of sleeping over at his girlfriend Marie's place, Peter had taken advantage of the empty room to do his work undisturbed.

'Now before you slash both wrists, hear me out,' Jim laughed. 'Only down to her bra and scanties. Then she gives a bow and they bring down the curtain. About twenty of

Armidale's petit bourgeoisie walked out. Here, order one for yourself and give me a hand with this lot.' He jerked his head at some glasses the barman was setting up on the counter.

Peter noticed that Tom Brookes sat at what would have been – had they not been anarchists – the head of the table. He lounged back, his left arm hooked over the back of his chair, the ubiquitous Army Club dangling from his lips. He was the only Anarchist who regularly smoked tailor-mades. Peter was disappointed that the only free seat was at his end of the table.

'Missed the fun, Morrison.' Brookes lifted a finely traced right eyebrow at Peter by way of greeting. He was the only person in the group Peter couldn't stand; he was also Jackie's steady.

'Yeah, bugger it. I'll be there next time, but.'

'There won't be a next time. Or if there is, there won't be a Jackie.' Tom turned to look at Peter.

'You surprise me, Tom. I didn't expect you to be that mediaeval.'

'I couldn't give two tugs of a turkey's tossle what Jackie does. I was referring, Morrison, to the views Admin are likely to have on the subject of calisthenic divestiture. They have just been apprising her of those views.'

A burst of cheering and wolf-calls announced Jackie's entrance. She seemed surprised at her reception. Her large eyes were as circular as her face, her lips were parted, leaving two front teeth resting lightly on her lower lip, her dark curly hair silhouetted like a frizzy halo. Dressed in a dark navy polo neck jumper with a deep V-neck that drew all male eyes, she smiled at her uproarious greeting. It was clear however from the tensed energy with which she marched over to the table, that she was hopping

mad. She sat down with a rush beside Brookes. She grabbed one of the beers that Peter had just put there, drinking half of it in two gulps.

‘Thanks, Tom. Blimey, did I need that.’ She wiped her mouth. ‘Fuckin’ bleeders, all of them. Bloody Major Sodding Somerset!’

Loud approving laughs greeted this opening gambit. Only a pommy sheila could get away with that, Peter thought.

‘Perchance the lady *is* a tramp,’ drawled Brookes, feigning a patrician’s disgust. ‘But what did the gallant major say?’

‘Oh, knock it off, Tom, just this once.’ Jackie hissed at him then turned to address them all. ‘Bloody Somerset started off on how he was acting *in loco parentis*, that he was responsible for my moral behaviour and what would my poor mother think if...’ she grew breathless as her anger climbed, ‘and so I told ’im that what my poor mother might think or say was none of ’is bleedin’ business.’

Whistles and shouts greeted this. Major Somerset was the Master of Jackie’s college. A martinet, no students had ever answered him back. Jackie now had.

‘Indeed, Miss Moffatt,’ she imitated his Indian army accent, ‘then in that event she would have no objection to your residing elsewhere than in this college. I and my staff are no longer prepared to assume any responsibility for your moral welfare. None whatsoever. You may pack your equipage, and leave as soon as you may. I shall also add this, Miss Moffatt,’ despite her anger, she was clearly enjoying her role playing, ‘one is prepared upon this occasion to prevail upon the authorities, to regard this most unseemly incident as a college matter. However, should any other breaches of a similar nature occur, one should be surprised indeed, if they did not constitute adequate grounds for

sending you down from the university itself.’ She concluded her role play with a loud ‘*Bastard!*’ and drained the rest of Brooke’s glass.

Marie, Jim’s girlfriend, called to her in the loud clatter that belied her funny, little, bird-like face. ‘Hey, Jackie, that’s beaut! Moving out of college I mean. Move in with me and Betty and the others! We got a spare room.’ Marie had been a late applicant to university and on-campus accommodation had been no longer available so she had obtained, with written parental agreement, a dispensation to live in a house in town. This was an arrangement that was as rare as it was convenient for her and Jim.

Jackie agreed immediately. Several beers later, she and her willing helpers installed her equipage at 177 Allingham Street, a rambling old house up near the railway line.

A month or so after the Rag Week Concert, Jackie arrived late for her Psych II class. Peter noticed her arrival, well into Colonel Parker’s lecture. She paused in the doorway, looked cautiously at Parker as he was lecturing, and moved swiftly to a seat. Her polo neck and skirt were undraped in the customary undergraduate green gown.

Parker looked up and saw her in the act of sitting down. He stopped in mid-sentence, his long face a picture of mock disbelief. He strode up to her desk and, glaring down at her from his gaunt heights, he barked:

‘You are academically undressed! Get out, man.’

‘My apologies, Colonel Parker, but I live in town and...’

‘Do not answer back. You are undressed, I say. Get out!’

Although Colonel Parker’s military connections and undistinguished war record were in the past, he required his students to address him by his former military title. He,

in turn addressed all students as ‘men’, irrespective of their gender, and required them to conform to the university’s anachronistic dress regulations to the letter. These regulations required students to attend lectures clad in the green undergraduate gown, with brass bars attached to the upper left lapel of the gown, one bar for each year of successfully completed study. No other lecturer was so literal in interpreting these surprising regulations: surprising, that is, in these free and easy days of post-war rural Australia.

Jackie was early for the next class, and sat towards the back of the lecture theatre, her gown wrapped around her. Near the end of the lecture, she stood up and clomped flat-footed toward the door, stealing the class’s attention. Parker had been explaining the dry complexities of Titchener’s introspectionism by reference to incomprehensible blackboard diagrams. He looked back over his shoulder, eyes blazing at the interruption, then having made his display of disciplinary rigour, he returned to the blackboard.

Jackie opened the door and, once on the other side of the threshold, turned and faced the class. With an elaborate flourish, she whirled her gown aside. She stood for one magnificent second, clad publicly for a second time just in bra and scanties. There followed a roar of laughter and applause. The door slammed shut. Parker’s head jerked round at the sound, but missed the spectacle. He was aware that that wretched Moffatt girl had again disturbed his class but was unaware how she had done so.

At the Annual Student Review Jackie and Peter collaborated to write satirical songs, she the arranger, he the librettist. They signed their works ‘M & M’: Moffatt and Morrison, after another rather better known team of composer and librettist. That other more famous combination inspired Peter to modify Bunthorne’s song from that team’s

Patience:

If you’re anxious for to shine in the academic line

As a top psy-chol-o-gist;

You must get up all the germs of Titchenerian terms,

Until you sound half-pissed.

You may lie in your laboratory, and declaim with empty oratory,

Your introspective state of mind.

The meaning doesn't matter, as it's only idle chatter

Of a psy-cho-logical kind.

And everyone will say, of your academic way,

If that old man expresses himself in terms too deep for me;

Why, what a very obscurantist academic man that academic man must be!

There were two more verses, each playing on Parker's public stances and barely plausible private vices. Peter sang it in mortar board and gown, Jackie accompanying him on the piano.

Students and all but one member of the university staff were hugely delighted. Peter found himself the darling of the English Department. He also found that he had failed Psychology II at the end of the year, while Jackie had scored her first bare Pass. Both were furious, Jackie more so than Peter. She was the more determined to beat Parker, which she did with characteristic paradox; she enrolled in Psychology III. She would work particularly hard, making it impossible, she explained to Peter, for Parker to mark her down a second time.

Such disciplined deviousness was quite beyond Peter. He admired her for it, but opted for the easier course of dropping psychology in third year. He didn't even sit for the supplementary examinations. He was thus forced to carry an extra history subject in his

third year, and – almost as wearing – to listen to a lecture from his father on Living-with-the-Consequences-of-Acting-the-Fool.

Peter emerged from the picture theatre blinking, trying to adjust to a bright Armidale spring afternoon. He had just seen a long-awaited rerun of *Casablanca* and mentally was still on the airstrip. He decided to go to the Great Western and join the mob. Hurrying along Beardy Street, Peter had gone only a few steps when he saw Dorothy walking towards him.

‘Why Peter! Fancy seeing you here! How’s things?’

‘Fine thanks Dorothy. Look, I’m in a bit of a hurry right now...’ A sudden thought struck him. *Why not take her along too? Poor sweet and innocent little Dorothy with that lot! What a shriek.* ‘Actually, I’m going to the Great Western. There’s a mob there I meet on Sat’d day arvos for a beer or three, sheilas as well as blokes. Why not join us?’ He liked talking rough to her; she asked for it, seeming so helpless. Her face showed immediate conflict.

‘Oh, I don’t know if I *should*, Pete. You know, I’m not the pub *type*.’

‘Some of the girls have shandies, or Pimm’s. Ever tried Pimm’s?’ She looked blank. ‘Anyway, you don’t have to drink. Just mag on if you prefer.’ To his surprise, she accepted.

‘Yeah, why not? Gee, Peter, it’s real nice of you to ask me.’

Most of The Anarchists were there. Jackie, a bit blotto already it seemed, was in full flight.

‘Women have the same feelings as men, God damn it!’ Jackie was shouting, banging her glass on the table for emphasis. The barman was watching with cold disapproval.

‘Where do you bastards think you get off,’ Jackie was noisily elaborating. ‘You touch and fumble, just to titillate yourselves. You don’t give pleasure, you take it!’

Brookes’ long, rangy body was slouched in a chair at the opposite end of the table, his arms hanging over the back of his chair.

‘How can a man give pleasure if his sort’s frigid? Eh, my dear?’ he drawled.

‘Cast your rotten little mind back, Tommy darling. Remember?’ Jackie peered at Brookes through her frizzy fringe. Peter took a sidelong glance at Dorothy. She smiled uncomfortably. She was getting a good show this afternoon, he thought.

Brookes signalled Jackie to shut up, but she continued anyway: ‘It wasn’t the girl who was frigid, as I recall. It was some dumb bastard with brewer’s droop!’ Loud laughter at Brookes’ expense, but he collected himself and replied:

‘Well, Jackie, just remember this in your lonely old age. There are two kinds of girls in this world. Those you shag and those you marry.’

Jackie jumped to her feet, her chair falling over with a crash. She grabbed two full glasses of beer from the table, one in each hand, and tossed their contents over Brookes, splashing several others, including Dorothy, in the process. Brookes, his shirt saturated and his black hair plastered across his face, lurched round the table and grabbed her by the wrist.

‘You bitch, I’ll...’

The barman vaulted the bar. ‘Righto, that’s enough! You’re all from the uni aren’t you? You,’ he pointed at Jackie, ‘what’s your name?’

‘You’ll get my name when you’ve taken his.’ Jackie’s voice was tight with rage.

‘I’m askin’ you.’

She glared defiantly back. He turned to the others. ‘Well, what’s her name?’

No one spoke. The barman glowered at them for a few seconds.

‘Very well, if that’s your attitude, I’m reporting this. And you, you baggage, had better not return here ever again, or I’ll throw you out personally. Got it? Now, all of you, clear out. Fast!’

Jackie strode out the door first, her chin high. Brookes ran after her. When Peter and Dorothy were out in the street, he was saying, ‘Trust you, you stupid bitch, you’ve...’

Jackie turned and said quietly, ‘Tom, go fuck your fist. This is it. I really mean it. You’ll never lay a finger on me again.’

She turned and walked in the direction of Allingham Street.

The effect on Peter was as profound as it was contradictory. Basically, he disapproved of anyone chucking beer around in pubs, especially girls who used four letter words in front of innocents like Dorothy. But he enormously admired Jackie’s ability to follow through with loud action what principle whispered to others. Telling Somerset off like that! And her handling of Parker! And now of Brookes! What dignity! A dignity akin to that of Bogart’s on the airstrip at Casablanca...

He rushed after her, leaving Dorothy gaping.

Jackie heard her name and stopped. ‘Pete! What...’

‘I’d like to walk with you a bit, Jackie.’ He caught her up and took her arm. ‘That was terrific of you. Dinkum. It’s about time someone put that bastard in his place.’

‘C’mon, I just did my lolly, that’s all. A private shindig between Brookes and me. Only we’ll have to find somewhere else to drink now.’ She seemed subdued, gently removing her arm from Peter’s grasp.

‘That’s no problem. We could go to Tatts or somewhere. But Brookes can go to...’

‘I said drop it, Pete. That’s it. Of course Tom’ll still be around. Just not around me.’ She took his arm again. ‘Anyway, what happened to that girl you came with. Dorothy Some-one-or-other, isn’t it?’

‘Oh hell!’ He’d forgotten her entirely. ‘She’ll be alright,’ he laughed guiltily. ‘I was only keeping her company on the bus back to College. Friend of the family, sort of.’

‘Well, now you’ve missed the bus. What are you going to do for dinner?’

‘I hadn’t thought about that.’

‘Well, you’ll just have to eat Tom’s share. He ain’t gettin’ any. Soss-and-mash, my specialty.’

They had the house to themselves. It was the first time they had ever talked together, alone, at length. Soon as they had washed up after dinner, she said, ‘Got something I’d like to play to you. I bought a new microgroove last week.’

‘You mean classical, heavy stuff?’

‘Yes. I’d like to play a couple of bits to you – that’s if you’d like to hear them.’ She looked at him, a trifle anxiously. They’d just been talking about the Blitz in London, how she’d been evacuated, her dad killed in El Alamein, her mum remarried.

‘Well this is what Eric, my step-dad, took us to on VE Day. A concert at the Albert Hall. Bach’s B Minor Mass it was. Know it?’ Her voice had dropped to a husky whisper, her London accent intensifying with her memories. ‘Here it was, Pete! Peace,

and us starting afresh like. It was the *Gloria* what really done it, particularly this bit. The *Gratias agimus tibi*, we give thanks. Yeah, sounds a bit daft, I know, me sayin' it like that but I want to say thanks to you, Pete. 'Spose I didn't show it, but you did make me feel good after that bloody scene. Truly.'

He was astounded to see that she was on the point of tears, her chin trembling. But it was true; the others had nicked off on her and he hadn't. She placed the record on the turntable and searched for the right groove. He leaned back on the sofa, but instead of sitting beside him, she sat at his feet. The music started. Yes, it was something, he thought. The basses started a rising theme that was gradually taken up by all the other parts, up into the sopranos, then higher still, bouncing into the altitudes commanded by the trumpets. And thus to the grateful climax.

His hand was resting on her shoulder, her arm crooked around his leg. It wasn't only the music. Surely Jackie was sharing something with him that she had so far kept private. He felt privileged. 'Jackie...'

She stood abruptly, went to the machine and switched it off. She turned to him, eyes shining. 'Did you like it then?'

'It was fantastic! I'd never guessed real heavy stuff like that could...'

She swung onto his lap. 'Shut up and kiss me.'

His feelings for Jackie had been quietly accumulating for a good year, but with Brookes around she had been quite out of his reach. Now here she was, her tongue sending shivers down his spine and into his groin, the V-neck of her pullover displaying the parting of her breasts. She ran her fingers up and down his back. Imitating her, he ran his hand under her pullover then unsnapped her bra. With a sigh she swung her arms

upwards. Her free-standing breasts were inches from his frenzied eyes, her nipples there for the kissing. So he did, in turn, while she worked his shirt off him.

‘Go to my room.’ She pointed down the corridor. ‘Shan’t be a sec.’ She winked and slipped into the bathroom.

He went to her room, pulled off the rest of his clothes, sat on her bed. A minute later she was standing by the bed, undoing her skirt.

‘Let me,’ he leaned over. Hands over her head, she turned round slowly as he undressed her.

‘Stay there.’ He slowly traced a finger over her lower body, so full of promise, an over-run exotic garden, traces of its fine lawn extending almost to her navel, almost to her thighs. Richness and promise. And then he did something he hadn’t been able to bring himself to do before. Clasp her buttocks, he drew her to him. Gasping, she leaned over him, clawing his back; she overbalanced and fell with a laugh onto the bed. She twisted onto her back and threw back her head, her arms calling him to her.

Hours later, Peter was happier than he’d ever been in his life before. He nuzzled and kissed her. She lay towards him, a tiny smile playing on her full lips, her front teeth protruding onto her lower lip. Those teeth: so characteristic of her. A technical flaw that Peter thought enhanced her, an imperfection that created perfection. His gaze alternated between those teeth and her large, round, slate-coloured eyes.

She glanced at her alarm clock beside the bed. ‘Oh shit, look at the time. Know what I’d like before the others come back and spoil it all? The last chorus, *Dona nobis pacem*. It’s the same music, note for note, as the Thank You chorus. That’d be good, wouldn’t it? Tie it all up, type of thing. Quick, we’ve only got about half an hour.’

She jumped out of bed, and taking his hand, led him to the living room. While she started the music, he switched off the light, leaving the room bathed only in moonlight. He sat on the sofa and she crept onto his lap. Both were still naked. She lowered her head beside his, he lifted his hand to caress her breast. The music stopped.

In an awed voice, he said: 'Jackie, I'll go now. I don't want to face the others when they get back, all that small talk after ... after *this*. I love you darling.' He'd always been very careful not to say that to anyone else before.

'And I love you too,' she whispered back.

Peter was leaving the lecture room after History IIIB when Kev caught his arm. His pale blue eyes were bulging more than usual, his agitated manner signalling panic stations.

'That bastard of a barman did dob us in, Pete. He knew my name and the VC has been at me already, wanting to know who was there, and who the sheila was that flung the beer around. I told 'im I was in the bog at the time, so he told me to round up the blokes who were there. We gotta see him 3.30, this arvo, lectures or no lectures.'

Peter was horrified. Up before the bloody Vice-Chancellor! For Jackie's sake he had to make up some story and get the others to agree to it. Like, she wasn't there, so her name needn't come into it at all. They'd say they'd picked up a couple of Teachers' College sheilas; they didn't know their names, couple of slags they were, last time we'll socialise with that lot, Sir... Well, something along those lines. Kev agreed. He also told Kev to try and find the others, but to leave Brookes to himself. Some ancient tribalism told him to do that, although a modern sense of embarrassment made him quail at the thought. He found him in the students' common room, playing snooker. He explained.

'So we're sticking to that, Tom. No one knows anything. Alright?'

Tom, inches taller than Peter, stared down at him, left eyebrow cocked, cue standing upright in his left hand. Army Club drooping from a sneering lip, he didn't say anything for a while, those mocking blue eyes just staring. He took a long drag on his cigarette, blew a smoke ring that swirled outwards around Peter's head, and drawled: 'I'll consider it.'

Peter roiled with anger but kept his peace. He had good reason to. After the way Jackie had publicly humiliated Brookes, it was likely he would not go along with the story. Peter had to assume Brookes was just stringing him along. Power. That's what made the likes of Tom Brookes tick.

'Good. See you outside Booloominbah at three twenty and we'll all make sure of our story before we see the VC.' Not looking at him again, Peter walked straight out into the canteen area and would have run, smack, bang, into Dorothy, had she not jumped aside. He remembered that he hadn't apologised to her for leaving her in the lurch last Saturday night.

'G'day, Dorothy. Sorry I had to leave you like that...'

He got no further. She was staring right past him, as if he wasn't there.

They arranged themselves in a line in front of the Vice-Chancellor, who was sitting behind his large and imposing desk.

'I'm not going to waste much time on this. You all know why you are here. The publican of a certain hotel has made an official complaint to me, and I am accordingly forced to act upon it. Now it might seem to you a trivial incident, as indeed under different circumstances it might to me. However, I'm sure you are aware of a distinct animus that currently exists between "town and gown". I fear that this is a natural and

almost inevitable consequence of the intermingling, within a self-enclosed community, of two relatively large groups of people with distinct beliefs and values.’ He paused, to allow this balanced and academic assessment to impress itself upon them.

‘So you see, we are in a sensitive situation and the adequate running of the university demands goodwill from the local community. That community has supported us well in the past; indeed, we owe our very existence to it...’

‘But excuse me, sir,’ Tom interrupted smoothly, ‘doesn’t the community also in turn require the goodwill of the university? Certainly, in a commercial sense, as it were.’

You smarmy prick, Peter thought. He was delighted that the VC testily cut Tom off.

‘Yes, yes, but that’s not the point. The present point is that I have received an official complaint, and it is incumbent upon me to act accordingly. I’m also warning you men to act carefully in future.’ He arranged some papers on his desk.

‘Now, to get back to the action by the young lady. I have interviewed some of you already. I’m given to understand that the person in question was unknown to you. Very odd. It does indicate, I suppose, that the age of chivalry is not yet dead. I commend you for that. So in this event I can take no action. In particular, I cannot warn her, officially, that if there is another such incident involving her in a public disorder, I shall be forced to send her down. Reluctantly, I might add. I must ask you, therefore, if you do happen to come across this person, that you will be so kind as to convey that message to her, er, unofficially.’ He paused, and looked up and down the line of faces. A faint smile appeared.

‘That would indeed be a pity. She is such a brilliant student.’

Thanks to a build-up of assignments, Peter hadn't seen Jackie since that Saturday night.

He was in his room, working on an essay, when Jim arrived, looking concerned.

'Just dropped Marie off at Allingham. Jackie's crook, really down in the dumps. She wants to see you.'

God, does she want to call it off, so soon? Peter wondered. 'Thanks, Jim. I'll go right away.'

Leaving his bike against the front fence, Peter rang the bell. No answer. Turning into the little lane beside the house, he saw the window to her bedroom was open. He flicked the iron bar off the hook, peering inside. He could see her lying on her back in bed, her eyes wide open, watching him.

'Hey, Jackie! It's me, Peter. Can I come in?'

She nodded her head. He scrambled through the window and sat on her bed. He bent to kiss her.

'Jackie, Jackie darling, what's the matter? Sorry I couldn't come around before. We had to see the Vice-Chancellor yesterday...'

She started sobbing. She spoke in broken fragments.

'Peter, my Thank You Man. But I'm stuck in the *miserere* bit now,' a faint tearful smile 'no, no... not your coming... the pub, that's what caused it... I suppose...' She closed her eyes for a minute or so.

'I've been down in the dumps since Sunday. Don't leave for a while yet Peter, please, Peter.' She struggled to sit up. 'Darling,' she brushed her lips against his. 'The reason why I'm like this right now,' she looked at him carefully, quite in control now, 'is that bastard Tom was around Sunday. The others were out. He wanted a *fuck*, for Christ's sake!'

‘You mean, Tom, after you dropping him, after all that we...’ Peter was barely coherent.

‘Said he’d dob me in if I didn’t. Said they’d send me down if they knew it was me. He knew the publican had reported it... and he said...’ words were coming with more and more difficulty. Finally, she burst out: ‘He said “What’s one more fuck amongst so many?” That’s what he said.’

Peter jumped off the bed panting, ‘I’ll kill him! I’ll kill the...’

‘No, Pete. It don’t matter. It’s over now.’

‘*Over?* So he... so you...?’

‘Yes, we did. For the last time. Ever, I said.’

Peter was chanting his murderous litany but Jackie interrupted.

‘No, Pete. Don’t do anything. It may end up in my being sent down. Just forget it. *Please!* Just forget it!’ She looked at him pleadingly. ‘Come here.’

He knelt by the bed. ‘Peter, please make love to me. Wipe it away. Love me.’

He couldn’t. He was too angry, too shocked. He couldn’t help her previous affairs with Brookes or with anyone else, that wasn’t it. The real shit of it was that she’d had sex with Brookes *after* he’d cut Brookes out – and *she needn’t have done it!* The Vice Chancellor had already known the girl in the bar was Jackie; he’d made that clear as he dismissed them. And Brookes knew that the VC had known. That made what he’d done even worse. Jackie had been already humiliated with that rape by blackmail but if she ever found out that the Vice had known all the time, it would humiliate her even more. She could have told Brookes to piss off and that would have been that. Peter vowed to do all he could to prevent her finding out.

She needn't have done it. That conclusion rolled upwards and around, like one of Brookes' damned smoke rings. With this vicious complication, his anger, his pity and a raw upsurge of jealousy, making love was the last thing he felt able to do. 'Jackie, I can't. Not right now, not...'

She stared at him, her face forming into a mask. As he was speaking she rolled over into the foetal position, her back to him.

He didn't see her again until after the examinations. At least that allowed him full time for swotting. He wanted to crack the Credits necessary in both English subjects to allow him to do Honours. If he had a special gift to humanity, he thought, it would be writing. Well, this would sort out who was the real Peter Morrison: the hack schoolteacher, like his father, or the poet and writer. That was the question to be resolved this year. But thanks to the agony visited upon him by Jackie and by Brookes – and by the prick who'd set the English IIIA papers – it looked like he'd be up the hill next year, at Armidale Teachers' College, obtaining his Diploma in Education. As would Jackie, Jim, Marie, Tom, Dorothy. Most of them, barring accidents.

The Anarchists held their final meeting of the year at Allingham Street. The final rort before the group parted and went their various ways for Christmas. Peter was torn. He wanted to go but his rage at Brookes continued as a poisonous roiling simmer. He didn't know how he could face Brookes socially. Would he go up to him and kill him? Or just wipe him out verbally? And Jackie? How could he face her? Jim, dimly aware of these searing complexities, jollied Peter into going. With Jim's catalytic company, and a few of the dozen bottles of Grafton ale they would be contributing, he thought he could let whatever might happen just happen.

Although it was late November, the night was cool, so they lit a fire in the big fire-place in the lounge room. The cheap pine edgings gave a beautiful big blaze, but they burned quickly, and someone had to keep running outside and bring in a new load.

Chairs, mattresses and cushions were arranged round the floor.

Jackie and Peter tried to avoid each other. But the inevitable happened: suddenly they found themselves face to face. Her chin puckered, her large eyes misted with more than alcohol. Peter surged inside, and was about to draw her to him and to hell with everything else, when he was aware that instead hell had come to them. A large smoke ring billowed and convoluted between them. Brookes was standing beside them, an Army Club dangling from his long fingers, his elbow supported by his left hand, an eyebrow infernally cocked. Hate drove love to cover. Peter tensed, ready to spring...

A large hand struck Peter on the back. 'Carn sport, get us another Grafton. You must've hidden the buggers.' Jim snatched Peter's empty glass from his grasp, and steered him bodily into the kitchen. Peter was grateful. He hated confrontation, especially over such a tender, private thing. If he and Brookes had had a public brawl over who'd been fucking who, it would be the talk of the uni for weeks. Catastrophic. Peering through the kitchen door, he saw Jackie and Tom talking together. With a hateful thrill of self-insight, he knew he was out of his depth. He didn't know how to handle this, so he tried to convince himself that he was well and truly out of it all.

He joined the others in the main room and ate, and drank, and talked, and drank again. They discussed their futures and especially their common past, recounting time and again those incidents and experiences that were quintessentially 'New England Coll': the visiting regulations, the gown regulations, the military presence as they reeled off the

teaching staff who had held some sort of military rank. Peter, happily drunk now, recalled Jackie's magnificent performance with Parker.

Jackie stared at him while he talked. She suddenly jumped up, and disappeared, reappearing moments later with her green undergraduate gown over her dress, and a record in her hand. She put the record on the gramophone. It was *Red Hot Blues*. The men cheered, yelling 'hubba hubba' and wolf-whistling. Some of the girls laughed, but Marie, looking like a worried little sparrow, pecked at Jim with her forefinger and thumb, frowning a question at him. Jim, grinning happily, ignored her.

Jackie stripped while keeping herself covered with the gown. As the final chord blared, she quickly opened her gown against the glare of the firelight. Her generous curves were silhouetted against the glow, the exquisite details in shadow. She wrapped the gown against herself, tightly, and squatted on a cushion next to Tom. She asked him loudly for a drink.

While he was gone, she stared at Peter. He returned her stare expressionlessly, determined to conform to his drunken decision. She narrowed her eyes, shook her head, and looked away. With a coward's relief, he realised that what had barely started was now indeed over. He went outside, to walk in the fresh air, to come to terms with this new reality.

When he returned, he found Marie and Jim had gone off to her room, Betty had gone to bed and those who were paired off were preparing to go. Hell, thought Peter, it's not midnight yet and I'll be stuck here with Kev and Bill, endlessly boozing, and with bloody Tom.

He'd decided, during his walk, that he should definitely talk to Jackie before he left. To confirm their current non-situation: 'Goodbye, my dear. We shall see each other

next year. A pity we aren't suited, my dear Jackie, but it would never have worked. Such a pity.'

He was going to have to wait a long time, by the look of it. They'd all had a skinful, sitting in the glow of the fire, silly grins on their faces, listening to Jackie. She was still wrapped in her gown, perched on the cushion, leaning forward, waving her arms, raving on, nineteen-to-the-dozen. She suddenly stopped, got up, and left the room.

'Jeez, she's a ripper,' Kev said, his grin and tone indicating honest admiration.

'A slag, you mean,' Tom sneered contemptuously.

'You bastard!' It was out before Peter could help it. His body felt leaden, his thoughts chaotic, his voice thick: 'You juss... use her... she's worth twenny of you...'

Tom cocked a delighted eyebrow at Peter, a smoke ring soon on the way.

'Whaddya getting at Morrison? Trying to say something? Get on with it, then. We're all ears.'

'Like when you blackmailed her... like when the VC knew all the time... you know... rape, that's what it was.' Peter knew he was too drunk to handle it. He shut up, reached for the makings, and rolled a misshapen cigarette. Brookes remained seated across from Peter, studying him with amusement, drawing elegantly on his tailor-made. Peter decided he would skip talking to Jackie after that display of drunken incoherence and just disappear quietly. But she entered the room before he could do so.

Standing in the doorway, swaying, she stared at them in turn. Except Peter. Her eyes missed him. Over and around him. She went to the gramophone and started up *Red Hot Blues* again. 'Well boys, 'ere we go.'

Naked under her gown, she revealed nothing until halfway through. She flung the gown aside, and weaved, dancing, in front of each of them. Except Peter. Tom clambered

jerkily to his feet and started dancing with her, mauling her, tearing off his own clothes.

As the record stopped, he led her out the door, erection bobbing like a nodding dog, to her bedroom.

He returned alone. Leering towards the door, he stage whispered loudly, 'Your turn, Bill. That's what the lady said.' Brookes turned to pick up his clothes, and began dressing, singing softly to himself.

Bill, a tall streak, looking every bit like the ring-in from Rural Science that he was, grinned lecherously at the others as he sauntered out the door. Leaning forward, eyes bulging, his curly hair almost upright with alarm, Kev whispered to Peter so that Brookes wouldn't hear: 'Pete, whaddya reckon, eh? Is she gonna do the lot of us? Struth.'

Peter felt that clear sobriety that often comes well into drunkenness. He didn't bother keeping his voice down. 'Looks like it, Kev. Sure looks like it. Fill ya boots. It's on the house.'

'Jeez, I dunno.' Kev suddenly continued, with a rush. 'Pete, I've never done it before. Maybe I'm too pissed.'

Tom's singing grew louder to register his contempt. Peter stared at Kev, trying to feel nothing. Bill returned buttoning up his trousers. Looking at Kev, Bill nodded towards the door. 'Your turn, mate.' Turning to Tom, Bill said, 'I'm shooting through, Tom. If you wanna lift, you better come now.'

'Yeah, suppose so. But what of Morrison here? He gets the all-night job, I take it?'

'Take what you fucking like, Brookes. Just piss off.' Peter turned his back on them, staring into the fire. They left.

Kev was hovering in the doorway as if waiting for instructions from Peter.

Receiving no reaction, he disappeared towards Jackie's room.

He emerged some time later, entering the room in a trance. He sat down beside Peter and gave a forced laugh. 'Boy, was I nervous! But I was okay. Fair dinkum, Pete!' He laughed manfully. 'Crikey, what a story!'

Peter whipped round at that. 'Listen asshole. Don't you go around spruikin' about what happened here tonight! She was pissed. We all were. Get it? Now nick off.' He turned back to the fire. Kev, hurt at Peter's unusual aggression, edged towards the door, and then he too was gone.

Peter loaded the fire with a bundle of edgings, cracked another bottle, and sat, and stared, and drank. He was doubly devastated now. First, earlier this evening, he'd made an obviously false start. He'd then gone for his walk and got it all worked out. He'd talk to her. That's what he was waiting to do. Then *this* happens. It shouldn't make any difference though. It's still the same. *A pity we aren't suited, but it would never have worked.* He shook his head in bewilderment, groaning aloud. An answering groan came from the bedroom up the passage. That's it then, thought Peter. We both know we're here. I've got to face her.

The room was in darkness. She was lying under the bedclothes, on her back, just visible in the light from the living room. He knelt beside her and touched her head.

'How could you? Jackie, Jackie, how *could* you?' Unsuccessfully, he tried to stifle a sob.

A husky voice muttered in the gloom: 'Jusht like the Jesus bloke. Saved the best till lasht. Come here, Pete.'

He lay beside her, fully clothed. Her arms wound around him and clung, her voice suddenly clear. ‘Don’t reject me again, Peter! Love me, stinking slut that I am, *love me Peter!*’

She started sobbing, and clung to him more tightly. He forgot his repulsion, his moral judgments. He cringed at the memory of how he’d rejected her before when she had really needed him. A rush of love for this complicated, self-destructive person overwhelmed him. He swiftly undressed and pulled the bedding over them.

CHAPTER 4

Dorothy had sought Peter out and apologised for ignoring him, as if it had been her fault he had left her in the lurch. Peter was happy enough to re-establish a veneer of normality in the otherwise crazy world in which he had found himself. Here he was back in the sane and homely task of accompanying Dorothy back to Bathurst for Christmas.

He was glad of Dorothy's current prattling, occasioned by her having the window seat, and therefore the responsibility, she seemed to think, of ensuring that Peter missed nothing of the scene unfolding before her. The one-way nature of such communication allowed Peter the opportunity of trying to disentangle the knots and contradictions writhing away in his brain.

The morning after the party they awoken very hung-over. Jackie's eyes looked terrible. Groaning, she'd staggered out first to the bathroom, then to the kitchen, where Peter heard the fizz of Enos in preparation. It had been a beautiful day outside, as only Armidale can be in early summer. They'd sat in the dining room with Jim, Marie and Betty, who reported that they had slept through the drama of the previous night. They'd drank strong tea, consolidating Enos with Aspro, trying not to notice the unlovely detritus that is the inevitable legacy of student parties. He and Jackie had then crept back to bed and slept until midday.

When they tried to handle the day for the second time, Jackie seemed in high spirits, not a word of the previous night. Peter wondered if she, like some alcoholics he'd

heard of, was suffering post-alcoholic amnesia. He wished he bloody was. Apparently not, for as he was leaving around two o'clock she murmured: 'Thanks, darling, for... for... making me feel good again.' Her eyes searching Peter's, her hand squeezing his tightly. And then a typical flip-flop. 'Well, don't muck about. Piss off. Giss a farewell kiss before you leave for Bathurst.'

As Peter walked down Allingham Street, he looked back and saw her standing on the veranda, in pink shorts and that old navy-blue V-neck pullover: the pullover that had a lot to answer for. Its removal had resulted in his recent conflicts and the reassembly of his deepest felt values into a system he was not sure he wished to own.

He returned to Allingham Street to have a long, passionate farewell, only to be pulled inside to talk to Jim, Marie and Betty. Jackie spent only a brief minute with him alone, on the veranda. Her final words, 'Toodle-oo old bean. Don't do anything I wouldn't do,' were followed by a wink and a nudge in the side with her elbow. He hadn't even kissed her goodbye. And she'd asked him to...

'Wake up, dreamy! You missed the emus!' Dorothy was waving her hand slowly in front of his eyes.

'Eh? Oh, sorry, Dorothy, I was miles away.'

'You are a sleepy-head today.' She added coyly, 'I suppose you've had your share of farewell parties this last week?'

'Oh yeah, one or two.' He struggled to imagine Dorothy being a fly on that wall! He still couldn't believe it. *He'd taken part in a gang-bang!* And it was Jackie's idea! What kind of slut did that make her? And yet he loved her. He loved her.

'What's she really like?'

He still wasn't back in the present. 'Who?'

‘Jackie, silly.’

Damn this, he thought, *let’s get off this line of conversation*. ‘You know, I think she’s the kindest, most natural person I have ever met. Not only that, she’s a talented musician and extremely bright. She’s so intelligent yet so *intuitive*.’

It was the end of that line of conversation.

‘Peter, darling!’ His mother threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. She then stepped back to admire Peter. ‘Oh, you’re so grown up, I can hardly believe it! You must be tired after that awful journey.’

‘Put it there if it weighs a ton!’ David held out his hand, beaming at his son. Peter was pleased to see them both, but this forced heartiness irritated him. *All that jolly good man-to-man fellowship comes of being a mason*, he supposed. *Crap on that*. He shook his father’s hand.

‘Got a bit of a surprise out there,’ David chuckled. ‘Now, how are your results? Anything out yet?’

‘No, not officially. We get mailed in a couple of weeks. Unofficially, I reckon I’ve passed everything, but no better’n that.’ They were walking out of the station and into the car park.

‘Oh well, that’s the main thing. There now. What do you think of that?’ They were standing beside a new, gleaming black Austin A40.

‘Isn’t she a beauty? English assembled, good solid British workmanship. None of your tinny local stuff. Nippy little bus, too.’ David, swelling with pride, fumbled for the car keys. Peter had mixed feelings. Now there’d be very strict limits on his use of the family car.

‘Tell us about your friends, Peter,’ Phyllis said as they drove home. ‘How’s Dorothy? I suppose you see quite a lot of her up there. Oh, you young things!’

‘Well no, Mum, as a matter of fact. I’ve hardly seen her at all this last term.’ Not quite true, but he didn’t want his parents to wander down that track.

‘Oh.’ There was silence. He noticed his parents exchange quick glances. But his mother pressed on, turning round over the front seat to look at him. ‘Got anyone special in mind, Peter?’

‘No, no. Just playing the field.’

Dorothy’s name came up again over tea. His mother started it.

‘You should ask Dorothy over to lunch. Really, Peter, you haven’t asked her here after all these years. And Dad’s such good friends with Mr Preston.’ She paused before continuing, her mind starting to race. ‘Better, we could all go on a picnic together, as a family!’

‘Here! Hold on, Mum. Maybe...’ *Maybe what? There was nothing more to say except that he did not want to meet her wretched family!*

But as things turned out he did meet them. Dorothy rang him from Orange, inviting him to have dinner with them, next Saturday. He accepted. What else could he do? Phyllis was delighted, fussing and asking questions about her. Was she religious? She attended church. High or Low? No idea. Haven’t you been to church with her?

‘Oh, for Heaven’s sake, Mum! You know I’ll only go to the Midnight Mass each Christmas, and that’s strictly a family affair, with you and Dad.’

Phyllis’s face fell. This was the one sore point between her and Peter. She had blamed all those freethinkers at university for influencing him but Peter’s fall from religious grace went back a lot further than that. They had never spoken of that terrible

afternoon, eight years ago. Peter had arrived home after dark, completely distraught, hair singed, black streaks down his face, blistered arms and legs, clothes burned. Although his burns were not serious, he was bed-ridden for days, hardly eating, hardly speaking. He had not only blamed himself bitterly for Nipper's death but also the religious superstitions that had taken him there. And God had let him down.

His parents didn't know how to handle it. They didn't question or probe, they just noted with wild anxiety, then with increasing relief, the progress of Peter's recovery. One outcome of that was decreasing involvement with The Church. To Phyllis's mortification he stopped genuflecting and making the sign of the cross. She would have been more mortified if she had known he'd rejected his religious faith.

'How are you getting to Orange, Pete?'

'Bus, Dad. There's one at 10.30a.m. I can be back at six tonight.' It was Saturday morning, and he was getting ready for his visit to Orange. He'd worked out the logistics for a day he didn't really relish, any more than he relished the means of getting there.

David's eyes twinkled. 'How'd you like to take the A40?'

'Oh, beaut! Gee, er, you sure?' Peter was genuinely overwhelmed. He'd driven it a bit, short distances only, and always in his father's company. It handled like a dream.

'Of course, son. After all, it's rather a special occasion, eh?'

Not for Peter it wasn't. Nevertheless, a couple of hours later he found himself parking near the Orange Post Office where he'd arranged to meet Dorothy.

'Oh Peter! Is that your dad's? Isn't it lovely?' She sidled up to him shyly, and kissed him on the cheek. She was wearing a calf-length New Look dress, with a fussy,

floral design, and a large summer hat. Peter, shy too, now their relationship seemed to have taken a new twist, went round the car to open the door for her.

‘Hop in. Better tell me how to get there.’

They drove the long way round, taking in some of the sights of Orange before eventually arriving in Calare, the suburb where the Prestons lived. The Preston house was a large, triple-fronted brick veneer, well-kept front garden with roses and a large rockery, the lawn impeccable.

‘We used to live above the bank, but they moved us out here. I much prefer it here.’ Dorothy touched Peter on the arm, and smiled her eager little-girl smile. ‘But do come in, Pete.’

Mrs Preston was a pleasant lady, with well-groomed, smoke-grey hair. She wore a necklace of large gemstones, which swayed with the occasional *clink* onto the cooking utensils as she worked. Mr Preston, plump and affable in waistcoat and tie, tried to put Peter at ease.

‘Ah, so you’re David Morrison’s son! Mighty pleased to meet you, and long past time too!’ They shook hands. ‘Mum and I are so grateful to you for taking care of young Dottie. She thinks a lot of you, you know.’

Indicating Peter’s right hand, Preston continued in confidential tones, man-to-man: ‘But I notice you haven’t joined the craft yet. Ah well, plenty of time, plenty of time. Oh yes, get your studies out of the way first.’

He offered Peter a beer while they waited for dinner. ‘Yes, I know your dad very well. Very well indeed. You know, he gave one of the finest charges I have ever heard during an official visit to my lodge when I was Worshipful Master.’

Mrs Preston was a good and generous cook. They had oxtail soup, roast beef, Yorkshire pud, and passionfruit pav. Peter was bursting when they finally got up from the table.

Mrs Preston gushed, ‘Well, I suppose you two would like to go off on your own! Dottie, why not take Peter over to the old gold mines at Lucknow? It’s a lovely drive, but do be careful. They say there’s subsidence in places...’

Peter found the old mining village at Lucknow, set in pretty farm country, interesting enough. After that, they drove back to town, had a spider in a milk bar, and talked about mutual friends. Except Jackie and The Anarchists.

He finally dropped Dorothy home about five, said his farewells to the Prestons, and returned to Bathurst.

Pleasant. Yes, you could say that, Peter thought. Her parents seemed decent enough, reminding him in so many ways of his own parents: a masonic father and a gushing mother. He was surprised, in retrospect, at how much he had enjoyed Dorothy’s company and had found her quite attractive – but the stomach churning ecstasy that he felt in Jackie’s presence was quite absent.

Jackie had of course been lurking in the back of his mind during all this. Peter couldn’t help coming back to the way she’d brushed him off that morning after. Could he love her after that? And after what she’d deliberately chosen to do the previous night. Could he love her after *that*? How he longed to see her, to find an answer to this question. Instead, all he did was to send her a Christmas card, with the stupid message: ‘Past. Present? Future?? Love, Peter.’

He just couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Christmas over, Phyllis rang Beryl Preston to make arrangements for the oft-discussed 'family picnic'. Beryl knew a pretty little spot, lots of nice shade, by the Macquarie River, and some good swimming for the 'young things'.

They met as planned, with cheerful reunions and introductions. Peter caught his breath momentarily as Dorothy stepped out of the Preston car. She was dressed in a lemon-and-white two-piece play suit that suited her dark blonde hair and blue eyes. She'd been sunbathing too, her legs lightly tanned. Her hair had been styled into an attractive pageboy cut. *Not bad at all*, Peter thought, *if only she'd throw her shoulders back!*

After lunch, Dorothy and Peter changed into their swimmers and walked upriver, carrying towels, looking for a suitable place to swim.

It was a beautiful day: cloudless sky, light breeze. They walked maybe a couple of miles and found a secluded grassy bank. The river slowly swept by, creating a deep, clear pool that in centuries would be a billabong. But in the transitional present, native melaleucas and exotic willows shaded this most pleasant of places.

'Looks like you could dive in here, no worries,' Peter said.

'Not yet. It's too soon after lunch. You don't want cramp, do you? Let's sunbake a while.' Dorothy shook her towel out on the grass and lay, face down.

'You look as if you've been doing a bit already,' Peter looked admiringly at her legs and shoulders.

'Yeah, I sit in the back garden while I'm reading. You don't get to do that in Armidale. It's not really private there, is it?'

'Not like here. Seems like there's nobody in a million miles.' What he next said surprised even himself: 'Let's sunbake in the buff! No one could see us!'

Dorothy lifted her head, towards him but not at him. ‘Oh, no, Peter! I just *couldn’t*... I don’t know you... that well.’

‘Well, I am.’ *Here goes nothing*, he thought, and slipped his trunks down, deliberately lying on his back. Which was a bit much, he came to realise, as his sturdy friend sought the unfamiliar light and warmth, like a phototropic palm tree.

Dorothy hastily dropped her head, turning away. The redness of her blush spread, creeping round the nape of her neck.

‘Just try without your bra strap. Otherwise it’ll leave a mark on your back.’ He leaned over her, noticing the swelling of her breasts as they pressed against the ground, and undid the buckle, gently laying the ends down beside her body. She didn’t object.

He lay back again, enjoying the warm sun, his nakedness, and the situation, wherever it might end. As he didn’t have any frenchies with him he knew that that wouldn’t be very far. But how far would she go? That was the question of the moment.

‘Come on. Time to do your front.’

She stirred and looked up, averting her head from Peter’s indubitable challenge. Clutching the top of her two-piece, she rolled on her back, beside Peter. She looked determinedly at his face. Just his face.

Peter smiled confidently. ‘Come on, you don’t need that,’ and gently removed her bra from her grasp.

‘*Peter...*’

Bending down and kissing her lips, he silenced her. Gently he traced a finger over and around her breasts, tickling her nipples. With the other hand, he guided her hand down there.

‘I don’t know what to do...’ Ignoring that, he drew a finger down her breast, across her stomach, and into the lower half of her two-piece. Gently pressing further, his finger found her silken curls.

‘Peter, *no!* Don’t go any further.’ Her voice was surprisingly strong. ‘I’ve made this promise to myself. The first man to make love to me is to be my husband. It’s as simple as that.’

Peter had found his answer, and he wasn’t in the least bit surprised. As he had strongly suspected, she was one of those after all. One of those you marry. Standing up, he went to the bank, and risking cramp, dived into the cooling waters of the Macquarie River.

Towards the end of January, Peter received the official notification of his exam results. No surprises there: passes all round. He was a graduate of New England University College (Sydney). Definitely no Honours now, but in turn, no awkward decisions about carving out a career in writing. Peter felt slightly ashamed that he found that a relief.

The day after his results arrived, at the very moment the mail was being delivered, Beryl Preston and Dorothy turned up. Beryl had some trumped up excuse to visit Bathurst, and of course she just had to come to the Morrisons for a cup of tea and a chat. And of *course* Dorothy came, who was dying to tell Peter her results. She too had passed all her subjects. Beryl Preston actually had the nerve to take the mail from the postman and bring it in with her; and right on top was a flamboyantly addressed letter for Peter, with a Parramatta postmark.

He couldn't wait. He said hello to the visitors, babbled his congratulations to Dorothy, and then excused himself. Hinting vaguely at bowel problems, he raced to the lavatory. Leaning against the wall, he ripped the letter open.

Peter Darling!

Just a rotten Christmas card, you bxxxxxd!!! You wait till I get you back at TC! That's if you're going. Got my results yesterday. Two stinking rotten passes. I know, you know, Parker knows, we all know, I deserved an HD in Psych but that fxxxxing bxxxxxd made sure I only got a miserable P. Makes me so *mad!*

How about you, dear old Pete? Bet you passed at least. Hope you didn't get any better 'cause then you mightn't be at TC. You'll write and let me know, won't you?

Peter, I hope your silence hasn't meant something awful about your feelings for me. I thought we would be at least friends, whatever, whatever. That party! Funny, but at the end, I *felt* you love me; right when I least deserved it. Really love me. And then I ran away. I always do. Afterwards, home in Parramatta, it struck me from *your* point of view. You must have been totally bewildered, poor old thing! Bewitched, buggered, and bewildered.

Pete, there's going to be a spare room here next year. Would you like to come in with us?! Yes! Yes! Pete, I'm going to behave from now on. You're so good for me. I'm as crazy as a coot; you're so level and balanced. So *I* think we'd make a good team. Like we did before, 'M & M', the old team with knobs on. Let's see what happens. Eh? Eh?

Don't let that hot-pants Dorothy seduce you. And don't tell me she wouldn't know how! She bloody would, mate of mine! Anyway, if she does, take *extra special* care – and tell me all the gory details afterwards. (Wouldn't it be soopah if her details weren't gory after all! Scandal!!!)

Your always friend and would be (?) lover,

J. XXX

He closed his eyes, leaning back against the wall, trying not to laugh, trying not to cry. He'd been as blind as Jackie had said she'd been. Why had he assumed she'd been playing silly buggers with him? And with that enormous relief came a resurgence of the warm, unaccountable, gush of love she'd inspired in him before. Lovable, adorable, marvellous, crazy Jackie!

He should jump at the thought of moving in with her. But to do that would be to commit himself to someone he didn't sufficiently understand. Sufficiently? Whom he didn't understand at all! Her crazies left him quite bewildered. Unlike Dorothy, whom he did understand, but who didn't set him on fire the way Jackie did. At that thought he suddenly realised Dorothy was waiting for him right now. Remembering his excuse, he pulled the chain.

'Sorry I was such a time. Everything came out all right in the end, though.' He deliberately made the coarse double entendre. If they didn't like it, bugger them. He suddenly felt free of these dreary people. Pleasant, honest, supportive: but, oh, so dreary! To his surprise, Beryl exploded with laughter.

‘Oh *Peter!* You’re such a *trick!* Now look, you two,’ she went on as she recovered, ‘why don’t you go for a walk? Phyll and I have something to talk about.’

Phyllis readily agreed and told Peter to be back for dinner.

Peter wondered where he was going to take Dorothy, to fill in a couple of hours. Why not up Mt Panorama? Maybe even to where Nipper had died. He’d see how he would feel. The memory had been so painful he hadn’t been back since that awful afternoon. Just thinking about it now stirred up a maelstrom of emotions that made him cringe. No, let sleeping dogs lie. The pathos of this last thought cancelled the pathos of the rest. Yes, he should face it. It would be a good test to take someone else there, someone neutral. He wouldn’t tell Dorothy what had happened. He couldn’t tell anyone about what he had done, how stupidly reckless, or superstitiously religious, he had been. He’d been both, reckless and superstitious. Looking back on it, he couldn’t understand why he had done what he had. How he had made Nipper in effect the sacrifice for Hopkins. Had God had accepted Nipper’s death, thereby allowing Hopkins to survive the war? What a stupid question. All that had happened was that he had killed his beloved dog.

Breathing deeply he said: ‘Dorothy, let’s walk a couple of miles to a place where I used to play as a kid. I haven’t been there for ages.’

‘Righto, Pete, suits me,’ she replied. She was in a floral summer dress and sandals. He took a sidelong glance at her. She really was quite a looker, if only she’d develop a better posture. Look at her right now: her head was bent downwards, her shoulders slumped, studying the ground. She looked up at him suddenly. Her eyes were moist and shining, little tears trembling at the corners.

‘That was from *her*, wasn’t it?’

‘If you mean, “Was that letter from Jackie Moffatt”, then the answer is “Yes, it was”.’ Peter thought he’d better clear this up once and for all.

‘So you’re still... *friendly*... are you?’

‘My word, yes Dorothy. Look, whatever our relationship might be, yours and mine, Jackie is a very good friend. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything more than that, but like we kiss when we meet and say goodbye and all that stuff,’ he added weakly. He thought he’d better ramp it up a bit. ‘I don’t know what you’ve got against Jackie. She’s the straightest person I know.’ *Well, in the important sense of the word ‘straight’*, he added silently to whatever scribe it was that kept a record of such things. While he was on the subject, he thought to clarify their own situation.

‘Like you and I, Dorothy, are friends. Good friends, but no more than that.’ He smiled into her now stricken eyes, and blundered on. ‘We established that by the river bank the other day. You yourself made that very clear.’

Dorothy’s eyes were now dropping tears in a glistening trail down each cheek. Her mouth was crumpled. She whispered. ‘No Peter. You’re the one who made that so clear. Not me.’

They walked on in silence, Peter a mixture of emotions, none pleasant. Dorothy had entered into the fantasies of both their parents – as if he didn’t know that already – but why should he feel guilty because he didn’t feel the way they wanted him to feel?

They had reached the clearing. No trace now of the fire. The gorse had grown back like it had been when he and Nipper had first arrived there nearly nine years ago. Poor little bugger, thought Peter, his ashes were now part of the soil, possibly right under my feet. Memories flooded him. He sat on the ground suddenly, his head bowed.

Dorothy, still standing, noticed his sudden change, his face hidden in his arms and knees, his whole body so tense-looking. His shoulders started shaking. She swiftly knelt down beside him, putting her arm around him.

‘Peter, dearest, what *is* it? It’s about us, isn’t it?’

Outwardly, he didn’t move. Inwardly, he seethed a prayer: *Oh God, not this, not now. Just make her disappear.*

And basically, for the rest of the vacation, she did disappear. He was scrupulously polite to her and to her parents, but that was all. He had it out with his mother and father, making it clear that he and Dorothy were just good friends and would they please stop trying to match-make? Their reactions were typical.

David: ‘Good Heavens, old man, I’d never in a million years try and influence you in a decision like that! I was just so pleased that you seemed to be getting on so well with old Reg’s daughter! He’s true blue, is Reg. The salt of the earth.’

Phyllis: ‘But you and Dorothy are so *suit*ed, Peter. I’m only thinking of your happiness. It’s far too early to be thinking of marriage, but certainly to have a *nice* girlfriend. I’m sure there must be such dreadful *types* going to university, especially these days.’

Peter had to laugh at that. She was so right about the *types*.

Soon after the morning train had arrived in Armidale, Peter said goodbye to Dorothy and walked the short distance from the station to Allingham Street. From the footpath he could hear loud classical music. He rang the bell and the music stopped. Jackie stood there in the navy blue pullover and the pink shorts, her sensuous mouth parted, showing those teeth.

‘I knew it was you. Dearest Peter! Come in, come in.’

He stumbled through the door and held her tightly. She raised her head, their lips met hungrily, their hands roving. Once they were in the bedroom, they stayed there all day.

They went to the Chinese café for tea, gorging themselves until they could scarcely move. Jackie leaned forward, resting her elbow on the table.

‘Now. The fabulous Dorothy. Did she try and bed you, mate?’

‘No, not her. But her parents, both our parents! You know what really shat me off was the way they carried on. Christ, if I’d had her on the floor in front of them, they couldn’t have been happier!’

‘Mefinks he doth protest too much. Pete, you haven’t answered my question. *Did – you – fuck – Dorothy?*’

Jackie’s voice carried all too clearly. Strongly disapproving faces jerked upwards from other tables in the cafe.

‘Oh Gawd,’ Peter mumbled, ‘let’s get out of here.’

‘Now to answer your question. No, I didn’t!’ Peter tried to explain what had happened by the waters of the Macquarie, but Jackie was squirming on her bed, helpless with laughter.

‘Oh Jesus, Pete, you should’ve seen their faces! They was bustin’ to hear your answer!’ She rolled around, hands pressed to her face. ‘You should’ve seen yourself, your expression, loving Jesus!’

‘C’mon, Jackie, snap out of it! It wasn’t that bloody funny. Someone there might have known us.’

She quietened. ‘Yes, you’d care about that, wouldn’t you? Hey! Better still, someone might’ve known Dorothy!’ She was off again, shrieking with laughter. ‘What if someone there was a special posh customer of the Orange Rural Bank, eh? Eh?’

Peter rose. ‘Back in a minute.’

He went to the lavatory, mainly to give himself some time to think. No, even though he loved her, he couldn’t move in here. Not yet. He hadn’t liked her outburst in the café at all. And then there was her seemingly masochistic relationship with Brookes. She’d *let* herself be blackmailed by him, and she needn’t have. Brookes had humiliated her in public, time and again. And then that party!

She was sitting upright on her bed, looking contrite. ‘Pete, you’re so serious! I didn’t mean to offend you. Come here.’

She seized him and forced her tongue into his mouth but he drew back.

‘Jackie, there’s a couple of things we’ve got to thrash out.’

She rolled her eyes upwards. ‘Here we go! Well?’

‘Jackie, you and Brookes. How could you put up with the bastard? Even to start with? And again, even after you’d given him the push? And *then*, after he’d raped you, well, blackmailed anyway, you grabbed him again at the party! What sort of hold has he got over you?’ His voice had risen, shooting question after question, she blinking and flinching as each hit her.

‘Fair crack of the whip, Pete. I know that bastard better than you. He would have got me sent down. And I just couldn’t afford that. Anyway, we’d slept together lots of times. You’d better get used to that.’

She looked up quickly to see how he was taking this. Not well, that much was evident. She went on. 'But apart from all that, you rejected me, Peter. You hurt me badly. Right here in this room. After Brookes... I needed you, Peter. God, how I *needed* you!'

'Jackie...'

She cut him off. 'Then at the party. I was using the oldest trick a girl has. Make him jealous. Make you come bounding over and sweep me off! But again you didn't. I caught your eye and saw it was over. You'd just given up.' She sighed, and drew her legs in towards her chest. Sitting upright, she wrapped her arms around her legs, her face resting sideways. Peter lay beside her, sprawled lengthways on the near ruined bedclothes.

'Then I thought I'd nothing more to lose. I knew you were still there. I guessed you'd want to say *something* to me. If you'd come to me, after *that*, you moralistic arsehole. Don't you see?' She suddenly relaxed and fell on top of him.

'And you did. You did! You *did!*'

Teachers' College was like being transported back into the Dark Ages, after Peter's happy experiences in the university's English department. Most of the Anarchists were there, except for Brookes, who had elected for the more prestigious Sydney Teachers' College.

On their first day there, the new Diploma in Education students were ushered solemnly into the main auditorium, where the Principal was waiting for them. Dressed in a three-piece suit, gold watch chain, and spats, he strutted up and down the podium, thumbs jammed in waistcoat pockets, metal rimmed spectacles on the bridge of his nose. He spoke with an accent hovering somewhere between Australian and a misconceived

Oxford: Jim called it ‘the Liberal-Country Party’ accent. Behind him hung a large portrait of His Majesty King George the Sixth, surrounded on either side by only slightly smaller portraits of previous college principals.

Jackie was sitting on one side of Peter, Jim on the other. Dorothy, he noticed, was seated across the aisle. Jackie got the giggles halfway through, thanks to Jim’s pungent editorial on the Principal’s exhortations. Her snuffles and snorts caused some reaction in their immediate neighbourhood. Dorothy glared across with fierce disapproval.

‘... studies at Teachers’ College are different, even more demanding than your university studies,’ the Principal was saying. ‘We assume, of course, that you know your subject content: what we emphasise here is *presentation*. Tidy work indicates a tidy mind. Here, we demand fine presentation in all your assignments and reports. Your lecturers will give you details. Now this is *not* trivial, I assure you. If you require neatness from your pupils, then you must exemplify that virtue yourselves. Everything that you do, but *everything*, becomes an example that your pupils will follow. Remember that.

‘So let us turn to dress and deportment. The Department, in its wisdom, has very strict uniform regulations for all of its pupils. Can it be said that a teacher may dress with less decorum than the lowliest of his pupils?’

Jim jumped up, hand raised. ‘Excuse me, sir, but aren’t we getting things a bit out of proportion?’

The auditorium froze into silence.

But the Principal was urbanity itself. ‘Ah, a dissident voice! Yes, young man, say your piece.’

‘Well sir, I and most of the other students here have been studying in the relatively free atmosphere of a university. We have learned a lot. Which had nothing to

do with what either lecturer or student happened to be wearing at the time!’ He sat down looking pleased with the way it had come out. Scattered applause clearly nettled the Principal.

‘Well, well, *well!* Young man, I only wish that I could have pursued my many years in teaching with as much acumen, enthusiasm and perception as you have evidently done with respect to your undergraduate studies!’ The Principal chuckled. ‘But when you have had some experience in the real world of our New South Wales Departmental schools, why then you shall sing a different song. Oh yes, a very different song.’

He moved to his lectern. Carefully draping himself over it, he fixed Jim with a cold stare. ‘I shall give you, young man, three years out there in that real world. Within that time, I shall wager either that you will give up the noble profession of school teaching deferring to a less demanding career, or you will back to the hilt every word I have uttered today!’

Dorothy realised very quickly that the relationship between Peter and Jackie was not what he had indicated in Bathurst. To make her pain sharper, in the closed atmosphere of the college, there was no escaping seeing them together. She could tell by their mutual glances, even when they sat at opposite sides of a lecture room, that there was something deep between them. And she could guess how deep *that* was! She was furious with herself for that prissy little speech by the river bank. So what if Peter had made love to her then! At least she might be the one sitting with him now, not that common little tart. She recalled Brookes’ sneer, that awful afternoon in the pub: ‘those you shag and those you marry’. She’d thought that was true then. She knew better now.

Dorothy was a realist. She knew that affairs rarely lasted for ever, particularly if someone as volatile and unpredictable as Jackie was involved. She had two options: to stand on her dignity and lose everything, or to maintain her friendship with Peter, pending further developments.

Peter seemed not unwilling to maintain some sort of contact. Thursday night Jackie had her music lessons; it was also the night each week that the college arranged a slide show, a visiting speaker, or something else equally improving. Dorothy and Peter often met at these gatherings, and they sat together. By second term, it had become almost an institution: Thursday night was 'their' night, hers and Peter's.

To her chagrin, Dorothy found that Jackie seemed not to mind her times with Peter; she seemed more amused than anything. Jackie would often leave the two of them talking together in the common room. She'd *never* do that if she were in Jackie's position! It hurt, as if she didn't matter. She forced herself to be objective about Jackie. She could be very funny, endearing even. But Dorothy knew this for certain: no matter how tolerant, amusing, endearing, or misunderstood Miss Sex Pot was, she was the enemy. She stood between her and Peter. And for that she could never forgive her. Never. Ever.

Dorothy was looking at him coyly. She had on a stylish two-piece suit, which was odd on an ordinary term day, and flash gemstone earrings. She asked: 'Well, aren't you going to say something?'

He looked completely nonplussed.

'Oh Peter, you haven't forgotten...' She looked hurt.

Oh Jesus, Peter thought, it was her twenty first birthday! He'd promised her a long time ago that they'd do something 'special', and had even told Jackie about his promise ('but not too bloody special, matey,' was her casual reaction).

'Course not! Many happy returns, and congratulations, whatever you're supposed to say.' Peter bent down and pecked her cheek. 'Fooled you then, didn't I? I've booked a table for the two of us in the big dining room at Tatts for tonight,' he lied, hoping it wasn't too late to do so.

He picked her up at her residence. Tatts was pretty posh, so he wore his only suit, and a tie, under his overcoat. She was dressed in a ballerina-length dress, lower cut than Dorothy's usual chaste style, he pleasantly discovered when he removed her coat and scarf and handed them to the waiter. Yes, she didn't look too bad at all, the old Dottie. She was even sitting with her shoulders back.

He found himself enjoying dinner and her personality, with unusual flashes of vivacity he hadn't noticed previously. And he was delighted with the smooth way he'd handled tonight's situation. There he was, caught completely on the hop, and he'd ad-libbed his way into creating a roaring success! His father would have been proud of him, he thought. Just the type of man the Education Department needs, he would say. *Well, old cock, they've got you now.*

They sat back, replete, with still a third of a bottle of that sweet wine, *Est ! Est!! Est!!!*, left. Dorothy was sitting sideways, legs crossed, her elbow resting on the back of her chair, supporting her head in her hand, smiling at him.

'Gee thanks, Pete. Thanks ever so much. You couldn't have given me a nicer present.'

‘Dorothy, it was a pleasure. I mean that. It’s great that we can still remain friends like this, isn’t it?’ Her smile dissolved at this reminder of her status, tonight of all nights. He regretted his tactlessness. ‘I mean such real good friends,’ he added hastily. ‘Here,’ he picked up the wine bottle, ‘Let’s finish this.’

‘No, you have it, Pete, I’ve had enough.’

Yes, he mused, as he finished the wine, a jolly good show. Pity about that lapse at the end there. He signalled the waiter, paid the bill and asked for their coats. He took her coat from the waiter and helped her put it on. He walked her to the door of her residence a brisk ten minutes away.

‘Come on in, Peter, and warm up a bit before you go back. It’s so nippy tonight.’

Dorothy put her finger to her lips as she opened the front door. They tiptoed down the corridor to her room, where she switched on the light and the electric radiator. Both stood over heater, rubbing their hands. Their hands touched. Each looked at the other in the same instant. Dorothy’s eyes were shining, her lips parted for the now inevitable kiss. He was surprised at her kiss, so passionate yet so soft. Dorothy herself pressed close to him, her body yielding, her feel so feminine. Urgently, he unbuttoned his fly, releasing his swollen, pulsing organ, and placed her hand on it. She sighed as if his ecstasy was also hers.

And shortly after, it was. Or near enough.

WAGGA WAGGA

1958

CHAPTER 5

Peter adjusted the boy's left forearm. With gentle concern, he suggested that the lad support his wrist with his right hand. Immediately after a soft *whoop*, the boy's frightened eyes welled hurt, anger, and tears.

Peter altered the target area to exact due punishment. With a sharp whimper the boy twisted his body to one side, his right hand snatching at his left wrist, as if his tortured hand could be torn off. He leaned against the wall, Peter standing over him.

Poor little tyke, Peter thought. He was a good kid. But it had to be. The rules were clear, and young Jonesie had infringed them. He had talked after a warning; a clear, unequivocal warning. If a teacher let his particular feelings over-ride the general principle, there would be chaos. He'd learned that the hard way, in his first year out in Singleton High. But now that he had acted as strict but fair disciplinarian, Peter put his arm around the boy's taut, thin shoulders and squeezed affectionately, in a fatherly way. 'We won't do that again, will we, old man? You're a good lad.'

Jonesie replied with his eyes, which displayed a curious blend of resentment, pain and gratitude. Croaking, 'No, sir,' he ran from the room, no longer caring that his sobs were audible.

Peter sighed and replaced the cane in its slot on top of the blackboard. He didn't like using the cane; he wished that the boys were exempt from corporal punishment, as were the girls, but as they weren't he went along with the system. At least he didn't cane

publicly, during class, as did some of his colleagues. He walked to the staff common room to record the details of Jonesie's nemesis in the official punishment book.

Wagga Wagga High, 'the high school on the hill' as it was called, despite the fact that Wagga had no other high school from which it needed to be distinguished, was Peter's second appointment. In his first appointment, two years at Singleton High, he had made those mistakes that new teachers make. Now Peter could start out at Wagga High without carrying any baggage plastered with such damning labels as 'first year out', 'he'll believe anything', 'weak discipline'. Wagga High had a good reputation and drew students from a large area. As the school song (which oddly enough fitted the tune of the 'Marines Hymn') put it:

From the hills of Tumbarumba

From the farms of Old Junee

From the tree-lined streets of Wagga

We climb the hill to thee...

Peter had been at Wagga for three years when Jim, his old mate from Armidale days, also climbed the hill to Wagga High, and Marie, now Jim's wife, to Wagga Central School. The Armidale Teachers' College Principal had been wrong about Jim. Five years out and he was still teaching in the state system: loving it and beloved by his students. But he was loathed by his senior colleagues at Wagga High, who saw him as a mischievous shit-stirrer.

Peter and Jim were having a drink in the local Returned and Services League, the RSL, after school. 'Well! You're really getting on side with the Establishment, aren't

you?' Jim stuffed a handful of nuts into his mouth, chewed vigorously, and went on:

'First, you join the RSL...'

'Which you're eager enough to bludge on,' Peter interrupted, waving his beer glass to take in their present, tacky surroundings.

'Next you let yourself be pushed by that monster Owens to toady along as Federation Rep. What could be next? Possibly an invitation to join Rotary? Or will it be the Freemasons?' Jim's tone was light but Peter wasn't taking this lightly – and not only because his membership of Rotary was currently in process. It was the crack about being Owens' bum-boy that had hurt him. Not wanting a fight with Jim, he emptied his glass and stood up. 'Same again?'

As Peter waited for the barman to emerge and take his order, he thought back to that interview with Owens. He'd just finished entering the details about caning young Jones in the punishment book when he heard that gravelly authoritarian voice behind him.

'Want a word with you, Peter.' No beg pardons.

Slightly alarmed, he turned to face the large balding man behind him. 'Yes, John?' It was an effort to use Owens' first name.

'Peter, how would you like to stand as Riverina Area Representative of the Teachers' Federation? The committee thought you'd be just the man. Young, fine teacher, on the brink of making his mark...' Owens let further compliments be swallowed in his goanna smile.

Peter had thought that his friendship with Jim might have finished any chances with the heavies in the conservative Teachers' Federation. Now it looked like he could play both sides. Although Peter was on the other side of the fence from Jim politically,

they were still mates. He could *talk* to Jim, which is what mates are for. His anger dissolved in that warm soup of homespun philosophy. He set the beers down.

‘Well Jim, don’t knock it. Some day you might need a friend in high places. Yes indeed, come to think of it. Let’s see now. The charge is unprofessional conduct. To wit.’ He sat back, ostentatiously raising his left hand, fingers outstretched, checking off points as he made them. ‘One, encouraging senior students to flout tradition by requesting them to address him by his first name, to wit, Jim. Two, descending upon classrooms during lunch hour in term two, 1957, unlawfully seizing canes from each, including mine you bastard, and ceremoniously breaking same publicly in the playground, loudly declaiming the absurd notion that beating children with sticks is torture and a violation of their human rights...’

‘As it bloody well is, of course. And for that, I’ll only treat you to another if you include, three, teaching students in a manner such that they not only like science, but the earnest simpleton who teaches it to them.’ Jim stood and picked up their glasses. ‘And talking of human rights, I’ll really tell you something when I’ve refilled these.’

Jim returned with the beers. ‘Try this for size. You know Rogers? Tall, heavily built lad in Intermediate year? Looks a thug, but actually quite bright; a cert for credits in chemistry and physics. Well, guess what? Owen is planning to withhold his Intermediate Certificate on grounds of character. Instead he gets a Certificate of Competence. Well?’

Peter was nonplussed. ‘Well, I suppose it could be a matter of character. If Rogers...’

‘I don’t think you’ve got the picture,’ Jim butted in. ‘Withholding his Intermediate says: this kid’s not dumb, but don’t trust him in a fit! That’s slander.’

‘But if the certificate is issued, there must be grounds. What’s Rogers done?’

Jim sighed. ‘What you are doing right now. Owens found him in the main street after school, smoking and smelling of liquor. But unlike you, he didn’t take any crap from Owens.’

Jim leaned forward, earnestly ignoring Peter’s well justified protest. ‘If Owens goes ahead with this, the shit will hit the fan. Old man Rogers is a union official at the Heinz factory in Bomen, a Trotskyite and a born troublemaker. He is, in fact, a man after my own heart. But what Rogers may not know is that although the department has the legal right to withhold the Intermediate Certificate, the parents, depending on the circumstances, could have the legal right to sue the teacher or teachers concerned for defamation. If they knew the grounds; and if they knew who the teacher was. If.’

Peter didn’t like this at all. ‘Now Jim...’

Jim waved his hand dismissively. ‘Nothing’s happened yet, maybe never will. Just thought I’d give you something to think about. Now, where were we?’

‘Shit stirrers. And speaking of which, remember your little bit of stirring that first day at Teachers’ College?’ Reminiscence was a safer topic, Peter thought.

Jim grinned with joy at the memory. ‘Pompous little twit. Yes, polish up Owens’ vowels a bit, dress him decently for a change, and you couldn’t tell the difference between him and that horrendous turd of a principal. Or our present one, the unlovable Flogger Mathewson.’ Jim leaned forward solemnly and wagged his finger at Peter. ‘And that’s what the department does to you. Even to you, Pete. *Tu es Petrus*, and upon this Rock shall I build My Department. Thus spake the first director general.’

Peter’s face hardened and Jim saw that this time he had overdone it. He returned to reminiscence, to a topic that had been off limits by unspoken agreement. Jackie.

‘What happened to her, Pete?’

Peter looked up sharply.

‘Well, you know,’ Jim smiled. ‘I’d have bet my balls that you and she would’ve got spliced.’

After a long silence, Peter’s feet shuffled a prelude to awkward, wrenched words. ‘Well, you know, I suppose everyone thinks Dottie cut her out. She didn’t. It was, well, it was between me and Jackie. Like we just weren’t suited. Talk about chalk and flamin’ cheese.’ A short bark of unamused laughter. He stared at a cigarette burn on the floor on Jim’s right. ‘Nah. Not suited.’

Peter thought about his reluctance to move in with Jackie when they had had that vacancy in her house. For all his feelings for her, he hadn’t been able to make that commitment. On the other hand, after Dorothy’s birthday, he realised that he had indeed made a commitment to Dorothy. It wasn’t just that she had aroused him sexually, it had felt right when they had made love. Everything had fallen into place as it hadn’t done with Jackie. He had known her rule, he had accepted it. He had felt a warmth, a responsibility, a commonality and a love that made marriage to her feel right. Peter, not wanting to explain all this to Jim, attributed his decision instead to their respective placements by the Department of Education. ‘You know, by some quirk of fate, the Department sent Jackie to Liverpool and me to Singleton.’ He looked up and smiled. ‘And Dottie to Singleton too.’

Peter drove from the RSL to their home in Koorringal deep in thought. Not suited! What single person in this world is suited to any other their whole lives through? Oh, he was suited to Jackie then; and he was suited to Dorothy now. She was exactly what he needed. When their first child, Phil, came along, she had given up teaching, devoting herself to

their home. A terrific mother, excellent cook and still a good looker. He'd made the right choice, all right. As he explained to himself, she fitted the role of perfect wife and mother to a tee while he fitted that of father and provider – and they both loved each other.

Reminiscence had wrenched him back to the last half of 1950. Practice teaching had intervened the week after Dorothy's memorable twenty-first birthday. Peter was sent to Glen Innes, Jackie to Tamworth, Dorothy remained in Armidale. Peter had written several times to both Dorothy and Jackie. He had wondered about writing to Jackie, once he had felt committed to Dorothy, but he stopped short of writing that one letter he should have written, telling Jackie that it was all off. Jackie wrote two letters to Peter.

Her first letter was long and chatty, full of details about her practice teaching. Her main observation lesson, on Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* symphony, had been a triumph. She played excerpts from each movement showing that Tchaikovsky was using music to illustrate the seasons of his life: a sad boyhood, manhood with its virile battle theme, the lyrical interlude of hopeless love, and the despairing, suicidal, last movement. The headmistress, who had been observing her, was in tears ('How about that, eh?') and had written her a rave report. Jackie's special forte was turning music into something personal to each listener.

By the time she had written her second letter, Jackie had obviously put two and two together. Some passages he could remember even now, eight years later. And they still made him cringe with guilt. 'When I'm up,' she'd written, 'I think yes, yes, the old team, "M&M". When I'm down, I see you with the girl next door. It haunts me, that picture.'

And yet, Peter had to admit that the exciting and unpredictable Jackie still tugged at something within himself. Peter Morrison, the creator, the writer, the lover. And then

there was Dorothy. Home, security, unconditional love, Bathurst itself. Peter recognised that he was not the straight Apollonian that his father was; neither was he the pure Dionysian that Jackie was. He had a foot in both camps, but in the end – to his relief and surprise – he chose to follow the principled path that his father would have taken.

Yes, Dionysius might have led him to commit to Dorothy on her birthday night, but since then Dionysius had been in retreat.

Peter took the FJ up the drive carefully. Last week, after a similar session at the RSL, he'd run over his daughter Mary's tricycle. The damage was only in Mary's imagination, mended by a few minutes of horsey-riding on his knee. But it was enough to make him take care when he'd had a few.

He slammed the car door. At the sound of his return, Mary flew out the back door, squeaking, 'Daddy, Daddy did you hit my trike this time?'

He stooped to pick her up and kissed her. 'Course not, darling. Like I hadn't last time.'

'Look what I did Daddy.' She showed him a drawing she had been clutching.

'Hey, isn't that nice. Clever girl' He slung the purring bundle over his shoulder and carried her inside to greet Dorothy and Phil. Six year old Phil was on the floor, puzzling over a set of instructions for a model plane kit. Peter set Mary down beside him.

'Hello, darling, how's things?' He looked at Dorothy across the breakfast bar. She leaned over and they kissed across it.

'Not bad, not bad. Mary was as good as gold when we went shopping this morning. Did she show you her drawing? Cute isn't it.' She paused to let her reproach sink in before she said it. 'You're a bit *late*, Pete. Anything the matter? I was thinking of

leaving your tea in the oven.’ She always looked forward to the couple of bulk, sweet sherries with Peter when he got home; she felt deprived when he was late.

‘Oh, nothing much. I’ll tell you after tea. One thing but... Owens and them have asked me to be nominated for Fed Rep. You know what that means! In with the nobs. A few trips to Sydney each year to sit on council; and a real say in what happens here at school. We’re getting there, Dottie!’

‘Peter, isn’t that great?’ Her resentment disappeared immediately.

‘So that’s why I’m a little late; and it’s worth a little celebration, eh?’ *To hell with it*, he thought, *a couple of sherries ’ll do no harm*. Even so, he was heavily aware of the beer he’d drunk with Jim.

She went back into the kitchen, and fishing inside the cupboard for the big wicker-covered demijohn, she poured two sherries into rose-tinted little glasses. Peter sat down with a sigh and watched Dorothy while she poured. Two pregnancies and a sweet tooth had brought to fruition the fullness promised in her uni days. Her face had filled out, as had her figure. She was attractive still, but the matron stood roundly in her shadow.

They talked about the prospect of Peter as federation representative for the Riverina. Then he got onto his present worry.

‘Jim, pet. I’m worried about him. Actually, I wasn’t late because of the Fed Rep business: it’s still unofficial anyway. I had a few beers with Jim at the RSL, and, well, I think he’s going too far.’

He told her the story, that is what there was of it, because it was all supposition so far. But if Owens did what he threatened to do to Rogers, and if Jim ganged up with the parents, then he, as Fed Rep, would be caught in the middle.

Dorothy cut in. ‘But Peter, darling, he’s your friend! If you’re on council when his case comes up, then of course you’ll support him! You will, won’t you?’ She turned to face him.

‘Of course I’ll do my best for him. But Dottie, don’t you see, it’s the principle that matters. It’s just bloody bad luck that Jim happens to be a friend of mine. It’d be, well, unethical of me to make a special case of a mate simply because he’s my mate.’

Her face told him he wasn’t getting far. ‘Never mind, Dottie, I’ll do my best for Jim. If and when the occasion arises. Let’s just hope it doesn’t.’

Peter was sitting on a bar stool sipping a beer in the West End Bar of the Wentworth Hotel on the afternoon before his first council meeting. He was a little over-awed, both by the occasion itself – a Fed Rep indeed! – and by the plush surroundings. The Federation certainly did its reps proud, but then so they should, he decided. There weren’t many perks in the teaching game. He’d studied the meeting papers in the train, noting with a start that council secretary was a certain T. Brookes. Bloody Tom, for sure. Still on the make. This would be a full-time job, better pay than a schoolie would get, and no doubt he was using the job as a stepping stone towards a political career. *Stuff him*, thought Peter *and good luck if that’s what he wanted*. Peter knew where his own talents lay. In tune with his reverie, a familiar voice interrupted:

‘Well, well, well! Long time no see. Peter Morrison, no less. Welcome to council.’

Peter turned round to see Brookes standing behind him. He was dressed in an immaculate grey suit, white shirt, light blue tie and matching breast pocket handkerchief, a pigskin brief case tucked under his left arm. A studied smile on his handsome face, he

extended his right hand. Peter jumped off his stool and shook hands. He'd already decided he had no choice but to be affable.

'G'day, Tom. Good to see you. You sure look like you've come up in the world since leaving the classroom. Congratulations.'

'No complaints. A bloody sight better than ramming the Industrial Revolution down unwilling throats, year in, year out. Deadly bloody business. Anyway, let's not stand here like two shags on a rock. Join the rest of us in the Private Bar. They're basically a shower, but we'll get there. You might recognise one or two others.' He cocked an eyebrow towards the door.

Christ, the bastard hadn't changed one bit, Peter thought. He'd go far, all right. Maybe he isn't a Catholic, but he'd fit the New South Wales State Australian Labour Party like a glove.

They moved into an adjoining bar. The light was subdued, with several groups of people sitting at tables. Brookes jerked his head at a group. 'Over there. I'll try and get a waiter to pull his finger out and then I'll introduce you.'

Peter moved over and stood tentatively beside the table. Brookes came back and immediately took charge.

'Comrades, I want you to meet our new Riverina Rep, Peter Morrison...'

Peter was standing behind a woman who snapped her head around and stared at him. A bass drum thumped in his stomach. Its pressure soared upwards, constricting his throat and inflating his skull, making him dizzy. Jackie was perhaps a little thinner; faint lines beginning to form around those large slate grey eyes that were looking steadily back at him. *Was there just a faint film of moisture across them?* But she was smiling formally, her hand outstretched.

‘Hello Peter. It’s been a long time.’ The same voice but softer, controlled, more mature.

‘Of course. You’ve already met,’ Brookes drawled. He turned to the others: ‘If you don’t watch out, the New England Mafia will be taking the council over. Come on, Peter, this is Fred Fitzsimmons, Newcastle Rep, and Herb Taylor, Western Districts...’

Peter mechanically released Jackie’s hand and shook hands across the table with the others. He sat down beside Jackie. The waiter arrived and all ordered beer, except Brookes who required gin and tonic. Peter had recovered, except for the thumping of his heart.

‘Jackie! I’m so surprised to see you here. Your name wasn’t on the list of reps?’

‘It was. Like yours. Shepherd; I’m married now. Also like you.’ She dropped the challenging tone. ‘It’s good to see you, Pete. I’m at Wollongong Girls High, Illawarra Rep. We must have a good long talk sometime.’

More reps arrived. After a few rounds Peter relaxed, enjoying the company and almost enjoying the situation. They had little chance of talking together and for that Peter was grateful. He still had to collect his scattered wits. But what was the problem? She was married, he was married. The past was past. And that was the problem. As soon as he saw her, he knew that – for him at any rate – the past was not past. Not quite.

They all went to dinner at an Italian restaurant up at the Cross. They didn’t sit together. Peter tried to but they got separated in the crush as they all tried to fit around two small tables. But at least he could study her quietly. Her voice, animated, witty, was music whatever she was talking about, the Cockney almost gone. She was dressed in a tasteful salt-and-pepper two-piece suit with a semi-transparent turquoise blouse – a far cry from the navy sweater and pink shorts. Now she was confident but not loud, relaxed

but not gauche, outgoing but not aggressive. She had seemed to have grown out of all those things about her that he didn't like. A compound of anger and self-pity gushed over him momentarily: *You should've been mine. By rights you're mine!* He was immediately disgusted at his treachery in even thinking that. The mood vanished as quickly as it had come.

They went back in two taxi loads. Jackie and he sat beside each other in the back of the second taxi; he made sure of that this time. At one stage, rounding a corner, she rolled against him, he put his arm around her to steady her. Their fingers touched, then locked for a split second. And that was all.

As they entered the hotel foyer, most of the party, expressing varying degrees of booze, fatigue or both, went to their rooms, leaving Brookes, Peter and Jackie standing there.

'Well,' murmured Brooks, 'I've got some homework to do, and no doubt you two have a lot to talk about.' His leer might have been pleasant on another face. '*Ciao*. Sweet dreams, and don't be late for the morning meeting.'

They watched him saunter across to the lift. Peter's earlier confusion was returning. Obviously they had to talk but he couldn't work out how to initiate conversation. The bar had not yet closed; safe neutral ground. The past must be kept in the past. They could talk about the Jim thing, neutral but a point of mutual interest from the past. They had about half an hour before the bar closed. Just long enough, then a good night's sleep.

He told her the substance of his talk in the RSL with Jim, about his own conflicts should it ever come to council, and even about Dorothy's disagreement.

'Really, Peter, you haven't changed. Not one little bit.'

‘Whatever that’s supposed to mean.’ He dared a hope – or was it a fear? – about what it might mean.

‘Oh, all this tosh about *principle*. Jim’s a mate of yours, yet you’d go along with the Federation if it came to the point. Dorothy was quite right, and not for the first time. Whatever that’s supposed to mean,’ she mimicked, sing-song. She tossed down her drink and stood up. ‘Well, Peter Morrison, my quondam lover and present fellow rep, it might be interesting over the next few sessions. I hope I get a chance to straighten you out on one or two things. Principles! Well, toodle-oo old bean. And finish your drink. You look as though you need it.’

She moved quickly out the door to the lobby. Peter started to follow her, but sank back into his chair, deeply depressed. Bloody Jackie! The finger squeeze. Now so cool, almost dismissive, but then why farewell him with toodle-oo old bean, that punch-line from the past? Blow hot, blow cold. The one thing he felt he could talk to her about, Jim’s predicament, had backfired. Jackie’s attitude had clinched the line-up of forces against him. All those people for whom he felt he had any sort of personal relationship – Jim, Marie, Dorothy, and now Jackie – were on one side, while he himself and the federation types were on the other. He got up heavily, cursing them all to perdition.

As he entered his room, the phone rang. ‘Reception here, sir. Sorry to disturb you but a small parcel has been left at the desk for you. Marked “Urgent”. Would you like me to send it up?’

Minutes later there was a knock at the door. A bellhop handed him a large manila envelope bearing the government’s OHMS logo. It was addressed to him care of the Wentworth Hotel, and was indeed marked URGENT. No stamp. No doubt council business from Tom, he thought with little interest. But when he pressed it, it contained

something strangely light and soft. He opened it. Good God, a pair of scanties! There was a note pinned to them: *If you want what goes inside these try Room 533. J.*

Heart thumping he picked them up and pressed them to his face. After that first shock at seeing her, he'd decided firmly and absolutely on what to do, and more to the point, on what not to do. But now, his nose filled with the essence of Jackie's being, old demons struggled for release. Dionysius, no longer slumbering away, sprang urgently awake at her smell.

Half-sobbing, half-laughing, he rushed out the door to find Room 533.

Morning coffee break must be due any time, Peter thought as he stretched and yawned, trying to bring himself back to the business on the agenda paper. The President's voice rolled sonorously on, explaining how he'd got tacit agreement from Premier Cahill on equal pay, if they'd accept that the increases be spread over four years. *Of course they'd accept. Why not bloody put the motion and move on to the next item of business?* But no, they had to go through these useless tribal rituals. The old chiefs step forward and tell the same stories, to the last detail, simply to demonstrate that it was their right to hold the floor and capture unwilling attention. It was a badge of rank that the President was now tediously displaying.

Peter looked once more across the conference table at Jackie. She must have been thinking something very similar, he could tell from the look in her eye and the face she pulled at him. The clock had spun back ten years. Last night had been just as if nothing had happened in all those intervening years. They finally fell asleep, exhausted, at four. Peter had managed to wake at eight and they had made it to the meeting on time. Physically tired, but mentally so relaxed, he felt tremendous in a way that he hadn't felt

since Armidale days. The reason why was sitting opposite him. Not together, where they could touch, but opposite, where they could look. He knew there would be touching enough tonight.

Then what?

He didn't know and recklessly didn't care. There was plenty of time. It was the beginning of the year, more or less, and with a bit of luck he would be seeing Jackie regularly every two months. Things would sort themselves out one way or another. Last night they hadn't talked about the future or about the past. They had lived in the present, a once eternal present, but which in retrospect seemed like an eye blink. Yes, plenty of time.

He then thought about Dorothy and the seriousness of what he had done. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt her. And what about the undiscussed Mr Shepherd, and any children he and Jackie might have? He smiled sadly to himself and caught Jackie's eye for the umpteenth time, who this time didn't smile back.

It was as if she had guessed what was going through his mind.

CHAPTER 6

‘Boop boop diddum daddum waddum choo. Boop boop diddum daddum waddum choo...’

Peter started from his work at the desk in front of the class and glanced out the window. No one he could see. Someone giggled nervously. Then again: ‘Boop boop diddum daddum...’ He couldn’t believe his ears. It was coming from within the class. He looked at the bent heads, the pupils intently writing an appreciation of the poem “Snake”.

‘And they swam and they swam...’ the droning went on. A movement caught his eye, fingers tapping in time. Rogers’ desk. *Bloody Rogers!* The last kid he wanted to have trouble with after what Jim had told him. *For God’s sake be careful*, he said to himself. But no kid ever talked out of turn, let alone *sang*, in Peter’s class. Not without swift retribution. But it might just be unintended.

‘Rogers!’

The droning stopped.

‘Uh?’

Don’t be drawn. Ignore that lack of ‘sir’, Peter counselled himself. ‘We can do without the concert.’ Peter stared commandingly at the brilliant blue eyes that returned his stare from under a single bushy black line that did service for two eyebrows in other faces.

‘What concert? Dunno whatcha mean.’

‘Address me correctly, Rogers.’ He couldn’t let it go a second time.

‘What concert? *Mister Morrison.*’

‘*Sir!*’

‘Mister Morrison. Sir.’

‘You were singing, Rogers, and disturbing the class.’ Peter kept his voice quiet and even, concentrating his stare half an inch above the bridge of Rogers’ nose; a trick to give the recipient of the gaze the impression that he was being imperiously and unarguably stared down.

‘Oh, was I? Didn’t realise that.’ As if an afterthought, he added, ‘Sir.’

Peter returned to his work but he was all too aware that the score was forty-thirty in Rogers’ favour. He thought he’d do well to concede the point, at this stage.

But it started again: ‘*And they swam and they swam right over the dam*’. The atmosphere was suddenly electric. The whole class tensed.

The sod, Peter fumed. Here was the first genuine no-holds-barred confrontation Peter had faced for seven years. He had to win, or his credibility would be shot to pieces.

‘Rogers,’ he kept his voice down, but forced iron into it, ‘you know the consequences of defying me, don’t you?’

Rogers feigned astonishment. ‘Defying you? What was I doing?’ Grinning, he drummed his fingers in exact time to the words he was now silently miming.

Jim’s warning came to him, but there was nothing else for it but the last resort. He reached up to the top of the blackboard and found the cane.

‘Rogers, I’m not going to wait until the end of the class.’ Peter tapped the palm of his left hand with the cane. ‘Get out into the corridor. Now.’

‘No, Mr Morrison, sir. I won’t.’

Oh, shit. Peter fought a rising sense of impotence. Rogers was bigger than he was and twice as fit. A physical brawl would be the end, the loss of prestige, devastating. One last try.

He laid the cane carefully on his desk and walked slowly and deliberately to Rogers’ desk at the back of the class, concentrating his gaze on that half-inch above Rogers’ nose. He placed his hands on the sides of Rogers’ desk, gripping the lid. He lowered his face to Rogers’ and said with as much menace as he could muster,

‘Go outside, Rogers, and take your medicine like a man. That is an order. Now *move!*’ He snapped the last word at the impassive face, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

Rogers responded with a broad smile. Disengaging the face-locking contest, he lounged back, hooking one arm over the back of his chair. With his other hand he removed a letter from his breast pocket.

‘Read this. *Sir.*’

Taken aback, Peter straightened up. He took the letter and opened it. It was addressed: ‘To Whom it may Concern at Wagga Wagga High School.’ The body of the letter, badly typewritten, went on:

Pursuant to my rights as Parent of one William Patrick Rogers, Student at said School, I Patrick Kevin Rogers hereby and without prejudice, and according to the Provisions of the Department of Education of this State of New South Wales as set out in the Handbook for the Conduct of Teachers in said Schools do invoke such sections and Sub-sections as

empower me to expressly and unequivocally FORBID the use of Corporeal Punishment on the person of the said William Patrick Rogers, which is barbarous and unnecessary for Teachers to use such. Any said Teacher who infringes this Instruction will be charged with assault and battery as a common criminal in a Court of Law.

Sgd. P.K. Rogers, Esq.

Bloody hell, thought Peter, *so that's what the prick had up his sleeve!* He'd deliberately led up to this confrontation. But Peter felt a weight lift. It was quite out of his hands now. Not only could he come out of this unscathed, he could capitalise on it.

Peter spoke smoothly and with authority. 'I think this puts a very different complexion on things, don't you, Rogers? This is a matter for the headmaster. Just take this to Mr Mathewson, and tell him I sent you.' He smiled easily. The matter was now entirely under his control, if anyone had any doubts.

Rogers' face was a picture of bewilderment as he realised he had inexplicably lost the initiative. That encouraged Peter to go one step further. 'You're a bright boy, Rogers. But that's not good enough. If you want your Intermediate Certificate at the end of this year, you don't only have to perform up to scratch in the exams. If you are deemed to be not of good character, a Certificate of Competence would be issued instead. That would not impress any prospective employer, Rogers. Not one little bit. You have made a very bad mistake today.'

The school bell signalled the end of the lesson, leaving Peter with game and set. But he was acutely aware that match point had yet to be played.

Headmaster Mathewson was nicknamed ‘Flogger’ after an unfortunate incident. A telegram boy had been waiting outside his office to deliver a telegram. Mathewson, opening the door, mistook him for a pupil who had been sent to him for disciplinary action. He hauled the telegram boy into his office by the collar and gave him six of the best.

He had found out his mistake on the sixth stroke, when the boy – hitherto paralysed with shock – jumped erect and shouted: ‘I’m the fuckin’ telegram boy! Whaddya think ya fuckin’ doin’?’ Mathewson, as shocked as the boy had been, apologised with bluff dignity and handed the boy a ten-shilling note.

And that was the end of that. That incident had enhanced Mathewson’s status in the school’s scheme of things, for here was a man who stood for no nonsense but could charm, or buy, whichever might work best, his way out of potential trouble.

Mathewson was now chairing a staff meeting he had hastily called. The teachers had poured their tea, loaded their saucers with biscuits, and were sitting around the scattered coffee tables in a large circle. Mathewson patted his two flowing bow waves of silvery-grey hair, ordered his gown correctly, and called the meeting to order. He stated that a boy had been sent to him with a most unusual but entirely legal letter exempting him from corporal punishment. The whole affair raised many important issues. ‘But first, perhaps Mr Morrison can give us some background.’

Peter told it as fairly as he could, admitting his feelings of physical fear and his vague references to withholding Rogers’ Intermediate Certificate. He insisted however, that that was a rhetorical gesture and that in retrospect it was difficult to say exactly what he had threatened, ‘except that it seemed rather splendid at the time!’ He grinned boyishly and obtained titters of support.

Mathewson's thin voice cut in. 'Thank you, Mr Morrison. Now let us all please note what this means.' He paused theatrically, gripping his gown at the lapels, one in each hand.

'You realise that Mr Rogers' letter is *de jure*. Teachers are bound by parents' wishes in this respect. Sorry...' he held up his hand to wave down the ripples and snorts of discontent at a legal system that could permit such things to be, 'but if any one of you canes Rogers, for whatever reason, it is likely that you will be the defendant, along with me as principal, might I add, in a legal action for assault and battery. I think that is the main point to be noted at this afternoon's meeting. You have been warned.'

'But Headmaster,' David Hughes, senior geography master, complained, 'if that oaf Rogers sets such a precedent, where does that leave us?'

'I think Mr Morrison has already indicated the answer to that,' Owens came in smoothly. 'We withhold the lout's Intermediate Certificate. There are grounds enough, as we all know.'

Peter was appalled. His rhetorical gesture had become policy – a dangerous policy that he knew from Jim could easily backfire. He was struggling to distance himself from what he had said by pointing out the dangers of such a policy when Jim spoke.

'I must warn you that if young Rogers' Intermediate Certificate was withheld, I'd have to convey to Mr Rogers, as a matter of natural justice, the nature of the allegations made against his son's character, and who made them. Mr Rogers then has the option of recourse to law. I imagine that judgments of character that would justify withholding a pupil's Intermediate Certificate would be defamatory. Courts use different standards from staffrooms, you know. The steamy miasma of gossip typical of this staffroom for instance...' Jim over-rode the interjections of 'Shame!' and 'Order' by raising his voice.

‘You must realise that certain persons here present would find themselves defendants in a legal action for sure. And one of those persons, as he pointed out earlier, would be Headmaster Mathewson himself.’

Owens leapt to his feet. ‘This is outrageous! I move the speaker be no longer heard.’

‘Second!’ was shouted in a flash.

‘I will not accept the motion,’ Mathewson looked as grim as death, his gimlet eyes boring through Jim. ‘It is unnecessary. This meeting is out of hand. I declare it closed!’ He got up and swept from the room.

Owens pushed across the room to Ken Norfolk, the chairman of the local chapter of the Teachers’ Federation, and spoke briefly. Norfolk nodded. Owens picked up a heavy ruler and banged loudly on the table: ‘Order! Order! Will the meeting come to order!’

‘What meeting, John? I thought Flogger had closed it,’ someone called.

‘I hereby declare an emergency meeting of the Wagga High Chapter of the Teachers’ Federation open,’ Norfolk intoned. There was another gasp of astonishment.

Peter was outraged: at Jim, for being a stupid, blind, pigheaded, egocentric arsehole by signalling his intentions and at Owens, for capitalising on this situation.

Owens remaining standing declaimed: ‘It is now clear that staff relations in this school have reached an impasse. It is intolerable that a member of this staff would side with one of our most recalcitrant students against his own colleagues. Such an action breaches at least two principles in our most recently adopted code of ethics, specifically numbers three and ten. In case anyone is in doubt about that, look at these...’ He passed around a bundle of sheets he’d already had duplicated. ‘This is not the first time that Mr

Henderson has stirred up dissension in this school. Would the secretary note the following?’

‘Here, what is this? Some kind of kangaroo court?’ Jim started out of his seat.

Owens, ignoring him, ploughed on, a malevolent replay of Peter’s clowning in the RSL.

‘First, he has deliberately fostered contempt for due authority by encouraging students to flout uniform regulations. Second, he has requested them to address him by his Christian name. Third, he has acted unprofessionally and provocatively by entering classrooms of colleagues and publicly destroying their canes. Fourth, it is likely that he has incited a parent to render his son uncontrollable in school...’

‘You bastard, Owens, I’ll see you in court...’

‘Fifth, by using indecent language to colleagues and threatening them with litigation.’

‘And up yours for the rent!’ Jim strode out the door. Two or three others got up and also left. As Peter too stood to leave, Owens called, ‘And I would strongly advise the federal representative to remain in his seat. This matter is certain to appear before Council and he’d better be fully apprised of the case against Henderson.’

Peter took the point. As reluctant observer, he witnessed the meeting resolve to take the matter to the Area Association with a view to seeking the expulsion of James Henderson from the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation, a move that would have disastrous effects on Jim’s career.

When Peter had returned from his first council meeting, Dorothy had met him at the station. He surprised himself at how easily and warmly he had greeted her. A twinge of

guilt, certainly, but as he'd heard that most fellows strayed after seven years, he put that to rest by telling himself that he was simply par for the marital course. And when he'd discovered, on the night of returning from Sydney, that his experience with Jackie had even revitalised the physical side of their marriage, he laid even that guilty twinge to rest.

Peter argued with himself that what had happened with Jackie was between him and her. It was enough, as long as he remained married to Dorothy, to remain true to her in the sense that mattered: by providing for her and the children, and by being kind and loving. And being kind surely included shielding Dorothy from the knowledge of his affair with Jackie. So given all that, he had his own life to lead. Jackie had been there first, and she occupied an inviolable part of him. A part they had rediscovered with joy in the space of two fleeting nights.

Jackie's first letter to him after that, addressed to the school, was on the surface friendly and chatty, recalling their 'M&M' days, when they were just good mates. Peter thought it was code for questioning their as yet undiscussed future by references to their past.

Late one night, sipping bulk sherry and allegedly marking papers, he poured out dozens of pages explaining his conflicts. His loyalty to Jim, to federation, to his principles, to his family and to Jackie. When he had finished, he sat back – noting with a shrug that he had just opened his third pack of twenties for the day – and reread the letter over and over. Something clicked. The conflict between Jim and the federation was like his conflict between Jackie and Dorothy. Loyalty to friends versus the security of a system of rules. Loyalty to a lover versus loyalty to a system called marriage. Yes, that was it. He giggled, and communicated that self-revelation in a rambling PS of another four pages.

Jackie concluded from that drunken PS that he was deeply confused, deeply in love, and on the point of making a commitment. A commitment that he had postponed for eight years. But Jackie being Jackie, she didn't push matters. She didn't tell Peter that her own marriage was in tatters, that she had moved out with her five-year-old daughter, and that her divorce was due to be heard in October that year.

The matter of Jim's expulsion came up at the next meeting of the Area Association. Ken Norfolk, as chairman of the Wagga High Chapter, presented the list of complaints. The last one, threatening to divulge confidential information in order to influence his colleagues' decisions about a student, was taken as the crucial evidence of unethical conduct. The difference between that and blackmail, Norfolk argued, was semantic.

However, the vehemence of the feeling against Jim receded in direct proportion to the distance from Wagga Wagga. The deputy of Junee High School, proud of his classical background, spoke in favour of people like Jim, 'as long as there aren't *too* many Socratic gadflies to sting the bull of Athens'. In the end, the motion was softened to read that Jim be asked to 'show cause' why he shouldn't be expelled. At least that way he'd be given the opportunity to answer the charges.

Peter felt obliged to state his conflict of interest. 'Mr Henderson is a personal friend of mine. I find these proceedings most distressing. On the other hand, I am completely aware of my role as a representative of this association. I shall serve the best way I can.' *Whatever the hell that might be*, he added to himself.

His comments were noted and the motion was passed. The secretary was instructed to write to Jim accordingly. As he left the meeting, Owens came over to Peter. 'That was courageous of you Pete, thanks for that speech. As you said, you *are* our

representative and I know you've got the guts to follow that through. That's why we elected you.' He gave Peter his gruesome smile and gripped Peter's arm before he walked away.

Peter drove immediately to Jim's place to tell him what had happened. Marie answered the door. The years had treated her well, she still had the cute little dicky-bird face, small eyes, beak of a nose, and that strident cackle that went with a kookaburra rather than the finch or the robin that her face suggested.

'G'day, Pete. Thought you might be coming around,' she clamoured as she opened the door. She then laid her hand on his arm and asked anxiously. 'Any news?'

'The worst. That stupid bloody husband of yours has sure stirred the possum. They wanted to expel him, but they softened it to ask him to show cause why he shouldn't be expelled. Well, where is the one-man revolution?'

'Hitting the piss last time I saw him. Come in and let's have it.'

Jim was in the lounge room. He looked up as Peter entered and poured a beer for him. 'Here, my judge and executioner, cop this. Well, don't stand there. Give us the drum.'

Peter told him of the association meeting, and what he had said about declaring both his interest in Jim as a friend and his role as representative. 'So, what are you going to do about it?'

'Have a guess,' Jim's eyes twinkled.

'Christ. Knowing you, just about anything. The more embarrassing the better.'

'Wrong. I'm going to do nothing. Sweet bugger all.'

'*Nothing?*' Peter was astounded.

‘Oh, except to write “Get fucked” across the secretary’s letter when it arrives and post it straight back.’

‘What’s the point, Pete?’ asked Marie. ‘Now just wipe that silly look off your face and think a minute. I agree with Jim one-hundred per cent about all this. It’s like what Thoreau said: you step to the music that *you* hear. You march to your own drum, nobody else’s, despite what you and your federation mates think. But there’s one thing I hope, Peter. Whatever your political views, I hope you and Dorothy will remain our friends. Unlike that other pack of hyenas.’

‘Hear, hear. I know you’ve been under some conflict of interest ever since we’ve been here, but it’s like Marie said. What’s the bloody point? Look, if I fight, the only way I’m not expelled is to apologise publicly to Owens and the federation. Then, sure, those guys would large-mindedly take me back into the fold.’

‘Maybe, Jim, with me on council, and with outsiders likely to take the large view, maybe you won’t have to apologise.’

‘Pete, you’re missing the point. I would be forced to march to someone else’s drum for the rest of my life!’ Jim stopped to top up glasses. While Jim stood in front of him, Peter sat, watching the foam creep up as Jim tilted the bottle. Jim looked down at him fondly.

‘You’re a bit of a mixture, you are, Pete. Now you take the others. They’ve no doubt whatsoever about how bloody right they are. The system, right up and down the line. Rules, authority, conformity, due process... all that shit. You think so too – up to a point. But let’s reflect. You must be due for subject master any day now. A spell in the federation in some executive role, join Rotary, Christ, you’ll be deputy, then principal, like a rat up a rope.’

Jim topped up his own glass, picked up his pipe and matches, sat opposite Peter and continued: ‘And yet, when you’re sitting in your principal’s office, you’ll be able to look back and say, “Yes, lads, I was a real dog in my day. When I was a student I had the affair of the century,”’ Peter’s eyes widened, but Jim was still into times past. ‘Yes, Pete, you did, you devil. And with one of the most fantastic women I’ve ever met. Anyone that earns the love of Jackie Moffatt is unlikely principal material. He can’t be all bad.’

‘Jim!’ Marie lashed out, a whipbird this time.

‘S’okay, my love. We’re mates.’ Jim sounded drunk, but he was eyeing Peter steadily.

Peter smiled to himself as those dear, warm memories flooded back, but not of ten years ago: less than two weeks. Yes, that’s what mates were for. And he’d be interested in Marie’s reaction, from the wife’s point of view. He rose, topped up his glass, lit a cigarette, inhaled and appeared deep in thought as smoke plumed through his nostrils.

‘No, Jim. Wrong. Not when I was a student. I was assistant English master at the time.’ He tilted his head back, eyeing Jim steadily as he drew again on his cigarette.

‘Well! Fuck me dead!’ Jim was a picture of stupefaction. Marie narrowed her eyes and watched Peter intently.

‘She, Jackie, is Fed Rep for Illawarra, would you believe. The first time I met her after eight years was at the last March council meeting.’ He stopped to swallow a gulp of beer to clear his throat. As he spoke, he realised how desperately he’d needed to discuss this with someone.

‘So it’s right back to base one. Wowee.’ Jim whistled.

‘Oh my God, poor Dorothy,’ whispered Marie.

‘Dorothy doesn’t know and needn’t ever know.’

‘Oh my God, poor Jackie then. You’re quite a bastard, aren’t you?’ Marie looked at him sharply.

‘Listen, have I got this right?’ Jim asked. ‘You’re just going to continue an affair at two monthly intervals? Which keeps your juices flowing, and Jackie happy – so you affect to believe – but nothing changes at home? Sorry, Pete, I tend to agree with Marie!’

Peter had thought Marie might disapprove of him but was deeply disappointed that Jim did, too. ‘Hey, Jim, mate, I think you’ve misunderstood. I don’t *like* this position! The tension...’

‘It must be absolute hell for you, old man! Gawd, would you credit it? Have you stopped to think about what you might be doing to other people? In particular to Jackie?’ Jim brought his voice down with an effort. He went on softly, ‘Pete, you’re doing a Fed Rep job again, like at tonight’s meeting. Exactly the bloody same, if you stop to think about it. Two bob each way.’

‘What are you saying, Jim? You think I should tell Dottie?’

Marie got up and walked over to Peter’s chair. She knelt, put her hand on his arm. A dove this time, she said softly: ‘Choose.’

‘But I can’t hurt Dorothy! Or the kids. I love them, I can’t hurt them!’

‘Then you have chosen.’ She shook her head slowly.

Of course he had to choose. It was one or the other. He just hadn’t seen it that clearly before. He had given the impression that the choice was going to be his present family. But was it really? What was his relationship with Dorothy, really? He loved her, yes, but his recent experience with Jackie had showed all too clearly what had been missing in his relationship with Dorothy. It was that all-encompassing frenzy to enter her every orifice with the sole aim of being interlocked with her to form one single being.

That was what real love was about. It was precisely what was lacking in his relationship with Dorothy. It had been there that night when he and Dorothy had made love for the first time. But whatever had been then was not the case now. Their relationship had become hollow: roles they acted with each other. When the children had grown up and left, their marriage would collapse, as they were thrown onto their own mutually diminishing resources. Far kinder to finish now, short and sharp.

Did he really believe that? He had talked himself into thinking that he did.

They met as arranged in the West End Bar, knowing the others would be in the Private Bar, and went outside to have dinner on their own. Then they would have the whole evening together. After dinner Peter switched the subject onto themselves. Jim's issue could wait. This couldn't.

'Jackie, we've got a lot to talk about, like about us, where we go from here.' He smiled between the candlesticks across the table at her. She smiled back, saying nothing, forcing clichés from him. 'We can't go on like this. We have to choose, don't we?'

'Choose then.' Just like a replay from Jim's.

'But, darling, it's not as simple as that. I mean, I'll have to get a transfer.'

'Apply for one then.'

'And what about you? Your marriage. I know nothing of that. You've always avoided that subject. I don't even know if you have any children.'

She smiled. 'Silly boy, you've seen the baby tracks.' He had, but she'd said nothing.

'Look, Jackie, you're holding out on me. Why? I've been open with you!' He sounded petulant. He was angry with himself for bugging this up so badly.

‘It’s nothing to do with you, Peter. That is, “you” in the sense of “us”. It’s my problem, and I’ll handle it my way.’ She stubbed her cigarette delicately, and then looking sideways at him, her eyes with that ever-present hint of mischief, ‘Aren’t you holding out on me?’

He looked blank.

She rested her chin on her fingers, elbows on the table, looking him full in the face.

‘Choose.’

His previous rationalisations flashed through his head in less than a second. He saw that he had no choice.

‘Jackie, will you marry me?’

She leaned across and brushed her lips against his ear. ‘Of course. And now let’s get the fuck out of here.’

Jim had indeed returned the secretary’s show-cause letter in the manner foreshadowed. His case was to be heard on the last day of the present session of council. Peter opened discussion by reading the list of complaints, then moving the request that Mr Henderson show cause why he should not be expelled from the Federation. Peter added, ‘I move that way as area representative. I myself have different views about this case than the majority of my colleagues and I reserve the right to vote against my own motion. I have explained my position to my local association.’

Brookes spoke immediately. ‘If you’ll excuse me Mr President, there seems to be an important procedural point here. It is of course commendable of Mr Morrison to inform both us and his association that he disagrees with the motion that it is his

responsibility to address. With the utmost respect, sir, this raises the possibility that the Riverina Association may – I say, may – be in danger of not having proper advocacy of its position. I raise this purely as a procedural matter, of course.’ Tom stopped, caught Peter’s eye, and smiled apologetically as if to say ‘I’m sure you understand, old man’.

You bloody destructive sod. Peter was outraged. He’d meant to be honest and open, and here Brookes had twisted it to look like he was stabbing his own association in the back. But after some nit-picking debate, the president was finally convinced that he might reasonably proceed. Brookes smiled across at Peter, as if delighted that the way was now clear, but of course you understand that one does have to raise these matters.

The debate on Peter’s motion dragged on. No amendment had been moved. Most members seemed terrified of creating a precedent; only one or two had come out strongly in favour of the motion. Someone suggested that Jim be invited to speak for himself next meeting, but the secretary expressed an aversion to receiving his own correspondence returned to him with obscenities scrawled over it. As usual, Tom got a laugh at someone else’s expense.

Then Jackie spoke. ‘Here we have a man who is an excellent teacher, from all accounts. He’s an individualist and holds an individualist’s view of education. The question before us is simple. Does Federation wish to make it public that we do not tolerate individualists, idealists, and humanists in our ranks? Surely not. The present issue is a storm in a rural teacup. Mr Henderson, through acts of extraordinary tactlessness, has alienated most of his colleagues. The answer is simple. Request that the department transfer him as quickly as possible. I’m sure they would agree. Order will then return to Wagga High, and we will not be forced to set precedents so soon after our code of ethics has been implemented. I accordingly move an amendment to Mr Morrison’s motion.’

‘Second!’ was shouted immediately.

The meeting closed five minutes later.

‘Darling, you were magnificent! Brilliant! Oh, I love you.’ He was on the verge of tears. Of pure joy. Of admiration for this marvellous person who had fulfilled all those promises from her tempestuous years at Armidale.

‘When, Peter?’ she asked quietly.

‘I’ll be in touch as soon as I can. Promise.’ The whistle blew. ‘Goodbye, darling.’ They kissed greedily until the train started to move. He stumbled inside, waved to her from the window until he could see her no more. He laid back, tears coursing freely down his cheeks.

He felt guilty this time when he met Dorothy. Very bloody guilty. Before and after he embraced her. And especially when he kissed Mary, who was eager to be tossed in the air and kissed by her Daddy. He quickly got onto the subject of the meeting and their decision.

‘Darling, I’ve got to go to school and tell Jim straight away.’

‘Oh Peter, so soon?’ She pouted. ‘I’ve cooked a special tea for us. There’s something I’d like to tell you. And you must be so tired after that awful train journey. Can’t it wait until this evening? Look, we’ll ask them round for drinks. *Please*, Peter. You don’t want to go to that silly school straight away. They’re not expecting you....’ She kissed him again, urgently.

Dorothy was vibrant, glowing. Peter asked her what it was she had wanted to tell him, but looking coy, she said she’d tell him when he returned from school before the

others came. ‘And now,’ she smiled, ‘you can go to your silly school, but don’t be late home, darling, will you?’

His euphoria from Sydney had long since evaporated. He had a terrible fear of what that ‘something to tell him’ was. Over her ‘special tea’, which comprised roast duck followed by black forest cheesecake, Dorothy was quite skittish. Peter finally couldn’t stand it any longer.

Affecting bluff heartiness, he said: ‘Come on, spit it out. Let’s hear the worst.’

She giggled. ‘You *know*, don’t you Pete? Well, I might be wrong, but I’m two weeks late and... oh, it just feels so right! I’m sure, Peter, I’m *sure!*’ Leaning across the table, she kissed him. ‘Shall we tell them tonight?’

Dorothy made that the first item on the agenda when Jim and Marie arrived. Jim kissed her with, ‘Hey, that’s tree-mendous, isn’t it? Pity we can’t crack a sprog or two ourselves. How much do you want for it?’ Marie chirped all the right things while staring at Peter, her sparrow’s eyes asking, ‘And how does *that* affect your choice, Tiger Tim?’

Later, Peter described the debate on Jim’s future. Just as he had hoped, Peter said that what was a dreadful catastrophe in Wagga, would be seen as a storm in a teacup elsewhere. ‘In fact,’ he said, ‘that was the argument used by the mover of the amendment, a very clever amendment that saved everyone’s face.’

‘Who was that, Pete?’ Dorothy asked.

‘Oh,’ he felt himself go crimson, ‘the Illawarra Rep.’ He went on with a forced laugh. ‘The real point is, how do you feel about the prospect of a transfer, Jim?’

‘Frankly, old man, I couldn’t give a monkey’s. It’s perfectly obvious that the NSW Education Department and we should part company. Actually, and this is to be

treated as confidential, old son, we're planning to go overseas. The *Oronsay* is sailing from Sydney on the 18th of December.'

'There are plenty of openings in England for Australian teachers,' Marie chattered on, 'and we've been making a few enquiries. Leicestershire is a very progressive authority, and we'd like to give it a bash there, for a start. It'd be a bloody sight better than the shit heap at Wagga High, that's for sure.'

'Hey, you've really got all this worked out! How long have you been working on this?' Peter felt more than a little put out. 'Shit, if I'd have known this, we could have settled this whole bloody business here easily! I'd have only needed to say you were going overseas and the matter would have been closed.'

Jim looked uncomfortable. 'Peter, I'm terribly sorry. I really am. But we haven't actually got job offers yet. Anyway, it's a matter of principle. I don't want the matter closed by an irrelevancy. I wanted to see how our NSW Teachers' Federation would handle this. I think they, you, have come out of it very well indeed.' The sardonic Jim returned. 'My faith in the system is restored.'

'Thanks a million. But when I think of all the man hours...'

'Peter,' Dorothy said reproachfully, 'don't spoil it. Marie, we'll be terribly sorry to see you go. But I'm positive you'll love it. It'll be for the best.'

'For sure, Jim,' mumbled Peter, 'I'm sorry too, course I am. But at least if you were in Broken Hill or Coonabarabran we could spend Christmases together. When do you announce the glad tidings?'

'Just as soon as we get confirmation from Leicester, or wherever. We're also interested in progressive schools like Dartington or Summerhill. I'm vaguely thinking of

doing postgraduate work later, maybe going to Canada. Oh Gawd, there's all sorts of opportunities. We're not tying ourselves down, at this stage.'

Peter was smarting. He'd felt Jim had been underhand. This was why Jim hadn't been sweating any blood over this business. He'd had his out up his sleeve all the time.

Lucky sod. Where's my out?

Despite their howls for blood weeks earlier, most of the school staff was greatly relieved about the outcome: a nasty precedent had been avoided. Peter was congratulated on his handling of the matter. Owens, quick as the next man to capitalise on the changed atmosphere, seconded the vote of commendation that Peter received.

If Peter's public position was rock-solid, his internal one had dissolved into an agonised pulp. Could he leave Dorothy when she was pregnant? Would he wait until after the birth? Leave *three* fatherless kids? Alimony and maintenance payments for three children? They'd have to sell the house at Wagga. But then where would Dorothy live with her three orphans?

But even that wasn't the issue, he now realised. It just wasn't him to renege on his solemn promise to Dorothy. It wasn't in his belief in himself, or in his principles, to break his promise to love, honour and cherish: this was a contract by any standards. And here he was now, Peterfamilias, on the one hand about to increase his familial base still further and on the other, considering smashing his familial edifice into bleeding ruins. *Peter the Rock, indeed!*

And then there was Jackie. Their love had reignited in seconds after ten years of cold neglect. And he had promised to marry her. How could he ignore that?

He felt hopelessly, horribly trapped. He had built cul-de-sacs into every turning of the mental maze in which he had placed himself.

‘Peter! For God’s sake come in. You look like Banquo’s ghost!’ Marie’s voice showed her concern in a low screech.

He stumbled through the front door. ‘Is Jim in? I must talk to him.’

‘Through here.’

She led him into the living room, where Jim was listening to The Goons, glass in hand. He looked up, saw Peter’s face, and nodded to Marie, ‘Well pet, don’t just stand there. Give the man a drink.’ He switched off Spike Milligan in mid-gobble.

Peter fell into a seat. Marie thrust a glass into his hand and stood anxiously watching him.

‘It’s confirmed. She’s pregnant.’

‘If congratulations were in order, I’d offer them. Obviously they’re not.’

Peter sat staring in front of him. Finally he said, ‘I’ve asked Jackie to marry me. She... accepted...’ He broke down. Ugly tearing sounds erupted from inside him. Marie’s face squeezed itself into a size smaller, covering it with her hands. Jim sat on the arm of Peter’s chair and put an arm around his shoulder.

‘Dear... dumb... bastard.’

Minutes passed. Peter pleaded: ‘Jim, what the hell can I do? Please help me!’

‘Let me refill your glass and let’s try and sort something out.’ Jim circulated the beer bottle, filled and lit his pipe, and sat opposite Peter. Marie fluttered to the floor where she perched at Jim’s feet, eyeing Peter steadily. Peter finally broke the silence.

‘I’m sure you can guess the story. After I left you, that word *choose* stuck to me like a burr. Of course, I knew it, really. I might have given you the impression that I was going to stick with Dottie...’ He looked enquiringly but no one gave any sign. ‘But really, I knew it was Jackie. You know, I’ve got this funny way of making decisions.’

Jim gave a hoot of laughter. ‘You can say that again!’

‘Well, there we were having dinner, the night before council, and I knew I had to clinch something one way or another there and then. But I couldn’t just ask her to marry me, it wasn’t possible. How could I marry her, just like that? Apart from my complications, I didn’t know her situation. I was stumbling, wanting more information, more bits of the puzzle to be put together, so that there would come a time when I’d see the full picture. Then I could make my choice. That’s the way I make decisions: wait until I’ve got as many bits of information as possible and let the picture take shape.’

He sighed, ‘But there was Jackie *not* putting her bits into the picture. She was forcing me to shape the picture and sort of like you, she kept staring at me with those eyes, Christ those eyes, saying nothing except “choose”, “choose”. Then, something I can’t understand. Do you know she’s been separated nearly all this year and her divorce comes up in a couple of months! Why didn’t she *tell* me?’

‘My opinion of that woman goes up by the minute,’ Marie murmured.

‘So there. I chose. And I was deliriously happy, right up to the moment I get home. Then the bombshell, which Dottie dropped ever so lightly, and which was confirmed this afternoon.’

‘What would you have chosen if all those bits *had* been in the picture?’ Jim asked.

‘I, er, it wouldn’t have made any difference. I think... I don’t know.’

‘And now it does? What’s changed, Pete, what’s really changed?’

‘The third kid, of course.’

‘So? A slightly higher maintenance payment. That’s a matter of arithmetic between you and Jackie, to see if that’s going to be an issue or not.’

‘Jim,’ Marie whispered reproachfully. She got up and sat on the arm of Peter’s chair, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder. He put his hand on hers.

‘Dorothy. She’s more vulnerable pregnant then with another baby. Yes, that’s a big factor. Dorothy with a three year old, well that’s tough but she could go back and teach... whatever. A baby sets the clock back another three years...’

‘Peter, have you thought about speaking to Dorothy yourself? After all, you are rather assuming an awful lot on her part, aren’t you? Maybe she’d like to be shat of you.’ She gave his shoulder a playful shove.

‘I have actually.’ Peter looked up at her, ‘Thought about it, I mean. No. Our relationship isn’t like that. You and Jim probably could as you’re more like friends than Dottie and I are. We are, well, *roles* to each other. She’s perfect wife and mother, and plays it well; I’m father and provider, and mostly I play that well. It works. Well, at least, it has so far.’

‘Bloody hell,’ Marie dropped her hand, and went to fetch another bottle of beer.

‘No, don’t get me wrong. It’s just that if I did tell her and I did leave, then her agony quotient is so much. If I did tell her but didn’t leave, it’s not all that much less, except that our roles would in future be buggerised more than somewhat. It wouldn’t work.’

‘Peter, a guy who sees marriage in terms of roles doesn’t deserve to fall in love with someone like Jackie and consider marrying her. *That* wouldn’t work, believe me.’

‘But I don’t act roles with Jackie. I’m me. And she’s very much her.’ Peter’s large brown eyes widened and stared mournfully across the room.

‘Peter, do you remember talking about the Dionysians and the Apollonians, and you saying that Jackie was the one and you the other? Well, you were wrong. You’re both, that’s your bloody trouble. That’s why I can like you, and Jackie can love you; and you still can fit into the NSW Education Department to the extent that you see it as fulfilling and rewarding.’ Jim relit his pipe, and leaned forward earnestly.

‘It’s not finance, it’s not family love, it’s not even protecting Dorothy that’s holding you back now. I reckon that if Dorothy hadn’t been pregnant when you’d returned from your Dionysian jaunt in Sydney, you would be in a state pretty similar to the one you’re in tonight. You keep using double standards, so that those bits in the jigsaw you were talking about are really two different puzzles. What you’ve got to decide is what picture you think you can live with for the rest of your life. What’s your basic, rock-bottom belief about yourself? If you can find the answer to that, you’ll know what to do.

‘Either way, it’s going to hurt.’

Peter was sitting on a bench on platform four, waiting for the Wollongong train. He was in Sydney for an ‘extraordinary’ meeting of council. It was the best excuse he could think of, to explain to Dorothy why he was going to Sydney. She had been unusually inquisitive, demanding to know what was on the agenda, complaining that she hadn’t been warned that all these extra meetings were going to occur. It was unlike her, but Peter thought it highly likely that his own behaviour over the past few weeks had been in itself extraordinary enough. He was fairly sure she knew that something was up. But as perfect

wives don't ask fathers and providers penetrating questions about their behaviour, unless it becomes too extraordinary, she didn't press matters.

He reviewed his years at Wagga. He'd done well. While he understood Jim, and liked him and Marie very much, he couldn't live like that himself, confronting and challenging, then tramping the world with no plans of settling anywhere. On the other hand, he wasn't as bad as his father who forewent promotion, just so he could stay in his rut in Bathurst. He had been deeply impressed with his experience on council. He felt it had given him a perspective on things. A few rotten eggs in one place didn't mean the whole system was wrong. If you just took the large view, you would then find that the eggs weren't so rotten after all. Look at Owens, who'd ended up supporting him.

There was little doubt now on which side the coin was falling. His most basic, rock-bottom belief? *I believe in system, order and obligation. I am Peter the Rock, a part of that structure. That is my credo, and I have proved it over the years.* This year, when there were rifts in the masonry at school, he'd helped to shore them up. And now another structure was under threat, his marriage that he had contracted to maintain. Right or wrong, he'd done that. And had to accept the consequences. The dice aren't cast a second time.

And one of those consequences was that he had to tell Jackie this. He knew Jim was right. It was going to hurt, all right. Hurt like screaming, fucking hell. Even the thought of that gripped his guts and was strangling his throat. *Blast...* he fumbled with his handkerchief and blew his nose. People were watching. He had thought of writing his reneging to Jackie. He'd drafted several letters, but no, that was the coward's way out. And he desperately wanted to see her again, one last time. So he had arranged this so-called 'extraordinary' meeting.

The Wollongong train arrived and Jackie was the first off. Briefly scanning the platform, she ran over to meet him. She was dressed in a sky-blue dress and matching jacket. She looked radiant, her white stilettos flying like disturbed seagulls as she ran to Peter and fell into his arms.

‘Oh darling, darling Peter! I’m so happy.’ She kissed him again, and stood back to watch him, holding his hands in front and between them. But those large, soft, brown eyes just stared at her, tears glistening at the corners. His bottom lip was trembling.

‘What’s the matter? *Peter!* What’s the matter?’

‘Let’s get a taxi. Out of here.’ They climbed into a taxi: ‘Menzies Hotel,’ he told the driver.

‘Why the Menzies, Peter?’ She asked on the way.

‘I didn’t want us to go to the Wentworth this time. Too much like council.’ He smiled wanly. She shrugged. *Not now, not in the taxi.* He told her about Jim and Marie going away, about how pleased the locals were about the council’s decision thanks to her, about his improved standing.

He kept talking while they got out of the taxi, signed in at reception, and then they were in their room.

‘Now, Pete, don’t bullshit me. Something’s really wrong, isn’t it?’

He nodded. ‘Jackie, I can’t.’ Christ, all those speeches, and now this. *I can’t.*

‘Can’t? *Can’t?* Oh no.’ She stood there, head bowed. Her face covered with her hands. She stood still, silent. Then, as if to herself, ‘*Not a second time...*’

That phrase took the handle of the knife of guilt and gave it a sharp twist. Peter groaned with the pain and doubled up. He reached out his hand for hers, to quieten the agony, to comfort himself. But it reached into nothingness. She had gone.

Gone before he had explained a thing.

SYDNEY

1968

CHAPTER 7

Peter let the Valiant coast down the drive and into the garage. It rolled to a halt at exactly the right spot. The first success for the day. He slammed the roller door down with a crash. He'd had nine years as subject master at North Pymble High, and what was there to show for it? A few kids looked like they'd shape up for the Higher School Certificate, or HSC, no problem, but the others? They were too bone idle to even think about when they'd have to earn a crust for a change, or were too busy frigging around with protest buttons and anti-Vietnam rallies. Or both. Usually both.

But flip that coin and what do you find on the other side? Principal Thomson obsessed with keeping student protest under control and bugger the academic work of the school. Thomson had called a special assembly last period this morning, Peter recalled fuming, so the HSC English class goes for a burton. Why? So Thomson can line the whole school up in the hot sun and harangue them on patriotism. While Thomson ranted on, his deputy, equally obsessed, got his thrills by stalking the outskirts of the parade, where kids had sought some shade, hauling them back into line by their shirt fronts and hissing into their faces. The teachers were required to walk up and down the ranks to remove protest badges and buttons. Except Peter, who had remained in the staffroom, alternating between anger that his class had been lost, and worry that he'd be in trouble for not attending this compulsory assembly. What would his poor old father, retired now

in his beloved Bathurst, make of schools these days? And here Peter was with another twenty years to go!

He mounted the fern-lined stepping-stones to the front door, telling himself to ignore the PEACE symbol Phil had stuck on it.

‘Christ, what a day! I’ve had it,’ he announced as he let himself in. Dorothy was waiting for him in the family room, face upheld for a kiss. A face still unlined, her skin clear. She was dressed in a muumuu, covering her now full figure. From the shoulders up, she was still attractive; from the shoulders down... selectively attractive. Peter had to smile at that.

‘What’s the joke, hun?’

‘Oh nothing,’ he grinned. ‘It’s good to be home after that damned school. Well, what’s new?’

‘You go onto the terrace and I’ll bring the usual. Plus something special.’

Peter went outside to the back terrace, hung with ferns and walled with vines on two sides, overlooking Lane Cove Ravine. He sat at the patio table and drank in the scene. So cool and peaceful, surrounded by natural bush, tall gumtrees, semi-tropical shrubs and hanging greenery. You wouldn’t credit that the Pacific Highway was only three blocks away, and that neighbours were crammed behind all that lovely greenery. The screen door slammed and Dorothy put a glass of his favourite fino sherry in front of him, just chilled enough for a light dew to condense on the thin glass, and a pile of mail. She dropped onto the seat beside him.

‘Try the top one, Pete. It looks interesting.’

It certainly did: *Meanjin Quarterly* was stamped on the envelope. A letter, not the self-addressed manila envelope he was used to. He tore it open.

Dear Mr Morrison,

We are pleased to inform you that your poem “Turramurra Soliloquy” has been most favourably reviewed by our editors and we shall be publishing this work in the March issue of *Meanjin*.

Please find enclosed a cheque for \$50.

We shall be very pleased to consider any further work that you may wish to contribute to this Journal...

‘YAHOO! Darling, I’ve done it! I’ve hit the big time!’

‘That’s for my clever husband.’ She kissed him again.

Since coming to Sydney and realising that this posting was likely to be a long one, and feeling increasingly disenchanted with that thought, he’d returned to his old love: writing poetry. He’d had a couple of poems published, in fifth-rate magazines for laughable fees – such as half a dozen copies of the magazine to distribute to hopefully admiring friends. But *Meanjin* was something else. It could be the start of... who knows? Maybe this was the way out of that aching nothingness that had been depressing him.

‘Dottie, how would you like to be married to a professional writer?’

Dorothy looked startled. ‘But I am already.’

‘No, sweet, I mean, well, let’s say this thing takes off? What price North Pymble High then? Eh?’

‘Silly-billy. That’s a career. This is just a hobby.’ She patted his arm and stood up. ‘A very clever hobby though. Oh dear, Mary will be home any moment from basketball, and Phil’s got to get out early for his jazz group. And where’s Jimmy? He should be home by now.’

'I waved to him as I passed Firelli's place, he's probably having tea with young Gino,' Peter mumbled tonelessly.

'Bother him! I wish he'd tell me. I'll get our tea on.'

Hobby indeed. And *tea*. He turned tea into dinner by accompanying it with a good Hunter red, bought at the vineyard door.

Peter excused himself as soon as he'd finished. He had a lot of thinking to do. He picked up the half-empty bottle of Drayton's Hermitage and went with his tulip glass out onto the terrace. The sun was just setting; silhouetting the vine leaves draping the terrace in gold and red.

That poem, Peter mused, was the best news for months, for years, in fact. Five, six years ago he'd felt those stirrings. *Write. Kill that aching void*. At first it had been a kind of therapy after the guilt and trauma with Jackie, but as he got into it, he nurtured a secret hope that his writing might eventually provide his way out of the pressure and conflict that teaching increasingly imposed. *Resign from teaching, be a freelance writer*. He hadn't seriously thought about that since those far-off Armidale days, when his middling academic performance had ruled that option out. Now might it be possible?

He held his glass up to the setting sun. Its light picked up the purple meniscus, piercing deeply into the rich red in the circular bowl of the glass. He swirled the wine in the glass and sniffed the rim, trying to identify the 'sweaty saddles' nose that was supposed to be the trademark of a Hunter shiraz but it eluded him. If he was going to get into this wine thing seriously, he knew he'd have to give up smoking. God always paid out one pleasure against another, the spoilsport.

True to Jim's prediction, Peter had been offered promotion to subject master at the end of that year at Wagga. And, as Jim had also predicted, he had gone out in glory.

Peter was popular with all the staff, radical and conservative alike, and held in high esteem by both the NSW Department and the Teachers' Federation. He was only despised by himself.

Peter had written to Jackie, trying to explain what he'd so miserably failed to do in that room at the Menzies. The letter was returned unopened. He wrote again. That letter was not returned. He didn't know to this day whether she'd ever received it, or had understood his complex but sincere reasoning. He had so desperately wanted her to understand that he hadn't seen her only as his bimonthly screw in Sydney. He'd hoped, while shuddering at the thought, that he might explain his position to her at the next council meeting. But she hadn't been there. She had resigned 'for personal reasons', as Brookes had read out from her resignation letter at the next meeting, his blue eyes fixed mockingly on Peter. How he had refrained from leaping across the table and squeezing the life from the neck that was underneath that light blue tie he didn't know.

Equally shattering was the discovery, some years later when they both had been drinking too much, that Dorothy had known about his affair with Jackie. She had noticed a love bite on Peter's neck on the first night back from the initial council meeting in 1958. At first she thought he'd just been playing around with some floozie he'd picked up in Sydney, which while hurtful was unlikely to undermine the role of father and provider. But then she'd discovered in the wastepaper basket a crumpled false start of the long, drunken letter Peter had written. That page was only about the Jim affair, but it contained her name: '... so Jackie, you see...' Dorothy had known that the extra meeting in Sydney was 'extraordinary'. She had gone through hell until he had returned home.

Wife and mother had retaliated by upping the ante on father and provider: she had stopped taking the pill. Young Jimmy was the result.

Peter hung up and returned to the family room, stunned. ‘You wouldn’t credit it! Guess who that was?’ He beamed at his family, who were variously knitting, doing homework, and watching television. ‘Jim! At least he said it was Jim. Sounded more like some kind of American hippie to me.’

‘Peter! That’s beaut! When can they...’

Dorothy was interrupted by Mary. ‘Uncle Jim? From Wagga?’ She returned to her homework.

‘Yes, Mary, that Uncle Jim,’ Phil said in a superior tone. ‘A cool cat, that one.’

‘Hey,’ young Jimmy asked, ‘isn’t he the man with my name?’

‘You could put it like that,’ Peter smiled. ‘Well anyway, you can all refresh your memories in approximately forty-five minutes. He and Auntie Marie are coming round to see us, and then it’s off to bed with you, Jimbo.’

An hour later, there was a furious pounding on the front door and continuous ringing of the doorbell. Peter opened the door.

‘Hey, man! It’s just great to see you. Just great!’

Jim’s face was barely recognisable, bisected as it was by the arch of a long moustache, and framed in a shroud of shoulder-length blond hair topped with a floppy leather hat with a large feather. He was wearing a suede, frontier-style jacket, with a line of fine shredded suede trailing from the arm seams and around the bottom of the coat.

Marie was dressed similarly, except her headgear was a leather headband, encrusted with fine beadwork. Her pageboy cut had gone; her long dark hair hanging instead like a stage curtain, its parting held open by the headband. But between that parting was Marie’s face, all right, her unmistakable sparrow’s nose peeping through. She

looked in her twenties – until she tossed back one wing of the curtain with a cock of her head, showing a very experienced bird’s eye, nested in fine wrinkles. Peter wondered if she’d now talk like a whooping crane or a roadrunner.

They leapt upon their hosts, kisses and hugs all round. The children were entranced, particularly when told to ‘cut that “Uncle” and “Auntie” crap. It’s “Jim” and “Marie”, okay?’ It was okay. Phil in particular was spellbound.

They settled in the living room. Peter immediately went to the fridge and returned with a tray, bottles and glasses.

‘Now, Jim, for God’s sake tell us what’s caused this transmogrification, seeing that you never wrote and told us. And in English if you don’t mind. Actually, Australian will do. Perhaps some Tooheys will jolt your vocal chords back to normal.’ Peter grinned,

‘Don’t heavy me, man,’ Jim grinned back. ‘Okay, as I said on the phone, I’ve got a job at the new Macquarie U. God, where do we begin? It’s been *fantastic*, Pete, the whole trip. I never write letters. Neither does Marie, I have just this moment discovered. Hey, why didn’t you write these guys? Sure, we’re bullshitting you a bit here...’ He went on, not very coherently.

‘Forget him. He’s stoned.’ Marie tossed in laconically, but on seeing Dorothy look puzzled and Phil’s eyes widen, she went on hurriedly, ‘Like, I mean jet-lagged. We got in early this morning and Macquarie had arranged this apartment so we went there. I had a bit of sleep but Jim here had to go to the U. Do you know it’s 5a.m. our time? I guess we’re both pretty pooped. We just dropped in to say a quick hi this time. We’ll catch up properly later; we got such a hell of a lot to talk about. Sometime soon, eh?’

Peter insisted on driving them. North Ryde was only fifteen minutes away, no trouble at all. Jim sat in the front, Marie perched on the back seat, leaning her head

between the two men. Jim was awake now, and a lot quieter. His accent, Peter noticed, was rather closer to his native Australian, except for odd words and phrases.

‘I’m sorry about that Pete. I made a bit of an asshole of myself, didn’t I? Marie was right, I was as high as a kite. Only just getting down now.’

‘Don’t quite follow.’

‘Stoned.’

‘Stoned? Like, you mean cannabis? Hey, over here that’s highly illegal, you must know that.’ Peter was alarmed.

‘Forget it. Some other time. Look, right now I’ve just got to ask you... just ask. Okay? Boy, I’m really looking forward to some heavy rap sessions with you. Jesus a lot’s happened.’

‘Get to the point, Jimmy Baby,’ Marie complained.

‘What in fuck’s name happened between you and Jackie?’ Jim suddenly asked.

Peter jerked the wheel slightly. He turned to look at Jim across Marie’s sweet, bird’s profile. He opened his mouth. His voice changed gear, twice, as he spoke.

‘After I... told her I couldn’t... she resigned from council. Haven’t seen her since.’ He swallowed hard.

Marie leaned forward and kissed him on the side of his face. ‘Poor old bugger. We care one hell of a lot for you. Don’t forget that.’

Jim squeezed Peter’s thigh. ‘Right on. Ah, nearly there. First right, yes, it’s that apartment block there. You can just see the campus development down the road, under those lights. At least I hope it’s developing. Looks like a rat’s arse at the moment.’

‘Jim, that was the nicest thing you’ve said all night.’

‘What?’

‘Rat’s arse. You forgot to say “ass”.’ Peter punched him on the arm, as he was getting out.

Jim stood outside the car and brayed: ‘And fuck you too, sport. Ooroo.’ They waved him off.

Peter had recovered from that moment of sentimentality, realising that they hadn’t talked about anything. Not even about his acceptance letter this afternoon. Their sympathy just at the end there had touched him. That wasn’t phoney and he wouldn’t forget it. As for the play-acting, you could forgive that after all their experiences.

He returned home to find that Dorothy was not so charitable. ‘I don’t like what’s happened to those two. They’re just not real. Not them at all.’ Phil had told her what ‘stoned’ meant.

‘Come on, Dottie, they were completely shagged out underneath it all. They were just acting the fool, to cover their tiredness. Anybody would change their ideas and their speech, after what they’ve been through.’

‘Not to that extent. Their language and manners are so, well, *crude*. I was worried the children were there,’ she finished.

‘Now look, Dorothy,’ Peter was barely able to control a surge of anger, ‘they’re our friends. I’m looking forward to lots of long evenings with them, whether you like them or not. And when they’re in our house, I expect you to do what you have always done for our guests: be a proper hostess.’

The look in her eyes told him he’d made his point only too clearly. Lying stiffly in bed later on, he felt sorry. Not only that, he knew he’d better make it up, otherwise it would only be more difficult in future.

‘Sorry, pet.’ He turned over and rummaged in the dark. In his mind’s eye, he dressed Dorothy in a beaded headband and frontiers jacket. It made her look very sexy.

Only a few days after their first meeting, Peter was hailed in the corridor by a familiar voice.

‘Hi there. Looking for Room 6Bl. A Miss Lafferty, prac teaching with Mr Morrison...’

‘Well, I’ll be buggered!’ Peter exclaimed. ‘So *you’re* supervising Miss Lafferty!’

It was instantly clear that Miss Lafferty was doing splendidly and didn’t need supervising, so they left her and walked round the school grounds, chatting. Jim was explaining the revolution in schools in Canada, and asked how the Flogger Mathewsons of the system were handling it in Australia.

‘Simple. Either by fighting on all fronts or pretending it doesn’t exist.’ Peter told him about the protest button assembly that Principal Thomson had called.

Jim choked. ‘Those kids have every right to protest about being murdered. Yes, fucking murdered! In a year or less, some of them will be having their asses burned off with napalm, or their cocks burned off with the Saigon green drip.’

Peter was shaken by Jim’s passion. ‘Look old man, it’s last period. Why don’t we just go back, give Miss Lafferty a High Distinction, and continue in the local?’

In the bar, Jim continued spraying anger, this time about the appointment of teachers. ‘How would you staff a school, if you were director general? Appoint the best applicant for the job? Or allocate teachers according to their date of application to the teaching service? The latter, if you’re in New South Wales. You promote the simple

fuckwit who's been waiting the longest. And he will be both – simple and fuckwitted, that is to say. Why? Because the good guys will already have left.'

'Good guys like you, you mean.'

'Of course, guys just like me.' Jim grinned. 'Which leaves the real nerds to get to be principal and run the show! Honestly, can you imagine anything more fucking stupid in your life? Unless, of course, you *want* a system that turns off anyone with a creative spark in them...'

'Don't tell me, Jim, I don't want to know.'

Jim was surprised. He'd expected a counter-attack, not least on the matter of Peter's candidacy for nerdship. And here was this drooping figure looking sadly into his beer. 'Look, you know I'm committed to the system. Formally. Yet, now that my run at Wagga is well and truly over and I've seen the rest of the thing in action, I'm... well, I'm wondering how I can live with it. Basically, I agree with you, bugger it. And I wish I didn't!'

The figure straightened up, took a mouthful of beer, and re-drooped. 'For years now I've been disillusioned. I tried to snap out of it by taking up writing. Hey, yes, I forgot to tell you. The day you arrived, *Meanjin* informed me they'd accepted a poem of mine. If it's the precursor of more to come, then stuff it, I'm going to chuck teaching in.' Peter grinned defiantly.

'Boy! I knew you had it there. Somewhere. Well, what does Dorothy think of that?'

'Oh Peter, now is that really *wise*?' He mocked, putting on a suburban whine that sounded nothing like Dorothy. 'Is that the thing to *do*? I mean, what would the

neighbours say? It's a larvely hobby, darls, but no security.' Jim raised an eyebrow at the brutality of the caricature.

Peter noted it and had the grace to cringe. 'God, I keep catching myself doing things like that. Got to stop. Or do something about it.'

'Jackie?' Jim asked quietly.

Peter looked at him sharply. 'No, no, that's all past. It's just that although the old Dorothy's a good stick, she's about as exciting as one. To tell you the real truth, she bores me to bloody death. Which makes me feel bad because she tries her best. I bounce between the pointlessness of school, and the vacuity of home, with occasional goodies thrown in which might just make it worthwhile. Like, for instance, finding a nice red wine, getting a poem published, or whinging about it all to an old mate.'

'Now here's a man with a flourishing midlife crisis,' Jim muttered.

'What the hell's that?'

'Male menopause. How our fucked over society lays shit on middle-aged men. The latest craze. You get over it by going to Gestalt workshops, smoking dope, swinging, yoga, and joining protest movements. The here and now is where it's at. Fuck the future. It's where the young look at the future and don't want a bar of it, and the middle-aged look at the past and think likewise. It only leaves the present. You and a bunch of chicks to groove with. Not bad.'

'You know, I hardly understood a word you've said. Talk bloody English.'

'Look, Pete, why not give the old Dottie a real treat tonight. Call her and say you're sparing her your boorish company just this once. Eat with us. We've got one hell of a lot to talk about.'

‘Pete! Great to see you.’ Marie skipped up to him and kissed him on the lips. She was wearing a mini-skirted shift, with what appeared to be American Indian designs embroidered on it. He hadn’t seen her in full daylight for years and was astonished. Her legs, the first time he’d ever seen so much of them, now he thought of it, were slim, shapely, evenly tanned. She didn’t have much else to do, he supposed, but lie in the sun all day. In the buff, by the look of it. It just didn’t seem possible that she and Dorothy were born within a month of each other. Or Peter and Jim, come to that. Jim seemed hard and fit, his unbuttoned shirt revealing a flat, hairy brown stomach. Peter was suddenly aware that he was turning to flab around the jowls and waist.

‘You look tremendous, Marie, how on earth do you manage it?’

She turned to look at him, obviously flattered. ‘Two things. Diet and positive thinking. We’ll give you examples of both tonight.’

The meal turned out to be vegetarian: bean and millet casserole, grated vegetables.

‘Marie’s just trying to impress you, Pete.’ Jim admitted with a grin. ‘We do eat meat, you know. Marie’s more into this than I am though, as you can probably tell. Sexy little devil, isn’t she?’

‘She always was.’

‘Stop putting me on! You’ve never thought about me as a sex object in your life.’ Marie cackled. *She was right*, thought Peter, *until two weeks ago*. ‘Talking of sex objects, when are we going to see La Dorothea round here?’

‘Maybe when she’s asked,’ Peter evaded the question.

‘Does she want to be asked? Straight up, Pete. I got bad vibes last week.’

‘Okay, straight up, if that means what I think it means, you frighten her. Not you personally, but what you stand for. I’d like us all to be friends and for you to come round a lot. But if and when you do, would you play it down a little? She’s a simple girl. She doesn’t understand. I hardly do myself.’

‘He’s getting there though, Marie. You ought to have heard him in the pub. Could have been me, ten years ago.’

‘No, Jim. I never had your anger or aggression, or your support. Marie’s brought you out, and you her. As you once said, you were friends and live as friends. I’m living with a wife, not a friend. A wife who, I’m sorry to say, I find extremely boring.’

‘And a job that he finds extremely boring.’

‘Oh Pete, and it could’ve been so different.’ Marie cupped her chin on her hand and stared at him. ‘What a mess. I’m so sorry.’

‘Look, do you mind? I’m not dead yet.’

She laughed. ‘Yeah. You’re okay. I’ve had my doubts, but I guess you’re okay.’

‘Marie, you’re on the point of being distinctly patronising.’

She looked hurt. ‘Sorry.’

Mollified, Peter went on. ‘Anyway, let’s get back to you, Jim. Now that you’ve dropped that hippie act... well, somewhat. You seem happy enough, underneath it all.’

‘Never been happier. I’m relaxed; we have a completely open relationship. There’s nothing that we hide from each other, and there’s no trips we lay on each other.’

‘Meaning?’

Their conversation was like a game of American doubles. Marie returned Peter’s serve. ‘Meaning that we don’t try and make the other person do something we think they should do. Or not do. In particular, we don’t use guilt as a weapon.’

Peter felt he was right the first time about being patronising, and tried to return a backspin. ‘I think I remember when you once did, or tried to, but Jim didn’t bite. Remember that party when Jackie stripped, end of third year, uni? I distinctly saw you disapproving of Jim’s evident enjoyment.’

‘Sure I was an uptight little bitch in those days, but that party was something else again. Jackie was kinda funny beforehand, like funny peculiar. I was afraid she might do something real crazy.’

‘She did. Do you know how crazy?’

She shook her head. ‘We went straight to bed after that act of hers. Next morning, you were still there.’

‘So she never told you.’ Peter hesitated, but after all those years, and after all they had shared together, he supposed he could tell them. ‘She invited all those remaining, including Brookes, to fuck her. I was at the end of the queue.’

‘Far out! That’s the wildest thing I ever heard!’ Jim paused for breath, a delighted grin on his face. ‘Hey, that chick was born twenty years before her time. Literally!’

Peter responded coldly. ‘You’ve completely misunderstood. It was not your here and now hedonism. It was an act of self-humiliation. A test for me, actually. The trip she was laying on me, as I believe you’d put it, was this: “Will Peter accept me after this or not? If so, good, I must be okay. If not, bad, I must be as awful as they all think I am.” I accepted her, we took it from there.’ Peter stopped. He voiced a strong need for alcohol.

‘Would you believe, there’s none in the place?’ Jim smiled. ‘I can offer you a better trip. Some consciousness-raising.’ He went into the living room and pulled the shades, although it was nearly dark already. He opened a small leather pouch and began rolling a cigarette. They sat on the floor, Peter propped up against cushions. Jim

elaborately lit up, inhaling deeply, holding his breath, his chest like a pouter pigeon's. He exhaled luxuriously and passed the joint to Peter. A dry-sweet herbal aroma filled the air.

'Have a drag, old man. Inhale deeply and hold it. Just sit with it.'

The taste was pleasant, mild and aromatic. He exhaled.

'No, man. Hold it. *Hold* it!'

'What is this? It's not tobacco?'

'Mary Jane.'

Peter looked blank.

'Marijuana. The best. Acapulco Gold.'

'Oh shit! No, mate, you take it back. They reckon that stuff drives you mad... you know that movie, *Reefer Madness*...'

'*Reefer Madness*? Don't believe that crap. That movie was establishment propaganda. Here, I'll take it,' Marie reached across, and sitting yoga-fashion, she inhaled deeply, just like Jim. She closed her eyes, murmuring. 'Yeah, man, that's it. Wow!' She exhaled, and passed it back to Jim.

'Mad! The man doesn't want to go mad! You are fucking mad, you know that? Like you've been telling us all night. Just one crazy mixed up cat! C'mon now, Pete, this'll straighten you out.'

His heart thumping, Peter took the joint, inhaled and held it. Again and again. They lit a second joint and passed it around. It all became excruciatingly funny. He, the senior English master at North Pymble Boys High, sitting on the floor, smoking dope with a bunch of hippies. Crazy! As was his pathetic set-up with Dorothy. Wild!

Jim moved over to the stereo and switched on a set of flashing coloured lights.

‘Lie back and *see* the music, man. You can’t do that with booze.’ The stereo played an electronic number that twittered and flitted, from bass to highest treble, from speaker to speaker, and back again. He *could* see it! Flickering round the room in glorious technicolour. Jim lay flat on his back Marie still in the Yoga position. Peter was entranced. The music stopped.

‘Now, this’ll *really* blow your mind. Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*. It’s a chorus of angels singing “Holy, bloody Holy” right up there in the ceiling and all these other cats from below the floor reply “Yeah, right on. Holy is God the Lord” or some such shit.’

A choir of trebles, silver and gold, started the ‘Holy’ singing from above Peter’s head. From beneath his feet, another choir sang back, the women dressed in green, the men in purple and black. Marie was rocking to the slow beat of the music. She suddenly pulled off her shift and threw it behind her. She was dressed only in bikini briefs. The strobe lights flashed the rise of her small breasts and her upturned nipples in ever changing colours. She threw her head back, eyes closed, her lithe body alternating between brown, yellow, purple, green, and brilliant white. Mouth open, she began *ah*-ing to the music.

This sensory overload hit Peter rigid. Marie’s near-nakedness, the music, the earlier conversation about Jackie, the dope, the strobe lights... and underneath all that, but rushing upwards to the surface, was the memory of his first night with Jackie, when she had played Bach to him. He gagged on that chord of memory, twenty years long. It was wrenched up from his guts, pulling with it the here and now of love, pain, and sorrow. Piercing love; deep sorrow. He sobbed until his jaw and throat locked in a single column of pain.

He rang the Henderson's bell. Seconds later he was gazing at an Indian princess, in a brown embroidered shift and a beaded headband.

'Come in, Pete. I've been out on the balcony. Come and have a carrot juice with me. You can spare a minute, can't you?'

'Sure, I'd prefer a beer though, if you don't mind. Here, I'm returning these books of Jim's.'

'Uh-huh. Jim's got a late afternoon class. I'll give them to him later. No sweat.'

They went inside, collected the drinks from the kitchen, and out to the small balcony. The sting had gone out of the afternoon sun, leaving an enveloping warmth. Marie had been sitting on a mattress propped up against the wall, reading. She sat down patting the place beside her.

'Here, boy. Now, can't miss any of that lovely sun. Keep talking.' She then whipped off her shift; this time she had nothing on underneath. She laughed. 'Come on, don't be shy Pete. It's quite private.'

Shy as he felt, he decided he would feel more awkward still, if he remained dressed. He slipped out of his clothes. It felt good but he wished he wasn't so white, so flabby around the middle. And he wished to hell that he could quell the excitement that was mounting all too obviously.

'I'm glad that *one* of you is pleased to see me, anyway.' Marie laughed. 'Don't worry Pete, you'll both get used to it.'

They sat and chatted. Both did get used to it.

After a pause in their conversation, Marie looked down and said, 'Hey, poor little feller. He needs cheering up.'

She smiled into his face then lowered her own. He surged erect in her mouth in seconds.

‘God, Marie! *Stop!*’

‘Don’t you like it?’ She lifted her face, a mischievous sparrow now.

‘Course. But hell! We’re friends. I mean, Jim’s my friend.’

‘He’s my friend, too. A very special friend. And you’re my friend.’

She bent her head and then looked up at him. ‘You don’t have to be in love to enjoy the body of a friend, do you?’ She pulled him onto the mattress on his back. She lay on top of him, her firm brown bottom arched over him. She was resting on her elbows, her face lowered beside his, whispering hoarsely into his ear.

‘If you want to fuck me, go ahead. But no heavy trips, okay? And if you don’t want to fuck me, then stiff shit, I’m going to fuck you.’ She slid her bottom down and along, steering with her fingers. Peter was an instant and ecstatic prisoner. It wasn’t his best friend’s wife, but some jungle creature at a primeval ceremony that was kneeling astride him, shrieking rhythmically to the tempo of her body, her long black hair, backlit by the sun, flailing his chest.

The ceremony ran its natural course. She was his best friend’s wife again, lying beside him, her chin cupped in both hands.

‘I know you won’t misunderstand that, Pete. We possibly won’t have sex again after today. On the other hand, possibly we may...’

‘But what about Jim?’

‘That’s okay, he’ll understand.’

‘*Will* understand?’

‘Of course. I’ll tell him soon as he gets back.’ She was laughing at his obvious confusion. ‘We trust each other. My vagina, and what goes into it, is my business. He trusts my judgment. He’d be pleased to know that you and I have shared that little bit more of each other.’

It was the last day of the holidays. Peter was in the living room, gazing out through the big picture window to the lush green ravine, trying to superimpose some of his thoughts onto this landscape that he loved. Nature had always been his strength in writing. He had thought that this social revolution stuff might give his writing a new vitality, but Jim had told him there was too much of the ‘shit eh?’ about it. Peter was *ooing* and *ahing* over things in the counterculture that were stale news to those already there, while those who weren’t there didn’t wish to know about it. He was speaking for a few clapped out schoolies who’d had their first joint and couldn’t believe their daring. But he thought he’d keep plugging away at it. It might take off.

The radio was on 2FC, a classical programme. Dorothy was arranging some flowers at the other end of the room. He sat upright as the announcer came on, his notepad sliding off his knee onto the floor. Dorothy looked at him curiously.

‘...last week, you remember, we traced symbolism in music, and we heard how people can relate to great music because it supplies them with their own symbols. Even if they are not the composer’s own. Now this week...’

Jackie! She was doing her thing on the ABC! Peter was determined that he would sit this through and not move an emotional muscle. Her voice was quite different from the Armidale days. It had become quite posh, the depth and huskiness being ideally suited

to the radio. She sounded authoritative, friendly, personal and... the Melachrino Strings suddenly oozed into the room.

‘Hey!’ His voice sharpened at the shock of the transition. ‘I was listening to that.’

‘Sorry, Pete, thought you were working. I usually have it on this station, you get tips on recipes and gardening and things.’ She didn’t offer to turn it back.

With another of those increasingly frequent surges of rage he was about to say ‘Now listen, woman, God damnit...’ but he checked himself. He looked at Dorothy, sidelong. She was clipping the stems of some flowers, fresh from the garden and arranging them in a vase, not indicating with a muscle of her body whether she had recognised that voice or not. *Fuck it, he thought, I want to hear what Jackie’s got to say. Apart from anything else, it’ll be bloody good. But don’t make an issue of it here.*

He got up and went to the car, which he’d left parked out in the driveway. He sat inside, wound up the windows, and switched on the radio.

‘... angels are a universal symbol in music. A sort of generalised innocence, if you like, that can mean just what the listener wants it to mean. Now here, for example, is a chorus from Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’. I’ll play it first.’

The stone music! Peter was delighted at the coincidence.

‘You must realise that the chorus here are the Children of Israel, the outcasts. The angel symbolism here, thus may easily be seen to represent a heavenly comfort for rejected and alienated people. But I also take that comfort in quite a personal sense, like after a bad experience of rejection or of loss. Now with our society changing the way it is, I can add another dimension still. The Children of Israel are like our young today. Their acts of worship are not in established traditions – their prophets are Malcolm X, Danny

the Red, Martin Luther King, Timothy Leary – mystics like Elijah, fierce like Elijah.

Perhaps nothing has changed....’

What? thought Peter, ‘... comfort in quite a personal sense... a bad experience of rejection...’ she’d said. Was she referring – to *him*? His hand clasped the top of the steering wheel tightly; he lowered his head onto it. It was no use. He couldn’t help it, after experiencing that music, he burst into tears again.

She was replaying the music. He flopped back, his head on the backrest, drinking it in, generously injecting his own personal loss but deriving no comfort. It finished. The regular announcer came on, ‘This is the ABC, 2FC Sydney, and that was another programme in our series ‘My View of Music’ by Jackie Lowenburg. At the same time next week, she...’

Lowenburg! Not Moffatt, not Shepherd. She had married again. His sense of loss deepened further, completely irrationally, he knew. No surprises, with a name like that, that she was talking about the Children of Israel. But he couldn’t help wonder if the ‘personal loss’, or ‘rejection’, referred to her second husband, not to him at all? He jerked back to reality. He had no a clue. And there was nothing he could do about it, even if he had. He tried to put it out of his mind and go back to the poem.

As he passed the kitchen, he heard Mary say in an awed voice, ‘Yes, Mummy, he was! Sitting in the car, like he was crying! Is he alright, do you think?’

Her voice was harsh. ‘Yes darling, I’m quite certain he’s alright. Now run off and tidy up your room...’

He crept back to his chair, ashamed that Mary had seen him. As he picked up his notepad he idly heard the radio: ‘... this is the ABC, 2FC Sydney. Here is the twelve

o'clock time signal...' It was a full two minutes, well into the highly esteemed *Goon Show*, before the significance of that, coupled with Dorothy's sudden harshness, hit him.

Dorothy kept postponing dinner with the Hendersons. Despite Peter's original hard-line, he didn't push the point. It was remarkable, he thought, how their relationship seesawed. When he was down, shat off with school and everything else, Dorothy would be bright and cheery, pottering around her beloved garden, clucking over the children, visiting the neighbours.

The seesaw had tilted the other way the afternoon he'd come home from screwing Marie, glowing, delighted with the dog he saw himself becoming. Dorothy's antennae had picked up something and she'd stacked on a shitty. Peter guessed it was simple as this: if he came back with a silly grin on his face, he'd been having a good time, and it had excluded her. He'd probably been whooping it up somewhere with that disreputable Jim. *So why couldn't we both be happy*, he wondered. One answer was that increasingly they were interested in different things. Dorothy wasn't interested in politics, she would never smoke pot in a fit, and she would never romp nude in the back garden with Jim before screwing him.

In bed that night he'd thought big-heartedly that he would bring some joy back into her miserable life. He started stroking her back, as she lay tensely facing the other direction. She snuggled her back close to him, telling him to go ahead. This could be a bit difficult, he thought. But remembering his earlier fantasy, he mentally dressed her in a headband and a brown Indian embroidered shift. It worked. But by the time he climaxed, Dorothy wasn't wearing the shift. And it wasn't Dorothy who wasn't wearing it.

Whether that did the trick or not, she proposed, soon afterwards, that he invite Jim and Marie to dinner, just the four of them, without the kids around. She wanted to keep the kids isolated from the Hendersons with all their wild talk. She could see that they were unduly influencing Peter. Recently, he'd tried to discuss the Vietnam War with her and explain what the protest movement was all about, but she was worse than not interested. All this talk, and the new permissiveness that it implied, undermined her basic beliefs in a tight family structure, getting on in the world, and planning for the future. And here was Peter consorting with friends who she knew used illegal drugs and talking about throwing in his job. Their son Phil, already difficult, was showing a disturbing interest and knowledge of that dangerous world. She tried to explain this to Peter, but he, showing off, dismissed her argument as 'arguably horse shit'. He did emphasise the 'arguably', but there was no denying where the 'horse shit' came from.

Dorothy went to a lot of trouble for the Henderson dinner. Peter suggested something light, possibly vegetarian, but she consulted her Robert Carrier and designed a French menu – *escargots*, a duck liver pâté, garlic prawns, all before the *boeuf bourguignon* – several courses, not large in themselves, but consisting wherever possible of animal protein. She asked Peter to provide both white and red wines, with a good sauternes to go with the peaches, flamed in Grand Marnier. Having spent the whole day in these preparations, she proceeded to get as blotto as she decently could on her favourite sweet sherry before they arrived.

Jim and Marie were on their best behaviour, as Peter had warned them to be. The conversation naturally turned back to Armidale and Wagga, and mutual friends. Except, of course, one mutual friend. Dorothy was surprised and pleased to find herself enjoying

the company and shrieked with laughter loudly and often. Late in the evening, she surprised everyone.

‘Yes, speaking of the old days. You’ll never guess who I heard on the wireless the other day. Jackie. Gawd, what was her last name? Finkelstein, Blue-Bag, something like that.’ She gave a shrill hoot. ‘Fancy her, marrying some Jew-boy! Oh well, she always had her eye on the main chance that one did.’

Peter hadn’t mentioned this incident to either of them. They looked carefully at Peter. He, however, had drunk well himself, and his nerve endings were not very sensitive. He just smiled and shrugged back.

Marie came in, cool and natural, ‘Jackie Moffatt, eh? Yeah, we shared a house together for nearly three years, along with some others. A Pommy sheila... Janet... I forget her surname.’

‘That’s right, Janet Smith. Peter’s first flame, eh Pete?’ That had to be safe, Jim thought.

‘Gotta thing about Poms, have you darls?’ Dorothy leant over and laid her hand on Peter’s arm.

‘Once upon a time,’ he murmured, ‘and then you came along.’

‘Liar! Jesus, you’re a liar, Peter Morrison!’ And then, turning to the others as though it was a family joke of no consequence, ‘you’ll never guess what Mary found in the driveway at the same time as I was listening to Jackie Blow-Bug, listening to its radio in its car. And blubbering its eyes out. And in front of its own daughter! Well, whaddya think of *that*?’

Jim got up and put an arm around her, pushing her sauternes glass away. ‘Hey Dottie, this’s no good.’

‘Don’t bullshit me, Jim Henderson. I *know*. He hadn’t got over the cow even during Wagga days. Now looks like a repeat session.’

‘C’mon, Dorothy,’ Jim led her from the table to the living room and sat her down. He knelt beside Dorothy, holding her hand. He asked gently: ‘What are you afraid of, Dottie?’

‘Isn’t it obvious? Did you know I nearly lost him, only ten years ago? Yes, course you bloody did. You were pretty thick, you all were. Still are.’ She snatched her hand away.

‘Dottie, you know I’ll not leave you for her! I wasn’t crying because of *her*. I was moved by the *music*. It meant fuck-all, so just stop stacking on a turn, darling, you’re giving us all the shits!’ Peter gave her a big grin and kissed her.

She gave him a wobbly smile back and muttered ‘Sorry. Drunk too much.’

‘Anyway,’ Marie continued as cool as ice, ‘Jackie was a good sort. I’m glad she’s got on like that. Look, Dottie, I know what’s gone on, that’s why we can talk about it. No sweat. It’s all out in the open and we can see it for what it is. A shadow from the past. The End.’

Dorothy sat for a while, head bowed, then said, ‘I still haven’t answered your question, Jim. I’m afraid for Peter. I’m afraid of the way he’s changing. Time was when he accepted things. And now he’s talking about giving up his job to write poetry! Then you come along, and turn his head still more, fill him full of Commo nonsense and make him unhappier still with his work, and with his home. That’s what I’m afraid of!’

‘Dorothy, I’m my own person. You must understand that. It’s nothing to do with Jim,’ Peter said earnestly.

Jim stirred uncomfortably. 'Look, Pete, it's after midnight already, we don't want to outstay our welcome...'

Marie took Dorothy's hand. 'C'mon Dottie. Jim's okay if you don't take him too seriously. Look, I'll give you a hand with the clearing up, and that'll give Peter a chance to straighten Jim out.'

Dorothy sniffed, spontaneously pecked Marie on the cheek, then threw her arms around her, 'You're okay, anyway.' They set off into the kitchen with a pile of dirty crockery.

'For a while I thought we were going to make it tonight. Then she has to go and get stinko. What can you do about that?' Peter asked Jim when they were out of earshot.

'Get pissed yourself, I suppose, Pete.'

Drunk as they were, neither was ready for sleep. Peter was coldly angry with Dorothy. She'd buggered everything. He lay on his back, breathing quickly and lightly, staring ahead. Dorothy was on her side tense and stiff. Suddenly she sat up and switched on the light.

'Something's got to give, Pete.'

'Right on.' He deliberately used the phrase and the accent.

'*Oh!*' She swirled round to face him, impotently furious. 'If that bastard hadn't turned up, things would've been alright.' She paused. 'Marie's alright. She understood me tonight. But that phoney Yank...'

'That's crap and you know it. It's nothing whatsoever to do with Jim. Or Jackie.'

'*Jackie*, eh? Giss kiss, then, Pe'er. Carn, then. Giss kiss, Pe'e?' Dorothy leered

with a wild approximation of Jackie's Cockney, thrusting a breast from under her loose nightie.

'This is it. This is what I've been waiting for. Thank you.' He jumped out of bed too violently, sending Dorothy sprawling. Her shoulder caught the bedside table, which fell on her face. The light shone on from its position on the floor, side-lighting her face in an ugly silhouette, a thin line of blood trickling from her mouth. Her eyes stared at Peter in disbelief as he stood over her, like a wrestler having thrown his opponent.

'Are you all right?'

She dabbed a finger on her lips and looked at the blood on her fingertips. 'Peter, you hit me! How could...'

'I didn't hit you. It was an accident.' He bent down and looked at her. 'You knocked the table over and it fell on you, that's all.' He dabbed her mouth with a Kleenex and peered at the wound. 'It's only a small cut. Look, I am so sorry about that, I really am, but it *wasn't* my fault. Now listen. In about ten minutes I am walking out of this house. I'm taking with me enough clothes and things to see me through the immediate future. I shall be taking the car. I shall be maintaining the repayments on this house, and I shall pay you twenty dollars less housekeeping per week than I am at present.

'What happened tonight simply tilted a balance that has been rocking for years. I have had enough of this marriage. It has nothing to do with Jim or Marie or anyone else. And certainly not Jackie.' He paused then continued. 'It's *us*, don't you see? We've grown apart. As I think was pretty bloody clear from tonight's performance.'

Dorothy slowly stood up and watched helplessly as he dressed, stacked clothes from the drawer then went to the storeroom, came back with a large suitcase, and packed it. As he was about to leave, she stood in the door of the bedroom, not talking, but trying

to push him back, feebly, hopelessly. He fended her aside. He went out the front door, into the garage. Dorothy heard the car start and back up the drive.

And then silence.

CHAPTER 8

Jack Gillson, the staffing inspector, was a tall, pleasant looking man with grey hair. He was standing behind his desk, holding out his hand in greeting. ‘Good to meet you, Peter. Call me Jack. Now then, what can I do for you?’ He waved Peter to a seat in front of his desk and sat down himself. Jack lit a pipe while indicating to Peter to say his piece.

‘I want a transfer from North Pymble. I’ve been there nine years now.’ Peter was reluctant to go on.

‘Well, I’m sure that could be arranged. But why not go through the usual channels? What’s the hurry?’ Jack leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

‘Personal reasons...’ Peter hesitated, looking at Jack. An encouraging nod from Jack told him to continue. ‘I feel I’m going stale, sir... Jack, and I need a change. I’ve had some poetry published,’ eyebrows rose approvingly, ‘and I need to get away, to try and think things through a bit.’

‘You’re not thinking of resigning, are you?’

‘Well, to be frank, I have thought about it but that’s an enormous step for someone like me. I’ve been teaching my whole life. I couldn’t afford to resign unless I was sure of the alternatives. Particularly now. You see there are family problems. I’ve left my wife, which is another reason why I want to move to a new school. Cut the ties, make a new start... and all that,’ he concluded.

‘Oh dear, oh dear, oh *dear!* How old are you... ah yes.’ Jack consulted a file on his desk. ‘And nine years subject master. A classic case, I’m afraid. The effing forties, I call it. The ‘F’ can stand for so many things: fighting, fulminating, fed up, fractious... I

know the style. Tired of school, tired of home, buck the system. I get dozens of cases a year, just like you, old chap. They all get over it, and so shall you, I have little doubt. Now, let's first put this whole effing mess into focus, shall we?' He smiled paternally over his horn-rimmed reading glasses and turned to Peter's file.

'Let's see now. Oh, your father was in the service too. In the blood, eh? Hmm, an excellent record, to date that is to say. Old Flogger Mathewson thought very highly of you. And you want to tarnish it a little? Tut, tut.' He dropped the file and smiled again.

'I'll tell you something. Normally you would be offered a deputyship quite soon. Probably somewhere up the Central Coast: Gosford, The Entrance, or some such. A few hellish years by the seaside, the oyster farms and orange groves. And with your record, so far that is, with country and metropolitan service, active and successful federation background, a dash of the effing forties to show you've got a bit of spunk, possibly principal of a large high school, Hunter Region, somewhere like that.' Jack sat back and watched Peter carefully. 'There now, what do you think of that?'

Peter thought he was being manipulated but he felt pleased, as he was sure Jack meant him to feel. Senior positions in the Central Coast or the Hunter were hard to come by. So, he was being brought into line, was he? He'd heard a different variation of the same theme from his father: *Play the game their way and they'll play it yours.*

'It sounds as good as anyone could expect. But I don't quite understand.'

'Well now, you did come to me for a transfer, and a transfer you shall have. Naturally, you need to get away from your old surroundings. How about North Shore, don't want to get too far from the family, eh, you never know.' Jack smiled.

'English/History subject master. Hmmm, yes of course. Queenscliff.' After rummaging

around in a card index, he turned to a large map on the wall, indicating a spot with his pipe stem.

‘Come here, Peter. Here’s Queenscliff High, back of Oliver Street, near the industrial area. It’s fairly new and co-ed. Interesting experiment in a way. That general area is served by Balgowlah Boys and Mackellar Girls, both traditional academic schools in an area which has a lot of problems. Particularly these days.’ He peered over his glasses in a manner that suggested Peter would understand whatever he had meant by that. ‘The English/History master there, man called Harrington, had a nervous breakdown recently. I could offer you the rest of this term there and the next, as things stand. The principal, Alan Stanway, is doing a marvellous job there. And that’s the best I can do for you, I’m afraid – short of relief teaching on a daily basis, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want that.’ He smiled and held out his hand.

‘Best of luck, Peter, and I do hope you resolve your problems. Remember, the department can use men like you.’

As he stepped out into Bridge Street, Peter reflected on the sympathy and understanding that Jack had shown. Not the moralising bureaucrat he expected, not a hint of censure. He had given him exactly what he had wanted. Yes, he grinned ruefully, he was being conned, all right. But he’d show them. By the end of next term he’d have his alternatives worked out.

And then Jack could shove it right up his amiable arse.

Peter went to Queenscliff the following day to check out the neighbourhood. It was typical upmarket North Shore nearer the coast, but to the west he came to the industrial area, close to Oliver Street. The school was built on a large block, fenced around on three

sides with rows of Norfolk pines, shielding it from the neighbourhood. Peter liked that.

The main block appeared new and quite attractive, less so were a row of demountables that served as classrooms. Well, this is where he would be teaching, so he went to a real estate agent and took a six-month lease on a small furnished flat in nearby Undercliff Road.

He presented himself at Queenscliff High that afternoon. Principal Alan Stanway was short and tubby with an easy-going smile, but he had a glint in his eye that said here was a man who'd stand no nonsense. Peter took to him immediately.

'Very pleased you could come, Peter. We've heard good things about you, so welcome aboard. We're currently in a bit of a hole with poor old Harrington on the sick list. He'll be seeking a transfer when he recovers. Unfortunately his replacement can't arrive until first term next year, so having you to see us out the rest of this year is just fantastic.'

'Very glad to be here, Alan.' Peter explained he was after a transfer for 'private' reasons and that he expected things to be settled in a few months. He already knew that Harrington had had a nervous breakdown but why, when he eventually recovered, didn't he want to return to Queenscliff? Did that have any implications for what was in store for Peter? Fishing, he asked: 'Jack Gillson mentioned that Queenscliff was an "experimental" school. In what way is it experimental?'

'As you know, Balgowlah and McKellar clean up the academic types, so that leaves us with a real challenge, a double challenge actually because of the changing ethnic mix in the neighbourhood. So we need to get kids involved in ways that they can relate to – and that's not by ramming an academic curriculum down their throats.'

‘Sounds like my cup of tea,’ Peter said remembering his days at Wagga and the likes of Rogers. Maybe discipline had been Harrington’s problem. The most important thing for discipline and getting good work out of kids, Peter felt, was to keep them busy all the time. Any gaps in the flow and all that youthful energy would burst through like exploding lava. And what did kids, whether academic or working class, like more than anything else? Talking about themselves and about what interests them. Very well, that is how he would keep this lot busy: autobiographical stories, charades, plays and poems.

And it worked, at least for the last few weeks of term two.

He was genuinely sorry that Dorothy had been physically hurt that night. It had been entirely accidental but she seemed to think he had deliberately hit her. That gave a sordid touch to the whole affair, which was undeserved. Otherwise Peter felt fine, liberated, two inches taller. As for the children, well, he’d work out access to them in due course.

Dorothy wasn’t going to be mean or vindictive about that, he was sure. As for divorce, that was no problem these days, thanks to the new Family Law Act; just as long as he didn’t cohabit with Dorothy for the next twelve months. *Fat chance.*

With settling in to school and getting used to his new found freedom, he’d been incommunicado for a couple of weeks into the second term. It was time to re-establish contact with at least part of his old world. He rang Jim, who insisted that he and Marie come straight over.

‘Pete,’ Jim exclaimed as soon as Peter had opened the door, ‘why didn’t you contact us, you prick? We’ve been worried sick about you. Not to mention Dottie.’

‘Yeah, good idea – let’s not mention her. Come in anyway.’

Jim was looking at Peter as at a naughty but loveable little boy. ‘Talk about freak-outs. No, *let’s* mention Dorothy, seeing it was our presence there that night that probably triggered things. Next thing we know Dottie is on the phone early next morning screeching that we were harbouring you, as if you were some kind of escaped criminal. Poor old girl, she sounded quite beside herself. “This is a job for Marie”, I said, so I kick her out of bed and tell her to shove around to Turramurra.’

‘She was shocked out of her mind, Peter. I can understand her eyes being swollen, but her *lips*? Jesus, Pete, I didn’t realise you were such a vicious prick!’ Marie accused.

‘Did she tell you I hit her?’

Marie nodded.

‘That’s not true! I got out of bed in too much of a hurry and the bedside table fell on her.’ He cringed at the thought that the word was out that he had struck Dorothy.

Marie looked at him with tiny eyes that suggested she less than half-believed him.

‘Well it *is* true,’ he mumbled. ‘How are the kids?’

‘They all heard the racket and only partially understood that when you’d left, you wouldn’t be coming back. Mary’s been a great help to Dorothy. She didn’t seem surprised, actually, and to tell the truth, I think she’s revelling in the drama of it all. Phil thinks you’re a bigger shit than ever, but for 17-year-old sons that’s par for the course. Wouldn’t matter much what you did.’

‘You’re a cynical bitch, Marie, you know that?’

‘But a good screw, right?’ She laughed. ‘Now that’s embarrassed you into silence why don’t we take you with us to a pad in Redfern? You might be interested.’

They drove to a terrace house, covered in symbols and slogans. The large front room opened out directly onto the street. People were crowding around the doorway.

They pushed their way through the crowd, most of whom were young people in t-shirts and jeans, a few in quite outlandish gear. Peter noticed several American accents; Jim said they were members of the American Students for a Democratic Society. They were here to try and build up a similar organisation in Australian universities.

Peter was astonished at the violence expressed in the speeches. Individual politicians were referred to as ‘mother-fuckers’ and ‘cock-suckers’. Students were urged to occupy the administration buildings of their universities, to smash symbols of control like the computer centres and senate rooms. If this is where nonlinear thinking led, Peter was almost willing to settle for the old days. When the speeches had finished, Jim led them out the back of the house. A knot of people was standing at an open doorway. Peter looked in.

A man with long, grey hair and a young face, small granny spectacles on his nose and dressed in a flowing toga, was reciting to a strummed guitar background. It sounded like a couple of lines from the *Iliad* on the Trojan War, then a couplet on the Vietnam War. The man declaimed in a thin, cultured and penetrating voice, which became increasingly familiar as Peter listened.

‘Jim, do you know this chap?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, I’ve met the guy. Very bright, very witty, camp as a row of tents. He’s an associate professor in the Sydney English Department. His name’s Hopkins...’

John Hopkins! Yes, both face and voice were recognisable now, only whereas the voice had once been thin and tentative, now it was thin and theatrical. Peter immediately thought of Nipper’s death. So God had stuck to his side of the bargain after all! He just as quickly dismissed that ridiculous association, leaving him very pleased to see his old teacher again. As Hopkins continued with his recitation, he sought periodic eye contact

with selected male members of his audience, smiling at them in a secretive way. When Hopkins had finished, Peter pushed through the crowd.

‘John! John Hopkins.’

Hopkins turned towards him. ‘Yes? Goodness me, I don’t know you, do I? You’re *far* too old.’ He held Peter’s hand between his own and twinkled good-humouredly at him through granny glasses. For a moment, Peter thought he was being introduced to Charles Hawtrey during the filming of *Carry on Cleo*.

‘Peter Morrison. You taught me, many years ago. Thirty to be exact, in Bathurst.’

‘Oh, come now. I never taught *anyone anything* in Bathurst. Although I do remember a very pretty little boy who gave me a poem. Such a nice poem it was. Well, well, so that was you. Oh dear, you *have* changed, haven’t you?’

‘Just as well,’ Peter laughed uncomfortably. He didn’t know if Hopkins was sending him up, or if this was his normal way of conversing. ‘I remember we saw you off at the railway station.’

‘Yes, Peter, of course I remember. Very clearly. I did mean that about the poem and as a matter of fact, I did keep it. When I returned from the war, I found it in my trousseau.’ Hopkins fluttered his eyes, then turned serious again. ‘I’ve used it in my classes as an example of unconscious imagery in children’s writing.’

Peter suddenly saw an opportunity: a professional critic. What a strange recycling of fate for Hopkins to adopt that role again. ‘Look, John, I can see you’re busy now, but I’d very much like to talk to you. I’m, er, still in the writing game, a teacher actually, but trying hard not to be...’ he tailed off, grinning self-consciously.

‘Of course, of course, dear boy, any time. Any time at all. Just give me a tiny tinkle at the Sydney English Department.’ He seized Peter by the shoulders, laid a cheek

against his, and pressed him gently to the door. As he was leaving he heard Hopkins say:

‘Well, well, you’ll never guess what a turn-up *that* was. Let me tell you, the time those naughty little boys gave me a turd. Yes, a real honest-to-God turd...’

Peter grinned to Jim, ‘I’ll tell you that story later. Unbelievable.’

Jim spoke briefly with Marie. She turned to Peter: ‘Let me drive you home, Pete. I want a quiet word just with you. Jim’s happy to stay a while. I’ll pick him up later.’

On the way back to Manly she returned to the subject of Dorothy. ‘I’ve been over there a few times, alone, not with Jim. You should know this, I’m not laying any trips, it’s just the case. She’s devastated.’

‘Oh God,’ Peter muttered.

‘Sorry, but you should know. The kids? They’ll be alright. It’s funny, you know. Dorothy seems to trust me.’

‘You and her have a lot in common. Me, for instance.’

‘God, you men are egocentric! The piece of cock that passeth all understanding. No, it’s simpler than that. We’re women with a common background and each of us has a ratbag of a husband. You were just the first of the two to go overboard. That’s how she sees it. Let it be, let it be.’

They drove on in silence for a while, then Marie asked: ‘How about you? You seem pretty together.’

‘I am. Or thought I was, until you said that.’

‘Oh brother, what a religious upbringing does to you. Is it guilt, or do you really care?’

‘Of course I care! I like her a lot. I just don’t want to live with her.’

‘Well, remember this, if you need reminding. Nothing’s final. Nothing’s irreparable. Meantime, you’ve got the chance you wanted. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘Then let it be.’

They had arrived at Peter’s flat. Before he could say anything, she was out of the driving seat and walking up to the door. He shrugged, letting them in.

‘I can’t offer you a carrot juice.’

‘I’ll settle for a white wine then.’

He got the drinks and she led off. ‘Now, what are you going to do about Jackie? Anything?’

He thought a while. ‘You know, when I was committed to Dorothy, when I was putting the barriers up and then screaming like hell because they were there, Jackie was an obsession. Now? I don’t know. I’ve been here a fortnight, free as the air. I can contact her at the ABC anytime I want to. I suppose I will, but to find what? That she’ll leap into my arms? I doubt that very much. Maybe she’s happily married. I’m not sure I want to discover that. Why don’t I put the whole thing down to a prolonged adolescence? And now I’m free, I can write poetry on the strength of it. You know, Marie, that might be the answer.’

‘Well, if you believe that, that’s okay by me.’ She looked at him sideways. ‘Not sure I do, though.’

She stood up. ‘I’d better go see what my ratbag of a husband is getting up to.’

Despite what he had told Marie, two days later Peter found himself walking up William Street towards the ABC building. It was the school vacation – and then what? The

moment of truth was only a term away when he had to leave Queenscliff. He'd been writing furiously at nights, but no replies from any publishers as yet.

He arrived at the main entrance of the ABC, but hesitated, debating whether to go on inside. He shrugged and approached the enquiries desk.

'Is Mrs Lowenburg in, please?'

The girl checked a list beside her. 'I'm sorry, sir, she's recording at the moment. She should be finished in about fifteen minutes, if I could say...'

Peter muttered his thanks and went outside. He tried to revive that sang-froid he'd displayed with Marie, but it was a losing battle. He lit a cigarette and leaned against the building, watching the traffic. Next thing, he was aware of her presence. He turned slowly towards the entrance of the building. Jackie was standing on the steps of the ABC building, her slate grey eyes wide open with amazement. Her hair was longer, softer, making her face slimmer, the puppy fat of student days completely gone. It was the face of a serene and self-confident woman, except for her retroussé nose, which added a dash of mischief. Her mouth was parted open, her white front teeth resting on her lower lip. She wore a woollen sheath dress, caught at the waist with a metal belt, emphasising her rounded hips and generous breasts.

A shadow flitted over her eyes – but then she smiled. She went up to him and placed her hands on his shoulders, warmly, showing her pleasure but firmly, keeping him from getting too close.

'Peter! What a coincidence!'

He turned his head, and clumsily kissed the top of her left hand. 'Not a coincidence, Jackie. I heard your programme. I came to see you...' He stopped.

She dropped her hands. They stood awkwardly, looking at each other. She shrugged. ‘Well?’

He shrugged back. He didn’t know what to say now. Finally he forced a laugh. ‘Let’s have lunch together. Surely we can talk, like friends? I just want to be friends, Jackie.’

Her relief at having an excuse was a trifle obvious. ‘Peter, that would have been nice, but not today. Elizabeth is due to meet me any moment. She’s my daughter, remember? I promised to have lunch with her and then we’re going shopping.’

‘Some other time, then. Please, Jackie... some other time?’ He immediately regretted the pleading in his voice.

He looked up to see a girl watching them. She was about fifteen, wearing a miniskirt, flowered sandals and a monogrammed blazer which Peter recognised as that of Methodist Ladies’ College, an exclusive girls’ school. She wore a PEACE button on her lapel and an embroidered headband in her long dark hair. She was slimmer than Jackie, but had her mother’s eyes and full mouth, separated by a longer patrician nose. A stunner, or would be one day.

She was staring at him condescendingly, aware of his inspection. ‘Hello Mummy.’

‘Hello darling. Peter, meet Elizabeth, my daughter. Darling, this is Mr Morrison, an old friend of mine.’

‘How do you do, Peter?’ Elizabeth said coolly, extending her hand. ‘Are you a musician too?’

Peter was completely thrown by her sophistication, the unusual offer of a hand from a child. He took it but grasped only the tips of her fingers and cursed his clumsiness.

He thought only to impress this supercilious creature who would have been his step-daughter, had things worked out differently.

‘Oh no,’ he giggled self-consciously, ‘I’m a poet. I’m into this protest thing, you know.’ *Oh Christ! Please make me disappear.*

Jackie looked at him. ‘A poet! Yes, we must meet some other time and talk about your poetry. That would be nice.’ He thought that she was being condescending as well.

‘Well, goodbye, Peter. Come on, darling.’ They began to move away.

‘Jackie! Let me call you then.’ His voice rose in pitch.

‘You know where to contact me. Lovely to meet you again after all these years.’

She turned and waved. ‘Now come on, Elizabeth.’

As they moved up the street, he heard Elizabeth flute languidly: ‘Do you suppose that he’s queer, Mummy? Jenny’s brother knows a poet and he tried... ‘

They were lost in the crowd.

He had to follow through, despite that debacle in William Street, which had been confounded by that supercilious little brat, and despite the coolness with which Jackie had farewelled him. There hadn’t been a touch of the old days. No ‘toodle-oo, old bean’. Only a flicker in her eyes, at the very first. And lunch? Yes, she’d agreed that it would be nice. *Nice!* And to think that super-cool and still maddeningly attractive celebrity had agreed to be his wife – and would have been if only he’d played it differently! And now he had committed himself to meeting her, committed by that drum he had to march to; the drum that had beaten many a wrong step for him so far. *Fuck it. One more wrong step then.*

He rang her back, the last week of the vacation. They made a rendezvous at Grissini's, a little Italian restaurant up the Cross. He replaced the receiver with cold sweat on his palms.

He arrived early, aware that being here was futile. Elizabeth had helped clinch that, with her snooty private school manners. Even if Jackie was a widow, or divorced again – he irrationally clung to that faint clue of her 'personal loss' – he couldn't possibly keep them in the style to which they were obviously accustomed. Either as schoolie or as rapidly failing protest poet. Did he even love her still? Probably not. Too many doors had closed. Then why in God's name was he sitting here like a prize twit, prolonging the agony? Not even unfinished business; his drumbeat had marched him here to carry out business that was already finished.

A hand was waving over his eyes.

'Wake up, dreamy!' It was not Dorothy in the train, but Jackie in the restaurant.

She slipped into the seat opposite him. After they had given their orders, she cupped her head in her hands, elbows on the table, gazing at him.

'We had to see each other again, Jackie. Even if only this once. We have, er, unfinished business.'

She smiled wryly and without humour. 'It seemed pretty finished to me. Both times. But if...'

He interrupted her. 'I just had to know if you understood... if you received my letter. I couldn't *bear* the way we parted...'

She said evenly, still smiling, but controlling her voice. 'Peter Morrison, you are the most egocentric person I have ever met in my life! Are you *serious*? Did you arrange this meeting, obviously sweating blood over it, just to make sure that I understood your

own private reasons for doing something ten years ago? Ten years! And then tell me how you've suffered over the way you shafted me?

'The slate's clean, as far as I'm concerned. I mean that. No hard feelings. But let me tell you, though, the final part of the story – just to put you in the picture and then no more talk of the past. I was pretty miserable for a while. But things worked out. I threw in teaching, got a job in the record library at the ABC and one thing led to another. Now I'm in music where I've always wanted to be. And in the course of that I met the most wonderful man. At last. Not like the curate's egg, excellent in parts, but the whole way through.' She noted and disregarded the pain in Peter's eyes. Leaning forward, her face only a few inches from his own, she said: '*I love him very much. We are, all three of us, very happy, Peter.*'

'I'm glad,' he whispered. He was, too, in a funny masochistic way. It was his doing that she was so happy now. At least some good had come out of it. *Poor bloody me though*, he couldn't help thinking.

'Well, let's start from the present. How are things with you?' She was now sitting normally in her chair, relaxed, her right eyebrow slightly raised. She looked to Peter at that moment about the most desirable person he could ever imagine, in every way.

'What's all this about being a poet? *A protest poet?*' She smiled, mockingly he thought.

'Oh, I'm still teaching, but yes, I'm trying to get back to writing full time, if I can support myself that way. Had some stuff published,' he paused modestly, 'in *Meanjin*. I'm now writing about this whole protest movement thing. I think we can learn a lot from it. In fact we'd better. Something's got to give.'

While they ate he told her about Jim and Marie's involvement and how they'd taken him to the pad in Redfern. Jackie was interested in his views on the protest

movement, and wanted to know the news about Jim and Marie. She obtained their address from Peter; she looked forward to seeing them again.

‘But Pete, one thing I don’t quite understand. What does Dorothy think of all this? Smoking dope and writing poetry as a living, for Christ’s sake!’ She hooted at the thought, the sparks of her old self flying off thicker each minute.

‘She can think what she bloody well likes. We’re separated.’

Jackie stopped laughing instantly. The sparks remaining in her eyes were now of anger. *So! It took you ten years to get around to it. And now, when it suits you, you come mooning around expecting... what? Oh, you poor bugger. You poor, silly bugger.* Her voice was gentle when she replied.

‘Then Peter, it’s no use us being here, talking like this, is it?’

He sat staring at her with his mournful brown eyes, trying to smile nonchalantly, as if he hadn’t tuned the conversation to a completely different wavelength.

She leaned forward, her grey eyes earnest and searching. ‘Can we really be friends? I mean just friends? I’d like it, if we could. Truly. But after what you have just told me, what do you really want of me?’

She was wearing a dress with a crossover low front and he could see a breast that he knew in minute detail. Underneath was her slim waist, those generous hips and the paradise that lay between them. He answered her question in his mind: *I want to take you from here and I want to kiss every inch of your wonderful, dear body. I want to make love to you day and night until the end of time. Now, Jackie, as from right now.*

‘I just want to be f... friends, too.’

She heard his words but read his eyes. She knew he was lying.

He knew she knew. 'No, Jackie, you're right. There's no more use us being here, you and I.' He concluded with a line that in other circumstances would have caused her to burst out laughing: 'The comedy is ended.'

He stood up. In keeping with his exit line, he seized her hand and held it a second as a farewell gesture. He turned and, forgetting the bill, he walked out the door.

CHAPTER 9

Peter was looking forward to going back to Queenscliff High. The meeting with Jackie had been a disaster, far worse than he could have imagined. He tried solace in his writing, but the words he wrote were sterile. For the first time since leaving Dorothy, he was desperately lonely.

He tried visiting the pubs around Manly Beach, but found the people there either securely interlocked with their own groups or partners, or loners and misfits as emotionally vacuous as he felt himself to be.

One night, depressed by the emptiness of the pub scene, he pushed through the crowd to the door. He collided with a girl who seemed to have stepped in his way as he was opening the door. Pretty in a funny kind of way and vaguely familiar, he thought.

He smiled, 'Sorry, didn't see you.'

'S'orlright,' she smiled back.

He crossed the road and was opening the door of his car when she came running over. 'Hey, Mister! Can you give me a lift? You go Queenscliff way, don'tcha?'

'Yeah, sure. But how do you know that?'

'Oh, I seen you here a few times. Thanks.'

Her mouth was moving methodically as she sat in the front beside him. He looked down at her, noting the longish brown hair, parted in the middle and gathered in a ponytail, fine arched eyebrows over extraordinary eyes: small, slanted and a brilliant

green. She had high cheekbones and a long, beaky nose over a mouth that, when it stopped moving, left her with lips parted, showing strong white front teeth. She looked like a pretty fox. She could have been any age, but must have been at least eighteen or she wouldn't have been in the pub. But definitely familiar, he thought.

'Scuse me.' She opened the window, spat out her gum, and leaned back, one arm hanging out the window, the other draped on the back of her seat, almost touching Peter. Her legs were wide apart. Her green eyes were watching him, her strong teeth shining whitely under the street lamp as she stared at him. Those teeth. For an instant he saw Jackie sitting beside him. But this girl's insolent eyes, her thin, light minidress, her brown thighs spreading their firmness on the front seat soon dispelled that image. His every sense twitched to her raw, animal sexuality.

Peter swallowed hard and started the car. 'Where can I take you?'

Catlike eyes continued to stare at him. She swung her right knee against his thigh. 'How about your place, okay?'

'Okay.' His heart was beating fast, his stomach was surging with a hunger he hadn't experienced for years.

'It'll cost ya, but. Twenty dollars.'

He nodded and accelerated.

Holding the door open for her, Peter followed her into the living room. Now he could see her properly in the light. Barefoot, an anklet of cheap plastic flowers on one leg accentuated the nakedness of her foot and her calf. Her legs were well formed, full calves, a deep brown. The hem of her dress only just covered her crotch. He imagined that her buttocks were as brown as her legs; they had to be. Likewise her breasts. It just wouldn't be right otherwise.

He reached out and tugged her ponytail gently, bringing her to a halt. He moved close up to her, staying behind her, his body pressing lightly onto hers.

‘I don’t know your name.’ His voice was thick.

‘Ginette. With a ‘G’.’ She tossed her ponytail free from his fingers but pressed back harder onto him and looked up over her shoulder. ‘’N yours?’

‘Peter.’

She smiled up at him, nodding as if she knew, those curious eyes goading him. Her enigmatic behaviour inflamed him. He zipped down her dress, and threw it forward over her shoulders; it fell on the floor. She was not wearing a bra. He took one breast in his hand. He was right, it was tanned. He slid his other hand over her belly, his fingers into her bikini briefs. Her luxuriance shocked him.

‘Jeez, you’re in a bit of an ’urry, ain’tcha?’ she complained laughing.

He was. He laid her on the floor and had her then and there, roughly, squeezing her breasts and buttocks. His climax was an anticlimax after that build-up of so much excitement.

‘Christ, go easy!’ She looked at him crossly as soon as he withdrew. ‘Light the fire, will ya? It’s a bit nippy ’ere. And you can give me that twenty like now, if ya don’t mind.’

She stood up and he handed her two tens, which she put in her shoulder bag. She started wandering around, inspecting the room while Peter sat by the heater, admiring this sleek, naked, fox-faced animal who moved with such casual grace.

‘Not much of a place you’ve got ’ere, eh? Where’s the stereo?’

‘I’m only here for a while. My real home’s in Turrumurra...’ *Shit, careful*, he cautioned himself, *you don’t give whores genuine information*. But she just looked at him

and nodded. She found his transistor radio and tuned it to a station playing loud rock. She took a pouch from her shoulder bag. She opened it, rolled a joint, and sat down on the floor by the heater, jerking her shoulders in time to the music.

‘Giss a light, will ya?’

As Peter held a match to the joint, she went on, ‘Bloody expensive, this stuff. That’s why I charge for a screw. Even then it can be real good – but not when a feller’s in too much of a fuckin’ ’urry.’ She looked at him reproachfully but without malice. ‘’Ere, want a toke?’

She handed him the joint. He inhaled deeply and handed it back. He switched the lights off, leaving the room lit from the open bedroom door, and the flare of the gas flame. He sat across from her, watching her, drinking in her body. The insistent beat of the radio drove the rhythmic jerk and twist of her body. As she inhaled, her breasts erected from her body, doing their own erotic dance to the beat. The drug funnelled his senses, focusing first on her spreading coffee-coloured triangle, displayed immediately in front of him, to her dancing breasts, to her arms and shoulders, to her face. That pretty, off-beat, triangular face. Slant eyes, staring at him through occasional puffs of smoke. But most of all, he focused on the part-opened mouth, with the strong white teeth lying on her bottom lip. He concentrated everything he had onto those teeth. So dear, so familiar. *I want to take you from here and I want to kiss every inch of your wonderful, dear body. I want to make love to you day and night until the end of time. Now, as from right now.*

‘Stay the night.’

‘Cost ya another thirty.’

‘Come with me.’

He took her into the shower and soaped her all over, sliding his fingers and palms over that wonderful brown flesh. As he knelt on the floor, soaping her buttocks, nuzzling the inside of her thigh with his lips and tongue, she lightly traced her finger round his ears and neck.

‘You’re a perve, you know that? You’re bloody mad. Nice mad, but.’ He patted her dry, with gentle strokes as if she was a delicate work of art and led her into the bedroom. At her insistence he left her extra thirty dollars on the bedside table before she lay on the bed. Then he did kiss every inch of her wonderful, dear body, and he did make love to her again and again, if not until the end of time.

Hours later a sleepy voice muttered, ‘Look, give over. I’m not made of plastic. And me name’s not fuckin’ Jackie neither.’

Peter woke with a start, sensing that something was wrong. The traffic was too loud before the alarm went. He rolled over to look at his bedside travelling alarm. It had gone. So had his companion of the previous night. And the money.

He leapt out of bed but a quick search through the small flat told him that she’d taken nothing else. He sighed and made himself a cup of coffee, thinking as he sat drinking it that fifty dollars and a travelling alarm clock wasn’t a bad price for the second most exquisitely sensual experience he’d ever had. It should help him to forget the foremost of those experiences. Bloody, little Foxy-Face! She knew how to arouse men with the knee press, the insolent stare, her movement when mooching around inspecting the place, the dancing shoulders and breasts. But did she experience much pleasure herself? Probably not, he realised, when he looked back at the driven selfishness of his own lovemaking. So driven was he, he now realised, that he’d completely forgotten about

using a condom. It struck him that, if she had been a professional, she would have insisted that he use one. She must have been a street slut after drug money. That was worrying.

He could only suppose that quite unaccountable explosion of lust that he'd experienced was a kind of purging of all that Jackie nonsense. At any rate, he felt clean now, condom or no condom, and was ready to write poetry again.

He took to early morning walks along Freshwater Beach, composing poetry. The nature stuff came out well. He'd stop and jot down notes along the way and then give himself an hour before breakfast to write his first draft. He tried some social protest stuff but it wasn't working. He needed some critical help. Remembering his conversation with Hopkins, Peter decided to take him at his word. He thought he might also mention Nipper's fate and the connection with his poem, 'Bushfire Sacrifice'.

Hopkins seemed delighted to see him. Peter said: 'John, before we start, I'd just like to tell you what happened after you'd left for the war.'

Hopkins looked surprised and pursed his lips into a quirky smile. 'Do tell.'

Peter now felt sorry he'd raised the matter; how to explain the convoluted thinking of a child? He'd stewed to himself over Nipper's death for years, and he'd thought this a good chance to try to make sense out of it with a sympathetic – and involved – audience. He had mentioned to Dorothy that he'd lost his dog in a bushfire, but that was all. No attempt to explain how it had come about or why. But where to start? The poem.

'Well, that poem I wrote. It brought together for me the war and the sacrifice soldiers might have to make with their lives. Then you – you were my favourite teacher

you know – you had been encouraged to go to war by my own father. That hurt. I had to do something. It started as sort of playacting, something along these lines. I would pretend to sacrifice my dog Nipper, so that God would let you live through the war. A pretend sacrifice in the same way that the Communion Service is a sort of pretend, but it's hard to explain my reasoning. Anyway, we went to a spot in the bush where I lit a ceremonial fire but things got out of control. What started as playacting got very bloody serious when the wind changed. I barely got out alive while Nipper... er... didn't.' Peter stopped. This hadn't really been what he as a boy had thought but at least it might make some sort of sense to an outsider. He swallowed, blinked, and tried a joke: 'And you did. Good old God.'

Hopkins muttered, 'Yes, indeed. Good old God.' Peter's story had stirred something. He had dropped his camp act, and looking more like an older version of the original John Hopkins said, 'I'm so sorry about your dog, Peter. Yes, I had a tough time in Tobruk... but survived, as you can see. I hope you think it was worth it.' There was a pause, then Charles Hawtrey reappeared. 'Now, my dear fellow, let us see if you are a poet or a poetaster. Do let me taste your poe.'

Peter squirmed at the distasteful shift from the deadly serious to the cheap double entendre but shrugged, and handed Hopkins a sample of his writing.

After reading silently for several minutes, Hopkins looked up. 'Now this protest-related stuff. It's just not *you*, now, is it Peter? You're just not *in* it. You'll send many a frisson of horror up the spines of favourite aunties,' he rolled his eyes upwards and squirmed, 'but they, poor dears, are not usually discriminating critics. No, Peter, I'd work on the nature poems if I were you. They *do* have something. You have developed a special *style*, haven't you? You take a scene and squirt your own juices into it, making it

part universal but part personal. I like that. Funny, I listened to a radio series the other day, which used music similarly. An oldish hag with a pleasing voice. Yes, *that's* the style Peter.'

So, Jackie rears her lovely head once again – just when he was trying to forget her. No matter, he took Hopkins's point. He regretted his initial confession about Nipper and how Hopkins had reacted, but the subsequent time with him had been helpful even if it began to pall towards the end. He enjoyed the *Carry On* movies, but even the cleverest of scriptwriters can't sustain the show for ever.

'Christ, they were difficult. Fidgety, giggling, just couldn't get to them. Doesn't bloody help that we can't use the cane on them,' complained Bill Peterson one afternoon in their favourite watering hole, the Prince of Wales. Bill was bemoaning an encounter he'd had with 4C.

'They not such a bad lot, Bill,' said Joe Santini. 'Don't you believe him, Peter. They are mostly like me, garlic-chewing wog. Pretty brainy, but no so good in English.'

'Butta good at makin' trouble,' Bill mimicked badly. 'You had that bunch yet, Pete?'

'Maybe last term, on and off. I was being shoved around from here to kingdom come when I first arrived. It's good now I've got regular classes. First lesson with 4C tomorrow.'

'Lucky you, sport. Good luck with teaching them English.' Bill downed his middy. 'Joe'll give you a hint or two while I go and get these babies replaced. Same again?'

‘He’s a too much cynical,’ Joe said. ‘They’re good, if you get to them at their level. Like me, in science. We do demonstrations, field trips. They like practical stuff.’

‘I do something similar. I get them to write their own stories, role playing, lots of oral work. It’s worked pretty well so far. So we’ll see how 4C takes it tomorrow.’

Just as Bill had been complaining, Peter was finding 4C restless. He explained that he wanted them to write a class play and maybe act it at the end of term. There was an initial burst of enthusiasm but when it sank in that they had to actually *write* it, there were cries of ‘I can’t write nothin’’, ‘Whadda we write about?’

‘Look class, it’ll be easy if we work together. All each of you need to do from now until the end of the period is to write down something important to you. In your own words, and pretend no one else is going to read it, if that helps. Maybe in the form of a diary entry, you know, something you want to remember, like it’s really important to you. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar. Just get the words down, okay? And don’t write your names on the paper. I’ll take them home and go through them and try to find a storyline. We’ll write the play together over the next few lessons.’

There was a bit more interest at that, particularly when they realised their work was going to be anonymous. Peter knew he was asking for obscenities and put-ons but he thought there might just be enough gold amongst the dross to put together a play that might mean something to them.

They were writing away in reasonable silence. Curious to see how they were going, Peter paced the class, to look over the shoulder of each pupil. But the crouching lower and the sidelong looks told him that this was not encouraging them to express

themselves. He knew how much poetry he'd write, if some wanker stood over his shoulder. So he remained out in front, where all could see him.

Suddenly he heard a muffled buzzing. A couple of girls giggled. It had come from the desk of a quiet girl Peter had hardly noticed, sitting towards the back against the wall, her head down. He walked towards her desk enquiringly. She lifted her face and stared at him with green, slanted eyes.

The shock rooted him to the spot. Twenty years of experience took the dazed automaton over that stood there. He turned to the class, several of whom had turned round, expecting an interesting diversion.

'Right, back to your work, you others,' he ordered over his shoulder. He turned back to Ginette. 'What have you got there?'

'An alarm clock. Sorry it went off – *sir* – it was an accident. True.'

She changed her position, lounging back, the attitude she had adopted when she'd first sat in Peter's car.

'Give it to me, please.'

'Oh no sir, I couldn't do that. You see, Mr Morrison, it belongs to a very special friend of mine. I'm lookin' after it for 'im.' Her smile widened as she spoke, and one green eye winked at him.

He was at a complete loss. It was the last period of the day, so he said without thinking, 'I see. Well in that case stay behind after the others have gone. I can't waste their time on this now. Get back to work.' He had forgotten the most basic of a schoolie's rules.

Peter sat at his desk, shaken to the marrow. This was going to determine his destiny all right! *Eighteen years old? Fifteen, more like!* Sexual relations with a student

was bad enough, but her being under age made it statutory rape! The very name of the offence sickened him. This could ruin him. He desperately tried to appear normal. He glanced sternly at Ginette's desk, she caught his eye and held it. Smiling slowly, she lowered her head back to work again.

The others had left. She was standing beside his desk. In her school uniform she looked like most other kids but perhaps her miniskirt was a little higher, her blouse a little fuller and tighter. Her hair was brushed back and shining, in good condition. She was no street slut. She looked down on him, smiling that maddening smile. Of course he'd thought that she had looked familiar when he picked her up. He'd taken her class a few times last term. It was just that you don't expect to see whores in school uniform or rather, schoolgirls in whore's uniform.

'Give you a surprise, did I, Peter?' *Peter*. She was going to play it tough.

'Ginette, I hope you're not...' He stood up, to gain height advantage.

'Not goin' to scab on you? Prob'ly not. I don't want to. True.' She sighed and looked up at him. 'Trouble is, Peter, I gotta lotta bills to pay. I got expensive tastes. You know?'

She slid her leg between Peter's and raised it, so that the top of her thigh gently touched the crotch of his trousers. Her face was only inches from his, that smile on her lips, her front teeth resting on her bottom lip. 'Twenty dollars and we call it quits. And while ya hand's there, y'can 'ave a feel if you like.'

He looked down and saw the afternoon sun from the windows picking up the fine golden hairs that stood out against the brown skin. He pushed her leg aside roughly. 'Stop that. Of course I won't.'

'Alright, Peter, just for that it's thirty dollars. Like now. '

All he could think was that he had to get rid of her. He paid her and she was out the door in a flash.

That night, as he went through the kids' papers, he came across one, neatly written, which read:

Dear Diary,

Peter Morrison fucks like a thrashing mechine. I'm still sore and that was days ago. It's worth it but cors I love him.

Yours,

Jacky

He wondered what would have happened, if he'd called her bluff straight off. But she'd caught him on the hop and he'd panicked. He wryly recalled his father's words: 'A teacher should *always* stop to think.' Well, he hadn't and now he was scared sick. She kept surprising him in places where they wouldn't be disturbed. Once, in the car park as he was about to drive home, she offered to go home with him and give him a good time. No way. But she still demanded twenty notes. He paid her.

He often thought about that last offer. In the safety of his fantasies, he could regret that refusal. The sheer sensual force of his first encounter with her vibrated richly and strongly – and it was reinforced every time he saw her. Why shouldn't he? But as his thoughts stepped from fantasy to reality, it was all too clear why he shouldn't.

Reality at the moment was a pile of papers containing the penultimate draft of their confounded play. Peter was sitting at the kitchen table, rain lashing the window beside his head, the gas fire across in the living area burbling quietly, keeping the whole flat comfortably warm. The transistor was tuned to 2FC, but no Jackie Lowenburg to

disturb, just a Haydn guitar quartet to soothe. The setting was a little spartan, otherwise homely. *Only better than home*, he thought, *here I am free*. He had forgotten his jade-eyed, golden-skinned succubus.

A loud knock on the frosted pane of the front door shattered these thoughts. *Very curious*, he thought. Only Marie and Jim knew that he lived here. He peered through the glass to make out a blurred figure, reflecting yellow from the street light. He opened the door.

She stood leaning against the porch, in a mustard coloured oilskin, her hair plastered lankly over her face. She looked at him and muttered, ‘G’day.’

His immediate impulse was to slam the door, but she sounded so sad and looked so bedraggled, his surprise kept the door open.

‘Ginette...?’

‘C’n I come in? It’s bloody freezing out here.’

‘Okay, come in.’ As he stood aside to let her past, she looked up at him, her eyes innocent, vulnerable. He stopped her gently, his hand on her wet shoulder.

‘What’s up?’

She didn’t answer, but continued on her way, pulling off her oilskin and dumping it on the floor, wetting the carpet. She wore jeans, the lower legs sodden, and a t-shirt, large patches of wet belying the efficiency of the oilskin.

‘Got a towel?’

‘Sure.’

He went to the bathroom, returning to find her sitting in front of the fire, dressed in bikini briefs and bra. Her t-shirt was stretched to dry on one chair, her jeans across the arm of the other. She sat cross-legged, leaning forward towards the heat. She took the

towel and started rubbing her body, then her hair. Her usual ponytail was sucked into the untidy mess of her hair.

Peter sat watching her. He was wondering if this might present the opportunity he needed, to talk to her reasonably, and to try to negotiate a truce and peace of mind.

‘Dad. Christ, I hate him!’ She said suddenly, glaring at Peter, her hate as visible as her shock of untidy hair.

So she did have a family. She was a real kid. Despite everything, he felt a twinge of concern for her. ‘What happened, Ginette?’

‘Oh, the usual. Whaddya reckon?’

‘How would I know?’

She looked at him, exasperated, as if he should know. ‘Found a lid, the prick. Flushed it down the toot. Over fifty buck’s worth!’

The cost of an all-nighter. So that was why she was here. Angry again, he got up and went to the table.

‘So that’s what you want,’ he snapped. ‘I’ve got work to do. When you’re dry you can go straight back home.’

She stared at him, hurt. ‘I didn’t come for that, Peter. I... I just needed to talk to someone.’

‘Huh.’

He picked up a paper and made a show of reading it. He was aware that she was staring at him, that she had said something at odds with his expectations of her. He could see her reflection in the window by his head. She was still rubbing the towel through her hair, her elbows raised. Their eyes met in the reflection. He turned to her real image. He had to say something.

‘Where do you live?’

‘’Bout ten minutes away.’ She smiled, as if happy at the contact. She held up her arm. ‘Look what the bastard did!’

There was a purplish mark on her right bicep. ‘After he fetched me one, he shouted “Next time, out you go. You not my daughter!”’ She mimicked a mid-European accent and continued, ““No Papa, I go now, ’cos you not a father.” So here I am, Peter. Let me stay, little bit, ’til he cool down. A couple hours, maybe.’ Her mimicry had frozen.

‘Sure, kid.’ *So here was the real Ginette*, he thought. *Why not let her stay a while, no harm done.* He returned to his work, and the earlier feeling of cosy domesticity came back, reinforced by the figure of the girl, warming herself by his fire. The wistful elegance of the slow movement of the Haydn enveloped them.

‘What’s that?’ She nodded towards the transistor.

‘Haydn. A guitar quartet.’ Her question pleased him.

‘Guitar? Funny sort of guitar. Like it but.’ She felt her hair. ‘Got a comb?’

‘You’ll find one in the bathroom.’

She stood up, went out, and came back with a comb and small hand mirror. She sat with her back to the fire, combing, her nearly dry hair hanging long and straight now, watching him. He looked up and again caught her eyes. *Not insolent now, not the least bit.* He smiled at her.

She got up, walked over, and sat at his feet. She pulled his legs around so she sat between them, her head resting sideways on his thigh. He felt a rush of excitement and was sorry. She smiled up at him, sideways through her long dark eyelashes.

‘Sorry I was such a bitch, Peter. Seems like we’re friends now, don’t it? But I wouldn’t have ratted on you, not really. Wouldn’t now, anyway.’

‘You could have fooled me.’ Relief flooded him.

She looked up at him. ‘Peter, who was Jackie?’

It was as if she’d karate-chopped him across the throat. It hurt as much as if she had. His eyes welled up.

‘Jackie should have been my wife,’ he spoke so softly that she leaned forward to hear, ‘but she married someone else.’ *And it was my fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault.* The words of confession sprang into his mind but he wasn’t confessing a sin but a lapse in judgment that was costing him dearly. Unfortunately, there was no absolution for lapses in judgment.

‘Do you love her still?’

Ginette’s question ratcheted up his self-pity. ‘Yes! Oh Ginette, yes I do. You know, you remind me of her in a way...’ *Hang on*, he told himself, *this is silly*. Confiding like this to a fifteen year old, near enough to his own Mary’s age! *God*, he thought, *Mary was a baby compared to this streetwise girl*. But she’d hit him for six with that simple question. *Who was Jackie? Who indeed? Jackie is someone you really do remind me of*, he thought, *your teeth, your uninhibited sexuality*.

She stood. She sat on his knee. ‘Am I like her, really? Tell me, Peter, how am I like her?’ She peered at him, brilliant green eyes screened by black eyelashes.

‘Your teeth, if you must know.’

She opened her mouth, her Bug’s Bunny teeth moving slowly over her full lower lip. ‘Kiss them.’

So he did. No harm in that. He took her in his arms, he kissed those teeth, and the lips that framed them, like he had kissed Jackie's teeth many times. It had never failed to arouse him. And it did not fail now. He knew she could feel his hardness as she sat on his knee.

'Peter,' she stood up. Hands behind her back, she unhooked her bra. 'Make love to me, Peter. Don't just fuck me, like you did before. Make *love* to me, like what you would do to Jackie. You can call me Jackie, like you did before. I'd like to be her, just for a while.'

If only you were, if only you were. Her breasts were only inches from his eyes, ready for his lips. He bent to kiss each one. His moral alarm clock buzzed somewhere in the depths of his being, but he ignored it. He was too distracted by this incongruous and irresistible mix of past and present.

She got down from his knee, unzipped his trousers and rested those teeth on his throbbing erection. After teasing him with playful, gentle bites, she stood up and stretched out in front of the fire, on her back and held out her arms to him.

They fell asleep locked in each other's arms.

He woke to a sense of loss, as if he had been dreaming the most exquisitely beautiful dream and now all memory of it had fled. Instead, as he came to realise his real situation, dread flooded him. Here he was, lying naked beside a minor with whom he had just had sexual relations – unprotected too – in the silly pretence that she was Jackie. But she wasn't; she was a schoolgirl, for whom he, as her teacher, had a special trust and responsibility.

She was awake, lying on her back, her eyes watching him. Her lips parted into a smile, revealing a glimpse of those teeth that had so misled him. She looked relaxed and happy. *God*, he thought, *if only the circumstances were different!* Heavy with regret but urgent with guilt, he clambered to his feet.

‘Come on, up you get. Home.’

She looked startled and sat up. ‘Oh, not yet, Peter, please. I was enjoying just being here with you. Just with you. I got problems back there.’

I’ll say, he thought. *A violent father, a dope habit, and no money. And here’s me, an extra soft touch after tonight’s little lot.* ‘No. Sorry, but you must go. Just a minute.’ He put on his trousers and fumbled for his wallet.

She caught his panic but misread its cause. ‘Don’t worry, Peter, I’ll tell Dad I’ve been at a girlfriend’s place.’ She seemed bewildered at his sudden change in mood.

‘Ginette, I’m really sorry. I only wish you could be Jackie, or rather Jackie’s replacement. But that can’t be, surely you must see that? Look, I know you’ve got financial problems so here, take this.’ Peter held out a fifty.

She backed away, waving the money aside. ‘No, no, Peter, I told you. That’s not what I came for...’ She stopped, staring at him.

Eyes suddenly hardening, she grabbed the money. ‘Okay, *Mister Morrison*, if you want to keep it that way, that’s okay by me too.’

She picked up her jeans, stuffed the money in the pocket, dressed in a flash, and ran out the door, crashing it behind her. Peter, thoroughly bewildered himself, stared for minutes at the wet patch her oilskin had left on the carpet. The searing joys of the evening had fled. His mounting terror at the situation his foolishness had created kept him awake all night.

As bad as his fears of being charged with statutory rape on the one hand, or of being milked dry on the other, was his self-disgust at having misread her so badly. He replayed her words and actions right up to that point when he'd blown it. He was now convinced that she had been genuinely seeking his love, not his money. He concluded that she could easily have become the sort of a friend that a teacher might legitimately have. Kids need a wiser, older brother or father figure: a counsellor. He could have done that well with Ginette; no sex, just the fatherly support that she so clearly needed. Not only would it have been good in itself, it would have wiped his earlier mistake with her, turning it into something positive. But he hadn't. After screwing her in the full knowledge that she was his student, he had assumed the worst about her. That she was still after his money when she wasn't.

In failing to recognise her intentions, he had turned a potential friend into a dangerous enemy, as he found out within a couple of days. He was now looking at something like fifty dollars or more a week – and this was on top of the two households he had to support. He couldn't stretch to it, something had to give.

There had to be a showdown.

The one extravagance Peter allowed himself was a couple of afternoons a week at the Prince of Wales with Joe and Bill. He decided that if a suitable opening came up, he would seek their advice. It came sooner than he expected.

'How're you going with that hopeless bunch in 4C?' Bill asked him just over a week later.

'Good, mate. In general, that is. We're writing a collective play, nearly finished. They seem keen on it and they're learning how to spell and write in the meantime.'

‘Good one. Oh yeah, they’re not all bad. But there are some individual kids...’

‘Too right, there are.’ *Here it goes*, he thought. ‘That Ginette, what’s her name, Stecovic? Know who I mean, foxy-faced kid? Looks like you’d never trust her.’

‘Bloody *right* you don’t trust her, mate. Eh Joe?’ Joe shrugged and pulled at his beer. ‘Christ if that little bitch gets her fangs into you, watch out.’

Peter started, clutching his glass. ‘Why? What’s she done?’

‘Your predecessor, for a start. So she says, anyway. I reckon that’s what gave him his breakdown. Yeah, that bloody little bitch started putting it around that Harrington was screwing her. Bullshit! He’d never do that in a fit, not one of his own pupils.’

Peter began to see a faint glimmer of light at the end of a very long tunnel. ‘Look, Joe, Bill, absolutely confidential, between you and I, but that’s exactly the same worry that I’ve got. It started with an essay she’d written, implying that I’d been into her panties. Then she starts popping up in odd places, demanding money, and if I don’t pay up she threatens she’ll tell Stanway and the police that I’ve been screwing her.’

‘You haven’t paid her anything, have you?’ Bill was watching Peter closely.

‘Shit, no. Course not.’

‘Then don’t you. Tell her to piss off. And then if anything comes of it, deny it, right along the line. Every word. Admit nothing.’

Peter felt that the conversation had become extremely complex. But all he said was, ‘Thanks, mate, I’ll bear it in mind.’

The pretty fox was waiting for him in the car park next afternoon, sitting on a log marker near his car. As he approached, she positioned herself with the car between them and the school. She pressed close towards him.

‘G’day, Peter. I’m outa dope. There. Whaddya think of that?’

He shrugged, spread his hands, trying to smile, while regretting from the bottom of his heart that he had misunderstood her so badly.

‘Ginette, this can’t go on any more. I’m skint. As I told you, I’ve got two households to support. And,’ he threw in, ‘my oldest son is about to go to uni and needs

‘To *uni!* So Peter has a son going to *university!*’ she crooned in a high-falutin’ accent. ‘And does his son fuck slutty schoolgirls like his Daddy does?’

‘Ginette, *please!*’ That juxtaposition distressed him deeply, all the more for its underlying truth. ‘Look, it wasn’t *like* that! For a brief moment, you and I, er, had something. You must know that. But you know how it is between us. It couldn’t possibly have *worked.*’

‘That’s only because you wouldn’t let it work, you creep. Like you had your chance, but you treated me like a whore. Just like the first time. Okay, that’s the way you want it, that’s the way we’ll play it. Twenty bucks. No, fuck you, make that fifty. Like now.’

Her words cut him; they also scared the hell out of him. But he’d worked out his strategy and he couldn’t back down. Her words and her face told him it was too late for a truce, let alone an offer of friendship. That realisation devastated him, especially in the knowledge that he’d buggered that up himself. But now it was him or her – if she gets hurt, it would be through her own spite.

‘Sorry, Ginette. No can do.’

She stared at him. The eyes were slits, brilliant green glinting through, her front teeth biting her lower lip in slow motion. As he watched her warily, the fox became a pig. A feral pig with savage tusks. She charged and seizing his arm buried those beautifully

white strong tusks into his right bicep. He shouted with pain and tried to push her loose.

But she hung on, grunting and biting. He could feel warm blood trickling down his arm.

Shocked with the pain, he slapped her. She stopped.

Her green eyes glaring their hatred, she ran off, brown legs flying, over the fence and down the road.

Alan Stanway touched his sleeve as Peter entered the common room for morning tea.

Peter flinched painfully.

‘Could you spare a moment, old chap? In my study, now? Rather urgent.’

This is it. Peter tried to calm himself with Bill’s words. *Deny it, right along the line. Admit nothing.*

Alan was ill at ease. He sat behind his desk, and waved Peter to a chair opposite.

‘Look, Peter, something quite disturbing has turned up. Remember a girl in 4C, name of Ginette Stecovic?’

He nodded. ‘Yes, funny kid...’

‘What she said wasn’t funny. She saw me this morning, and made a very serious charge. She claimed that you had had sexual intercourse with her on several occasions.’

‘Alan, that is completely untrue!’ Peter leaned forward earnestly, desperately trying to communicate wounded sincerity. His arm brushed the edge of Stanway’s desk as he did so, reminding him painfully of his insincerity.

‘Oh God, Alan, what can I say? She’s a good kid in many ways, but right from the beginning I knew something really crook was up. She wrote an obscene essay, the very first day I took that class on a regular basis. Look, I’ll bring it in and show you, if you like!’

Stanway relaxed into his chair. 'No need, Peter. I believe you. It fits. Had to bring the matter up though.' He shook his head. 'Oh *Christ!* You see, that's the third complaint she's made against members of staff. First Harrington, then... oh, it doesn't matter. None of it was true. I've already talked things over with her parents but they're at a complete loss. Nice people, but old Stecovic admits he can't do anything with her. All I could suggest was boarding school, he can certainly afford it.'

Stanway thumped the desk with his fist. 'Well, it's not going to be our problem anymore. She'll just have to go. She's near enough to leaving age and I'll get the machinery for her expulsion in motion straight away. You know me. I always try to give the kids the benefit of the doubt wherever possible, but this is too much.' He stood up and held out his hand.

'Well, thanks, Peter, for being so good about it. That's the last we'll hear from her. And while you're here, I just want to say that we'll be very sorry to see you go at the end of the term. You've done a mighty job with 4C. A mighty, fucking job.'

Peter walked out the door, lightheaded with relief. Then it hit him what Alan had said. *Three* members of staff! He remembered Bill's attitude in the pub and started to chuckle, but a sharp pang of jealousy stopped the chuckle dead. So much for her plea for love. She was a positively dangerous blackmailer, who had manipulated not only him but others. Well, no more.

As he sat in his car that afternoon to drive home he felt something crunch uncomfortably. He felt underneath him, and pulled out a travelling alarm clock. It had been smashed to pieces.

NEWCASTLE

1980-1981

CHAPTER 10

‘Three spades.’

‘Pass.’

‘Four no trumps.’

‘Double.’

Four no trumps? Had she read Goren very closely, expecting him to bid back appropriately? Or had she just forgotten that no trumps beat spades? The latter. They went down horrendously. Malcolm Craig elaborately began tallying the score.

‘Well, Peter, let me see. That makes it 4220 points. So you owe me \$42.20. I’ll accept a bottle of that ’56 Baileys hermitage, in lieu, if you like.’

‘No way. Cash it is. It’s over and done with that way. To lose the Baileys would leave me in deep mourning. I’d never forgive Dorothy for that.’

‘That’s why I think husbands and wives should swap partners,’ Helen Craig gloated.

‘You betcha. Here are my car keys,’ Peter leered convincingly. *My God*, he thought, *never in a fit, not Helen*.

‘Oh you *men!* I meant just for the night,’ she gurgled back.

‘So did I!’ Shrieks and belly laughs all round.

‘Okay, Peter, and for that you can also let me sample some of that cabernet port from Mudgee you were telling me about. God! A man’s wife isn’t even safe.’

Malcolm was principal of a neighbouring school, and this year he was president of the Principal's Association. Peter entertained colleagues to keep the works quietly oiled. A sudden crisis in the school and Peter might well need someone useful to call on. Malcolm settled back and sipped his port.

'Hmmm. Not bad that, not too sweet. Happy days. Well, Peter, how long's it been here at Charlestown? Four, five years?'

'Five, this year.'

'I'll bet you didn't know what you were letting yourself in for. You know, Charlestown could have been the best school in the area: the type of kid that goes there, the physical outlook. There aren't many principals who can sit at their desk and gaze out to sea. But for that privilege, you have to cop that rat's nest. I blame the federation for that. The teachers there just used the place.'

'So did the department, you know.' Peter was working up to a display. He stood to get some cigars and used the journey to pace up and down theatrically. 'Jack Gillson used to appoint his mates within a year or so of retirement to schools like Charlestown – areas where they wanted to retire.' He handed Malcolm a cigar. 'Do you know how many principals that school had in the six years before I got there? Four. I was the fifth. So no wonder there was no morale. The leadership had been provided by broken down old men who couldn't give a continental about the fact that half their Year Tens had no chance of a job when they left.'

'Christ, Malcolm, what's the system for? Jobs for the boys?' Peter stopped and grinned a little foolishly. 'Sorry about that. Got carried away.'

His moment of drama was as deliberate a ploy as the dinner party itself. He wanted to make a particular point – and he wanted Malcolm’s help in a project he had in mind.

But Malcolm, ever gracious, was not taken in. ‘Has it ever occurred to you that the school was being kept at the ready for the right bloke? And that that right bloke was you? So just what *had* you done to be the department’s golden-haired boy?’

Peter was surprised and flattered. He would have loved to say: ‘Simple really. Got mixed up in radical politics, smoked marijuana, and paid a nice juicy Fourth Former for the occasional fuck. They offered me the pick of schools on condition that I promised to be a good boy in future!’

Instead he said, ‘The squeaky wheel principle. I was fed up with North Pymble and the poor little rich kids who thought the new revolution was going to solve the world’s problems. On the spur of the moment I asked Jack for a transfer. He sent me to a new school. Difficult, with large numbers of ethnic kids, but it worked out fine. I suppose I struck it lucky.’ He smiled the easy smile of success hard won.

Dorothy looked warningly at Peter through this, concerned that he might refer to their bust-up. She would have been rather more concerned if she knew what he was really holding back.

He had known what the official brown envelope contained as soon as he’d seen it. But it wasn’t only a reminder that his time at Queenscliff was nearly up. It was the notice of his promotion to deputy principal, The Entrance High School. And a PS from Jack Gillson in his own hand, congratulating him on his success at Queenscliff, saying that Alan Stanway

had written about Peter's excellent work there, with the Year 10s especially. The departmental screws were tightening, bringing Peter well and truly back on board.

Jim and Marie had kept him informed about how things had been at Turramurra. Dorothy had been coping. She had not, as understandably she might have, pounded Marie's ears with whinges about Peter's selfishness and irresponsibility. He could imagine Dorothy melding the role of perfect wife with that of suffering mother, Peter the loved but errant little boy.

He had taken the two younger children out a few times but it had been awful. They had stared at him, saying little. What could he offer them? Another visit to Taronga Park Zoo? Or would it be Luna Park next time? Or, as was now possible, a new start at The Entrance, a semi-rural community with magnificent beaches for the kids, and a higher salary with which to support them? He knew he should discuss the matter with Dorothy but, hang on he warned himself, whose drum would he then be marching to? To his own, he concluded. His problem was that he heard the beat of two drums. The one he'd been hearing for the last year had marched him into... freedom? Temporarily, yes, but that freedom had now palled. Self-actualisation? Great for the ego, but let's face it. The proceeds from his writing hadn't netted him enough to cover the mind-blowing episodes with Ginette. The other drum was now beating a persuasive, nostalgic rhythm that went as far back as Bathurst. He resonated to that beat.

He went up the block to the telephone booth. Mary answered. *Oh no*, he thought, *I can't face it, I'll call back*. As he dilly-dallied, she had said plaintively, 'Daddy? That's you, isn't it, Daddy?'

'Yes... darling, how are you?'

He heard muffled sobbing, then 'Come home, Daddy... please, come home!'

There was some shuffling at the other end of the line and another voice spoke.

‘Peter, is that you, dear? Come home. We want you to. We need you.’

Peter was appointed to Charlestown, a suburb of Newcastle, at the relatively young age of forty-seven. When he arrived, he found the place was a shambles. Little discipline amongst the students, less amongst the staff.

Morning after morning, he had looked out of his office window to see a different senior girl walking what seemed to be the same toddler along the seaward side of the school or playing with it in the rockery near his window. Puzzled, he asked one of the baby sitters what was going on.

‘This is Mrs Wiley’s baby, sir. I’m minding him for her,’ the girl replied.

He sent for Mrs Wiley and warned her that this must stop instantly. She affected to be dumbfounded, saying that the previous principal hadn’t made an issue of it. But she conceded, as she had to. ‘Oh, very well then, Mr Morrison. I was going to put John in a crèche anyway. My inspection for List 2 is coming up soon.’

‘Well, I’m afraid I can’t support you. Not until I have more significant evidence than this of your professional responsibility. I can’t have you imposing on students at the cost of their own education, never mind that they’re in an examination year. In fact, it would be better for your record if you withdrew your application and reapplied next year.’

Mrs Wiley went to the federation, charging Peter with discrimination under the anti-discrimination legislation. The president of the local chapter, a nice enough chap called Stan Palmer, came to Peter’s office to announce that a vote of censure had been passed. But only just, as Peter already knew.

‘Thanks very much, Stan,’ he said, as he was handed the typed letter of rebuke, ‘I don’t think we disagree very much about this, do we?’ He let the letter fall into the rubbish bin. ‘Now, what about a drink? I’ve got some Glenfiddich right here, as it happens. Or we can go to the Mattara and have a couple of beers, if you prefer.’

It had been a struggle, but within three years Peter had re-established Charlestown’s earlier claim to be one of the finer schools in the Newcastle area.

In mid-1975, he had been in Sydney attending a meeting. He was standing in a crowded train, the passenger on his left had her back to him. She was dressed in a jade-green shot silk creation that fitted her like an elegant second skin. Her shoulders were bare and deeply tanned. As he surreptitiously studied her, she turned to read the station sign. Her profile was unmistakable. It was nearly seven years since he’d last seen her; she would be about twenty-two now. On reflection, he was unsure if he had behaved the worse or if she had.

‘Ginette?’ he asked tentatively.

Those incredible eyes, the same colour as her dress, turned and met his. Her face had filled out, too. Not the sharp, pretty fox with the strong, dangerous teeth anymore but, her nose not profiled, she was a strikingly beautiful woman. Her lips were parted in a faint questioning smile, her teeth spelled charm, not danger.

‘Peter Morrison,’ he explained with a wary smile. She hadn’t recognised him with his now almost grey hair and much increased weight.

The eyes switched to a duller shade of green, the smile vanished. ‘Well, *well!*’ She looked hard at him. ‘I suppose I could thank you. On the other hand, when I think

how you brushed me off and then dobbed me in, I think I'd rather take a chunk out of your other arm!'

Her voice was poised, only isolated vowels were tatty as of old. Peter was relieved to see that her aggression was a ploy, for as she finished her eyes and face suddenly lit up, inviting him to reply.

'Th-thank me?'

'When I was expelled it made my father realise, finally, that he could no longer control his wild and wayward daughter. He was quite rich actually, owned a large tiling business. After I left Queenscliff, he paid some rather sadistic nuns several thousand a year to control me instead. They kept me on the straight and narrow, even if my previous teachers couldn't.' She pulled a face at him. 'I'm now a private secretary in a large company, engaged to be married. Things are pretty good. Oh, and this is my stop.'

Those eyes, that spirit! No suited company twit deserves you! A flash of regret reminded him of his own inadequacy in handling her. Even now, he'd given her nothing.

'It's nice to tidy up loose ends, Peter, and you were a very loose end. But I'm glad to have met you again, I really am.' She put her hands lightly on his shoulders, drew herself up to him, and kissed him full on the lips. The doors of the train hissed open and she was gone.

'She's left him, Pete. Wants to live with us for a while.' Dorothy hung up the telephone and turned to Peter. There were tears in her eyes, her voice harsh and angry.

'Better now than later, when there may be kids to be mangled.' His cynicism was meant to comfort her but it didn't.

Dorothy assumed he was telling her something about his own decisions. ‘Fat lot you care! And your own daughter, too. Well you’d better show a nicer attitude than that. She’ll be here around ten tonight.’

‘Love to see her, pity about the circs though.’

‘She says she wants to stay here and think a bit and then she’ll decide.’ Dorothy paused and bit her lip.

‘Decide what?’

‘‘Oh, decide whether to abort the child or have it. Then she’ll see if she wants to marry the f-father.’ Dorothy broke down and threw herself into Peter’s arms.

You wouldn’t credit it, he thought. Mary, with her sad Orphan-Annie face, the result of placing his large brown eyes in Dorothy’s facial legacy of sweet innocence. His own Mary, brought up in a loving home, every advantage, a sweet kid. Goes to Newcastle Teachers’ College and then she breaks out. She lives with Justin for a whole year, then meets Bob and marries him. And what a big deal that was, a cathedral wedding, the works. Then within a year of her marriage she gets pregnant, but not by Bob, or by Justin, but by some dropkick who Peter had never heard of.

Peter tried to get Dorothy to see that Mary’s life was her own, that nothing that had happened so far was irreversible or catastrophic. In trying to cheer her up, he pointed to the uneven and tangled chain of causes that led to anyone’s present condition.

‘Darling, you simply can’t tell. Take our three. Here’s Mary going through a temporary crisis; and you can be sure that that’s all it is. She’ll settle down. And Phil, as equable a kid as you could imagine, apart from frigging around with the peace movement, settles down to complete his HSC no problems. And then he’s off. Chucks university, rampages around the world doing God-knows-what, and now he’s up the

coast, quietly farming. And young Jimmy just plugs away, not causing a ripple at any time, halfway through his engineering degree.'

'Well?'

'Well, you can make too much of a particular phase someone is going through. Look at others... er, look at Jackie, for instance...'

'You can leave *her* out of it.'

'No, she illustrates my point. I want to show how people can become so different from what they once were. She used to be a right tearaway. Now she's happily married, as balanced and composed a person as you'd ever find. But she's still Jackie.' This was obviously not going across too well so he chose another example. 'Then there was this girl at Queenscliff High. Unmanageable, she paid for a drug habit by prostituting herself... er, so they said. Anyway, I heard recently that she's now a successful private secretary, poised, sophisticated, and engaged to be married.'

Something in Peter's voice may have betrayed him, for Dorothy stared at him in an unusually concentrated way. But she said nothing. Peter was aware of her stare, and couldn't stop himself from blushing. He blundered on.

'Well, um, take me. Brought up with the most stable background possible. Marry you, my dear, and settle down. Some ups and downs, then I really kick over the traces in Sydney. But you were giving and loving enough to ignore the bits that hurt,' he patted her face and smiled a little forcedly, 'and here we are. The most rewarding period of our lives, *n'est-ce pas?*'

She nodded, not very enthusiastically. 'But I don't see what you're driving at, Pete. We *start* with Mary, then somehow we get onto a tart in Queenscliff and how okay she really is, as if I give a shit about that, and now we're onto how rewarding your life is.'

‘Our lives, Dottie, not just mine. All sorts of complicated things in the past make us what we are. What I’m saying is, don’t worry too much about Mary’s present crisis. She’s just made a wrong turn and it’s led her up a blind alley. She just needs to choose again.’

To choose again. All difficult choices demand a sacrifice of some kind. You choose something you think you value more than what you have to give up. But you don’t know if what you have chosen turns out to be worse than what you have given up. His problem was those two bloody drummers. Each drummer valued something different, to march to one drummer meant being out of step with the other. He had chosen to marry Dorothy because he had valued her and what she represented. That had meant sacrificing Jackie, not once, but twice. That had led him to ‘The Effing Forties’, as Jack had called it. But by then the world had changed and his real choice could no longer be made. So his next choice was Dorothy, for the third time.

And third time lucky, he was as happy as at any time in his life.

Mary had kept her front door key from college days. She let herself in and dropped her things on the hall floor with a crash. ‘Hi Mum! Hi Dad!’ she called unnecessarily loudly.

They sat in the living room, Mary picking her favourite chair where she could see right out across Lake Macquarie to the lights sparkling at Belmont and Swansea.

‘It’s good to be back. Don’t know for how long,’ she smiled sadly, her eyes large, their moisture almost ready to fall.

‘You’ve chucked in your job then?’ Peter asked.

‘Leave without pay. Personal reasons. I have the car, that mess in the hall, a few hundred dollars, and a bun in the oven. Next?’

Dorothy winced, on the point of tears again, but Peter smiled to himself. *Good girl, it hurts much less when you can laugh at yourself, just a little.*

‘And a husband, darling,’ Dorothy reminded her with uncharacteristic lack of insight.

‘That dickhead! I don’t want to talk about him, Mum. He’s the least of my worries.’ She looked at her mother’s look of desperate concern, and thought she owed her some kind of explanation. She sighed. ‘All right, try this for size. Bob *irritates* me, Mum. He gives me the creeps, with his gentle voice, babying me, patronising me constantly: “There, there, little girl, leave it to Bobbie,” Honestly! And in bed he probes around “Is that how my little girl likes it?”’

Dorothy squirmed uncomfortably at such a direct reference to her daughter’s sex life. Peter was fascinated. Maybe he’d got Mary’s perception of choices wrong. She was certainly coming across as a tough little baby now. *Good on you, girlie.*

‘Anyway, I meet Sean at a party. He treats me like a woman and I react like a woman. And here the both of us are.’ She shrugged, smiling wanly.

Sean, so at least this dropkick has a name, Peter thought.

‘What? Darling, you didn’t bring this Sean here, did you?’ Dorothy asked ingenuously.

‘Oh, *Mum!*’ was all Mary needed to say. Rolling her eyes was superfluous.

‘Do you want to marry him?’ Dorothy sniffed.

‘Yes. No. I don’t know. I guess I don’t know him well enough...’

‘You knew him well enough to let him...’

‘Look, pet,’ Peter interrupted, looking angrily at Dorothy. God, she could be insensitive at times. ‘Look, pet, if you’re not sure then keep your options open. You know?’

‘Yeah, I know. I’m just not sure that I can do that. Anyone else? I’d advise ’em to have it done every time. But now it’s me.’

Peter knew that if ever this was a moment when a single choice could make or break a life this was it. He smiled at her. ‘I know, I know. Whichever way, just don’t box yourself in. Keep your options open.’

‘Like you did, you mean?’ Mary asked with heavy irony, referring to his escape from Turramurra.

‘Mary, Daddy and I didn’t have to get married,’ Dorothy said loudly, mistaking her point.

‘Yes we did,’ Peter cut in, ‘let’s be honest about it. Only the foetus that clinched the matter was germinated in me, not in you. And being mental, not physical, it was that much harder to abort.’

Mary misunderstood his complex metaphor. ‘Hey, so you two *did* screw before you married! Unreal! That makes me feel a hell of a lot better. Mum, I always thought you were so straight and Dad and I were the weirdos!’

Dorothy was looking more and more distressed as Mary went on, ‘Come on, of *course!* I remember that night in Turramurra, the shouting and fighting and then Dad nicking off. I thought he was having an affair. Why else would a spouse leave? Well I know now, there are plenty of reasons.’ She went over and kissed her parents, who were slightly bemused by the ambiguity of her last remark. She patted her stomach, ‘Come on, Option. How open are we going to keep you, eh?’

‘It’s a form of murder, Peter! I couldn’t stand it. *We* could bring the little darling up if she didn’t want to! Please, Peter.’ They were sitting on the sundeck, watching the yachts on the lake below.

‘It’s her decision, and it’s not murder before the third month,’ Peter said firmly, plucking a figure from the air. He hoped Mary was on the right side of it. He felt it quite inappropriate for him and Dorothy to take over what had to be Mary’s own responsibility. It had to be Mary’s own decision, they oughtn’t to make one alternative too easy for her by raising her child. He remembered the subtle and not so subtle pressures placed on them by his and Dorothy’s parents. Anyway, he felt he was far too old to think of taking on a new born baby, even if it would be his own grandchild.

He was trying, with little success, to explain this to Dorothy when Mary stepped out openly onto the deck. She’d been standing in the background, listening. She was pale and shaky, and lowered herself into a chair gingerly. She looked on the point of tears.

‘Mummy, Dad, you’ll be delighted to know... the options are open.’ She looked hard at Peter, then burst into a flood of tears and threw herself into Dorothy’s arms. Peter cringed as he reflected afresh on the subtlety of parental pressure. How could you *not* influence a child’s choice? And which child are you talking about: the one that chooses freedom? Or the one that is dealt death?

‘But John, the unemployment rate for sixteen to eighteen-year-olds is pushing thirty per cent! What are the schools doing about *that*?’ No histrionics needed here. Peter was genuinely angry.

‘Come now, Peter. It’s not the schools’ job to prepare fodder for BHP,’ John Tallboys replied. ‘My Years 11 and 12 are there to prepare kids for higher education. I’m not having any bludgers coasting along for the ride, holding back the good kids.’

‘But that’s making it more and more difficult for the poor buggers ever to get jobs!’ Peter shot back. It was moments like this when Peter utterly endorsed Jim’s cracks at the system.

He had designed a programme designed to keep kids in school after Year 10 doing practical and vocational studies. With Malcolm Fraser Prime Minister and youth unemployment through the roof, the alternative for most kids was the dole and steadily decreasing chances of ever getting a job. The problem was that no one school could afford the workshop facilities, old cars, extra business machines, photographic and video equipment, and the part-time staffing. But, and this was his plan, a group of schools could. Moreover, as a group, they would have some chance of getting a special grant from the NSW state government.

Malcolm was in the chair and playing it very cool, Peter was quite unsure how he would jump. Tallboys’ position was only too clear, and it seemed to have some support. Then old Wilf Thwaites spoke up.

‘I’d like young Morrison to run whatever programme he sees fit at Charlestown. That’s his business. But it certainly isn’t any of ours. Colleagues, we are wasting our time on trivia. I move we proceed to the next item on this long and important agenda.’

But Thwaites’s gag was defeated. Malcolm, with a teasing look at Peter, threw in his school. Wally Milburn and Peter Kelly immediately followed suit. Peter had got his minimum number of schools to work the programme.

The next step was to work on the State Minister to help finance it.

After several weeks of writing submissions and staff meetings, today, after coming down to Sydney for a meeting with the Minister, they had finally secured the funding for the first trial year of Peter's Employment Enrichment Programme, or EEP as Peter called it.

They were in the ruefully familiar West End Bar of the Wentworth. Malcolm, Wally and Peter Kelly proposed the toast:

'To Peter Morrison, the biggest urger in the Hunter Valley!' They all drank.

'I couldn't have done it without you blokes, you mighty bunch of bastards!' He clinked glasses with each in turn. They drank again.

'And here's to your namesake, Malcolm, the screwdriver of the unemployed. May the right hand thread on his prick eternally engage left hand sockets!' Peter belched loudly, elbowing Malcolm. They drank yet again.

Peter was ecstatic that it had come off. It had been touch and go, and had cost him a small fortune in bridge losses, incurred largely through Dorothy's enthusiastic ineptitude, and in the purchase of expensive grog in the cause of buttering up colleagues.

What else was there in this complicated chain? He looked around the bar. Over twenty years since first meeting Brookes here. And Jackie. And Room 533. He'd forgotten the numbers of his own rooms but then he'd hardly slept in them. He giggled to himself as he elliptically calculated that the federation could have saved a packet, if he had told them there was no need to pay for the rooms he hadn't been occupying. Well then, he'd repay that indirect and devious debt right now. Three meetings in 1958, six nights' worth of bed and breakfast. But don't forget 1968, he gleefully reminded himself, the year when a golden-dusted brown thigh and a pair of green, slanted eyes had provoked him so. If it hadn't been for that bit of consciousness-raising, he was sure he

wouldn't be here now, fighting the good fight for the failures and the unmanageables in the system.

A hand was waving across his face. 'Wakey-wakey! Morrison's off into Happy Land!'

Peter collected himself, and grinned at this last association with things past. 'Sorry, fellers. Just remembering last time I was here. Look, next round's on me. Something special.' He beckoned to the waiter. 'Would you bring two bottles of Grange or something equally as good, if such a thing there be. Must be a '58 and a '68. And eight clean tasting glasses, please.'

'Christ! He really has gone round the twist,' Malcolm muttered in awe as the waiter left them. 'Look, old son, don't get too carried away...'

'I know what I'm doing, mate. Right now anyway. You can try me in an hour's time, if you like. The thing is I have an old and private debt and I want to share its repayment with you chaps.'

He settled for a Lindeman's '58 four-digit Hunter and a '68 Grange. *Appropriate enough*, Peter thought, while the waiter half-filled two glasses for each person. They drank and compared. Again and again.

'The difference between Hunter wines and Hunter schoolies is that the former *improve* with bloody age.' Peter leaned forward solemnly. 'Take that old deadhead Thwaites...'

There was a hoot of laughter but Peter Kelly suddenly jumped up.

'Hey, the TAA bus leaves in approximately thirty seconds. Let's move it.' They fell through the front doors and into Elizabeth Street in time to see the airport bus emerge from the TAA building and turn up the street.

‘Fuck!’ Peter mouthed. ‘Never mind, you blokes stay here. There’s a cab about to pull out now. I’ll grab it.’ He lurched up the street, stumbling as he ran, shouting indistinctly: ‘Taxi! Ta-a-a-x-i!’

Wally nudged the others. ‘The silly bugger! That’s not a cab. I just saw a sort get into the driving seat.’ They laughed and ambled after him.

Peter stumbled and fell. The others picked him up and dusted him down. He was a bit shaken but otherwise unhurt. They found a taxi soon after, arriving at the airport in plenty of time for their Williamtown flight.

Jackie stepped out from the footpath and opened the door of her car. As she climbed into the driver’s seat, she looked back down the street and saw a man running towards her from the Wentworth. She shrugged and started the engine. She heard someone shouting – her name!

‘Jackie! Ja-a-a-ck-ie!’

She looked into the rear-vision mirror. Peter was running towards her, waving his arms. He looked demented. She shut her eyes tightly, remembering his tortured face at that restaurant as he left her sitting at the table, so many years ago. She had never forgotten that moment, but had hoped and prayed he would eventually accept the inevitable. And now *this*, twelve years later! She stabbed the shift into drive, narrowly missing the car parked in front of her. She caught a quick glimpse in the rear mirror and saw that he had fallen and was being helped to his feet by bystanders. She accelerated down the street; away, away, from that poor demented soul.

A deep pity filled her as she remembered his face, jowled and flabby, purple with exertion and excitement. His staring eyes! But it was still the face of the man she

had loved to desperation so many years ago. Tears were streaming down her face now, not in love, but in pity. *If you have any pity at all, God, stop crucifying him. Give him some peace, O God. Give him peace.*

Wally had left his car at Williamstown and delivered the others back to their homes. On the way back they ribbed Peter about his small moment of drama.

‘Knock it off, fellers. A bloke can make a simple mistake like that... spec’lly when the silly tart has a red’n’white car. Now I ask you, what sort of sheila with any sense’d go round confusing a bloke like that, eh?’ He laughed, then paused a moment. ‘Hmm, she looked kinda familiar come to think of it... No, let’s think o’ the important things. The programme... bloody ripper, eh? Jus’ bloody ripper.’

Wally let him off at the front drive, refusing the offer of a drink. Peter staggered happily down the drive and let himself in.

‘Dottie! We did it, hun. We bloody did it.’ He ambled into the kitchen and hugged her.

‘That’s for my clever husband,’ she said, kissing him. ‘Celebrating already, eh?’ She gave an exaggerated sniff.

‘Yes, but not with you, my pet, not with you. Now what’s for dins and I’ll retrieve the appropriate from down below, so you can join in the celebrations.’

As he filled the glasses with an experimental merlot from the Hunter Valley, he said, ‘You know, pet, a funny thing happened. A bloody funny thing. We missed the bus, see, and so I raced off to what I thought was a taxi. It wasn’t, but it wouldn’t have mattered ’cos I fell arse over tit anyway. No, no, not hurt at all. Do you know,’ he looked owlshly at her and repeated, ‘do you know, I could’ve sworn for a minute there that it

was Jackie in that car. Bloody Jackie, eh? Couldn't've been though. She shot through like a packet of salts. Nah, wassen Jackie. Looked too old.'

Dorothy listened to her husband with mixed feelings. Was he trying to tell her something? Now and again he did keep bringing up her name, inconsequentially, as though it didn't matter. Dorothy thought it mattered all right. Look at him now, plastered out of his mind. Thirty years! Was there no end to his old obsession? Not that she felt any qualms about her own security. Since The Entrance they had been as close as they'd ever been. They'd had their differences, the most recent over Mary's crisis. The shock of that had receded now Mary had picked herself up and gone back to her job but to neither Bob nor Sean. Dorothy had to concede that Peter's philosophy had been 'for the best'. Whatever that might turn out to be. Yes, she didn't doubt his loyalty now. She just felt so sorry that he was still obsessed and that it was hurting him. A warm gush of love and pity came over her, as she watched him hold his glass to the light, sniff it, and mumble, 'sweaty saddles, be buggered.'

He got up from the table, feeling physically and mentally complete. A little too complete, physically, as he stumbled against his chair. But that, he decided, was his reward for a job well done. Bloody well done. Now for his reward. He was into his Beethoven phase. One thing about the old Jackie – *odd about that old moo in the car* – she'd given him an insight into music that now, in his autumnal years, was a source of immense pleasure. The rich and complex sound waves that flowed from his speakers drew him into an inward search, seeking a complementary mental harmony.

He'd once read an essay by Aldous Huxley called 'Music at Night' that had sent him scampering to the record shop to buy the stimulus for that essay: Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. Huxley had described his feelings on hearing, late at night, the *Benedictus*:

Blessed is He that Cometh. Peter's feelings weren't quite the same as Huxley's, but then they wouldn't be, would they. According to Jackie's thesis, you project your own theme onto it, based on your own feelings of blessedness, or whatever.

At last, after all those years of conflict, he was indeed feeling blessed. He switched off all the lights and placed the record on, catching the last of the Hosanna to get that magical transition, via the *Praeludium*. The high solo violin, hovering then descending, like a beautiful golden leaf dropping from a tree in autumn, looping in a downward spiral towards the ground. Fruition, completeness. He considered himself in that phase now, in his own life. Rich, ripe, nearing completion. The project accomplished today was a small example of that. And as usual, when completely relaxed, happy, and not to say more than a little sloshed, his emotions swelled with the music. The sequence totally transported him. Starting with the tremolo on the solo violin, the chorus whispering '*Benedictus, Benedictus*', followed by the solo voices taking the theme higher and higher in a slow waltz. Tears were streaming down his face, his breath caught and he sobbed audibly.

Dorothy was standing just inside the door, desperately concerned. She could see his tear-stained face in the moonlight, reflected off Lake Macquarie, streaming through the window. When the music stopped, he lay back in his chair, not moving. She went up to him soundlessly and put an arm around him.

'Peter, oh Peter,' she whispered, 'Can't you have happiness with me? Not even now?'

He turned his tear-streaked face to her. The moment had gone; he was back to his drunken self. 'Dottie, happiness... is... a fulfilled love, a fulfilled life. Thass what happiness is.' *Like I am now*, he meant to add.

She misunderstood. She let him go, softly crying and mostly for him. She went into the ensuite and changed into the nightie she knew he liked. She waited for him to stumble up, clean his teeth, and fall into bed.

She clung to him. ‘Love me, Peter, love me. I can give you happiness too. Please, Peter.’

He loved her, and as he rolled over she prayed: ‘Please give him peace, God, if you have any pity at all. Give him peace.’

He laid his head on the pillow, the solo violin still whispering in his skull.

Fucking magic!

CHAPTER 11

Only six months after his victory, Peter received a letter from the Minister warning him that in the present economic climate there could be no guarantee that the EEP grant would be continued. It would depend on the progress made. Meantime, Peter was required to submit a detailed accounting of funds disbursed thus far, and evidence for the success of the scheme. *What a load of bullshit*, Peter thought bitterly, *for the sake of a paltry \$5000.*

Nineteen eighty-one was the year of the Razor Gang, charged to slash public sector spending to the bone. Many teachers resented schemes like Peter's, which they saw as squandering limited resources on bludgers and no-hopers. Peter's deputy, Dennis Hammond, was one such. He was also a member of the Labor Party, and over many a beer, Peter worked on that allegiance in the attempt to gain Hammond's much needed support.

'Look, Dennis, you know what Fraser's doing, don't you? He's starving government schools so he can beef up government support for private schools. He's pandering to the elite! *Their* kids are the ones that'll get the top jobs. Or any bloody jobs, the way it looks.' He gulped some beer and continued. 'Our Year 11 programme helps keep the options open for the non-elite, the ordinary joes. Fuck it!' he slammed his glass

onto the table. 'If the Labor Party isn't going to stick up for them, who is?' He regretted that too much anger was showing. An increasingly common failing these days.

'Now, Peter,' Dennis said uneasily, 'a principal, of all people, shouldn't confuse politics and education. Schools aren't instruments of social change, you know.'

Peter's anger flared again. 'Aren't they fucking just? What do you think Fraser and his gang are using them for right now?' He forced a grin, but it was too late. His anger was contagious.

'Shit on the social philosophy, Mr Principal,' Dennis retorted. 'Let's just be practical. Get a kid committed to an academic course when he's young enough to be conned into it and bright enough to handle it. Keep him there until he realises for himself that he's onto his meal ticket. And if he doesn't want to stay there and better himself, then stuff him. That's his business. But I don't want my time, and the taxpayer's money, spent on allowing him to indulge his whims and fancies.'

'Never mind, Peter,' Malcolm said over the phone. 'We've done our best and you can't do better than that. You're letting it get to you, old son. By the way, did I tell you I got a case of Californian reds from Farmers the other day? We should get together, it'd be interesting to stack them up against the new cool climate West Australians.'

After he'd hung up Peter felt a bit better. *You can't do better than that.* No you can't, but he was a long way off giving his best. God, there must be hundreds of firms they could have put the bite on: tax deductible donation, scads of PR to be had from helping the underprivileged into the workforce.

He got up and went to his envied window: the view of the sea, down to and beyond Redhead Bluff. *You're letting it get to you, old son.* Yes, he supposed he was. He

was aware of an increasing pain in his arm. Turning to go back to his desk, he suddenly felt dizzy and weak. Sweat sprang from his face and into his clothes, he panicked as vision receded. His heart pounded a vicious surge of heartburn up his windpipe.

He clawed his way to his desk and sat as gently as he could. He rested his head on his hands. After a few minutes the paroxysm relaxed, leaving him weak, with the taste of raw acid in the back of his throat. He wondered if Jane would have some Mylanta or Rennies, or something. He walked gingerly over to the door into the main office, and poked his head around.

‘Jane, you wouldn’t have any Mylanta or antacid stuff, would you? Even bicarb would...’

‘Why, Peter,’ she interrupted, ‘you look absolutely awful! Your face, it’s all blotchy!’ She stared at him a few seconds and then took him by the arm back into his office, laying him in an armchair. ‘Now stay there and relax. I’ll get you some water, and then I’m going to ring Dorothy.’

‘First the good news. You’ve just had a minor heart attack. Quite minor, no real damage done. But it’s a warning...’

‘Heart! Oh Jesus,’ Peter mumbled, ‘and that’s the good news?’

‘The bad news is that you’ll have to change your lifestyle. Now let’s see. Your blood pressure is 190 over 100; that’s appalling. Your path tests have come back. Not good, cholesterol way too high. You’re about thirty kilos overweight, that’s over four stone you’ve got to shed. And there’s some evidence of liver damage, not irreversible as yet, but it will be if you continue the way you’re going.’

‘I’m going to give it to you straight, Peter. You’re smoking, eating, and drinking yourself into the grave. And working yourself in that general direction, too, I’ve no doubt.’ Keith Turner looked at Peter enquiringly.

Peter nodded impatiently. ‘Come on, Keith, get on with it. Can you prescribe anything?’

‘I’ll give you a script for some stuff to get the blood pressure down and for a relaxant. Follow the directions to the letter, Peter, no mucking around. But more important, you’ve just got to allow things to function as they were made to. That’s the hard part.

‘Now, get this. One, no smoking. Finish. Out. A small amount of grog can even do some good, but no amount of tobacco did anything but harm...’

‘Not even a cigar after dinner?’

‘Up to you. It depends on whether you want to retire on schedule vertically, or be carried out of the school horizontally. Two, as I said, a small amount of grog won’t do any harm. I know you like your drop, so let’s say the odd glass of beer for sure and no more than a couple of glasses of white wine or Scotch with plenty of water a day. I’d recommend against red. No fortifieds, no neat spirits.’

Peter groaned as he remembered the reds and vintage ports he’d been cellaring for the last few years, and those important drinking and dinner traditions he’d established with his colleagues. The job would be much harder without that.

‘Three, diet. No salt, not even in cooking, there’s plenty there naturally. More than enough.’

‘Salt?’

‘Salt. No animal fats, no butter. Use margarine instead. And red meat no more than twice a week, say. No cakes or pastries. And finally, exercise. Take it easy at first, very easy, but you’ve got to get your cardiovascular system working. I’ve got some charts I’ll give you that’ll prescribe a suitable exercise regimen for you.’ He looked at Peter’s face then added, ‘As I said, it’s up to you. Horizontal or vertical, mate.

‘Oh, and one last thing. I hope you’ve got a reliable deputy. I’m writing you a certificate recommending one month’s sick leave. If you follow what I’ve just told you to the letter, you’ll be back there on the job a new man. Promise.’

He shook Peter’s hand, and ushered him out of the surgery.

‘No, no salt, thanks, Jimmy. My diet, remember?’ He grimaced at the thought of the tasteless and minuscule portion of chicken in front of him, ungarnished by even that basic condiment.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ Jimmy grinned cheerfully, as he sprinkled salt liberally over his rather larger serving. ‘You’ll be right, though. When you knock off some of that flab, you can come jogging with me round the block a few times.’

‘Jogging? Like hell I will.’ He surged with anger at the unfairness of it all, and abruptly excusing himself, left the table to go and play some music. But not the *Benedictus*. Blessed, my arse.

Dorothy finished the washing up and went to sit with him. ‘Peter, what can we do now you’re off for a while? We should get away somewhere. It’ll be so much easier in a new environment.’

‘I know what I’d like to do, and that’s to crack open a bottle of a decent red and forget the whole bloody thing.’

She plugged on regardless. 'We've got that standing invitation from Jim and Marie to stay in their holiday shack in Port Macquarie. We haven't seen them for ages. Oh, go on, Pete, give them a ring!'

Her enthusiasm rubbed off. 'Hmm. Jim and Marie, eh? Yes, let's think about it.'

'Now, Pete. Ring him now.'

A crafty look came into his eye. 'Okay, but on condition that you help me mangle a bottle of that Margaret River cabernet for one last time. Agreed?'

She hugged him. 'Alright you old rogue, agreed. But you've got to make the call first.'

He checked their Armidale number and dialled. While it was ringing he thought it was funny that Jim and Marie had landed back at the university from whence they'd started. After the protest movement had died, Jim had knuckled down and published voluminously, and two years ago he was appointed professor of education at New England, their old campus now being a full-blown university. Peter and Dorothy had always intended to visit them, as demanded in the last two Christmas cards, but had never got around to it. Now was the time...

'Sick leave?' he heard Jim bawl down the phone. 'Christ man, what have you been doing to yourself? No, don't tell me, I can guess. Silly old sod... yes of course... we'll be at Port Macquarie from the 15th to the 30th. Plenty of room, for any or all of the time. Look, I'll send you directions, see you then.'

Peter scurried happily to the cellar, stopping in the kitchen on his way back to pick up a pack of roasted nuts. Unsalted.

Jim stood in the driveway, squinting up the road, his hands on his hips, shirt flapping open in the afternoon breeze. As the Lexus nosed enquiringly round the corner, he waved his arms over his head, yelling: 'Here, you blind bugger! Right here.'

He bounded over and shook Peter's hand and pushed his face across Peter to kiss Dorothy. He backed out saying, 'The drive's a bit tricky, steep and sandy in parts. I'll go ahead and guide.'

He loped up the track that served as a drive, Peter following and parking at the rear of the cottage. Marie was standing on the back step in a long cotton shift, her dark hair streaked with iron grey, flying behind her. Her features were now even more ornithological, with the inevitable sagging of skin and filigrees of fine wrinkles. She looked in keeping here like a fine, kind sea eagle. She screeched a sea eagle's raucous welcome.

Peter hung his head out the window and called, 'Hi, Gorgeous. Why cover up those sexy legs?'

She threw her dress up, and wagged a slim, brown leg at him, and screeched again. That sight dredged a complex of memories for Peter. *How does she do it? Incredible at fifty-three.* She skipped to the car and kissed them both.

They unpacked and stacked their things in their bedroom, basically furnished but with a magnificent view of the sea, past Tacking Point.

Jim had thoughtfully stocked up with low calorie beer, and Peter needed little arm-twisting. They sat around in the living room, while Marie prepared a huge snapper bought from a local fisherman that morning. At the sight of that, Peter extracted a couple of bottles of Upper Hunter Semillon from the case he'd insisted on bringing, and put

them in the fridge. 'White wine's okay. Anyway, this is a special occasion,' he replied to a comment that nobody had made.

Fish and salad. Normally an entree for Peter, but his stomach was at last learning to contract obligingly given the severe discouragement it had been receiving over the last week. He felt near enough to satisfied. Jim had pushed his chair back. Peter studied him. Jim's hair was completely grey and receding. His face was tanned, lean and deeply lined; a graceful and complimentary imposition of age that hadn't altered the basic contours of his face at all. His chest and stomach were covered in greying hair, underneath as hard and firm as twenty and more years ago. The years hadn't been quite so kind to Marie, from the shoulders up. Twists of wrinkles surrounded her eyes, and mouth lines, gathering again under her chin and neck. From the shoulders down? All Peter had seen was one leg, and that was a limb a teenage girl wouldn't fret over. *Bugger them*, he thought. It wasn't fair!

'You two make me sick, you look so damned healthy!' He laughed good-naturedly and raised his near empty glass.

'Sorry to hear about your problem, Pete,' Jim leaned forward earnestly. 'It's quite reversible you know. There's some startling evidence on the effects of exercise on cardiac conditions. Do you know that in the States there are clubs for people who've had massive heart attacks? If you survive the first one, you can, with a lot of carefully planned training, run a marathon within a year.'

'Your cheeky young namesake has been pushing that one at me. No way. The last time I ran any distance, about forty yards as I recall, I was chasing what I thought was a taxi. Next, I was on my arse in Elizabeth Street utterly shagged out. Hey, yeah, that was funny. Let me tell you...'

Peter woke up early next morning, feeling fine. With Dorothy still asleep, he slipped out of bed and sat by the window, gazing out to sea. It reminded him, unfortunately, of the view from his office window and what he'd been thinking of when he'd fallen ill – cadging donations from industry. Might work, but he'd have to be able to show them that the programme was working. What a bastard to be away now of all times! Dennis obviously wasn't going to put himself out over it, to say the least. An excuse could easily be found, by someone who wanted an excuse, not to refund the programme for next year.

He'd killed his own creation, he thought bitterly. Killed it through his own weakness, his heart, and what he had chosen to do to it. That was an old story, wasn't it? That line of Oscar Wilde's: *Yet each man kills the thing he loves*. What had been his loves? Jackie, poetry, the programme, Dorothy. She'd been stunned a couple of times but not killed. Yes he did love her, and yes, she did come bouncing back each time. He looked across the room and saw her eyes closed peacefully, her blonde-tinted hair falling softly around her head on the pillows. He smiled as a warm wave of love washed over him.

All those other loves he had killed by a deliberate choice that was nevertheless mostly out of his hands. What sort of choice was that? The sort that it is the lot of humanity to make. You know only some of the facts, alternatives and consequences. But you choose nonetheless. You have to. And you mostly screw it up. At least he had. What had Marie said in their North Ryde apartment? 'What a mess. I'm so sorry.' To which he'd replied something like, 'Do you fucking mind? I'm not dead yet!' No, not then, but he felt uncomfortably bloody close to it now.

His capsule of self-pity was broken when a figure appeared at the door. Marie, in her dressing gown, was looking enquiringly at him and pointing to the sea. Peter shushed, nodding to Dorothy, and stepped into the corridor with Marie. She whispered: 'Anyone for a swim? We're just on our way.'

'In August? You're mad!'

'It's real warm. Honest!''

'Get nicked. See you when you get back.' He pecked her cheek and patted her bottom, which rolled pleasingly under her gown, reassuring him that he was indeed not dead yet.

He went back to the window. He could see them crossing the road, swinging their towels, talking and laughing. *How about those two*, he thought. Surely to God they'd made their own choices and bugged them up? If they had, they weren't showing. But, then his weren't showing all day, every day. Take that night he came back from the Wentworth, after his programme had got the go-ahead. He had been so pleased with himself. He'd felt blessed. '*Blessed am I, I, I, from Charlestown High-igh-igh*,' he sang to himself to the theme from Beethoven. No, you can't tell at any given moment, as he'd tried to explain to Dorothy about Mary's crisis. This too was surely a temporary low.

It did turn out to be a warm day, so warm that Peter and Dorothy were persuaded to change and go to the beach. The four of them clambered down a steep cliff path. The beach was broken here and there by rocky outcrops, which gave some privacy.

'This section is semiofficially recognised as a nuddy beach, if you're that way inclined,' Jim explained. 'Suit yourselves. We're going for a bit of a run. See you in a while.' They both took off their clothes and ran off down the beach. Peter was a little

irritated by their smugness, but he was curious to see how Dorothy was going to handle this.

‘Well, when in Rome...’ he said taking his clothes off and lying face down on his stomach. To his pleased surprise Dorothy did likewise. She looked at him across her arm as she lay and said, ‘Easier than last time, isn’t?’

He too was remembering the episode by the Macquarie River, what, thirty-two years ago.

‘I was a prude then. I bitterly regretted that afterwards. Did you know?’

He shook his head.

‘When I saw you and... Jackie... together, I used to think “If only I’d let him! That’d be me there with him, not her.”’ She smiled.

‘What are you complaining about? You didn’t. And it was you, eventually.’

‘Exactly. Eventually. After I *did*.’

‘So much for the power of screwing, then. Hey, did you like it, that first time?’ He’d never asked her that before.

‘Not in itself, no. It hurt. But I liked the general idea...’

‘The general idea? Lovemaking’s not an idea.’

She patted his arm, on the scar where Ginette had bitten him. ‘And not a memory to perve on either.’

Peter wondered if her reply and that touch were coincidental or had she guessed? Before he could think up an answer to that they were distracted as cold water splashed them. Dorothy squeaked and sat up before realising the consequences. Jim was shaking his hands over her, dripping from his recent swim.

‘Had to get you to turn around, Dottie, or you’d look like you’d fallen face-first into a tub of whitewash.’

They sat on their towels. Peter surreptitiously studied Marie’s body. Too much sun had turned patches of skin scaly. Her breasts were now little more than flaps of brown skin with large buttons of a deeper brown, her pubic hair fading. But she was an agreeable sight to a fellow fifty-three-year-old. He arranged himself so that his slowly stirring erection was invisible to Dorothy but not to Marie. Her smile signalled that she found the tribute gratifying.

Dorothy surprised Peter twice more that day. After dinner, Jim brought out a pouch and a pack of papers. ‘I know smoking’s not on for you, old man, but this is different. Cannabis is a relaxant. If anything, it’ll do you good.’

‘You still smoke it then?’ Peter asked.

‘We grow a bit indoors and use it occasionally. You ever tried it, Dottie?’

She shook her head, eyes a trifle wide. ‘I’ll give it a bash, though. It seems the day for firsts for me.’ She laughed. ‘Can’t vouch for him though.’

‘Depends what’s next on the agenda, I guess,’ grinned Peter. ‘Now if we swapped partners, so I went off with Jim, and you with Marie, now *that* would be a first.’ He realised too late the easy implication to be drawn from that remark.

‘Oh?’ She was about to say something and stopped. She looked at Peter, and then at Marie, a strange expression on her face.

Jim stepped in quickly. ‘Now folks, the greatest show on earth. Stone music, in glorious Technicolor.’

This experience was quite different from the other occasions when Peter had smoked dope. This time it was quiet, relaxed and intimate. Jim and Marie were talking

more and more openly about their experiences. Then Marie asked: ‘And how about your two-month rampage, Pete?’

‘Why don’t you tell them about the girl in Queenscliff, Pete?’ Dorothy was fishing, he was sure.

‘What girl?’

‘I don’t know her name. But there was some girl, a prostitute wasn’t she?’

‘Darling, I don’t go around with prostitutes.’

‘Not now. But maybe you did then. I remember you saying some girl had been a prostitute but became a private secretary and was happily married or something.’ She was looking at him coolly, apparently not the least put out.

Christ, what antennae, he thought. ‘You’re jumping to conclusions darling!’

‘Am I? Well did you? And if so, tell us all about it.’

Jim and Marie looked at each other uneasily, recalling a not dissimilar build-up to a very unpleasant evening. Peter looked hard at Dorothy. She smiled back and nodded, ‘Go on.’

So he did. From the point where he was upset at having firmly and finally, he emphasised *finally*, accepted the Jackie business, to the search for company in the Manly pubs, to Foxy-Face’s request for a lift. He called her that rather than Ginette, it seemed to depersonalise the episode. He skipped the scorching details until he came to the missing alarm clock, then its dreadful reveille, which shattered his fantasy of peaceful escape.

Jim packed up at that. ‘Unreal! In your own class!’

‘It wasn’t funny at the time, mate! Well anyway, at the end of the lesson she started blackmailing me, naturally enough I suppose, but I knew I’d have to act tough from the outset.’ *Well, true enough, as far as it goes*, he told himself. ‘I was technically

innocent, as I didn't know at the time she was a student of mine, or that she was under age, so I felt justified in a flat denial, if anything ever came of it. So when she finally got the message that she wasn't getting anywhere with her blackmail threats, she went to the boss. I denied it, and he believed me rather than her. That's all.'

'And the bite mark? Has that anything to do with this story?' Dorothy asked.

He looked at her with amazement. 'Yes, it has, actually. That was her parting gift. Christ, darling, how did you work all that out?'

She looked pleased with herself. 'Well, the wound, which looked like a bite, was only partly healed when you came home. As for the rest, you'd begin to say something and stop. You'd bring up one thing when you'd been talking about something else. Anything mentioned immediately after a reference to Jackie was sure to be good value. And when a married forty-year-old ups and leaves home, he's going to sow his oats on a fairly wide front, I should think. Wouldn't you agree, Marie?'

Yes, Dorothy had been amazing, except that she hadn't concluded that Marie had been in Peter's score. So later in bed, Peter in a rush of honesty set that record straight: once, at Queenscliff. Not quite true but Queenscliff seemed safer to admit than at their Macquarie apartment when Peter was still with Dorothy. Yes, Jim knew about it and hadn't minded. As for Foxy-Face, Dorothy had worked out that something like that had occurred, and no, she didn't hold against him something he'd done over ten years ago when he wasn't living with her.

It was all an immense relief to Peter; he had so much less to hide now. But what remained in hiding was too complex a mixture of forbidden eroticism and resulting self-hatred for it ever to be revealed.

They left the girls to potter about the house while they went for a walk to the lighthouse.

They sat on a rock on the bluff at Tacking Point, looking out to sea. At their feet, maybe a hundred feet below, the waves rolled lazily onto the rocky foreshore. Peter idly tossed pebbles over the cliff, aiming them into a rock pool below. Jim finally broke the warm silence.

‘Pete, I nearly mentioned this last night, but thought better of it. The old Dottie was in tremendous form. Jeez, the way she handled that bit about, er, Foxy-Face, wasn’t it?’ His eyes invited elaboration, not for the ladies.

‘Not much more to tell. But what happened that night, God, you’d never believe it...’ Peter trailed off, his whole expression warming at the heat that the memory of the last unadmitted two hours with Ginette gave off, still. He murmured, ‘Only one person... Oh, I shouldn’t compare.’

‘Jackie?’

‘Jackie.’ Peter began to close up at the association. No, he shouldn’t compare, it was totally different.

‘Jackie. That’s where I meant to begin.’ Jim fiddled with a stick he’d picked up. He snapped it in two and threw the pieces over the cliff. ‘We’ve been in touch, you know.’

‘You, and... the Lowenburgs?’

Jim nodded. ‘You gave her our address, remember? She phoned and asked us out to dinner at their place. Then we had them back, and... well, before we left for New England, we had become quite close.’ He paused, watching how Peter was reacting. He continued. ‘She’s changed of course. That much older, that much saner. Lowenburg was a bit of a surprise. Fifteen years older than her at a rough guess, and stinking rich. A

beautiful big place at Double Bay. He's an Austrian refugee, fled just before the war.

Studied conducting and oboe at the Julliard in New York. Came out here with the Elizabethan Opera Trust in the sixties, did freelance work sometimes with the ABC, which is where he met Jackie, and now teaches at the Con. He's a very nice urbane guy but he keeps in the background.'

'Stuff him, Jim, what about Jackie?'

'Well, we saw much more of her. You know their daughter, Jackie's daughter that is, she and Lowenburg had no kids, well she went through NIDA? Liza Morphett, Liza with a 'zee', making quite a name for herself.'

A family of celebrities. He'd seen Liza on several shows but hadn't recognised her as the fifteen-year-old he'd met in the Cross. Not even the sound-alike last name, Morphett, Moffatt, provided a clue. So the supercilious Elizabeth was a TV star. It was both a pain and a relief for Peter to see himself so completely outclassed. Had he married Jackie all those years ago, Elizabeth Morrison would probably be a country schoolie by now, like as not divorced with a couple of kids, and recalling Mary, each with different fathers.

'You still haven't said anything about Jackie. Like, well, was she happy in her beautiful big place at Double Bay, and her hot shot daughter, and her radio programme...?' He hadn't meant to sound bitter. It just fell out that way.

'Pete, you said something about falling over in the street, chasing a cab. Well that *was* Jackie. She thought you were chasing her, in desperation.'

Peter laughed at the irony. He explained the fatuous misunderstanding. And how, he'd realised after, Dorothy had thought exactly what Jackie had apparently thought. And both were wrong! For once.

‘No, I didn’t recognise her at the time. And, would you believe, hardly cared afterwards when it occurred to me that it did look like her! She looked old. I guess that’s what threw me.’

‘She was terribly upset over that. Thought you’d never get over your affair.’ Jim paused then looked sharply at Peter. ‘And you have?’

‘You can’t torture yourself for ever. Yes, I’ve got over it. Like you get over a broken leg. The scars are there, it hurts sometimes, but basically you forget and life goes on. Look, Jim, I’m fifty-three. There’s no room for Jackie now. And life *is* good, apart from my heart.’ He added quickly, ‘What’s she look like now? Seen her lately?’

Jim looked sheepish. ‘Yes, she and Elizabeth were here only a couple of months ago. They stayed with us for a few days. Yes, I suppose she does look old. She’s lost weight, and with her build, well her face has sort of sagged. Lovely silver hair with a touch of the old blue rinse. Looks older than she is. Like a very gracious lady, except when she ripped her togs off and went swimming, stoned to the eyeballs.’ Jim laughed at the memory. ‘What a gal! We’re very fond of her.’

Peter thought Jim was hinting at the possibility of having them all down, together.

‘If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, then no. No for me, certainly no for Dorothy. What you’ve said has helped me write the last chapter. Thanks for that. We’ve grown so far apart now, that even if we did, if we could meet... as friends... I think it would destroy something.’

Peter’s large brown eyes gazed mournfully out to sea. ‘Apart from some things I’d prefer to forget, my experience with Jackie was very dear, very precious. It’s now formed its own entity... it’s sort of like those pebbles down there, all washed up on the seashore. I’d like to keep that beautifully moulded pebble in my memory, a precious

gemstone entire in itself.' Yes, he carried on to himself, *a gemstone that had been washed brilliant and iridescent by the oceans of time, as too had a once rough-cut piece of jade.*

He stood up and put his arm around his friend's shoulder. 'So it's all locked up in the museum of my memory. Come on, let's get back to the girls.'

On the last day, Jim and Peter were standing in the back garden. 'I'm so glad you came down here. It's been marvellous. Look, tell you what. When I retire I'll flog the present shack. I've already put a deposit down on a two-acre section just a little further along the road with better views and I'll build my own dream house there. Sit and write, watch the sea, catch fish and screw Marie for as long as I can manage to keep it up.

'What I'm getting to is this. I happen to know that the block next door to mine is up for sale. Before you leave here, why not go to the real estate agent and put down a deposit? Then in your old age you can build your place next to mine and we'll screw each other's wives, or each other if you prefer, until the grim reaper reapeth. Just one thing, Pete. For Christ's sake look after yourself.'

He put his hands on Peter's shoulders and rested his forehead against his. 'Watch the booze and *please* do some exercise. I'm determined one day to even the score and bed Dorothy and I want you around to lend a helping shoulder.'

Their visit to the Hendersons had been hugely successful. Although Peter had refused to be inveigled into jogging, Jim, with the collusion of the others, worked it so that there were plenty of walks, cliff-climbing, and horseplay to get Peter more active. The diet was right, except that Peter did insist on a couple of visits to the bottle shop when his case of semillon ran out, as it did all too quickly. He managed to lose three or four kilos, and, with his uncharacteristic tan, it looked like he'd lost a lot more.

Psychologically, it was even better. He'd cleared the air with Dorothy over so many things, and she'd shown herself completely accepting. They were closer than they'd ever been.

Peter strode into the foyer of Charlestown High, impatient to get back to work. Jane was arranging some flowers in a tall vase on the counter. She looked up as he approached.

'Peter! You look *marvellous*! Welcome back.'

'Thanks, Jane. It's good to be back. Had a wonderful time, very relaxing. How's everything been?'

'Oh, er, it's been rather hectic, actually. Dennis will word you up. Shall I ask him to see you this morning? And Mr Craig wants you to ring him as soon as you can, and – now Lorraine, just say hello to Mr Morrison and get on with that letter,' she said in an aside to the office junior. 'Oh, the girls these days,' she rolled her eyes at Peter, judging and sentencing in that one gesture. 'I've put the most important correspondence on your desk...'

'Hello, Lorraine, nice to see you again,' Peter threw in.

'... and then I'll go through some matters with you, just as soon as you buzz me.'

'Thanks, Jane. Give me a few minutes. Perhaps you'd better get Mr Craig on the line now.'

He acknowledged greetings, from shy to brash, from passing students as he went to his office to take the call to Malcolm.

'Have a good break, Peter? Good, good. Sorry to have to hit you with this straight off, but one almighty cock-up, Peter. Trouble with one of the volunteers, yes,

unfortunately at Charlestown. You'll get your side of the story from Dennis, but it could just queer our pitch.'

Peter's stomach went cold. He could feel his heart beginning to race. *Hold it, hold it. Don't undo all that good work.* While he was breathing in and out slowly to control his rising inner turmoil, Malcolm told him that one of his volunteer workers, an unemployed ex-student, had been in charge of a group of students on a study tour of some new works near Muswellbrook. On the way back, he'd rolled some joints and passed them round. Most of the students in the minibus were from Charlestown, a couple from Wally's and one from Malcolm's schools. Someone had blabbed to a friend, who'd told a parent, who'd told a teacher, who'd told Dennis. And Dennis had told the police. The helper had been charged with possessing and distributing an illicit drug, the students concerned were under threat of suspension.

As he hung up, Peter reflected that this was all that was needed to kill his programme for good. Dennis must be secretly delighted. He told Jane to tell Dennis to see him immediately, whether he was teaching or not.

'Good to see you, Peter,' Dennis came through the door and held out his hand. 'Have a good rest?'

'Tremendous, thanks. Which is just as bloody well, judging from the shambles I've inherited. Look, why couldn't you have played it down until I got back?'

'Play it down?' Dennis looked taken aback. 'Peter, you know as well as I do that drug offences are pretty damned serious! A parent had got hold of the story and it was simply out of my hands. The staff were up in arms about it and then the Parents and Citizens came in on the act. I had to get the bastard charged. Otherwise...' he spread his hands and smiled disarmingly.

‘It happened only last week. You could have, if you had so chosen, shuffled the responsibility off onto me, pending my return.’ Peter ignored his internal warning system. ‘Especially as the P&C was due to meet this week anyway. Instead, you chose to convene an extraordinary meeting. Well, I’ve no doubt that you’ve achieved what you wanted to achieve.’

Dennis continued to play it cool.

‘Now hold on, Peter, I was acting principal and I had to use my judgment. I’m sorry you see things that way, but, well, I did what I saw I had to do, as a responsible citizen and as your agent. But I’m sure that nothing’s irrevocable. You know I’ll support you in whatever further action you see fit to take – particularly about the students concerned. Don’t worry, Pete, we’re behind you.’

The crisis had passed. Peter relaxed and, when Dennis had gone, jotted a list of things he had to do.

Peter sat beside the president at the next meeting of the schools’ Parents and Citizens’ Association. Assessing the gathering, Peter noted that there were more than usual present, seven or eight people who weren’t part of the usual furniture for these dreary meetings. These, he realised, were parents of the so-called criminal element, recently unmasked. He as principal and Dennis as his deputy were the only staff members present.

‘And now we come to Item Six. I believe Mr Morrison asked that this be placed on the agenda. I shall accordingly ask him to address the meeting upon this matter. Mr Principal, would you care so to oblige?’

‘Thank you, Mr President,’ Peter tossed him a quick smile. ‘Now, as you all know, I was on sick leave when this most unfortunate matter of the field trip came up.

My deputy, Mr Hammond, felt bound to take certain action.’ Peter acknowledged Dennis with a pleasant wag of the head, while the latter watched Peter carefully. ‘In essential respects, I endorse what he has done.’ He smiled at Dennis, who smirked back. A shuffle of approval went round the room. ‘The essential respects are these: he informed the police and he convened a meeting of this Association. I understand that you have discussed the matter, but arrived at no firm resolution.

‘That is good. The question of disciplinary action against the students concerned is in hand, and I am sure you can leave that to our discretion.’ He beamed at the audience, some of whom were now looking rather uncertain.

‘Now arising out of all this is the future of the Employment Enrichment Programme itself. As you know, we have been most generously supported by local industries and by the NSW State Government.’ He summarised the programme and its benefits: increased employment opportunities, the personal development of the participants, community involvement and inter-school cooperation. He concluded, ‘So you see it would be most unfortunate if this one-off and utterly reprehensible incident were to jeopardise one of the most exciting projects this school has initiated. Unfortunately, as you know, public funding has been cut, recently. Therefore, I put it to you that this P&C needs to show our confidence in the programme. I assure you that I shall keep a watchful eye on things in the future and guarantee that there will not be a repetition of this most unfortunate incident. Accordingly, I move that this meeting endorse the programme in principle. I would need such a motion to ensure future state funding. In due course, I shall put to you proposals that will put that endorsement into practical effect. Dennis?’

He cocked an eyebrow at Dennis, who was forced to mutter, 'Second. I support everything the principal has said.'

Instead, however, of progressing smoothly to the vote, a parent, whose child wasn't on the bus, stood up, his voice trembling righteousness. 'This motion is all very well, but it's not what concerns us here tonight. Several senior students of this school have been engaged in criminal activities. Yes! *Criminal* activities.' Scattered mutters of 'hear, hear' rippled through the audience, 'so before we vote on this, I want to know what Mr Morrison intends to do about these same criminals.'

'I have already said...'

'Here! My kid's not a criminal! How dare you!' a woman shouted. Peter recognised the mother of Fenton, one of the 'defiant' students.

'Order! Order! Please, I must have order,' the president interposed.

'Please let me finish,' Peter said blandly. 'I have already said we have the matter in hand. There were students involved from other schools and I must confer with the principals concerned. I also have to discuss this with my own staff. As you know, I have only just returned from sick leave. Clearly, we must all act consistently in such a serious matter.'

'And *we* must be assured that the good apples won't be contaminated by the rotten ones,' retorted the first speaker, glaring at Mrs Fenton, who jerked two fingers at him and left the room.

The president brought the meeting to order, after conferring with Peter. 'I must rule that the question of disciplining the students is a separate issue from the question of the desirability or otherwise of the said programme, which is, I must remind you, the subject of our present motion. I am certain that we can rely on Mr Morrison to conduct

such sanctions as befit his professional judgment in this respect.’ He smiled bleakly at

Peter. ‘Any further discussion? Ah yes, Mr Johnson.’

Athol Johnson, an executive in a large industrial firm, was a friend of Dennis’s, Peter remembered.

‘Mr President, I would happily support this programme but we have been given notice that continuing it will involve a financial commitment from this P&C, amounting, if I am not mistaken, to a virtual blank cheque because it may be unlikely that we would receive state funding in future. Given the stringencies under which we unfortunately shall be working, an endorsement such as we have been asked to provide tonight might be at the expense of other causes, equally or even more worthy of our support. We should allow ourselves the opportunity of at least debating the respective merits of these other demands, if and when they arise, vis-à-vis the present proposal. Therefore, sir, and with the utmost regret, I must speak against this otherwise admirable, but in the present circumstances, premature motion.’

Peter intercepted a glance between Hammond and Johnson. He suddenly realised he’d been done over. He raged both at his own negligence in framing the motion the way he had and at the duplicity of that bastard of a deputy who’d out-conned him. He desperately tried to frame an amendment to his own motion that would save matters, but was overcome with a wave of helplessness. His heart beat wildly, a surge of acid rose in his gullet.

There were no further speakers. The motion was put. It was lost by one vote.

‘Dottie, that *bastard!* And after all I’ve done for those parents’ kids! I’d even conned Dennis – so I’d thought, but the double-dealing prick...’ He stopped, breathed deeply,

then almost shouted, 'It was a straight-out vote of no confidence in the management of the school! No. In *me*, personally. That's insupportable. I've got to transfer. Damn them all.'

'Darling, please. You mustn't get excited! How many did you say there were? Twenty-three? Twelve voted against your motion. Twelve. And if that woman hadn't walked out it would have been a tie. The president bloke, what's-his-name, would have had to use his casting vote on your side. Then you would have won. See? It doesn't matter.'

'No, Dottie, it *does* matter. The fact that the vote's official will kill the programme. Anyone, Hammond most likely, can write to the Minister simply reporting that the school's own P&C wouldn't support the programme. Finish. No programme. But it's even worse than that. Don't you see? My own staff are against me. Only they haven't the guts to come out and say so. Well, we've got a staff meeting tomorrow and I'm going to flay the sods. And now I'm going to need some fortification and then some sleep.' He got up.

'Peter, where are you going?'

'To the sideboard. Where, if my memory serves me correctly, is one bottle of Scotch, three-quarters full. It won't be in one hour from now.'

He spent the morning with Wally and Malcolm. While Peter's school had been ripped apart by this episode, there'd been scarcely a ripple in either of theirs. The students had been interviewed, affected to be deeply sorry, and as there had been no leak, both principals had decided to let the matter drop. They were going to approach their P&Cs

later in the year, when they had some facts and figures on the programme, and take it from there.

Peter realised he'd made a mess of it. He shouldn't have presented the bloody motion at all at this stage, when the marijuana episode was the issue uppermost in the parents' minds. Never mind the complicated and inept way he'd done so. He had a terrible intuition that he was going to pieces. Two monumental mistakes in one day – and so soon after a wonderfully restful holiday! What would he be like under prolonged pressure?

And now this bloody staff meeting. No doubt a third mistake in the making.

He entered the room with the remnants of his first hangover in many weeks reverberating in his skull and in his listless body. His pressured brains, true to recent form, forced his decision to tackle the meeting by taking the bull by the horns.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the only business for this meeting is this debacle I've come back to. It was most unfortunate I was away when the marijuana incident occurred. Had I not been, the outcome would have been a lot less scarifying for the school, and I fear, for the programme itself.' He stared at Dennis.

'I consider that this matter has been grossly mishandled. Grossly. Further, I believe that it was done so deliberately, in order to subvert the programme...'

'I object, Mr Principal, I deeply resent...' Dennis was cut off.

'Over-ruled. I advise you to keep your peace until I've finished.' Peter was in a self-induced rage. Gone was Peter the Rock, the Peter who believed in system, order and obligation. His heart was racing, his hands were shaking. But he was right. He knew damned well he was right.

The staff stared at him in amazement. Stan Palmer tried to signal with a surreptitiously flapping hand: ‘Tone it down! We’re with you!’

But Peter was off. His face flushed and heavy, his eyes glaring straight ahead, he charged on. ‘I was betrayed...’ *That was wrong.* ‘I retract that. I’m sorry.’ He wiped his hands over his sweating face, breathed deeply, and started again.

‘Let us say a tactical error was made. Now, I understand that you’ve had a meeting on the question of sanctions. Would someone please...?’

A voice said tentatively, ‘Dennis? Do you want to...?’

‘I’m an observer. I don’t believe this.’ Hammond sat back and folded his arms.

After an awkward silence Stan Palmer spoke. ‘Well, Principal, we did discuss whether some sort of sanctions might be appropriate in one or two cases, such as suspension from sporting events, say, or the school play. Fenton, for instance, has a part in the play, and he has a history of disruption.’

Peter had had enough. ‘There are to be no sanctions. None. I have interviewed the kids and I doubt that any one of us would have behaved differently in similar circumstances. There is nothing more to be said. The meeting is closed.’

He got up heavily and walked awkwardly out the door. He negotiated the corridors and found his office. With a sigh, he sat at his desk, his head in his hands. There was a knock at the door. It opened before any invitation gave license. Hammond stood in the doorway.

‘I’m seeking a transfer, Principal. You have totally undermined my position. I shall be sending a complete report on this to head office explaining my reasons.’

He left.

They sat staring vacantly out the window at the dark waters of Lake Macquarie, the distant lights no cheer. He went over the events of the day. There was no other conclusion.

‘Dorothy, I’m stuffed. Ten years ago I would have walked this in, no worries. Look at Malcolm and Wally. A bit of finger wagging, and “No sir, we won’t do it again sir, promise sir”, while their staff support them. The shit of it is that I think mine would have too, most of them, but I wouldn’t let them! To confront them like that! It’s just not me, Dottie. I’m losing my grip.’ He put out his hand and she squeezed it, without saying anything.

The telephone rang. She got up and took it. She returned.

‘For you. Stan Palmer.’

Peter groaned and took the phone. ‘Yes, Stan. Yes, he did. Well, thank you for that, although it’s bit bloody late now. Eh? What’s the federation got to do with it? The bastard! And so what will you be recommending from the chair? Yes, well that’s good of you. Thanks for your support, but it doesn’t make one tomtit’s arsehole of a difference, the programme’s fucked well and truly now, isn’t it? Yeah, sorry Stan. Thanks again for the kind words.’

Dorothy sat listening to this, her depression now matching Peter’s. She managed a smile as he came back. ‘Sweetheart, I wish you wouldn’t swear so much. I’m sure that doesn’t help with staff relations.’ She took his hand again.

‘That’s the level of those peasants. They admire me for it. Anyway, it makes *me* feel better, which is more important. Well, I suppose you got the general drift of that?’

Her eyes asked for elaboration.

‘Not only is Hammond seeking a transfer on the grounds that I’m impossible to work with, but also that I publicly put him down, and that I’m squandering school funds on useless and unacademic projects. He is seeking federation support on the specific issue of my treatment of him in public.

‘He may or may not get it. Stan thinks he won’t. He said there’s a general feeling of goodwill towards me, despite everything.’

‘There you are, darling, it’s not so bad after all!’

‘Yes, but the consequences are the same. Hammond has his P&C vote, possibly a federation vote, and his own highly angled version to put to the department. And to the Minister as well, no doubt. That’s the end of the programme. I’ll not get state, industrial or P&C support now. Kaput. Finished. The one reasonably humane and innovative thing I’ve tried in my whole teaching career.’

‘There’s one consolation, Peter. Remember years ago, you told me that Jim had said that you weren’t really like the others, you know, Owens, the TC Principal, Flogger Mathewson. Well, he’s right. You’re as good or better at doing the job of principal, but you’re not like that lot. You’re...’

‘Marching to my own drum.’ Peter grimaced at the memory.

‘Eh?’

‘Oh, nothing. Something Thoreau once said.’

‘What’s it mean?’

‘Basically, it means that I’m a fuck-up because I have two drummers banging away inside me with two different beats. You’re lucky. You have only one.’

He stood up. ‘I hear the other drummer right now. His name’s Dionysius.’

Dorothy stared, not sure whether to laugh or to be alarmed. He patted her knee.

‘Excuse me a moment, pet, I’ve got my marching orders.’ He went to the cellar and came back with a bottle of port, two glasses and a cigar.

‘No, Peter, you know...’ He kissed her into silence.

He poured the drinks, lit the cigar.

‘The time has to come to review. Remember last year when Mary came home with a horrendous choice to make? And I tried to persuade you to leave that choice for her to make, not for us to try and influence her.’ He paused. ‘Look, we’re in our fifties now. We can look back and see the choices that we’ve made and that we have to live. That is, until the next crisis, then more choices. No one else can make them for us; rather if they do, it’s bound to be bloody disastrous.’

He topped up his glass.

‘Well, mostly disastrous. And the shit of it is, Dottie, that we have to make those choices. What was it St Paul said? “On earth, we see through a glass, darkly.” Here’s my glass,’ he raised his port, ‘and dark it is. You can hardly see through the bloody thing. That’s life.’

He turned on her fiercely.

‘Good came of that break-out in Sydney! I saw well enough, through my dark glasses, that the schools were, well, messing the kids up. Bloody Gin... bloody Foxy-Face taught me more than a hundred of your Thomsons, Floggers or Hammonds about education! This programme was the result of that... that experience. But the bastards won. A thousand drums beating in unison puts mine out of step. That’s what I mean. We choose, and all the cards aren’t being played. The game’s stacked. Only stacked more against some than others. Look at Jim, the lovely bastard.’

The bottle was half empty now.

‘Dottie, you don’t even know what’s in my mind, do you? Remember that night this programme got the okay; when I got back as full as a fart? It hit me afterwards. You were *sorry* for me! Something about my seeing Jackie, or thinking that I saw her. Look, old darls, you were right up shit creek! No, don’t get upset. It didn’t really matter!’ He giggled. ‘It wasn’t Jackie at all. I was moved by the music! That *Benedictus* thing. I was just so happy, you wouldn’t believe...’

Dorothy was hurt. Her feeling for him that night had been so... so pure, not ‘up shit creek’. She looked at him, slumped back in his chair. His cigar had gone out. That giggle had been as empty as his glass right now. He looked at her. His eyes betrayed where he now was. At the brink of despair. The programme? No, the programme was only a symbol. He really believed that he’d made a mess of his life.

She wondered if she had been the cause of that mess? Even so, she loved him. The poor self-destructive darling. This time she knew she was right. He did need comfort, the comfort he’d almost told her she herself couldn’t give him. Maybe something else could. That music. Fighting the tears that were now crowding her eyes, and lifting her voice so that it wasn’t snagged in the hooks in her throat, she asked:

‘Beethoven, isn’t it under the ‘Bs’, dear?’

‘Huh?’

He didn’t understand. Never mind. She’d find it. She pulled out the boxed set of the *Missa Solemnis. Credo, Sanctus, Hosanna... yes, Benedictus*, that was it. She switched on the stereo, put the record on, lowering the needle to where it should begin.

The high solo violin sang from the speakers and lowered slowly. The ethereal music laced around the room, the autumn leaves falling. The chorus whispered, ‘*Benedictus, Benedictus*’....

Peter sat up, rigid. He weaved his way to the stereo. 'Blessed be damned!'

He brought his fist down onto the delicate cartridge, the speakers spat a deafening *crack!* The turntable continued to spin to a slow, harsh, scraping.

He'd killed Beethoven, another thing he loved.

PORT MACQUARIE

1994-1997

CHAPTER 12

‘Do you want to unpack now, or just relax a bit?’ Dorothy called from the bedroom. Peter was standing in a dream, gazing at the long familiar scene of the boats on Lake Macquarie. *Retirement*. He wondered how he was going to fill in the remaining autumnal years. Autumn, late autumn certainly, but it didn’t feel like winter yet.

‘Peter! Do you want to unpack yet?’ Dorothy repeated. She walked into the living room. ‘Something the matter, darling?’

He looked at her. The old Dottie, but not so old. She was in her favourite gear, a muumuu. Not all that different from Turramurra days, really. Her hair was tinted an attractive ash-blonde with dark streaks, her face was smooth but for some mouth lines, her eyes sagging only a little, but as clear and blue as ever. Her body was full, but not stout. Their diet, prescribed for Peter’s benefit, had done her more good than him. Mentally and physically she was in her prime. She was full of life. She’d carried him through all that sightseeing on the world tour, from which they’d just returned. She was now the rock.

‘I’m beat. Let’s just relax.’ He lowered himself into a chair, facing the window. She brought him his lemon, lime and bitters, his current pre-dinner drink that lacked the one crucial ingredient that made pre-dinner drinks what they should be. He allowed himself moderate social drinking, which disqualified his usual pre-dinners with Dorothy.

‘Sorry to be leaving?’ she asked, eyeing him with a twinge of concern over the rim of her glass of oloroso.

‘Nah, we’re finished here. To tell the truth, I was finished in 1981 when I’d had that heart attack. Jim was right after all. I did become like every other principal this state has produced. You’re either like that to start with, or trying to fight the buggers wears you down to their level. You end up like that anyway.’

‘You wouldn’t have, if you hadn’t smoked and drank so much! Cut the self-pity, Pete. Things weren’t so bad these last few years. And what about the last three months? Worth it?’

‘Guess I’ll think so in a day or two, looking back on our slides and things. But right now, I’m rooted.’

‘Course it was worth seeing what the rest of the world looks like! Come on, Grumpy, I enjoyed every minute of it – and all for the cost of an in-ground pool at Port Macquarie. And we can well do without that as long as we remain friends with the neighbours. Jim and Marie have just installed a beauty. Two more weeks clearing up here, then it’s roll on Port Mac.’

Before they left for their retirement dream home, curiosity drove him to park outside Charlestown High in his new Lexus, watching with a critical eye how the students behaved as they moved out of the gates and lined up at the bus stop. A familiar figure, talking to a student, looked across at the parked Lexus and his face broke into a broad smile. Stan Palmer hurried over.

‘Peter, you old trooper! Still patrolling the beat, eh? How was the trip? You look years younger on it.’

‘Terrific, thanks, Stan. Just happened to be passing.’

Stan tried to persuade him to come to the staffroom, but Peter wouldn't have it.

Stan understood, but did persuade Peter to join him for a drink in the Mattara. Peter welcomed the chance to reminisce. *That's what life was to be now, wasn't it*, he thought: *blowing the dust off old memories, reviewing one's life*. He allowed himself a Glenfiddich, a token to his first drink with Stan. *Good Christ, nearly fifteen years ago!*

'So you turned down your principalship, did you, Stan? I heard you had the offer, just before I left.'

'The easiest decision in my life, Pete. I took a good look around me. After you'd pulled Charlestown out of the mire – and kept it out, old son – remaining as deputy here seemed a better deal than sweating it out by running the show somewhere else. Not to mention trying to keep uppity deputies in their place.' Stan paused, looked carefully at Peter, and then went on. 'It's ancient history now, Pete, but despite what you then thought, there were three silent cheers at the way you put Dennis Hammond in his place.'

Peter acknowledged the tribute with a wave of his glass. It was bloody funny. Hammond had shafted his programme and it hadn't done him one bit of good. The federation hadn't backed Hammond and the department had shuffled him sideways, somewhere in the sticks. Peter had heard he was there still, thirteen years later. Peter's stocks in the department had been higher than he himself had believed. Hammond's act was seen as the unforgiveable in departmental eyes: disloyalty. Peter savoured that irony even more than he savoured the Glenfiddich.

'Thanks, Stan. Now that makes me feel real good.' He paused. 'You know, when you've had it, and, er, are out of things,' he avoided saying 'on the scrap-heap', that phrase beloved of self-pitying retirees, 'you see things in terms of what might have been. Your achievements you see as failures, 'cause they're never as good as you intended

them to be. My one ambition was to get that bloody Employment Enrichment Programme going. I saw myself as running in neutral after that was shafted.

‘It’s wrong, Stan. There ought to be some kind of middle position for teachers on their last lap. When the fire has burnt itself out, we oldies can still contribute something. Be mentor, friend, master-teacher, something, to help the young ’uns coming into the system. But we shouldn’t try to keep running the bloody show ourselves.’ A subversive thought struck him. ‘Tell me, on the QT, how’s the new bloke managing?’

Stan was not hearing a rambling old man. Peter was the most genuine principal he’d worked under. He looked at the heavy, kind face, with its baggy brown eyes, wondering if there would be more like him.

‘He’s the new broom, sweeping us back into the fifties that his neo-Thatcherite bosses see as some kind of golden age. After we’ve held assembly, saluted the flag and played boy soldiers, it’s back to the basics. Weekly spelling tests when no one writes more than a sentence, do mental arithmetic when they’ve all got calculators. No cooperative project work and certainly no Employment Enrichment Programmes. You managed to hold those neo-conservative bastards at bay but our new guy’s one of them. Now, I didn’t tell you that, Pete.’

Peter realised just how glad he was to be out of it. His philosophy was totally at odds with the Apollonian New Right who seemed to be taking control of the whole world. He told Stan how glad, how profoundly glad, he was to have had this talk with him. As well as catching up with a good mate, it had helped him put his own position into perspective. His programme for the non-academic kids had seemed so important, so topical. But the times had changed. The programme would be seen as irrelevant today, despite the even greater need for it now, than fourteen years ago. You can’t foretell the

future. You can only do what you think is right at the time, with your knowledge and limitations. To choose, to choose again, and again and again, without the knowledge your choices scream for.

Yes, Jim had been right. You can only march to your own drum. And now the common drum tattooed regimentation, corporatisation and the defeat of young souls.

Peter had instructed the architect to make their two levels accessible by ramps, so that a doddering old bloke with a dicky ticker needn't worry about stairs. Standing on their prize balcony overlooking the sea, they could see right into Jim's backyard. Reclining on two banana floats in their large pool were their old friends and new neighbours. They shouted and waved.

'We'll be over in a sec,' Jim shouted back.

Jim was over first, dressed only in shorts. Bounding up the ramp he threw himself on Dorothy. 'Tree-mendous! Beaut to see you. We'll be seeing one hell of a lot of each other...'

Marie, walking stiffly, smiled with deep pleasure and kissed them both. She was thin, her hair iron grey, her eyes tight and wizened. The sea eagle was fine-looking still, but old. Her voice had a slight crack. She took a step and a spasm of pain crossed her face.

'Arthritis,' she explained, 'that's what the whirlpool's for. Now, more importantly, when do the carriers arrive? Stay with us until everything's shipshape.'

The carriers arrived two days later. Not a breakage. While Dorothy and Marie packed away the nonessentials, Peter and Jim got to work on what Peter called the essentials. They were in the cool basement, lined with storm pipes: the cellar.

‘You know, Jim, one thing the old ticker did for me was guarantee that I’d have a fantastic cellar to retire to! Look at this.’ He lovingly unwrapped newspaper from a bottle. ‘A 1980 Rothbury, Individual Paddock Semillon. One of the years of the big drought. Low yield, but the quality! Fourteen years old. And still not over the hill – I hope. We’ll find out, anyway. Christ, there’s no way I’d have any of this stuff left if I’d kept up the old habits. And now with no smoking, I can actually taste it. There’s no cloud without a silver lining, and all that crap.’

Peter beamed happily at Jim, who was looking at him as Peter thought with a touch of censure. ‘Now, don’t preach.’

‘I said nothing. But nothing.’

‘Bugger it! I’m sixty-six and can go out how I like. Wine and music for me. But you haven’t seen my new equipment yet. When we get this stuff stacked away, gently, if you don’t mind, and, no, West Australian reds over here. No, they’re Hunters. Christ! Don’t you academics read labels? That’s Victorian – over there...’

All this ancient treasure! A case of twenty-year-old ports. And what have we here, Peter gloated, a twenty-five-year-old Clare riesling, that’s what! Had it held up? That’s the question and we’d find out the answer. Boy, wouldn’t we find out!

‘No, seriously, Jim. I’m not going to be bloody silly or anything. Strictly social drinking. In six weeks it’s my birthday. We’ll have a real gourmet’s dinner. Good, that seems to be the lot. Now come upstairs. You won’t believe your ears.’

Peter took Jim upstairs to the large lounge room with its picture window looking out to sea, but more to the present point this was where the hi-fi was installed on brass and chrome shelving. To the right and left were two tall flat black panels – electrostatic speakers two metres high – and round the walls a surround system. He slipped a disc into

the DVD player. Approximately one hundred musicians crowded into the room with them, performing a chorus from Haydn's *Creation*.

'Listen to that tenor, third from the left; the bastard's singing flat... and the second cello, bet he didn't resin his bow properly.' Peter was enthralled with his latest toy. 'You and Marie can drop in any time to wallow in this and we'll wallow in your whirlpool to keep the arthritis at bay.'

'Come on, Pete, I'm only an academic. I'm not into real culture like wine and music.' He paused. 'Oh, and that reminds me. I saw an item in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that might interest you. Remember that camp English professor we met at a protest meeting, yonks ago? You said that he'd taught you in Bathurst but got into some kind of trouble and was packed off to the war... Hopwood, Hopkins, something like that.'

'John Hopkins? Yes, of course I remember. Why was he in the news?'

'A tragedy. He was set upon by a gang of thugs in Hyde Park and beaten up badly. He died in hospital a couple of days later. Seems like he was trolling for rough trade and copped a gay bashing. I cut the item out, thought you'd like to see the details.'

'Thanks, Jim, yes I would. Poor bloody John. What a shit of a thing to happen. He was a really nice guy. He started my interest in poetry...'

Peter swallowed more loudly than he had intended, shrugged, and forced a smile.

Dorothy had gone to no end of trouble. Peter recalled with a grin that previous effort of hers when she had prepared a lavish dinner for the Hendersons more than twenty-five years ago. What a difference this time. He was so happy that all four of them were now such great friends.

‘This’s the way garlic prawns should be! Fantastic, Dorothy.’ She acknowledged Jim’s compliment with a playful nudge of her thigh. Peter filled their glasses with one of his precious ’80 Rothbury’s, just slightly chilled, not to numb the flavour. It came out almost viscous, the colour a deep straw. He nosed then tasted.

‘This should be drunk kneeling,’ he murmured reverently. ‘An absolute classic. Honey, burnt toast...’

‘Yeah, not bad.’ Jim took a pull as if it were beer, grinning defiantly at Peter.

‘Well, I like it, Pete. Makes me feel quite, *mmm*.’ Marie snuggled up to Peter. He gave her thigh a monkey bite with his hand.

The tone of the evening was playful and flirtatious– until Jim introduced a new subject. ‘Listen you two, let’s clear up a little matter right now. Say whatever you really mean and we’ll work around it. Fact is, Jackie and Liza are arriving Wednesday week. Liza is on a job and will only be here for a day or so, but Jackie wants to stay a while, maybe a week, ten days. Well, what do you think of that?’

‘Do what you like, Jim, it’s your house.’ Peter replied, looking across the table at Dorothy. ‘Hey, hun, wanna see Jackie Blow-Bug, Blue-Bag, whatever it was?’ He came over cool enough but inside he was quailing.

‘Blow-Job,’ she poked her tongue out at Peter. ‘Yes, Jim, I would. Yes sir, I really bloody would! It’s about time one or two things were cleared up, and Jackie’s one of them. If it hadn’t been for Old Faithful here, I could almost have made friends with Jackie, once I’d got used to her. Sheesh, I remember the first time I met her in the Great Western...’

Jim put his arm around her. ‘That’s my girl.’

‘There was always something good and generous about her. Take away her mads and you’d have a really nice person.’

‘Even with,’ Marie added.

‘Yes, by all means we’d like to see them. As Dottie says, it’s about time.’ Peter turned to her, ‘Honest, darls, there’s nothing to worry about. Hasn’t been for years.’

‘I didn’t say there was,’ she murmured.

‘Remember when I fell on my arse chasing that imaginary taxi? Well, when I thought that it might have been Jackie, I didn’t give a shit! Fair dinkum.’ His forehead was speckled with sweat, calling his detachment into question. ‘That time in 1980, when we stayed here, Jim and I talked about exactly this situation. I put Jackie on a shelf, a museum piece from the Morrison archives. But now it’s all over, I really think we *could* meet as friends. I’d like that. And I’d like it particularly, Dottie, if you and she could be friends.’

‘Well, you heard. That’s what she just said,’ Marie cackled kindly. ‘I’m especially glad about that because there’s something else you should know. Old Felix died five years ago, and she, poor thing, has cancer. Didn’t say so, of course. But she had major surgery last year. She didn’t say what it was, but Liza referred to a growth, causing a *huge* over-reaction from Jackie. Shit, I don’t know.’ She caught the look on Peter’s face and went on. ‘Just assume everything’s hunky-dory. Maybe it is.’

Peter was silent, looking downwards, shaking his head, trying to cope with all these revelations – at her coming, at her probable death sentence.

Marie went on. ‘Jackie lives with Liza at Double Bay. Liza went through a couple of marriages in as many years. Decided she’d live with Mummy.’

Peter was curious about Liza, how she'd turned out from that supercilious, bitchy schoolgirl. 'Tell us about Liza.'

'Oh, she's all right. Crikey, the most exclusive girls' school in Sydney, then NIDA, then instant success on stage, then television. By forty she's bound to be a shade egocentric, unless she's really, really exceptional. Liza's just ordinarily exceptional.'

Peter said slowly, 'I met her once. She was fifteen and so goddamn superior! She reduced me to a simpering twit in seconds. A budding ball-crusher, that one. Tell you what, it was she that...'

Blushing, he squashed his next words, *convinced me that Jackie and I would be unsuited*, and said hurriedly 'made me see Jackie in a new light. Do you know, underneath all that bolshie kick-the-system-stuff in the Armidale Jackie, there was this middle-class-blue-rinse Jackie! It doesn't add up.'

It was not what he'd started to say, but it was odd, when he thought about it. *Christ on a bicycle, did Jackie march to two drummers too?*

Jim was silent for a while. 'Good one. But, you know, come the welfare of their kids, most parents would distort any principle. Maybe even I, us, might have done the same. Hard to say. Well, you'll just have to ask her, won't you?'

Peter thought that he would. He was going to need a repertoire of nice, safe questions for the encounter. He wasn't sure how he was going to handle it. How would she? How would Dorothy? He took a deep breath; time would tell.

Right now, he thought, *time for the dessert and the '76 Chateau Suduiraut I've been saving for the right occasion*. 'Folks,' he announced, 'we are about to experience a true blue sauternes, nearly twenty years old! I bet you'll *see* the nose and be able to snip

little golden bits off it and press them in a big old leather book. C'mon Dottie, let's have your wonderful creation and it's equally wonderful accompaniment!'

Dorothy brought out the mangoes-in-pastry, topped with castor sugar and brandied cream, while Peter lovingly uncorked the Suduiraut. The second Peter removed the cork the intense nose of beautifully candied limes, lemons and gorgeous unnameable things draped itself in layers around the table. 'Ah, this's what retirement's about! To enjoy the good things in life.' He was delighted that he didn't want to kill that aftertaste with a cigar. The Suduiraut would be a companion in his mouth and sinuses all tomorrow, too.

They were replete, happy. Marie suddenly pulled a face.

'Blast! My arthritis. Jim, I've got to hop into the whirlpool before going to bed. Anyone?'

Jim and Dorothy were laughing and talking and hardly heard. Peter looked around at the others, beside him, Marie. Live, healthy-looking, arthritis notwithstanding, attractive, brown, wiry, grey... what a mixture! Despite her thinness and her age, she still exuded something. She wasn't as quick, as animal. He couldn't see the Indian princess any more. But something? Oh yes. He gave her a quick squeeze and a kiss, as he topped up her glass. He glanced up to catch Dorothy watching him. She was smiling at them, her eyebrows raised. With the lights dim, and Dottie's full face, tasteful clothes and blonde tints darkening the fine sheen of her hair, she looked... a very sexy sexagenarian. She wore a thin dress, and her bust, was, well, astonishing. He knew it was cunningly supported but credit where credit's due, the old Dottie had rung the changes since '68! He remembered how young Marie had appeared then, and how staid and matronly Dorothy had seemed. Well now, take another look. Jim obviously was.

‘Come on, Dottie. How about you, then?’ She shook her head. Peter pursed his lips at her and stood up. ‘Well, we’re going to the whirlpool. Join us if you like...’ No response. With a shrug, he finished the last of his sauternes, and gallantly offered Marie his arm.

They walked up the sloping path to the connecting gate. As he unlatched it, Peter looked back to the living room. Two silhouettes, heads together, bobbing and laughing. He shrugged. Marie went ahead and switched on the heater for the whirlpool.

Minutes later they were sitting in the hot, steamy, bubbling water.

‘How’s the arthritis?’ They were sitting on the ledge, his arm around her thin shoulders, their legs kicking aimlessly in the hot turmoil.

‘Fun–*nee!* It’s completely gone. I feel, *yum!*’ She nuzzled her beaky little nose into his neck. What sensuality. The heat, the taste of that marvellous sauternes lingering, the prickles of desire tracing their course from the touch of that little hard nose, down to his stomach...

‘Are they coming?’

‘I doubt it. Not yet. Give them a go.’ She laid her head back on the edge of the spa and laughed up at him. With a rising sense of joy, and of unbelief at what appeared to be happening, he covered the laugh with his own face. He then eased himself out of the spa.

‘We’ll give them a few minutes, and...’

‘And?’

He shrugged and dried himself. She got out of the spa, pressing her long grey hair with a towel, which she wound into a turban. They went inside, to the main bedroom.

‘Your birthday present.’ She knelt, her turbaned head low. She clasped his buttocks, and took him in her mouth. He unwound her turban, and gently ran her hair through his fingers. He looked down at the lean, brown back, and stirred with the warmth of her caressing. So different from the first time she’d done that. Something to be said for old age. A warm friendly act to be savoured, like an old wine. No greedy gulps and an instant hit.

He placed his hands under her armpits and lifted her to meet him.

He woke up slowly. A trace of old times there, a slight hangover. He looked across at Marie. Asleep, still. The improbability of last night came back. What had Dorothy been doing? He recalled Jim’s playful threat: ‘I’m going to even the score one day and bed Dorothy...’ And by God, it seems that he probably had! How about that? Even the score? No, he was still one up on Jim. He chuckled, waking Marie.

‘What’s so funny?’ Marie looked up blearily and they stared at each other, and then they both started giggling.

‘Oh, Pete, *Pete!* Isn’t it just too wild? Pushing seventy, and swinging like a couple of... er... forty-year-olds! What a way to go.’

‘Love it. But I’m a little worried about Dottie. I didn’t think she was that pissed...’

‘Why does she have to be pissed?’

Why indeed? But how to break the ice, Peter wondered. Be natural. Take it up from where they’d left off last night. Go outside. Wave to them. Hey, why didn’t you come across last night? We were so tired we just fell asleep.

Jim came through the gate first, in his underpants, his clothes over his arm. Dorothy followed, wrapped in a thin dressing gown. The four of them stood a few

seconds facing each other. Dorothy's smooth face was suffused with a delicate pink. She didn't look Peter in the eye. Head down, she moved slowly towards him and threw her arms around him, her hot face beside his. She hugged him, a touch of frenzy in that hug. His hands moved up and down her back, over her buttocks. She was naked underneath that thin gown.

'Peter. Peter, darling! What can I say? It took me over forty years to have my second man.' She raised her face, eyes brimming shame and laughter. Her lips pursed together in a distorted cupid's bow. He was astonished at his reaction: he surged to take his naughty, adorable wife.

Now, Dottie, as from right now.

He wouldn't have recognised her. Her hair was silver, no rinse, her complexion sallow and her face drawn. Her eyes were the same; her front teeth protruding even more as her mouth had sunk. Beside her was a taller woman. He recognised her immediately from the many TV shows she'd starred in. She was beautiful, Jackie's eyes and mouth, now he could see her face to face. But longer hair, a slimmer, more classically acceptable face.

Jackie moved over immediately, her hand extended. Peter took it, but then she drew him to her, and kissed him.

'Peter! After all these years.' Her voice had changed too, deeper, cracked, older, but recognisably that voice. She then turned to shake hands with Dorothy, but Dorothy beat her to it. She took her in her arms and hugged her tightly, kissing her cheek.

'Jackie! I'm just so glad we could meet at last...'

The six figures froze momentarily, like models on a stage set, no movement apart from some blinking and swallowing. Peter was the first to move and went to Liza, who was standing apart, composed. He anticipated her handshake by offering his.

‘We met before, remember? I was a failed poet but not the least bit queer. Delighted to see you again, but I don’t think you’ve met Dorothy.’

She apparently remembered, laughed with calculated delight, and upstaged Peter by kissing him with the full-lip treatment. She kissed Dorothy too, who was just a tad overcome with meeting a famous TV star. Peter cringed a little as Dorothy went through the sycophantic. ‘Oh, we enjoyed you in *Last Return* so much, but I suppose everyone you meet tells you something like that.’

Yes, they usually did; and only ordinarily exceptional stars were unable to avoid responding by filling the invisible role their admirers had cast for them, hamming their ordinariness by telling story after story of the exceptionality of show biz. Which, by the time they came to the main course, had returned to being very ordinary. At one stage Peter’s eyes met Marie’s and they signalled complete agreement with each other. He didn’t dare look at Jackie. He didn’t want to hurt her by inadvertently letting her know that her daughter was a pain in the arse. Jackie was scarcely eating; her left hand crumbled a bread roll on her side plate, her head down, looking up sideways now and then in a ghostly shadow of that once endearing gesture. She was mostly silent, except to briefly confirm a rhetorical question of Liza’s. Something was definitely missing. He decided to try and bring her out a little; and to take the spotlight off Liza.

‘Jackie...’

Her eyes immediately lifted to meet his. They were as alert and intelligent as they ever were. Her lips parted, those teeth, white and strong, too. Yes, she was there all right, behind the mask.

‘Jackie, would you mind if I asked you something personal?’

She gave him her sidelong glance, a flicker of a mischievous smile. ‘That’s a strange question, Peter, coming from you.’

‘No, listen. When you were at Armidale, and later, as a teacher,’ he was relieved that he could refer to that period without a quiver in his voice or a quickening of his heart, ‘you were a real champion of the underdog. Or perhaps an implacable enemy of the overdog would be more accurate. Remember Parker?’ He paused, noting the answering smiles. ‘Then again in council. You were more determined to support Jim than even I was...’

‘*Even* you, you bastard? You’d have sold me down the drain for two bob and a toffee apple, given half the chance!’ Jim shouted, lifting his glass.

‘Knickers. Anyway Jackie, see what I’m driving at? In ten years it seemed like you’d done a backflip. You’d become a member of that establishment you had seemed to be so opposed to. Double Bay, private schools...’ He raised enquiring eyebrows.

He could see that Liza didn’t like this direction in the conversation. At ‘private schools’ she stiffened, looking at Peter coldly through narrowed eyes. Egocentrically, he guessed she was thinking that had she been his stepdaughter and not Lowenburg’s she would have gone to the local state school, as had his own children, and she wouldn’t now be one of Australia’s top actresses.

‘Yes, Jackie,’ brayed Jim. ‘Explain to your party comrades why you sold out to the bourgeoisie!’ He was sitting next to her and squeezed her around the shoulders.

Jackie snuggled her face into Jim's neck and then struggled back to her original position.

'Come on, fellows, you know a mother's first priority.' She put her hand down and held Liza's under the table. 'Things were rough for the first year or so at the ABC. My first husband completely bamboozled me over the property settlement. He lied to the court and so disgusted me that out of principle, silly me, I even refused to accept maintenance. We lived in a crummy area, and Liza had a rough time in primary school. All because I was too bloody proud.'

'Then I got a job at the ABC and along came Felix, who amongst other things insisted that Liza go to MLC, with its splendid music education programme. He could afford it, and it was about time the balance was redressed. State schools were then so fucking terrible, which is why I'd got out of them years before...'

Peter, remembering his life-long commitment to government schools, said: 'Now hang on, my whole life has been...'

Jackie added, 'I meant *then*, Peter, things are much better...'

'Hear, hear!' Jim interrupted, slapping the table. 'That's exactly why I got out when I did. And if Marie had ever dropped a pup or two, there's no way I'd have sent them to any high school I can think of. Particularly a girl. Unbelievably chauvinistic, patronising, down-putting. A perfect training ground for a submissive suburban moo, ten, twenty years down the track...'

'Has Jim answered your question, Peter?' Jackie looked across the table at him drily. 'He's done it better than I could.'

Looking first at Dorothy and then at Liza, and remembering his own children, Peter thought, *yes, and I know my druthers.*

Liza had to leave next day for a consultation on a new telemovie. Jim and Marie suggested a poolside drink in the afternoon. As soon as they gathered around the dumb-waiter, helping themselves to drinks and bits to eat, Marie let her robe fall off, and reclined on a blow-up lounge. Jackie too undressed, leaving her bra firmly attached.

‘Pardon me if I don’t get completely starkers. I’ve had a mastectomy. Not a pretty sight.’ She sat on an air cushion; knees curled up and locked in her arms. Between her withered flanks had existed the most exquisite source of pleasure that Peter had ever known. Those fantastic breasts, once so firm, now a wad of padding, in the wrong sized bra.

Peter and Dorothy looked at each other enquiringly. Dorothy shrugged and removed her clothes. She left a towel carelessly but strategically placed, as she reclined on her lounge. Liza had stripped and stood directly in front of Peter. Her breasts were large, round and firm. Her pubic region was generous; her hips broad without, as Jackie’s had been, overgenerous. Peter couldn’t help comparing her with her mother at that age, no doubt, he thought, as Liza was intending that he would: *Look at me. I’m much more attractive than she ever was! Look at my tits! She hasn’t got any!* He glanced quickly at the others. No one else seemed to have noticed anything. Perhaps he was overreacting.

They had their drinks and snacks and, after a quick confab with Dorothy, they refused an invitation to dinner.

‘Well, I suppose we shan’t be seeing you in the morning, Liza, so we’ll say goodbye now.’ Peter held his hand out but she ignored it, kissing him on the lips again. She then went one better. She stepped back, looking at him steadily with Jackie’s large

grey eyes and slightly parted mouth revealing strong white teeth, deliberately mimicking her mother, Peter thought.

She rested her arms around his neck. ‘Goodbye, Peter. I wonder what sort of step-father *you* would have made.’

They saw quite a lot of Jackie over the next few days. He couldn’t help noticing how she had sparked up considerably after Liza had left. They took her to restaurants in town, visited the convict ruins further up the coast, and they talked. They listened to music, but in the end it was mostly just Jackie and Peter because none of the others were really interested. He found to his delight that he *could* be a friend to her, not a hint of sexuality, of regret, of private reminiscences; just an exploration of a common interest by two old acquaintances.

For their final meal together, Marie secured three large fresh crabs, Jim threw together his one and only specialty, a Caesar salad, remembered from North American days and Peter supplied the drinks. He wanted to produce a bottle for each of the significant decades of their mutual interaction: ’48 or ’49, a ’58, a ’68. But the best he could manage was a 1948 Para Port, which wasn’t all that great. He didn’t have any ’58s, but several ’68s. He settled on a Yugoslavian Prokupac, a highly alcoholic rosé that Malcolm Craig had given him, just before Peter had made his token gesture to go on the wagon. It had remained in his cellar ever since. Well, the others mightn’t appreciate the symbolism of that, but he’d be drinking a silent toast to his golden-dusted, jade secret. The remaining wines he chose were beautifully aged, complex whites that would set up Marie’s crabs to perfection.

They sat outside on the patio while Marie barbecued the exquisite smelling crays in soy and garlic. Before dinner, the sea breeze found its way behind the house, and they moved inside to eat. Jackie sat at the far end of the table, Peter and Dorothy on either side of her and opposite each other. Jackie wore a simple white dress, which in the dim light lifted the sallowness of her skin. Comparing her to the first night they'd met her here, Peter thought, she looked much better. More relaxed – as if an inner spring had been released, filling out her skin. With her uncomplicated diamond necklace, she looked like a queen holding court.

That image didn't remain for long. She was lavish in her praise for the food and for Peter's selection of wines. Noisily merry, she entirely dispelled the silent assumption that this was the last time the five of them would sit down to a meal together.

They reminisced freely without the restraint of Liza's presence. One memory had involved them all, directly or indirectly: the dinner party, in the year of the Prokupac. Dorothy gave the license for that recollection.

'Jackie, you'll never believe this.' She turned to Peter. 'Remember when I got stinko, and told 'em all about how Mary saw you crying at Jackie's radio programme?'

Peter cut in, alarmed. 'It was the music, the *Elijah* excerpt. You know, Dottie, you and Mary never did understand that.' He turned to Jackie to explain. 'The Hendersons were up for dinner...'

'I called you Jackie Blow-Bug. I couldn't remember your proper name!' Dorothy shrieked, laying her hand on Jackie's shoulder, snorting with laughter.

Jackie looked startled, as though she was wondering if she was being sent up. Peter, too, was beginning to wonder.

‘And I called you Jackie Blow-Job!’ Marie clamoured like a tree full of kookaburras. Jackie suddenly relaxed and joined in the chorus. It was okay, after all.

‘Oh shit! Go on, spoil a good story,’ Peter grinned. ‘I was just coming to the moment of high drama. The bit when I got real mad at Dorothy and pissed off into the night. I wrote poetry, unsuccessfully; and humped Marie here, rather more successfully.’

‘Successfully?’ Marie teased, ‘I don’t remember that bit! Must have fallen asleep.’

‘*What?*’ Jackie was looking around the table in amazement. ‘Dottie... Marie...!’ She slapped both hands palms-down on the table, her mouth agape, eyes wide, staring at each of the others. At Dorothy in particular.

‘Don’t look at me, it was out of my control! Why don’t you go the whole hog, Peter? Tell her about...’ Dorothy was inviting him to spill his naughty-boy dinner story. Peter took this to be Dorothy’s way of saying to Jackie: *We’re all friends here, no secrets. We accept you.*

‘Let me pour the wine, first,’ Peter replied. He poured an inch of Prokupac. It was the colour of an old faded brick, beautiful nose but with some oxidation. He tasted it. *Over the hill and far away, a pleasant memory of more vital days. Isn’t that true of all of us here*, he wondered. And Ginette herself. Would she now be fair, fat and forty, aging as rapidly as her country’s wine? Or would she be as alluring, as fascinating, and as dangerous as ever she was?

He was brought back by the general clamour for the story. He repeated the official version for Jackie’s benefit, while he himself mused on the fact that it was her front teeth that had first connected his unfulfilled longings for Jackie to the earthy marvellousness of that other tempestuous creature. *I want to make love to you until the*

end of time. Good God, how could that be? Yet he had wanted to. To both of his '68 passions. And he had betrayed both of them. A tightness formed in his throat and he tossed off his glass to loosen it.

'Hey, don't we get any of your Yugoslavian treasure?' Marie cackled shrilly and shoved her glass over.

'Oh, terribly sorry. It's seen better days, I'm afraid, like all of us, eh? But see what you think.' He poured some into their glasses. 'Now, where was I? Oh yes, the little tart pinched my alarm clock. Next I heard it buzzing away – in class! Yes, my whore was one of my new Fourth Formers!'

Jackie was delighted with the story and demanded to see his love bite. She asked, 'And what happened to that poetry phase, Peter? Anything?'

'Nah. Poetry keeps cropping up in my life in a mild sort of way. When I was a little kid, then at Armidale, briefly, then again in Sydney. I've got a few minor things published, but... oh well. I guess I haven't got what it takes.' He smiled ruefully, then added, 'I remember something I once overheard my father say "He's a good solid kid, don't get me wrong, but I doubt he'll set the world on fire."' Thanks, Dad, right as usual.' He lifted his glass and toasted the ceiling. 'So you see, Jackie, when all's said and done, I guess I was meant to be a schoolie and to end up as a good, solid, respected school principal. Peter Morrison, that was your life.' He shrugged in a self-mocking way.

There was a silence. Suddenly self-conscious, he went on.

'Well, how about you? Have you any unfulfilled little sidelines?'

'No. Sex, motherhood and music. I've been through the lot. With possibly music as the most important, but don't tell Liza that.'

'She believes it's sex, does she?' Jim called from the other end of the table.

Jackie poked her tongue out. 'Music. My radio programme was probably the peak of my brilliant career.'

So they switched to music, and the conversation broke up. He and Jackie seemed to be talking just to each other. Dorothy interrupted.

'Look, as it's Jackie's last night here, why don't you take her next door and let her have one last session with your magnificent equipment – *musical* equipment I mean,' she emphasised above the uproar, 'just for a little while.'

Peter looked surprised. 'But that would be rather rude of us. Let's all go.'

'No, not me. You know I basically find music a bore, and, well, how about you, Jackie? Is there anything you'd like to listen to, one last time? Before you go, I mean before next time; like we never know when that might be.' Dorothy blushed at her clumsiness.

'Thanks, Dottie. Yes, there is something I really would like to hear. It won't take long.' She stooped and lightly kissed Dorothy's face, wiping away her embarrassment. She turned, looking questioningly at Peter.

He nodded, and they left.

Peter supported her by the elbow as they walked down the path. 'Did you want to hear anything in particular?'

'Guess!' She looked up at him, eyes shining, her silvery hair brilliant in the moonlight.

Peter wondered what she meant. Surely not... No, the waters were too deep. He chose the obviously irrelevant.

'Some Mozart?'

He cringed at her disappointed, sidelong glance. They climbed the ramp and went inside. The small lamp by the stereo was still on, and the moon was shining from the sea through the panorama windows. Peter stopped, as he always did, at that splendid view: sea and moon now interwoven as lovers' limbs. He was still waiting for her answer, but he knew what it would be. His stomach fluttered at what might happen after that.

'The *Gratias*, Pete,' she whispered into his ear. She turned to face him. She placed her arms round his neck and kissed him on the lips. Her large blue-grey eyes, the least changed part of her, gazed steadily at him.

So the waters are to be that deep then. A depth of forty-six years. Shimmering water in moonlight, yes, but there could be some treacherous undertow. He returned her kiss. He turned to the stereo, found the disc, and set it to start at the track she had asked for, and that she had herself chosen all those years ago.

They sat on the sofa, as they had sat on another sofa that forty-six years ago, which now seemed to Peter like last week. She was at his feet and his arm resting lightly on her shoulder. She looked up at him, as if for permission, then without receiving any, climbed into his lap. They sat, not moving, except for a gentle sniff from her. Peter enjoyed the music just as much as he enjoyed her. But he didn't enjoy this tangling of the decades.

The echoes hadn't died from that defining D major chord on the *magnam gloriam tuam*, when she slid off his lap, allowing him to switch off the machine. As he turned around, she was facing him, her back to the window. She stopped him dead in his tracks with the intensity of her look. Suddenly she reached behind and unzipped her dress. It fell at her feet.

'Peter. Look at me.' She reached behind again to undo her bra.

He tried to reply. 'No, my dear, I...'

'Look at me!'

She stood stock still, dressed only in her briefs. She was thin, her skin shiny, her breasts... vanished. He could see the rib cage, where those marvellous breasts had once been. Skin and two scars, now healed. No nipples. Just skin.

Why is she doing this? he wondered desperately. Why do this to herself? To me? Surely she doesn't want my pity?

She did not. She was the same as ever she was. Wilful, vulnerable, desperately needing reassurance, and buying it in the most expensive way. He could read her mind now, as he hadn't been able to read it back at the Allingham Street party: *Will he do it now after he sees how ugly I've become?*

He held out his arms to her. He kissed her, careful to study her eyes, her lips, her teeth. He closed his eyes, lowered his head to her chest, kissing in two circles, lips meeting continuously the corrugations of her ribs. She laid back, hands reaching to him. With his eyes closed, he recreated memories of Jackie, their heat fuelling the desire he knew he had to maintain.

He kissed her lips again, her face, her teeth. Those teeth. For a fleeting second he remembered kissing the teeth of that golden-dusted sixteen-year-old, with firm brown thighs and mocking jade-green eyes. He surged at that memory, but killed it. His desire had to be fuelled by Jackie herself.

There were so many memories of Jackie. In Armidale, in Sydney, and now. Now!
Oh yes, now... Now will you rest in peace?

‘Oh Peter, Peter. Thank you,’ she murmured softly. Tears were streaming down her face but her mouth was relaxed, her smile peaceful. ‘That’s why I wanted the ‘Thank you’ music. I knew you would. I knew. *Gratias*, thank you, thank you.

‘And before we go back,’ her face filled with mischievous delight at the thought of two naughty kids running next door for a quick fuck, and going back, pretending nothing had happened, ‘I want the *Dona nobis pacem*. Peace. The same music, now asking for peace. Remember, Pete? Remember when I first told you about that?’

He remembered, very clearly. He found the track. He switched off the light, leaving the room bathed only in moonlight. He sat back on the sofa and she crept again onto his lap. She lowered her head beside his. He ran his hands round the nape of her neck, down the curve of her back, her smell still familiar. It was easy now to suspend disbelief. He lifted, as before, his hand to her breast. It met the surgeon’s hiatus. And the music stopped.

She raised her head, eyes awash. ‘That’s what I needed, Peter Morrison. Sometimes I think I’ve made a mess of my life. You know, all the problems at Armidale, then in Sydney, with you, especially with you. And now, this bloody cancer. No, I’m not kidding myself. I won’t be around for much longer.’

She smiled at him and gently stroked his cheek. She sat up, their eyes inches apart.

‘But I wouldn’t have had it otherwise. It *couldn’t* have been otherwise between you and I. We buggered up, all along the way. But then, with you right now, I felt something I really needed. Peace. And I wanted to say “Thank you”. My way.’

She hadn’t been fooled. For once, their role-playing had been in synchrony.

All through her visit Peter had been haunted by those lines of Yeats that Peter Warlock had set, in that searing song cycle *The Curlew*. It would rip her to shreds if he played that now. And him.

Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,

I had a beautiful friend

And dreamed that the old despair

Would end in love in the end:

They had once dreamed that their old despair would end in love. No longer. That was past and gone. Their present act of love? A mime of love.

And peace in the end. Not love.

They walked back into the dining room to find the others as they had left them, quietly talking. Jim looked up.

‘Jeez, you took your time, didn’t you? We could hear the bloody racket from here...’ He started off characteristically boisterous, but uncharacteristically fell silent. He looked at them as if his normal jocularly was out of place. *God, Peter thought, what do we look like? Do we have a big red ‘F’ painted on our foreheads?*

He looked quickly at Dorothy who smiled. ‘Everything go okay? You’re just in time for coffee.’ Her smile was simple and uncomplicated, but her eyes were unnaturally bright. She seemed to be trying to hold herself in control.

Peter was aghast. *They’ve all twigged! What a stupid bloody thing to have done! Why didn’t we get back earlier?*

Jackie was admirably casual. ‘Thanks Dottie. That was a very nice idea. I wanted to check how Peter’s equipment handled a couple of sections of the B Minor. His equipment is streets ahead of mine. I’ll get Liza to see about ordering a new hi-fi.’

Throughout this cool explanation Marie stared at Jackie. Her little sparrow eyes darted back to Peter. An ethereal look haloed her face, and then it was too much for her. Blurting, ‘I’ll go get some coffee,’ she ran out of the room before she made a real dick of herself.

Peter carefully went round the other side of the table to sit next to Dorothy. She squeezed his hand under the table and gave Peter a sidelong look of affection. Suddenly it hit him. She had guessed what had happened and hadn’t minded! She was that sure of his love for her.

At that realisation, he loved Dorothy more than at any other time in his life.

CHAPTER 13

It was three years after Jackie's death, that morning when he'd woken up, feeling strangely warm and relaxed. He tried to move. He couldn't. He couldn't even turn his head to Dorothy, still asleep beside him.

'Do... Do... Do,' was all he could manage.

She jerked upright. *'Peter! What's wrong? Oh Peter!'* She looked down at his tortured, trapped eyes rolling towards her, imploring her to do something. She saw instantly what had happened; she'd been half-expecting something like this. She rang the doctor, called for an ambulance and then rang Jim.

It was two months before Peter returned home, his left side still partially paralysed, his speech distorted, his mouth twisted. A physiotherapist visited two hours a day. In another two months she left for the last time, pleased that her patient had apparently made a lot of progress. By then he was able to move around and to talk easily. He seemed to resume his life. But if the outward results were limited to a crooked smile and the odd stumble, the inside results, though less visible, were more drastic. Particularly to Dorothy who bore the main brunt of them. He became subject to unpredictable moods: sullen, silent, an outburst of rage at some triviality, then he would snap out of it. He believed that alcohol helped to banish the glooms, but it seemed to Dorothy that the opposite was usually the case.

He liked to retire to his bower at the back of the garden, overlooking both their house and Jim's. It was trellised on three sides, roofed with vines, and furnished with a table and one chair, where he could sit, think, write and watch. He was watching them

now in Jim's backyard. Dorothy and Jim were in the pool, leaning against the edge, talking. Marie was sitting at her games table, crouched over, seemingly half-listening to the others while she played her computer game. She was like him. Left out. Crippled. She with her arthritis, he with his stroke. He could still feel the pressure in his skull, the grind and jolt as he spoke, the drag of his foot as he inadvertently kicked something as he struggled along. But one good thing it had done – it had cleared his brain.

He knew enough of physiology, he thought, to diagnose his condition. His movements on the left hand side of his body were slow, sometimes disobedient. That meant the damage was in the right hemisphere of his cortex. And that meant that his left hemisphere, which controlled verbal functions, was now dominant. Writing would be easier now. *You have your right hand to write with and your left-hand brain to think with*, he told himself. After all those abortive years trying to write poetry, this must be a sort of retrogressive evolution. The distracting bits of him had been paralysed, leaving the real him intact for his lifelong love: poetry.

While poor old Marie had been fucked all over by God, leaving her joints stiff and painful and her hands like talons, Peter concluded that God had been good to him. It was a sign: don't move about, don't talk and don't interact with others. Just write.

He looked again at the pool, and then, with a twisted grin, drew his notebook to him and began to write. Nothing came. If he could get himself into the right frame of mind he was sure it would all come out, all that stuff he'd been thinking about last night in bed, glad he couldn't sleep because of all that creativity that had been welling up inside him. Now where was it? Still there, somewhere, he was sure. It just needed stirring up, loosening. A tumbler filled with ice and bourbon, that'd be the ticket.

He got up and moved down the path into the house, past the kitchen, into the cellar. *What? The pipes are nearly empty. No more than a dozen or so bottles left. Too many empty pipes. Have to send in an order to the vineyards. Shit, I didn't come here for that. What?*

He wandered back to the kitchen, and looked vacantly around the shelves. He went into the living room. Now he remembered: the sideboard. He opened it, took out a bottle of bourbon, but shook his head and replaced it. *Jim drinks that Yankee stuff. No good for writing. Beer!*

Of course, he remembered now. He went to the frig, extracted a bottle of Cascade Premium, took a glass from the cupboard, and went to the living room to relax with beer and Haydn.

They could hear the Surprise Symphony from the pool. Dorothy turned to Jim and shrugged. 'I do wish he'd join us. He worries me.'

'Don't worry, old love, he's okay. Sounds like he's having a ball right now,' Jim replied with a smile.

'Jim, he's so different; well today he is. Yesterday he was fine, most of the time. And then when he hits the turps, he's off. No, even that's not true. He can be a good drunk too. But mostly a bad one.'

There was a silence, then Marie asked: 'What's his poetry like? Really like. You've read it?'

Dorothy looked guilty. 'It's like reading someone's diary, but yes, I sneak a look at his notebook now and again, just to see if I can get any clues. I'm no critic but some

stuff is really good, or so it seems to me. But other stuff,' she smirked, 'is bloody awful.

Corny.'

'Well, any clues?'

'Oh there's some recurrent themes. He's getting back into religion, lots of references to what I imagine was his childhood. Something terrible had happened to a pet dog he'd had, Nipper his name was. The dog was killed in a bushfire and I think Peter blamed himself for that, but what the story was I don't know. He only told me of the dog's death. I found a truly awful poem he'd written a couple of days ago. Something like this: "Nipper, Nipper. Where are you, you little ripper"?' She giggled and stopped herself. 'Oh I shouldn't, it's too pathetic.'

'Nasty, nasty. Let the poor bugger be.' Marie's voice, tight and thin, interrupted them. She leaned forward over her game; her face wreathed in kind wrinkles, wagging a bent forefinger at them. 'Those were the bits when he was pissed. Which reminds me. Jim, I'm thirsty. Just leap into the kitchen and drag out a few cans, eh? If you can't lick him, join him, I say.'

She cleared the table for them and they sat around, a can of light ale each.

'You know,' Dorothy said thoughtfully, 'it's like his wiring is jangled. Sometimes it's as if "love" means "keep out of the way", "concern" means "interference."' She sighed. 'If only it were that simple. Sometimes we're going along as normal, then suddenly it's like these simple words change their meaning. He can fly off the handle at the drop of a hat. Well, you're the psychologist, Jim. What do I do?'

'Well, apart from not mixing your metaphors, I'm not too sure what you can do. Look, we're all aging and our brains are shrinking, some areas more than others. The pre-

frontal cortex, which governs executive planning and metacognitive functioning amongst other things, usually shrinks faster than...’

‘Oh, cut the Neuropsychology 101, Jimmy Baby, let’s have it in plain English,’

Marie interrupted.

‘Well, it means that we are less reflective with age and are poorer at planning our actions. We don’t monitor what we say and do as much as we used to, so we fall back on habitual ways of thinking and behaving. We become less socially aware; we become caricatures of ourselves, if you like, unthinking replicas of what we once were. And the older we get, the further back we go into childhood memories and behaviour. We can counteract that to some extent by learning things we’ve never done before, like a new foreign language...’ Jim glanced up, noting the impatience that was appearing on Dorothy’s face. ‘Yes, well, back to our old mate. All that’s true of Peter too, but his stroke has complicated matters. What extra damage that has done is hard to say. Those rushes of rage may suggest damage to subcortical areas, those forgetful fits – possibly the beginnings of dementia. Whatever, he’s running on half steam I’d say and there’s nothing we can do about it. You love him, so do we all. That’s it really, isn’t it? Humour him, and when he’s in his clear moments, well, just like old times, eh?’

‘I’d better be in a good humouring mood tomorrow,’ Dorothy said. ‘He wants to go to the nine o’clock Communion Service at St Thomas’s, you know downtown in Hay Street.’

‘You’re kidding!’ Marie squawked in amazement. ‘When was the last time he went to church?’

‘Mary’s wedding. Her first one that is, nearly twenty years ago.’

‘Just as I said. Brain damage. But cheer up. He’ll probably have forgotten that too, by tomorrow.’

Peter was surprised himself, at his sudden interest in religion. He thought maybe that was related to the fact that over the last few years his dreams were increasingly about Bathurst, Nipper and his father and mother. He was beginning to feel much more sympathetic to his stick-in-the-mud father. He regretted the patronising arrogance he had felt, and more regretfully had displayed. Possibly, he thought, that was why he was reverting to The Church in his old age, revisiting the source of his very being.

He got up early to ‘prepare himself’ as his mother used to say. No breakfast, not even a cup of coffee. He sat, staring out to sea, trying to recall the words and order of the Mass. He was confused by the fact that his recordings of the Mass were set in Latin and in the Roman order. He couldn’t check against the Book of Common Prayer; he couldn’t remember when they’d last had one in the house.

When they arrived at St Thomas’s they were shown to a pew and forced to sit in the middle. He saw with alarm that a group of teenagers, in jeans and t-shirts, some with guitars, sat in the choir stalls. They sang the sickest introit Peter had ever heard, straight country-and-western but all about Jesus and the Holy Ghost.

The priest entered in surplice and stole, thongs on his feet. No vestments. He stood at one side of the chancel, intoning prayers in colloquial English, which Peter thought was banal and out of context. The priest moved behind a large wooden table at the entry to the chancel, facing the congregation from behind this thing, not standing in front of the High Altar, facing east. He began celebrating Mass still using colloquial English.

Peter was outraged. He yearned to leave, but quailed at the thought of pushing through the densely packed pew. He whispered hoarsely, 'I can't stand this, darling. This is sacrilege! I want to go.' Peter looked imploringly as if Dorothy could magically make all those people disappear.

She smiled and whispered back, 'Never mind, sweetheart. We can't move now. Actually, I rather like it. At least I understand what's going on.'

He grunted disagreement but sat it out. During Communion, members of the choir administered the elements. They cheerily trooped up the aisles, each to a block of pews, and passed first the plate of wafers, with the smiled instructions: 'Take one and pass along'. Then they passed a tumbler of Christ's Blood, which looked awfully like bulk port, and a small cloth saying song-song: 'Take a sip, wipe the rim, and pass along'. Before and after the ingestion of the Substance of Christ, people turned to their neighbours, beside, in front, and behind, exchanging greetings. *Fucking hell! What sort of madhouse is this?* Yet, Peter automatically echoed, 'Peace, friend' to some pleasant young lady on his right. The choir members returned to render a cheerful and folksy *Gloria*, to wind up with a final pick-of-the-pops hymn.

The congregation filed outside, most people hanging around in groups, chatting in the warm sun. The priest in shirt and shorts, divested now of all symbols of office, moved from group to group. Peter pushed up to him.

'Excuse me, Father.'

'Good morning, friend. I'm afraid I don't know your name. New here? I'm Geoff Prentice.' He held out his hand, smiling a warm, open smile. Young, handsome, fit looking. *Could be a footballer*, Peter thought.

‘Peter Morrison.’ Peter was not smiling. ‘Look Father, I want to have a word with you about...’

‘Glad to meet you, Peter. But just call me Geoff. Everyone does.’ He smiled again, warm and winning.

But it didn’t win Peter. ‘Look Father Geoffrey, if that’s what you’d prefer, I just want to say that this is the first time for years I’ve been to church, and it will be the last. What I saw and heard in there bordered on sacrilege.’

Peter’s voice was raised, and the throng of people who were waiting to speak to Geoff drew back, unconsciously forming a circle around them, like children at a playground fight. Their expressions, as they looked at each other, seemed to be asking: Who was this nasty old man, suddenly turning up after our family service and abusing our Geoff? Poor old feller, probably a bit cracked. Ah, and that must be his wife, such a nice looking lady, years younger than he.

The nice looking lady whispered, ‘Peter, later dear.’ And to Geoff: ‘Hello, I’m Dorothy. Pleased to meet you, Geoff. We haven’t been to church for ages.’ She held out her hand to be shaken. The playground group relaxed.

‘Delighted to meet you, my dear, to meet you both. Perhaps you and Peter would prefer to come to the Eleven O’Clock. The Nine’s our special service for the young folk. Now, tell me, where do you live? Perhaps I could visit you? I’d be delighted.’

‘No, it’s all right, thank you very much...’ Peter’s reply was interrupted by Dorothy, who gave their address, and with that she smiled and quickly left with Peter in tow.

It was a sullen drive home. Finally, Peter burst out, ‘Dottie, why did you ask that creepy bloody halfback to visit us? I don’t like the parish church. Not after today. Even if

they have got an apartheid job for the oldies. Pity; it's a lovely building. But no, darling, I... '

He paused a moment, to collect thoughts that were spinning in a centrifuge of anger. The more he talked, the sorrier for himself he felt, the angrier at Dorothy. 'I *resent* the way you took over there! Made me look like a crusty old fool, instead of supporting me. Fuck it! This church business is entirely my own affair. I don't want you trying to run it for me.'

Dorothy started angrily, but didn't say a word.

They drove the rest of the way home in silence. Peter became increasingly aware of a sickly taste in his mouth, a cloying sweetness from the cheap port he'd just sipped. It hit him: Christ's Blood wouldn't taste like *that!* So much then for the so-called miracle of transubstantiation that was supposed to follow the words of consecration. They should use a decent wine. *Well, that's what I'll bloody well do right now*, he thought. *I'll go up to my bower and whack out some poetry, with the help of a drop of a decent red.*

'Darling, would you like a nice cooked breakfast now? You haven't eaten all morning.' Dorothy caught him as he ambled through the kitchen.

'Eh? Oh, yes. Suppose so. Yes, I should really,' he repeated as he remembered his intention. He didn't want to wipe out on an empty stomach. He figured that with a good breakfast now he'd be set until dinnertime. He'd have all afternoon for some writing and drinking, that is unless some interfering bastard – or bitch – doesn't spoil things by being... No, just leave it at *being*. He liked that. *In good form today.*

'Whack it on a tray, Dorothy. I'll be back in a minute.' He continued his way downstairs to the cellar.

Red. The warm day and the omelette are asking for a nice, cool white, but blood is red, so red it has to be. Get that taste out of my mouth. Hello, a Cowra shiraz, nearly twenty years old! Very appropriate; near Bathurst, when religion was as it should be and people accepted it. That big service in the old Bathurst cathedral... I still remember that. The outbreak of war. Sacrifice. That service had made a big impression on me, even if I didn't understand half of it. Yeah, I misunderstood badly. Enough to change my life, and to terminate Nipper's. The Supreme Sacrifice, huh. Funny how kids get things wrong. Just look at those bloody beatniks in the choir today. What sacrifice have any of them ever made about anything...

'Peter? Your breakfast's ready.' Dorothy's voice filtered downstairs, an edge of concern betraying the light casual tone she tried to use.

Huh? What am I doing here? He rapidly tried to fill in the gaps with the small clues he had. Dorothy calling for him to come to breakfast. A bottle on the table. A red. She must want it for something. He went upstairs and handed her the bottle. She started, and then smiled indulgently, as at a spoilt little boy.

'So you want me to open it for you as well, do you? There you go, then. No, I won't have any.' She took out the opener and withdrew the cork, placing the bottle and a glass on the tray, beside his omelette and coffee pot.

Well, well, I didn't expect that after this morning. She wanted the wine just so she could open it for me! He smiled sheepishly at her. Clutching his tray, he went out the door and up to his bower in the back garden.

But it wasn't coming out right. Sensing that something had mucked up his creativity today he leaned back and savoured his omelette and the beautifully aged Cowra. Looking through his vine-covered wall on the left, he could see into Henderson's

pool. Both of them were there: Marie's scrawny neck sticking out of her whirlpool, Jim on an air mattress floating around his pool, reading. He suddenly felt a flood of warmth towards these old friends of his. Oddly enough, they didn't seem to interact much these days. He looked at his bottle, still three-quarters full.

He left his notebook and pen and the food tray. He went down the path through the connecting gate carrying the bottle and his glass.

'Hi strangers!' he called. 'Got a nice surprise for you. Look what I found in the cellar! A '79 Cowra. Just beautiful right now. I saw you here and thought it'd be nice to have a chat, and you c'd help me kill this beautiful creature I have in my hand.'

Jim and Marie looked at each other. 'Great!' Jim called. 'I'll nip inside and get a couple of glasses.'

'Carn, me old lover, give us a hand out of this thing,' Marie called up at him. 'Switch is behind you.'

Peter switched off the pool and went to help her as she struggled to lift herself out. Supporting her under her armpits, the lean, brown, twisted body of his friend of fifty years emerged.

'How's the arthritis feel now?' he asked. 'I must say you're looking pretty good.'

'Good after a turn in that thing. Ah, but too old to be flattered, Pete.' She stepped down, with his support, and lowered herself into a chair, where she wrapped a towel around herself. 'Great to see you, but. You haven't been over much recently.' She was watching him carefully, as if trying to work him out.

Jim returned with two glasses, looking towards the Morrison house as he sat down. 'Yeah, good to see you, Pete. Dorothy be over soon?'

Ah, that's the question, isn't it? Not if I know anything about it, she won't. Not after what she'd done this morning. He couldn't quite remember what she had done, but it had hurt him deeply. She was thick with these two, all right. Don't let on a thing. Be natural.

'No, Jim, she had to go out. Something about seeing the rector.' He thought quickly and added, 'Surely she told you about... you know?' He'd lost it, just as quickly.

Marie glanced up as Peter was talking and could see Dorothy walking up the path to Peter's bower and step inside.

'Ah yes, you went to church this morning, didn't you? How did it go?'

Got it. Dorothy had taken the rector's side against me. He replied, 'Not too good. Things have changed. Not like she used to be at all.'

'She?' Marie started.

'Yes. She's bloody bossy. And kind of sly. Oh, I shouldn't say that, I know. But things happen when I'm not looking. My notebook isn't where I know I put it.' He leaned forward and whispered, 'I think she deliberately hides things from me! Oh, I don't know. I don't know.' He leaned back, looking at Jim with patient complicity, as if his old friend completely understood his difficult problem with Dorothy.

Dorothy was in the kitchen when Peter wandered next door. *Good, she thought, showing a bit of interest at last. I'll keep out of the way; maybe a talk about old times and a glass of wine will cheer him up a bit after this morning's debacle.* She was sorry she'd caused him to become so angry with her when she'd been trying her best to help him. One small comfort was that after a day or so it was unlikely he'd remember much about it.

Now was a good time to collect his tray without disturbing him. She gingerly stepped outside and looked next door. Peter and Jim had their backs to her. There on the table was the tray and Peter's empty plate. Beside it was his notebook and pen. *What had he been writing this time?* Glancing over her shoulder to check she couldn't be seen, she opened up the notebook. A few scratchings about childhood days in Bathurst. Something about the teacher Peter's class had humiliated: Peter had told her about that, but she'd forgotten the details. Then a few sentences about church service and making the Supreme Sacrifice. *Seems that the service this morning has sparked something off,* she thought.

She turned back a page or two: a poem, longer than usual.

I Taught You

I taught you to spell you spelt domination
I taught you to read you read my lust
I taught you to think you thought to tempt
I taught you to speak you demanded your price
I taught you to write you wrote of her love
I taught you to question you asked with your thigh
I taught you to taste you drained my being
I taught you to reason you explained with your teeth
I taught you to discover you found my cowardice
I taught you to hate you forgave with your lips
I taught you to weigh you found me wanting.

You taught me to sense your animal grace
You taught me to pine for your wild golden body

You taught me to cringe from your mocking jade eyes

You taught me to see your imperfect perfection

You taught me to feel your own private pain

You taught me to kiss with the lips of betrayal

You taught me to hurt in blind self-protection

You taught me to sleep the sleep of exhaustion

You taught me to dream of impossible friendship

You taught me to lie and despise my own soul

You taught me to love you my dearest enemy

I was your master you were my pupil

You were my mistress I am your slave.

Dorothy couldn't believe her eyes. A far cry indeed from the slightly shamefaced, boys-will-be-boys after-dinner version he'd been telling them! Not only had he been having it off with that school kid on a regular basis, but had been besotted with her. Still was, by the look of it. Or was it a silly old man romanticising about what might have been? She would never know. *That's what you get for prying into other people's things*, she reflected. She resolved never to look into his notebook again. But she couldn't avoid a rush of anger at the actual affair, or if it hadn't been, at his obsession with the idea of it.

She was even angrier with herself, a victim of the snooper's comeuppance.

Peter heard a car pull up as he was changing a disc. Dorothy could go. He didn't want to see anyone. But apparently he had no choice. He could hear Dorothy's bright chatter.

'Yes, he's up here. Follow me.'

She came into the room, smiling with a little too much effort. She was followed by a young man in dark trousers and long-sleeved white shirt, two black crosses on the broad lapels of his open shirt collar.

‘Geoff Prentice, the rector, to see you. Remember, Peter? We met after the service last Sunday.’

He didn’t, but he understood Dorothy’s strategy: feeding him background in case he had forgotten. A sensible arrangement, that might seem strangely repetitive to an outsider, but it was a damned sight less strange than a completely blank stare.

‘Yes, of course, Father. Pleased to see you again.’ He shook hands, and gave Dorothy the nod. *Fill me in a bit more.* Something unpleasant, but that was all he could place.

She took over quickly. ‘Geoff wanted to call and explain that we should really have gone to the Eleven O’Clock. The Nine O’Clock is jazzed up for the young folk...’

So, he’d stirred the possum, had he? He couldn’t stop a wicked grin. Served the trendy right. But his imperfect nerves made the smile appear as one of contrition.

‘That’s right, Peter. I’m always delighted to see new faces in our congregation and thought I’d call, see how you both are, and explain our different programmes. Different masses for different classes, eh?’ He pronounced ‘masses’ like Peter’s mother used to do when referring to ‘High Marss’. Geoff laughed at his own flash of wit.

Programmes, for fuck’s sake. Marsses and clarsses! Arses more like. This fellow’s a right royal pain in one. Now Peter remembered that sickly bulk port, and how he had needed to get the taste out of his mouth. His theologising came back to him.

‘Look, sit down Father Geoff. I’d like to discuss a couple of things. I was brought up an Anglo-Catholic, but sadly lapsed until recently. You might call it deathbed

repentance, but I, we, are getting interested again in The Church. Yes, last Sunday was a bit of a shock to the old system. Now, what say we have a drop of some really nice wine? Got a cellar full of old stuff that I hardly touch these days.’ He pushed himself up out of his chair, grinning like a demon from a Chinese opera. ‘You have a word with Father Geoff, darling, I’ll be back in a second.’

On his way to the cellar he kept repeating ‘wine, blood, wine, blood’ under his breath to make sure he didn’t forget. Couldn’t spoil this little joke. None of the Cowra was left, but he found an East Coast Tasmanian cabernet. With sixteen years on it, drinking at its absolute peak, that would be a real Sacrifice, almost a Supreme one, to pour down the throat of a bumptious young parson! He returned with the bottle and three tulip glasses and a decanter. He carefully uncorked and decanted the wine with elaborate ceremony.

‘Really, Peter, you shouldn’t go to all this trouble. I like a drop of a good wine now and again, but...’

‘My pleasure, Father Geoffrey. I’m about to make a point, a very important theological point. There now, Father, sniff carefully, and then roll a little round your tongue...’

He winked elaborately at an uneasy looking Dorothy as he handed the glasses round. He sat back in his chair, savouring it. *Perfection. Couldn’t be better.*

‘Well? Mind you, it hasn’t had a chance to breathe yet. Just swirl it round your glass a little. It’ll come up.’

‘Yes, er, well it is really quite magnificent. I rarely get the chance to drink anything of this quality.’ Geoff looked pleased; probably as much at the honour he was being accorded as at the gustatory experience itself.

‘Do you believe in transubstantiation?’ Peter suddenly asked, leaning forward.

‘No, I’m afraid not.’ Geoff looked puzzled at the question. ‘I doubt any Anglican minister would subscribe to that doctrine these days.’

‘Good, Father Geoff, because neither do I. You proved that to me last Sunday. There’s no way in the world bulk port drunk out of a middy tastes like the Blood of Christ!’

‘*Peter!*’ Dorothy was shocked.

But Geoff exploded with laughter, carefully putting his glass down before he spilt any.

‘Oh, you must tell that to the Vatican Council, Peter,’ he finally got out. ‘That’s an argument that might, finally, get them to change their minds!’

His mirth annoyed Peter. He had expected this sententious young do-gooder to take at least some offence. ‘Now listen, Father, I wasn’t being funny. There are certain implications. Now, take that wine there. What does it remind you of? In looks, smell, taste?’

Geoff, quiet now, looked, sniffed and tasted. ‘Er, peppermint... blackcurrants? Well, *wine*. I don’t understand.’

‘Blood?’ Peter looked intensely at him.

‘Well, yes, I suppose so... yes, I could say that... to some extent.’

‘A damned sight more like blood than sweet bulk port, eh?’

‘I suppose so. But wait a minute, what are you suggesting?’

‘I’m suggesting that instead of cheap skating with bulk port, you use a *decent* wine. And instead of getting a bunch of hairy teenagers to strum guitars and bleat like cut cats, you use *decent* music. Nothing but the best for God, Father.’

‘Now, just a minute, Peter,’ Geoff smiled easily, ‘I agree with you in principle, of course, but in practice? It’d be just far too expensive. Vintage wines? Professionally trained singers? No, Peter, you’re an idealist.’

‘Not as expensive as you think. After all it is the *Sacrifice* of the Mass isn’t it? Right, then every celebration of the Mass should involve some sacrifice by the congregation. Arrange beforehand with members of the congregation to donate a bottle of good stuff, worthy to commemorate the original Sacrifice God made when he allowed his son to be crucified. That’s if you believe in the commemoration theory. And if, like me, you’d like to believe that something a little more important than mere commemoration happens during the Prayer of Consecration – that is, assuming it’s said in words of ageless dignity and not composed from newspaper clippings – then the ingredients that convey the spirit of Christ, if not his actual substance, should be of the highest quality. There’s that much less of a jump in the alchemy.’ He held up his hand as Geoff tried to interrupt. ‘And as for the music, well you could fit out a church, particularly that lovely old building, with a surround system, one hundred watts per channel should probably do it, for a few thousand. And then you could play the very best music composed by the best minds of all the centuries, who wrote precisely for the celebration of the Mass: Palestrina, Byrd, Tallis, Mozart, even the agnostic Vaughan Williams wrote for the Mass. You don’t have to be nationalistic or narrow about it. Just the best. Not the rum-tum and impromptu caterwauling of the spawn of suburbia! There now. What do you think of that?’

Geoff glanced across at Dorothy, who had frozen into a statue that was staring out the window. ‘Peter,’ he replied gently, ‘I think you and I have different philosophies about the function of the Communion Service. As Jesus said, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The general view of The Church now is that the word

“communion” means communion between members of the congregation, as well as with God. Now, the old elitist view...’

‘*Elitist?*’ Peter shouted. ‘Me? Elitist? I’ll have you fucking know, young man’, Dorothy groaned audibly, ‘that when I was a school principal I worked my arse off for the underprivileged kids, the victims of the bloody fascist Liberal governments and their elitist programmes that you, no, your parents, or maybe your grandparents, come to think of it, supported! So bloody hard, in fact I sacrificed my health for them.’

Geoff tried to interrupt time after time but Peter was not to be stopped.

‘Yes, it is a matter of philosophy. And you and your bloody bunch of do-gooders had better get a few things straight. You’re *not* there for a social service. That’s a political job, and if your *elitist* elected governments aren’t doing that job, then they should be tossed out on their shiny, silver-plated arses. You stick to your job, mate, which is to help man come to terms, if he believes in one, with his Creator; to worship, to relate to Him, or Her or It, I don’t know. But I’m at that stage of my life where I think that is what I should be doing. It’s between me and my God, whoever, whatever, that might be. And your job is to try and help me.

‘And any conception of God that I know of involves the notion of sacrifice, the giving of one’s best at some cost to oneself. Worship... er goes that-a-way,’ he waved his hand vertically, ‘not that-a-way,’ he spread his arms wide, taking in the unsuspecting thousands, mowing their lawns, lying beside their pools and on the beaches, from Port Macquarie to Lake Cathie. ‘Offer God the *best* that man has created over the ages. That way, some simple souls like myself may effect their relationship with God.’

And have self-indulgent wine tastings and concerts to boot, Geoff’s face said, but his words were conciliatory. ‘That’s an interesting point of view, Peter, but one I suspect

that you are able to handle perfectly well without the assistance of The Church. You obviously have worked it out very well indeed. The view of The Church is, as I said, quite different.’

‘I see. You’re coming the old Pontius Pilate on me, are you? Washing your hands of a politically incorrect view? As I said, the provision of social services is a secular job. That’s for government departments or social agencies like... like the Freemasons.’ He suddenly thought of David and the arguments he and Phyllis had had on that same topic. That convinced him, if he needed more convincing, that he was right. And this creeping Jesus and his politically motivated sponsors were deeply bloody wrong.

Geoff stood up.

‘Yes, Mr Prentice, I think perhaps you had better go. And don’t bother calling again. Unless,’ he added grandly, ‘unless you mull things over and are ready to concede that I am right.’

‘Well, I won’t say I’m sorry I called, but I can see when I am beaten. Unless, perhaps...’ he looked at the thoroughly discomforted Dorothy with an unspoken question, to which she shook her head. He held out his hand, which Peter took on a sudden whim in order to give the Freemason’s sign that he had once wheedled out of David.

‘Whether we disagree or not, Peter, you are both welcome at St Thomas’s at any time.’ He smiled uneasily, shook Dorothy’s hand, and then she ushered him downstairs.

‘And up your pious quoit,’ Peter muttered while they were still on the stairs.

Dorothy returned upstairs near tears. ‘Peter! I’m just so *ashamed*. How could you? It must have cost him a lot to come here after the way you treated him on Sunday, and then to be... be *mocked* like that. It’s un...unforgiveable!’ She slumped into her chair, too disappointed and too angry to speak further. But if she had thought she’d bought into

a blazing row with her still-loved husband she was thankfully mistaken. He was bubbling with joy.

‘Nothing like a jolly good discussion, eh? Silly young tit. Look, he hasn’t even finished his glass.’ He drained Geoff’s glass and topped it up from the still half-full bottle.

‘Vintage Christ, indeed.’

The details of Peter’s victory, and his euphoria, began to slip away. What he retained was his conviction that The Church had failed. It was now just a social club. His poor mother would be turning in her grave, he thought. Yet it had been her church that had so badly misled him as a boy: a misconception that had led to Nipper’s death. In turn, he recalled the news item about Hopkins’ death. Peter closed his eyes and saw the clipping as clearly as if it was before him now. John Christopher Hopkins, aged seventy-two, emeritus professor of English at Sydney University, fatally assaulted in Hyde Park on 26th May, 1990. He had sat in his bower all the next day mulling all this over. So Hopkins was killed despite Peter’s unwitting sacrifice of Nipper. *God had reneged on his bargain. He hadn’t spared Hopkins but had led him to a terrible death, almost as terrible as Nipper’s had been.* But what on earth could he do about that? He knew he had to do something; he had to complete the circle.

Jim and Marie came over the next night. Conversation flagged so they had watched a movie set in the Deep South. Peter was more interested in following his thoughts than in the movie, but he caught one particularly vivid scene involving a line of crosses blazing in front of someone’s house. The sight of the crosses stirred something, but when he tried to locate what that might be, the image bounced loosely in his mind,

one more to add to the jangled series of images: of a smouldering dog lurching towards him, of fire, of hoodlums kicking a helpless old man to death.

That night he had a terrifying nightmare. Himself and John Hopkins, caught in a semi-circle of fire, the fire creeping inexorably towards them like a hunting cat, flattened to the ground, deadly and unstoppable. Hopkins walking into the fire, standing like a burning statue, glaring at Peter with terrible eyes. Turning around, he walked back towards Peter, his face hideously melting as if he were a waxworks figure...

Peter woke covered in sweat, his heart pounding, eyes staring into blackness. Suddenly, he was overwhelmed with anger. Anger at Nipper's death, anger at Hopkins' death, anger at that travesty of a church service, anger at the whole idea of God, religion and the whole damned thing. He'd been screwed over by God his whole life. He suddenly remembered his father mentioning Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac – to kill his own son! – just to please God. And his own reaction: *I'd hate God if He forced me to make a choice like that!* And just as bad, he now thought, God had tricked him into being the cause of Nipper's agonising death. *God, you bastard! You bloody bastard!* He was now certain of what he had to do, and he needed his wits about him in order to do it. He sat on the edge of the bed, breathing deeply, trying to get his anger under control.

He forced himself to stay awake until predawn. He looked at the bedside alarm. 5.30a.m. Now was the time. He looked across at Dorothy who was snoring softly. He carefully got out of bed and dressed in the dark. He collected a box of matches from the kitchen and went to the garage where there was a four-litre can of petrol for the little-used lawnmower. He picked the can up. Just as he had thought, it was nearly full. He put it on the passenger seat of the Lexus. Now the tricky bit. If he used the remote door control the usual way the garage door would squeak and rumble, waking half the neighbourhood,

including Dorothy. That would wreck everything. He thought to jab the button in spurts, raising the door an inch at a time until it was high enough to get the car through. He listened intently. Silence, apart from the dawn chorus tuning up.

He drove carefully downtown to Hay Street, parking outside St Thomas Church. Fortunately it was still dark. Carrying the petrol can and patting his pocket to ensure he'd brought the matches, he went to the west door. It was locked. He hadn't anticipated that. Cursing under his breath, he stumbled round the far side, out of sight from the street, and felt his way round the wall towards the east end. He came across the chancel door. He tried the handle – it was unlocked. Once inside, he closed the door. It clicked shut, loudly. *Shit, hope no one heard that.* Waiting a moment he tried to adjust his eyes to the dark. The sun was not yet up and he daren't switch on any lights. He struck a match. A few yards away was that bloody excuse for an altar, from which the trendy priest had celebrated Mass, facing the congregation if you please! *Well, that's got to go for a start.*

He remembered the image of the Ku Klux Klan film they were watching last night. *A cross, that's what I need.* The match spluttered out, burning his fingers. He struck another and moved further up the chancel. At a prayer desk he found what he was looking for, a large wooden cross in a socket beside the desk. By now the first light of dawn had struck the east window. He could see well enough without the matches. He lifted the cross from its socket and walking back down the chancel, he propped the cross against the tawdry wooden altar.

He had a flashback to Mt Panorama. He recalled what he had been thinking when walking to the spot with Nipper. Sacrifice, Bushfire Sacrifice, Supreme bloody Sacrifice. *What I'm going to do now is no sacrifice. It's revenge. I'd meant well but bloody God has let me down on all fronts. Hopkins dead, Nipper dead. God dead. Or if God wasn't dead*

he soon would be. I'll start with that bloody table. Burn the sodding thing and then they can celebrate Mass the proper way from the high altar like they used to. The old way... Hey no. It was the old way that had let me down! Didn't God get me to pretend to sacrifice Nipper to save John Hopkins? And what did he do? He allowed both to die. Horribly. Then so must his house go too, this bloody church. All of it. From Nipper's ashes to this lot of ashes!

Satisfied with his convoluted line of reasoning, he unscrewed the lid of the can and splashed petrol over the table and the cross. He remembered what a close call it had been up Mt. Panorama when the wind had sealed the path off. But he'd got through. *I'll do the same here. Once the table is on fire, I'll empty the can in the chancel and then I'm out through the chancel door.*

He lit a match and tossed it on the altar. There was a loud whoosh; just like that bush that first went up all those years ago. That had gone up *whoosh*, just like this. The cross caught fire, looking like those Klu Klux Klan crosses in that movie last night. Peter liked that touch and stood for a few seconds watching the cross-shaped flames. Turning, he strode up the chancel, trailing petrol behind him, then across to the chancel door. With seconds to go before the fire caught up with him, he tried to open the chancel door. It wouldn't budge.

He'd locked himself in.

Dorothy woke up to find that Peter wasn't there beside her. Wondering, she went down to the kitchen. No, he hadn't had breakfast, not even a cup of coffee by the look of it. She glanced at the kitchen clock. 7.05a.m. The sun had just got up, and it was cold. Where

was he? She went out the back door to look in his hideaway. He wasn't there. Returning to the house, she passed the garage door. It was open and the car was gone.

Now she panicked. He never drove anywhere nowadays unless he had to, and never at this time of the morning. She went outside and looked up the road. Jim was outside watering his front garden.

'Hi, Dottie. You're up early. What's up? You look pretty upset.'

'I am, Jim. Have you seen Peter, or heard the car? He's gone, Jim, and I'm *worried.*'

'Gone? Must be a simple explanation. He must have mistaken the time or something. Come inside. Have a cuppa. You look like you could use one. We'll work something out.'

They sat at the kitchen table while Marie filled the jug. She switched on the radio as she usually did. A local winemaker was being interviewed when the announcer suddenly cut in, 'This is Radio 2MC-FM and now we interrupt our programme for a news flash. Port Macquarie police are investigating what appears to be an arsonist attack on St Thomas's, our beautiful old convict-built church. The east end of the church was badly damaged in a fire that appears to have been deliberately lit. A man's charred body was found. Police say it appears that he was trying to escape through the chancel door but it was locked. Would anyone who...'

Jim, who had been standing by the window, interrupted: 'Dottie, a police car has just drawn up outside your place...'