BLESSED KISS (Creative work)

THE AUTHOR IS THE BOOK (Exegesis)

LARRY BUTTROSE

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ABSTRACT

Creative Work: The novel *Blessed Kiss*

Blessed Kiss is set in a Roman Catholic seaside parish in Adelaide in 1960-61. Patrick and Margaret Carlow's marriage is under strain because of Patrick's secret affair with Fay Netley, a shop assistant he met in a Broken Hill pharmacy while on one of his outback sales trips as a commercial traveller.

As the affair deepens and Fay moves to Adelaide to be closer to him, Patrick's marriage starts to unravel as Margaret worries that something is very wrong.

While his parents are preoccupied with their own problems, their nine year old son Michael comes ever more closely under the eye of their parish priest, Father James Quinlan, and in the end Margaret must choose between acting on her suspicions regarding her parish priest, and her faith itself, to save her son.

Exegesis: The Author *Is* The Book

The exegesis examines the creative work *Blessed Kiss* in the light of the history and identity of its author, and progresses to a critique of Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author", rejecting the notion of inauthenticity in favour of the work embodying the author.

Statement of Originality

This work contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where reference had been made in the text.

I give consent for this copy of my thesis being available for loan when deposited in the University Library.

Larry Buttrose

8 September 2010

BLESSED KISS

by Larry Buttrose

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CONSPIRACY AND ABOMINATION

This was the part he liked the least, with nothing to redeem the bone loneliness of the saltbush flats. You didn't need fire and brimstone to make a place terrible. If he had believed in ghosts they would be out there, vapours in the gullies. But he didn't believe in ghosts. The souls of the dead were in Heaven, in Purgatory, or Hell. Or Limbo, he corrected.

Besides the saltbush and the carcasses of roos struck by vehicles, the only other item of note was the occasional rusting crashed or overturned car, or the skeleton of one broken down and picked clean. He had been coming on these trips during school holidays for three years now, and had recognised early on that breaking down was not a good thing.

Once he asked who did that, stripped all those cars?

'People,' his father had said.

'But who are they?'

'I don't know. Just people.'

'No one ever sees them?'

'They do it at night. Out here no one ever sees them.'

'What would we do if we broke down?'

'Flag someone down for help.'

'What if there were no cars?'

'There's always a car or a truck. You just have to wait.'

'What if night comes first?'

'You stay with the car. You always stay with the car. But someone comes in the end. Stay with the car and you're all right.'

Stay with the car. He knew that. But despite any reassurance his father might offer, he also knew that many of the roads they travelled, especially the dirt tracks in the far

Outback, saw very few cars. You might wait hours, days, for one. He also knew his father didn't like him asking too many questions of this sort, probably considering it unmanly to worry. Besides, his father said the Holden never broke down.

His father drove hunched over the wheel, cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth. He had smoked for as long as Michael could remember. Of an evening he would light up in front of the television, the blue pall fogging the living room. Michael hated the smell of it in the house, the car, in his clothes. He also knew it couldn't be good for his father. His mother had given up and tried to persuade him, and Michael had often asked him to stop. What was it all about? What was the problem? In the end it was another thing he simply couldn't understand.

He had his window wound all the way down and the wind streamed in, running through his hair, over his face. He kept an eye out for willy-willies. In the hot dry air out here you often saw them, little red twisters across the flatlands.

'Lochiel,' his father announced.

It was the first word he had spoken since swearing about the "stinking bloody" soap factory on their way out of the city, hours before. It wasn't that his father was always such a quiet man, but he was on driving trips. The boy assumed it was a time for him be off in his own thoughts and accepted it.

The searing white Lochiel salt lake dazzled his eyes, under a blue sky that ran away and kept on going. The size of the sky disconcerted him. He didn't like too big a sky, as he didn't like too small a room. He preferred things of a moderate order, but they rarely were. Life in general disappointed in that way, too extreme. Teachers were too ready to flare into anger, aunts to smother with kisses, friends fickle, nights when he woke up too deep and silent. When they watched the television news there were always soldiers in helmets with guns. Sometimes it felt the whole world was at war, and their little home surrounded by it. He wondered why no one did anything. It was wrong there was so much needless suffering, surely someone could stop it? He remembered how two years before he had asked his father why the police didn't stop wars, put the soldiers in gaol to stop them fighting. The memory prompted a smile now at his own naivety, but also at how his father had given him one of his occasional sparkle-eyed laughs, and said he'd never quite thought about it like that, but yes, that was the problem with war, no police to stop it.

'Lunch,' his father said, as he always did a few moments after the Lochiel announcement. Lunch meant a corned beef sandwich and a finger bun, while his father would pick at a roll and drink three schooners of beer and take a Bex. His father always had his Bex, slipping the white powder down the little papers they came in, onto his tongue. He did suffer badly from headaches. Sometimes at home he would disappear into the bedroom with the venetian blinds clamped tight and not come out for a day, even two. Migraines, his mother called them. She suffered from them too, though not as badly as his father.

They reached the huddle of iron structures which was the town, drawing up by the hotel in an orange halo of dust. The boy noticed particles of it settling onto his father's suit as they got out of the car. At the hotel entrance he coughed his smoker's cough, ran a forefinger between his neck and collar, brushed his shoulders and buttoned his suit jacket and straightened his tie, and drew himself erect.

An hour and a half later they were back on the road, beer fumes mingling with cigarette smoke in the car. Michael rested his head on the door with the wind rushing in. His father was happier, chatting. Beer did that. He had also met three men in the hotel and one of them had placed an order. Out here, you would think everyone would want a water softener, but most people couldn't afford it. Sometimes they went without a sale for weeks, but today, their first day away, his father had made one.

'...and the greengrocer says, that's a really nice pear!' one of the men had laughed.

'That's what the bishop said to the actress!' his father cried, as he had done in so many hotels, as Michael sipped a lemonade and raspberry through a straw and the men roared like it was the first time any of them had heard it, and it was the funniest thing.

He didn't ask his father what it meant: he knew it was for adults. But it made him wonder, as he also wondered about what it would be like to drink beer. He knew that too much made you drunk, but the taste was awful, nowhere near as good as lemonade and raspberry.

'You certainly like beer a lot don't you dad,' he had once said, younger, and his father's eyes had sparkled as he laughed and declared, 'Too right, son!'.

She rang up the sale and put the money in the till and the man put his hat on and walked back out into the street. The heat was already intense, and he merged into the bleach of Oxide Street. With what he was taking and in the doses he was, it wouldn't be long before he disappeared altogether.

'May?' her boss called from the adjoining lab. 'Was that Mr Watkins?'

'Yes.'

'Did he remember to take his repeat with him?'

'Yes he did.'

She went back to *The Advertiser.* The front page story was Tom Playford's plan to build another power station. There was also a photograph of children at the beach at Semaphore, under the headline "Kids Beat The Heat". They were splashing water over each other, with their mother looking on. Even though all the faces were happy, there was something desolate about the picture. Perhaps it was just Semaphore. When she was a girl staying with her aunt down in Adelaide for the summer holidays, she used to catch the bus over to Semaphore from the Port to go to the pictures.

'How about a beer after work?' Bob called from the lab.

'Sorry, can't tonight.'

She wondered what to wear: the black dress, or the new blue one? He liked the black one on her. He was always saying so, acted like it too. Or there was the green silk one with the raised hem, or the red one with the plunging backline.

The door-bell clanged and a tall woman in a broad-brimmed hat came in. She wore gloves, and despite the heat of the day, a beige topcoat over her frock.

'Yes, Mrs Clark.'

'A bottle of Aspro, please. And some Vapo-Rub. Peter's picked up a wog.'

'Always something going round isn't there.'

'Yes. And if it's there to be picked up, Peter will do it. It's that school of course. Unsanitary. Substandard.'

She waited while her items were collected from the shelves behind the counter. After they were wrapped and presented, she opened her purse and took out a ten shilling note.

'You're looking quite well May.' It was almost an admonishment.

'Thank you Mrs Clark.' As she counted out the change she considered returning the compliment but didn't. 'I hope Peter feels better soon.'

'Thank you. Good-day.'

May watched her out the door. She half-expected Bob to call out something but he didn't. She returned to the newspaper, but she wasn't reading it. Instead she put her hand inside the pocket of her uniform, and touched the telegram. She had intuited that it would come today, had seen the boy coming down the street long before he entered the shop. She had waited until he left before opening the envelope and reading the single word: "TONIGHT".

The black dress or the blue? The green or the red? Which undergarments - she had recently purchased some which tingled even her own fingers - and which perfume? She knew different scents now, ordered them in from Sydney. She had never expected to become the woman she now felt herself to be. Boys had found her pretty enough, but had somehow sensed she was a bit different to other girls. She was different, but only a little bit, but that was probably all it took. She always thought she would end up a miner's wife anyway, like the other girls.

When she didn't let that happen, she feared she might become a virgin spinster. She might have too, had she not taken the job at the chemist's, and soon had two men in her life. Funnily enough, blokes looked at her again now. Women did as well, as if she had no right to be herself. It was all a bit queer and she found she liked it.

'Morning tea time May.'

'Yes Bob.'

She left the counter and made the tea in the lab surrounded by the tall jars of powder and vials of fluid. Bob was a swarthy man, younger than he might have been. Once or twice he'd touched her where he shouldn't have done. She hadn't slapped him, hadn't encouraged him either, and that was how it had started.

It was cool where they sat and drank their tea. Her fingers lingered on the telegram in her pocket. On the iron roof above, the sun pelted down white and hard.

His father sold three units on the week-long trip, and he bought a Hills rotary clothes hoist and put down a deposit on a twin-tub. Michael's mother looked happier than she had in a long time, and the boy couldn't help but wonder at the power of money.

A few days after the trip Michael fell ill. His mother fretted, wondering whether he had been up to the journey after his recent bout of flu. He began running a very high fever, and complained of dizziness. His father telephoned Doctor Sweetapple, who said he would come right away. Michael had never had a home visit and knew it had to mean he was very sick. He heard the hushed tones of his parents with the doctor in the next room, and was not surprised when his mother told him he was going to the Children's Hospital for a little while.

They drove up to town the following morning, and were shown into a ward where Michael changed into a pair of pressed pyjamas, and climbed into an iron-framed bed where his parents tucked him in. Even though he was well aware that they were going home and he was staying, it still felt odd when they kissed him goodbye and walked out the door, leaving him alone there. It reminded him of his first day at school, but worse.

He spoke little with the children in the other beds at first: they were mostly too sick for talk anyway. Doctors came and went, and nurses noted his temperature onto a chart, took blood and gave him needles. He didn't like that part of it, but soon got used to it. He also worried he might show fear, but no real fear came. He was a bit surprised by that, and quietly pleased. The only really unsettling thing was the big medical machines used for tests, with their cold grey-green bulk and machinery noises. The hospital food he enjoyed. Breakfast was corn flakes or Weet-Bix, lunch a pie or pasty with sauce, and tea was grilled chops or sausages with chips and peas. Best of all, when he left the peas no one told him to eat them. For sweets there was custard tart or boiled pudding. He always ate the sweets.

Visiting hours were from six until eight o'clock and his parents came every night. He had always known they loved him, but had never seen it so plainly as when they looked down at him in his hospital bed. He saw the fear in their eyes too, of losing him. This was how much you could love, he realised. The knowledge in its turn disconcerted him.

There was a flow of others: the cousins, uncles and aunts who brought apples and

pears, glace fruit and nuts, and little boxes of Milk Tray chocolates. Apart from visiting time, he was largely alone, but found that not disagreeable. He had his crystal set, which he tuned in to music and news, and when he had enough of that he read Biggles or Baby Huey comics, or looked out the window. The hospital was on a main road near the city centre, which until his illness he had only ever visited with his mother, shopping in the big department stores. He enjoyed observing the daily life of the delivery vans and taxis, and people getting on and off buses grabbing papers from chorusing newsboys.

Visitors tended to avoid speaking about his illness. The only direct reference came from his best friend, Robert, who whispered in his ear that he only needed to worry if his parents asked if he would like to go to Disneyland. Robert said that would mean he was going to die. After that Michael was always a little nervous when his parents visited and prayed a bit harder each night, but Disneyland went mercifully unmentioned.

The doctors couldn't find any cause for his sickness, and after two weeks he was allowed to go home. The fevers had abated and didn't return, and he went back to school. His parents still worried, though. He was thin. He had never been robust, and didn't eat enough for their liking. His mother called him "sensitive". After his illness they tried even harder to get him to eat, especially his vegetables.

He felt different after the time in hospital. He had been out in the world alone, faced illness, even death, and come back. He had also learned about love, and how fear stalked it from the shadows. It made him wonder if he was already growing up.

* * *

The church was down on the seafront, nestled in the avenue of big Norfolk pines. It was a modern brick building, squat and square, with a peaked roof of corrugated iron, recently repainted by the parish men in working bees. Beside it stood the sandstone presbytery. Some people, Protestants for the most part, had commented that the new building looked a bit odd beside the more traditional one, intimating that it was perhaps a bit too modern. But the parishioners were proud of their church, attending services well beyond the mandated and even on the frostiest of winter weekday mornings. They looked to the building's maintenance and the beautification of its surrounds.

The parishioners who crowded in for Sunday Mass knew each other well. The men in suits and ties and the women in hats and shoes that itched in the heat, had gone to school together, played tennis together, danced at parish socials and married each others' sisters and brothers. They each knew where the others worked, what their wage was and how much of it they put into the collection plate. No one ever left and newcomers were rare beyond the occasional family of New Australians, Italians or Poles, and they kept pretty much to themselves.

Father James Quinlan was a recent arrival, however. His relative youth, height and build gave him something of the appearance of an athlete in a clerical collar, a contrast with his predecessor, Father Riley, who had breathed his last down in the beach dunes cradling an empty flagon of Four Crown Port.

He had made an impression quickly enough, officiating at parish functions, visiting homes, taking tea with the ladies and a glass of beer with the men. He was considered down to earth, without tickets on himself, even though it was rumoured he had attended university and had a diploma of some sort. Father Riley's education had not gone beyond a parish school in County Mayo.

Father Quinlan was markedly different to his predecessor in the pulpit. In his weekly sermons, Father Riley had gently encouraged the parishioners to generosity of spirit and good deeds, even if his words were occasionally slurred. When Father Quinlan preached, something powerful seemed to possess him, to take him over, his presence filled the church and his voice rang, so much so that one or two parishioners had quietly suggested, only half jokingly, that he might be a bit of a frustrated actor. It was certainly the case as well that he often spoke on subjects that Father Riley had never touched.

Michael sat between his parents, Missal resting on his lap. This morning his mother had achieved a perfect part in the ripe wheat of his hair, unthreading it with a seamstress's art before slicking it down with oil. His father, in his Sunday best suit, sat with his grey-flecked black hair glistening with brilliantine.

The cooling draughts of sea air flowing in the church's open doorway brought with them the tang of beached fish and seaweed: sometimes it felt strange to Michael, the outside world of nature making its presence felt within this shadowed vault of incense and chanted Latin. This morning, however, he dismissed distraction. Now that he was nine and

a confirmed communicant, he considered it his duty to attempt to understand the weekly sermon. Until a few months ago he had largely let it slide over his head, but now he made an effort, even though it meant asking his parents questions they often seemed uncomfortable about answering.

‘I don’t need to tell you the cause of this unease we are all feeling nowadays,’ Father Quinlan was saying, his tone measured, but with a suggestion of the storm to come. ‘It comes from the permissiveness, the licentious abominations in the eyes of God, that we see creeping in.’

Father Quinlan drew a white handkerchief from the folds of his shining green robes, and dabbed his forehead. Ladies took the cue and swished fans. It was only November but the heat was building. There had already been a heat wave, and Michael had heard the predictions on the radio of a long hot summer to come.

‘Some say it is a Communist conspiracy,’ the priest resumed, ‘others that it comes from America, from the television, the films, that are part and parcel of our changing lives.’

The boy silently mouthed the large, unfamiliar words... *licentious abominations, Communist conspiracy...*

‘Now, I don’t know about any Communist conspiracy, nor do I pretend to know the source of these modern evils of ours. I only know the cure.’ Father Quinlan’s tautness of throat, rising tone and flash of eye presaged his crescendo. The whites of his eyes flared as he declaimed his final words staring down into the faces of his flock, appearing to search out each individual, interrogate with a look. ‘The sickness must be weeded out, cut out... like a cancer... before it infects the entire body. Otherwise our community, our lives, our very faith, could be lost, forever!’

A silence followed these words, one in which Father Quinlan appeared almost to bask. Then someone coughed, others shifted in their pews, and he departed the pulpit. Soon there came the Latin murmur of prayer from the altar, the ringing of bells, the raising of the Host.

As Michael lined up with his parents to receive Communion, he found he still experienced a holy awe at receiving the sacred host, taking the body and blood of Christ onto his own tongue. As the bread wafer dissolved in his saliva - he could never bring himself to chew - he pondered, as he always did, whether his soul had been perfectly pure,

entirely purged of all sin. This was because he was unsure whether he had ever committed an actual sin, whether his soul had ever been marked by it - beyond Original Sin of course, which the sacrament of Baptism had washed away.

The matter of sin created ongoing complications for Michael. No matter how hard he searched his soul, agonised even, he failed to turn up deeds or thoughts that might incontestably constitute sin. So when his turn came in the Confessional booth of a Saturday afternoon, he invariably found himself in a state of near panic. Of what could he accuse himself, to the shadowy figure beyond the wire mesh? Before his First Confession, he had wondered what the priest would say if he said that he had nothing to confess. Would he urge him to search his conscience more deeply, even chide him for spiritual laziness? Perhaps thinking you were without sin was in itself a sin of pride, and so in thinking himself sinless he was committing that most fundamental sin of all, which had lost Adam and Eve their earthly paradise.

In the end he would mutter “bloody” under his breath, and confess the sin of swearing, but it felt manufactured, even fraudulent, and he worried whether that solution was not itself a sin. After all, wasn’t God’s forgiveness conditional upon the sinner making a sincere effort not to commit the sin again? Yet, here he was, planning to repeat it each week! That simply had to be a sin itself, and often he thought this was the sin he ought to be confessing, but was daunted by trying to provide an explanation of the intricacies. It perplexed him every Saturday afternoon, as he unhappily swore and then confessed it, and did his penance of three Hail Marys; and it perplexed him even more deeply every Sunday morning, as he swallowed the Communion host.

Now, as the last morsels of the wafer dissolved in his mouth, he wondered whether taking the body of Christ into his own would not bring him eternal darkness instead of light. Another inner voice whispered the outrageous suggestion that this could be like cannibalism of a kind. That thought had to be a sin too, but was another he could never confess. The worst thing of all was there was no one with whom he could discuss all this. His parents wouldn’t understand, and the idea of asking his parish priest intimidated and daunted him. Yet, he knew, one day he must, or the strain would become too much. Perhaps it already was. Perhaps that was why he had become sick, from worry. The thought worried him more.

After Mass Father Quinlan stood outside to farewell the families as they emerged blinking into the sun. The stiff breeze ruffled his vestments and Michael's mother clutched her hat. After accepting their compliments on his sermon, the priest turned to Michael. 'And can I expect to see you down here for tennis practice, now that you're feeling better?'

'I hope so, Father.'

'Still been a bit out of sorts haven't you Michael,' his mother said. 'But he'll be better soon.'

The priest bent towards him. 'You were quite sick I know. I'm not surprised you haven't been down to practice. But I hear you're one of the most promising young players in the parish, so it'll be good to see you when you're up to it. Who knows, I might even play a set or two with you myself.' He cast a wink in the direction of Michael's parents. 'I have something else in mind too, which I hope your parents will be able to agree to. At any rate, we shall see.'

In the car going home, Michael asked what Father Quinlan had meant, but neither of his parents seemed to know. That didn't concern him too much: what he really wanted to ask was what did licentious abominations and Communist conspiracy mean. But he knew this was not the time, and that he would have to wait.

Sunday lunch was roast beef or lamb. Today it was beef, with roast potatoes and boiled peas, and cauliflower in white sauce. Margaret juggled the plates from the oven and set them down on the servery before dishing up the vegetables while Patrick carved the joint.

They took their places at the table in the kitchen alcove and said grace, and after their first mouthfuls Margaret asked Patrick, as she always did, if it was tender enough.

'Perfect,' he said. 'Now eat up Michael before it gets cold. And your peas and cauliflower too.'

They ate in a quiet broken only by the scrape of metal on china, and Patrick getting up to pour himself more beer.

'I do like Father Quinlan,' Margaret said.

'I think we all do, don't we?' Patrick replied.

‘He has some interesting ideas. New ideas.’

Patrick looked up. ‘What sort of ideas?’

‘When he spoke at the Ladies Auxiliary the other morning, he said that Mass might be spoken in English some day.’ Margaret sipped her Passiona. ‘He thought it might even be soon, within a few years. He asked us what we thought about that.’

‘What did people say?’

‘Most didn’t like the sound of it. They thought something might be lost if it was in English.’

‘Did Father Quinlan offer an opinion?’

‘Not in as many words, but I could tell he was in favour.’

‘Did you say anything?’

‘I said it might be a good thing because people would have a better idea of what was going on.’

Patrick looked at her as if he was about to respond, took another mouthful of beer and resumed eating. Margaret wondered if she had said too much.

The breeze coming in through the window made little or no impression on the terrific heat built up from the gas stove cooking for two hours in the middle of a hot day, and her house-dress felt uncomfortably damp with perspiration. She wished she could just strip it off and sit there with nothing on, a wildly lewd thought she banished before it had even formed fully, one not befitting a Catholic wife and mother. But still it was there, in the back of her mind. Planted there by whom, the Devil? Or was it the modern world, the one whose abominations so concerned Father Quinlan? Yet there he was, in favour of something very modern himself, the Mass said in English.

Like her parish priest, she had a complicated relationship with the new. Science promised to defeat disease and feed the world, even the poorest people. That was good, but then it worried her to read as well about hydrogen bombs and missiles, sputniks and the like. Sometimes it felt as if the world was out of control, careering down a slippery slope. Where would it all lead, she wondered, and what kind of world would Michael walk in his adult years, when they were gone. Aspects of modern life were thought-provoking in other ways too. She quite liked the fashions, for instance. Why must she be expected to wear starchy dresses with stockings and gloves, especially in the summertime, just to catch a

bus up to town to pay the bills and do some shopping? And where was the harm if hems rose to the knee? Feminine calves were attractive, made by God. Why banish them beneath dowdy hemlines?

There was also the matter of the two-piece bathing suit she had bought in John Martin's two weeks before, but had since kept buried at the bottom of her unmentionables drawer. It was in a discreet enough colour, bottle green, but still she worried how Patrick might react. Be bold, the saleswoman had laughed, he'll love it, and love you in it. But could she be that bold? She also liked modern music, and of an afternoon, with Patrick at work and Michael at school, the voice of Harry Belafonte or even Elvis Presley would curl from the radiogram across the dark wood of the sitting room floor, and she would whirl in the eddies. Or she would improvise jazz moves, to *Take Five.* Patrick had no time for any of the "jazzbos" as he called them. For him music had reached its summit with Crosby and Sinatra.

There were also things she suspected she liked but was not sure that she should. Recently in Doctor Sweetapple's waiting room she had found an old *Life* magazine in a pile of *National Geographics* and *Womens Weeklys.* The paintings she saw in it were by an American, an apparently very famous man whose name she could not now recall. He had been enraged by life itself, so it seemed, flung himself into fist-fights and extramarital affairs, drank far too much and was killed in a road accident. Yet when she looked at the colour reproductions of his works, which were not so much like paintings as she knew the term, but more like blood of many colours spurted from his own veins spattered and spotted across the canvas, she could not deny that they were extraordinary, beautiful even, evoking something great or tragic beneath the surface of mere paint.

She had never experienced anything like that from art before, although she had once or twice experienced something similar, reading a book she should not have, one the Church would have frowned upon, a story which touched vividly, but realistically, upon physical love. She knew Patrick would disapprove, and kept her reading and feelings to herself, and never mentioned the American painter. Their shared cultural diet was confined to the occasional stage show up in town, or the pictures over at the Bay.

'Dad, what did Father Quinlan mean by li-cent-ious abom...abom-in-ations?' Michael asked. Margaret glanced at her husband.

‘Things you don’t need to know about, not yet anyway,’ Patrick replied.

‘But I’m nine now. Well past the Age of Reason.’

‘You are. But there are some things we all have to face, big things, difficult things... and you still have a few years yet.’

‘What about Communist conspiracy? What does that mean?’

‘Eat your peas and cauliflower.’

‘Is it so bad that you can’t even talk about it?’ Michael persisted. ‘And if it is, how come Father Quinlan is talking about it, in church?’

Unable to conceal the hint of a smile, Margaret got up to fetch the meat for Patrick to carve. He always took seconds on Sundays.

‘I want to see that plate shining clean, Michael.’

‘But dad...’

‘That’s enough. How many times do I have to tell you, you have to eat your greens.’

The boy’s eyes fell to the congealed cap of dun-coloured sauce covering the chunks of boiled cauliflower, and the clump of peas. He didn’t move.

‘Don’t be disobedient.’

‘I’m sorry, dad.’

It was curious to Margaret that a boy who was so well behaved in almost every other respect could be so stubborn about eating a few vegetables. Yet here it was again, the stand-off they all endured so often, but particularly on Sundays. All Michael wanted was to get away from the table as fast as possible, to go to a friend’s place, or read in his room. Or, as it was on this occasion, ask difficult questions.

‘Do you want to get sick again?’ Patrick said.

‘No dad.’

‘Then eat your bloody vegetables.’

Margaret recoiled slightly at the swear word, but Michael gave no sign.

‘I’ll try dad.’

He speared a few peas with his fork, placed them in his mouth, and chewed.

Margaret wanted to explain to him again how crucial greens were to the body, how their lack could lead to inhibited growth and weak limbs, and to remind him of the starving

children of India, whose wide lugubrious eyes would reproach the wasting of another meal. She remained quiet though: it was Patrick's place to discipline him. She stared at her son willing him to eat, but he merely looked back. There wasn't defiance in his eyes, no scorn or rebellion. If anything, there was apology, even sympathy.

'Is it a sin to leave food on a plate?' Michael asked.

Margaret was surprised to detect a note almost of hope in his voice.

'In a world with so many people going hungry, it could well be,' Patrick said. 'But you'd have to ask Father Quinlan about that. You might also discuss the sin of disobedience with him.'

Michael looked up. Again Margaret was surprised by a strange look of hope.

'Speaking of Father Quinlan,' Patrick said, 'what about tennis? I think the doctor would be happy for you to get back on the court. You do still like tennis, don't you?'

'Yes dad.'

The boy's tone did not convince.

'Well, do you?'

'Yes, dad, I do. I mean it.'

'Then will you play again, down at the church courts?'

'Yes, dad.' The boy's eyes fell again to his plate. ' May I leave the table now please?'

Patrick stared at him, went to say something, but then sighed yes. They watched as he ran off.

'Don't worry,' Margaret said, scraping the uneaten food away. 'He'll eat when he's ready.'

Patrick lit a cigarette and looked out the window.

It was less than fifty yards to Robert's place, past the brick fronts and trimmed lawns, the roses and conifers of Walker Street, to the corner. A left turn then, into Palmer Street, and on the right, number five, Robert's. He was disappointed to see the Zephyr absent from the driveway. When he knocked on the back door, his suspicion was confirmed. They were probably on a family picnic in the Hills, or a drive down to Port Noarlunga. That was

his parents' favourite Sunday drive too, ending up in the beer garden of the Port Noarlunga Hotel, where Michael would spend the afternoon in the kids' zoo enclosure while his parents sat with friends at a table under a tattered old beach umbrella and ordered beer by the jug. His father was a different man then, a carefree arm draped around his wife's shoulders.

It was there, one afternoon - he didn't remember exactly how long ago - he had realised that his mother was pretty. It was one of those turning points, he knew. That for a childhood eternity your mother is simply your mother, who loves you because she is your mother, the centre of your world. Then one day, in the space of a moment you realise that others see her differently, as a woman in a world of women, as pretty, not so pretty, or plain. His mother, he had realised that day, seeing his half-drunk father eyeing her over a beer jug, was a pretty woman.

But Robert's parents would not be sitting in any beer garden. They were teetotallers, Church of Christ. As he walked away, he felt hungry. Not finishing lunch, he hadn't been rewarded with the dessert he got for a shining dinner plate. But there was sixpence in his pocket and the shop wasn't too far, and in ten minutes time he was peeling the wrapper from a White Knight bar. He only wished they used more chocolate covering and less of the peppermint stuff inside, which was so hard and chewy you could feel the drag on your fillings.

He turned towards home, down streets of new brick Housing Trust homes where men laboured with push mowers and women shuttled in and out of doors with brimming schooner glasses. As he often did, he found himself counting his steps, and on a whim imagined them as years... 10, 11, 12. All too quickly he reached 19, 20, 21. Manhood, his father said, 21. What would he look like as a man? What would he be doing? It pricked him to realise he might not be living with his parents. Young men often didn't. But if not with them, who with? Then he would sally on into 22, 23, 24, 25, the years which unfurled further beneath his feet. What would he be at 30? That time, in the far-off year of 1981, was so cloaked in mist that he couldn't envision it at all. He would be married by then, with a family. A wife, children. He had often wondered about wives, the getting of them in the first place, and then what one did with them. Children of course arrived after you got the wife. His parents had never spoken of how children came into the world, beyond infant

bedtime stories about storks and cabbage patches, but he had seen the women on the street with their stomachs swelled and knew what was inside them. He had asked his mother about it once, how the babies were in there and how the women came to be that way, but she had changed the topic, saying his father would explain it one day when he was a little bit older. He knew from that, and jokes Robert had made, that babies came from "dirty things" men and women did together. But exactly what they did neither knew, not even Robert.

He counted his steps to 40, 41, 42. What happened then, when your children were growing up and you were starting to get old? His dad was already 35. One day he would be 40, then 50. He stopped counting at 50. There seemed little point. He couldn't summon up any images of himself at such a distance. It was like looking up at a star and trying to work out how it would look if you were standing on it. You just couldn't get that close.

He turned the corner back into Walker Street, and dawdled past the front yards of neighbours. The Wards. The Gallaghers. The Kemps. The Keilors. The McInernys. His own front yard had a low wooden fence painted white, brush pines in the front yard, shrubs by the entry porch, and the rows of red, pink, white and gold roses that his mother tended.

He was about to go inside when he spotted a cricket ball amid the tangle of roses. It looked a good one, shiny red and new, and there it was, somehow in his front yard. He wriggled down through the undergrowth towards it, thorns catching at his shirt, his fingers straining forward across the powdery loam. Just as his hand wrapped around it, he heard sounds from the window of the master bedroom above him. The sounds were odd, making him think at first that his mother was in pain; but then, curiously, not in pain. The notion swept him then, in a revelation of a sort, that suddenly here lay the answer to the question he had been asking, the key to the mystery, the things men and women did together. The power of curiosity prompted him to do then what he might have thought he never could have done, which was to lift his head, and peek inside.

Margaret had accepted a lacking in their intimate life for a long time. There was little she could do about it; it was just the way things were. Nor was it something one could talk

about. She didn't feel able to raise it with Patrick, and the only other two people whose domain it could possibly fall into were Doctor Sweetapple and Father Quinlan, and she certainly couldn't imagine ever speaking of it with either of them.

She had, however, spoken of it once, quite recently, with Pam Ahearne. It was after a third glass of claret at Tom and Shirley Regan's backyard barbecue, as she found herself sitting alone with Pam while the men stood around the keg at the other end of the yard, telling blue jokes. Pam had been widowed two years before, after her husband Bill rolled his car down near Millicent. Like Patrick, Bill had been a travelling salesman. He and Pam had emitted the outward signs of being happily married, and she had been led sobbing from his graveside. But before long, a number of noticeable changes had taken place. Pam was still under thirty, attractive with a good figure, and in the months after she buried Bill she had begun updating her wardrobe with outfits that many in the parish considered a bit too revealing. Those tight slacks and tops, they whispered, left little to the imagination. Some of them wondered, more or less out loud, what Bill might have said. But Pam didn't seem to care what anyone thought, and then the rumour spread that she had a gentleman friend.

Pam intrigued and worried Margaret in equal measure. After Pam mentioned Wal, calling him her boyfriend, and even speaking of some of the things they did together, Margaret found her own wine-loosened tongue speaking of her relations with Patrick. She found Pam a good listener, and when Margaret had finished speaking, Pam declared straight out that familiarity was the enemy of sex, and that she thought it humanly impossible to be excited about the same one person forever. She said that although the Church counselled - or was it consoled with - the importance of companionship, the body and mind could not function properly without good sex. With Wal she realised how deeply out of touch she had been with herself and her physical needs, how much she had missed the excitement, the sheer release and intimacy she and Bill had lacked for years.

'It had gone by the third year of our marriage,' she said to Margaret. 'We just went through the motions for years after that. I'm sure it's like that for everyone. Three years - then kaput.'

'So we have to get new husbands every three years?' Margaret joked, and Pam laughed 'Why not?!' down into her glass. 'You know, I'd always been afraid of Bill

getting himself killed on one of those country trips. I thought I'd die too if he did. But now I think I was actually dead back then, and I've come back to life now. As if when his casket closed, mine opened, and out I came, glass in hand!'

Margaret smiled and poured them more claret. The men at the keg were yelling and laughing. Patrick had just said something very funny apparently, probably his favourite crack about the bishop and actress.

'What about sin? Do you...'

'Confess what I do with Wal?' Pam laughed. 'Good Lord no! God doesn't need to hear all that! Besides, if it feels good for me, for my body, it's not a sin. It can't possibly be. Do you think God would want us to go through nearly all of our lives sexless as shop manikins? I know I'm not doing anything wrong. Sex is a good thing, a bloody good thing.'

Patrick was labouring on top of her. How heavy his body had become. Was he putting on weight, or did she feel it more now? She wished he would direct his beery breath somewhere else. His skin stuck to hers and caught uncomfortably. Then he ejaculated, and she moaned. She knew he liked her to moan a little, a small duty for a Catholic wife.

Whatever fleeting pleasure she might have felt passed, and was immediately replaced by the habitual nag of worry. They were practising the Rhythm Method, sanctioned by the Church, but it was unreliable. What would they do if she became pregnant? The feeds, nappies, the cry that cuts the deepest night, and all the rocking and there-theres in the chilly pre-dawn. The rags and wipes and bags of things to be carted about, the rattles and bears, pushers and prams, rusks and rice cereal. No, she didn't want to go through it again. She felt a bit guilty about it, knowing she was meant to be happily propagating for God and country. But the sheer draining hard work of it, and the daily struggle for the three of them to stay afloat - how much harder would a baby make all that? Not that Patrick wanted another child, always saying they couldn't afford it, and he was right. Yet he was adamant they not use any contraceptives either, that being a sin. So any day it could happen, and it probably would. What would they do then? Pray? God didn't change nappies, she thought, mentally paraphrasing Pam. God didn't do the 3 a.m. feeds and he didn't pay the gas bill. That was the trouble with that Rhythm Method of His.

She tried to dismiss the thoughts, but they persisted. Somehow the complexity of her feelings about intimacy with Patrick always led back to God, as if any difficulties between them had to be placed before Him first, up there on his throne of gilded clouds, with them supplicant before him, pleading their case for a fulfilling or at the least liveable life. Why was it that God and Church pervaded their marriage, bedroom, even her own needs and desires? Did God really demand that much of His faithful? Wasn't it enough they praised Him, and were kind towards each other? Did he really need to be a policeman too? What was it to Him, off in infinite space and time, what one tiny human did in that regard?

Patrick rolled off her. She felt the wetness gather in the sheet under her, and shifted onto her side. She looked at the pale length of his limbs slatted with daylight through the venetians, at his thin lips, the water in his distant eyes.

'I love you, Patrick.'

'I love you too.'

He kissed her, pulled on his dressing gown and walked out of the room. He relieved himself and went into the kitchen to make the tea. He filled the kettle, lit the gas and reached for the Bex in the cupboard. As he waited for the water to boil he watched Michael through the window, playing in the backyard. He was tossing a cricket ball high into the air and catching it. He seemed happy in it, even happy to be alone. He really was a good kid, if a little bit unusual.

Michael sat in his place in the classroom with the plaster peeling off. There were three rows of ten desks, each with a pupil sitting at it. The desks had wooden writing tops that could be raised to reach books and pencils kept inside, and inbuilt inkwells. Although the desks were old, none looked touched by past pupils, not even a date or set of initials. It was a grievous breach of the rules to deface school property; worse, it was a sin.

The late November day was warming quickly and the room was stuffy, and Michael was having difficulty concentrating on the 8 times tables written on the blackboard. The class was sing-songing through them, but it felt to him as though his own voice was coming from a distant place, barely recognisable as his own. It was his third day

back, but Sister Mary Grace was still being nice: she must have been told he had been near death. He had heard his father refer to her as “ample, young and Irish”, but what he did not know about was her temper. She had descended like blotched red rage cloaked in black the day Michael had begun school four years before, wielding the cane willy-nilly. Left-handed, he had soon learned of his collusion with the prince of darkness. ‘The hand of the devil!’ Sister Mary Grace had declaimed, and his left hand was caned until it could no longer hold a pencil, and he had learned to write with his right.

As the class chanted through the tables, Sister Mary Grace went to the door and glanced out into the corridor before raising a hand for them to stop.

‘Now class, we have something special this morning,’ she said, in what they all recognised as her cheeriest tone. ‘A guest. Our parish priest Father Quinlan is joining us. Everyone stand up please.’

The children stood and Father Quinlan entered, acknowledging them with a wave.

‘Thank you Sister. Now please all of you resume your places, and Sister Mary Grace will get on with the class. I’m here to listen, and to help with anything I can.’

He sat in a chair placed beside the teacher’s desk at the head of the class, and waited while she surveyed her class with a fixed, small-toothed smile.

‘Because we have our important visitor, I thought we would have some Religious Instruction questions and answers, to show Father Quinlan how well you are all doing. So, first of all, who can tell me why we have to go to Confession?’

Hands darted into the air but mouths remained closed.

‘Terry Fitzhenry.’

A sallow-faced boy with too-close cropped dark hair stood.

‘We go to Confession because we can’t receive God in Holy Communion with sin on our souls, Sister.’

‘And what are the three kinds of sin?’

‘Original sin, mortal sin and venial sin, Sister.’

‘Thank you. You may sit down. And what happens if you die with a mortal sin on your soul? Michael Carlow...’

‘You go to hell, Sister.’

‘And if you die with a venial sin on your soul?’

‘You have to go to Purgatory before you can go to Heaven, Sister.’

‘And what happens in Purgatory?’

‘You get scourged until you’re pure again, Sister.’

‘Thank you, Michael. You may sit down now.’

The nun looked pleased, and Father Quinlan nodded. But Michael remained standing.

‘But, Sister... please... I have a question. Do you get scourged by devils, or by angels?’

‘Pardon, Michael?’

‘I’ve often wondered, who does the scourging in Purgatory? Angels or devils? Because I thought devils were only in Hell. Yet it’s hard to imagine an angel ever scourging anyone.’

‘Well... I...’ The nun looked nonplussed.

‘If you will permit me Sister,’ the priest said. ‘Michael, the scourging is performed by whomsoever God wills to scourge.’

Though he knew the answer to be incomplete, and remained puzzled, the boy knew to accept it.

‘Thank you, Father.’

But he still did not resume his seat, staring at the priest with that thoughtful intensity the nun so often found disconcerting.

‘There is one other thing I’d like to ask please, Father.’

‘Now Michael...’ the nun interposed, but the priest raised his hand to her.

‘What is it, my son?’

‘What if when you go Confession you’ve got nothing to confess?’

‘That’s easy. You don’t go.’

He chuckled as he said it, and the children followed the cue to laugh too, as did their teacher. Small laughter rippled the room.

‘But what if you’re expected to go?’ Michael persisted. ‘By your parents, your family. And they might think there’s something... wrong... if you don’t?’

Sister Mary Grace emitted a sigh of impatience.

‘I’m sure that if you search your heart carefully Michael, you will find a little sin

in there somewhere,' she said. 'Perhaps something you promised your mother you would do, and didn't. A bad thought you might have had about someone. Perhaps you found threepence in the schoolyard and didn't hand it in.'

'But I've never done any of those things.'

The nun's exasperation was matched by the priest's chuckle.

'Trust me, Michael,' Father Quinlan said, 'you will find your own sin. Everyone sins. It's only human to sin.'

'Is it a sin not to eat your vegetables?' he asked quickly.

The priest smiled again before answering. 'If your parents have told you to, well, yes, it could be. A sin of disobedience.'

Of all things, the nun saw the strange boy smile, almost as if he were relieved by the answer.

'You might wish to discuss it further with your confessor,' Father Quinlan added.

'Thank you, Father,' Michael said.

'And now, sit down please Michael,' Sister Mary Grace said with finality. 'Everyone open your Catechisms at page sixty, and go to the paragraph starting, "God is love".'

The priest continued gazing benignly out as they went on with the class. Mum is right, Michael was thinking, he is a very nice man. Much nicer than poor old Father Riley. He never had time at all for children.

Michael was surprised when one of the Grade Two boys sought him out him with a note at lunch time. It was in a sealed envelope, and had come from the school office. Michael had never opened a note like it before. The only ones he had received had been from his mother, usually telling him she might get home a little after him, and to use his key.

The boy who brought it hung around out of curiosity, but Michael wasn't having anything of that. He opened the note in a toilet cubicle, away from prying eyes. It was from the school principal, telling him to present himself at the church presbytery at 2.15 p.m., as Father Quinlan wished to speak with him. He read it twice, then once more before folding it and putting it back in the envelope.

It must have had something to do with the class that morning, he thought. Father Quinlan must be annoyed about his questions: all those smiles must really have only been masking his annoyance. The realisation plunged him into turmoil. Why had he asked those questions? Surely he should have asked them in the Confessional, not in the classroom. Father Quinlan no doubt thought him a show-off, or a fool. Worse, a pest. He wondered if he was permitted to cane him. He was a lot bigger and stronger than Sister Mary Grace. He could hurt, no doubt about it. Why, oh why, had he said those things? He knew he shouldn't have, even as he was saying them. And so now here he was, with this note in his hands.

He showed it to Sister Mary Grace, who showed little if any response and excused him from class. He washed his face, combed his hair and straightened his uniform. The church and presbytery were a short walk away, and he started out fifteen minutes before the appointed time to ensure he was punctual. Each step was imbued with dread, as if it were carrying him closer to a fate he should have prayed to God to spare him. His mouth, why did so many questions spout from it? Why couldn't he hold his tongue like other people did, like his own father did most of the time? You wouldn't see him getting himself into trouble like this.

He passed down streets of well-kept houses, from which came the sounds of crying babies and vacuum cleaners. Sounds of normal life through open summer doors. How he wished his life could be that again, normal. But today he had spoken, erred. It was pride, he supposed, that had made him speak up like that. That old, old sin of pride. And now he had to take the punishment to be meted out. He hastened his step then: better to face the demons, get it over with. He left the streets and reached the seafront, the esplanade lined with the Norfolk pines, and a short way down it, the church. Never had his eyes beheld it with such trepidation.

The old stone presbytery next to it reared up dark and forbidding as he approached, as if ready to swallow him up. He stopped at the door, redoubled his courage, reached up and pushed the doorbell, but nothing happened. He waited, and rang it again. Perhaps no one was in: sudden hope coursed through him that it was all a mistake, a misunderstanding. But then it opened and he saw the Black Sea Witch.

'Yes?' she said, peering down.

'I'm Michael Carlow. I've been told to come and see Father Quinlan.'

He handed her the note. A stooped, harrowed woman in her sixties, Mrs King the housekeeper was known to the parish children as The Black Sea Witch. Michael had never joined in, thinking it cruel, but nonetheless that was who she was in his thoughts now.

'He's in his study.'

He managed to nod, and she stepped back into the doorway, allowing him to enter, and led him down a high-ceilinged hallway. The walls were white with red tiles underfoot. There were small, brightly coloured, strange-looking paintings here and there. It all felt pleasant, and somehow Michael couldn't imagine they would have been there back in Father Riley's day.

Mrs King knocked on a wood-panelled door.

'Come in,' came Father Quinlan's voice.

'It's the young Carlow boy come to see you, Father.'

'Ah. Good. Show him in please.'

Michael had never been into a study as such, but found himself ushered into a room which looked like a large comfortable living room. There was a couch by the open fireplace, paintings on the wall, a brightly coloured rug on the wooden floor, bookshelves and a desk with a telephone on it. Father Quinlan sat reading in an armchair in the big bay window which looked out onto a walled garden. He looked relaxed, almost drowsy, as if he had just awakened from a nap. His movements were fluid and smooth, and he exuded none of the tension Michael would have expected to find if punishment were on his mind. But he knew better than to judge by appearances.

'Come in, sit down.' Father Quinlan indicated the armchair next to his with a wave of his hand.

'Thank you, Father.' He stepped across the room and settled into the chair.

'Tea, Father?' the housekeeper asked.

'Yes please, Mrs King. With some biscuits please.'

'Right you are, Father. I'll leave the door ajar if you don't mind, and be back with the tray directly.'

Despite Michael's curiosity about seeing the preserve of the clergy at first-hand, he was determined to go straight to the problem the moment Mrs King had left.

'I'm sorry, Father,' he said.

'Sorry?' Father Quinlan said. 'About what?'

'My behaviour in class today.'

'Why?'

Michael was confused. 'Well, that's why you've asked me here, isn't it, Father? Because of my questions today. I know I must have looked like a bit of a show-off. Or foolish.'

'Not at all.'

'Really, Father?'

'No. They were genuine questions, reasonable questions. I had no problem at all with them.' Michael must have visibly relaxed then, because the priest smiled. 'Actually it's me who should be apologising. I seem to have got you into a bit of a state by asking you here today.'

In the light flooding in the bay window, Michael noticed the hue of Father Quinlan's eyes. Their clear, shimmering blue reminded him of a photograph he had once seen from the Great Barrier Reef, of the open sky taken by a skin diver a few feet below the water.

'Well, Father, it's just that when I received that note, I thought it was because I'd done something wrong.'

'You've done nothing wrong, nothing at all,' the priest said. 'Not that I know of anyway.' He added a reassuring smile.

'Thank you, Father. I mean, well, that's good. So, is it about the tennis then?'

'No, it's not about that either.'

'Father,' the housekeeper said from outside the door.

'Come in, Mrs King.'

'I had the urn on so it only took a moment.'

She brought in a tray bearing a large teapot with a jug of milk and bowl of sugar, two cups, saucers and spoons, and a plate of mixed sweet biscuits. She set it all down onto a side-table between the armchairs.

'Thank you, Mrs King.'

'Right you are, Father.' She left, closing the door behind her.

'Tea, Michael?'

'Yes, thank you Father.'

'Help yourself to milk and sugar.'

'Thank you, Father.'

'And Michael, you don't have to call me Father all the time. I know who I am.'

'Thank you, Father.' He stopped himself. 'I mean, well, thank you.'

Father Quinlan smiled again. It was as if he was always smiling. He set the book he had been reading down onto the side-table to pour the tea, and Michael saw the spine, *The Magic Mountain.* He saw the author's name too, Thomas Mann. It looked a large, serious book, and he wondered if that meant it might not really be about a magic mountain.

'Do you enjoy reading?'

'Oh yes,' Michael said. 'Very much.'

'What do you like to read?'

'The Secret Seven. Biggles. What is that book about? Is it really about a magic mountain?'

'In a way. It's about a hospital on a mountain-top where people go to try to get over their illness.'

'I wonder if it was anything like the hospital I went to.'

'This was a long time ago, before the First World War. And it was a special hospital, for people suffering from tuberculosis... TB. Destroying their lungs. Luckily we can be inoculated now.'

'Yes Father, that is lucky.'

Father Quinlan handed him the book. It was thick and felt weighty in his hands. On the dust-jacket was a painting in vivid tones of a young man standing in the snow beside a woman in a black overcoat. She wore red lipstick and fine-looking gloves. Behind them was a doctor in a white coat with a medical chart, against a backdrop of a snow-capped, pine clad peak. Father Quinlan watched as his eyes navigated the detail.

'Are these two people sick? They don't look very sick.'

'You can't see it, but they are. In some ways that's what the book is about. A sickness in their world that no one could quite see. A bit like our world now, I think.'

The priest sipped his tea and nibbled on his biscuit. Michael did likewise. He would have loved to dunk it but knew better, given the occasion.

'It's about more than that though too,' Father Quinlan said. 'Much more. Ways of living. Life itself. Love too, of course. Everything. Like any good book should be.'

Michael felt overwhelmed. The things Father Quinlan was speaking of sounded so huge and grand. They were things he knew he was interested in, even at his age, but had never expected to discuss with an adult, and certainly not when the adult was his parish priest: the opportunity and the privilege were too immense.

'You might like to read it one day, when you're a bit older,' Father Quinlan said. 'Have you seen our garden?'

Michael was relieved to turn his attention to the roses and beds of daisies and petunias outside the bay window. There were also flowering shrubs, and other plants he couldn't identify.

'It's beautiful, Father.'

'Yes. Father Riley planted most of it. It was his garden, his pride and joy. Not many people knew of it, almost his own secret.'

They looked out at the garden and drank their tea. A magpie swooped and nabbed an insect from the clipped lawn that ran in a long, narrow rectangle between the formal beds of flowers and shrubs. Michael watched it climb away past circling gulls.

'Like everything else worthwhile,' Father Quinlan said, 'a garden requires care and attention.' He drained his cup, re-set it onto its its saucer and placed them down on the side-table. 'Care... Attention... Things that are in sadly short supply nowadays.'

Michael realised his full attention was now required, and turned to face the priest.

'I know this may sound a bit odd to you, Michael, but do you have any idea how few boys of character, real character, there are about these days? Boys one might count upon to continue God's holy work into the next generation? Needless to say, it's the times. These are not good times, and the character of the young people can only reflect that. But occasionally a boy comes along who is different to the rest. Who exhibits the intelligence, spirit, and strength of character one is always seeking in a boy. I believe you have those qualities.'

Michael could not suppress his surprise. 'Me? Do you really think so?'

'I know it. And that is why I am inviting you to be one of my altar boys.'

'An altar boy...'

'I know it may come as a surprise, as you're a bit younger than some, but I am asking you to consider it. There are some hours of training involved, naturally, but I think we could both find those easily enough. And then there are the hours you would need to commit to the service of altar boy itself. You'll need some time to think and talk it over with your parents. I've already spoken to them, and they seem more than happy for you to undertake it. But I want to know what you think yourself.'

'I... well Father... I don't know what to say.'

'I know it's quite unexpected, and you've been ill and have to make up for lost time at school, but if you want to do this, you can.'

'Thank you, Father.'

Michael didn't know what else to say. He knew it was an honour to be asked. But it was also true that he had to catch up on schoolwork with the end of year tests coming up, and then there was sport, and friends, and all the rest. He also knew, however, that he could not pass up the offer.

'Think it over and let me know. More tea? Another biscuit?'

'No thank you, Father.'

'Admirably abstemious. It's probably time you got back back to class anyway.'

'Yes, Father. Thank you for the tea.'

'Oh, and here, take this.' He swivelled around to his bookshelves and located a volume which he handed to Michael: *The Child's Compendium of Greek Mythology.* 'You might find it interesting reading. My mother gave it to me when I was your age, and I did. It kept me captivated in fact.'

'But Father, I can't borrow something that precious.'

'Of course you can. It's just sitting on my shelf. What use are books if they're not read? I know you'll take care of it.'

Michael looked down at the perfectly kept old hardbacked book in his hands. 'Thank you. I shall return it in two weeks, Father.'

'This isn't the public library, Michael. The end of the holidays will be perfectly all right. Goodbye now.'

He shook Michael's hand, and Mrs King escorted him out the front door. Walking away, he marvelled at how life played such tricks. He had arrived in near mortal fear, and now was walking away whistling, his head filled with his altar duties to come, along with stray thoughts of a couple who stood close together in snow. It almost seemed, too, that he had found a friend. Someone he could talk to about all the things he wanted to talk about. How unexpected, he thought, that that person should be his parish priest.

When he spoke with his parents that evening, they all agreed he should grasp such an opportunity, and his father telephoned Father Quinlan the following day. It was settled that his training would begin in the holidays.

The school break-up came, and Michael went home to seven whole weeks of freedom. He enjoyed the Christmas holidays more with each passing year. He had also become accustomed to their rhythm. At first the weeks extended to the horizon of time. The period up to Christmas was the best, with the prospect of presents and festivities, and the "Back To School" advertisements still very distant. Then came the interlude between Christmas and New Year, followed by the two-week family beach holiday down at Victor Harbour. And then, yes, those dreaded ads would begin, and school itself not long after.

For now though he was free to hang about the house reading, or muck around with Robert at his place. Well, almost free. There would be his training with Father Quinlan, and he had agreed to play tennis for the parish, which meant practice on Thursdays and playing on Saturdays, but first he was going on another country trip with his father. He had asked to go, and although both of his parents expressed doubts about whether he was up to it, in the end all agreed a change of scene and fresh country air couldn't help but do him good.

'We all need a little adventure too, I suppose,' his mother had said, in support of Michael's request, and his father had finally nodded assent.

* * *

May could have sworn the P.M.G. boy smirked as he handed her the telegram. She already knew its single word, and waited until he left the shop before she opened it and read: “TONIGHT”. The leer the boy tossed her back through the window as he walked to his bicycle made her wish she lived in a bigger town.

May had long accepted she was in some crucial respects different to other young women in the Hill. Most of them would not have the secret part to their lives that she did, she was certain of that. She seemed to like different things too; or, put another way, didn’t like a lot of the things that they did. The chatter they went on with, about the ratbags who drove them around town in their hot-rods, their wedding day dreams and the recipes they had snipped from *Women’s Weekly,* did not interest her. She wasn’t sure what did interest her, but she knew what didn’t.

‘Bob, do you mind if I leave a bit early today?’

‘Something special on?’ he called back from the lab. ‘Then you’ll need to put something special on, won’t you.’ Before she could respond he poked his head out the door and winked. ‘Church social?’

‘Something like that.’

He grinned and went back into the lab. They both knew she was no churchgoer. He sensed her plans were quite different, even if he had no real idea about what they were. What she planned to do that evening would probably surprise him a good deal if he ever asked, and if she ever told him. But he had the sense not to ask, and one had to admire that in a man. He knew he was lucky to have found occasional favour with a young woman, and left it at that. For her part, she liked a realist, and he was one. Their silent understanding made her feel more like a mature woman. At other times though, she felt herself little more than a trollop in a mining town.

The bitumen felt good beneath the tyres. It had been an easy run so far. Not too hot either, considering. There’d even been a bit of rain out here, a blush of green on the red earth.

‘How far now, dad?’

‘Less than a hundred miles.’

They'd be there by six. Sign in, take Michael down to dinner, tuck him into bed by 8.30. He always fell straight to sleep and was a very deep sleeper, never even stirring. Children, they got the best sleep of their lives when they hardly even needed it. But then they probably did need it, with all that growth. But sometimes when his worries were so bad he couldn't sleep properly for weeks on end, he found himself of all things jealous of his own son, who could go down so far, so deep, for so long, sleep through the night and wake happy and untroubled.

Patrick's sources of worry were many, but reduced in essence to money and May. May Netley: he didn't think of her by name often, especially in full. It was usually about how she looked at him, how she smelled, felt in his arms. Thinking her name now prompted anticipation. Yet that name had robbed him of so much sleep and peace of mind. When he awoke at three in the morning with it resounding in his mental echo chamber, he would lie there torturing himself, asking what was he doing, why was he bearing this incalculable risk for a single night every few weeks? And how was it that she had so quickly become one of the precious things that sustained him, like Margaret's warmth in bed as he neared sleep, or Michael's perfect seriousness about almost everything? Where had it been written down that he would one day need May, and what would he do if it ended? There could never be anyone to replace her: he wouldn't embark on anything like this again, it was madness. But it had happened, by accident, by chance, magic even, and now she was part of his life. To think it had all started with a packet of Bex. A smile across the counter had become a ten-minute conversation, had become a drink that night. Before he knew it they were in his car, the buttons her of dress parting.

He wondered if Margaret sensed it. He could never conceal anything from her. Probably at least she wondered why he went to Confession up in town sometimes, at the Cathedral. He always contrived some plausible reason, but one day she might put two and two together, connect the city Confession to the country trip he had just returned from. Or could she simply not imagine that there might be a sin he needed to confess, but not to his own parish priest who knew him, whom he would have to speak to and look in the eye? Or did she suspect nothing, trusting him? He trusted her. She would never betray him: she just wouldn't. He knew that made what he was doing all the more unfair, but there was nothing to be done about it now: he knew he couldn't stop himself.

Margaret. A good woman, a good wife, and he was betraying her. What would she say, feel, if she ever really did find out? What would it mean for the three of them? The destruction of their family? It should not of course, not logically. Not for someone only seen for one night every few weeks, surely. But he knew it would. Inevitably. All would be lost. Strangely enough, family was part of the reason why he liked to bring Michael on these trips, even though he knew it had to constitute something of a risk. With Michael along, for one thing the family was still there with him, even if what he was doing was so wrong, and placing it all at risk. The morning after seeing May he would have breakfast with Michael and they would drive on to the next town, and somehow all would feel right enough in his world again, even if it wasn't. He would tell himself that provided no one knew, his existence was safe. And no one would ever know. He never breathed a word, May was discreet and lived far away, and the only other person who would ever know was a stranger sworn to the secrecy of the Confessional box.

He did feel guilt. No matter how he might rationalise his need for it, he was betraying Margaret by habitually committing the sin of adultery. Also, he was not making good Confessions, because he knew the sin would continue as long as May would. The price: risking eternal damnation in Hell. If there was such a place. If there was a Devil, and a God. Really, he didn't know. No one did. What happened when you died, no one knew. But he was born a Catholic and lived a Catholic, and that was that.

'Dad?'

Michael's voice brought him back to the wheel.

'Yes?'

'Do you like Mr Kennedy?'

'I think he'll make a fine president.'

'He's a Catholic, isn't he.'

'He is.'

'What does "sworn in" mean?'

'That's when the president or prime minister, or whatever, takes an oath before God to do their best in their new job.'

'But do they really have to swear when they do it?'

Patrick smiled. 'It's a different kind of swearing son.'

Patrick's eye tracked a milestone. Ninety to go. She would have the telegram in her pocket. She kept them all, and had shown him her collection. All with that same single word. She loved that about them, she said. Only the dates changed.

'And what does Communist conspiracy mean dad?'

'Michael...'

'Please. I just want to know dad. We've got plenty of time out here. Please?'

Patrick flicked a cigarette from the pack, lit up, fixed it into the corner of his mouth, and inhaled.

'I just don't think you need to know things like that yet.'

'But I do, dad. I do need that.'

Patrick exhaled a jet of smoke that whisped about the car's interior.

'Well... all right. I'll try to explain.'

'Thanks, dad.'

'Now, there are some people in this world, in Russia and China mainly, who don't like the way we do things here in Australia. They want to change everything, take away people's freedom to live as they want to, take away their freedom to vote, to speak their minds and run their businesses. They want everyone to be the same, think the same, get paid the same. They are what we call Communists. Now, conspiracy... well, a conspiracy is like a secret agreement, a plot, to do something bad. Right now there's lots of people who think that Communists are plotting, conspiring, to take over our government, our country, and make everyone slaves to the way they think. Do you understand?'

'Sort of, I think.' The boy was quiet a moment. 'But is it so bad if everyone gets paid the same? Wouldn't that stop people from being jealous, and stealing and things like that?'

'That's the idea of it, what we call the theory of it, of Communism. But in practice it doesn't work. The Communist countries have just taken away people's rights and not given them anything back except a hard life.'

'Do you think there's a Communist conspiracy here in Australia dad?'

'I don't know. Probably not. But it hasn't hurt Ming too much to make people think it.'

'You mean Mr Menzies?'

‘Yes. Ming. Pig iron Bob.’

‘Why do you say it hasn’t hurt him?’

‘Because he’s made people think there’s a real Communist conspiracy, they’ve voted for him and kept him as prime minister to protect them from it. Understand?’

‘I think so.’

It didn’t matter much if he didn’t. He would, soon enough. At least he was quiet now. But then came the next question, which Patrick might have so easily predicted.

‘And what about... licentious abomination, dad?’

‘For that one you really will have wait to a while.’

‘But dad...’

‘I’m sorry son.’

‘Please.’

‘No, son.’

‘How long will I have to wait?’

‘A few years.’

‘Years! Why?’

‘Because that’s just how it is.’

‘But dad...’

‘No more on that one now, Michael.’

Michael didn’t ask again. He knew far better than to push things too far, which, Patrick knew, was the smart part of him.

He always enjoyed dinner at the hotel. They sat at a table with a white table cloth, and a waitress dressed in black would come around to take their orders and bring their meals. There were potted plants and ornamental urns, and a radiogram in the corner playing piano music. The menu was printed on a gilt-edged card with the hotel’s monogram at the top. Michael always ordered the same thing, chicken noodle soup followed by grilled chops. His father drank two glasses of wine, and didn’t bother him with eating all his vegetables provided he made an effort: there were different rules away. For sweets there was bread and butter pudding or chocolate cake, while his father had his cheese and

greens. They ate at a leisurely pace, his father finishing with a cup of coffee, while he was allowed a hot chocolate. Then they would take a short stroll before going back to their room to bed.

The hotel had recently been refurbished, with a wing of new motel units attached to the original stone structure. Michael had asked his father if they could ask for one of the motel rooms, and it turned out that because of bookings there was no choice anyway. Michael liked the feel of the room with its walls gleaming with newness, soft beds and its own bathroom with a shower recess and shiny taps. The room had air conditioning too, tingly chilly after a hot day on the road. It all felt space age after their usual accommodations upstairs in the original part of the building, with the lace curtains, washstand in the corner and bathroom down the corridor. They were also able to park the car right outside the room too, so getting their luggage in and out was much easier.

When they returned, Michael put on his pyjamas, brushed his teeth and climbed into bed. He took out *The Child's Compendium of Greek Mythology*. Father Quinlan had been right, the myths were enthralling. He was reading about Theseus and the Minotaur, a young man so brave that he went down alone into a dark tunnel deep underground and faced the monster that had devoured many people, and terrorised all of Crete. He had looked Crete up in his atlas before leaving home. It made the story easier to picture. He had also found some illustrations of the ruins of Knossos, with beautiful restored pictures of Cretan women, bullfighting, and frolicking blue dolphins. Meanwhile his father sat in the corner doing what he always did after dinner, reading *The Advertiser*. He could spend hours on it, every word. The Letters to the Editor, Births and Deaths, Lost and Found, Odd Spot. He even read Max Fatchen's funny little poems.

'Michael, time to sleep now.'

'Just one more page please, dad?'

'It must be good. What is it?'

He showed the book. 'Father Quinlan loaned it to me. It was his when he was a boy.'

'That was kind of him.'

His father went back to the paper for another minute or two, then looked up again. 'All right, time gentlemen.'

Michael closed the book and his father switched off his bedside light.

'Goodnight, son.'

Michael felt his kiss on his cheek.

'Goodnight, dad.'

He closed his eyes and waited for the waves of sleep, the rolling swells that rocked you until you drifted away. He found he was quite tired, and let the waves take him. In a minute or two he would be far gone. He drifted.

But then there was a noise, and it jarred him back. Opening his eyes he saw his father. He must have dropped something. A shoe, taking it off for bed. Michael's eyes were closing again when a thought struck him. His father didn't look like he was getting ready for bed. He had changed, but not into his pyjamas. He was dressed in his smart casuals, and he didn't look like he was taking his shoes off, but putting them on. Was he going out? His father had never done that before, gone out and left him alone in the room.

Michael took in a breath to speak, but then something, he did not know what, stopped him. Whatever it was, it urged him to remain silent. Instead, he shut his eyes. He could feel his father's gaze on him then, probably wondering if the fall of the shoe had woken him. A moment later he heard movement again, and half opening a eye saw his father pulling on his sports jacket. He went into the bathroom, and Michael heard him brushing his teeth. Then the sound of the hair-oil bottle. Again, he was tempted to speak up. He felt like a spy. But he resisted the temptation, and closed his eyes again as his father stepped out of the bathroom.

There was a moment when he felt his father was quite close, probably looking down at him. Then he heard the low jangle of keys, and the motel room door eased open and closed. He opened his eyes and saw that it was true, his father had gone and left him. Then he heard the car door outside, and his father getting in.

Conflicting feelings coursed through him. One was that he was nine years old now, and if his father wanted to go out and play cards or whatever for an hour or two, why shouldn't he? But then, his father had never spoken of any friends in Broken Hill, so where was he going? More to the point, why hadn't he mentioned it? Surely he could have said something, if that was all there was to it. So what was going on? Where was he going? And why had he left him alone in a motel room hundreds of miles from home?

The engine started. He heard the grating of the gears as the car was put in reverse. In a few seconds his father would be gone. Michael leapt from the bed and grabbed his dressing gown. He waited until the car had turned and was starting to pull away before he opened the unit door. He left it unlatched and set off after the car at a sprint.

He emerged onto a lit street near the middle of town. Fortunately, there was no one on the pavement, and only a few cars on the street. He saw the Holden accelerating away. Even though he knew he could never keep up, he ran down the pavement, keeping his eyes fixed on the tail-lights. It came to a stop sign at an intersection, and his father waited as an old bomb rattled across. Then the Holden went one street further up, and turned left. It took Michael a minute or two to reach the corner his father had taken, and by the time he looked down the street, there was no sign of the car. There was however a sign saying "No Through Road", which meant the car had to be down there in the darkness somewhere, unless his father had turned off into a side-street.

Still not quite sure what he was doing, he ran down the side-street. He saw a man walking a dog coming towards him up the footpath, and there was nowhere for him to hide.

'Hello young fella,' the man said, apparently thinking nothing of seeing a nine-year old running down a dark side-street in his pyjamas at nine o'clock at night.

'Good evening,' Michael replied, and ran by.

He sprinted all the way down to the end of the street, but didn't see the Holden anywhere. Most of the houses were in darkness, abandoned-looking shacks with dusty, shabby yards. Behind a fence a large dog started barking furiously, hurling itself against the wire. He felt a surge of fear. Too much time had passed since he last saw the car, he wouldn't find it now.

He retraced his steps up the street to where the houses were lit and people obviously lived. There was a narrow cross-street, more a laneway, and he decided to take a quick look down it. If he didn't find the car there, he'd go back. He couldn't stay out for long. His father might only have popped out to get something, and already be on the way back to the hotel. What if he got there and found Michael gone? He might think someone had kidnapped him.

The cross-street was tree-lined, and almost pleasant in comparison to what he'd

just seen. It was a warm night, and the sound of music on the radio and laughter came from open windows and doorways. It felt like a neighbourhood you might visit to play cards, or have a drink with friends. But who were these friends his father had?

He saw it then, a little way up on the right, the dark outline of the Holden under the spreading branches of a tree. Peering about, he approached. It was parked in front of a neat fibro cottage. There was a low fence and a front gate, and he saw beds of flowers in the front yard. A rotary sprinkler watered a trimmed lawn. He saw a light on inside, but no sign of his father. Whose house was this? And if it was a cards night, where were the other men's cars? His father's was the only one.

He stopped in the shadows under the tree, for the first time fully aware of how nervous he was. He was doing something that he should not, and knew it. But then he couldn't escape the feeling his father was doing something he should not either. So what should he do? Knock on the door? Call out? Wait for him to come out? Or go back to the hotel and sleep? He didn't know. What he did know was that nothing about this felt right. He decided to wait, at least a few minutes. He sat by the tree trunk and drew his dressing gown around him. Its navy blue merged with the tree shadows, camouflaging him. The night air was blood-temperature but the sky was clear, the stars big and bright: soon, he knew, it would would start to get chilly.

He was startled by sudden laughter from inside the house, a woman's laugh, lilting and carefree. Was his father in there with a lady? How did he know a lady here? Who was she? And what did it mean that he was with her? He heard her laugh again, only this time he heard a man's laugh too, his father. There was no mistake about it then, his dad was in there with a woman. And he was spying, and it all felt wrong, very wrong.

Even though he was afraid, he found himself moving closer, stepping over the low front fence, and, staying in the shadows as much as possible, edging towards the house. He stepped onto the front verandah and crept to the window the laughter had come from. A sudden peal almost made him cry out, and he had to fight the urge to run. He crept forward, however, crouching under the window. As he did, he was struck by the memory that not long ago he had been doing the same thing under his parents' bedroom window. Only this time he knew that if he peeked inside he wouldn't see what he had seen there. There were none of those sounds of pain that weren't really pain coming from in here.

He waited, taking in deep breaths. Oddly enough, he smelled something beautiful in the moment he paused, the sweet waft of a night desert flower perhaps. He had read about them once, though couldn't remember where. Then he took in a very deep breath, lifted his head and stole a glance into the room.

It was lamp-lit, with a muted golden light. He saw his father there, half turned away. He didn't have any clothes on, and was sitting on a large bed, drinking a glass of wine with a woman who also was naked. She was young and dark-haired, and looked quite pretty. Then, in the moment of Michael looking, his father leaned forward and kissed the woman on the lips.

Michael stifled a gasp. He stepped back a pace or two, bumping a potted plant on a stand, which fell over with thump.

'What's that?' he heard his father's voice say.

Michael leapt from the verandah down into the shadows, sprinted across the lawn through the sprinkler, hurdled the fence and darted up the street, keeping to the dark areas under the trees.

'Hey!' his father's voice shouted from the house. 'Hey you!'

Michael ran all the way up the narrow street, and turned towards the lights of the main street. Minutes later he was back in bed. The Holden pulled up outside soon after. He heard his father get out, unlock the room door and come in. He could feel him looking down at him as he feigned sleep, feel his heavy breath. He wondered if his own breathing was heavy too, and if his father could tell. Then, a terrible thought. His dressing gown at the foot of the bed, damp from the sprinkler. If his father touched it, he would know. Yet he couldn't risk opening his eyes to see what he was doing.

'Sleep well, son,' his father whispered.

He heard his father go back outside, start the car and go. Michael picked up his dressing gown, as if trying to tell whether it had felt his father's touch. He was still awake when his father returned two hours later and undressed in the dark, his breath heavy with the sour smell of wine.

Next thing he was being shaken. 'Wake up Michael.'

'What time is it, dad?'

'It's after nine. We've both overslept. Get up, son.'

Michael got of bed, changed into a clean shirt and shorts and put on his sandals. Strips of morning sun through the curtains burned the carpet.

'Funny you slept in too,' his father said.

'I must have been very tired. It was a big drive yesterday.'

His father looked at him but didn't reply as he buttoned his shirt and knotted his tie. 'Pack your things. We've got to have some breakfast, I've got a peanut to meet, and then we've got to get on the frog and toad for home.'

Michael read in the car while his father had his meeting. He came out complaining of a headache, and before they left town he pulled up for a packet of Bex. Even though his father had stopped the car a little way down the street from the chemist shop, craning his neck Michael could see the woman who served his father, and even though it was silenced by the plate-glass and the distance, could hear her laugh.

Margaret sat on the couch with a cup of tea. Father Quinlan was in the armchair, picking at the platter of cheese and biscuits she had set down on the occasional table. The wall clock said 3.17. It was one of those cooler days that sometimes turned up in early-mid December, and Margaret had drawn the venetians halfway up letting air and light in, and they could see out into the front garden. The roses looked lovely, though the brush pines needed a trim, and Patrick would certainly have to get the mower onto that lawn when he got back.

'Jackson Pollock,' Father Quinlan said.

'Yes, that's him. Do you know the sorts of paintings he did?'

'Yes. Extraordinary.'

She wasn't sure whether he meant a good or bad extraordinary, but sensed it was the former. Still, she proceeded with caution.

'I've never seen anything like them before.'

'No,' he said, 'no one had.'

Still unclear on his stance, she sought firmer turf. 'More tea, Father?'

'Thank you. And then I'd better continue on my rounds.'

She poured and he added his milk and sugar. You couldn't help but notice the way

he did things. A sizeable man with a delicate cup held delicately, yet with assurance. Everything about him was assured. It made you think he had never experienced doubt of any kind.

'So they're back tomorrow.'

'Yes, Father.'

'You must miss them terribly when they go.'

'Always.'

'Patrick has to go a fair bit so it seems.'

'Every couple of months, sometimes more often.'

'Business going well?'

'It has its ups and downs. But enough for us to keep body and soul together.'

He sipped the tea and looked out the window. 'The roses really are lovely.'

'Thank you, Father.'

'The trick is the pruning of course.'

'I prune very hard, Father.'

'That's the ticket, so do I.' He took another dry biscuit and cube of cheese. 'Are you happy, Margaret?'

The question came from so far out of the blue that she didn't even have time to feel surprise. 'Happy, Father?'

'Yes.'

'I suppose I am. It's a difficult question though.'

'Is it?'

'There's lots of things that come into it I mean.'

'Yes, there are. But in the end you're either happy or you're not. So are you Margaret?'

'Yes, Father,' she said. 'I am.'

'Things are going well with the family then.'

'In what regard, Father?'

'Well, Michael seems like a good boy. Bright. Inquisitive.'

'Oh yes, he is.'

'And Patrick. Things are good?'

'How do you mean, Father?'

'Between the two of you.'

His directness rendered her unable to respond at first.

'Margaret, I believe that it is important for a priest to know the real needs of his parishioners, and not just hear the platitudes, so he can help however he can. Of course there will be areas you may well feel are too personal to talk about, but if there's anything you'd like to talk to me about, anything at all, don't hesitate. The sacred institution of marriage is under such pressure nowadays. It needs help. I want to help any way I can.'

'Thank you, Father.'

'That's what I'm here for.'

'Thank you.'

'So, is there anything you'd like to mention?'

'Not really, Father. Everything's fine.'

'That's good to hear, Margaret.'

She hesitated then, looking down into her teacup.

'Except...'It came out of her abruptly then, unstoppered. 'Sometimes I think I don't give him enough of what he needs, physically. I love him so much, Father. But he can cut himself off at times, isolate himself, and then I can't reach him at all.'

'And you blame yourself for it.'

'I do.'

'Of course you do. When we give and give of ourselves to another and fear it's still not enough... well, these are normal human feelings of inadequacy. Patrick probably feels them too about you. The two of you should perhaps discuss it all openly between you. These things are better dealt with directly, or problems and worries can fester.'

'That is true, Father.'

'Sometimes it can help to get away for a few days, just the two of you.'

'Do you think so, Father?'

'Away from house and home, work, responsibilities and the like, yes. Then you two could tell each other exactly how you feel. And enjoy being together again.'

The image of the two of them in a hotel room away for a few days discussing their marriage daunted her.

‘I suppose we might really need something like that.’

‘Many married people do. No, correction, in my experience most married people do. Things build up, or else they get swept under the carpet. Misunderstandings occur, resentment sets in. Before you know it you’ve got real problems. Better to get away and talk it through first.’

‘Yes, Father,’ she said. ‘You’re right. But it could be a bit of a problem with Michael.’

‘How?’

‘What he’ll do while we’re away.’

‘You don’t have family or friends who could mind him?’

‘Only my sister down in Mount Gambier. We could perhaps send him down there for a few days. He might like that of course. I’d have to write and ask her.’

‘I’m sure something could be worked out. But first things first. You should have a proper talk with Patrick when he comes back, and take it from there.’

‘I will, Father. I’ll do that.’

‘It’s just, I’d hate to see any problems occurring in one of the parish’s finest families.’

‘Thank you, Father.’

‘It comes with the collar, Margaret.’

After he left she sat in silence in the fullness of afternoon, surprised at how she had managed to be so open with a person she scarcely knew, even if he was her parish priest, and how she wished she could be as open with her own husband. The fact that she had not been in such a long time vexed her.

Down to the last fifty miles. Late, but they would be home tonight. There was an art to driving distances. Concentrate, keep your wits about you, don’t let your thoughts wander too much. They would pass One Tree Hill, Bolivar, then the suburbs would light up around them. He had meant to stop and telephone Margaret about their arrival time, but decided instead to keep going and get there. She would come outside in her dressing gown

as he drove up the driveway. They would tuck Michael in then slip into bed and he would kiss her on the neck where she liked it.

The boy had fallen asleep as soon as night fell. Well, it was a long time on the road for a young bloke. He slept curled up, hair flicking in the breeze through the window. His face was so young and open that Patrick dismissed all of his dark concerns. Impossible it could have been him at May’s window. And the fact that his dressing gown had felt damp? He must have splashed some water on it while brushing his teeth, simple as that.

THE MOCKERY OF CROCKERY

‘Father, why did the Roman soldiers make Jesus wear the crown of thorns?’ Father Quinlan had been helping Michael with his new surplice and soutane when a picture on the vestry wall had caught his eye.

‘They were mocking him, Michael. As King of the Jews.’

‘What is a Jew, Father?’

‘One of the Chosen People.’

‘Are there still Jews today?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where are they?’

‘All around the world. Though many of them live in Israel, in the Holy Land.’

‘Do we have Jews in Adelaide?’

‘Some. Not that many though.’

‘How can you tell them from other people?’

‘You can’t really. It’s more their customs and religion, their beliefs.’

‘Sister Mary Grace told us that Jews have dark skin and hooked noses.’

‘Did she?’

‘Yes. But then I said that Jesus is a Jew, and he doesn’t look like that in any of the holy pictures.’

‘And what did she say?’

‘She said I had to remember that Jesus was also the Son of God, and that’s why he looked different.’

The priest tried to conceal a smile.

‘But then I said, what about the other apostles? They aren’t sons of God and most of them don’t look like that in holy pictures either. Except for Judas.’

‘What did she say then?’

‘That I asked too many questions and to sit down.’

The smile became impossible to conceal. ‘Well you had asked quite a few.’

‘But at least I have the answer, that Jews can look like anyone else. Thank you, Father.’

‘Now come over here and look at yourself in the mirror.’

Michael was astonished at the transformation. With his vestments on he looked like a real altar boy. ‘Gee whiz.’

‘You could say that.’

‘Father, do you mind me asking questions?’

‘No. Because that is how we learn.’

‘That’s what I thought. But most people don’t seem to want to answer them.’

‘Well, people don’t always have time.’

‘But even when I choose my time, it’s still hard to get answers to some questions.’

‘For instance?’

‘A few weeks ago you spoke about... licentious... abominations... in a sermon. I’ve asked my parents what that means, but they won’t tell me.’

‘It means sinful acts between people, Michael. Impure acts.’

‘Impure...’

‘Yes. Do you know what that means?’

‘I... think so, Father. Things you shouldn’t be doing, with your body.’

‘Then you have your meaning. You can also look up words you don’t know in the dictionary. Do you have one, and know how to use it?’

‘We do at home. But I wasn’t sure I was allowed to do that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Some words are bad words.’

‘There’s no word you can’t look up the meaning of. It’s not words themselves that are bad, but how and why they’re used.’

‘Yes Father. Thank you, Father.’

‘Now, do your vestments feel comfortable?’

‘They do.’

'Are you ready to begin?'

'Yes, Father. But could I ask one more question?'

'Go ahead.'

'What if I've done something that might be a sin, but I don't know whether it is or not?'

'Then you should ask your Confessor.'

'May I ask you now?'

'If it's a matter for the Confessional then it's best left for the confessional box.'

'Yes, Father. I'll do that.'

'Good. Now let's begin.'

He led the way out of the vestry onto the altar.

Patrick walked through the low dunes to the beach carrying the umbrella and picnic basket. Michael followed in his Speedos, beach towel around his neck, and Margaret, with the blanket. The day was still and hot, only a ripple of swell on the sea. Being a Saturday there were quite a few down on the beach, but nothing like the crowds they got over at the Bay. Patrick hated crowds. Their beach, with its family groups dotted along its length, was about as much as he could take.

They reached their spot and Patrick set up the umbrella and helped Margaret spread the blanket. He shed his shorts and singlet, walked out into the water and swam straight out, as he always did. He would swim for perhaps half a mile before stopping and treading water, and then swim straight back in. It didn't matter that there might be sharks out there and that people had been taken in the past, it was just what he did, his swim. He would repeat it before they left in the late afternoon, and spend the rest of the time dozing.

Margaret was under the umbrella with the transistor playing when he got back.

'Where's Michael?' he asked, towelling off.

'Gone for an ice cream with Terry and some other boys from school.' She rolled over and turned the music down and sat up. 'Patrick, did anything happen while you were away?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, Michael has been a little bit quiet since he came back from the trip.'

'Has he? I hadn't noticed.'

'You didn't get angry with him or anything like that?'

'No. He was well behaved as he always is. Perhaps it's just being on holidays. Change of routine.'

'Yes. Perhaps that's it,' she said.

He saw that she was still in her sun dress. 'Not going in?'

'In a minute.'

He finished drying and settled beside her. 'Not a bad sort of a day.'

She started unbuttoning the front of her dress. Her hesitancy drew his attention, and she became self-conscious. When the dress parted and fell it revealed a two-piece bathing costume.

'Do you like it?' she asked.

'Green suits you.'

'So you don't.'

'I didn't say that.'

'It's too revealing.'

'Not at all. I like it. It suits you.'

He looked out to sea, shielding his eyes with his hand. Infants played with buckets and spades down by the water, and boys pelted each other with handfuls of sand in the shallows. There was a yacht not far offshore, and a freighter on the horizon.

'I bought it a while ago. I didn't know what you'd think.'

'I like you to look attractive. You know that.'

The midday news had come on. The announcer mentioned something that Mr Menzies had said.

'Are you interested in that yacht?' she asked.

'What?'

'I asked, are you interested in that yacht out there? Because that's where you're looking.'

'I'm just looking at the sea.'

'Yes. And not at me.'

'I like your bathers, Margaret.'

'You do think they're too revealing.'

'No I don't.'

'Yes, you do.'

'I like them. You look lovely.'

'I look horrible. Cheap and fat and horrible.'

He didn't reply. The news came to an end, and there was a succession of gong tones, followed by Nat King Cole.

'I'd like to listen to AN. The cricket.'

He changed the station. Gulls swooped in and scrimmaged over some chips an infant girl had tossed onto the sand. A commentator eulogised the delivery stride of a bowler.

'I'm pregnant.'

It took a moment to register.

'What?'

'I saw the doctor while you were away. I'm pregnant.'

She took off her sunglasses, and the green of her eyes ran.

'I... Margaret...'

'I haven't been able to sleep. I didn't know how to tell you... what to say.'

He put his arms around her and gave her a kiss.

'That's wonderful.'

'You're happy?'

'Of course I am. It'll be good for us to have another child. And a brother or sister for Michael too.'

'I thought you'd say we can't afford it.'

'We'll just have to, won't we.'

'I've been in anguish, Patrick.'

'Everything's all right. When is it due?'

'June the doctor thinks.'

'A winter baby. Our bonnie winter baby.'

'Smile, Patrick. Please smile.'

'I am.'

'That's just your lips.'

'No, I'm smiling. I really am. I'm happy. We'll manage. We will. Everything'll be all right.'

She put her arms around him and kissed him, longer than he might have liked in public. But when she drew her lips from the kiss, he knew there was more. She was different today.

'I want us to go away together.'

'We're going down to Victor in three weeks time,' he said.

'Just the two of us, I mean. Some time alone.'

Her eyes said it had to happen. It was only a matter of when.

'Well, after Michael goes back to school then,' he said. 'We could take a van down at Goolwa, or else stay in the hotel at Robe, the one where we had our honeymoon.'

Michael flopped glistening wet onto his towel.

'Did you get your ice cream?' his mother asked.

'Yes thanks mum.'

He lay on his back and stared up at the sky. There was only one cloud on his horizon, and by day's end it would be dispelled. There would still be the niggling concern about his mother, what it could mean if she knew. One thing was certain, he must not tell her. He knew in his marrow that she would not be happy to hear about his father kissing the lady in Broken Hill.

He turned around to look at her, and saw the unexpected costume.

'Mum... your bathers.'

'Do you like them?'

The word licentious came into his head, now that he had the dictionary meaning. But he knew it wasn't exactly applicable here, and that besides, no matter what he mustn't say it.

'Yes mum, I love green.'

'We have some news, darling. You're going to have a little brother or sister. I'm going to have a baby.'

There were shouts over the air. A wicket had fallen.

Michael watched as a penitent came out from the booth, then rose from the kneeler and entered. Closing the door, he was in the shadow realm of the Confessional. It might have been a place of reassurance: here was deliverance, where sinners regained the right to take the Holy Eucharist, and to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. What a gift God had given Man! A second chance, a way to redeem himself. And not just one second chance, but an unlimited number, because God in his infinite Wisdom knew Man was capable of endless sin, just as His own mercy was boundless.

But Michael had never found the Confessional reassuring. After so long without proper material for a confession, he now believed he may have committed a serious sin, but one which would require a difficult explanation. During the days since their return, he had attempted to put it all out of his mind, to be cheerful, normal. But his life was no longer normal.

He heard the muffled sounds of the priest speaking with the penitent in the booth on the far side. He could tell from the tone that the priest was dispensing penance, and would soon slide back the wooden hatch to Michael's booth, and he would see the shadowed outline of Father Quinlan's face behind the wire grille. It was a moment he had put out of his mind, but now it was here. That was how it was with moments you dreaded though, they always came.

The hatch slid open.

'Bless me Father for I have sinned. It is one week since my last Confession Father, and I accuse myself of...'

'Yes, my son?'

'Well, Father.'

'Yes?'

'Of... spying on my dad.'

'Spying?' the priest said. 'How?'

'You see, Father, it's quite a long story. And I'm not actually sure it's a sin. Though it probably is.'

'It's troubling you, my son.'

'Yes it is, Father.'

'Then it's best that you tell it all, no matter how long it takes. There is no rushing in the Confessional.'

'Thank you, Father. Well, this week I went on a country trip with my dad. He goes away quite a lot, for work, and when I can, I go with him. Anyway, when we were staying in our hotel in Broken Hill, I realised my dad wasn't going to bed after he tucked me in. He was getting ready to go out. I thought he was probably going to play cards or something, but then he's never left me alone like that before in a hotel. Not that I know of anyway.'

The idea that it might have happened before only hit home in that moment, and it halted him.

'Go on please.'

'Anyway, when he left, I didn't want to be there alone. I wanted to know where he was going. So I followed the car.'

'How?'

'I ran after it, Father.'

'What, in your pyjamas you mean?'

'And dressing gown. Yes, Father.'

'What happened then?'

'He didn't go very far. And I managed to find the car down a sidestreet.'

'And was it there that you... spied on him?'

'Yes, Father. The car was parked outside a house, and I heard his voice inside, so I peeked in a window. And he was in there, with a lady I'd never seen before, sitting on a bed. They were drinking wine.'

Michael felt the hesitation from the other side.

'How were they dressed, my son?'

'They had nothing on, Father.'

A silence followed.

'What happened next?'

'They... kissed. And I bumped into something, and my dad heard and came to the window, but I ran away, all the way back to the hotel.'

'Did he realise it was you there?'

'I don't think so.'

'And then?'

'He came back soon after, checked on me in my bed, and went back out and came back later. And that's what happened, Father.'

'I see.'

'Did I commit a sin?'

'Did your father ask you anything about this?'

'No, Father.'

'Then you haven't lied. Did he ask you never to leave your bed in the hotel?'

'No. I don't think he ever expected me to.'

'So it's not a sin of disobedience. But you shouldn't have gone out because you knew your parents would not have approved of you running around the streets alone at night like that, so to that degree it is a sin of disobedience. For your penance say three Three Hail Marys. And I absolve you of your sin in the name of the Father, The Son and the Holy Ghost. Go in peace my son.'

As Michael said his penance in the pews, he felt his first true sin washed away. Walking through the church entrance and down the front steps into the late afternoon sun and smelling the ocean, he felt lighter than he had in memory. He had sinned, and God had forgiven.

The big display windows of the Rundle Street department stores were wreathed with tinsel and lit up for the Christmas season, the pavements abustle with shoppers from the Beehive Corner all the way down to Miss Gladys Sym Choon's. The halls of the Myer Emporium rang cheerily with trade, and children wriggled in the queue for their minute on the knee of Father Christmas in The Magic Cave at John Martin's. Choristers carolled on street corners, the season's cheer punctured only by cries of newsboys and the odd man ranting that the end that was nigh.

Michael strode the pavement beside his mother carrying parcels and bags, some containing the presents that he knew he would receive in his stocking. He had suspected

the worst about Father Christmas for some time, and during the previous Christmas his parents had not been able to convince him back to the comfort of the nursery myth. He preferred the truth, and besides, now he could tell his parents exactly what he wanted.

'Remember to walk on the outside of me, Michael,' his mother said.

She always said that. He had looked it up in a book and found it came from mediaeval times, with the man chivalrously walking in the position where the contents of chamber pots were more likely to fall when tossed from the windows above. Curious that it had persisted into the age of sewerage though, Michael thought.

He had only just moved to the outside of her when his mother grabbed his arm and pulled him to a halt, spat on her lacy little handkerchief and rubbed it hard on a spot on his face. She had done this since he was a toddler, and it greatly embarrassed him now. Perhaps she was doing it almost as a reminder of the past.

'Mum...!' he protested, squirming against her grip, but she kept it up until satisfied the last vestige of grime was gone.

Their final stop was John Martin's, and on the way out of the store his mother dropped in to the footwear section to speak to a man who worked there, whom she sometimes saw on trips up to town. Cec was tall but stooped with a sad horse face and wispy thin grey-brown hair. He was more than attentive to her, and laughed a lot at nothing much in particular, it seemed to Michael. One day Margaret told him that she had been engaged to Cec before she met Patrick, and had broken it off. The poor man had been heartbroken so it seemed, and never married, and she liked to maintain the friendship. This time they only spoke for a minute or so, while Michael idled among the racks of shoes. He saw them kiss their usual parting peck, but after Broken Hill nothing seemed quite the same any more, and he looked away.

His mother must have sensed something, but waited until they got off the bus and began the long walk home.

'Is everything all right, Michael?'

'Yes, mum.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Are the parcels too heavy?'

‘No, mum.’

‘Is anything troubling you?’

‘No.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘No, mum.’

They walked on in silence through the subdivision. A dog shot across their path. In the shaggy rye grass of a vacant lot, a man whacked at something with a rake.

‘Did anything happen while you were away to upset you? Did your father get angry, or anything like that?’

‘No, mum.’

‘But something did happen while you were away, didn’t it. I know it did.’

‘Mum, nothing happened.’

He felt himself sliding. Here he was, lying to his mother. Sin was seeking him out, slithering and curling itself around him. Working on him for his past sins of pride of believing he wasn’t a sinner.

‘Michael.’ She drew him to a halt. They were standing on the concrete pathway that ran through a small park, only two hundred yards from home. His father would be back from work soon. Dinner would be cooking, the TV on, everything normal. If only his mother would leave him be. But that was a fond hope. When she bent down and looked him in the eye he saw the disquiet deep in hers. ‘What happened, Michael?’

‘Nothing mum.’

‘You know it’s a sin to lie. You know that. Do you want to commit sin?’

‘No, mum. I don’t.’

‘Then tell me.’

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

‘There is. I know there is. What is it?’

Her face came so close to his that their noses touched. It would have been funny in different circumstances.

‘It’s nothing, mum. Really. Just that... well... dad went out one night, that’s all. While we were away.’

‘Out? What... you mean, after you’d gone to bed?’

‘Yes.’

‘He just went out and left you?’

Her rising tone made him hesitate. ‘Yes.’

‘Alone in the hotel room, asleep?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you woke up and found him gone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Were you scared?’

‘A little bit.’

‘But you went back to sleep.’

‘Yes, eventually.’

His mother stood up straight, took in a deep breath, and looked away.

‘Did you ask him where he went?’

‘I didn’t even tell him I knew he’d gone.’

‘Why not?’

‘I just didn’t. We got up next morning and left.’

‘Where was this?’

‘In Broken Hill.’

‘So this is what’s been bothering you. I’ll speak with him when we get home.’

‘No, Mum, please, please don’t.’

‘Michael, it’s not right to leave you asleep and alone like that. What if he does it again? I’ll speak with him.’

‘But mum...’

‘Don’t argue.’

She took his hand and started walking him towards home, but then abruptly stopped again and bent down towards him.

‘Is that all, Michael?’

‘Yes, mum.’

‘Nothing more?’

‘No, nothing.’

‘So you don’t know where he went or who he saw?’

He thought quickly. 'How could I, mum?'

She stared hard at him, into him, so it felt.

'So you really don't know anything more, Michael.'

He shook his head. 'No, mum. That's all I know.'

She stared at him a moment longer, then relaxed what he realised was a very tight grip on his arm, and they started walking towards home lugging their bags of presents.

His father stopped off at the pub and didn't get home until well after six. By then, like the dinner, his mother was on a low simmer. When his father came through the back door wearing his beery grin he was met with a stare and an accusation.

'Why did you leave Michael alone in the hotel room in Broken Hill?'

'What?'

'Why did you?'

'What makes you think I did?'

'Michael told me. Oh, don't worry, he hasn't been telling tales. I had to drag it out of him. But he woke up when you went out that night. A boy alone in a strange hotel, with his father gone heaven knows where!'

'I only went out for a little while.'

'But you did go.'

'For an hour or two... I had to go and meet a peanut.'

'At night?'

'He... wanted me to meet his wife too, sell her on the idea. She wears the pants.'

Margaret turned her back and stirred the vegetables. Patrick looked down at Michael who sat shamefaced at the kitchen table.

'What was his name?' Margaret asked, still turned away.

'Bert,' Patrick said, after the slightest hesitation.

'Bert who?'

'Margaret, I'm not going to be cross-examined. I've told you what happened. I know I shouldn't have left Michael but I thought he'd be all right for a little while. I didn't realise he'd woken up.' His father shot another glance his way, and Michael withered.

‘Why didn’t you tell Michael you were going out?’

‘I thought he might be worried and not sleep. And he always sleeps so well. He never wakes up.’

‘Bert who?’ Margaret repeated.

‘I don’t bloody remember. I was introduced to him in a pub.’

‘But still you found his address. And don’t swear.’

‘We met up at an RSL.’

‘What was his wife’s name?’

‘What is this, Margaret?’

‘Just tell me her name!’

‘Rose. All right? Rose! Enough now Margaret. Enough.’

She wheeled about and flung the wooden spoon down hard at his feet. ‘Don’t you ever, ever, ever do that again!’

She stalked out and locked herself in the bedroom.

Michael had never seen his parents exchange words anything like this, and the darkness that had decended upon the room as they were spoken, frightened him more than ever before.

He shared a monosyllabic meal with his father, and Patrick set a plate of food outside the bedroom door and knocked.

‘Dinner,’ he said.

There was no response.

‘Why didn’t you bloody tell me you woke up?’ Patrick said as they did the washing up.

‘I... didn’t know how to, Dad.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

It was the first blasphemy Michael had ever heard uttered. Now he knew its power. Worse, he knew the reason for it. His mother had not believed his father’s story. Worst of all, he himself knew that it was a lie.

His father slept the night on the couch and his mother did not leave the bedroom until near lunchtime the next day. Michael could only wonder what would happen if she ever found out who his father really did see that night in Broken Hill.

‘Remember to glide, glide,’ Father Quinlan said. ‘Good altar boys don’t walk, they glide.’

‘Yes, Father.’

‘You have to imagine yourself as an actor on a stage, and that I am the director.’

They were alone in the half-lit church. It was his third session with Father Quinlan in three days, and although Michael felt hot and a bit breathless in his surplice and soutane, he knew he was mastering the training.

‘Now kneel, please, and we’ll practise with the bells. First, I genuflect.’

Michael rang the bells, echoing through the empty church.

‘I rise and hold up the sacred host.’

Michael rang the bells again.

‘I genuflect again.’

Michael rang the bells a third time.

‘Good. Now come over here, I want you to practise pouring the wine through my fingers into the chalice.

They used water for the practice session, and a few morsels of broken-up bread.

‘Remember you must pour very carefully. That once it is consecrated, every single speck of the Sacred Host is the body and blood of Our Lord.’

‘Yes, Father.’

Michael poured as well as his nervous fingers would allow, not spilling any.

‘Bene,’ the priest announced.

A few minutes later Father Quinlan led the way back into the vestry, where he helped Michael out of his vestments.

‘How is the book coming along?’ he asked.

‘The stories are really exciting, Father, for such old ones.’

‘What’s been your favourite so far?’

‘The Minotaur.’

‘Gripping, isn’t it. It was my favourite too when I was your age.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. It’s a very rich allegory.’

‘What is an allegory, Father?’

‘It’s something which seems to be about one thing, but is really about another. In this case, Theseus is us, everyone, going deep into himself to confront... well, what, do you think?’

‘The beast?’

‘Yes, but the beast represents something. What might it be?’

‘I... don’t know Father.’

‘It is fear, Michael. It’s a story about how we all must face our deepest fears alone, and defeat them. Remarkable to think it comes down to us from thousands of years ago. How some things are with us always, never changing.’

‘Yes, Father. It is remarkable.’

The priest took the boy’s vestments and hung them on a hanger on a rack.

‘I believe you’re ready for the real thing now Michael. Sunday Mass.’

‘This Sunday, Father?’

‘Yes. Your parents will be very proud.’

‘Thank you, Father. They will be.’

‘Joe Parker and Terry Fitzhenry will also be assisting, so they’ll help you through it. Who knows, perhaps you’ll even be ready for Midnight Mass.’

‘You mean Christmas Eve... next week?’

‘I do.’

Michael had only even been allowed to attend it for the first time the previous year. It had always possessed the mystery and allure of something his parents went off to in the middle of the night while he stayed with the neighbours. When they returned his father would carry him half-asleep back home to bed, and he would fall back to sleep to the sounds of them sitting up drinking with friends.

‘Thank you, Father.’

‘Welcome to our holy brotherhood, Michael.’

Margaret could not quite credit it. She was standing in her own kitchen, washing the breakfast dishes. Patrick was at work. She would make the beds and do the laundry. It was a day like any other, except it was almost Christmas, and so later she would wrap presents. Then she would have a cup of tea, and make Michael's lunch. This was her life. Only now she felt it was someone else's life, the life of a woman who was pregnant and didn't know if she wanted to be, to a man she felt she could no longer trust, and wasn't certain she even loved any more.

That woman could not be her. But she was. The crockery mocked her. The tea mugs, Patrick's, Michael's, hers: the blue, the red and the green, all mocked. The sheets in the linen press mocked her, and of course the wedding photographs on the living room wall did. The holiday snaps resting in their albums mocked too. The toys in Michael's room certainly did. She knew each toy, when and where it had been bought, and how much he had loved and played with it. *The Three Bears* and *The Three Pigs* mocked. *Peter Rabbit* mocked. Who was this woman, everything around her asked, who had allowed her life to become such a charade? Everything was a memento of a better time, a relic of past happiness. And now she was having another baby: there would be more photographs, more toys, more everything, it would all sweep over her in a tidal wave of babydom, in a few short months.

She washed Michael's breakfast bowl, scouring a stubborn flake of Weet-bix. The bowl had a picture of a racing car on it, not that he had the remotest interest in racing cars. He ate from it every day and she washed it every day. She put it in the dish rack and watched the suds drip down onto the steel sink-top, counting the drips, breaths. The day was big and blue and sunny in the window, outside was another world but she couldn't reach it. Her ears rang and she felt dizzy. She couldn't eat: she said it was morning sickness but knew it was different. The baby would come. There was no way it could be stopped, that was out of the question, beyond any mention. She would swell and grow tired, brace herself, and give birth. Patrick would make a fuss. Friends would send cards and teddy bears and make a fuss. Everyone would. And then she would be left alone in the house with it, screaming.

Who were they, Bert and Rose of Broken Hill? Did they exist? What did he do

that night? Who did he need to see so badly that he left his young son alone asleep in a hotel room? She had been through Patrick's pockets, drawers, letters. Nothing. But that was Patrick, so accomplished at giving nothing away. More likely she would leave a sign that she had been looking, and he would know she didn't trust him. He probably knew already.

She took the broom from its place by the refrigerator and swept the floor. She put the dust into the pan and emptied it into the kitchen tidy beneath the blue-coloured picture of the Blessed Virgin. She wanted to be sick.

'Mum.' Michael was coming down the hall. 'I've finished my training. I'm going to serve at Mass on Sunday, and perhaps even at Midnight Mass next week.'

'Are you darling? That's wonderful.' She had to summon up more enthusiasm, any enthusiasm. 'Very wonderful.'

'What's for lunch, mum?'

'Baked beans on toast.'

She cut two slices of bread and put them under the griller, took the butter from the fridge and looked for the can opener.

'What about you, mum, what are you having?'

She could not tell him how much the very concept of food disgusted her at that moment.

'I've already had something.'

She answered the telephone. 'Bob's Your Chemist.' She heard a clunk down the line. It was the sound made when a button was pressed in a public booth, and the coins dropped. 'Bob's Your Chemist,' she repeated.

'May.'

'Patrick?'

It was the last voice she might have expected to hear.

'May, I'm calling because... because there's been some trouble.'

Everything in his voice confirmed it.

'What kind of trouble?'

'I... I think my son might have followed me last time I was there, that he was the one at the window. I think he might know.'

'No... but, how could that be?'

'Impossible, I know. But I think that's what happened.'

'Have you spoken to him?'

'No. Not about exactly what he knows. And I won't.'

'Has he spoken to anyone else?'

'I don't think so. Not to his mother anyway, not everything anyway. Nor to anyone else that I know of. He's a bright boy.'

Panic seized her then. What was Patrick going to say now? That it was too dangerous to go on, that he couldn't risk seeing her any more, that it was over?

'It's good to hear your voice. I don't think we've ever spoken on the telephone before,' she said, and smiled, hoping that somehow he could feel it down the line.

He didn't reply. The seconds ran. She feared his next word.

'I love you,' he said. He had never said that. Anything like it.

'I love you too, Patrick.'

'I don't want this to end.'

'I don't either. Neither of us does. So it won't.'

'What if it has to though?'

'We can't let that happen. We can't.'

'I need to see you. But I can't, not for weeks. I shouldn't have brought him with me. I shouldn't have. It was stupid.'

'No it wasn't. You wanted to spend time with him. He's your son.'

'But it was still stupid. I just never thought... never dreamed it possible that...'

The telephonist came onto the line.

'Thirty seconds. Do you wish to extend?'

The tautness of her tone made May wonder how much she had overheard.

'No, thank you,' Patrick said.

More seconds passed.

'I could come and live in Adelaide,' May said.

'What?'

‘I want to get out of here anyway.’

He didn’t speak.

‘I could rent a flat,’ she said quickly. ‘We could see each other more often. It’d be easier to keep secret too. People know too much in places like this.’

‘When would this be, do you think?’

‘Soon.’

‘I’ll call again.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Merry Christmas, darling.’

The line went dead. As she replaced the receiver, she realised she had thought about it for years but had made her mind up in a moment.

* * *

Michael served at Midnight Mass, and his parents watched with unabashed pride as the Bishop passed by. Father Quinlan told them he made a very fine altar boy. The next morning Michael unwrapped a chemistry set, a model aeroplane kit, a diving mask and snorkel, a chess set and a new beach towel.

New Year came and went. They had a big party in the back yard and friends came and drank too much, sang badly and kissed wetly at midnight. Michael was allowed to see in the New Year, sang *Auld Lang Syne* and felt grown up. He saw his mother asleep in a chair with wine spilling from her glass. He had never seen her drink too much, but New Year’s Eve had its own rules, he knew.

After New Year came Victor Harbour. His father swore his swearing as he loaded up the car, and they set off down South Road. They rented the shack halfway between town and the Bluff. Michael was allowed to take Robert along, and they spent the days swimming in the Crystal Pool off Granite Island, climbing cliffs and exploring caves. They caught salmon trout off the Screwpile Jetty that Margaret cleaned and cooked for tea. They burnt, blistered, peeled and burnt again in the January sun. Patrick said it was good

for them, would toughen up their skin. At night they played cards and Scrabble around the kitchen table, the door and windows wide open to let the breeze in. The Victor holiday was a highpoint of his year, when Michael could do as he pleased. His parents enjoyed it as well. Although he noticed they were quieter than usual, it did feel like the tensions of previous weeks had subsided. They laughed together, held hands on the beach. But still something was not right. His father was smoking more, and his mother was too. He had rarely seen her smoke, and the sight of it now unsettled him.

Too soon Victor had been and gone. They were sitting in the living room back at home and the Back To School ads had started on TV. He did not see a lot of them, however, because the smoke in the living room was getting so thick that often he skipped his favourite TV shows, and read in his room.

The housekeeper answered the door with a look of recognition.

‘Michael. Come to see Father?’

‘Yes, Mrs King. Is he home?’

‘He’s just finished his lunch and he’s in his study doing his correspondence.’

‘I wouldn’t want to disturb him.’

‘That’s all right. I’m sure he’ll be pleased to see you.’

She led him down the hallway and knocked on the study door. ‘Father, it’s Michael Carlow come to see you.’

Father Quinlan appeared in the doorway, smiling. ‘Come in, come in, take a seat.’ Mrs King nodded and took her leave.

‘Been having a good holiday?’

‘Yes Father.’

‘How was Victor?’

‘Lots of fun, thank you.’

‘Got lots of sun too, I see. A good healthy tan.’

‘I brought your book back, Father.’

‘Thank you. Did you finish it?’

‘Yes. It was wonderful. Zeus, Apollo, Diana, the Medusa, the Minotaur...’

‘Would you like some tea?’

‘Thank you very much, Father, that would be lovely.’

The priest walked to the door, opened it and called out a request to Mrs King to bring tea and biscuits.

‘So how are your mother and father?’

‘Both well, Father.’

‘Excellent. And so now it’s back to school.’

‘Yes, Father.’

Father Quinlan smiled at the tone in the boy’s voice. ‘There’ll be more holidays, Michael.’

‘Mum and dad are having another holiday soon. By themselves.’

‘I see. And where are they going?’

‘Down to Robe.’

‘And what will you do while they’re away?’

‘I don’t know yet. But they’ll work something out.’

‘Perhaps you can stay with a friend’s family, or such.’

‘Yes. Perhaps.’

Father Quinlan leant in a little closer. His breath smelled fresh, of peppermint. He was such a strong man, Michael felt, yet kindly and caring.

‘I have another book for you Michael.’

‘Thank you Father.’

He took it from the shelf and handed it to Michael. Slender and new-looking, it was titled *A Holy Calling?*. The dust jacket showed a boy sitting on a crowded bus with a narrow shaft of light beaming down from the Holy Ghost above in heaven, touching him on the forehead. The beam touched none of the other passengers, and they seemed unaware of it. The boy was very aware though, his eyes turned heavenward.

‘Vocational guidance, Michael. Do you understand what that means?’

‘Not exactly, Father.’

‘It means help with choosing what you will do with your life. Have you thought about what you would like to do yet, when you grow up?‘

‘Yes. A doctor. Or a geologist.’

‘A geologist? Why that?’

‘Because you get to go to faraway places by yourself, and find minerals that Australia needs.’

‘Well, yes, that could be a fine calling. Or medicine, that goes without saying. Or else, perhaps, God may be calling you to join Him in His holy work as a member of His priesthood, or holy brotherhood. This book helps you to work out if you’re getting that call from God.’

‘Does the call come at my age, Father?’

‘It can come at any age.’

‘How old were you when you received yours?’

‘Oh, mine came late. I was twenty-five.’

‘And how did you know?’

‘Well, there’s something of a story to that. I come from Melbourne. When I finished school my parents sent me to university, and when I got my degree and finished there, my father wanted me to enter the family business, which is insurance. But I wanted to become a teacher, which he didn’t like very much.

‘We talked about it, discussed it. Argued, I have to admit. I decided to think about it, and take a trip around Australia before deciding what to do. I thumbed lifts, took buses, even rode a motorbike for a while. I worked as a cook, a shearer, on a fishing boat up in Queensland. I sold bus tickets in Brisbane and prospected in the Territory. After a year or so I stopped for a while in Darwin. The war had only been over a few years then, and there was plenty of work rebuilding from the bombing by the Japs. I met a lovely girl there, and we were going to get married. I saw my future mapping itself out before me. Building a house, raising a family...’

The housekeeper knocked with the tray of tea and biscuits.

‘Thank you, Mrs King.’

She set the pot, milk and cups and the plate of biscuits, down on the side table. ‘You’re welcome, Father. Do you need anything else?’

‘No, that’s all for now, thank you.’

Father Quinlan waited until she had gone before resuming his story. ‘I knew my

parents would be disappointed at my decision, and me not entering the business after all, but I couldn't help that. You only get one go at life. But then, something else happened. It happened when I got a job doing building repairs on a church, and one day found myself standing alone in front of the altar that I was mending. The altarpiece was very humble and unadorned, in fact the whole church was like that. A place of God, not gold, you might say. And it was as I was thinking to myself that the true places of God were like that, humble ones, when a voice said quite clearly, almost as if it were spoken out loud: "Come and join me in my work." I knew I was either going mad - or else it was the voice of God.' He poured the tea. 'Add your own milk and sugar if you would Michael.'

'Yes, and what happened then, Father?'

'Well, I had to tell the girl I was engaged to. And it broke her heart, I'm very sorry to say. My parents were hit even harder. Not only wasn't I going into the family business, I was choosing a completely different path altogether. My father was so hurt he wouldn't speak to me, and didn't for years. But I had my calling, with no doubt whatsoever in my mind. I enrolled in a seminary and joined the priesthood, and here I am today.'

'Does your father speak to you now?'

'He did, just before he died. My mother accepted it more easily. I stay with her when I go back to Melbourne.'

'Do you have brothers and sisters?'

'No. Like you I'm an only child.'

Michael hesitated, but then saw no reason not to say it. 'I'm not going to be that for much longer, Father. Mum's going to have a baby.'

'Wonderful! Your parents must be delighted.'

'Oh yes, they are Father.'

'Please do give them my congratulations.'

'I will.'

'I commend the book to you. Very modern in its thinking. Just have a read, and let me know what you think.'

'I will, thank you, Father.'

May had forgotten how hot Adelaide could get in January, in its own way almost as bad as the Hill. Her bag bulged with shopping, and as she entered the greengrocer's she felt perspiration trickle down the back of her dress. The sensation was not ladylike.

'Yes?' The young stallkeeper's tone merged the question into a welcoming grin. It was her third visit to the Central Market in the week or so since her arrival.

'Two pounds of potatoes, please. Half a cauliflower. And a slice of that watermelon.'

'Big slice or small slice?'

'This much, thank you,' she said, indicating with a generous width with her two forefingers.

He flashed her a cheeky look, and cut a big piece. 'That the lot? That'll be two and six then.'

'Thank you.'

She gave him a ten shilling note and he handed back the change and helped her put the purchases into her shopping bag.

'Good-day then,' she said, and went back out into the sunny glare. The hot north wind was picking up, and she tightened her headscarf. She hurried her step but her heel snagged in a pavement groove and she almost stumbled.

The flat was in a narrow street down near South Terrace, in a new block of four. Hers was upstairs, bedroom at the back, which was just as well with the heat. She had been sparing with what she had brought, and the two rooms looked spartan. There was the pair of threadbare green armchairs inherited from her parents, and the patterned rug and coffee table an aunt had insisted she take. Of a morning she drank her tea at the kitchen table from Saint Vincent de Paul, and after work she would sit there by the radio.

Patrick had so far come by on two occasions, directly after work, for an hour or so. It felt nowhere near enough, but she couldn't complain: at least she had him that much. He had helped her find a job, with a bootmaker over in Prospect, answering the phone and doing the accounts. The wages paid the rent and allowed her an indulgence or two, such as a telephone. It sat solid and black upon the kitchen table. Every once in a while it would ring, and at the other end would be Bob, her sister, or Patrick.

She wondered what she might do tonight. Go to a film, she thought; perhaps there was a foreign film on somewhere, a French one, or Italian. Down from the Hill on holidays once she had gone along to an Italian film, at a cinema tucked away down Unley Road. It was about a girl who had been sold by her mother to a carnival strongman, and even though the film was very different to anything she had seen before, its strangeness and the peculiar beauty of the girl had captivated her. The strongman was extremely harsh and cruel to the girl, but even when a much nicer man, a soft-hearted clown, had fallen in love with her, she still couldn't leave him. May recalled crying at the end, when the strongman finds out years later that she is dead, and realises too late how badly he had treated her. She couldn't remember the name of the film, but the name of the man who made it had stuck because he had become famous in the picture magazines, and because of the funny name she used in her head to remember his, "Flea-knee".

There might be another film like that on somewhere. If not this weekend, next perhaps. There would be plenty of time for her to go. She drew the blinds against the sun and unpacked the shopping. She took the cutting knife from the kitchen drawer and sliced the rind from the melon, shed her dress and sat in the kitchen chair in her slip, dining on the cool flesh. She switched on the radio and piano notes ran around the room as she spat out the pips. It was twenty past one on a Saturday afternoon and there was no one in the world to tell her what to do.

Michael walked home thinking about their talk. He was constantly surprised at how Father Quinlan treated him almost as an equal. An educated man, and him a nine year old boy. If only all adults were like him, able to talk with children, not down to them.

The book had disconcerted him though. He harboured no desire that he could tell to become a priest. Instead his heart had been set on either medicine or geology, with a slight leaning towards the latter. He did want to help sick people, but he didn't know how much of their suffering he could take. Rocks didn't feel pain or die. Rocks were stable, and undemanding. All you needed to do was tap them with a hammer and they split open, delivering up their riches for the good of mankind.

But the priesthood... he loved God and his Church, of course he did, but could not

picture himself in the black robes and white collar for the rest of his life, living alone in the presbytery, no matter how pleasant the interior and the gardens. He did not want to spend his life speaking with ladies at tea groups and writing sermons. And though he knew he was too young to know what it really meant, like Father Quinlan when he was a younger man, he wanted a home, a wife, children. That was odd, he knew it. He kept it to himself. Other boys of his age didn't like girls. It was expected that you didn't. But he did like girls, whenever he met one. He liked the way their eyes were and how they laughed. They were smart too.

All that meant there was a problem. Would Father Quinlan be put out if he returned the book but said nothing more about a holy vocation? Would he feel he had wasted his time, and end their chats and the lending of books? He would miss the grown-up conversation over tea and biscuits. But he couldn't agree to joining the priesthood just for that.

He sighed out loud. Why did everything have to be so complicated? And there was still the lady in Broken Hill, that part of the story not told to his mother, and the unhappiness that he felt between his parents, and this trip they were going to take alone together. Why did they need it, and where would he be while they were away?

He looked up at the sky. No, there was definitely no beam from heaven shining down on him. He had been chosen for many difficult things, but not that one, not yet anyway.

Margaret had half expected it anyway. Her sister had always been selfish, so why would she put herself out one iota now? Still, the words sat heavily on the page of the letter. *Not possible for Michael to come... John doing building work on the house... too many commitments... very sorry, but...*

She put the letter down, and a sob welled. There was no purpose to it anyway. What would they learn from going away together that they didn't already know? They were in trouble. It was as obvious as the spaces between Patrick's words. There didn't seem to be any way out. Marriage guidance? She doubted it. It wasn't guidance they needed, but a marriage.

Patrick wasn't the same. Something had shifted. He worked longer hours, came home later, left earlier. Often she couldn't get him at the office and no one seemed to know where he was. Where once he would always have telephoned home at least once during the day, now the phone sat in silence all day long. She missed his calls and she didn't: missed him and didn't. But it was all going, she felt, crumpling. Was there another woman? Was that what the episode in Broken Hill had been about, another woman?

Her intuition said the woman would be quite pretty. She would have taste in clothes and shoes. She would be well groomed and turned out. Margaret imagined she was from a good family, though she didn't know why such a woman would be involved with a married man, but women did so, not only in books and films, but in real life. In Broken Hill she would have to be the wife of a doctor or teacher. She might be a teacher herself. Or a nursing sister. But still, she couldn't quite complete the mental picture of the woman in Broken Hill. Perhaps there was no woman after all.

Or, was she somewhere else, even in Adelaide? That would explain the lateness, the lack of calls. The notion settled hard in her stomach. No, please God, no. But she felt it. What if he really did have a woman, in Adelaide, in a little flat somewhere? And go to her with flowers, and they would drink and go to bed and he would run his hands over her and they would make love in a way the two of them hadn't in years. Her suspicions crystallised: Patrick had a woman in a flat. That had to be the explanation for his behaviour.

But, then, if so, what was she to do about it? Follow him, spy, prove it? What could be achieved by doing that? The real problem was not that he was doing it, but that he had needed to, and that he had gone ahead with something so monstrous, and so dangerous to them all. That said it all, said he didn't love her any more because he was willing to risk her, risk Michael, risk everything to be in bed with another woman. That declared a lack of love, a lack of respect, and even worse, a lack of belief in them as a couple, and a family. It said he didn't care what happened to the three of them provided he got what he wanted. More than anything, it said it was over between them and with no way back, no matter what Father Quinlan might say about holidays away together, or marriage guidance, or such. The foundations had shifted, the pillars rotted from inside, unseen.

She got up to make a pot of coffee. Late afternoon sun slanted through the

venetians lighting the flowers in the print of the settee. The floorboards glowed from the wax and polish of the morning. She saw his hand on the woman's thigh, whoever she was. She saw Patrick kissing his girl, and tasted his beer. She saw him on top of her and her eyes in his. She put the coffee into the pot. One, two, three teaspoons. She didn't drink coffee often; only when the mood came. The kettle whistled on the stove. She turned off the gas and poured the boiling water in, let the coffee steam rush up and hit her. Then she was sitting on the floor, her legs so white against the green linoleum. Why didn't he love her any more? She let it all out then, the rage in a howl and tears, felt herself collapse to the floor and lie there with her insides cramping.

Michael's face was above her. She saw a book topple from his fingers onto the linoleum.

'Mum, mum,' he was saying, 'are you all right?'

'Michael?'

Her voice appeared to come from the far end of the house.

'I'll phone the doctor, mum.'

'No, darling,' she was saying, 'no darling, there's no need. It's nothing. I just...'

'What, mum?'

His small face was inches from hers.

'I just needed a little lie down.'

'On the kitchen floor?'

'I'm all right, darling. The baby, I get tired. Now help me up please.'

He extended his hand and she got up, unsteadily at first. The world rotated alarmingly.

'Are you sure you're all right, mum?'

'Yes, darling.'

The telephone rang.

'Leave it,' she said. She steadied herself with spread fingers on the servery. 'It'll probably be your father.'

'But mum...'

'I'll ring him back. I feel all right now. Please, don't worry about anything.'

'Yes mum,' he said with doubt.

'Promise?'

She ran a bath for Michael then went to the toilet to check. Everything seemed normal. She didn't know if she was relieved or not. She rang Patrick. The call had indeed been from him. He said he had a client to see and would be home late. She told him she would keep his dinner warm and set the receiver back in its cradle.

She poured the pot of lukewarm coffee down the sink. It was then she noticed the book that had fallen to the floor, and picked it up. It was about vocations in the priesthood. She was relieved when Michael told her over dinner that although he liked Father Quinlan, he was not keen on taking holy orders. The conversation felt like an important one to have, and besides, she was grateful for the distraction. And when it came down to it, she did not want a priest for a son: that would be like losing him.

He lay beside her in the twilight. Neither spoke until their breathing became more normal. He saw a tiny rash on her chin and wished with her sensitive skin that he could shave just before his visits, but that was not possible. He settled back onto the bed and slipped off the condom.

'I wish we didn't have to use those things,' she said. 'There are other other ways. I know my cycle.'

He nodded.

'Trust me I do.'

'I trust you.'

She got up to make the tea as she always did. She left the door open and in the living room window he could see the shadow flashes of a cars going up the street. A neon sign had lit up on the corner with South Terrace, a cold rose shading at the edge of the window. The bedside clock said seven. He could be home by eight at a push, get his story straight as he drove.

'Would you like a biscuit with it darling?' she called. 'I've got ginger snaps.'

'Thanks.'

'I've started shopping at the Central Market. I like the stalls the Italians and Greeks have. Do you like olives?'

'I don't know. Haven't had them often though.'

'I'll get us some next time. They're quite nice with Saos and cheese.'

She came back in still naked. She never put anything on after lovemaking, and even slept with nothing on. There were beaches not far out of town that people hardly ever went to. He told himself he would take her there one day.

'Kettle'll be boiled in a sec. I just wanted to see you.' She sat down on the bed and ran her hand across his chest. He reached his arm around her waist, and his fingers strayed. 'Not there,' she teased, 'you know what'll happen.'

'Perhaps I want it to.'

'You don't have time. It's late.'

'Is it?' He drew her closer.

'They have nice tomatoes at the Central Market too,' she said. 'And figs, fresh ones. Plump and soft. Do you like fresh figs?'

'I've never tried one.'

'And soon there'll be grapes, and apples and pears.'

He lay her carefully beside him.

'I love you, Patrick.'

'I love you too.'

On the drive home he thought up a client, a peanut named Max Kemp. He had a property in the Hills, at Ashton, grew apples and pears. He had all but decided to place an order, but then haggled for a discount. It wasn't company policy to offer discounts, he had told him, and before he knew it the peanut was on his feet walking away. Another bloody waste of time, he would say, sorry darling. He would eat dinner and in bed tell her he loved her, which he did, and their boy, and the baby she was expecting. He wondered though how many narrowly missed sales he could accrue before Margaret's suspicions were aroused.

As he pulled into the driveway Michael came running outside, his face white in the headlights, with the news that the doctor had been and an ambulance had taken Margaret up to hospital.

Neither spoke. Michael remembered scenes like it from television, the relatives in the corridor, waiting for the doctor. When the doctor came out of his mother's room he took his father aside and they spoke in whispers.

Michael followed his father back to the car and they were sitting in it before he told him that the doctor's opinion was that she would be all right, but would need to stay in hospital for a few days. The doctor had said he was hopeful that the baby would be all right as well.

'So is the baby really all right then, dad?'

'Of course, son. These blokes know their stuff.'

On the way home his father stopped the car at a shop and bought him a dandy, and Michael spooned the ice cream slowly with the little wooden spatula.

'When can we see mum?'

'Tomorrow, or the next day I suppose.' His father stopped then, as if he hadn't really considered that yet. 'I don't know, I think all we can do is wait for the doctor to call.'

The telephone rang the next day, and they made the trip back up to town. Michael felt overwhelming relief seeing his mother sitting up in bed and smiling when they walked into the ward. His father kissed her and she cried, and the next day they returned and took her home. Watching from the back seat as his father drove them down through Mile End, he experienced waves of relief that his mother seemed well again, but felt even better when she laughed happily at something his father said.

SEVENTY CIGARETTES

The world that spread away to the four compass points from the little church community by the sea, for the most part went unacknowledged. The people who genuflected in the aisles of Father Quinlan's church turned their gaze inwards, perhaps not always deep into their souls, but more often, as one might expect, towards their own needs and concerns.

The pages of *The Advertiser* and *The News,* and the reports on the radio and television, recounted hostilities in the Congo and Algeria, in Cuba and South Vietnam, and the Cold War manoeuvrings of the United States and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, but these little exercised the minds of parishioners. History could flap its arms and wring its hands all it liked, but the concerns of the parishioners were with other things, such as the cost of a beer or cigarettes, shoes, or a new line of cosmetics.

There was also the gossip, about a promotion for this man or that, or of a new hat upon the head of this or that woman, and there was scandal, in a fellow witnessed emerging unsteadily from an early opener, a cardigan worn too tightly about the bust by a woman, or the display of more than acceptable calf by her daughter. Most time of all was taken up in talk about the form of a West Torrens football player, or Les Favell with the cricket bat.

None of this should be surprising, as people the world over rarely see past their own igloo, mansion, hut or flat. When he was older, Michael would realise that myopia and apathy were only to be expected, but at this very young age he could not help being surprised that adults spoke so seldom about the distant places and events that so engaged him.

Nightly he would listen in to the world on his crystal set, school atlas propped open so that he could pinpoint each important location on a map. Not that merely hearing

about the conflicts of the Congolese and Vietnamese explained very much. Most of what he heard remained mysterious, encoded in terms like "megaton" and "politburo", and in odd-sounding names like Nasser and Kenyatta, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-Tung. Most of them ran past him as mere sounds, thwarting his desire to work out how they might fit into the great jigsaw of world and event.

As the year 1961 began, he listened in often to the news of the approaching inauguration of the new president of the United States, Mr Kennedy, the man whom his father had told him proudly was a Catholic. He started to listen more intently, straining at the edge of understanding of each new official pronouncement and statement, because every single grain of knowledge acquired was a small persuasion that he might one day grasp the world and its doings more as a whole.

More than anything else though, he listened to escape his own life, which had become more painful and difficult. News from the troubled farflung corners of the world, with their Iron Curtains and Warsaw Pacts, and some strange thing called a *coo-detar,* was in its own way comforting in its very distance from him, while the chill down the passage of his home betrayed their own cold war.

When he awoke on an autumn morning in late March, he saw the ear-piece of the crystal set dangling by his bed, and realised he must have listened later than usual the night before. In the same moment he realised it was Saturday, and that not only did he not have to go to school, but that a special treat awaited him. His father had promised to take him to the hobby shop up in Torrensville to buy the Hurricane fighter model kit he had been saving up for, and the realisation in turn raised the prospect of many more lost, contented hours of assembling, gluing, and applying the all-important transfers.

Being Saturday, the new day also meant a game of squash for his father, and after the hobby shop they would continue up Henley Beach Road to Ovingham, a sad-looking old suburb by the railway tracks, and the courts where for an hour his father would thrash a small black ball around the white box of squash. His father liked to say that squash was like chess, except that you were on the board yourself and all the pieces too. He always played the same opponent, a man called Len, a short and stout, barrel-chested fellow who nonetheless got around the court with deceptive ease, and who pushed him, or so he liked to joke, to within a beat of a heart attack. Michael knew his father would like him to take it

up too, when his health permitted, but for now he was left to sit in a plastic chair above the court and read while they played.

In winter after squash, his father might drop him off to play in the school football game, or else, as today, drive them straight home for lunch. Michael loved Saturday lunch. His father always prepared it, grilled bacon and tomatoes on toast, and a slice of well buttered toast and Glen Ewin jam from the tin.

He heard his father in the kitchen then, starting to make breakfast: as usual the day had begun before anyone but his father was ready for it. He lay in bed a moment more, mentally taking from the box and examining all the moulded plastic parts of the new model aircraft he would get today, calculating how satisfyingly difficult the Hurricane would be to assemble.

The priest sniffed the apricot. He remembered being taught about the origins of the word. Arabic, from Morocco. A delicacy, the texture and shading of a young woman's cheek, his tutor had added. They had left the tutorial room and were at the pub over the road, drinking pots of beer on the pavement while the trams rattled past down Lygon Street. How glad he had felt to be there, talking about apricots and the cheeks of young women over beers with a bunch of fellow students, and not a worker jammed in a tram, being transported out to dormitory suburbs. But would he too inevitably end up in Box Hill?

The study of English: what a privilege. Three years, a major. From Chaucer to Auden, Dickens to Dickinson. He had an aptitude, he recalled his tutor saying. His tutor had been a man not so much older than himself. He had published a book of poems, there had been a complimentary review in *The Age,* and the word was he was working on a novel. He had liked his tutor. Alan, that had been his name. A thin bloke of middle height who liked a beer. Controversially, he was a Communist. But Alan didn't care what people said: he was a poet.

'A pound of apricots, please.'

'Yes, get 'em while you can Father. Won't be round for too much longer, another year,' the shopkeeper said.

'And are the apples good?'

‘New season, just came in, Lenswood, the best.’

‘A pound of those too then please.’

Father Quinlan paid and stepped away from the stall. The Market was quiet for a Saturday. Oddly enough, on quiet days it reminded him of a church, with its shadowy interior, and the smells of the spices mingling into a kind of incense. Even the atmosphere, which was concentrated and intense, imbued it with a sense that more than simple commerce was going on within its walls.

He finished his shopping, and next there was the coffee place he liked, an Italian one tucked away in a far corner of the market. People said it made you feel like you were in Rome or Bologna, although he had never been to either, as much as he might have wished it. He sat at a small table and ordered the espresso coffee and the moist almond pastry dusted with castor sugar that comprised his weekly indulgence. As he waited for the coffee to come, the place started filling up with shoppers with stuffed bags and worn feet. There were one or two bearded varsity types too, as well as a fellow he had seen mentioned in the social pages, a European businessman who went about town with the Ern Malley fellow, Max Harris.

His order arrived, and he alternated sips with nibbles on the pastry. His eye was drawn by someone coming in, a pretty young woman who took a table on the far side of the cafe. She slipped off her light topcoat and he glimpsed a snug, brightly patterned frock beneath. It didn’t take Einstein to guess she was meeting a man. There was something cinematic in the way her eyes scanned the cafe too, and watched the window onto the street, as Deborah Kerr might for her lover.

She ordered and drank a coffee, but no one came. Then she appeared to notice something in the window, snatched up her coat and paid at the counter, and was out the door. He peered out into the window where she had been watching, and saw her going up to a man. They smiled and started walking away side by side. It was a scene which could have happened anywhere around the world, on the streets of any city, but what made it remarkable to his eyes was that the man was Patrick Carlow.

Perhaps it was a continuation of his film notion, he didn’t know, but Father Quinlan decided to follow them. The day was warm with bright sun, and the glare cloaked him. He kept his distance down Gouger Street, pausing to peer in shop windows, and

when they turned left off and began threading their way through the alleys of workingmen's terrace houses, he was behind them, if well back. He did not know what he might hope to achieve through such behaviour, but it did not stop him continuing with it.

At one point the couple paused by a stobie pole, and he saw Patrick look up and down the street. He might have spotted him too, if not for a parked truck. Father Quinlan held his breath as Patrick took the woman in his arms, and kissed her. They remained suspended there before his eyes, under the black electrical wires that sprouted from the pole, outside a sombre little terrace house, their lips together and arms tight about each other.

The image shook him, not only because of the audaciousness of the adulterers kissing on a street in the middle of Adelaide in broad daylight. More than that, what disturbed him was the primal nature of the kiss itself, the obvious abandonment of the woman to Patrick's arms, to her fate, to whatever will be will be, and his ease in taking her, possessing her, almost as if she were part of him. The sight was as exhilarating as it was shocking. Until that moment he would never have thought that Patrick had it in him to take a woman as boldly and brazenly as that.

At length the single shape divided into two, and they continued walking up the street, but much faster now. He knew what that meant, and had to quicken his step to keep up, tricky to do while maintaining distance. A minute or two later they turned off into a new-looking block of flats, where he presumed she lived. By the time he reached there, head down and stride quickened to walk straight by, there was no sign of them. They were by now inside her flat.

He tried not to think about what would happen next, and hurried his pace even more, striding to the end of the street where it met South Terrace, and the parklands began. He crossed the road and walked agitated beneath the gum trees to a park bench. As he sat, his mind was filled with questions, and fancies. Was she the woman from Broken Hill whom Michael had mentioned in confession - or was she just possibly another woman entirely? Could it be that somehow Patrick had a string of pretty young women he was bedding? What would a young woman find attractive in a middle-aged man like Patrick, especially if she happened to be aware that he was a married Catholic? But the attraction was plainly there: he had seen more than enough to know that.

In spite of himself, his thoughts returned to the flat. He could not shut out thoughts of the kisses, entangled limbs and sweat, all of it. *Lady Chatterly's Lover* might be banned by the Index, but that did not mean that as a young student he had not read it, even if he had confessed it later. Nor did it mean he himself had not taken a girl to bed, and done with her what he had confessed to his parish priest, much to the old man's exasperation that the pleasures of the flesh never seemed to lose their allure, even after young Catholics had been fully prepared for the temptations they would face through the flesh. There was also Diane, the girl he almost married in Darwin, and their nights and afternoons together. He knew well enough what was going on in that flat, not a hundred yards from where he sat: it was with him still, and his own arousal at the memory shamed him where he sat. The emerald pattern of the girl's frock as she took off her topcoat in the cafe, her youthful clear-eyed beauty, and her look of expectation as she watched in the window for her lover, these stayed with him too.

He needed to take and to hold someone, for himself. He felt it then more powerfully than ever before. The confusion of his sexual feelings, he knew, came down in the end to one thing: he wanted to enjoy the pleasures that lovers found together. What else really mattered, after all? An oath of celibacy, what did that count against the sexual urge, the life urge? But he could not even hold another person, or even worse, be held. Who was there he could hold, and who could hold him? Nobody but his mother. To be held by another human being he would have to travel to Melbourne, and embrace his aged mother. It was absurd, inhuman, but there it was: there was no one else on the face of the earth but his mother, whom he could properly touch or be touched by. What sort of life was that? People desired touch. It was who they were, a basic need, and he ached for it.

He slipped his hand inside his trousers, and in a matter of moments all the need was washed from him, disappeared, gone. He felt spirtually weakened, but it was over. It was as if he had been held in the gaze of the Devil himself as he sat there, and now mercifully that gaze had moved on. He thanked God for His intercession, and prayed that his sin of desire for what he must not desire would be absolved quickly, and he would be purified. He looked around, felt the afternoon breeze on his face, saw the patterns the leaves above cast down onto the sullied earth.

He looked at his watch. There was plenty of time to stroll over to the cathedral in

Wakefield Street where he could make his confession and return home absolved, restored in the eyes of God. He got up and walked in the direction he had come from, back towards Gouger Street. Something suggested he walk back past the block: Patrick had been in there with her for less than half an hour, so there should be little or no risk of their crossing paths.

It turned out otherwise. As he made good speed up the street and peered towards the block of flats, he heard his name called.

'Father Quinlan!'

He saw Patrick up ahead, unlocking his car.

'Patrick, well, this is a surprise.'

'What brings you up this way, Father?'

He toyed with a story about visiting a former parishioner now living in the area, but thought better of it.

'I come to the Central Market most weekends to shop, and have a walk after.'

'Nice day for it, a walk.'

'And you, Patrick?'

'Client call.'

'Of course. Even on a Saturday, you poor fellow.'

'Mammon's work is never done.'

'Indeed no,' the priest agreed, and smiled.

'Well, see you at Mass tomorrow, Father.'

Patrick opened the car door. 'Do you need you a lift back down, Father, aren't you hearing Confession today?'

'No, there's a young priest from the next parish there today.'

'Good you get a day off from all us sinners now and then.'

'Although I'm actually off to the cathedral now, to make confession there.'

'What have you got to confess, Father?' Patrick grinned.

'Oh, we all have our sins. Would you like to come along with me perhaps?'

'No, thanks anyway, Father, but not today.'

Patrick got in, started the engine and drove off. As Father Quinlan waved him goodbye, he thought he noticed a flicker of a curtain from one of the upstairs flats.

Patrick drove at a measured speed down through the suburbs towards home. His story would be sufficient. He even had a letter from a peanut, if Margaret wanted to see it, that would do for a plausible story about where he'd been for an hour or so on a Saturday afternoon. She wouldn't ask anyway, she never did. The accusation was there in her eyes, though accusation did not fully describe what he saw in them. It was knowledge he saw, knowledge mingled with disappointment. There was also a remoteness to them too, which he knew sprang from the pain of the disappointment. How fitting, he thought, that eating from the tree of knowledge had been the downfall, the Original Sin of humanity. From knowledge came pain. Better to be ignorant and happy then, in the eyes of God?

His thoughts went to less abstract concerns. What was he to do, give up May? He loved her, in the way he felt a man loves a woman when he truly possesses her, body and mind, and she possessed him, in that every second he was not with her he was thinking about how to get back to her, contrive some circumstance that would demand his absence from the home or the office, so that for a few precious hours, even minutes, they could lie naked together in that little flat off South Terrace.

He jabbed the car lighter and felt for the packet in his pocket. Only a few left, so he would have to stop off for more. Saturdays and Sundays were mostly two packets, but week-days were three-packet plus days, seventies sometimes. She was like that to him, he realised, a cigarette, a need, something he could not live without, not now, nor even imagine himself being able to. There was nicotine in cigarettes, a drug of a sort, which smokers came to crave. May was like that to him. Something he could not live without now, but which he was only too aware could eventually destroy him.

Why May, though? In many regards, she was a woman like many others. Yes she was young and pretty, but there were many women like that, and you didn't spend your whole waking day wondering about them. But he did about May. It was as inexplicable as it was irrational, that was the strangest thing. The way he felt when he held her was something he could not explain. It was, he supposed, a bit like what got artists to paint and writers to write. If you could express it more easily than that, there wouldn't be any art or poetry, but there was, and there was May and how he felt about her, and he could not deny

that they were somehow the same thing. Did he love her though, really? Or was it only lust, the passion and excitement, and the great sinfulness of it all?

Sin. Oddly enough it was perfection in its own way, the freeing of desires that people suppressed every other moment when they weren't sinning. That fellow Freud would have said a few things about sin, he thought. He inhaled the smoke, and it tasted like sin. If only her waist were not so narrow and supple, her breasts his to be touched, her mouth so right. And how had she become the woman she was, working in a shop in Broken Hill? You couldn't learn things like that out of books. Who would ever have thought that of May, the girl behind the counter of the chemist's shop in Oxide Street, whom he had met so recently yet long ago, while asking for something as everyday as a packet of Bex? That this had all come from a chance meeting across a counter said that life must be more full of possibilities than we can ever imagine, and that on any day, at any given moment, you might meet a girl by accident in a shop or aboard a bus, and not long afterwards be making love to her. And next thing you can't imagine yourself living without her, and the course of your life be changed forever.

What was even more remarkable was that he had never had an affair, never even really thought of having one, until May. If someone had said to him a year or so before that he would be carrying on an adulterous liaison with a young woman who had moved all the way from Broken Hill to Adelaide to be with him, he would have thought it patent nonsense, an impossibility. And after all, he still loved Margaret, and there was Michael, and the baby coming, their family and its sanctity.

But he had done it. He had tasted the bittersweet of sin, and it had consumed him, had come to own him. Was it the work of the Devil, he had often wondered. Well, did the Devil make cigarettes, the "cancer sticks" he smoked? No, they were made by women in aprons and hair-nets in factories in America. Did the Devil make him go off and have sex with May, fall for May? No, that was simple human desire, passion, love, lust, call it what you will: a human need. It was something everyone craved, for their very wellbeing, if they faced up to the truth. So was it even really a sin, then? No, it wasn't, he decided then, not in his book anyway. If there was a sin it was with Margaret, pretending to be her lover when he no longer was, pretending to care in ways he didn't, and in his endless intricate deceptions to hide the truth from her, because it was easier and simpler to go on with the

charade of their marriage than it was to tell her what was really going on, and lose it all, perhaps even Michael and the baby in the process. That was the real sin, all the lying to Margaret, and that did taste bitter, as the day after seventy cigarettes.

He pulled up at a stop sign and waited while an old bloke in a Prefect puttered across the intersection. Other questions came as he let the brake go and accelerated off. What if he died with all these sins on his soul, fornication, lying, and all the rest of it? Because he made bad Confessions by repeating the sins after his absolutions, and if they were real sins they were all still with him, on him, staining his soul. Would God send him to Hell when he died? Yes he would, if he had sinned that was the way things worked, straight to Hell and Do Not Pass Go. But surely God must have had a May of His own, and know what it meant? He smiled at the notion, but it was true. God was omniscient and He would know how it felt to be May's lover and why he desired her and loved her and could not imagine letting her go. God would certainly know all that. And if God knew that, surely He would know that what they were doing together was good, not in any way evil, no matter what the Commandments might say. God in His heart would know otherwise, would know Patrick and May were doing no wrong, but that on the contrary what they did together was something of beauty. He did not recall such beauty ever with Margaret, not even at the very outset. This was different. It was, he thought, the stuff of life, and so a God of Love, of Beauty, of Joy, could not consign him to Hell for that. If, of course, that was the kind of god He truly was, a God of Love. Sometimes he did wonder about that, with some of the things that were written in the Bible.

He parked outside the little church on Marion Road, and went inside. As he began his confession, he realised he had been to the same priest on several occasions, and that the half deaf old man's mind was on other things as usual. Through the grille Patrick could hear the Sheffield Shield cricket broadcast leaking from the transistor earphone in the priest's other ear. South Australia was in trouble, two down for not many, and once again the old priest would have little interest in anything else.

When Pam Ahearne knocked at the door she told Margaret she had been in the area and thought she might just drop in. They had not seen each other in months, and there was a

lot to catch up on. Pam was happy and surprised to learn Margaret was pregnant, and had a surprise of her own. She had dropped Wal, the boyfriend she had taken up with after the death of her husband Bill, and instead had taken up with an Eye-tie.

'I didn't know you went for Continentals,' Margaret said.

'Neither did I, but let me tell you, I wouldn't swap Franco for quids. He's well-dressed, he has manners. He loves to spend money on me. He doesn't drink beer, only wine, and in moderation. He doesn't gamble or even snore in bed. No, he's the perfect gentleman.'

Pam did appear to Margaret as though she had been supping on the good sauce of life. She had her hair cut short and it suited her face, the dark fringe setting off her blue eyes. She was thinner but not too thin. She had come in dark slacks and a grey satin Chinese-style blouse, which together showed off how good her figure really was now. The contrast to the smocked and aproned housewife who used to look after old Bill, was striking.

'Has he got you cooking his spaghetti though?'

'Not on your life. Get this - Franco cooks! Lovely meals too. Veal, meatballs, fish, you name it he cooks it.'

'Is he a chef?'

'No! He sells real estate! He's a spiv. A dago most people would call him. But you can keep your Aussie blokes for all I care. They're mostly bloody useless anyway. Brewer's droop and fart in bed, pissed half the time, who needs 'em?'

They were drinking whisky sodas. With Patrick's continued absence that afternoon, Margaret considered herself within her rights to open the glass cabinet housing the spirits, normally out of bounds except for Christmas, baptisms and wakes. She re-poured Pam another nice big double, and a fair belt for herself.

'Christ, another one like the last and I'll be shickered well and truly,' Pam laughed as Margaret topped up her up with soda.

'Except of course for Patrick,' Pam said.

'What?'

'Those things I was saying about Aussie men. They don't apply to Patrick, you know that. But then he's not like other blokes, is he. He's a cut above, a big cut above.'

Margaret took a long draught from her glass, and settled it back down on the occasional table. 'Is he really,' she said more than asked, with a look at Pam.

'What, you two not having trouble are you?'

Margaret looked down. 'He's got another woman, Pam.'

'What, who? Patrick? No...'

'Yes he has,' Margaret said, 'he's got one.'

'But... really... he's not the type.'

'I don't know about types and I certainly don't know any more what type he is. All I know now is that he's the type who's cheating with another woman.'

'Are you sure? Got proof?'

'No. But I know he is. I know it.'

Pam eyed her over the rim of her whisky glass. 'So, if you don't have proof, what are you basing all this on?'

Margaret explained what Michael had told her.

'That's it?' Pam said.

'I know there's a lot of surmising I've added to it. But I know, I know he is, I just know it. I mean, he's hardly ever here nowadays, always off at work, seeing clients...'

'Well, you two are having another child. And isn't everyone saying these are difficult times, credit squeeze and all that. I mean, perhaps he's only trying to make a little more money.'

'I can see her in his eyes,' Margaret said, crying. 'That woman. That's how I know. I can see her, right there in his eyes.'

Pam said nothing for a moment, but took her hand. 'And haven't you been unwell, in hospital, and shouldn't you be avoiding bad things like whisky, and tears for that matter?'

'Yes, you're right,' Margaret said, looking up and managing a smile. 'Yes on all counts.'

'Patrick loves you. He always has. He's a good man and believe me they really don't grow on trees.' She drained her glass, and looked around. 'You know this is such a lovely room, with the trees outside and the sun coming in. I've just realised we've never sat in here.'

'No. Patrick prefers to sit in the kitchen.'

'Well this is a very pretty room,' Pam repeated.

'Pretty for you, all right,' Margaret said, in a sudden flush of anger. 'You get sex. You've got your spiv who buys you things and takes you out and shows you off to his Eye-tie mates. You've got excitement. Change. You've got a lovely figure.'

'Yes. And you're having a baby, and how touched are you, eh?' Pam reached out and took Margaret, gently sobbing, into her arms. She was still holding her when Patrick's car pulled up in the driveway and they heard the car door close and the clink of the pair of beer bottles as he came up the steps.

'Adelaide is the capital of the driest state on the driest continent in the world,' Michael wrote, in a careful hand. 'Its annual rainfall is twenty inches. The state of South Australia is mostly semi-desert, and the Goyder Line shows where growing crops has to stop but some farmers can still have sheep and cattle. The southern districts of the state get some more rain and...'

From the kitchen at the other end of the house he heard the rise and fall of voices. His father, mother and Pam Ahearne were having a session. His parents sometimes had one after his father came home from the pub on a Saturday night. A friend of two might drop by, like tonight, and they would all drink on: that was a session. He would hear the rising tempo of conversation, and the growing intensity in the voices, and then the big crescendo of laughter at a joke, before it settled back down again into a background murmur of talk.

Michael worked at his student desk, writing in large looping copperplate, pausing to use his blotter or snip a photograph from the stack of *Advertisers* and *Sunday Mails* his father had saved for him from the rubbish, or the *Women's Weeklys* his mother kept in a stack in the corner of their bedroom. On the shelf in front of him was the model Hurricane in its opened box awaiting assembly, and the Savings Bank of South Australia money box, shaped like the bank headquarters building, which had yielded up the florins and shillings to buy it. He had the Hurricane box lid facing out so that he could see the glossy colour wartwork of the fighter plane skimming low over the green fields of England.

His social studies project grew page by page, and he took comfort from the distant adult voices: they said that everything was all right after all. After weeks of unspoken tension in the house, and none of the usual hugs or kisses between his parents, this sounded more like a normal Saturday night. His parents were laughing and joking, then Michael heard his father shout out “that’s what the bishop said to the actress!”, and smiled at the shrieks of laughter from his mother and Pam that followed.

He cut a black and white photo from an *Advertiser*, of Iron Knob on Eyre Peninsula, and pasted it in and wrote a few words beneath about mining there, and at Iron Baron and Iron Monarch. He wrote that the Port Augusta power stations were nearby, and how these had been constructed by the Premier, Mr Playford, though, he noted, not exactly with his own hands, but more on his orders. He wrote of how silver, lead and zinc were smelted at Port Pirie - even if he only had a vague notion of what smelting was - and found another photograph, of the Whyalla shipyard, which he carefully cut out and smeared with Clag to fix into his project book.

He looked at the clock on his desk. It was nearly eight-thirty. It was quiet in the kitchen now. His parents were probably saying goodbye to Pam, and his mother would come in to tuck him into bed. He missed her reading him a bedtime story: that was already in the past for him. Strange how such things passed so quickly in life, and without ceremony.

‘South Australian primary industry also includes wine-making, in the Barossa Valley, and in the south-east of the state,’ he wrote. ‘Kangaroo Island has farming too, and some people even go out there just to look at seals.’

He wrote and cut out more pictures and pasted them in, and when he looked at the clock again it was ten past nine. Puzzled that no one had come to his room, he opened the door and looked out into the hallway. It was empty, and there seemed to be nobody left in the kitchen, though there was a light on and he could see an opened half-empty bottle of West End beside a beer glass. His father never left an uncapped bottle.

He walked down to the kitchen and into the living room, but there was no sign of anyone. Pam must have gone home, and his parents gone to bed without saying goodnight to him. To confirm the suspicion he walked quietly up to their bedroom and saw the light on beneath the door. He heard their voices, and was comforted to know they were in there,

but something about them suggested it was better not to go in. He lingered, then went back to his room, switched off his light and climbed into bed. He thought he could hear noises from his parents still through the wall, but they sounded far away now, and the wind was rustling the leaves in the trees outside, and in a minute or so he was asleep.

It had been quite different. Something about his body, and the way he touched her. It had also gone on for longer than any instance she could remember, and she had enjoyed it, even though they had to exercise caution now she was more heavily pregnant. Perhaps it had been the circumstances, after discussing personal things with Pam before he came home. It might also have been to do with the two solid whiskies she had drunk, and the extra one or two she had enjoyed around the table with Patrick and Pam. They hadn't eaten much either, and she realised she was possibly more than a bit drunk. She smiled at the thought: getting drunk was what got most women pregnant in the first place. Once you were there the grog had supposedly had done its job. There had also been some doctors in the papers warning about drinking and how women should avoid too much of it, as well as smoking, during pregnancy. Well, everyone knew drinking and smoking weren't good for you. Anyone who pretended they didn't was doing just that, pretending. Those things the cigarette companies went on with, about smoking being healthy and sporty, it was tommy rot and everyone knew it but they didn't stop smoking either. She hoped she hadn't done any harm to the child, and worried about the turn she had had, and her stint in hospital, and the doctor saying he couldn't guarantee that all would be right with the baby. What was she doing drinking, if there was any risk at all, even a small one? What if it was born deformed or palsied? A child, after all, was forever.

She looked down at her belly. The time was coming. A snore choked in Patrick's throat and she looked over to where he lay half-undressed in his unbuttoned shirt and singlet and socks, spreadeagled across the bed. Perhaps there really was no other woman. Perhaps he really was just working harder to make more money for them. She wished it were true, wished it with all she had. But it wasn't the truth. There was a woman, had to be, she knew it from that day she had spoken to Michael in the park. Even, really, from the moment Patrick had returned from that trip.

She realised she hadn't tucked Michael in. He hadn't even had a proper tea, poor boy. They had all been joking and drinking too much. She hoped he was all right, and that he had put himself to bed. It was just as well that he was a clever and capable boy, she was thinking, as sleep took her.

The bubbles spilled over the lip of the bathtub and ran down its sides. Candles flickered, the radio in the kitchen played lovely music, by a Frenchman called Debussy, so the announcer said, and she had a glass of riesling at her elbow. She remembered scenes like it in films, probably with Sophia Loren or Elizabeth Taylor. But here she was not just watching, but living it. She had her own place in the city, a job, a car, and a lover. Somehow or other, things had turned out. The counter of the chemist shop back in Broken Hill and Bob heaving beerily over her once upon a time, they were all in the past now. She had escaped marriage to a miner and spinsterhood. She had never even dreamed that she could get away; life had felt preordained. Yet here she was, in a real bath with real bubbles in her own flat down in the city. She smiled to think she was like some kind of Liz Taylor amid all those bubbles. Bob had once said she looked a bit like her, even if he might have been a bit more flattering than honest. But it would be nice to think she was the tiniest bit like her, with that cat-like beauty and grace.

She sipped the wine and relaxed more deeply into the clouds of foam. Tomorrow was Sunday. She might visit the Botanical Gardens, or the Zoo, walk through the parklands or the grounds of the university. She liked the footbridge that crossed the Torrens there, with the old fashioned streetlamps, and the rowing sheds down by the water. She had ventured into the Barr Smith Library, into the Reading Room with its rows of tables with green reading lamps and copper-pipe warmers for the feet of students in the winter. Fixed high in the walls were big glass domes shaped like the world, shedding light on the words on the page.

She might learn French. She had always wanted to; well now she could. If she knew French she might even meet a talented gentleman like Mr Debussy one day. She had noticed a French restaurant down Hindley Street: she could go in and order dishes in French, even frogs' legs and snails. The Myer Emporium could order her French clothing

and shoes too, she knew, after browsing a catalogue in there with the Eiffel Tower printed on it. If she learned French one day she might go to Paris and see the real Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame and Montmartre as well. Why not? It was there to be seen. It was only a matter of time and money, and both could be arranged, one day.

She lifted her calf from the water and ran the facewasher over it, settled back into the warm suds up to her neck. Although she missed Patrick a lot, and their times together were so scattered and brief, there were advantages too, she had come to realise, in an affair with a married man. Your desire did not seem to diminish because you never knew when you would see him next, and when you did it was always such a drama, a mad blur of clothing dragged off and a chaotic rush to the bed.

It also meant he wasn’t forever in her hair, as a husband might be, and there were no children - she certainly hoped not, anyway. She remembered then that they had made love again without a condom that day. It was getting to be a pattern, a game of risk both seemed not to mind playing. She had told him she knew her inner workings well, and had never fallen pregnant in the past - she did not offer any further detail, and Patrick fortunately did not ask - and so she felt the chance was slim. But now she wondered if the odds really were as low as she had made out. She was still young, and they had been doing it a lot more often, even on their intermittent basis, than she ever had with Bob. What if she conceived, what then?

As was her habit, she dismissed the thought as unpleasant and replaced it with a more pleasant one. On the bus home from work she passed the Hotel Australia, the smartest one in Adelaide. She had read a newspaper article about its cocktail lounge, where ladies in elegant frocks sipped martinis with their gentlemen companions while a jazz quartet played. The photograph accompanying the article showed modern light fittings and a carpet with a geometric pattern, and a display of abstract art on the walls.

It looked, in every sense, like a place she would like to go, and she resolved then and there that on the next Friday she would come straight home from work, shower, and change into her new cocktail frock and shoulder wrap, with the string of Mikimoto pearls Bob had given her, her finest black nylons and Italian stiletto shoes. Then she would telephone for a taxi to take her to the cocktail lounge of the Hotel Australia in Brougham Place, North Adelaide. She would wear her satin gloves and sunglasses, and even sit in the

back seat on the way there, like Americans did in films, and when she arrived she would order a martini or a manhattan, and sit up on a bar stool, and see what happened next.

Long after Michael, Patrick, Margaret and May slept that night, Father Quinlan remained awake. He had confessed his sins up at the cathedral, his soul washed clean again, yet still there was no sleep for him. That was for the innocent.

It was well past one in the morning: he had to say early mass at seven and needed sleep, but still it would not come. Sleep was deliverance, sleep was truth, sleep was grace, and he possessed none of them. He tried to read some poems of Hopkins, but now the same lines that usually soared towards the heavens felt pat and contrived, assonant to the point of silliness.

He wished sleep upon himself, prayed to God for the boon of it, but it was not given. He knew the reason: God could look as readily as He wished into any man’s heart.

APRIL

Summer relaxed its grip in March. At first it was the evenings, which tended cool and clear, good still for sitting outdoors but occasionally requiring a light cardigan or jacket. This was the pleasantest month in Adelaide, after the fainting heat, blistering northerlies and hot gully winds of the long weeks of high summer. Lawns exhaled relief in the shower of sprinklers, the heavens powdered a sombre blue, and it was perfection of a kind. When the calendar flipped over to April the days would cool as well, and the fresh chill of the night heralded the coming winter.

‘I’m very sorry to have taken so long to return your book, Father,’ Michael said.

‘That’s all right. Did you find it interesting?’

‘Yes. I did.’

‘And, did it get you interested at all in the idea of a holy vocation?’

‘I was interested to read about it, Father,’ Michael said, choosing his words, ‘but I still think I would like to be a geologist, if you don’t mind.’

Father Quinlan smiled. ‘Michael, your life is your own to live. I only loaned you the book so you’d know how a calling from God can come seemingly from out of the blue, right when you least expect it. As happened in my case. The call just came and I answered it, as I’m sure you will too, if you receive a call.’

‘Yes, Father.’

The conversation was difficult. Michael wished more than anything that he could tell Father Quinlan that he had received a call from God, that the tiny halo of light had descended upon him as he stood on the bus, or walked to the shops. But it hadn’t, and he doubted it ever would. He didn’t know why he should have that doubt, but he did. Still, he remembered, Father Quinlan had doubted he would ever get a call from God, and he had.

'It's all right, Michael,' the priest smiled again, sensing his discomfort, 'not everyone gets a call. If they did, we'd have no doctors, or lawyers, or farmers... or geologists.'

'That's right, Father. And how would we know about rocks then?'

'Precisely. And who would find our iron ore, and our gold and uranium, and our coal and tin. No, it's very important work that you have in mind for yourself, and I don't want you to think in any way that I'm disappointed in you, because I'm not. Because, you are, well...'

Father Quinlan stopped speaking, and Michael looked up and saw his eyes intent upon him, almost strangely, with a kind of sadness in them that he had not noticed before.

'Because you are...' he repeated, 'one of the brightest, cleverest, best boys we have in the entire parish.'

Michael felt his face heat up as he blushed, and had to look down at his feet.

'Your parents are proud of you, I'm sure your school is, and your church is too. You are a very, very fine boy.'

Michael tried to find the words, failed, and tried again. 'Th... thank you... thank you Father.'

The priest reached out and clasped his shoulder, rocking him gently. 'Speaking of which, I want you to serve at Easter Sunday Mass.'

Michael looked up again. 'Do you, Father, really?'

'Yes. The bishop will be celebrating it you know.'

'The bishop...', Michael breathed.

'To my mind Easter Sunday Mass is the major event on the calendar, bigger even than Christmas Day, or Good Friday. After all, it proves to everyone that Jesus was more than a man, that he was divine. It marks the day he rose from the dead and revealed to us all his victory over death. So can you serve then?'

'Oh yes, yes, thank you Father.'

'It will make your parents very proud.'

'I hope it will, yes.'

'Well, I'm sure it will.'

Father Quinlan offered him a buttered Bush Biscuit from the plate on the table at

his elbow. ‘You will need some special instruction for it though. Can I count on you to be free on Wednesday after school?’

‘Yes, Father.’

‘Just come to the church vestry after school and I’ll meet you there. You can tell your parents you’ll be home in plenty of time for tea.’

Michael nodded, and bit with care into a corner of the large rectangular biscuit, taking care not to crack it too much at the outset. They were both silent a moment.

‘April soon,’ Father Quinlan said, gesturing towards the window. ‘Then the real autumn will start, the trees will lose their leaves, the nights will draw in, and the fires be lit.’

‘I like the autumn,’ Michael said.

‘So do I. Though the poet said, “April is the cruellest month”.’

‘Why did he say the cruellest?’

‘Because, as he wrote it, April breeds lilacs out of the dead land, and stirs dull roots with spring rain. This is in the northern hemisphere, mind you, where April brings the spring.’

‘But why is it cruel to bring new life, Father? Isn’t that a good thing? Flowers, buds on trees?’

‘You might have thought so, but not to this poet.’

‘Who is he Father?’

‘Eliot, T.S. Eliot... Thomas Stearns Eliot. He was an American, but he went to live in England and became even more English than the English.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard of him.’

‘You wouldn’t have, not yet anyway. What poets are you reading at school... Tennyson... Browning...’?

‘We had to read *Hiawatha* out loud in class last week.’

‘Yes, that’s by Longfellow, an American. Henry Wadworth Longfellow. And Hiawatha was chief of the Mohawk Indians. Have you read any Australian poetry?’

‘I didn’t know we wrote any, Father.’

‘Oh yes, quite a bit. Here, look.’

He indicated a shelf of books to his left. ‘Henry Lawson, James McAuley, Kenneth Slessor...’

‘Who is Jindyworobak?’ Michael asked, reading the name on a book spine.

‘That’s not one person, Michael... it’s a group of poets here in South Australia, the Jindyworobaks.’

‘I’ve never heard of them, Father.’

‘Of course not, not yet at any rate. But perhaps you will one day. They have some very interesting ideas, about the Aboriginal people.’

‘Aborigines, Father?’

Michael had only once or twice seen an Aborigine. They were dark-skinned people, and the original inhabitants of Australia, but they looked a sad lot if you saw them, and some of them seemed to like beer even more than his father. Once he and his mother had been walking past Whitmore Square and there was a group of men sitting on the grass in the middle of it. His mother said something about Aborigines, and he craned his neck to look, but she grabbed his hand and walked by quickly with her head down, and told him to do the same. When he asked why, she wouldn’t say, except that it had been the right thing to do in the circumstances.

‘Yes. Anyway, you’ll no doubt learn more about them too, in due course.’

‘Yes, Father.’ Michael looked at his watch. ‘I’d better be going home now.’

‘Yes, it is getting on a bit. Please give your parents my regards.’

‘I will, Father.’

‘And see you on Wednesday, after school.’

‘Yes, Father.’

As he had done before when Michael was about to leave, Father Quinlan reached to his bookshelf, and this time took out a thin book which he handed to him. On the cover the boy saw printed *The Poems of Banjo Paterson.*

‘Banjo,’ Michael smiled, ‘like the one people play?’

‘It was his nom-de-plume, which means his pen-name, that he used as a writer. His real name was Andrew Paterson, and he was one of that rare wonderful species, the Australian poet.’

Michael looked down at the little book in his hands, at the cover of a sunlit river winding through gum trees.

‘Thank you, Father.’

As Michael got to his feet, Father Quinlan took the book back a moment, opened it and slipped in a piece of paper. ‘Book-mark,’ he said. ‘Read the poem I’ve marked. It’s very famous. I think you’ll like it.’

‘I will, thank you, Father.’

Michael felt the priest’s manly grip on his shoulder again as he saw him to the door and bade him cheerio with a wave.

The last rays of sun slanted through the window, and the Friday night traffic began to build up out on O’Connell Street. May sat on a stool in the cocktail bar of the Hotel Australia. Just as she had imagined it, she had showered after work and dressed up in her cocktail dress, with the sheer black stockings and high heels, satin gloves to the elbow and the wrap around her shoulders.

Cigarette smoke curled through the room and she breathed it in with her perfume. She had often read about the Hotel Australia back in the Hill, and now, of all things, she was here. She tapped her foot to the jazz quartet in the corner while the well-to-do ascended the stairs to dine. She thought about Patrick. He would be home now, in the bosom of the family. From passing comments he had made, she sometimes tried to imagine the living room in which the three of them would be sitting now, after tea. If it hadn’t been for Patrick, she wouldn’t be here. She owed him so much as well as loved him, but as she raised the cocktail glass to her lips and sipped her martini she felt no guilt about being out alone in a bar on a Friday night. Patrick had his whole other life, the one he lived when he was not with her at the flat, in those brief hard-won moments. For the rest of the time, nearly all of every day of the week, she was alone. The least she could do was go out and enjoy herself, and if a man should sit on the bar stool next to hers and talk to her, so be it. It didn’t mean anything. It was only conversation she was seeking, after all.

‘Good evening,’ a male voice said, so closely on cue that it made her start.

She turned around and saw a handsome young man standing a respectful distance away from her. He was well dressed in a suit and tie, his dark hair neatly oiled and combed back, and was most probably Italian or Greek. You encountered a lot of New Australians in the Hill.

'Hello.'

'If that seat is not taken, would you mind if I sat down next to you and perhaps ordered us a drink?'

'No,' she smiled. 'The seat is not taken, and I would not mind at all if you sat down next to me and certainly did order us a drink.'

'Thank you,' he said with grin. 'You are very kind.'

He sat down and arranged himself beside her. He was carrying a briefcase which he put down carefully, smiled at her again and gestured to the barman.

'You are drinking a martini?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Another then?'

'Yes please.'

'Two martinis,' he said and the barman nodded.

When the barman walked away to the other end of the bar to make them, he extended his hand for her to shake. 'My name is Federico.'

'As in flea-knee?' she asked, and laughed. 'I'm sorry, flea-knee is my own pet name for him. I mean Fellini.'

His eyes widened. 'You have heard of him?'

'Of course!'

'Have you seen *La Dolce Vita* then?

'No, not yet. But I've read lots about it,. I mean, gosh, he's famous.'

'Remarkable. Not that you know it, of course,' he hastened to add, 'and the film, yes, indeed, it is remarkable too, a wonderful film, Roma, how could it not be wonderful... but I have met so few people who know who Fellini is.'

'Oh, there are always photos of him in the magazines, you know, with actresses, or on the set of one of his films. I often read about him because I enjoy foreign films.'

'I see. And, your name please?'

'May.'

'And, May, do you...' he began, then laughed as he said it, 'come here often?'

She laughed too. 'No, it's my first time. I've only recently moved to Adelaide, from Broken Hill. And you?'

'My first time as well,' he said.

'And are you from Adelaide yourself?'

'Yes, I was born here. It's my parents who are the real Italians, from Calabria. No, I was very much born here, near to this place, in North Adelaide, Calvary Hospital.'

The barman brought their martinis and set them down on coasters on the bar. The band was playing *Mack the Knife*, the pianist crooning the opening verse.

'The Bobby Darin version,' Federico noted. 'I must say I prefer the old Louis Armstrong one. And I have a wonderful recording at home, of the original *Threepenny Opera*, in German. The version of the song is very different in that one of course.'

May nodded. She only knew the Bobby Darin song from the hit parade shows that Bob had liked to tune into on the radio.

'What sort of music do you like, May?'

'Well, I like piano music.'

'Classical music you mean?'

She wasn't quite sure. 'Yes.'

'I love classical music. But then how couldn't I... I'm Italian! You know, Vivaldi, Verdi... Caruso...'

May nodded. She knew the names but not much more. After a shift her father used to play old recordings of Caruso, too loudly, and sing along in the bath.

'But then I like popular music too... Sinatra, Paul Anka. April Stevens, *Teach Me Tiger...* did you know she's Italian too?'

May sipped her cocktail. It was a delightfully cool drink, and along with everything else it made her feel a bit light-headed. She had forgotten how good a martini tasted. She had only had them occasionally, at dress-up parties in the Hill, and once or twice Bob had prepared them. His were always very strong, two more than enough for any lady. She wondered then how strong these were, as she was already into her second.

The piano player was belting out the words now, and then the guitarist stood up brandishing a trumpet and blew hard.

'*d'ja hear 'bout Louie Miller? He disappeared, babe*
After drawin' out all his hard-earned cash...'

She felt Federico's eyes on her as she watched the band.

‘And what is your job?’

‘I work for a bootmaker, over in Prospect. I do the reception, and some secretarial and bookkeeping work. And you?’

‘I work in my uncle’s market garden. But I moonlight as a university student.’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘so you’re a varsity man.’

‘Yes. When I’m not pulling out weeds from the carrots that is.’

She smiled. ‘Such a beautiful place, the university, the grounds, the library. Do you read books in that big room in the library?’

‘Oh yes. Most days I am there in the Reading Room.’

‘How wonderful that must be, to be able to read, study your days away. What are you studying, by the way?’

‘Architecture.’

She realised then the room had gone quiet, back down to the background noise of conversation. The band must have finished.

‘They’re taking five,’ Federico said, appearing to read her thought.

‘And are Italians very... interested in architecture?’

He broke into a grin again. ‘Of course! Our buildings are the most famous in the world. The ancient Forum in Rome, the Pantheon, surely the most beautiful building on earth. Saint Peter’s Basilica, and the Duomo in Florence... all designed and built by Italians.’

She had never thought about it like that before. ‘Yes... no, of course, you’re right.’

He finished his martini, and saw that her glass was nearly empty too. ‘Would you like another?’

Turning to reply, she realised that he had begun to take on a likeness to Marcello Mastroianni. Another drink would complete the transformation.

‘No thank you, Federico.’

‘No, that’s enough for me too. And please just call me Freddy, if you prefer it.’

Freddy. It didn’t sound adequate. But she was pleased he was concerned for her ease. ‘All right, Freddy it is then.’

‘Listen, I have my pay-packet burning a hole in my jacket pocket. What say we have some dinner together? I hear the dining room here is really quite good.’

She looked at him and blinked, unable to speak for a moment. Dinner at the Hotel Australia.

'Of course, though, if you aren't hungry, or would prefer not to...'

'No, no, thank you,' she said, 'that would be very lovely, Freddy.'

She attained the waking realisation that it was Saturday. Another week, another Saturday come around. The bed was empty: he had gone. Then she heard the sounds of breakfast being prepared down the passage in the kitchen, and wondered what time it was; seven-thirty, eight perhaps. She was very tired, almost too tired to be bothered with the day at all. It wasn't only the baby. She was bone tired and nauseous from the charade of playing dutiful wife to faithful husband. Husband, the word sounded hollow. He wasn't a husband, he was a man she hardly knew any more, who slept beside her and made breakfast and left.

She remembered how on the Saturday night before, after a few drinks, they had made love, and she had enjoyed it. But in the days since, she had come to accept that it been good for all the wrong reasons. It had been as if Patrick had not been making love to her at all, but to another woman, a woman he truly desired, the other woman his lover, the woman of his selfish, awful affair. She wanted to get up somehow and go down to the kitchen now, even if she was so sick she had to crawl, and scream at him and have it out once and for all. And she told herself that if it weren't for Michael and the baby soon to come, she would have confronted him then and there, told him what she knew to be true and watched him wriggle and try to deny it, or else openly admit it, and stand there looking at her. Either way at least she would be freed from the burden of suspicion. The problem was, what then? Have him sleep on the couch for the rest of their days? No, he would probably leave her, take off with his woman, and she would be left alone with a young son and infant, and the opprobrium of a community that would find ways to attach the blame to her, even if only for reminding them of the taboo of sex.

No matter what a woman did, she realised, no matter how innocent a party she might be, somehow the mud could always be guaranteed to stick to her, and not to the man. No matter what happened, Patrick would ultimately be excused and pardoned for the

affair, confess and be forgiven. His sin, his weakness of the flesh, would be understood and tolerated, even secretly admired by the men of the parish, for his conquest. But she on the other hand would be seen as somehow sullied, even guilty, a failure because her man had needed to seek sex elsewhere. Sex, sex, why was everything always about sex? She enjoyed sex, sometimes, certainly had in the past, but it didn't rule her life. And there was something very curious, she felt keenly in that moment, about religion and sex. The two were so closely connected, interrelated, intertwined, religion and sex and sex and religion, purity and filth and filth and purity, public piety and loathing of sex and terror of sex, yet an obsession with sex, exaltation of sex, glorification. It was almost as if God Himself was sex. And somehow the woman was always the last consideration in these things, her desires and needs, cares, the afterthought of male lust.

It all suddenly crystallised for her then, in a seeming moment, how unfair it all was to women like her, and it made her want to scream, made her want to run out into the street and yell at the top of her lungs, "Bugger you men, and bugger you God, all of you!" She wanted to cry out, "Give me a man like Jackson Pollock! Give me a drunken womaniser like him any day, because no matter what you might think of him, he was what he was, true to himself! Not some fake posturing saint, some pathetic pious worm!"

But, if that was what she needed to say about men and about God, what about the Church then, the bishops, priests, the Pope himself, all of them? It might have been the sickness and the exhaustion, and no doubt it was, but she beheld them in that moment as corrupt, dirty old men in gold-embroidered frocks and frilly white slips, costumed old shysters selling snakeoil labelled "God" and rubbing their hands with glee in their private realm beyond the altar as they counted the takings in silver. She had seen pictures of the Vatican. What did they need all that gold for, all those palaces? It seemed monstrous, a colossal, horrible confidence trick. And she was one of the tricked, and had been all her life.

She eased her head back into the pillow, feeling sicker than ever, sick with torment. Was it only the pregnancy, she didn't know. Had it been this bad last time? Not from what she could remember, but then so much time was lost and forgotten in the churned wake of a baby. She was on the verge of throwing up. What was wrong? Why was she so ill? Was there something really wrong with her, that the doctors hadn't found? Perhaps she would

die in the birth, or her baby would be born with two heads or no legs, or some rare blood disease. She didn't know. All she knew was that at the other end of their home was a man making breakfast who pretended to love her but did not any more, because he was having an affair with - no, *fucking*, that was the word, he was fucking another woman. Buttering her toast was the sum of their marriage, the toast and the tea, and the odd fuck. The love, the passion, the need, the desire, were all for her, the other woman, whoever she was. How she detested the hypocrite down the passage, who called himself her husband, and all the other hypocrites who bowed their heads in the pews beside him, with their gossip and sport and hats and shoes and pay packets and promotions, and the hypocrite priests whose only interest was in grasping poor people's money, and the hypocrite God they all said they worshipped as a God of love, but was really just jealous and mean and brutal and hard and mad.

The worst part though, truly the worst, was that she knew she would later repent these terrible thoughts, confess her doubts no matter how deep they were, to Father Quinlan in the booth, because in the end who was she to pit herself against the might of him and all the men who stood behind him, against the armies of bishops and scholars, the Pope, and God Himself? A woman alone: what chance could she have against all of them?

He wrote down the words, "Clancy of the Overflow". Clancy was obvious enough. But where and what was the Overflow? He moved on from the title. The first bit wasn't too difficult, even if there were some hard bits like "just on spec" and "verbatim". It was about a letter that had been written by the person writing the poem, and who had got a reply from someone who told him that "Clancy's gone to Queensland droving and we don't know where he are". A very ignorant person the respondent had to be with a sentence like that, Michael could tell, his opinion confirmed by the observation that it appeared the letter had been written "with a thumbnail dipped in tar".

The next two verses were easier, even if there were more things for him to look up, words like "erratic", and the word "fancy" because how he was used to understanding it didn't seem to work. Now the poet was imagining Clancy's life as a drover, and Michael especially liked the lines, which he read out loud:

And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended,
And at night the wond'rous glory of the everlasting stars.

That part he did enjoy. It made him realise, for one thing, that rivers had sand-bars, and he liked the rhythm of it, like the flow of the river itself.

The rest of the poem was completely different. The poet complained about living in the city and his job in an office, and the "fiendish rattle" of trams and the fighting of the "gutter children". This seemed a bit unfair on the children, as it wasn't their fault if they were in the gutter, unless they were there against their parents' orders, in which case it was disobedience. At the end the poet said he'd like to swap jobs with Clancy, and go droving cattle in the outback, while Clancy worked in the city with the office, but said he doubted "he'd suit the office, Clancy of the Overflow".

Michael liked it, and even better, felt he understood it. That made the experience of reading and re-reading it exhilarating, as each time he did so, the picture became a bit clearer, of a man in a suit sitting in an office in a city, dreaming about living out under the sun and stars, droving cattle.

He put the book down and yawned. But instead of starting to get ready for bed, he got up and went out onto the porch and looked at the stars. Another Saturday night, and again his parents were having a session in the kitchen with a couple of friends, and he could hear the rise and fall of their talk and laughter. It was a cool night, clear, and the stars were bright. Next week it would be Easter, and soon, his birthday. He would be ten, "double figures" his mother said. Everything seemed to be moving so quickly. For some reason a line from the earliest nursery song he remembered from the mist of childhood, came into his mind.

'Twinkle twinkle little star,' he sang, almost under his voice, *'how I wonder...'* He stopped, and peered up into the night sky. He was worried about his parents, he knew, worried about whether they were getting on any better. He chided himself yet again for ever having said anything at all about that night in Broken Hill. But his mother wouldn't really suffer because of what he had seen that night, he knew that. His father would always be kind to her. She really had nothing to worry about, except the baby arriving safely. He

wished his father was at home more, but knew he had to work to make money for them, anyone knew that. He wished it could all be easier than it was, but it wasn't. He found himself singing again then, this time the song they sang at school assemblies.

'*There is a land where summer skies*

Are gleaming with a thousand dyes,

Blending in witching harmonies... in harmonies...'

The pitch of his thin child's voice did its practised dip on the repetition of *in harmonies,* then faded out. The back yard was quiet again, except for the crickets. He liked *The Song of Australia.* Sister Mary Grace had said it had been written by a South Australian, a woman named Caroline Carleton. He wondered if Banjo Paterson was South Australian too. Probably not. Something said he was from Sydney or Melbourne, big cities with lots of noisy trams and gutter children. He had never seen any gutter children in Adelaide, that was for sure. It didn't matter anyway. He liked Banjo's poem, wherever he was from, just as he liked *The Song of Australia.* He had to write poems at school, everyone did. But, what if no one was making you do it, and you wrote them just because you wanted to, like Banjo did? What made you want to write them in the first place? Where did that come from, and what was so special about poems anyway that teachers talked about them, even Father Quinlan?

He looked up again at the sky, and the stars that Clancy might have seen from his camp by the river. His mother said some people believed their lives were ruled by the stars, and followed the little section in *The News* next to the Funnies. His mother sometimes read them too, although she said there was nothing to it, and that she only read them for fun. There were so many stars, right across the sky. He didn't think they had any effect on people's lives down here, how could they? But it was a funny thought that all around the world, everywhere, things were about to happen in the lives of people, through whatever it was that caused them. People would be born and would die. Some would fall off bicycles and be hurt, some would win a race they had trained hard to win, a scientist in a far-off laboratory would be discovering something important in a test tube, while somewhere else someone was dying of hunger, or from a bullet wound, while another was striking oil or finding gold. Big things were always building up, like storms, and then one day they hit and changed things, just as little things built up too, and changed things in small ways,

perhaps even hardly noticeable, but changed them. For whatever reason, the song came back then, and he sang a little more.

'And grassy knoll, and forest height,

Are flushing in the rosy light,

And all above in azure bright -

Australia... Aust-ra-lia.... Aust-ray-lee-ah...'

The final phrase was dying on his lips as he heard a new bout of laughter through the kitchen window, and feared for a moment that they had heard him singing, but the sound subsided as quickly at it had come. One of his father's jokes, probably. He peed on the lawn and went back inside and left the stars to themselves.

The following Wednesday Michael arrived home to find his mother sitting with her head bowed down in front of a colander of potatoes on the kitchen table. Hearing him she looked up, and he saw her eyes were red.

'Are you all right, Mum?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

'Your eyes are all red.'

'I just woke up. I had an afternoon nap.'

He put his schoolbag down while she got up from the table straightening her hair and looked out the window. 'You're late home. It's getting dark.'

'Yes. But I had altar boy practice with Father Quinlan,' he said, 'remember, for Easter Sunday Mass.'

'Oh, yes, so you did. Peel the potatoes will you dear. And after that I'll need you to shell some peas.'

'What's for tea, mum?'

'Chops.'

He saw only four lamb chops on the sheet of butcher paper on the table. 'Dad won't be home for tea?'

‘No, he telephoned. Working back again.’ She turned away and started filling a saucepan for the potatoes.

‘It’s going to be wonderful on Sunday, Mum.’

‘That’s lovely, dear.’

‘It went very well today. And Father Quinlan was so nice to me when we finished. He even let me kiss his ring.’

‘Did he?’

‘Yes. His special ring on his finger. And he even gave me a Blessed Kiss.’

‘Oh? What’s that?’

‘He kissed my hand, to honour me for my service as an altar boy. And he said that it was a Blessed Kiss.’

She turned on the gas and struck a match to light the ring. The burning blue was intense in the dim room.

‘I’ll turn the light on, Mum.’

‘No, don’t. I’ve got a bit of a headache. Just finish up here and you can go and watch television.’

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

‘It’s just a headache. Don’t fuss, Michael.’

He knew better than to do that. He finished peeling the potatoes and shelled the peas and went out into the living room and turned on the television. He had just missed the *Roy Rogers Show*: they were singing “happy trails to you”. Another of his favourites came on though, *The Adventures of Hiram Holiday*. Usually he loved Hiram’s adventures in far off places, but today he sat barely watching, wishing he had never ever gone off on travels of his own, with his father to Broken Hill, and vowed never to go to that place again.

* * *

On Easter Sunday morning he awoke to find a little bag of chocolate Easter eggs by his bed, and thanked his parents over breakfast. It was a point of honour that he had stopped believing in the Easter Bunny at six. The Easter Mass itself was all it was meant to be, a

grand spectacle with the bishop resplendent in his vestments, the dense billows of incense, and the choral singing of the children dressed in their Sunday very best. But it all failed to move or excite him. He could feel it from the moment they got into the car, and when he glanced from the altar to their pew and saw them staring up at him with glum pride, they were seated so far apart it was as if he were there, invisibly between them. If his parents sat so distantly from each other, he could not help but think, what use were all the prayers, hymns and frankincense? Then he realised with a jolt that the thought had to be sinful. When he did not take Holy Communion, he sensed a question in Father Quinlan's eyes. He left straight after Mass and the family drove home with hardly a word.

She answered on the second ring. 'Hello, May.' It was Freddy.

She had been surprised at herself, very, but then perhaps it was time she stopped being so surprised. She had been intimate with Freddy on that first night they met at the Hotel Australia, and on the four occasions she had seen him in the fortnight since. People might call him an Eye-Tie, but what did they know. They might call her a slut too, if they knew.

'How are you, Freddy?'

'I'm very good, thank you. But all the better for hearing your charming voice.'

She never knew whether to smile or not. Other than Bob and Patrick sometimes, in her experience Australian men never said anything of the sort. They were "men of few words", who always said that actions spoke louder than anything they might say, and then the next thing tried to excuse their actions on account of drink. It was as if they all wanted to be like Chips Rafferty in his films, a big silent bloke with a fag in his mouth. But Freddy wasn't like that. She wasn't used to a man who spoke so well, who said nice things her about her appearance, even about things that she said. She had smiled the first few times he had done it, but now was starting to get used to it, even if it still sounded a bit strange sometimes. In fact, she found that she liked it.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

'Having a cup of tea. I've eaten, and listened to the seven o'clock news, and now I'm drinking a cup of tea. How about you?'

'Still studying, still climbing my Mont Blanc of textbooks. And I pulled out an entire paddock of sour sobs this morning.' He paused a moment. 'Besides wanting to say hello, I'm calling to invite you to come with me to a party on the weekend. My cousin and his wife have a new baby son, and the baptism is on Saturday, and there will be a party after.'

'A family party?'

'Yes.'

'But are you sure it would be all right to invite me?'

'Of course! They would all love to meet you! It will be a big party, lots of people, food, wine, dancing.'

'Well that sounds lovely. What time?'

'What about if I come by and pick you up at three o'clock?'

'Three o'clock it is then.'

They spoke a little more, and after they hung up she sat in the old armchair in the front window looking down into the street and sipped her tea. She felt a bit dizzy with things. She was seeing Patrick two or three times a week, and now it seemed she would be seeing Freddy at least that much as well. Not that there was such a problem with that, as Patrick's visits were brief, an hour, two at the most, and for the rest of her time she might as well have been a single woman. Which she was, if she chose to think of it in those terms.

Freddy's visits were different to Patrick's. He stayed all night beside her in her bed and they made love several times each night. When they didn't have to get up for work the next day, they slept until well into the morning, and she would wake to find herself in his arms. That had been a new experience, and a pleasant one. She enjoyed the reassurance of it, even the smell of him. Who would have thought an Italian would smell so good? People said they were dirty, but they weren't, certainly not Freddy. He was clean as any Australian, cleaner in that he hardly smoked, and didn't even drink beer.

He was also different in how he conducted himself in bed. While she enjoyed it with Patrick, it was a another experience entirely with Freddy. He was thoughtful and sensitive, more generous and giving. Perhaps it was that he was Continental, or educated, or perhaps it was just him, she didn't know. All she knew was that she liked it, a lot.

Sometimes she wondered what Patrick might say if he ever found out that she was seeing another man. He would be very unhappy about it, she knew, angry, his pride wounded, and would certainly end it, so it was crucial he never knew. The same went for Freddy: it was just as important that he didn't learn about Patrick. It struck her she would have to be careful about any clues they might inadvertently leave behind in the flat. The other might discover it, and suspect. When there were several occasions each week that she might spend with one or the other, there was always the risk something might go wrong. No, she would have to be extremely careful. The thought of discovery frightened her, and the repercussions. And what if she lost both of them somehow, what then?

She rinsed her teacup and glanced up at the clock: five past eight. She felt tired for such an early hour, but work had been busy that day. Still, there was one more task she had been putting off, which she was determined to get done before she went to bed. She found the postcard she had bought at the newspaper kiosk on Victoria Square. It showed the band rotunda in Elder Gardens, with the lawns gently sloping to the banks of Torrens Lake, and the ducks and a passing Popeye ferry in the distance. She sat down at the kitchen table, uncapped her pen and began writing.

"Dear Bob, I'm sorry it's taken me so long to put pen to paper, but as you can no doubt imagine, quite a bit has happened since I arrived in Adelaide. But I have to say, so far so good. I have a job, a flat, and I've even started making some new friends..."

With that she paused, and sat back in the chair. Freddy had said he would pick her up at three o'clock on Saturday, but she now remembered she was also to meet Patrick at the Markets at two o'clock that day. It took a moment for it to sink in, but she had, as the expression went, double-booked herself, very much so.

Patrick locked the car and went up the stairs. He had arranged it today that he could knock off early from work, spend a couple of hours with May, and no one would ask any questions. He knocked on the door and after a moment or two it opened. It was late afternoon and she would just have come home from work. When she opened the door she had a towel around her and her hair was wet. He shut the door behind them as he kissed her and the towel dropped to the floor. He carried her to the bed pulling off his clothes.

When he went into the kitchen to make the tea, he found she had a new brand of biscuits, and a block of Haigh's chocolate.

'Haigh's,' he called out, 'very fancy.'

'My weekly treat,' she replied from the bed.

'I thought I was that,' he said with a laugh. He made the tea and brought it in on a tray.

'I like it when you make the tea,' she smiled, as he brought it in.

'I see you've got new biscuits too, Granitas.'

'Yes, I thought I'd give them a go.' She took her cup of tea, and bit into the biscuit. 'Nice, aren't they.'

'Yes, though I don't think you'd ever beat a Milk Arrowroot.'

He drew the "root" part of the word out, attempting a comic effect, and was rewarded with a smile, but it faded.

'Patrick. About Saturday.'

'Yes?'

'I'm going to have to work that day.'

'What?'

'Yes, stocktake. I have to go in.'

'That's a shame,' he said, 'I had far more pleasant plans for you then.'

'I know. So did I.'

'Oh well. Have to expect it occasionally I suppose.'

'Yes. I'll miss you.'

'And I'll miss you,' he said.

'I'm sorry, darling.'

'Well, it could be good, in a way. Make me appreciate you just that much more.'

She sat up in bed. 'Perhaps one night we could... you know, go out together.'

'Go out. Where?'

'I like films. Foreign films too. Do you like them?'

'Foreign. You mean French?'

It sounded to him like something they could possibly do. Foreign films were shown in out of the way little cinemas, where he might expect to take her undetected.

'Yes. Or Italian.'

'Didn't know they made films, the Eye-Ties.'

'Oh yes, some very famous stars are Italian.'

'You mean Sophia Loren, and Gina Lollabrigida. Harlots though, aren't they.'

'And directors,' she added, 'like Fellini.'

'Any relation to Mussolini?'

'No, Fellini, Federico Fellini, you must have heard of him. He's always in the magazines, the newspapers sometimes.'

'No, can't say I have heard of him.' He contemplated her a moment. 'Spreading your wings a bit in the big city, aren't you.'

'A little bit, yes, I suppose.'

He chuckled. 'Remember Icarus though.'

'Who?'

'Icarus. From the myth. Flew too high, and the wax holding his wings onto his back melted in the sun. Crashed back to earth.'

'That's a sad story,' she said.

'Sad truth too,' Patrick said, reaching for a sock.

Father Quinlan prayed in the chair in his room and prayed half the night, prayed in bed before sleep, and first thing when he woke. He prayed while working in the garden, and walking the beach down to Grange Jetty, and on his rounds to visit parishioners. As he prayed now, clicking through his rosary as he knelt at a quarter past ten on a rainy Thursday morning, with not another soul in the church.

Prayer. There was so much praise to give God, so much to praise Him for, and so much forgiveness to seek for sin. There was always sin. There was an infinity of questions to ask Him, too, but only one lifetime to ask in. In essence though, Father Quinlan believed that all the questions reduced to one, which was how to be properly human. That was what people sought from God, the guidance in how to live their one life on earth, and how from it to gain eternal life in heaven.

That no answers came did not make him suspect there was no God to give them, but reinforced his belief that there truly was one thing beyond even God Himself, which was our own conduct of our own lives through God-given Free Will. He knew that concept, intellectually, and asked God for guidance about how to use his Free Will, as any good Catholic should. The absence of any answer did not make him question any less, and as time passed, in spite of himself, he experienced a slow, clawing desperation, a kind of moral muscle cramp, whenever he returned to the problem of how to live.

His difficulty was exacerbated by the faces. And there they were again, in his mind's eye as he knelt at a quarter past ten on that rainy Thursday morning, the faces that he saw so often, of the two student girls he had gone out with in his university days, the ones he had slept with; and the dental nurse he had met in the quayside pub in Cairns; and the face of the runaway wife with hardly a penny to her name he had met beachcombing in Darwin, who had lived with him in his caravan for two months. There was the face of Diane, the girl he might have married, the one who did not become the mother of their children in the home he never built. And the faces prompted him to to think of all the other men he might have become, too - the university lecturer, English teacher, even the insurance broker...

But these thoughts, and the faces of the women, he realised were a distraction from prayer and devotion, the Devil's work. When the thoughts came, as they did now, he resolutely tried to turn his mind back to God. But it was difficult, because the faces were real faces, of real women with whom he shared intimacy, perhaps even loved for a time, whereas for the face of God all he could manage was what he recognised too well as just another bearded old Zeus. God would not look like that. No one knew what He would look like, nor even if had a face. But how could human beings love a faceless God? They needed something they could comprehend - that, he knew, was why they had given Him the face of Zeus. But the women had faces, pretty ones too, and he remembered each one vividly still, and the times he had spent with them; and in moments such as this one, no matter how hard he tried, and how hard he pressed upon his rosary beads, so that the ends of his fingers indented and ached, he could not escape the faces, all of them merging and transmuting from one to another, from woman to woman, as if all were indeed one.

There was a new face among them too, of the girl he had seen looking out the

window in the cafe at the Central Market, the one waiting for Patrick. He himself was still young, younger than Patrick, and better looking too. So why had God decreed that Patrick should have her, and that he have no one, not her, not Diane, not the girl he had taken to that hotel from the bar in Cairns - nobody. No sex, no love, not even a touch of a hand; nothing, no one. But was it God who demanded that of him, or was it the Pope, the Church? And if so, why? What was there for anyone to gain, from such pain? A venom of defiance, of sin, coursed through him, and he could not stop it. He was right back where he had been in the park, and would have to confess it all again. But it just did not seem right that he could not behave fully as a man, and that when it came to sex, he was a eunuch. But he wasn't a eunuch, he was a man, a young man.

He felt woozy, as if his arteries would explode, as if he were being strangled. Then the faces all melded with each other into a mental collage, a confusion of feelings, sensations and needs. He did not wish it, could not accept it: it was not who he was. But, diabolically, it was there, the maelstrom of urges, the dark area in which he could see nothing but imagine everything, including all the things he did not wish to imagine. They were not him: but there they were.

In less disturbed moments, he might accept that this was the way things were, that the Devil was tempting him, that God was trying him, that it was all part of God's plan for him to become a soul ready for heaven; but at other times, as on this morning when the rain fell steadily outside the open door of the church in a long grey shroud over the sea, he knew there was only one word for what he felt: abomination.

Margaret sat in the living room feeling as if she had been shifting rocks. Well into the sixth month, expanding rapidly and heavily: how big could a baby get? She didn't remember getting this tired with Michael, but she had been in her twenties back then.

'Did I tell you that Michael has learned all of *Clancy of the Overflow* by heart, and recited it to me the other day?'

'No, Father, you didn't.'

'Well he did, recited the whole thing when he dropped the book back to the presbytery.'

'He's very clever, Father, and such a good memory.'

Father Quinlan finished his tea and put the cup back onto the saucer on the side table. 'You always make a proper cup of tea, Margaret, good and strong, with lots of milk, just as I like it.'

'Thank you, Father. There are more biscuits if you would like.'

'No thanks, I've had more than my share.'

They had talked Michael, the weather, the coming winter and the garden, and exchanged kind observations about one or two of the parishioners. There came the pause then, when something would need to be said, or the parties disperse.

'So... your sister wasn't able to help out with Michael,' Father Quinlan mentioned, 'not even for a few days.'

'No. It seems she has problems enough of her own down there at present.'

He paused. 'But is the need for it still there?'

'Yes, Father, I believe so. Very much so.'

'I'm sorry, but I suspected as much.'

'Sometimes I really don't know how I...' she started, but then her voice cracked to a husk, and to her shame the tears spilled from her eyes in hot dollops.

The priest was on his feet then, crouched by the side of her chair, his arm around her shoulders. 'It's all right, it's all right.'

'I only wish it were, Father,' she said, louder than she expected to. 'I truly do wish that it was all right. But it's not. It really isn't all right!'

'There, there, take your time.'

'I have taken my time, Father. And I've run out of it. In less than three months I'll have no time left, just a crying baby, an unhappy son and a husband who's somewhere else and up to no good!' He held her while she cried. 'You might ask how do I know he's up to no good, but I know it Father, I do know it! A woman knows these things and I know it!'

'Just try to relax now, Margaret...'

'I can't relax, Father!'

'You have to try. In your state and with what happened before, you really must. I'll make you some more tea.'

‘Let me get it, Father.’

‘No. You stay right there. I know where the kitchen is and I’ll fetch the tea. What I want you to do is sit there quietly and take some deep breaths and attempt to compose yourself, all right?’

‘All right. Thank you, Father.’

She did as he asked, and he was out of the room for a few minutes, boiling the kettle for more tea. When he returned he placed a steaming mug and a saucer of biscuits on the table.

‘Thank you, Father,’ she said, taking a sip.

‘Feeling better?’

‘A bit, yes, I am.’

‘Good.’

He said nothing more for a few moments, but drank his tea and looked out the window.

‘I have to tell you though Father, I’ve had doubts.’

‘About Patrick?’

‘About Patrick, about the Church, even God.’

‘That’s only normal,’ he said. ‘Everyone has doubts about things, from time to time. It’s how we test out our feelings, and how we know what is dear to us in the end, because they can survive that scrutiny and that doubt.’

‘What about you? Have you ever had doubts?’

‘Of course I have. I’m human, aren’t I? Who but a dictator goes through life absolutely sure in every moment that they’re taking the right path, free of any care or doubt at all?’

‘So you don’t think it’s wrong, my thoughts?’

‘No.’

‘But I have thought some terrible things at times, Father, very terrible.’

‘Bring them to the confessional. That’s what it’s there for. But doubt itself is not sin. Doubt is honest and truthful. Whereas pretending to believe in something you don’t believe in because it’s more convenient that way, that is deception, self-deception, deception of others... a lie.’

She stared, then looked down. ‘I feel ashamed, Father. Of things I’ve said to myself, of how dark some things are that I’ve thought. Of how desperate and helpless I’ve felt. How weak and pathetic.’

‘But we all feel those things,’ he said. ‘Often.’

‘And feel this kind of shame, Father?’

‘Yes, yes, we do. We all feel shame, many of us most of the time. Desperation, and fear, and shame. That is why Jesus Christ is so important in our lives, because he delivers us from the darkness, of sin. It’s only through him we can save ourselves from it. Without him the world is dark, and senseless, and...’

He stopped speaking because they saw the car pulling into the driveway, and Patrick getting out fetching something from the rear seat.

‘Speak of the devil,’ Margaret said.

‘Before he comes in, I want you to know that if you two really do need to get away alone, I can help. I’m thinking of taking some of the older altar boys on a camping trip down the coast, a few days, you know, and of course Michael would be most welcome to come along too. Do him good anyway, the fresh air and beach and walks in the bush. And you and Patrick could get away, and have that time you need.’

She stared at him, unable to conceal her gratitude. ‘Thank you, Father. That is such a kind offer... I’ll have to speak with...’

Her words were cut short as Patrick sailed in through the front door clutching a big bunch of red roses. ‘Ah, Father! Now what brings you here?’

‘Oh, on my rounds, Patrick, you know.’

Patrick grinned and bent down to kiss Margaret, handing her the flowers, and a small heart-shaped box of chocolates.

‘Oh... they’re lovely, thank you darling!’ she said. ‘And Haigh’s?’ she said, looking at the inscription on the chocolate box.

‘Only the best for my Margaret. I’ve been working such long hours, away from the house too much, and the chance came up to get away early and I thought, Friday afternoon, time I was home!’ He boldly kissed Margaret full on the lips, and Father Quinlan politely turned his head.

‘Sorry about that, Father,’ Patrick grinned.

'It's all right, Patrick.'

'You've been drinking,' Margaret chided, but smiling too.

'Only a couple or three.'

After the priest had left, Patrick opened a bottle of beer and she joined him in a glass, sitting with him on the couch. When Michael came home, Patrick announced they would celebrate his coming birthday with a picnic, and the boy could not conceal his happiness.

The party felt more like a fete. It was under a big marquee in the yard of a house on Findon Road that opened out onto a broad expanse of market gardens at the back. Just as she might have expected it from the films, there was the long table where everyone sat eating and drinking wine, and the tiny baby in the arms of the priest who had baptised him. As the afternoon progressed into evening, the dance floor began to crowd with young couples, older married pairs, and grandparents dancing with children. Everyone seemed to be a relative of Freddy's, and he spoke with them all and showed her off in the blue party frock he had bought her. There was a band that played *O Sole Mio* and *Volare*, and Freddy spun her round the dance floor until she felt dizzy. Then it was time for more pasta and meat and salad and bread and wine, until she felt she couldn't take another thing, and then the hostess wheeled out the gelato and tiramisu.

An elderly man ushered Freddy aside, and he excused himself and went over to the drinks table to talk with him. Left to her own devices, May walked down to the back fence and looked out at the fields of carrots and potatoes that stretched away into the moonlit distance.

'Like a giant greengrocer's, isn't it,' a voice said at her shoulder, and she found a woman standing beside her. She was perhaps a year or two older, attractive, with dark hair, in a fashionable party frock similar to her own.

'Yes, supplying half the city I suppose.'

The other woman smiled. 'I'm Pam.'

'I'm May.'

'Not Italian, are you,' she said.

'No.'

'Me neither. Though I'd say we're probably the only two non-Italians here.'

May smiled. 'I came along with Freddy.'

'I'm sorry, I don't know him.'

'Sorry... I mean, Federico. Do you know him?'

'No, but that doesn't mean much, I don't know many people here. But he's sure to be some sort of relative of my bloke, Franco.'

'I don't think I've met Franco either.'

'Oh, he's here, somewhere. Probably doing a deal with someone,' Pam chuckled. 'He's in real estate.' She sipped from the lipsticked glass of wine dangling in her hand. 'So how long have you been going out with him?'

'Not long, only a few weeks.'

'So it's all very fresh and exciting,' Pam grinned.

'Yes, it is, I think you'd have to say,' May smiled back.

'Lucky girls, aren't we. Lots of Australian girls wouldn't touch them with a barge-pole. Don't know what they're missing out on, if you ask me.'

'No they don't. You're right.'

'Franco is such a good cook, I'm sure I'm putting on weight!'

'Oh, but you have a lovely figure. I'd say he's not doing you any harm at all!'

They laughed, and May saw Freddy finishing his conversation with the elderly man and looking around, apparently for her.

'I might get back to Freddy now. It's been nice meeting you.'

'Yes. We have a lot in common - Italian men!' Pam laughed.

When she rejoined Freddy, he led her outside the marquee into the dark by the side fence and kissed her with a passion that excited her.

'You're wonderful,' he said.

She didn't know what to say. The night felt almost too good. Even the air smelled like wine, from the last of the grapes turning on the vine that ran down the fence.

'It's not just me who thinks so. That man I was speaking with just then, he is my uncle. The one I work for. He says you are the most beautiful woman here! And you're not even Italian!'

May felt herself blush. ‘That’s very kind of him to say so.’

‘He says I must ask you to marry me, straight away. Before any other man can grab you.’

She smiled, unsure how to respond. ‘And what did you say?’

‘I said give me time please, uncle, I’ve only just met her! I don’t want to scare her off!’ He opened his hand. ‘Here, try this.’

‘What is it?’

‘A fig. Have you eaten fresh fig?’

‘No, never.’

‘Try it. They have trees full of them here, and almonds, and olives.’

She bit in, and the earthy sweetness overwhelmed her. ‘Oh...’ was all she could manage.

‘Good, isn’t it.’

She nodded, and wiped a trickle of fig juice from the corner of his mouth, and he kissed her again before leading her by the hand back into the marquee.

May met up again with Pam on the dance floor and the four of them sat down for a drink, and they found Freddy and Franco were indeed related, if distantly. As they said their goodbyes at the end of the evening, Franco farewelled May with a Continental kiss on either cheek, as Freddy kissed Pam, and the women agreed they must stay in touch, and exchanged telephone numbers. As Freddy drove them back up towards town and her flat, May smiled to think that she seemed to have found a new friend.

‘Mr Castro has said these were mercenaries,’ President Kennedy was saying. ‘According to press reports, the final message to be relayed from the refugee forces on the beach came from the rebel commander when asked if he wished to be evacuated. His answer was: “I will never leave this country.” That is not the reply of a mercenary.’

Despite his best efforts with the dial, Michael was starting to lose the signal. It happened often with his crystal set. A signal would be strong and he could hear everything, and then it would fade into a lot of other radio sounds, of music and voices,

until it was inaudible. Perhaps there was a storm somewhere making interference. He strained to hear the president's words through the wash of static.

'He has gone now to join in the mountains countless other guerrilla fighters, who are equally determined that the dedication of those who gave their lives shall not be forgotten, and that Cuba must not be abandoned to the Communists. And we do not intend it either!'

Besides straining to hear, as ever he strained to understand. No matter how many words he looked up in the dictionary, there were always more: "mercenary", "refugee", "guerrilla" (which he knew was obviously not "gorilla", but what did it mean?) and of course "Communists". That last one he heard over and over again, and had looked it up in the dictionary many times, and his father had tried to explain it to him that once, but the meaning still remained unclear to him, as did the cause of the anger and bitterness with which it was spoken on almost every occasion he heard it.

He could tell from the tone of President Kennedy's voice that something bad had happened. A big battle had been lost. In Cuba. He had the atlas open, and knew it was an island near the United States. The battle had occurred at a place called the Bay of Pigs, but it wasn't marked on his map, so he didn't know where in Cuba. He understood that some men who were Cuban friends of President Kennedy's had been beaten in a battle by men of the Cuban Communist strongman - he was always called that - President Castro. He knew that there had been bombing and shooting on a beach, ships had been sunk and men died, and others had been taken prisoner. It had been like a war, a little war. He knew all that, but wanted to know more. It felt imperative to know it, right then, and he wished with all his heart there was some way to find out. Now that he was nearly ten, in less than a week's time, it was high time he knew properly what a Communist was. And a mercenary, and a guerrilla, and a politburo for that matter.

The president had continued speaking all the while, and Michael could sense from his tone that he was coming to an end.

'...I am convinced that we in this country and the Free World possess the necessary resource, and the skill, and the added strength that comes from a belief in the freedom of man. And I am equally convinced that history will record the fact that this bitter struggle reached its climax in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Let me then make clear

as the President of the United States that I am determined of our system's survival and success, regardless of the cost and regardless of the peril!'

The last words were worrying. Would there be a war over this place, Cuba? What would that mean, entire armies fighting, even atomic bombs? Would they drop one on Adelaide? What would happen if they did, to his mother, and his father, and him? Would they all die?

He finally slept. In the morning, as his father buttered the toast and made the tea, he asked him where the Bay of Pigs was. His father looked up with a surprised expression, and didn't answer straight away. Then Michael asked him straight out if there was going to be a war with Cuba, with missiles and bombs, and one even dropped on Adelaide. Before he knew it his father was laughing and smiling that there was nothing to worry about, that nothing like that could ever happen, not with a great man like President Kennedy in charge, and not over a backward little place like Cuba.

'Cuba?' his father said, 'no one's going to war over Cuba. Do you know what Cuba's major export is?'

'No, dad.'

'Cigars!' his father laughed. 'And no one's ever fought a war yet over cigars!'

His father kept laughing, and Michael joined in.

Given his father's mood, he was tempted to push his luck. 'And Dad, what about Doctor Castro? I mean, I remember you telling me that Communists wanted everyone to get the money and things, but what about Doctor Castro? What kind of Communist is he?'

His father stopped laughing, and looked down into his mug of tea. 'A godless bastard. That's what any Communist is. And that chief spear-waver of theirs, Castro, he's the bloody worst of the lot. He's a galah, a nong. A bum.'

* * *

They were climbing the foothills. The rain had held off and the day promised to burnish into perfect autumn. Freddy drove cautiously: he wasn't a show-off about anything.

'Are you a Catholic, Freddy?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'I thought all Italians are Catholics.'

'My parents are, and I was brought up one. But I'm not a Catholic.'

'Perhaps you're what they call a submerged Catholic.'

'Well, yes, perhaps that is what you could call me, if you wished to. But I think I'm really more like a sunk to the rocks on the bottom of the sea Catholic, than just a submerged one.'

She laughed and edged closer on the bench seat, running a hand over his neck and shoulder. Freddy was dressed in a sports shirt and dark slacks, his hair neatly cut and combed, and had on a pair of dark glasses which she thought made him look like he had just stepped out of a magazine photograph from the French Riviera.

'What about you?' he asked.

'Once at school I had to fill in a form about religion, so I asked my mother and she said "just put down Methodist". And I said "Why? We're not Methodists?". And she said "just put it down, it's easier that way. No one ever asks anything about Methodists."'

Freddy grinned. 'Where are we meeting them again?'

'The Long Gully kiosk at midday.'

He glanced at his watch. 'We should be just about right on time then. Have you ever been there before?'

'No.'

'You'll like it. It's a very pretty place. People love it. I only hope it is not too crowded.'

'I suppose there might be quite few up there, on a Sunday.'

'Oh yes, especially on a nice day like this.'

A few minutes later they pulled up at the kiosk and found the others waiting there. Franco had dressed with a similar casual elegance to Freddy, if a bit more fussily, May thought, and Pam looked the height of fashion in a headscarf and dark glasses, white top and black slacks.

Franco greeted May with the already familiar Continental-style kisses, and fetched out tennis racquets and sandshoes from his car.

'So did you bring your racquets?' Pam asked.

'No, sorry, but I don't play very well,' May said, 'and Freddy doesn't play at all.'

'Never mind,' Pam said with a sly twinkle, 'you two can catch tadpoles.'

She led the way and they began walking down the road, branching off it down a track. They forded a creek and climbed its shallow bank.

'The courts aren't far, just down here,' Pam said.

'Who are these friends of yours anyway?' May asked, just as they heard the shouts of people playing tennis up ahead, and rounding a little bend, saw the courts.

Patrick was serving and Michael receiving. Father Quinlan was partnering him at the far end, and as Michael reached to play a forehand return of serve, the priest noticed a group of people coming towards them. He first recognised one of the women as an occasional parishioner, but then he noticed the other woman too. He must have stopped to look, because Michael's return had landed in, and Patrick played a backhand which had come to him, but Father Quinlan had hardly raised his racquet to play, and the ball had bounced into the cyclone wire back-stop.

'Bad luck, Father,' Patrick called from the other end, while Michael looked over at him, slightly puzzled.

Father Quinlan didn't notice Michael because he had realised without a doubt who the other woman was. Of all people, she was the one from the cafe, Patrick's woman. The realisation astonished him. What was she doing here? Was she mad, or Patrick mad, or the both of them? He had never seen the two men before. All he could tell about them, from their complexions, their style of dress and their bearing, was that they were New Australians, Greeks or Italians. He noticed something else too: Michael had seen the group, and he read the surprised expression only too clearly on the boy's face.

'Forty-fifteen!' Patrick called out from the other end, pronouncing the score as he always did before serving, and still unaware of anything untoward. Shirley Regan, partnering him at the net, tensed for a fast first serve.

'Hello, Patrick!' a woman's voice trilled as he was about to toss the ball into the

air for service, and Father Quinlan and Michael saw him turn around towards Pam, who had called, but could not see the look on his face as he registered who was among the other people behind her.

'Pam...' Patrick replied, as if it were beyond him to get more than the single syllable out.

'Where's Margaret?' she asked, looking about as she led her group in through the metal gate and onto the edge of the court.

'Over with the others... just past the trees, putting out the picnic things,' Patrick managed.

'Well I suppose I couldn't have expected her to be out on the court with you, not past six months at any rate,' she laughed. 'Margaret said to bring friends along, so this is my boyfriend Franco, and this is May, and her boyfriend Freddy.'

Patrick stood immobile, racquet dangling from his hand. He did not know how he did it, but he strained a smile, and extended his hand to shake the hands of the men. He did not know how to greet May, and after a pause which felt drawn out enough for the entire world to notice, he forced a smile and muttered hello, which to his ears fell dead upon the leaf littered asphalt of the court. May nodded but did not speak, hardly even raising her eyes, and he knew then that this meeting must somehow have been as much of a surprise to her as to him. That had to be it: almost no woman would do such a thing on purpose, not unless she truly hated the man, and May did not hate him.

'I'm Father Quinlan,' the priest put in. He and Michael had come down from the other end of the court.

'And I'm Shirley Regan,' Patrick's tennis partner said, her tone noting that Patrick was not making much of a fist of the introductions.

'Missed you at church lately, Pam,' Father Quinlan said, in a half-jovial attempt at conversation.

'Yes, sorry about that, Father,' she smiled back, but did not offer anything further. The men with her continued to look uncomfortable, Patrick saw, and May's eyes remained averted.

'And hello there, birthday boy!' Pam chortled down to Michael, and the others were saying their hellos to him when Margaret called out that it was time for Patrick to

come back and light the barbecue, and they all followed him as he led the way through a little stand of trees to the picnic site.

Michael ate his chops and sausages and peeked over the edge of his plate. His eyes wandered over the group assembled on and around the picnic blankets, but inevitably came to rest on May. He had only seen her for a half-instant that night in Broken Hill, and in the distance through the window of the chemist shop, but he recognised her beyond doubt: her face was graven into his memory. What was she doing in Adelaide, and at his birthday, and in the company of two men his father would regard as Eye-Ties? He had worked out that they had come as the guests of Pam, but how had that come about? What did Pam know about the woman and his father? All he knew himself was that he would have to keep very quiet. A nine year old might guess as much, but a ten year old would know it, he thought, with some satisfaction.

Their picnics were usually fun. His father always drank a lot and burned the meat and told jokes and tried to pinch his mother's bottom, in fact the bottom of any woman who happened to pass by, and everyone would shriek with laughter. But today the meat wasn't burned: his father had cooked it with quiet concentration over at the concrete barbecue at the edge of the clearing where they had set down their blankets and unpacked their baskets. His mother, he saw, wore a slightly puzzled expression, but talked happily enough with the Eye-Ties, a lot of their talk about salads, something which Michael, and he presumed all children, disliked.

He found the Eye-Ties very nice, especially the one introduced as Freddy. He appeared to be a kind and intelligent man, and Michael was interested to learn that he was studying at the university. Not that he knew much about the university, except that its full name was the University of Adelaide, and that it was a very big school that people went to when they finished school, and studied complicated things like rockets and geology. He would have to go there himself one day if he wanted to be a geologist, and his mother had walked him through its grounds once or twice, and it seemed quiet and shady. He had never met anyone who had gone there, and the funny thing was that when he finally did, the student turned out to be an Eye-Tie. His father rarely used the word without an

accompanying “stupid” or “dirty”, but Freddy seemed neither stupid nor dirty, nothing like it, but clever from the way he spoke, and, to Michael’s eyes, very well washed. As for the others, most of them chatted in little groups, including Pam, who spent most of her time with May, who seemed very shy and spent most of the time looking away at the trees, up at the sky or down at her feet. Her face had a serious expression, and he hadn’t heard her laugh once.

After his mother had cleared the lunch plates away she brought out the chocolate birthday cake with green Freddo frogs on top and the ten candles lit, and they all sang loudly, their voices echoing down the gully and startling a flock of rosellas picking through the grass.

‘Make a wish, Michael!’ Pam urged, ‘make a wish and don’t tell!’, and he blew out all the candles with a breath, and was officially ten. Recalling what his mother had said about double figures, he realised with a slight pang that he would never be a single figure again, and presumably not make three figures either. Two figures was it, he thought, the ones of a grown-up. His secret wish was grown-up too, he thought: that his parents be happy.

When they had all eaten their cake his dad went back onto the tennis court with Shirley and Tom Regan and one of the Eye-Ties, the one called Franco, and his mother chatted over tin mugs of bush tea with Freddy and Pam, and May, who still said almost nothing. When Michael mentioned that he was going down to the creek, Father Quinlan said he might come along too. As they walked away chatting, Father Quinlan put his arm around his shoulders, and Michael felt reassured to have such a good friend who was an adult.

Patrick was snoring again, comforting in its own way. He always snored after the claret on their picnics, even if today he hadn’t got the flagon out until it was starting to get late. By then most of the others had gone, and he might even have guzzled it alone, she smiled to think, if Shirl and Tom had not been such willing accomplices. But then, Patrick had been in a queer mood for most of the day. That wasn’t front page news, he often was, had been for all of their marriage. He could descend into one of his moods for no reason, and

nothing could get him out of it except time, a few hours alone, even a day or two sometimes. He would say it was a headache and take a lot of Bex, but she knew it wasn't a normal headache. She didn't know what it was, but when it happened there was nothing to be done but wait for him to come out of it.

His behaviour that day had been unusually odd though, even for him: quiet, self-absorbed, almost sullen. He had been all right on the drive up in the morning, looking forward to tennis. Father Quinlan had been big-noting himself a bit, he said: well, this would be his chance to show what he could do with a racquet.

Patrick had gone onto the court soon after they arrived, but when the others had turned up, Pam and her friends, his mood had changed. It wasn't so much that he'd soured, as she had seen often before, or that he'd lapsed into a bad mood. He had withdrawn from conversation almost completely, and his mood hadn't lifted, not a bit, until he went back onto the court with Tom and Shirl after the others had left, and opened the flagon.

Perhaps it had been the Eye-Ties. After all, he often spoke of them disparagingly, like most people did. But in the past, whenever he'd actually met one, he'd been the perfect gentleman, making jokes, a charmer in his own way. It was curious how much he could turn on when he wanted to, but he rarely did, more was the pity. Today he had hardly even looked at them. It wasn't that he'd been insulting or even offhand: he'd simply avoided them.

If it wasn't the Italians, what then? Was it Pam? She knew he had mixed feelings about Pam and her new life after Bill. The clothes she got around in were perhaps a bit too fashionable for his taste, and there was the boyfriend too. But even Patrick would have to admit that Pam deserved to start a new life after Bill. She was still young, so why shouldn't she find herself a new fellow while she still could? She had been a good wife to Bill - no one, not even the pickiest goody-two-shoes in the parish, would deny that. So what did people expect, that she'd just get old and wither away and die, the mournful widow? Not bloody likely, she couldn't help but smile to think, not a girl like Pam. She was too much her own person, with much too much get up and go for that.

Then there was the other woman, the petite brunette, Pam's friend May. She was an attractive girl too, if unusually quiet. But Pam had said she had recently moved to

Adelaide, so some shyness in company was understandable. She wondered if Patrick had noticed her, then remembered that he had hardly looked at her. Could her mere presence have upset him in some way? Perhaps she was a little too pretty for him, or her top a bit too tight across the bust. Patrick was such a prude. Or had he met her somewhere before, and not liked her, she wondered, though surely he would have mentioned that. For a crazy moment she almost entertained the notion that May was the other woman - but that was impossible. Why would she come to their picnic... the idea was ridiculous. Besides, May had a boyfriend, the convivial, and to Margaret's eyes rather handsome, Freddy. She had talked with him alone for a few minutes, and learned that his real name was Federico, which she found a nice name and asked if she could use it, to which he had readily agreed.

No, if May were Patrick's other woman, why would she bring Freddy along to cause a scene? Why would she have Freddy at all in that case? May couldn't be the other woman. But then a very strange idea struck her, that perhaps Pam hadn't mentioned whose picnic they were coming to, and so it could have been a shock to May to find Patrick there. But, even in a place as small as Adelaide that sort of thing just didn't happen, secret lovers turning up unexpectedly at each other's parties, with other lovers in tow. It wasn't Peyton Place. She had discreetly read the book - Patrick would never have approved - and no, Adelaide was not like that.

But still it played on her mind, as Patrick sawed and grated on the pillow beside her. Why had he behaved like that? But why did he behave as he usualy did anyway, so erratically? She would never know, not even if she found out who the other woman was, or if she really did exist at all. Tonight, for some reason, there was a touch of doubt about it in her mind. Patrick had been sweeter in recent days, more considerate. Perhaps she had made the whole silly thing up in her mind, misconstruing a few words from Michael after that trip. And pregnancy was a stressful and difficult time for any woman.

With that she allowed herself to drift to the edge of sleep, but for some reason it would not come. She thought it might be the school tuck-shop roster, and that she was meant to go in one day soon and couldn't remember what day just then and there; but that wasn't it either. She worried away at it, not sure what she was looking for anyway, in the recesses of her memory, but then something did come to her.

It was when Father Quinlan had put his arm around Michael, and they had gone

down to the creek. What possible interest, she wondered, was there for a priest in a creek? And the way in which he had put his arm around Michael, there was something in that which nagged at her. It was familiar; almost, she thought, too familiar, even proprietorial. As if Father Quinlan had some kind of right over their child. Something felt uncomfortable there, not quite right.

But no, her concern was silly and far-fetched, she was being over-protective, she realised, and tried to dismiss it from her mind, and sleep. Yet as she lay there, something else stole into her thoughts, something she now remembered half hearing Michael say in the kitchen not long ago. She had been distracted by other things and was not listening properly, but now she heard plainly what he had said, the words “Blessed Kiss”.

MAY

The boss let her off early and she caught the bus on Prospect Road and got off at Jerningham Terrace. She walked briskly through the clattering leaves. It wasn't far but the day was cold and she realised she would need a proper overcoat for the winter. She was pleased to enter the solid old bluestone building.

'I have an appointment for three-thirty, May Netley.'

'Yes, that's right, with Doctor Cuthbert.'

She took a seat in the Waiting Room.

The telephonist was on the line. 'Mr Carlow, there's a woman on the line for you, a Miss Netley?'

He hesitated. 'Put her through, Lorraine.'

They had not spoken since the picnic.

'Patrick,' she said, 'I need to see you.'

He didn't reply.

'Patrick, I'm... I can't say just sorry. I'm... I'm devastated. I never imagined that day, I didn't know that...'

He still said nothing.

'Patrick, please.'

'There's nothing to be said.'

'I need to see you. Urgently. I've had some news.'

'Can't you tell it over the telephone?' He said it coldly as he could.

'No, I'm sorry. I can't.'

It was plain in her voice that she could not. He heard her sob.

'Patrick... this is... I need to see you, I have to.'

'What about your Eye-Tie boyfriend? Won't he do?'

'Patrick, it is you I need to see. It's you I love.'

Again he was silent.

'Patrick. Please. Can't we sit down and talk? I have to speak with you. It's very important, life and death.'

He still did not reply. She held her breath.

'All right,' he said at length. 'I could perhaps meet you at the cafe.'

'When?'

'An hour.'

'Thank you, Patrick.'

He hung up wishing he had not taken the call.

Margaret sensed it the moment she came in the door. She walked straight up the passage and into the bedroom and opened his wardrobe and found it was empty. Then she saw the envelope on the dressing table.

'Dad working late?' Michael asked at the tea table.

'No, he's away.'

'He didn't say he had was going away on a trip.'

'He had to at the last minute.'

The boy picked up his lamb chop in his fingers and delicately sheared the bone of meat with his front teeth. As he chewed, he saw his mother's eyes were elsewhere.

'It's all right, Mum,' he said. 'He's never gone too long.'

She got up and started carrying things to the sink before he had finished eating.

'Where's he gone anyway, mum? Broken Hill again?'

She did not reply, turning on the tap.

That night the talk was still all about Cuba. There was a new word being used to describe what had occurred at the Bay of Pigs now: *fiasco*. He jotted it down, hopeful about the spelling, another one to look up in the dictionary, or ask his father when he came back

from his trip. All the talk now was whether "the Cuban fiasco would hurt President Kennedy's standing".

It worried him that President Kennedy might be hurt in any way. Whenever he thought of him, for some reason he saw his father, a good, strong, reliable man whom other people admired. And he knew that his father believed in the president, not just because he was a Catholic, nor because his mother said he was handsome. Mr Kennedy was obviously clever and spoke very well, if with a strong accent even for an American. Stephen had seen lots of photographs of him in the newspapers and heard him on the radio and the television news, and could tell he was a man who cared about other people, just like his father did. So when people said bad things about President Kennedy, he felt it as a double affront, almost against his father as well.

He thought about him sitting at the wheel on the long trip back up to Broken Hill, and was reminded of their journey a few months before. He presumed the trip meant he had new sales to secure. There was that woman there too, though. Perhaps he would see her while he was there. But she had just been in Adelaide, and at the picnic. Was she living in Adelaide now, or had she only been down on a visit? And what had she been doing at the picnic with the Italian man, Freddy? Was he her boyfriend? He still wondered about all those things.

He had a magazine of his father's, called *Time*, which he liked to look through because there was a lot in it about President Kennedy. There were photographs of him and Mrs Kennedy and their children on the lawns of the White House, on a picnic, and out sailing in a yacht. They all looked so happy that just looking at them made him feel better, even when there was so much talk about bombs and World War Three, because no matter what happened, he knew President Kennedy would never risk the wellbeing of his family. As long as they smiled happily together, everything would be all right in the world, he was sure.

They drove up South Road and into the foothills. After a cloudy start it had turned into one of those days that sometimes came in May, when the autumn ripened into golden fields and blue skies, and the bald hills stark with gullies of grey. They passed roadside

stalls selling flowers and fruit, and the big advertising hoardings that marked the edge of town. They went by the turnoff to Christies Beach and Port Noarlunga and through McLaren Vale, and commenced the long slow grind up Willunga Hill.

May sat close to Patrick at the wheel. A week had passed since her call and their meeting in the cafe to tell him of her pregnancy. He had been extremely hurt and angry about Freddy, and had mocked her about who the father was, but she was steadfast that the baby was his. The doctor had confirmed that she was already pregnant before she even met Freddy, and she showed him the date on the doctor's letter.

'I love you, not Freddy,' she had said simply, across the cafe table. 'I'm going to have your baby and I want us to be a family. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me.'

'But why... why the bloody hell did you start seeing the bastard at all?'

'I was lonely in a new town, with no friends. I didn't get to see much of you. Most of the time I was just alone there in the flat. I went out one night by myself, and met him. But I never intended...' She paused. 'And I never thought you'd leave you wife for me.'

The truth of that stopped him.

'Would you stop seeing him if I left Margaret?'

'Yes. Of course I would. You already know that.'

'So you really don't love Freddy, never did.'

'I love you,' she had replied, and he had not pursued it further. Instead, he had surprised her by kissing her openly in the cafe, and all eyes had turned to them, but he hadn't cared. She sensed in that moment that he was casting a weight from himself, and was freed.

They had driven straight from the cafe down to the local hotel, where he had left her in the Lounge Bar while he went over to the house. He had expected Margaret might be out shopping and Michael over at a Robert's after school, and he was right. But he was also aware that time was short, grabbing just a few things, and leaving the note he had written in the car. Then he returned to the hotel and picked up May. As they drove back up to her flat, he had placed his hand on her knee, but after a moment she gently removed it, taking it in hers and kissing it. 'Remember you're driving for three now,' she had said, and he had grinned.

It had turned out better than she could have imagined. Not that she really knew what would happen, except that she would tell him the baby was his and that she loved him, and hope he would stand by her. Now they were suddenly together, a couple who would be sharing her flat. She was very happy about it, even if it did make it difficult to know what to do about Freddy. She needed to speak with him, even just to let him know what had happened, and to break it off civilly; but how, with Patrick there, and what to say anyway? The pity of it was that in the short time she had known him, she had grown very fond of Freddy, not only as a lover but as a friend. It was sad to think she might never be able to see him again, but she knew that was probably the case.

Part of her might have suggested that she choose Freddy over Patrick. He had no complications like Patrick - she had so often felt guilty, awful about his wife and son - he was much closer to her age, and, she felt, his interests and temperament were more like hers. But once she had received confirmation of the pregnancy and knew who the father of her child had to be, her only option had been to tell Patrick, and see what transpired.

It had been a surprise when he moved in with her that same day, but if they were to be together with a family of their own, that was coming sooner or later, so why not sooner? As a Catholic he had not suggested trying to arrange an abortion, nor even her giving the child up for adoption. Both were gratifying, as she could not have agreed to either. As for marriage, she knew divorce and re-marriage were out of the question for him: she dared not hope for that much. For now, all she could hope for was that he would stick by her, and that they would have a healthy child, and be as happy as they could be in the circumstances.

‘Victor in half an hour,’ he said, as at last they crested Willunga Hill. ‘Feel like some lunch?’

‘Yes, I think I might.’

‘Not feeling queasy?’

‘Not now, no.’

‘Good. There are a couple of decent pubs in Victor. We’ll grab some nice grub.’

The plains behind them, they traversed the scrubby forests of eucalypt on the southern slopes. Before long they would descend on the far side, and get their first view of Encounter Bay.

Margaret and Michael walked towards the church. He carried a book and wore a look of concern.

'He won't be expecting to see you too, Mum.'

She shook her head and kept walking. She walked at a brisk pace he found hard to match at the best of times, but today her step was all the more strident. When he had mentioned he was going over to the presbytery to see Father Quinlan, she had said she needed to see him too, and would come with him. He had wondered out loud why she couldn't go another time, but she flatly said that she was coming with him, and he knew better than to argue.

Father Quinlan seemed happy enough to see them both, and showed Margaret to a seat. Then Michael handed him the book, a collection of Henry Lawson's stories.

'Which was your favourite one Michael?'

'*The Loaded Dog*. It was very funny, Father.'

'Yes it's a beauty.'

'I've also written something Father, not just for class.' He took a folded exercise book page from his pocket and put it on the table. 'Would you read it for me, please, Father?'

'Of course. But for now perhaps you could go outside for a walk, because I can see your mother might like to speak with me alone.'

She waited until a few moments after Michael went and Father Quinlan had closed the door.

'He's left me, Father,' she said quietly. 'As I thought, for another woman.'

'When?'

'Two days ago.'

'Does Michael know?'

'Not yet. He thinks he's away on a country trip.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'No.'

'Who the woman is?'

'No. He left a note, but it didn't say anything much. And left me some money.'

'What did the note say?'

Margaret had maintained a studied composure, but now her hands started to quiver, a tear blurted from her eye and her throat clamped with a sob.

'He said he was sorry,' she managed. 'Very sorry. But he'd realised he needed more from life and wasn't going to die regretting he'd never tried to get it. That he'd met another woman and loved her, and was going off to be with her. Then he asked me to tell Michael how sorry and sad he was, and that he would ring us in a week or so. And that it had been good, but the time had come for change, and so he'd made the very difficult decision to go. Oh, and that he loved us both very much.'

Father Quinlan nodded. 'Was that all?'

'Yes.'

He reached out to comfort her, but she hung back. 'I'm all right, Father.'

He had his housekeeper bring in tea. Margaret hardly touched hers and wouldn't take a biscuit from the plate.

'If it's any comfort,' he said at length, 'Patrick will probably come back home soon. Men sometimes do this sort of thing, run off with someone for a little while, but in the end they nearly all realise they need their families.'

'How about their wives, Father?' she said, almost sharply, peering up red-eyed at him.

'Of course. Their wives, their children... families.'

His cup was empty and he refilled it, but Margaret refused more. She had drunk less than a mouthful.

'I don't know if this will be of any help Margaret, but that camp I mentioned is on the weekend after next... you know, me taking the senior altar boys away camping. I'd still be very happy to take Michael along, if you wished. You might appreciate a little time by yourself, or spend time with friends, you know.'

He was surprised by the direct look she gave him.

'No thank you, Father.'

'You'd prefer him not to go, you mean... to stay at home with you?'

'Yes, Father. That is what I would prefer.'

'I understand. Some other time then.'

She did not respond: her silence was almost conspicuous.

Eventually he cleared his throat. 'Well, I suppose I should think about getting on with things. I'm hearing Confession soon. Perhaps Michael can come back for his visit another time.'

She nodded, rose from her seat and picked up her handbag, and he went to the door to show her out.

'Margaret, give it time, that's all it will need. He'll come home, I'm sure of it.'

'We'll see, Father. But just don't ask me to forgive him if he does.'

'Margaret, I can understand how you must feel...'

'Not now, Father,' she replied, the sharpness back in her voice. 'Not now. Thank you for the tea.'

She went out and he heard her calling for Michael. As they walked away, Father Quinlan lingered by the door with the uncomfortable suspicion that Patrick's leaving had perhaps not been the main reason for her visit.

They ate sausages and mash at the kitchen table. She cleared away the plates and asked him to wash up, and went out of the room. As he did the dishes he heard her in the living room speaking on the telephone. She only spoke for a minute or so, and when she stopped it was very quiet again. Saturday night: usually his mum and dad would be having a session in the kitchen, but not tonight. He wondered when his dad would ring from Broken Hill.

He went to his room and sat at his desk and looked up at the Hurricane on his shelf. It sat there, assembled and glued, in the glory of all its colour transfer markings, on its stand beside his Spitfire, his Stuka, his Me109. Beautiful, he wanted to say; satisfying, he wished. The problem was though, he felt let down. When you got it home and assembled it and put the transfers on it and put it on its little stand, it was still terrific, but not quite as terrific as it had been when you were thinking about it and wanted it so badly, and now it was just another model on his shelf.

How odd, that he did not love it more, now that he had it. How odd too, that he

found so many things odd. Perhaps he was like the man in the office in the Banjo poem, not satisfied, not fitting in with things quite as others did. Not satisfied when you should be: was that right or wrong? Then he heard someone at the front door, and the sound of his mother greeting Pam.

He walked her over the causeway out to Granite Island and they sat perched up on top, looking back at Victor Harbour and Encounter Bay. They poked around the shops in the main street and strolled the esplanade as the afternoon started to close in, and the green glint faded from the waves. He shot a row of ducks at the shooting gallery in the sideshow by the park, and they walked aimlessly through streets that smelled of dry seaweed and hot chips, of Saturday night in Victor.

They ordered up steaks and a bottle of claret at the Royal Hotel and jived in the ballroom to a rock and roll band. Patrick marvelled at how there was a first time for everything, even dancing with the woman you loved. It struck him then that he truly did love May, and that whatever the price, and it would be a very heavy one, he was doing the right thing. What else could he do, anyway? Let her go, with a baby? It perplexed him deeply still that she had been able to carry on with that Eye-Tie with such apparent ease and lack of guilt, but far bigger things were at stake now. He would be the father of May's child, not some Eye-Tie, and start a new family with her; and that would change her too, make her grow, mature into the wife he some day would make her. They were already together for good or ill, in sickness and in health. What choice did either of them have now anyway? She could not go back to Broken Hill, just as he could not go back to Margaret. Their choices had been made, their bridges burned.

There was another first time for everything too. Here he was with May, in Victor, where only a few months previously he had been on a family holiday with Margaret and Michael. The annual family holiday: they had been here so many summers past. But no more. Now it would be where he and May came, with their own child, their own little boy or girl. There would be another child as well, the baby Margaret would bear in a matter of weeks. A new baby, but the father gone. The scandal would be deep and intense, he knew it, of course it would. And with May, and their child, he would be living in sin. Now it was

not just a matter of sinful acts: his whole existence was sinful. Every moment he lived with her, he was in mortal sin. He was bathed in sin now, swam in it. If he died he would go to Hell, that was assured. But, he knew, to live without her now would be a Hell of its own, a living one. He preferred to chance Hell later. After all, in the long run he could legitimise his set-up with May - though Margaret would have to die first for that - and return to the fold and confess it all, make his peace with God and wipe his soul slate clean again. He loved God, acknowledged the Pope as his spiritual Father and followed the teachings of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church, but for now he had no choice. He had become a bad Catholic; and probably now, he realised, a submerged one.

There were other deep concerns too. When the two babies were born he would have two complete families, five people to support. The problem of money would worry him grey, particularly with the credit squeeze biting and sales harder to find. But there would be plenty of time for worry, the rest of his life, and for now he was happy to be free of it, enjoy the beautiful young woman he danced with, and a future which was nothing if not utterly new.

The band made a big, drawn-out finish of *Chantilly Lace,* and everyone applauded. He saw the happiness in May's face. Like him, she had never expected life to be so good either. But love could play tricks on life, and turn it down new paths you might never have expected. The lights faded down, to darkness. The guitarist plucked harp-like arpeggios and the singer stepped into the light at the microphone and began to croon.

Oh my love, my darling,

I've hungered for your touch,

A long lonely time...

The couples around them shuffled close together, and he folded May into his arms and she kissed him so deeply that he forgot all about Margaret and about Michael, even that she had so recently been kissing that bloody Eye-Tie bastard.

Later he walked her down to the empty beach and they strayed across the sands watching the moon rise. He liked her pale grey dress with the pearl buttons that he trembled to undo while lifting her hem and kissing her belly. He spread his jacket and she lay upon it and drew him down to her.

Father Quinlan had retired early, but yet again found sleep would not come. He mentally replayed the conversation with Margaret, examining it minutely. Michael would not be coming on the camp, for whatever reason. He sensed that no matter what he had said, it would not have made any difference, and that her mind had already been made up.

But why? Yes, with her husband gone, perhaps she didn't want the silence of an empty house without Michael. But was it something else? If there was another explanation, it could only be that she suspected something, and that something was an impropriety so monstrous that he was astonished she could even imagine it. Most Catholic mothers would dismiss and shun such a notion before they even properly had it. What kind of woman could suspect her own parish priest as being capable of something as terrible as that? Yet, when he ran through his mental card index of the faces of the parish women, he saw that if any might be capable of suspecting such a thing, it would be Margaret. There was something about her that said she was different to the others: he wasn't sure what, but it was there.

What would she do now? Curtail, even end Michael's visits to the presbytery altogether, and perhaps stop him serving as an altar boy? Eyebrows would be raised, but considering the straits she was in with her marriage, that would be the least of her worries. Her life would be fodder for parish gossip for months, probably years. He could not remember ever having encountered an instance, even hearing an account, of such salaciousness, the husband with the young mistress who comes to the city to join him, leaving his pregnant wife and young son for her. The scandal would cause a sensation when word leaked out. How would Margaret deal with that, on top of everything else? And given that he was one of the few people she could turn to, would she maintain her resolution about Michael? Or would she come to the view she had been acting irrationally, in a state of shock, and let things settle back to the way they were before?

He did not know the answer to any of it because Margaret was a woman, and how many men, including husbands, truly knew the mind of a woman? Like the Virgin Mary bearing the infant Jesus, they were a perfect mystery.

On the kitchen radio Mel Cameron was doing an advert for Solomon's Carpets. Then came the mournfully jaunty slide guitar, and Wanda Jackson began to wail.

'*I don't want your lonely mansion*

With a tear in every room...'

It was ridiculous that such sentimental pap could move her. But there was nothing Margaret could do about the tears. The timing of the song irritated her too, even though most songs they played on the radio were about broken hearts.

'*Silver threads and golden needles*

Can't patch up this heart of mine...'

'You haven't heard anything more from him then,' Pam was saying, and Margaret shook her head. 'Well listen, I know... here's an idea. Why don't you take a few days off, get away for a break somewhere? Go down to Port Elliot, or Victor, or Robe. Or your sister, where's she?'

'Mount Gambier,' Margaret said.

'It's lovely down there. Bill took me for holidays once or twice. We went on picnics to the Blue Lake, lovely.'

'I don't think I'm quite in the mood for the Blue Lake,' Margaret said. 'Except perhaps to throw myself into it.'

Pam could not restrain a smile. 'No, perhaps not the time for picnics there just now,' and Margaret almost managed a smile too. 'You're not alone in this though. There seems to be a rash of it at present,' Pam said.

'What?'

'Blokes leaving their wives. Must be something in the water. Or the beer. It's why Franco isn't with me tonight.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's gone off drinking with Freddy, who's drowning his sorrows because it's all over with May. And the reason for that is that, unbeknownst to Freddy, racy little May's been seeing another bloke on the side, a married one, and now he's left his wife for her... and that's why she said ta-ta Freddy. Franco thinks she was just using Freddy to get what she wanted with the other bloke anyway, but I don't think she's that kind of girl.'

'What kind of girl is she then, do you think?'

Pam looked up. 'Funny, but I don't really know. I mean, I haven't known her very long. But I do know her well enough to know she's not the kind of girl Franco suspects she might be.'

Margaret topped up their glasses. 'You said May's only recently arrived in Adelaide. From the country.'

'Yes.'

The intuition Margaret had felt since the picnic, crystallised into the question she had been afraid to ask. 'Do you know where she's from then?'

'Broken Hill, I think,' Pam said, sipping her beer. 'Yes, Broken Hill, that's what she said.'

Margaret said nothing, and Pam looked over at her and saw she had become quite pale in the face.

'Are you all right?'

Margaret did not reply, lowering her head, and Pam got up and put her arm around her.

'What is it Margaret?'

'Nothing... it's nothing, I'm all right.'

'Bastard. He's a bastard,' Pam said. 'But listen, it really could be nice for you if you got away for a little while, out of the house, don't you think?'

'That's what Father Quinlan's been telling me,' Margaret said. 'He wants to take Michael on a camp with some other altar boys, and I could have some time to myself.'

'Well, that sounds nice. A very kind offer. And what did you say, is Michael going?'

'No.'

'That's a pity. Why not?'

'I said no.'

'But, you might enjoy some time to yourself.'

The song had ended. Mel was endorsing Ravesi the Chemist. 'I feel Michael might have been spending a bit too much time with Father Quinlan lately,' Margaret said quietly. 'He's always at the presbytery. He should spend more time with other boys.'

‘But I thought he and Father Quinlan got on well.’

‘I just don’t like Michael spending too much time there. I don’t think it’s healthy.’

Pam paused, and eyed her. ‘Hang on. You’re not suggesting that there’s anything... you know... wrong... with Father Quinlan and Michael spending time together though, are you?’

‘All I’m saying is Michael has been spending too much time with him, with an adult. He’s been unwell and sickly and he needs to run around in the sunshine with other boys, for his health.’

Pam picked up the bottle and refilled their empty glasses. They were drinking ponies: bigger glasses made the West End too bitter for Margaret. Besides, it got warm. Even in winter she couldn’t stand it anything but deep chilled.

‘In fact,’ Margaret said, ‘I’ve decided that Michael won’t be spending any more time at all alone with Father Quinlan.’

Pam’s eyed widened. ‘Margaret!’

‘My mind is made up.’

‘But surely...’

‘It’s not healthy, Pam.’

‘People will talk, I mean...’

‘Bloody well let them! I couldn’t care less what they say.’

‘Margaret, I know you’re upset... any woman would be in your position... and when you’re upset everything around you can look pretty bleak... I understand that. You can start to get all kinds of ideas. I know some mean-minded people around the place would find it hard to believe it, but I didn’t know what to do with myself after Bill’s death. It took me ages to right myself, or so it felt. Didn’t much know who I was any more for a while there. We all get thrown off balance sometimes. But you can’t blame the whole world for what Patrick has done.’

‘I’m not doing that.’

‘Aren’t you? Because I think you’ve started to doubt people who have your best interests at heart, like Father Quinlan. I don’t even go to church any more, but...’

‘I’ve made my mind up.’

'So you keep saying. But Father Quinlan is a good man. A very good man, I know that much. He'd never, ever do anything untoward to a child in his trust. No priest would. They're men of God. And the things that you're suspecting... and I really do find it hard to believe you do... well they're the wickedest things one could ever imagine.'

'And what if you're wrong, Pam? What happens then?'

'I'm not wrong. And what about if you're wrong?'

'Then no harm will be done.'

'Except perhaps to Michael, in what he misses out on,' Pam said. 'And to you.'

'How do you mean?'

'How can you be part of the congregation still, the parish, if this is the kind of thing you're thinking? How could you go even go to church?'

'I could go to another church.'

'But it wouldn't be yours.'

'You seem to do all right without it these days.'

'But you're not me. We're different.'

'Are we?' Margaret said. 'I think we all need pretty much the same things. Which is why Patrick's run off with May. To make himself feel special, and we all want that.'

Pam almost gagged on her beer. 'May?? You think he's gone off with May?'

'Of course he has, the bastard.'

Margaret got up and walked to the pantry and grabbed a packet of peanuts and rattled them into a dish. The radio had gone to news, race riots in Alabama, and she switched it off. The room was very quiet then. She resumed her seat and offered Pam a nut, but she shook her head, unable to speak.

'But... how could it be May?' Pam asked, at last. 'I mean, she was with Freddy, at Michael's birthday...'

'She didn't know who she was seeing that day, did she,' Margaret said. 'I mean, whose party she was going to.'

'No, you're right, that's true. But Patrick... he saw her there with Freddy, I mean, how could he take her back, be with her now..?'

'Oh, don't you worry about that. Patrick would have forgiven her. He's a very good Catholic after all. And she's a very pretty girl.'

They had thought about taking a room at the Royal, but the prospect of waking together in the sunny flat was more enticing. Mount Compass loomed in the darkness, and they drove through the silent hamlet at its foot. It was still an hour before midnight, but every light was out as they passed. Soon they would be through the scrubby stretch and going down Willunga Hill.

'I think I like Paul for a boy. And Audrey for a girl.'

'As in Newman and Hepburn,' he chuckled. 'Well, we've got to start a list somewhere.'

'What are your favourites then?'

'I don't know. I haven't really given it much thought. Still got plenty of time for that, haven't we?'

'Yes. But we do want to be prepared.'

'We will be.'

They drove on in silence. He enjoyed night driving. There were fewer distractions for one thing, and in the heat of summer sometimes the only way to get through the miles was to drive by night. He had done a lot of it.

'We'll have to get a house, don't you think?' she said.

'Yes we will.'

'Where would you like to live?'

'I don't know. Norwood perhaps... or Unley. We should be able to get something cheap and decent enough with room there.'

'What about Margaret and the children?'

He knew she had been wanting ask that for quite a while. 'You mean, will I see them?'

'Yes.'

'I will. Or would want to. But how and when, and how to arrange it... no, I haven't thought through any of that yet.'

'It'll be difficult for you.'

'I know that.'

'I love you, Patrick,' she said, and kissed his neck.

'I love you too.'

They made the descent of Willunga Hill, passing the liquid black vales in its flank. Ahead were the stubbled moonlit plains of McLaren Vale. The car sped smoothly, almost as if they were flying, and they soon reached the bottom where the road ran straight back to Adelaide.

'Such a lovely night, isn't it,' May said, 'just lovely.'

'Not too much longer now, and we'll be home in bed.'

'Perhaps we could look for a house in Prospect too,' she mused, 'or up in Magill...'

He saw a car coming up a dirt side-road towards them on the highway, lights on high beam. He realised it was travelling fast and not giving any sign of slowing down, and could hit them if the driver didn't brake. He blew the horn, but the car kept coming.

'Bloody hooligans.'

He pulled the wheel, swerving out into the oncoming lane. Nothing was coming the other way, but there was a patch of loose gravel on the road surface, and at the speed they were still doing off the hill, the car slid further over to the right, off the bitumen and onto the far gravel shoulder. Patrick battled to regain control, but in a moment more they had slewed off the gravel and down into a ditch.

'Christ! God!'

A glance and he saw May she she sat, staring ahead, features frozen. He knew not to brake too hard or the car could roll, but with a line of trees coming up he had no choice. The ground was soft under the braking wheels, and the car rolled.

He felt it go over once, twice. He was aware of being flung around inside it, but that was all. With a bone-crunching crash it slammed a last time down onto its roof, and lay there helpless as a beetle on its back, wheels spinning in the drifts of dust.

Patrick found himself conscious, and jerked his head to look for May, but she wasn't in her seat. Bleeding and in pain all over his body, he was able to drag himself from the wreckage and crawl off through the dirt. He made out her shape near one of the big gums that had caused him to hit the brakes, and somehow he got half to his feet and staggered towards her.

‘May!’

The other car had turned around and was pulling up, and in its headlights he saw with immense relief that she looked unhurt, lying at the base of the tree. He reached her and kissed her, and her eyes blinked open and saw him.

‘May... May... thank God you’re all right.’

She didn’t answer, gazing up at him.

* * *

The group of three huddled in thin sun by a plot in West Terrace Cemetery, as the priest shuffled the leaves of a prayer book. Pam comforted Freddy, while Franco watched without expression. The only other mourner, a squat middle-aged man, stood a short distance off.

When it was over and they walked away, they learned the man’s name was Bob, and that he was a pharmacist from Broken Hill, and May’s previous employer. He had flown down because her parents were no longer living, and none of her few remaining relatives in the Hill could make the journey.

They went to a hotel on Pirie Street for what became an ad hoc wake, and some time later Bob let slip the suggestion that he too had been an intimate of May’s. In the fog of beer fumes and cigarette smoke, it had somehow come out too that May had been pregnant when she died. Her affairs with Patrick and Freddy were already becoming the stuff of front bar gossip across the city. The scandal had been fanned by ever more salacious rumour, so that in death May had acquired the reputation of a *femme fatale,* as well as a common slut.

It would be some time before Patrick learned all this. When he stirred from a coma in his bed at the Royal Adelaide Hospital five days after the accident, the first and hardest thing he had to take in and accept was the fact of May’s death.

Some time later, Margaret and Michael were ushered in. They had virtually camped in the corridor outside his room since a policeman knocked on the door early on Sunday

morning. Others had joined in the vigil, including Father Quinlan, Pam, Tom and Shirley Regan and a few more from down at the parish, but Margaret and Michael were alone outside when Patrick emerged from the coma.

They found him subdued, unable to speak much. Margaret placed a hand on his and let it rest there a while. She told him how good it was to see him alive, and how much they had missed him. Michael kissed him and gave him a box of Roses chocolates he had bought with his pocket money. He said he couldn't wait until he could come home, and might even have cried except for the fear of his father thinking him a sissy.

Patrick's eyes soon closed, and he appeared to be drifting back to sleep, and the nurse showed them out. In the corridor the doctor said that he had suffered severe concussion, cracked ribs and a broken arm, as well as suspected internal injuries and a host of more minor ones. He expected him to remain in hospital for two or three weeks. He would eventually make a full recovery, the doctor said, but it could well take quite some time. When Margaret thanked him and his staff for all they had done, he smiled and said she should have Patrick home in time for the birth of their baby.

'Shearman grabs the ball on the wing, and takes one bounce... two bounces... three! He's got Lindsay Head on a lead in the pocket, and fires in a perfect stab dropkick for the skipper to take on the chest, just thirty yards out from goal, directly in front!'

Patrick sat by the kitchen radio with his arm in a sling. It was hard for Margaret to tell if he was listening when she walked in. His face had remained almost expressionless since his discharge and homecoming two days before.

'Head puts boot to ball and bangs it right through the middle of the high-diddle-diddle for another one for Torrens, taking them to just four straight kicks behind Port!'

She put the apron on, and took out the flour to make a tray of scones. They were the one thing he seemed to have any interest in eating, with big dollops of butter and jam.

'Patrick?' He didn't answer at first. 'Patrick?' she repeated, more loudly, 'are you hungry?'

'No thanks.'

'I'm making more scones.'

He did not reply.

She switched the radio off and sat down at the far end of the kitchen table. She waited a moment, trying to engage his eyes with hers before she spoke.

'Patrick... we both know what happened. We both know what you did. Now we need to work out what to do about it.'

He lowered his head, shaking it slightly.

'We have to talk things through and work out what we are going to do,' she reiterated. 'I am going to give birth to our child in a few weeks, and you and I have to know what's going to happen after that. Now I'm happy enough for us to go on for the time being as we are, with you living here with us, in the spare room. The baby can be with me in the bedroom for quite a while anyway. You've still got your job you can go back to when you're up to it, and even though business isn't too startling just at the moment, I'm sure things will pick up. We'll cope, whatever happens. But I need to know that you see this is how we should handle things. And I need you to say something.'

He looked up, eyes rinsed of meaning.

'Patrick, you have to say something.'

'I... I don't know what to.'

'Say you're sorry at least. Say you behaved stupidly, lost your head, I don't know. Patrick this will be very hard on all of us. People love scandal. We have to work together to get through it. I'll stick by you... what choice have I got anyway, about to give birth to our child.'

'I'm... I am sorry, Margaret,' he said. 'Sorry for my sins.'

'No Patrick, that's what you say to Father Quinlan. To me you say you are deeply and desperately sorry for deserting me and running off with that girl, that poor tragic girl as it turns out, and making a complete wreck of our lives, our home, our family and our reputation. That's what you say to me, to your wife. Sin is between you and your own conscience. To me you give a heartfelt apology, a promise to never even think of doing anything like that again, and pledge yourself to the future of our family. That is what you do.'

'Of course I do,' he murmured. 'All that. I'm very sorry. For all I've done.'

'So we go on then, as I've said.'

He nodded.

'You stay in the spare room.'

He nodded again.

She sat back. It wasn't much, but at least it was something. 'Now, would you like some scones?'

'Yes, thank you. And I'd like to go to Confession later.'

'We'll all go.' She leaned over and switched the football back on the radio. 'Where's Michael by the way?'

'At a friend's I think he said.'

She frowned, just as the radio commentator yelled that Geoff Kingston had kicked another one for the Eagles, and now they were only three straight kicks behind Port.

Michael walked at Father Quinlan's side through the presbytery gardens. He had directly disobeyed his mother in making the visit, but felt he had no choice: he needed to tell Father Quinlan how things stood; and besides, there was a last book to be returned.

'Did you enjoy it, Michael?'

'Yes Father, I did, very much.'

'It's an adult work of course, but I thought the story might interest you a bit more than *Hiawatha.'*

'It did. Though it's very sad for the man, and the boy, and the fish as well.'

'The author is probably the most famous writer in the world nowadays. He won a very big award called the Nobel Prize, with this book. He's an American, but he's been many places. Hunted big game in Africa, and lived in Cuba. And that's where the story is set. Have you heard of Cuba?'

'Yes, Father. I looked it up in my atlas. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco.'

Father Quinlan looked down, surprised. 'You know about that?'

'Yes, Father.'

'And do you know what fiasco means then?'

'The dictionary says it's a big mess, when everything goes wrong.'

'Well done, Michael.'

‘Thank you, Father.’

The priest showed him where he had planted his bulbs, and spoke of the daffodils and tulips to come. Michael listened closely enough, even if gardening interested adults more than it did him.

‘So it must be good to have your dad home from the hospital,’ Father Quinlan said a few minutes later, when they had returned indoors and sat down in the armchairs for tea.

‘Yes. He still doesn’t look very well though.’

‘It was a very serious accident Michael. It was only by the grace of God that he survived.’

‘I know, Father.’

‘And how has he settled back in, at home?’

‘He’s been pretty quiet so far.’

‘Only to be expected. And your mother, she must be pleased to have him back.’

‘I’d say so, Father. But you know, with her about to have the baby, she’s very tired.’

‘Of course, poor Margaret, yes.’

Michael hesitated before speaking again. ‘My mother doesn’t want me to come here on visits any more Father. I don’t really know why, because I know she likes you, but she says she wants me to get out and spend more time with other boys. Not that I don’t do that anyway, and I’m only here once a week or so...’

‘No, it’s all right, Michael. Your mother is right. At your age you need to get out in the sunshine and run around as much as you can with other boys. And with the baby due, no doubt she wants you around the house more too, to help out and do chores, run errands and such. It must be hard without a car too, after being so used to having one.’

‘Yes. I hope dad gets us another one.’

‘I’m sure he will. He needs one for his work after all.’

‘Yes,’ Michael said. ‘I’ve always enjoyed coming here to see you, Father. And you’ve been very kind with the books.’

‘I’m sure something will sort itself out.’

Michael wanted to say to Father Quinlan then how much he had helped him, how

he had taught him about all sorts of interesting things, but more than that, how he had helped him to feel more sure about himself and the interests he had, and the thoughts that went around all the time in his head. But he did not say any of it because he did not quite know how to, and could not be certain that the words would come out sounding as he intended.

Not long afterwards Father Quinlan waved from the entrance as he watched the boy walk away into a cold June afternoon, shut the door to his room and knelt to pray.

His mother was behind the screen door when he got home. She asked him where he had been, and he told her why he had felt he had to visit Father Quinlan once more, and had done so. He apologised for his disobedience and told her it would not happen again.

'Very well,' she said, 'you can confess it to him in about half an hour. We're off to Confession.'

'Is dad coming?'

'Yes.'

'Good. He must be feeling a bit better then.'

It was a mile walk to the church, but the only alternative was to wait for a bus that came only intermittently on weekends. They picked their way across muddy nature strips and down puddled roads.

'Are you all right, Patrick?' she asked after a few minutes. She was breathing heavily herself from the exertion.

'Don't worry about me,' he said.

There was only a handful of other penitents in the church when they genuflected and knelt in the pew. Nonetheless one or two faces turned, and Margaret heard the sharp intake of breath, and then hurried whispers.

'Try to ignore them,' Patrick said.

'You ignore them. They're ill-mannered gossip-mongers.'

She glared at faces which quickly turned away, while Patrick rose and entered the vacant confessional booth. After he had been in there for twenty minutes or so, the other

confessional booth on the far side of the priest's central one became free, and the boy rose to take it, but his mother's hand restrained him.

'Wait until your dad comes out, and then you can take your turn.'

Michael looked confused, but obeyed without demur. When Patrick finally emerged he walked straight to an empty section on the far side of the church to kneel and say his penance. A look from Margaret told Michael he could now go in.

For a short time he listened to Father Quinlan hearing the confession of the old lady on the other side. She was confessing in detail the sins of anger and swearing at her dog. When she had finished, Michael heard Father Quinlan's absolution, and three Hail Marys being given as penance. Then the little wooden hatch on the far booth shut, and Michael's slid open.

'Yes, my son,' Father Quinlan said.

'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.'

As he said the words, a small thrill ran through Michael's frame, because here was a real sin to confess, a proper sin of barefaced disobedience. No it wasn't robbing someone or bashing them up, but as sins went it was at least on the scale.

'Yes, my son,' Father Quinlan repeated.

'I accuse myself of... disobedience against my mother. She had forbidden me to go and see a... friend. But I did it anyway.'

'I see,' the priest said. 'And was your disobedience against her clearly expressed views?'

'Yes, Father.'

'And there was no good reason of yours, for disobeying her? Perhaps the wellbeing of your mother herself, or some other family member?'

'No, Father. Not that I can think of.'

'And are you truly sorry for your disobedience?'

'Yes, Father, I am.'

'And...' the priest's voice rasped slightly, 'and... do you promise not to repeat this disobedience?'

'Yes, Father. I do.'

'Then I absolve you of your sin, my son. Do you have any other sins to confess?'

'No, Father.'

'Then go in peace.'

'But, what about my penance, Father?'

'There is no penance in this instance, my son.'

'Not even one Hail Mary?'

'No.'

'But is the sin properly forgiven then?'

'Yes, my son. It is. Now go in peace.'

The hatch slid shut concluding his confession, but as he sat there, surprised at having no penance to say, Michael heard what sounded like heavy breathing from the priest's booth, and it was several seconds more before he heard the hatch on the far side slide open, and the murmur of another penitent.

Michael felt mixed emotions as he rose and left. He had confessed a real, proper sin and gained absolution. But the lack of any penance to say left the whole thing short of a satisfying completion, a little short-changed.

'Kneel and say your penance now, Michael, and then we'll wait outside for your father to finish his.'

'But I didn't get given any penance.'

'What, none at all?'

'Nothing.'

'You confessed your disobedience?'

'Yes mum, I did.'

She stared in the direction of the central booth, where the priest sat behind the thin wooden door.

'All right, let's go then, come on.'

'But what about you, mum? Aren't you confessing today?'

She shook her head and led him from the church, their departure pursued by more whispers from the scattering of penitents, who then turned their attention to the lone figure of the distant corner, still murmuring rosaries and clicking his beads.

The following day was cold again, a grinding winter westerly whipping up white horses out on the Gulf and casting a haze of salt spray over the parishioners as they huddled in the church entrance assembling for Sunday Mass. Margaret, Patrick and Michael walked heads down through the squalls and stinging showers. Margaret could not walk quickly, and the winds made it impossible to use an umbrella, so they had to rely on raincoats, all of which meant hair, cuffs and shoes were hardly at their Sunday best when they arrived late at the church.

They hung their wet raincoats in the vestibule and did their best to tidy up, Margaret patting her face dry with her handkerchief and adjusting her hat, and helping Michael re-comb his hair, before they entered. They found the church full to capacity with worshippers, the air inside warm and damp, smelling of hair-spray and face powder, and the acrid odour of wet wool steeped in stale tobacco.

The whispers began as they entered under the big stained glass window and made their way up the central aisle towards the distant altar, where Father Quinlan read from the pulpit at the brass lectern. The whispers followed them into the pew where Shirley Regan gestured that she had kept places for them.

‘Thank you, Shirl,’ Margaret said quietly, as they settled their things and sat.

Father Quinlan glanced up from his Missal and appeared to notice them, but read on seamlessly. As the seconds passed, however, the whispering did not diminish, but instead steadily increased in volume. Faces turned towards them from along their row, and from the pews in front, some heads craning so openly that Father Quinlan looked up again, and this time paused in an attempt to settle the congregation, and loudly cleared his throat.

It had no effect. At the back, and soon at the front too, people half rose in their places for a glimpse of the scandalous adulterer and his blighted family. The whispering grew to a buzz, and a low hissing was heard too.

‘What’s going on, Mum?’ Michael asked, looking around.

‘Don’t worry about it.’

Patrick said nothing and went forward to kneel on the kneeler, hands clasped together in prayer, eyes averted to the floor of the church.

'But Mum... they're hissing... at us.'

'I said don't worry about it, Michael.'

'But what are they hissing us for... why?'

She was about to tell Michael yet again not to worry about it, to ignore it, let it pass, but then something cracked, broke in her. She knew in a moment there was nothing else to be done now. She rose in her place and stood in silence. Seeing her, the voices fell quiet one by one, and eventually she spoke up in a measured voice.

'You are the people.... the people I grew up with, people Patrick and I have known all our lives. And yet you are the same ones who are now hissing my husband, my son, my baby who is about to be born, and me.'

The noise resumed in an instant, the buzz turning into open chatter, as well as more hissing, while at the same time Father Quinlan spoke up from the altar.

'Margaret, everyone, please...'

'Do you expect us to put up with it, Father?' she said. 'Turn the other cheek? I've turned the other cheek. I've done it all my life, and they've slapped that too.'

An unseen male voice called out from down the back, 'Sit down and be quiet, Margaret,' while another, a woman's, called from near the front, 'Shame on you... shame!!'.

'Everyone, please, be quiet!!' Father Quinlan called out. 'Silence everybody! Please!'

'Who will cast the first stone?' Margaret said. 'I'll tell you who - look at you, you're all lining up to do it. Forgiveness, you couldn't spell it, much less give it. You're ignorant, and superstitious, and small-minded.'

She had not raised her voice, but everyone in the church, Father Quinlan included, heard. A new din followed, furious faces turned towards her, angry shouts, fingers stabbing the air.

'Everyone! Quiet please!' Father Quinlan was yelling now, clutching red-faced to the pulpit. 'Margaret, Margaret... please be quiet and sit down and allow me to continue!!'

'No Father. I'm sorry, but no. Enough, I've had enough. I've had a lifetime, more than enough.' She left her place in the pew and made her way to the centre aisle.

'Come on, Michael, we're going.'

‘Margaret, no... please... don’t...’ Shirley Regan said, but her voice was hardly heard over the shouts and calls.

‘Michael,’ Margaret repeated.

‘Yes, mum.’

As he followed her out into the aisle, a ringed female hand from the pew behind grabbed for him but Margaret pushed it aside.

‘You have no right!’ a dark suited young man called out.

‘I have every right. He is my son. Not yours. Not Father Quinlan’s. Mine.’

‘He is God’s child!’ an old woman shrieked. She saw it was Mary Hannan. She had been her teacher at the convent school.

‘And he is Patrick’s!’ the woman at her elbow declared, Kitty Halligan, whom she’d gone to school with, been caned with, by Mary Hannan.

‘Patrick,’ Margaret called back, ‘are you coming?’ He did not answer, nor even move, kneeling, hands clasped together, eyes to the floor. ‘Patrick?’ she repeated loudly, in the same moment glimpsing Father Quinlan, unable to speak, with his head down on his Missal. She felt unable to cope with it any more as well, too heavy, out of breath.

‘Patrick is not going with you!’ a woman in a canary yellow pillbox hat screamed out, Joan Parker, with whom she had played tennis when they were teenagers. ‘Hag! Witch!’

‘He’s staying here!’ more voices joined in, jeering.

Margaret stood clasping Michael hard by the hand. ‘So Patrick, now you’ve made your peace with God, confessed your sins, and wish to stay. No thought for us. Only for your pathetic belief in your pitiful soul.’ She cast her eyes high around the church. ‘We were married here, Patrick.’ She looked back down at him again, but he did not turn his head towards her.

‘Come on then, Michael.’

Still clasping his hand tightly, she started the long walk down the aisle towards the doors, followed by yells, hissing and booing. She was by now so very tired, in pain with it.

‘But what about dad?’ Michael asked.

‘He’s staying here.’

‘But... where are we going?’

'Enough now, shoosh.'

'Margaret...' Father Quinlan called from the altar, regaining his voice. 'Stop, Margaret, please... Michael...'

Hearing her son's name, she stopped and turned to face Father Quinlan and the parish a last time. She looked at the face of the priest, into his wide staring eyes, and drew in her breath to say something, but then did not. She grabbed their coats and stepped out into the bitter wind and cold, and hustled Michael away from the church as fast as her aching legs could carry her.

* * *

Michael peered over the top of his coffee mug around the parlour of the elegantly faded towered and spired gothic. The biggest folly in all of Elsternwick, Barb liked to call it. The datura plants in the window were monsters, the shaggy lawn strewn with their mortal trumpets as morning leeched in through the mottled glass. Opposite him at the kitchen table, Leo drank his coffee in his tennis shirt and shorts. Barb's nickname for him was "Benjy Bunter", and he was patently striving to change that: it was just past nine and he had already played three sets and walked the dog at Saint Kilda.

'So how long are you taking my little angel away from me?'

Leo had family money, Michael knew, the dry cleaning chain stretching from Sunshine to Brighton; his own suburban empire of carbon tetrachloride, Leo called it. He had aspirations to other things though, to make films. Barb said he spent time knocking around La Mama and the Pram getting to know actors, and had even met David Williamson, but nothing had come of it.

'Only a week or so,' Michael said. 'We both have to be back for uni.'

'I didn't know Barb actually went to lectures. In my day we had to or else. But then Barb's Barb.'

They had been together for eight months. Barb was in Worker-Student Alliance, and he had been smitten from the moment he first saw her on a loud hailer. She was wiry

and intense and got about in cut-off jeans and tank tops and wore a big Uncle Ho badge. Her face was elfin and thin and she cut her hair short and wore a Women's Liberation Movement earring.

They were in the same Politics year, and for a time had shared a tutorial group, but Michael hadn't managed a word to her all that time, not even when she handed him his weekly "Grassroots" handbill. It might have stayed that way too, but he had become the poetry editor on the student newspaper, and Barb submitted a poem. He had felt it too doctrinaire and didactic and that he had to reject it, and the next day she had turned up at the office wanting an explanation. All his shyness had evaporated in a heated debate about Shelley and Byron, Mayakovsky and Voznesensky. They had kept at it over coffees at Johnny's Green Room and beers at the Albion, and in the end she had taken him back to her room and shut the door and they had hardly come out for a week.

Michael soon learned about Barb's estranged parents. When Barb took him for dinner to her mother's place in Kew he had quietly marvelled at everything from the crockery and cutlery to the Tuckers and Boyds on the wall, while Barb worried herself more than a good Marxist might have about how he spooned his soup.

There was a sound from the stairs.

'Mike's here!' Leo called.

'Jesus Christ, dad,' Barb called back, and walked in lugging a canvas rucksack. 'It's Michael, okay? Michael. Please? How's the coffee?'

The year had flown. He had his part-time job stacking shelves at the supermarket, lectures, exams, political rallies to go to and protests to make. And like Barb, he had two parents to visit. Nearly three years after they had left, Patrick had followed them to Melbourne, but by then Margaret had well and truly moved on. Patrick had found that hard to accept, and in the years since, just keeping going had become increasingly difficult. He had worked at a string of jobs, moved from flat to flat, drank. Though he was still only in his mid forties, he looked a lot older, and it hurt Michael to see him like that, on a sharp downward spiral. After all, despite everything, he still loved his father.

His most recent move had been into a bedsit on Gertrude Street, and after lectures Michael would walk over to visit, but Patrick was mostly drunk and morose. The only thing he liked to talk about was what a useless bum Billy McMahon was, and how

Whitlam would give the country hope, but the words fell hollow from his lips, as if nothing at all could give him hope any more. He needed a woman, Michael knew, but there wasn't one; he probably even needed his religion back as well, but that was long gone too.

Things had turned out differently for Margaret. Michael's stepfather John was a fit and trim Ansett executive whom Margaret had met while working as a receptionist at the airline office. Not that they had ever formalised things through nuptuals: a divorce had been hard to get from Patrick, and in the end she had saved herself the trouble. Anyway, she hardly believed in it any more. She and John lived in an ultramodern glass and brick home he had built on the beachfront at Sandringham. Michael's sister Louisa went to a private school, non-denominational. She was ten now, and Michael would have liked to be able to spend more time with her, but his studies were demanding and it was a long way for a drop-in visit. Louisa was a tomboy, forever climbing trees and rescuing kittens. Although she did well at school, she did not so much share his love of books and reading, which was in a way ironic to Michael, as she was the one who had been born the day after Hemingway died.

He mostly visited at weekends, sometimes staying overnight, and his mother kept a bed made up. Like Barb, she was a women's liberationist, attended rallies and Vietnam Moratorium protests. The three of them had marched side by side with arms linked. Michael was himself a carrier of the feminist torch, if not entirely sure how a man best went about doing it. Margaret gave the impression of having transcended the trauma of the past, even if Michael could not help but notice the sadness that lingered in her eyes, and at the corners of her mouth. Occasionally she cried remembering something from their hard first days in the new city, the scarecrow landlady who had rented them a damp room in Fitzroy, and how she had taken charity to keep it. She had worked in a fish and chip shop, a Greek deli, washed cars, sold flowers in cafes and scoured pots in kitchens while Michael minded the baby after school; and somehow, with perseverence and good luck, the three of them had come through it.

'None of it was ever, ever easy,' she had said one afternoon, sipping tea as the pair of them sat looking out through the wide windows across the grey expanse of the bay. 'But somehow, here we are.'

When he had not replied straight away, she went on, as if she had been saving the

words up. 'I know you'd wish your father to be here with us, Michael, I know that. And I'd have wished it too, prayed for it if praying was worth anything, and could have done anyone any good.'

'Mum, I don't wish it. My only wish is that you be happy.'

'No, you do wish it Michael, you do, I know you do. And why wouldn't you? Look at him now too, poor wretch. But we lost him, and long ago. Long before that girl, he was gone. Otherwise why would he do that to us, with her. And then let us pack up and go away alone from our home, leave everything and come here. He didn't have the courage to choose us, only her, or God... which meant himself, really.'

Michael wanted to suggest that perhaps some men just did things like that, and that when the affair had begun he might not have thought it could become serious, certainly not as serious as it got. But he didn't say anything. He finished his tea and got up.

'I better go, mum.'

But she grabbed his hand hard, and looked into his eyes with an intensity that still surprised him that she could possess. 'But at least we got away from that fucking priest, Michael. And that fucking bloody church! At least we did that!'

He had heard his mother swear on occasion, but never with anything like such vehemence. He hesitated, then opened his mouth to say something, about Father Quinlan whom he still could not find it in himself to hate as his mother did, and about the full truth he still sought from her, in his long-held belief that she must have had further cause beyond mere suspicion, to act as she had. Then Louisa came scooting in, panting hard and bug-eyed with the news that a huge fish, a shark even, had been washed up dead and rotting down on the beach and was stinking to high heaven.

His mother had seen him off at the gate as he drove away in the Holden. He had turned twenty-one that year and she given it to him as his present. It was nothing fancy, a beaten up EH wagon that had cost three hundred dollars, but he had been as pleased as if she'd bought him an E-Type. When the exams finished and the summer holidays came, he and Barb had taken off down the coast in the wagon, long days spent in the waves and nights on the mattress in the back. They saw in the New Year at a beach party: 1972 felt full of promise, a new government coming, surely, an end to the war, a better and brighter world.

Leo brought him back from his thoughts. ‘So you’re driving all the way to Adelaide, today?’

‘Yes, that’s what we’re intending.’

‘In that old Holden of yours?’

‘Yes, dad, in that old Holden,’ Barb replied. ‘Unless you want to give us the keys to the Merc of course.’

‘Long way, Adelaide,’ Leo mused. ‘Churches, and wowsers, and a few toffee-nosed old families. Present company excepted of course. And S.A.’s pretty well just gibbers and scrub.’

‘Dad,’ Barb sighed, ‘Michael wants to go there for the Festival of Arts. And he was born there, grew up there.’

‘You grew up in Adelaide?’ Leo asked, in apparent surprise.

‘Yes, I’m a South Australian. And they can be rather beautiful gibbers and scrub, if you see them.’

‘Perhaps, I suppose. If you like that kind of thing. What’s so special about this festival anyway, to go all that way?’

‘It’s the best in the country dad. And we want to go to Writers’ Week, and some plays and concerts.’

‘Who’s coming, the big star guests?’

‘Ginsberg, for one,’ Barb said.

‘Ginsberg... yes... America,’ Leo intoned, ‘when will you divest yourself of your boxer shorts and bobby socks, something like that...’

‘Oh dad, don’t pretend to be such a killjoy phillistine,’ Barb chided. ‘I know what’s on your bookshelves. I know what films you go to, and the plays, and who your friends are. Besides, Michael Dransfield’s coming.’

‘He’s a dope fiend, isn’t he?’

‘He’s a great poet and you know it,’ Barb said. ‘Besides, you should talk, all the dope you smoke.’

‘No I don’t.’

‘You can smell it through your bedroom door dad.’

‘Mothballs,’ Leo said.

The opening riff of “Eagle Rock” fuzzed from 3UZ as they drove up Flemington Road under a murky low sky. Footscray and Pentridge and the western suburbs passed through the rain-pocked windscreen, then Bacchus Marsh, Ballarat, Ararat. They traversed wheatlands and the grazing country of the Western Districts, pushing on into the badlands of Dimboola and Nhill, until they crossed over at Bordertown.

It was the first time he had been back since that terrible Sunday night that he and Margaret had boarded the Overland, nearly eleven years before. They drove up the Dukes Highway, passing through the pine forests into a flat, sparse landscape. The Holden chugged on well enough. Not a good place to break down though, Michael thought, and remembered his father’s Holden, the one he always said never broke down, and somehow it hadn’t, ever.

‘How long to Adelaide?’ Barb asked, dozing with feet up on the dash as dusk came on.

‘We should be at Tailem Bend in about an hour or so. Then we cross the Murray and pretty soon we’re in the Adelaide Hills.’

They stopped for coffee and filled up at Murray Bridge, and before long were making the descent of the Hills, with the city of Adelaide laid out below in avenues of winking lights.

‘It does look quite beautiful at night,’ Barb said.

‘Not too bad in the daytime either, from memory,’ he said, as they took the hairpin bend at the Devil’s Elbow, and went on to the last few miles.

They sat in a row of chairs at the State Library listening to A.D. Hope speaking about poetry. ‘Where’s Dransfield?’ Barb whispered in Michael’s ear. ‘He’s meant to be on this panel... where the hell is he?’

‘I don’t know... perhaps he got held up coming over from Sydney,’ Michael whispered back.

‘Or just doesn’t want to be anywhere near old Alec Hope.’

As she was saying it, Michael noticed a man sitting on the far side of the room, listening intently. He was very thin with lank grey hair, and might have been in his fifties or sixties, although something said he was younger than that, but aged. Even out of the black robes and clerical collar and in blue jeans and an open-necked shirt, there was no doubting who it was.

'Michael...' Barb was whispering in his ear again, but he barely heard her as Father Quinlan's eyes turned their way, perhaps attracted by the whispers, and settled upon him; and there was no doubt, despite the decade that had passed, and that the boy he had last seen was now a man, that he recognised him. They looked at each other for a moment, and the priest nodded slightly, lips rising in the subtlest of smiles, before turning back to the speaker.

When the session ended there was an instantaneous buzz of conversation, much of it about Dransfield's failure to show, and loud speculations regarding the reason. There had after all been considerable complications with Voznesensky's visit too, and with the star American drawcards, Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, with some people saying they wouldn't come at all.

There was another session about to start over in the university, and people got up all at once and started to leave, the confusion heightened by a chair toppling over backwards and knocking into an elderly woman labouring to get up from hers. When things had settled down and the room was starting to clear, Michael realised that Father Quinlan's seat was empty. He looked around at the people going out the door, but the priest had already left.

'What's the matter?' Barb asked.

'Oh... I knew someone, a man who was sitting over there.'

As he indicated the seat, he saw that something had been left there, and walked over.

'What is it?' Barb asked.

'A note. On a blank page torn out from the back of a book. He must have written on it and ripped it out and left it here.'

'Well come on, what does it say?'

'"Sorry. JQ."'

‘That’s it, that’s all?’

‘Yes.’

He looked down at the handwritten words again.

‘Who is he then, this JQ?’

‘James... Quinlan,’ Michael said, feeling slightly odd as he enunciated his first name, rather than Father. ‘He was our parish priest, when I was growing up here.’

He had not told Barb much about his childhood, and the circumstances in which he and his mother had left Adelaide and gone to live in Melbourne. He had meant to try, but had never known where to begin.

‘He liked books and poetry, and encouraged me to as well,’ Michael said, looking out the door and up the polished corridor towards the front entrance onto North Terrace, empty now. ‘We were friends too, sort of, I suppose.’

‘Pity he wasn’t able stay to see you then,’ Barb said, gathering her things up, ‘but at least he did say sorry.’

They ran into some friends from Melbourne who were also in town for the Festival. Michael suggested they all go down the coast for the day, and they ended up under the umbrellas in the beer garden of the Port Noarlunga Hotel.

‘My mum and dad used to bring me down here on weekends,’ he said, arm around Barb at their table. ‘Once I remember us coming down for a summer carnival at Christies, and the entertainment for the crowds included watching old cars being pushed off the headland and crashing onto the rocks in the sea below. Even as a child I thought it was so wonderfully and stupidly pointless.’

Barb squeezed his hand and laughed. ‘We didn’t get such existential entertainments growing up in Melbourne. Just lots of art galleries and theatre and ballet.’

As the day ended, most of them went off to take turns running and tumbling drunk down the tall dunes that stood where the Onkaparinga coiled a last time before reaching the sea. Barb stayed with the others while Michael walked off and sat on the beach.
He watched the sun setting into the Gulf, then turned right around to look back at the distant bald brown hills, with all their vacant blue sky, and felt himself overwhelmed.

It was the beauty of the desolation that moved him, or perhaps it was the desolateness of the beauty. The plains and hills, even the gibbers and saltbush had their redemption after all. It was to the emptiness of this place that he belonged, if one could belong to things absent. That he no longer lived here, he thought, was perhaps fitting. But more than likely it was just the way things had turned out.

THE AUTHOR *IS* THE BOOK: HISTORY, IDENTITY AND MEANING IN LITERARY FICTION

by Larry Buttrose

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INTRODUCTION

Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life,
every quality of his mind is written large in his works.
- Virginia Woolf

This quotation from Woolf neatly expresses one of the received wisdoms about the relationship between what is "true" and invented in fiction. The view that all fiction carries, in some form, within its warp and woof the essence of the person who created it, cannot come as too much of a surprise: after all, most authors choose to write what they know about. We experience, learn, we acquire memories, and in every moment, including when we write, we are drawing upon that experience, that knowledge, and those memories. Ernest Hemingway turned this into his famous advisory, "write what you know", urging would-be writers to delve into their own experience and memories to create fiction. Otherwise, he said, it would lack authenticity, and ring hollow.

One might respond to both Woolf and Hemingway that they are stating the obvious, that what else can a writer do but write what they know? But this would be to ignore the fact that since the inception of the modern novel, writers have been lauded for their powers of invention, for their ability to "make things up", whether the cosmic visions of the great worlds beyond in Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and Arthur C. Clarke, or our infernal mental inner workings in the writings of authors such as Kafka, Joyce, Camus, and Woolf herself.

But the enterprise of "making things up" prompts the further question of from where and from what were these new things made up? The persuasiveness of the notion that "it all must have come from somewhere" has in part informed the arguments of some postmodernist theoreticians that everything has been said before, and that all works of art and literature are re-workings of old themes, and, according to author and critic Roland Barthes, constitute "a tissue of quotations". (Barthes, R., 1997)

This led some postmodernists, including Barthes, to argue that there was no such thing as originality, and taken to its extreme, that everything has been said.

In this essay, I intend to consider this general proposition through a discussion of the family history, personal experiences and inspiration behind the writing of my novel *Blessed Kiss*, as well as other works of mine, and in relation to my perception of the experiences of authors J.M.Coetzee, and Woolf and Hemingway themselves. In pursuing such a framing of my own work, I shall seek to establish a position that is independent of the various cultural and relativist theories that orbit around the term "postmodernism".

Harvard critic Louis Menand provides a useful description of this most argued about and elusive of -isms:

> Postmodernism is the Swiss Army knife of critical concepts. It's definitionally overloaded, and it can do almost any job you need done. This is partly because, like many terms that begin with "post", it is fundamentally ambidextrous. Postmodernism can mean, "We're all modernists now. Modernism has won." Or it can mean, "No-one can be a modernist anymore. Modernism is over." People who use "postmodernism" in the first "mission accomplished" sense believe that modernism - the art and literature associated with figures like Picasso and Joyce - changed the game completely, and that everyone is still working through the consequences. Modernism is the song that never ends. Being postmodernist just means that we can never be pre-modernist again. People who use it in the second sense, as the epitaph for modernism, think that somewhere along the line, there was a break with the assumptions, practices, and ambitions of modernist art and literature, and then everyone since then is (or ought to be) on to something very different. Being postmodernist means that we can never be modernist again. (Menand, 2009).

During the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism of Menand's second definition kind - which spread from predominantly French or francophone thinkers who came to prominence decades before - was in vogue internationally. "Theory", so-called, originated

from midcentury writers and thinkers such as Barthes, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault, and later Jean Baudrillard, although its evolution can be traced back to the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, the linguistic work of de Saussure, to Nietzsche, and to the Greeks. Postmodern "theory" denies objective truth, positing instead a never-ending horizon of subjectivities: that is, relativism, and deferral of meaning. Wrapped in the postmodernist parcel is Barthes' "death of the author", power relationships inherent in knowledge and language, the questioning of "Grand Narratives" such as progress, history and artistic originality, and the shifting cultural-political implications of every phrase we might utter, every inch of newsprint, frame of a film.

The popularity of postmodernist relativism in the creative arts on university campuses around the world during the closing decades of the twentieth century - and the ongoing questioning of the value of any book, work of art, even gesture, emotion, thought - led to an explosion of writing which included appropriation from other sources, intertextuality (mixing texts from two or more sources), and a general sense of ironic oversight over the entire process of creating an original work, which the creator of it viewed after all as a lost enterprise. To many postmodernist thinkers, originality was part of the "faux nobility" of the artist, a sort of cutting off of the Van Gogh ear writ large, to be consigned to the intellectual dustbin along with other notions like large P Progress, and the essential goodness (or otherwise) of humanity. These, and a perceived self-aggrandising heroicism of previous generations of writers, are rejected by some postmodernist theorists, as Selden, Widdowson and Brooker suggest:

> Several theorists draw attention to the way in which postmodernist critics reject the elitism, sophisticated formal experimentation and tragic sense of alienation of to be found in the modernist writers... [in the various poststructuralist theorists] if there is a summarising idea it is the theme of the absent centre. (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 1997)

In "interrogating" and "debunking" the nobility of the cause of large A Artists, the champions of Menand's second definition postmodernism appeared to challenge the

notion of greatness per se, leading some critics to speculate that they were placing Mickey Mouse on the same level as Hamlet. But Menand hoists his colours to the mast:

> What killed the distinction (between high art and popular art) wasn't defining pop art up. It was defining high art down. It was the recognition that serious art, too, is produced and consumed in a market-place. The point of Warhol's Campbell's soup-can paintings was not that a soup can is like a work of art. It was that a work of art is like a soup can: they are both commodities... High art and literature have always been stimulated by popular sources (and have given stimulus back); and anti-art, art that thumbs its nose at aesthetic decorum, has its honoured place in the modernist tradition. Duchamp and the Dadaists were making anti-art almost a hundred years ago. But you can make anti-art - Duchamp's "Fountain", for example - only when everyone still has some conception of authentic, stand-alone, for-its-own-sake art. Warhol's work is not anti-art. Finding no quality to hang a distinction between authentic art and everything else, it simply drops the question. (Menand, 2009)

This debate has been raised at this point as it is germane to this discussion, because if Woolf's opinion is to be accepted, then everything we write may essentially be a "tissue of quotations" - from our own lives, experiences and memories.

Barthes and others used his "tissue of quotations" to argue *against* the idea of originality, but if we are persuaded to Woolf's statement, we may end up with the opposite view. This is because if memories are unique to us - as any life experience is unique - and if everything we write comes from those memories and experiences, then everything we write will of essence be unique, and so original. Our personal tissue box of quotations will be unique because of what is being quoted, that is, our own unique body of experiences and memories. As Woolf puts it, our individual experience will be "written large" in our writing: so the title of this work, the author *is* the book.

As already indicated, my intention is to explore this topic through consideration of a number of works, including my own. Among these will be my two published novels, *The Maze of the Muse* and *Sweet Sentence,* and my new novel, the manuscript *Blessed Kiss*, which is set in my native Adelaide in 1960-61, and draws upon my memories of place and time, and some personal experiences. I shall also consider works by Woolf herself, by Hemingway, as well as J.M. Coetzee's *The Diary of a Bad Year,* which appears to tease the reader about the truth of the author through its complex mediations between fiction and memoir.

I shall also be referring to biographers and critics, in their own divagations in the murky sea of human un/consciousness that laps between personal history, memory and fiction. But intellectually this work will be rooted in discussing works in terms of story, character, outcome and authorial intent, and not through the interpretative lens of any all-encompassing "theory". That any work sits within a wider framework and will be interpreted in different ways at different times by different people according to their socio-political perspective, was known to writers as far back as Aristophanes and Virgil. For some theorists to construct an enclosed interpretative system around such an obvious idea always suggested a certain patronising arrogance; worse, it has given rise to a constrictive academic orthodoxy, and an intellectual shibboleth.

While some may still doubt the intimacy of the link between a writer's life and their work, and the meaning they inscribe into it, I hope the reader will forgive the perhaps poetic observation at the outset here, that household dust is largely composed of the dead skin of the people who live in that house, and that during the course of our lives it is matter from our own bodies, our selves, which comes to settle upon the books in our shelves, and in the case of authors, upon the manuscripts they write. As such, each page we write is finely covered with the shed skin of the person we are, and the self we have been. Who we are is always with us, even in the dust that settles upon the words we write.

HISTORY

Who am I? What am I doing here? Where am I going? The questions are old as humanity and we don't know the answers to any of them. But what was I doing a minute ago? Well, yes, we do seem to know that much: I was making a cup of tea, the bed, a phone call, love, making plans. We know these things because they are fresh in that ever-winding recording we call memory, and are already in the process of becoming its near relative, history.

All writing is arguably history, in that by the time it is read, the act of writing it is in the past. Furthermore, whether it is a novel, or a how-to guide to mediaeval castles or organic gardening, a book will in some regard record a way of life and a time. Writing about mediaeval castles will of necessity take in who built them and who they were meant to keep out, and where the style of architecture originated, just as writing about organic gardening may cover where and by whom it is practised, and its context in an era when most farming is conducted using chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Plays, poems and personal letters are all products of and reflect their time too, and in their own way constitute histories of it. Fictional works about the present will chronicle it for future scholars, just as any imagined fictional future is also a creation of its own time, drawing upon what is known from the present and past to envision a comprehensible future.

Given this, history is inextricably interwoven with writing of all kinds. So what is history then? How do we define it? Essentially, a history is a record of what happened in the past. That past may be our own, the past of our family and friends, the nation in which we live, or the entire world. All are histories.

What is not quite so obvious is what happens when events become located further back in the past - weeks, months, years and decades - and distant from our immediate circle of family, friends and other connections, and environment. As other more recent

events tend to take precedence in our personal consciousness, we relegate those more distant to a gradually growing level of doubt regarding their accuracy and veracity, and they are ultimately consigned to misty obscurity. So we have come to rely upon written records and depictions in art, and, from the nineteenth century onwards, photographs, film and video, to record what happened to us, or to our forebears, the nation we live in, and the human race as a whole.

But it is not only the natural attrition of our memories that may jeopardise history. History is hostage to the burning of libraries, the brittleness of newsprint, the decay of photographs, film and video. It may also be hostage to ideology.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* George Orwell demonstrates the fragility of history when it is exposed to the blowtorch - or rat-cage - of totalitarianism. In the authoritarian super-state of Oceania, history is rewritten even as it is made, to conform with the changing ideological demands of the all-powerful state. Although the job of the book's protagonist Winston Smith is the equivalent of a newspaper sub-editor, his real task is to rewrite news stories which no longer conform to the ideological and historical requirements of the unseen oligarchs of Oceania.

A previously published news story in the form of a clipping from a newspaper that no longer aligns with the desired official state of affairs, is flicked down a "memory hole", a small opening in his work cubicle, that leads down to the furnaces beneath the Ministry of Truth, where Smith works. Any inconvenient discrepancy between what had been predicted by the Party and what actually occurred is thus turned to ashes, and all other records, including films, radio programmes and references in books, are changed constantly too, to conform to the altered needs of the present. Sometimes the same single fact, such as the current weekly ration of chocolate, may be changed many times. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* historical fact depends upon the whim of the Party oligarchs.

Although Smith knows all this instinctively, he is brought face to face with the impermanence of fact and history when under interrogation and torture by a more senior Party member, O'Brien. When O'Brien holds up a photograph which if widely seen could threaten the credibility of the rulership of Oceania, Smith cannot restrain himself:

> ‘It exists!’ he cried.
>
> ‘No,’ said O’Brien.
>
> He stepped across the room. There was a memory hole in the opposite wall. O’Brien lifted the grating. Unseen, the frail slip of paper was whirling away on the current of warm air; it was vanishing in a flash of flame. O’Brien turned away from the wall.
>
> ‘Ashes,’ he said. ‘Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed.’
>
> ‘But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it.’
>
> ‘I do not remember it,’ said O’Brien. (Orwell, 1990)

Shortly afterwards in the same conversation, O’Brien summarises for Smith the state of affairs in Oceania, after first having forced him to repeat the Party slogan, “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”. Sensing that Smith has still not surrendered completely, and threatening another bout of torture, O’Brien crystallises the Party’s view of history:

> ‘Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?’
>
> ‘No.’
>
> ‘Then where does the past exist, if at all?’
>
> ‘In records. It is written down.’
>
> ‘In records. And -- ?’
>
> ‘In the mind. In human memories.’
>
> ‘In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?’ (Orwell, 1990)

This ideological power over history has in recent decades come to feature in intellectual positions from the right, left and centre. The denial by some academics and

writers of the scale of the massacres of Australia's indigenous populations by white settlers during the past two centuries has sparked robust debate in the academy, in political circles and in the wider community, about what constitutes the "real" history of Australia.

The postmodernist view is that there is no such thing as objective history, and that instead it constitutes a contested ideological terrain between opposing political forces. This is in many ways simply a restatement of the old maxim that history is written by the victors - and one could certainly argue that until recent times Australia's history of the last two centuries was written by the European colonists and settlers, from their standpoint, to the virtual exclusion of the history of the invaded peoples, the indigenous inhabitants.

As often happens in such debates however, each side has overstated their case. It is not true that there are no facts beyond debate, such as that the First Fleet anchored in Port Jackson in the year 1788 in the Christian calendar. Nor can one debate that one of the earliest settlements established by the new arrivals after Sydney Cove, was at Parramatta. What is debatable, though, for instance, is how brutal the settlers and troops who backed them were in taking the land from the indigenous inhabitants, and, in terms of debatable particularities of history, what were the events of the battle between the warrior Pemulwuy and his men and troops near Parramatta in 1797. (Buttrose, 2007)

The zealous relativist and subjectivist project pursued by some postmodernist authors has had the benefit of seeking a closer defining of history, with one of the more commonly used originating from British historian Keith Jenkins.

> History is a shifting, problematic discourse, ostensibly about an aspect of the world, the past, that is produced by a group of present-minded workers (overwhelmingly in our culture salaried historians) who go about their work in mutually recognisable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal spectrum. (Jenkins, 2002)

Here however we see another problem. One cannot help but suspect this knotted, prolix definition would be all but incomprehensible to anyone outside the ranks of the author's fellow "present-minded workers", and perhaps unconsciously demonstrates how complex the proposition of "history" has become.

When Herodotus wrote his *History* of the Persian Wars in the fifth century BCE, and in so doing became the "Father of History", he did so from the Greek side, about the oriental "other", and debates about his use of fact, research, and the degree to which he "travelled and reported" continue to this day. The very notions of history and its writing, have always been the subject of controversy and debate. So they should be: after all, history is a record of a time, a people, and the things they did, for good or ill. It is not surprising that the very idea of what history is, remains as contentious as the facts and events any chronicle purports to represent.

The question here, though, is what is the relationship between history and literature, and how does the changing and contested nature of history interact with literature? In their textbook on literary theory, Selden, Widdowson and Brooker summarise the postmodernist view.

> The relations between literature and history must be rethought. There is no stable and fixed "history" which can be treated as the "background" against which literature can be foregrounded. All history (histories) is "foreground". (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 1997)

What concerns us here is whether this contested nature of history holds for individuals as well, in our own memories of our individual lives. My view is that it does, because while Jenkins might hold history to be "shifting" and "problematic" as written by its present-minded workers or salaried historians, the same would appear to be the case on the personal level, in the conflicting memories of relatives and friends. Even on an individual level, history is not fixed or absolute, but the contrary.

A simple example should illustrate this point. The morning after a night of heavy drinking, a young woman wakes with the painful memory that at the party she attended,

she ended up staggering about the room and vomiting on a friend. She feels shame and embarrassment at the memory, yet a year later, over a drink with the same friend, both are laughing at it. The passage of time, and the change in circumstances and context, means the woman feels differently about her memory of exactly the same events. In a few decades time, her memory may become almost affectionate in the afterglow of her fading youth, and the facts themselves may alter, with the amount of vomit recalled and the friend's shock and horror rising by the decade.

I mention this with regard to my own history. The events of my life which constitute my personal history are going to be remembered differently in my fifties than when I was in my twenties or thirties; and perhaps it is the perspective gained through the extra decades, and the different kinds of insights developed over time, that help constitute those memories. But before I move to a consideration of those memories and that history, I must first retrace my family background, to throw as much light as I can upon the question that opened this chapter: Who am I?

When we speak of the "human family", especially in connection with social, religious and political matters, we articulate a comforting abstraction. Yet we are also articulating a biological and historical truth, in that we humans are all familiarly related, being descendants of the first members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Within our cells we each carry genes that go back to our earliest human ancestors, and genes which we share with all other people, so our species truly is our family.

My own place in the human family, and in particular in my own family clan, I owe to the evolutionary and historical singularity of my birth; and through all the vagaries of distant ancestry and historical chance, I gained the family name "Buttrose".

That name came into being less than two centuries ago, but through its invention, a family story began that will unfold far into the future. I intend to recount here the origin of that name, as part of my thesis that the author *is* the book. This family history is part of who I am, and, I shall show, is present in the works I have written, just as the history of other authors is manifested in every seam of their work.

Until the last decade or so the Buttrose family name was thought to have been

derived from Montrose or Melrose, even the French name Butreaux. But since 1980, one of my cousins, Heather Walker, has privately published a constantly updated, thoroughly researched genealogy titled *The Buttrose Family & Their Butter Ancestors,* and so has helped solve many of the mysteries surrounding the family name, and the shared origins of those of that name. According to her research of records, the Buttroses originated from Scotland, where we can trace a lineage back to the Murray clan in the Middle Ages, and thence further back to an eleventh century earl. The name Buttrose originated only in the year 1852, when my great great grandparents William Fenwick Butter and Frances Adelaide Crear sailed from Scotland for Australia.

On the male side, Ms Walker has traced the Buttrose origins back to Robert Butter (1766-1802), a ropemaker, and his wife Catherine Macdonald (dates unknown), of Perthshire, Scotland. They had eight children, the youngest of whom was another Robert Butter (1803-?), who became a mail guard, and travelled extensively around Scotland. He met and married Mary Fenwick (1801-1874) and they had nine children, one of whom was William Fenwick Butter (1829-1866).

William married Frances Adelaide Crear (1828-1909) at the United Presbyterian Church in Glasgow on 25 April 1851. By this time, however, according to official records, his name was no longer Butter, but Butters. Eight months later, on 19 December, the young couple boarded the ship the *Washington* as steerage passengers. They did not go alone: Frances's mother, Frances Alexandrina Crear, and two of the daughter Frances's siblings, accompanied them on the voyage among the 90 passengers aboard.

By the time the ship left and sailed from Greenock in the Firth of Clyde bound for South Australia, William's surname had gone through another metamorphosis: the ship's log records his name as "W. Birtrouse", and so it would appear that young William was actively casting around for a new surname. On 1 May 1852, as the *Washington* sailed up the Gulf of Saint Vincent approaching Adelaide, it ran aground on notorious Troubridge Shoal. The captain was said to be drunk at the helm, though no charges were ever laid.

> Passengers were landed safely and tents erected with sails from the ship - a government sloop was sent to collect them - some family belongings including paintings (family portraits) were lost. (Walker, 2004)

The family sorely missed the lost portraits, and is said to have knocked on doors in the streets and laneways of Port Adelaide looking for them, to no avail. It was not only the family portraits that were lost: so too was the old Butter/Butters/Birtrouse name, forever. By the time they landed in Adelaide, William and Frances Adelaide were the Buttroses. Why the name was changed is debatable. In the opinion of my cousin Ita Buttrose, which she expressed on the television program *Who Do You Think You Are?** devoted to her family background, it may have occurred for romantic reasons - a couple leaving for Australia with less than full family blessing on all sides. This is because William was born less than nine months after his parents' marriage, making him technically a bastard child.

Further, Frances Adelaide Crear came from an aristocratic lineage - on the side of her mother, a woman who admittedly had no concern about accompanying the couple halfway around the world - while William Fenwick Butter was from the family of a mail guard. Or else perhaps the young couple changed it simply to make a new start in a new land. Yet another theory is that the shipping clerk who wrote down the name simply misheard it, because of the Glaswegian accent. Whatever the reason, the change was rendered much easier by the fate of the *Washington*: the ship's log and passenger list were both lost to the sea in the wreck. When William and Frances set foot ashore in Adelaide, the Buttrose family was born.

Things seem to have moved rapidly for the young Buttroses in the colony of South Australia, itself in its infancy, founded just 16 years previously in 1836. Although they arrived only in May of 1852, by September William was a mounted policeman, escorting gold transports back to South Australia from the Victorian goldfields.

Later he was appointed first police constable at the Echunga goldfields in the Adelaide Hills, where the family remained until 1860, when William was transferred to Morphett Vale, south of Adelaide. In 1864 he was promoted to First Class Trooper, and in 1866 the couple moved again, this time to Angaston, north of Adelaide, in the Barossa Valley, where William died, on 15 July of the same year. It is thought that he died in a fall from his horse, but the real cause of his death may be less dramatic. His death certificate states that he was suffering from diabetes, and makes no mention of a fall. Ita Buttrose recounts the theory that he may have fallen from a horse, but that he did so after losing

consciousness due to the effects of diabetes. His widow Frances Adelaide remained in Angaston, where she opened and ran her own school, and lived on to be 81.

William was only 37 when he died, but in the 14 years since he and Frances Adelaide had arrived in South Australia, they had had eight children, seven of whom survived. Among them was John Oswald Buttrose, my great grandfather. Their second child, he was born in 1854, in Adelaide. He became a commercial traveller, his job taking him to various parts of South Australia. He is said to have been something of a charmer and womaniser, with various female friends in the towns dotted along his route. Life became increasingly difficult, however, especially after his wife Catherine Sanderson died at the age of 41 in 1899, leaving him with their six children. He remarried a decade later, in 1909, but the union was not a success.

> Remarried at 55 years to widow Sarah Noble, who ran the hotel where he was living. However he was reported to have been drunk when he married Sarah and after he sobered up he found her very ugly and did not stay living with her. (Walker, 2004.)

He died in Adelaide in 1916 of tuberculosis, aged 60. His second child, also called John Oswald, was my grandfather.

While the younger John Oswald's elder brother William became a pillar of the community, a councillor at Glenelg with a street named after him, John Oswald (1881-1969) seems to have been something of a reprobate and drinker like his father. As a young man he was a footballer, captaining the Australian Rules football team Sturt, and gaining state selection in 1904 for the annual grudge match between South Australia and Victoria.

In 1907 he married Lillian Agnes Kelly, the daughter of Murray Bridge publican Charles Kelly. Charles Kelly had previously been licensee of the landmark Botanic Hotel in Adelaide, and his father, also named Charles Kelly, had worked on the construction of the overland telegraph from Adelaide to Darwin. There is a well named after him in the remote north of South Australia.

John (called "Ossie") and Lillian (known by her middle name Agnes) had seven children while he made an unsteady living in show business, first as Adelaide manager of

the theatrical company J.C. Williamson. He went on to a varied career working in the stage and film businesses, but was often unemployed, and drank, and after two decades of marriage left Agnes and the family, just as the Great Depression was about to hit. As Heather Walker summarises it:

> Managed film exchanges (Fox in Perth), managed theatres, looked after concert artists, took theatre companies on tour and even ran a tent show at the Perth Royal Show. Had frequent bouts of unemployment - "shot through" in 1928 - leaving wife and seven children. (Walker, 2004)

"Ossie" remained in Adelaide for a couple of years, then drifted east, to Melbourne and Sydney. He was later gaoled for not paying maintenance, but released when his elder brother, the ever-responsible William, intervened to help. His later years were spent living with a woman called "Bunny", described by relatives as "small and Jewish", at Homebush and Blacktown in Sydney's western suburbs, where he died in 1969.

The eldest of the children of "Ossie" and Agnes was Charles Buttrose (1909-1999), a distinguished editor and journalist, war correspondent, and later a deputy general manager of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (now Corporation).

Charles might also have had a career as a singer. In 2001 "A strip of seashore known as Henley Beach: A history of its Catholic community", was published in Adelaide by the Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Parish History Group. Its author Frank Sweeney mentions his voice at some length, while showing incidentally how much the family moved about Australia.

> [Henley Beach resident Irene Cashen] remembers the voice of Charles Buttrose, the eldest of the Buttrose family, on occasion in the mid 1930s. As a boy soprano in Perth during the 1920s, he had sung at picture theatres and cafes accompanied (on the piano) by his mother, Agnes. He had been billed as the "Boy with the angel's voice". In maturity he retained a memorable tenor voice. (Sweeney, 2001)

Charles went on to father four children, the second being the renowned editor and feminist Ita Buttrose (1942-).

The fifth of the seven children born to “Ossie” and Agnes was Philip Buttrose (1919-2001), my father. His life was somewhat less eventful than that of his father, grandfather or great grandfather.

He was born in Saint Kilda in Melbourne, as the family moved around in pursuit of work and income. After “Ossie” left, in spite of the problems of caring for seven children during the Great Depression, my grandmother Agnes managed to keep the family together, supported by the eldest, Charles, who at the age of 14 got a job as a proofreader with the Adelaide afternoon newspaper *The News*.

My father enlisted after the outbreak of World War II, and worked as an aircraft mechanic, but did not see active service. After the war he and other members of the family settled in the Adelaide seaside suburb of Henley Beach, and followed the religion of their mother’s Irish forebears, as churchgoing Roman Catholics.

He had a string of jobs, selling vacuum cleaners and life insurance door-to-door, and, like his grandfather, was a commercial traveller in rural and outback South Australia, selling car batteries. At the time of my birth in 1952, he was a battery packer working in an old bluestone warehouse down by the docks in Port Adelaide. He later became state manager of the company, Clyde Batteries, and in the years before his retirement, was state manager of Lucas Batteries, working in an industrial premises off the Main North Road at Gepps Cross.

In 1951 he married Josephine Butler (1925-), and I was born the following year, a century after William Fenwick and Frances Adelaide arrived in South Australia.

I have traced my paternal lineage in some detail, but shall now devote only a few paragraphs to my mother’s side. The reason is that little is known about my mother’s family. My mother does not know who her father was, and her knowledge about her mother’s side only goes back as far as her grandfather, with the snippet of information that he was a London tobacconist. Her mother, Hilda Rose Petts, left London and arrived in Australia during World War I. My mother believes she had left England because she was unmarried and pregnant, with her first baby, Joan.

On arrival in Adelaide, Hilda took up with a man called Horsey, and Joan, along with Hilda's second child Freddie, bore the surname Horsey. Hilda found employment as a domestic with the wealthy merchant and state MP Sir Wallace Sandford, at his home Sandford House on East Terrace, and she rose to the trusted position of housekeeper. Around this time her sister, Gertrude Victoria Petts, who had lived in Surrey and married a Yorkshireman from Sheffield called Samuel Edward Butler, arrived in Adelaide to help her with young Joan and Freddie.

In mid 1924 Hilda became pregnant again,** and my mother Josephine and her identical twin sister Mary were born in Adelaide on 26 March 1925. Josephine and Mary were almost from the first given into the care of Hilda's childless sister Gertrude and her husband Samuel, who raised them as their own. This arrangement was formalised in 1933, in the depths of the Great Depression, through a court order. My mother remembers being in the court, as an 8 year old girl, the day the order was made.

Josephine and Mary grew up as pretty and popular girls in the Roman Catholic parish of Henley and Grange in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I believe my father counted himself lucky to find such a bride, and after their marriage, and my birth, he was content to devote himself to the home and family life.

My first few years were lived in a semi-detached rented home in North Street, Henley Beach, but in 1957 with a War Service Loan my parents bought a Housing Trust home in a new development on reclaimed land at Fulham, between Henley Beach and Adelaide Airport at West Beach. My father lived there until his death in 2001, after which it was sold, and the house and gardens razed for a new house on the site. My mother moved into a nearby retirement village, on Henley Beach Road at Fulham, and so has lived in the same suburb for more than 50 years.

Our family life was close-knit, my father venturing out only for work, and a night or two a week at the pub until it closed at 6 o'clock. Socialising was confined to Saturday afternoons at the South Henley Hotel, and picnics and barbeques with a small circle of family and friends. My mother went back to work in the 1970s, relieved to see vistas beyond the home. She had always wanted to return to work, but my father had been against it.

Why have I raised all this at such length, and what is its immediate relation to the topic of this work? My response is that if I am to consider my own writing in relation to Woolf's contention that who we are is manifest in everything we write, and to my corollary that the author is the book, I must know as well as I can who I am, and what is my history, and from that, what is my identity.

I have also traced my family history in some depth because in the next chapter I shall be dealing with my manuscript novel *Blessed Kiss* and other works of my own, and tracing their elements back to my own life, and shall attempt to demonstrate how the origin and history of my family has provided raw material for my storytelling - often without my even being properly aware of it.

IDENTITY

The past isn't dead and buried.
In fact, it isn't even the past.

- William Faulkner

Here Faulkner reflects upon the ongoing nature of history down the generations. We can never divorce ourselves from the past: there is no past, as such, because from the past comes history, and from that comes identity. The past lives on in each generation that rises from the old, in its memories, in its stories, in its very genes.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, we see this in peoples and nations, in families and individuals. In the case of Australia, our popularly recorded history of events such as the Eureka uprising, the deeds of the Kelly Gang, and the "Anzac legend", have all helped feed what is widely held as the image of Australian identity, as no-nonsense and suspicious of authority, as can-do, lean and male.

Like all histories, this conventional one is questioned. There are those who argue that part of our identity was formed as much as anything else from our national guilt at the way the European settlers took the land from Australia's indigenous peoples, and the massacres and other crimes committed in the process - the "whispering in our hearts", in other words, of historian Henry Reynolds. There are others, such as *Quadrant* editor Keith Windschuttle, who argue that Europeans should feel no guilt because the terrible acts did not occur, or not in any numbers to concern the white population too much at any rate, though the forced dispossession itself is hard to argue against, even for Windschuttle. There is the indigenous history of Australia, that of its aboriginal peoples, recorded in works of art and by word of mouth in myth and legend, going back at least 50,000 years. There is another history, of Australian women, struggling for rights, for jobs and equal pay, and yet another of the post-World War II migrants, and the prejudice they encountered upon arrival. This continues nowadays, not so much on the basis of language, ethnicity or skin colour, but of religion.

These aspects of our history, however, converge in the creation of a "national character". Individual Australians might argue about the degree to which each of these

strands is asserted in the whole, and the degree to which national attributes such as giving each other "a fair go", laconic self-confidence and a wry sense of humour, are present in our identity. But few would deny they are there, at the least in part, and originate perhaps in the need for co-operation and forbearance in a dry and challenging land. From our history has grown our national identity.

What can be said for nations can also be said for families. Family is a major factor in the character of the individual. As with all things relating to human development, we may not know the exact contribution within each individual of family history, genes, environment, as well as chance, in helping determine the person we become, but we do know that they are all elements in the melting pot, and family background and history are certainly important ingredients.

To return then to my own family history, and the creation of my own identity: as is true with other people, my identity was moulded from many sources, including genes and environment, but in my case one of the richest factors was story. I grew up on family stories, about our relatives, elders and forebears. As mentioned in the previous chapter, my grandfather "Ossie" left his wife Agnes with their seven children, including my father Philip, and later lived in Blacktown in western Sydney with a woman called Bunny. That much of the break-up of my father's family I know. But I never received a straightforward account of it from my father during his lifetime, and grew up gleaning snippets through jokes and gossip, after family members had downed a few drinks, or else when we would drive past a dero on the street, and my father would make his habitual quip, "there's my old dad". Similarly on my mother's side, in spite of persistent questioning over the years, it was only because I asked the full truth from her to include here, that I have come closer to achieving anything like a more complete understanding of her family background, especially her mystery father.

In my adolescence my mother used to remark that her father could have been "any of the stray village dogs", though in later years she said his name might have been "Eddie Puddy", but that she knew no more. One night after a few drinks she said that Eddie might have had a "touch of the tar", suggesting he was perhaps part indigenous, but she later retracted the comment, and has never allowed herself to be drawn on it since.

Another story related to my Uncle Jack, my father's immediate elder brother, who

lost an arm in World War II. I always got on well with him - even if his nick-name for me was "Bird Brain", perversely because I did quite well at school and graduated from university - and I named my son after him. Growing up, I was always told that Uncle Jack had lost his arm fighting the Japanese in New Guinea in World War II, tossing a hand grenade that detonated too soon. Only in recent times did another of my uncles - Sydney, by then in his nineties - correct that, saying Jack did not see combat in New Guinea, but drove a bulldozer building airstrips there for the Americans, and had lost his arm in a gelignite fishing trip gone very wrong.

Such stories formed the mythology of our family, of hardship on both sides, of broken families and bitterness, none of it at all like the strictured and proper moral world one might have expected from the families of devout Roman Catholics I had on both sides. What did I draw from this, as a child growing up, and now in maturity? Should I take it that humans live far more complex lives than one might expect from the creeds and moral codes they espouse? Certainly that is suggested by the facts as I know them now, and this idea is woven into my novel *Blessed Kiss,* in which the surface layer of suburban Catholic morality is seen to be literally wafer thin.

Given the foregoing, it is perhaps ironic that I have not until recent years been very conscious of indulging in reflections about my family background. I considered myself different from the background I sprang from, coming from working class suburbia into the urban professional middle class, and felt, for better or worse, largely "self-made". I knew my mother had argued strongly with my father to get me the best education available in the Catholic system, with the Jesuits, and that had helped me get to university and essentially create the person I became. But beyond that I hadn't looked much into my past for clues about who I was, and certainly not back into genealogical records.

I began delving into my past as I drafted *Blessed Kiss* in 2006-2008, and my interest was further sparked after seeing the television documentary about my cousin Ita Buttrose, *Who Do You Think You Are*, telecast in 2008. Although the programme concentrated to a large degree on her mother's Jewish heritage, there was enough about the Buttrose side to prompt my interest. This led me to reconsider who I was in the first place, and how my own identity had been formed, and to look back over my life to see what its major turning points were, especially in relation to the moulding of my identity.

I was an only child for much of my childhood, in a close family relationship with my parents who themselves remained close partners. The home environment was nurturing and protective: I was never allowed to have a bicycle, for instance, as my father deemed the (near empty) roads too dangerous. When I was eleven my parents had another child, but she died at five days, and they adopted a three-week old baby, my sister Mary-Anne.

Although the family were practising Catholics, there was always a tinge of scepticism in the air in our home, especially concerning those members of the local congregation whom my father believed saw themselves as the devout of the devout. He could never abide “show ponies”, as he called them. We were a “Labor family”, and at the dinner table my father nightly aired wittily scathing views about the ruling conservative national government in Canberra, and our long-serving prime minister, Robert Menzies, or “Ming”, the widely used nickname that my father preferred. My mother, on the other hand, held that all political parties behaved like schoolchildren and liked to declare that she intentionally voted informal, though there seemed little doubt that in the booth she voted Labor. So I grew up in a family which, while largely lacking in formal education - my father had only one year of secondary education, and my mother nothing beyond primary, both having had to seek work during the Depression - was nonetheless engaged in a lively manner with politics and current affairs.

Although I was an altar boy from the age of eight, I rejected Catholicism at fifteen, as I felt that any religion which was sexually prohibitive was anti-life. I became agnostic, and have remained so. I matriculated at seventeen, and enrolled in an Arts degree at Adelaide University. In the same year I gained a journalism cadetship at the ABC, and also started up a poetry magazine with a work colleague, so that in the space of twelve months my own individual identity, as a tertiary-educated journalist and writer, was being formed. That has been my identity since and remains, and it has been this education and this writerly bent that have allowed me to trawl my memories of growing up in a working class seaside Catholic community in Adelaide in the early 1960s, and transmute those memories into fiction, in *Blessed Kiss.*

This is by no means the first time I have used my memories of growing up in the western suburbs of Adelaide for fiction, as I have used it previously as well in nonfiction. The first instances though were in my poems, four collections of which were published in

my twenties and thirties. In the poem “Henley Beach Scene”, I mentally re-walk the streets and strand of Henley and Grange, with my mother.

> ...we walk back through the streets
>
> where along Military Road infants
> file to Confess, Eucharist,
>
> then they file
> back again
>
> Star of the Sea Convent
> how many longer, creased bodies
>
> would you now see washed against
> these neutral sands,
>
> wedding rings and hate
> in the gnarls of their hands;
>
> and Mother, shall we walk on now
> past Haig Mansions on the Esplanade
>
> with their new winter white paint
> and boys with collies;
>
> but looking past my shoulder
> I realise you are gone again
>
> feel this pain of hands outstretched
> to the past intangible... (Buttrose, 1982)

Re-reading these lines decades after I wrote them, I can see now that they refer in part to my mother's struggle with chronic depression. Her condition was exacerbated when, as a young wife, she found herself left alone without a car or even a nearby bus, in a new house in an uncompleted government housing development. She yearned to return to work, but was forbidden to by my father. My fuller realisation of the power dynamic that existed between my parents - my father's unquestioned dominance over my fragile mother - gives the poem added meaning upon re-reading now.

I reflect upon my relations with my parents in a passage of memoir published in my travel book, *The King Neptune Day & Night Club*. In 1987, when I was in my mid thirties and my parents in their sixties, I flew to Darwin to join them for ten days in Kakadu National Park, while they were on a round-Australia caravan trip. The passage below also refers, with an immediacy that startles me when reading it now, to my father's relationship to his mother-in-law, my mother's adoptive mother, Gertrude Petts. Freud might have found food for thought here.

> So here we were together again, really for the first time in fifteen years, my father hunched over the steering wheel in that idiosyncratic style of his, my mother studying maps in the passenger seat and reading out tidbits. I was in the back seat listening to tapes on my walkman feeling like a teenager.
>
> The car was a Valiant Regal V6 1980 model, silver with blue trim, vinyl roof and power steering. It was called Gert - after my mother's late mother. Gert was in fact the mother of all cars. My father had called all his cars Gert since he met my mother - from the old black Peugeots he drove through the South Australian bush as an outback salesman in the fifties, to the VWs and Holdens of the sixties and the chunky Falcons and Valiants of the seventies. These vehicles might have worn different bodies, but through a process of automotive transmigration understood only by my father they all possessed the same soul. They were all Gert. (Buttrose, 1992)

I drew upon my upbringing, and the characters of my parents, albeit in both instances in altered form, in my first novel *The Maze of the Muse.* One fact not altered was that like its central character Jack Driscoll, I had grown up in a bookless house on a treeless suburban street, something I had never before articulated before quite like that, even to myself. As I wrote the line I had a revelation of sorts about how fortunate I had been to escape the circumstances into which I had been born. Few who grew up in our working class suburb managed a similar change, many going into trades and factory work, and remaining residents of the area.

It was also true that as in the case of Jack Driscoll's father, my real father was a shy man who avoided much social contact, and would lock himself in the bedroom if the front doorbell ever rang unexpectedly. He had once played the violin, which along with his military-issue rifle gathered dust in a pillow case on top of his wardrobe. The character of Jack Driscoll's father in *The Maze of the Muse* is a melding of the factual and the invented. The family setting has shifted too, from Adelaide to Canberra.

> My father had a job I found hard to describe in the schoolyard, "salesman or something". In point of fact he was buyer for a department store in Civic, a position to which he had been promoted quite late in life from the sales floor. He had written himself as a young man, bush ballads, songs which he and his brothers would sing around the piano. But the war came and frontline service in New Guinea left him with chronic malaria. By the time he fully recovered from that (and met and married my mother) his days of writing had long passed. Now he didn't even read. All that was left was an old bitterness about something that had glimmered before him, so briefly. He played golf at weekends and was obsessed with the upkeep of the house, and rarely had much to say. (Buttrose, 1998)

I revisit my family past, again altered, in *Blessed Kiss.* Set in a working class Roman Catholic parish in a seaside suburb of Adelaide in the early 1960s, it explores a web of guile and deceit involving a nine year old boy, Michael Carlow, his dissatisfied

mother and unfaithful father, and a priest with paedophilic feelings who exploits the vulnerability in the parents' relationship to pursue greater access to their son.

In an early passage, Michael recalls something that is already in his own past, a brief period spent in the Adelaide Children's Hospital while doctors conducted tests into his mysterious illness. My own stint in that same hospital when I was five remains one of my earliest memories, not so much for the fear and separation from my family, but as a strange first taste of freedom.

> Apart from visiting time, he was largely alone, but found that not disagreeable. He had his crystal set, which he tuned in to music and news, and when he had enough of that he read Biggles or Baby Huey comics, or looked out the window. The hospital was on a main road near the city centre, which until his illness he had only ever visited with his mother, shopping in the big department stores. He enjoyed observing the daily life of the delivery vans and taxis, and people getting on and off buses grabbing papers from chorusing newsboys (Buttrose, 2010)

Michael Carlow is recovering from an undiagnosed illness when a young and educated priest, Father James Quinlan, is appointed parish priest in his suburb. Quinlan takes an immediate interest in Michael, who is bright and full of curiosity.

Michael's parents are in their late thirties. Patrick travels the outback selling water softeners, and has been married to Margaret for more than a decade. A dutiful Catholic wife, Margaret feels unfulfilled, and has interests in art and music which are "modern" compared with Patrick's. He is a reserved man - except when he is with his lover, May Netley.

May works in a chemist shop in Broken Hill. Having always thought she would end up a miner's wife, then finding herself alone in her late twenties, she had virtually given up on love until Patrick strayed into the shop one day with a headache, looking for a packet of Bex analgesics. Their affair, initially confined to a night every few weeks on

Patrick's country trips, sees her begin to blossom after she makes the move to Adelaide to be closer to Patrick. The move creates complications for Patrick though, forcing him to contemplate whether his future will be with her, or Margaret and Michael. Though Margaret is unaware of the affair, she strongly suspects something is amiss. Meanwhile Father Quinlan is moving in ever tighter circles around Michael.

In addition to her suspicions, Margaret feels a growing sense of general dissatisfaction with her role as a woman, and like many women in the 1960s is feeling her way towards some kind of independence, feelings which surface at odd times, such as when she finds herself affected by seeing pictures and an article about the painter Jackson Pollock in an old *Life* magazine in her doctor's waiting room.

> She had never experienced anything like that from art before, although she had once or twice experienced something similar, reading a book which she knew she shouldn't have, one the Church would have frowned upon, a story which touched vividly, but realistically, upon physical love. She knew Patrick would disapprove, and kept her reading and feelings to herself, and never mentioned the American painter. Their shared cultural diet was restricted to the occasional stage show up in town, or the pictures over at the Bay. (Buttrose, 2010)

Margaret is in a number of respects the 1950s suburban captive housewife identified by American feminist Betty Friedan. A pioneer of so-called "second wave" feminism (that is, 1960s-70s feminism) Friedan is best known for her landmark work, *The Feminine Mystique,* published in 1963. As a married woman, she had herself experienced the frustration of the "perfect homemaker" in conservative 1950s America, and came to the view that the suburbs were receptacles of the bottled up angst of women denied freedom and opportunity, and believed their feeling of being trapped in the marital home was sapping their emotional and psychological wellbeing. My mother, and the Margaret Carlow of *Blessed Kiss,* experienced such a feeling.

My father spent years as a commercial traveller in the outback, selling car batteries to dealerships in country towns. I used to accompany him sometimes, and even though I was only six or seven at the time, I retain vivid memories of those journeys, vivid as the blue of the outback sky, of my father hunched at the wheel as we drove down rough dirt roads, cigarette clenched hard between his teeth. I remember too the brittle yellowed lace curtains of the old country pubs where we stayed, and how my father would never order dessert from the menu at dinner, but only “cheese and greens”. He liked to keep himself trim, and would already have been getting plenty of calories from his daily intake of West End beer.

I was not aware of it at the time, having not met my cousin Heather Walker and learned of her genealogical researches, but outback commercial travelling was already part of our family history, with my father’s grandfather, John Oswald Buttrose (senior) travelling about as a salesman. That he had girlfriends dotted along the way is something else I appear unwittingly to have drawn upon in the character of Patrick Carlow, even if in his case there is only one lover, May. In early passages in *Blessed Kiss,* I draw upon my memories of my father driving in the outback.

> He had his window wound all the way down and the wind streamed in, running through his hair, over his face. He kept an eye out for willy-willies. In the hot dry air out here you often saw them, little red twisters across the flatlands.
>
> ‘Lochiel,’ his father announced.
>
> It was the first word he had spoken since swearing about the “stinking bloody”soap factory on their way out of the city, hours before. It wasn't that his father was always such a quiet man, but he was on driving trips. The boy assumed it was a time for him be off in his own thoughts and accepted it. (Buttrose, 2010)

The portrait of a man quite like my own father is drawn in further detail, from the boy’s point of view, as they get out of the car at the Lochiel Hotel, and he notices familiar actions and gestures of his father’s.

> They reached the huddle of iron structures which was the town, drawing up by the hotel in an orange halo of dust. The boy noticed particles of it settling onto his father's suit as they got out of the car. At the hotel entrance he coughed his smoker's cough, ran forefinger between his neck and collar, brushed his shoulders and buttoned his suit jacket and straightened his tie, and drew himself erect.
>
> An hour and a half later they were back on the road, beer fumes mingling with cigarette smoke in the car. Michael rested his head on the door with the wind rushing in. His father was happier, chatting. Beer did that. He had also met three men in the hotel and one of them had placed an order. (Buttrose, 2010)

Inevitably it is not only my parents who are drawn in both fictional and nonfictional forms in my work, but myself too. The versions range from the subtle to the all but subliminal, even to me. In this description of Michael, the reader gets a perspective of the world from a nine year old boy. It was only as I was actually typing the words that I remembered that perspective, of seeing the world looming hugely above, and being almost frightened of the breadth and height of the outback sky, as conversely too of the confines of enclosed space, and the often extreme nature of so many aspects of experience in life.

> The searing white Lochiel salt lake dazzled his eyes, under a blue sky that ran away and kept on going. The size of the sky disconcerted him. He didn't like too big a sky, as he didn't like too small a room. He preferred things of a moderate order, but they rarely were. Life in general disappointed in that way, too extreme. Teachers were too ready to flare into anger, aunts to smother with kisses, friends fickle, nights when he woke up too deep and silent. When they watched the television news there were always soldiers in helmets with guns. Sometimes it felt the whole world was at war, and their little home surrounded by it. (Buttrose, 2010)

In the novel's coda, Michael, now aged 21, has spent the past decade living in Melbourne with his mother Margaret, after she left Patrick. Michael is now at university, and has a feminist girlfriend, Barb, who comes from an arty Melbourne Jewish family. He takes Barb back to Adelaide for Writers Week at the Festival of Arts, and later they drive down to Port Noarlunga with a group of friends, and Michael finds himself struck by his abiding sense of connection to his native South Australia.

> He watched the sun setting into the Gulf, then turned right around to look back at the distant bald brown hills, with all their vacant blue sky, and felt himself overwhelmed.
>
> It was the beauty of the desolation that moved him, or perhaps it was the desolateness of the beauty. The plains and hills, even the gibbers and saltbush had their redemption after all. It was to the emptiness of this place that he belonged, if one could belong to things absent. (Buttrose, 2010)

Jack Driscoll, the central character in *The Maze of the Muse,* is in many respects like a slightly older Michael, aged 23. Jack has moved on from university studies to pursue his desire to write. The novel, written ten years before *Blessed Kiss,* is in the first person - something I now consider a mistake for a work in which the protagonist was very similar to me, making it that much easier for the reader to confuse the author with the character.

> My challenge to myself was to travel hard and live simply, and at the end of my grand tour make up my mind what to do next. The choice was to return to the Masters Degree on offer, this culminating in probable tenure in the Department of English, or else try to do what I had always wanted to - attempt to write.
>
> And that is what I did on those warm, still afternoons when the shops pulled down their shutters and the old town drifted into siesta - I tried to

> write again from scratch, with no preconceptions, no prejudices, no goals or objectives. I was seeking a new voice, the voice of whoever I now was, the person sitting at this broken down table in this broken down hotel room above the Placa Real, pen in hand and paper ready, staring down at the fountain... And I thought, if I cannot write here in Barcelona then I really am not a poet, but rather I am what my father always told me I was: a fool. (Buttrose, 1998)

In reality my father never called me a fool for pursuing writing: both he and my mother were as supportive as parents could be when their 22 year old son announces that he has quit his promising day job in journalism to pursue a career in something as tenuous, marginal and notoriously non-paying as writing. Nonetheless, whenever I received a rejection slip for a poem or story, I thought of my parents, and how after the education they had scrimped to give me I was letting them down in trying to publish things that rarely saw print, and made me precious little if any money, and how I should have stayed in journalism or else gone out and got myself another "real job".

I reflect upon this in the "factional" short story "In Dreams", in which, after the collapse of a teenage garage rock band I had joined only that same day, I am thrown back upon the fundamental matters facing me as a 15 year old, which were getting to university and getting out of the working class suburb into which I had been born, while at the same time behaving honourably towards my family.

> I had to do well this year, and the next, and the one after, to get to university, to get out. And I had to do the right thing by my parents too. If I didn't, who would? (Buttrose, 2009)

The reader may suspect that these examples from my own work merely show that as a writer I have drawn particularly from my background, my family history and the identity that grew from it. But that is not the case. As mentioned previously, up until recently I considered myself a "self made" individual who had never consciously written

of my past and background, except to illustrate some other point or aspect of life in general. In *The Maze of the Muse,* for instance, I did not set out to write about my family, but about poetry, and the poet's quest for knowledge and identity, and gaining the "poet's blessing" of English poet Robert Graves.

I created the character of Jack Driscoll partially from myself, because from my own experiences of travelling to Spain to meet Graves, I knew I had authentic raw material for a book about a young poet's quest. Poets are rarely portrayed authentically. They are either drunkenly and passionately overdrawn, or else too ethereally removed from real life. I felt in this book I had the chance of drawing a poet who was more true to life, and hoped to achieve that.

There is also the "fracturing" of the author, through more than one character in a book, and this is the case, or so I have come to discern, in some of the characters of my second novel, *Sweet Sentence.* The novel is set in Pondicherry in India, where its central character Julia Keefe has travelled to update a Lonely Planet-style budget travel guidebook. Julia is from Sydney, recovering from a failed marriage, and staying at the Sea View, an elegantly fading guesthouse run on the palm-fringed esplanade of the former French colony on the Bay of Bengal.

The Sea View's eight rooms are peopled with a miscellany of spiritual seekers, recluses and idealists - all seeking the impossible, escape from their troubled lives back in the West. A fleeting encounter leaves Julia with the pregnancy she had long hoped for, and the lack of which had helped cause her marriage to fail. But now her pregnancy places her in circumstances that demand she reconsider her life, and what she wants from it.

Re-reading the novel, written a decade ago, I can see facets of myself - as well as my father - woven into several characters, among them the recluse Kingston Chance.

> Kingston Chance was in Room Seven, right next to hers. No-one knew exactly how long he had lived in the Sea View, but it was said to be a number of years. South African, he was a man of military set, heavy browed and jowled, English accent acute, formal of voice and retiring of habit. He was usually reticent to speak, unless it was at breakfast, (he was

> for some reason at his most outgoing first thing in the day), when he might expand on some particularity of the city-state of Pondicherry, its French colonial history, its architecture, the cavalcade of souls that had passed down its streets. He was said to be writing a book about the place, but no-one had ever seen him with pen in hand, or heard the tap of a keyboard from behind his door. His avowed passion was books, and he read "entirely promiscuously". He had let it be known he had an ex-wife in Mumbai, where he had been in business of some unstated kind, before turning up suitcase (and not much more) in hand at the Sea View. He resided alone in his room, walled in with hardbacks stacked in tinplate cases from floor to ceiling, and was never sighted after noon. (Buttrose, 2001)

I wrote the book as a relationship I had been in for more than a decade was approaching its end, and now suspect I was imagining my own escape through Kingston's room and books. There is also plainly an aspect of my father's reticence too, in Kingston's retiring to his room and rarely coming out.

I can sense an aspect of myself as well in Marco Manzini, the Anglo-Italian with whom Julia is briefly involved. He too has removed himself from the world to Pondicherry, to sit alone with sardonically twisted lip, watching everything pass him by.

> From his chair in Le Cafe Blanc, he watched her progress in his direction down the promenade. Marco enjoyed taking his breakfast in this useless pile of concrete some idiot must have thought would work well as a seaside cafe. In its age-streaked, sea-eaten boxyness, it looked a bit like something Le Corbusier might have done, a botched sketch rescued from his wastepaper basket. Indians seemed to like his inhuman, prison-like designs: they had even entrusted him with designing Chandigar, an entire city! Kingston had mentioned one morning he believed an earlier incarnation of the cafe might have been associated with the operations of

> the wharf, which had been swept away by a cyclone decades before, its remains jutting up from the sea like the snapped-off ribs of a whale. But he himself found it difficult to believe that explanation. The building made for such a ludicrous cafe, it had to be purpose-built. (Buttrose, 2001)

I can also sense an aspect of myself in the reserved, demure and somewhat confused protagonist Julia. As mentioned, I wrote this novel at a time of gathering stormclouds in my own marital life, and Julia's flight to India and ongoing separation from her husband and business partner Tim reflect in part my own problems. Their relationship founders on the question of having a child, which she wants, but Tim is not ready for, yet, a position I had been in for a number of years with a former partner, with whom I did ultimately have a child.

Early in the book, it is recounted that Tim has attempted to buck the issue by filling their house with gifts for the day Julia returns (alone) from a trip overseas. In an instant her frustrations crystallise, and for once she takes direct action.

> She cleared the house of the flowers. She threw out the basket and the nuts and the ribbon. The chocolate she ate and the champagne she drank. She composed a brief email, saying she would be turning thirty-three in a matter of weeks, and wished to have a child in the following year. She wanted him to be the father, but if he did not want that himself, or could not make up his mind, she would make other arrangements. As she clicked on "Send" and the message whizzed off into the witchcraft of the Internet, she derived satisfaction from the *other arrangements*. It was understated, coolly divorced from the reality of sex, sperm and egg with a new lover, which lay beneath the veneer of those two words. (Buttrose, 2001)

Considering at some length these details of my background and their relation to my writing, as I have here, I have been repeatedly surprised at how intricately interwoven the two are. I could cite many other examples from my books, stories and poems, where I see

the clear and indelible mark of my own experience, and the trace too of the history of my forebears. After all, what would I be without them? They are in me, in my consciousness, and in the ways I express myself, including my writing.

My belief is that the same applies to other writers, and that there are threads in their works that weave back into their past, intertwined with their memories and experiences; threads which they may not be aware of, and of which a casual reader would also be unaware. Obviously there is not room for an exhaustive survey of literature at this point, but I wish to present a case through a number of examples.

The author's life is plainly present in Dante's *Divine Comedy,* in his life experience of the Christian religion and his placement of various rivals and foes in the lower, ever more terrible rings of hell, until he is literally walking over their heads beneath the ice at the bottom. It is obvious too in Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* when he reflects upon his own experiences in the Battle of Lepanto, and his slavery that followed, while a background as a seaman and navigator suffuses the fiction of Conrad, who himself remarked "every novel contains an element of autobiography - and this can hardly be denied, since the creator can only express himself in his creation..." (Conrad, 1988).

Virginia Woolf was born in London into an aristocratic literary and artistic family, and educated at home. Her mother died while Virginia was in her early teens, and the death of her father in 1904 triggered a nervous breakdown. She continued to suffer psychiatric problems for most of her life, and was hospitalised at times. In addition to the deaths of her mother and father, she is believed to have suffered trauma from sexual abuse.

> ...she had to deal from early childhood with... a man who used to hang around Hyde Park Gate and expose himself to children (fearfully remembered in *The Years*) and, it seems, a sexual assault by Gerald Duckworth [her half brother] in very early childhood. (Lee, 1996)

Woolf suffered from depression for much of her life. In 1941, she experienced a severe bout after returning to her country home in Sussex after visiting Blitz-ravaged London. She disappeared not long after, leaving a suicide note for her husband Leonard.

Her body was not found for nearly three weeks. The coroner gave a verdict of suicide: Woolf had placed stones in the pockets of her overcoat, and walked out into the Ouse River near her home.

Her first novel *The Voyage Out,* was published in 1915, when she was 33 years old. In comparison with her later works, such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To The Lighthouse* (1927), it is more in the style of a nineteenth century novel, a realist account of an innocent young woman's journey towards experience, as might have befitted an Austen or Bronte. Having been raised by two maiden aunts in Richmond, 24 year old Rachel Vinrace is dispatched from London by her remote father on a sea journey to South America. She makes the voyage in the care of another aunt, Helen Ambrose, a woman more worldly than her Richmond relatives.

On board the insalubrious tramp steamer the *Euphrosyne*, Miss Vinrace becomes acquainted with a varied collection of English intellectuals and literati, and after a kiss from a young man named Richard Dalloway, is aroused by feelings of a kind she has not experienced before. As the voyage proceeds it becomes plain that as with many journeys recounted in literature, this one is metaphorical as well as actual, away from the self one has been, towards another, a transformation.

Biographer and critic Phyllis Rose makes the parallel with Woolf's own life in writing of the journey and arrival in South America:

> In some ways, Rachel's story to this point is a fascinating transformation of Virginia Woolf's personal history. When she was thirteen, in 1895, her mother died. Her father, Leslie Stephen, the Victorian man of letters, was a melodramatic and egotistical mourner, insisting that the large life of their house at Hyde Park Gate in Kensington focus on himself, his loss, his gloom. Unlike Mr Vinrace in *The Voyage Out,* who was too absent, Leslie Stephen was too present, but the result for his daughter was the same: restricted life. (Rose, 1991)

That transformation and breaking from strictures in Woolf's life, is echoed in Rachel's interior monologue. Further, and perhaps even more tellingly, as Rachel feels her way towards a larger life on her own "voyage out", in her growing confidence socially and in her relationship with Terence Hewet, she realises that for everyone else too, existence is a matter of muddling through. Behind Rachel's realisation, the reader may sense the fragile Woolf trying to make sense of the daily grappling with life which other people merely seemed to accept.

> That was the strange thing, that one did not know where one was going, or what one wanted, and followed blindly, suffering so much in secret, always unprepared and amazed and knowing nothing; but one thing led to another and by degrees something had formed itself out of nothing, and so one reached at last this calm, this quiet, this certainty, and this was the process that people called living. (Woolf, 1991)

A month after their engagement, Rachel is stricken with illness and dies. As he sits with Rachel while life slips away from her, Hewet is left with the overwhelming sense of their union.

> Unconscious whether he thought the words or spoke them aloud, he said, "No two people have ever been so happy as we have been. No-one has ever loved as we have loved." (Woolf, 1991)

There is a clear resonance here in the suicide note she would leave for her husband, a quarter of a century later, that ended: "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been". It appears the words she wrote in *The Voyage Out,* in the early days of marriage to Leonard, when she was in her early thirties, remained with her to the end, and re-appeared in that most poignant of settings, the suicide note she left for him. This is another clear interweaving of the author's life and experience with her work, bleeding back all the way into her life, and death.

The character of Richard Dalloway from *The Voyage Out* remained with Woolf too, reappearing as the husband of Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway.* In this book Woolf uses the "stream of consciousness" technique pioneered by Joyce in *Ulysses*, convincingly allowing the reader to become privy to the flow of thoughts of the protagonist, in a persuasive real time.

The book interweaves through the course of a single day the stories of Clarissa Dalloway, the wife of conservative politician Richard Dalloway, who will host a party that the Prime Minister and all of London society will attend, and that of Septimus Smith, a man shellshocked and traumatised after the Great War, who will die. Clarissa Dalloway has a nagging sense of dissatisfaction with what she has become, when as a younger woman she might have wished to take the world and shake it. Smith has a doomed true love for the wife he will soon leave in death. These story threads link up when news of Smith's suicide is revealed at Clarissa's party. Smith has thrown himself from the upper floor of a building, impaling himself on the iron spikes of a railing, pierced through the heart. The identification of Clarissa with Smith, and, once removed, of the real life Virginia with Smith, crystallise in the novel's closing passages, as Clarissa reflects on his death.

> Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (Woolf, 1996)

As the train of thought continues, she considers what might have happened if Septimus had consulted the foremost London doctor of the age for such ailments - as he had, fatally.

> Suppose... he had gone to see Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage - forcing your soul, that was it - if

> this young man had gone to him and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that? (Woolf, 1996)

She follows that thought with another in which she transfers the tragedy of the young man to herself, while nearby her husband sits unaware of her turmoil, reading *The Times.*

> Somehow it was her disaster - her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand there in her evening dress. (Woolf, 1996)

Here the author's life and her work are seen to be closely intertwined.

Ernest Hemingway served as a volunteer ambulance driver with the Italian forces during World War I, was wounded, and had a lengthy recovery in military hospitals. During this time he fell in unrequited love with a nurse, Agnes von Korowsky, who would later become the heroine of his World War I novel, *A Farewell to Arms.*

In *Hemingway The 1930s*, biographer Michael Reynolds claims this is the real backdrop to the fiction of *A Farewell to Arms.*

> On July 8, 1918, beside the muddy Piave River on the Venetian plain, a night mortar shell ruined his right knee, filled his legs with shrapnel, and left him with concussion; after less than a month at the front lines, Hemingway spent the remainder of the war recuperating in a Milan hospital, where he fell in love with a nurse eight years his senior. Ten years after the experience, he has created a war more real than any he had known.

> He gives his war wound and his nurse to Frederic Henry; to his fictional nurse, he gives his wife's second pregnancy. From his first marriage with Hadley Richardson, he takes their good times at Chamby when the roads were iron-hard and they deeply in love. (Reynolds, 1997)

Hemingway's *Fiesta* (1927), was set in the racy Paris of the interwar years, and against the backdrop of the annual San Fermin Festival in Pamplona in Spain, with its running of the bulls through the narrow streets. The story of the love between an impotent American and a spirited Englishwoman has obvious resonances for the young, war-wounded American author intoxicated by the allurements of Paris and the brutal summer spectacle of a Spanish bullfighting festival. Hemingway reflected upon writing from harsh experience in a letter to fellow author F. Scott Fitzgerald:

> We are all bitched from the start and you especially have to be hurt like hell before you can write seriously. But when you get the damned hurt use it - don't cheat with it. (Phillips, 1986)

For the character of the spirited Englishwoman, Lady Brett Ashley, biographer Jeffrey Meyers argues that the author drew upon an Englishwoman who had captured his roving marital eye, Lady Mary Duff Twysden, or "Duff" as she was known.

> Hemingway, who called Lady Twysden an "alcoholic nymphomaniac" was attracted by her title and found her a lively drinking companion. He thought she was chic, witty, sexy, reckless and exciting... She was the model for Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* and was delighted by the literary notoriety. (Meyers, 1985)

In the 1930s Hemingway lived at Key West in Florida, but returned to Europe as a correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, from which he fashioned another love story, and one of his greatest successes, *For Whom The Bell Tolls.* The story of a young

American, Robert Jordan, who joins a guerrilla band fighting the fascists, it fuses together love, politics and sexuality in a heady mix.

Hemingway's *Across The River and Into The Trees*, published in 1950 is usually ranked among his lesser efforts, with its almost hackneyed story of an old soldier on a last fling with a teenage Italian contessa in Venice. Hemingway himself held out the highest of hopes for it, as revealed in the famous reportage by *New Yorker* writer Lillian Ross of his two-day stopover in New York City en route from Cuba to Europe in 1950.

> He had one arm around a scuffed, dilapidated briefcase pasted up with travel stickers... He crooked the arm around the briefcase into a tight hug and said that inside was the unfinished manuscript of his new book, *Across the River and Into the Trees*... 'She's a better book than *Farewell*,' Hemingway said. 'I think it's the best one, but you are always prejudiced, I guess.' (Ross, 1962)

Whatever the quality of the book, for our purposes here it would seem that in it Hemingway's identity and life are wrapped together more tightly than ever. *Across The River and Into The Trees* is in essence Hemingway's *Death in Venice,* and though not in the same class as the Mann novella, it has similar cadences, of the doomed, hopelessly idealistic passion of an older man for someone much younger, a final spark of love before death in the lovely, stinking, sinking city of Venice.

The ageing and sick American colonel who shuffles a last tango with the 19 year old Italian contessa is appropriately named Cantwell, and despite his declared passion to father five children with Renata, his few days in Venice are more of an afterglow of desire, and more tellingly, of the pain of memory.

The assignation begins as one might expect. When Renata enters Harry's Bar where Cantwell waits for her, she is 'shining in her youth and tall striding beauty, and the carelessness the wind had made of her hair'. (Hemingway, 1977) Yet soon after, on that same evening as they dine, Renata surprises us.

> 'The mirror bores me,' she said. 'Putting on lipstick and moving your lips around each other to spread it properly and combing your too heavy hair is not a life for a woman, or even a girl alone, who loves someone. When you want to be the moon and various stars and live with your man and have five sons, looking at yourself in the mirror and doing the artifices of a woman is not very exciting.'
>
> 'Then let us be married at once.'
>
> 'No,' she said. 'I had to make a decision about that, as about the other different things. All week long is my time to make decisions.'
>
> 'I make them too,' the Colonel told her. 'But I am very vulnerable on this.'
>
> 'Let's not talk about it.' (Hemingway, 1977)

As his final few days of life unfold in Renata's company, bitter memories of the war only just ended return vividly to him. He is in some regards like the Septimus Smith of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway,* scarred by war, walking wounded with the mark of death on him: he cannot love as he would wish. 'She was there beside him, wishing to be loved, if he had any love to give.' (Hemingway, 1977)

After taking his leave of Renata, Cantwell is driven away towards Trieste in his army vehicle. He knows his death is imminent, and recounts to his driver the last words of the mortally wounded Confederate general, "Stonewall" Jackson: 'No, no, let us cross over the river and rest in the shade of the trees.' (Hemingway, 1977) A moment later 'it hit him the third time' (a heart attack) and he tells his driver - also named Jackson - '"I'm going to get into the large back seat of this God-damned oversized luxurious automobile." That was the last thing the Colonel ever said.' (Hemingway, 1977)

What are we to make of this story, in the context of Hemingway's life and work? My belief is Hemingway reflects repeatedly upon the issue of human frailty: that all is not possible for us, that our capabilities are not limitless, that we certainly are not invincible, and that we can all have our spirits dented or broken, if the injury is bad enough.

This is the theme I believe Hemingway wrote about in the deserter-lover of *A Farewell to Arms,* the impotent man of *Fiesta,* the man who gives his life to someone

else's war in *For Whom The Bell Tolls,* the dying colonel clinging to love and life in *Across The River and Into the Trees,* and the old fisherman whose dream of a great catch, of deliverance, of a better life to come, is eaten literally chunk by chunk by the circling sharks, in *The Old Man and the Sea.*

This concern with human frailty I believe is part of the popular appeal of Hemingway the author, and is ironically enough the opposite to the "machismo" attributed to him by some detractors. Instead, he articulated with sensitivity and accessibility the fears and inadequacies we all experience, fears of acceptance by others, of sexual adequacy, of our commitment to our beliefs, of merely coping as life ebbs from us, as it does from his Colonel Cantwell. My view as well is that this view of human frailty came to him as a young man, after he was wounded in war while still teenager, the "hurt like hell" that he suffered himself before he sat down and began to write seriously.

The other author I shall consider here is J.M. Coetzee. Despite his stature as a Nobel Prize winning author, his 2007 work *Diary of a Bad Year* left some reviewers perplexed, in part because this experimental novel deliberately teased the reader about the relationship between its protagonist and author.

Diary of a Bad Year has three separate storylines running simultaneously. These are written as three separate sections of text, at the top, middle and bottom of each page. The first is not exactly story as such, but a collection of short essays under the title "Strong Opinions", as spoken into a dictaphone by the ageing author C., and covering his views on everything from the origins of the state, to anarchism and terrorism, the policies of Australia's conservative Howard government, paedophilia and English usage, music classical and modern, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author.*

On each page there is also C.'s running account of his relationship with Anya, his provocatively sexy Filipina typist whom he met in the laundry of the apartment block they share, while the third line is Anya's account of her time working with "Senor C.", and her criticisms of his essays, which she invariably finds uninteresting. This third storyline also weaves in Anya's live-in boyfriend Alan, a finance sector jock who sees C. as a predictable old-fashioned socialist.

The novel's climax is an apocalyptic dinner party during which Alan's spiteful

resentment at the regard Anya and C. have gained for each other shoots forth in a geyser of drunken bile. He also reveals that he had been planning a financial scam involving illicit use of C.'s bank accounts, a moment in its own way almost as outrageous as the burning kerosene in the hair of *Disgrace.*

The three storylines are intricately interwoven, and the book is satisfying in its exploration of intimacy and shame, age and desire, and C.'s "pessimistic quietistic anarchism". But perhaps the most fascinating aspect is the gradual unveiling of the identity of C. himself.

Early on he is simply C., but later we learn he is J.C., and Anya refers to him as "Juan". Coetzee himself is a "Juan", the J.M. standing for John Maxwell, and like the famous writer in his book, he is South African from Cape Town. So, is this "character" Coetzee? He may appear to be, and the views he expresses are as we might expect, especially such indicators as sympathy with the animal rights cause.

He appears to tear away the last character mask when he mentions "my novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*". (Coetzee, 2007) This is of course a book in reality written by Coetzee himself. Yet one fictive veil remains. The writer C. is said to be 72, in 2007, but Coetzee is only 70 this year, 2010. So, can we take it that the views that C., or J.C., expresses in "Strong Opinions" are reliably those of John Coetzee? Or is it that the real man suspects (or fears perhaps) that he will grow into the character he has written; that he is the character - the book - and the book him?

The possible answer is yet another layer in the webwork of this book. In Strong Opinion number 30, *On Authority in Fiction.* C notes:

> Announcements of the death of the author and of authorship made by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault a quarter of a century ago came down to the claim that the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks. (Coetzee, 2007)

While suspecting the "obscure pleasure" Barthes found reading Zola may have given him cause for self-doubt, C. goes on to postulate that despite all the brouhaha Barthes and others had made, the authority of authors over their own work abides.

> Now that the dust has settled, the mystery of Tolstoy's authority and of the authority of other great authors, remains untouched. (Coetzee, 2007)

If meaning can truly be encoded by an author, if their work is not just a carpetbag of rhetoric or tissue box of references but an arrow of their intention, if the beauty or otherwise in writing is not only in the eye of the beholder, then this book is the case *par excellence*, one in which the central character divests himself before our eyes of any rhetorical trickery, and stands before us as the author himself. On my reading, that is what this book ultimately is, an authorial chord in a major key, ringing with resoluteness and played with panache.

MEANING

We all of us seek meaning, in religion and philosophy, in family and children, in relationships, in work and career, in art and music, in sex and love, sport and recreation, travel. Some of us may seek it through one of these predominantly, as a Buddhist monk does through religion, or a professional soccer player does through sport, or we may seek it from several sources combined, like marriage, career and religion. But either way, it is still comes down to the same thing, a search for meaning.

Our search can hardly come as a surprise, as all of life is a faltering resistance to disease and ageing, a fight to the death with death. In that short, stark moment that is the living consciousness of each of us, we try each in our way to make sense of what is happening to us, and of the mysterious fate that awaits us all in death, while mining our experience for meaning in what Samuel Beckett understood to be our human condition of meaninglessness.

We are all of us Vladimir and Estragon, Beckett saw, tramps marooned in a tawdry wasteland, not knowing why we are here nor who we are, and waiting for that unseen destiny to arrive, which he gave the identity of Godot. As such, Godot is not God, not even meaning, but only that which will come to pass in time, for us all; something we shall never see, touch, know or comprehend.

As discussed here previously in the “History” chapter, self-awareness is a defining characteristic of humans, but it is also the cross we bear throughout life, each on our own track up towards our yet unglimpsed personal Golgotha.

Some find refuge in a belief in a god and a divinely ordained destiny, with the attainment of eternal bliss or entry into an endless paradise the reward for the right-thinker and right-doer. Others murmur the dogmas but don’t know what they think or feel, really, knowing only that tomorrow the alarm will go off and they will be jammed aboard a bus going to a distant workplace; or, perhaps, no alarm will be set because they no longer have

even the numb tedium of the job they loved to hate, and that all that awaits them now is the blue glare of daytime television, and nattering, bickering, and fretting over bills.

Others face stark existential horizons, believing in no life beyond this one that we are living, with some coming to the view that doing the right thing, through acts of compassion for one's fellow human beings, is an end in itself and its own reward, and from that extract meaning enough to go on. Whatever our approach, be it to spend our lives writing insurance or *billets-doux*, playing the stock market or *Grand Theft Auto,* we are each in our own way trying to create meaning in our lives. If one accepts this, it is not so surprising then that the issue of meaning is even more crucial to those who work with it intimately, who wrestle with it daily, such as writers. But in recent decades their right to assert their meaning in their work has been brought under question, along with the survival of the major art form of fiction, the novel.

One essay of importance in this respect is the famous essay, *The Death of the Author,* by Roland Barthes. It was published in 1968, the year of the student uprising in Paris, and it is important to recall the backdrop against which it was written, the revolt of Western youth in the 1960s against established authority. This took many forms, from protests against the Vietnam War and the movement to ban nuclear weapons, to student uprisings against university hierarchies, to hippie "flower power" and rock music, and, true to its time, Barthes' essay has the stridency of a slogan through a megaphone to a throng of students. But the uprising failed: there was no revolution on the streets of Paris in 1968. Today France is ruled by conservatives headed by President Nicolai Sarkozy, a playboy more from the pages of Colette than anything by Marx.

The Death of the Author addresses itself to the authority of writers over their work, and the convention that they may have a deep and inextricable link with it, that their own unique and definite meaning is inscribed deeply within it. To Barthes, however, once it leaves the author, any work is a "text" - photographs, films and advertisements are also texts - with no inherent or inscribed meaning. Rather, it is a "tissue of quotations" from other sources, and its meaning is that which the reader gives it: ergo the slogan, "the reader writes the book". Barthes opens his essay with, indeed, a quotation, from *Sarrasine,* by Honore de Balzac. He quotes a few lines, then after a flurry of semi-rhetorical questions regarding the authorship of those lines, leaps to his thesis.

> Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (Barthes, 1997)

He proceeds to a thumbnail history of writing, beginning with "ethnographic societies" - none of which he identifies, but by which he appears to mean every non-Western society ever studied by ethnographers - in which he argues that the author did not exist as such, but was rather a mediator between gods or elemental forces and humanity. The author he sees appearing from the European Middle Ages onwards, when via an unholy tryst between English empiricism and French rationalism, a cult arose of the individual as author as 'the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology'. (Barthes, 1997) He goes on to nail his villain:

> The image of literature to be found in ordinary [sic] culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. (Barthes, 1997)

While it is sometimes irritating when writers, artists or composers are considered and valued not so much for their work but their lives, in bemoaning this Barthes is merely bemoaning human nature, or, if one prefers it, observed human behaviour. Critics and readers always have and always will want to look at the creator behind a work, because they believe that doing so will inform them more fundamentally about the work. It is perhaps understandable that Barthes might have wished to attack an over-reliance upon biographical material towards a possible deeper understanding of an author's work, but his essay reads like an over-reaction.

Barthes proceeds to award points to the poet Mallarme for "deriding the Author", and then divulges the breathless news that the academy has now made it possible to kill off the (now capitalised) Author.

> '...linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool... Linguistically the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing more than the instance saying *I*: language knows a "subject", not a "person", and this subject, empty outside the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language "hold together", suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it.' (Barthes, 1997)

Here Barthes is drawing upon the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and others, and theories of semiotics regarding the relationship between the world as we experience it, and the way in which our apprehension of it is expressed through symbols. It is one of a number of theories regarding the ways in which humans record meaning from experience and communicate it to others, but to Barthes these semiotic theories were proven, so completely that they did not need to be stated in anything but the vaguest of terms.

Barthes continues to press this point though, through further bald statements and generalisations, none of them supported.

> We now know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. (Barthes, 1997)

Thus Barthes stumbles against the obvious. In his zeal to deride originality - a key aspect of the make-up of his tyrannical "Author-God" - he fails to recognise that this, his own essay, *The Death of the Author,* is an original work because no-one had ever drawn before upon linguistics quite in this manner to mount an attack on the authority of the author. Part of the appeal to many, who decades later still repeat his words, is the very originality of his own attack.

Towards the close of the essay, he moves against meaning *per se,* and any attempt to find it:

> ...the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. (Barthes 1997)

He concludes with a loud endorsement of the reader, as the creator of meaning in any "text".

> Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focussed and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author... We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes, 1997)

Barthes' argument is essentially predicated upon phenomenological relativism, that no two readings of a work will ever be exactly the same. That would seem true, up to a point. That is what we have always referred to as difference of opinion, and it goes back much further than Barthes, to the cave. People have always varied in opinions because we have differing sense perceptions and predispositions, and cultural, class and ethnic backgrounds. We have always known that there will be a very wide variety of opinion regarding all manner of things: it is one thought that is definitely not original.

As with different opinions on the meaning of a story, we each may see a table slightly differently, or perceive a slightly different hue of blue in the sky. That does not mean that there is no table, nor that the sky is not blue, which we affirm by putting our

cups on the table, and choosing to leave the umbrella home. Despite differing sensory responses, human beings operate in a *consensual* reality, one which is a workable approximation of reality for each person.

But to move from the fact of difference of opinion to the fiction of no inherent meaning, is as sophistical as it is specious. Of course views between readers will differ about meaning in a book, to a lesser or sometimes greater degree. But none of that means there is no meaning inherent in each work, and no perceptible and largely agreed authorial intention.

Barthes sledgehammered the walnut. But *The Death of the Author* was catchy, sensationalist, and it resonated because it appeared to give us licence to value our own opinion. But postmodern "theory" didn't give us that. We have always had it. Like a lot of things to do with "theory", including its phenomenological relativism, it is not news. Nor for that matter is the elevation of self-referential fiction as somehow new. Cervantes was doing it four centuries ago, as John Rutherford, the author of one of several recent translations of *Don Quixote,* remarks in his Introduction: 'self-conscious and self-referential fiction is not, as certain contemporary critics and theoreticians seem in their postmodernist parochiality to believe, a twentieth century discovery.' (Rutherford, 2003) This begs the question of whether there is now a generation adequately familiar with the literary canon it criticises.

But Barthes' essay gained longterm popularity in large areas of the international literary academy. The notion of postmodernism that "it's all been said before and we're just putting the old bits together in interesting ways now", struck a chord. As well, a plethora of other theories, such as gender, race and queer, became attached to it, and over time, "theory", as it became known, tended from the new and challenging towards the established and orthodox, and from the analytical and critical to the proscriptive.

This not only stifles creativity, but humour and satire, as both must often sail close to the wind of political correctness. Rather, literature lends itself to Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "carnivalesque", as a form and place within which transgression against dominant norms finds expression, and the status quo is mocked and subverted through satire and farce. As Selden, Widdowson and Brooker suggest:

> Bakhtin's discussion of 'Carnival' has important applications both to particular texts and to the history of literary genres. The festivities associated with carnival are collective and popular; hierarchies are turned on their heads... Everything authoritative, rigid or serious, is subverted, loosened and mocked. (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 1997)

What could be further from this than some "theory", self-absorbed and deeply serious about itself - even deeply serious about its "playfulness". In the process, a truth has been eroded: good writing is not about correctness or ideology, but the courage to express a truth, the author's truth, no matter how uncomfortable, unfashionable or ideologically incorrect that may be. Orthodoxy breeds fear, and fear is death to literature. In that regard at least, then, the author has indeed been placed in mortal peril.

As stated throughout this work, my view of authorial meaning is the opposite to that of Barthes, and founded in the intimate bond between writers and what they write. That connection between the history, identity and experience of authors and their work is mediated by their intelligence, power of memory, and creativity, and their ability with language to express fiction in new ways. Fiction is not just things "made up" by an author, but rather can include everything experienced in their life, right up until the point of signing off on the final proofs of their book.

As we have seen through my own life, history and literary works, and authors such as Woolf, Hemingway and Coetzee, the lives of writers are interwoven inextricably with their works. Meaning is crucial to these authors - as it is to me - because meaning grows from a writer's experience, and is as fundamental to their expression.

As Hemingway wrote:

> The hardest thing in the world to do is write straight honest prose on human beings. First you have to know the subject; then you have to know how to write. Both take a lifetime to learn. (Phillips, 1986)

My argument here prompts a final question: If there is no book written, does the reader still write it?

AFTERWORD

None of the foregoing should of course be seen to underestimate the reader in any regard. The author may write the book, but the reader gets to read it, and in doing so, may just see inside the heart of another person. There is a beauty to reading, as there is to writing. The two are in a symbiosis, not a conflict.

New Zealand-born author Martin Edmond gives poignant expression to this:

> A vast number of consoled wretches: the readers of this world are not usually described thus, but why not? Whether the consolation be philosophic, poetic, fictional, nonfictional, is beside the point: the living presence of an (unsubstantial) other within us makes our own unreality a little easier to bear, for a while that lasts as long as consciousness does. The means of this sharing is a telepathic act whereby words first spoken in one person's head are, via the acts of writing and then of reading, spoken again in another's. (Edmond, 2007)

This is the beauty of the writer-reader symbiosis, that springs from the author's work of living and of writing - another symbiosis - through which, almost magically, the author is the book.

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