stripped and scrubbed his whole body, but discovered that he had no belief any longer in the water's power to cleanse.

What horrified him was that he might find himself face to face with the man whose smell he had on his hands, in his head too, a thing so intimate, so personal, that surely he would recognise it on the man himself, and the word would leap up in the air between them, taking form from the stench. He swung about again. And it seemed to him now that it was the sky that had been smeared, the earth, the water. The word was on them; some old darkness out of the depth of things was scribbled there for ever, and could never now be eradicated.

12

ANDY MCKILLOP'S visionary powers were greater than he knew. The blacks had brought Gemmy something, though it wasn't a stone.

When all the proper formalities had been exchanged, and the necessary questions asked and answered, the silence between them as they sat, all three, and faced one another, became a conversation of another kind; and the space between them, three feet of baked earth where ants in their other life scurried about carrying bits of bark and other broken stuff in the excited scent of a new and foreign presence, expanded and became the tract of land up there under the flight of air and the stars of the night sky, that was the tribe's home territory, with its pools and creeks and underground sources of water, its rock ridges and scrub, its edible fruits and berries and flocks of birds and other creatures, all alive in their names and the stories that contained their spirit, for a man to walk into and print with the spirit of his feet and the invisible impact of his breath.

For longer, much longer, than the ten minutes Andy McKillop counted from his side of the hill, they moved together through its known places. And Gemmy – as he recognised one and then another feature of it, the site of old happenings, strange encounters, or stories, or lean feasts – felt the energy flow back into him, and saw, in the sudden access of it, how weak he had grown in these last months, with the dry little cough that plagued him, and his stomach troubles.

The air he breathed here did him no good, the food too. The ground he walked on jarred at every step. The land up there was his mother, the only one he had ever known. It belonged to him as he did to it; not by birth but by second birth, by gift, and not just for his lifetime either but for the whole of time, since it was for the whole of time that it existed, as he did too so long as he was one with it. This was what the blacks had brought him, in case he needed it. They were concerned that in coming here, among these ghostly white creatures, he might have slipped back into the thinner world of wraiths and demons that he had escaped, though never completely, in his days with them. They had come to reclaim him; but lightly, bringing what would feed his spirit.

They spread the land out for him, gave him its waters to drink. As he took huge draughts of it, saw it light his flesh. Watched him, laughing, bathe in it, scooping great handfuls over his breast. In the little space of dust between them as they sat, they danced, beat up clouds, threw rainbows over their heads. Then they rose, exchanged the formalities of parting, and went. A day and a night it would take them to reach a place that was already humming all round him as he took up his hammer and sent the blows of it leaping with such clarity in the release of his spirit that they might be flying, he thought, thirty miles off, like stars his arms could fling over the furthest ridge to light their path.

Then that bloke Andy appeared; came stumbling out of the scrub with his crooked jaw and restless, runaway eyes, and stood leaning on air, with the odd, empty look that anything, any madness might fill; hinting, demanding. The air around him was immediately infected, sucked into the emptiness he made just by stepping into it. Gemmy felt the good health that had been given him weaken. As if he had looked into a pool – that was how this Andy affected him – and seen an image of himself that was all unfocused pieces that would not fit.

With an effort he pulled his eyes away, and the man, or the furious emptiness rather that wore a look and held a shotgun and was trying to find the *shape* of a man, went still and vanished.

It was the kind he was, this Andy. If you refused him your attention he mumbled, dithered, boiled with his own hopeless impotence, and disappeared.

But when, with a hiss, he did turn on his heel at last and stalk away, Gemmy felt his heart fall. He was real enough; the emptiness was real. And they stood too close to one another on the lowest rung of things in the settlement for his ferocity to accept defeat.

Slowly, over the months, he had learned how to handle such fellows. He stepped into their skin, looked about quickly, stepped out again, then dealt with them as they dealt with themselves.

One or two of them knew this and kept clear. They did not care to be exposed, even to themselves. Others felt it but did not know, and the less they knew the more openly hostile they grew; these were the ones you had to watch out for. He watched, allowing himself no illusions, and since there was a kind of agreement among them, or so it seemed, that open savagery was not permitted, he survived.

He had no real tormentors here. Even the crudest among them affected a bantering tone – though he soon saw through it – as if any mischief they might get up to was an expression of an irresistible jollity, and when it went too far, and he was roughly used, the fault, if anyone's, was his. They got him to his feet, brushed him down, told him he wasn't hurt, that he was a good fellow and that they had meant no harm. (It was true. They thought they didn't.)

His real tormentors were in his head, and they came after him more and more often now as their shapes rose clearer in his memory and grew faces and fists in the dark hours of his sleep. And as always, it was Mosey and The Irish who were the worst of them: Mosey with his high thin voice and fair wisp of a beard, soft as a girl, and The Irish with gunpowder pits in his cheeks and two fingers gone from his right hand.

'What have we got here, now? A boy, is it? By Jimminy yes, I reckon it's a boy, a boyo. But what a scrawny, thin-necked, weasel of a boy,' and with each new taunt they would begin to push him back and forth between them, 'what a snub-nosed –'

'Red-eared –'

'Big-mouthed –'

'Low-arsed –'

'Knock-kneed –'

'Imitation of a boy it is! More like a scrap of old cheese –'

'Or the sole off me boot –'

'Or a bit of stale pie crust you can't hardly get your teeth into –'

'Than a boy, a boy, a boyo!'

All the while leering and lunging as they sang the words back and forth and bowled him back and forth between them, till they began to thrust about under his clothes, and the cries that broke from him as their fingers pinched and poked and teased and twisted were the cries of a child, but the pain now was that of a grown man, outraged and powerless, who had to stand by and see it done, and for all the fierce howls that came out of him could neither drive the devils off nor prevent what, in a moment now, unless he wakes, will be past all remedy . . .

He wakes from such a dream. A clammy hand is over his mouth, a mouth, close in the dark but not his own, is roughly panting. He struggles; half waking, jerks his body to get free, but as so often, the dream hangs on, tough arms hurdle his ribs. It hangs on just that breath longer than sleep, but the breath, indrawn, is very deep and the fear comes to him that this time he may not be able to shake it off, that the tormentors he carries within him, who have been so long hidden and have begun, more and more often now, to come to the surface in him, will this time break clear, get out into the real world, where he will have no more control of them than he had in the days when they were real and he was one of them.

And it is true. This time it is true. He is awake, and these others, all knuckled hands and shoulders and rough heads and breath, are cramped close under the lean-to with him, shoving, whispering instructions, at one point giggling.

They have got him hooped about with their arms, they are pulling a bag over his head, and with the choking chaffy roughness of it against his mouth, and in the dry breathlessness of nightmare, he is being hopped and dragged over stones, and when he stumbles, jerked upright by a crowd of bodiless whisperers who are trotting along on all sides of him, as if all his tormentors had found one another at last in the dream-space of his head, and discovering now what they have in common, have joined forces to gallop him to some corner of the dark where he is flat-handed this way and that, and when he throws up his hands to protect himself, falls, but at other times merely hovers on the brink, and is baited and played with; not brutally but with hands, neither fisted nor frenzied, coming at him from every direction, and without sound save for the grunted effort it takes to haul a man to his feet so that he can be knocked down again, and the breathing in the darkness, which is huge even inside the sack, of many mouths.

Suddenly there is water round his ankles, and when he stumbles this time there is a splash that scatters moonlight through his skull.

His arms are jerked back, his head pushed down. His head, roaring into the sack, is thrust under water and the darkness in the sack turns to mud. He gasps mud. Then goes under again, and yet again, till a voice rises in protest. The others say hush, but it changes things. The grip on his arms weakens.

He is released and on his knees in the creek when he hears a voice he does recognise: Jock's. It is shouting.

A scuffle, the barging all round him of bodies in the dark, and the next moment he is upright, gasping, breathless inside the sack, and the sack, muddy and streaming, is torn from his head.

13

ELLEN MCIVOR STIRRED. From the other side of the wall had come one of those nightmare cries that were so much part of their nights up here that she did no more at first than pause in her half-sleep and listen for the disturbance it might make among her children. But on this occasion there was more. A series of bumps against the wall itself jerked her into full wakefulness. She put her hand out, touched her husband's arm in the dark, and he started up, his hand on his shotgun. Rolling out of bed he went to one window, then quickly to the other, as she, her heart swinging wildly, put her foot to the ground. One of the children woke. It was Janet. 'Shh,' she said, rising quickly now.

The child sat up with her eyes wide in the darkness and looked to where her father crouched at the window, his face tense in the faint light from out there, the barrel of the shotgun softly aglow. 'What is it?' she breathed.

'Shh,' the voice came again.

Jock was puzzled. He saw a muffled group, but it was making away from the hut, not towards it, in an awkward, shuffling way that he could not understand; a huddle of four, maybe five figures.

He handed Ellen the shotgun and began to pull on his moleskins and boots while she, with the shotgun ready, took his place at the window. She could see nothing out there. The group was swallowed up now in the darkness further down the slope and she wondered what he had seen that disturbed him.

He took the gun, touched her hand lightly in the half-dark,

gave her a warning look to be quiet, and slipped the latch of the door.

'What is it?' Janet asked again.

'Shh, ye'll wake the ithers.'

Going to the door, she opened it a crack, letting a flood of moonlight in, and a medley of night sounds, but nothing more.

'It's naethin',' she said. 'Gae back to sleep.'

She had opened the door just wide enough to slip through, and barefoot now, just as she was in her nightgown, she stepped out, dropping the latch behind her.

Careful not to wake Meg, who slept beside her, or Lachlan, who was already mumbling, Janet set her foot to the ground and crossed quickly to the door. Very carefully she raised the latch and, barefoot like her mother, ventured out into the strangeness of the yard.

It was transformed, made unfamiliar by moonlight and the tinking of night-creatures. Big clouds overhead seemed closer than any she had seen by day, and the ground, which her bare feet knew well enough in sunlight, felt odd, not quite safe. She was aware of every pebble in the unevenness of it.

Her mother was standing very still about halfway down the slope, her nightgown shifting a little and the dark of her body outlined within it. She was struck by the heaviness, the solidity it suggested, and a sudden affection for her mother, which she did not always feel and seldom expressed, came moistly into her throat so that she was tempted to call her. The material of her mother's nightgown was all agitated moonlight, but the body inside it was dark, bulky, deeply rooted out there. Though exposed, it did not seem vulnerable. She had a flash of her own body, dark and thin inside her nightgown, but was exhilarated rather than afraid.

There was no sign of her father, or of whatever it was that had drawn him out, then her mother, then her.

She stood without breathing, or so it seemed, and the calm she felt, which was all suspense of ordinary, daytime feeling, had to do with the tense and brittle strangeness with which the world was touched, which might have more to do, she thought, with some quality she had brought to it out of her sleep than with the play of clouds across moonlight.

I am the one who is seeing all this, she thought.

That, as much as anything, accounted for the nature of what she saw. And with it came another thought: Me, not Lachlan.

She was aware suddenly of being outside in the dark, while the other children slept on in the house.

Not for a moment in all this did she think of danger.

Her mother turned and started up the slope, then stopped a moment, looked back, then came on again; and when she saw her standing in the dark there, outside the door, did not chide her.

They stood side by side and watched her father and Gemmy come up the hill, Gemmy stumbling, her father with one arm round the man, supporting him. Her father raised his head and the look he gave them she would never forget.

He led Gemmy by them and to his sleeping place against the side of the house.

'Janet come awa' noo,' her mother coaxed, touching her lightly, not perhaps for the first time, 'come ben, come to yur bed.'

When Jock McIvor reached the bottom of the slope, it had been to see no more than the last shadowy retreat of whoever it was. They were gone across the creek. He could hear them crashing through the scrub on the other side. There was no point in following. He had Gemmy to deal with, who was drenched and quaking, and had to be half-carried up the slope.

What he had dreaded most when he had come rushing downhill was that he would have now to come face to face with them; they would stand in the open at last. They had saved themselves, and him too, by making off. Cowards, he thought bitterly. But wasn't he one too in the relief he felt? He was shaking, but comforted Gemmy as well as he could and for the first time did not draw away when the man clutched and held on.

Looking up about halfway up the slope, he saw his wife.

He did not want to face her. She saw it and turned away, and went to where Janet was standing, barefooted at the door.

That was when the real fear, the real anger took him. That in the middle of the night his wife and daughter should be standing out under big clouds at the edge of the dark, hanging together and watching him drag a helpless creature, half out of his wits, back from a moment of senseless bullying, while the men who had done it – neighbours! – were creeping home to crawl in beside their own wives, safe in bed.

He went on past them and dragged Gemmy into the shelter of the lean-to. Laying aside his rifle, he crawled with him into that musty, dark-smelling place, and did a thing he could not for his life have done a week, perhaps even an hour ago: he sat huddled close to him in the dark, and when he shivered, drew him closer, pulled the old moth-eaten blanket round the two of them, and with the man against him, heard his juddering breath, and smelt it, while outside moonlight fell on the cleared space round the hut where his wife and children waited.

Janet lay awake in the dark and it was a long time before her father came in.

She heard him undress and climb into bed, and for a moment they whispered, but she could not make out what they said. In the morning, grim-faced and slow as he always was, her father had nothing to say and she knew that whatever it was that had happened, which she had seen and not seen, she must not ask about.

Once, during the day, her mother came very quietly and kissed her, as if in recognition of something between them that the others were to be kept from, even Lachlan; but she did not know what it was, and when she looked up expectantly, her mother did not enlighten her.

Perhaps the gesture had been meant as a consolation. But for what?

The place where her mother's dry lips touched her brow glowed, and for a long time afterwards she was aware of it, as if, at that point, a kind of knowledge had been passed to her.

It was the moment she would think of later – more even than the more ordinary and alarming one that came soon after – as the true moment of her growing up.

14

SMALL FIG OR *plum with oval, dark-green leaves, the milky juice of its young shoots being efficacious in healing wounds. The scraped root-bark of another plant (the* Ourai *or* Grevia*) is used to make a poultice: large alternate, oval serrated leaf with a small brown berry, generally in pairs, on a small axiliary pendicale.*

Barkabah: *broad-leafed apple tree with pink and white flowers, the fruit full of seed and tasting a little like dried banana.*

Small, creeping leguminous plant that runs in and out of the grass, Kardolo *in the native tongue, with a blue flower like that of cultivated tea: three narrow long sharp-pointed leaves upon a common stalk, with a root not unlike carrot.*

These entries in Mr Frazer's field notebook give no indication of the conditions under which they were made. Their clear copperplate, the lines as straight and orderly as a row of cabbages in a Berkshire field, and the details of the drawings that accompany them, do not suggest that what is being recorded belongs still to the untamed wilderness or that the man who is at work on them – a large man in a collarless shirt, the wide-awake hat laid aside for the moment but leaving a red line across his brow under the sweaty scalp – has for the past hour been plunging uphill over rough ground and is now settled on a log in a tropical clearing to set down, in all the excitement of new discovery, what he has just been shown.

To achieve the meticulously detailed drawings and the almost pedantic notes, he has to keep hand and heart steady. It is as if, in disciplining himself to the demands of the work, he has broken through to a cleared place in his own nature where these plants are already installed behind glass.

Gemmy, watching, is solemnly impressed. His tongue, following the movements of Mr Frazer's hand, works at the corner of his lips as if it too had a part in the business. The drawings for him have a mystical significance. They are proof that Mr Frazer, this odd whitefeller, has grasped, beyond colour or weight or smell, the *spirit* of what he has been shown. Watching a plant emerge, the swelling bulb or fruit, the perfected leaf, Gemmy is entranced almost to breathlessness, his own spirit suspended as the real, edible object, in its ghostly form, breaks out of itself onto the whiteness of the page.

The accuracy and attention belong to Mr Frazer's dogged side. Since the day he made his first pot-hook he has known that he is a plodder; that if he is to keep up with the tumbling complexity of things he must pay closer attention than others to every detail. But he adopts quite a different mode when, under the hiss of the evening lamp, he takes out his writing-up book and lets himself loose in the realm of speculation. The lines run crooked then and might come from a different hand, as thought leaps, darts away up sidetracks, doubles back, stops amazed at its own discoveries, dances, kicks its heels up, delightedly tumbles:

We have been wrong to see this continent as hostile and infelicitous, so that only by the fiercest stoicism, a supreme resolution and force of will, and by felling, clearing, sowing with the seeds we have brought with us, and by importing sheep, cattle, rabbits, even the very birds of the air, can it be shaped and made habitable. It is habitable already. I think of our early settlers, starving on these shores in the midst of plenty they did not recognise, in a blessed nature of flesh, fowl, fruit that was all around them and which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive, since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious. We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there. Is it not strange, this history of ours, in which explorers, men on the track of the unknown, fall dry-mouthed and exhausted in country where natives, moving just ahead of them, or behind, or a mile to one side, are living, as they have done for centuries, off the land? Is there not a kind of refractory pride in it, an insistence that if the land will not present itself to us in terms that we know, we would rather die than take it as it is? For there is a truth here and it is this: that no continent lies outside God's bounty and his intention to provide for his children. He is a gardener and everything he makes is a garden. This place too will one day, I believe, yield its fruits to us and to the great banquet at which we are guests, the common feast; as the Americas brought corn and tomatoes and sweet peppers, and rhubarb and the potato, that bitter root of the high Andes that women, over long years, by experiment and crossbreeding, have leached of its poison and made palatable, to be the food of millions. (There is a lily-root here that the women know how to boil and make edible.)

The children of this land were made for it, as it was for them, and is to them a rich habitation, teeming with milk and honey – even if much of its richness is still hidden; but then so was the milk and honey of the Promised Land, which was neither milk, in fact, nor honey, and the land itself to all appearance parched and without promise. We must humble ourselves and learn from them. The time will come when we too will be sustained not only by wheat and lamb and bottled cucumbers, but by what the land itself produces, tasting at last the earthy sweetness of it, allowing it to feed our flesh with its minerals and underground secrets so that what spreads in us is an intimate understanding of what it truly is, with all that is unknowable in it made familiar within.

Pausing a moment, he draws back from where his hand, running on ahead, has taken him further than he meant.

He is aware of the lamp's hissing; of his wife, her head, under its cloud of hair, bent over the music she is reading through; and beyond the sill, the night, stirred by the clapping of wings, the inaudible puff of seeds as they spread, the random but orderly couplings and killings of a nature different from the one he was used to at home, yet the same.

Since earliest childhood, botanising has been his one sure refuge. With the loneliness of an only child among nine brothers and sisters, he had discovered that the world of plants offered an order he would never find among men. Even the idea of *family* seemed most moving to him as it applied to specimens as wonderfully different to the eye as the apple and the rose.

He was a night wanderer. Slipping out in the dark he would track night-scented flowers in the summer woods, or, with breathing suspended and his whole body alert, observe from a hide, in the soft night air and a liquid light with its own colours, the life of creatures that were abroad, as he was, while the human world slept. That was the joy of the thing. While the eyes of others were closed, or open only on the fanciful world of dreams, to look in on a part of creation that is secret, but only because it lives in another time zone from that of men.

Night-creatures, night-flowering plants. They touched on what was hidden in his own nature; and it occurs to him, as he plunges through the undergrowth with Gemmy, or strides knee-deep up a slope, that in a way he is still at it. This, from the point of view of where he began, is the night side of the globe. He has found it at last, can explore it now in full sunlight. Is that why his discoveries here mean so much to him?

He turns back a moment to his notebook, and what he sees is no longer a wild place but orchards in which, arranging themselves in rows, wild plum and fig and apple have moved into the world of cultivation, and in the early morning light, workers with the sun on their backs hang from ladders and reach out to pluck them.

The theodolite, he writes, *offers only one way of moving into the continent and apprehending the scope and contours of it. Did we not, long ago, did not our distant ancestors, bring in out of the great plains where they wandered, out of mere wilderness, the old coarse grasses that lapped the bellies of their horses, and, separating the grains and nursing them to plumpness, learning how to mill and grind and make daily bread, and how to tend the wild vine till its fruit yielded wine,*

create settled places where men and women sit at tables among neighbours, in a daily sacrament which is the image of the Lord's greater one? All this can be done again. This is what is intended by our coming here: to make this place too part of the world's garden, but by changing ourselves rather than it and adding thus to the richness and variety of things. Our poor friend Gemmy is a forerunner. He is no longer a white man, or a European, whatever his birth, but a true child of the place as it will one day be, a crude one certainly, unaware of what he has achieved – and that too perhaps is part of His intention: that the exemplum should be of the simplest and most obvious sort, deeply moving to those who are willing to look, and to see, without prejudice, that in allowing himself to be at home here, he has crossed the boundaries of his given nature. Of course, such changes inspire in the timid a . . .

He breaks off, his hand pausing above the inkwell. He has come to a knotty place in his reflections, feeling a lapse of the high emotion that has carried him on.

One day, not long ago, returning from one of his afternoon excursions, he came upon Jim Sweetman with his granddaughter on his shoulders, a pudgy child of three, rather spoiled and with eyes so deep in her fat little cheeks that you caught only a glint of them as she jerked her legs and crowed. The old fellow was prancing about in circles, lifting his head and dancing left and right as the child directed.

Still in the excited state his excursions aroused in him, he hailed the man, and they stood a moment on the path while the child, sulking, jerked her legs, impatient to have her grandfather go back to being a pony. Jim Sweetman, patiently, set his hands over her knees, and still half-attending to the child's call upon him, and a little put out himself, perhaps, at the interruption to their play, listened, accepted the hard little fruit he was offered, though not the suggestion that he should bite into it. So he himself did, and showed the man the seeds.

Jim Sweetman did not light up with the vision of orchards. He seemed embarrassed in fact, and at just that moment the little girl drove her heels into him.

'Stop that now,' he said, more sharply perhaps than he meant. 'Grandpa's talking.'

The child's face collapsed. She took a breath, and Jim Sweetman, feeling the change of weight in her little body, lifted her down on to his arm.

Too late. She had begun to shriek, and very satisfied with the effect it produced, she continued, and would not be pacified. He had stood by, waiting for the child's passion to exhaust itself. He had forgotten what fierce, self-willed little creatures children could be. It was so long since he had had any of his own.

The child shot a glance at him, shrieked again, and Jim Sweetman, stricken, while the child sobbed into his breast, shook his head at him as if *he* were responsible. If the man recalled anything of the occasion it would be the little girl's grief. The hard little fruit he had been shown meant nothing to him.

Jim Sweetman, for all his lack of imagination, was the best of them. He knew better than to try the rest. Being caught, once or twice, coming in with Gemmy, he had seen the look in their eyes, and felt Gemmy, who missed very little in this way, fall away from his side – intending, no doubt, kind creature that he was, to protect him.

If he is to get any response to his schemes he must go higher; that's what he has learned. Farmers grasp only what they already know. So, with no notion as yet who it is intended for, he has begun writing what he thinks of as a 'report'.

He looks again to where his wife, just feet away, sits with a score in her lap, her head bowed over her music. She turns a page, her hand going to catch a wisp of hair that has come astray.

'What is it?' he asks, as if he heard a faint burst of what she is playing in her head. 'Is it Field?' But she does not look up. She has not heard him over the wave of notes.

He is in the habit of turning pages for her while she plays – or rather, he was; she has no instrument up here. It is the first time in all their moves that he has been unable to provide one for her. She does not complain; though music, he knows, is

her refuge from the frustration she sometimes feels. With *him*, with his passionate confusions. She saves herself by taking no part in his interests, perhaps out of a fear of finding them foolish, and he in turn keeps out of hers. He does not interfere in the letters she writes to their girls, and to the boy, Edward, except to add his greetings at the bottom of a page. And if he dips at times into the things she likes to read, articles on political economy and the like in the journals she receives, it is not because he hopes to share their arguments with her, but, in a tender way, to catch a glimpse of where she has been, and what it might be there that has excited her. He reads over such passages, and their underlinings, with a deep pleasure, though often enough they have no meaning to him. Only in music, when he turns the pages and sees precisely where her fingers have arrived at in the score, is he quite certain of her emotions and his own, and feels they are one.

They have been married for thirty-three years. She has followed him in his progress – or decline – halfway across the world, and further each year from her real life, which is, he knows, in their children. She is cleverer than he is but does not make him feel it. Cleverness, she knows, has nothing to do with what he is after; which is revelation. What will be revealed, he believes, is the unique gift that is in each man and woman, in each creature and plant too – what else has his study of nature shown him? – and must also be in him: a gift he alone can give to the world, and which without him it must lack.

She sits with the music spread in her lap. The piece has come to an end. Quickly, feeling his gaze, she looks up, makes a face, not at all the face of a woman in her sixties – a child, it might be, playfully poking a tongue at him – then places her hands on her hips, leans far back from the waist, and yawns.

The other women in the settlement found the minister's wife poky. It had got about that she was the cousin of an earl, maybe a duke, and they had hoped for glimpses in her of the romance of birth, even in the reduced form, up here, of a silver milk jug or a set of crested spoons. They wanted a hint in their vicinity of pride, high custom, refinement. That the Frazers were poverty-stricken was no impediment. That was *his* fault.

But she fulfilled none of these easy expectations and might even have set out, in her brusque way, to thwart them. She was a small freckled person, though fine-boned, with a mass of hair that had once been red-gold and was now rusty and none too well controlled. She was dutiful enough in her enquiry about the health of children, but did not always remember their names. Once a month she received a parcel of books and other papers from one of her daughters, the elder one at Aldershot (the other lived at Poole and there was a son in Canada who taught school), which she herself went into Bowen to collect and would immediately, right there at the steamer-wharf, tear a corner from, like a child with a loaf of bread; she was so hungry for its contents.

They would have liked to send their girls to her to be improved with a little needlework of the fancier kind, but she had no skill with a needle, even, as you could see from Mr Frazer's shirts, in the plainer way of buttons and hems. Many of them, poor as they were and with no claim to gentility, were better managers than she was and had a higher regard for what they thought of as the refinements. The one thing you could say of her was that she did not give herself airs. They would have complained if she had, but when she did not they felt cheated of the bit of colour she might have shown them, which would have been a greater comfort here than absent-minded kindness or charity.

'I want to speak to you about something important,' she says from the bed while her husband is still undressing. He looks surprised, then comes in his shirtsleeves to sit beside her. He loves these late moments of intimacy between them.

'Charlie, something very serious has happened,' she says, 'you mustn't be upset.' She goes back a week to Gemmy's visit from the blacks, then, too quickly for him to quite make the connection, to the attack at the McIvors'.

He feels the blood come to his cheek. It is only partly indignation and a kind of shame at so much baseness; there is

also the personal embarrassment of having it brought home to him, yet again, how out of touch he is. He has heard nothing of this; seen nothing either.

'Who can have done such a thing?'

His wife does not reply. Today the men of the place, shamefaced perhaps, have kept out of sight. It is the women who have been busy.

'I know you believe there is no harm in the man,' she tells him, 'and I'm sure you are right. There is none. But people are afraid. There is harm in that. It would be best – Millie Sweetman thinks so, and she is a very sensible woman – if he were put where they can do him no harm. Where he wasn't quite so – visible. Of course, the best thing of all would be to send him away altogether – to Brisbane, if it could be arranged. But in the meantime – I've already spoken to her – Mrs Hutchence would take him in.'

So it was arranged. No one, not even his wife, has thought it worth consulting him.

'Charlie,' she says gently. She takes his hand. 'It had to be done as quickly as possible. The McIvors can't be left with him, they've already suffered, and there are children to consider. It's true there's no harm in him, but he *is* a danger just the same. Not through his own fault, poor fellow. It was best to let Millie Sweetman take over – people will accept that. And you know what Mrs Hutchence is,' she adds lightly. 'They won't try their nonsense with her.'

But the heaviness on his heart will not shift. His one consolation is that he knows at last what he must do, and who his report is for.

15

WHEN THEY WERE working with the bees they worked in silence. That was how Janet thought of it, though in fact Mrs Hutchence kept up a continuous slow talk – it was the only time she did – which was not meant to tell you things – that was all by-the-way – or to do anything at all in fact but be a soothing noise in which the bees, Mrs Hutchence herself, and she as Mrs Hutchence's helper, were gathered in a single breath into an activity that required this overriding soft babble to contain and settle them.

Mrs Hutchence would have been surprised if you had told her: 'That was a funny story – the one about the Chinese pirate.' She would have denied she had ever told it, and wonder, perhaps, how it had got across from *her* head, since the event or the memory of it might indeed have been hanging about there, into yours. When she was silent she often thought she had said something – it could cause difficulties that, Leona certainly thought so – but when she *had* said something she was, as often as not, unaware of it.

This business with the bees was like no other. Something in you slept while you were at it and you woke refreshed, which was just why Janet loved it and why the bees, now, were a necessity to her, as if without them she could never enter into her own thoughts. She felt too that Mrs Hutchence was her first and would always be her greatest friend.

The old woman had a strange effect on her. Under her influence the world slowed to a pace she could manage at last: by which she meant that she had time to *see* things, to let them enter her and reveal what they were. It was a beautiful effect, this. Without it she did not know how she would ever have discovered certain things or believed they existed.

They had come to Mrs Hutchence through Gemmy, who had been called to make hives for her, and since he knew about these things, had once or twice gone into the bush and found swarms of the little stingless native bees she kept along with her imported ones.

The first time they went to visit her Janet had been carrying a present her mother had sent: a bowl of mutton jelly with a sealing of solid fat, and to keep the flies off, a crochet cover weighted with beads. With Meg trailing behind and the bowl held in both hands before her, she had walked slowly down the long road out of town, found the house, which they both marvelled at, mounted the stairs to the verandah, called into the still, dark interior, and when they got no reply, set off downhill towards the gully and its hives.

They saw Mrs Hutchence from far off, looking unfamiliar in a bonnet and veil, with her skirts hiked up and her big boots flopping. Billowy clouds of smoke issued from her sleeves so that she herself was shadowy, and the bees, where they passed through the slanty sun-shafts, were dazzling sparks.

Janet knew what she was doing, there was no mystery in it. But the scene, just the same, touched on something, just at the edge of thought, that she could not catch hold of. She would have liked to set the bowl down, relieve the ache in her arms, and concentrate on the spectacle and the slight disturbance it had set up in her, which was not at all unpleasant; but she could not risk it. Ants were already scurrying around her feet, engaged for the moment in hauling off dead bees, but alert already, the explorers among them, to what she carried. She had to use first one foot, then the other, to brush them off.

So she stood holding the bowl just yards from where Mrs Hutchence was working, with Meg, who was not sure about the bees, sheltering behind her; and in fact one or two of the most adventurous of them did come and settle on the crochet cover, and roll about there, and light at last on her hands. Mrs Hutchence, she thought, was singing; though it might have been the bees, which were exploding in separate points of light, then rushing together in clumps. The smoke reached their nostrils. Meg sneezed.

'Goodness,' Mrs Hutchence exclaimed, 'who are you, child?' seeing only one of them. She came forward. Bees were tumbling in the folds of her sleeves and dotted all the front of her veil. 'Don't be frightened.'

'I'm not,' Janet said. Her stiffness had to do with the way her arms ached from holding the bowl.

'An't you now.'

Mrs Hutchence gave her a hard look.

'Well you needn't be, either. The smoke makes 'em sleepy, you know,' and she sent a little puff towards them.

'Dear me, there are two of you.'

They came often after that, and were introduced to the house and its treasures, but for Janet the real attraction was Mrs Hutchence and the hives, which looked so closed and quiet under the trees but were filled with such fierce activity – another life, quite independent of their human one, but organised, purposeful, and involving so many complex rituals. She loved the way, while you were dealing with them, you had to submit yourself to *their* side of things.

Meg, on the other hand, was attracted to Leona. Janet too enjoyed the company of the kitchen table, with its games and teases, but it was the hives that drew her more. If she could escape, she thought, just for a moment, out of her personal mind into their communally single one, she would know at last what it was like to be an angel.

This thought belonged, yet did not, to what she thought of as her 'visions' but was more reliable than those, more down to earth. They had a worked-up quality to them; she worked them up out of *herself*. This came from outside and had begun when she saw Mrs Hutchence at work for the first time.

She associated her feelings at that moment with the ache in her arms, and with the bowl and its two covers, the one of fat, the other of crochet weighted with beads, which had kept her earthbound if she had been inclined to float; but mostly with the sound the bees made, the single vibrant word resounding in their furry heads, the way it gathered and magnified, so that she understood immediately not just *what* they were, in their individual bee bodies, but *why* they were; the flow of the honey and its making out of pollens gathered from all the surrounding country – the stringybark blossoms, the banksias, the eggs-and-bacon bushes they grazed on, the swamp-water they drank – to become the heavy scoop of gold in the bowl of a spoon, and the transparent thread from which, in its slow falling, it hung and did not fall.

She became Mrs Hutchence's helper, with a sunbonnet and veil of her own, and soon was as expert, almost, as the older woman. But by then, the event had occurred that was to settle her in this business; and for life.

It was on a day not long after Gemmy had moved into the little room there, so she was no longer a beginner. They had finished their work with the bees. She had put off her bonnet and veil.

The day had been unusually oppressive, steamy, and for the last hour a dull sky had been glowering, bronze with a greenish edge to it, that bruised the sight. Suddenly there was the sound of a wind getting up in the grove, though she did not feel the touch of it, and before she could complete the breath she had taken, or expel it in a cry, the swarm was on her, thickening so fast about her that it was as if night had fallen, just like that, in a single cloud. She just had time to see her hands covered with plushy, alive fur gloves before her whole body crusted over and she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind.

Her own mind closed in her. She lost all sense of where her feet might be, or her dreamy wrists, or whether she was still standing, as she had been a moment before, in the shadowy grove, or had been lifted from the face of the earth.

The bees have their stomachs full, her mind told her, they will not sting. Stand still, stand still. It was her old mind that told her this.

She stood still as still and did not breathe. She surrendered herself.

You are our bride, her new and separate mind told her as it drummed and swayed above the earth. Ah, so that is it! They have smelled the sticky blood-flow. They think it is honey. It is.

Mrs Hutchence was only feet away. So was Gemmy. She could hear their voices calling to her through the din her body was making. But it made no difference, now, the distance, three feet or a thousand years, no difference at all; or whether she was a girl (a woman), or a tree. She stood sleeping. Upright. A bride. Then the bitterness of smoke came to her throat, and the cloud began to lift; and there, through the gaps in herself, was Mrs Hutchence with coils of smoke pouring out of her sleeves, and Gemmy, open-mouthed with a frame in his arms, and the bees, one by one, then in fistfulls, rolling off her, peeling away like a crust, till she stood in her own skin again, which was fresh where the air touched it, and only a few dozen foolish creatures were left that had got themselves caught and were butting with their furry heads and kicking, in a panic at being alone.

She felt Mrs Hutchence's hands on her skin now, which was quite clear and unharmed but seemed new to her, and all through Mrs Hutchence's fearful ministrations and Gemmy's whimpering cries, she remained a little out of herself – half-sleeping, regretful, her two feet planted square on the earth.

Years later she would become expert beyond anything Mrs Hutchence might have dreamed of at the bee business. She would know all the breeds and crossbreeds, and create one or two new ones – actually bring them into being, whole swarms that the earth had never known till she called them. She would devote her life to these creatures, bringing to the daily practical study of their habits and all the facts and lore that is the long history of their interaction with men, a bodily excitement that went back to this moment, under the trees, when her mind had for a moment been their unbodied one and she had been drawn into the process and mystery of things.

For it was not the bees themselves that had claimed her; they had been only the little winged agents of it, the little furry-headed, armed angels that might, if she had panicked, have stung her to death, martyred her on the spot, a solid, silly giant that had stumbled in among them.

All that was still to come. For the moment, still numbed by the shock of what had struck her, she moved to comfort Mrs Hutchence, who had sunk to the ground, and sat like a rock gone suddenly soft, and sobbed and took a good while to get her breath.

'Don't be upset Mrs Hutchence,' she said, feeling the older by years, though her voice was unchanged. 'The bees didn't hurt me, I knew they wouldn't. I remembered what you told me and it was true. They didn't sting.'

She saw then, from the look on Mrs Hutchence's face, that though her own faith had been absolute, Mrs Hutchence's had not.

So it had been *that* that had saved her, the power of her own belief, which could change mere circumstance and make miracles.

She went, half-dreaming, and looked at the hive, all sealed now, a squared-off cloud, still drumming, that had once been clamped to her skin, a living darkness, so that the only light came from inside her, from the open space she had become inside the skin they made of living particles, little flames.

She had remained cool inside, and when the flames drew off what was restored to her had a new shape, was simpler; she had emerged with a new body, which the world – and this was the point – had dealt with to its limit and let go, and which, from now on, however things might appear, it could not destroy.

She was rather surprised really that she did not *appear* changed to Mrs Hutchence, since the body she was now standing in, as her mind saw it, was not at all the old one.

She looked past Mrs Hutchence to where she had stood just a moment back, and what she saw was not herself, not a gawky child in pigtails and a faded frock, but a charred stump, all crusted black and bubbling; and she saw it – this, when she met his astonished look, was what convinced her – through Gemmy's eyes.

16

GEMMY, SUFFERING FROM bruised ribs and a broken mouth, but even more from a bruising of the spirit that threw him into moments of frantic terror, was given a room at Mrs Hutchence's, a little back room so small you might have stood in it and touched your fingertips to either wall, but clean, freshly painted and cheerful, the women thought. It did not occur to them that its very spareness, its being so light and open, yet enclosed, might prove frightful to him. Once the door was shut he did not know where to set himself between its close walls.

There was a cot where in his first days in the house Leona sat beside him and fed him soup and tried to make sense of the stumbling stories he had to tell; also a chair with an embroidered cushion, and a low little chest of drawers. From the beginning the chest was a worry to him.

He believed at first that the discomfort it caused him, the sense that assailed him of his spirit being touched and interfered with, must come from something Mrs Hutchence kept there. Leona was astonished one day to find him sitting in the midst of a snowstorm. He had taken the sheets and pillowcases they kept in the drawers, hauled them out, dragged them round the room, and then tried, very ineffectually, to stuff them back again. What could have possessed him? Was it a tantrum? Something *they* had done? Mrs Hutchence reproved him, but lightly – she did not want the poor fellow upset – and they spent a whole morning with their sleeves rolled up and the copper boiling. To make sure there was no repetition of the trouble, Mrs Hutchence found a place for the things in her own room. The little two-drawered chest stayed empty. But Gemmy by then had discovered what it was that had touched him.

It was the smell of the wood, which was quite unlike that of any of the local timbers he had to do with, and the moment he understood it, he stepped out of the room, out of his present self, into a clearing that had always been there, he thought, just waiting for him to stumble to the centre of it. And there he stood again with fine wood-dust raining down on his head, mixing with snot to clog nostrils and throat.

Back, far back, before Willett, when he was still at the maggot stage, he had been one of an army of little shitty creatures, mere bundles of rag and breath but with hands that could clasp a broom and strength enough to push it, whose job it was, for all the hours of daylight, to crawl about in the low place under the machines in a timber mill, sweeping sawdust into wooden pans. Fine wood-dust poured incessantly from the teeth of the saws – that was the smell – and there was another, heavier smell, which was that of the oily grime round the base of the machines and the bolt-heads that fixed them to the floor, which they picked out with their nails, mixed with sawdust, and ate. He had never since tasted anything so good. Overwhelmed, he stared at the object, the little pinewood chest that came no higher than his thigh, the same height he had been then, which had brought all this back to him.

When darkness fell in the close little room, it stirred; the smell moved towards him and the screaming of the machines returned that all day had deafened them so that even when they were stilled the screaming in their heads went on. He would feel about in the darkness then for the others. What part of the world had *they* got themselves to? Their sharp little elbows and knees had poked through his flesh. When they curled up in close heaps together between the legs of the machines, among snufflings and breathings and bubbly murmurings, their communal heat and breath was a thing his body had never forgotten or known again. Where were they, his fellow maggots? What had they turned into when, at five or six, he had discovered the shape of an ancient, undernourished child and become Willett's Boy? All night his body sought them in his sleep.

So the room began to work its magic on him. Sweating between walls he entered a different sleep from the one he had known in the lean-to at the McIvors' and in his years with the blacks, a sleep that belonged to a different life and produced different demons; the kind that live in rooms.

It is a fearful thing to be faced in the dark by a pair of cracked leather boots, all their eyeholes torn, their laces trailing, the loose tongues charred and smelling of flame.

The boots are Willett's. They are empty. Touched with flame, they sit propped up in front of a grate. Willett has just stepped out of them, and in his stockinged feet, one big toe showing, is padding round the room, filling it with his richness and the rumblings of his voice. Willett. Source of unquestionable commands; of curses, blows, growls, slobbery kisses. The first being he has memory of. Before Willett there is only darkness, his life as a maggot, the giant legs of machines. In a moment he will turn his attention from Willett's boots, which it is his job to place in such a way that they dry but do not scorch, and there, in the reflected light of the fire, Willett himself will stand, red-haired, gigantic, with his shaggy brows and a voice that can creep about in every corner of a room, the fiery god-demon and ruler of his world, whose touch and smell and breath is on every object he puts his hand to.

The boots? Willett's. The long clay pipe that he is allowed, when Willett is in the mood, to take a slow drag on? Willett's.

The blackened pan is for cooking Willett's supper, a nice fat sausage, and provides his own supper too, in the grease he scrapes from it with his finger or with a crust of bread.

Willett's razor strop. Which he has experience of on Saturday nights, when he uses it to whet Willett's razor – more intimately, if he has been playing up, when Willett gives him a lick of it across his back. Then there is the cake of soap that gives Willett's hands their smell, a choking sweetness.

He is Willett's Boy, as the boots are Willett's boots. He has

nothing of his own. Everything that comes to him comes through Willett, including his name, Gemmy, which is what Willett calls him when he is not just 'Boy'.

Willett is a rat-catcher, and they have a bulldog, Ketch, and two ferrets. If the ferrets have names he has forgotten them.

Having known no better life than this, he cannot imagine one. Willett provides the only bit of closeness he has ever been offered, and since he has nothing else to love, he loves him with a fierce intensity, a fear too, which is the greatest he knows, that he may get lost, or that Willett one day may abandon him, taking with him the whole world as he conceives it: Ketch, the ferrets, the streets Willett is king of, the razor, the sweet garden smell of his hands, his curses, his kisses, the warm grease of the skillet, the boots with their trailing laces and tongues lit with flame, his name, Gemmy, his claim to existence as a boy, as Willett's Boy.

In one corner of their room is a heap of keys of every shape and size, some as long as his forearm. Willett adds to them each week by poking about in the boxes outside rag-and-bone shops, or in the market barrows along the canal, weighing this one or that in his palm, turning it in the air and chuckling. He has never been introduced to the rooms, or chests or little boxes the keys unlock. They are part of a life, he believes, that Willett keeps secret from him. He can only think that while he is asleep at night Willett must slip off to one or other of those rooms and sit gloating over the contents of the chests or boxes that lie open before him, but what they might contain he cannot imagine: things that exist in parts of the world he has not seen, that Willett has not revealed to him.

He pinches himself to stay awake. He will follow Willett and see where he goes. But he is too tired. The moment his head touches the sacks he sleeps on he is asleep. He imagines that he has stolen one of the keys, found the room it opens, then a box, and with the lid of the box closed over him, lies with his hands folded in the dark, not daring to breathe, waiting for Willett to appear. He hears the door of the room open. Hears Willett's boots dragging. Sees a crack of light as the lid is lifted, smells the sweet garden smell, squeezes his eyes shut in the dark, waits for the voice: 'Ah, boy, so that's where you've got to.' Waits and waits. In one of the drawers of the chest, in the clean little box of a room at Mrs Hutchence's with his hands folded on his breast, his cheeks wet with tears, barely breathing.

Six days a week, rain or shine, they go to the park, Regent's Park. Willett's job is to clear its ponds of rats. His job is to go in with the ferrets, then, at the end of the day, to see that the animals are caged and watered, to dry Willett's boots, polish the brass on Ketch's lead, and, when all is done, to slip out in the early light of the gas-lamps and fetch ale for their supper.

Among so many barefoot urchins slipping in and out of the crowd – up to no good, on the lookout for mischief – he has a place, he is Someone's Boy. The jug he carries is the guarantee of that; empty on one leg of the journey, so that he can skip along as he pleases, full and in danger of slopping on the way back.

Very happy, since he is of a cheerful disposition, to be free for a little among the noise and many interests of the streets; he ducks and dodges among the crowd, leaping out of the way of carriage wheels on the slushy cobbles and cursing the drivers; when it freezes keeping an eye on the rumps of the standing horses, or the donkeys in costers' carts, for the wink of an arsehole and the load of steaming shit that comes tumbling; then diving in quick to get the good of it, the lovely quick-fading warmth between his toes. He may stop a moment, not long – Willett can be a devil – to see the blood from an accident, or two punks, urged on by a mob, beating the daylights out of each other, or a tinker at work with a little *tink-tink* hammer and a bit of fire in a tin, or to trade insults with his friend the hot-muffin man, or catch snatches of music outside a penny-gaff.

As a sideline to the rat-catching trade, Willett supplies rats for weekend matches. As Willett's Boy he gets pennies for drawing the rats out of their cage, which is a basket with an iron top, and tossing them by handfuls into the ring.

He is used to rats, but it is a mucky business. Willett, very dandified in a red handkerchief and brushed hat, rubs him beforehand with caraway oil, and pets and cajoles, and urges

him not to look feared, and if he draws back (out of sight of the gentlemen, of course) whispers hoarse threats, which he knows he can rely on, and pinches him hard under the ribs. But he *is* afraid.

When he plunges his arm into the musky dark and hauls the sewer- and ditch-rats out of the hot, drain-smelling interior, they squeal and tumble over one another's backs, and fight, using their teeth something horrible, and he gets many wounds that turn to open sores. He has scars all over his hands – one thumb is bitten through – and on his ears as well, since the rats, if they get the chance, will run up his body like squirrels up a tree trunk and fix their claws in his hair, till Willett untangles and tears them off. They get up the legs of his trousers too if they are not laced at the knees with string.

He is a game little fellow – that is his reputation. He is proud of it, and has learned to swagger and win cheers. Only at night, when he curls up on his pile of sacks, the rats appear in great numbers and huge size in his dreams, and if he yells and wakes Willett he is thrashed. So he sleeps with one of the ferrets under his shirt, in the belief that the smell of it will keep the dream rats off.

That is his life. He can imagine no other. He fusses, in his anxious, old-mannish way, over Willett's needs, takes pride in their housekeeping and their catch, and pleasure in what bits and pieces of entertainment he comes by in the streets. Willett is an easy fellow when he isn't drunk or in one of his dumps. They have rare times together. Especially when Mag is with them, who is Willett's moll, and sometimes, on Willett's suggestion, when they've all been drinking together, takes him on her lap like an overgrown baby, and gives him her breast to suck, and, to Willett's vast amusement, frigs him under his shirt till he is squealing. But one night, after a beating no worse than others he has received, he waits till Willett is snoring, and, still heavy-headed from the beer they have drunk, gets up, lets the ferrets out of their cages, sweeps a heap of rubbish into the middle of the room, finds tinder, and lights it. There, he thinks as he watches it catch. He could not say what he has in mind. Nothing, perhaps. He is eleven or twelve years old and some darker nature has begun to emerge in him. He has resentments.

He stands watching the smoke make wavery threads. They twine and thicken. When the first little jigging flames appear, a smile comes to his lips. Now a lively redness is playing on the walls, the flames jump in play, so cheerful and full of change that he is held in a state between dreamy contemplation and an excitement that makes the hairs rise all over his body. He breaks off and goes, in an easy unthinking way, to where Willett lies and kicks him. Perhaps he intends to show Willett how changed everything is, to share with him what he has achieved. Willett growls. He does not stir.

The ferrets are running now, tumbling over the backs of chairs, leaping at the walls, the redness bristling on their backs. He too begins to be alarmed. The flames are taller than he is. He runs at them and stamps a little but burns the soles of his feet. Snatching up a rug, he tries to stifle them, but they shoot out from under it, and the rug too catches, showering sparks. He has to throw it in with the rest. The whole room is aglow. It sweats. Grease runs down the walls. The ferrets are mad things under his feet. At last, with smoke thickening all round him and choking in his throat, he can think of nothing else to do but throw the window open, and, as the cold air rushes over his shoulders and the room gives a roar behind him, leap out into the night, and run, and keep running till he passes the last street he recognises and where anyone might recognise him.

It does not occur to him that he has stepped off the world. The streets he is moving through are cobbled, have corners to turn. Walking briskly though aimlessly, since he is in a place he has never been, and avoiding strangers, he comes at last to a deserted part of town, tall buildings with bricked-up windows and what he takes to be the rigging of ships. With his brain roaring, he sits for a time with his hands over his ears and his feet in the gutter, all the inside of his head a blaze of red; then crawls into a doorway to sleep.

Once, in the night, a fierce-eyed little ragman comes, and takes him by the collar, and tries to push him into a sack. He breaks away, climbs a rope, tumbles into a box, and falls dead asleep.

When he wakes cold sunlight is on his cheek. The box has no lid. But he lies very still as he usually does in this particular dream and waits for Willett to find him: 'Ah, so that's where you've got to.'

But it isn't Willett. It is a big, tow-headed fellow of eighteen or nineteen, in a blue knitted cap and with dirty stubble on his cheek and no teeth, who hauls him up by the scruff of his neck so that he hangs like a rabbit outside a poulterer's shop. The youth's nose is on a level with his own; his legs are dangling. Then the mouth opens: 'Captain!' it bellows.

He had not meant to set himself loose in the world. He had not meant to end anything. He felt himself swinging now where the blue-capped youth held him in his fist, first one way, then another, and what he saw over the youth's shoulder terrified him: no gas-lamps, no houses, but a vastness of an ashen grey colour crawling with smoke as if the whole world was burning behind him.

He would learn to live with this crawling emptiness, but the first glimpse of it made his belly squirm. He had cast himself loose and the world had run away with him; he was lost, he was dangling, and would remain so till Willett, in an odour of char, with his eyebrows ablaze and his scorched boots hanging from their laces at his neck, turned up again to curse and wallop him, then, with a growl, take him back. He never ceased to expect that event and to fear it. He expected it still. A world from which Willett had entirely disappeared was inconceivable to him.

Willett's boots had reappeared: utterly real to him, every crack in their leather running with flame, the laces trailing, the tongue-flaps loose. It was Willett he could not find, though he heard him often enough, grumbling in the corners of the room, and smelt him there, a mixture of char and sweat, then at last the garden smell. He lay with his eyes closed, hands folded on his chest, his cheeks in the hot dark wet with tears. 'Ah, boy, so that's where you've got to!'

Where? Where had he got to?

Two years he was at sea. Or three. On one ship, then another: *The Gannet, The Star of Newcastle, The Charleston* – those were some of the names; last of all *The Pamukale*. He made himself small, had a full belly, was often bullied and worse by the others. Mosey. The Irish.

Old Crouch, *The Pamukale*'s carpenter, was a good 'un. He liked to sing hymns while he worked and had two daughters, one a seal – a silkie he called her; she could change herself into a seal. He learned to use a chisel, a plane, a spirit level. Then, one day, too ill to care what happened to him and with no knowledge of what part of the world he was in – how would Willett find him here? – they put him overboard; he moved out of the shadow of the ship that tilted and creaked above him, out of its coolness, away from the faces at the rails. Burning alive down there, he felt the sun leap out, a single flame. All he had known shrank to a black dot jigging in his skull.

These visions that dragged him back and racked his body with the reliving of what he had already endured a first time, left him weak and shaken. Despite the kindness Mrs Hutchence showed him, and Leona's many attentions, he grew heartsick for his lean-to at the McIvors', and for the children, especially Lachlan. Meg and Janet he also missed, though he saw them almost daily. At Mrs Hutchence's they were absorbed now in a new life, the group round the kitchen table, where the presence of Hector and the schoolmaster, and the rapid talk, and so much laughter and play, confused him, kept him off. He began to sicken, and saw at last that what he was suffering here had to do with the sheets of paper where, months ago, Mr Frazer and the schoolmaster had set down his life. It was from there that the events of his former existence came and demanded to be turned back again from magic squiggles into the pain, joy, grief he was torn by, and which his present body was too weak to endure.

More and more now he was haunted by those sheets, seven in all, he had not forgotten the number, that Mr Frazer had folded and put into his pocket, and which he had never seen again; till he was convinced that the only way to save himself

from so much racking, and despair and sweat, was to get them back again. They would be in one place or the other, those sheets; either at Mr Frazer's or at the schoolhouse. All he needed was the strength to get there. But that was just what their magic had drawn from him.

17

WHEN LACHLAN BEATTIE looked about, it seemed to him that his whole world had come apart. The group of younger boys he moved among was all edge and shove. Their code was the same one their fathers used, but their fathers had seen enough of others' and their own deficiencies to draw back from unyielding absolutes. They could not. Lachlan, though he was smaller than the rest, had till now held authority over them and commanded fellows like Jeff Murcutt and the younger Corcorans. They saw their chance now and were after him.

He had always been a firebrand. When he first came among them it had amused the older fellows to taunt him. At the least touch he would fly red-faced to the attack. The others would strike back, but in a lazy fashion, condescendingly, since they were so much older. 'Lay off,' they would drawl, 'you mad bugger!' Very fast on his feet, he would duck in under their fists and leave them winded. They learned then. 'Honest, Locky,' Hec Gosper would tell him as they started off home, 'you're bloody mad!'

Hector, in those days, had not yet moved up into the group of older fellows, young men almost, who hung about the verandah of the store. Though convention decreed that he should ignore a mere ten-year-old so long as they were in company, Hector had from the beginning taken the younger boy under his wing. Lachlan, who was unhappy in the new place, was grateful for it, but wary too, at first. His accent was the point on which he was tormented, and he was concerned that what Hector might have in mind was a shared impediment.

It was a mean thought, and when he saw, as he did almost immediately, how open Hector was, how little of his own indirectness there was in the other boy, he was ashamed. There was always this seed of self-consciousness in him that made him suspicious and spoiled things. He grew fond of Hector and depended on him, so it was distressing when Gemmy's coming raised a conflict between them.

For the others, taunting Gemmy had become a new way – the old one had become stale by now – of provoking him, a new form of fun. These were the days when Gemmy was always at his heel, and he, still full of his moment at the fence, tended to swagger and show him off.

Hector did not join in these boyish scrabblings in the dust, he was too old for that; but he too was under the influence of that first day, and so long as others were about, kept up his grudge. It had put Lachlan in a spot. It was a matter of honour with him to stand up for Gemmy whatever the cost. He ignored Hector's gibes as long as he could, but the time came at last when he had to protest.

It was foolish of him. There were too many interested bystanders. Hector, furious that he had broken what he had thought was an understanding between them, could do nothing but respond. 'What?' he shouted. 'What's that?', and there was, on the first sound, as it burst from him, a little hissing through the nose that was the last of a defect he had eliminated save when he was out of control.

Lachlan was stricken. He would have given anything not to be the occasion of such a lapse. 'Com' awn, Gemmy,' he said and walked away, but the damage was done. There was, after that, an embarrassment between them that made it necessary, so long as others were about, to keep up a show of hostility that each knew was a pretence. When they were not observed they fell back into their old intimacy, though it was constrained. On these occasions, Gemmy, who did not understand the rules they followed, was puzzled, and hurt too at times, by an inconsistency in Lachlan that he could not account for.

But Hector, at last, dropped out of the group of younger boys, keeping with fellows now who were his own age.

Lachlan, not quite thirteen, was in between. He would leave school at Christmas, be free at last of the indignity of ink-stains on his fingers and the company of kids like Jeff Murcutt and the Corcorans, and littlies, and girls. In the meantime he began to test his welcome among the group at the store; he developed a talent for launching gobs of spit further than any of his fellows, laughed louder than the loudest of them at any sort of raw joke, and smoked and swore.

It was one of the conditions of his move into an older group that Gemmy could not appear, and he had, gently at first, then coldly, to discourage him. He was sorry for it. But it was absurd to have Gemmy always tagging at his heels, and he blushed now to recall a time when he had regarded it as a sign of his power. How puffed up he had been with his own importance! What a fool he must have appeared to the very fellows he had meant to impress!

His enlightenment had begun with the humiliations the schoolmaster had heaped upon him, and though he did not thank the man for it, he saw now that having set his face in the direction of manhood, he could not turn back. What he distrusted in himself was a tendency, a girlish one he thought, to let his affections rule. It was a weakness he was determined to stamp out. Still, there were days when he could not bear the look Gemmy wore, and would have given anything to step back a year and tell him, 'A'richt, Gemmy, com' awn then' – but what good would it do?

It was about the time of Gemmy's visit from the blacks and the series of accidents that had begun with the broken fence. Christmas was two months off. He was in the playground with companions he had outgrown.

'So where's yer mate,' Jeff Murcutt asked, 'yer shadow?' And then, looking about with mock surprise, 'Oh, I didn't see 'im!' Leo Corcoran had begun a little lopsided walk around them, with an expression so like Gemmy's that three or four younger boys, who were watching, rolled about in the dirt at such a show of brilliance.

'Shut your jaw,' Lachlan hissed.

'An' if I don't?'

Lachlan began to walk away.

'An' if I don't? What'll you do, eh? Get Gemmy t' set 'is blacks on us?'

He turned at that.

'You should hear what my Pa says. It's a wonder someone don't do the right thing, one a' these nights, and pot the bastard!'

Leo at that began his lopsided walk again, and Jeff Murcutt, with a grin, brought his arm up like a shotgun and followed Leo round the circle. There was a breathless moment in which boys of ten, eleven, some of them almost thirteen as Lachlan was, were soul-struck as he himself had been, that first day at the fence, by the evocation of arms. Jeff Murcutt stood empowered in the midst of them, actually changed, himself impressed almost to awe by what he was reaching for, and Leo hovered. Then Jeff's lips moved. 'Bang!' he said, not loud.

The puff of air out of his mouth struck Leo in the chest. He hung in the air, mouth open, head thrown back, one hand at his breast, and they watched him, slowly, buckle at the knees and fall.

It was in the same playground circle, two days later, that he heard of the night attack.

He had known at breakfast that something was amiss but nothing was said, and it was a sign of how things had changed among them that he dared not ask. His aunt fussed and looked strained, his uncle was soft with him. He kept looking from one to the other waiting for enlightenment.

'I hear you had a bit of strife last night,' Jeff Murcutt announced. The others looked interested; they knew no more, Lachlan saw, than he did. He narrowed his eyes and did not respond, but felt his heart knock against his ribcage and knew, from the sudden dizziness he felt, that he had gone pale. Let Jeff Murcutt tell, if he knew something. But all he did was stand smirking, with his head down and his toes scuffing the dust.

It was Jed Corcoran, poor dumb Jed, who did the asking. He thought he was the only one who did not know.

'What strife? What happened?' he said in his babyish, snot-thickened voice.

'*He* knows,' Jeff Murcutt told him.

Jed Corcoran turned his soft eyes on him. 'What Locky? What happened?'

Lachlan turned and strode away. 'What?' he heard Jed ask again. 'I din' hear nothing.'

He felt betrayed on all sides. That Janet had been there, and he had not. That he had slept through it like a mere kid. That they had let him sleep, as if he could be no help, and had afterwards kept it from him!

It was his aunt who told him the details at last, white-faced, taut as a wire, speaking through clenched lips. He understood how his uncle felt because he too felt the power drain from him and the stab of fear; not at what he might have to face – he would face anything, he was brave enough – but at what he might have to admit of the way the world was, and how his failure to see it was a weakness in him.

He did not go to school. He took his gun and went off into the bush, but all he did was sit, hunched up with the gun in his lap, trying to see how they could go on now, how their life, his life, could ever be settled and ordinary again.

It was out here that Hector found him.

'Wha' do *you* want?' he called.

Hector, a little way off, squatted on his heels. He plucked a grass-stalk and put it between his crooked teeth.

'Well?' Lachlan demanded. He had to fight to keep back tears.

Hector continued to sit, his hat down over his eyes, the lip showing clear under his pale moustache.

He knew what Hector was doing. He had decided to sit, saying nothing, since there was nothing words could say, and wear him down. And it happened. The hostility he felt melted in him, and after a little, still without speaking, Hector got to his feet and walked away.

With Gemmy's removal to a distance a kind of normality did come back to them in a pretence on all sides that what had occurred was a misunderstanding and no harm done.

His aunt, always a realist, went along with it. When her neighbours turned up, full of high spirits, to gossip or bring recipes or ask for help with a bit of sewing, she welcomed them, frostily at first, and never quite in the old way; she had a kind of reserve now that would never leave her. They knew it and took her as she was.

Things were not so easy for his uncle. Lachlan saw this because he too felt it. Something had been destroyed in him that could not be put right. He watched his uncle drift back after a time to his friends, to Barney Mason, Jim Sweetman, but the days of unselfconscious trust in his standing among them, and the belief that to be thought well of by such fellows was the first thing in the world, were gone. He was watchful now. There was always a little niggling worm of denial in him, a need to seek out, even in the straightest of men, some hint of crookedness that might be the truth even they did not know. He was quieter these days. He had moved away into a distance in himself that even Lachlan felt he could not presume on, and what he experienced there began to engrave itself in lines upon him, though he too kept up the pretence that life, in something like the old form, had resumed and would go on.

Lachlan did not believe it. He was still at the stage where everything presented itself in the absolute, as a possibility to be carried blithely into the future or done with, once and for all. When he was forced to qualify, as with Hector, he felt uneasy. He was so changeable himself he wanted the world, even in the bitter form in which he now saw it, to be fixed. So when he went to visit Gemmy at Mrs Hutchence's, a little shamefaced at having left it so long, he was surprised to walk in on a noisy company whose existence he had had no conception of, though Janet, and Meg too, had tried to tell him of it. And here they were, all, seated at a table among teacups and crumbs – Janet, Meg, Gemmy, Hector, even the schoolmaster – with Leona pouring tea out of a blue pot. They turned to face him, looking up out of the same mid-sentence, whose unfinished hilarity hung in the air, and he saw with a pang that in all these last weeks, which had been such misery to him, they had been happily settled, even Hector, in this lighted corner of the world.

They made a place for him. Leona introduced herself, and gave him tea. There was a little cake too, with raisins in it, which crumbled in his hand when he bit into it. He looked up, very self-conscious, to see if it mattered, but it appeared not to, and he added to the scatter of crumbs.

Just the same, he felt awkward. They went back to their lively chatter, which was all half-joking banter that the others seemed practised in and which he did not know how to enter; all its terms were unfamiliar to him. He sat glum and silent and only Gemmy, he thought, amid so much jollity, moved in the same dark strand with him.

But he felt displeased with himself. There was, he saw, some other lighter way of responding to things. These others had found it. What was wrong with him that he could not?

He kept an eye on Hector. He had expected the older boy might be abashed at being caught like this in the company of women, and girls – not to speak of the schoolmaster. He kept waiting for Hector to tip him off, with a wink, that his part in it was a kind of foolery. But Hector was the noisiest among them. Didn't he know what a clown he was making of himself, with his slick hair and his empty gallantries, or that Leona, to whom they were addressed, made fun of them and was too old for him? He blushed for his friend. Only slowly did it occur to him that some of Hector's showing off was for his benefit; he was expected to be impressed.

What puzzled him most was the presence of the schoolmaster, who said very little. Was he embarrassed at being discovered here, as Hector might have been and was not? But after a little he saw that Mr Abbot too was included in Leona's teasing, and did not mind it any more than Hector did, and that Hector's sallies, in a joking way that suggested an understanding between them, were meant to be measured against what Mr Abbot could produce.

He produced very little. It was Hector who set the pace – Lachlan was astonished, where had he learned all this? – and was the more unconstrained, the more skilled too, at answering Leona back and provoking and pleasing her.

She tried the game, briefly, with him. She had a different tone for each of them, and he thought he detected in the one she chose for him a degree of mockery – for his youth, was it? – that brought a flush of indignation to his cheek. She saw it and drew back, but when he was ignored he took offence. She saw that too, but did not know how to help him.

And Janet?

In these last months they had grown apart. He was already aware of a change in her, but it was now, in this company, that he saw how great it might be. He had taken for granted always that their lives were intertwined, by which he meant that her chief concern must be him. She did nothing to deny it, but was absorbed, he saw, in a world of her own that he had no part in. He caught looks between her and his aunt that had not been there before, and when he burst in upon them once, with his usual expectation of welcome, was surprised by the faces they turned to him, which were attentive but subtly closed.

It had struck him then, and for the first time, that there might be areas of experience that he was not intended to enter. That closed look marked only the closest and most gently guarded of them. Beyond lay others that had never heard of him and never would hear.

He was shaken. In the revelation that a power he had taken for granted in himself might have limitations, he felt much of it fall away.

Meanwhile, here at the table, Janet met his eyes and flushed with embarrassment. Not surely for him!

He found an excuse to get away, though Leona protested. Gemmy went with him, and they walked a little way on the road together. They barely spoke. Gemmy was sick. He too felt sick at heart. He promised to return but knew that he would not, and Gemmy knew it too. They stood a moment, then he turned and moved away.

He looked back once and saw that Gemmy too had turned, about sixty yards off, and they faced one another down the white ribbon of track. They were too far off to be more to one another than figures whose eyes, whose real dimensions even, were lost to distance.

For years afterwards he would have dreams in which he would stand trying, against the fact of distance, to see the look on Gemmy's face, and once or twice, in his dream, he walked back through the white dust, which rose in ghostly spirals around him, and went right up to where he was standing, and looked into his face. But it remained as blurred as it had been from sixty yards off, and he woke with his cheeks wet, even after so long, though he was no longer a child.

18

AFTER THREE YEARS in the north, Mr Frazer was delighted with Brisbane. The service at Marr's Boarding House was cheerful, the jug and basin on the washstand a wonderful guarantee of the amenities, clear water, steaming hot in the mornings, and the soup at the *table d'hôte* agreeably thick.

The little town was very little, not much more really than a village, and this surprised him considering the almost mystical importance they attached to it 'up there', but impressive monuments were in sight. They were shadowy as yet behind scaffolding, but one or two of them had stepped clear and stood broad-fronted and substantial above the verandahed hotels and weatherboard bank buildings and stores, the picket fences, and rutted, rather twisty lanes where, on his morning walk to the top of a wooded ridge, he met barefooted youths driving cows.

The Governor, he soon discovered, was a very visible figure. He dashed about the unpaved streets in a gleaming chariot, wearing epaulettes and a sword, and gave the impression, with his ramrod stance and lean profile, of being the embodiment of a distant, almost unapproachable power. But when Mr Frazer presented himself at Government House, it was Sir George himself who looked out of a window and called him in.

It was as if he had arrived at a rundown country mansion, Palladian in style but with household arrangements that appeared to be Irish, or perhaps the climate had something to do with it; the day was sultry. Toys and flowers with their heads off lay scattered about the entrance hall, which otherwise was very empty – a child's hobbyhorse, several wooden animals. There were scurryings in side rooms and a woman's voice raised in complaint.

Sir George came out and seemed irritated by the commotion. Ignoring Mr Frazer and the startled footman, he flung open a door, stood glaring, and the scufflings ceased; but his face, when he turned, remained peevish, and Mr Frazer had the impression, a flash, no more, not of a naval man retired early but of a dignified upper servant who had been caught in his master's clothes and was convinced, if he was overbearing enough, that he would get away with it. 'My dear fellow,' he exclaimed, with sudden affability, 'do come in. I'm delighted.'

The interview that followed was a puzzle to Mr Frazer. He felt that he had never quite got the hang of it, or of Sir George either.

Sir George, having recovered his poise, appeared a fine, bluff fellow, not so old as you might have thought, and not at all stiff; he invited you to be entirely open with him. But Mr Frazer was disconcerted, just the same, by the line of questioning he took. He had written earlier, no doubt, to Mr Herbert – it was Mr Herbert who had set him on to make this *report*? No? Then it was one or other of the people up there (the Governor pushed about a pile of papers he had before him and seemed more and more put out) whom of course he had complete knowledge of – Mr McIntosh, perhaps, one of the O'Hares? It occurred to Mr Frazer after a moment that he was suspected of being an emissary, a secret one, though Sir George had nosed him out, of forces that Sir George was at war with, and who were always, by one means or another, trying to get under his guard. Sir George fixed him with a hurt look, accusatory blue. Am I right sir? Have I found you out?

Not at all, he insisted. He had come here entirely in his own right, on behalf – very briefly, though he feared not briefly enough, he tried to describe Gemmy, who was not very easily describable; how the man, through his knowledge of native life, had led him etc . . . It was enough anyway to satisfy Sir George that he was not one of a cabal, yet another subverter of the great design, and that his report was not part of a plan to entrap and discredit him.

But once the report was rendered harmless Sir George lost interest in it, and in Gemmy too. 'Yes, yes,' he muttered, 'an interesting case – they are interesting people –' but a moment later they had leapt to Hesiod and arrived, before Mr Frazer had quite caught up, at Homer, a frequent destination, he guessed, in Sir George's conversational flights.

Sir George's commission here is to call into existence a new self-governing state; in a land, territory rather, about the size of France and all the Germanies combined, wild, cut in two by the southern tropic, and largely, as yet, unpeopled. He is alternately intoxicated by the largeness of the undertaking and depressed that in being set down, at more than forty, at the ends of the earth, he may drop from sight. To keep his name before the Lords in Westminster he writes to one or another of them almost daily, describing in grandiloquent terms, all classical allusion and analogy, the names he has bestowed on a nameless part of the empire, the towns he has founded, the laws laid down. He sees himself as a kind of imperial demiurge, out of mere rocks and air creating spaces where history may now occur – at once the Hesiod of the place, its Solon, and its antipodean Pericles.

The archaic and the classical, indeed the prehistoric and the classical, exist side by side here and in the same moment. Sir George finds it entirely understandable that in the little coastal port he has honoured with his name a crocodile has been seen to emerge from the mud and waddle unperturbed about the main street, and that in his capital of a mere five thousand souls the monuments he is building, dome and portico, rise in incongruous glory above the backs of bullock teams, the curses of their drivers, and under the gaze of creatures, only recently redeemed from nakedness, whose minds are still sunk in unfathomable night.

They are in the age of wonders here, where forms, nameless as yet, are just beginning to emerge out of the dark, the dreamlike: the age of the hippogriff and demogorgon, of the heroes and demigods, too, of future legend, who just happen to have names like Jones and Dalrymple, and wear moleskins, or, as he does, the uniform of Her Majesty's Colonial Service. 'Your town,' he writes to his patron, Lord Cardwell, of the little mosquito-infested port in the north on which he has settled that great man's name, 'lies in a position analogous to that of Thermopylae; that is, at the north end of the Australian Epirus'. In his mind, as it soars and hangs eagle-like over the great expanse of past and future, the local squattocracy, rough fellows most of them, are his squatter kings. 'Runs (the colonial term for a wide-ranging pasture)' he informs one of his Lordships, 'seems a literal translation of δρόμοι εὔρεες of Homer, where the shepherd kings feed their cattle in a similar climate to that of Arcadia. How refreshing among my daily cares are these classical analogies.' Being escorted into a little western town of nine pubs and a butcher shop, by a party of two hundred stockmen, he sees himself riding in the company of attendant centaurs. Analogy is his drug. He finds it everywhere.

At eighteen he fell in love with the Mediterranean. Twenty years later he married into it. Lady Bowen, Roma Diamantina, is the daughter of the President of the Senate of Corfu, the Count Candiano di Roma.

Queensland, one has to say, was not Sir George's first choice, but he is determined to make the most of it. He refuses to be put off by its failure at times to come up to the mark. His own mind knows no bounds. He is monstrously ambitious. What he fears is that if he is too successful here he will be taken for granted and overlooked; but there are occasions when he fears even more that he may be *exposed*, since the secret that gnaws his soul, child as he is of a Donegal rectory, is that he is an imposter.

Sir George, easy now, reaches behind him and slips from a shelf two little volumes of which he is himself the very modest author. Mr Frazer is impressed.

One is an argument in favour of the present island of Ithaca as the site of Homer's island; the other an account of a journey on horseback, across Thessaly and the High Pindus, from Constantinople to Corfu. Sir George, it appears, has

stood at the summit of all three classical peaks, Etna, Parnassus, Mount Olympus – a feat no other Briton has emulated. But when he opens the atlas he has recently commissioned, and they look together at the town there that bears Sir George's name, Mr Frazer, remembering the scattered huts along the shore and the listless air about the jetty he sailed from, for he knows the actual place, feels his confidence in the Governor take a downward turn. A kind of gloom comes over him. Sir George, he decides, exudes an air of magnificent unreality that includes everything he looks upon. He has got close enough to feel its disintegrating effect in every part of him.

They do come back to his report, Sir George *has* read it. Perhaps now, Mr Frazer thinks, taking a firm hold on his own sinking spirits, we will get down to facts. In all this heady leaping about the globe he had grown more and more conscious of Gemmy, poor fellow; so real in the room that he can almost smell him, and, in a malicious moment, wishes Sir George could too.

But Sir George has no interest in facts. He takes the long view, the long *high* view, and from there, since his mind has the same capacity to leap centuries into the future as back into the past, the whole of time being its sphere, the vision Mr Frazer has outlined in his report of orchards, not of exotic (that is, European) but of native fruit, stretching in all directions to the skyline, had long since passed the arguing and planning stage, the clearing and grafting and seed-and-sapling stage, and is, in Sir George's mind, accomplished. To descend to detail would be to miss the wood for the scrubby little trees. That sort of thing he leaves to those who have a talent for it, who love to burrow and bury themselves (he is glaring again) in minutiae, dull fellows, dull facts. Recovering quickly, he beams at Mr Frazer, whom he sees as a man, after all, consumed by an idea, with no one behind him, a man he can trust. He expresses his entire satisfaction with their little talk and invites him to dinner where he will have the pleasure (Sir George looks humorous) of meeting the Premier, Mr Herbert – and Lady Bowen, of course. Thursday then, seven sharp.

But at this descent to mere detail Sir George grows gloomy again, suspicious – or perhaps a new barb has found its mark and is working its slow poison in him. When Mr Frazer gets up to leave he has set his jaw and is gazing irascibly out the window towards the dispiriting bushland of the opposing shore.

Two nights later, in the prettily furnished dining room at Government House, they are four at table: Sir George; Lady Bowen, a fine, tall, dark-haired woman, not quite beautiful but with splendid shoulders and eyes; Mr Frazer himself; and the Premier, Mr Herbert, a very young man with soft fair hair and a large head, who has walked in the three miles from Herston, his estate on the edge of town, with his dog, Skip, and a basket of fresh vegetables.

Mr Herbert lives at Herston with his friend of Oxford days, Mr Bramston. The house, with its animals and its model garden, is a joint enterprise, as is suggested by the merging of the young men's names – a Horatian retreat for Mr Herbert from the rough and tumble of colonial democracy, which he does not believe in, and the game, which does not quite suit him, of state-making.

Mr Herbert, the only son of the fifth son of an Earl, is in all ways the gentleman amateur, but one, Sir George finds, who has set out, almost in the spirit of contradiction, to be rigorously professional in everything he does. It is a matter of character. He is painstaking, dedicated, self-effacing and smug – this is Sir George's view, who suspects him, correctly as it happens, of reporting unfavourably upon him to his great family at home.

Mr Herbert, who has a good deal to put up with, regards Sir George as a madman, but one he has a kind of responsibility for: an autocratic, impulsive, obstinate, ceremoniously pedantic, fantastical, profoundly humourless man with only one gift, a strong but inconvenient memory, which nature has bestowed upon him in compensation, it would appear, for his entire lack of sense.

The two men are as different as they can be.

Sir George is hungry for office and has a premonition

already that the higher forms of it will elude him; not, he believes, through any fault of his own but through neglect, not to say malice, at home.

Mr Herbert is made for success but winces at it. He does not despise office, even high office, but his austere nature and distaste for every sort of public display means that he would prefer it to be anonymous; what his soul craves is privacy. He is weary of his term here, which he looks upon already as an adventure of his youth. He is weary of Sir George and his infantile vanities and *crises ministérielles*. He is even weary, at times, of the little boat in which, since he is fond of the outdoors and all manly pursuits, he likes to skip about on the waters of the bay, and of Herston, the fifty acres of Cambridgeshire he has established in a place that, once he leaves it, he will not revisit. All of which, and more, is in the air as the servants move behind them at table.

Mr Frazer has the sense of being an intruder here among people who have been too long shut up together, have already said everything they can bear to say to one another and are speaking in code.

'Really, Mr Frazer,' says Lady Bowen, 'you should see Herston.' (They are eating some of the Herston vegetables, so the subject has arisen quite naturally.) 'You would think yourself in England. The peaches! So plump, and with such a blush on the skin. Even at Corfu we had nothing like them. We are very gay when we go to Herston. Mr Herbert has a machine for making ice brought all the way from India, from which he makes, with his own hands –' the word, on the lady's breath, hangs a little, so that Mr Frazer is aware of the knuckles in young Mr Herbert's broad hands as he works his knife and fork – 'the most delicious water-ice. The children are very fond of water-ice. Especially little George.'

'Our asparagus, this year,' Mr Herbert announces at another point, and the colour comes to his cheek, 'is quite special. People told us, you know, that it couldn't be done. Too damp. But there it is.'

'And the strawberries,' says Lady Bowen, darting a quick glance at Sir George who has put his knife and fork down, drawn himself up and is smouldering. 'The children had never seen strawberries – actually *growing*. Peeping out under their little – leaves.'

This talk of fruit and vegetables, especially in the tension it seems to create, unnerves Mr Frazer. It is intended, he believes, to make way for his report. He waits for Sir George now to take up what Lady Bowen has so skilfully prepared, and wonders when he does not if *he* should do it. Surely not. Then it occurs to him that he has mistaken things altogether. Sir George finds this talk of gardens and strawberries and asparagus suspicious, sinister even – is that it? A way of informing him, indirectly (in which case it would be Mr Herbert's business Lady Bowen has been doing), that his interest in the native fruit scheme is known and that if he wants to save himself from absolute folly, he had better pull out while he can. Sir George's anxiety, Mr Frazer sees, is that he may speak out and embarrass him.

So the litany of Herston's splendours goes on from grapes and China peaches to its mouse deer, its Breton cows, its Arabian bull, its peacocks, pheasants, guinea pigs, and, after a strained half hour of port, they retire at last to the sitting room. Here Lady Bowen, in a sweet Italian voice and with a delicate touch on the keys, sings from the sheet music Mr Herbert has brought, while Skip, at his master's feet, looks on, and coffee is brought, and they settle into a cosy torpor in which Mr Frazer fears he may doze off.

Suddenly there is an explosion in the room. Lady Bowen has slapped her forearm. A smudge of crimson appears there, the rich blood of the Candianos, which she stares at a moment – they all do – as if she had not expected it to be quite so scarlet or so abundant. She rises and leaves the room.

Clouds of mosquitos have drifted in from the mangroves downriver – the price of the cooling breeze that has sprung up – and go sailing by with their fine legs hanging. When Lady Bowen returns the blood is gone and she has a servant with her who bears in each hand a lighted coil of some sharp smelling stuff (dried cow-manure, Mr Frazer guesses) that he sets on the floor, and from which thin smoke weaves upward and spreads.

From Sir George's reproachful look as he takes his leave, Mr Frazer guesses that he has in some way offended. He has failed to play some role he was assigned here, which he was not clever enough, or socially adroit enough, to perceive. Or he has been too responsive to Mr Herbert; whom he finds rather attractive on the whole, very manly and unassuming and, at one moment, when he took the opportunity, perhaps foolishly, to speak of Gemmy – whose name Mr Herbert already knew – very attentive and sympathetic. Sir George has seen it and sniffed out a defection, a choice of loyalties. Anyway, next morning, at Marr's, there is a note.

It is from the Premier and is in two parts. The first thanks him, mysteriously, for his 'understanding' on the previous evening. 'I was – I presume here on your confidence – very grateful for that, as I daresay was our hostess, though I speak, of course, only for myself . . .'

And the second?

'I have, after our brief conversation, been considering what might be done for Mr Fairley, whose position, I believe, was your chief reason for coming to us. I have pleasure in informing you that I have arranged for him to be offered the post of Customs Officer at the port of Bowen, at a salary of fifty pounds per annum, the official notification of which, etc, etc.'

He was astonished. Had he made himself so unclear? Was it a return for his 'understanding' of a situation he had not understood? Was it a joke whose humour he was expected to recognise – at the expense, perhaps, of Sir George? Was it cynicism? Was it large-handed indifference? Anyway, it was what he took back with him.

The orchards he had foreseen receded into a future that appeared increasingly remote but no more unreal to him than the place he now stood in, with the Premier's letter in his hand, the jug and basin with their nasturtium pattern, sitting solidly on the washstand, and the busy little capital coming to life beyond the sill, all its picket fences gleaming, the relentless sunlight bouncing off its domes.

19

A DAY OF BUSHFIRES, brassy sky; the air stilled, smelling of char. Fine ash falling, as if the sun at last had burnt itself out and the last flakes of it were descending to cover the earth. It did not surprise him. He too felt burnt out, his skull a husk, paper-thin and rattling as he walked. He felt, as he followed the white ribbon that led to the settlement, that he had lost all weight in the world; his feet made so little impression in the dust that it was as if he had not passed, or had passed through into another being and no longer shared – with the powdery dust under his feet, the rocks, the trees along the way where he paused a moment to rest and, settling his palm against a tree trunk, felt the sap streaming up from where the giant tree was rooted – the hold these things had on the earth. He shuffled. He tottered. His tongue felt brittle in his mouth as an insect's wing. He was going to claim back his life; to find the sheets of paper where all that had happened to him had been set down in the black blood that had so much power over his own: the events, things, people too, that sprang to life in them, Willett's boots, the ferrets, Mosey and The Irish. Magicked into squiggles, like the ghosts of insects under bark, they had drawn the last of his spirit from him. They were drawing him to his death.

George Abbot, at his desk in the schoolroom, had a pile of papers before him and a pen in his hand. More lives, Gemmy thought, that out there somewhere held others in their spell.

He seemed a different figure, this man in his shirtsleeves with his shirt open and the pen in his hand, from the youth he sometimes saw at the kitchen table. He was in his role here of sorcerer. He felt the power of that in him even at Mrs Hutchence's, where he was called George. He was not what he seemed.

He recalled the old harshness with which, in the days when he had followed Lachlan and the girls to school, the man had driven him away. He had smelled on him then an aversion that came from the blood, and was not convinced by the familiarity he had begun to show him or the attempts he made at kindness. It was not done for his benefit – or so he thought – but to impress Leona.

A man may have two natures. Here at his desk the schoolteacher was in the other darker and more powerful one, seated before a pile of papers, with at his elbow the bottle with the spirit that smelled of earth.

George Abbot, looking up from his tedious corrections, was surprised to see Gemmy at the window. He was startled. How long had he been there? He felt a kind of goosepimpling at the intensity of his look. The fellow seemed sick, out of himself. He got up quickly and helped him in.

It took him a little time to understand what he wanted. His garbled speech, all stutters, made no sense, and he thought at first he must be delirious. He was asking for people George had never heard of, or so he thought, till one name, Willett, struck him, and he remembered some bit of what, nearly a year ago, he had set down, and in this very room too. It was then that he grasped it. He wanted *that* – that piece of writing. He wanted it back. Well he did not have it, of course. Mr Frazer did. Mr Frazer was in Brisbane.

'This, Gemmy?' he asked, holding up one of the exercises he had been correcting.

Gemmy, looking rather sly, reached out and, not quite grasping, relieved him of it. George was surprised at himself. At the ease with which he let it go.

Gemmy raised the sheet to his nostrils and sniffed, and a look George Abbot could not have defined, but would never forget, spread over his features. He waited in expectation, and George, more out of curiosity than anything else, or to see the look again, offered him a second sheet, then another, till seven of the ill-written exercises, all blotches and scratchings out, had passed from his hand to Gemmy's.

'What do you want them for?' he asked.

Gemmy looked at him gravely and did not reply. He slipped the papers into his pocket and George, inwardly, shrugged. Useless, he decided, to demand them back.

'You should go home now, Gemmy,' he said gently. 'They'll be worrying about you. Do you want me to come with you?'

He shook his head, and began, alarmed perhaps, to get up, but tottered.

'Here, let me get you something,' he said. 'A slice of bread – some water.'

The man sat again and he went quickly into the little room behind the blackboard and cut a thick slice of bread, poured a mug of water. He was only gone a moment. But when he came back to the schoolroom, with the plate in one hand and the mug in the other, Gemmy was gone. Puzzled, he set the bread and water down, and went back to his corrections – or what remained of them. What would he tell Jeff Murcutt and the rest, whose exercises, sweated over in the narrow desks, turned this way and that to get a better purchase on the paper, grimed with dirt, smeared with ink, filled painfully with what he had knocked into their skulls, he had allowed Gemmy – just like that – to walk off with.

Since he had begun to love but also to forget himself a little, the world and everything around him appeared in a new light. He regarded Gemmy very differently now from when he had sat at the table here, an unwilling schoolboy, and taken down the 'facts' Mr Frazer dictated. Gemmy had repelled him then. Something in the muddiness of his eye, the meaty stench he gave off, a filth, ingrained, ineradicable perhaps – most of all in his cringing eagerness to please, had challenged his belief that suffering, even of the most degrading sort, would bring out the best in a man, and that the spectacle of it must inspire noble sentiments. Well, no noble sentiments had come to him when he was faced with Gemmy. If what had survived in this brutish specimen was, as Mr Frazer appeared to believe, naked essential humanity, then it was too little. He held his nose. He wanted no part of it. What a high-minded, fastidious little theorist he had been. Was youth an excuse? Unhappiness? He no longer thought so.

Part of the affront he had felt as Mr Frazer agonised over the greasy rag of a man, who had never perhaps been more than a plain imbecile, was that in all the time he had been here, he had never once shown any feeling for *him*.

But there had been something deeper, even then. It was the fear that Mr Frazer, for all his embarrassing effusions, might be right. That what they were dealing with, in Gemmy, might be closer to them, to *him*, than he knew. Mr Frazer had accepted that from the start – he paid that much tribute to the man. He, choked by the stench of the suggestion, by what he felt as its blackening touch upon him, had fought it, but come round at last. He felt humbled now; and most of all when Gemmy, recalling no doubt the persecutions he had used against him, shrank at his approach. He saw – it was still himself he was thinking of, it was the only way he could grasp what others felt – that there might be something after all in mere endurance. He would have liked to break through the silence that kept Gemmy apart from them, find what it was in him that had made that possible, discover what had been done to him, beyond what was visible in the marks he bore, the one eyebrow that gave him his quizzical, wren-like look, that had harmed him in one part and in another had not, so that he had at moments, and most of all when he appeared merely dumb and ox-like, a kind of grandeur that went painfully to the heart.

'Grandeur' was the word that came to him, and he did not reject it. It did not seem too large for what he saw at times in a man who had been kicked from one side of the world to the other, not even knowing perhaps what part of it he was in, except that he was there in his own skin. That, the skin, is what he had come down to from the realm of noble sentiments.

They were in a place, a continent, where it was mere naked endurance perhaps that best revealed the qualities of men. And that might be true of every place, when the fabric of pageant and the illusion of noble sentiments had been ripped away. In any event, he cared enough for Gemmy now to lay his corrections aside and set off for Mrs Hutchence's, to see the fellow had got safely home. If he hurried, he thought, he might catch him up on the road.

Leaving the schoolhouse, Gemmy paused a moment, the papers safely in his pocket, and as he looked about him, felt for the first time that he could go any way he pleased; he did not have to go back down the ribbon of road.

To the north, beyond the swamp and its band of ti-tree forest, the sky was a smoky glow, cloudless because what filled it was a single cloud, blooming with a light that might have been that of the fallen sun, its ashes shaken out now and even the deep core failing. The forests up there had all day been climbing into the sky and drifting down again to cover all this side of the range with ash; a breath out of the heart of the country. There was no finality in it. He knew that. One life was burned up, hollowed out with flame, to crack the seeds from which new life would come; that was the law. The seasons here were fire, ash, then the explosion out of blackened earth and charred, unkillable stumps, of springy shoots and loose-folded, sticky little leaves; the hard seed tormented with flame till it splits, springs open, then a hissing as the first raindrops plump and spatter, and the new forest, leaf by leaf in its old shape, ghostly at first in its feathery lightness, breathes out of charred sticks and smoulder in a season too long to be measured by days or moons or by one man's life or many.

He walked swiftly now over the charred earth and was himself crumbling. If he did not find the word soon that would let him enter here, there would be nothing left of him but a ghost of heat, a whiff as he passed of fallen ash.

A drop of moisture sizzled on his tongue: the word – he had found it. *Water*. Slow dribbles of rain began to fall. He was entering rain country. Soon the sky let down tangled streamers, and he was walking now in a known landscape; all the names of things, as he met them, even in their ashen form,

shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him, succulent green, soft paw and eyeball, muscle tense under fur.

He still carried in his pocket the sheets of paper on which they had written down his life. He took them out now. They were sodden. Rain had begun to wash the writing from them, the names, the events; their black magic now a watery sky-colour, the sooty grains sluicing away even as he watched; the paper turning pulpy, beginning to break up in his hands, dropping like soggy crumbs from his fingers into puddles where he left them, bits all disconnected . . . *and my friens Billy an . . . pretty little black patch over . . . thunder Then . . . of every colour of . . .*

20

THE SISTERS OF St Iona's, Wynnum, were in a state of mild but pleasant ferment. The motor that emerged between the rusty palms of their drive, with its gleaming radiator grille and swoop of mudguards over spoked wheels, was a novelty. Almost beautiful in its way, it nosed its metal form, all purring, into the quiet of their walled retreat (the walls were ten feet high, spiked at the top with shards of glass from ginger beer and lemonade bottles), an impressive but dangerous reminder of a world they had set themselves apart from, though not entirely, and which had lately become very noisy and tragically interesting. The driver too, when he leapt out, was a novelty. That the occupant of the car was less so did not spoil the effect.

The world *he* belonged to was familiar. It was that of their fathers and brothers, the bushman in three-piece suit down for The Show. He had none of the up-to-date glamour of the driver, though he too, in fact, was an older man, and drew what they saw in him of the brute world that began at their gates from the animal sheen of his jacketed shoulders and the polish on his boots. He moved round in front of his machine and set his hand to chrome. The Minister's shaggy head appeared. Manoeuvring his large frame out of the door, he shook himself as it were on the path.

He was here to see their own Sister Monica, who had, in these last weeks, done a quite extraordinary thing: she had got herself into the papers.

Some of her letters had been intercepted by the authorities and she had been suspected, briefly, of being a risk to security, perhaps a spy. It was nonsense of course and soon

proved so; but some of the sisters had looked at her for a time with new eyes – the suspicion, after all, the mere possibility, was something – and one or two of them had been pleased to see her momentarily brought down. She was, to say no more, an infuriating woman, in no way humble; though they too, of course, were happy to have the cloud lifted from their little community, and the now famous correspondence declared innocuous, if not quite commonplace; unconnected, anyway, with news, battles, anger and the confirmation, unnecessary one might have thought, of dominion loyalty.

Still, they fluttered at the promise of yet another ministerial visitation. The *man* had not been cleared, or not in the public eye; and they rather enjoyed the hint, beyond his obvious plain looking and plain speaking, of something not quite trustworthy in him. It confirmed them in their distrust of the world, especially the active, overbearing male part of it. Some of them rushed about to see that the bannisters were without dust, rubbed their elbows on window-glass, peered at the tiles in the entry hall for heel-marks and scratches, as if he were here as an inspector of their devotion to the *domestic* virtues, to expose them as housewives largely failed. Discreetly, from upper windows, they watched Sister Monica, kilting her skirt up over her boots, go down the stone steps to greet him.

'Lachlan,' she said, and kissed him, first on one cheek then the other. 'Hello,' he replied, and glanced up under his brows at the watchers, who sprang back behind glass.

Even if no one could hear, he never quite knew how to address her in these moments when they were still in view. Later, she would be plain Janet. He could never quite come at 'Sister' or 'Monica'.

'Let's get away from the gallery,' she said.

'Forty minutes, Wilson,' he told the driver, who clicked his heels; then, very aware of the impression he was making above, moved across to the lawn and stood, back to the building, legs apart, with the sun on his shoulders, a thin trail of smoke rising before him, and myna birds pecking boldly round his boots.

The convent was an imposing structure of sandstone and timber with a double-storeyed verandah, open below but with rust-stained venetians above. The roof was of colonial iron but the towers at either end, each with its set of louvred windows, and the columnated brick chimneys, gave it a baronial, almost Elizabethan look.

It had been built, with ballroom, billiard room and separate kitchen and servants' quarters, for a local shipping magnate, whose fortune, before Federation put an end to that sort of thing, had been based on blackbirding for the sugar interests up north. His widow, an organiser, these days, of charity balls for the War effort, had deeded it to the sisters, as part of a bid for respectability in which the family name, in keeping with the new mood of expeditionary fervour and heroic self-sacrifice, would be relieved of the stain of Early Days in the South Seas, and the old ruffian who had been the scourge of all the nearby islands could become, with his white waistcoat and whiskers, a benign, grandfatherly figure, the very embodiment of the last great, if rather rough age of hobnailed visionaries. In this form his portrait dominated the staircase with its cedar newel posts and spindles, glaring down in regret, perhaps, of the children and grandchildren he had expected to fill the house when he first conceived it in the loneliness of nights up in the tropics, or in disapproval of the women in sensible boots who crossed and recrossed the stained-glass entry hall with their hands in their pockets, or, with skirts hauled up in the freedom of seclusion, swabbed its tiles with lye.

On his first visit, Lachlan Beattie had been entertained by the Mother Superior. Passing under the gaze of the old cut-throat (he had come across Duncan McGregor once or twice in earlier days, an unedifying experience), he had been led into a dark, overfurnished room to sip tea from a little ladylike cup, while Janet, impatiently, looked on.

The Mother Superior was a sensible woman, not inclined to panic at their moment of notoriety. She had allowed him to charm her, as she had him, but did not see him again. These days, free of formality, Janet led him round past the shabby side of the building towards the garden.

Things were ramshackle back here. There were tubs and a blackened furnace for washdays, and down a path of uneven bricks, two lopsided dunnies under a crown of pink antignonon. He imagined the sisters slopping out after dark under umbrellas in their loose boots, and the nightmen with cans on their shoulders, staggering to their wagons early enough on hot mornings not to cross one of the sisters on the path.

The garden, this afternoon, was steaming after a downpour. Snails were out, dragging their shells from under cassia and canna bushes. Sister Monica, Janet, very deliberately set her boots down in a little crunching dance this way and that in front of him. He felt, as he passed, the drag of a wet branch at his sleeve. Plumbago, all its long shoots drenched. He plucked a flower and, without thinking, put the stem between his teeth, finding the drop of sweetness. She turned to see what had stopped him.

'Ah,' she said. What struck her, almost painfully, was the blue of the flower, which was exactly that of his eyes.

'Children still do that, you know,' she told him, thinking of her little lost visitors; but what she was looking at was the town-boy she saw standing up in him, all his roughness gone in the tender mouth and formal, angelic pose as the song poured out and her poor mother wept.

'Do they?' he said, feeling a little foolish. It had been an unconscious gesture. He had forgotten the drop of sweetness, or thought he had. Something in him had not.

Over the five weeks since his first visit they had settled on a favourite spot in the garden. It was here that she led him.

A balustraded terrace, much decayed and minus its urns, looked down beyond marble steps to a lawn. The left side of it was laid out as a chessboard, squares of black and white marble – the white veined with black, the black with white – of which some had tilted and others were split, with clumps of dark-leaved yellow-flowering clover in the cracks. Along one side was a bench, also of marble, in the shape of a sofa, with bolster-like arms, clawed feet, and in the panels a pair of plump-cheeked scowling cherubs. It was out of the sun but in sight of her hives, which stood in the lower garden beyond a row of scrubby apple trees and a giant mulberry.

'Do you mind?' he asked. But it was a formality; he did not wait for her permission, but removed his jacket and sat, heavy-shouldered and shaggy, in shirtsleeves and vest. His hands and forehead you saw, now that he looked so much like a workman, were scabbed from the sun.

After a moment she slipped her hand into the depths of her habit and found an apple, a Granny Smith.

He made a little gesture of surprise, as if the apple were special rather than the established opening it had become to their talk. 'What a beauty!' he said. He turned it in his loose-skinned hand, then raised it to his nose and sniffed.

She watched him take the penknife from his pocket, unclasp it, and very cleanly, cutting in towards the core, remove a crisp little green-skinned wedge, which he offered her on the end of the knife. When she shook her head, he slipped it into his mouth and very slowly chewed. She was conscious of the sunspots on his hands, the scabs; like her own, like her father's – the wrong skin for this country.

The way of cutting an apple too was her father's. It was to see it again and experience the tender pleasure it gave her, that she had, each time now after the first, brought an apple for him. It was his reaching up that first day in the orchard and plucking one of their hard little apples, and sitting himself down and cutting into it, that had, almost by chance, re-established the continuity in their lives, and created, with an immediacy they might not otherwise have managed, this intimacy between them.

They had seen little of one another over the years. His place in the House, then later as a Minister, meant he had always been in view, but only in a public way. It was her mother, and later Meg, who had passed on family news. Then, two years ago, when one of her contacts was threatened because of the war, she had, presuming on their closeness, written him a letter, asking if he could use his influence with the authorities who, as she put it, were being more than usually stupid. It did not occur to her that it might harm him.

Her contact was a Catholic priest in Jena, whose work touched on her own, but whose doctorate, the backing of his order, and a university laboratory to consult, meant he was

better placed than she was to answer certain questions that had engaged her for nearly thirty years.

It seemed absurd, she wrote, that the business of nations (these were early days, before the full horror had come to them) should get in the way of work that had only to do with *nature*; which knew nothing, cared nothing either, for the little laws of men – even statesmen. There was, she assured him, no code involved in the information she and her priest were passing back and forth; or rather, there was a code, but they had not cracked it, and she doubted whether the Commonwealth censors would either, unless they happened to be bees. She had no reason to believe her priest (however patriotic he might be – she too was patriotic, up to a point) was any more dangerous as a German, and a Roman, than she was as an Australian and a mere woman and nun . . . All this in a hasty, rather untidy hand, and all of it evocative enough of what he had known of her over the years to make him smile at the bossiness, the mixture of appeal to his power and large-handed dismissal of its sphere.

He kept it by him and read it again, not much interested, frankly, in the problem, but to get the quality of her, which was so tart on the page, and which took him back to his boyish self, and her, and all that time of painful beginnings.

He did reopen the way to her alien contact, then wrote in a more personal way to say that he had heard of her work, which was not quite so obscure as she believed, and how pleased her mother and father would have been – it seemed strange, after so long, to recall these guardian figures, these ghosts of a lifetime ago – and went on, having evoked the spirit of family, to a private matter, the death of his wife, which had occurred just seven months before. He wondered if he might come one day and visit her. Did the order permit that? Only, of course, if it was permissible and she herself did not mind.

She was surprised, reading his letter, by its courtesy, its tentativeness, its tenderness she might have said, and recalling her own prickly tone felt foolish; all the more because she knew it had less to do with the offence to her pride in having to beg than with her feelings for *him*, which were still, after so long, quite raw and unresolved.

She read and reread his letter, and meant to reply but did not. A whole year went by. Till one morning she opened the newspaper and found herself swept up in a storm of public anger, and accusation and denial, that meant they *had* to meet, but no longer on their own terms.

A Fortitude Valley pastry cook, Walter Goetz by name, a naturalised German, had had his windows broken the week after Paschendaele by a gang of patriotic football fans. When he complained he was himself arrested, charged with disturbing the peace, and found guilty. He and his Australian wife and four children were to be deported and their assets confiscated.

It was an ugly affair. Protest meetings were called at which inflammatory statements were made, editorials appeared, one or two men in high places, who put their names to a petition, were pointed to and pilloried. One of these was Walter Goetz's representative, a Minister of the Crown no less, Lachlan Beattie. He was attacked in Parliament, there was a break-in at his home, someone in his own office leaked documents to the press, and among them was a letter from a nun, Sister Monica, who turned out to be Mr Beattie's cousin, appealing, etc, etc. Sister Monica, Janet, was astonished one morning to find her letters to Father Elsheimer reproduced in all their dangerous mystery on the front page of *The Courier*, flight-patterns, dance-steps, points of the compass, all explicable now as the language of an international conspiracy. Most damning of all was her letter to her cousin.

Rereading it in cold print, she did find it odd. Its tone was provocative, no doubt of that, and seen in a public rather than a personal light, rather puzzling; even she had to admit that. Within an hour he had called on the telephone to apologise and reassure her. The affair really involved only himself. He was sorry she had been dragged into it. But she was ashamed. She saw at once the seriousness of the thing.

The other nuns, caught up in the excitement of it, did not; till other calls began to come in: newspapers demanding interviews, parents cancelling music lessons, anonymous voices shouting loyal obscenities. A youth on a bicycle rode up the drive, a butcher's boy it turned out, and put a stone through one of their windows wrapped in a Union Jack.

In the afternoons after school was out, half a dozen local children, rather ragged and barefoot, the girls and boys both, had been accustomed to come with shoe-boxes under their arms and pick mulberry leaves. They were poor children from one-roomed shacks on Wynnum Road. Their mothers took in washing. Their fathers worked at the abattoirs at Cannon Hills or were labourers on the roads. Sister Monica had let them scramble up high after the tenderest leaves and given them beeswax to chew. When all the sweetness was gone and the wax was white, they would mould it into miniature chairs and tables for their dolls' houses, and the boys, these days, into tanks, which they brought to show her. 'Baroom!' Now they were forbidden the place. In half a dozen houses all along Wynnum Road there was wailing as silkworms starved and fathers set off in search of alternative mulberry trees. Ridiculous, all of it! At the end of the week Lachlan Beattie telephoned again and, on Mother Francis' suggestion, made his first visit.

They had faced one another on that occasion with a certain shyness. It would have been difficult anyway, after so long. In some ways the 'circumstances' made it easier; they could start off with something public between them. She apologised again for having embarrassed him.

'No, no, you mustn't,' he insisted. 'I'm the one who should apologise. You're being dragged in my wake – you, poor Goetz. All that has nothing to do with it. Even the war. They don't care about that. They want my head, that's all.' She looked at it. It was fine, familiar. 'And they'll get it too, that's what I've come to warn you of – eventually. When it happens,' he looked amused, 'you mustn't think that you were to blame.'

'But is there nothing you can do?'

'Yes – I can fight, I'm doing that right now. I'll give as good as I get. I'm no saint myself when it comes to that sort of thing. But I won't win. I've embarrassed the Government, that's the real issue. It's my colleagues who'll get rid of me . . . We might as well drop this, you know. I'd rather talk about something cleaner. Your bees, for instance. Let's talk about your clean little bees.'

'Cruel little bees,' she corrected. 'Oh clean too, yes – but there's nothing noble about them, or difficult, or unpredictable. That's why they're so easy to handle. And Mr Goetz?'

He shook his head.

'Was he a friend?'

'No. He's rather an unattractive fellow really, I don't quite trust him. The wife is all nerves. Sick, I mean. They're helpless, hopeless people. Nancy –' He paused, but she knew who Nancy was – 'used to go there. She was fond of his Gügelhopf. So really,' he said, after a little pause – they were running out of steam – 'that's the end of it.'

They were walking down to look at her hives, and as they passed through the scrubby orchard he reached up for an apple. 'May I?' he asked. 'Will they mind?', and pulled one. It was ripe enough but small and misshapen. He slipped it into a pocket.

She showed him her hives, which were not of the usual sort but of glass so that an observer could see through to all that was going on in them, all the events and organised procedures and rituals of another life.

Like one of her children, Alice or Kevin or Ben, who loved to look in and see if they couldn't catch some bit of information that she might have overlooked (they too were on the track of the Great Secret), he squatted, peered in through the transparent pane, and his face, she saw, had the same puzzled wonder and wide-eyed, dreamy calm that she looked for in the children, being pleased, for a time, to give up the greater study for this lesser and no less touching one.

It was like peering through into the City of God – that is how she thought of it, and how she saw it reflected in them; into the life of little furry-headed angels with a flair for geometry, and some power (this was the great Problem she had set herself) of *communicating*. The form of it was plainly

visible, she knew, each time she came to the glass, but her mind in its human shape could not grasp it, though there had been a moment, long ago, when she *had* known it, of this she was convinced.

This, all those years ago, was what Mrs Hutchence had led her to. Not by explanation but through example and sympathy, which was why she made no attempt now to tell him what her life was but to let him look into the hive and see.

She would have thought of it once, the many-minded, one-minded swarm, as an angel. She thought of it these days as a machine, which was a change but not a difference. Would he understand any of this? She wanted him to.

That they had, anyway, moved closer, was proved a little later, when they settled for the first time on the seat beside the chessboard, and he took off his jacket, then drew the apple from one pocket and a little penknife from the other. What he spoke of, as she watched him cut and lift out a neat wedge, was his grandson, Willie, who ten months before had been killed in France. The penknife was his. It was of yellowed ivory, with a silver-framed portrait on one side of King Edward, on the other of Alexandra. He had had it as a boy, and it had been with him, still a boy, when he fell, among the contents of his pocket along with Woodbines, a box of matches, and a hard little apple he must have picked in an abandoned orchard, with a single sliver cut from it.

She knew what he was telling and wanted her to see. The boy must just have had time to shut the knife and slip it, along with the apple, into his pocket. Cutting into the hard little foreign fruit, inwards like that, to the core, was the last thing he had done, very solemnly as his grandfather was doing it, before they were called forward. The sour-sweet wafer might still have been in his mouth when he was hit – his last taste of the world, its greenness, along with his warm breath expelled to meet the larger, colder one of the autumn morning, then the rush of blood. She watched the scabbed hands cut another thin slice, watched him chew and swallow.

Each time, after that, she had provided the apple. Nothing was said, except for his surprised 'ah' and the slow appraisal.

So now, on this fifth occasion, she watched him eat and he told her: 'It's to be on Wednesday. I wanted you to know beforehand. They'll give the usual reasons, poor health, you know, as if I were fair worn oot –' He smiled at the bit of old Scots. 'Actually,' – he looked at her and laughed – 'I've never been fitter.'

He cut another slice of apple. It went into his mouth. He chewed. Then looking up: 'You know, I wish I'd come ten years ago.'

She caught his eye and was puzzled a moment, then saw what he was thinking. Now how was that? He meant he might have had Willie with him. She would have seen the boy.

But not more clearly, she might have told him, than I see him now.

What he wanted in her mouth was the boy's name; to hear it spoken aloud, in the world, on another's lips. Now how did she know that?

What a thing Love is, she thought. And that was the word on her lips, though she did not speak it. Love. What she said was 'Lachlan' and took his large paw in her own equally scabbed and freckled one.

He looked startled, she released it, and he sat, his hands in his lap, with the half-eaten apple in one hand and in the other the little knife. There was the sound of his breathing, a little broken, and further off the low, continuous humming of her bees, a note she was always aware of, somewhere, not too far off.

They had moved a long way back now, to a moment that more than once in these last weeks had risen up between them and declared itself, and been turned away. A scorching summer afternoon when the whole landscape around had been in shimmering motion, dissolving, re-forming, and they had stood together, he, Meg and herself – he a little in front, being a boy, a man – while the creature, unrecognised and unnamed as yet, that had launched itself out of the unknown world towards them, that the landscape itself had hurled into their midst, a ragged fragment of itself, or of its history or their own, some part of it that was still to come, had hung there against the pulsing sky as if undecided as yet which way to move, upward in flight into the sun or, as some imbalance in its own body, its heart perhaps, drew it, or the earth, or the power of their gazing, downward to where they stood rooted, its toes meanwhile hooked over the peeled bark of the fence rail, the muscles of its stringy feet tensed, its stick-like arms flailing.

She stood there again and found herself saying: 'I sometimes think that that was all I ever knew of him: what struck me in that moment before I knew him at all. When he was up there' (she saw the hooked toes again, dusty and misshapen, the muscles of his scraggy neck where the head was thrown back), 'before he fell, poor fellow, and became just – there's nothing clear in my head of what he might have been before that, and afterwards he was just Gemmy, someone we loved.'

Loved. The word, which she had used as if there was nothing problematical in naming thus such a tumult of feelings, released a weight in him that he felt shift and fall away.

'And while he was up there?'

'I don't know. Except that I have never seen anyone clearer in all my life. All that he was. All.'

He looked at her with his watery blue eyes, red-rimmed now in the blotched flesh, but the same eyes that had looked up, bold and fearful, at what was in the sights of the make-believe gun he had raised, the dry stick fallen from some ringbarked tree that had lain on the earth a season, dead, and which he had picked up out of its tree-life and refashioned, in their world, into a weapon with all the power of safety in it, of death too, and had pointed at the creature's heart, and *yes*, he thought, *hit it*, and brought him down, and that was the start of it, and so long as the image had life in his head, it was not ended.

She knew the end, such as it was, of the story.

Nine years after Gemmy's disappearance, Lachlan Beattie had been one of a Government road gang that was surveying the country to the north, preparing the way for a highway that would run, a thread of dust, through all the little burgeoning leap-frog settlements, sleepy harbour towns, goldmining camps, scattered dwellings round a railhead or timber- or sugar-mill, between Brisbane and, fifteen hundred miles further on into the tropics, the last of Governor Bowen's little far-flung struggling ports; across canelands sickly sweet with molasses, rainforests, dried-out, sparsely-forested cattle country with nine-foot anthills, and a hundred flash-flooding creeks and wide mangrove-fringed streams. He knew the country up there. He knew a little of the native languages. He had been working for the past three years, first as a labourer, then as a foreman, on road gangs all up and down the coast; work of an animal kind that would burn away, he believed, the last of boyhood in him, and his exorbitant dreams.

In each place they came to, from odd natives who came out of the scrub to watch them set up their surveying gear, and peg and measure, and lend a hand at times if it amused them, and the straggling groups they met who were trooping, miserably now, from one camping site to the next, he made enquiries. Only he would know, she thought, with what emotion, what excitement at the possibility of coming face to face again with someone he had once been fond of; what dread too, since his conscience was not clear. She had known nothing in those days of what he was feeling. They were no longer close.

He did hear something at last, though there was no certainty in it. The clan it involved might not have been the one he was seeking. He had only a few words of their language, picked up from Gemmy and poorly learned, and the place was further north than he had estimated.

It involved a 'dispersal' six years before by a group of cattlemen and two native troopers, too slight an affair to be called a massacre, and no newspaper had got hold of it. The blacks had been ridden down and brought to earth by blows from a stirrup iron at the end of a stirrup leather – an effective weapon, when used at a gallop, for smashing skulls. The remnants of the clan, including the young woman who gave him his facts, had scattered and been absorbed into a larger group. The bones of the victims, eight or nine in all, men, women, two small children, they had carried with them and disposed of in the usual way, in parcels in the forks of trees.

The story already had elements in common with others he had heard up here, which when he tried to track them down had proved elusive. Perhaps they were all one story. Whether this one had happened, as the woman claimed, six years ago in her own lifetime, or in her mother's, or last year, it had been gathered now into the dreamtime of the land itself, a shadowy realm where the bones of facts had already drawn around them the skin of rocks, of beasts, of air.

The young woman offered to guide him there, and since she had been a child at the time, ten or eleven, they took an older woman with them; but she too, when questioned, was vague and would lead him only by indirections. It was he who felt a kind of certainty and clung to it, as they struck away from the coast and came at last to a bit of scrub by a waterhole. The two women squatted behind a rock. They refused to go further. The older woman began to wail.

There were bones – not so many. Eight parcels of bark, two of child size, resting a little above eye-level.

He looked at one dry bundle, then another – they were not distinguishable – and felt nothing more for one than for any of them. His feelings, which had seemed so clear as they approached the place, failed him now. He sorrowed quietly for all, in the hope that it might also cover *his* bones, if they were here, and decided, without proof, out of a need to free himself at last of a duty he had undertaken, a promise made, and a weight on his heart, that this was the place and that one of these parcels, which could not be disturbed, contained the bones of a man with a jawbone different from the rest, enlarged joints, the mark of an old break on the left leg, whose wandering at last had come to an end, and this was it. When he told his uncle of the thing (Janet had listened without speaking, without meeting his eye), it was as a dry certainty, though she knew he did not believe it. He was tying up one of the loose ends of his own life, which might otherwise have gone on bleeding for ever.

All that, fifty years ago. An age. They were living in another country. He could afford to admit now that it had not ended. Something Gemmy had touched off in them was what they were still living, both, in their different ways. It would end only when they were ended, and maybe not even then. They would come back, as they had now, from the far points they had moved away to, and stand side by side looking up at the figure outlined there against a streaming sky. Still balanced. For a last moment held still by their gaze, their solemn and fearful attention, at the one clear point, till this last, where they were inextricably joined and would always be.

Later, when he was gone, Janet sat in the fading light at the window of her room – she still thought of herself mostly by her original name, and the more so today, under the influence of her cousin's visit.

Her room was on the other side of the house from the garden. Her hives were out of sight here but they were not out of mind; her work went on, continuous somewhere in her head, and she was pleased to have in sight this other view, these flatlands that as they approached the bay became mud, and later, when the tide rippled in, would be moonlight.

Out there were the houses her little visitors came from: one-roomed shacks on low stumps, behind tumbledown paling fences or rusty wire; yards straggly with sunflowers and strewn with rubbish, old bed frames, a collapsed buggy with only its shafts visible above a riot of morning glory, lines of colourless washing, and in a weedy pile, old beer and castor-oil bottles, charred stick-ends, broken bricks.

Behind the squares of light out there her children would be sitting down to boiled potatoes or bread and dripping, and in a short time now, would sleep, and silkworms, in the dark of shoeboxes, rustling, feeding, would be spinning the sticky gold out of their mouths, the finest thread, and miniature tables and chairs made of white beeswax from which children – Alice, Kevin, Ian, Isabel, Ben – had chewed the last faint sweetness, and on which they had left, in the moulding, their giant fingerprints, would stand in ideal order in the dark of little partitioned rooms, in houses that had been butter-boxes.

It pleased her to let her mind drift so far, then further – out over the muddy, stinking flats towards the waters of the bay, which were not visible yet, but approaching.

Her mind, even as it entered the ravaged yards, the shacks, the heads of sleeping children who were forbidden for the time being to visit but would come back when all this nonsense was over, the jaws of silkworms softly spinning, was at the same time stilled, dreamily attendant, beyond tinted glass, to the life of the hive, moving closer now to the spirit of it, to the language they were using, those angelic creatures in their world of pure geometry, of circles, half-circles, hexagons, figures-of-eight.

When she glances up again, for she has been dozing, the misty blue out there has become indigo; the first lights have been doused, though the houses themselves do not fade from her mind, or the children who are sleeping in them. The first bright line of moonlight has appeared out on the mudflats, marking the ever moving, ever approaching, ever receding shore. All this a kind of praying. It does not make a house any less vivid out there because she can no longer see its light; or the children any less close because they no longer come to visit; or Willie because she has never known him except for what she has felt in Lachlan, and through him, in herself, the wedge of apple in his mouth; or her mother, long gone, standing out on the hillslope in the dark, the dark of her body solid through the flimsy stuff, the moonlight, of her shift; or her father slumped at the breakfast table, the loose skin of her mother's hand, like an old glove, on the leathery back of his neck; or in darkness now, on the other side of the house, the single mind of the hive, closed on itself, on its secret, which her own mind approaches and draws back from, the moment of illumination when she will again be filled with it; and Mrs Hutchence who has led her to this; and always, in a stilled moment that has lasted for years, Gemmy as she saw him, once and for all, up there on the stripped and shiny rail, never to fall, and Flash slicing the air with his yelps in clear dog-language, and his arms flung out, never to lift him clear; overbalancing now, drawn by the power, all unconscious in them, of their gaze, their need to draw him into their lives – love, again love – overbalanced but not yet falling. All these, Lord, all these. Let none be left in the dark or out of mind, on this night, now, in this corner of the world or any other, at this hour, in the middle of this war . . .

Out beyond the flatlands the line of light pulses and swells. The sea, in sight now, ruffles, accelerates. Quickly now it is rising towards us, it approaches.

As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another.

It glows in fullness till the tide is high and the light almost, but not quite, unbearable, as the moon plucks at our world and all the waters of the earth ache towards it, and the light, running in fast now, reaches the edges of the shore, just so far in its order, and all the muddy margin of the bay is alive, and in a line of running fire all the outline of the vast continent appears, in touch now with its other life.

THE WORDS GEMMY shouts at the fence in Chapter 1 (the seed of this fiction) were actually spoken at much the same time and place, but in different circumstances, by Gemmy Morril or Morrell, whose Christian name I have also appropriated; otherwise this novel has no origin in fact. E. Gregory wrote a brief account of Morril's life from which I have taken the three descriptions of local flora at the beginning of Chapter 14. The Herbert letters in Bruce Knox's *Robert Herbert: Premier* provided some of the detail for Chapter 18.

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