



BERYL FLETCHER

THEWORDBURNERS

In The Word Burners, Beryl Fletcher writes ordinary people with extraordinary style, revealing sisterhood in all its incarnations — blood, friendship, family, love — with pinpoint accuracy for the pain and a poignant hope for the possible. — Stella Duffy

Winner, Commonwealth Writers Prize,
South East Asia and South Pacific, best first book.

 SPINIFEX



New Zealand feminist writer Beryl Fletcher has published four novels: *The Word Burners* (1991, 2002), *The Iron Mouth* (1993), *The Silicon Tongue* (1996) and *The Bloodwood Clan* (1999). She has been the recipient of prizes and awards and two Writers in Residence (USA and New Zealand) and her books have been translated into German and Korean.

THE WORD BURNERS

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*To my parents,
Joan and Alan Fletcher*



...the longing for order, [is] a desire to turn the human world into an inorganic one, where everything would function perfectly and work on schedule, subordinated to a suprapersonal system. The longing for order is at the same time a longing for death, because life is an incessant disruption of order.

Milan Kundera, *The Farewell Party*

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION OF *THE WORD BURNERS*

By Sigrid Markmann

The tide is pushing gently into the harbour. The Port Hills, near Christchurch New Zealand, are cloud-capped, only a few patches lit by the early morning sun. Tui and korimako, the blossoms of kowhai and gum trees, indicate springtime in the Southern Hemisphere. It's the end of August, 2001.

Flashback to the year 1992—I'm on my way to this antipodean country—New Zealand/Aotearoa. Two books are in my reading kit, returning home with me to their Mutterland, Mother-land, Papatuanuku. Patricia Grace's *Potiki* and Beryl Fletcher's *The Word Burners*. I can't decide which of the two books to read first so I take the easy way out and choose the author in alphabetical order. Fletcher comes before Grace and Beryl before Patricia.

From my bed in Germany to another bed in Auckland will be a distance of about 19.000 km, or, in travel time, from door-to-door, at least thirty-two hours. I don't sleep well in planes and a good book or three will help me to survive the trip, especially a good book taking me on a different, more relaxing journey than the one I will have to endure.

Hamburg Flughafen—fighting a luggage trolley with a wonky wheel—I paid two Deutschmark for this? Check-in, some discussion with the airline counter person, who envies me my destination, the country she most wishes to visit, while commiserating with me over the time and distance it will take to get there; through passport control to the holding rooms at the boarding gate where I will wait about half an hour before my flight takes me to Frankfurt; yet another rummage through my kangaroo pouch for passport, flight

tickets, hotel vouchers, boarding pass; one last pre-flight nervous pee; no time to start reading.

Frankfurt is somewhere below. If we circle one more time I'll be running to catch my Air New Zealand flight before this plane touches down. At least this delay has allowed me time to meet Julia, one of the main characters in *The Word Burners*. Julia, married with two children, is just beginning a new life as a lecturer in Women's Studies at a New Zealand university. Her husband, Bob, willingly, is the home-minder. Her sister Isobel lives overseas; she'd fled the country the night before her wedding. Julia keeps a diary. Writing for her is essential because it might assist her to find meaning to her life, to make sense of what's going on in her job, to retain what she thinks is her certainty.

Finally the plane has landed. Frankfurt International Airport, passport control, same procedure. With a sigh of relief, like Isobel, I've found my seat *in the tourist section of a jumbo jet on [my] way...to New Zealand. [I'm] in the middle of a row and [I'm] very uncomfortable. [My green backpack] is stuck underneath [my] knees, [my] long legs are crowded up in front of [me]*. Unlike Julia's sister Isobel, who is experiencing a similar flight to the one I'm having, I'm not going home—yet...

After the welcome drink—a glass of Champagne to relax—and the dinner—chicken, I think—I'm trying to fall asleep—without success. I'm thinking of Julia and *The Word Burners* and the questions which the title evokes. Burning words, is that killing language? In a world without words, do we lose consciousness of the world around us? The breakdown of language; doesn't it give way to inarticulate screams, groans or even silence? And if the words are burnt, would there be a recovery of language necessary for the process of rebuilding a perhaps shattered or violent world? Violence through language? Through the ideology language carries? Through people who gain power over others by imposing/using language?

Julia, I remember, takes up her job as lecturer in Women's Studies. How will she deal with a male dominated discourse in academia? *We must learn the right language, the right methods*, she thinks, and expects a perfect fit between her theory and action. However, she has to make decisions in everyday life that conflict with her feminist ideology. It will be, I assume, her quest to bring her life and her theory together without the pain of contradictions.

Yes, the meal definitely was chicken. Why is it that airline chicken is always so bland? I would have given anything for some of Sally's chickens. Even if I *had to chop off their heads with an axe, gut them, prepare them, light the fire under the copper in the washhouse and boil the water for plucking*. Even the smell of the hot feathers and the way that the skin puckered up when they were pulled out. Savoury roast chicken... Sally's chicken which she never ate would have been better than ten-mile-high-chicken. At least Sally's chicks would have had a happy life. Poor Sally, driven to obsession because of plucked chicken, gutted ducks, gluttonous brothers, mucky cows... She escapes her rough and raw childhood through marriage and spends her adult life trying to keep mess and disorder at bay by compulsive cleaning. The rituals of cleaning work for her, *binding her fiercely to the illusion of order*. Like her mother, Sally, Julia seeks certainty and order in her life—she expects feminist theory to help her achieve this.

And Bob, her husband, who chooses to be responsible for house and children? Is he pleased with himself? He tells Julia what she needs. He believes that she needs certainty in her life and control over her emotions. He does not want her to find the truth that he thinks she seeks. Big words for somebody who embodies the cult of the individual and rationalises *that subjectivity plays an important role in the alienation of bourgeois life*—a life he lives without any scruples. Empty words for Julia, dangerous words, that put the blame for her insecurity on her, make her feel like *the failed worker, the*

failed poet, the failed feminist. The way he uses language exposes the violence and power of words. I thoroughly dislike Bob for his arrogance, selfishness, cynicism, and self-satisfied patronising attitude.

I have to get up from my seat, walk down the aisle, stretch my muscles. People are sleeping, snoring, some are watching a film. *I want to get out, breathe the salty air, run to the edge of the surf, scoop up a handful of sea water, splash it over my head, walk into the grey froth, knee-deep one moment, ankle deep the next, feel the sand under my feet and the retreating surf.* Julia longs desperately for solitude and seeks to enjoy the beach, the water and the birds but is hassled by Bob who wants to keep control. I too am unable to fulfil my desires to stroll along stretches of sand and water and enjoy the solitude of such an act, not because of some controlling mate but simply because I do not think it would be possible to do so, given where I am, right now. Out of the small window I can see that the sun is ready to begin another journey across the sky. The Morning Star is glittering at the edge of night. The sunrise begins with a red line marking the horizon. I remember one line that I've read somewhere recently: "We are free in time in the dawn light and as with all freedom there comes to us knowledge." It's a different knowledge Isobel is thinking about on her return home to New Zealand. The man sitting beside her tries to engage her in a conversation she does not want, even seems to see her as sexually available. Isobel moves in for the kill by using patriarchal words, knowledge, and theories against this member of patriarchy.

I look at my neighbour. Apart from the polite greetings we exchanged when I first sat down, we haven't exchanged many words, and I'm quite happy about it. I want to be on my own. Coincidentally, as I'm thinking about the absence of words shared between us, he turns towards me, opens his mouth. But I'm already putting on the headphones. I close my eyes, the music plays, I feel the plane begin to descend.

Like Isobel, I hate landings. My fingers are unfurling as the plane speeds smoothly down the runway.

Singapore—Changi Airport. Stopover. The heat is intense. In my hotel room the air conditioner rattles and the shutters don't help either. I am so wide awake that I decide to go for a walk. Although I've been here before, the order and cleanliness—how Sally would enjoy this—of the city strikes me. Isobel's plane lands in Bombay [Mumbai]. From her window she gets an *impression of a vast disordered city; huge towers with broken windows, ruined shelters, the vitality and terror of urban poverty. The airport buildings look shabby and neglected*. Not Sally's idea of heaven, I bet. Singapore is quite the opposite. It seems there is only one truth here: order and security. But whose truth is it? I'm having dinner in a small Chinese restaurant before going back to the hotel to have a rest. Isobel cannot leave the plane—for other security reasons. She ponders her fear that her *accursed awareness of the dangers of language is her downfall*. A self-confessed logophobic, she is terrified of the power of language to fix reality which might be perceived as the only true reality. *Language can kill. She had to put down her pen, she could not write her doctoral thesis*. She had no choice. *I have nothing left to do but live until I die, she thinks*.

My plane leaves Singapore for Auckland the next morning. Only eleven hours more to go. Meanwhile, Isobel has landed in New Zealand; Julia picks her up at the airport. She realises that Isobel has changed. Not only is Isobel secure in her sexuality but also in the choice of her friends and her lifestyle. Julia, on the other hand, just wants to survive, and she is mourning the loss of intimacy between her and her older sister. When Wendy, one of Julia's students, makes friends with Isobel, Julia envies her sister. *The closeness of dykes, she thinks*. Before Isobel *came out and went to live in England*, [she] *was her only friend in the world*. Although Julia sees herself in a position of power over Wendy, she fears that, through Wendy's *relationship with Isobel, she will lose control over*

the image of herself as a feminist on the front line. 'Wendy will tell her the truth about me and the compromises I make in my work,' she writes in her diary. Full of fear because everything seems to dissolve, Julia is craving for the steadfastness, the tenacity and the ongoing courage to push for security and order. In her need for security she is tied to the notion of the one truth; but she has still *one foot in feminist mysticism and one foot in the barren world of male truth*. On the contrary, Isobel recognises that there is nothing like a single objective reality and that feminism should not be read as a prescriptive theory but as a discourse that is interdependent with the discourse of other theoretical approaches. In Isobel it is affirmed that—despite stumblings—fear can be overcome, change is possible and love can happen. She can take up writing again and I'm relieved.

"No, no, no. Please, no chicken this time. Fish and a good glass of New Zealand white wine will do." A first taste of New Zealand. I'm sitting next to a woman who is returning home from Ireland where she had visited her relatives. While she talks about her visit overseas and about Hamilton, where she lives, I'm taken by her New Zealand accent. An accent which, during my earlier travels to New Zealand, enabled me to accept that this was a place quite different from other English-speaking countries I had visited; particularly Britain and the USA, places which considered themselves to be the centres of the word, the English spoken word.

Julia, Sally and Isobel are still with me. So is Wendy. So are the others: Clemency who wants to become pregnant even though her husband is infertile; Paulette who drinks too much but becomes Sally's non-threatening companion who can appreciate Sally's homemaking; Dr Berry and Lydia who more or less succeed in the academic system. Each of these women has a completely different set of values and attitudes. Each of them, therefore, chooses different solutions to self-doubts, anxieties, violent arguments, experiences in their relationships with family, partner, friends, colleagues.

Is it then, after all, I wonder, a feminist novel? Since the term “feminist” does not describe a certain style, or literary form, since it locates the text in terms of a particular understanding of the nature of women’s role in society, it is a feminist novel. The author has successfully completed her project to create a story which is feminist in nature and character. The role of language is crucial. *The Word Burners* engages the reader in problems of meaning and in a process of puzzling over language and power structures. Language, it suggests, is both the concrete manifestation of ideology—in which speakers are authorised to think and act, the “one truth” Julia is looking for—and the site of its questioning and undoing. Julia and Isobel are brought to see through and around the settings of their language, so as to see a different reality. Both have to deal with the performative force of language that comes from the repetition of prior norms and acts that are linked to an oppressive patriarchal society and its institutions. *The Word Burners* takes up these norms, and through its characters gives life to them thereby questioning the shaping form of language as it organises their encounters with the world. For Julia, as well as for Isobel, it turns out to be a struggle, not only of resistance but also of survival.

As the plane approaches Auckland, I see below me the Tasman Sea glinting with the first rays of the early morning sun. The rows of passengers to my left are craning to see the sun grow on the eastern horizon. Out of my window the view which only minutes before was black with night is now exposed by the rising sun. Ahead, and to the south-west, a layer of pinkish clouds signal the presence of land. If the Maori of old had approached the land that is now known as New Zealand from the sky, they may not have called it Aotearoa—the Land of the Long White Cloud—but possibly something quite different. I know that the land is somewhere out there because that is often the nature of cloud formations. I’m too excited to start my second book and am delightfully surprised that *The Word Burners* while not taking a lot of

time to read despite its 305 pages will take a lot of time to fully absorb. I imagine that it will engage me for a lot longer than it took to devour.

The plane has landed. I'm walking with my New Zealand "sister" across the car park to her car. "Sister"? She is that and more. She is my heart and my love, and she is as welcoming as her name, Powhiri. Which is what the Maori ceremony of welcome is called. And yes, she is also my "sister". The early morning is surprisingly warm for the middle of winter and the colours in the flowers and blossoms I see as we drive through the suburbs of South Auckland to take the Southern motorway to Hamilton are confusing for someone used to the barrenness of a northern European winter. My sister *is in full flight, she is talking about her job. Names and ideas pour from her mouth...[I] am feeling very tired, [my] body has suddenly collapsed in on itself. [My] eyes fill with tears. [My sister] glances sideways and is shocked to see tears. She thinks she has said something to upset [me]. "I'm not crying, it's jetlag. "The car pulls over and stops. "Hop in the back, love. I brought a blanket and a pillow, I thought you might need to sleep on the way."*...Lying in the back seat my face is a few feet from the black waterfall of [my] sisters hair. [I] can't resist putting out a hand and stroking it. *"Its so beautiful, a silken cloak,"* [I murmur]. "Shhhh, go to sleep. The day after tomorrow I want you to meet my friend Beryl. She is a writer. I think you'll like her."

Well, I met Beryl. Turns out that it was Beryl Fletcher of *The Word Burners*. What a coincidence!

There she is opening the door inviting us in. The room is light, windows on two sides, one out into the garden right into a punga tree; the magnolias are in bloom—beginning of September: springtime in New Zealand. "Want a cuppa?" We sit down. Beryl is easy going. She and my "sister" are exchanging the latest news about friends. I can feel that both her extended family and her feminist community are very important to her. She feels close to women of her generation

who had to wait until middle life before coming to terms with the social roles which had hitherto constrained them, and finally finding an identity with which they were comfortable. Her political commitment and interest in the lives of women becomes clear when she talks about her own past: born in 1938 in Auckland into a socialist working-class family, raised in a state house area, told by a careers adviser that university education was “wasted on a girl”. It was twenty-two years and two children later that she went to university and “a new world of ideas opened up to her”.

Her experience certainly does not lie outside the symbolic order identified by feminists as phallo-logocentric; for her this is a realm which needs to be explored in terms of a feminist approach. Feminism, we agree, functions as a critique not only of a male-dominated social world, but of the dominant philosophical and linguistic order of Western civilisation (Lacan’s symbolic order). She talks easily, and with passion, about subjects close to her heart and mind. She is concerned with both the spiritual and moral aspects of society, without linking them to formal religion; instead, her politics are grounded in a humanist perspective, in the necessity of opposing oppressive structures and the macho mindset, in the necessity of creating a morality that allows human beings to find fulfilment in their private lives, in the necessity of decency, acceptance, and justice in the public sphere. Even today, we agree, there are still journalists and other people who can’t use the word “feminist” without adding “man-hating”. Some of them have advanced to “politically correct” when it comes to feminism, environmental issues, nuclear power, thus trivialising a valid and constructive way of looking at the world. Beryl is close to the society she lives in. She is committed to her writing and to the “development of a New Zealand fiction that expresses the difference between the received images of our culture and the lives of people driven to the outer edges of society”.

Looking back one decade after *The Word Burners* was published many things have happened: in November 1992 *The Word Burners* was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Book published in South East Asia and the Pacific. In September 1993 Beryl's second novel *The Iron Mouth* was named as one of the Top Twenty Books in the 1993 Listener Women's Book Festival. Two critically acclaimed novels, both published by Spinifex Press followed: in 1996, *The Silicon Tongue*, and in 1999, *The Bloodwood Clan*. She has written short stories and is a book reviewer for the *Waikato Times*, *The New Zealand Herald*, and *The Australian Women's Book Review*. In 1994, she was awarded the place offered to a New Zealand writer at the International Writers' Program at the University of Iowa, USA, and in 1999 she was selected as Writer in Residence at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. She was invited to read from her works and to take part in panel discussions at various institutions and conferences in Canada, Australia, USA, and Germany.

One focus in the English Department at the University of Osnabrueck/Germany at which I teach is the anglophone literatures outside the UK and the USA. With the emergence of these literatures a new way of "seeing" is required. At the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s I spent hours at night poring over books trying to cram in years of colonial and "post"-colonial history and literatures. These books proved to be a journey of rediscovery since I learned again that stories enable us to cross time, space and cultures; they can give a sense of connection and connectedness. Although the fictional and real story of every human being is unique, at the same time it embraces feelings, emotions, responses, found in the larger story of humanity. Stories, I learned again, may also show the commonalities in the human struggle for self-definition, and in the effort of not becoming entrenched in any role set from the outside, they might show what is needed to create more peaceful and just relationships between human

beings. It is through stories and their respective cultural backgrounds that I try to engage students in an educational process that hopefully enables them to experience a new way of understanding.

In 1998 we hosted the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) and the International Autumn Summer School on the New Literatures in English (ASS). Beryl was invited to both events, as writer, key note speaker and lecturer. Her books had been on the set book list, and with the students we had crossed time, space and culture, had found commonalities and differences. So it was their urgent wish to have Beryl for a one-week course during the ASS. She was so convincing and successful that in 2000 an invitation followed from the University in Kiel/Germany that hosted the ASS 2000.

Over the years Beryl and I have become friends. Oscar Wilde said of friendship: "It is far more tragic than love. It lasts longer." And this friendship will last, because—also in Oscar Wilde's words—"the grace of sweet companionship, the charm of pleasant conversation, and all those gentle humanities that make life lovely and are an accompaniment to life as music might be, keeping things in tune and filling with melody the harsh or silent places."

The tide is ebbing, seabirds are diving for their own special brand of Tangaroa's fare; spring breezes ruffle the water and, in the neighbour's garden, even though winter has not officially passed, the magnolias have passed the budding stage and are reminding me of that time, nearly a decade ago, when I sat with Beryl and admired the punga and magnolia in her garden little knowing that I was at the beginning of a most marvellous chapter in the book of life. Thank you, Beryl.

I

The first problem on Saturday night is a phone call from the baby sitter to say that she is ill and cannot come to sit with the children as planned. Bob offers to mind them but Julia knows that Clemency will be upset if she turns up at their farewell party without him. She says, half-jokingly, 'You don't really want to go, you want to get out of it.'

Bob laughs. 'I wouldn't mind eating a nice dinner but you have to admit that Gerald can be a bore at times.'

Julia has to agree.

In the end, after phoning Clemency (who said she supposed it would be all right), they bundle the excited children into the car and drive through the chill night air to where Clemency and Gerald live. The car turns into a long curved driveway covered with scoria. Soft lights are in strategic positions around the garden. The headlights of the car blink along the trunks of tall copper beeches that line one side of the driveway.

Clemency comes out on to the front porch. 'Welcome! Come on inside Bob, Gerald will get you a drink. Oh hello kids, you're in your pajamas already, that's good. Do you think they'll go to sleep Julia?'

'If they know what's good for them they will.'

Clemency takes hold of Kezia's hand and leads the way upstairs. Kezia is casting pleading eyes at her mother. Julia ignores her.

She probably wants to stay up late. No chance. She'll get overtired, then I'll never get her to go to sleep and my night will be ruined.

She checks to make sure that Timmy has his teddy bear and Kezia her doll.

Clemency helps Julia to tuck the children into the twin beds in the guest room.

'Can we have a story Mum?'

'I've forgotten to bring a book.'

Kezia throws her doll on to the floor.

'What did you do that for?'

'She jumped away from me, she gets naughty when she doesn't have a story.'

'Tell us about when you were little,' says Timmy.

'I'll do better than that. I'll tell you a real story that your Auntie Isobel told me when I was a little girl. It's about a witch, a lonely old witch who wished she had a sister. This witch lived in the olden days before there was any night-time in the world. It was always daytime so the poor old witch was always busy. She never went to bed because her bedtime never came around. All day long she worked hard making spells. She was worn out and very lonely because she had no one to talk to. One day, she decided to work her strongest magic. She said some really powerful spells, so powerful that all her energy was drained away and she fell into a faint upon the floor. When she awoke, she was very frightened. It was dark, pitch black. Remember, she had never seen the night-time before. In front of her sat a very old woman, a witch like herself.'

'How come she could see the witch in the dark?'

Clemency laughs. 'He's got you there.'

'Witches are so magic they can see anywhere.'

'You've got an answer for everything!'

Timmy says impatiently, ‘Go on, go on, what happened next?’

‘The witch cackled, “Thank you sister, for calling me from exile.” The day witch asked, “Who are you?” and the other witch said, “I am your sister, the night witch. Up till now you’ve had all the power but now, my little sister, you must learn to share.” At first, the day witch was very happy. She was so pleased to have a sister. She made her very welcome and after her initial fright she learned to love the night-time which gave her space to rest. But after a while she began to realize that her sister was not a good witch like herself but was a wicked old lady who did bad things—’

‘Kezia’s gone to sleep,’ says Clemency.

Julia picks up the doll from the floor and places it beside her daughter.

‘What bad things did the night witch do?’ asks Timmy.

‘Shhh! Don’t wake her up, I’ll finish the story another time.’

‘It’s not fair. I’m older than her, I should be allowed to stay up.’

‘Go to sleep.’ says Julia firmly. She kisses him on his grumpy forehead, tucks him up tightly in the duvet, and leaves the room.

Clemency turns the lights off in the landing. ‘You’re strict with your kids.’

‘They don’t know where to draw the line so you have to draw it for them.’

‘Even so...’

‘To hell with the kids’ stuff. I would love a drink, let’s go.’

The two women walk down the stairs and enter the dining room. There is a hum of conversation and a clink of ice against glass. The music is soft and unobtrusive.

‘Oh good,’ says Clemency. ‘Dave and Mary have arrived.’

Julia groans inwardly. Clemency always invites this pair when Bob and Julia come for dinner. She thinks it helps Mary to talk to someone like Julia because Mary is always saying

she would like to take a course, get a degree, do something with her life.

Mary calls out to Julia, 'Congratulations! Great news about your job. Dave thinks so too, don't you darling?'

'It's wonderful news dear, good on you—but what does Bob think of it?'

Bob yells from across the room, 'He likes it, he likes it!'

Laughter; more drinks, canapés, pleasantries. Julia drinks her first gin and tonic quickly. She feels tired and dispirited and annoyed with herself.

Why am I so silent? Why do I allow fuckwits like Dave to call me dear?

'I wish Jim and Paulette would hurry up,' says Clemency. 'Esmé will start to panic.'

'Stop fussing,' says Gerald. 'Leave everything to Esmé, she's perfectly competent.'

I bet, thinks Julia, slipping further into her mood of detachment. And not just at cooking either, you fucker.

Gerald pats the seat of the empty bar stool beside him. 'Come over and talk to me, you haven't said hello to me yet.'

Julia wishes she is assertive enough to decline his offer but can't think of anything to say that won't make it perfectly clear to Clemency that she can't stand her husband.

Clemency had only once complained about Gerald to Julia. He had sacked one of his secretaries because she had miscarried rather noisily and bloodily in the board room toilet. When Clemency challenged him he had insisted that her unmarried state was not the problem, it was because she had not revealed her pregnancy to him. Clemency had suggested that her pregnancy was a private matter but Gerald replied that anything that interfered with a worker's performance was very much his business.

Clemency cried when she told Julia about it. She had tried to see Gerald's point of view but still thought he had been too hard on the girl. Julia seized her chance and began to tell Clemency exactly what she thought of Gerald but Clemency

wouldn't listen. She seemed rather taken aback at Julia's comments and said that Julia was taking a feminist view of what had happened but Gerald also had a right to his opinion. After all, he did have a business to run. A few days later, she claimed that she had cried because she felt sorry for the girl losing her baby and not because she had been angry with Gerald.

Julia remembers all this as she sits next to Gerald on the bar stool. He raises his glass. 'Come on, give us a smile, things can't be that serious.'

She feels like punching him but instead she drinks the rest of her gin and tonic and hands him the empty glass. He pours her another.

'So you're leaving us.'

'I'm lucky to get this job.'

'I can't understand why feminist stuff needs to be in a university. There was nothing like that when I did my degree. Tell you what, if I ever make my second million I'll endow a chair in Men's Studies.'

'Too late Gerald, we've got lots of those already.'

He laughs. 'At least you've got a sense of humour!'

The door chimes sound. Clemency hurries off into the hallway.

'In spite of what you think Julia, I'm all for women having more initiative. I have never discriminated against women in my firm. Some of our toughest young executives are women.'

'I didn't think you approved of aggressive women.'

Gerald raises his eyes in exasperation. 'Why do I bother?'

Clemency walks briskly into the room with Jim and Paulette in tow. 'Now we're all here, we can eat. I'll tell Esmé.'

Jim apologizes for their late arrival. He says it's Paulette's fault, she changed her dress twice, couldn't make up her mind what to wear on her feet, and then had to put her face on and that's always a big job.

Paulette puffs away on her black cigarette holder, grinning and nodding. Julia can see that she is already quite drunk.

Gerald says, 'Didn't Clem tell you this house is a smoke-free zone now?'

'Sorry darling, I forgot.' Clemency fetches an ashtray from the sideboard and Paulette stubs out her cigarette with an unsteady hand.

Clemency excuses herself and leaves the room to help Esmé with the food. The guests take their places at the table. Their names have been written on silver place cards and Julia finds herself seated next to Dave. Clemency and Esmé come into the room carrying a huge iron saucepan of green-lipped mussels in their shells, and jugs of hot tomato and garlic sauce.

Conversation lags. Jim devours his food, drinks two glasses of chilled white wine and tells a rude joke about a fox in a box.

The joke has broken the ice. The others talk and laugh and tell each other how nice it is to see everybody again.

Bob and Jim talk about their office where they are both insurance assessors. Together, they thread their way through a jungle of office anecdote and intrigue. The cosy world they build between them excludes the others.

Clemency attempts to divert the conversation into general topics that everybody can discuss, but they seem determined to continue with their office gossip. She gives up after a while and talks about her failure to conceive and about Mary's plan to study once the children are at school.

Paulette is silently drinking herself into a stupor.

Jim says briskly, 'That's enough dear, no more for you.' He asks Esmé to bring iced water from the kitchen.

'There isn't any.'

Clemency says hurriedly, 'Put some ice cubes and tap water into a glass jug Esmé, that'll do the trick.'

Esmé stalks out.

Paulette leaves the table rather unsteadily to go to the toilet. Julia is dying for a smoke so she goes out with her. They open the door into the luxurious downstairs bathroom. Paulette

asks Julia for a cigarette and then offers her a sip of whisky from a small hip flask that she has hidden in her handbag.

‘I fooled the old boy again.’

‘Don’t you think you’ve had enough?’

Paulette stops smiling and says frostily, ‘Don’t you preach to me, lady. I never have too much. My problem is I don’t get enough.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Got a light?’ They smoke in silence for a few moments. ‘Look how my hands shake. Jim reckons it’s because I’m going through the change.’ She drinks another mouthful of whisky. ‘He’ll miss your Bob at work, he thinks a lot of him.’

‘It’s strange that they are such good friends when there’s such a big age difference.’

‘I never think of Jim as old, he’s just a boy to me.’

Julia hesitates, then asks, ‘Doesn’t it make you feel awful when he tells those sexist jokes?’

Paulette smiles. ‘I couldn’t care less, it doesn’t bother me.’ She points to the flask now safely hidden in her handbag. ‘He’s good to me, puts up with this, understands it, somehow.’

‘But surely you feel put down?’

‘He doesn’t mean it, it’s his way of being social.’ She throws her cigarette butt into the toilet bowl. ‘I don’t mind the jokes but I never let him talk dirty.’ Her puffy face collapses suddenly into a sea of wrinkles. ‘There’s one word I can’t stand. If I hear it, I feel terribly sick.’

Julia pats her arm. She cannot speak.

Paulette says, ‘You must think I’m stupid.’ She sponges her face with pancake make-up. It sticks in the lines in her forehead and settles in pale creamy splotches around her thin lips. She applies some fresh lipstick with an unsteady hand.

Julia experiences a moment of compassion for her which feels almost like love. Why does Paulette bother with this charade? Only the young are permitted to perform the rituals of artifice. Yet she continues to mask her face with her cover-up, her shield; the modern armour of a woman warrior

fighting her fear of a word that wounds more deeply than a sword.

‘You look lovely. Come on, let’s go back. The others will be wondering where we’ve got to.’

They walk down the hallway. Paulette suddenly grabs her arm and says in a low fierce voice, ‘Don’t ever give up your job, not for anybody or anything.’

Julia assures her that she never will. Together they re-enter the dining room.

The rack of lamb appears and is eaten. The rosé and the claret is poured and is drunk. The women talk of children and possessions, the men of economic doom.

Their voices get louder, more drunken. The men interrupt each other in their eagerness to explain what it is that the economy really needs. Bob tries to argue with them but nobody listens to him. He lapses into a gloomy silence.

The desserts are brought in. Julia helps herself, taking a little from each dish. The crystal bowls and the glass plates shine and glow under the soft lights. Julia is lulled by the good food, the good wine and the texture of whipped cream on her tongue. The conversation washes over her. She doesn’t want to listen; she concentrates on the bite of dry white wine, the tart lushness of strawberries and the sting of lemon juice on melon.

The other diners fall like wolves upon the sweets. The dessert trolley rocks as if it were under siege. Gerald bristles with moral indignation as he devours a bowl of guauva mousse. Dave complains his way through a mound of pavlova. Jim waves his creamy spoon around in the air, crying out against his imminent ruin. Their mouths are full of sugar and fruit yet they cry out against their hard lives and impending poverty.

Julia feels light-headed and reckless. Suddenly, she cries out, ‘If you knew how absurd you sound!’

There’s a sudden silence in the room; then Gerald laughs and others follow. Clemency looks apprehensive. She comes

over to her friend and asks her in a quiet voice if she's feeling okay.

'I'll go outside and get some fresh air, I need a smoke.'

'I feel awful making you go into the garden.'

'It doesn't matter, I don't mind.'

'I'll come with you.'

'No, please. Stay and finish your dessert.'

She almost runs from the room. She wants to get away from these people and from Clemency's eagerness to please.

Mary comes out into the garden. She crunches through the ankle-deep leaves and flaps her arms around her body. 'It's freezing out here.'

Julia says nothing. The lights in the garden flicker in the wind and the branches of the trees move slowly in the uneven light. A drift of dead leaves rattles across her feet.

Mary shivers. 'The coffee's ready.'

'Go back in if you're cold. I'll be a while yet.'

'I really need to talk to you Julia, everything is such a mess.'

Julia listens to Mary's tale of pain and struggle. She talks on and on about the need to expand her mind, to do something real, to take flight from the domestic life. Julia has heard it all before. She breaks into the monologue.

'Look, I understand your problem, but what's stopping you?'

Mary hesitates. 'Dave's a bit negative about me enrolling at university next year but he hasn't actually said I can't go.'

Julia throws her cigarette butt under a camellia bush. 'Go on.'

'Last year, when I went to a preliminary study course, he put a lot of pressure on me.'

'In what way?'

'Whenever I had to work on an assignment he found something urgent for me to do, like putting a button on his shirt or looking for something he couldn't find. I'm scared that if I study full-time, he'll get worse.'

'Bob and I worked things out.'

Mary nods. She has tears in her eyes. 'The thing is, I can't bear it when Dave gets angry with me. I turn myself inside out to please him and I get frightened when I don't.'

Julia touches her arm. 'It's very difficult for us to do things that we know are going to make other people unhappy or angry.'

Mary hesitates. 'Don't tell Dave I spoke to you.'

Julia promises.

They go inside, back to the warmth and the babble of the others. They help themselves to coffee.

Bob comes over to Julia and whispers, 'Let's go soon, I'm tired.'

He swallows the last mouthful of his liqueur. Julia thanks Clemency for the lovely dinner.

The car runs sweetly through the crisp winter night. Bob winds down the window to get some fresh air. Julia feels that she should be driving but Bob insists that he's fine. They have their usual argument about who has had more to drink but they are halfway home before Bob admits that he must be over the legal limit. Julia decides not to make an issue of it.

Kezia lies fast asleep in her safety harness in the back seat. Timmy yawns and rubs his eyes. 'What does the night witch do, Mum?'

'The night witch?'

'I was telling the kids a story about the day witch and the night witch but I didn't finish it because Kezia fell asleep. It's one of the stories that Isobel told me when we were little.'

They drive on. Julia looks back and makes sure that Timmy has gone back to sleep before she continues. 'She comes out at night, attracted by the smell of hot meat and the odour of evil thoughts and enters men's bodies and eats off their penises while they sleep.'

'Is that a suitable story to tell the kids?'

'I'm only kidding. But she does do some unspeakable things, things you can't talk about.'

‘You’ll frighten them.’

‘Isobel told me hundreds of stories about day and night witches when I was a kid and it didn’t hurt me.’

Bob says affectionately, That’s a matter of opinion.’

‘Thanks for nothing.’

They arrive back at their house. The wind has died down. The ground is covered with a thin pale skin halfway between a dew and a frost. Their footsteps make dark green bruises on the white grass. They carry the children around the tea chests and half-filled boxes that line the hallway.

Together, they settle the children down and watch the late news on television.

They go to bed and make love in a slow and friendly sort of way. Afterwards, Bob ruffles her hair and asks her if she’s happy. Julia says yes, quite happy that the night witch hasn’t paid a visit to Bob yet.

Bob laughs. He turns over and is instantly asleep.

Julia drapes her body around his warm back and lies awake for a long time thinking over the events of the dinner party.

Her last conscious thought is of Isobel and she falls asleep with a sound on her lips which might be a sigh or just a gentle letting go of her sister’s name.

She sleeps deeply at first and does not awaken when a morepork sounds its lonely haunting cry. Yet that cry penetrates and disturbs her dreams so that she tosses uneasily in her sleep and wakes hours later with a feeling of unfinished business in her head and a dry sourness in her mouth.

Sunday morning

Dearest Isobel,

I dreamt about you last night, at least I think I did. I remember a cry, a voice coming at me from somewhere and I think it was you. I was scared to death.

This will be my last letter to you from Birkenhead, we're leaving next week. Mum told me that she wrote to you and gave you the news about my job.

I'm scared shitless. Especially coming in at second term when the courses have already started. The woman they originally appointed became ill and had to resign. Tough on her but great for me.

When are you coming back to New Zealand? I thought those summer photos I sent to you would make you homesick. I miss you, especially at the moment when so many changes are happening in my life.

Did Mum mention that she's worried about Dad's health? Apparently, the doctor couldn't find a thing wrong with him. I reckon it's wishful thinking. She can't leave him, so death is the only way out. Of course, she'd never admit to it, not in a hundred years.

Isobel, I did have a dream about you last night, it just came back to me this very minute.

In my dream, you called to me but not in your own voice. It was a scary sort of non-human cry, but I knew it was you. I turned around, you were swimming towards me, in a sea, a peculiar sort of sea, not water but words. They were not written words, I could see no letters just symbols and signs of a strange fluid shape. The symbols seemed to be made of a white fluid something like milk. They were not constant, they were changing all the time but I knew what they were.

You swam towards me smiling, raising up your wet arms, the sun shining brilliantly on the wet hairs of your body, you called out to me, laughing, thrashing about. Suddenly, the milk turned into indian ink, the words became unchanging and hard, they started to crash into each other like wet stone smacking into wet stone. It became darker and noisier. You disappeared, I couldn't see you any more. Then a terrible silence fell. The sea had turned into a frozen black mass of obsidian or jet; shiny, hard, unyielding. I felt a terror that was beyond belief, beyond words.

Then I heard you laugh behind me. I turned, and there you were! Still laughing and shining with sunshine and milk, and I wasn't scared anymore.

What a dream! Maybe Bob is right when he says I have too much imagination. Or maybe it was the rich food and drink I had at Clemency's last night.

Talking about imagination, remember those stories you used to tell me, the ones about the day witch and the night witch? I found my childhood diaries when I packed up my things and I'd written some of them down. I was going to throw them away but I changed my mind. Clemency went wild at me for even thinking about it. She keeps everything and I mean everything.

Poor Clemency, I suppose it's because her present life is so hideous that she clings to reminders of the past. Not that she admits to being unhappy, far from it. She's just like Mum, never speaks badly about the stupid dick she's married to, wouldn't dare.

Clemency tells me that she spends hours dreaming about the things she did as a girl, the colour and style of her clothes, the conversations she had with particular people, the feel of fabrics, the taste of food.

I can't remember my childhood in such specific detail. That's why it was so weird reading my diaries. It was as if I was reading about someone else. What has really thrown me is how differently I see our parents now compared with how I wrote about them. Apparently, I thought Dad was terrific but I didn't think much of Mum. I kept trying to win Dad over by doing things for him and making him things. I come across as a manipulative little girl.

It seems so unfair that I loved Dad more than Mum when he never paid me any attention or lifted a finger to help in the house.

I can understand Mum much better now that I've got Timmy and Kezia but I'm not going to make the same mistakes she did. I hate the way that she goes up or down

depending on what you and I are doing at any given moment. What a responsibility. Is this why you went overseas? You rat, leaving it all to me.

Talking of rats, you should have been with us last night. I can't remember if you've ever met Gerald, the creep that Clemency married. He's handsome and successful and a real bastard.

I wish Clemency had never met him.

I suppose it's arrogant of me to judge other women the way that I do but they make me feel so helpless at times. They think that because I have studied women's issues at an intellectual level I have a magic wand that can wave all their troubles away. If only this were so.

It seems as though my women friends use me as a sort of theoretical aspirin to ease their pain inside their prison cell of tradition but they will never allow the real bars to be removed. They think that I've escaped, that I'm on the outside looking in, what a joke.

I remember coming away from some of my tutorials at university feeling like a reactionary because I was still cohabitating with the 'enemy' at home. Poor Bob, as if he could ever be my enemy. He's my best mate, except for you.

I wish you were here right now so we could have a good gossip and tell each other night witch stories. I didn't know that night witches live in many cultures until I read about them at university. I thought that they were something that belonged exclusively to us.

To make the unspeakable speakable one needs a real object to talk about. Maybe the night witch is nothing but a convenient coat hook to hang the cloths of evil upon. I suppose she does serve the function of making the invisible visible and therefore able to be dealt with.

I'm glad I wrote your stories down in my childhood diaries because now I can read them to Timmy and Kezia. It gives me a sense of continuity to read them the same stories that we had as kids.

I feel inspired to start keeping a diary again, especially over the next year or two. It might assist me to make sense of what's going on in my job if I write down my impression of events as they happen. Besides, when I thought about throwing my diaries away I realized that one cannot obliterate one's past merely by destroying the documentation of it. Only death can do that.

On that sombre note I must leave you and finish the packing. Please answer soon and please think about coming home even if it's only for a visit. I'll write to you next when we've found a house in Hamilton and are settled in.

All my love, Julia



2

Julia has arranged to meet Clemency at a café in town at twelve-thirty. She did not want to go at first but Clemency had insisted on shouting her to one last lunch.

She drives the Fiat over the harbour bridge and into a multi-level car park. She follows a sports car up and up, round and round, looking for a place to park. The car is being driven very fast, its tyres shriek in protest on every corner.

She parks next to the sports car on level five. A young woman sits in the BMW, pushing her short thick hair into place with a tiny cylindrical hairbrush. She smiles at Julia in the rear-vision mirror and opens the door. 'Bitch of a day.'

'Not at all pleasant.'

Julia can't help staring at the woman as she steps out of the car. She is dressed in long floppy black clothes. Her hair is jet black, her face stark white except for brilliant red lipstick and two bright red slashes on her cheeks. In spite of the disguise that Julia calls Ponsonby Gothic and others call high class punk, the woman is very beautiful. The way she holds her body, the shape of her features and her irreverent comment catch Julia's attention.

They walk down to the street level together. Their high heels click noisily against the concrete stairs.

‘Going shopping?’ asks Julia.

‘No, I’m meeting my girlfriend for lunch.’

‘Me too.’

The woman smiles and pulls a packet of cigarettes from her bag. She offers one to Julia and lights it for her with an expensive lighter.

‘It’s nice to meet a fellow addict, everyone is so pure these days but what the fuck.’

Julia feels excited but she doesn’t know why. The woman is at least ten years younger than herself yet she conveys a sense of certainty and strength that Julia envies.

They reach the street. The woman waves her cigarette at Julia and says, ‘See ya.’ She walks off in a swirl of long black skirts.

Julia arrives at the café a couple of minutes early. She sees Clemency coming up the street. She looks beautiful in a cashmere dress. Julia kisses her warm cheek and a flush of perfume and powder wash over her.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ says Clemency. The bus was full.’

‘You’re not late darling, I was early.’

They enter the café. Julia feels pleased to be out of the biting wind. The air is thick with the fragrance of food and the noises of eating. The clink of plates on table tops and the laughter of the people surround her in a cocoon of warmth. She takes a deep breath. ‘This is nice Clem.’

Clemency fusses over choosing a table and can’t find anywhere to hang her coat. She frowns up at the blackboard that announces the dishes of the day.

‘I hope there’s something you’ll like Julia.’

‘Stop worrying, I’m sure there will be.’ She takes her cigarettes and lighter from her bag.

‘You’re not allowed to smoke in here. Sorry, I forgot to tell you.’

Julia laughs. 'No meat, no fags! I knew there had to be a reason why I've never been here before.'

'Sorry.'

'Tell you what, stop saying sorry and I won't worry about not being able to smoke. Deal?'

'Deal.'

They order and begin to eat.

'I feel healthier already.'

'Oh Julia.'

'What's with this health kick anyway? It's not like you.'

Clemency explains that it's a new approach to the problem of her infertility. She read about it in the *Woman's Weekly*. Apparently, the correct diet and exercise can bring on ovulation.

'But you don't even know if it's your fault. Have you talked to Gerald again about taking the tests?'

'I've tried but he's adamant that it's not him.'

'How does he know?'

Clemency fiddles with her fork. 'He got a girl pregnant at his high school.'

'Yeah I remember you telling me, but that was years ago. He could easily have lost his fertility since then.'

Clemency changes the subject. She asks if Bob has left work yet and how they were coping with being together so much.

'It's like being on holiday. It'll be better once we've moved to Hamilton and get into a new routine.'

Julia eats quickly. The salad and the fruit juice seem to have increased her appetite, or perhaps her craving for cigarettes and coffee is making her hungry.

She thinks of the crunch of her coffee grinder, the oily taste of bitter Turkish blend, the sound of the match striking the box, the hot blue smoke of a cigarette. The jolt of caffeine and the burn of nicotine transport her from the mundane world into a realm of experience where thinking becomes a delight rather than a chore. These are her best moments. The joy of the breakthrough when something is finally grasped;

one more mystery dissolved, one more concept devoured, one more word demystified and tucked safely away in its place.

‘Julia, I asked you a question.’

‘What?’

‘I asked if you remembered the time when you and me and Isobel went to that school social and you had those long red fake fingernails and you put your hand out to get a piece of chocolate cake from the buffet and Isobel said in a big loud voice, ‘thought you were on a diet’ and you pulled your hand back and one nail got stuck in the cake. You ran off embarrassed leaving this little red flag stuck up on the cake like a glacé cherry and Isobel teased you all the way home.’ Clemency is convulsed with laughter.

Julia grins. ‘I could have murdered you both. Isobel thought it hilarious.’

‘It was, it was!’

‘Why bring that old story up now?’

Clemency lowers her voice. ‘Look at those nails on that blonde girl over there. I swear they’re fakes, they look too good to be true.’

Julia looks across the room and sees a fair-haired woman talking animatedly to a woman with short black hair and bright make-up. Julia recognizes her brief acquaintance from the car park. She can’t help staring at the two women. They are so beautiful, so alive, so happy to be together. She can’t hear what they are talking about but it is evident that the blonde woman is telling the dark woman something both very important and very funny because she alternates between exclaiming what! no! never! and bursts of laughter that she tries desperately to control.

‘Julia, I’m talking to you.’ Clemency sounds aggrieved.

‘Sorry.’

Clemency asks her if she’s heard from Isobel lately. Julia tells her that Isobel has lost her job at the old persons’ shelter in Sheffield for going to the CND festival in Somerset without permission and that she has moved house yet again. Clemency

wonders if Isobel is ever going to settle down and if she ever hears from that Australian she almost married two years ago.

Julia says she doubts it.

What a dance she led us on that burning summer day in Te Kauwhata. All those gifts, all that food, and Dad saying typical Isobel, waiting until the very last minute to cancel, after everyone else has done all the work. Mum, standing by the presents, fingering the wrappings, saying it was terrible that Isobel would never get to use them now.

Mum tried to give away the cooked chicken and the hams but there were few takers. It was as if the food carried with it a message of failed ritual that made people fearful of contamination.

Clemency says, 'Remember all that food? I thought your Mother was going to explode.'

'She wasn't the only one.'

'It had its funny side though.'

'I can't remember laughing.'

Isobel left the night before her wedding, her face swollen with weeping, her nails bitten down to blood. She kept saying that she was a coward and a shit but that she couldn't help it. Julia, unable to bear her sister's agony, told her to go quickly, she would break the news to Mum and Dad. Together, they pushed the car down the street so that their sleeping parents would not hear the noise of the motor starting up.

When she told them, her father sat down calmly in the armchair and said 'You spoilt her Sally, it's all your fault.'

She said in a tight high voice, 'Not now Denby.' She covered her face with her hands. The tears ran down her fingers and her thin brown arms.

At that moment, Julia experienced a feeling of pure hatred for her father. It was a moment of utter revelation to her. She had always read his passivity as gentleness, but now she saw that it was a deliberate stance to avoid taking responsibility. When things went wrong he always blamed Sally. He played

the part of a judgemental onlooker rather than a vital participant in the life of the family.

Clemency stands up. 'I'm going to the loo, do you want to come?'

'No, I'm going back for a refill of salad, it was so delicious.'

'You're such a hog today Julia.'

'It's the lack of nicotine. Bloody hell, if I didn't smoke I'd be as big as a house.'

Clemency walks off. Julia goes up to the counter and heaps her plate up with raw silver beet and pumpkin seed salad. The woman behind the counter informs her that returns of salad are free. Julia feels ridiculously pleased with herself. The pale green pumpkin seeds glisten with olive oil. The dark green leaves of the silver beet are fresh and crisp and smell of lemon juice. She returns to her table and begins to eat.

Clemency reappears. Her face is flushed and she seems agitated and out of breath.

'Whatever is the matter?' asks Julia indistinctly. Her mouth is full of half chewed silver beet.

'Something awful just happened to me.'

'Were you attacked?'

'No, nothing like that.'

Clemency opens her handbag and takes out her handkerchief. She dabs at her eyes and her forehead. She tells Julia that she came out of the cubicle to find those two girls, you know, who had been sitting over there, and they were...

Julia tells her to go on.

'Well, they were, you know, embracing each other.'

'So what's awful about that, they're friends aren't they?'

'No, I don't mean like us. I mean really kissing, on the mouth.'

'They probably fancy each other.'

Clemency blows her nose and says she can't help it but the whole business makes her feel quite ill. She asks how come they're so beautiful and wear make-up and look so feminine?

Julia explains that lesbians come in all shapes and sizes and vary in looks and style just as heterosexuals do.

Clemency says she couldn't help feeling sick when she saw the long red nails of the blonde girl touching the dark girl's breast in a sexual way; it didn't seem right. What right have they got to go around upsetting people like that?

'They probably didn't even know you were in there. Anyway, it's not really their problem, it's yours.'

Clemency shakes her head. 'I could never bear to touch another woman like that.'

Julia recalls a conversation they had had a few months ago when Clemency had confessed to resorting to masturbation because she never had orgasms with Gerald. She had said at the time that Julia's matter of fact attitude had helped her enormously.

'But you touch your own body.'

'You know that I do.'

'Is your body dirty?'

'I don't think like that anymore.'

'Well, my love, ask yourself, what's the difference?'

Clemency says she needs more time, it's hard to get used to the idea of women acting like that. Maybe if she knew some lesbians personally it would help her to understand.

Julia tells Clemency that she already does. She mentions a few names from their school days including two women teachers whom Clemency had idolized.

Clemency is astounded. 'But I've been to their house, they used to help me with my homework, I never would have guessed.'

'They would hardly shout it from the roof-tops.'

'How did you find out?'

'Isobel told me.'

'To think of Miss Bateson and Miss Clarke! They're so ladylike, I can't get over it.'

'Look, if I don't have a cigarette I'm going to die, let's go.'

They walk towards the Art Gallery. The wintry wind blows through the trees in the park. Their feet and ankles become buried in fallen leaves. They sit on a wooden seat in a small paved courtyard next to a reclining sculpture that looks like a fat brown seal.

'I can't take it in,' says Clemency. 'About Miss Bateson and Miss Clarke.'

'Tough.'

Clemency looks upset and accuses Julia of being too hard on her.

'I don't mean to be. It's just that I forget that people like you still exist.'

'Thanks!'

'Shit, I didn't mean it like that.'

Clemency pulls on her gloves and stands up. She looks very miserable. 'I'd better go. I'm sorry if I've upset you. Can't we part as friends?'

Julia looks up at her, standing like an anxious child in the wind, her fair hair blowing around her neat collar. 'Come on, I'll walk you to your bus.'

'Forgiven?'

'If you forgive me.'

Clemency looks relieved. They walk up the steep hill towards the bus-stop. Julia feels out of breath. She stops walking for a moment.

'Are you sure I can't give you a lift home?'

'Positive. It's miles out of your way.'

'When are you going to get your licence?'

'Gerald isn't keen. He says the traffic is too heavy now, especially over the bridge.'

'He's scared that if you learn to drive you'll go out too much.'

'It's not that Julia, and you know it.'

'Do I?' She tries to look innocent but spoils it by laughing out loud.

Clemency smiles in spite of herself. 'You never give up, that's why I love you so much.'

The bus pulls up. Julia says, 'This is it kid, I won't be seeing you for a while.'

'When you're settled in, I'll come down and see you.'

'Promise you'll come?'

'Promise.'

They embrace and Clemency boards her bus. Julia walks slowly back to the car park and sits in the Fiat for a few minutes. The sports car is still parked beside her but there is no sign of the owner.

She drives over the harbour bridge and turns into her street. The little boats in the bay are tugging at their moorings in the choppy gray sea.

No more boats, no more sea, no more weather sweeping across the harbour. An inland town, neat gardens and wooden houses on a flat green plain. The end of one life and the beginning of another.

She parks her car carefully between the rows of packing cases in the garage and enters the house. Moments later, a light rain begins to fall.



3

Saturday, 11 May

We've been lucky getting this house so close to the University. It's not far to drive to work. We have to be careful of money. Bob reckons we have to live on two-thirds of what we had before. He's very keen to get the garden going and fix the house up. It's a bit small. There are only three bedrooms so I can't have a study to work in at home. Bob wants to know why I need a study when I've got an office at work. I have taken some of my books up to the University and put some posters on the wall but I don't feel comfortable working there yet. It's unfamiliar and new. Term starts in three weeks and I'm scared stiff. I've met two of the other lecturers, Lydia Margaret and Jeanine Watson. They were helpful and welcoming, although I thought Lydia rather a cold person. It's clear that she's more politically aware than Jeanine although they both described themselves as feminists. Lydia looks very dykey but I don't know if she is. Jeanine is glamorous and wears expensive clothes. She is Acting Head of the Department because Dr Berry is away on leave.

The kids are unsettled. Timmy misses his friends, poor little bugger. Once they start school, things will be easier. I still seem to be doing most of the organizing of the kids and the house.

Bob says I don't want to give up control. Once I start my teaching schedule, things will have to change.

I miss the sea terribly. The river is not the same, it smells of dark sewers and spawns seedy ducks grown fat on garbage. It's not like it was when we were kids and Mum and Dad brought us down to Hamilton to shop and we ate ham sandwiches and drank orange cordial on the crumbly banks. We heard tales of great floods with brown water flowing across the roads and rafts of debris moving downstream like stately islands on the move. We heard about the toddler who lost a foot to an eel as big as a fence post, and one morning in winter we saw a taniwha floating through the mist.

We were in awe of the river in childhood, we felt its mystery and its power. Now it is tamed, made use of. Most of the water is recycled sewerage and the banks are piled up high and dry. Development brings safety. Isobel would say it's all part of the Great Sanitization Process that takes the wilderness out of our lives. Bob would say that capitalism appropriates everything for its own needs and the river is just another commodity. I say take me back to the sea.

Monday, 13 May

Jeanine came to the house. She seems very nice and I'm glad that there's at least one other married woman in the Department. She told me that Clare Berry is due back from leave in a month. Apparently, she's great to work with and is a celibate het. Jeanine said that makes three of us with Lydia as the token dyke. So that's all sorted out.

Working hard. I've got most of the first lectures written. It would be so much easier if I had organized the courses right from the beginning of the year. Jeanine said that Shona Black was brilliant but couldn't hack the pace, she tried to be all things to all people and ended up being torn apart. She's given up her doctorate as well as teaching. Her course notes and papers are in a state of chaos. She was either a rotten organizer

or under a lot of stress. I feel sorry for her. What bad luck to crack up after only one term.

I went into town this morning to look for clothes for the kids.

Quite depressing, the creeping plague of mirror glass. We cannot ever look within, we can only see a distorted reflection of the exterior world.

Bob says there is nothing wrong with reflections as long as they are accurate and show the true picture; it's the distortions that bother me, not the mirrors themselves. Maybe he's right.

I must learn to rely less on my feelings and more on evidence. Our passion and our intuition have been used against us in the past. We must learn the right language, the right methods.

I am writing this outside in the winter sun. The plum trees look very trim in their pruned state. Bob has done a great deal of work outside already. He says the freedom from his job has released a new energy in him. I too feel a release but for different reasons. I'm doing what I want to do at last.

Thursday, 16 May

I went to a staff meeting this morning. Lydia, Jeanine and I are the only full-time lecturers until Dr Berry comes back. We have tutors recruited from the graduate school and some part-timers who are based in other departments. A curious system.

I was surprised to find out that all the students' work is graded a second time outside the Department by male lecturers. Jeanine said it's to achieve balance and that it was a concession that Dr Berry had to make to get the Department off the ground. Lydia said bullshit to balance, the patriarchs want to keep a finger in the pie.

I am beginning to understand the political complexities of teaching at a university.

Thursday, 23 May

Mum and Dad came for dinner last night. I cooked a leg of lamb, roast potatoes and green peas. I hate cooking for Dad,

he is so conservative with food. I cheated though, I put fresh rosemary on the meat. Dad said it tasted like a bloody scent bottle. Mum said it gave the meat an interesting flavour, she is so diplomatic I could scream at times.

She's not herself, there's something worrying her. It could be the duck shooting season. She's always been against Dad shooting ducks. It's funny, he seems almost proud that she nags him about it. I suppose it gives him a chance to play the traditional role of the hen-pecked husband. He can tell his mates in the pub the worn-out old jokes about getting cold tongue for dinner because he's been out shooting with the boys. He's quite the joker at times.

Mum has a cleanliness fetish. I didn't realize it until I was grown up. I can see her now, moving from room to room, cleaning and tidying, constantly on the move. It was as if she invented an ideal state for each room and then had to spend her days in endless rituals of restoration for fear of loss of the ideal. She told us that her own mother was an untidy woman who 'kept a dirty kitchen' and she made up her mind as a young girl that she would never be like her.

Our house was difficult for a child. She would send me back to the bathroom to remove a single hair from the handbasin. To spill anything was stupid, to mark the top of the table was a crime and to break a plate was tantamount to murder. She never yelled at us and never hit us. Instead, she punished us with coldness and the silent suffering of her face.

When I was a child I didn't understand her and thought she didn't love me. Memories wound me. I can see her now; crawling on her hands and knees on the front lawn removing dead leaves with the brush and pan, scrubbing window frames with a tooth-brush, hovering anxiously over us while we ate, pouncing like a tiger on fallen crumbs.

I feel a compassion for her that borders on rage. Isobel says she fell for the ideology of security and sold herself down the river. She took on a job and did it too damn well. Imagine how successful she would have been if she had been a man.

Saturday, 25 May

Clemency rang. She wants to come down to see me next week before term starts. I arranged to meet her at the bus station next Thursday. She didn't say much except that she was lonely for me and that she had come to a decision about something really important to her. She wouldn't say what it was. I told her I hate mysteries and that she was a big shit to keep me in suspense. She still wouldn't tell me. So I'll have to wait to find out what she's up to.

I'm busy with preparation for my courses. Jeanine is very helpful and has given me some good books and references to work with. She says she enjoys being child-free and intends to remain that way. She knows who'd be doing most of the work if she and Ed ever had kids. He's supportive of rights for women but delightfully vague about domestic matters.

Monday night, 27 May

Lydia rang and asked me to have lunch with her. I was relieved that she sounded so friendly because I had detected a coolness towards me at the staff meeting last week. She told me she had just realized that I was Isobel's sister. Isobel had often talked about me when they were at university together and Jeanine had told her I hailed from Te Kauwhata, so she put two and two together.

We met at a pub in town so that Lydia could have a glass of white wine with her salad. She said she never eats flesh but loves her wine. I had the fish of the day because I didn't want to eat meat in front of her. I feel rather shy of her, she comes across as being so sure of herself.

She asked for news of Isobel and I told her all I knew. She described Isobel as a real intellect and said what a shame that she dropped her doctorate, we could do with more women of her calibre in the system. I told her I didn't know why Isobel had dropped out, she hadn't discussed it with me except to say that male academics never listened to feminist students.

Lydia said same old story, but someone has to stay in there to make sure that the Boys didn't always get their own way. She said the hardest thing to take is a woman who does well and then furthers her career by oppressing other women. I asked if we had any of those in our Department. She said darkly I would have to make up my own mind about that, she didn't want to put ideas into my head. She gets accused enough as it is.

I really like Lydia. She looks full of health and vitality. I feel somewhat faded in her presence. She said some nice things about Jeanine although it's obvious to me that their politics are very different.

We spent two hours together. It was good to talk to her, she has a wonderful sense of humour and admires Isobel, and that's good enough for me.

Wednesday afternoon, 29 May

I was in the book shop this morning and a woman came up to me and said remember me from the car park in Auckland? I was astonished to see her. She told me that she was a third-year student and that she had done her first two years at Auckland. Lydia had persuaded her to come down here to do her final year.

I asked her what courses she was taking, and she's in two of mine. She told me her name is Wendy McDonald. She looked even more beautiful than I remembered. I suggested that we have a cup of tea in the student café and she agreed.

Everyone stared at her, she doesn't look like a student. I felt excited and proud to be with her. She told me she confuses all the heavies on campus because the way she dresses doesn't square off with her radical politics. She loves teasing the hairy leg brigade and what the fuck has physical appearance got to do with her head and where it's at anyway?

She told me she's a dyke and I almost told her that I already knew because of what Clemency saw, but I kept

silent. I'm not sure if it's a good idea to get too friendly with my students in case I have to give them low grades. Assessment is going to be my biggest hassle because I have no idea what the standards are like.

Wendy told me that she and Lydia are close friends and knock around together but that her lover lives in Auckland, worse luck.

She told me that Lydia had hoped for another lesbian teacher in the Department because she felt so isolated, but now she had met me, she felt that everything would work out okay.

I feel good after talking to Wendy, especially the news that Lydia approves of me. She gave me some useful information about the politics of the Department too. The radical students tolerate Jeanine because she is totally up-front and honest, what you see is what you get. Dr Berry is another matter. She presents the facts of women's lives in an apolitical fashion that comes across as a joke to all but the most conservative of students. Lydia finds it difficult to cope with her because she sees feminism as revolution, pure and simple.

Wendy asked me where I stood. I waffled a bit but said eventually that I am somewhere in between these two positions. I feel that this is a truthful answer.

Wendy said that's fine, all they wanted was someone who was clear about their politics, that had been the problem with Shona, they never knew where they were with her. She made radical noises with her dyke friends and backed down time and again when she was challenged by the straights.

I loved being with her, she made me feel good, I think she really likes me. I didn't want her to go, and kept buying her cups of tea. She said I shouldn't pay for her because she's from a filthy rich bourgeois family. She loves being the daughter of a capitalist, every time she gives money from her allowance to Rape Crisis or Straight Dykes she can picture her father's face going purple with rage.

Wait until I tell Clemency tomorrow, she'll be staggered.

Saturday, 1 June

Clemency has been and gone. She wouldn't stay longer than two days because of Gerald. Leaving her marriage wasn't her big decision, far from it. She said she had thought a lot about my suggestion that Gerald could be the cause of her infertility and after her appointment with her specialist last week, she's pretty sure I'm right. The specialist told her that he can't find any reason why she's unable to fall pregnant and she's decided to put it to the test. Not with Gerald, he won't talk about it with her anymore, says she's getting obsessed. I think he's right for once. She told me she doesn't want to keep living if she doesn't have a baby. I feel so afraid for her.

She swore me to secrecy about her plans. I can't believe that she's going to go ahead with it. She's always been so against women being unfaithful to their husbands. She says it isn't wrong, it's not really adultery, all she wants is some sperm to do the deed with. I questioned her ethics over the deception of Gerald and the morality of sleeping with someone to have a child without their consent. She wouldn't listen to me, she is quite determined to go ahead. She told me she wants one other person to know in case anything happens to her. She thought I would support her because I'm a feminist. I said what the hell did that have to do with it, but she refused to discuss it any further.

I tried to, but she laughed and teased me about being nosey and kept changing the subject. The strange thing is that she is more relaxed and happy than I have seen her since she married Gerald. She even let me drop a few negative comments into the conversation about Our Hero without snapping my head off. Maybe it's because she's decided to take action behind Gerald's back to achieve her desire to have a child. She is beginning to take control of her own life, but where will it end? Gerald will kill her if he ever gets wind of her scheme.

We drove up to Te Kauwhata because she wanted to visit her father at the nursing home and I wanted to see Mum. She

was pleased to see us and turned on a beautiful lunch. Her yeast buns had Clemency in raptures. The taste of the cinnamon and the melting butter on the hot raisins took me back to my childhood days and the wonderful stories that Isobel told me by the fragrant fires of gum and cedar that burned in the front room.

Mum won't allow fires these days, she worries about the soot.

She seemed very jumpy. When I asked her if everything was okay she said she won't relax until after the duck shooting season is over. She fears the season will be extended, there are so many ducks around this year. She doesn't know how she can handle it, the smelly bodies swinging from the hooks in the tool shed, the cauldron full of boiling feathers, the black swamp water in Denby's clothes. She couldn't sleep last night and had a terrible dream about Denby lying dead in the raupo.

I reminded her that she felt like this every year but nothing ever happened. Dad was very cautious with guns and never took any risks. She wasn't convinced.

I didn't like leaving her in this state but Clemency wanted to visit the junk shop to look for antique teapots. Mum told us that she didn't need us to stay and keep her company because Vera was going to pop in and besides, she had to get going in the kitchen. Denby would be home from bowls soon and would need his afternoon tea.

We left, and Clemency had a wonderful time rummaging through the junk shop. She bought three old teapots and a silver tray. We drove out of town towards the craft centre and saw Miss Clarke and Miss Bateson driving towards us, but although we waved at them they did not appear to recognize us. Clemency said she would never cut them dead or be rude to them but she didn't agree with their life-style and that was that. I said who was she to talk about morality? Look at what she was planning to do to Gerald. She answered that it was natural for her to want children, she was only following nature, which is more than women like that do.

She sounded so certain, so confident of herself, I didn't have the heart to argue with her. I should have challenged her there and then on her ridiculous ideas about nature but I couldn't. In spite of everything, I can't help admiring her wickedness in her plan to deceive Gerald. It's true that morality is tempered by desire but Clemency is about to go over the top. She's going to do something I would never have the courage to do.

I told her about meeting Wendy and she looked surprised and embarrassed. I tried to tell her how interesting Wendy is but she cut me short and said that I didn't have to do the justification bit with her. Then she asked if I had a thing about lesbians. I felt so pissed off with her I nearly said of course I'm interested, I have to be because of my sister, but I remembered my promise to Isobel and stopped just in time.

There was a coolness between us after that. She kept giving Bob meaningful looks at dinner and made a point of clearing the table and sweeping the kitchen floor in front of him. I felt uneasy that night and I still do. There has been a shift in our relationship. We parted as friends but there is a wall between us that wasn't there before. I felt she was giving Bob a message about how a real woman should act. He didn't pick it up and is his usual oblivious self. I would never tell him of my fears, I would get the inevitable lecture on reading too much into behaviour and inventing problems that aren't really there.

I still love Clemency but I feel that we are moving apart. She used to listen to me and take everything I said seriously. Now I feel that I am losing my influence over her.

Clemency has a right to feel as she does and to act the way that she wants. Why do I feel so disturbed? She is a stronger person because she is beginning to take control of her life but in a strange way I sense that she is oppressing me by her actions. It is ridiculous to feel that she is hurting me when I have achieved so much, whereas all she is doing is condemning herself to further life imprisonment with Gerald.

I wish Isobel were here with me tonight. I remember one of her stories; the night witch had a fear of a certain word, it was the only thing in the whole world that could take her magic away. Her sister unknowingly spoke this word aloud so the night witch entered her body when she was asleep and ate a tiny piece of her brain.

I remember this story tonight because I feel that Clemency has taken something away from my head, there's a bit of me missing, I am forgetting some of my words.

Monday, 3 June, 11.30 p.m.

I must pull myself together. I have to give my first lecture tomorrow. I feel very scared. Lydia will be there, she is going to introduce me to the students and then stay to listen to the lecture. The topic is 'Changes in Work and Identity During World War Two'. I hope she won't be too critical.

It's ironic that my first lecture is about identity, when my own persona flaps around several poles like sheets in the wind. In the last few years I have focused myself on the children, the garden, domesticity. I must reaffirm the feminist core of myself.

Lydia and Wendy came to see me after dinner. They didn't stay long, they came to wish me luck for tomorrow. They had spent the long weekend in Auckland.

Lydia told me they got stoned and walked along the boardwalk at Milford. She says it's a joke, like going to the seaside in England, but I like the boardwalk. People promenade self-consciously in shoes and stockings and take the air without getting their feet dirty but they are still at the beach.

The truth is that I love the sea in all its forms. I don't give a damn if it's the wild west coast or a walled place of watered lawns and picnic tables. Wherever I smell salt and feel sand blow against my skin, I have come home.

Bob was tactful when the women came, he said hello and then went into the lounge to watch tele. Wendy offered me a joint but I told her the house is dope-free because of the kids. She said that's cool. I was dying for a cigarette but didn't want to light up in front of them because Jeanine told me that Lydia is very anti-nicotine and goes off her head at any one smoking near her.

Lydia and Isobel are very alike. Sometimes when Lydia speaks I get a strange feeling that my sister is in the room with us. It comforts me.

Darling Isobel, I wish you were here with me tonight. I remember those wretched nights before school exams when I broke out in a nervous rash and you would tell me over and over that I could do it. I am suffering from the same lack of confidence tonight, my familiar failure of nerve.

I'm writing this in the bedroom where Bob has built me a small shelf under the window. The garden is bright with moonlight, the air is frosty and still. It is so quiet tonight, even the dogs are silent. I would welcome a noise, a sign of human habitation, a sense of other lives being lived. I need a distraction from my terror.

Bob says I should get things in proportion, the students will be just as nervous of me as I am of them. He's right, I must try to take a more objective view of my situation.

I hope I sleep well tonight and dream of the sea.



4

Sally is whirling through her house on a cloud of yellow dusters, disinfectant, camphor, and Boronia Air Freshener. She is happiest in the mornings during her daily routine; her check and countercheck that all is as it should be in her perfect house. She dances in front of her long mirror, an amazing figure in her housework fancy dress. Wet and dry dusters hang from her belt, a paper bag is tied on to the front pocket of her smock. She hums along with familiar music on her transistor, she pulls an old wooden tea trolley loaded with the nostrums and potions of her trade. She sprays and rubs, sings and dances, picks up a match from the floor, places it in the brown paper bag, adjusts one pink fringed blind to the exact level of the other and rattles her trolley to the next point of attack.

She consults the check-list in her mind; her temporal and spatial maps provide the exact placement of everything in the house and the due date for checking and cleaning each item. Today is glass day, one of her favourites. She loves unpacking her good things from the china-cabinet and handling each object. The tall thin glasses painted with elegant white swans, the crystal punch bowl, the bone china tea-set, the silver cake

stand, the pink glass heron, the christening mugs belonging to the girls, the silver horseshoe from her wedding cake. She caresses each piece, she hums and sings to herself as she empties the cabinet. Carefully, she takes the glass shelves from the cabinet and cleans them with Windolene. She strokes the tiny leaded window panes with a paint brush dipped in methylated spirits. The sun shines into the room and catches the cabinet doors with light. The sparkle on the clean glass makes her feel peaceful and safe.

On the cabinet top are family photos, some in silver frames. She cleans the glass but not the frames, it's silver day tomorrow. Her younger self dressed in a white wedding dress stares out of a photo. She holds an enormous sheaf of yellow lilies and wears a floor-length veil of ivory lace covered with embroidered roses. Her day of innocence and flowers; escape from her complaining mother, the hard work on the farm, the endless teasing from her brothers, the smell of sour cream in the dairy, the killing and the blood.

Sally rubs the glass on the photo vigorously. She likes to think about the farm and everything she did as a child. She hated it so much; it makes her feel powerful and strong to have survived and be living in a proper house in a real town. Her friend Vera understands. They often talk to each other about their childhoods. Vera too had come to Te Kauwhata from a poor farming family. They had lived near Te Akau on marginal land. Vera describes her childhood as all mud and mutton and says at least Sally was reared on a dairy farm, everyone knows cows are easier than sheep. The way she tells it, the life of her family was an endless war fought against the gorse, the rain, the government and the incredible stupidity of sheep. At least she had a good mother. Vera still mourns her, says she was a wonderful woman, had a hard life but never complained, was gentle and good in spite of having all those kids and a drunken husband.

Sally had it the other way around. Her father was her friend and protector but her mother favoured her brothers over her

and made Sally wait on them hand and foot. She had to serve them at the table, make their beds and wash their clothes. She still burns with resentment at the memory of the hated piss bucket and how she had to lift it up with her thin arms, heavy after a night spent on the home brew, the rank smell of it melting dark holes in the frosty grass. She and her mother had to use the toilet outside because Stanley said sheilas didn't have the right tool and had to use paper. Her brothers were all older than her, she was an afterthought. Her mother fell pregnant with her during the change so Sally thought of herself as a changeling, a cinderella. Stanley said don't hold your breath kid, there ain't too many princes around these parts and even if one did turn up they ain't made the glass slipper yet that would fit your big hoof. She still hated her feet, they were broad and flat, a consequence of going barefooted for the first twelve years of her life.

Stanley was the oldest of her three brothers and the worst torment of her childhood. He teased her, he ordered her around. Her mother never intervened, she would shrug her shoulders and say boys are like that, you have to get used to it. Stanley was careful not to harass her in front of Father after one incident when he tripped her up and sent her flying across the linoleum and she burnt her arm against the hot coal range. Father knocked Stanley across the room with one blow, he was a huge man, she had never seen him hit anyone before. Stanley was so shocked he actually cried in front of them, blubbered like a baby. Father said if you ever touch your sister again you will be sent away to Auntie Edna's in town, you will not be my son anymore, you must never hurt women, not for any reason.

Sally loved him so much, she couldn't believe it when Stanley and Will came yelling and screaming up the dripping valley on the afternoon of her fourteenth birthday saying that Father had rolled the tractor, they couldn't move it off him, he wasn't breathing. Sally remembers pulling the table cloth from the table and the party food falling to the floor. Down it

went, the cream sponge cakes, the chocolate lamingtons, the bowls of trifle and lime green jelly. Two golden queen peaches flecked with dust and cream stared up at her like malevolent yellow eyes. She jumped on them, smashed them into bits. Stanley had to grab her arms and twist them up her back to stop her. She pulled away and ran out through the back verandah into a wall of water from the broken gutter. She could hear Father's dog Batty yelping over the sound of the rain. She went down into the sodden green valley following the noise of the dog. The tractor was upside down, it looked like an insect with a broken back. She could see his checked woollen shirt poking out from under the seat. It was so still, there was no wind, just the rain falling straight down and Batty pulling at Father's red shirt, whining and crying.

Her rage sustained her through the funeral, when people came in black clothes and gray felt hats, bringing scones wrapped in tea towels, sides of mutton, sacks of potatoes, flowers and condolences. You must look after your poor mother they said, help her all you can now she is alone. A shocking thing to happen when times are so hard. They turned away from her with uncomfortable eyes when she screamed it's not fair, it's not fair! Everyone said she took it the hardest in the family but they didn't understand that it was anger as well as grief that made her scream. How could he have done this to her? She was alone now, at the mercy of her mother and the boys.

Things settled down after a time. Sally learned the arts of lying and avoidance. She became skilled at judging just how far she could go with Stanley and her mother. She worked hard, gave them little reason for complaint. They took her out of school to work full-time in the kitchen and the house. Her mother had to help with the milking and worked outdoors most of the day so Sally had the house to herself except at meal times. She had to get out of bed at four in the morning to stoke up the range and boil the big black kettle for tea and hot water washes. She would cut the hard white

bread into thick slices for toast and soak the coarse oatmeal for the porridge. In they would come, Mother looking frumpy in her milking clothes, the boys half asleep and moody, swearing about the effing dogs, the effing mud, the effing price of butter fat. Father would never let them swear in front of her. Now that he was gone, they did what they liked. They said she had it cushy in the nice warm house while they were outside in all effing weathers earning her keep. Her mother laughed with them. Sally sometimes wondered if she was afraid of Stanley too.

After early morning tea and toast, Stanley, Mother and Will would go to the cowshed to milk the cows. Perce, the youngest of the three boys, was responsible for the pigs, the chooks and the vegetable garden. Sally had to help him but she didn't mind being alone with Perce. Away from the other two he was a silent and unthreatening companion. Sally cooked the scraps from the night before and mixed them with mash and hot water for the hens. She had to make the beds and pick the dirty clothes up from the floor in the boys' sleep-out. She tidied the kitchen and lounge and kept the range going for the big cooked breakfast at eight o'clock. They would eat bowls of porridge doused in thick cream and golden syrup followed by bacon, sausages and eggs, toast and marmalade and huge mugs of sugared tea. After breakfast, the boys would sit around the kitchen table, rolling up their smokes and discussing the jobs for the day ahead. They would tease her about her cooking but they never left much on their plates. They were enormous eaters, their greed sickened her. Mother said it was a good thing they had a farm, they would all starve to death if they lived in town and had to pay for everything they ate.

Stanley made her tie the feet of cockerels to be slaughtered and hold their heads down on the chopping block. The blow of the axe would ring right through her body. It was her job to gut them and prepare them for cooking. She would light the fire under the copper in the wash-house and boil the water

for plucking. She hated the smell of the hot feathers and the way that the skin puckered up when she pulled them out. The pitted naked skin repelled her. She boiled them, roasted them, made soup from the bones and the necks, but she never ate them.

It was the same with the eels the boys caught from the creek. She dreaded seeing them hook the long gray bodies up on the back verandah. She had to cut the skin around the neck and place cheese cloth around the body. One hard pull and the skin came off like a hand out of a glove. It disgusted her.

The oily fishy smell of the kitchen when she fried eel fillets rolled in breadcrumbs made her feel ill. Stanley would tease her, push pieces under her nose, say sniff it, sniff it, what does it remind you of, ha ha, if you don't know, put your head between your legs. Will would say you should eat up girl, people are starving.

The worst thing Stanley ever did to her was to kill Batty close to the house where she could hear the dog crying and the explosion of the shot gun. He said Batty was pining for Father and was no use on the farm anymore. She told Stanley that he should put a bullet into her, she was pining too. He laughed and said at least she still obeyed. Sally wept for hours. Her father had spoilt Batty, loved her too hard and now the dog had died for it. She wondered if she would ever have to die for love.

When she was a little girl she and Perce would take it in turns to put their freezing bare feet into the hot bucket of mash on the way to the hen-house in winter. Perce was the only one of her brothers who had ever been kind to her but even he changed after Father died. He was nice to her when they were alone but teased her as much as Stanley and Will did when they were all together.

Sally stares at her eighteen-year-old face in the wedding photo. Even though forty-seven years have passed since her Big Day, she remembers everything. The horseshoe from her

wedding cake is in the cabinet, the orange blossom headband that held her veil in place is in the top left-hand drawer of her dressing-table. Her wedding dress was made into two beautiful white satin blouses by Perce's wife Doris. There is a square of the material stored away in her sandalwood chest. The white satin shoes had been dyed red; Sally had danced them to pieces in the years before Isobel was born.

She still feels proud of herself for being strong enough to stand up to Stanley and Will over the matter of Denby. Stanley hated Denby, said he was a sissy, couldn't do a decent day's work or hold his beer. Sally met him at a local dance when they were both seventeen. He had been sent to Glen Massey from Auckland to work on his uncle's farm. His own father was unemployed and was sweating it out in a work camp near Taupo. All the local girls had hovered around Denby. The local boys sneered at him and called him citified.

There was something different about him. He had a certain glamour that the local farm boys could not match. Sally couldn't believe it when he asked her for the supper waltz. They ate cheerios on toothpicks dipped into tomato sauce and sipped glasses of fruit punch. He asked which plate she had brought and ate two pieces of her shortbread. She was surprised when he told her he hated farm life and she said me too, me too. She loved dancing with him, his hands were dry and firm, he was careful not to push his erection into her the way the other boys always did. He danced every dance with her after the supper dance, everyone was gossiping about it.

Stanley tried to get him to come outside to drink home brew under the macrocarpas but he said he'd had an unfortunate encounter with his uncle's latest efforts and he'd decided to stick to pub beer in future, thanks all the same. Stanley was furious. He was very proud of his home brew.

Denby gave her a kiss while she waited for Stanley to bring the truck around from the back of the hall. They drove off, and he called out see you at the dance next week and she smiled and waved back at him in spite of Will digging his

elbow into her side. He told her to watch out for those leering city boys, they were only after one thing. Stanley said bluntly that if any one as much as touched his little sister, let alone effed her, he would give him a hiding. For once, their crudity did not hurt her. She had a feeling of hope and confidence that was new to her.

She married Denby a year later. She left the farm and her brothers, in spite of her mother's threats and Stanley calling her a traitor. Her mother had refused at first to sign the document giving her consent, but Sally told her she would run away with Denby married or not. It was the first and last time that Sally ever defied her mother. Stanley said in the end, let her go, who needs the little slut, everyone knows he's already been into her, better make it legal before she drops a bundle and disgraces all of us. Her mother looked very angry and pulled her roughly into the hall and interrogated her. Sally crossed her fingers behind her back and told a lie, said it was true. Her mother smacked her face and screamed what have you done to me? Sally held herself together, she had to get away from this place and Denby was her only chance. She told her mother she was not pregnant yet, but it was only a matter of time before her luck changed.

It worked, her mother signed.

The pressure went off in the next few weeks, the harassment and teasing stopped. It was as if they recognized the importance of the transition she had made into the mysterious world of sex. She knew the body of a man, therefore she knew all their other secrets. Her mother tried to question her but Sally smiled enigmatically and said those things are personal, you shouldn't ask. She never told Denby how she had forced her mother's hand.

Her brothers behaved themselves well at her wedding. Stanley didn't get drunk. He was courting Doreen Fraser and she was there with the rest of her family. They owned a prosperous dairy farm in the district. It was at her wedding that Will and Perce became interested in Doreen's sisters,

Maureen and Doris. Everyone said it was a good thing, they weren't getting any younger, it was about time the Fraser girls settled down.

Within a year, Sally's three brothers were married in a triple wedding that is still famous in the district. The Fraser sisters took over the women's work on the farm. Her mother retired to her chair in front of the coal range and knitted and dozed away the rest of her life. Sally's three brothers, old men now, still live at the farm. They are cared for by Will's wife Maureen, the only survivor of the three sisters.

Sally smiles to herself as she polishes the mirror on the china-cabinet. She sees herself as a refugee from the life that killed two of her sisters-in-law and made a sad old slave of the other. She thinks of the houses on the farm where her brothers live. The old one where she was born is still there, empty and derelict. The water tank leans drunkenly on one side, the washhouse has collapsed into a pile of rotting timbers on the other. The old house is slowly disappearing piece by piece into the fireplace and coal range of the big new house that was built beside it ten years after her brothers were married.

She does not mourn the old house. It is ugly and broken and in certain lights and weathers presents a disturbing face. On the rare occasions that she visits her brothers, she cannot pass the bay window beside the front verandah without glancing in nervously at the shadows that flicker in and out of vision behind the glass.

She is glad the wash-house has gone. Memories of pulling steaming sheets up high with the copper stick, the stiff rollers on the wringer, the hiss of the boiling linen hitting the cold water in the tub, the intense colour of Reckitts Blue in the final rinse. And always piles of dirty washing, it never ended. The gray work socks stinking of sweat and silage, her mother's brown lisle stockings, the butter muslin and sour cheese cloths from the dairy, the greasy tea towels and the blackened oven cloths. She remembers the struggle to cut pieces of yellow soap

from the bar of rock hard Taniwha, the sores on her hands from washing soda, the taste of the starch lumps that she chewed to keep herself going.

And the bodies. The rabbits and ducks and pigs that her brothers shot and hung from hooks at the other end of the wash-house. The dead eyes watched her as she worked, turning the handle of the wringer, rubbing filthy dungarees up and down the wooden washboard, breaking bits of kindling across her knee to feed the fire under the copper. The gamey smell of the rabbits and the bloody necks of the poultry are linked forever in her mind with the smell of boiling soap and hard labour in the wash-house.

She thinks of her own immaculate laundry, her automatic washing machine, her white net curtains, her Softly and her Drive. She never allows Denby to hang the dead wild ducks in her laundry, he has to put them in the tool shed. He says it's stupid, there's no water in there, but she never gives in.

She sprays the windows of the lounge with a new spray that is supposed to stop condensation. She frowns at the streaks that a shaft of sun reveals. This stuff isn't as good as Bon Ami but she hasn't seen that in the shops for years. It maddens her when an old tried and true brand disappears from the shelves and an inferior new product takes its place. Nobody ever consults her, Sally the expert.

A voice calls her from the kitchen. Vera Sutton. Sally glances at her watch, it's ten-thirty, time for a tea break.

Vera is buttering currant buns and putting them on the willow-pattern cake plate. 'I knocked but you didn't hear so I let myself in. I've brought you something for morning tea.'

Sally unties the scarf from her head and takes off her cleaning smock.

'Sorry I interrupted your work, I thought you'd be having a day off for the public holiday.'

'Don't worry about it. Those buns look delicious. I'll put the kettle on, we'll have a nice cuppa.'

'Where's your old man?'

‘Down at the lake, mucking around the maimai.’

‘Has he shot many this year?’

‘Yeah, it’s a bumper season, they’re extending it two more weeks.’

‘Poor Sally, I know how you hate it.’

‘I’ll survive.’

She eats a bun. Vera talks about the continual conflict between her children Brenda and Donny. ‘If only they didn’t try to get at each other through me, I’m so tired of it. That’s one thing you’re lucky with Sal, your girls don’t hate each other.’

Budgie Boy rattles his bell and taps his beak against the bars of the cage, the transistor plays soft background music. Sally likes the comforting domestic sounds of her kitchen. She starts thinking about her next job. The hall cupboard needs to be tidied, the spare blankets are due for an airing today.

‘Has Denby had any more trouble with the Spencer boys?’

‘What?’

Vera laughs, ‘I knew you weren’t listening to me, you were miles away.’

‘Sorry love.’

‘I asked if those hoons had bothered Denby again.’

‘How did you know about it?’

‘Donny told me, the blokes were talking about it in the pub.’

‘What did he tell you?’

‘He said they tried to claim Denby’s maimai. What a cheek, he’s had that same posi for years.’

‘They were sitting inside it when he went to fix the roof, they said they were going to register the maimai the next day, but Denby got up early and beat them to it.’

‘I bet he was wild.’

Sally pours herself another cup of tea. The lid of the teapot falls on to the floor and smashes into pieces. She nearly jumps out of her skin. ‘Oh how stupid of me, it’s broken, it’s broken!’

Vera helps her to sweep up the pieces with the dustpan and brush. Sally tries to fit the broken china together but it's hopeless.

'Damn and blast it,' she groans. 'Excuse my french, but it was my favourite teapot.'

'Calm down Sal, it's not the end of the world.'

'Talk about dropsy, that's the second thing I've broken this week.'

'Don't let it get to you love.'

Sally feels glad that Vera is with her. She tells her about the bad dream she had last night. Denby dead and hung up on a meat hook in the tool shed, naked except for his work boots.

Vera says it doesn't mean anything, just a nightmare. She often dreams of something awful happening to her kids, it's nature's way of making you rehearse things so that if anything happens you're ready for it. Sally says she would never be ready for seeing Denby like that, not ever. Vera says you don't have to because it's not going to happen, it's just a dream Sal, just a dream. Forget it, have another bun, you don't eat enough. She pats her hand, tells her a funny story from her childhood, makes her laugh.

They finish their morning tea and wash up the dishes. Sally polishes the stainless steel sink with her special cloth. Vera teases her about her clean habits and says she wishes she was tidy but when you live alone things change. Sally thinks it would be easier, there wouldn't be someone else to mess things up. Vera says it doesn't seem to work like that, you can't be bothered to do things just for yourself. It's different when you live without a husband to care for.

Sally insists that she does it for herself. Denby never notices what she has done, she has given up telling him how hard she works. It's because she had a dirty mother, they say that whatever your mother was, you turn out the opposite, the swing of the pendulum they call it. She tells Vera how she would lie in bed at night when she was a young girl, mentally cleaning and reorganizing the whole house. When she went to

Auckland on the train with her mother, she would look out of the window and re-arrange fallen fences, weed untidy gardens, pick up firewood, paint roofs. It made her feel powerful to imagine she could do it just by thinking about it. She hates travelling by train now, nothing but scruffy backyards and rubbish tips, it's cleaner to go by road.

Vera says you talk a lot about when you were a kid at Glen Massey, it can't have been all bad otherwise you would want to forget it. It's human nature to remember the good times and forget the bad, that's why elderly people harp about the old days all the time.

'Ha, the good old days, people have short memories. You're always telling me what a terrible time your mother had.'

That's because she married a drunken swine. If she'd had a decent husband like your mother, her life would have been completely different.'

'But my mother was hopeless.'

'She would have been even more hopeless if she'd been beaten up like my mum.'

'I would never let a man hit me, that would be the end.'

'Murray never laid a hand on me, even when I gave him a hard time.'

'Do you still miss him Vera?'

'Not any more, he's been dead a long time.'

'He was a good man. You and I were lucky, we both married good men.'

Vera says that's for sure, when you look around and see the pigs some girls are married to. Thank goodness Brenda and Julia have both married decent blokes.

Sally agrees.

Vera asks if Isobel is thinking of getting married, how old is she now? Thirty-five? She'd better get a move on or she'll miss the boat.

'It's not too late for her,' answers Sally. 'I didn't have Julia until I was thirty-five. Girls are having babies later these days,

they want to travel and have careers first and good luck to them.'

Vera asks if Bob and Julia have settled in to their new house yet.

Sally tells her that Bob is putting in the garden and looking after the kids when Julia is busy. Things are working out fine so far and they seem very happy.

'It's all a novelty for him at the moment but he'll get sick of it soon and start looking for a real job. I was reading about house-husbands in the *Woman's Weekly* and none of them stick to it for long. It's no life for a man, they get bored silly with it.'

They go outside into the garden and Sally cuts some iceland poppies for Vera to take home. She holds her face up the sun, it is a warm day for June. There is hardly a breath of wind, the orange and yellow poppies stand motionless on their thin hairy stems. Vera praises her garden. She can't get over how beautiful it is, not a weed in sight.

Sally likes to look at her house from outside. It is an oasis of calmness in the sunlight; clean pale bricks with lemon window sills and shutters. A weeping elm holds its intricate branches around a wire training frame. Her roses and shrubs are dutifully tied, staked and pruned. Everything is up to date and ordered.

A corrugated iron fence, painted green, stands between the house and the property next door. On the other side of that fence is Sally's shame; a terrible place of junk adrift in a sea of paspalum, dandelions and thistles. The long grass conceals a mess of bottles, tins and wooden beer crates. An old car body lies upside down like a beached turtle. The house is empty and abandoned. Sally dreads a hard frost that will kill the grass and reveal the full horror of the place. She complained to the council but they said the property is part of a deceased estate and they were powerless to act. An old woman lived there for many years. Sally used to help her with her housework

and cooking but one morning found her dead in her armchair, a last cup of tea still clutched in her hand.

‘That property is getting worse,’ says Vera. ‘It’s a shame, Mrs Pritchard used to have it real nice.’

‘It’s scary how quick things fall to pieces.’

‘Why don’t her sons sell or rent it?’

Sally says the old lady didn’t leave a will and the sons are arguing over ownership of the property. The problem is that people dump rubbish there at night, she tries to get their number plates but it is too dark to see.

‘Thanks for the poppies. I should be going now, I don’t want to hold you up.’

‘Why don’t you stay and have something to eat? I’d like a bit of company.’

Denby’s van comes down the road. The tyres throw up gravel as he drives up the driveway and through the open garage door.

‘That’s funny,’ says Sally. ‘He told me he wanted to work on his maimai after the morning shoot so I gave him some sandwiches for lunch. I wonder why he’s back so soon?’

‘I’d better go.’

‘Are you sure? You’re welcome to stay.’

Vera says she should look in on Brenda, Dwayne has a terrible head cold, she might come back tomorrow. Sally farewells her and goes into the garage.

Denby is taking his gear from the van. There are two mallard ducks hanging up in the back. He looks tired and angry.

‘Those bloody hoons, I caught them shooting from a camouflaged boat this morning, they took no notice of me when I ticked them off.’

Sally asks nervously if it was the Spencer boys again.

Denby says who else? They couldn’t claim his maimai, were too bloody lazy to build one themselves so they resort to breaking the law. They threatened him with a shot gun, told him to piss off or else.

‘Ring the police!’

‘No way, it’ll only make things worse.’

Sally pleads with him but he won’t listen. He gloats over his morning kill, they are nice and plump, much better than the skinny one he got yesterday with lead in her gizzard. He says that mallards are getting crafty and harder to shoot, there are too many hunters around. In a few years there won’t be many ducks left. He misses the greys that used to flock to the lake in great numbers but are now few and far between.

Sally goes inside to make him a cup of tea and to get away from the talk of ducks. She hurriedly removes the cleaning gear and the tea trolley from the kitchen. Denby comes in and changes into his bowling clothes. He asks for a hot lunch to get his strength up for the game.

‘Are you going to be there all afternoon?’

‘Probably, it depends. Why do you ask?’

‘Nothing.’

He goes into the lounge to read the paper while she grates cheese and peels potatoes for his favourite lunch dish. When the top of the casserole is nicely browned, she calls him in to the dining room to eat. He looks pleased at her efforts and gobbles it up without speaking. She breaks the silence by asking after his shooting mate Joseph. Denby says he wasn’t down there today, his wife made him stay at home for a family dinner but he got a banded spoonie yesterday, half his luck. He hopes he’ll be on deck tomorrow, it’s good to have company, especially with the rough element down at the lake these days.

They drink tea in the lounge. Sally thinks ahead to her chores for the afternoon. Her spirits lift as she rehearses lifting the sweet-smelling aired blankets off the line and checking the neat piles of folded linen in the hall cupboard.

Denby asks her to hang the ducks in the tool shed, he forgot to do it before he changed and he doesn’t want to drip blood on his whites.

She lifts the two ducks from the van and places them carefully on the grass outside the garage. Her husband pecks at her cheek with dry chapped lips, and reverses out of the driveway. She waits until the van has chugged off down the street before she goes back inside to put on a plastic apron and a special pair of rubber gloves.

She holds the bodies at arm's length and carries them gingerly to the tool shed. The concrete floor underneath the hooks is the colour of old dark beetroot. She closes the door quickly behind her and goes to the laundry where she washes the gloves and the plastic apron in Savlon.

She puts on her cleaning smock and scarf, turns on her transistor and pulls her trolley from the store room. She goes into the bathroom to check the handbasin for traces of Denby. Sure enough, he has left dark smears on the soap and the hand towel is wet and crumpled on the floor. At least he has put his dirty overalls in the washing basket. She pulls them out to see if they need to be soaked in Bioluivil. There is a faint smell of warm dead feathers and swamp water. She squirts air freshener around the room and scrubs the cake of soap with disinfectant.

Budgie Boy trills at her from the kitchen. She remembers that Monday is cage day. 'Hang on love,' she cries. 'I'm coming.' She cleans out the bottom of the cage, replaces his water dish and hangs him by the window. The sun shines on his blue and green feathers, he tilts his head and chirps with joy. She whirls through the rest of the afternoon, singing along with the radio and Budgie Boy. The hall cupboard is tidied, the dinner started, glass shimmers and shines, blankets are aired, her tasks are all achieved.

The rituals of cleanliness have worked and she is able to bind herself fiercely to the illusion of order once again.



5

Tuesday night, 4 June

I've survived my first day of teaching. It wasn't so bad. People seem pretty casual down here, it isn't as formal as Auckland. My lecture went quite well. The students laughed out loud at some of the posters that I'd brought in to illustrate the propaganda about women during World War Two.

There were some stropky students in the class. Three older women in the front row were particularly noisy. One of them gave the fingers to a male student who said it wasn't sexist to give the women's jobs to men at the end of the war, it was economic necessity. Another woman yelled out, 'Necessity for whom? Whenever something is done for economic reasons, women get kicked in the arse.'

I started to feel a bit nervous at this point, I thought the students were getting too worked up. I said something about the need to look at things dispassionately and make reasoned judgements about our collective past so that we can make real choices in our present lives. Someone called out what's wrong with passion? I didn't answer but ploughed on ahead through my notes. I felt a bit intimidated by the three women in the front row. They seemed to hang on every word I said. I tried not to look at them through the rest of the lecture.

Lydia told me about them afterwards. They had been

friends for years and had recently collectively dumped their husbands. She and Vivian had gone to their hilarious coming-out party where they had dressed as debutantes in white dresses, long gloves, corsages, the whole bit.

Lydia makes me laugh. She is a wonderful person, I am beginning to appreciate her tolerance and sense of humour. That coming-out party! Lydia said it was one of the funniest nights of her life. I felt proud that Lydia trusted me enough to tell me about it.

It is so refreshing to be able to laugh with a lesbian about the doings of other lesbians. Such a contrast with my experiences as a student. I'd always felt a misfit, one of the 'others', not a real feminist. I talked about it once, in a tutorial, and one of the lesbians said tough, now you know what it's like to be an outsider. I was devastated. It seems to me that there is more integration down here. Lydia said that feminists of any sort are a bit thin on the ground in this town, we need each other, and besides, there's more than one way to fight the revolution.

It frightened me when she said that, it brought up my anxiety about the problem of assessment. I have never marked an essay in my life. How do I know what is good work and what isn't? What are the criteria of excellence? I know that the student should look at different theoretical explanations and show evidence of wide reading in the topic under discussion. But what will I do if a student puts her own opinions all over the place without backing anything up? I must work this out for myself before I mark my first piece of work otherwise I'll make a fool of myself.

Lydia said that most of the students wanted to do well in the course without having their cosy little worlds disturbed, but it was our duty as feminists to do just that.

I asked her about the morality of this, upsetting people I mean. She said what the hell do you mean morality? Whose morality are you talking about? I glossed over it, changed the subject, she sounded really annoyed with me.

I must be careful not to reveal my weaknesses to Lydia. Isobel says I should learn to forgive myself my obsessions, they are only a problem when they stop me from doing what is right. But what is right? Is it the same as the truth? I find the idea of truth so difficult. Sometimes it changes its colours like a chameleon. It's like the dreams I have where words change into water and milk, wood and stone, iron and jet. They become hard then fluid then solid again, never quite sure of themselves or what they are meant to be. I know that words change their meaning depending on who speaks. For example, Clemency's words are different from my words, but are her words false? There must be a way of judging the truth of words away from the speaker, they must have some validity of their own.

Bob says that I need more certainty in my life. He thinks I lean too much on subjective explanations and that my emotionalism stops me from finding the truth that I seek. He believes that subjectivity plays an important role in the alienation of bourgeois life. The cult of the individual takes the heat off the system and in common with many other women, I see fault within myself; the failed worker, the failed poet, the failed feminist.

It is true that I am attracted to certainty, all the people that I love have found it. Bob and Isobel are two of a kind, that's why they get on so well together. It's the same with Lydia, I feel so drawn towards her. I cannot rid myself of the feeling that she knows something that I don't.

I have been through too much these past few weeks, I feel so vulnerable and afraid. I walk the rope, I am somewhere between two poles, I don't know where to turn. The night witch calls me, her voice is seductive, it has the sweetness of perfect pitch. I strain to hear the voice of her sister but she is silent. It seems that I must get through this abyss of uncertainty alone.

Wednesday night, 5 June

A deputation from the work course came to see me today. They want me to change the title of the course from 'Gender

and Work in New Zealand' to 'Gender and Work in Aotearoa'. I agreed in principle but told them that I would have to consult with Dr Berry when she returned.

I talked to the others about it in the tea-room.

Jeanine said, 'Oh them again, they wanted it changed last year but we forgot to re-title it in the calendar so we're stuck with it. Anyway, it's only a name. Discrimination lies in deeds not words.'

'You talk simplistic shit at times,' said Lydia. 'If it's okay to call Aotearoa by its honky name why not go the whole hog and say that it's okay to call women sluts?'

She and Lydia argued all through morning tea. I felt a bit lost. I can see that they have different views on the power and ideology of language but I can't take sides because I'm not sure what I believe. What amazes me is that although they don't seem to agree on anything they are obviously good friends.

Maybe it's like me and Clem, the attraction of opposites. I asked them about it. Lydia seemed surprised that I saw them as opposites. She said no way, we're just different versions of the same thing. Jeanine agreed.

So much for my theory.

Thursday night

Bob informed me that he's asked Jim and Paulette down for the weekend. He said that Jim was missing him and that both he and Paulette were keen to see our new house. Jim was writing an article for *The Republican* and he wanted some help from Bob.

I felt angry that Bob didn't consult me first. I need the weekend to get my shit together for next week but I couldn't bring myself to growl at him, he seemed so pleased with himself.

I asked Bob if Jim has said anything about Paulette's drinking and he said he didn't mention her except to say she

was much the same. Poor Paulette. If I work hard Friday night and Saturday morning maybe I'll get ahead enough to be able to spend some time with her.

I told Bob he would have to do most of the cooking when they came, I would be tied up preparing lectures for the next week. He said no problem, you do what you have to.

I gave him a big hug and a kiss. He is so understanding, I can't think how I would survive my job without him.



6

Julia is sitting in her office drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. She has opened the window to let the smoke out. She knows she shouldn't smoke up here but she can't help herself. The two-hour tutorial she has just finished was very difficult. Nobody seemed interested in her ideas and when she spoke, they didn't respond.

In the other tutorial she takes for this course, the students are lively and argumentative. In the class on Wednesday night, her students discussed whether men should be allowed to take feminist courses. All of the women thought they should, except for Susan, who argued passionately that the knowledge and thinking of feminists is being appropriated for the use of men and what the hell is the point of studying the history of this process if we keep on doing it.

She challenged Julia, asked her what she thought.

There was a silence. After a while, Julia said open classes are university policy and that as a junior lecturer without tenure she couldn't do anything to change the rules. She wanted to remain impartial but the students were free to have their own opinions as long as they could argue their case well and could provide evidence to back up their statements.

She drinks the last of her coffee. There is a knock at the door. Lydia has come to ask a favour. Her electric jug is out of order and she's dying for a cup of tea.

'Help yourself, it's just boiled.'

Lydia asks her how the tutorial went. Julia tells her it didn't and Lydia laughs and says not to worry, we all have that problem from time to time. You can't get words out of those who have nothing to say.

'I'm sure they have ideas but they don't trust me enough to say what they think.'

'You shouldn't take all the blame.'

'There's one man in the group and he's the worst. He won't even look at me.'

'You probably threaten the shit out of him.'

'I'm sure you're wrong, I've said nothing to hurt his feelings.'

'You don't have to, your mere presence is enough. Men are taught that women are not intellectuals then suddenly they are confronted with a woman lecturer who has the power to pass or fail, and they can't cope with it.'

'I hate the idea of having power over the students.'

'What the hell did you think the job was?'

Julia feels hurt. Lydia apologizes. She says she can be a dogmatic bitch at times. Viv is always ticking her off for it. Speaking of Vivian, she wants to know if you are free to come to dinner next Wednesday because she knows Isobel, and she would like to meet you too.

Julia is pleased at the invitation and accepts on the spot. She feels flattered that Lydia and her lover want her to visit them at their house. Is this the beginning of acceptance, the entry into the enchanted forest? She thinks about Isobel and all that she owes her. Her sister is her bridge, her entry point into worlds that would remain closed if it were not for the respect that she evokes.

Lydia says, 'I'm arranging a staff meeting for next week so you can meet the second readers for your courses.'

'I've already met Richard Burrows. He's going to second read for my women writers course.'

'Dicky Boy will never argue with your grades, he's a lamb to the slaughter.'

'Why bother then?'

Lydia grins. 'It keeps up the academic standards in a marginal new discipline and helps to achieve a balance between feminist and mainstream thought.'

'That sounds like a quote.'

'It is. Dr Berry wrote it.'

'Did she really say that?'

'Remind me to give you a copy of her paper, 'Voices From the Feminist Ghetto'. It's all in there.'

'Who's the second reader for our course?'

'Peter Patterson. He can be a bloody problem. It's better if you meet him with me the first time, otherwise he'll try to patronize the pants off you, literally. He's been going around saying it's a good thing that you are co-lecturing the course with me.'

'But he doesn't know the first thing about me.'

'Yes he does, he knows you're straight. He told Jeanine it was about time that the students were exposed to the other side of things in my course.'

Julia feels apprehensive about meeting him next week. She asks Lydia what Jeanine thinks of him.

'She gives him hell. Jeanine feels safe because she's got tenure but she underestimates him and should take more care.'

Lydia finishes her tea and leaves the room. Julia gets a sudden flash of insight into her lecture for next week, a feminist analysis of Janet Frame's novel, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. She writes furiously, excited by her idea of the relationship between the denial of female experience and the character in the novel who loses the power of speech. Frame's silent character is a young woman under the power of her mother who fears that, if her daughter speaks, she will tell the truth about the horror of the lives of women. Frame

formulates silence as fearful in its transparency, because it reveals the lack of meaning in everyday life. The mother sees that the true companion and lover of women is silence.

Julia writes and writes. She falls in love with her own language, she is alive with the thrill of conquest. She feels that she is about to uncover the key to a certain mystery that has hovered on the outskirts of her consciousness all her life.

She chain-smokes and works without a break for two hours. Her right hand clutches the pen so hard it takes on the appearance of a claw.

There is a knock on the door. Wendy walks in. She stands in the middle of the room without speaking.

Julia is startled, her body jumps. She feels as if she has been physically pulled from the private act of thinking into an irritating external world.

‘I’m looking for Lydia, I need to talk to her urgently.’

Julia is annoyed at the interruption but she doesn’t ask Wendy to leave. She is surprised to see that Wendy is not wearing make-up and that her hair is a mess. ‘I saw her a few hours ago. Would you like me to give her a ring?’

‘I’ve just been to her room, she’s not there.’

‘Would you like a coffee?’

Wendy nods. ‘I have to see you anyway about my essay. Lydia said I should discuss it with you.’ Her voice sounds strained.

‘What area are you interested in?’

‘I want to write a sort of ironic overview of the changes in consciousness between pre-feminist and postmodern women.’

Julia wants to ask her if she’s in trouble but doesn’t feel able to. It’s obvious that Wendy wants to keep the conversation safe. Julia warns her not to make her essay too general as this tends to diffuse the argument. She suggests that she concentrate on one or two theorists or one text.

Wendy manages a smile. ‘You must be a mind-reader, that’s what I always do, I try to write the world.’

‘You have to learn to construct limits, that’s one of the features of good scholarship.’

Wendy doesn’t answer. She drinks her coffee silently. Julia tries to draw her out about her essay but it seems that Wendy is finished with that topic for the moment.

‘I’ll try Lydia’s office again if you like.’

‘Thanks.’

Julia dials the number and Lydia answers. ‘I’ll come now.’

When she enters the room, Wendy puts her arms around her and bursts into tears. ‘I’m dying, help me Lydia, help me!’

‘So Jude has finally left you.’

Julia doesn’t know what to do. A woman she hardly knows is having hysterics in her office.

Lydia holds Wendy, kisses her on the face, says that’s right, cry it all away, cry all you want, cry her out of your life.

Wendy sobs. Julia starts to say something but Lydia stops her by putting a finger to her lips. Then Wendy starts to shout abuse, calls Jude a bitch and a shit, an absolute arsehole.

Lydia croons to her, says over and over yeah she is, she is, you’ll be better off without her.

‘But I love her, I love her, I’m dying, help me, help me!’

Julia feels devastated. She thought Wendy was a tough assertive woman, on top of things, unbreakable.

Wendy says she must go for an urgent piss. She rushes from the room.

‘Sorry to land this on you,’ says Lydia.

‘I feel so helpless.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll take her home with me. Viv is good with Wendy. This has happened before. She’s an incurable romantic, it’s her downfall.’

‘I misread her, I thought she was a cynic.’

‘Totally, except for love. Just between you and me, she’s better off without Jude. They were hopeless together. Wendy wants undying love and Jude wants to play around.’

Wendy returns. Her eyes are red with weeping but she has put her lipstick on and combed her hair.

'Come on love,' says Lydia. 'Viv is waiting for me.'

Julia is glad to see them go. She is feeling uncertain and afraid and needs time to herself to try and understand why Wendy's outburst has affected her this way.

What the hell is happening to me? There's a blank in the mirror when it comes to attending to myself. I fear the loss of innocence in others but it's much worse when it happens to me. Maybe I need to kill off the fairy stories, perhaps there is no enchanted forest.

There is a knock at the door. Julia hopes that Lydia and Wendy have not returned.

It's Jeanine. 'I'm off to the pub. Want to come?'

'I'd love to but I've promised to take the kids to town for tea and they'll be waiting for me.'

She tells Jeanine about the meeting next week with the second readers. Jeanine pulls a face and says watch out for that shit Peter. He pretends to be very supportive of what we're trying to do but all he does is impose his own views, all in the name of good academic writing. He won't accept anything a student writes without back-up from data and statistics or without bringing it into line with the work of a published theorist.

Julia is puzzled. 'But I thought this is what we're trying to get the students to do. Surely they need to examine the bias of their own opinions?'

'Of course. But he's no help, he's full of his own truths about feminist experience, he never listens to us.'

Julia feels her head begin to pound. She wonders what Jeanine would think about her analysis of Janet Frame's work.

Jeanine leaves. Julia wishes that she had been able to go with her. She has an urgent need to talk with someone. She feels as if the ideas that she had sorted out for herself before coming to this place are under attack.

She tries to return to her work on the Janet Frame lecture for next week. The words that she thought so brilliant a short time before now appear as the scribbings of an idiot. The

meanings have run away and left empty black marks on the page.

She reads, *the silent woman in this work is a metaphor for the phenomenon of the erasure of women's experience*. It's crazy, she can't remember which community she speaks for any more.

She thinks of Kezia and Timmy and her role in the real world, the provider of hamburgers and cuddles, the official dispenser of band-aids and comfort.

She dials home and Kezia answers. Julia tells her to get ready to go out, she's on her way.

Julia can hear Timmy calling out in the background and Bob telling them both to keep quiet. She hangs up the receiver and packs up her notes and books for the weekend of work ahead.

She collects the Fiat and drives away from the empty campus towards the friendly chaos of a Friday night out with the kids.



7

Tuesday night, 11 June

Here I am at my lonely window again, sleep eludes me. I don't mind this insomnia, it gives me some precious time to myself. What a turn around. Now Bob is the one who sleeps in the afternoons and craves company at night. I don't feel like talking when I come home from work. My head is full of conversations, arguments, debates. Sometimes I crave a world without speech.

My work lecture went well today. Wendy was there. She looked beautiful in her dark flowing clothes and bright make-up. She has a blonde fringe now and a tiny white plait at the nape of her neck. She's like a red and white hibiscus on a black stem.

She told me she has sworn to be celibate for a while, she has learned her lesson. Love destroys, so she's giving it up for good.

I smiled at her. 'How can you say that at your age?'

She said she means it, she's never going to fall in love again.

I am very excited about my lecture on Janet Frame. I think it's the best thing I've ever done. There is a wonderful passage

early on in the book where the mother bemoans the fact that European myths lose their power in a raw colonial land.

I need a fable to fall like a gentle cloak from the sky, to protect my daughter and myself with the cloak spread over the familiar names and situations, however terrible...

My idea is to draw a relationship between the difficulty of using European fable to explain life in New Zealand and the alienation of feminist experience mediated through the language of patriarchal myths. When we enter a new world as feminists, the fairy tales from the old world become impotent.

...my daughter sits speechless, a living fable, with no spinning-wheel to prick her finger on, dropping blood in the snow...

I wonder if Frame is saying that when the myths no longer speak authentically we become somewhat less than human?

There is a hunger among us, I sense this in the students. We need a fiction and a heroic past that resonates with the reality of our lives as women. We live as strangers, burdened with the cultural baggage that we bring. I am beginning to understand the necessity for constructing myths that provide a framework of certainty in our lives. Maybe this is why I rely so much on Isobel. She gave me the myths of my childhood, gathered from all sorts of unlikely sources. In the absence of valid tales we constructed our own.

Frame is uncovering some deep truths about the relationship between language and identity that I haven't yet come to grips with.

I didn't get a fair go over the weekend in spite of Bob's good intentions. Everything was fine until Saturday night. Then Paulette tried to cook the dinner. Bob encouraged her, in spite of the fact that she had been drinking all afternoon. He said she wanted to do something useful.

He and Jim left her to it and went into the lounge to work on Jim's article for *The Republican*. I felt bloody angry with them. In the end I had to take over, there was chaos in the

kitchen. I fought with a pile of dishes and half-peeled potatoes while they fought the paper revolution over bottles of beer.

I feel so bad about Paulette and what I did to her. She was at that stage of drunkenness when one is still sober enough to try and cover it up. She sat at the table and chain-smoked while I worked. She talked non-stop, choosing her words carefully to disguise her slurred speech. It was all praise for her family; how wonderful Gen her daughter was, how great Jim was, how his tutor at the WEA read his essay aloud to the class, how the other students look up to him. On and on she went until I was nearly at screaming point.

Then she said, 'You're lucky too, your kids are real darlings and Bob lets you do anything you want.'

I wanted to yell out why the hell shouldn't he, but I reminded myself that Paulette can't help being trapped in her traditional views.

I watched her trying to light a cigarette, her nail polish was blood red and chipped. Her hands look like wounded animals, they shake as if they are trying to bite each other. There must be some reward, something that holds her to life, some reason for her refusal to look upon the face of her real enemy.

I kept thinking about my conversation with her earlier that afternoon, when she told me she'd seen Clemency drinking alone at the Gluepot in Ponsonby.

'You should have seen her Julia! She looked so terrible I hardly recognized her. She was dressed in those awful black clothes, her face was a death mask, white powder, purple lips.'

I was shocked. 'Did she tell you why she was there?'

'Same as me, having a quick one. I asked her why she was dressed that way. She went all snooty on me, said she felt like being in fashion for a change.'

Paulette annoyed me, she sniggered over Clemency, she thought she was out to get a bit of action behind her husband's back. I guessed what Clemency was up to, she wasn't looking for a good time, she was fighting for her life. It is ironic that she is seeking her salvation in a public bar, the afternoon watering

hole of sad alcoholics. To think of my innocent Clemency sitting in the middle of this collective pain horrified me.

I felt a ridiculous anger towards Paulette, I felt she should have got Clemency out of there. It was her duty as an older woman to talk to Clemency, tell her some home truths about her life.

I suppose this is why I did something unforgivable to Paulette, I told her about the night witch.

I was bashing pots around, trying to gain control of the dinner. The food was ruined, she had boiled the steamer dry and tried to thaw the steaks out under the hot tap. The vision of Clemency that she placed in my mind haunted me; I felt so pissed off with everything.

I told Paulette about the stories that Isobel had invented as a child, and how they had been built into my mind as a series of cautionary tales. I told her that every woman had a night witch, I had mine, and by the look of things Clemency had just begun to discover hers.

Paulette enjoyed it at first. Then she asked me if I knew what her night witch was, and I made the mistake of telling her.

I said she hated herself, hated her body. I told her she drank to cover up her failure to make the grade. I explained that it was not her fault, that the ideas had been forced on her, they were there for a reason, but it was too late.

She went very quiet. She didn't speak and she didn't cry. She just sat there rigid, I couldn't get a word out of her.

I got scared, called out for Jim. He came into the kitchen making a lot of noise, he was well on the way to getting drunk himself.

'Pay no attention. She plays dead sometimes, it's her way of avoiding things.'

But I wouldn't leave it alone. I was determined to make her acknowledge that I was speaking the truth. I held her face between my hands and cried, 'Listen to me! I'm trying to help you.'

Jim yelled, 'I've had it your drinking, I've had it up to here! There's nothing worse than a drunken cunt!'

She vomited right across the table, it came out of her mouth like a missile. The strange thing was that she didn't move or make a sound. It was like turning on a hose.

I helped Jim to clean her up and together we put her into Kezia's bed.

I've blown it with Paulette. I have done nothing to help her, all I did was make Jim angry with her. I was glad that Paulette had made a mess for me to clean up, it served me right.

She didn't mention it the next day but I know that she hadn't forgotten what I'd said about the night witch. We were both careful of each other, we skirted around the edge of conversation like cats circling around a snake. I feel that she doesn't trust me anymore, she's afraid of what I might say.

I was glad when they left.

Wednesday, late at night, 12 June

Dearest Isobel,

It was great to hear from you so soon after our arrival here. Your letter helped to settle me, I was feeling disorientated after living for so long in Birkenhead. Leaving my garden and house was more of a wrench than I expected. You always say I get too attached to places and you're right. I am in mourning for the loss of the sea.

Bob has taken over the garden and I don't feel as if I really live here yet. My work has become more central to my life than home. I suppose this is inevitable because I need to put so much of myself into my work. Everything is so new and strange.

Isobel, I had a fantastic time tonight. I had dinner with Lydia and her lover Vivian Heather. They both send their love. Vivian said she doesn't know if you'll remember her, she used to drink at Shakespeare's way back when. Her name was Vivian Springfield in those days.

Their house is beautiful. The candles were scented, there

were flowers everywhere. There is a sense of order and peace. They are so fond of each other, you can feel it as a presence in the house.

We ate pasta full of succulent little surprises. Pale pink shrimps, huge black olives shining like dark eyes through the mozzarella sauce. For a few hours everything came together with divine cohesion, the people, the food, the conversation.

Tonight at Lydia's house I felt as if I'd come home.

So different from our family celebrations. I'm run off my feet. Kids never leave you alone. It would be so much easier to organize my life without my two.

Mum rang me just before I left for Lydia's tonight. Please write to her Isobel, she's worried about you. I tried to reassure her but you know what a worrier she is. She carried on for about five minutes about Dad and the extended duck shoot this year. Sometimes I could throttle him. If something I did worried the life out of my partner, I would think twice about doing it. Surely some responsibility should be taken.

I've survived the first week and a half of my job. I know this is the right place for me to work. My problem is that I'm finding it hard to suss out the politics of the other lecturers. I don't know where I stand.

My boss, Dr Berry, is still on leave. I'm getting conflicting stories about her from the others. Lydia sees her as an opportunist and a hypocrite, but the other teachers seem very positive about her.

My two second readers are another hassle. Peter drips with breathless sincerity, he goes on and on about how much the feminist revolution has meant to him, need I say more? But I can cope with him, he's a familiar type. It's the other one that worries me and I don't know why. Lydia tells me he's easy to work with.

Remember me telling you about Wendy McDonald? She made a scene in my office the other day. Her lover Jude had just dumped her and Wendy was devastated. I'm so thankful that Lydia was there. She has close personal relationships with

her students. She says she doesn't want to teach unless she is able to become involved with the whole person. I agree with her in principle but I don't think I've got the nerve to go in as deep as she does. Anyway, I have Kezia and Timmy and Bob to think about. They are my first priority.

You asked how Bob is coping with being a full-time parent. He's fine so far, he really likes it. The kids turn to him more and more, it certainly takes the pressure off me. I feel no jealousy at the new relationship between him and the kids. Children are such power brokers. They have to be nice to the person who has the main control over them. I have faded somewhat from their lives and I don't mind at all.

Isobel, I can't write any more, I'm starting to feel tired at last. I was so stimulated after my wonderful night with Lydia and Vivian that I thought I'd never be able to put my head down.

It's one o'clock in the morning here. I'm trying to imagine what you're doing at this moment in your terrace house in Meersbrook. I loved your description of your two-up two-down with scullery. How on earth do you cope without a bathroom? The nineteenth century is alive and well in Sheffield it seems. Your life feels so distant from mine, I can't picture it.

Write to me soon and tell me all about your current political activity and your daily doings. Above all, tell me that you love me and that you're coming home soon.

All my love, Julia

Thursday night, 13 June

I feel so much better after my wonderful night at Lydia's and Viv's. They were warm and welcoming towards me, I am beginning to feel part of a community again.

I miss my women's group in Auckland, even though I was beginning to grow tired of hearing the same old stuff over and over again. They speak out within the group but then go home and live the apolitical life with their families and in

their jobs. They exist in fragments, and the link between the different cells of experience becomes stretched to the point of absurdity.

The women here come across as more together and more tolerant than my feminist friends in Auckland. I wonder why. I'll ask Isobel next time I write to her, maybe she can shed some light on the mystery.

She cautioned me to be careful of myself in her last letter. She said that when you teach feminist theory you have to confront your own political morality at every turn. I am beginning to understand what she means.

Yesterday, Lydia and I went to the meeting with the second readers for my courses. She was very conciliatory and diplomatic with the two men. (She told me later this is part of her politics of survival.) It's strange that I felt so uncomfortable with Richard. Maybe he threatens me because he knows a lot about literature. He said he had read my thesis on Robin Hyde but he didn't say what he thought of it, he just smiled. I don't where he's coming from.

I discussed it with Bob and he said this is typical of me, I have to suss out everyone before I've seen them in action. I should give myself more time, I shouldn't be so hung up on making instant decisions about people.

I told him that I was feeling upset about what I had done to Paulette. He didn't seem too concerned. Jim had discussed the situation with him and he's thinking of committing Paulette because things have gone from bad to worse at home. She isn't doing the housework any more and she doesn't keep herself clean.

I wish he hadn't told me this. I feel worse than ever about attacking Paulette. She needs all the friends she can get at the moment.

I gave my lecture on Janet Frame today. I feel uncertain about the impact it made. I wonder how many of the students in this course are feminists or have read any feminist theory? Not many, if the discussion after the lecture is anything to go

by. I had to go over the whole business of erasure of women's voices in written history. I fear that most of the students didn't understand the relationship between this and Erlene, the silent woman in Frame's book.

I used the passage, *She was not going to speak to anyone. She could not speak if she wanted to, because everytime she opened her mouth to say something, her voice, in hiding, reminded her that there was nothing to say, and no words to say it.*

I said that this was an example of the consequences of erasure, the internalization of the idea that the only good woman is a silent woman. Erlene is not mad, she has merely taken the ideology to its logical conclusion.

A clue to my failure to communicate to the students was given to me by Susan after the class. She has already challenged me in the work course and I was a little afraid of what she might say. She stayed back after the class and told me, to my great relief, that she had thoroughly enjoyed my lecture. It had illuminated Frame's work for her, she now felt keen to go back and re-read her books with a new understanding.

She told me that some of the students were saying that my lectures were too introspective, too theoretical. They wanted more substance, more facts. She talked about the fear of theory that haunts many women. In her opinion, it is logical to be afraid of theory when it had oppressed us in the past and was busily appropriating feminist experience in the present.

I cannot agree with her and I told her so. Women fear theory because we have been seen as incapable of intellectual work and have been led to believe that it is unfeminine to love ideas. The fear comes from a lack of confidence in ourselves as thinkers.

She said it's deeper than lack of confidence, it's a rejection of abstract thought itself. Some of her feminist friends give her shit for being at university. They tell her she is mind wanking while they are out in the real world, rearing children, supporting other women, trying to survive inside the phallogocentric worlds of welfare and work.

Sweet memories of my student days. The endless arguments about the politics of being inside or outside the system as if the system was a building that one could leave or return to at will.

I am pleased that Susan liked my lecture. I must move carefully though. I need to ground my work in empirical evidence, otherwise I will lose my audience before I've even started.

I rang Clemency tonight. She apologized for being cool towards me when she came down to see me.

I asked her if she was pregnant yet.

She laughed and said give me a chance, it can't be done overnight but I'm working on it.

I felt like saying I know you are, but be careful my darling, be careful.

We talked some more and Clemency was so warm towards me that I forgave her for upsetting me last time I saw her.

I feel a sense of relief at our renewed sense of intimacy. Does this mean that I need her friendship and approval more than I had realized? I used to think that our friendship was rather one-sided and that I gave her more than she gave me. Now I am not so sure. All I know is that after I had talked to her I felt happy and safe and I like this feeling. It eludes me too often these days.

I'm glad it's Friday tomorrow and there's only the work tutorial to get through. I'm looking forward to the weekend. Bob suggested that we take the kids to Raglan on Saturday if the weather is fine. I jumped at it. Jeanine tells me the beach is magnificent. If I work hard tomorrow on my lectures for next week, I think I can manage to have Saturday off.

I need a break from the endless task of trying to do the right thing for my students. I want to forget my conscience, my inner voice. I need at least one day of pure experience, food, laughter, sea birds, driftwood, fires, salt wind.

An end to analysis, I must take a brief journey into life in the *durée*.



8

Julia and Bob and the kids are driving over the hills to the coast. It is a wonderful clear morning. The air is still and the green hills shimmer in the light.

‘Winter has taken a holiday especially for us,’ says Julia. ‘We could be anywhere, the coast of Greece, Spain, the Aegean Islands. This is what Laurence Durrell would call a ringing day, a day of milky light with a taste of salt in the air. If he could hear the high voice of that bell bird calling across the bare hills he would say yes, this is the sound of a ringing day.’

Bob smiles good naturedly at her. ‘You should get back to your poetry. I can almost smell the crushed pink thyme flowers underneath my feet again.’

Julia loves him for saying this. It shows her that he remembers the origins of their love, back in their years of wandering the world before Timmy came and their backpacks were laid aside for ever. Lost times, lost and laid over, buried under years of work and money, the safe life in Birkenhead.

They begin the long climb down the bush track towards Ngarunui Beach. Kezia plays her jungle game, pretending that animals will leap out at them at any moment. Timmy says

she's stupid, there are only birds and ferns here, and they can't hurt anyone.

Julia takes Kezia's hand. The little girl looks up at her and smiles. Julia thinks half your luck kid, when I was your age I had more than birds to scare me, I had the night witch. She wonders what it would be like for Kezia to have an older sister who filled her head with fantastic tales. The pragmatic Timmy would never invent stories. He is obsessed with gadgets and the inner workings of machines, a true child of his age.

They move down the roughly hewn path through the quiet green bush. Suddenly, the surf appears below them, frothing and growling along the wet gray sand.

Julia cries, 'The sea, the sea!'

She runs down the track and through the low sand-hills. She removes her shoes and jumps up and down on the dry sand. She gulps mouthfuls of air, she runs to the edge of the surf, she scoops up a handful of sea water and splashes it over her head. She walks into the gray froth, knee-deep one moment, ankle-deep the next. Her toes cling like claws against the pull of the retreating surf. Holes form underneath her feet, she sways, she holds, she takes root. Something sharp and shelly pulls itself away from under her left foot. She prods it gently with a toe. The shape suggests tuatua.

Don't worry, she says silently, I won't tell anyone you're here, there'll be no digging today.

The children are jumping around the sand-hills. Bob comes down to the water's edge. He asks her if she's finished her purification rituals yet.

She says please don't tease, don't spoil things but he won't leave her alone. He tries to trip her up in the surf then hits the water with the flat of his hand to give her a shower. He swings a huge lump of sodden kelp in a circle around his head. A piece flies off and hits her cheek.

'That really hurt me, you shit!' Her cheek is bleeding where a piece of shell embedded in the kelp has bitten into her flesh. She picks up the leathery brown frond of seaweed and breaks

it open. There is an astringent smell of iodine and salt. She holds it against the wound.

Julia walks away from him down the beach. Kezia runs to her and grabs her hand. 'Were you fighting?'

'No, Daddy was playing around and he went too far.'

'Your face is bleeding.' Kezia sounds scared.

Julia reassures her. They walk a long way on the wet sand. An enormous shadow passes over them. Kezia grips Julia's shirt so hard she almost rips it off her back. 'Is it a bird?'

'No, it's a hang-glider.'

They sit further up the beach in a warm hollow in the dunes and watch the glider riding the thermals. A big gray and white sea bird rides the air alongside. They hover together, a human hanging from metal and nylon and the original feathered prototype.

Kezia is excited. 'I thought only birds could fly.'

Julia thinks he looks wonderful up there. A technological copy of what is good and true in nature, the Greeks would have loved it.

Kezia screams, 'He's coming down, he's landing.'

The hang-glider drops gently in front of them. The rider pulls himself clear of the harness. He walks towards them and takes off his crash helmet.

It's no Greek God, it's a tall young woman with long curly brown hair. 'Have you got the right time on you?' she asks.

Julia is flustered at the banality of her request. 'Yes, I think my watch is right, it says half-past eleven.'

'Thanks.' She says she had to come down, she's starving and she needs a piss. She goes up into the sand-hills and disappears from sight.

Julia lights a cigarette. Kezia puts the crash helmet on, it swamps her narrow face. She holds her arms out and cries, 'I'm flying, I'm flying.'

The aviator comes back from the sand-hills. She asks Julia if she can borrow a smoke. Julia says help yourself, take a couple for later if you like. She feels shy of the young woman;

she's a breed apart, one of the new ones who are not physically afraid of anything.

'Have you ever tried it?'

'Hang-gliding? Oh I couldn't, I'm scared of anything that involves heights.'

'I love it. I come out most weekends, it's where I want to be.'

She goes off and gathers up her glider. They watch her walk down the beach until she disappears into a break in the cliff face. Kezia wants to stay and watch her fly over again but Julia says it's picnic time and if they don't go back now the others will take the best food.

So much for art as a mirror of nature, thinks Julia. All the bird-woman wanted was a fag and a piss, trust me to confuse philosophy with the brute needs of the body.

She and Kezia walk back along the beach to where Bob and Timmy are sitting on a large driftwood log. Clouds are beginning to gather, there is a thin cold wind. The waves change from smooth green rollers into agitated gray water broken with white foam.

'Better have the picnic now, it's going to get cold,' says Bob.

They spread the tartan rug and Julia takes the wrapped food from the chillibin; hard-boiled eggs, cheese, apples and some cold slices of last night's potato pie. Timmy wants some sandwiches. Bob says tough luck, sandwiches are a cliché at a picnic, that's why he didn't make any. They start a long argument. Bob teases Timmy about what he calls his peasant tastes.

Julia eats silently. She is in the grip of a craving for solitude that is almost like a physical lust. She wants to be alone with the cry of the sea birds and the wet gray sand. She wants to be free of these other voices that conflict with the clean and tremendous noise of the sea.

'Hurry up and eat,' says Bob. 'I think we should leave soon, the weather is going to break.'

Kezia chokes on her hard-boiled egg and Bob thumps her on the back. Her eyes fill with tears.

‘You are making them eat too quickly,’ says Julia.

Timmy says he wants to go home and watch tele, the beach is boring.

Julia feels herself pulling away from them. When the children were younger she was the centre of their world. They would stay on the beach with her for hours, never complaining. Now, she cannot satisfy them with anything. Wherever she takes them, they want to be somewhere else.

She walks down to the edge of the water and turns her back on the trio. She wishes that they would go home and leave her out here for a few hours. If only there was a bus back to Hamilton.

They walk back up the track. Bob touches the trees and bushes and recites a litany of names. This is a young kahikatea he cries and oh look a mahoe! It’s all growing back, one day this might be real bush again.

‘What are you talking about? It’s real now.’

‘No way. It’s been colonized, ripped off, the trees and birds renamed. This bush is a commodity, it’s only been spared to serve as an illusion of wilderness for the tourists.’

‘But a tourist is just a visitor, we’re visitors too.’

‘You don’t understand appropriation Julia. Trees, soil, seeds, the very air we breathe. Capitalism takes everything.’

Julia touches the sore place on her cheek, the cut is sealed with dried blood. He wounded her, he used something from the sea to do it, what about her environment, her space?

She can’t resist saying that for all their difference in rhetoric, they both use exactly the same products, the same amount of water, air and fuel, they drive the same car and live in the same domestic environment and at this very moment are treading the same pathway through the bush, the only difference being that he is criticizing it, and she is loving it for how it is now, at this very moment, and not for what he thought it should be in the world of the ideal.

He launches into his standard lecture on false consciousness. Julia has heard it before, many times, and she is happy that she has diverted him on to safer ground. She remembers Isobel's comment that abstract theory is the place that men retreat to when they are personally attacked. She remembers too, her shock of recognition one night years ago when she heard Isobel describe marxist theory as the 'safe house' of patriarchy in the West.

Bob talks on and on, his speech is littered with concepts of work and war; revolution, class struggle, economic rationality.

Julia lets his words drift away through the bush like pages from a book that she no longer wishes to read. She resents the pollution of this green damp place with words of blood and hate. The bush diverts her. She breathes the pure air, she breaks off a small piece of lemon-scented manuka and holds it to her nose.

They reach the top of the track. Bob pauses to catch his breath. There is a small bead of sweat on his bald patch. Julia feels a momentary compassion for this man, her lover and her friend. At least he feels something, at least he has a sense of mourning for the world.

The car rolls through the darkening afternoon. Soon they are driving through a curtain of water that makes the windscreen wipers jerk and hiss against the streaming glass.

'We left at a good time,' says Bob with satisfaction. 'If we'd mucked about any longer we would have been caught like drowned rats.'

Julia thinks I would love to be out in the rain, really in it, soaked, dowsed, steeped, wet to the core. It would flesh out these skinny bones of mine, I would plump out like a fat raisin soaked in rum.

She stretches her arms up and sighs.

'Did you like the beach?' asks Bob.

'You know me, never happier than when I'm near the sea. Thanks for organizing this day Bob, for doing the lunch and everything.'

He reaches over and squeezes her thigh. 'We'll come again soon, and next time we'll judge the weather better so we can stay longer.'

They reach the house and the children run on to the front porch.

'Hey Mum,' yells Timmy. 'There's a note on the door.'

Julia takes the piece of damp paper from him. 'What the fuck has happened?'

Bob runs to her side and reads the note. 'Don't panic, it's probably nothing.'

'But it's from the police, they want me to ring them urgently. Something terrible must have happened. Quick quick, the key.'

'Calm yourself. I'll ring them if you like.'

'No let me, let me.'

They go into the hall. Julia rings the police station. She cries oh Jesus no, oh Christ no, oh fuck no.

'Tell me what's happened!'

'They've been trying to get hold of me all day. It's Dad, they've found his body in the swamp. He's drowned, he's dead.'

Bob holds her. She sobs, saying over and over, what will Mum do, this will kill her, she'll never cope without him. The children cry, Bob holds them too. They stand in a circle in the middle of the hall, holding each other.

Julia sobs, 'What will happen to my mother?'

'We must go to her, I'll ring her now and tell her we're on our way.'

He rings Sally's number, there's no reply. Julia says she's probably gone to Vera's, we'll have to drive up and find her.

'What about ringing Isobel in Sheffield?'

'She isn't on the phone. Isobel will come home when she hears, this will bring her back.'

'Don't set your heart on it.'

'She'll come home, I know she will.'

They climb back into the car. All through the sad, rainy journey to Te Kauwhata, Julia wonders what she can say to her mother to ease her pain. All she can think of are trite phrases like time being a great healer and at least you've got your memories.

The trouble is, I can't really grieve for Dad, I can't be sincere. I feel no sense of loss for myself but I'm scared that Mum will go to pieces without him.

Julia tries to concentrate on the landscape through the car window but the wet paddocks and the bunches of sodden miserable sheep seem unreal. She cannot feel the tyres of the car touching the road, she is floating through the air.

In the end, the only thought that grounds her is the certain knowledge that Isobel will come, and that in a few days time she will once again be sitting at her sister's feet.



9

Isobel sat with her lover Maggie in the tiny kitchen of the terrace-house that they shared with three other women in Sheffield. Maggie spread her toast with marmalade and poured a cup of strong tea into a cracked mug. She clasped the mug with one thin white hand and stuffed her mouth full of hot drippy toast with the other.

‘Of course you must go back for the funeral Bel,’ she said indistinctly. ‘But I’ll miss you. Promise me you’ll come home soon?’

‘Just as soon as I can raise the fare,’ replied Isobel.

Maggie took a huge gulp of tea and swallowed noisily. She looked miserable.

‘You believe me don’t you?’

‘I’m scared that when you get back to New Zealand, Julia will persuade you to stay.’

Isobel laughed. ‘You’ve got her sussed. She’ll try, but it won’t work. I don’t know if I could live down there again.’

‘I want to come with you.’

‘If only we had the money.’

Maggie had sacrificed her family to be with Isobel. Her father had threatened Isobel with the police when his daughter

had left home to move in with her. Isobel would never forget the look on Maggie's face, her saying over and over, sorry Bel, I'm so sorry Bel, I thought I could be open with them, tell them the truth of what I am, I'll never trust them again.

In spite of her terror, Isobel had felt sorry for Maggie's parents. They were so bewildered with their world, everything they had loved had collapsed. Maggie's father was a redundant steel worker who had lived for his job before he was blown away in the hurricane of unemployment that hit Sheffield in the 1980s. Her mother, Betty, had cried over and over, but you're all we've got our Maggie, all we've got.

Maggie said I'm still here Mum, look at me, I'm not dead for Christ's sake.

It was no use. They saw her affair with Isobel as a rejection of them, of everything they had lived for. Her father had forbidden her mother to speak to her ever again, but after a few months of silence and misery for Maggie, Betty had turned up one freezing afternoon with a batch of cheese scones. Maggie had cried and held her and given her sherry. Betty got quite tipsy and left saying what the old man didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

After this, she left little hand-written messages for them at the local stationer announcing the time and date of her next visit. Maggie said it was the first time that her mother had ever defied her father and, who knows, one thing could lead to another. She was enjoying herself, maybe she was a would-be-if-she-could-be, a closet girl from way back. Isobel teased her and said dream on darling, every dyke I've ever known has this dream about her mother. Maggie said what about Sally then? Isobel went into hoots of laughter. If you knew her, you'd know how funny that is! She told Maggie about her mother's fear of dirt, her fear of bodies, her fear of life itself. Maggie said poor old thing, she must have a hard time staying sane with the likes of both you and the crazy Julia for daughters.

Maggie can't stand Julia, she admitted it. Isobel always read Julia's letters aloud to her. Maggie thought that Julia moaned about nothing, invented problems that didn't exist. She said Julia was so privileged, there she was, educated, good kids, great job and all she could do was to pressure Isobel to come home. Dependency. She'd heard about it between mothers and children, between lovers, but sisters? It wasn't healthy the way Julia carried on, laying all her emotional baggage on Isobel, trying to make her feel guilty.

Isobel agreed with her up to a point but told Maggie that, in spite of everything, she had a soft spot for her sister and besides Julia was coping with the family all on her own.

She drank some tea, thinking of her mother and Julia and the traumatic journey ahead. The attic stairs creaked.

Maggie groaned. 'Oh gawd, here comes Lady Hil. End of peace and quiet.'

Hilary came into the kitchen looking tired and miserable. She said no it's not a nice day, and no I didn't get any sleep and I regret to inform you that in spite of the alleged repair done by the landlord, the attic still leaks.

Maggie and Isobel shared the small terrace-house with three other lesbians, Hilary, Rose and Jill. There was tension in the house. Rose and Jill were lovers and had a stormy relationship. They spent hours closeted in their room shouting and crying. Sometimes one or the other would emerge and try to involve whoever was in the kitchen in the argument. Isobel resolutely kept silent on the question of Rose and Jill. She said the other flatmates should not take sides but Maggie couldn't help herself. She sided with Rose and called Jill 'that slag from Broomhill' behind her back. Isobel said why did you agree to have her in the flat if you hate her so much? Maggie said bitterly, so speaks the voice of privilege. Since when have the poor been able to choose who they live with? It's hard to find people to share this scruffy place and if we told Rose we didn't want Jill here, she would leave with her. If they weren't here, how would we pay the bloody rent? Seventy pounds. Every

week, on the nail, nine o'clock every Saturday morning, you could set your clock by that prick who collects the rents with his knowing looks, his nudge nudge wink wink, how are all you girls today, behaving yourselves I hope? Maggie said that if she ever got any money she would live alone, oh the peace, the bliss of saying exactly who could enter through that door. Isobel said what about me, would I be allowed to visit? Of course stupid, said Maggie, I'd have you there, with me, that's what I meant by living alone.

Hilary sat down at the table. 'Where are Rose and Jill?' she asked.

'Rose is at the hospital, she started day-shift today. I don't know where Jill is.'

Maggie said, 'She's either still asleep or she's slagged off somewhere.'

Isobel gave her a warning look.

Hilary said, 'I saw her down at the club last night, having a good time by the look of her.'

'I bet she was, while her girlfriend slaves away at the hospital to keep her in smokes and booze.'

'Lay off,' said Isobel. 'There's nothing wrong in partners having time out from each other.'

'Shit, I'm going to get a lecture again. The one about being too possessive.'

Hilary looked uncomfortable. She left the room and took her cup of tea with her. Maggie and Isobel heard the attic stairs creak.

Maggie said, 'Middle-class bitch, the minute she hears something unpleasant she crawls back to her hole'.

'Don't be too hard on her, she's lonely. It's difficult for her here, living with two couples. If only she could find someone.'

'It's her own fault for being such a cow.'

'She's brave though, taking the plunge at her age.'

Hilary had come out two years ago and had left a husband and a beautiful cottage in Bakewell so she could live more 'in accordance with her nature' as she put it. Maggie scoffed at

this expression. She said it was the posh way of saying she wanted to fuck women.

Isobel felt uneasy at Maggie's bitterness against middle-class women. She tried to turn Maggie's hate towards what she saw as the real enemy, patriarchal social structures. But Maggie said that's what class is you berk, different language but same old shit. The trouble with middle-class women is that they are so bloody ladylike. They want all the goodies without the aggro and the dirty words. As if revolution could ever be nice.

Isobel sighed. She didn't want to argue with Maggie today. She was waiting for Julia to telex five hundred pounds for her air fare. She had tentatively booked a Qantas flight that flew direct to Auckland. Now she was wondering if British Airways might not be cheaper.

Maggie said, 'What are your plans for the day my darling?'

'I'll check at the bank to see if the money has arrived and then I might go back to the travel agent to have look at British Airways.'

'I knew you were going to dither over airlines.'

Isobel smiled, 'Typical Bel, ay.'

Maggie imitated her accent. 'That's right, ay.'

'Don't tease me, you ratbag.'

Maggie jumped up from the table and cleared the breakfast things into the scullery. She said trust Lady Muck to leave her nasty wet brown tea bag oozing its juice all over the sink bench for the servant to clean up. It's funny how the nice ones were the biggest sluts out when it came to housework.

'Taihoa, give it a rest love.'

'Only if you come and give me a big cuddle,' answered Maggie.

Isobel did. She held her close to her tall body and rubbed her back. 'The trouble is, when you do your number against women like Hilary, I feel that you are also criticizing me.'

'You're nothing like her.'

'So I'm not middle-class?'

‘Yeah, but different. You don’t know you are, you’re sort of oblivious and I can live with that.’

Isobel ruffled her hair. ‘What you really mean is I ain’t no lady.’

Maggie laughed, ‘No way.’

‘So you have finally admitted it.’

Maggie grinned and pulled herself free from Isobel’s embrace. ‘Stop teasing me you old cow.’ She attacked Isobel with the dish cloth and Isobel responded by turning on the tap and flicking Maggie with drops of cold water.

‘Not so much of the old, thank-you very much.’

They fooled around for a few minutes and ended up in a heap on the old sofa in the kitchen. Maggie ran her hands through Isobel’s short black spiky hair and tickled her behind her ears. They kissed.

Maggie had tears in her eyes. ‘You’re the only good thing that has ever happened to me and now you’re leaving.’

‘It’s temporary, I’ll be back.’

‘What if you meet someone else?’

‘What if you do?’

‘I’m going to be a good girl. Are you?’

‘I don’t know.’

Maggie pushed her away angrily. ‘You never talk straight, you always say you don’t know, you say that about everything!’

‘But it’s true, it’s how I feel. Do you want me to lie? Is that what you want?’

‘Of course not.’

Isobel stroked Maggie’s curly brown hair. She didn’t know what to say to make Maggie feel better. She felt both proud and guilty about Maggie’s love for her. I’m proud that she loves me, she thought, it makes me feel special. I’m her first love, her first woman. But how can she love a fucked-up person like me? I have forgotten how to live. I can’t make a decision without agonizing over the outcomes to the point of total inertia. Too many choices, too much head work, too much

seeing the many possibilities in one situation. What Maggie loves is an illusion. She doesn't know that I live in pieces, like a broken bowl. I am guilty, I have allowed her to fall in love with me when I know that I am unlovable.

Maggie said, 'I don't want you to lie but I wish I could make you say what I want to hear.'

They held each other for a few moments longer.

Isobel glanced at her watch. 'Come on love, time to get cracking.'

They walked down Upper Valley Road. The rain had dissolved into a fine mist and the air was mild and damp. Isobel never tired of looking in the front window of each tiny terrace-house. There was not much to see, the lace curtains were always drawn, but she liked to imagine the lives that were being lived within and the continuity of such lives with what she imagined to be working-class existence in nineteenth century industrial England. The terrace that they lived in was built in 1860. She never stopped telling Maggie how marvellous it was to live somewhere so old and so well used. Maggie called her a colonial romantic and said she'd swap the whole fucking lot for a bathroom of her own.

Isobel didn't care about the lack of a bathroom in the house. She enjoyed going to the bath house twice a week, it made an occasion out of a mundane activity. She liked to listen to the other women talk as they bathed. She didn't belong, she had no wish to, but it was reassuring for her to sit on the outskirts of a community of women who supported each other through their troubles. They spoke of their families, their work, and their poverty; children and husbands unemployed, daughters running off to London, sons mauled by police dogs, old mothers freezing to death, the horror of endless debts. It made her feel like a real outsider, nothing in her own life remotely approached their experiences. It struck her that living at this level of poverty produces a life of intolerable uncertainty. These women never knew if they could pay the rent for another week, or if the next knock on the door would shatter their

lives forever. Sometimes Isobel felt like weeping with compassion at their courage. She knew that she couldn't bear one day of such a life.

A bus came. They boarded it and went into the centre of Sheffield. Maggie refused to come to the travel shop with Isobel. She wanted to sit on the grass in front of the Town Hall and watch the young unemployed people drinking cider and promenading up and down to pass the time away. She said it made her feel better to know that she was not the only one thrown into the void of no money, no status, no nothing except the desire to survive just one more week.

'But don't you see the beauty of it?' asked Isobel. 'You have the chance to create your own relationship to the world without the intermediary of work. If you were employed it would be shit work, a mindless cleaning job, or slogging away in a bloody factory.'

'How the fuck can I create this relationship, as you put it, without money? The pricks and the bastards who own this world have made it the Law that if you don't have money, you suck shit. There ain't no choices in poverty Bel my love, no should I do this or that, no should I buy this or that, no should I think this or that.'

'You've chosen to be a dyke, they can't take that away from you.'

Maggie said bitterly, 'Yeah, but that is the bottom line. I'm an uneducated, unemployed, man-hating queer, I don't even exist for the pricks.'

'But we must change the structures, we must force them to give us dignity and position.'

'It's different for you Bel, you went to university. You're acceptable, you're one of them, they'll listen to you!' She was shouting.

Isobel didn't want to continue the conversation. People were looking at them. She hated public scenes but she couldn't tell Maggie this. She would only say yeah that's right, keep

everything nice, keep everything cool, keep everything under cover.

They arrived at the Town Hall. The rain had stopped. Maggie took off her old raincoat and laid it on a wet seat and sat down. There were dozens of young people hanging around. Some of them were lying on the wet grass. Their hair was multi-coloured, teased up in mohawks, in short smooth bobs or shaved close to the head. They were dressed in many styles: old military uniforms, shabby black leathers, glitter scarves, faded and patched denim jeans.

Isobel thought they looked like children dressed up for a party that would never happen, a sad carnival of the disinherited.

‘Go and do your business, hassle the travel agent, I’ll be fine here.’

Isobel bent down and whispered, ‘I love you Maggie.’

‘I love you too.’

Isobel went to the travel shop and after some thought, changed her tentative booking from Qantas to a British Airways flight. She went to the bank to see if the money had arrived from Julia but her account balance still read three pounds and forty-three pence. She withdrew the three pounds so that she could buy Maggie something nice for lunch. She didn’t want to go back to the Town Hall just yet, she wanted to walk alone for a while.

She walked along Haymarket to check out the food stalls at Castle Market. The buildings were washed with rain, shallow puddles lay on the paving stones, the air was cool and mild. There were throngs of people walking through the summer streets towards the markets and Isobel found herself caught up in the flow of the crowd. She sensed that people were staring at her because of her height and what Maggie called her colonial swagger. Isobel didn’t think she walked differently from the people here, but Maggie said she moved in a sort of loose limbed way as if there was plenty of room, whereas the English move with closed-up bodies like neatly

folded umbrellas. Maggie said she liked walking with her because Isobel was tall and brown, she looked exotic compared with the pale-skinned locals.

Isobel wanted to go to the toilet and found one at the market. After she had relieved herself, she stood in the queue to wash her hands. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and realized with a shock how strained and tired she looked. She felt a little dizzy, she needed to sit down.

Stupid of me not to eat any breakfast she thought.

She found a seat outside the market. All at once, she felt tears come into her eyes and before she could control herself, she was weeping openly.

An old woman sat down next to her. 'Don't cry love, things can't be that bad.'

'I don't know what's come over me,' sobbed Isobel. 'My father drowned last week and this is the first time I've cried.'

'Oh how terrible,' said the old woman. 'Go ahead, shed your tears, it'll do you good.'

'I'm crying for my mother. She's all alone now.'

'Poor thing, I know how she feels, I'm a widow too. Does she live in Australia?'

Isobel said through her tears, 'No, New Zealand, I'm going back next week.'

The old woman rummaged in her battered handbag and brought out a packet of paper handkerchiefs. 'Here love, sop up your tears with this.'

Isobel dried her eyes. 'I feel such an idiot, breaking down in public. I don't know what set me off.'

'It comes over you at the oddest times. I still cry about my Arthur and he's been gone nearly three years now.'

The woman told Isobel her name was Ethel and that she lived alone. If she didn't come to town every day and sit in the streets to watch the people, she would go mad with loneliness. It gave her something to do, a timetable to work to. Breakfast at eight, tidy up her house by nine and then out on the streets no matter what the weather was. Most of her friends were

dead or put away. She was one of the lucky ones because she had her health and she had her daughter June who visited her from Chesterfield whenever she had the time.

Isobel liked her, she was warm and friendly. She told her about the house she lived in with four other women. Ethel said oh not Meersbrook, that's where I was brought up, I was married there. I live in a pensioner's flat in Broomspring Lane now, it's a lovely little house but I miss Meersbrook, I miss the life.

Isobel began to feel better. On a sudden impulse, she asked Ethel if she wanted to walk over to the Town Hall and share some lunch with her and her friend Maggie. Ethel said she had a few hours to fill in before she went home to watch the tele at five o'clock, so yes she'd love to come.

They walked briskly up High Street towards the Town Hall. Isobel was surprised at how quickly this bowed little woman could walk. She talked about Sheffield, she'd lived there all her life and her mother before her. She said it was much nicer than it used to be. Some parts had to be rebuilt after the war because of what Hitler did. She told Isobel the history of some of the buildings they passed. Isobel was enchanted.

They approached the Town Hall. Maggie was sitting where Isobel had left her. She looked hunched over and miserable. Isobel felt guilty for leaving her sitting there for so long.

'Sorry for keeping you waiting Maggie.'

'It's okay, I was having a doze. Did you get your ticket?'

Isobel said nervously, 'This is Ethel, I asked her to have lunch with us.'

Maggie grinned, 'Hello Ethel, nice to meet you.'

Isobel felt relieved. Maggie asked her if she had any money, Isobel held up three fingers.

'Come on then,' said Maggie. 'Let's go over to the Crucible and have a scoff.'

'I meant to get some sarneys from the market but I forgot.'

'Never mind, we'll do it in style. Are you up to walking that far Ethel?'

Isobel laughed and said no worries, she'll out-walk both of us.

They set off. Maggie and Ethel chattered away like old friends. Maggie told Ethel about the other women in their house and how only one of them had a job. Ethel said this unemployment is dreadful. Fancy, girls like you, so smart and clever being out of work. At least you've got company where you live, someone to share things with.

She stopped to look in the window of a clothes shop.

Maggie said softly to Isobel, 'Trust you to bugger off and pick up another woman the minute my back is turned.'

Isobel grinned. 'You're a good sort, do you know that Maggie?'

'So are you.'

They reached the Crucible just in time. Heavy rain had begun to sweep across the city. People in bright summer clothes were running through the drumming streets. Plastic umbrellas bloomed out like tropical flowers. The air became luminous, everything looked washed and new.

They found a table by the window. Ethel opened her handbag and withdrew a small brown coin purse. Isobel said no this is our shout, we've got three quid. Ethel took no notice. With much ceremony she counted out two pounds and fifty pence in coins.

'This is spare. It's pension day tomorrow. Let's buy something hot to eat.'

They ordered toasted sandwiches and a pot of tea for three. Isobel had the usual problem of trying to explain to the young woman behind the counter that she didn't want butter or margarine on her sandwich. Maggie teased her, said you and your fads. She told Ethel that Isobel was a vegan and Ethel said she'd never heard of that. Isobel explained that she wouldn't eat anything that came from an animal, it was against her politics. Maggie said she won't even trust the margarine in case it's got tallow in it. Ethel said she didn't know how Isobel survived, she couldn't do without her piece

of fish from the chippy on Friday nights or the two eggs she allowed herself each week.

'I eat well I do, not like some of the old people in my street. Bread and jam and cakes, that's all they have. Mind you, I do have a sweet biscuit with my cup of tea, I can't drink my tea without something sweet.'

'I know what you mean,' said Maggie. 'I'm a sugar girl myself. Chocolate's my thing but I never have enough money to satisfy my craving.'

Ethel dived back into her bag. She took out two Mars Bars and tried to place them in Maggie's hand.

'No, you keep them for a treat in front of tele.'

'I can't, it hurts my teeth something terrible. I never eat chocolate, I just steal it.'

Maggie laughed and laughed. She choked on her bacon sandwich and Isobel had to give her a thump on the back.

'You've made my day Ethel, you really have.'

'Have you ever been caught?' asked Isobel.

'Oh yes. But the social worker got me off, she said I did it because I was grieving for Arthur.'

'What do you think?'

Ethel flashed her worn yellowed teeth in a huge smile. 'I've nicked chocolate since I was a kid, but she was such a nice girl I didn't have the heart to tell her that.'

Isobel said she should be careful not to get caught again she might not be so lucky a second time.

'I'm not worried, I'd get off, people think all old ladies are potty.'

They spent some time looking at the paintings hanging in the foyer of the theatre. It was an exhibition by two local woman painters. One painted abstracts in soft water-colours of angular shapes suggesting hardness and inflexibility. Isobel loved them. She pointed out the contradiction between form and medium to Maggie who said don't confuse me with jargon, I don't understand what you mean.

‘But don’t you see how clever she is? She’s trying to make a fundamental statement about women.’

‘I can’t see it, they look like horrible wallpaper designs to me. This other woman is better. Menstruation paintings by Sarah Hamshere. This is more like it Bel, you can see the blood, you can feel the pain.’

‘I don’t think the depiction of pain is her intention. It’s more of a celebration of fertility and the mysticism surrounding women’s blood.’

Maggie said fiercely, ‘Don’t patronize me Bel.’

Isobel moved away. She knew she had gone over the line again with Maggie but she was tired of having to constantly monitor her speech. She looked around for Ethel and found her talking animatedly to a pale young woman seated on one of the chrome seats in front of the paintings.

‘Maggie and I are going back to the Town Hall in a minute. Are you coming?’

‘No, I’ll stay here until the rain has stopped. There’s plenty of company here, I won’t be lonely.’

Maggie came over. Isobel could see that she was still angry. She hoped she wouldn’t make a scene in front of Ethel.

‘I think we should go. The bank said the money might come in the afternoon mail. The agent won’t hold my ticket much longer.’

Maggie put her arms around Ethel and gave her a hug, said thanks again for the Mars Bars. They’ll taste all the nicer because they’ve been ripped off.

‘You should come over to my place one day, there’s lots of chocolate in my house. Not just Mars Bars, real chocolates, gift wrapped, all sorts of things. Someone should eat them before they go off.’

Maggie said well, my mother always said waste not want not, so I’ll take you up on your offer. She borrowed a biro from Isobel, pulled up the sleeve of her coat and wrote Ethel’s address on her arm.

They left the theatre and ran up Norfolk Row to Fargate. The rain was so heavy it was like having buckets of water thrown into their faces.

Maggie gasped, 'Slow down Bel, I'm drowning.'

'I want to hurry, my bloody jacket is useless, I'm saturated.'

The fountain in Fargate was overflowing. Two young boys were swimming in the water, fully clothed. Maggie stopped to watch them but Isobel ran on ahead and sheltered under a shop verandah. For a moment she thought that Maggie was going to jump into the water with the boys. She was relieved when she ran over and stood beside her.

'We may as well go on,' said Isobel. 'We can't get any wetter.'

'It's funny, once you've decided you don't care if you get wet, you sort of relax into it and enjoy it.'

'That's what Julia likes to do in the rain.'

Maggie squeezed Isobel's arm. 'Just think, you'll be seeing her soon.'

Isobel looked at her. The rain was running down her face, her hair was lying flat and brown on her head. Her raincoat was dark with water, her leather sandals were soaked and swollen. She looked as if she had just emerged from the sea.

'You look like Aphrodite, all you need is some seaweed in your hair and a wrinkle in your hand.'

'You don't look so hot yourself old girl.'

'I don't know how people cope with us, we're both so beautiful.'

They walked the rest of the way arm in arm, holding their faces up to the rain. Isobel felt relieved that Maggie's anger seemed to have washed away in the cloudburst.

They reached the bank where Isobel had her account.

'I'm coming in with you Bel, I want to drip water all over their posh carpet.'

'Don't piss them off until after they've given us the money.'

The money had arrived, and the teller gave Isobel a bank draft for five hundred pounds.

Maggie said, 'Oh let me look at it, let me have a feel, I've never seen such a big cheque before.'

They went to the travel agent. Maggie waited outside. Isobel paid for the ticket with the draft and received thirty pounds change. She gleefully showed Maggie the money.

'We're rich!'

'How come?'

'It's because I changed my flight, the one I've got now is cheaper.'

'Have you finally got your ticket then?'

'Yes, here it is.'

'So it's really going to happen, it's official.' Tears came into her eyes.

'Don't cry love. I have to go, you know that.'

Maggie said she couldn't help it, she was going to miss her so much.

'Let's go the pub and spend some of this money and get pissed as farts, that can be our adventure for today.'

Maggie brightened up. 'No, I've got a better idea. Let's keep it until next week and then I can come down to Heathrow to see you off.'

'Are you sure you want to come? It could be very lonely for you coming back in the train all by yourself.'

'I've never been to Heathrow before, it would be great fun.'

'I would rather get my goodbyes over and done with. I hate those emotional scenes at airports.'

Maggie looked upset. 'If you don't want me to come then I won't.'

Isobel felt contrite. 'On second thoughts, I'd really like you to be there, but no one else.'

'Are you sure Bel?'

'I'm sure.'

They walked towards the bus stop. Maggie was smiling and happy, Isobel silent.

The trouble with having a lover is that everything you do and say bounces back at you as a reproach. It's like my mother

with me and Julia. Our lives are experienced by her as a negation of everything she stands for. Her attitude either silences me or forces me to invent a version of my life that will not panic her. Either way, our relationship is doomed to be inauthentic.

I am walking back into a life of deceit. Dad won't be there to make trouble for me but his absence will create other problems. Mum will be a mess and Julia will be feeling as guilty as hell, knowing her. Guilty because she loved him too much as a child. Guilty because she couldn't love him as an adult.

I'm guilty too, I ran away without ever telling him what I thought of him. I have the rhetoric and the passion of feminism, I have the insights, the knowledge, the experience. I confront strangers, I confront my lovers, I confront myself, everyone and everything except my parents and my sister. Mum lives for the day that I embrace the life of a married woman, Julia lives for my constant approval of her life. The potential for pain is horrific. I cannot bear to hurt them, yet I know that I am in danger of losing myself if I am not allowed to wear my true colours. It has taken me so long to achieve authenticity, I don't know if I can live without it any more.

They boarded the bus. Maggie was cheerful and talkative.

There was a note at the stationer's announcing Betty's next visit in two weeks time. Maggie said she'd ask Ethel over the same afternoon and then she and her mother could talk about the good old days in Meersbrook together.

'I don't think you should. Ethel doesn't know that we live in a dykes' house, she might feel awkward.'

'But she sussed us Bel, I know she did.'

'You live in a dream world at times, Maggie. It wouldn't be fair to ask Ethel to the house. It would worry and upset her.'

They argued all the way along Upper Valley Road. Maggie said that people should be forced to confront the fact that we exist and that we are ordinary women. Isobel agreed with her in principle but said we have to be careful how we do it. It's

not right to make an old woman like Ethel uncomfortable just to score a political point.

By the time they unlocked the back door they had reached a compromise of sorts. Maggie said she'd go over to see Ethel at Broomspring Lane to get some chocolate and while she was there she would tactfully sound her out. If all went well, she would then invite her over on the Thursday that Betty was planning to visit. Isobel smiled at the thought of Maggie being tactful but she gave her a big hug and praised her and told her she was her little love.

'Mum will be sorry she didn't see you to say goodbye.'

'I'll send her a postcard from New Zealand.'

'No don't do that, Dad reads her mail.'

'I'll send it here then.'

'Thanks, she'd like that.'

Maggie put the kettle on the stove and took the mugs out of the cupboard for tea. Isobel went outside into the yard to use the toilet. There was a used tampon floating in the toilet bowl. It looked like a fat red turd. She pulled the chain hard and watched it swirl away. Probably Hilary, she never had mastered the art of using the ancient plumbing. She sat there peeing and thought about the day in town and what had happened between her and Maggie at the art exhibition. One thing I won't miss is the way she hassles me when I use big words. The tragedy is that she is so bright, she's naturally clever but she won't believe me when I tell her that.

Isobel went inside and washed her hands in the scullery. She told Maggie about the tampon in the toilet.

Maggie said sweetly, 'She probably thought it was too sacred to flush, women's blood and all that.'

'You don't let me get away with anything do you.'

Maggie put her arms around her. 'I love teasing you, you bite like a fish.'

They drank their tea and cuddled up on the sofa. There was no sign of the others in the house although Maggie told Isobel she thought Hilary was up in the attic doing whatever

the hell she did up there all day. She'd heard boards creak, she'd called out come down and get a cuppa Hil, but there was no answer.

'Let her stew in her own juice, stuck-up old cow.'

'You're always talking about her,' said Isobel. 'I think you've got a soft spot for her.'

'I don't like her because she doesn't like me.'

'You don't give her a chance. You should make friends. Otherwise when I go you'll only have Rose to talk to in the house.'

'There's the new flatmate, Valerie whatshername, Rose's friend.'

'Is she going to take my room?'

'No, she's going to have mine. I don't want any one else in your room Bel, it would feel strange.'

Isobel wriggled uncomfortably. 'I should have got out of my wet clothes sooner. I smell like an old dog.'

'Shit, what wouldn't I give to jump into a lovely hot bath right now.'

'Let's boil some water and have a wash together.'

Maggie filled the Zip and Isobel brought up the big wash bowl from the basement. They spent the rest of the afternoon washing each other and rinsing the rain water from their hair. The kitchen smelt of soap and apple shampoo.

Outside, the rain ran gently down the old bricks in the yard. Water flowed down the kitchen window from the broken spouting. The drains sang and gurgled.

Inside, Maggie and Isobel toasted crumpets for their tea and drank their one cup of real coffee for the day. A warm river of yellow butter ran down Maggie's chin. She put out her tongue and tried to lick it off.

Isobel said, 'This is bliss, the rain is singing to me, I've got clean hair, all this and a cup of wonderful coffee.'

'You've got me too, don't forget about me.'

'As if I ever would.'

Isobel thought about the long journey ahead and her mother alone and bewildered in the house in Te Kauwhata. She thought about Julia and the last time she had seen her, pushing the car down the road in the middle of that terrible night, her long black hair blowing in the wind, her burning eyes, her voice thick with tears. She thought about being a stranger here, and the poverty she had seen in Sheffield. It suddenly occurred to her that her father's death was not the only reason she had agreed to return to New Zealand.

I feel the pull of the land, I should go home and give something back, even if only for a short time. I feel that I have unfinished business with Aotearoa. It's time I paid my dues.



10

Isobel is sitting in the tourist section of a jumbo jet on her way back to New Zealand. She is in the middle of a row and she is very uncomfortable. Her orange Hallmark pack is stuck underneath her knees. Her long legs are crowded up in front of her. She is trying without success to fall asleep. The woman on her left has a thin and haggard face. She eats sweets and biscuits continuously and sighs a lot. She offers Isobel some Smarties, she pours them from the packet into her dry white palm, they shine like small bright jewels in the twilight. Isobel declines, but later takes two wrapped toffees from the woman who tells her that her name is Mrs Bonnie Grooms and that she likes Harrogate and Coconut Creme the best.

On Isobel's right is a youngish man who has been drinking steadily ever since the plane left Heathrow. He keeps sipping away and looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

She stares ahead, she is reliving the journey down to London on the inter-city express. She remembers the landscapes that ran smoothly past her window, sad back yards, old quarries filled with filthy water, piles of brick and metal, dead things from a lost and golden age.

It was raining of course. The crooked spire at Chesterfield looked black and bent like a witch's hat. Maggie told Isobel one of the local legends; a village girl of dubious reputation entered the church in a white bridal dress and the tower laughed so much that it remained permanently bent. Isobel said, 'Typical anti-woman shit.' Maggie asked where her sense of humour had gone, she herself had thought it quite funny.

The rain shrouded the villages and fields in a gentle mist. The train was crowded. Maggie, trying to be cheerful, kept up a non-stop monologue of anecdotes and funny stories, while Isobel silently watched the fields unrolling beside them.

She admired Maggie for her desire to keep grief from their last day together but the bright chatter unnerved her. It was as if Maggie was trying to pump up the air with words that had no purpose other than holding back a great bird of loneliness that had begun to fold its black wings around her.

'Want a drink?'

Isobel stares at the man seated next to her. 'What?'

'Do you want me to order you a drink?'

'No.'

'It'll help you to sleep.'

She makes an effort. 'Okay, get me a brandy and soda please.' Maybe a drink would silence the sound of Maggie's chatter in her head and wash the taste of guilt lingering in her mouth from their last kiss.

'Have you read *Fear of Flying*?'

'Yes, ages ago.'

'Great book, don't you think?'

'No.'

He looks surprised. 'Surely you liked it. It's wonderful to read a woman writer who understands what sex is all about.'

'The book is a cop out, a fake, it says to men what men want to hear, it's not about us.'

He grins, 'Whew, you have strong views, what a refreshing change.'

Oh fuck, thinks Isobel, trust me to cop a feminist groupie. I had him down as a conservative business man but he's probably a bloody school teacher or something. Now I'll never get rid of him.

'What do you do?' he asks.

'I'm a funeral director.'

'No, seriously.'

'I bury the dead.'

He looks unsure of himself for the first time. Isobel hopes she has shut him up for good. No such luck.

'I suppose someone's got to do it.'

She sighs and sips at her brandy.

'My name is David Potts, what's your

'Maggie.'

'Just Maggie?'

'That's it.'

'Like Cher?'

'Yeah.'

'Come to think of it you remind me of her, same profile and amazing black hair.'

Isobel thinks why the fuck did I start this? I'll never shut him up.

She turns to Mrs Bonnie Grooms and asks if she has any more of those delicious toffees. The woman looks pleased that Isobel has spoken to her. She rustles around in the bag of toffee wrappings. Oh good, she says, there's one left and you can have it. Isobel says you keep it, but the woman places it in her hand; it's a Nutty Delight. Isobel chews it with her mouth open and slurps the last of her brandy from her glass. She turns to Potts when he speaks to her, he wants to know where her place of business is.

'Anywhere and everywhere mate, death is quite popular you know, everyone has a go at it sooner or later.'

'I'm beginning to think you're having me on.'

She grins at him and places one long brown finger around

the toffee caught on her back teeth and hoicks it foward to the front of her mouth.

He drains his glass and yells out to the flight attendant to get him another. She leans over from an empty seat behind Isobel and whispers, 'I could move you to another seat.'

'I can handle him, but if any one moves from their seat why not him? He's the one getting pissed not me.'

'Point taken Madam, just let me know if he gets out of hand.'

Mrs Bonnie Grooms overhears and makes a tut tut noise with her tongue. They drink too much when it's free, she says, they should make them pay for it. Isobel says oh they pay all right, he'll be sorry in the morning.

Outside, the clouds are flooded with apricot light from the last rays of the setting sun. There is no sensation of movement. Isobel feels as if she is hanging in the stratosphere, suspended above the world. She loves the idea that she is completely at the mercy of events at this moment, the crew, the weather, the silver chariot that she rides.

There is nothing I can do, nothing I have to decide. It almost hassles me to death having to plan travel, but once the wheels and the wings are in motion there is a wonderful inevitability to it all. I would like to stay in this space forever, circling endlessly around the planet. Someone to bring me food, someone to wash my body, someone to dress me. Sunrise after sunrise, sunset after sunset, the indigo skies of night flowing in and out like tides of black water, a return to a life without thought, without desire.

Mrs Bonnie Grooms says candyfloss, the clouds look like candyfloss. It reminds me of fairs and things, of merry-go-rounds and hotdogs, children in fancy dress with painted faces, pizzas and pickles and ice-cream.

She sees food in everything, thinks Isobel. I am surrounded by addicts. That man with his booze, this woman with her junk food.

The lights go on in the plane, the candyfloss disappears. Mrs Grooms rises from her seat and announces that she's going to the loo before they serve dinner. She disappears towards the back of the plane.

David Potts tries once more to engage Isobel in conversation. 'What sort of books do you like then? You interest me, I don't meet many women like you, in my line of business as it were.' His voice is becoming slurred, his speech fragmented. It is obvious that he wants Isobel to ask him about his work, he wants to talk about himself.

Isobel finds it strange to be in a situation where a man sees her as sexually available. She feels a momentary feeling of compassion for him before she moves in for the kill.

'Oh I read anything on hermeneutics, critical theory, phenomenology, that sort of stuff.'

He looks at her and laughs uneasily. 'Interesting,' he murmurs. 'Very interesting.'

Isobel is tempted to catch him out by asking him what he thinks of Habermas's work on distorted communication but she loses interest. Maybe I shouldn't put men down like this, but it's not my fault that he's got too much ego to admit that he doesn't know what the fuck I'm talking about. They gave me the words, the knowledge, the theories. I can't resist the irony of using the patriarch's words as bullets against one of their own.

The dinner trolleys rattle down the narrow aisle between the rows of seats. Dinner is seafood cocktail, lamb chops and vegetables. Isobel refuses her tray of food. The flight attendant says if only Madam had told us she was a vegetarian we could have ordered her a special meal. Isobel feels sorry for her, she looks tired and flustered.

'Please don't worry about me, I never eat airline food. It doesn't agree with me.'

The flight attendant hovers over her anxiously. 'We can order Madam something at Bombay.'

Isobel wants to please her. 'Thanks very much, that would be nice.'

'I could have eaten your dinner,' whispers Mrs Grooms. 'They never give you enough on these flights. It's more of a snack than a meal.'

Isobel tries not to watch her eating. She pulls small pieces of meat from her lamb chop and complains that there is hardly anything on it. She finishes everything quickly, her tray is a battlefield of bones and plastic. There is a single piece of lettuce from the seafood cocktail left drowning in Thousand Island dressing. Isobel can't help staring at it; she gives it a five-second reprieve. She counts silently to three before a wrinkled white hand descends and swirls the green leaf in the pink sauce. There is a noise of sucking. It goes down, then up again, until the plastic dish is wiped clean.

Isobel is angry with herself for feeling disgusted with the woman.

Here I am, living in a world that persecutes me and my kind, and I am feeling hate for this poor woman who is trying to silence the pain in her body by singing it to sleep with food. I have no right to judge her. We are two of a kind. What she seeks through taste, I seek through making love. But just as she can never satisfy her appetite, I cannot live for sex alone. I cannot take the confusion that comes when the soft hand of a lover lies side by side with the cruel words of critical attack.

I desire a pure lover, one who adores my body, but I alone must be the author of my soul.

She opens her pack and takes out a bag of fruit and nuts. She offers the bag to her neighbour who takes a handful and says, 'How kind, I adore dried fruit, it's the sweetness I love. I can't imagine a world without sweetness. Did you read about that woman who got a million dollars because she crashed her car and lost her sense of taste?'

'No.'

'Imagine, never to taste a date again.'

Isobel, her mouth full of fruit, agrees that it would indeed be terrible.

Compensation is paid for loss of a limb or a bodily sensation like taste, but never for a loss like mine. How can you calculate the pain of the immobility that comes with having too many choices, too many roads to travel? I fear the paralysis that seizes me when I have to make decisions. I know that my choice becomes my fate. If I go this way, or do that thing, I am irrevocably fated to endure what comes next. Like this journey home. Already, there are certain events laid out before me in the future that I must live through because I have decided to make this journey. I have no control over my dependence on Julia for money and shelter when I arrive, no control over what Mum will say to me about the night I ran away. I go forward with the awful knowledge that I am the sole author of my pain.

She puts on the headphones and drowns herself in the music of Benjamin Britten. The haunting voice of Peter Pears displaces the mundane sounds of fork against plate, the subdued chatter of the travellers, the cries of a young baby. She closes her eyes, the music plays in her head, the plane bucks and lifts underneath her body. She drifts into a doze. The music becomes the immediate reality, and the hundreds of people trapped in their seats, enclosing her in discomfort and noise, take on the colours of an uneasy dream.

She feels the plane begin to descend. She opens her eyes and stretches. The woman on her left is asleep with her mouth open. The seat on her right is empty.

She leaves her seat with difficulty and stands up in the aisle so that she can see the thin light of dawn spreading across the clouds. The flight attendant asks her to sit down, they will be landing in a minute or two. She tells Isobel that some vegetarian food has been ordered for her and that it will be brought on board when they land in Bombay. Isobel thanks her again.

She struggles back to her seat. Mrs Bonnie Grooms opens her eyes and apologizes for being in the way. Isobel regains her seat and braces herself. She hates landings, hates the feeling that she is diving down through the air against tremendous resistance. She stretches her body up so she can see through the window across the aisle. The plane banks and turns. She gets an impression of a vast disorderd city below; huge towers with broken windows, ruined shelters, the vitality and terror of urban poverty.

The plane runs smoothly down the runway. Small huts are crowded right up to the high wire fence. Mrs Grooms asks do people really live in those shacks? Oh the poor poor things.

The airport buildings look shabby and neglected. Two seedy-looking vultures droop their untidy feathers on the roof. The captain tells the passengers they cannot leave the plane for security reasons. The doors open and a group of tiny men carrying brushes, pans and dusters enter the plane. They bring with them a spicy warm heat, the life of the city.

Isobel closes her eyes. She wants to get off the plane and lose herself in this place of murdered buildings where vultures wait. The struggle for survival is laid out in the open, no bullshit, no pretence, unlike the place that I've come from and the place that I'm going to. I could lose myself in such a city, I could be free here.

Mrs Grooms whispers it's funny to see men doing the cleaning. Isobel opens her eyes and sees a man on his hands and knees in the aisle. He works at tremendous speed, brushing up dirt from the carpet into his brush and pan. The woman continues, my Auntie lived here in the old days, she told me about the untouchables, they do all the dirty work.

Isobel feels terrible. She wants to smile at the man, she wants to communicate with him, she wants to tell him I'm an untouchable too. It's no use. He works frantically and doesn't raise his head. She feels angry with herself for romanticizing the poverty of this culture. I'm no better than the rest, she thinks sadly, I'm just a tourist too. I drift around the world,

transposing the suffering of others into my own desires, as if they exist merely to provide picturesque stimulation for my jaded senses.

The men leave the plane, the passengers sit patiently in the shimmering heat. At last, they taxi off and lift effortlessly into the sky. There is no sign of David Potts. Isobel stretches out across the empty seat next to her.

She drifts off into a doze. Mrs Grooms's voice recedes into a soft background noise like the sound of gentle water retreating with the tide. Isobel thinks about Erlene, the silent woman in Janet Frame's novel, *Scented Gardens for the Blind*. She was impressed with Julia's analysis although she had told her in a letter that Janet Frame would probably have a fit if she knew what feminist academics were doing to her work.

I have a fear of my words becoming public property. This is why I'll never put pen to paper again. My accursed awareness of the dangers of language is my downfall.

Logophobia, the irrational fear of words.

I fear committing myself to any one form of logic. I dread the thought of one day finding myself amongst others around a metaphoric fire, burning the iconic fuel of one dogmatic standard of excellence. It would only be a matter of time before the *aristoi* pointed me out as a dangerous member of the collective.

Language can kill.

I find it difficult to cope with the knowledge that logic is a collective human invention. Logic has no life beyond experience, it exists as the noblest form of fiction. We invent a science of thinking that pretends to come from superior beings, Goddesses, Gods, Philosophers, but it comes from nobody but us.

I couldn't write my doctoral thesis because I knew that whatever I said could be said in a hundred different ways. Every sentence I wrote opened up infinite possibilities of other ways of speaking. I had to put down my pen, I had no choice.

I had to kill language before it killed me.

Sometimes I envy Julia her search for certainty, but I know she'll never find it. It has no existence outside language. At least she has her desire to cling to, she has her quest. I have nothing left to do but live until I die.

The plane lands at Perth. Isobel goes into the rest room in the transit lounge. Her abdomen is uncomfortable, she feels as if she is going to bleed any minute. Sure enough, there is a familiar streak of thin red blood in the toilet bowl.

Fuck, this is all I need, I wish I'd put some sponges in my pack.

She gets a tampon from a dispenser and a pair of clean knickers out of her pack. The tampon feels hard and uncomfortable in her vagina compared with the soft sea sponges that she has used for years. She leaves the rest room and finds a seat in the transit lounge. Australian voices surround her. A wave of longing engulfs her, she feels tears come into her eyes. Now where the hell did that spring from, she wonders. I must have been away from home too long.

They board the plane. Somewhere between Perth and Adelaide the flight attendant brings Isobel a plate of bright yellow dahl and a bowl of rice. She tries to eat it but the dahl tastes bland and the rice is soggy. Mrs Grooms is asleep and Isobel has no choice but to surrender the uneaten food back to the reproachful hands of the flight attendant. She feels like a naughty child who has refused to eat her dinner after her mother has spent hours slaving over a hot stove.

They land in Adelaide. Isobel paces around the transit lounge to exercise her legs. Her feet are swollen and puffy. She replaces her tampon and washes her face. She feels tired and hungry and alienated from her body.

The plane takes off. There is a new passenger sitting beside her. Isobel is disappointed to find that she has lost her extra space.

She is feeling annoyed with her body for bleeding a week too soon. She thinks that it must be the shock of moving from one side of the world to another too quickly. No time

for a gentle transition. She wonders if the same thing happened to women in the old days when people travelled around the world in ships.

I would like to float slowly across the bucking wet skin of the planet instead of falling through stark sunrise and blue black night in the stratosphere. The sea would lift my ship with the buoyancy of salt, a safe movement in a natural world. A ship is just one form of life travelling amongst other aquatic forms: dolphin, plankton, sea-horse, whale. Up here, there's only the laws of aerodynamics between me and the immense indifference of space.

I'm scared, I don't know what I'm going to do when I get home. If my fate is created by the initial decisions I make, I should gracefully accept what happens to me. But how much control do I really have? I chose this journey yes, but I did not choose to be born a woman in this particular historical moment in this particular country. Am I catching Julia's illness, the need for certainty?

It's a Pakeha disease, this need for security, the alienation of the colonial identity and all that shit. The boring obsession of male writers in my country, forever wanting to know who we are, the 'we' referring to Pakeha males. Where does this leave me? I'm a woman with a forbidden identity coming back to live in a community of women who have been taught to see themselves as mindless idiots. Why am I coming home? I couldn't cope with it when I pretended to be heterosexual. What's it going to be like now that I'm out?

Isobel sighs and rearranges her cramped legs underneath the seat in front of her. Mrs Grooms offers her some salted peanuts, Isobel declines with thanks.

The new passenger sitting on her right is a hairdresser from Rotorua. She speaks in a high-pitched voice with a broad accent. Isobel likes the novelty of listening to a real New Zealand voice again. She almost admires the woman's ability to talk so swiftly for so long without needing any feedback from her listeners.

Mrs Grooms breaks into the monologue. 'Oh you're a widow, me too.'

'When did you lose your hubby?'

The two women swap stories on the horrors of being left alone in the world.

Isobel listens to them. She is interested in what they have to say because her mother is now a member of their sad ranks, the useless ones, the widows. Sally's marriage was a disaster, it turned her into a compulsive cleaner who was never locked up or 'treated' because her problem was entirely appropriate to the notion of what women are supposed to be in New Zealand; the Custodian of the House. She should be free now that Denby is gone, but she won't be. She will begin to play the most pathetic role of her life, that of the man-less woman.

Isobel could hardly believe her eyes when she had first seen widows described as 'relict of...' in death notices in *The Times*. But now she begins to think it's the only honest word to describe what is left when the husband has gone. A relict is a survivor of a past life, in limbo because what defined her in the first place is absent. Isobel dreads seeing her mother as the relict of Denby, it will be more painful to watch than seeing her as a wife.

The women chatter away. Isobel feels afraid because she cannot like these women, they make her as angry as men do. She cries silently and in anguish, where is my place, who can I love? I cannot love men, they are too powerful and too violent, they cannot live without bursting out with bombs, fists, worlds of death and fantasy, they would even make wars with the stars.

I cannot love most women, they fear me. I provide another form of life that is so dangerous to their lives with men that they must either kill me or kiss me. But I want neither to be killed nor kissed. I want to be myself, a serious woman, one who desires to be taken seriously.

Nobody listens to what a lesbian says, everything she says is mediated through the category of lesbian. Who really speaks

when a lesbian speaks? The category speaks, not the woman.

She sits between the two women with her earphones on. She wants to drown out the voices of Mrs Grooms and the hairdresser. She listens to the words of folk songs sung by Peter Pears. The songs are about love, death and loss. Nothing changes.

The plane flies low over the Manukau Harbour. Isobel cranes her neck to see as much as she can of the green fields and the blue sea below. It is almost dusk. There is a fine rain falling, wisps of vapour drift past the wings of the plane. The country looks wet and lush and clean.

The plane lands with a bump and rolls to a stop. Isobel tries to stand up, her right leg has gone to sleep. A flight attendant is spraying the cabin with insecticide. He asks her to remain seated until the spraying is completed. She sits, feeling embarrassed.

The passengers leave the plane. Isobel waits until Mrs Grooms and the hairdresser have left their seats before she shoulders her small pack. Her leg still feels numb and she rubs her calf to try and restore the circulation. When she reaches the window next to the doorway of the plane, she can see Julia standing alone on the observation deck. She is dressed in a black leather jacket. Her long black hair flows down her back. The rain is falling on her, she is standing motionless, waiting. She looks as if she has taken root.

Isobel feels a rush of love and compassion for her sister. She stops and tries to wave to her but the flight attendant says, keep moving Madam, please don't hold up the queue.

She loses sight of Julia when she enters the tube connecting the plane to the custom hall. Officials dressed in uniforms stare at her, check her passport, unpack her gear. She feels as if her whole being is under review.

At last she completes the formalities of re-entry. She pushes her luggage trolley into the passenger terminal. Julia is there, standing tall and dark and wet at the back of the crowd.

Isobel cries out to her and then they are holding each other and laughing and crying.

‘You look wonderful Isobel!’

‘God you’re wet! How is Mum coping? Has it been too awful for you?’

They cling to each other. Isobel notices people staring at them. She remembers that this always happens when she and Julia are together. They are both nearly six feet tall.

Stare at the freak show, you buggers, she thinks. I’m back home for one minute, and already you’re making me feel different.

‘Come on, let’s get the hell out of here, this place is making me nervous.’

They walk out into the car park. The distinctive smell of an Auckland winter’s night hits Isobel in the face. She sniffs the air.

Julia puts her arm around her. ‘Are you glad to be home Isobel?’

‘I’m feeling happier about it now, it’s lovely to see you again. Are you okay?’

Julia doesn’t answer. She is busily unlocking the door of a metallic green Toyota Corolla.

‘Whew, you’ve gone up-market.’

‘It’s only a hired car.’

‘You shouldn’t have gone to any expense on my account.’

‘The Fiat is on its last legs. Besides, you’re worth it.’

They drive away into the gentle rainy dusk. There is no wind, the tall trees along Memorial Drive are standing quietly in the rain.

‘The thing is,’ says Julia, ‘I don’t know what the hell to do about Mum. She’s acting very strangely.’

‘What’s she doing?’

‘Nothing, that’s the odd thing. You wouldn’t know that she has just lost her husband. The house is as spotless as ever. She seems quite cheerful, but she’s said some strange things. Vera Sutton rang me the other day, she’s quite worried.’

‘What things?’

‘Mum said Dad died because of what Stanley did.’

‘What’s Uncle Stanley got to do with it?’

‘God knows. I think we should go and see her as soon as you’ve recovered from your journey.’

‘Sure.’

‘Sorry we had to have the funeral before you could get home.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

They drive through the dark wet deserted streets of the suburbs and come to the ramp leading to the southern motorway.

‘Here we go.’ says Julia. ‘Sunday night, hoonerama on the motorway, the ski boys are driving home.’

Isobel detects a note of panic in Julia’s voice. ‘You’re a good driver, I feel perfectly safe with you.’

Julia laughs. ‘Your voice sounds pommie, you’ve caught their accent.’

‘You make it sound like an infectious disease.’

Julia says soberly, ‘I can’t bear you to be any different Isobel. I want you to be the same as you were when you left me.’

Oh shit, thinks Isobel. Here we go, I knew it wouldn’t be long before she started to sing her old song again. ‘I went away because I wanted to live overseas, in a place where nobody knew me.’

‘You left me to cope with the family hysterics.’

‘I’ve lived with guilt for two years. But I don’t feel guilty anymore. I have banished it from my life forever, I refuse to feel it.’

Julia hesitates for a moment, then asks, ‘Was it hard leaving?’

‘Awful. The only thing that comforted Maggie was my promise to return as soon as I can get enough money.’

‘How long are you going to be here?’

‘I don’t know.’

'It could be ages before you go back, there's not much work around Hamilton at the moment.'

'I'm not interested in working.'

'But how will you survive?'

'The welfare state is a wonderful thing.'

Julia laughs. 'You haven't changed. It's great to have you back.'

Isobel touches her sister's arm. She tells her she loves her but not to count on having her around for more than a few months. She tells her that she has made the decision to look for a room in a lesbian household. It is no longer possible for her to live with straights.

Julia protests. 'But I am your sister, you should be with me. Bob doesn't mind, in fact he would enjoy your company. He said he gets a bit lonely during the day.'

So the fool is getting sick of playing at housewife, thinks Isobel. Another good reason for me not to stay too long with them.

The thought of spending all day alone with her brother-in-law fills her with horror. He is one of the most self-satisfied and irritating men she has ever met. She has never understood why Julia believes that she and Bob get on well together. Bob probably told her they did, and Julia believes everything that Bob tells her. He always sounds so sure of himself, he speaks firmly and positively, and Julia's craving for certainty holds her to this man who is nothing but a polished practitioner of the 'let me tell you what you really mean' school.

'So he's going cold on the idea.'

'What?'

'Running the house and looking after the kids.'

'Oh no, he really likes it, and he's good at it too, much better than I ever was.'

Isobel changes the subject. They reach the end of the motorway. The rain has stopped and the moon has appeared from behind a slowly moving cloud. The traffic has thinned out. Julia is in full flight, she is talking about her job. Names

and ideas pour from her mouth; Lydia, Dr Berry, Jeanine, Wendy. She weaves her way through a maze of conflict, she names who is for theory, who is for affirmative action, who said what to whom and the reason they said it.

Isobel is feeling very tired, her body has suddenly collapsed in on itself. Her eyes fill with tears.

Julia glances sideways and is shocked to see her sister's tears. She thinks she has said something to upset her.

'I'm not crying, it's jet lag. I've got to the stage where if I can't lie down and stretch my back, I'll die.'

Julia apologizes for not noticing how quiet her sister had become. 'Trust me to keep raving on about my job when you're too tired to take it in.'

She pulls over and stops the car. 'Hop in the back love. I brought a blanket and a pillow, I thought you might need to sleep on the way home.'

They get out of the car. Isobel lies down on the back seat. Her knees are bent up against her breast but at least her head is down. Julia plumps up the pillow and tucks the tartan rug around her sister. Isobel feels like a little girl being put to bed by her mother.

Julia gets back into the front seat of the car. They move off. Isobel's face is a few feet from the black waterfall of her sister's hair. She can't resist putting out a hand and stroking it.

'It's so beautiful, a silken cloak,' she murmurs.

'Shhh, go to sleep.'

Isobel's last vision before she finally loses consciousness is the coal-burning power station at Meremere. It is lit up like a bizarre Christmas tree. Smoke hangs motionless above the chimneys in the windless night. There is a harsh smell of burning grit.

Isobel tries to say *requiescat in pace Aotearoa*, but then forgets what she is thinking and drifts away into a dreamless sleep.



11

Sunday night, 8 September

The smell of apple blossom comes quietly to my window. Spring has a special silence all of its own.

My garden is terrible in its beauty. It presents a flawless skin, aflame with flowers, but the bees must sing their fatal song; they carry a honeyed sword.

It's like my life, my mind, my body. Alive on the outside, sweet death within. Like Monique Wittig, I have discovered a desire to make love with more than what appears to be. I need to break through the false skin of structure, to where truth lives. I would like to kiss the very bones and blood of pure experience.

Bob says he's worried for me, I'm working too hard. If only he knew the burdens we are asked to carry.

They used to accuse witches when things went wrong, now feminists get the blame. They say that feminists are causing men to be more violent and that we are destroying family life. I don't understand, I don't want to destroy my family. I can't imagine my life without them.

Isobel told me she believes there is a grain of truth in what they say except that the extent of our powers is absurdly exaggerated. We are more assertive and this makes the Boys angry with us. Their free lunch is over and they know it.

The European witches were accused of stealing penises and keeping them as pets. They were said to hide them in birds' nests and feed them with pieces of bread and rotten meat. This accusation was grounded on the belief that even when separated from its owner, the penis had a life of its own. The Boys can live with that. The act of keeping a penis alive to do the work of the devil gives recognition to the mystical power of the dick.

Isobel says the biggest sin that dykes commit is their rejection of the male genitalia and all that it symbolizes. To break a ball is to recognize its power. Dykes are not ball-breakers, they don't care enough to be bothered. Isobel told me this is why she doesn't fight the Boys at a formal level any more. She says she has invented a new feminist stance, the Politics of Indifference.

She refuses to bring any more firewood to fuel their flames. Their logic of woman-hate is kept alive by the stimulation that we provide, whether by love or critique. Neither confirm nor deny, that is the praxis of indifference.

I am awed by her intellect. When I am with her, the strength of her ideas binds me to her. I know, I feel, I believe that she is right.

I found the first few weeks after she returned home so difficult. There seemed to be unspoken tension between her and Bob. I challenged her about it. She told me she had changed a lot in England and she wasn't as tolerant of men as she used to be. I didn't understand, I asked her what Bob was doing wrong. She told me to forget it, it was nothing. I couldn't get her to say what was bugging her about him. It was much easier after she moved out and stayed with Lydia and Vivian while she looked for a house to rent.

I loved going to that house when she was there. I spent hours talking the night away. Bob started to get a bit funny about the amount of time I spent there and I had to tell him that I was working with Lydia on the course that we teach. He told me I was getting obsessed with work but he doesn't understand how I feel about gaining entry into the enchanted forest. I can't explain what it is that makes me feel so good about these women.

Isobel thinks it's more than being accepted for who I am. Lydia and Viv are true lovers, they create an ambience of hope that attracts people to them like moths around a candle.

It's deeper than this. They have a joy, a lust, a passion for ideas that hit me in the gut the first time I heard them speak. Ideas are not something added on, abstract, out there. These women make them breathe, scream, talk, sing, dance, they make them live. That is the flame that holds me to them. I warm my hands at the fire of the radiant absolute, not as Isobel suggests the drowsy coals of love.

I can't believe that she's been back in New Zealand for three months. I was very pleased when she found the farmhouse at Eureka. She said she had to take it, she couldn't resist living in a district with a name like that. Especially as the house is on a stretch of road called the Eureka Straight. Maggie would die laughing writing that on the front of her letters.

Now that she has found her house and is on the dole I feel safer. I know it will be a long time before she can return to England. I was clever, I told her she had to repay the money I lent her for her fare home. We don't need it but it will make it harder for her to save up to get back.

She came to visit us today. She looks wonderful, full of life, healthy and brown. Bob says it's because she is able to lead a self-indulgent life, she has nobody to worry about except herself. Not true. She is very worried about Mum, she rings her every day to check up on her.

I told her about Vera's phone call to me last night. Apparently Mum was seen hanging around the Spencers' house again. One of the Spencer brothers phoned Vera and warned her to keep her friend away from their house, or else.

It seems that Mum blames them for Dad's death. She made a dreadful scene at the inquest accusing them of drowning him so they could claim his maimai. We know that she's wrong, there is no evidence of any foul play, but for some reason that we don't understand she's become obsessed with the Spencers.

Isobel said they are typical small town hoons, but she knows they didn't do anything to Dad. It's a classic case of projection. Mum confuses them with her three brothers. She asked me if Mum had ever told me about the way they had terrorized her when she was young. I was very surprised. Mum has never said anything negative about her family except to tell me that her mother kept a dirty kitchen. She said she would rather die than ever hear us say that about her.

I wished that Isobel had told me about Mum's brothers sooner and I told her so.

'I didn't know myself until last week. Vera told me that Mum has dropped a few hints over the years about her brothers' behaviour and asked if I thought that this was the reason she was acting strangely over Dad's death. Vera said that she gets the impression that Mum was badly bullied by the three boys, Stanley in particular.'

'Do you think she was sexually abused?'

'That was the first thing I thought of too but there's no way I could ask Vera something like that, she'd burst a blood-vessel.'

'What are we going to do?'

She put her arms around me. 'Maybe we are worrying over nothing. She's still a slave to the house but that's a good thing because it keeps her occupied most of the time. All she is doing is standing outside the Spencer's house, she doesn't go on to the property, she's not breaking the law.'

'But don't you think it's weird? She goes at certain times, Vera said you could set your clock by her.'

Isobel said that sometimes when people are lonely they get into structured routines. She told me about an old woman called Ethel that she and Maggie had met just before she left England. This woman used to leave her house every day at the same time and walk around the streets of Sheffield. It was as if walking the streets was her work. It's possible that Mum is getting into some sort of pattern of behaviour that replaces the routine that she kept to when Dad was alive.

Isobel reassures me, I'm so glad that she's here. I couldn't cope with all this plus my job at the moment.

She asked me about my work. I told her the last three weeks had been the best part of the year so far, no lectures. Tomorrow, all hell will break loose. Jeanine tells me that the last term of the year is the worst.

I am finding it hard to get close to Jeanine, I don't think she likes me. I hate the way she talks about her husband, it makes me feel uneasy. It must be more than the economic privilege of marriage that holds her to him. I asked Lydia about it. She said that Jeanine uses the system to her own advantage but she doesn't do anything against her politics. She has a very clear view of the oppression of family life and she makes sure that she wins.

But what about love? Where does that fit in?

Lydia asked me what compromises I make in my own relationship but I couldn't think of any. I feel privileged to be with a man who takes responsibility for his children and who gives me the freedom to be myself. My relationship with Bob is light years ahead of the horror of my parents' marriage.

Looking back over the past few months, I feel reasonably happy with my progress. I have had some good feedback from students in all my courses especially the course that I teach with Lydia. She is a delight to work with. She agonizes over each lecture and over the progress of each student. She gives extra hours of tuition to the students who have problems with the course. She discusses my lectures with me before and after I present them, and gives me many helpful suggestions.

Isobel asked me how I was coping with the problem of assessment. I showed her the criteria of excellence that Peter Patterson worked out for me; the rules to use when judging the worth of academic writing.

She went into this rave about the fruitless desire of academics to impose order on language.

‘Surely language has its own order.’

‘But that’s just it. The order belongs to us, we are the sole authors, it doesn’t exist without our will, our desire. We choose, we choose, don’t you see that Julia?’

I was puzzled. I agreed with her, it was common sense I told her, so why the hell are we arguing?

‘This list of rules enables him to say I’d love to pass your work dear, but you haven’t come up to the standards of good scholarship. Don’t take it personally dear, I didn’t make the rules up, they are there, they exist, regardless of what you or I want.’

I thought Isobel had been talking to Jeanine, but she said she hadn’t. Jeanine had told me to watch out for Peter because he failed one student each year on principle. She had told me what he says to the student on these horrible occasions and Isobel had it almost word for word. It was uncanny.

I felt as if the ground had been cut from under me. I know that I need the reassurance of rules. Otherwise I’ll go through hell again with the breakdown of the familiar, the failure of nerve.

I love thinking about ideas in the abstract. I love the challenge of unpicking concepts and fitting them together with others that I have decoded. Why then did Isobel scare me so?

There, I’ve said it, I’ve written it down. Sometimes I am afraid of what my sister will say. Why haven’t I admitted this before? I fear certain words that she speaks, like ‘choosing’ and ‘responsibility’ and ‘desire’. I don’t want to decide the validity of one course of action over another, I want it to choose me.

I want to understand the world, I want to know the rock-bottom truth of everything, I want to peel away the skin that

covers up reality, yet there are certain words I cannot bear. They have the power to fling me into that dangerous sea of uncertainty where there is no beacon, no rock, no lighthouse. I am a mass of contradictions. I lecture on the politics of language, on the power of language to oppress, yet I am in the same class of women as Paulette who cannot hear the word 'cunt' without throwing up. Her agony is cleaner than mine. It is logical for her to fear that word given her experience as a pre-feminist woman living under siege in the war between the sexes. Where is the logic in my fear? I thought the war was over, I thought I'd helped to sign the truce.

Maybe Isobel is right, I should walk away, become indifferent. I feel things too much, I lean towards obsession, I want it all.

But I crave protection too. I want to build a house that is fortified against the night witch; walls of steel and silk, a roof of black solid words, a net of facts woven together into a cloth that will shelter my body against the chaos of her unspoken practice. Isobel thinks it's impossible to build this house. She believes that the desire for an architecture of certainty comes from a false hope of positivism. But I can't give it up yet, I'm not ready. She's lucky, she has found an alternative, but I could not live her life.

Isobel is more evolved than I am, she doesn't need a job or kids or marriage to shape her identity. I am more of this world. I need these structures, these people. If I strip away my work, my kids, Bob, this house, there is an emptiness which I could never imagine being filled. I think I am beginning to understand my mother and her need for order. She is lucky that she can fulfil her desire in the ordering of objects and the endless restoration of appearances. If only my salvation were so simple.

I never dreamt that I would envy my mother.

Thursday night, 12 September

Lydia and Jeanine came to my office today and told me that Dr Berry has returned and that she wants to meet us tomorrow

in her office for coffee and a chat. She was meant to return in June but had extended her leave until now. We were not told why.

Lydia said that Dr Berry had probably fallen in love with a beautiful woman in London and that's why she had delayed her return. Maybe she's come home to come out.

Jeanine said dream on Lydia, you won't rest until every woman in the world is a dyke.

'You're probably right, worse luck. I can't wait for that woman to fall in love and turn into a human being.'

'I've never been in love, what does that make me?'

'At least you fuck, she wouldn't know where to start. Anyway, my friend, do not mock falling in love, you never know when the axe will fall and it might just happen to be a labrys.'

Jeanine rolled her eyes at me and said see what I mean? They laughed and hugged each other. I envy Jeanine. She can say whatever she likes in front of Lydia. I am still a little wary of her.

I am very nervous about meeting Dr Berry tomorrow. It feels strange that I have worked here for a term and still haven't met my boss. I have re-read her paper, 'Voices From the Ghetto: The Tragedy of Fragmentation in Feminist Studies'. She is a very clear writer and I agree with some of the points she makes but I still feel uneasy about her underlying views.

I showed the paper to Isobel and she said that she was sick and tired of reading this sort of thing. She said all categories of knowledge are in ghettos, every discipline has to have a language world, a jargon, a meta-speak, why pick on women's studies? Men's studies are separated into disciplines, and what's more, they have expended a huge amount of energy to keep the great unwashed out. They built a moat around their knowledge for hundreds of years and put up a huge sign, 'Fellers Only, by order, God'.

I love the way she talks, she makes me laugh. I asked her if she ever considered going back to her studies but she went quiet and said she didn't want to talk about it.

I have tried to discuss it with her before but she won't do it. I asked Lydia about it and she told me that Isobel didn't want to upset me by running down the academic enterprise because she knows how much it means to me. I didn't realize how protective my sister is of me. I love her for it, but I wish that she would tell me what happened to her doctoral thesis and why she pulled out almost at the end of her studies. I need to know because Lydia has warned me that I will be pressured to enrol for my doctorate if I want to get tenure.

I have no choice, I must enrol, I need this job. I want to keep doing it forever and ever. I like earning the money to support Bob and the kids but it's deeper than that. I have always been afraid my children might devour me and I'll end up like my mother, making love to a house. Bob says fat chance, I'm too messy for that. He doesn't realize that it's only because I am continually diverted into the world of ideas that I do not become obsessed with keeping up a physical appearance of order.

Bob says that when he became a house-husband he realized how disorganized I was. He didn't notice it so much when he was working because he lived in a sort of unhappy fog. Now he has found out my slapdash ways, my corner cutting, my tendency to become a slob. He tells me that I am my own worst enemy because as I move through the house I litter the space around me.

I always try to go in deep. Instead of washing the dishes I will start to clean a wall or tidy a cupboard. Then I get interrupted and the contents of the cupboard will be all over the table. Then the kids want a snack and their mess is added to the confusion. Bob says I lack basic organizational skills, I have never learnt to do first things first. If you do the essentials, he says, the fussy bits will look after themselves.

It's the same with my academic work. Sometimes I'll spend hours looking up an obscure reference and then have to rush through the preparation for the main part of the lecture.

Isobel rang me today, we had a strange conversation. I got the feeling that she was trying to tell me something important but I couldn't get her to spell it out. I felt confused after we hung up. What's going on? One thing did please me though. She said she may not return to England just yet, she has a feeling that her life is about to go through one of those sudden shifts where all hell breaks loose and then settles down to something unimaginable in the present. I said great stuff and half your luck, I could do with a change. My life is bogged down in petty routines, it's hard to see if there's a grand scheme buried in it anywhere. She said you don't need an upheaval, you need more of the same. We all need some stability in our lives Julia, and you've got it made.

I was surprised at her change of tune. Can it be that my wandering sister is feeling the urge to stay in one place for a while?

I am beginning to feel tired. Bob is sound asleep on the bed and is snoring gently. I don't know how he can sleep with the light on and me hunched over my writing shelf like a broken poppy.

That's Isobel's description of me. When she stayed with us she used to peep through the door late at night to see if I was still working and I would sneak out into the kitchen with her to drink cocoa and have one last fag before I settled down for the night. She found it amusing to see my tall body folded up to fit under the desk. I said you make me sound like an old umbrella and she said no, a broken poppy.

To bed now. I'll fold up my crushed petals and steal away.



12

Julia, Jeanine and Lydia are walking along the corridor towards Dr Berry's door. Julia had agonized over what to wear this morning because she wants to make a good impression on Dr Berry. She decided to play it safe and settled on her black dress and cream linen jacket.

They stand outside the door. Julia takes a handkerchief out of her bag and wipes her sweating hands. Lydia knocks.

A strong deep voice calls out. 'Enter.'

They go in. Dr Berry is a small woman with short gray hair. For some reason, Julia had imagined her to be a tall, overweight woman. She can't remember where she got this impression from.

Dr Berry comes forward and takes one of Julia's hands between her own. Julia looks down at her, she is nearly a foot taller.

'Goodness, I had no idea you were so tall,' laughs Dr Berry. 'Sit down for heaven's sake, I'll get a stiff neck trying to talk to you.'

She sits behind her desk in a large revolving chair. 'It's so good to be back Jeanine.'

'You look wonderful.'

Lydia says innocently, 'Whatever you got up to in London, it must have suited you.'

'I achieved what I went there to do. It took rather longer than I had anticipated but I got there in the end.'

They drink coffee and chat about London and the state of the world. Julia begins to relax. Dr Berry is warm and friendly.

'I've been hearing good things about you Julia. Dr Patterson and Dr Burrows both seem to think that you are coping quite well so far.'

Lydia says, 'You haven't asked me yet.'

There is a small uncomfortable silence. Dr Berry asks her what she means.

'I am in a better position to make judgements about her teaching than they are. Why didn't you ask me?'

Julia feels afraid. The mood of the meeting is changing from one of warmth to one of antagonism. She feels annoyed with Lydia for using her to score a point against Dr Berry.

'Lydia, I would have been delighted to hear your opinion first, if it's so important to you. But you weren't answering your phone yesterday so I wasn't able to discuss it with you.'

'It's not important to me personally but the principle bloody is.'

'What do you mean?'

'You place a greater importance on what they think compared with a woman colleague.'

'You have misunderstood me.'

'I have understood you only too well. What if I contradict them? What if I say that Julia is lousy? Whose word would you take?'

'I take your point, but you are quite wrong if you assume I did it deliberately.'

Dr Berry looks annoyed. She asks Jeanine and Julia to leave her office for a few minutes so that she can have a private chat with Lydia.

Julia feels as if she is about to burst into tears. She rushes along the corridor to her room, pursued by Jeanine who asks her anxiously if she's feeling okay.

They go into Julia's office and close the door behind them. Julia lights a cigarette with a shaking hand. Jeanine tells her she shouldn't take what has just happened too seriously, there is always friction between Lydia and Dr Berry.

Julia says she is shocked at the antagonism between the two women and wants to know how the hell they work together.

'Dr Berry has to be conciliatory. If she wasn't, none of us would have a job. I have always found her easy to work with because I accept the need for her to run with the Boys to some extent. Lydia is an idealist, she wants the revolution now. The reason that Dr Berry and I get on okay is because we both understand the need for compromise. We wouldn't survive in this place for one day without it.'

Julia begins to feel a little better. Jeanine is making sense and it is obvious that she doesn't let the hostility between Lydia and Dr Berry spoil her working life. Julia hopes that she too can remain on good terms with Lydia and gain the respect of Dr Berry. She feels that it would fatal to take sides.

'We should be getting back,' says Jeanine. 'Do you feel better now Julia?'

'Yes thanks.'

They walk back towards Dr Berry's office. Wendy McDonald and Susan Jean are standing outside the closed door.

'What are you lot doing here?' asks Jeanine.

'Dr Berry said she wanted a meeting with the class reps but we're the only ones who've turned up so far,' says Susan.

Julia thinks Wendy looks amazing. Her long black clothes are draped in complicated layers around her body. She has snow white skin, bright red lips, black eye shadow.

'How's the essay going?'

‘Okay. Thanks for giving me an extension, it’s taking fucking yonks to do.’

Dr Berry opens the door and asks them to come in. Jeanine introduces the two students to her. She welcomes them and says she hopes that they are enjoying their studies.

Julia sneaks a look at Lydia. She looks rather subdued but manages to give Wendy a hug and a kiss.

‘Where are the others?’ asks Dr Berry.

‘They weren’t given much notice,’ says Lydia. ‘They probably don’t know about it.’

‘I asked Susan to ring around.’

‘I did, but some of them are still out of town, working.’

‘Oh well, we can’t do anything about it now but I do wish you had let me know. I would have postponed the meeting.’

Julia feels a peculiar sense of *déjà vu*. It’s like being a school-girl again. She is intimidated by Dr Berry just as she was by Miss Vickers, the head mistress at her high school. It’s the way that Dr Berry looks and speaks that brings up these old feelings of inadequacy. She’s English and well educated. Julia sits slumped in her chair. She wants to pour herself another cup of coffee but she knows that if she stands up she will do something clumsy.

Dr Berry and the others discuss the courses and the grievances of a small but vocal group of students who are demanding smaller workloads. Wendy says she agrees with them, the workloads are ridiculous. She herself is doing six courses and she’s supposed to be churning out one essay per week which is obvious bullshit because how the fuck can standards be maintained?

There is a small silence.

‘What do you think Susan?’ asks Dr Berry.

‘I agree with her.’

Another small silence.

‘The trouble is...’ begins Lydia.

Dr Berry interrupts her. 'I think I've got the picture Lydia. These young women have given me a good overview of the situation. I shall look into it.'

She suggests that the meeting of class reps be resumed next week when the others are here. Wendy and Susan stand up to leave the office. Wendy hesitates at the door and then turns and says to Julia, 'See you at lunch?'

Julia nods.

'Who is that extraordinary young woman?' asks Dr Berry.

'She's a friend of mine from Auckland,' says Lydia. 'Wendy McDonald, super-bright, radical politics.'

'She doesn't look like a student.'

'She likes to challenge stereotypes.'

'I know you think me old-fashioned Lydia, but I find her language hard to take. She's obviously had a good education. Why does she feel the need to use the language of the gutter?'

'Why don't you ask her?'

'I shall, I shall. It fascinates me. Did I mention to you that I finished the field work for my study of the class difference in feminist speech while I was in London? One of my findings is that middle-class feminists sometimes speak roughly in order to deny their class origins. I wonder if that's why Wendy does it?'

'Probably not, we don't have class here, so why would she need to?'

'We do so have class here,' says Jeanine. 'The gender one, the girls and the boys.'

'*Touché*, but it's not class in the English sense, nothing bloody like it.'

Dr Berry says, 'Oh it's so good to hear the same old arguments again. I'm starting to feel as if I'm really back home.'

They laugh. Julia tries to smile. She can't understand the relationships between these women. Surely they can feel the tension? She wants to talk to Lydia about everything that has happened here this morning. She needs to make sense of how she feels about Dr Berry.

The others go off to the staff room for lunch. Julia excuses herself. She doesn't want to be with them until she has sorted herself out. A small doubt about Lydia enters her mind. How can she go off to lunch with Dr Berry as if nothing had happened between them?

Bob is right about me, I'm a coward when it comes to conflict. I'm not going to tell him what's happened this morning, he'll just say welcome to reality Julia, it's a big bad world out there. Just because you're a feminist and work with so-called feminists, don't think you're immune.

Wendy waves to her from the end of the corridor. 'Coming down to the café?'

'Hang on a moment, I have to check up on Kezia. She's not very well.'

Wendy waits outside her office while she dials home. Bob answers. Kezia is a little better, her temperature is down and she's having a sleep. Julia thanks him, she doesn't know why.

'Everything okay?' asks Wendy.

'Yeah, all's well.'

They walk down through the warm air and the tender green leaves. Wendy tells Julia that spring is her favourite time, it makes a girl feel that life is worth living. There's an indefinable lightness in the body; it becomes what it should be, a faithful landscape of the soul. In spring, there is a glimpse of a pre-bourgeois world, a momentary return to a state of innocence.

Julia smiles at Wendy. For a self-confessed anarchist she has a lot of joy. Especially today. There is a sense of excitement around her, she burns with it.

They line up at the lunch-time queue. People stare at Wendy. Julia enjoys the stir that Wendy's beauty and style create.

They sit outside on the little wooden jetty by the artificial lake. A lone blue heron wades at the edge of the water. Julia tosses it a piece of bread but a mallard swims quickly towards it and gets there first.

'Bloody ducks!' says Wendy.

‘My father died while duck shooting.’

‘Yeah, Bel said.’

‘Isobel?’

‘She told me all about it the other night.’

Julia finishes eating her bread roll and bites into her apple. The light breeze ripples through the young birch leaves above their heads. Wendy’s blonde fringe moves gently in the wind. The bright sunlight transforms her made-up face into a glazed red and white mask. Julia feels a momentary compassion for her, this rich clever young woman, who needs to construct a physical barrier between herself and the world. The intellect is not enough. The body too must construct a politics of survival. Maybe this is where I have gone wrong. I was teased so much about my height when I was young that all I wanted was to be normal, anonymous, short. I concentrated so much on trying to conceal my height that I forgot to forge a positive image for my body. I have never found a style, a way of presenting myself to the world that feels right for me.

‘I should cut my hair,’ she says.

Wendy looks puzzled. Julia laughs. ‘Just thinking aloud. What do you think? Would it suit me?’

‘You have such a lovely face, any hair style would suit you.’

Julia feels ridiculously pleased at Wendy’s comment.

Wendy hesitates, then says, ‘I hope you don’t mind that Isobel and I talked about you and your father.’

‘I didn’t know that you two were friends.’

Wendy says quickly, ‘I met her at Lydia and Viv’s a few weeks ago.’

‘Funny, she didn’t say anything to me. Does she know that you’re taking two of my courses?’

‘Of course. She said she was going to mention it to you, she must have forgotten.’

‘What did you think of Dr Berry’s reaction to your complaints about the workloads?’

‘I wasn’t surprised.’

‘What do you think of her?’

‘She’s an old-fashioned girl from way back, a walking talking dinosaur.’

Julia laughs. ‘That’s not quite how I would describe her.’

‘How would you describe her?’

Julia hesitates for a few seconds, then says, ‘I have to admit she makes me feel a bit inadequate.’

‘How come?’

Julia recovers herself. ‘She comes across as very professional and controlled.’

‘Yeah, a fucking dinosaur. Someone once told her that’s how university lecturers are supposed to behave and she’s sticking to it.’

‘She’s not dogmatic though.’

‘She doesn’t need to be. She gains control over people by showing her disapproval but it doesn’t wash with me. I’ve had years of practice with my mother with that particular type of emotional blackmail. It’s simple to fight back once you know how.’

‘Really?’

‘You tell yourself you don’t need their approval, you tell them to take a flying fuck at a pavlova, anything.’

‘It wouldn’t work with my mother.’

‘Bel says...’

‘Go on,’ says Julia.

Wendy hesitates. ‘I’d better not say.’

Julia feels hurt and angry with Isobel for discussing her with a student. The trouble is, it cuts down my authority, makes me look a fool. It must have been something negative, otherwise Wendy would have told me what it was.

How easy it’s been for Isobel to make friends since she came to Hamilton. The closeness of dykes. Once, Isobel was all mine. I was her only friend in the world before she came out and went to live in England. Now, she has a community of women friends to love her and be with her. They accept her unconditionally, she has done nothing to earn their love. I have put work in, I have made an effort, but they only accept

me because of her. Why do I get the feeling that I am about to be shut out of the enchanted forest?

Wendy says she must go to her one o'clock class, the lecturer is one of those punctual bastards.

Julia is glad to see her go. She is feeling annoyed with herself for revealing her vulnerability to Wendy. She wants Wendy to admire her, to see her as a strong woman, one of the new breed.

Julia decides to get away from the campus for a while. She drives home and parks the car in the driveway. She can see Bob bending over in the vegetable garden pulling up weeds.

'Come and look at this!'

She walks over to where he is working the rich brown soil.

'Look at the worms. This compost is bloody fantastic.'

Julia feels a momentary feeling of envy. His life is so simple compared with hers.

'How was it?' he asks.

'She gave me some positive feedback from other lecturers.'

'That's good.'

'I suppose so.'

He shakes the soil from his hands. 'Let's go in, you sound as if you could do with a drink.'

They go into the house. Kezia calls out from the toilet, 'I want to get up now, I'm all better.'

'No you're not,' says Bob. 'Get back to bed at once young lady.'

Julia sits at the kitchen table. Bob opens two cans of beer and Julia lights up a cigarette. He asks her what happened at the staff meeting this morning. She tells him about the discussion on heavy workloads and how shocked Dr Berry was at Wendy's language and appearance.

Bob laughs. 'Wendy's wonderful, a real original. I love the thought of that bastard McDonald having a daughter like her, it's poetic justice.'

'I didn't know you knew her father.'

'I know of him. He's a notorious landlord in Auckland.'

'She doesn't get on with him.'

'Who would, the man's a prick. I bet he hates the thought of her being a dyke. Mind you, so do I. She's so gorgeous, I can't help feeling it's a waste.'

'That's what Lydia and Viv say about me.'

He looks startled. 'What the hell do they mean?'

'The same as you do except in their case it's because I don't turn on to women.'

Bob grins sheepishly, '*Touché*'. He stands up and opens the fridge door to get some more beer.

'Haven't you got a class this afternoon?'

'Yeah, my awful work tutorial, the silent one.'

'Why have you come home then?'

Julia shrugs and says she's not sure, maybe she needed to get away from the place after the stress of the meeting.

'What else happened?'

Julia gives in and tells him about the scene between Lydia and Dr Berry. He laughs and says it sounds just like the bloody office he used to work in except somewhat more deadly. Julia interrupts him, she tells him that's the weird thing, Lydia more or less accused Dr Berry of pandering to the Boys which is the worst thing ever to say to a feminist, and then off she goes to lunch with her as if nothing's happened.

He takes one of her hands in his. She knows what's next, he always does this before he gives her one of his lectures. She wonders which one it will be today. The one about being too emotionally involved, not rational enough?

'You take everything too much to heart Julia.'

'I knew you were going to say something like that.'

'Like what?'

'Mention my feelings.'

He frowns. 'I don't what the hell you're talking about. I'm not saying you shouldn't feel things.'

'What are you saying then?'

Bob drops her hand and drains the last of the beer from his can. 'I have to live with you and it hasn't been very bloody easy the last few months.'

She opens her mouth to interrupt him but he won't let her speak.

'Let me finish. I love you and I don't want you to go down the tubes again. You've got to keep things in proportion, for all our sakes. The thing is, Julia, you've changed, I feel it, the kids feel it.'

'How?'

'It's hard to put into words. You're resistant, you don't listen to me anymore, not like you used to. You stay up late writing in that bloody book of yours, you don't come to bed until I'm asleep, you've withdrawn from Kezia.'

Julia holds her cigarette up to her mouth with a trembling hand. 'I had no idea you felt like this, you should've told me sooner.'

'I didn't want to add to your stress. I know how hard you've been working. I've tried to run things smoothly here so that you could put all your energy into your work.'

He stands up and throws the empty beer can into the kitchen tidy.

Julia feels tears come into her eyes.

'See what I mean? I can't say anything to you without you getting upset. We have to be able to discuss things without you going off the deep end. I hate making you cry, but we have to talk things through, especially now that we've changed our lives so much. Otherwise we're not going to make it.'

Julia feels afraid. Something solid in her life is melting and dissolving, changing form, becoming something other than itself. It's like her recurring nightmare where she and Isobel are lost in a sea of churning milk, and words change from blood to stone, curd to rock, skin to bone.

Bob holds her. She feels his warmth and sweat, she smells the beer on his breath. She pushes him away.

He looks hurt. 'Don't be like that.'

She tries to say she's sorry but the words won't come. She walks to the kitchen window and looks out into the garden.

'Don't start brooding. We'll talk about it tonight.'

She nods. He goes out on to the back porch and pulls on his gardening boots.

'Check up on Kezia will you Julia?' he calls.

Julia goes into the little girl's bedroom. Kezia is lying sideways across her bed, sound asleep. She is breathing noisily. Julia listens to her for a few moments. There is a jar of Vicks on the bedside table. Julia smears some on a white paper handkerchief and places it near Kezia's face.

She leaves the room and collects her things for the rest of the afternoon. She opens the door of the Fiat. Bob is shovelling compost into the wheelbarrow. She calls out to him that Kezia is out like a light, a bit blocked up but not too bad, she'll see him at teatime. He waves the spade in acknowledgement.

Julia parks the car in the staff parking area. Chinese elms stand in thin lines along the pathway where she walks. She feels a strange sense of displacement. She takes a deep breath and raises her arms above her head. Someone comes up behind her.

'Are you praying Julia?' It's Dr Berry and she's smiling.

Julia feels foolish. 'I'm just doing some deep breathing.'

'Everything all right?'

'Of course.'

The two women walk together. Dr Berry tells Julia about her plans for next year. She seems to include Julia when she mentions future development in courses on feminist writers. Julia feels a sense of relief. Is this a hint that Dr Berry will support her application for tenure?

She is running late for her tutorial. She hurries to the classroom.

'Good afternoon everyone,' she begins. 'Today we're going to discuss occupational segregation and the role of gender in

occupational choice...any questions or comments on the lecture this week?’

Nothing. All she can see is the tops of their heads as they stare down at their notes. She plunges ahead, getting desperate, repeating herself. Where the hell is Wendy? Why isn’t she here?

Someone starts speaking. A young woman in a long skirt and sandals tells the class about her holiday job in a pickle factory where she worked last summer.

The ice is broken, two more students discuss their work experience. Julia tentatively uses a comment one of them makes to illustrate a theoretical point from her lecture. They understand! At least they are smiling at her as if they do. The hour flows by, Julia begins to relax.



13

Friday night, 13 September

I was packing up my papers for the weekend when Jeanine came to my office and told me they were about to go down to the pub and that Dr Berry was keen for me to come too.

I was flattered that she wanted me to go. This, and the success of the tutorial, put me in a good mood and I didn't want to spoil it by going home to a sick child and a grumpy husband. I rang Bob and told him it was important for me to mix with the others socially after what had happened at the meeting this morning. He didn't seem to mind; in fact he said he thought it a good idea for me to relax a bit.

I enjoyed myself at first. We drank lager and ate greasy chips in the students' bar. Dr Berry was very friendly and Jeanine and Lydia were in top form. They argued like mad and shouted each other down and laughed a lot. Dr Berry said nothing's changed, you women are as outrageous as ever.

She has a precise way of talking, authoritative and strong. I wish I had her voice, her presence. She is warm and friendly but there is a bite, a hard edge, a strength. I shouldn't be

afraid of her but I suppose it's logical to be careful of what I say, until I get tenure anyway.

I left the pub before the others. Lydia and Jeanine said see you Monday, and Dr Berry gave me a hug. She said she felt that we were going to get on well in the Department.

I was so high, I felt I could do anything. Instead of turning off into our street at the end of Hillcrest Road, I headed towards Eureka. I wanted Isobel to see me like this; confident, full of self-love, starting to make the break, taking time for myself.

I arrived there to find the old farmhouse in darkness. The gate at the top of the drive was chained and locked so I left the car on the roadside and walked the rest of the way.

I felt annoyed with myself for not ringing first to check if Isobel was home. I stood on the verandah and waited in the hope that her car would soon rattle down the long drive and that she would be thrilled to see me. There was a beautiful smell of jasmine in the air. It was very still. The old oak trees at the back of the house were covered in their first flush of pale green leaves. I heard a noise and I realized that there was somebody inside the house. I didn't think it could be her because her car wasn't there and the back door was locked. I crept to her window and looked through a gap in the curtain. I had a clear view of the two women inside and what they were doing. I made an awful noise, half-way between a sob and a groan, it came from deep within my body. Isobel came yelling to the window, she sounded both angry and frightened. I tried to run but she saw me and called back into the room, 'Don't panic, it's only Julia.'

She opened the door to the verandah and I went inside. The beauty of her naked body intimidated me, I couldn't speak. She took my hand and led me back to her bedroom. Wendy was sitting up in the bed rolling a joint. Isobel said we're in love, I was going to tell you, but you've jumped the gun by sneaking up on us.

I felt humiliated, I tried to explain to her I thought someone had broken into her house because her car wasn't there. She said the bloody thing blew up again, it's in the garage waiting for parts, but it doesn't matter, forget it, at least it wasn't a man perving at us.

I told Wendy I was sorry to barge in, and she said, 'I don't give a fuck, I wanted to tell you before but Bel wouldn't let me. Want a toke?'

I said no thanks, I'd had too much to drink to risk a smoke on top of it.

Isobel went back to the bed, they held each other, their bare breasts touched. Wendy turned the joint around and they had a long kissing toke. Then Isobel put on her dressing gown and said come into the kitchen Julia, I'll make you a coffee and we'll talk.

Wendy said don't leave me too long darling, a girl could die in this state, if you know what I mean.

Isobel laughed, 'I won't be long.'

We went into the kitchen and Isobel put the kettle on the coal range to make coffee. She looked rather anxious and told me that she had been wanting to tell me about Wendy for weeks but she thought I might be upset.

'It's nothing to do with me.'

'It is in a way, Wendy is your student.'

'That isn't an issue.'

'I'm glad you feel okay about it, I'm so in love with her, I've never felt like this before.'

'Didn't you love Maggie?'

She frowned. 'I thought I did, but this is different. Wendy is wonderful, I love her intellect.'

I almost said her body too by the looks of things but I restrained myself. I had already made enough of a fool of myself. She was in the grip of something very powerful, you could see it in the lines of her body. There was an intensity in her movements; she caressed the small manuka logs before she fed them into the coal range, she turned the handle of the

coffee grinder slowly and strongly as if she were stirring something solid in a large pot.

She said, 'I feel as if I've just arrived somewhere after a long journey, I'm living for the first time. Can you understand what this means to me?'

I needed time to understand why I felt so upset. I couldn't take the risk of appearing jealous of Wendy, I already knew which way the wind would blow if Isobel had to make a choice between us. I decided to pretend to be pleased about their affair.

'I'm very happy for you. Wendy is a lovely woman and she's lucky to have someone like you.'

Isobel looked relieved. She put her arms around me and gave me a hug.

'Thanks Julia, I'm really pleased. It's strange how I want everybody to love her as much as I do.'

'That's part of being in love, I felt like that when I fell in love with Bob.'

'I've got a lot to learn, I'm just beginning to realize how ignorant I am.'

'What about Maggie?'

'I've written to her and told her I won't be coming back to England.'

'Did you tell her why?'

'There's no point, she'll be upset enough that I'm not returning.'

I lit a cigarette before I remembered that her house is smoke-free. I offered to smoke outside but she smiled and said not to worry.

I've been an idiot she told me, a victim of my own fucked praxis. I was brilliant at intellectualizing life but no good at living it. I thought I knew everything about how meaning changed with context. Yet I was stupid about love, I thought it was an absolute that existed across time and place. I blamed love because it never came up to my expectations but it was my construction of love that was wrong, not love itself. I

thought I was the innocent one and love the guilty, but it was the other way around. Do you understand?

I said I thought so, I'd have to think about it. I was excited that she was talking to me like this, it felt like a return to our teenage years in Te Kauwhata. I wanted the conversation to continue.

'Now I know what love can be. Someone amazing who adores me as I am. Every other woman I've been with has tried to mould me to her image of what I should be. And I've done it too. I've tried to make the other woman into a replica of myself.'

We talked and I smoked another cigarette and drank two cups of black coffee. Isobel told me about the conversations between her and Wendy, they spent most of their time talking. Wendy called it creating the dialogue of love, she said there can be no love without shared speech.

'Can you imagine what it's been like for me Julia? I've always felt alone, I never thought I'd meet a woman like Wendy. She never tries to stop me saying anything, she gets into my reality, she revels in it, she expands on it, she laughs with it. She saw through me the first night we spent together. She told me I was a coward to have stopped writing. So, she says, you bought the crap about there being no real truth because there are too many ways of speaking. You've been brainwashed, truth is always multiple; it has nothing to do with evidence and everything to do with morality.'

I feel deeply disturbed at what she said. Does Wendy mean that we are nothing but our own invention? It terrifies me, I must talk to Bob about it in the morning.

I told her I felt a bit hurt at her saying she had never had anyone to talk to before she met Wendy. What about me?

'I wasn't leaving you out Julia but there is a special closeness with someone who is also your lover. I never got it together when I slept with men. That dreadful contradiction between their loathing of women's bodies and their urgent need of mine. It was worse in a way when I started to sleep with

women because I didn't expect to feel another split, this time between body and mind. None of them would let me speak the words that I desired to bring to life between us. They loved my body but they didn't really love *me*.'

I was lost and I admitted it. Isobel laughed and said no wonder, I'm raving and it's all Wendy's fault, she has lit a fire in my head and it's out of control.

I told her I must go now and she gave me a hug. I drove away through the warm still night. I parked the car and walked down by the river. I knew it was dangerous to be there alone but I didn't care. The river provided a substitute for where I really wanted to be, the bush and the sea. I sat with my back against the tree so that I was facing the tiled pathway that ran along the river bank. I felt safe there, nobody could see me.

I went over everything that had just happened. I couldn't get the sight of Isobel and Wendy in bed out of my mind. It disturbed me that I felt sexually aroused at the sight of their breasts touching. I have always had strong feelings about breasts; to me, they represent both a pure sexual essence (if there is such a thing) and the vulnerability of women. When I think of innocence, I sometimes think of breasts.

But how can I be innocent if their breasts aroused me? I must think about this very carefully, I'm going to have a problem facing Wendy in class if I don't work it out. Am I sexually attracted to her? I have wondered about this before. I imagined making love with Wendy but it did nothing for me. I admit to a strong desire to touch her breasts but that's all. I am very interested in her, I love her company, but I could never be passionate about her.

Am I jealous of Wendy because she has become Isobel's lover? If I really loved my sister, I would be happy for her instead of suffering from this ridiculous sense of betrayal.

I faced the fact a long time ago that I am prone to jealousy. I want to be the primary one for the ones that I love. Bob knows this, he's really good about it. He knows I could never

handle him fucking someone else. Intellectually, I know it's ridiculous to be possessive but the feeling in my gut is another matter.

Isobel says I want everything cut and dried, I can't cope with things that appear to cancel each other out, I always look for a happy ending.

I don't want to live happily ever after, I just want to survive. I wish this Wendy business hadn't happened until after the end of the term, I have so much work to do. I don't have the energy to grieve over Isobel.

I'm in mourning for the loss of intimacy between us. It was wonderful when she stayed here. She told me everything about her relationship with Maggie. Things have already happened between her and Wendy that I know nothing about. She'll never confide in me about this relationship because I'm in a position of power over Wendy.

But the power isn't all one way. Wendy will discuss my lectures with Isobel, I will lose control over the image of myself as a feminist on the front line. Wendy will tell her the truth about me and the compromises I make in my work.

Today is Friday the thirteenth, I should have been more careful of myself.

Isobel once told me that Friday is named after a triple Goddess called Freya. Fish represent Freya's genitals, never mind what the Catholics say. She said it's ironic that pious people sit down every Friday to sink their teeth into the biggest cunt symbol in antiquity.

I never know how serious she is about what she calls the Great Matriarchal Mystery Tour. She is serious one minute, flippant the next. I challenged her once and she said I'm both Julia, get the picture? I both believe and disbelieve and if I don't know something, I invent it.

I asked her if that was honest.

Of course it is, she answered, because I have the courage to say so. What is history anyway but the victors' interpretation of events?

She leads me into a world of imagination where I feel vibrant and alive. I can't bear the thought that she might love someone else more than me. This is my fear, I have found the words to say it, I must confront it.

Wendy is beautiful and clever and brave. Isobel will love her more than me, I will fade away, I will become just a little sister in her eyes.

The night witch calls me, she plants the seeds of deliverance in my mind. She lures me towards the speechless life and I listen to her song, there have been too many needles in my body tonight. The witch tells me to chant the words I fear over and over; the strangest thing happens, they go down to just a sound, a meaningless noise. The repetition breaks the link between the word and what it means, it renders down the form into separate parts.

Everything dissolves, I can't remember what the words signify any more, I am emptied of fear.

To bed. I'll be able to sleep now that she has told me what to do and I have listened to her. Why was I ever afraid?

There is solace in gaining entry to the silent world.



14

Sally moved through the tasks of her Friday morning routine. She vacuumed the dining room, cleaned the bath and handbasin, swept and washed the kitchen floor. She went into the hall and checked that the doors were shut to the rooms that she had closed off after Denby died. Impurity, in all its forms, must be stopped from entering these rooms, her life depended on it.

Sally had worked out a complicated schedule for watching the Spencer boys and this meant that she had been forced to cut down on her housework. She resented them so much; not only had they killed her husband, they stopped her spending precious time on her house and garden. She felt that she had to supervise them, she owed it to Denby. Sooner or later they would make an error of judgement, they would cross the line again and she would be there, filled with a passion for revenge.

Since Denby's death she was more determined than ever to keep her home clean and ordered. Vera had hinted that she could relax now that Denby wasn't there to dirty up the place but Sally didn't think that this would make any difference. Besides, she had to do all his work as well as her own. Vera said she was surprised, she'd always thought that Sally had

done absolutely everything. Oh no, said Sally, he was always fixing things around the house and he sometimes mowed the lawns.

The day after Denby's funeral, Sally had gone into the garage and stared at his things spread around the benches and hanging untidily from the walls. He had never let her touch his tools. She had suffered terribly over the years from having to look at a mess that she could do nothing about.

Julia called out from the kitchen window to leave everything to her, she would sort out Dad's things later. But she had misunderstood Sally. She wasn't upset at the sight of Denby's belongings, she wanted to restore order.

Sally began her task fearfully. She realized that she was listening for the sound of his van or his voice asking her to make him a cup of tea. She wondered how long it would take her to get used to the fact that he would never come home again.

The trouble was that she kept forgetting that he was dead. She wanted to tell him what had happened when she reported the Spencer boys to the police. They had treated her like a fool, a stupid old woman, someone not quite right in the head.

A sense of desolation spread through her body. It was a peculiar feeling, one quite new to her, a kind of terminal emptiness, a feeling of what do I do now? What's next? Is this all there is?

She spoke to him silently while she tidied the tools. She made a promise to him that she would keep his tools in perfect order, oiled and cleaned, and that nobody would take them away.

In spite of the strange sensations in her body, she felt satisfied with the look of the garage when she had finished.

It suddenly occurred to her that he would never hang dead ducks in the tool shed again. She spent the next hour scrubbing old dark stains from the concrete floor. She pushed her brush laden with Vim back and forward, she worked herself into a

sweat, the blood moved. Julia had come out to see what she was doing and said oh God, please leave it, come inside, but Sally had refused. She wanted to scrub everything away, the blood stains, the dead ducks, the memory of her dream of Denby's body on the meat hook.

Her vigil of the Spencers added many hours to her day. It had not been easy to cut down on her work until she'd hit on the idea of closing off some rooms. This meant that she didn't have to include the whole house in her daily routine. Each closed-off room was cleaned thoroughly once a week.

After the initial wrench she quite enjoyed going into the two spare bedrooms and the lounge only once a week. It was like seeing her possessions after a long parting. She greeted them like old friends. They sat there unchanging, solid, dependable, imbued with memories of her past. Every object was connected in some way to her life with Denby and the children. Gifts, photographs, feathers, shells, gem stones, silk flowers, china ornaments; she remembered how each one had come into her house and for what reason.

She liked to handle her possessions and relive the circumstances of their origin, yet sometimes they evoked feelings of despair. They gave her a sad message that her real life was over. Her symbols of relationship provided for the past but denied her a future. She felt as if nothing new would ever happen to her again and that the rest of her life would be spent walking in the same tight circle.

She went into the kitchen and filled the kettle with water. She wanted a cup of tea but decided to eat nothing just yet. It was tempting to take a snack but she didn't want to make a mess. She had changed her mealtimes so that she ate two meals instead of three; this saved at least three-quarters of an hour a day.

She checked the time, she must rush through the rest of her work, the Spencer boys always had lunch in the pub on Fridays and she had to be there.

She poured boiling water into her small brown pot and drank a cup of hot black tea. Milk was no longer necessary to her, she had become used to not having it in the house. It was not the expense, it was the bother. She didn't want to have to remember to put the milk bottle at the gate each night or to wash the dirty bottles out.

She went into her bedroom with her cleaning equipment. She had not yet come to terms with this room, the place where she and Denby had slept together for so many years. The wallpaper had been replaced four times, she remembered all the patterns. The current one was her favourite; a beautiful embossed vinyl, cream, with tiny blue flowers set in a lattice-work of fine blue stripes. Denby had argued with her over the wallpaper, he said it was too busy, but in the end he let her have her way. He had been so good about choices for the house, he always let her make the final decision. He said the house was her work-place and she had to stare at it all day so it was up to her to decide how it should look.

She stood in the middle of the room brushing the ceiling with her special cobweb mop. They formed very quickly at this time of the year. She brushed the ceiling to remove any tiny webs up there that she couldn't see.

She had lost some of her pleasure in cleaning this room, there were too many lost moments set into the walls. She wished she didn't have to sleep in here and that it could be closed off like the others. A sudden thought came to her. She could take her bed into the dining room. Why hadn't she thought of this before? She could store her clothes for the week in the hall cupboard. Her bedroom cleaning could go into her weekly schedule. This would leave only the bathroom, the laundry, the kitchen and the dining room to clean every day.

A perfect solution.

She rushed to the kitchen and pulled her time notebook from the book shelf. This book contained her lists of jobs and schedules for the week. The appointments with the Spencers

were scattered through the pages in bright red ink. They stood out from her lists of jobs like accusations. She deleted *do bedroom* from her long list under the heading *Every Day*. She wrote *clean main bedroom* into her list of essential jobs to be done on Tuesdays.

She went back into the bedroom in a fever of excitement. She wanted to close the door to this room, trap the furniture and air within it, cancel out the worry of it, stop the outside from coming in.

She tried to move the bed but it was too heavy for her. She ran to the telephone in the hall and dialled Vera's number. It rang and rang. Sally was about to hang up, when Vera asked 'Who is it?' in a grumpy voice.

'It's only me,' answered Sally. 'I wondered if you could come over, I need to move the bed.'

'Ronald is here, hang on, I'll ask him.'

Sally started to say don't worry, but Vera had already gone to ask him if he would help. Sally regretted ringing Vera for assistance. She didn't want Ronald to come to her house again, the first time had been a disaster. It was Vera who had driven her crazy. She had mooned over him, behaved like a stupid young girl. Sally had been embarrassed but Ronald hadn't seemed to notice. Vera called him her boyfriend in front of him. That's how she introduced him, this is my boyfriend Ronald. She wouldn't leave him alone, she wore him on her arm like a trophy, a hunter returning from the kill.

She whispered to Sally, I had forgotten, you know, what it was like, it's been a long time between drinks, if you know what I mean.

Sally didn't want to think about Vera in bed with a man, it repelled her. Vera had changed since she met Ronald. Her daughter Brenda was worried too, she had phoned Sally yesterday and talked to her about it. She said Ronald was just a selfish old man who wanted somewhere to live. It was home comforts he wanted not Vera, he didn't give a damn for her, she could be any lonely old widow.

Vera said, 'Okay, we'll be over in a minute.'

'Are you sure it isn't a bother?'

'Ronald is happy to help you out.'

They arrived, and Sally made them a cup of tea in the kitchen. She mixed up some milk powder in a jug and hoped that they wouldn't ask for anything to eat. Vera pulled a packet of Shrewsbury biscuits from her bag and placed them in the centre of the table. Ronald said how wonderful, my favourites.

She beamed at him. 'Why do you think I bought them?'

Sally said stiffly, 'I could have given you some crackers and cheese.'

'Ronald needs something sweet with his cuppa, he's a real sugar boy in the mornings, aren't you darling?'

Ronald smirked, his dentures were smeared with scarlet jam and yellow biscuit crumbs. He looked like a cat eating a canary.

'What furniture do you want us to move?' asked Vera.

'Just the big double bed. I don't want to sleep in that bedroom anymore.'

'Good idea. When my hubby died, I changed bedrooms.'

Sally didn't want to tell her that she intended to sleep in the dining room. She knew that Vera wouldn't understand.

'I want to move into the other front bedroom but I need to clean it out first. I thought we could put the bed into the dining room temporarily.'

Vera gave her a sharp look. 'The dining room?'

'Any more tea?' asked Ronald.

Vera busied herself with pouring out his tea and feeding him bits of Shrewsbury biscuit from her plate.

The bed was difficult to move. It had a heavy wooden base with drawers and a pine headboard with an attached bookcase and bedside table. Vera said she'd always loved it and Sally should let her know if she ever wanted to sell it.

Ronald was useful, he was much stronger than he looked. He hobbled along on arthritic legs that looked like bent brown

twigs but they would never have moved the bed without him. He obviously enjoyed himself, helping the 'girls' as he called them. Sally felt quite grateful to him when the bed was finally installed in the dining room.

She wanted Ronald and Vera to go so she could take her clothes out of the bedroom and put them in the hall cupboard. She looked at her watch. Eleven o'clock. She had to be at the Tavern at twelve.

'Are you going out Sal?'

'Just shopping.'

'We can take you in Ronald's ute.'

'Thanks, but I'm only going down to the village, I'll ride my bike.'

'You and that old bike!'

Sally felt annoyed with Vera. She liked riding her bike, it gave her freedom and independence. Denby hadn't taught her to drive, he said there was no point in both of them risking their lives on the road. After he died, she didn't know what to do, there was no local transport and the house was two miles from the village centre. She used the local taxi once a week to go to the shops but she needed a way of moving about the town at night to watch the Spencer boys. One day, while visiting Julia and Bob in Hamilton, she had seen an elderly woman riding an old black bike with her shopping sitting in front of her in a cane basket. I can do that, she thought. It means I could go wherever I want, silently and alone. No one would have to know.

She bought an old bike and was pleased to discover that she hadn't forgotten how to ride. Julia worried about the trucks and milk tankers that hurtled along the streets of Te Kauwhata but Isobel had praised her mother. She told Sally that it was great that she was doing something for herself at last.

Ronald cleared his throat. 'Come on Vera, we'd better get moving if we're driving through to Pukekohe.' He winked at Sally.

Vera took his arm. They drove off in Ronald's Toyota Utility, his only possession. He loved his vehicle, said he felt in tune with it because it had a powerful engine in a rough old body, just like him.

Sally felt confused. Why had he winked at her? He must have known she wanted them to go. She hoped she hadn't offended him. She had liked him more today, he seemed less under Vera's spell, more in control of himself.

She cleaned the bedroom thoroughly and put some clothes in the hall cupboard for the next seven days. She found it very satisfying to arrange her things into seven neat piles. It meant that she knew exactly what she would be wearing each day in the near future.

She fondled the clothes, felt the texture, she recited the days ahead, this dress for Sunday, this one for Monday. She liked the predictability in knowing that it would be this gray skirt brushing against her legs as she rode her bike through the dark streets of Te Kauwhata on Saturday night to haunt the Spencers' card game.

She walked through her house, the sun sparkled on the cleanliness of her possessions and she felt in good spirits for the first time since Denby had died.

Something had lifted from her, she felt free of him at last. All his things were in the closed-off rooms, nothing of him remained in the parts of the house that she still used. She had managed to banish him from the present, she didn't have to worry about him any more.

This would increase her energy for her task of watching the Spencers. She said their names over and over to herself, it helped to cut them down to size.

I'm scared, she thought, but I must go on. What can I do to protect myself?

She remembered something from her childhood. Her mother had been frightened of someone, she wouldn't say who. She had written a name on a piece of paper and glued it to a mirror, blank side out. The name reflected eternally back

to itself, nobody from the outside looking in could read it. Her mother said it gave her protection because as long as the his name was in the mirror, the evil he was trying to do would reflect back on himself. Sally watched that piece of paper for years, she was dying to know whose name was on it. It turned yellow and brown and became part of the fly spots and dirt on the mirror. Sally looked for it on the day of her mother's funeral but it had gone. Stanley laughed at her when she asked about it, he called her a sticky beak and a nosey parker. She was too afraid of him to ask if he had peeked at the name.

Sally wrote the names of the Spencer boys on a piece of paper. They looked comical written down; Fats, Mungo and Wack. She wasn't sure if putting nicknames in the mirror would work, she wished she knew their real names.

In spite of her reservations, she felt glad when she'd done it. It was better than nothing. There must be a way of finding out their real names. Vera used to be their mother's friend, Vera would know, but she couldn't ask her. She wouldn't let Sally talk about the Spencer boys, she gave her funny looks if she mentioned them. All she would say is thank God poor Mercia died before her sons grew up, they would have broken her heart.

Sally checked her cleaning gear to make sure everything was perfect; bottles and containers in their right place on the tea trolley, cloths and dusters immersed in Dynamo, the list of morning tasks in the time notebook dated and ticked off.

It gave her the courage to prepare herself for the moment when she entered the Tavern and saw the Spencer boys seated at a table eating their lunch. It was always a struggle. This was the only time during a week of secret activity that she showed herself to them. It was essential to her plan that they saw her there, in that place, where Denby had spent so many happy hours. He had called it his stamping ground. We men are like animals, he used to say; we need our own territory, a place where we can go and mix with our own kind. It made

Sally think of leather bridles and the mounted stag's head in the hallway of her brothers' house.

It was difficult for her to enter the Tavern alone. She had never done this before Denby died. The first Friday she had gone there, everyone had turned and stared at her. She felt as if she had entered a holy place, a man's place, where she had no right to be. It was somewhat easier now. She was getting used to sitting alone, nursing her shandy, while the Spencers wolfed down their hot meat pies and siphoned the froth from the top of their jugs of bitter.

She pedalled quickly out of her street and on to the main road. Time had been displaced in the moving of the bed and although she was pleased with herself for changing her sleeping arrangements, it meant that she was running late.

The warm wind pulled at her hair, her cheeks burned, fragments of gravel flew up from the road and stung her legs, she pedalled faster and faster, she felt as if she was flying. By the time she reached the Tavern, she was quite exhilarated. She chained her bike to a post on the verandah and stood still for a few minutes taking deep breaths and smoothing down her hair and her skirt. She entered; good, the boys were still there, she hadn't missed them.

Fats was perched on a flimsy chair, his huge body exuding oily smells from the eel factory where he worked. Mungo had dirty fingernails and muddy boots. Wack was small and quiet and freckled. Sally thought his skinny white arms looked weak next to the extravagance of tattooed brown skin displayed by his two older brothers.

Sally sat near the window. She knew that they had seen her come in, she could tell by the way that Fats tightened up the muscles in his thick neck and banged the empty beer jug down on the table. Wack kept looking at her and then looking away when he caught her eye. She felt less hatred towards him than the other two, it was obvious that he was under their influence.

Mungo went up to the bar and spoke to Spaz the barman. Spaz looked amused; he laughed and shrugged his shoulders. Sally could hear every word they said. All her senses had become more acute since Denby died. It was as if she had emerged out of a thick warm fog, a cloister. She experienced smells and sights and sounds as if they were old and familiar truths that she was struggling to retrieve.

I was asleep, she thought. I was lulled into a doze by my life with Denby but I was happy with him, he suited me. He never did anything unexpected, I always knew where I was with him. Now that I am in a new place, I need to listen more carefully to the world.

She heard Spaz say to Mungo, 'I can't chuck her out mate, she has the same right to be here as you jokers.'

'The old cunt is always watching us, we can't go anywhere. She seems to know where we're going before we do. Fats is starting to get the willies.'

Spaz laughed. 'What could an old girl like that do to you?'

Mungo lowered his voice. 'What about harvest time? What are we going to do then?'

Spaz frowned. 'Shut up, don't talk like that in here. We'll think of something.'

Mungo went back to the table with his beer jug refilled.

Harvest? Sally puzzled over this. She knew that Mungo had a large vegetable garden and that he sold vegetables from a stall at the front of their property.

I'll have a look next time I go over there at night, she thought. I might find something useful.

The three men drank the last of their beer and pushed their chairs back noisily on the floor. Sally stood up and watched them walk out on to the verandah. Mungo and Wack went over to their Holden station wagon. Fats kicked at the wheel of her bike but the chain held it in position. Sally went to the window and stared out. He raised his boot to kick the bike again but caught a glimpse of her blue eyes glittering at him through the smokey glass. He flung himself into the driver's

seat of the rusty station wagon and drove off with a roar and a squeal of tyres. Sally thought she saw a hand raised in a gesture of insult but the car was moving so fast she couldn't be sure.

I'm getting them rattled, she thought, I'm getting through to them at last. And all they can think of doing is giving me the fingers.

She realized that she hadn't been afraid of them today. The balance had tipped her way, they were running from her as if they were ashamed that an old woman could threaten them.

She returned to her table and took her handbag from the back of the chair. She went up to the bar and ordered another shandy from Spaz. He made the usual comment about ruining good lemonade with beer but today she did not feel obliged to laugh at his joke. She looked him right in the eye and did not smile.

'Cheer up love, things can't be that bad,' he said.

She didn't answer, even though she could sense his anger at her for not responding to his banter. She felt a new sense of strength. She didn't know where it had come from or what it meant.

She finished her shandy and left the pub. Outside, the sun was flooding the street with a dense white light. Sally stretched out her arms and raised her face upwards. The warmth soaked into her skin. She felt her flesh swell. A strange feeling possessed her, one of pure physicality, of being at home in her body.

She pedalled the bike towards the shopping centre, her skirt hitched higher than usual. She wanted the sun to shine on her legs; those limbs that she had always thought to be the ugliest part of her body. They were thin and white, marked with blue lines and blotches, skin stretched around bone.

Sparrow legs Stanley had called them. One day you'll snap off at the knees and then what use will you be to anyone? We'll have to have you put down.

She heard his old taunts speak to her, she felt his eyes on her flesh. She pedalled faster and faster, she flew along the hot tarseal, the sun burnt into the back of her neck. She thought of purity and cleanliness, of how the sun heals the damp wounds of winter. Her terror melted, she wanted to call out, hey Stanley, see my sparrow legs go! Look at me, look at me now!

Images of death and flesh opened out into the sun before her; feathers and blood, the bodies of the animals they had forced her to skin, swamp water, the smell of game, the vivid dreams of Denby hanging naked on a meat hook, his penis half eaten away by eels.

She drifted through the supermarket, smiling to herself, sniffing and rattling packages and replacing them on the shelves. When she arrived at the checkout, she was surprised to find that she had only three items in her trolley; a box of Sunlight Soap, a container of Cerebos Salt, a tin of Watties Baked Beans.

Her frugality pleased her.

Everything is so simple now. There's just me to feed. No more trying to pad out the food before pension day, adding potatoes to the soup pot, apologizing to him for the lack of rump steak. I've cut my food costs down to almost nothing.

She left the shopping centre and mounted her bike once more. Time to return home and follow out the rest of the plan for the day. Tonight, she was due at the Spencer property on the outskirts of Te Kauwhata. It was a long ride and she needed to rest so that she could get there and back without falling victim to the strange attacks of weepy exhaustion that sometimes came over her when she was on the bike.

She drifted off to sleep at three o'clock. It was easy for her now that the bed was in the dining room. No more strange wanderings of the mind, the puzzle of where Denby had gone and why he had died, the whereabouts of those hands that had once held her reluctant body, the drift of the tide where

Julia and Bob had thrown his ashes near the seaward haunts of his boyhood.

She awoke an hour later, feeling calm and refreshed. The dream had not returned. After a light meal and one cup of tea without milk, she performed the rest of her housework and garden routine for the day. She crossed off the items under Friday in her time notebook. She loved this moment when the future became fulfilled in the present, and she knew that once again she had achieved her ideal scheme for the day. In spite of the extra time taken by moving the bed, she had managed to catch up and was right on target for her Friday night vigil.

She rode the bike slowly along the road that led to where the Spencers lived. The sun was still high and hot, the orchards that lined the road looked wilted and dusty. There was little traffic. Sally was glad that tea-time and television held people indoors. She felt that she was going about her work in privacy and safety.

She reached the turn-off to the gravel road. This was the most difficult part of her journey. The bike skated across the metal chips. She had to clutch the handle bars tightly to keep the front wheel firmly in the wheel rut.

The Spencer homestead came into view. Sally stopped at the old fridge at the top of the driveway. She opened the door. There was a copy of the *Waikato Times* inside and four bottles of milk. She prized off the cap from one of the milk bottles and poured a small amount into a clump of thistles. She took a small plastic jar from her bag and poured a little of the contents into the opened milk bottle. She replaced the tin foil cap and smiled with satisfaction. Nobody could tell that it had been tampered with. Next, she took the newspaper from the fridge and replaced it with the old yellow one she had brought.

She wheeled her bike into the thick bushes that lined the drive so that she could not be seen from the house. Something was different; there were no pig dogs barking and straining at

their leads. She left her bike hidden in the bushes and crept silently towards the house. The dogs were not here, they would have sensed her presence by now.

Sally felt disappointed. This meant that the Spencer boys had gone out somewhere. They had broken their Friday night routine. She came out from behind the hydrangea bushes and stood in the middle of the driveway. The front window of the house blinded her with the reflection of the late afternoon sun. She stood her ground, stared it down, refused to let the disturbing light force her back into the shadows. She looked up; the finial was in exactly the same place as the one on the old farmhouse she had lived in as a child. The same shape, the same dull brown colour, the same drunken lean. She noticed other similarities to her childhood home; the twin pitched roof, the bay window, the peeling gray paint on the verandah steps.

She had never been this close to the house before. She walked around the side and peered through one of the dirty windows. There was an old wooden bed in the centre of the room covered in a quilt of possum skins. Clothes were scattered around the floor, work boots, jeans, bush shirts, jackets. The scrim walls were covered with pictures of crosses, swastikas, swords, ruined castles, and tortured creatures with multi-coloured hair spinning out in fantastic aureoles. Sally felt as if she was looking into the cave of an alien animal, it excited her to be this close to the den of her enemies.

She walked around to the back of the house. Two orange cats lay sprawled out on an old sofa in the shade. Sally patted one of them on the head.

'You're a pretty boy,' she said aloud. He opened his eyes and stretched out a lazy paw. She stroked him under the chin, he closed his eyes and purred.

She withdrew her hand. What am I doing? she thought. I'm forgetting where I am. They are part of the Spencer zoo, I must remember what I'm here for and what these boys have done to me.

She walked back to where her bike was hidden. The sun burned through the thin cotton material of her blouse. She was halfway along the dusty metal road before it occurred to her that the Spencers might be at the swimming hole on the reserve at the back of their property.

That's why the dogs weren't there, they have taken them for a swim.

She continued down the road until she came to the dirt track that led to the swimming hole. She hid her bike in the bush and continued on foot. The trees were thick and green and she enjoyed the coolness of the air after the heat of the gravel road. A fantail hovered above her head, she was ringed with the stinging chant of cicadas. She felt as if she was being drawn into a world of living creatures who were eager to help her.

Further down the track, she heard the splashing of water and children calling out to each other. She crept silently towards the swimming hole and crouched underneath a thick coprosma that hung over the water. Several young boys were playing in the pool. One of them swung out on a rope and dropped like a stone into the water. Sally watched him surface. He lifted his blond head from the water and shook himself like a water rat. Sally remembered swimming here when her girls were little and Julia shaking out her long black hair in a similar fashion.

Where were the Spencers? Ah, there was Fats sitting on the opposite bank rolling up a cigarette. His stomach hung over the belt of his wet jeans like a big brown sack. He turned to speak to someone behind him and Sally had a clear view of the tattoos across his massive shoulders. They looked like the pictures in the bedroom; a skull, a sword, a broken cross, an old man holding a scythe.

Mungo was sitting behind his brother. His body was bare except for a pair of skimpy grey underpants. His chest was deeply tanned and hairless and covered in brightly coloured tattoos; red flowers, a shoal of fish, an ear of corn. Sally was

relieved at the gentler pictures he displayed. She found him less menacing than Fats. It might be because she had once seen him digging in his vegetable garden and planting out lettuce seedlings with a tender hand.

She pulled herself up, hey girl, watch yourself, you are starting to soften up, remember Denby in the raupo, remember what they did to your life.

She saw Wack coming through the bush behind his brothers, the pig dogs at his heels. They didn't sense her presence; the children were making a great deal of noise, screaming and splashing in the water. Fats and Mungo were dragging on the same cigarette. Wack had a puff, he drew the smoke into his mouth and held it there a long moment before he exhaled. Fats and Mungo were laughing and joking and yelling at each other.

Sally didn't understand what they were saying. She felt the same sense of loneliness she had experienced as a child when her brothers created a world of talk that kept her at a distance.

She stood up suddenly and exposed herself to the assembled group of males. A shadow spread over the swimming hole, the rope stopped swinging, the little boys fell silent.

She flew up and over the trees and underneath her, a boy cried out, 'There's something dark in the water, let's get out of here!'

Wack shivered, Mungo placed a nervous hand on the collar of his dog. Fats said, 'What the fuck was in that shit we just smoked?'

They moved closer together on the bank. The manuka moved in a sudden gust of wind, clay pebbles rattled down into the water, the heat went out of the air, darkness began to fall into the rift.

She hovered over them, watched them pack up their towels and cans of beer. She followed them from the water hole. They crashed through the bush and the cicadas and the birds fell silent.

The twilight gathered up the bush in a dusky shroud. She almost lost sight of them, then saw a gleam of pale skin, a burst of golden stars tattooed across a shoulder. It was Wack, running shirtless through the bush.

Sally soared, she flew, she hurled a *mutspell* of revenge on the men down below. She saw them find her bike, she willed them not to harm it.

They searched the bush near the bike but they didn't find her.

She heard Fats say, 'How the hell did she know we were here? I've had it with the old cow, something's got to be done.'

She waited until they had disappeared up the track before she came out. Her bike lay where she had left it, her kit bag was safely in the basket over the front wheel. She checked its contents; nothing had been disturbed. The Spencers' newspaper and her plastic jar of lemon juice were still inside the bag.

She moved carefully through the gathering night, nothing could spoil the perfection of her mood. She stood quietly at the edge of the bush, a lone cicada sang softly above her head. The manuka swayed, the cicada stopped in mid trill, silence came down around her like a cloak. She mounted her bike.

This has been my best day since Denby died. It worked, I put their names in the mirror and things have turned my way.

The night deepened, a breeze blew up, the tarseal grew colder. She felt as if she was riding across a gap in time, the front wheel moving somewhere new, the back wheel dragging in something more ancient than dreams.

She rode her bike slowly home.



15

Tuesday, 15 October

I'm holding on to things at work. The tension between Lydia and Dr Berry seems to be under control since Lydia's outburst. I still haven't quite forgiven Lydia for involving me the way she did. I tackled her about my teaching and she seemed shocked that I thought she meant it when she said what if Julia's teaching was lousy?

I wanted to know why those particular words came into her head. Why use the word lousy? Was it a slip of the tongue? She assured me that she was using it as an example, no more, no less.

I have started to loosen up with her. We talk about all sorts of thing.

I shouldn't have broken my promise to Clemency but Lydia had told me so many secrets about people at the University that I felt a need to reciprocate with some secrets of my own. I told her that Clemency planned to get pregnant behind Gerald's back. Lydia was astounded, she thought she'd heard everything but this took the cake.

I told her that Clemency would do anything to fall pregnant.

‘From what you’ve told me about her marriage, it’s more than child-fever, she wants to pay Gerald back.’

Lydia is very interested in the phenomenon of women’s revenge against men. She told me it appears in different forms in many cultures and the more rigid the patriarchy, the tougher the opposition. It’s like the slaves in America or prisoners in jail, they work out ways of getting their own back against the people who dominate them.

She has written a fascinating paper on revenge that’s going to be published in *Signs* next year. It throws so much light on what Mum is up to at the moment. She is still behaving strangely with the Spencers. I discussed it with Lydia and she said it was a classic case of projection. Mum had to get rid of her resentment against men for her unhappy life and she turned on those who were already marginal in the community.

I discussed Lydia’s theory with Isobel but she didn’t agree. She said that Mum had nothing against men as a class, in fact she looked up to them. Isobel believes that Mum harasses the Spencers because she has never dealt with the things that happened between her and Stanley when they were young. Stanley had been very much against her marriage and this had never been resolved. The only way to solve the problem was for her to confront Stanley and bring old resentments out into the open, but she wouldn’t do it.

I hadn’t realized that Isobel had talked to Mum about the Spencers. Apparently she has tackled her about it on more than one occasion.

Old feelings die hard. When we were children I thought that Mum loved Isobel more than me. I mentioned it to Isobel and she reacted quite angrily to the suggestion that she had ever been the favourite.

‘If you knew how hard I’ve had to work at that relationship Julia.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’ll always be one jump ahead, because you’re not a dyke.’

She looked quite upset, I put my arms around her and told her again that I was sorry. I have tried to talk to Mum about lesbians since Isobel came out to her a few months ago but I can’t get her to discuss it, not at any sort of level. She clams up, changes the subject, she doesn’t want to know.

Isobel told me she got the same treatment. Mum told her not to be silly, and refused to talk about it again.

Isobel and I make a point of bringing lesbians into the conversation whenever we are with her but it makes no difference. When *that word* impinges, a veil descends; she is determined not to hear it, she kills it off out there in the air before it can come into her ears and register in her consciousness.

We discussed it with Lydia and she said typical, the old death by silence bit.

She collects coming-out stories of reactions by parents, she wants to write a book about them. She said they follow a pattern. There’s denial, the silent treatment, like your mother’s. Others become hysterical and say you’ve ruined my life or it’s only a stage, you’ll grow out of it.

Isobel challenged her about the ethics of rewriting lesbian experience into academic work that turns private pain into public knowledge.

‘But Bel, that’s the point! Until knowledge is made public there is no validation. We must bring everything out of the closet, the pain, the homophobia, the joy, the love.’

They argued about it for hours.

I have tried to remember the main points because they gave me an insight into my sister’s attitude towards me and the work that I do.

Lydia said that Isobel doesn’t believe in academic writing, so it’s irrelevant for her to make a special case out of lesbian feminist analysis. She brought up the issue of Isobel’s doctoral thesis lying hidden in a drawer. Lydia believes that it should

be made available to feminists who desperately need intellectual support in unfriendly academic worlds.

Isobel said, 'Too late Lydia, I burnt the bloody thing ages ago.'

I felt a sense of shock. All those years of reading and writing, all those endless hours of work, how could she bring herself to do it?

Isobel told us that she wasn't able to write any more because she feared that her work would be read as 'truth' instead of one version amongst many. She called it logophobia, the fear of writing.

'But this is serious,' said Lydia. 'You're negating the whole possibility of literacy.'

'The trouble is I don't know where to lay the blame. Does it exist only in my imagination or is the real problem the failure of language itself?'

We were sitting on the back lawn at Lydia's place, it was a warm cloudy day. Isobel and I had gone for a drive and had ended up drinking tea with Vivian and Lydia in their garden. I remember the sound of black bumble-bees in the scarlet runners and the scratch of a file against a spade from the garden next door. I remember the pain in Isobel's face and her confession to Lydia that since she and Wendy had become lovers she had been rethinking her position and was beginning to regret the burning of her work.

I had no idea that my darling has been through so much.

I am beginning to understand the price that my sister has paid for taking the world of abstract ideas so seriously. She knows the inherent evil that careless talk can bring. Is silence the only solution? Lydia would disagree. She believes in bringing everything out into the daylight of public debate. I agree with her up to a point but the problem of truth remains. How can we acknowledge different versions of power yet put forward our own ideas as the 'truth'?

The life-line I cling to is the knowledge that I have developed my need for certainty from intellectual conviction as well as

emotional necessity. I would never admit to emotional necessity in front of Bob, it would confirm what he already knows about me. I agree that it's wrong to make judgements from gut feelings but what the hell can I do? The noisy leap of the blood, sudden bursts of joy and pain; my body always sings more loudly to me than external scripts. I fight against this, I embrace the need for rules, for evidence.

I hear the internal lure of my body as the song of the night witch, she would destroy my life of reason if she had her way. She comes from unbridled wilderness, from magical forests of wolf and thorn where things were never quite what they appeared to be. But we shot the animals, burnt the enchanted forests, rewrote the myths. We internalized the night witch; she came to live within us as a reminder that wild places can undergo radical transformation, but never be destroyed.

It's so difficult for me to write this down, I fear that by doing so I invoke her presence more strongly than before. But I need to try to understand what it is that I am really afraid of and why I feel this way when my life is running like a dream. I must hold on to the good things; my kids, Bob, my work, the wonderful feedback I get from students, my friendships with women. And darling Isobel, still my tower of strength, in spite of her love affair with Wendy and her confession of logophobia.

I'm tired now, I must go to bed. Bob is fast asleep. He has worked so hard on the section the last few weeks. The garden looks immaculate and is full of fresh spring plants. He says the main work is done, he'll just have to keep it weeded from now on. I wonder what he'll do now that he's got the garden organized. I hope he doesn't get bored, I couldn't go through that again. Those last few months at Birkenhead were hell. I felt that I had to compensate him for staying in a job that he hated because he was doing it for us. I wouldn't be able to summon up that amount of energy again.

Tomorrow I give a lecture on 'Changing Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women'. I feel quite good about it, I hope Lydia likes what I have to say.

I can hear a dog howling a long way off. A lonely sound. The sky is light and clear, more like summer than spring. To bed, to bed.

Wednesday, 16 October

The lecture went well, Lydia complimented me. A woman came up to me afterwards, and told me the lecture had helped her to understand the politics of living with a violent man. No, she isn't with him now but the experience haunts her. She finds it difficult to know if someone genuinely loves her or just wants to possess her. Where do you draw the line?

I told her I understood her dilemma theoretically but not experientially. I have never been in a violent relationship.

Bob baked a huge kahawai for dinner, the house smelt of fish. It was beautifully cooked with herbs and spices. I enjoyed eating it very much. His cooking has improved over the past few months; he has now taken over most of the responsibility for buying and cooking the food. I don't feel any loss of role over this, quite the contrary. I cook about once a week now and quite enjoy it. The kids say they like Bob's dinners better than mine but I don't feel the slightest twinge of jealousy. I have discovered that the housewife part of myself has been easy to shed. Somehow it never became part of my ego.

Not so my life as a parent. Timmy and I get on all right, Kezia is another story. She seems to have internalized the idea that a mother should be at the beck and call of her children. It hurts me when she says I'm not a real mother; I curse the TV shows that she watches and the example set by other working mothers in the neighbourhood who cannot relinquish control of the domestic scene. Some of them see my situation as one of loss, as if something has been taken from me.

Kezia's new kitten Buffy went crazy with the smell of fish. I am fond of cats but I can't bear animals close to me when I'm eating. Bob had to put her outside.

I discussed my lecture with Bob over dinner, he was very interested in the students' reactions to it.

'It must be wonderful to have a job where you can change people's ideas.'

I pulled a face.

'Why does it bother you? You should be pleased.'

'I don't want to change people, they should do it for themselves.'

He gave me a little talk about facing up to my responsibilities as a lecturer. I argued with him in a half-hearted sort of way, I couldn't be bothered getting in too deep. The trouble is I know he's right. It's my cursed fear that holds me back, my fear of breaking into the innocence of others. I am reluctant to burst through a shell of conviction that may be all that is holding someone together.

Isobel tells me I'm wrong; as a feminist I should be committed to doing just that. She says she doesn't know how the hell I can teach feminist theory with the attitudes I have about the sanctity of the private thoughts of the other.

I told her it's not as difficult as it sounds. I provide the information, I do the reading, the research, I give out the evidence from reliable sources. I am an instrument of communication between the evidence and the students, that's all. If it does change their lives or throw them into confusion, it's not my problem; the evidence did it, not me.

Bob served himself another chunk of kahawai and poured caper sauce over it. He said he'd been thinking about next year, he needed to live a more political life. 'I want to go back to university, get my teeth into something.'

'But you've already got a degree.'

'That was a long time ago and it was just a meal ticket. Can you imagine me studying management or commerce now?'

I had to smile, it did seem ridiculous. Then he dropped his bombshell. He told me he'd decided to enrol for a degree in feminist studies.

I mumbled something unintelligible and took my plate over to the sink.

I didn't want to discuss it in front of the children. I waited until Buffy was safely restored to Kezia and both children were in the lounge watching a video.

We washed up together, Bob kept looking at me, he seemed rather anxious at my lack of reaction to his news.

I wanted to say I'm in shock, but I couldn't think of a valid argument to back it up. What sensible reason could I give for feeling like this?

Bob said, 'I've looked at all the subjects and it seems to me that feminist studies is right at the forefront of political thought; it provides the most telling critique of capitalism since Marx.'

I had to agree, I had no choice, I'd been saying as much to Bob over the past few months. I changed tactics, I asked him about the ethics of a husband taking a course taught by his wife.

'I've checked with the Registrar. There's a precedent. Richard Burrows's wife took one of his courses last year and someone else marked her work.'

I felt hurt that he had talked to the Registrar without discussing it with me first.

'What's the problem? Things won't change, I'll be here for the kids when you're at work.'

I was struck by the irony of the situation; a husband reassures his wife that his university study won't interfere with the domestic routine. I started to laugh, I couldn't help myself.

He realized what he'd said and started to laugh too.

The bloody phone went in the middle of all this hilarity. It was Isobel. Vera had phoned her, she thought Mum was behaving strangely. No, not the Spencers this time, the house. She's closed off some of the rooms and she's sleeping in the dining room.

I promised I'd go to Te Kauwhata this Saturday and check up on her.

I told her about Bob enrolling next year in feminist studies. She thought I was having her on.

‘No such luck.’

She exploded. I’ve never heard her so angry. ‘He can’t bear you to have anything of your own!’

I was shocked, she’d never said anything against Bob before. I tried to explain to her how I had been building up the idea to him that feminist theory was grand theory, a universal explanation that underpinned all theories of power.

She wouldn’t listen. ‘That’s not the real reason and you know it.’

I was shattered at her reaction. I tried to tell her that Bob was genuinely interested in ideas. It hasn’t entered his head that I may not want him as a student.

So why do I feel betrayed? Maybe it’s because I feel that it should have entered his head. I thought he knew me better.

Our relationship is already set along certain lines but if we become teacher and student, new ways of judging each other would come into play.

How can two people live together for ten years and not know each other better? He has no idea that I feel invaded and afraid at the thought of him becoming a part of my working life. I had no idea that he could be so insensitive towards me. I assumed that because we share a life together, he knows what goes on in my mind.

Isobel says events don’t happen accidentally, we do it to ourselves. We pull the future back to the present by the initial choices that we make.

I challenged her. If desire motivates my decisions, how come I make choices that draw me towards trouble? Does this mean I have a subconscious leaning towards self-destruction?

She told me she couldn’t answer that, I had to work it out for myself.

I thought she sounded evasive. She’s changed and I don’t know why. In the past, I sensed a clear strong centre in my

sister. Now, whenever I try to grasp her essence, something melts away, I can't get a fix on her.

I must take the courage to talk to her about it. It's getting to the stage where I don't always feel comfortable when I'm with her. I play games with her, I try to change the subject when we begin to swim towards the deep end.

Things have changed between us since Wendy moved into the farmhouse. Sometimes I wish that they had never met and that Isobel and I could be together in the same way that we were before she went to England.

It's been a horrible night. I envy Bob's ability to sleep soundly after a quarrel. There he lies, calm and peaceful, while I try to work out what the hell is going on. He wouldn't agree that we have quarrelled, he would say I was doing my usual trick of exaggerating the importance of what happened between us.

I am reluctant to lay down my pen. Outside, a gentle spring rain has begun to fall. I can hear it tapping quietly on the tin roof. I can see the newly planted citrus trees in the garden lifting up their arms to drink. The rain calms me, it tells me that life goes on regardless of my anxiety.

A good place to finish for the night. I need more love, sea-love, love of the sea; if I can't have it awake, I'll take it in my sleep. I want to be carried back to an earlier time when Aphrodite glistened with pearls and wet blue silk. Once, she placed a white cowrie shell on my brow and called me Daughter, I want to dream of her again.

To bed now, there is always a promise.

Saturday night, 19 October

Clemency turned up unexpectedly last night. She apologized for not ringing me before she left Auckland, she wanted to tell me her news in person.

She's pregnant! Things are great, or so she says. I can't believe the change in her, she holds her body straight, there is a new look in her eyes.

She arrived driving a car, that was the first shock. She told us she went to a driving school behind Gerald's back and presented her licence to him, wrapped in gold paper on one of her best dinner plates. I am beginning to believe that I have underestimated Clemency. I find it very satisfying that she's standing up to Gerald at last.

The second shock was that she spoke freely about the circumstances of her pregnancy in front of Bob.

No, Gerald didn't know that it wasn't his child and he wasn't ever going to know. He was proud that she was pregnant, he was going around telling everyone he'd done it at last. If anyone ever told him about her activities in the Gluepot, she would deny it.

Bob looked horrified. He challenged her about the safety of what she had done. What about Aids, what about congenital defects, what about the ethics of the thing? He said that Clemency had deceived two men, both Gerald and the poor mug that she had relieved of sperm under false pretences. He wanted to know what I thought about the situation.

I told him that I'd known for months what Clemency was up to. He seemed rather aggrieved that I hadn't shared it with him, but I told him a promise is a promise. (I didn't dare tell them that I had already told Lydia about it.)

He gave us a lecture on men having the right to know if a child is theirs and having the right to consent to produce a child. He said that in his view Clemency had committed a form of rape on the guy in the pub, she had forced him to produce a child without his consent.

Clemency didn't seem to care that Bob disapproved of what she'd done. His words couldn't touch the fantastic anticipation in her body, she quivered with it; she swore she enjoyed absolutely everything about pregnancy, even morning sickness.

I am more upset with Bob's reaction than she is. I tried to discuss it with him in bed last night but he wouldn't listen to

anything I said. He went on and on about it, I couldn't get a word in.

I feel rather afraid of him, which is stupid because I haven't done anything wrong. I must get over my problem of feeling guilty over the actions of other women. When men criticize women I sometimes feel as if they are attacking me simply because I'm a member of the tribe.

Clemency and I went up to Te Kauwhata this afternoon to check up on Mum. I took the opportunity during the drive to ask her why the hell she had spilled the beans to Bob.

'I thought about it before I came down and I decided to ask you both to be godparents. I wanted him to know the truth.'

'He's taking it out on me.'

'I don't understand, I thought he disliked Gerald.'

I don't really care that Clemency has tricked Gerald, it's his own fault that she had to go to such bizarre lengths. But there is a principle at stake, Bob is right about that. All people should consent to bring their own child into the world, not just women. We can't claim a right for us and not for men. Yet we are the ones that actually bear the child, we take the risks. Does this give us more rights? I must talk to Lydia about this, I wonder what she'll think.

I told Clemency that Mum had been acting strangely since Dad died.

'People do weird things when they lose their partners,' she said. 'Look at what my father did after my mother left him. I have never forgiven him for not taking my kitten and my toys out of the house before he set fire to it. He said he did it to cleanse himself of the memory of her, the floor where she had walked, the stove where she had cooked, the tub where she had bathed. But what about my memories? He didn't care that he was destroying my past along with hers. He even ploughed her garden under, I can remember crying bitterly when I saw the blade of his rotary hoe crushing her beautiful

lupins into the mud. They were in full flower, she was so proud of them.'

I listened carefully to her. I'd known about the fire of course. By the time I'd met Clemency at high school, the story had become one of the classic legends of the town. The strange thing is that until today, she had never discussed it with me. I hadn't been sure if she remembered it, she had been only four years old at the time.

I told her it was good that she was talking about the fire, it might help her to come to grips with past events that must have been very difficult for a little child to understand.

'Now I'm pregnant it bewilders me even more. How could my mother leave me like that? How can any woman leave her children?'

I said something about the position of women in those days. She said she knew all that, but other women had been in the same boat and they hadn't run off.

'I've hired an agency to try and find her. I want to hear her version of events, I want to understand.'

Poor Clemency, it seems that she has replaced one obsession with another.

We arrived at Mum's place. The house looked normal from the outside, spotless paintwork, clean windows glittering in the sun, garden raked and weeded to within an inch of its life.

I knocked at the back door. Mum came running, dressed in her housework clothes. She seemed surprised to see us. It was obvious that she had forgotten that I had phoned to tell her that Clemency and I were driving up.

She said she hadn't written it down in her book last night and it had gone right out of her mind. 'But it's lovely to see you both, come in, come in.'

Clemency and I sat at the kitchen table. I looked carefully around the room, nothing seemed to have changed since I was last here. Mum busied herself with making a pot of tea. 'You'll have to go into the dining room, I've done in here today but not in there, so it doesn't matter if we drop crumbs.'

We went into the dining room. The double bed from my parents' bedroom almost filled up the small room. It gave me a strange feeling to see it next to the table where we had eaten so many family meals. For me, the bed was a private place where my parents had lived out their secret lives.

I waited until Mum went back into the kitchen and then I took a quick look around the rest of the house. I couldn't open any of the doors, she'd stuck masking tape around the doorways. I didn't dare peel it off. I looked in the hall cupboards, one was the same as usual: cakes of soap, tissues and toilet paper, vacuum cleaner parts. The other one had paper patterns and sewing things, knitting needles and cotton reels, and Mum's clothes in seven neat piles, each one labelled with a day of the week.

Why has she closed off the lounge and all the bedrooms? What the hell is she up to?

Clemency was wonderful with Mum, she didn't blink an eye when we sat on the double bed in the dining room and drank tea without milk and nibbled at dry unbuttered cream crackers.

I had to bring up the subject of the bed. I waited until Clemency had told her that she was pregnant.

'Congratulations, better late than never. I must make you something.'

She raced off to get her baby knitting books. I followed her out and bailed her up in the hallway.

'Why have you closed off the rooms?'

'I have too much work to do.'

I tried to interrupt, but she held a finger to my lips.

'This way I don't have to clean the rooms every day. It's just a way of saving time, that's all.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I am.'

She took me into the kitchen and showed me a notebook with lists of jobs to be done daily and weekly. 'I open up all the rooms each week and give them a good clean. See, main

bedroom Tuesday, lounge Wednesday, they're not really closed off at all. I tape the doors up after I've cleaned to keep the dust out, it works very well.'

Interposed between the tasks there were sentences in red ink written in some sort of code. She wouldn't tell me what they meant. I wondered if they were a record of her secret appointments with the Spencers.

It's frightening; every activity in her life has a time and every time has an activity. She's trying to give importance to all the minutes in her day by sealing them up into a framework of trivial tasks.

'Why didn't you leave one bedroom open Mum? Why the bed in the dining room?'

'I couldn't stay in the big bedroom, I felt Denby was still there.'

'Why not one of the others?'

'I couldn't, they were already closed up.'

Her logic defeated me. We went back to the dining room. She and Clemency went through the knitting patterns and Clemency chose a traditional pram set of bonnet, matinee jacket, mittens and bootees.

'I'll knit it up in feather and fan, it thickens out the three-ply, makes it warmer.'

'Are you sure it's not too much work?'

'It gives me something to do with my hands when I watch television.'

We chatted about doings in Te Kauwhata. She told us about Vera's love affair. She had Clemency clutching her sides with laughter at her description of Vera fussing over the poor old man she has claimed as her boyfriend.

After we left, I asked Clemency if she thought Mum had changed.

'She's lost weight but that's normal after a sudden bereavement. I don't think there's much wrong with her, she hasn't lost her sense of humour, she made me laugh.'

'But the house!'

‘What’s new? She’s always been careful with cleanliness. Closing up part of the house is just an extension of that.’

I feel reassured. I have been carrying this unspoken fear that my mother is losing her mind. Her life operates as a example of how not to live as a woman. I have learned to accept her lack of independence, her passivity, her eternal fear that something dreadful is about to happen. She’s irritating, critical, but unchanging; that’s the key. If she changes too much, another rock in my life would turn into sand, I wouldn’t be able to cope.

After we had visited Clemency’s father, we went to the coffee bar. I couldn’t believe how much she ate; a salad roll stained with beetroot, a blueberry muffin, an asparagus roll. She laughed and patted her stomach when I commented on her appetite. I left her in the coffee bar and went outside for a smoke.

I hate the main street of my old home town. I can smell the bigotry embedded in the tarsealed footpath, as if the small minds that live here have poisoned the very dust in the streets.

I remember wishing as a child that an enormous tidal wave would come inland from the sea and sweep through the streets of Te Kauwhata, not to kill but to cleanse. Even then I had the idea that sea water had special powers. I felt quite shaken when I read of ancient matriarchal societies that believed that the primal chaos of the sea became language and light through salt water changing into birth fluid in the womb.

Things were good when we got home. We cooked a huge meal together, Bob made pesto, the kitchen smelt of basil and garlic and hot tomato sauce. We drank beer and two bottles of red wine, we were giggling and laughing and overeating in the warm kitchen. Clemency broke her no-alcohol rule, she had a small glass of Bob’s home brew. She told us it was great to be staying with a real family.

We went to bed early, I was a bit pissed and Bob wanted to make love. I wanted him too, I always get amorous after red wine, it was lovely to feel his warm naked body in mine.

Afterwards, Bob put his arms around me and said he was sorry about last night, maybe he's been too hard on Clemency. If Gerald really loved her, he would have had his fertility tested instead of being so stubborn and macho about it.

He kissed me gently on the head. I went instantly to sleep full of wine and food and love.

Three hours later I awoke. Red wine knocks me out, then wakes me up with a jolt; my mind races, my head grows huge, my flesh shrinks.

It's three o'clock in the morning. I must go back to bed and try to sleep. A glass of water for the dry horrors, a warm wet flannel between my legs to dilute the salty smell of love, a glance out of the bedroom window at the moon. Tonight she is a Dianic crescent, floating in and out of thin white cloud.

Which crone awaits me tonight? Maybe Atropos the Cutter will be looking for me, huge shears at the ready; maybe she will call, this way Julia, this way to the flesh, this way to destruction, follow my silver blade!

Then she'll pull me down into the swirling cauldron of milk and blood that gives birth to the powerful words of death, nonbeing, renewal, consciousness. But has she got the order right? The night witch always begins with destruction but my intellect tells me that death can only be the last act, never the first.

Once more I prepare myself to go through the fires of this dream, if dream it is.



16

Julia and Bob are driving to Dr Berry's house to attend an end of term dinner party. It is a warm night. Bob has already drunk a bottle of home brew and is in a happy mood.

Julia is feeling apprehensive about the dish she has prepared for the party. She is nursing a large tureen of silver beet and bean curd soup on her lap. She forgot Dr Berry's warning about the number of vegetarians coming tonight and has used a beef cube in the stock. She hopes that nobody will find out. She agrees with Dr Berry who described her vegetarian guests as 'tiresome individuals'.

Julia prays that the topic won't come up in the conversation, she might feel the need to confess that the soup is tainted. Lydia told her that if she ever accidentally ate anything to do with an animal her body would know, it would reject it at once, she would throw up for days.

They arrive at Dr Berry's house in River Road. It is a large house with three dormer windows set into a roof of orange tiles. A soft yellow street light shines through the silver birches and throws up thin moving shadows against brick and glass. There are already a number of cars parked on the grass verge. Julia hopes they are not late. The invitation had said *seven for*

seven-thirty, and it is now seven-forty. The baby sitter had been delayed.

Dr Berry opens the door. She shakes hands with Bob and kisses Julia warmly on the cheek. Julia is surprised, Dr Berry has never shown her any affection before. Dr Berry asks them to leave their jackets and bags up in her bedroom to save cluttering up the dining room. She indicates the staircase at the end of the hall and tells them that her room is through the second door on the first landing. She takes the soup tureen from Julia and hurries off with it.

The bedroom is an enormous room full of dark expensive-looking mahogany furniture. Bob takes off his denim jacket and places it on the bed. 'What a place. She must be rich.'

'I had no idea.'

'It would take more than a salary like hers to live in a place like this.'

Julia hopes he isn't going to start lecturing her on 'the decadent bourgeoisie'. She says nervously, 'Dr Berry seems in a good mood tonight.'

'She's not at all what I expected from your description of her.'

Julia can't resist going into the *en suite* on the pretext that she wants to use the toilet. She is surprised at the range of cosmetics and perfumes displayed on glass shelves and on the bench alongside the hand basin. Skin products by Lancôme, French perfumes, cakes of soap wrapped in expensive packaging, a dozen different varieties of shampoo and conditioner. It isn't just the self-indulgence that strikes Julia as odd, it's the mess. She had thought that Dr Berry would live in a clinical and uncluttered environment like her office. Many of the tubes and pots are without lids, some are empty. The glass shelves are smeared with a mixture of dust and spilt creams and lotions. The soap in the handbasin is cracked and dry as if it hadn't been used for a long time.

Julia feels that tonight will be important in her quest to find out what makes Dr Berry tick. There are hidden

dimensions to her boss that she needs to know about, her job depends on it. It's obvious that Dr Berry is anxious about her appearance and is a compulsive collector of beauty counter 'feminine' aids. Julia finds it difficult to connect this room with Dr Berry's actual appearance. She dresses in dull colours and sensible clothes, her hair is gray and untinted, her make-up is barely noticeable.

They walk down the wooden staircase towards the hum of voices coming from the dining room. Julia experiences a moment of shyness at the doorway. Bob is with her, and she wants her colleagues to approve of him. She wonders if he ever felt like this when she accompanied him to work parties. Probably not. His jobs had never been politically sensitive like hers. His colleagues had judged her in other ways, of course. Women are always under surveillance; there is constant pressure to be one of those yellow-haired and silent ghosts of male desire.

He won't ever have to go through the body shit that I did. All those jokes about my height, did he have to use a ladder to kiss me, did he get a stiff neck staring up at me, very amusing.

Jeanine is standing beside the long maroon velvet drapes at the bay window. She is holding a drink and talking to a well dressed, good-looking man. She screams out to Julia, 'You're late Rattle! Come over here at once and meet Edward.'

It is obvious to Julia that Jeanine has been drinking. She looks very glamorous in her silver dress, her make-up and hair are perfect, but there is a certain vagueness in her eyes and her voice is slightly slurred.

'Edward, this is Julia and Bob. I've told you all about them.'

The men shake hands. Edward says, 'So you're the famous house-husband.'

Bob admits that he is.

'Do you realize what you're doing to us? I can't get away with anything in the house since Jeanine met you.'

Jeanine looks uncomfortable. Julia rescues her.

‘He’s not that great, I still have to do most of the organizing.’

‘What a relief. Can I get you two a gin and tonic?’ He goes over to a kauri sideboard covered with a beautiful lace cloth. There are bottles and glasses of various shapes and sizes, dishes of cashew nuts, bowls of sliced lemons, a silver ice-bucket with tongs.

Bob grins at Julia. ‘Fibber,’ he says.

‘Couldn’t help myself.’

‘I wish to God I’d never told the silly bugger about you two,’ says Jeanine. ‘He won’t let me forget it.’

Edward comes back carrying three glasses of gin and tonic. ‘Clare is a wonderful woman,’ he says in a low voice. ‘But you have to watch the glasses, they can be rather dusty. Housekeeping is not her strong point.’

Bob laughs. ‘She needs to get herself a handy bloke like me.’

‘She should be so lucky.’ Jeanine is practically leaning on Bob. Is she trying to annoy Edward?

Julia has to move away from them, she can’t take any more. She wonders if jokes about their so-called role swap are going to be the conversational theme of the evening.

Julia suddenly feels too tall and thin in her black leggings and her loose-fitting jacket. She wishes that she had worn a dress. Everyone else looks dressed up, she hadn’t realized that formal dress was required. This is turning out to be the strangest pot-luck dinner she’s ever been to.

She greets other people in the room. Everyone is mellow with drink and talk, and the ambience of luxurious surroundings. She stands beside Lydia and Vivian and tries to absorb some of their strength. Lydia says quietly, ‘Told you it was going to be a bun fight.’

‘How’s it going?’ asks Vivian.

Julia isn’t sure if she means her job or this particular evening. ‘No more lectures to write thank goodness. I’m still busy though, I’ll be glad when the term’s over.’

‘The marking is bloody endless,’ says Lydia. ‘Which reminds me Julia, has Wendy handed in her essay yet?’

‘She told me she’d get it to me this week.’

Lydia frowns. ‘Well, I hope she does. Peter is chaffing at the bit.’

There is a sudden drop in the noise level. Wendy and Isobel have come into the room and everybody is staring at them. Both are dressed in black. Wendy’s make-up is startling. Her cheeks are bright red, her skin white, her eyes huge and dark. She turns to greet Susan Jean and Julia notices a row of tiny silver skulls sewn across the back of her leather jacket.

Isobel has her hair sticking up in short thin spikes. Silver chains hang from her tight leather jerkin. She has accentuated her height by wearing high heeled boots and skin-tight leather pants. Julia thinks her sister very beautiful. More than that, she is grateful to her for daring to look exotic.

She rushes over to her and gives her a huge hug. Isobel laughs. ‘Careful, you’ll break my ribs.’

Peter Patterson comes over to them. ‘This has got to be your sister Julia, you look so alike.’

Isobel is all charm and poise and tinkling silver chains, she’s even wearing perfume. She’s super nice to Peter, it’s obvious that she’s priming him up for a fall. Julia knows her too well. She has a momentary feeling of panic but thinks oh what the hell, let her do what she wants.

She goes over to the sideboard and pours herself another gin. Jeanine has the right idea, she has drunk just enough to put a wedge between herself and her anxiety. A necessary tactic on a night like this.

There is a long rimu dining table in the centre of the room. It is bare except for silver cutlery and a stack of white china plates. Julia hopes that the food is served soon. She looks around for nibbles but there is nothing except for the rapidly disappearing cashews on the sideboard.

She drifts over to speak to Susan and Wendy. Lydia and

Vivian come over to chat with them. Julia drains the last of her drink. She tells Lydia the latest about Clemency. The other women are very interested.

‘How did she do the deed?’ asks Susan.

‘With a teaspoon, believe it or not.’

‘That must have been difficult.’

‘It was a special teaspoon, one of the few things left that had once belonged to her mother.’

‘Another thing to add to the list.’

‘List?’

‘The list of things that dykes use to get pregnant with; icing funnels, eye droppers, plastic sauce bottles, syringes, turkey basters, douche bags, you name it, we’ve used it.’

‘Who’s the guy?’ asks Wendy.

‘She doesn’t know, a stranger, someone in the Gluepot. He was drunk, she took him outside into a dark alleyway and wanked him off.’

‘Yuk! How could she?’ says Susan.

Julia suddenly remembers she is talking to lesbians. She feels ashamed at her lack of tact.

Vivan frowns, ‘There was no need for her to do it like that, there’s plenty of gay men who want kids, we have a list of names.’

‘She’s married, and it’s important to her that her husband doesn’t find out.’

‘I thought you were talking about a dyke.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Sorry, I just assumed that she was.’

Susan says, ‘Why didn’t she just fuck the guy if she’s straight? Why all the hassle with the teaspoon?’

‘Because she couldn’t bring herself to be unfaithful to her husband.’

Wendy laughs. ‘You’ve got to be kidding!’

Lydia says she doesn’t give a stuff about what Clemency has done to her husband, Julia told her all about him and it serves him damn well right.

Julia is glad that Lydia is here. The other women are laughing with Wendy, she wishes now that she hadn't talked about it, damn the gin.

She can see Peter Patterson and Isobel talking and laughing together across the room. It occurs to her that he doesn't know that her sister is a lesbian. Isobel is playing up to him, mocking him, having him on. She can see Coralie Patterson eyeing them too, but it's not likely that she'll interfere. According to Lydia, Coralie lets her husband get away with murder when it comes to chatting up other women.

'Hello, I'm Julia Rattle, I work with your husband.'

'Nice to meet you.' They shake hands. The third finger of her left hand carries an enormous burden of rings; a wedding ring, a glittering diamond, three narrow gold bands set with tiny rubies and deep green emeralds. Julia is fascinated, she can't help commenting on them.

Coralie smiles. 'I love jewellery, it's my weakness. Each eternity ring marks off five years of marriage with Peter.'

Julia risks it. 'A celebration or a consolation?'

She laughs. 'Both!'

Julia has heard that Coralie is a respected worker at a women's refuge and is a skilled incest counsellor. She is known as a tough woman in a crisis and is said to have once wrestled a child from the arms of a violent and disturbed man. Julia can't square these stories off in her mind with the fact that she is married to Peter the Groupie.

'Is that your sister?' asks Coralie.

'Yes, she came with Wendy.'

'Ah, Wendy.' She sounds relieved.

'You know her?'

'She comes down to the refuge. The women don't know what to make of her at times, she can be so outrageous.'

Julia takes another risk. 'She's my sister's lover.'

Coralie sips at her sherry and whispers down into her glass, 'Poor old Peter, he's fallen in it again.'

Julia feels embarrassed. She could shoot Isobel at this moment. Coralie looks her in the eye and Julia sees that she is trying hard not to laugh.

‘Don’t feel bad on your sister’s behalf, Peter is a complete fool with attractive women, he can’t help himself.’

‘How do you stand it?’

‘He’s good to me in other ways. Besides, he never gets anywhere, women see through him straight away.’

‘I’ve found him friendly at work, he’s given me lots of help with assessment.’

‘That’s good, I’m glad, it must be hard in your first year.’

Julia warms to her, especially when Coralie tells her that she thinks it wonderful that Bob takes care of the house and kids.

‘Do other men tease him? I bet they do. They punish any man brave enough to collaborate with feminists. Every time Peter’s father comes to stay with us, he asks Peter when he’s going to open a refuge for men to get away from abusive women. Peter gets so angry.’

Dr Berry comes into the room carrying Julia’s soup tureen. Richard Burrows and his wife Eva follow her with plates of buttered toast.

There is a rush to the table. Julia prays that there will be enough soup to go around but there isn’t. The toast runs out immediately. Lydia asks if there’s any more. Dr Berry says there’s plenty of food to come, you’ll all be bursting if you eat too much now.

Julia feels guilty watching Lydia eating her bean curd soup, especially when she says it’s delicious, and could she have the recipe please?

Isobel and Peter are still talking together, they haven’t come to the table to fight for their share of soup. Julia goes over to them, she has decided that enough is enough. She wants to break their talk apart before Isobel goes too far.

‘Why haven’t I met your sister before?’ asks Peter. ‘You must have been deliberately keeping her from me.’

Julia doesn't know how to answer him. He is fired up with his game of impressing Isobel, he is glowing with it, his adrenalin is running high. Whatever Julia says, he will twist it into something that he hopes will show him up in a good light. She abandons her idea to blow Isobel's cover.

Isobel says, 'Peter's been telling me all about his system for marking essays, I wish I'd had something like that when I was teaching.'

Julia feels the hairs prickle on the back of her neck. What is her sister up to? She was a graduate student, not a lecturer.

Isobel says she thinks it's brave of him, more than that, fantastic. Not many lecturers would have the courage to stick to rules that have been abandoned years ago by forward-thinking theorists.

He frowns, 'What rules?'

'Oh you know, things like insisting on novelty.'

'But surely saying something new is a mark of excellence, a real contribution to good scholarship?'

'I agree with you but your critics would ask, what is good scholarship? There can never be an objective set of rules to define that. The rules are part of a current discourse, they have no external validity of their own.'

'Discourse! If you knew how bored I am with that bloody word.'

Isobel says she couldn't agree more, as far as she's concerned the notion of discourse is a drag, it should be abolished forthwith, the sooner they get back to some good old-fashioned red-blooded empiricism the better.

Julia can't believe that Peter doesn't know she's having him on. Isobel stands close to him, she stares into his eyes, her voice rings with false innocence, she's like a cat playing with a mouse. The air is thick with her perfume, she waves her arms around, the black leather jerkin susurrates against her skin.

Julia thinks he must be locked into the vibrations of Isobel's body, he must be drowning in the honey of her voice. Why else would he be listening to his downfall so raptly, mouth

half open, tongue on bottom lip, eyes like hot blue stones in his flushed face?

Julia is finding it difficult to follow the twists and turns of Isobel's argument but she knows that Isobel is trying to show Peter up by both agreeing with him and making him look ridiculous at one and the same time. She feels almost sorry for him, he is obviously out of his depth.

Wendy comes over, drink in hand. Julia hopes that Wendy will divert Isobel from her cruel game.

Isobel's in full flight. 'The world of academia should listen to people like you Peter, some of these trendy postmodern buggers can't tell their arse from their elbows let alone fact from theory. You are right to insist on the correct interpretation of the essay topic. To hell with all this nonsense about the contextuality of meaning, what a wank! A topic declares itself, it says precisely what it wants to say, no more, no less.'

Wendy argues with Isobel. Who decides on the correct meaning of words? Why should one person's definition be superior to another's? For example, the essay she's writing at the moment has a title that can be read in significantly different ways depending on the readers' sense of humour and whether or not they can recognize irony when they are hit over the head with it.

Isobel argues back. Julia can't believe what she's hearing. They are playing games with Peter by pretending to be on opposite sides.

Peter is obviously irritated by Wendy joining the conversation. He has had several confrontations with her at the University, and once told Julia that in his opinion Wendy is nothing but a rich spoiled brat.

'You should listen to Isobel,' he says. 'She talks a lot of sense.'

'I think she talks shit.'

Isobel pretends to look annoyed. They argue loudly.

Julia feels furious with them both. She has to work with this man. When he discovers that Wendy and Isobel are lovers, he'll feel humiliated and it could rebound on her.

Coralie comes over. Julia tries to catch her eye to plead for deliverance. No need, she's understood the situation from across the room.

She asks Peter to come over to the table and choose some entrées with her. He gives in, but not before he asks Isobel to ring him at the work to discuss the possibility of contributing to a research seminar to be held on the last day of term. He tells her that it's essential that his department gets more exposure to feminist ideas and that she's one of the most articulate feminist academics he's ever met.

Julia whispers, 'Come outside with me for a moment? I want to talk to you.'

Isobel says she's starving, she's already missed out on the soup.

They walk through a ranch slider on the side of the dining room and come out on to a long wide verandah.

'I know I've been naughty but I couldn't help myself.'

'How could you? I've got to work with that guy.'

Isobel says that when she meets men like Peter she is flung back into that awful time when she had to pretend to be straight in order to get her PhD scholarship. She had to butter up her professor both intellectually and sexually just to get enrolled.

Julia asks if it's fair that Peter takes the brunt for things that happened between Isobel and other men in the past.

Isobel explodes. 'The man's a bastard. Sure, I was playing games and so was Wendy. But what about his games? He was trying to fuck me with his eyes, right in the same room as his wife. Do you think he would have given me any attention if he'd known I was a dyke? That guy is a real dyke-hater, I know it.'

'Well, he will be now, after what you've done.'

‘Rubbish! The guy’s too stupid to know I was sending him up;’

‘He has influence over Wendy’s final grades. How can she take such risks?’

Isobel is silent for a moment. The noise of the party bursts through the door. There is a smell of hot pastry, garlic bread, curried fish.

‘I’m starving, I’ve been working in the garden all day, I need to eat.’

‘Wait a minute, listen to me.’

Isobel hesitates, then settles back on the seat. ‘Okay, I’m listening.’

‘Remember the politics of passivity? You said you couldn’t be bothered fighting the Boys anymore. So what the hell were you doing in there with Peter?’

‘You’ve got it wrong, it’s not passivity, it’s indifference. Neither confirm nor deny, remember?’

‘But you pretended to agree with him.’

‘Exactly! I was being ironic, not that he twigged to it, the dipstick.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You’re right up to a point, I’m no longer completely indifferent. Wendy has taught me to feel passionate again, to make a noise, to leave a mark wherever I go. She’s taught me that it is possible for conflicting ideas to live happily together. I know that everything is relative but I also know that my words and my politics are just as good as anyone else’s.’

Julia is thrilled. ‘Does this mean that you’ll go back to your doctorate?’

‘Maybe.’

They go back into the dining room arm in arm. The table has been cleared again. Isobel groans. ‘See what you’ve done to me? Now I’ll die of starvation.’

Wendy appears beside them with a loaded plate. ‘I kept this aside for you Bel.’

‘You angel.’

'I had to fix that bastard, he had the cheek to tell me that he has a lot in common with you.'

'Really.'

'I wasn't going to say anything else but he sneered at me and I got wild.'

Wendy hesitates. Isobel insists that she continues.

'Okay, you asked for it. I said to him, you and I also have something in common, we both want to get into Isobel's cunt but sorry Dr Patterson, I've beaten you to it.'

'Wendy!'

'You made me tell you.'

Isobel looks shocked at first, then she laughs and laughs.

'You're so wicked. What am I going to do with you?'

'I have a few suggestions.'

Julia can't help laughing too. She's drinking chilled white wine, and she's beginning to fall in love with everything in the room, the rich burgundy colour of the drapes, the smell of hot chocolate pudding that has just been placed on the table. She looks around for Bob, she wants to tell him how happy she is, how much she loves him.

He's over at the far side of the room talking to Coralie Patterson and Eva Burrows. The two women appear to be hanging onto every word he says.

Julia goes over and Bob introduces her to Eva.

'Richard's told me all about you.' Her words are slightly slurred.

'What did he say about me then?'

'That you're beautiful and clever.'

Julia is astounded. 'You're having me on!'

'Why would I do that?'

'I didn't think he liked me.' She sways slightly.

Coralie puts her hand on Julia's arm. 'Come and sit down love, over here.' She leads the obedient Julia to a small leather sofa on the edge of the room. They sit down. Bob and Eva hover in front of them.

'I want another drink,' says Julia.

Bob takes her glass. 'I'll get you one more, then that's it.'

Eva suddenly drops between the two women. It's a tight squeeze on the two-seater sofa. She peers up into Julia's face. Julia can smell the whisky on her breath.

'It's funny that he likes you.'

'Who?'

'Richard.'

'Why's that?'

'Because he doesn't usually like women, he doesn't get on with them.'

Julia is taken aback. She notices that Eva calls women 'them' not 'us.' It occurs to her that Eva may be jealous of her. She takes a deep breath, she tries to sober up, she doesn't want to make trouble for herself.

'He seems to get on well with the women in the Department.'

'You don't know what he says behind their backs, he criticizes everyone, except you.'

She peers even more intently at Julia, as if she's trying to memorize her facial features. Julia feels like a specimen in a laboratory. She asks herself why she is sitting meekly on this ridiculous sofa listening to this drunken, insecure woman.

Julia can't believe that Richard Burrows thinks her clever. She doesn't know what he thinks of her work. No matter how hard she tries to get through to him he never gives her any feedback. He just smiles and makes irrelevant remarks. He makes her feel inadequate and invisible just like her father used to do.

Coralie asks, 'What did you lot do to my husband? He looks rather subdued.'

Julia laughs. She wants to divert Eva's attention away from her preoccupation with Richard. She thinks it safe to tell Coralie what Wendy had said. Didn't Coralie say earlier that Peter is always making a fool of himself over beautiful women? She tells them word for word what Wendy said to him.

There is a shocked silence. The two women withdraw physically from Julia. She realizes immediately that she has crossed the inviolate line that women draw between making fun of men in general and humiliating a man that belongs to one of them.

Eva says bitterly, 'I would never get away with that, not for a minute.'

Coralie says coldly that she finds that particular word very offensive, if she ever hears a man use it she puts a stop to the conversation immediately.

'If I was beautiful and clever, they'd let me,' says Eva.

Bob returns with Julia's drink. Her hands are shaking so much, she spills wine over her trousers.

'Don't you agree Bob?' asks Eva.

'With what?'

'Never mind.' She stands up carefully and moves away in search of more whisky.

Coralie stands up too and smooths down her rumpled white dress.

'Well Bob, it's been nice talking to you. I must go now and persuade my poor tired husband to come home with me.'

'Going so soon?' Julia thinks he sounds disappointed.

'Peter has worked very hard this week, he needs an early night.'

Bob sits beside Julia on the leather sofa. 'I must have bad breath.'

Julia says nothing. She has put the wine glass carefully on the arm rest of the sofa.

She feels terrible. She has upset the wives of two of her colleagues. Worse, Peter and Richard are both members of the selection panel that decides who gets tenure. She doesn't care so much about Eva, she's obviously got problems and wouldn't have much influence over Richard anyway by the sound of it. Coralie is the one she regrets. She really liked her until this awful thing happened. Now, she is fearful of what Coralie will say to her husband.

She takes a huge gulp of wine, it runs in a cool white flood down her aching throat.

Why weren't they angry with Wendy instead of me? Probably because she's already a lost cause, she's expected to be a man-hater. Isobel once said that heterosexuals hold each other to a strict set of rules. We allow just so much freedom but we never let each other forget our primary allegiance to men. I've been spending too much time with lesbians, I'm forgetting who and what I am.

'I want to go home.'

'It's too early, we haven't had coffee yet.'

'I want to go home.'

'You're too pissed to drive.'

'I shall take a taxi.'

He looks relieved.

Maybe he thought I was about to make a scene, like that time when I was getting ill. He's had a good time here tonight, women have talked to him, admired him, looked up to him. He's hungry for it, he needs to get his ego stroked. Maybe he's afraid that I'll spoil things for him.

She goes out into the hall and calls a cab. She can see Bob through the dining room door laughing and talking with Eva.

A feeling of grief comes over her, a feeling of loss, of hopelessness. Dr Berry comes from the kitchen carrying a tray of cheese and biscuits. She looks at Julia. 'Give us a smile, things can't be that serious!'

She disappears through the dining room door in a swirl of expensive skirts.

Julia slumps down on the wooden stool next to the telephone. She remembers Gerald saying those very same words to her at the dinner party before they left Birkenhead. She'd thought all that had been left behind her, but here she is, taking it from a woman. 'Look pleasant for the man Julia, smile please.' Dr Berry knows that a sad woman is not a good woman and, what is even more sinister, she feels she has the right to say so.

She has power over me, she has the potential to wreck my life. I couldn't answer back even though I know she's in the wrong, there's too much at stake.

Julia stands up and looks at herself in the mirror above the telephone. Her mind clears suddenly. She had expected more from these people because they were advantaged by a university education. Dr Berry writes erudite papers, she's published books on feminist theory. Her writing is full of high-sounding morality and is rich with symbols of higher learning. She's always saying that women need to have all the skills, they need to know more than the men. She's a very successful woman, a heroine, one of the few woman professors in the country. Julia has seen women listening to her in rapture; they always applaud her loudly at the end of seminars. But what are they applauding? Nothing but the fact that one of them has beaten the Boys at their own game.

Julia had thought that the main purpose of being a feminist was to change the nature of the patriarchal game not merely to become a superior player.

She stares at herself in the mirror; she's seeing herself clearly for the first time. This is the beginning of the end of innocence and she knows it. It seems naive to her now that she even thought the avoidance of contradictions desirable, let alone possible. She remembers Isobel saying that certainty had no existence outside language, why hadn't she listened to her earlier?

Survival will become the sole object of my desire. I can be a feminist and succeed within the system. I want a permanent job at the University and I'm going to get it.

Bob comes into the hall. 'Still waiting for your cab love?'

She puts her arms around him and gives him a big squeeze. He looks pleased.

'What was that for?'

'I love you.' She tries to kiss him.

He grins and pretends to escape. 'What brought this on?'

She tells him she's fine now, in fact she feels better than she has for ages.

A young woman knocks at the front door. 'Cab for Rattle?'

Julia gets into the taxi. A stiff wind has sprung up, the tall trees in River Road bounce around the street lights.

The taxi driver says, 'The spring weather didn't last long, ay.'

Julia tells her she's been to a work party and that she drank too much to be able to drive home. The driver says oh work parties, I hope you didn't get chased around by your boss like I did last Christmas.

Julia smiles and answers well, I did, in a sort of a way.

'You can't trust some fellas, they get a few drinks in them and think you're looking for it.'

'That's true, luckily I work with women most of the time.'

'You must have a neat job.'

'Yeah, I do.'

The taxi arrives at her house. She pays the fare and says goodnight. The taxi driver backs away down the drive. Inside, Delwyn the baby sitter is waiting for them to come home. Julia stays outside in the garden, she doesn't want to break the spell of her newly found strength by having to listen to Delwyn's chatter about what she's seen on the tele tonight.

She sits on the damp ground underneath the big loquat tree where Kezia has made a little hut. Julia pulls a plastic cushion from the hut and makes herself comfortable. The large leathery leaves fall almost to the ground in a perfect canopy. She manages to find a few small pungent fruits and eats them carefully. The ground is covered with dead papery leaves and half-eaten fruit. The birds have been busy. She adds her own detritus to the deep litter by spitting out mouthfuls of yellow skin and black pips. There is a lively world down here, snails and slugs are out in force. An earth worm touches the little finger of her left hand with a wet pink nose.

Julia hears the unmistakable snuffle of a hedgehog behind her. It comes very close to her, Julia can just see its prickly outline and small black snout.

‘Henrietta, come.’ She speaks very softly and puts out her hand. To her delight, the hedgehog doesn’t roll herself into a ball, she stands quietly within inches of Julia’s outstretched hand. She can feel the little creature look at her as if to say oh it’s you.

Julia keeps very still. She wonders why people find it exciting when something small and wild comes into a suburban garden.

A minute passes, then the hedgehog rustles away through the dead leaves.

Julia takes off her shoes and socks and rubs earth into her feet.

She confronts her deepest fears; being lost and naked in the *nagual*, forgetting the words that could fill the emptiness of the wilderness. She forces herself to enter that terrible place where the threat is not of wolf and thorn, but of nothingness.

A violent gust of wind blows through the canopy of the loquat tree. Julia is showered with dead leaves and sharp twigs.

She laughs and lifts her arms up above her head.

She feels as if she’s holding something away from her head. She begins to feel sleepy and relaxed, her arms drop slowly, she sinks to the ground. She drifts away into her dream of milky seas. She sees an enormous hand stirring, stirring, stirring. It’s the hand of an old woman, her silver bangles clink and jangle, a silver snake winds around a wrinkled finger. Drops of milk swirl and twist and fly, they change form, they become birds of many different colours. The feathers fall through the air, they become voices speaking and singing in multiple texts.

The air is thick with talking feathers, she breathes them in, her wings bloom out like huge red flowers. She flies away with the birds, they soar, they sing, they dive.

She knows that she's arrived at a place she's always longed for. She sees the huge black cauldron filled with milk and the old woman stirring, stirring, stirring. She dives through the roaring air, the old woman looks up; she has Isobel's face.

Julia dives into the white vortex, the red flowers collapse, the singing stops.

It's the end of pain; she falls asleep, wrapped in the black cloths of silence.



17

Monday, 28 October

Bob has forgiven me for the fright I gave him last Saturday night. He came home at two o'clock in the morning and couldn't find me. In the end, he guessed I'd be out in the garden, he knows I head for the trees when I'm upset or drunk.

I was cold and stiff when he woke me up. What a tongue lashing I got. He said I should take responsibility and think of others instead of my own emotional needs. I agreed with him. If he'd disappeared on me, I would have been pissed off. I always feel resentful when other people give me frights.

Like today. Isobel rang me and said she's worried about Mum. Vera Sutton phoned her and told her that something strange is going on. She can't prove it, but she thinks that Mum is sleeping out in the garage. Isobel phoned Mum last night and she sounded much the same as usual. Vera must be mistaken. If Mum was in the garage how come she answered the phone inside the house?

Vera told Isobel that Mum was still haunting the Spencers. Mungo saw her pulling up plants from his garden in the middle of the night, but he didn't lay charges. He rang Vera and told

her to tell the old bitch to keep the hell away from the Spencer house or else. Vera was very frightened. She told him to ring Sally, not her, and he answered, that'll be the bloody day, I don't want nothing to do with that one.

Something has to be done, but what? I find myself becoming impatient with Mum. It's months since Dad died, when is she going to pull herself together?

I told Isobel how busy I am in spite of the fact that lecturing is over for the year. The marking is piling up on me, the prospect of assessing all those essays is daunting. She promised to drive up to Te Kauwhata in the next few days. We discussed the possibility of getting Mum into some form of grief counselling. Isobel said if only she'd been more independent of Dad, she'd be okay by now. It never ends, the bugger is still oppressing her from beyond the grave.

I don't know how I feel about Dad now. I only have to read my childhood diaries to understand how preoccupied I was with my desire for his approval. Isobel says all little girls are like that with their fathers, we're learning how to please the Man.

I was always jealous of Isobel, I thought that she was Mum's pet and I spent a lot of energy trying to come between them. Dad was another matter. He never gave us the slightest clue whether he favoured Isobel over me and I never felt in competition with her for his affections. I just wanted him to pay attention to me, talk to me, approve of me.

It doesn't seem fair. Mum did all the work, all the training, and as children, we hated her for it. Everything that went wrong in the family was laid at her door, we never blamed Dad for anything because it wasn't his job. We oppressed her too.

If only she would try to understand feminist analysis. She's been trained to centre her life around a man and now he's gone. Her identity died in the raupo along with Dad. She's lost the very centre of her being and all that's left is her

obsession with cleanliness and her absurd desire for revenge against the Spencers.

I have been careful not to centre my life around my family. The kids will leave me when they grow up and who knows how long Bob and I will last. I have never centred my quest for security on being with him forever.

The party last Saturday night was an important event in my life. I feel as if I've grown up at last. I used to think that certainty was a state of mind, an emotional condition. I know now that it's much more than that. I need to fix it outside of myself, in solid words on paper, in case the right path eludes me again.

Here's what I've worked out. I've been confusing two different realms of experience. I thought that ideas and actions were two expressions of the same thing and they can never be that. Feminist theory lives in the realm of the idea, it is idealism. I have tried to be true to my feminist ideals and it has torn me apart.

From now on, I intend to keep the words, the ideals, the ideology where they belong. I'll lock them away in books, within the concrete walls of the institution, where they can shimmer away like the butterflies in Pandora's box. Under containment.

I must keep my ideals apart from my actions; I want a permanent job, I want to be a successful lecturer and above all, I want to survive.

The politics that operate within the classroom are different from the politics that operate without. My struggle has resulted from not realizing this sooner. Looking back over the past few months, reading my diary, it's become plain to me that I have invented much of my own pain. I have spent too much energy looking for the perfect fit between ideals and real life instead of asking myself if this utopian coherence is ever possible in the first place.

To bed now. It's been a lovely day, sun and flowers and food and the children playing happily together. Bob told me

today he's proud of me for doing so well at my job. He put his arms around me and gave me a big hug. I'm lucky to have him for a husband and I told him so. It makes such a difference, this feeling of warmth and acceptance. I am beginning to understand how hard it's been for both of us the last few months. We have gone through so many changes in our lives.

Is it too soon to believe that everything is starting to come right for me at last?

Wednesday, 30 October

Isobel turned up with Mum today. I was shocked at her appearance, she's lost more weight. I never thought I would see my mother looking so thin and frail. Isobel asked her to make tea in the kitchen while she and I had a look at the vegetable garden.

We went outside and pretended to look at Bob's onion patch. Isobel told me that Mum is sleeping in the garage and that she's had a phone extension put outside.

I couldn't believe it. What the hell is happening to her? Isobel thinks that the cleaning fetish has overtaken her completely. It's making her life hell, we must do something.

I agreed with her, but what?

Then Isobel told me that Uncle Will had phoned to tell her that his wife Maureen was very ill. They want Mum to go to the farm to help out.

'She won't go, not a hope.'

'You're probably right, damn it. It would have been a good temporary solution. We have to try to talk her into it, that's why I've brought her down here for the day.'

We walked around the tomato stakes at the edge of the garden. Isobel told me about Mum's bike riding expeditions and her spying campaign at the Spencer's house. Vera had given Isobel the whole story. The town was buzzing with gossip, kids put a rock through her window, someone dumped rubbish on her lawn.

The worst thing was that she had let Budgie Boy out of his cage.

‘Never!’

‘Vera swears it’s true. Mum showed her the cage, swept out and stinking of disinfectant. She told Vera that he wouldn’t stop making messes so she opened the door of his cage and hung it up outside in a tree. Apparently, the poor thing didn’t want to leave, he kept trying to get back into his cage but she brought it back inside. He hung about for a day or two, then disappeared.’

Mum called out to us to come inside and have a cup of tea. We went in. The tea was dreadful, it tasted like Ajax. She confessed that she’d ‘given the teapot a good scrub’ before she’d made the tea. This was the last straw.

I tried to speak gently to her, I told her that Auntie Maureen was very ill, the men couldn’t cope with the housework, they wanted her to go up to the farm to help them out.

Isobel and I were surprised at her reaction. She agreed instantly to go for as long as she was needed. I asked her about Uncle Stanley. Would she feel okay living with him?

She frowned. ‘Isobel’s been telling tales on me.’

‘Not really, I’ve always known you didn’t get on with him very well.’

‘Things are different now.’

‘How?’

‘They just are.’ She wouldn’t look at me.

Isobel placed a warning hand on my shoulder. She praised Mum for her decision and said she’d take her back to Te Kauwhata today to get her things and then run her across to Glen Massey.

I couldn’t believe how easy it had been to persuade her.

Isobel rang the farm and told Uncle Will the news. He was thrilled and said good old Sal, I knew she wouldn’t let us down.

Mum just smiled when Isobel told her what he’d said. I felt a chill run down my back. I’ve never seen my mother smile like that before.

I asked her to dust and vacuum the lounge for me because I was very busy marking essays. She said she'd be pleased to help. I waited until I heard the noise of the cleaner before I discussed the situation with Isobel.

We agreed that helping out at the farm was the best solution. On the other hand, neither of us has been there for years, so we have very little idea of the current state of the place. We hoped we were not encouraging her to go into a situation that she would find impossible to cope with.

Isobel said going back might revive Mum's unresolved problems with Stanley but I don't think that will happen. I sense a new strength in my mother. Isobel agreed that she'd changed but that strength is the wrong word. She can't quite put her finger on it, she'll reserve her decision. She'll leave her at the farm for a few days and then go up and have a look at things.

I'm relieved that Isobel is taking charge of the situation. I'm very busy and it's hard to get a long stretch of time to myself. It's not so bad at home when the children are at school. Bob is very considerate. I find it hard to work in my office. Too many interruptions.

I'm finding the essays a real problem. The standard is very uneven. I don't know what comments to write on some of them. I find that I am developing a set of hackneyed comments like *you make some useful points but...*

I can remember how disappointed I used to be when I received comments like this. But what else can I do?

I rang Wendy to ask where her essay was. She told me she'd have it typed up by Friday. She sounded very excited, she told me it was the best thing she'd ever written. She also apologized for what she'd done to Peter at Dr Berry's.

I was flabbergasted, I never thought I'd ever hear Wendy apologize for anything. Then she added, Isobel suggested I do it, mystery solved.

I told her to forget it, I'd seen Peter since last Saturday and he never mentioned it. Wendy said she'd smoked a huge joint

before she arrived at the dinner party and it made her throw caution to the wind. She's sorry she put women down by talking dirty to a dickhead like Peter. It only turns the buggers on to talk like that, she could kick herself.

I love talking with Wendy, her voice is passionate and exciting, some of her vitality flowed into me. I told her the news about Mum and she was pleased we had found a temporary solution.

I hung up the phone with reluctance. I'd much rather talk to Wendy than mark the last six essays of my quota for the day. Jeanine says I'm taking it too seriously. She spends ten minutes per essay, no more, no less. She told me I'm mad to spend an hour on each. Maybe, but I can't help thinking of the pain and anxiety that goes into the writing of each one of them.

The desperate attempt to explain personal experience by the use of feminist theory. The idea as band-aid, the word as healer. I'm lucky that I found out the difference between theory and experience before my frantic attempts at unity tore me apart.

Thursday, 31 October

Late at night. The night has come at last and I can sit quietly on my own without other people impinging upon my consciousness. It's raining, I can hear it running quietly down the drain pipe underneath my window. The fanlight is open, the smell of wet compost drifts into the room, it reminds of the clean pink skins of earth worms.

Something weird is happening. I am finding it hard to remember conversations I have had with people a few minutes before. I feel a strong urge to write everything down before it escapes from my control. Is the strain of marking essays catching up with me? The funny thing is, I don't feel stressed, I just can't be bothered talking to anyone. I would rather write a note.

I came back from work this morning to find Jim sitting in the kitchen with Bob, drinking beer. I didn't want to sit down with them, I sensed that Jim had come to talk to us about Paulette and I couldn't face it. I said hullo, nice to see you, I'm busy, and fled to my desk in the bedroom. Later, Bob brought me in a cup of coffee.

He told me that Jim was looking for a live-in housekeeper to look after Paulette during the day. He thought Sally might be interested. He couldn't pay a wage but she'd get free board. I told him that I'd pass the message on to Mum up at the farm but I didn't think she'd leave there yet.

I wanted to say funny how popular she is now she's a widow, but I didn't. I wrote a note to myself on a piece of paper. I put it all down, it became a poem about a woman who is sentenced to become an unpaid servant for the rest of her life because she let her husband go to the lake and be drowned.

Bob wanted to know what I was writing. I said nothing much, just a note to myself. He shrugged and went out.

I heard the phone ringing in the hall. It was Lydia. She asked me if I was okay, she thought she'd made me angry this morning by talking about Clemency when I had made it clear that I didn't want to discuss it.

I reassured her, I told her I'd been feeling a bit antisocial this morning, if she still wanted to discuss Clemency, it's fine by me.

Lydia said that she'd spent a lot of time thinking about what Clemency has done. 'She's been pushed into it Julia, she had no choice. I find it touching that she didn't actually sleep with another guy and did it the way she did.'

We went round and round in circles. In the end, I told her we're never going to agree, but Clemency is my friend, this pregnancy is very important to her, and I have decided to support her as much as I can.

Lydia praised me.

I wrote myself a note.

I've had a strange day, I need to write it down in my diary to fix it in my mind. I need to consult the notes I've made throughout the day.

Lydia thinks the essays I've marked so far are fine. 'Good comments, fair grades, no worries.'

Lydia praised me.

I wrote myself a note.

Kezia wouldn't leave me alone after dinner, she kept knocking on my door looking for attention. I didn't feel like talking to her but I made an effort. I find it hard to understand her sometimes, her world has become alien to me. What do children think about? I can't remember what it's like to be five.

I kissed her and held her on my knee. I let her prattle on with her tales and complaints about Timmy and someone called Pamela. Who's she? Kezia didn't seem to notice that I didn't answer her, she seemed content to cuddle up to me at my desk.

I gave her some green paper to draw on, I wrote comments on the essay mark charts.

She went off to get ready for bed, I drank coffee, marked essays, gave Bob a kiss goodnight. He went to bed.

I wrote myself a note.

Friday, 1 November

Late afternoon. The first day of real heat, the first hot flush of the summer season. Bob has taken the kids into town to buy their summer sandals. They wanted me to come but I came into my room and refused to budge. I couldn't think of anything worse than the hot glass of a city on such a day.

I told Bob I had to mark the last few essays and take the marks to the secretary late this afternoon. Not quite a lie, they said Monday morning was the absolute deadline. I've finished my marking except for Wendy's essay. Isobel is going to bring it over tonight and bring me news of Mum. She's

driving to Glen Massey today to see how things are going up at the farm.

It feels strange to be writing in my diary in the heat of the day. I miss the peace of the night, the safety of being able to write without interruption. I've taken the phone off the hook, it helps me to know that someone else's voice can't move into my head until I've finished saying what I need to say.

I have a pile of notes to work through. We had a staff meeting this morning, I had to write so fast, my hand cramped up. I want to translate my notes while I can remember some of the voices, it's peculiar how quickly they fade away.

Words must be kept under control. I can't use a computer because dangerous transformations occur; words vanish into mysterious numerical codes. Who knows what would happen if the trillions of noughts and ones turned themselves into something other than I intended? Writing them down on paper is the only safe way I know.

I can't imagine what it was like before writing was invented. How did people survive during a time when truth was only as good as the last word spoken?

The phrase *under containment* haunts me, I hear the words as clearly as if someone has spoken them aloud in my ear.

How can I keep my life *under containment*? My skills are diminishing. I have tried so hard to improve the strength of the net but the fish are growing larger, more aggressive. Once, they swam forward in willing silver shapes. Now, they refuse to conspire with me.

I'm reading my notes. Good, it's working. As I write them down in my diary, I remember what happened.

Peter smiles at me, his knee touches mine very lightly. Is this an accident? No, he is signalling me to join him in a conspiracy against Lydia who is arguing with Dr Berry about the levels of work the students are expected to do under the internal assessment system.

(Doing an internal, making a judgement within. The blood and bones of pure experience, going right inside.)

‘What do you think Julia?’

(No answer. I keep my head down and write.)

Lydia looks at me, but I can’t give her what she wants.

He touches my knee again, a little harder this time. They are pushing Lydia into a corner, even Jeanine remains indifferent to her friend’s unspoken appeal.

‘They seem to be coping, I don’t think we should cut the workloads. What are the retention rates like this year?’

‘Patchy,’ says Dr Berry. She frowns at the charts in front of her. ‘You lost four. Julia’s writing course held steady, only one person dropped out. You lost nine Lydia. What happened?’

‘There’s always a high drop-out rate in theory courses, especially this advanced one because, to be frank, the initial theory course leaves a lot to be desired.’

(Lydia be careful. Dr Berry teaches the first-year theory course.)

‘That’s not what your class rep told me,’ says Peter.

Lydia is angry. She picks up her folder and bangs it twice on the table.

‘I feel it’s a mistake to over-emphasize radical theory,’ says Peter. ‘We have to cater for the middle ground.’

‘Are you referring to lesbian theory?’

‘Well, no offence Lydia, but how relevant is it to most women?’

‘Lydia must be free to choose her own course content,’ says Dr Berry. ‘We must adhere to the principle of academic freedom.’

(Clever Dr Berry. She is protecting herself from being criticized about the course content of her first-year theory course. I’m beginning to learn how the others construct the rules of survival.)

Peter won’t let it go. ‘What about the rights of the students?’

Lydia explodes, ‘What the fuck are you on about?’

‘Well, no offence Lydia, but I think that you should keep your personal beliefs out of your teaching. We’re here to teach, not to push a particular life-style.’

(Lydia, be careful, he wants you to go over the top.)

She breathes deeply, she counts to ten under her breath, you can just hear her saying the numbers.

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ says Lydia at last. ‘Tell me, no offence Peter, but how do you achieve it? How do you lecture without pushing the patriarchal life style? Not to mention compulsory heterosexuality.’

(Uproar! Everybody speaks at once, slow down please, I’m missing too many pieces...)

Same day, at night. Isobel came for a brief visit after dinner and gave me Wendy’s essay. She told me that Mum is coping well, somehow she’s got our old uncles right where she wants them. Auntie Maureen is very ill, no one would say what was wrong, but by the look of her, she’s got cancer. There’s something wrong with Stanley too, he didn’t seem to know who Isobel was. Probably just old age. He must be nearly eighty by now.

After she left, I opened the manila folder with Wendy’s essay inside. I read the title, it knocked the wind out of me. She’s called it ‘Talking Cunts’. I’ve read the first page, it’s fucking amazing, she’s brilliant.

I want to write it down in my diary; the physical act of producing the letters holds me to the page, it stops me from weeping with joy. I don’t need to write notes to myself anymore, I am face to face with a form of truth that I thought was lost to me.

I leap in, my fear leaks out, I take up my pen...



18

TALKING CUNTS

Introduction

I was born a cunt, I have lived like a cunt and unless the revolution finally comes and turns us all into androgynes, I shall die a cunt.

But, when I die, I will be a qualitatively different sort of cunt from the one I was born. For I have learned along with many other cunts of my generation the meaning of false speech versus true speech. I have learned of the power invested in presenting the contradictions of the cunt as if they were an immutable truth that always was, is, and forever shall be, a-men.

For too long we listened to the voice of the non-cunt who formulated our identity in tune with His need, His desire, His vision. The muteness of our tongues has been redressed, the silence is silenced. We have regained our voice and have turned the talk towards ourselves.

The quiet cunt is no more. The talking cunt is here.

The Contradictions of the Cunt

There is an old joke which goes something like this. A man goes into his doctor's surgery. He says to the doctor, 'I'm in

trouble, you have to help me. I feel good but all my friends tell me I look really bad. I can't walk down the street without someone coming up to me and saying you look terrible, you must be a really sick man, to look so bad. And I answer but I feel fine, I feel good. Doctor, can you tell me what is wrong with me?'

'That's easy,' replied the Doctor. 'You're a cunt.'

The man is shocked. 'Why do you say that?'

'You look bad yet you feel good. That makes you a cunt.'

This 'joke' illustrates, in part, the first contradiction of the cunt that I wish to address.

The cunt is formulated as an object of great beauty and desire; it sits firmly astride a pedestal of patriarchal awe. Yet this worship is contradicted by the powerful imagery of the Dark Side of the Cunt which has dominated art, religion and literature for as long as we have been conscious of ourselves as an historically relevant people. Cunts are associated with pollution, dangerous menstrual blood, fumes, noxious discharges, mottled purple lips, menopausal atrophy. Cunts take the leading role in pornographic movies. Cunts are thought to possess strange powers that spiritually emasculate a man while in the very act of providing a physical and emotional place for the expression of his maleness. From myths, superstitions, and witch hunts, to the modern language of obstetrics and gynaecology, the Dark Side of the Cunt haunts us all.

We live under the auspices of late twentieth-century capitalism where the endless search for commodity has not overlooked the potential of the cunt. The formulation of the cunt as an object has been essential to this process. The cunt, along with a host of other human activities and artifacts, has been first objectified and then transformed into a commodity. The transformation of cunt into commodity has meant the loss of some of the mythical terror associated with it but it is still manipulated in precisely the same manner as the historical definitions of terror and evil allowed.

The pursuit of objectivity is also the pursuit of the perfection of appearance. The old myth of evil changes into one of ugliness and ill health. The historical contradiction of the cunt as both the source of fertility and the source of corruption has been rewritten in modern times to one of ugliness of appearance (both literal and metaphoric) versus the beauty of physical passion.

We cunts grew up knowing about the passion that we invoke but somehow the notion of ugliness became more important. This is understandable given that most cunts undergo sexual harassment which is anything but beautiful. One of the first tasks of the talking cunts was to defuse the idea of ugliness of appearance so that we could hold a mirror to ourselves, part our lips as it were, without disgust.

The metaphoric ugliness of the cunt is expressed in the massive body of scientific and moral writings that sees cunts as the living embodiment of all that is neurotic, inferior, powerless and bloody-minded in the human condition.

Non-cunts have learned to live with the *looks bad feels good* contradiction. They speak the speech of cunt-hating, often in jokes or in technological language, yet avidly pursue the physical possession of it. One of the strangest ironies of the cunt is that masculinity must conquer it in order to define itself as quintessentially male, yet those very pursuits that masculinity has appropriated for itself can be destroyed by the physical penetration of the cunt. Men are warned not to fuck prior to those Magical Male Moments like playing rugby, catching fish, hunting animals, killing other men or conducting religious rituals.

This irony teaches us that male activities are sacred and the cunt, profane. Excess access to profanity (via the cunt) can chase the fish from the sea, sap a bloke's strength in the ruck, anger the Gods, weaken the very essence of maleness that is the manifestation of all that is holy and good in the world.

It is not only the use of the cunt in close proximity to sacred male ritual that initiates profanity and danger. The cunt by its

very nature has an unnerving capacity to draw evil powers towards it. Part of the identity of cunt, the essence of being cunt, the cunt-ness of cunt, is disgust, danger and darkness. This is why the word 'cunt' persists in being the worst 'bad word' in a lexicon of woman-hating that marks us as a separate category of being, a form of life which at certain historical moments is formulated as that which contradicts the light, the might, and the right of the masculine principle.

The primacy of patriarchy as ultimate authority is very ancient compared with the authority of God the Father although it is obvious that the two go hand in hand. Throughout the history of this unholy alliance, the role of the cunt has been one of mediation. Here all is activity; the cunt is the battleground for the keepers of the faith to conduct the fight between good and evil. It has provided a place, an architecture, a habitation, for the playing out of contradictions. The cunt can be both the place where male avenges male (rape in war) and the virgin birth place of a God.

Witness the positing of the witch's cunt as the ultimate target of a certain Monsieur who wanted to destroy all that was good in the world. In common with other deities of patriarchy, the devil was a bloke who worked through cunts to get back at other blokes. A saintly man who wants to fuck is said to be tempted by the devil. A man who becomes labelled with that peculiar word 'womanizer' is said to have gone to the devil. Once again, the cunt is the meat in the sandwich between men and evil.

The battle between good and evil is enshrined in our history. All too often, the cunt has been the mediator between what is thought to be noble and what is thought to be base. The cunt has never had a morality of its own. It functions as a rope in a deadly tug of war between men and darkness, humanity and bestiality, enlightenment and the abyss. This lack of morality means that the cunt cannot make choices. It has no free will. Men walk the cunt like a tightrope between the twin

pillars of good and evil but if the rope frays, breaks or cries out, the tightrope walker never blames himself.

Whatever happens to the cunt is the cunt's own fault and belongs together with the intrinsic cunt-ness of cunts. For example, if a cunt is raped it must have flaunted itself. If a cunt reaches a certain age and has never been entered it is because no man wanted it and not because the cunt chose otherwise. The unused cunt is categorized as frigid, old-maidish, atrophied, unlovely and unhealthy. It seems that the cunt reaches the depths of profanity when it has never been blessed, made holy, or otherwise sanctified by the touch of the Gods.

Rebecca West called married cunts *Ladies of Loot*. She believed it was immoral for women to be kept by men simply because they happened to be married to them. To expand on her usage we could formulate the virginal cunt as the *lootee* and the cunt that has been used by too many men as the *looted*.

The virginal cunt (the *lootee*) is exchanged for a lifetime of economic support and respectability. It is not uncommon, however, for things to go wrong. When a virginal cunt feels cheated on her side of the bargain she is apt to make statements like the classic *I have have given you the best years of my life*.

This is philosophically troublesome to a talking cunt like myself in that it throws up the possibility of time, memory and experience becoming commodities that can be bought, sold or gifted on the open market, just as if they were a pound of butter or a packet of pork sausages. On reflection, though, maybe our sadder but wiser virginal cunt is dead correct when she claims commodity status for her best years. The only quibble I have is that she didn't *give*, she *exchanged*, and if the joker she married hasn't kept to his side of the bargain he deserves the sharp edge of her tongue and worse.

The contradiction between change and constancy is manipulated by non-cunts to keep cunts in their place. A good example of this is the way that the particular intellectual

passion of each age is always thought to be unsuitable or even dangerous for the feminine mind. Theology and ontology were the 'in' topics for hundreds of years and were compulsory topics to gain entry to a university. Unfortunately, cunts did not have the highly developed religious sense nor the intellectual equipment to cope with important questions like whether God wanted us to kill people who said the earth moved around the sun or how many angels would fit on the head of a pin.

Then thinkers became obsessed with our Greek and Roman origins and the language and literature of dead cultures became the important topics of scholarship. It was discovered that cunts did not have a facility for the classics or for languages in general although, to be fair, a small group of privileged cunts were allowed to take a break from their embroidery and pianoforte lessons to indulge in something called 'French Conversation'.

Recently, mathematics has replaced theology and the classics as the correct intellectual pursuit of scholars. Positivism, rationality, evidence and data are the key concepts of our age. Alas, little boys race little girls to the lego blocks and develop the superior spatial and logical capacities that ground mathematical ability.

Once again, we cunts have missed the bus.

It is not only in intellectual pursuits that the contradiction between change and constancy works to the advantage of the non-cunts. It also enables them to delete, add, redefine, subtract, mutilate, glorify, paint, photograph, magnify or surgically improve the cunt in accordance with the current fashion of what cunts are and what they're good for.

Witness the changing pictorial versions of the cunt. Pubic hair appears and disappears with bewildering rapidity throughout art history. The clitoris did a mysterious bunk for 150 years; it vanished completely from medical, biological and anatomical texts. Witness the freudian theory that rewrote the identity of the cunt so powerfully that today it

has become embedded in Western consciousness as absolute truth. Freud was shrewd enough to abandon the old Christian mysticism of the cunt in exchange for the new religion of psychological science, but nothing changed. The fact that nature is posited as the source of the identity and function of the cunt denies the possibility of change in much the same way that the God-created cunt did.

Once again the cunt was formulated as inferior to the non-cunt. This was no coincidence and did not escape the attention of talking cunts when we finally found our voice. Freud can be fun though. A good way to raise a laugh is to talk about Freud's cunt theories in everyday language. He said that all cunts are jealous of cocks and that cunts are emotionally weak because of inferior sexual equipment. Women today literally shriek with laughter at the idea of penis envy. I suppose Freud would see this as more evidence of our collective hysteria.

But listen. Imagine if a famous talking cunt scientist said all men suffered from clit envy and were psychological wrecks because they weren't women. She'd be burnt at the stake of ridicule pretty damn quick and that's what should have happened to Sir Sigmund before he wrecked the lives of generations of women by creating a highly lucrative pseudo-science around the inferiority of the cunt.

Generations of learned and distinguished non-cunts have spent an enormous amount of energy debating the woman question and have idled away many an anxious hour wondering what on earth to do with THE SEX (except for the obvious which they were already doing *ad nauseum*).

Naturally, nobody bothered to ask THE SEX how they felt about all this. Even now, in the era of talking cunts, disbelief is expressed about the validity of our experience. Yet, in spite of the incredulity that our talk arouses, we have learned the art of authentic speech. This means that we talk in tune with our experience instead of being alienated from it by contradictions that have traditionally worked towards the benefit of non-cunts.

Listen for a moment. Cunts have smaller skulls than non cunts therefore they are not able to vote. Cunts are not capable of participating as full citizens of the state. What is a cunt? Is it animal, vegetable or mineral? Has it a soul? If so, is it qualitatively the same soul as that of a non-cunt? Does a cunt soul enter the foetus at the same time as a non-cunt soul? Do cunts enter a unisex heaven in the after life or is heaven a cunt-free haven for warriors who have entered in by courtesy of their death in battles organized by their warlord, viking chief, president, prime minister, führer or managing director?

Listen to tradition. Cunts turn meat bad during menstruation so butchers must be men. A cunt called Eve sinned so cunts suffer agony in childbirth. Cunts are likely to have sex with the devil, dry off their neighbours cows and corrupt non-cunts with fucking, therefore they cannot be trusted with the sacred rituals of priesthood. Non-cunts are more important than cunts so they get to keep the family name, inherit the family wealth and wear the magic colour blue as infants to ward off the evil eye. Cunts cannot study philosophy because their brains operate with inferior forms of logic and if they think too much they will grow moustaches and turn into men.

Listen to the voices of power. Cunts are not good leaders, cannot take or give orders, do not have enough authority in manner or voice to make distinguished figureheads. Therefore, they never get to be the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Dark Prince of Twentieth Century Thought.

The anti-cunt rhetoric of the non-cunts hides its political nature by a method so simple yet so deadly that it took us talking cunts a long time to smell a rat. The method is objective authority and the Rat is the patriarchal overlord who controls, invents and publishes the Word.

Our oppression is carried foward in a babble of voices, a forest of paper and a sea of silicon chips. Words, conversations, dialogues, data, speeches, addresses, lectures, seminars, theories, songs, poems, dirty jokes, papal edicts,

pronouncements, proclamations, sermons, holy books, posters, political pamphlets, treatises, theses, treaties, on it goes. These are the language games of the patriarchs and they all have one thing in common.

They kill cunts.

Death occurs in two ways. First, there is death by denial. This is devastatingly simple to achieve and consists of ignoring, leaving out, omitting and silencing any mention of cunts or cunt activities. When challenged on this, the patriarchs claim that when they speak of their own doings they are also automatically including us. (This is bullshit.) The alternative defence is to blame the structure of the language which of course must not be interfered with. (More bullshit.)

Secondly, there is death by distortion. This is somewhat more subtle than silence but is still a form of death because it presents the identity of cunts through the politically distorted eyes of the oppressors. The oppressors claim that these distortions are legitimate by referring to an external and absolute authority. For example, God made cunts that way, blame him not us. Genetics and hormones create the psyche of the cunt, blame Mother Nature not us. Cultural tradition and sex roles have made you into the cunt that you are, blame the socialization process not us.

It goes something like this. Old idea: God created cunts to serve man as his helpmeet therefore cunts should accept their identity as sacred and unchangable. New idea: women have babies, perform unpaid labour, support the workers in the real world, therefore cunt inferiority is functionally necessary in a modern, highly stratified society.

You pays your money and you takes your choice.

All this change and confusion has resulted in the great twentieth century puzzle *The Mystery of the Vanishing Clit*. Many have tried to solve this puzzle with varying degrees of success. We lost the clit for a long time then Freud found it, but pronounced it childish, infantile and immature. To make sure that the sexual focus was moved from the clit back to the

vagina (more fun for the non-cunts) the myth of the vaginal orgasm was invented. We listened in awe to yet another non-cunt expert who told us all about it. Non-cunts love to play games with women's sexuality and there's big bickies in it too. *Hunt the Cunt* is much more fun than *Hunt the Slipper*, especially when fame and fortune descend upon those who write best-selling books about it.

The Problem of Identity

When cunts began talking together an astounding thing happened. We found that very few of us felt how we were supposed to feel. We rejected the definition and identity that we had been given. It's not that we didn't try, on the contrary, we tried very hard to be the sort of cunts that men said we were. Apart from the confusion of cunt identity there was the ever present problem of saying one thing and feeling another, the gap between language and experience. In the meantime we became Great Actors.

Double binds abound. Try this one. If a cunt is dumb then that's just what she is, a dumb cunt. But a clever cunt who shows she's clever is also a dumb cunt. It follows then, that a really clever cunt must be the one who isn't dumb enough to show she's clever but clever enough not to be a REAL dumb cunt. Get it?

The creation of a new identity is a very serious matter because we know from bitter experience that the categories of identity, the words, the naming of what something is, legitimates all future action towards it.

Talking cunts are not asking for the moon. We already have that by courtesy of our menstrual cycles. All we want is the dignity of our own identity that has nothing to do with how non-cunts use, abuse, perceive, desire or otherwise need us. We want to be recognized as creative and intelligent human beings in our own right. We may not wish to pursue identical

interests with non-cunts yet we demand comparable social rewards for what we are and what we do.

Conclusion

We talking cunts have found our voice. This became an absolute necessity once we realized that many cunts live in a daze of valium, hysteria, religious mania, hate their own bodies, mistrust their own souls, feel ignorant, ugly, unworthy and stupid. To rewrite the dialogue was, and is, very difficult because our past is full of cunt-hate.

The his-story of the cunt has been written through the eyes of a small élite group of non-cunts and we know what they said about us. Cunts are the focus of romantic love yet are also dangerous, murky, witchy and dirty. Cunts are the upholders of all that is moral and good yet are too stupid to understand politics. Cunts are the source of cultural continuity and fertility yet do not deserve an authentic voice of their own.

But all is not lost. Now that we have learned to read between the lines, now that we love the sound of our own voices, now that the talking cunt is beginning to be diffused into language, art and culture, now that we enjoy each other's company, now that we no longer need the approval of non-cunts to feel important, educated and alive, now that we are creating an exciting cunt world of our own, now that we have lost our niceness and have realized our passion and our strength, now, now is our time, the time of the cunt, the time for the cunt to come into her own.

We must hold fiercely to our new identity of authentic speech. In other times and in other places, the voice of the cunt has sung her lovely song only to be silenced, ridiculed or burnt so that the following generation of cunts is unaware of her attempt to build a life that has always been there but has had to be recreated in each generation because of what the Rat did to the words of our song.

THE WORD BURNERS

We will never be silenced again. The cunt has found her voice and her song has never been more strong or more beautiful. The quiet cunt will become an artifact of history, a curiosity of the past that will serve as a reminder of where we have been, what was done to us, and for what reason.

The quiet cunt is no more; the talking cunt is here.



19

The staff are holding a special meeting to discuss the problem of Wendy's essay.

Julia knows that there is going to be trouble. Lydia has warned her that Peter is furious over the essay and that he is determined to fail Wendy even though Julia has already graded it A-.

'Shall we begin?' Dr Berry rustles the grade sheets on the table in front of her. 'Now, who wants to go first. Lydia?'

'I recommend that the grade given by Julia stands. I am the senior lecturer responsible for this course and I agree completely with her comments and her assessment of the quality of the work.'

A silence.

Peter says flatly, 'How can you justify that? In my view it should be failed outright.'

Julia clears her throat, she tries to speak but nothing comes out.

Lydia rescues her. 'I have gone over this essay very carefully and I believe that it fulfils the criteria laid down by the University and the Department.'

'It certainly does not,' says Peter.

Dr Berry sighs. 'I do hate these disputes over grades. Could we not reach a compromise in this case? I find this work distasteful, to put it mildly, but for the sake of peace I'd suggest perhaps a C+ grade.'

'No.' Lydia's voice is quiet but very determined.

Peter says, 'I have nothing personal against this student but I suggest that the work should be failed because it does not come up to academic standards.'

Jeanine whispers to Julia. 'Here we go, he's decided that Wendy's going to be the token fail for the year.'

Dr Berry frowns. 'Why on earth did you agree to accept this essay as the sole piece of work for the course? Did you see a draft?'

Lydia holds up a piece of computer paper. 'We both felt she could do it. Her academic achievements last year were amazing. All straight A's.'

'Let me see that.' Peter studies the computer printout. 'This makes her so-called essay for this course all the more tragic.'

Julia listens while they argue. Lydia says that Wendy has obviously read very widely to produce such a work; she never claimed that she was writing facts, the essay is clearly theoretical, and it was professionally typed up in impeccable English. What more could he ask for? Sure, Wendy took risks, all good writers do, how else can anyone come up with novel ideas? This work shows an excellent grasp of marxist and feminist theory. The theories are not explicitly discussed but no one could write like this without a damn good understanding of contemporary writings on the relationship between language and power.

Julia listens to her intently; clever Lydia is using his own arguments against him. But Peter won't give in. He says over and over, I take your point, but you can't get away from the fact that the work does not come up to the required standard, where are the references, the footnotes, the quotes?

Then he drops his bombshell. 'I must say that I think it unethical that Julia graded this essay in the first place.'

Lydia and Julia freeze.

'Julia's sister Isobel is romantically involved with this student. Her marking could not possibly be without bias.'

Julia's head begins to beat in an ominous way. She makes a huge effort.

Dr Berry says, 'Is this true Julia?'

'Yes.'

'You might have informed me.'

'I didn't think it relevant.'

'Let's be sensible about this. What's to be done?'

Jeanine says, 'Let's ask everyone what they think, then take a vote.'

Dr Berry asks if everyone has read the essay. She frowns when she discovers that the part-time lecturers haven't done so. She wants to know why they didn't fulfil the request she made in her memo, especially when she made sure that a copy of the essay had been sent to everyone.

There is an embarrassed silence. Juanita Hay says in a cold voice that she has no intention of reading an essay with such a scurrilous title, she didn't offer to teach a course on the 'History of Mediaeval Women' for no extra pay and with considerable increase to her workload to have to put up with these so-called radical young women deliberately setting out to shock.

'Does any one else feel like this?'

No answer.

Dr Berry sighs, 'Then I suggest that the problem be solved by the full-time teachers. The others may go.'

Peter tells Dr Berry that there are now many copies of the essay circulating around the University, everyone is talking about it, everyone is arguing over it. The wretched thing is rapidly becoming a *cause célèbre*.

'I was afraid of this. We must be very careful. The future of this Department may be at stake.'

Lydia says with heat, 'What about Wendy's future? She wrote her essay in good faith. She was told that we would be

the only ones to read it and now she's going to be ridiculed by ignorant shits who haven't got a clue what her work really means.'

Richard Burrows says, 'This student is obviously gifted but we must have given out false signals of liberalism. This is a collective failure, we must all take the responsibility.'

'Hang on,' says Lydia 'We haven't established yet that the essay is a fail, far from it.'

'We should all have a serious think about this,' says Dr Berry. 'We can't make a quick decision. There is also the matter of academic freedom to consider. Let's go to lunch and meet again later.'

Lydia says she needs some fresh air and wants to go for a walk around the lake. Jeanine says I'll come too Lydia, I need to talk to you away from the others. Julia tags along.

They walk along the damp paths. A brown duck wanders across in front of them with fat ducklings in tow. The magnolia trees are flushed with bright green leaves. Flowers hang like pink lanterns from the rhododendron bushes.

For Julia, the gardens give off a false scent. There is a smell of bone-dust, she wants to peel off a thin strip of soil and expose the empty ground beneath.

Jeanine says, 'I've got a problem Lydia, and I don't know what the hell to do.'

'Tell me.'

'This bloody essay business. You know what I think of Peter, I hate his policy of failing at least one student per year. I'll keep on fighting him over it like I have in the past. My problem is that in this case I agree with him. It's no good Lydia, I've racked my brains over Wendy's essay, but I don't like it.'

'This is serious. I thought I could count on you to support us.'

Jeanine looks unhappy. 'I want to agree with you but I can't. I must be honest with you. The worst thing is that I feel

Wendy is poking fun at women, I feel she's having a laugh at our expense.'

'No! You've got it wrong!'

'Don't tell me what to think.'

They stop walking and sit on a bench. Lydia puts her arm around her friend and tells her she's sorry she yelled at her. 'See what he's doing to us? The bastard is coming between us.'

'It's not just him, Wendy should take some of the blame too. What the hell possessed her to write such a thing?'

They talk for a few minutes. Lydia thanks Jeanine for telling her now. It would have been terrible to hear it for the first time in front of Dr Bloody Berry and those other arseholes.

Jeanine says she needs to go to the café and buy something to eat, otherwise she won't be able to get through the rest of the afternoon.

Julia and Lydia sit at opposite ends of the bench.

'I'm sorry this has happened in your junior year Julia.'

Julia looks at her without speaking.

'Some of it's my fault, I knew Wendy was writing something innovative and controversial and I encouraged her to do it. Isobel did too.'

'Isobel?'

'She helped her to write it.'

Julia stands up and walks quickly along the pathway.

'Wait! I want to talk to you.'

'Why?'

Lydia hesitates, then says, 'Well, it seems to be the day for honesty, so here goes. Isobel is worried about you, I am too. You've been so quiet lately, withdrawn almost. Is everything all right between you and Bob?'

'Never better.'

'Then what's the problem?'

'Nothing.'

Lydia looks puzzled. 'There must be something.'

'No, I just want to be peaceful.'

Lydia looks relieved. 'Fair enough. You didn't mind me mentioning it?'

'Of course not.'

Julia isn't worried about the essay any more. From the moment that Lydia told her that Isobel helped Wendy to write it, she has known what she must do.

The women walk together in silence. Julia smokes a cigarette. Lydia leans down and sniffs at a border of bright yellow mignonettes, she takes deep breaths of fragrant air. Julia smiles to herself.

Lydia isn't giving me her usual anti-smoking lecture because she's already walked across the threshold of friendship and she doesn't want to take any more risks with me. But her body tells me how she feels, she speaks to me through the language of the body. I must write down how she does it; now that I can't speak my passion anymore, I must learn how to write the body.

They go back into the gray concrete building. Two pigeons sit on the window ledge of Julia's room. She hums silently to them while she boils the jug for tea. One bird looks at her with a small bright eye; it lifts a wing to her and blinks, she hums back.

She asks Lydia to stay and drink tea with her. Lydia agrees.

The pigeons fly away, something has startled them. Julia looks at the ledge; they have left fresh white droppings and a small gray feather. She leans out of the window and grabs the feather. She wants to hold it her hand in remembrance of air and flight and one bright eye.

Lydia looks worried. 'Hurry, it's way after one o'clock.'

The meeting has already started. They can hear people arguing as they approach the staff room.

'We had to start without you,' says Dr Berry, in an aggrieved tone of voice. 'Some of us have to go soon. This is a very busy time of the year.'

'Sorry,' says Lydia.

‘We were just about to take a vote on the essay. Are you still unwilling to compromise by giving Wendy a C+ grade?’

‘I insist that this essay is passed with an A•grade.’

Peter says emphatically, ‘No way, it’s a fail.’

‘She has to pass six courses to finish her degree. She has A’s in her other five papers. It will look strange if we fail her.’

Dr Berry sighs. ‘I’m quite aware of Wendy’s situation Lydia, but I’m not happy about giving her an A grade. This essay is out of place in a university but in some ways it’s an interesting piece of work. Perhaps it should be sent to one of the alternative presses?’

Lydia says quickly, ‘I’m glad you brought up the idea of having this work published. Peter, if I can get a promise of publication, would you reserve your decision?’

‘Only if it’s in a mainstream journal.’

Lydia thumps her file on the desk, her cheeks are flushed.

Julia says quietly, ‘Writing is always reduced to the laws of men.’

They all turn and look at her. She strokes her cheek with the feather.

Lydia says, ‘Julia agrees with me.’

The feather moves up and down and across. ‘Absolutely, yes, on the worth of the essay that is.’

Dr Berry says, ‘Let’s put it to the vote. All those who feel that the essay is up to standard and should get a high grade, raise their hand.’

Lydia is the only one who raises her hand. She hisses at Julia, ‘Put your hand up!’

Julia ignores her. The feather moves up and down.

Dr Berry looks puzzled. ‘I thought you liked the essay.’

‘I love it, it’s the best essay I’ve ever read, but it shouldn’t be passed.’

‘What the fuck?’ cries Lydia.

Peter can’t believe it, he’s smiling all over his face. ‘You’ve made the right decision Julia.’

'I don't care what you think,' says Julia firmly. 'This is one decision I'm making for myself.'

Lydia has tears in her eyes. 'Why Julia, why?'

'I thought you'd understand Lydia, I must follow the others.'

'Why, why?'

Julia smiles and turns towards her. 'Because I want tenure of course.'

There is a shocked silence.

Lydia leaves the room in tears. Jeanine rushes after her. Julia feels waves of hostility coming towards her from the others. She can't understand why they are angry with her.

Dr Berry says hurriedly, 'I close this meeting. You are given permission to fail Wendy McDonald from the course Dr Patterson.' She leaves the staff room and goes into her suite of offices. They hear the door slam behind her.

Peter follows her out of the room. He won't look Julia in the eye.

Julia is left sitting at the table with Richard. She's feeling bewildered and betrayed.

'You shouldn't have said that Julia.'

'What?'

'About wanting tenure.'

'But I do.'

He stands up and smooths the creases from his trousers. 'Julia, if you are going to succeed at university you will have to learn to play the game.'

Julia retreats. All her old childhood woes come back to her; the fear of authority, the fear of doing the wrong thing, the fear of antagonizing others.

She writes furious notes to herself (we have to learn to write the body but I don't know what to do—how can I make my body do what I want?).

Richard is still standing beside her.

She looks up. 'You never told us what you thought of the essay.'

'I said she was a gifted student.'

'Yes, but you didn't say if you liked the essay or not.'

'It wasn't required.'

(He lays blame but never has to say what he actually thinks. Safety. Nobody ever knows where he's coming from. This means he can take a contradictory stand at a later time and not look like an idiot.)

'What are you writing?' He's trying to see the words on the open page of her notebook but she doesn't care, they are written in her own peculiar shorthand.

She stands up and gathers her papers together. Richard follows her out of the staff room right up to her office door. She fumbles with her key. Why doesn't he leave her in peace? What does he want her to say?

He comes into her room uninvited. She sits behind her desk, lights a cigarette and blows the smoke towards him. He tries to wave it away.

'Why did she do it then?'

'Who?'

'Wendy.'

She shrugs and busies herself with her notebook.

'What's it like? Having a lesbian sister, I mean.'

She shrugs again.

'Have you ever been tempted?'

'Have you?'

'Good God no.'

'Why ask me then?'

'Some people say that it runs in families.'

'You make it sound like a congenital defect.'

'I didn't mean to. It's interesting, that's all.'

Julia puts her head down low over her desk and resumes writing notes to herself.

Richard coughs and turns to leave the room. 'If you ever want to talk about it, come to me. I've made a study of it, in literature that is. Have you read any contemporary lesbian fiction?'

(I don't know what to say to him, I hate the way he says the word lesbian.)

'You should, some of it's quite amazing, it might help you to understand your sister.'

(Isobel, why did you write the essay with Wendy? Why did you help to create the situation that I'm in? You have exposed me to this man as surely as if you had ripped all my clothes from me in front of him.)

'I think Wendy did it for malicious reasons,' he says. 'Maybe it's her way of getting back at us for some imagined slight.'

Julia keeps on writing.

'She must have known it would be failed, she can't be serious about her degree.'

Julia looks up. 'Richard, please go away, I'm very busy.'

He bangs the door behind him.

(Now I can try and make sense of things. Fact, Wendy and Isobel both know that I am a junior lecturer with tenure at stake. Fact, if I don't get tenure here, no other university will touch me with a barge pole. Fact, the essay is very clever but it isn't written in the correct academic language and it could have been without losing anything.

Theory, Isobel did it because she doesn't think I should be working here. Theory, Wendy did it because she's jealous of the closeness between me and Isobel. Theory, they are both innocent of malicious intent and genuinely thought this essay would pass with flying colours.)

There is a knock at the door. Julia doesn't open it at first, she is afraid that Richard may have returned.

Another knock. Julia hears Lydia call out, 'Are you in there Julia? It's me.'

Julia opens the door.

'I've rung Isobel, she'll be here soon.'

'What for?'

'We need to talk, the three of us.'

'Where's Wendy?'

‘She’s in Auckland.’

Julia writes something in her notebook.

‘Julia, I can’t wait until Isobel gets here, I have to know why you didn’t support me.’

(I won’t be able to find the words to talk with her if she gets angry.)

Isobel bursts in. She’s in her gardening clothes, and looks hot and dirty. She runs to Julia and takes her in her arms. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Why shouldn’t I be?’

Lydia says, ‘Okay, party-time’s over, let’s talk.’

She and Isobel go over and over what happened in the staff meeting this afternoon. Julia writes copious notes in shorthand.

‘From what you’ve told me, even if Julia had voted with you, it would still have been just two against the rest.’

(Like we were once Isobel, two against the world. Now, there’s just me left.)

Lydia says, ‘You’re right, but that’s not the point. Julia initially gave the essay a high grade and she should have stuck to her guns.’

(They are talking about me as if I’m not here.)

‘I wish Wendy and I had never written the damn thing. Look at the state she’s in.’

(What state? It’s not me that’s hot and red and angry.)

‘That essay is excellent, and you know it. Haven’t these wankers ever heard of ironic writing? Don’t they realize the theoretical knowledge that Wendy brings to her work?’

Isobel says bitterly, ‘Since when has merit had a fucking thing to do with it.’

‘You mustn’t let this business get to you.’

‘But see what’s happened here? As soon as the writing went public, I lost control over it.’

‘You’re missing the point. It’s not a question of control, it’s a question of ethics. If Peter hadn’t done his nut over the essay nobody else would have bothered to read it. In previous years

he's had the sense to fail marginal students. This year, he's gone too far, I'm not going to take it.'

(I've been attacked too Lydia, are you going to do anything about that?)

'Where does Dr Berry stand?'

'She's offered to send the essay to external markers to get another opinion. If they recommend a pass, she thinks she can persuade the Academic Board to give Wendy her degree.'

'I don't think Wendy cares anymore. She told me she finds it rather appealing to fail her whole degree by just one paper.'

'The blatant homophobia is what really sticks in my craw,' says Lydia. 'Peter would deny it of course, but I know I'm right.'

'Is he angry with us because of what we did to him at the party?'

'Very likely. He told the rest of the staff that it was unethical for Julia to mark the essay because of your relationship with Wendy.'

Isobel is furious. 'The prick!'

(Is that a tear in your eye Isobel? I wish I could cry, I feel that I'm drying up from the inside out.)

'Jeanine has warned me to be careful,' says Lydia. 'Dr Berry asked her why all the problems over the years have been caused by lesbians. Jeanine said she made us sound like lepers, she raved on about Shona Black leaving us in the lurch and now this. I'm sure she thinks it's some sort of conspiracy.'

'It's all very well for Jeanine to criticize Dr Berry but she didn't support us herself.'

Julia puts down her book and fumbles in her drawer for a box of matches.

Isobel holds out her hand. 'Come on, time to come home Julia.' She leads her out to the corridor. Julia pulls her hand away and runs back into the office to get her notebook.

Lydia walks with them to Isobel's car. They put Julia in the passenger seat and Isobel clicks the seat belt into place and closes the door. Julia can hear them talking outside the car.

She tries to catch the words with her pen but she finds it difficult to hear properly.

Lydia kisses Isobel and waves goodbye to Julia.

Julia starts to write again. She is still scribbling when they arrive home. Bob comes out and helps her out of the car. He tries to take the notebook from her but Isobel stops him with a warning look.

Julia says she wants to have a wash and then go to sleep. She won't let Bob turn the shower on for her, he runs her a warm bath instead. After he's left the bathroom, she throws two cups of plain salt into the water. The hot salty water draws the blood to the surface of her skin. She's careful to hold the notebook up out of the water, her arms ache with the effort.

Bob dries her with a clean towel. She feels comforted and warm. They go into the bedroom. Bob pulls the curtains and asks her if she wants the fan turned on for the heat. She shakes her head.

She is alone in the room. She closes the notebook and her mind flies apart, she falls into a dreamless sleep.



20

Sally found the first few days back at the farm very difficult. It frightened her to find how easily she slipped back into her identity of little sister. It was like putting on an old familiar coat that she had shed briefly for a short season in the sun. Te Kauwhata, her lemon and green house, her baby daughters, all those years of work and living had become compressed into a few lost and golden hours the moment she walked back into her brothers' house.

She had worked so hard to transform the past by moulding it into an ordered present, but it had merely been lying in wait like a wounded animal, ready to pounce when she turned her back. Life had moved full circle; it was as if Denby had never existed. She found it hard to remember what he looked like, she kept trying to think of his body, the sound of his voice, the feel of his skin. If only she had brought a photograph of him with her. It hadn't occurred to her that this house of disease and disorder and old men could erase him as effectively in death as it had in life.

The state of the house terrified her. She threw herself into the task of cleaning up. She thought that if she restored a sense of order and light, she would also restore the memory of

Denby's body to its rightful place. She felt as if she was fighting more for his life than her own.

The house was cluttered with useless objects. Piles of sour cloths, stained newspapers, shards of brown glass, string, rusty knives, perished rubberbands, used envelopes, dead plants, old socks, worn out shoes; the horrible rubble of lives carelessly spent.

Her brothers simply moved things around. When they wanted to sit in a particular chair or on the floor they moved the pile of rubbish to the nearest clear space.

On her first day there, Sally found a pair of her mother's old navy lace-up shoes, worn up into that peculiar twist at the toe that was her trademark. There was a brown lisle stocking stuffed into one of the shoes Sally threw them into a paper rubbish sack, she couldn't bear to look at them. Her mother had been dead for thirty years, yet here were her shoes still suffering from the imprint of her painful feet.

Will laughed at her when she mentioned it at dinner that night. He told her nothing tied up tomatoes as good as Mum's stockings, they kept the plants from being ripped up by the westerlies. It was the best legacy she'd left, old stockings by the hundred, you'd have thought the old tart was a centipede. Waste not, want not, put the one you found in the shed with the rest.

The kitchen was the worst room in the house. The pitted surface of the terrazzo bench was covered in cracked plates, elderly lemons, and washed out tins. The table was covered in old copies of the *Listener* and the *Waikato Times* and the long defunct *Weekly News* with its distinctive pink cover.

The fridge was empty except for a piece of sweaty cheese and a rusty tin of mutton fat furred with green mould. Sally had to tie a cloth soaked in eucalyptus around her nose to cope with the swarms of germs that she imagined to be flying aggressively towards her the moment she opened the door.

One of her first tasks was to write out an extensive list of foodstuffs for Will and Perce to buy down at the local Four

Square. They went off eagerly, they said they were looking forward to eating a decent dinner for once.

Maureen, her sister-in-law, was very apologetic to Sally about the state of the house. Sally felt sorry for her, she was obviously very ill. Sally asked her what was wrong with her but Maureen refused to discuss it. She said she was just tired, she would be all right now that Sal was here.

Will told Sally that it had 'spread all through her', but he never mentioned the word cancer, no one did. It was no problem for Sally to keep up the pretence that she was only here to help out until Maureen 'was up and about again'. She was skilled in the art of keeping silent about the unpleasant facts of life.

Sally went into every room of the house the first day she was there and wrote down in her notebook a list of the work she had to do.

Will and Perce spent their time pottering around the farm. Stanley never left the property. He spent most of his time cutting out bits and pieces from newspapers, and sitting on the verandah, smoking and staring into space.

In the beginning, Sally tried to please him and went out of her way to cook him special treats. When she planned the food for each day, she asked herself, what would Stanley like to eat?

She remembered that he used to love Anzac biscuits, and the fourth morning she was there, she baked some especially for him. She took him a cup of tea and an Anzac to where he sat on the front verandah. She was scared that he would notice the lack of desiccated coconut in the biscuit. The coconut jar was crawling with weevils. For a few agonizing moments, Sally had experimented with the idea of using the coconut regardless, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Weevils were such dirty creatures, they looked so black against the pure white of the coconut shreds.

Stanley was sitting quietly in the early morning sun. An unlit cigarette drooped from his mouth, his untidy gray hair

lifted up and down in the breeze, his eyes were half shut. Sally suddenly saw him for what he was, a tired old man who couldn't look after himself.

'What's this?' He prodded the Anzac biscuit.

'You know what it is.'

He bit into it and smiled and patted her hand. Sally thought her head would burst.

She sat next to him in the old wicker chair. A piece of unravelled cane dug into her back but she didn't want to move. She pulled up her dress to warm her legs in the sun. She waited for Stanley to comment on her thin white legs but he said nothing.

She heard Maureen call to her. Reluctantly, she went inside. Maureen said she was sorry to disturb her, she had tried to stand up but her legs were too weak. She needed a drink of water. 'Perhaps you could bring a jug to save me having to bother you again. Where has Will gone to? I want him here.'

Sally explained to her that Will and Perce had taken Boss into the vet, the old dog wasn't well and they were worried about him.

Maureen said, 'I wish someone would put me down.'

'You shouldn't talk like that.'

'It's the pain talking Sal, not me.'

Sally washed Maureen's face with a cool flannel. She hoped that the district nurse would come today to give the sick woman a bath, she hated doing it. Maureen's body was a mirror image of her own; blue veins trying to worm their way through skin as thin and fragile as onion peel, a rope of scars on her abdomen in the shape of a cross, down for the caesarian, across for the hysterectomy.

Maureen kicked off her covers and complained about the heat. She lifted up her nightgown and pointed to her scars. 'They made a mess of me.'

'They look the same as the ones on my stomach.'

'What was it all for?'

Sally didn't understand what she meant at first.

Then Maureen talked about her youngest son Jimmy. She hadn't heard from him for twenty years. She has clear memories of the last day they spent together; the look of his freckled hand stretching out for the corned beef sandwiches she had made for his journey, the sun flashing on his dark glasses, the torn patches on the knees of his faded jeans.

'I hope that wherever he is, he's looking after himself, you know what boys are.'

'Not really, I only had daughters.'

'You're lucky, girls stay near their mothers. I hardly ever see my boys.'

Sally didn't want to talk about Maureen's three sons. She knew that Denby had thought them selfish and ungrateful and badly trained. She remembered Karl and Joe as boisterous children. They had visited her once in Te Kauwhata and had yelled and shrieked, wrestled each other, knocked things over. Jimmy had sat reading a book for the whole afternoon. He was a big boy for his age, tough-looking and silent. She could remember feeling rather scared of him. He seemed to be more like an adult than a young boy.

Maureen said, 'Will told me not to help him, but I had to.'

'Of course you did, any mother would.'

'I didn't want him to go but they said he must.' She sounded close to tears.

'Lie back dear, I'll brush your hair for you.'

Maureen did as she was told. Sally was curious about the story of Jimmy, but she was afraid to ask Maureen why her son had been thrown off the farm in case she upset her.

Maureen asked her if she missed Denby.

'Yes, but it's easier now that I've sorted a few things out.'

'I wonder if I'll be missed?'

'That's enough of that sort of talk.'

Maureen stopped speaking. Sally felt relieved. Something new had come between the two women since Sally had moved into the farmhouse. There was a potential for the breaking of silences. Sally felt as if she had been handed a book of secrets

and that Maureen was telling her to open the cover and peek inside. Better to leave it shut, she thought. Who knows what impure recollections may be waiting to fly forth from those uncut pages?

Later, Isobel and Wendy came, closely followed by the district nurse. Suddenly, the house was full of women. Sally was very busy making cups of tea for everyone and apologizing for giving them bought biscuits to eat. She would make sure her tins were full next time they called.

Isobel praised her efforts in the house. 'What a difference, I can't get over it, you've performed miracles.'

Wendy said, 'You must have worked hard.'

Sally glowed and swelled in their praise. She felt able to smile at Wendy for the first time since she'd met her. She'd felt intimidated before, in awe of her almost.

The district nurse wanted a private chat with Sally.

She showed the nurse into the front sitting room. She was upset to find a pair of muddy boots on the carpet that she had shampooed the day before. She picked them up and stuck her head through the window that opened on to the front verandah. Stanley was still sitting in his chair.

'Are these yours?' she asked.

He turned and stared at her with a puzzled look on his face.

'Never mind.' She threw the boots into the long grass in front of the house.

The nurse sat down in the big armchair and smiled at her. 'I want to tell you what a good job you're doing with Mrs Clarke.'

Sally froze. Mrs Clarke? For one awful moment she thought the nurse meant her mother. I'm being ridiculous, she thought, it's Maureen, she's Mrs Clarke too, all the Fraser girls are.

'Thank-you Nurse.'

'Please call me Merle.'

'My name's Sally.'

Merle smiled. 'Good. I don't like to be formal, especially as you and I will be seeing a lot of each other in the next few weeks.'

'Is she getting worse?'

'I'm afraid so. Is her husband here? I want to discuss the possibility of admitting her to hospital.'

'She won't go, she's told me that over and over.'

'Are you prepared to stay on here and nurse her?'

'I don't know, I've never looked after anyone really sick before.'

'Then I suggest we leave things as they are for the moment. I'll come every second day and we'll see what happens.'

She gave Sally some morphine tablets and told her to keep careful notes on how often she gave them to her sister-in-law.

Sally pulled her time notebook out of her apron pocket and wrote *M for M, every four hours, one hundred mg tab.*

Merle looked impressed. 'You're well organized. I feel that my patient is in good hands.'

Sally felt pleased that a professional woman was praising her. It was starting to happen at last, the vindication that she craved.

Denby had sometimes laughed at her, Vera called her fussy, Isobel said she was over-anxious, Julia had lectured her on the dangers of becoming obsessed with cleanliness. But she had to construct a strong frame to trap the hours to come. If she failed to do this, the future would flow back towards her before she was ready for it, and she wouldn't know what to do. She was so afraid of not knowing the shape of the hours ahead of her, she could sniff the wilderness in it; people with faces of tormented animals, abandoned old women with tangled hair, dead birds with milk and blood flowing from their beaks, a reversal of all that was clean and safe in her life.

She shuddered. 'I have to know what to expect. Otherwise I can't cope.'

Merle asked her if there was anyone else in the family who could help out. She realized that Sally's brothers were not capable of looking after themselves.

‘They’ve never had to learn.’

‘It’s a pity that your oldest brother is getting worse.’

‘Stanley?’

‘His memory is going.’

Sally thought, so that’s what it is, I knew something was different. I have been losing my fear of him since I came back here and I didn’t know why.

‘What will happen to him?’

‘If his memory gets worse and it probably will, you may have to think about putting him into care.’

‘Will and Perce will have to decide that, it’s not my worry.’

She felt astounded with herself for saying this. It had suddenly occurred to her that her brothers could not force her to help them against her will. She didn’t have to do anything for them unless she wanted to.

They left the front sitting room and returned to the kitchen where Isobel and Wendy were drinking their tea.

‘Isobel, would you be able to come up every few days and help me with Maureen?’

Isobel looked surprised. ‘Of course, it’s not fair to leave it all to you.’

Sally thanked her.

‘You’ve made my day,’ said Isobel. ‘I’ve never heard you ask for help before.’

Sally laughed. ‘I’m getting bossy. I’m starting to take after you and Julia.’

‘About time. If you don’t speak up, how does anyone know what you need?’

Sally walked with Merle to the car. The sun was hot, the air was still and warm. Tall summer grass brushed against her cotton skirt. She waved to Merle as the car drove away down the rough gravel drive. She felt strong and important for the first time in her life. She raised her arms high above her head and breathed in the warm clean air.

She saw the farm ute pass Merle's car at the bottom of the drive. Will and Perce were back from town. She went inside the house and put the kettle on for their afternoon tea.

Isobel and Wendy had gone to the bedroom to say goodbye to Maureen. The two men clumped into the kitchen carrying Boss in a large basket.

'How's the dog?' asked Sally.

'The vet wants us to have him put down, he's too old for an operation,' said Perce. He sounded upset.

'Never mind Perce,' she said gently. 'He's had a good life.'

She poured out two mugs of tea and placed some wine biscuits on a plate. They sipped their tea and dunked their biscuits.

Sally waited until they had drained their mugs. 'Okay you two, time for us to have a talk.'

They looked at her in surprise.

'Maureen is very sick.'

Will pushed his chair away from the table.

'Don't move away, listen to me. She doesn't want to die in hospital.'

'I thought she was getting better.'

'That's not what the nurse thinks.'

'What does she know? She's not the doctor.'

Sally placed her hand on his arm. 'I know it's hard to accept, but you have to listen to me.'

She told them she would stay and look after Maureen but they would have to help her. They could start by taking their boots off at the door, she was sick and tired of cleaning up their mud. Also, she must insist that Boss was taken outside to his kennel, she couldn't bear to clean up his urine one more time.

The two old men carried Boss to the kennel outside the back door. They took their boots off and left them on the back verandah. They sat down at the table again and ate more biscuits and drank another mug of tea.

Sally put the milk away in the fridge. Will rolled up a Park Drive.

‘No smoking in the kitchen,’ said Sally.

He sat quite still, then struck a match and lit his smoke very slowly and inhaled deeply. He lifted his head and breathed out a mouthful of smoke towards the yellowed ceiling.

‘From now on,’ said Sally.

Isobel and Wendy came back into the kitchen. Sally thanked them for coming and asked Isobel to ring her tomorrow to arrange her next visit to help with Maureen.

Will said, ‘What’s all this?’

‘Isobel is going to help me with Maureen.’

‘Who organized that?’

‘Me,’ said Isobel. ‘Is there a problem?’

He sucked in a lungful of smoke and blew it out. Isobel waved the smoke away with her hands.

‘You shouldn’t smoke near food Uncle Will, it’s not hygienic.’

‘After this one, he’s not going to,’ said Sally.

Will looked into her eyes, she stared right back. He dropped his eyes first and turned his head away.

Isobel hugged her mother in delight. ‘Good for you.’

‘Bloody women,’ mumbled Will. ‘A bloke can’t get any peace.’

Sally said, ‘You can have all the peace you want after I go back home to Te Kauwhata.’

Perce looked puzzled. ‘I thought you were selling up.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘I just assumed you wouldn’t need your house any more.’

‘I am here to help Maureen out, that’s all. I owe it to her because she helped to look after Mum for all those years.’

‘But what will happen to us? After you go, I mean.’

Sally shrugged. ‘You will have to make other arrangements. You could pay a housekeeper, I don’t know. It’s up to you.’

Isobel clapped her hands in applause. 'Wonderful. Keep going, keep going!'

Sally sat down suddenly. She felt overwhelmed with what she was doing. She patted her time notebook in her pocket for comfort; yes, there it was, safe and sound. If only she knew the date of Maureen's death, she could work out exactly how long she had to complete her tasks in this house. Next time Merle came she would ask her how long Maureen had to live, things would be easier to plan if she knew.

Isobel and Wendy drove away in a swirl of dust and gravel.

Sally went to the kitchen garden to pick some silver beet leaves for dinner. The garden lay in the shelter of the old homestead, out of the westerly wind. She walked through the warm earth amongst the tall dock weeds and summer grass. She took off her shoes and placed her soft white feet carefully along the overgrown rows. The heat shimmered off the iron roof of the house. It looked naked without the weather boards along one side. Perce told her that they were gradually demolishing it and using the wood for winter fires. The empty shell of timber and iron and glass held within it the potential return of an old pain and a lost voice that Sally wished to keep buried. She was pleased that the house was disappearing piece by piece into a cleansing fire.

The finials were gone from the twin peaks of the roof, the wooden steps were broken, and the sun and rain had removed all traces of paint that had once covered the verandah floor in a shiny gray skin.

The ribs of the house were baking in the sun. Sally could see right into the room where she had slept as a child. The floor had pieces of old brown linoleum sticking to it. She remembered her hatred of that dirty floor; she had scrubbed and polished it so hard that she had worn holes in it, right down to the rimu boards.

Houses are like bodies, she thought. You keep growing, cleaning, polishing, feeding, washing, mending, talking; then

suddenly it's over. You die, they get empty, nobody wants to know anymore.

I try not to think of what happened to Denby's body, I can't believe his strong brown hands are ashes in the sea. But what's the alternative? If you bury something, it decays. I can't imagine the horror of that.

Empty houses rot, they should burn too.

She cut some silver beet leaves and plucked a bunch of mint that was growing wild in the old kitchen garden. She sniffed at it, the sharp clean smell of spearmint flooded her senses. It brought the memory back of this garden as a childhood haven, a place to come and hide when Stanley's teasing became unbearable. She used to lie in the garden and crush lemon verbena and mint between her fingers; it put a barrier of sensation between her and the ugly words he threw like darts into her body.

She doesn't think she'll ever have to hide again, he has lost his desire to hurt her. Sometimes, he mixed her up with Doreen his dead wife. Yesterday, he had asked her if 'the boys' were coming home. Sally didn't know if he meant Will and Perce or Maureen's long-gone sons. She questioned him, but he got confused and asked her what the hell she was talking about.

She stayed in the garden for hours. hoeing and weeding and thinking. She thought about her home and garden in Te Kauwhata and looked forward to returning there soon. She wondered if the Spencer boys were missing her attentions and laughed with pleasure at what she had done to them. She realized that this was the first time she'd thought about the Spencers since she'd come to the farm. She took the time notebook from her pocket and wrote *cancelled* over the red ink entries in the rest of the book.

There's nothing left for me to do. I don't need them any more, it's over.

The shadows lengthened. She put the garden tools back into the shed and took the silver beet into the kitchen. Perce was sitting at the kitchen table.

‘Where’ve you been Sal?’

‘Out in the garden.’

‘What’s for tea?’

‘Braised neck chops and potatoes and silver beet.’

‘Good.’

Sally skimmed yellow fat from the saucepan of boiled chops. She ate a haricot bean from the top of the pot to make sure they were soft and ready to eat.

‘Maureen wants you.’

‘Where’s Will?’

‘Mucking around with the ute.’

Sally banged the saucepan lid back on the pot of chops. ‘He should be inside with her when I’m busy. I can’t be everywhere at once.’

A tear rolled down Perce’s cheek. Sally, with a sense of shock, saw him dab at his eyes with the sleeve of his checked shirt. She hadn’t seen him cry since the day her father had died underneath his tractor.

‘What’s the matter Perce?’

He mumbled into his sleeve, ‘I feel a bit sad today, that’s all.’

‘What about?’

‘I’ve been thinking about Doris a lot lately, dunno why.’

Sally sat down at the table. She patted his hand and told him she knew how he felt, she misses Denby a lot too.

‘But Doris died ten years ago. Why can’t I get over it?’

‘Perhaps Maureen’s illness reminds you of how Doris died.’

‘Yeah, that’s probably it.’

She boiled the kettle and made him a cup of tea. She gave him two of Stanley’s Anzac biscuits.

Perce said, ‘Won’t you reconsider staying on Sal?’

She shrugged her shoulders and carried on peeling the potatoes.

‘We need you.’

She felt both sad and angry. All her life she had longed to hear those words, but now they meant nothing to her.

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Will thought you might be lonely and bored living on your own.’

‘That was kind of him.’

Perce didn’t answer.

Sally grasped hold of her new-found confidence. ‘You know as well as I do that he only said that because I’m a good housekeeper. He wants me to stay here.’

Perce retreated into a miserable silence.

Sally ignored him. She was feeling excited and proud of herself.

It’s so easy, she thought. Why didn’t I realize how easy it would be? I’m on top now and I’m never going down again.

She left the kitchen and went to attend to Maureen. There was a strange smell in the bedroom. Sally knew what it was. She had encountered it before when she had visited a friend of Denby’s in the cancer ward at the hospital.

Maureen looked worse. She seemed to be having difficulty in focusing her eyes.

‘Are you hungry?’

Maureen shook her head. ‘No, my mouth tastes funny.’ She clung to Sally’s hand. ‘Don’t leave me.’

Sally stroked her face. Poor Maureen. The last of the Fraser girls. They had been the butt of jokes in the district when they were young because they were large and plain and clumsy. Old Mr Fraser had once called them his three prime heifers in front of everyone at a dance. Sally could remember Maureen sobbing her eyes out in the powder room. Doreen and Doris had stood up to him, told him to shut his bloody mouth. Mr Fraser had hit Doreen across the mouth. The district had buzzed with talk for days afterwards.

Sally had never been a close friend of the Fraser girls before or after they married her brothers. The three women were fond of each other and didn’t seem to need anyone else. In the early days at the farm, Sally had envied their closeness. They did everything together; cooking, gardening, preserving fruit,

making jam, designing and sewing beautiful clothes. Everything they did turned out well. Sally thought them very clever.

‘Since Doris died, things haven’t been the same.’

‘Try to settle down love.’

Sally gave her a morphine tablet and a glass of water. She ticked off the time in her notebook where Maureen’s medication schedule was entered. Maureen closed her eyes. Sally stayed beside her until she went to sleep.

The days passed. Gradually, Sally gained control over the house. Her elderly brothers began to centre their activities around her needs and her desires. Sally became the pivot around which they danced. Scones, pikelets and cakes flowed from her fingers, flowers came into the house, ash trays and muddy boots went out. The windows shone in the sun, the furniture glowed with lemon polish, the bath was white again. Perce and Will weeded the kitchen garden and mended some loose boards on the back verandah. They got into the habit of asking her what they could do to help, and she handed out tasks, written on slips of paper sealed in brown envelopes. If they thought this strange, they said nothing.

Throughout this frantic activity, Stanley walked aimlessly around the house, or sat smoking and dozing in his old armchair on the front verandah. Sometimes, he cut pictures and articles from the *Waikato Times* and put them in a pile on the kitchen mantelpiece but Sally noticed that he was finding it increasingly difficult to use the scissors.

Every morning she made him morning tea and sat with him on the front verandah. She would chatter away about the weather and the farm and the neighbour’s steers grazing the paddocks where their jersey cows used to munch the grass and mount each other and give birth to little fawn-coloured calves.

She missed the cows, it didn’t seem the same without them. She had loved the big brown eyes and the rough friendly tongues licking at her clothes. Stanley said he hated the bloody

things; the endless milking, the drenching, the stink of cow shit. He was bloody glad they'd sold them and leased out the farm for grazing. It was the best thing they'd ever done.

She talked about their parents and their childhood, she didn't know how much he remembered or understood. Sometimes he laughed, sometimes he frowned, sometimes he stared blankly at her as if he didn't know who she was.

He didn't answer her very often and he never initiated a conversation. She was glad of this. It was wonderful for her to be able to talk to him without the fear of him teasing her and putting her down.

She became more daring as the days went by. She began to talk about things that she had thought would always be forbidden between them. She mentioned Denby and how Stanley had treated him. It was no good. Stanley wanted to know who the hell she was talking about.

Sally talked about their father. Stanley remembered the tractor accident and the funeral, but he shook his head when she told him how she had grieved for Father's dog. She couldn't get it through to him that she was talking about a dog that he had killed over fifty years ago.

Perce told her she was wasting her time with Stanley. He's gone in the head, old age has caught up with him Sal, forget him, talk to us if you're lonely.

Sally was too busy to feel lonely. Isobel came every second day, she alternated with Merle. Sally was surprised at how competent her daughter was with Maureen. Isobel reminded her that she had worked in an old person's shelter in England. Some of the old people she had looked after were cancer patients and some of them were like Uncle Stanley.

'It's either the body or the mind that goes first,' she said. 'I don't know which is worse.'

'Better the mind first, then you don't know you're going to die.'

'Has Maureen talked to you about death?'

'Not in so many words.'

'I think she knows she hasn't got long. I tried to talk to her about it, but she kept changing the subject.'

'That's her way of coping,' said Sally. 'We have to respect that.'

Isobel praised her mother for her sensitivity. Sally glowed. She enjoyed Isobel's visits, she felt a new closeness growing between them. She asked after Julia but Isobel didn't tell her much except to say that she was stressed after a hectic third term and needed to rest. She wasn't able to come up and help at the moment but she would try to make it in a week or two.

Isobel asked her if Maureen had mentioned her son Jimmy. Maureen was worried because he didn't know about her illness. She'd got it into her head that if he was told about it, he would rush to her bedside. She had asked Isobel to try and have him traced through the police and the Salvation Army. Isobel said if they found him, she would ask him if he wanted to re-establish contact with his mother. If he didn't, she would tell Maureen that the search had been unsuccessful.

Sally was surprised that Maureen and Isobel had discussed the possibility of finding Jimmy. Isobel told her it was because she and Jimmy were two of a kind and Maureen knew it. Didn't Sally know why Jimmy was sent away from the farm twenty years ago? Stanley caught him in bed with a farm hand, that's right, another guy.

Sally wondered if Maureen had said anything about Isobel to the others. She felt very relieved when Isobel told her no way, you must be joking. Maureen wouldn't tell those homophobic old men anything about me. Maureen had never cared about Jimmy's sexuality, she'd known for ages he was gay, and she'd kept quiet about it until he was found out. It was the bloody men who had driven him away.

Sally was glad that Isobel had told her about Jimmy. She would be careful to change the subject if Maureen wanted to talk about him or if she mentioned Isobel's friendship with Wendy. She had already made a few pointed comments about their relationship.

Sally wanted to ask Isobel not to bring Wendy to the farm again but she was afraid that Isobel would get angry with her. She didn't want to say anything that would threaten the new closeness between them.

Isobel asked her what she was going to do after Maureen died.

'I'll be happy to help out at the farm occasionally, but I need to go back to Te Kauwhata soon. I miss my things.' Her eyes filled with tears. She wiped her face with a lacy handkerchief. 'You must think I'm stupid.'

'You don't get attached to the objects themselves, you associate them with events from your past. What's wrong with that?'

Sally thought about this when she took Stanley his tea the next morning. Gentle summer rain was falling on the iron roof and down the drain pipes, with the soft noise of a small creek running through damp fern. She talked about the rain and how it would stimulate the summer grass, but he didn't seem to understand. She held his hand out under the broken drain pipe and the water ran down his arm. He giggled like a child. She said water for the tanks Stanley, lovely soft rain water. Remember the old tank stand where you used to chain Batty up? Remember how she cried and pulled on her chain when she saw you coming towards her with the rifle?

He looked at her blankly. It was obvious to her that his memory had become worse. He had no control over which fragment of the past would be screened next, he was at the mercy of broken images shifting in and out of vision.

She was pleased that she remembered everything that had happened between them. This gave her the freedom to say and do exactly as she wanted. She was the one with a clear memory of the past, not him, and this meant that she had the control over what was said in the present.

I am writing a good ending to an unhappy story, she thought. Time has become my friend rather than my enemy. I

have waited so long for this, I can't believe that it's happening at last.

The rain continued for the next four days and nights. The westerly wind droned around the corners of the house, rain and soot fell down the chimney. The coal range was strung with wet washing and the kitchen smelt of steaming socks and hot ashes.

Nobody could go outside. Sally missed her morning teas on the front verandah with Stanley. Perce and Will sat around the house, eating huge quantities of Sally's scones and cakes and complaining about the unseasonable weather. Will looked tired, he had been attending to Maureen during the nights since the rain began.

'She doesn't like the way the wind howls around the house,' he said. 'She thinks it's a banshee calling to her. I told her to pay no attention, she's lived in this district all her life, the westerly should be part of her soul.'

On the fifth night the black rain clouds cleared and the wind dropped. Will had fallen into an exhausted sleep on the sofa in the front room. Sally was sitting up with Maureen. She opened the window in the bedroom and breathed in the cool clean air. She stared up at the night sky; yes, there was the moon, a thin yellow sickle. The stars looked cold and distant. Nothing cares about us she thought, we are nothing, what's the point of being afraid any more?

Sally wasn't aware of the exact moment when Maureen stopped breathing. The room was very quiet. She was too preoccupied with her thoughts to notice Maureen's last breath stealing past her through the open window. It was a gentle death.

When Sally finally turned away from the window, she knew instantly that Maureen was dead. She didn't need to wake Will up, he was standing in the doorway looking frightened and confused.

'Has she gone Sal?'

She put her arms around him while he wept a few tears.

'It's for the best love, she was very sick.'

'I know, I know.'

She arranged Maureen on the pillow and washed her face and brushed her hair.

Perce appeared in his old wool dressing gown. He said he'd make them all a cup of tea. 'Should we wake Stanley?'

'No, let him sleep. He wouldn't understand anyway,' said Will.

Sally rang the doctor and Isobel while Perce put the kettle on and fussed over the tea pot and sugar bowl and milk bottle.

Sally let Perce wait on her and Will. She felt very tired but immensely relieved that Maureen's pain was over and that she was free to go home. She looked at her two old brothers. Their eyes were watering, their lips trembling, they clutched their tea mugs with shaking hands. She had never seen them so sad and helpless, she almost loved them at this moment.

'It's okay to smoke inside if you want to.'

Perce took the box of Park Drive from the mantelpiece and rolled two cigarettes.

Will puffed at his smoke. Thanks Sal. For everything, I mean.'

'I'm glad I came.'

'Are you really?'

'Yes, I like to be useful.'

Perce said hopefully, 'You could stay on and help us.'

Sally shook her head. 'You mustn't pressure me, my mind's made up.'

Dr Meares came and wrote out the necessary forms. He praised Sally for providing good care to Maureen over the past few weeks. Sally said it was nothing, Will and the district nurse and her daughter Isobel had done just as much for Maureen as she had. The doctor said well someone has transformed this place, and a little bird told me it was you.

Isobel and Wendy came just as the doctor was leaving. The sky was beginning to lighten with the rising sun and the rooster crowed his welcome to a fine warm day. Isobel fussed

over Sally, she kept asking her if she was okay and telling her that she should eat some breakfast. She made a big pot of porridge for the others. Sally ate a small piece of buttered toast to please her.

After breakfast, Sally and Wendy and Isobel sat quietly with Maureen, waiting for the undertakers to come. Will said he needed to go for a walk outside. He wanted to say goodbye to Maureen in the places where she used to work around the farm. Sally caught a glimpse of his gray head through the open window, he seemed to be walking towards the old house. Perce came to the doorway and asked the women if they needed anything. He retreated quickly when they shook their heads. Sally could hear him crashing around the kitchen trying to tidy up the breakfast dishes.

Wendy took three candles from her bag and asked Sally if it was okay to light them. Sally nodded. She was beginning to feel very strained. She wished that the men would come from the funeral home and take Maureen away. She wanted it over.

Wendy lit the candles, one white, one red, one black. Isobel took some objects from Wendy's bag and laid them out on a white cloth at the foot of the bed. She unscrewed the lid from a glass jar that contained something that looked like dead leaves. Sally recognized the smell of crushed lemon verbena leaves and dried thyme. Isobel crumpled up some white paper and put it with the dried herbs into a small black iron pot. She lit the paper, and thin spirals of fragrant smoke rose slowly upwards.

Sally burst into tears.

Isobel held her and rubbed her back. 'Cry all you want, let it all go.'

Sally wasn't crying for Maureen, she was mourning Denby's death. She wept because he had died alone out in the black swamp water, with the eels nibbling his helpless body. He should have died in his bed, with me holding his hand and Isobel lighting candles and herbs. I would have a last memory of him like this, peaceful, at the end of all pain.

Wendy blew out the red and the white candle. The black one burned on, she lit another from the flame and held it over Maureen's head. The fire in the iron pot died down. Sally breathed in the aromatic smell of the lemon verbena leaves; it replaced the smell of illness with something healing and strong.

Sally dried her eyes and sat down next to Isobel. She leaned against her tall daughter's shoulder. It comforted her to feel contact with a warm body after the last few months of loneliness.

Sally heard the crunch of tyres on gravel. She got up from her chair and looked out of the window. She saw three men in gray suits getting out of a black station wagon.

'They're here,' she said.

Isobel packed away the white cloth and the jar of dried herbs and the iron pot. Wendy blew out the black candle and placed a small spot of warm wax in the middle of Maureen's forehead and whispered something in her ear.

Isobel kissed her on each cheek and said, 'Hecate protect you.'

Sally heard Perce let the undertakers in. She closed the bedroom door and leant against it until Isobel and Wendy had finished putting away their things.

Then she called out, 'Through here gentlemen, you can take her away now.'

Sally knew she would always remember this morning; the smell of verbena, the flickering of candles, the white motes of dust drifting in intense light when they carried Maureen in a green canvas sling through the doorway.

And above all, the warm feel of Isobel's body, the fresh smell of her cotton shirt, the love in her dark eyes.

Sally went back to a place she had left many years before, to a time when she had soaped and washed and dressed and fed her infant daughters with a physical pleasure that was the nearest thing to sexual joy she had ever experienced.

Why did I let myself forget this? I must have been mad, it's the only thing that's ever meant anything to me, and I killed the memory, I pushed it away.

She went outside and ran over to the old farmhouse. She sat on the verandah steps, thinking about the events of the past few weeks.

Wendy and Isobel waved goodbye to her from the car as they drove away. She could see Perce wandering off towards the hen house with a bowl of hot mash. The old dog Boss hobbled at his heels. There was no sign of Will.

She leaned her back against the warm wooden step and closed her eyes. Her head was spinning, she wanted to escape for a while. The warmth of the sun lulled her, and the events of the night wrapped her body in a mantle of fatigue.

She stayed there for nearly an hour, eyes closed, not quite asleep, until visions of the mess in the kitchen and the dirty washing piled up in the laundry brought her back to her senses.

Come on girl, time to get going, there's work to be done.

She stood up, rolled up the sleeves of her cardigan, and walked calmly back to the house.



21

Isobel and Wendy are working in their garden at Eureka. It is a warm cloudy day. They weed the scarlet runners and the french beans, then lie naked between the tall rows of corn and smoke a joint of last season's flower heads. Wendy strokes Isobel's thigh with the pale green silk frond of a corn cob. Isobel lies on the dry earth staring upwards, she could swear the clouds are wheeling slowly around the sky in perfect circles.

They discuss Maureen's funeral; Julia had turned up wearing a huge black straw hat and a long black dress, Stanley refused to leave the house, Will had cried uncontrollably when he saw Maureen lying in her coffin at the funeral parlour. His two sons and their wives chattered in a matter-of-fact way about home decorating, jobs, neighbours and kids, as if they were at a birthday party instead of a funeral. In spite of extensive enquiries made by the police, the whereabouts of Jimmy remained a mystery.

A few people came back to the farm from the crematorium, and stood around making awkward conversation, trying not to look too eager to get away. Sally produced hot savouries and freshly percolated coffee.

Julia was silent and withdrawn.

Bob was defensive about Julia, he told Isobel not to worry. 'It's no good talking over and over the same old stuff with her, it would do more harm than good.'

'Is she still going to give that public lecture next week?'

'She's determined to do it.'

'Maybe I should try to talk her out of it.'

Bob said he didn't think Julia would listen to Isobel anymore than she would to him. 'Maybe it'll be a good thing for her to focus on something else rather than that bloody essay. It's a panel discussion, so at least she won't have to carry the whole thing on her own.'

He asked Isobel if she and Wendy were coming.

'I'll be there, but I don't know about Wendy. She says she's sick of hearing about the problem of working women.'

They hoe up the potatoes. Isobel shows Wendy how to use the hoe without bending her back. She tells Wendy that she's worried about Julia. She's spending hours and hours in preparation for the discussion, but she won't show anyone what she's written. All we know is what Bob told me at the funeral.

Wendy pauses in her hoeing. 'I've decided to go and show support for Julia after all.'

Isobel pulls out a clump of summer grass and throws it into the wheelbarrow. 'I'm glad. I used to think it possible to live purely within oneself, but I know now that I was wrong. There is no such thing as an individual, our lives extend beyond us, we spiral out into everything. That's why we have to be political.'

Wendy throws down her hoe and hugs Isobel. Her body is streaked with sweat and dirt. Isobel holds Wendy's hot brown body gently against her own. She kisses Wendy's lips, her mouth tastes of dope and sweat. The sun breaks through the cloud and floods their bodies with heat and light. Isobel feels love come roaring through the pores of her skin, the air is filled with the beating of wings.

'If you knew how happy I feel at this moment.'

‘Me too.’

They stand silently for a long moment, rocking their bodies together in the bright sun. Then the sky clouds over, the air cools down, and they take up their hoes and finish banking up the last row of potatoes.

They work until the sky darkens and the evening star comes out briefly from behind a slowly moving cloud. Wendy runs a deep bath, Isobel chops fish for the cat, Christabel.

They sit in the bath together. Wendy pours hot water and camomile flowers over Isobel’s head. Isobel washes Wendy’s back. The steam fogs up the window, their bodies turn rosy with heat.

‘I know what I’ll do!’ cries Wendy.

‘What about?’

‘My bloody degree. I’ll accept the C grade for my essay and then do a big scene at graduation.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like tearing up my degree in front of everybody and saying my piece about the oppression of lesbian scholars.’

‘Brilliant!’

‘What will Julia think?’

Isobel frowns. ‘We’d better not tell her. She can’t take much strain at the moment.’

‘Is she having another breakdown?’

‘Bob doesn’t think so and he went through the last one with her, so I guess I have to take his word for it.’

‘You’re still worried about her, I can tell.’

‘She’s changed towards me, I can’t seem to get through to her anymore.’

Wendy hesitates, then says, ‘I hope you don’t think I’m the cause of this trouble between you.’

‘You mustn’t blame yourself darling, Julia has lots of problems. The essay brought things to a head, and maybe that’s a good thing. She seems to have abandoned her hero worship of me and I’m bloody relieved. Maybe our relationship will be healthier now.’

‘What do you think is wrong with her?’

Isobel wraps a towel around her wet hair. ‘It’s ironic really, because Julia has spent a lot of energy trying not to be like Mum, but the older she gets, the more she falls into the same trap. They have different ways of trying to create patterns out of the messiness of life, but it’s based on the same need for order.’

‘Like Sally’s time notebook?’

‘Yeah, she tries to create the illusion of order by writing down the future before it happens.’

‘But Julia isn’t like that.’

‘She doesn’t give a shit about dirt and mess but she craves an ordered world of the intellect, a world where statements of truth can be made with rock hard certainty.’

‘There is no such world.’

‘I know that, but she’s afraid to live without the promise of it. She’s a mass of contradictions. She has one foot in feminist mysticism, and one foot in the barren world of male truth.’

‘You know my favourite wise old woman’s saying?’

Isobel grins, ‘I know, I know, she who sits on fence gets split cunt. I told her that, I told her to watch out.’

‘How did she react?’

‘She laughed, but she didn’t seem able to make the connection with her own situation. She always blames herself when things go wrong. She’s good at defining the oppression of other women but not her own.’

‘What does she write down in that notebook?’

‘I’ve tried to peek, but it’s in her own shorthand. I asked her if it was her diary and she said no, just things people say.’

‘How does that fulfil her need for control?’

‘I don’t know, but she carries it everywhere. I saw her writing in it at Maureen’s funeral.’

‘Maybe it’s her way of making sense of the present.’

'I think you've hit on it darling,' says Isobel thoughtfully. 'I remember her saying a few weeks ago that she found written words safer than spoken ones. Memory is treacherous she said, talk flies thick and fast, I need to pin it down on paper.'

'Sally writes down what she *wants* to happen, and Julia writes down what she *thinks* is happening.' Wendy begins to laugh.

'What's funny about it?'

'If you started to keep a notebook, you'd have to document the past, that's all they've left for you.'

Isobel splashes water in Wendy's face. 'Cheeky bugger.'

Wendy pulls the plug out and dries her back vigorously. There is a tearing sound, the towel falls into two pieces in her hand.

'More dusters!'

They get the giggles about the state of the linen in their household.

'It's wonderful to live like this,' cries Wendy. 'My mother would die if she had to eat from one of our plates, she would hardly be able to put one of our bent forks to her mouth.'

Wendy blows her nose on a piece of toilet paper. 'Isn't it awful Bel, she doesn't know anything about poor people, she would deny the existence of such cutlery and towels, she simply wouldn't believe that anyone could use such things.'

The telephone rings. Isobel runs to answer it. Her mother is calling from her house in Te Kauwhata. Isobel says but Mum, I was coming up to Glen Massey tomorrow to drive you home. Has anything happened at the farm?

'No.'

'Who drove you?'

'Jim and Paulette.'

'How come?'

'I've got a job.'

'What?'

'Jim is going to pay me to look after Paulette.'

Isobel sits down on the hall bench. She's feeling worried, what on earth has made her mother decide to take on an alcoholic?

'But Mum, Paulette's got a drinking problem, are you sure you can cope with that?'

Sally lowers her voice to a whisper. 'I don't know, but it's good money and it's only for two weeks, Jim needs a break.'

'But you've had no experience with this sort of thing.'

Sally raises her voice, 'That's nice Isobel, I have to go now.'

'I'll come up and see you soon, be careful.'

Isobel and Wendy talk about it while they prepare a meal. Wendy thinks it might work out, perhaps companionship with a woman of her own age is what Sally needs.

'But why Paulette? Talk about two broken reeds propping each other up.'

'Julia likes Paulette, she said so.'

'She also told me things are a bit strained between them, she didn't say why.'

'Imagine living on your own at Sally's age without women friends.'

'She's got Vera but she doesn't see much of her since Vera met the boyfriend.'

'Typical heterosexist stuff, Vera gets herself a bloke and leaves your mother for dead.'

'Pity she met him, they used to be such good friends.'

'Anyway, I think you should give Sally a chance.'

Isobel frowns. 'What does that mean?'

'It means, Bel of my heart, that you can't have it both ways. You've always said that your mother should be more independent. She's starting to do it, she refused to stay at the farm, and now she's decided to have Paulette at her house. She made both of these decisions without consulting you or Julia. You can't turn around and criticize her now, you'll put her right back where she was.'

'You're right, of course.'

'It's easier for me, I'm not emotionally involved. I'm hopeless when it comes to my own parents.'

'Is that why you seldom contact them?'

'I simply don't know what to do about them, so I keep away.'

Isobel puts the last of the batter into the iron frying pan. The kitchen fills with the fragrant smells of herbs and hot oil. Wendy fills her plate with food and takes a huge bite of hot potato fritter. 'Ouch! That hurt.'

'Serves you right for being so greedy.'

'All this fresh air and exercise makes a girl extra hungry.'

'Be honest, you've got the munchies.'

Wendy says soberly, 'I love my life here with you Bel, the garden, the food, our bodies, everything.'

Isobel comes to the table and strokes Wendy's arm. *'You folded me in your flax cloak/a white heron came/not with the feathers of peace/but with the stolen berries of intensity/colours are deep now/I never understood the redness of red before, or the blueness of blue/I never tasted bread before, or the juice of green apples/I never felt salt on my skin before, or ripe pomegranates bursting from finger tips.'*

Wendy holds her hand without speaking, her dark brown eyes shine with tears.

'Julia wrote that. I didn't get it quite right, it's years since I read it.'

'I didn't know she wrote poetry.'

'I don't think she's written much lately. She stopped when she went to university.'

'Poor Julia.'

'Her poetry is very sensuous. She believes that love lives in the sea, the air, the plants; it's out there, waiting for us to discover it, we have to pull it towards us.'

'That's amazing.'

'I'm just beginning to realize how much she's changed. I haven't heard her talk like that since before I went away.'

Wendy looks puzzled. 'I don't get it. Studying can't have changed her, I've done it, you've done it, Lydia's done it, and we haven't lost our joy.'

'I think it must be how you approach academic work. If you see things as straight facts you can go under. I knew from the beginning that everything comes from ideology, so I didn't get caught.'

'What about Lydia? She says that we should stay in there fighting, otherwise we'll be silenced again.'

'I choose to stay unemployed because I refuse to compromise my politics. Who's right?'

'It's not a problem. Each is a valid political stance and each is important.'

'Sometimes I wonder if I'm taking the easy way out.'

'What's easy about living in poverty?'

'That's another problem for me. I know I'm very short of money on the dole, but I can't really believe that I'm poor. I think of Maggie, no hot water, terrible food, inadequate heating. She's the poor one, not me.'

Wendy kisses her on the forehead. They finish their meal and wash up the dishes. They lie entwined along the old sofa on the front verandah watching the night sky darken. A morepork calls out from the rimu trees at the back of the farm. The cool wind has died down, the air is still. The moon peeps through the drifting clouds, their faces glow with sunburn in the pale light. Wendy is silent, her eyes are half shut. Isobel whispers words of endearment to her, soothing words that mingle with the fragrant smell of jasmine and honeysuckle.

They lie on the sofa for hours, they are too tired and too relaxed to move. Overhead, the clouds melt away, and white stars blink and stare in the velvet summer night.

Isobel and Wendy are waiting for Bob outside the Founders Theatre. The panel discussion on women and work is about to begin. Crowds of people are queueing up at the main door.

There are two members of parliament speaking here tonight. They are both traditional men who have made their political reputations on attempting to preserve what they describe as 'The Great New Zealand Family.' Julia and another woman, a well known feminist activist, have been asked to speak against them.

Bob hurries up to them. 'Thanks for waiting Isobel.'

'Is Julia okay?'

'She's bloody nervous, but she's met up with Dawn Hobson out the back and she seems a bit more relaxed now.'

They enter the theatre and find the row where Lydia and Vivian have saved seats for them.

'I'm surprised that there's so many here people here considering how close it is to Christmas,' says Lydia.

Isobel looks around. 'I reckon a lot of them are fundies; see all the white cardies and print dresses and walk shorts and long socks?'

Wendy sniffs the air and says in a loud voice, 'You're right darling, I can smell *eau de bigot*.'

An elderly woman in front of them turns around and glares at her. Wendy smiles back at her and gives her a huge wink. The woman turns her head away abruptly.

The lights go up on the stage. The chairperson walks in ahead of the four speakers. Julia is dressed in a bright red dress and a white belt. Her hair flows down her back like a shiny black mantle.

'She looks lovely,' says Isobel to Bob.

He whispers back, 'God, I'll be glad when this is over.'

Isobel picks up his tension. She hasn't seen her sister since Maureen's funeral and it looks as if Julia has lost more weight. Her face looks gaunt under the stage lights, and the tight white belt accentuates her thin body.

Isobel feels compassion for her. She has never seen her sister look so vulnerable and alone. She's glad that Dawn Hobson is up there with her.

The crowd clap the women panelists politely but give the two members of parliament a rapturous welcome. Isobel's heart sinks. Her worst fears are confirmed, hardly any feminist supporters have bothered to turn up, the crowd is stacked with right-wing fundamentalists.

The chairperson is a middle-aged woman from the city council. She begins by saying that she has never been discriminated against in her working life, but she is interested in what the feminists have to say. As a single woman, the choice between working and family life hasn't come up for her, (she says this with regret as if life has dealt her a blow), so she will have to take a neutral stance in tonight's discussion.

'Bullshit!' hisses Lydia. 'I've seen her at the Club in Auckland, she's a closet career dyke.'

'You're kidding.'

Vivian says, 'She's right, I've seen her too.'

One of the men speaks first. Isobel hardly bothers to listen after the first few minutes, she's heard it all before: the essential role of a full-time mother in the home, family life as the most important structure in society, etc etc. What is new is his usage of statistics and economic jargon to back up what he's saying. He makes it sound so reasonable, so scientific. Isobel sees Dawn Hobson smiling to herself and making notes. Julia is staring straight ahead at the audience.

Dawn is next. She begins very gently, speaking of the right for women to work in the paid work force, the change in family life over the past thirty years, the trend away from one breadwinner per household, the shorter span of child rearing for women.

'She's boring,' says Wendy to Isobel.

'She can't be too radical and she knows it.'

Wendy looks upset. 'She's assuming every woman is heterosexual. I feel like getting up and giving her a piece of my mind.'

Isobel whispers, 'With this audience, the word feminist would get you lynched, let alone lesbian. I know how you

feel darling, but please don't make a scene. I just want Julia to get through her speech. That's why we're here, to support her.'

The second man gets up to speak. He starts to rave against abortion, he compares women who have had abortions to Hitler, 'the murderer of little innocents', he talks about violence and rape and social breakdown, and he lays it all at the door of the feminists.

'Feminists have betrayed womanhood; they have made our wonderful New Zealand mothers feel guilty because they don't go out to work, they've made them feel worthless and stupid. The feminists are trying to change the laws of man by corrupting God's sacred plan.'

'Jesus wept,' groans Wendy.

'Be quiet,' hisses Bob.

The audience breaks into loud applause, some people at the back start singing a hymn. The chairperson calls for order. Julia sits very still. When the noise abates, the chairperson introduces her as a teacher.

Julia coughs and remains silent. Isobel clutches Wendy's hand, the theatre becomes very quiet, everyone waits for her to speak.

At last she says in a firm voice, 'Feminist studies, I teach feminist studies.'

Wendy yells out, 'Good on you Julia!'

The male speaker who had blamed feminists for everything, calls out, 'That's where your hard-earned money goes ladies and gentlemen, into an education system that brainwashes our young.'

There is uproar in the theatre. One of the men on the stage is laughing at something the other one has whispered in his ear.

Isobel can see Dawn Hobson appealing to the chairperson to control the situation. She is so afraid for Julia, the hostility of the crowd is stabbing into her body, she feels as if she wants to crawl away and hide. It must be much worse up on stage.

Dawn Hobson yells out to the men, 'We listened to you without interjecting, why don't you give us a fair go?'

One of the men stands up and motions to the crowd to be quiet. Order is restored. Isobel's knees are shaking uncontrollably.

Julia stands up at the podium holding a sheaf of notes. She clears her throat and shuffles through her papers.

'Statistics show that...research has proved that women...in the last few decades...the work of...'

'Oh God,' says Bob. 'She's lost it, I was afraid of this.'

People in the audience are quiet now, they wonder what is happening. Suddenly, Julia seizes her papers and throws them up into the air. She pulls the microphone from the stand and runs to the front of the stage. Her high heels hammer down on the bare timber floor, her long red dress balloons out, pieces of paper float down behind her.

She shrieks into the microphone, 'I was born a cunt, I have lived like a cunt, and unless the revolution finally comes I'll die a cunt!'

Isobel is paralysed with terror. There is a shocked noise, the indrawing of many breaths, nobody moves.

Bob is on his feet, he's trying to work his way along the row. Isobel can't move. Lydia and Wendy are looking at each other, they don't know what to do.

The chairperson goes to Julia's side and tries to take her arm. Julia shakes her off.

'We are haunted by the dark side of the cunt!'

Bob is running up the stairs to the stage. He reaches her side and grapples with her, he tries to wrench the microphone from her hand. She kicks his leg and screams, 'Talking cunts are here!'

The crowd begins to chant, 'Get her off, get her off, get her off!' The microphone goes dead. One of the men on stage has disconnected the power. Julia, still shouting and yelling, is led from the stage.

Wendy says, 'Oh shit oh hell oh fuck.'

Isobel feels overwhelmed with guilt, it's the most dreadful sensation she has ever experienced. What has she done to her sister?

Lydia says, 'Come on, we'd better go and see if we can help.'

Isobel says, 'I can't face her, it's all my fault.' She turns on Wendy, 'Why the hell did I ever let you talk me into helping you with that fucking essay?'

Wendy tries to take Isobel's hand but she pushes her away.

They leave their seats. The panel discussion has resumed, the chairperson has apologized for Julia's outburst and questions for the speakers are being collected from the audience. People stare at the four women as they walk up the aisle. They can feel the hatred. An elderly man hisses at them, women dressed as men, an abomination in the eyes of God!

When they get outside, they can see Bob helping Julia into the Fiat. They run over to the car.

Isobel says, 'I'm sorry Julia, please please forgive me.'

Julia stares at her sister without recognition. Bob shuts the passenger door. Isobel can see that he is nearly crying. 'I should have made her stay at home.'

'You weren't to know.'

'I've been kidding myself, I didn't want to face up to the fact that she's ill again.'

'What are we going to do?'

'She'll have to leave her job, it's too much for her.'

'She can decide that for herself, when she's better,' says Isobel.

Lydia looks uncomfortable. 'After tonight, she might not have the choice.'

'Why?'

'I saw Dr Berry in the audience.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Isobel is frantic.

'I didn't see her until we were leaving.'

'Are you saying that she will veto tenure for Julia?'

‘Probably. Tonight will let her off the hook. She won’t have to get into the politics of Julia’s supervision of Wendy’s essay, she’ll say there’s a problem with Julia’s health.’

Isobel feels more wretched than ever. She is full of rage against herself.

I might have known something like this would happen. My written words became public property, I lost control of them and Julia is taking the rap instead of me. I committed myself to one form of logic, knowing that the readers would impose a different, more sinister meaning than was intended. The act of putting pen to paper has driven my sister mad.

Julia sits upright in the car with her eyes shut. There is a strong westerly wind blowing. The women watch the Fiat drive away. Julia’s hair flies around her face in a black cloud, Bob’s shoulders look tense and hunched up over the wheel.

They get into Lydia’s car.

Isobel holds her body stiffly away from Wendy’s in the back seat.

The street lights flicker across Wendy’s face as they drive across the bridge. The river runs beneath them, black and silent. The wind makes the car shudder.

‘What a shit of a night,’ says Vivian.

Lydia slows the car down and pulls over. ‘Right, you two,’ she says firmly. ‘Why don’t you get out of the car and go for a walk and get yourselves sorted out.’

Isobel shrugs her shoulders. Wendy begins to cry.

Lydia says, ‘Isobel, do something.’

Isobel relents. She opens the door and gets out. ‘Come on Wendy, let’s talk.’

They hold hands and walk along the road that leads to a small park by the edge of the river. The place is deserted. Although the wind is strong enough to blow waves up against the river bank, the air is warm. A female mallard duck is sitting beside a wooden bench. She looks very uncomfortable; her feathers are being blown by the wind into a brown ruff around her neck.

Isobel says, 'Poor thing, she looks like I feel.'

Wendy sobs, 'I can't bear you to be angry with me.'

'Sorry, I shouldn't have taken it out on you.'

Wendy asks Isobel if she still loves her.

'Of course I do.'

Wendy blows her nose and dries her eyes. Isobel puts her arms around her and kisses her. They hold each other in silence for a few minutes.

Isobel says, 'I had no right to shout at you.'

'You were frightened for your sister.'

'That doesn't excuse me.'

'As long as you still love me.'

'Of course I do.'

They return to the car. Lydia and Vivian are waiting patiently, listening to a tape of *Tosca*.

Lydia looks at them closely. 'Everything okay now?'

They drive to Lydia's and Vivian's house for supper.

The kitchen is hung with bunches of bay leaves. There is an impression of sun and light, as if daytime heat and garden smells are trapped inside. Vivian grinds the coffee beans, Wendy gets the cups.

'The next few weeks are going to be hard,' says Isobel. 'It's her silence that scares me. If only she would talk to someone.'

Lydia says, 'She's been talking to me.'

'Oh?'

'I wasn't going to tell you, but after what's happened I feel that I should.'

Isobel is hurt that her sister has talked to Lydia instead of to her.

Lydia says, 'She told me that she's become rather afraid of you.'

'You're joking!'

'If you're going to be able to help her, you must listen.'

Isobel sips her coffee as Lydia tells her what Julia had said. Something about acts of hostility between people who are

joined together through blood, something about people who are secretly trying to harm their own kind.

Isobel looks puzzled, 'I don't understand.'

'I don't either, I thought you could explain.'

'Oh God, it's those stories I used to tell her as a kid. Did she mention the night witch?'

'She said she can cope with the day witch, whatever that means, but not with what you're trying to do.'

Isobel can't believe that Julia is linking her with that childhood stuff about witches. She tells the women about the stories she invented as a child, and how she'd forgotten all about them until Julia mentioned the night witch in a letter to her just before their father died.

'What did she say?' asks Vivian.

Isobel frowns. 'I'm trying to remember. Something about night witches appearing in many different cultures. That's right, she accused me of pinching the idea out of a book.'

'And did you?'

'Look, is this important?'

'It's all she talked about, so it must be.'

Isobel sighs and says she's tired out, she can't think about it any more. Fuck her family, they've dealt her nothing but shit the last few months. Dad drowning himself in the swamp, Mum doing her purity number to the point of absurdity, Auntie Maureen dying and leaving three helpless old men, and now Julia losing her nerve and turning against her.

'The irony of it Lydia. I'm the only one in the family with my bloody act still together and she thinks I'm working against her.'

'She didn't say that exactly.'

'It sounds like it to me.'

Wendy says, 'Come on darling, it's no good going over and over it, let's go.'

Isobel allows Wendy to lead her out to where her old car is parked. Lydia and Vivian wave them goodbye from the

kitchen porch. The yellow patch of warm light disappears abruptly when they close the door.

Isobel shivers. Wendy takes the wheel, and after grinding through a series of monotonous suburban streets, they travel briskly along the dark windy highway towards Eureka.

After a long silence, Isobel puts her hand on Wendy's knee and says, 'Thanks.'

'What for?'

'Putting up with my shit tonight.'

'Darling, what are lovers for?'

'Meeting you has been the one good thing to happen to me since I came back.'

'Happy to oblige.'

Isobel says suddenly, 'That's it, I remember what else she said.'

'Who?'

'Julia, about night witches. In order to make the unspeakable speakable, one needs a real object to talk about.'

'I thought witches ate human flesh, walked backwards, that sort of stuff.'

'Sometimes, but that's not the point. Night witches shouldn't be taken literally, they are metaphors of unspeakable acts, that's why I don't understand why Julia is linking them up with me.'

'Are you sure that's what she's doing?'

'It's the only sense I can make of what she told Lydia.'

'This is serious Bel.'

'Fucking right it is.' She thinks for a few moments, then says, 'Julia's obsession with certainty is the key to understanding her dilemma.'

'You're probably right.'

'Why has she suddenly lost it?'

'That's what we need to find out.'

'I've never hurt her in my life, I don't understand why she's turned against me.'

Wendy tries to calm her down. 'Don't jump to conclusions Bel, we don't know what's going on yet.'

'Do you think we ever will?'

'We're tough and we're lesbians and we love each other, we can do anything.'

The tall macrocarpas that line their driveway come into view. Wendy turns the car off the road. The huge branches are tossing up and down in the wind, the westerly is blowing up a summer gale. A few fat drops of rain fall on to the dusty gravel. A pine cone bounces against the windscreen with a sharp crack.

The car stops beside the verandah. The house is dark and shuttered. The two women run towards the back door with their arms around each other, laughing and screaming in the wind.

Within minutes, the rain drums down hard and heavy and wet on the iron roof. Isobel and Wendy lie in each other's arms. Isobel can't sleep, she goes over and over the events of the night. In the end, she stops thinking about anything, and instead, listens to the rise and fall of Wendy's breath and the music of the rain running down the gutters.



22

Sally is basting the turkey for Christmas dinner and talking to Bob. She is giving him a description of the meal to come, and her plans for the garden and house over the summer. He leans against the kitchen wall, drinking a can of beer. Paulette and Julia are outside the house smoking cigarettes. Sally has placed seats in the back garden for 'the two naughty girls' as she calls them. There is a crock pot of water on the wooden table between them. Sally wants them to put the butts into the water, it hasn't rained for two weeks, the grass is tinder dry. She reminds them what happened up at the farm; a terrible thing, the old house going up in smoke after all these years, there was still some useful timber left in her.

Isobel has her own idea about the fire but she keeps it to herself. The police said they suspected arson. Stanley was the prime suspect. His brothers had seen him lighting matches near the house on the day of the fire. But in spite of Sally saying it was terrible, Isobel felt that her mother was secretly pleased. When she talked about it, her lips stretched into a smile which belied what she was saying. Isobel asked her where she had been two days ago when it had happened and she answered where do you think? Here with Paulette.

Paulette said quickly, of course Sal, we were watching *Coronation Street* on the tele at the time.

It sounded too glib, as if they had rehearsed it.

Paulette and Sally were difficult to track down. Isobel tried to contact them at least once a day to see how her mother was coping with Paulette and to give them news of Julia's progress. During the day, the phone rang and rang, but no one answered it. When Isobel finally got through at night, Sally would say, oh we must have been out in the garden or down the shops, you just missed us, we were home most of the day.

Paulette has a car, an old Datsun 1600. Vera told Isobel they were always driving around the town, Paulette at the wheel, Sally sitting up like Jacky beside her; no, she didn't know where they went but she wished they were home more often. Now that Ronald has gone to live with that awful woman in Tauranga, she's lonely, she wished that Sally would spend more time with her. Ronald had answered an ad in the paper, lonely widow, petite figure, new car, you know the sort of thing. Vera found out that the woman is divorced not widowed, and lives in a flash brick house with standard roses and paving stones. Apparently she's got a puffy face and fat legs. So much for the petite figure.

Wendy said serve Vera right, it was poetic justice, she dropped Sally when it suited her and now Sally's got a new girlfriend.

Isobel pointed out that Paulette is hardly Sally's girlfriend and Wendy said not in our sense of the word, but that's what she calls her, she introduces her as my girlfriend Paulette, haven't you noticed? Anyway, to hell with Vera, look how she blames the other woman for luring Ronald away. She doesn't hold him responsible for his own actions because he's been bewitched by a brick house and the promise of a slim body.

Isobel thinks about this as she wanders around the garden with Wendy. The air is warm and still, everybody says it's the best holiday weather for years. The roses and petunias and

painted daisies are wilting in the heat. Wendy plunges her hands into the dry soil around a pink snapdragon and cries feel it Bel, the earth is hot.

The sky is high and deep and radiant. Isobel loves the intensity of it. She throws her arms up as if she's trying to pull down the luminous quality of the deep blue space into her body.

Paulette looks at them as if they are crazy. She draws smoke from her black cigarette holder and sips tonic water. Julia sits beside her wearing a big straw hat.

Isobel and Bob are pleased with her progress. Since that dreadful night at the Founders, she has been very quiet and sleeps a lot, but she remembers what she did, and has been talking to Isobel a little; she lost control, something came over her. For the first time in her life, she experienced the smell and taste of woman-hating dogma as a palpable evil, she felt as if she was eating it, wearing it, shitting it. Her body was being entered against her will, she felt as if she was being raped by a swarm of angry wasps, they got to the very centre of her body, she had to speak those words, it was her only defence. Did Isobel understand?

Of course, Isobel answered. You were frightened, so you used our words from the essay as a spell of protection. The trouble is that you didn't really protect yourself, you made things worse. You used *that* word, you said it over and over, you brought it out of a long-hidden private place and flaunted it in public. There was nothing wrong with what you said but it was the wrong place to say it in. The context must be one where your words cannot be turned against you; some will say you're mad or sick, some will say you're wicked, some will say you used dirty words as a shock tactic.

Julia asked her what she thought. Isobel, choosing her words with care, said of course you're not mad or wicked, but you were out of control, you said so yourself, so we have to find out why it happened. But don't dwell on it. What you did wasn't so terrible. Wendy thinks it has it's

funny side. She says she'll never forget the looks on those fundamentalists' faces as long as she lives.

Isobel and Wendy come in from the garden. Kezia and Timmy are playing with their Christmas presents in the lounge. Bob is setting the table in the dining room and Sally is placing baked kumara, potatoes and pumpkin into heated dishes on the sideboard.

Isobel says, 'The house looks lovely Sally, it's good to see all the rooms back in action.'

Sally smiles, 'All except one.'

'Your old bedroom?'

'There's no need to use it. Paulette's quite happy to sleep in the small bedroom.'

Isobel and Wendy exchange glances. 'When's she going home?' asks Isobel.

'She likes it here.'

'How do you feel about it?'

Sally begins to carve thick slices from the turkey. 'Come and get it!' she yells.

Timmy and Kezia clatter noisily into the room. 'Where do we sit Nana?'

'Anywhere you like.'

Isobel whispers to Wendy, 'I knew she wouldn't answer me.'

Paulette and Julia come into the dining room and take their seats at the table. Bob asks Julia to remove her straw hat. She shakes her head and holds the brim tightly with both hands as if she expects him to remove it by force.

Kezia stares at her mother. 'You look silly.'

Bob says sharply, 'Be quiet Kezia, remember what I told you.'

They begin to eat. Isobel swallows a mouthful of food and announces that she has never tasted such delicious fresh green peas. She compliments her mother on her gardening skills and says she can't wait for their next crop at Eureka to start

producing. The pods have set but they are still too small to pick.

Sally tries to place a slice of turkey on her daughter's plate. Isobel reminds her that she never eats flesh. Sally looks annoyed. 'I thought you'd make an exception for Christmas dinner.'

'I don't eat turkey either,' says Wendy.

'But I've got nothing else to give you.'

Isobel sighs, 'Don't worry about it Mum, there's plenty of food here that we can eat.'

'Why don't you eat meat?' asks Paulette.

Isobel begins to explain, Sally cuts her short. 'Not today Isobel please, not on Christmas Day.'

'Why?'

'I don't want any arguments, today should be a happy day.'

'Mum's right,' says Julia. 'There is a time and a place for everything, especially the speaking of certain words.'

Everybody stops eating and looks at her. She hasn't spoken since she and Bob and the children arrived an hour ago.

Bob takes a gulp of red wine and says with feeling, 'I'm very pleased to hear you say that. I wish you'd remembered it before you blew your stack at the Founders.'

Isobel frowns and shakes her head at him. She's afraid that Julia will get upset.

'It's okay,' says Julia. 'Let him say what he thinks.'

Bob says grumpily, 'Thanks for giving me permission to speak.'

Julia smiles, 'Go ahead, tell me exactly how you feel.'

'I don't bloody feel anything. All I bloody said was I wish you'd thought about a time and a place for everything that night at the Founders.'

'I'm not going to say it's wrong for you to get angry because that's what you do to me.'

'What the hell are you on about?'

'You tell me I feel things too much.'

'Lay off!'

'You say I'm too emotional,' She takes a mouthful of kumara and chews it with obvious enjoyment.

Bob looks visibly shaken. He pours himself another glass of wine.

Isobel is astounded. She has never heard Julia speak like this to Bob before. It is satisfying to hear her challenge the criticisms that Bob constantly throws at her, but what frightens Isobel is the matter-of-fact way her sister is behaving. She is too calm, too cool. Where is her passion?

'We'll discuss this later Julia.' Bob's speech is becoming a little slurred.

Sally says, 'Good idea, we should have peace and quiet on this special day.'

Julia takes another big mouthful of kumara. 'No we won't, we'll talk about it right now, out in the open.'

Sally stands up. 'Please Julia, if you have any thought for me, you'll stop.'

'Don't be afraid, I'm perfectly calm. At last I'm becoming what Bob wants, a cool and rational human being.'

That's not fair!' yells Bob.

Kezia begins to cry. Julia pays no attention to her daughter's tears. She pulls her notebook from her pocket and waves it around. 'See, it's all in here. I write down all the facts of the case.'

Bob says sarcastically, 'What facts have you written about me?'

'The wonderful things you do in the house.'

He looks relieved. 'That's okay then.'

'And about how you try to squash my feelings.'

'That's it.' He grabs the notebook from her and jumps away from the table. He starts to tear at the pages. 'I've had a fucking gutsful.'

Isobel screams, 'No Bob no!'

Julia looks stunned. She puts her knife and fork down carefully on the table and folds the collar of her dress up

around her neck. She closes her eyes and starts to rock gently backwards and forwards.

Isobel hisses at Bob, 'See what you've done.'

Bob is tearing pages from the notebook one by one and crumpling them up. He pushes them into the fire-box of the coal range and lights a match. The smoke drifts, flames begin to roar up the chimney, Bob rips and tears, Kezia wails.

Wendy says quietly, 'This is very dangerous Bel, what shall we do?'

Isobel moves across the room to Julia and folds her in her arms. She rocks her sister like a child. Julia leans into her for a moment then opens her eyes. She stares into Isobel's face, then opens her mouth and tries to speak, but nothing comes out except a short harsh grunt.

Isobel is shocked at the look in her sister's eyes, she can't believe that Julia is afraid of her.

Bob throws the last page of the notebook into the fire. He tells the children to gather up their Christmas presents, they are driving back to Hamilton right away.

'But that's not fair, we haven't had our pudding yet!' cries Timmy.

'Can't you stay a little longer?' asks Sally.'

'I must take her home, you can see how unpredictable her behaviour is.'

Sally promises to give them big pieces of plum pudding and Christmas cake to take home. Timmy and Kezia go into the lounge to fetch their gifts.

'You shouldn't be driving,' says Isobel.

'You stay out of it.'

'You've drunk too much.'

'Don't interfere. Haven't you done enough?'

'What do you mean by that?'

'You and your fucking girlfriend and that fucking essay!'

Isobel puts her hands over her face and starts to cry. Wendy runs to her side and puts her arms around her.

Sally cries, 'Please please don't fight, I can't bear it.'

Bob leads Julia from the dining room, the children trail behind her. Timmy carries an armful of gifts, Kezia is holding her doll.

Sally wraps thick slices of Christmas cake and puts a chunk of pudding into a plastic container. She kisses the children goodbye.

Isobel, with tears pouring down her face, runs out to the car and tries to persuade Bob to let her drive them home.

He refuses, and tells her to mind her own business.

‘But Bob, the children.’

‘For God’s sake give me some credit for knowing when I can drive and when I can’t.’

The car roars off. She goes back inside.

Sally suggests they all have a nice cup of tea to settle themselves down.

‘You won’t ever discuss anything important,’ says Isobel. ‘All you can think of is making bloody cups of tea.’

‘You’re wrong,’ says Paulette. ‘Sal is always talking about important things.’

Isobel is astonished. ‘You think so?’

‘I know so. I’ve learnt so much from her.’

Sally looks embarrassed. ‘Cut it out Paulette, I’ll get a swelled head.’

‘No, let me speak.’ She raises her glass of lemonade. ‘She looks after me, nobody ever did that before. It’s fantastic how she cleans this place and cooks beautiful food and grows flowers. All my life I have wanted to be a good home-maker but I didn’t have what it takes. Living with her is the next best thing. Let’s drink a toast, charge your glasses. To Sally Winter!’

Wendy pours a little red wine into Isobel’s glass and raises her own to her lips. ‘Come on Bel, let’s drink to your mother.’

Isobel clinks glasses with Wendy.

Sally says, ‘You can have your real drink now Paulette.’ She takes a key from a chain around her neck and unlocks a cupboard in the sideboard. She takes out a bottle of gin and

pours a generous measure into a tall glass and adds tonic water and a slice of lemon. Paulette takes the glass from her hand with reverent joy, her face glows.

'I'll take it outside Sal, then I can have a smoke.'

'Okay Paulette, but don't take too long, I'm serving up the pudding.'

Isobel waits until Paulette has gone outside, then says, 'What on earth did you do that for? You'll set her off again.'

'She gets two drinks a day, one at lunch time and one just before dinner.'

'But she isn't supposed to drink anything.'

'Says who? The trouble was that Jim let her drink all the time, it was almost as if he didn't care if she drank too much. I told her when she came here that I would allow her two drinks a day, no more. If she breaks that rule, she goes.'

Wendy says, 'Well she can't be an alcoholic, otherwise she couldn't stop at one drink.'

'It seems to work. It gives her something to look forward to.'

Isobel says, 'I salute your wisdom.'

Sally looks pleased. 'Thanks Isobel, it's nice to be appreciated.' She cuts the rich plum pudding into slices and pours hot vanilla custard over it.

'Does she ever hear from her husband?' asks Wendy.

'Oh yes, he sometimes rings up to see how we're getting on.'

'What's he like?'

She places bowls of pudding on the table. The custard is rapidly forming a thick yellow skin. 'He seems very devoted to her but...'

'Go on,' says Isobel.

Sally lowers her voice. 'He teases her a lot, he makes jokes about her, right in front of her. I'm sure he doesn't mean to hurt her but she's very sensitive. I think the drink might have been a way of blocking things out.'

The telephone rings. Sally answers it and puts her hand over the receiver.

‘It’s Clemency, ringing from Auckland. She wants to speak to Julia. What’ll I tell her?’

Isobel, her mouth full of pudding, says indistinctly, ‘I’ll talk to her if you like.’

She takes the phone into the hall, trailing the cord behind her. Clemency wants to know why Julia isn’t there, she’d arranged to ring her to wish the children a Merry Christmas. Just think Isobel, she crows, next year I’ll have my own little one to celebrate Christmas with.

‘Fantastic,’ answers Isobel.

‘But tell me, is Julia okay? Bob told me last week she hasn’t been too well.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Nothing much, something about working too hard.’

‘He would.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘We are enduring a typical happy family Christmas Day, that’s all.’

‘Did Bob and Julia have a fight?’

‘It’s not as simple as that. Look, why don’t you come down and visit Julia soon? I know she’d love to see you and it might help cheer her up.’

‘Is it her job?’

‘Partly, it’s very complicated, none of us know what’s really going on.’

‘I’ll try to come soon.’

‘You sound happy anyway Clemency.’

‘I am, I am, never better.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Is Paulette there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I saw Jim the other day. I was surprised when he told me she wasn’t coming home for Christmas dinner. Poor Jim, he

looked quite lost. I wanted to ask him to come to our place for Christmas dinner but Gerald wouldn't hear of it.'

'Isn't there a daughter living in Auckland?'

'Yes, but Jim doesn't get on with her.'

'Typical happy family.'

Clemency laughs, 'You haven't changed Isobel.'

'Neither has the typical happy family.'

'I must go, bye for now.'

'Goodbye.'

She goes back into the dining room. Paulette is seated at the table, spooning pudding into her mouth. She and Sally are laughing at something. All at once, Isobel feels annoyed with her mother. She allowed her two grandchildren to drive off with a drunken angry man at the wheel without trying to stop him, her younger daughter is ill, and here she is laughing over a silly joke with Paulette.

Isobel says, 'I'm worried about Julia.'

'Bob will look after her.'

'Huhhh.'

Sally begins to clear the table. Paulette is chatting away to her, singing the praises of the wonderful meal and the pudding in particular.

Wendy mouths at Isobel I've had enough, can we go soon? Isobel gives her an emphatic nod. They gather up their things. Sally pleads with them to stay for the afternoon. Vera is coming over for tea and Christmas cake at four o'clock and she'll wonder where Isobel and Julia have got to.

'Tell her we have another engagement,' says Isobel. She feels an urgent need to leave her mother's house as quickly as possible. Vera is the last person on earth she wants to talk to. She needs to discuss the events of the afternoon with Wendy, she wants to get rid of her nagging feeling of guilt over the essay.

They make their escape from the house. 'Thank God that's over for another year,' says Isobel. She lets out a huge sigh of relief as they drive away.

Wendy laughs. 'You think you've got problems. Sally is a pussycat compared with my mother. She would never tolerate you and me sitting together at the hallowed family board for Christmas dinner.'

'It's easier without Dad there. Mum seems less tense this year, in spite of Bob's outburst.'

'She must miss him though.'

'Of course she does, that's why it's great that Paulette is staying with her. It was the way she pandered to him that drove me crazy, she acted grateful to him all the time. He left everything to her, the housework, the shopping, the meals, caring for us. And when anything went wrong he always blamed her, and she took it.'

'Maybe she's less tense because she's in control of everything, she doesn't have to please him, she can do exactly what she wants.'

'You're probably right. She's got Paulette sussed, that's for sure. She looks so much better.'

'Paulette needed someone to take responsibility for her life, and she's found just the right person.'

Isobel smiles, 'I'm glad you like my mother. Isn't it stupid? I both love her and hate her but I couldn't bear it if you ran her down.'

'The bonds of blood.'

Isobel sighs. 'If only I didn't have this worry over Julia, I love her too but I don't know what to do to help her.'

Wendy hesitates, then says, 'I think you should withdraw a little.'

'But she's my sister.'

'It would be for your own good, you're getting tense.'

'You sound just like Maggie.'

'I'm not jealous of Julia, if that's what you're thinking.'

'Sorry, I'm feeling the strain. Wasn't Bob dreadful? I've never seen him so aggressive.'

‘The booze didn’t help. On the other hand, maybe it’s a good thing he came out into the open, Julia knows where she stands now.’

‘He won’t take any criticism from her, that much is clear.’

Isobel turns the wheel sharp left at the highway junction. There is little traffic. Warm air blows through the car, bringing smells of hot tar and dry grass.

‘There’s just one more thing,’ she says.

‘What, my darling.’

‘I’m going to drive past Julia and Bob’s house.’

‘Are we going in?’

‘No, I just want to make sure the car is there. Otherwise I’ll worry.’

‘Okay.’

They arrive at the outskirts of the city. They drive through the street where Bob and Julia live. Isobel is very relieved to see their car parked in the driveway. She cruises past slowly, everything looks normal. They drive a few houses down the street. A little girl is walking towards them on the footpath. She stares at the car, then waves at them in excitement.

‘Oh God, that was Kezia.’

‘So what?’

‘She’ll tell Bob I was checking up on him.’

‘Too bad.’

Isobel speeds away. She can see Kezia’s disappointed face receding in the rear vision mirror. ‘I feel mean not stopping to say hello.’

‘I think we’ve both had enough of your relations for one day.’

Isobel smiles. ‘You’re probably right.’

They arrive home. Christabel is asleep on the old sofa on the verandah. She stretches a lazy paw towards them as they unlock the front door. The leafy branches of the old oak trees crowd against the lounge windows, the house is lit with dappled sun. Isobel says it’s so peaceful here, I’m thankful to be home in one piece, almost.

Wendy dozes off on the day bed in the dining room. Isobel lies on her back on the floor, she likes the hardness of the bare boards. She drifts in and out of sleep, then arises and has a cool wash. She goes into the garden. The early evening is as calm and beautiful as the day. She forages for beans and carrots and ripe tomatoes. The vegetables are sweet and warm and running with juice.

Wendy joins her. They sit underneath an oak tree and smoke several joints. She feeds Wendy tiny pieces of bean and carrot. Isobel experiences the movement of time as a circular dance, the minutes leap at her sideways, stay for a moment, then jump further and further away from her. There is no smooth passage like the orderly ticking of a clock. The oak tree bends down and grows a protective green cloak over her body. Somewhere, there is a bell ringing.

‘Don’t answer it,’ says Wendy.

‘Is it the phone?’ Isobel sits up slowly.

‘You must be really out of it, it’s been ringing on and off for ages.’

‘Why didn’t you answer it?’

‘Couldn’t be stuffed.’

‘I’d better go in, it might be important,’ She runs inside. The phone stops just before she lifts the receiver. She has to sit down on the hall seat, she feels a little dizzy. After a few moments, the phone rings again. It’s Bob, and he sounds very anxious. ‘Isobel? Thank God I’ve got through to you at last.’

Her first impulse is to hang up without answering but something in his voice stops her.

‘Is Julia there with you?’

‘No, there’s just me and Wendy here.’

‘Shit, I was positive she would head for your place.’

‘Is she missing?’

‘She took off an hour ago, driving the car like a maniac. I’m stuck here with the kids, I can’t go looking for her.’

‘Have you rung anyone else?’

‘I’ve rung Lydia, but there’s no answer.’

'They've gone to Whitianga to stay with Vivian's mother.'

'Can you think of anyone else she'd go to?'

'Most of her friends are away.'

'It's too soon to ring the police. Bloody hell, I could wring her fucking neck for doing this to me.'

'You shouldn't have burnt her notebook, you set her off again.'

'It was the drink,' says Bob. 'It made me reckless.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Go and look for her, I have to stay here in case she comes home.'

'Okay, but I'm not sure where to start. Have you rung Mum?'

'I feel a bit awkward after this afternoon, would you ring her?'

'I suppose so, but it's very unlikely that she's gone back to Te Kauwhata.'

'I gave her another one as soon as we got home but she wouldn't look at it.'

'Another what?'

'Notebook.'

'Oh Bob.'

'I'll hang up now, she might be trying to ring me.'

'I'm sure she'll come home soon, she probably just needed time out.'

'I hope you're right. I can't take much more, I'm on the edge myself.'

'I'll do what I can.'

'Isobel?'

'Yes?'

'I'm sorry about what I said to you today, about the essay.'

'Forget it.'

'I want you to know that in spite of everything, I love Julia. I don't know what I'd do without her.'

Isobel says sharply, 'Don't even think about it, goodbye.'

Wendy has come inside and is standing by the phone. Isobel takes her in her arms and they hug each other. 'Did you hear that?'

'Enough to get the gist of what's happened.'

'Where the hell is she?'

'I bet she's gone to Raglan.'

Isobel says, 'You could be right, she's got a thing about the sea. If she wanted to be alone for a while, she'd probably head for the coast.'

'Are you okay to drive?'

'I wish I wasn't so stoned.'

'I'll come with you if you like.'

Isobel gives her a big hug. 'Thanks darling. Sorry about my family, what a day.'

They feed the cat and lock the house. Wendy takes the wheel. They drive back towards the city, then through Frankton and on to the Raglan road. Isobel estimates that the sun will set in about an hour. She wonders which part of Raglan Julia has gone to, if indeed she is there at all. She suggests to Wendy that they go to Ocean Beach first. If the Fiat isn't parked there, they'll go on to Ngarunui Beach and then further along the coast to Whale Bay.

Wendy agrees with the plan. The car twists and turns around the hills. They are driving directly into the setting sun, it floods into their eyes one minute, then disappears behind a hill the next.

Isobel is at the mercy of her body, the flashing sunlight, the circles whirling within circles; she begins to chant silently Isis, Astarte, Hecate, Demeter...

They arrive at Ocean Beach. The parking area is empty except for an old dented Valiant. Wendy turns the car around on the dusty gravel road. They drive back to the main road. The car grinds slowly up the hill towards Bryant Home and turns the last corner at the top of the hill. Hecate, Demeter, Kali...

Wendy cries, 'There's the Fiat!'

They hurriedly park the car. Isobel throws a beach towel into Wendy's pack.

They move through the darkening bush and on to the top of the cliff. Wendy jumps in fright as a pair of gray warblers fly up in front of her face. The birds hover above them, trilling their sad sweet call from tree to tree.

Isobel and Wendy peer over the edge of the cliff. The beach lies far below. The tide is half out, the wet gray sand glistens in the dying rays of sun. The flags marking out the safe swimming area are gone, the beach looks deserted.

'Come on,' says Wendy. 'She must be down here somewhere.'

Someone is walking through the bush towards them. It's a tall woman wearing a straw hat and carrying a pack on her back. Kali! Innana!

Isobel nearly cries with disappointment when she sees a stranger's face underneath the hat. She asks her if she's seen a woman with long black hair down on the beach.

'Yeah, there was someone down there like that, earlier on.'

'Is she still there?'

'I dunno, I've been at the other end of the beach, I just walked back.'

'But she was there when you started out?'

'Yeah. Who is she?'

'My sister, we need to find her.'

'Does she come here much?'

'Why do you ask?'

'I think I've seen her here before, with a little girl.'

'That would be Kezia, my niece.'

'I remember now, I was hang-gliding, she gave me a bag.'

'That'll be Julia, she always carries cigarettes.'

Wendy asks the woman if she spoke to Julia today.

She frowns, 'I said hello but she didn't answer me. She was acting a bit weird.'

'What was she doing?'

‘She was running around in circles, gathering things up from the beach. She tried to light a fire, then she went into the water with her clothes on.’

‘Oh God.’

‘It’s okay, I watched her from a distance, she came out again.’

‘What did she do then?’

‘Nothing, just sat on the beach.’

Wendy says, ‘Let’s go Bel, it’s getting dark.’

The woman waves goodbye and walks back up the gravel path towards the road. Isobel and Wendy quicken their pace. A tiny stream is running across their path. The wooden steps leading to the beach are slippery with mud. Isobel nearly falls, she clutches the wooden railing and it wobbles underneath her body. Wendy holds her around the waist and together they half fall, half jump, on to the sand.

The beach is empty of people. There is a slight breeze, the sea is calm.

‘Come on,’ cries Isobel. ‘Let’s look over towards the rocks.’

They run along the soft sand. They reach the craggy black rocks at the end of the beach. Suddenly, Isobel sees a circle stamped out with some blackened driftwood in the centre. She runs forward and falls to her knees.

‘Look Wendy, she’s made an altar, she’s put down symbols of the four directions, north, south, east and west.’

‘You’re right, the feather is air, the shell is water. Look, here’s a half-burnt candle.’

This gives me hope. She came here with intent, she brought this candle to the beach to perform a ritual on that mystic line drawn between land and sea. Julia often speaks of the energy of this line, the endless pull of the tide, the power of the land to resist. She came here to strengthen herself, that’s all.

Wendy says, ‘Here’s a piece of paper with something written on it.’

Isobel takes it from her. ‘She’s tried to burn it but it’s still legible I think.’

‘Is it in her code?’

'No, it's words.' She reads it aloud, '*This is my day, this is the day of the night witch.*'

'Oh God.'

Isobel begins to tremble, she can feel her body shake and melt, she sinks down on the sand.

Wendy says, 'Don't give up. Look, the paper's charred, that means she was doing a banishment ritual, she was trying to burn the night witch.'

'Then where is she? Where is my sister?' cries Isobel.

She runs to the exposed rocks at the edge of the breakers. Dusk is deepening into night. There is a path of golden light running from her feet to where the sun is disappearing into the sea.

Something big is caught against the rocks. At first she sees it as a clump of kelp washed up by the sea. She stares at it for a moment before the shape registers in her mind as the outline of a long black body.

She screams to Wendy. They pull Julia from the rocks, sodden and heavy in her black dress. They lay her out on the beach. Isobel begins to apply mouth to mouth resuscitation.

'Go Wendy, go for help!'

'I don't want to leave you.'

'Go! It's our only chance.'

Wendy runs off along the hard sand at the edge of the sea.

Isobel lies Julia on her back and feels for her pulse. Nothing. She starts mouth to mouth resuscitation again. The coldness of Julia's body makes the steel grow harder in her own breast.

The darkness comes down suddenly, and a small chill breeze sweeps up from the water. Isobel works on her sister's body with desperate fury. Is it her imagination? Does she see Julia's eyelids flicker?

She checks her sister's pulse. She can feel a faint beat.

'Keep going,' she cries. 'Keep going, breathe!'

Julia stirs and takes a breath, then another and another. Isobel holds her sister's head to the side and talks softly to her as Julia vomits and coughs and vomits again.

Isobel pulls off Julia's wet clothes and wraps her in the beach towel. She rubs her sister's body with the towel, a little colour comes back into Julia's face. 'Isobel?'

'I'm here darling, Isobel's here.'

'I thought the *dakini* had come to suck away my last breath.'

'Don't talk, save your strength.'

'I have to go back.'

'Shhh darling, you must be exhausted.'

Julia loses consciousness again. Her breathing is shallow and fast. Isobel calls out in anguish, 'Wendy hurry, please please hurry!'

She takes off her track suit top and dresses Julia in it. After a few minutes, Julia opens her eyes and whispers, 'The sea is milk, the words are turning into stone, we are swimming in the dream.'

'Shhh, keep calm, help will come soon.'

'She's calling me back.'

'Hold on, hold on!' cries Isobel. She seizes her sister's hands.

Julia's face is luminous and deathly pale against the dark gray sand. Her long black hair fans out around her. She looks calm and cold and beautiful. Isobel's tears fall down like white rain. She clings fiercely to her sister's hands, she can't let go.

A tractor towing a trailer comes driving along the beach. Wendy is hanging on the back. She screams, 'There they are, stop, stop!'

A man leaps from the front seat of the tractor. He and Wendy run towards the black rocks. They see the two women lying on the sand like broken flowers, one in a track suit top, one in a track suit bottom.

Wendy pulls Isobel to her feet. They cling to each other for a moment, then help the man lift Julia on to the trailer. The tractor starts the long ride back.

Isobel makes sure that she is holding on tightly to Julia's body before she begins her mourning cry; it starts with a small high noise at the back of her throat and builds into a roar of

anguish that rises into the night sky like a solid wall of sound. The shriek goes on and on, and for a fraction of a second, the pulse of the sea falters.

There is a brief and terrible silence; the breakers stand still, birds freeze on the cliff top, a lone gray gull falls from the sky. Far out in the ocean, a whale answers the cry from the land with her own high haunting song of loss.

AFTERWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION OF *THE WORD BURNERS*

By Beryl Fletcher

I wrote and directed my first play when I was eight years old and living in Auckland, New Zealand. It was called *The Highwayman and the Lady*, a ten-minute piece of derived nonsense set in England. The play was a dismal failure. Amongst other disasters, my sister Hil forgot her lines and the audience of sixty stropky working-class kids demanded their money back. The adults thought it was hilarious but I was deeply affected by this experience. I was heartbroken that my writing was not taken seriously but it also made me determined that one day, I would become a writer.

It was a long time coming. I was married twice, and lived in Australia for eleven years. Both marriages ended in divorce. I arrived back in New Zealand with two young children in the early 1970s. I had no tertiary education and had to support both my children financially. I worked in part time and casual jobs and went to university and gained a masters degree in social science. All through these years, I never stopped writing; short stories, journals, plays, a novel. But like my first attempt, *The Highwayman and the Lady*, my writing did not seem to belong to me. I had absorbed the message that real literature came from England, the homeland of my ancestors. Apart from the colonial brainwashing that gave me a false sense of place for my work, my writing was deeply sexist. I had no idea that I was trying to write from a male point of view or that the women in my work were inauthentic. Mercifully, I did not seek publication for any of this work. I always knew that it was inferior.

During my university studies I read feminist books. My confusions melted away. I became an activist, working mostly

for single mothers' welfare reform, the rape crisis movement and abortion rights. My writing at this time was largely political. I tutored for six years at the University of Waikato and spent three years as a temporary lecturer. But I did not want to pursue an academic career. I wanted to write novels, and now that I had begun the process of shedding the sexist and colonial legacy of my upbringing, I felt that I could at last write something that would be true to myself and reflect the enormous changes that were happening in my life and the lives of the women around me.

I began to write *The Word Burners* when I turned fifty in 1988. I had already written the chapter *Talking Cunts* two years before, and this gave me the core of an idea for the plot and the themes of the book. I was living in Ponsonby, an inner suburb of Auckland at the time. I was broke, looking for work, living on the dole. Each day I walked to the public library to sit and write and keep warm. My writing method was to constantly rewrite each sentence over and over again until I was satisfied with the final result. My method has remained unchanged, except that now I write straight onto a computer keyboard instead of using a pen and paper. I must have written the word cunt dozens of times each day in the weeks that it took to write this chapter. I worked in the Polynesian Room at the library. School children often visited this section and I kept a large atlas on my desk to cover up my work if they passed by and looked at the page I was working on. I gathered up the discarded papers at the end of the day and stuffed them into my pack. I did not want to upset the cleaning staff if they happened to read bits of abandoned text in the waste paper bin.

I once read *Talking Cunts* aloud to a woman-only audience after explaining that I was retrieving the word to be synonymous with 'woman'. The mostly middle-class audience enjoyed it, but the young female bar staff at the venue took fright and fled. This taught me a valuable lesson about context. The word cunt still has a terrible power over some women.

I finished writing *The Word Burners* in 1990. The main themes are the search for meaning and order in a rapidly changing world, and how language can shape ideology and become a violent weapon in times of social change. I created a trio of characters, two sisters and their mother. I was preoccupied with reading postmodern theory at the time and I was disturbed at the implications of radical relativism for both language and action. I made Isobel fall into the trap of logophobia. She had developed a fear of writing after realising that taken to its logical extreme, radical relativism denied the possibility of ever making a firm statement about anything. Julia, influenced by her Marxist husband, was still searching for objective certainty unsullied by emotion or subjectivity. Sally their mother, sought to banish death and disorder by controlling her physical environment, in particular her house and garden. She became the ultimate house-proud woman. Isobel and her mother Sally make positive changes in their lives but after much thought and experimentation, I sacrificed Julia.

So here was the finished book. Now what? I already knew that many new writers had enormous difficulty in getting published and I had no idea how to approach a publisher. Luck stepped in. I attended a weekend workshop for women at Karioi, near Raglan. There I met Cathie Dunsford, who ran a writer's workshop at the event. I was impressed with her enthusiasm for writing, her knowledge of literature and her understanding of the publishing industry. She made me feel that I could do anything. We went for a walk in the bush behind the camp, and I told her that I had written a novel. She said, out of the blue, 'Send your book to me, I'll get it published for you.' I was flabbergasted at her faith in me, a virtual stranger.

I went home and posted her the manuscript. Two weeks of nervous waiting followed. Then came the letter. She thought the book was fantastic, well written, and she was sure she could find a publisher. She gave me a stunning critique,

suggested some important structural and textual changes and suggested that by killing Julia off at the end of the book, I was leaving myself open to charges of perpetuating the 'mad bad' female stereotype so rampant in mainstream literature.

After careful thought, I decided that to keep true to the themes of the book, I had to keep the ending of the book as it was. I communicated this decision to Cathie and she agreed with my analysis. Susan Sayer, a close friend, offered to help me do the final edit. We sat in Susan's holiday caravan parked at Raglan Motor Camp and went over and over the text and Cathie's critique, pausing every now and then to take a swim in the warm ocean and eat sea-food pasta.

I sent the final draft to Cathie and she sent it to Daphne Brasell in Wellington, a new publisher on the scene. Cathie had met Daphne a few months before and she had told Cathie that she was looking for new writers. In mid January, Cathie rang to say that Daphne liked the book and that she was very keen to publish it.

The three of us went to Wellington to meet Daphne and to sign the contract. Susan and I travelled from Hamilton. We had little money, so after researching fares, we went on the night bus, a hell trip of thirteen hours. That damn bus went all over the place, delivering papers, and picking up passengers and stopping at every greasy spoon café and truck stop from here to the back of beyond. But once we arrived in Wellington, we were treated like VIPs. We stayed at a house belonging to a Brasell employee, high in the windy hills of Wadestown. We were taken out to expensive restaurants.

While we were in Wellington, Cathie announced that she was about to make a career move from professional arts management to becoming a self-employed publishing consultant. After a decade of hard work, she is now both an established novelist with an international reputation and the director of Dunsford Publishing Consultants. I was one of her first clients. Susan Sayer subsequently gained a PhD on

New Zealand lesbian literature and has since established her own literary agency.

I have read that feminist writers fear their mother's reaction to their books and I was no exception. I wanted to dedicate it to my parents Alan and Joan but I warned them to read the text first. Mum cried. I asked her why. She said that she didn't know really, it was just the shock. That word, over and over. Dad took it in his stride. He said he was proud of me, regardless. He wouldn't elaborate. They both said that I could dedicate it to them. And they came to the launch and bought copies for relatives and friends, some of whom wrote puzzled and sometimes hilarious letters back to them asking them what was it all about then, and where had I gone wrong?

The Word Burners was selected as one of the top twenty books for the 1991 Listener Women's Book Festival and I toured around New Zealand. Then in the middle of the following year, Daphne Brasell phoned me with the exciting news that my novel had won the South East Asian and South Pacific section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for best first book. This prestigious international literary prize is awarded annually to fiction writers selected from 54 countries, all members of the Commonwealth of Nations.

The prizes were awarded in Toronto, Canada and the whole event took two weeks. I had a problem with walking at the time and had to use a walking stick. Susan Sayer offered to accompany me on the long flight. Her assistance and support made things so much easier for me. Until we arrived there, I had not realised the scope or the importance of this prize. The best part was talking informally to the other prize-winning writers and some of the judges. It reinforced my view that our work was equal to other parts of the world and I banished any lingering trace of 'colonial cringe' forever. I felt too, that it was a victory of sorts that a novel with feminist characters and themes important to women could win a prize of this sort.

Nothing can match the thrill of seeing my first novel in print. Since the publication of *The Word Burners* in 1991, I have written and published three further novels, *The Iron Mouth*, *The Silicon Tongue* and *The Bloodwood Clan*. Now that it has been reprinted ten years after it first appeared, I am still proud of *The Word Burners*. There is something about a first novel, a sort of innocent recklessness, a freshness, that is sometimes difficult to recapture in further works.

I would like to thank Cathie Dunsford for being instrumental in getting the first edition of *The Word Burners* published with Daphne Brasell Associates Press. She came into my life at a crucial moment and has supported my work in every possible way ever since. I am thrilled that Spinifex Press has brought *The Word Burners* back into print and would like to thank Sigrid Markmann for writing the foreword. It has been a privilege to work with the publishers, Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein. For me, one of the best things about my first novel is the collaborative nature of its editing and publication and the longstanding friendships that have arisen from its birth. I am embedded in an international network of writers and publishers and academics who share my vision of a world where women's voices in all their variety and difference are able to be heard.

I treasure these friendships beyond measure.

OTHER TITLES BY BERYL FLETCHER

The Iron Mouth

Beryl Fletcher

Top Twenty Title, Listener Women's Book Festival

"The language is a lyrical delight ... one is compelled to read on to find out what is going to happen ... as they play the games people have played for thousands of years."

—Marion Findlay

ISBN: 1-875559-22-1

The Silicon Tongue

Beryl Fletcher

"One of the best reads I have ever had. I couldn't put it down, gripped in the exploration of intersecting lives, rejoicing that women in their seventies can fly in cyberspace."

—Diane Nason, *Hot Gos*

ISBN: 1-875559-49-3

The Bloodwood Clan

Beryl Fletcher

"*The Bloodwood Clan* deftly mixes elements of thriller, social commentary and feminist psychology. I'll be disappointed if it's not included in next year's Montana shortlist."

—Iain Sharp, *Sunday Star Times*

ISBN: 1-875559-80-9

OTHER FICTION TITLES FROM SPINIFEX PRESS

All That False Instruction

Kerryn Higgs

Passionate, funny and heartbreaking, this remarkable novel traces a young woman's turbulent coming of age. Originally published under pseudonym of Elizabeth Riley.

"An explosive mix of raw sanity and wicked humour-a bombshell of a book."

—Robert Dessaix

ISBN: 1-876756-14-4

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