

# **Our Lady of the Flowers**

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The first sentence of every novel should be:

Trust me, this will take some time but there is order, here,  
very faint, very human. Meander if you want to get to town.

(Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*)

It is almost morning, two boys sit blinded and motionless in the front seat of a stationary car like kangaroos in a shooter's spotlight. They have stopped laughing and chacking. It isn't fun any more.

### **One thing leads to another**

Grace Parkes is squeezed behind the wheel of her station wagon as it crunches slowly along a narrow road in Rookwood, cemetery, a sprawling necropolis high with trees and mausoleums and low with graves. The cemetery has received the city of Sydney's dead for over one-hundred-years. On the seat next to her is a bunch of iris, the last remaining flowers from her garden, and three bought bunches of marigolds. She can see them out of the corner of her eyes. The marigolds are the least expensive flowers you can buy, a paltry offering to be laid on Sam's grave in this daily ritual.

Almost every cent she has is spent on flowers, plus every cent she can borrow, cajole or steal from the rest of her family. The little that remains goes into a fund for a headstone. It will be made of black polished marble with a photo of Sam set in it, not like the fading picture behind glass that is now propped against a wooden cross at end of the grave. She can see the headstone in her mind.

Grace stops the car in front of a new grave piled with an array of bright flowers; this is what Sam should have every day. She closes her eyes and listens to the bees buzzing in and out of the blossoms then opens them and squints up the road and down the road. There's only a lone figure in the far distance. She climbs out of the car and walks slowly over to the new grave. She carefully removes a bunch of flowers as though it is something she does all the time and ambles back to the car. She doesn't even know what the flowers are, but they are beautiful. Not until many months later will she learn they are oriental lilies. She places them in the back of the wagon and climbs in. Her heart is pounding. No one's seen her.

At Sam's grave the iris are placed in one vase, the marigolds in another, and the relocated lilies in a third, closest to the photo and the cross. She smiles. She lowers herself onto the edge of the grave. "Do you like those?" she asks the photo of Sam.

Sam grins up at her.

"Hope you don't mind where they come from."

The following day Grace helps herself to more flowers, taking only from the new graves that have an abundance. She removes dancing red fuchsias from one, golden wattle from another, choosing carefully to make sure no gaps are left. She puts the flowers in the shade of the station wagon boot and spreads an old sheet over them as gently as covering a sleeping child.

She looks around at the crosses and headstones, the umbrellas of camphor laurel trees and the elliptical cypress. Tawny grasses rasp in the warm breeze, leaves rustle, sad sounds of a cemetery. She feels guilty, but justified.

Grace turns on a tap and washes her hands under the silver stream. As she straightens she notices a magnificent wreath of roses on a new grave. She walks over, drying her hands on her skirt. The tight fold of petals on barbed stems glow dark red in the sun and their fragrance hangs in the air. They are the most beautiful roses she has ever seen. She can't resist. The station wagon is fifty metres away and the tailgate is shut. She turns through three hundred and sixty degrees. No one. Grace picks up the roses and sets off along the road towards the station wagon at a hasty walk. Half way there she becomes aware of a noise behind her and turns. The roof of a car appears over the crest of a rise. On the roof is a sign, 'Security'. It rises slowly like a malevolent sun. The grave is behind her in the direction of the approaching car; the station wagon is ahead. Close to panic she considers dumping the roses but it's too late. Without slowing down she does the only thing she can think of.

The security car draws level, then slowly passes. Looking through his sunglasses into the rear view mirror the young Pacific Islander driver can see an elderly woman wearing an ankle length black dress waddling down the road like a giant penguin. He can't see the tears of pain on her cheeks.

Grace reaches the rear of the wagon and raises the tailgate as the security car disappears around a curve. Then, like a mother giving birth, she opens her legs and drops the magnificent bunch of dark red roses into her waiting hands. She wipes away the tears, reefs her skirt to her waist and gently dabs the rows of thorn blood spots in the dough-soft flesh of her thighs.

She is unaware of the forces she has set in motion with that theft of flowers.

### **One year earlier**

#### **How it all began**

A seventeen-year-old girl is wandering home from school in the spring chill of a Friday afternoon, her bag full of drawings and her head full of dreams. She turns the corner into the dead-end street where she lives. A crowd is gathered outside her house like people at an auction. TV network vans are parked two wheels on the kerb.

A neighbour grabs her, "Don't go in Tansy!"

The girl pushes her aside. Her bag falls from her shoulder. Drawings spill into the road. She runs the three paces up the path and into the house.

The door to a bedroom is open and three people are wrestling and screaming on the bed, a knot of a writhing arms and legs. At the bottom of the knot is her grandmother, Grace. Tansy glimpses her mane of tangled grey hair, wild eyes and a foam-flecked mouth, fleshy thighs; the dirty soles of her mother's feet; her Grandad's straining muscles.

"Whatyadoing? What's happened?" Tansy yells.

Her mother is calling over and over, "It's me. Me. Me. Rose. Don't. Don't. Pleeese. Mum! Don't."

"What's happened?" Tansy yells again above the tumult.

Her mother half turns, her crimson face streaked with sweat and tears. "Sam's dead!"

Tansy gasps and fights for breath. "No! He can't be! No! No! How can he be dead? Where is he?"

"Sam's dead Tansy!" her mother turns again and yells "He's dead."

"You're lying to me."

"He's dead."

"How? How is he dead?"

"Shot. Shot! Shot!"

"Who by?"

Her mother continues struggling with her shrieking Gran on the bed. "They shot him! They shot him!" she yells.

"Who did?" Tansy shrieks.

Her mother's answer is lost in the pandemonium.

Tansy staggers from the bedroom, lurches along the hallway and falls on her knees beneath the gnarled grapevine by the backdoor. She buries her face in her hands and wails.

Malvin, a young man in oily blue overalls, is walking home from work along a back lane when he hears a noise, something between a scream and the bellow of a dying animal. The sound stops him like a wall. It is coming from his home. He runs, vaults the fence and ploughs through his grandad's vegetable garden, flattening rows of tomato plants.

He drops on his knees in front of a girl hunched moaning beneath a grapevine, his younger sister Tansy.

"What's the matter? Whatshappened to ya?"

He takes her by the shoulders, "Tansy. Tell me! Tell me! Please."

Tansy lifts her head and looks at him through tear-drowned eyes. Her fists drum his chest, “It’s Sam!”

“What is?”

She thrusts him away and collapses sobbing, back against the vine.

A few kilometres away in the Railway View pub Jack Marsden is enjoying an end of week drink with his workmates, a cold beer held firm in his brickie’s hand. Above the heads in the crowded bar he glimpses one more roadside tragedy on a silent TV; the contorted, broken legs of a youth lying on his back in the gutter, face obscured, blood-stained shirt pulled open from chest to navel.

Neighbours are gathered outside the house the dead youth lived in — it’s the same house he lives in.

Jack reaches for the bar with his glass but misses and the glass crashes to the ground. A foaming tide of beer spreads across the tiled floor.

Malvin runs into the house. His mother and grandad are holding his thrashing Gran down on her bed.

“What’s going on? Where’s Sam?” Malvin yells.

“Sam’s dead.” His mother chokes on the words.

Malvin stands, rigid as a stone.

“Help us with Gran! Hold her. Don’t let go,” she sobs.

Malvin, uncomprehending in the turmoil, stumbles to the bed. He leans all his weight onto his grandmother and tries to restrain the kicking limbs.

His mother reappears with pantyhose and belts and they tie Gran to the bed.

Television crews knock on the door and spy through the windows until Grandad blinds the glass with blankets.

Dr Yeung from the local medical centre arrives in a squeal of brakes, with needle, tranquilliser and a box of Serepax.

Some neighbours linger to watch the news being made, others hurry home to watch on TV. They are told that seventeen-year-old Sam Parkes was shot and killed by a police officer in the early hours of the morning after he allegedly tried to run the officer down.

The TV news shows Sam’s twisted and broken legs below the torn, bloodstained and bloody shorts he had bought the day before. One foot is bare, the other is wearing a runner. A car is close to the body, the driver’s door swinging open, two bloody hand prints press the rear door.

The car was stolen, says the suited and solemn young journalist standing in the middle of the road, microphone in hand looking the viewer straight in the eyes.

Tansy flees the chaos, flees the news, flees Sam's death. Those who are not caring for Gran search for her. A few kilometres away in a deserted old house she crouches on a dirty mattress, arms around her legs, tight as a snail in a shell.

A hurricane twists and roars around her mind screaming no! No! No!

She shivers sleepless and cold throughout the night. The muffled crash of shipping containers on the White Bay wharves punctuate the night. At dawn Tansy walks on stiff legs across grey, splintered floorboards, passed peeling wallpaper, down echoing wooden steps out into an overgrown backyard. She picks her way over the rubbish alongside the house and crosses a narrow crumbling road to a wasteland. She stands, the fingers of each hand hooked in a sagging chain link fence, blank eyes wandering over a half-demolished skeleton of steel girders and concrete. A small wetland, lush with reeds and paperbark saplings has formed in a depression, reclaiming the brick-strewn ground. A heron, grey and thin, stalks with the intensity and single mindedness of a killer. Its frail body freezes. It lunges. The head tilts back. The slender neck swallows.

She can't think of life without Sam, an uncle barely older than her, together since they were babies.

He was there last night. Gone this morning. Alive, then dead.

Tonight they were going to a gig.

Tansy shifts and the fence rattles. The heron launches itself effortlessly into the air, spindly legs dangling. It spirals upward on big, slow wings, and sets its beak in the direction of the Harbour and the city.

Tansy closes her eyes. The reeds rasp in a chilly wind. She unhooks her fingers, wraps her arms around herself and walks back to the old house.

The remainder of the day she sits on the mattress in a corner, her eyes repeatedly following the pattern of looping, entwined roses in the faded and tattered wallpaper, always ending where she began, with Sam. Sam. Sam. Her beautiful Sam. The crooked smile, the curly hair, the slender body, gone.

In the early evening a car stops outside the house. Tansy peers through the cracked and grimy window. A woman cop is in the street below. Her eyes wander over the house before she gets back into the car. Are they searching for her?

She thinks of Gran and everyone at home but can face no one. Since her outburst of grief Tansy hasn't cried. She is as dry and empty as this old house that was once filled with love. To let her feelings out would be too much. Too much grief and not enough Sam. No Sam. No beautiful, lovely Sam. She is alone — except for Sam, who is everywhere and nowhere.

He is in her dreams when she curls up on the mattress and finally drifts into troubled sleep. He arrives in a car to pick her up for the gig, leans his curly head out the window and grins. She feels the envy of her friends as she walks towards him. Sam stretches across and opens the passenger door for her. But the door doesn't open. They don't drive away. It becomes the moment when everything stops.

Tansy awakens, shivering, a painful emptiness in her belly. She gets to her feet, stiff and weak, wobbles down the stairs into the warm of the spring sun and sets off towards home and family.

They embrace her return and the end of their fears. They believe they understand why she fled. Her mother cooks her favourite food, her father holds her hands and talks. Malvin never lets her out of his sight. They promise innocence will be upheld at the trial and guilt will be punished.

Grace weeps, day and night, lulled for a while by the visits of Dr Yeung; a psychiatrist; a constant supply of Serepax; and Johnnie.

She awaits the justice that the court will impose on the man who shot her son. And she waits.

Grace stops cooking for the family. She ignores their pleas for her to eat. She no longer cares about those who are living.

Each morning she climbs out of bed, wraps a black dress twice around her emaciated body and Johnnie drives her west to Rookwood Cemetery.

Each day she places flowers on a grave marked with a wooden cross. A photo of young Sam behind a glass frame is propped next to a tiny oil lamp. Grace kneels, "When I have enough money I will put up the marble headstone. I promise my boy, I promise."

Johnnie sits under a tree from where he can hear the murmur of his wife's voice as she talks to their dead son.

After a couple of hours he drives her home and Grace sits in their darkened bedroom. Sometimes she is silent. Sometimes she talks to Sam. Sometimes she shouts and weeps long into the night

The neighbours shut tight their windows and doors to keep out the grief.

For a year the routine continues, the cemetery, flowers, grief, and waiting. Waiting. The family, waiting for justice.

### **Then what happens?**

Eventually, the trial of Constable Sean Farrell, the man who shot Sam.

He is found not guilty of manslaughter. He is free.

The family is stupefied. Grace's despair turns to rage. She stops taking her nine Serepax a day. She stops seeing a shrink. She won't allow Dr Yeung into the house. She vows revenge.

Grace decides that Sam is to be re-born and together they will attain justice. She shuffles into the garden in the early morning and ignoring Boris the rooster's demand for a ritualistic scratching of his neck, she hunts the sitting hens from their nest boxes until she finds a warm, white egg.

She takes it.

There, amidst the smell of chicken shit, feathers and earth, Grace unfastens the top of her blouse, puts her hand down the front and carefully places the egg between her shrunken breasts where it rests in the hammock of her bra.

That night she lies down, looks up at the glowing stars stuck to the ceiling and waits for sleep. Johnnie sighs, turns, and seeks the softness of her belly with his hand, she pushes him away. He is a threat to the re-incarnation of Sam; one clumsy move and the egg from which Sam will emerge will be broken.

Johnnie is miffed. But he's been knocked back before. He rolls over and closes his eyes.

"I'll be sleeping on my back for the next three weeks. Don't touch me. Anywhere," Grace says.

Johnnie sits up abruptly. "What ya talking about Grace?" he says with the soft-burr remains of his West Coast American accent.

He turns the light on and sees for the first time the egg, held in place by a cross of sticky tape.

"Grace! What-are-ya-doing?"

"Sam's in there. I'm hatching him."

"Sam?" Johnnie asks incredulously.

"That's what I said."

"Sam was our son, not a goddamn chicken," Johnnie shouts.

"He's in there, and he's staying there until it's time," Grace says with finality.

All that night both lay awake; Grace, because she's afraid if she moves the egg will break, Johnnie, wondering what to do about his wife. He's been by her side night and day since the killing,

never going to work, never leaving the house. The rest of the family sit and comfort her, there is always someone to talk and listen. Now. This?

Johnnie thinks of her and of Sam.

Grace remains on her back breathing deeply and rhythmically.

Where did he and Grace go wrong? How can they all understand? How can they work out a future?

Early next morning Johnnie tells the rest of the family about the egg.

Rose goes into the bedroom. Her mother is lying, hands by her side, eyes staring at the ceiling.

“Mum, why don’t you take the egg back to the chooks,” she suggests gently.

“He’s safe here with me.”

“Mum. Sam’s dead. You can’t bring him back. He was my little brother. I loved him. I hurt too. Everyone hurts. But we’ve gotta get on with living. Give me the egg Mum. Please.”

“Don’t you dare touch.” Grace snaps.

“Sam’s not on there Mum..”

“Who ses?”

“It’s a hen’s egg.”

Rose realises the futility of logic. She stands looking at her mother, “Try to get some sleep,” then quietly leaves the room.

Grace tells Johnnie that not only can’t he touch her for three weeks, but he can’t sleep with her until Sam is hatched. She even suspends the most important thing in her life, her daily visits to Sam’s grave, for fear the egg will become chilled and infertile. Each day Johnnie takes flowers to Rookwood on her behalf.

She lies on her bed day and night with the egg on her warm flesh, looking at the photos of Sam on a shrine she has created in a corner of the room. She will keep burning an oil lamp as she has promised Sam — until they have avenged his killing. Candle flames sway in a slight draught. She wills Sam to grow in the egg. She wonders what he will look like when he comes out. Will he be born a miniature Sam, like Tom Thumb, or a baby who will grow into a full size Sam in a few weeks? Every two hours she turns the egg.

Johnnie sets up canvas camp bed at the foot of their king size bed so he can look after her until she gets better, if she ever does. He lights the candles on the shrine, fills the lamp with oil, and brings her food, lots of food. She tells him she needs to eat to generate warmth for the egg. He spends his days in the kitchen cooking. She eats every half hour: whole chickens, dozens of eggs, beef stews, lamb curries, vegetables, yoghurt, her favourite Greek cakes, galaktobourekos, halva,

baklava, tastes acquired through her Greek mother Dario, from where also came Grace's preoccupation with oil lamps, candles and other rituals of death and mourning.

Grace grows bigger by the day and the egg sinks deeper between the warm flesh of her breasts until it is lost from sight. She can feel it on her skin, smooth and hard. Her hand slides under the sheets and up her belly until her fingertips find the shell between her breasts, then she delicately traces the contours to ensure the egg is intact. The shell is smooth and warm. She imagines the soft-as-a-baby's skin membrane, between the egg shell and amniotic fluid in which Sam floats in a foetal position sucking his thumb. She rolls ever so slightly, and ever so slowly, from side-to-side, so that the embryonic Sam will be rocked in his cradle of flesh. She smiles at the thought of him in there, warm and secure. And she smiles at the thought that she is cheating the man who killed Sam. She is cheating death. Sam will be back and together they will get revenge.

After a month in which she neither changes her clothes nor showers, the egg breaks. Inside the brittle shell is a dried and shrivelled embryo. Grace weeps. She rages. She heads for the chook yard as fast as her body will allow. When Boris sticks his head out to be scratched she grabs him by the neck, swings him around and cracks him like a whip. The terrified hens flee in a flurry of feathers and frantic clucking. With one heave she launches Boris into the air. He flies higher and faster than he did any time in his life, then hits the power wires and stays there.

The carcass will hang for months, at first fly-blown with maggots, which drop like white, wriggling rice onto the footpath, then as a mummified, once-magnificent bird. He will finally fall and be carried off by a local mongrel.

Rebirth of Sam has failed. Grace is alone in her battle. But if Sam cannot be with her in person, he can still guide her.

She resumes her daily visits to Rookwood Cemetery. She replaces the flowers Johnnie had placed there the day before, she refills the oil lamp and sits. "I will find another way for us to do it," she tells Sam. "Maybe the egg was too difficult. But I haven't given up my darling. Together we'll get him."

Johnnie develops his own coping rituals. He rejoins his gang working on the old wooden ferry jetties around the Harbour. At the end of each day he goes to the Docksides pub in Balmain where he slowly drinks a bottle of Johnnie Walker whisky.

Grace is impatient, therefore her half conceived plans to get Constable Farrell are neither sophisticated nor tactically sound. A few weeks after the egg debacle the family is in Johnnie's car when they stop at traffic lights near Newtown police station, Constable Farrell's base. Grace is sitting in the back, Rose on one side, Jack on the other. With a flick of her fingers Grace has her seat belt off is half way out the door with a knife in her hand. Jack grabs her hair and heaves her back inside.

"Lemme go!" Grace shrieks as the car takes off through a red light, the doors swinging open like a charging elephant's ears. Johnnie clamps his foot on the accelerator and heads for home while Grace struggles frantically between Rose and Jack. She is still clutching the knife when the car skids to a halt outside the house, Jack and Rose drag her great bulk inside and tie her to a chair, the knife still in her hand. Blood drips from a cut in Jack's arm. Grace remains tied until they extract a promise that she'll never do it again.

Grace sits for days staring at the blowup photo of Sam in his soccer jersey hanging on the wall in the lounge room, planning the demise of Constable Sean Farrell. She phones him at the police station and in a disguised voice says, "You're a murderer. A killer of children. A man with no guts. I'm gonna kill you so your mother suffers the way Grace Parkes suffers. I'm..."

"Fuck off! Demented bitch!" Constable Farrell yells.

She rings again and says, "There's a car full of explosives parked in the basement, its gonna go off soon."

The police have their own way of dealing with their tormentor.

Johnnie is driving along the road when a patrol car pulls him over.

"Did you know you were exceeding the speed limit? Sir."

"Bullshit I was!"

"You've got defective tyres. Sir"

"Bullshit I have."

Johnnie gets the message.

He's pulled over every time he goes out in his car. So is Jack. So is Malvin. Bald tyres, speeding, parking, dangerous driving, everything the cops can imagine, until the three think they're financing the entire police force of New South Wales with their fines.

Tansy is walking home from school with her friends when a cop car drives up slowly alongside and a female constable leans out of the window. "How's that hole in the neck uncle 'a' yours Tansy?"

Is it right you an' him used to have a real good time together when nobody was home eh?" She extends a middle finger into the air and wiggles it. She and the driver laugh as they take off.

At Rookwood Cemetery Grace sits at the grave and admits to Sam that vengeance isn't going to be easy. She's an amateur and hasn't worked out the best way. She asks him to be patient

She stands at an intersection of the road near Newtown police station working out how to ambush cop cars; how to blow them up; how to shoot an occupant when the car stops at traffic lights.

She watches videos of Italian Mafia killings, noting how they demolish cars with limpet bombs or explosive devises placed in the road; how they ambush their enemies in coffee shops and bars and kill them with machine guns, shotguns, pistols. She watches scores of crime DVDs. She watches and plots, determined to learn from the professionals. She knows nothing of explosives nor of small arms but she knows that, like all of them, she needs a gun.

Then comes an unexpected opportunity.

The family persuades Grace to have a night out, away from gangster and the gloom of the house. Grace knows they think it'll be 'good for her'.

She sits with them in the Golden Dragon Chinese restaurant.

Rose has persuaded her to get out of her trackies and into something decent. Grace has bought a dress in her favourite colour — black. It hangs on her like a Bedouin tent. Johnnie's on one side of her, Rose on the other, Jack across the wide round table. Tansy wouldn't come. She says she has too much drawing, or writing or other school stuff.

Grace knows she's avoiding her, her own gran. Malvin says he's working overtime at the garage.

They don't care about Sam any more. Grace's looks around the table from one to the other.

"He was a good boy. He'd never do what that cop said he did. He was different, even when he was little," she reminds them.

"I know every mother says that but it's true, isn't it Johnnie?" She fixes her husband with her eyes. She knows he's only half listening.

"Yeah," Johnnie replies sipping his whisky.

They've all heard the stories many times, even before Sam's death. Sam the favourite. Sam the one born when Grace was forty and Rose was already a grown woman. He wasn't meant to be, but he was and everyone was glad of it.

“Remember when he was little and he used to sit by my bed waiting for me to wake up? An’ how he once put a mirror to my mouth to see if I was still breathing because he was scared I was dead?”

Johnnie and Rose remember. Jack’s heard the story so often he feels he was there.

“He always thought of others first. When his friends were in trouble he brought them to stay with us and tried to patch it up with their parents, didn’t he? All the time eh.”

Jack calls the waiter and they order. Grace chooses sweet and sour pork and beef with black bean sauce.

“When he went out he used to ring me all the time. ‘You all right Ma? I won’t be late.’ He’d tell all the kids they had to look after their mothers. I know he wasn’t an angel an’ he got into trouble with the cops. But they hassled all the kids, everybody knows that. They even hassled him at school. Remember the time he got into a fight ‘cause somebody called him a wog, just because he’s dark like me. The cops arrested him. Bastards!”

Everybody remembers.

“He wouldn’t take any bullying from them cops either. That’s why they had it in for him.

“I’ll kill that Constable Farrell. The murderer.”

“Quit it!” Rose says angrily. “You’ll never heal if you just keep on hating.”

“You’ll end up in jail,” Johnnie says.

“It’ll be worth it just to see his face. I want to shoot him when he’s sitting in a car so he knows what it’s like. And I don’t wan’ him to die straight away. I wanna see him lying in the gutter.”

“You’re gonna be worse than they are,” Jack tells her.

“I’ll feel bad for his mother but. It’s not her fault she has a pig for a son.”

“Why wish it on her then?” Jack wants to know.

A waiter brings the food, something to think about other than Sam. Grace picks at the contents of her plate then pushes it aside.

“I’m gonna the loo.” She wipes her hands on a serviette and drops it on the table.

There is a collective sigh and they all look at each other as she disappears.

“What we gonna do?” Johnnie asks.

“Look after her ‘till she’s back in her right mind,” Rose reminds him. “No matter how long.”

“He-was-scared-shitless,” says a woman’s voice over the top of the toilet wall. “Didn’t think he’d get off because of that bloody truck driver witness.”

Grace is just about to walk out of her cubicle when she hears.

“The little hoon got what he deserved,” the voice says again.

“Course, you can’t blame Sean. They let them kids get away with murder these days,” a second voice says.

“It’s the parents.”

Grace hears water then the sound of a hand drier. She climbs onto the toilet seat and peers over the door just as the two women are walking out. One is slim and tanned, with short blonde hair and is dressed in white; the other has hennaed hair and is in black.

The chef in the kitchen of the Golden Dragon is preparing duck, he stretches his hand out for his cleaver, but it’s gone.

Outside his kitchen door Grace is standing, her back to the wall, eyes scanning the restaurant for a blonde head and a hennaed head. Neither is visible above the padded red velvet booths.

Grace begins a slow walk about the floor, looking for the two women and a man she’s sure is with them, Constable Sean Farrell.

Back at her table there are stirrings of unease.

“Mum’s a long time.”

“The stress’ affected her bladder, she’s up and down all bloody night,” Johnnie says.

Rose stands and turns around but can’t see her mother. “I’ll check out the toilets.”

Rose knocks on cubicle doors and calls Grace’s name. No response. She is down on her knees and looking under doors when a woman comes out of a cubicle and nearly steps on her.

“What you doing? Checking knickers?” the woman sneers, and tap-taps disdainfully on high-heeled shoes across the tiled floor and out the door.

Rose goes back to the table and tells everyone Grace is gone.

Away.

Off.

Hiding.

Waiting.

Lurking.

They hunt. Johnnie, wobbling through to the kitchen. Rose in the restaurant, Jack in the lane.

While they’re looking Grace is watching from the dark of a shop doorway across the road from the Golden Dragon. The duck-greased cleaver is tucked inside her sleeve.

Constable Sean Farrell, his blonde wife Nicole, Constable John Cummins, the mate who was with him when Sam was killed, and his girlfriend the hennaed haired woman, Maggie, all come out of the restaurant a few cans of beer and two bottles of wine happier than when they went in.

Jack is standing at the end of the lane, as they walk past he doesn't know them from Adams or Eves.

Grace does. The face of Constable Sean Farrell is burned into her mind. She's seen it a million times since the first TV image and newspaper pictures; standing by the side of a police car, baby face and hair bleached white by a camera flash, or television lights.

Grace steps out of the darkness of the doorway and into the road. Her right hand moves into her left sleeve, her fingers curl around the handle and she withdraws the cleaver like a sabre from a scabbard.

The duck-greased cleaver slides from her duck-greased hand and clatters onto the footpath, steel on concrete. Constable Sean Farrell and his group are making too much noise to hear.

Jack isn't.

He runs across the road and grabs his mother-in-law by the arms. She twists and pulls and tries to pick up the cleaver as it slides back and forth between their kicking feet. She knows she'll never get another opportunity like this. She curses Jack. She struggles in his arms like cat in a sack, their faces centimetres apart. He can feel the bones of her body under the flesh, smell black bean sauce and garlic on her breath, see the flash of her eyes.

"Let-me-go! Let-me-go!" she screams.

He hangs on as she swings them both backwards and forwards. "No! No! Nobloodyway! We're going home."

Grace hates him, his face so close, the sight of his teeth and lips, and the meaningless words he keeps saying.

His arms wrap around her tight as a carpet snake. The more she fights the tighter he holds, the weaker she becomes

Eventually she succumbs and stands sobbing into his chest.

They get back home still shaking from Grace's murder attempt and there is a family conference.

"You've gotta stop, Mum before somebody's killed. "

"That's the idea. An eye for an eye," is all Grace will say.

They argue. She should have counselling again. She should be back on Serepax. She should be institutionalised for a time for her own sake.

She rejects every suggestion. .

"We can't watch over you night and day," Johnnie says wearily.

"That's right," agrees Grace.

Tansy sits on the periphery of the arguments. She stayed home but did little homework. She looks across the room at Malvin. His eyes are blank. He doesn't talk much these days. He just goes to work at the garage, comes home, watches TV, goes to bed. Goes to work at the garage, comes home, watches TV, goes to bed. What has happened to the family? She wants Sam back. She wants to wake up with a jolt and find she has been in a bad dream and the woman sitting on the other side of the room is the gran she's always known, not a crazy old woman; and her drunken grandad is no longer drunk but someone who loves music more than whisky. She wants her mother and father and brother to be the same people as before. She wants Sam to walk through the door and wink at her when no one is looking.

As usual Grace doesn't sleep much that night. How to get Constable Farrell? is the question never out of her mind. But waiting for an opportunity isn't going to work. That attempt at the Chinese restaurant was a farce. If she was in a movie she'd have an assault rifle or a machine-gun not a borrowed meat cleaver, and she would roar by Constable Farrell in a stolen car and pump him full of holes, then take off, tyres squealing. She'd hide the car in some out of the way old garage, or torch it down a lane or drive it off the edge of a cliff, jumping out at the last moment..

But they never show you on TV the simple things, like how to be in the same place at the same time as the victim and exactly when there's a space to drive into alongside the victim.

If you're a copper it's easy. You can follow anyone you want — particularly if they're a kid — you can pull them over, you can call them 'a fucking wog cunt' a 'black bastard' a 'dole bludging piece 'a' shit,' then when the victim says 'I aint fucking done nuthin!' you can arrest them for using obscene language and resisting arrest. Or if you're feeling particularly impatient you can blow their head off with your police issue pistol and say in court, 'I was in fear of my life your honour'.

If it turns out the victim didn't have a gun, how was the cop to know? He or she would simply say, 'He reached under the seat,' or 'he put his hand inside his shirt. I thought he had a gun. I didn't know he was only scratching a pimple'.

The cop would have just been doing a job, protecting society from violent kids and crims.

"You asleep?" Johnnie asks from the foot of the bed.

"Yeah."

"You gotta get a grip. They'll lock you up."

"As long as I get him first I don't care."

"That won't bring Sam back."

"If I get Constable Farrell they can hang me, then I'll be with Sam."

"There's no death penalty in Australia."

“There is! Cops carry it out all the time. They’re judge, jury, executioner. Kids. Adults. Pensioners, Homeless. Blacks. Immigrants. An’ that’s all right. No worries, everybody says, ‘it’s not me or mine. They must have done something wrong.’”

They lay side-by-side, each looking at the invisible ceiling.

“I’ll get you a tablet,” Johnnie suggests.

“No. I’ve too many things to think about. I need to talk to Sam. He’ll tell me what to do, how to get him.”

Johnnie eventually drifts off and is disturbed in the early hours by a noise that invades his sleep and turns it into a dream. He’s in a hut somewhere in the mountains. It’s dark and a door is banging gently in the wind. He gets up and closes it. But each time he goes back to bed the noise begins again, a door swinging against the jamb, bang, bang, bang.

He opens his eyes.

Grace is sitting on the edge of the bed, swinging a leg.

“What ya doing?” he asks.

“Watcha think? If you took this off I wouldn’t bloodywell waken you,” she shakes the leg. A metal cowbell clunks. It is fastened around her ankle with a light chain and secured with a small padlock.

“I know,” Johnnie says.

“It’s illegal, restraining someone like this. It’s cruelty.”

“You gonna complain to the cops?”

Grace grunts. The bell was adopted in the first few months of Sam’s death when everyone was afraid to let Grace out of sight in case she did something to herself or someone else. It is an alternative to sharing nights of Grace-watching that had left everyone exhausted. The bell is secured to her ankle when she goes to bed and taken off in the morning. Johnnie had tried tying her leg to his leg while they slept. It was self-imposed torture as Grace deliberately and frequently jerked her leg, or repeatedly swung out of bed and Johnnie had to walk with her around the house.

Now he can hear her on her way to the toilet, clack, clack, clack like a restless beast wandering a dark hillside.

Everyone else can hear too: Rose and Jack, Malvin, Tansy. The silent right leg, then the belled left leg, the silent right leg, the belled left leg. They wait for the toilet to flush and then walk back down the hall to bed, clunk, silence, clunk, silence, clunk, silence.

“Why don’t they let her kill him?” Tansy asks herself under her pillow. “Get it over with.”

Gran wears Johnnie down with her incessant nightly activities. Every time she gets up he remains awake while she clacks her way to the bathroom and back. Each night she kneels in front of the shrine and talks to Sam's photo in the flickering light. On her lap are the shorts, shirt and running shoes that Sam wore when he was killed. She has taken them from the hall cupboard. The shorts and shirt are ripped and dirty, both covered in the dark stains of dried blood. Grace strokes the clothes, muttering.

She calls it talking to Sam.

Eventually Johnnie declares a truce and says he won't attach the bell to Grace's ankle if she agrees to do nothing foolish.

"Of course I won't do anything foolish," she says. The things Grace plans aren't foolish — as far as Grace is concerned.

Johnnie folds up the camp bed and moves into the spare room. He sleeps the whole night through or listen to his music while Grace is free to wander the house or sit in the dark of her bedroom, talking to Sam and plan.

The immediate problem is solved for Johnnie. But nothing improves for Tansy. In her bedroom next to Grace's she waits for the click that is the opening of the linen cupboard in the hall, then the click that is the closing. She reaches out and touches two kittens, Fluff a soft-furred harlequin female. and Puss, a male tabby, given to Gran by a neighbour

She knows that Gran is in her nightgown and has taken the folded clothes and the running shoes from the cupboard, and on bare feet, is silently bearing them along the hall and into her bedroom. Tansy hears another click as the door shuts.

She breathes again. She hates this. Hates! Hates! Hates! She is living in a mad house dominated by a ghoul, her gran, who is entangling her and everyone else in her grief, like fish in a net, dragging them down into deep cold water to drown alongside her.

Tansy's friends won't come home with her because of the woman dressed in black who wants to talk only about someone who is dead. They don't want to listen to Gran go on about angelic Sam and the wicked copper who killed him. The few who would come are prevented by their parents. In a house full of family Tansy is alone.

In her bedroom Grace's bulky figure kneels on the floor before flickering candles and the oil lamp, burning dimly in the dark. Sam smiles down at her.

The shirt and the running shoes are next to her. They are laid out with the care of an archivist displaying ancient manuscripts.

She touches the shorts with the palm of her hands and runs her fingers over the ripped backside and the stiff blood stains, black in the dim light. She does the same with the shirt, spreading it flat like a dutiful mother looking for holes to mend. But none of these holes will ever be mended. Grace lifts each garment and kisses it, the shirt, then the shorts. She picks up the shoes and holds them to her cheek before placing them next to the shirt and shorts.

“Sam. Sam. I love you my boy. I’ll always look after you,” she whispers. “You’re the most beautiful boy in the world. The kindest, the loveliest son a mother could have. I’ll get him for you. Even if it takes my whole life.

“Come tonight. Talk to me. Tell me how you are and what you’re doing.”

Grace gets to her feet, folds back the bedclothes and picks up the shirt, the shorts and the shoes and places them carefully in the bed. She climbs in and covers herself. She stretches out a hand and places it on the clothes.

“Sam, tell me what to do.”

Life in the house settles into a routine, which if not ‘normal’ is tolerable. It is months since the trial and the incident at the Chinese restaurant and Grace hasn’t attempted murder or suicide. She continues her rituals of visiting Sam’s grave during the day and talking to him each night.

Then she disappears.

Rose makes the discovery when she wakes well before dawn with a feeling of unease. She realises she hasn’t heard the usual click of the linen cupboard door.

Jack’s asleep on his belly. The only light comes through the blinds from the street. Something has woken her. Then she recognises the faint just-gone-out smell of a candle.

She gets out of bed and tip-toes down the hall to Grace’s room. The usual glow of light under the door is muted.

She puts an ear to the door and listens. She hears nothing.

Rose taps on the door and listens again.

She taps once more, then slowly turns the handle.

The bed hasn’t been slept in. On Sam’s shrine only the little blue oil lamp burns, the one her mother never allows to go out, but the candles haven’t been replaced and have burned down to pools of wax that are skinning over.

Rose checks the bathroom, the kitchen. The shorts, shirt and running shoes are in their usual day-time place in the linen cupboard.

She goes into the garden and checks Grace's favourite place under the vine. On the table are freshly discarded leaves from a rose bush and sections of thorned stems.

She walks among the flower beds knowing that sometimes when Gran can't sleep and Sam doesn't visit her dreams, her mother will go there, touch the tightly closed buds and talk to them. The plants stand pale in the reflected light of the street but her mother isn't there.

The dew is cold on Rose's bare feet and she can hear night sounds; the murmur of the city, distant cars, a disembodied shout, and close at hand, her father snoring in bed after another night at the pub.

But there are no noises from her Mother, no dark bulk in the garden.

She hurries back to her bedroom.

"Jack! Jack! Mum's gone!" she whispers.

Jack rolls over and tries to remain in sleep. "Try the loo."

Rose shakes him by the shoulder.

"She's gone! I said!"

The house is roused. But there is no sign of Grace.

There is panic.

When did she go?

Where did she go?

What is she up to?

Malvin joins Rose and Jack in their car. Tansy stays home to keep Grandad company.

They drive slowly around the almost deserted streets, windows down, eyes scanning every possible space. They drive past Newtown police station, looking for the parked station wagon.

"Try Rookwood Cemetery," Rose tells Jack.

"Why would she go off in the middle of the night?" Malvin asks.

"Why does she do half the things she does?" Rose replies.

In the half-hour drive to the cemetery each of them ponders where Grace might be and what she could be up to. Has she devised another mad plan to get Farrell?

Jack drives through the gates at Rookwood and cruises slowly through the maze of avenues. No matter which way they go they end up where they started. They are about to abandon their search when a vehicle appears, flashes its headlights and stops a short distance away.

Jack becomes aware of a dimly lit sign on the roof saying, 'Security'.

A figure gets out and a blinding light bobs towards them.

“Whatcha doing in here this time a night?” a male voice demands as his flashlight probes the inside of the car, stopping at each head.

“Looking for someone,” Jack says, realising before he has finished how stupid it sounds.

“That right,” says the voice registering that that there are two men and one woman.

“There’s been a bereavement in the family. The mother’s finding it hard to come to terms with it. Thought she might have come down here to the grave,” Rose says.

“That happens,” the voice comes back out of the dark.

“What’s she look like? I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Rose begins to tell him but Jack interrupts.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure she’s not here,” he says.

“Righto,” says the security guard.

Jack drives slowly off and the security hurries back to his girlfriend who’s sitting under a date palm, naked and shivering, under a picnic blanket

They drive out of the cemetery and into the lit streets of the suburb. They have no idea where Grace might be.

While Jack, Rose and Malvin are searching the cemetery, Grace is closer to home. She has parked the station wagon and is walking along a dimly lit road. In her hand is a bunch of red roses from her garden. Her dark, bulky figure moves alongside grass nature strips where twisted jacaranda trees grow, past neat gardens and resting cars. A police car surges along nearby Parramatta Road, siren screaming. Her stomach churns. Is Constable Farrell driving? Is another kid gonna end up dead? Within moments the sound is gone.

She puffs and sweats but keeps going; under a railway bridge parallel with the track. It’s easier now, slightly down hill towards a junction on the opposite side of the road.

She stops at a group of paperbark trees growing between the road and the railway track. Wedged in the fork of one is a bunch of withered roses on dry, woody stems. They crumble and drift to the ground like black snow when she touches them.

Grace slowly lowers herself to sit at the base of the tree, feet in the gutter, the palm of each hand on the concrete curb. This is where it happened. Where the shots were fired that ended Sam’s life

She remains motionless.

An electric train thunders by a few metres behind her, its passengers like sleeping fish in a tank.

Grace is oblivious.

She runs her hands around the gutter, her fingers drawing concentric circles in the grit.

“You didn’t come to me tonight Sam. I waited. Have I done something wrong? You don’t have to come I know. But I miss you when you don’t.

“I try not to be demanding. If you come when I ask, that’s good. If you don’t, there’s other nights.”

She knows he always comes eventually, grins and says, “Hello Ma. I love you Ma, you’re the best mother in the world.”

That shows what sort of a boy he was. She failed to protect him, yet he still thinks she’s the best mother in the world.

Maybe when he isn’t there he’s planning things, finding some way for her to get at Constable Farrell. Maybe he’s not allowed to talk about things like that. She doesn’t know what he can say and what he can’t. What he can see and what he can’t. Can he look into the past from where he is, and into the future too? Who knows.

If he’d been alive she’d have talked to him many times a day, like any mother, for years, until she’d become old and died. By that time they’d have had hundreds of thousands of conversations. What happened isn’t natural, God didn’t take Sam, man did.

But here she goes, on about God again, when she doesn’t believe in God anymore.

What sort of man shoots an unarmed seventeen-year-old?

The answer is simple, a man called Sean Farrell.

Grace is still sitting on the kerb, her back to the paperbark tree when they find her. Two fresh red roses are wedged in the fork of a tree. She is safe.

At home, Johnnie snores. Tansy packs a bag.

She has fled before Jack, Rose, Malvin and Grace return.

One has been found.

One has been lost.

Grace sits among tiers of flowers in the pale shade of a polytarp spread above her head. Her weathered skin is bathed in a sea-blue light of filtered sun. Grace’s behind overflows a cushioned milk crate, her sagging skirt falls into a black valley between her legs. After that first theft of roses and the realisation that there was an abundance of flowers going to waste in Rookwood Cemetery she had an idea and turned to Malvin for help. He took her station wagon in to work and returned it with a deep and spacious insulated box built into the back. Grace had a place for her contraband. The box changed her life, purloining a few flowers to fulfil her commitment to Sam became something much bigger. She obtained enough flowers for him and enough to establish a stall

outside Royal Prince Alfred Hospital which has become immensely popular. She sells the flowers to people who bear them into the wards, petalled, pistilled and stamened to celebrate life or assuage off death.

The flowers and the satisfaction they give are balm in her troubled life. And they earn good money.

But that is not what she is thinking about now. Her mind is on Tansy. She blames herself for not only Sam's death but Tansy's disappearance and the anguish it is causing the family.

Gone.

Without a goodbye.

Lost.

Because Grace was lost.

Who can blame her. How could a young girl live in the same house as an obsessed old woman? Everyone waits for a phone call from Tansy. But it never comes.

They ring her, over and over, but she doesn't answer mobile.

All these months and no one knows where she is.

How she is.

The police say don't worry. She is not a missing person.

She is just missing.

Grace tries to concentrate on the flowers and the people buying them. Her blooms are the cheapest and the best in this sprawling sun-drenched city of Sydney. And she's proud of it. People consult her on what they should buy. They discuss the beauty and lifespan of various flowers and no matter how poor, they never go away empty handed. She's the Robin Hood of flowers, but she also turns a profit, not for her but for Sam, the headstone, and the Farrell Fund. She is waiting Sam's word on that and who knows what it will cost when the time comes.

Grace sprays the flowers, then herself, with a fine mist and sits back on the milk crate, hands on her thighs. She thinks back to that day when she hid the bunch of red roses between her legs. Unconsciously she dabs her thighs with her skirt as though the thorns have just pierced her skin. Before that day all her money had been spent on flowers for Sam, and Johnnie's money, what he didn't spend at the pub, and Rose's, and Jack's too, when she could get hold of it.

Grace expands her flower garden to cope with demand, first for Sam's grave, then, the stall. She has taken over Johnnie's vegetable plot, a metre at a time. He resisted the invasion, retreating spade by spade, trench warfare, until vanquished, he withdrew. Grace dug up the one metre by ten metre area of lawn and shrubs that made up the front garden and planted more flowers. Next the strip of

grass alongside the road in front of the house was dug and planted and bloomed. Eventually every bit of soil sprouts flowers.

In fact her garden has become so grand that people drive to the house to look. They walk along the lane at the back, climb the fence to peer over. They lift their children so they too can look. Jack and Malvin constantly replaces boards that people have pulled off in their eagerness to get a glimpse of the extraordinary display. If they are lucky and Grace is working in the garden she lets them take selfies with her.

Grace breaks out of her reverie and looks admiringly at her prize for the day, a bunch of roses that earlier adorned a grave in Rookwood Cemetery. They've been placed in the deepest shade of the polytarp, yet at the same time given the greatest prominence. They're the most expensive flowers on her stall, partly because they're the most beautiful, partly because she wants to have them near her as long as she can.

A young man in a business suit stops and looks at them. He's tall, flabby with trim red hair. His sombre suit sits stylishly on his body and his tie is splashed with deep, dark red and a flash of moonlight. He puts down his briefcase and looks at the roses. Grace smiles acknowledgment, lifts them gently out of the water and raises them in front of him like a baby. The man sniffs. He puts his hand inside his jacket and withdraws his wallet. Grace wraps the flowers, ties them with a ribbon and says goodbye.

The young man, briefcase in one hand and the flowers held high in the other, hurries into the hospital. He steps out of the lift, then like an Olympian bearing the torch, speeds along the corridor and into a room where the wrinkled face of his first son peeps out at him from beneath a sheet, like an apricot in tissue paper. His wife, drained, wan, and preened, smiles up at him. She takes the roses, sniffs, lays them on her chest. She closes her eyes and puts her arms around his neck. The late-afternoon stubble of his chin scratches her cheek and he smells her favourite perfume. His son's tiny flat nose twitches. He will be imbued with a love of roses, ingested with milk on those first vigorous, seeking and sucking following his father's gift.

In later life he will have a passion for red roses. He will woo with them and never wonder why.

Six mornings a week Grace feeds the chooks early, then does her round of recent graves to harvest flowers before setting up her stall. The routine soothes her. The gentle clucking, the smell of

feathers, straw, earth and grain, evoke childhood memories of Queensland; her mother and her father, the heat of the early morning sun rolling out of the ground morning after morning like a molten ball from a forge.

Grace scratches the neck of Boris II. Like Boris I, he is big and he is white. He shuts his eyes in ecstasy while the hens run frantically around Grace's legs. Luckily for Boris II, being a chook, he knows nothing about the fate of his predecessor. Grace feels guilty for what she did to Boris I. It wasn't his fault that the egg didn't produce another Sam. That was a foolish idea. She wasn't thinking straight at the time. She tells Boris II that he is safe.

She collects the eggs and lets Boris II and the hens out to pick around the flower beds. They are soon lost among the blooms that rise in a multi-hued forest on all sides of the chook shed. Grace stands with an ice cream container of eggs in her hand, looking over the array of blossoms, deciding which she will pick for Sam.

Today, Saturday, the routine is different to the rest of the week. She will visit Sam early in the morning then have breakfast with Rose and Jack then open the stall at the hospital. .

When the weather is cool she sits with the cats and the morning paper inside the sunny window. When it is hot she sits with the cats and the paper in a large, sun-bleached wicker chair beneath a rickety trellis over which the venerable grapevine grows.

Being in the sun of the cemeteries so often has changed the way she looks, as has the massive amount of weight she acquired when she was trying to hatch Sam from an egg. She is mahogany skinned, dark as an African, curly as a Maori, with thighs you could hide a ship between and breasts that slope down to her belly like mountains to a plain. Food nourished her as she waited for Sam to be re-born, now it is solace for grief.

The currawongs, magpies and noisy miners wind down their early morning clamour. Doves coo and the cats groom themselves in a patch of sun. These moments are the closest Grace gets to peace. She sips black scalding tea, eats buttered toast and honey. She watches the cats. Puss is growing into a big tabby, black lines, the colour of a charred stump, radiate along the fur from each eye. Because of a slight defect in the right eye he often flicks it shut in a disconcerting wink.

Fluff, his sister, is smaller, her soft fur flecked with green and grey, eyes like a bush baby, a harlequin face with the two colours meeting in opposing symmetry on the face and chin.

Puss jumps onto Jack's lap and he strokes him for a moment. "If I was as handsome as you mate I wouldn't be a brickie in the building trade, I'd be a star in Hollywood."

"He's only big and handsome because he's had his balls cut off. If you want to go to Hollywood that badly I'll cut yours off too," Rose tells him.

Jack grins. “No you wouldn’t. You’re as attached to them as I am.”

Grace goes through the obituaries in the paper, choosing which burials she will visit during the week. She checks from A to Z, marking off the ones most likely to be productive. In a school exercise book she notes the burials of the famous that could also be worth returning to on the anniversary of their death. She takes mental note of the suburb the deceased lived in. The north shore and other money places like Woollhara are the best. But there’s distance to consider and how it’ll affect the collecting of flowers, depending on the time of year, the temperature, the day of the week. There’s places to avoid if possible, like the parched sandy acres of Botany cemetery overlooking the bay and industrial sites.

Botany has too many concrete paths, roads, walks, gravestones and crosses. And too many graves that are just grassy patches, neither headstones nor kerb stones, just little wooden crosses with stick-on RIPs and names hand-painted in black wobbly letters. No use looking to poor whites or poor blacks for flowers.

She learned long ago to tell the difference between real and artificial flowers from a kilometre away. Artificial flowers are a curse. They have spread their gaudy colours across lawn cemeteries, another noxious exotic. They’re an attempt to deny mortality in places dedicated to mortality.

When someone famous dies its bonus time, particularly if they are a Sir this, or Lady that. Politicians are usually a good bet. So are once —famous sports figures, media, film and television stars. When the paper announces their death she keeps her fingers crossed waiting for details of the funeral arrangements. Four words can render them valueless: ‘No flowers by request.’

Instead of flowers it’s usually suggested that donations be sent to the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Arthritis Foundation, or such. Noble ideas, she thinks, particularly now she’s got arthritis in her knees. Why can’t they make donations and send flowers?

She reads aloud the list of names of the dead, a mantra that soothes and saddens. There is rhyme and rhythm: Apps, Astill, Atkins; Ballantyne, Beacham, Bingham; Capon, Carlson, Clare; Darmody, Dowling; Hucker, Huxley; Joseph, Judd; Kay, Kerr, Kerwan; Levy, Littlejohn, Lonergan and Lunn; O’Connor, O’Donnell, O’Sullivan; Roberts, Roughly; Watson, Wilkins, Williams, Win Pe; Yasin, Yates and York; Ziegler and Zimmermann.

There are simple messages of goodbye: In God’s garden; In God’s loving care; the Loved and remembered always; the Sadly missed; the Always in our hearts; the Rest in peace and Lest we forgets.

There are those that strive for nobility: ‘Every day that we are alive there is hope and beauty’,  
or:

'Yet the strong man must go;  
for the journey is done  
and the summit is attained  
And the barriers fall.' (Robert Browning)

"What if the summit isn't attained and the strong is a boy and not a man? Why must he go?" she says to Fluff.

Grace lowers the newspaper and the neat black columns swim in murky water. She wipes her eyes then dries them with the back of her hand.

She's developed an instinct for funerals that generate the most flowers. Often it's a burial of the very old or the very young. The very old may have lots of surviving relatives, therefore lots of flowers. The very young may have lots of friends who are shocked, saddened, momentarily scared and likely to spend money. But she refuses to go near any that are under twenty. Seeing distraught mothers is like watching herself.

The skill comes in working out which of the deceased has a lot of surviving relatives and which have only a few. If the announcement has many names of the bereaved attached, then it's a good indication there'll be lots of flowers.

Rose comes into the garden, a mug of tea in her hand. "Anybody you know?"

"All of em," Grace replies.

"What you're doing's wrong Mum."

"Reading the paper?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do. And I hope I'm forgiven."

"I thought you didn't believe in God anymore."

"I'm not talking about Him. I'm talking about Sam."

"It's still wrong. What would you think if somebody was stealing flowers from his grave?"

"I only take where there's lots. An' I only take a few."

"It's still stealing."

Grace raises her mug of tea, sips, and looks out over the garden. "It's all for Sam."

The girl taps the white ball so it slowly rolls to the red and gently pushes it over the edge into the unseen pocket. Outside the Town Hall pub the traffic stops-and-starts its way along King Street and exhaust fumes drift skyward. Her hair is twisted in a loose knot at the back of her head and shines like sun-touched copper in the dinginess. Her opponent is a guy as thin as a piece of string and wearing a tight gelato-yellow tee-shirt and baggy pants, which reach as far as skinny calves.

A young man sits in the corner sipping a beer and watching. He's searching for a word to describe the girl and comes up with radiant. That's it, she's radiant. She glows. Light shines from her face and smile. Earlier he noticed her hair. It hung loose to her waist, fine and straight. "Rapunzel, Rapunzel let down your hair," he said to himself.

"What was that mate?" the guy next to him asked.

The young man shook his head and laughed. "Nothing."

She's secured her hair now on the back of her head out of the way while playing pool. As she leans over the table wisps of that hair hang down the nape of her pale neck. She's not a beach girl. No definitely not a beach girl, he thinks. Her clothes are an odd mix. Not hippy, but hippyish.

He goes over to the pool table and lays a coin on the scratched and cigarette-burned mahogany surround, a challenge to the winner. He's sure it's gonna be her. He keeps watching as she walks around the table with graceful ease, playing each shot cleanly and confidently then stepping back to allow her opponent in.

He's right in his prediction. Ten minutes later she sinks the last three balls with a smile of triumph and slides her winnings from the side of the table into her cupped hand. She disappears from his line of sight and comes back without the money. Her opponent shakes her hand briefly and limply then heads to the bar, past the shrieking band with its four female followers and a couple of muso mates standing next to the speakers.

The young man goes over to the pool table and nods at her. She introduces herself, shouting above the din.

"Tansy!"

"Wallace!"

They shake hands.

He slips two dollars into the slot. He's got four dollars left in his pocket. This needs to be a profitable game.

Tansy wins the toss. She chalks the end of her cue. She gathers a hank of copper hair from where it has fallen down her back, twists it, and tucks it onto the top of her head again where it sits in shining defiance of gravity. She leans over the pool table, draws the polished slender shaft back

through her fingers then shoots it forward. The tip cracks the white and the ball skids over the smooth blue surface, smashes into the balls of random colours huddled in a triangle. They scatter in terror to the four corners of the table. She pockets three balls before missing the fourth. Her opponent smiles.

Tansy watches him as he pokes long black hair behind a dangling silver Celtic cross earring. He has pale skin and dark serious eyes.

He leans over the table on one leg, stretches out lean white arms drawn with black hairs, and plays his shot. His cue ball tips the yellow, which rolls slowly to the middle pocket, hesitates for a moment on the rim, then falls in.

He misses his second ball, a green. She plays again and sinks two more balls, yellow and red before missing the third. She's a lot better than he is, but he's never pretended that he's good.

It doesn't take her long to beat him. She picks up her winnings and he watches as she puts them into a battered black leather purse inside a canvas, army shoulder bag dangling from a stool. He thanks her for the game and they shake hands. Hers is cold for such a hot day. His are callused and warm.

Wallace digs out the last of his money from his jeans and buys a beer. It slides down his throat cold and sharp.

Tansy buys a schooner for herself and one for her friend Melanie, a short, stocky woman with pale hair. She lifts the glass to her mouth and looks over the rim at him across the bar as she takes a swig. She leans her back on a stool and sticks her legs out, looks over at him again and smiles.

Wallace saunters over drinking as he goes.

"You're good," he shouts.

"Not really."

"You mean I'm bad?"

"Yeah!" She says laughing as though there could be any doubt about it.

He takes a sip of his beer, looks directly at her. Then laughs too.

"You're right, I'm bloody shithouse. But I'm good at some things."

She blows a raspberry.

That wasn't the smartest thing to say. "You know what I mean, pool isn't everything."

"You being sarcastic?" she asks.

"You're quick," Wallace tells her and they both laugh.

The banter's interrupted by a guy with purple hair who challenges her to a game. She accepts, has one more sip of beer then wanders over to the table.

Tansy plays her shot. When she looks up Wallace has gone.

Wallace William walks briskly down King Street, Celtic cross earrings dancing at each step. He turns into a side street and stops. He pulls Tansy's purse and a bunch of keys from inside his shirt, opens it, lifts two twenty dollar notes, flips through various bits of paper, and pauses at a washed-out, well thumbed colour picture, slightly out of focus, a youth of about seventeen with long curly dark hair. He's in a flower garden, facing the camera, arms folded across his chest, showing young biceps under a tee-shirt, a cheeky looking bugger, he's grinning, not just at the person taking the picture, but at the future. Staring into its face and liking what he sees. A kid ready to take on the world. Frightened of nothing. Capable of anything.

Wallace slides the picture back into the purse.

He finds what he's looking for, a driving license, and scans the address. Ten minutes walk, seven if he's quick. He gets up and takes off, fast as he can without running.

Wallace slides a key into the lock, pushes the door open and steps into the hall. "Anybody home?" he shouts.

A big tabby cat, miaows, then scuttles off down the hall. Wallace follows, through the brown-going-on-grey lounge room, over a carpet that smells of beer and cigarette smoke, past a sagging settee and matching arm chair, paintings, photos, sound system and CDs.

He goes slowly through to the dishes-in-the-sink kitchen, looks around, then reaches up onto the shelf above the door, fumbles around until he finds a key, unlocks the back door and swings it open. He stands looking at a luxuriant jungle of plants, beer-bottles, bits of burned barbecue wood and charcoal garden, soggy from the previous night's rain. A couple of wobbly steel chairs with torn plastic seats are lined up beside an abandoned outside dunny. Blue fallen bells dot the ground from a huge jacaranda whose trunk straddles the fence line in defiance of who owns it. The arms spread benignly into both gardens, hanging a veil of blue from an even bluer sky. The cat runs up the trunk, stops and looks down, its pupils dark slits in yellow eyes.

Wallace picks up his bag from the hallway and like a mountaineer, climbs the steep, staircase and pushes open the first door. A great vase of red flowers sits on a small table at the foot of a rumpled bed that takes almost the entire, untidy room. The walls are covered in drawings all with the same name, Tansy. There are prints and movie posters. He sifts through the belongings on a bedside table: a paperback on Frida Kahlo; an Isabel Allende novel; earrings; a necklace made of coloured seeds; a silver brooch of a fairy; pencils; a box of tissues. On the mantelpiece above a fireplace there's crayons, pencils, charcoal sticks in a jar and a framed pencil drawing of a nude,

curly haired young man. He takes the stolen purse out of his pocket and compares the photo with the drawing. It's the same person. Wallace hesitates a moment, then puts back one of the twenty dollar notes he'd lifted and lays the purse on the table. He picks up a Mickey Mouse watch and examines it before putting it back.

A young woman opens the front door, clinging to her shopping, walks along the hall and chinks a couple of bottles in their soggy brown paper bags onto the kitchen table. She lets the air that has been holding her together out of her lungs in a big sigh.

"Fucking dill," she says, looking at the open back door. "Last-out, locks-up!" she sing-songs to herself.

She pours a glass of beer, then with quick movements, shuffles everything in the fridge around until she finds room for the bottle-and-a-half then fastens the door shut with an ockie strap. She dances across the lounge room and puts on a CD. As she straightens she has a funny sensation in the back of her neck. She turns.

A man is standing on the stairs looking down on her. He has long black hair and a Celtic cross earring. She catches her breath.

"G'day. Sorry if I scared you. I'm Davie ." He smiles. "Friend'a Tansy's, from Melbourne. She said I could crash here a coupla nights till I find a place. Hope it's all right."

"Er, she never mentioned it."

"I just turned up."

"Oh, yeah. I'm Lizzie."

Lizzie in a cheesecloth blouse and cotton skirt. Little breasts and narrow hips.

"My real name's Victoria but everyone calls me Lizzie; after the flower, you know, busy lizzie, it's everywhere, like me," she giggles.

"Course," says Wallace.

He remains on the step, a cavalier's hair, pale face and two days stubble, awkwardly looking down at her looking nervously up.

"I'll just go sort my gear out," he says and retreats up the stairs into the gloom.

Lizzie turns up the volume up of the CD player and heads for her room.

"Hope it's not too loud!" she shouts.

Back in the pub Tansy's watching a pool game and nodding her head absent-mindedly to music from a group pounding away in the corner. She beat the bloke with purple hair, accepted another challenge and lost. Enough pool for one day, but time for one more beer. Without turning around,

Tansy fumbles for the wallet in her bag hanging on the back of the stool. She tries both pockets, tunnels into corners too small to hide it. She looks under the stool. She walks in the direction of the bar, examining the floor like a black tracker. No signs. She asks Rick, the barman. Naah! He hasn't seen it.

“Shit! Some bastards taken it!”

“You musta left it at home,” Rick says.

She barges out of the pub. Along crowded King Street at a fast walk. Then a run. Her watch. Her precious watch is on the mantelpiece in her bedroom. Why? Why is she so bloody stupid?

Lizzie is half asleep as she heads for the kitchen to get another beer. Tansy's friend is coming down the steps with his bag.

“Beer?” She asks.

“Aha, yeah, why not.”

She pours one. He ‘cheers’ her, and she does the same to him. He gulps the beer down in two mouthfuls.

“I've changed my mind about staying. A bit cramped isn't it? Gonna try a mate's place instead. Say g'bye to Tansy for me. Thanks for the beer.”

He picks up his bag, waves goodbye from the end of the hall, then comes back. He hands her Tansy's keys.

“Nearly forgot. Tell her thanks an' I'll catch her later.”

He goes backwards down the hall and out the door.

Tansy holds a bunch of keys up in front of her like a severed head. Her watch is now safely on her wrist, her wallet's in her hand, less half her money.

“I don't believe it,” she screams. “The cheeky, fucking bastard.”

“Some ‘a my CDs are gone,” Lizzie moans.

“I bet he let me beat him at pool so I'd have to play the challenger while he came here!”

Tansy flings the keys against the wall and a lump of plaster drops to the floor.

Johnnie Walker perches on a stool at a corner of the bar of the Dockside Hotel, forearms on the scarred top. Women used to tell him he looked like a Viking. He had a mass of blond hair with tight curls and a beard to match. He doesn't look like a Viking now.

Johnnie has been a regular for so long that he is immortalised. On the wall behind him there's a mural of pub drinkers, he's one of them, sitting at the bar wearing his work gear, green shirt with long sleeves, shorts and boots, glass raised to his mouth. It must have been summer when it was painted. The pub doors are wide open and slabs of sunlight lay on the floor.

He is sitting in exactly the same place as now. His back's to the mural, which has its back to him, a mirror image. A couple admiring it don't recognise the man in the mural with the man at the bar. The man in the mural has the curly hair and beard of a mythological God, his arms and legs are muscular". The man at the bar looks old and thin, his hair and beard sparse and straggly.

There are people playing pool, a bank of poker machines, a big TV on the wall that no one's watching.

It's five-thirty. He's been working all week on the nearby Thames Street ferry wharf reconstruction, five minutes walk from the Dockside Hotel. He's knocked off a bit early, so he's off to a good start. Some of the gang joined him for a couple of beers then left. The sweat, sawdust and bits of bark on his shirt have dried and the fine wood splinters in his hands have rubbed out and drifted to the floor. He's nearly one third of the way through a bottle of Johnnie Walker whisky. It sits in front of him next to a jug of water. The guy on the label is striding jauntily, happily and healthily into the future like always. The man on the label and the man at the bar now share the same name, although the man at the bar does not stride jauntily into the future. Johnnie took the first two glasses neat. He sipped. The spirit burned his throat, flowing hot as lava into his stomach.

He has loved Johnnie Walker whisky all his life. He worked. And he drank. No problems. Then Sam was killed. Now he drinks. And drinks. But he's hanging on, still working — most of the time.

He turns to the man next to him, Frank, who's there most nights too. "Whatsaman to do? They say time...heals all wounds. Or ... is it ... the other way round?. Grace seems all right now, more or less But, I bet she's plotting, some damned thing. Won't say wharitis. Stealin flower,' an' sellin, an' putting money in the bank. Forwhat? Forwhat? You tell me eh! An' not a word ... not a word, from young Tansy. How do we find her? Tell me that as well."

Frank's heard most of this before, but not about the flowers. "Where she steal 'em?"

Johnnie leans forwards and whispers.

Frank's red face splits in a laugh. "The cheeky bugger. Sounds like a good one, eh!" His entrepreneurial mate Dargie will love this story.

“She’ll get caught. I’m telling ya.” Johnnie says. “Ya have to move ... on, doncha? Forget. That’s what I’m doing forgetting. Sam’s gone, the poor young devil. Ya’ve gotta concentrate on the living. Find Tansy for starters. That’s what we gotta do. Find Tansy.”

“I know it’s not easy,” Frank says.

“What would you goddam know about it? About Grace. Or Sam. Or Tansy. Or it beineasy. Oranyfuckinthing!”

Johnnie turns his back on Frank and thinks about Sam and Tansy. They were like brother and sister. Sam came along as an after thought, or more accurately after a night out. Grace wasn’t happy. But the bundle in her belly became Sam, and the centre of her world.

But you’ve gotta move on.

Johnnie turns back to Frank, “Sorry mate. Didn’t mean...”

But Frank ’s gone.

Johnnie pours more whisky. Sips.

Other drinkers come into the pub and nod in Johnnie’s direction or raise a hand. He attempts a friendly growl in response.

Not many stay to talk with him these days — even pub talk.

He sips his whisky. His face is like a red flower with blue veins.

It’s all Grace can think of. Sam. Blow-up pictures of Sam, all over the house. Sam in soccer gear; Sam with big sister Rose; Sam with Tansy, Sam by himself; Sam with mates; Sam with him; Sam with mother; Sam with mother an’ him. The goddamn house’s covered. Was driving all of us mad too. Then Rose said ‘Enough! You can put ‘em in the bedroom only Mum’. Grace threw tantrums an’ moaned an’ groaned, then did as she was told, for a change.

Stars glow in the dark on the bedroom ceiling above their bed. The Southern Cross, Orion. An’ others. A Christmas present from Sam when he was a kid. Stuck up by him and Tansy, balancing on a step ladder. They are bewdiful. But where the hell is she? Who’s she with? Who’s looking after her?

Johnnie empties his glass. Pours more whisky. Adds water. Drinks. The bedroom’s a shrine. Photos on all the walls. An’ the altar. Candles. Oil lamp. Soccer trophies. Photos in frames. Light flickering across Sam’s face, an’ his eyes follering ya. Round the room. Wherever ya go. Them eyes. Ya lay on your belly with the covers over your head an’ you still can feel ‘em boring intaya.

Wakeup in the middla of the night, ‘n’ Grace’ll be lying there, lookin’ at the flames an’ Sam’s face. No wonner she can’t put him to rest.

How can yastop thinkin’, ‘if only...’ when he’s looking at ya, all the time?

If only Grace and him had been home that night.

If only he'd stopped Sam going out.

If only he'd spent more time talking to Sam and less time talking to everyone else.

If only he...If only she...if only we.

Then there was the goddam egg an' sleeping on the camp bed at the foota the big bed. Better in the spare room. Either go there or go mad. At least in the spare room Sam wasn't watching him all the time. Wasn't Sam's fault though, havin to watch. That was Grace's doing.

Poor little devil.

He'da bin nineteen now.

Johnnie turns to the TV. What's it all about? History is that it? He concentrates on the images that come and go almost before he focuses. But he thinks he recognises them. Kennedy. President Kennedy. Vietnam. I wuz there buddy. Didn't see you in the shit'n'guts though. I remember. An' the other feller...? Hang on! It's Clinton, not bloody Kennedy up there. Clinton. The man famous for his dick. Every time that woman, what's her name, opened her mouth he stopped her talking.

"Whazzizname? The one next to Clinton." He asks a woman at his elbow —she's bewdiful. They're all bewdiful."

"Who?"

"Yerknow."

The woman smiles politely, then moves away.

Johnnie turns to the man squashed up on the other side of him and says "Clinton was a mass murderer. Juzlike Kennedy. Kennedy sent the troopsinter Veeyetnam. We killed two million uv 'em an' they killed seventy thousan' of us. One'a my best buddies among them. Me too nearly.

"An' we lost.

"My buddies. I wuz there." Johnnie takes another sip of his whisky.

The man next to him doesn't know what the hell he's on about. "Dead right," he says and rolls his eyes at his mates.

Johnnie recognises the person standing by Clinton on the TV, but he still can't put a name to him. He knows the name'll come eventually. Ten minutes time. An hour. Tomorrow. Lot of goddam good that'll do.

He focuses on the screen again. Wishes he could do what politicians do — smile an' talkat the same time. The Russians can't, or won't.

"S'natural human nature to believe somebody who smiles," Johnnie says to the man nearest him. He's not sure whether it's the same man.

Got it! The bloke with Clinton was Tony Blah. The Pommy. Tony Blair. Phoney Blair. Whatever. If he'd been able to hear him talking above the din he'd have got him right away. That posh Pommy accent. He smiles all the time. He'd smile if he was going down with Titanic. Smile if he'd got shit up to his mouth. In fact his mouth looks more like sphincter than mouth. He's like a ventriloquist's dummy. Somebody's got their hand right up his arse.

But it's all history. What's gonna happen, that's history too. Just a matter of time. Seconds and it's history. Milliseconds. "Turn the sound up can't ya," Johnnie tells Quinlan, the publican.

"Righto Johnnie." He doesn't.

An old woman wearing a beanie in the black and yellow stripe colours of the local football team wanders around the bar trying to sell wire coat hangers and crocheted egg cosies that are in black and yellow stripes too, with tiny pom poms on the top. She stops in front of Johnnie. He gives her two dollars and slips one of the egg cosy beanies into his shirt pocket.

"I'll give the hangersamiss. Than's Betty.

"Turnthesounup Quinnie! Carnear what they're saying."

"No worries Johnnie," Quinlan clunks the fridge door shut with his knee. He doesn't adjust the sound because there is none.

Horses are gallop across the screen.

Where've the pollies gone?

They're racing, racing, racing, racing.

"Who changed thegoddamchannel? I was lookin at it," Johnnie shouts. He takes another drink. His head slumps between his shoulders.

Far away on the south-western outskirts of the city Rae McCarthy is getting ready for a Saturday night in town.

"Anyone'd think you were gonna a Hollywood movie premier," her daughter Kate says from the bedroom doorway.

Rae ignores her. Sixteen-year-olds think their mothers are too old to have a night out. Rae stands before the mirror, purse hanging from her shoulder, showered, layered pinned primped and perfumed. Shampooed combed curled and blonde. Hips round in cream coloured pants, breasts pushing against a green silk blouse. Putting on a bit'a weight. Despite diets. She's seen worse. She's ready.

“Don’t know why you’re going with her,” Kate yells from the bathroom.

“Cos she’s my friend, that’s why. Something different. Got a right to a girls’ night out once inawhile’. If it doesn’t work out I won’t go again,” Rae yells back. “An’ make sure you behave yourself at Pam’s place.”

“Mum! I’m not a kid. Make sure you behave yourself.”

“You gonna get a video or what?”

‘Or what.’ sounds the best option to Kate but she calls back, “A video!”

“Right, I’m off,” Rae puts her arm around her daughter on her way out but not so hard as to crumple her blouse. “Ta-ra.”

“Bye Mum, have a nice night, but not too late, see you in the morning.”

“Cheeky.” Rae gives an air kiss so as not to smudge her lipstick and steps out the door. She feels like a teenager planning something, looking forward to it — nervously.

Nola Esposito tucks the twins into their bunks and hugs each of them. She lowers the mozzie nets, and they lie, sun-yellow sheets up to their chins. Identical twins. Identical smiles. Michelle and Katrina. Each name chosen from a book of names.

“Be good.”

She tries to sound firm. Katrina pushes back the mozzie net and grabs Nola around the neck for one last bone-breaking hug. Nola gasps and laughs, pries herself free and lowers the net. She leans in again over Michelle and kisses her to even things out.

“That’s it! Close your eyes. Go to sleep the both of you and by the time you wake I’ll be back home.”

She tip-toes silently out and pulls on the high heeled boots waiting at attention by the kitchen door. She polishes the silver toe caps with a tissue and brushes her hair at the bathroom mirror after wiping clear the shower fog. She checks her smile.

Jane, the baby sitter arrives on time, picks up the money from under the ash tray on the table and slips it into a shirt pocket. “They’ll be right as rain, don’t worry.”

Nola won’t worry. Not tonight anyway. Her ex, Zac, will be around at eight to take over from Jane, she hopes. He’s promised. She picks up her bag, slings it over her shoulder and goes out the back door, past old engines, gearboxes and other car parts that Zac has been going to remove ever since they separated eighteen months ago. She goes through the side gate, propping it shut behind her with a length of paling — a vain attempt to keep Rinny in. Rinny, covered in red dirt, crawls out from behind a broken fibro panel under the front of the house, shakes himself, squeezes through a

gap in the fence and runs barking after her, fifty metres as far as the bridge over the railway to the station.

Nola's heels clack a castanet rhythm as she runs down the steps to the platform towards the fortyish woman in a green silk blouse.

"You set?" She asks Rae McCarthy.

"I am." Rae flashes a confident smile as the train rolls in.

Nola and Rae scramble into a taxi outside Central Station. Rae wriggles into a corner and fastens her seat belt. She peers out the window.

"The Dockside Hotel, Balmain!" Nola tells the driver. She laughs at Rae. "Don't worry about Dargie, he's never gonna know."

Rae grins. A forced grin. It's all right for her to say don't worry. Nola doesn't know her boyfriend Dargie like she does.

They crawl in the evening traffic over Anzac Bridge and follow the line of cars into the suburb. The Dockside Hotel is packed. Nola struggles to the bar with Rae close behind and gets two vodkas and orange. They sip and survey the scene.

"A lotta guys but not a lotta talent," Nola finally says.

Rae nods. She watches Nola scan the bar, her eyes sharp and hard, like a hawk on top a power pole. Nola makes eye contacts but no one appeals.

Rae looks around, those at the pool table, the backs of the heads of pokie players, the photos of the pub on the wall, a mural of the bar and its drinkers.

A drunk next to her turns and mutters through his beard "Watsaringan? Watsaringan?"

He looks her in the eyes, tries again, "Ifeesessoright thensgonna beeoright. Eh?"

Rae smiles.

Johnnie Parkes, aka Johnnie Walker, shakes his head, turns away and pours himself another drink from a bottle of the scotch whose name has also become his name since he got into the habit of drinking a bottle a night. He tops up with water and returns his attention to the TV.

Rae shrugs her shoulder at Nola. They should go. They wander with the crowds along Darling Street then climb in a cab.

"Take us to Heaven," Rae says and grins.

"Night on the town eh girls?" The cabie checks Nola and Rae out in the rear view mirror.

"A big night," Nola tells the reflected dark eyes and the cropped hair on the back of his head.

"Sounds exciting."

Nola settles back in the sighing seat, burning with anticipation. Rae, in the other corner, smiles her brightest across the space of the cab as the city spins by.

“You been there?” Nola asks the driver.

“Lotsa times. Lotsa times.” He savours the memories and grins, catches her eyes in the mirror, then looks in the direction of Rae.

“You going tonight?” Nola suggests rather than asks.

“Finish midnight. Meet you there? Together eh?”

Did the way he said, “together”, mean just that? Rae looks at Nola and curls her lips in theatrical revulsion.

“Why not. Both of us.” Nola starts laughing.

By the time they get to the Empress of Heaven hotel the driver is raring to go.

“Settle down,” Nola teases. “Gotta check it out, have a chat, have a drink.”

The driver wants them to go to his place first, then meet in Heaven.

“Come on, it’s near here,” he cajoles and smiles. He has brown skin and white teeth.

Oh Christ! says a voice in Rae’s head, what have I got into?

She scrambles out of the car and stands on the kerb, holding the door open for Nola. Come on Nola, the voice in her head pleads. Nola slides across the seat and swings slender legs out, then her equally slender body.

“Later then? One ‘o’ clock?” the driver says, leaning across the front seat.

Nola kisses him on the forehead dismissively. A couple of young gay guys scramble into the cab and Nola’s answer is lost in their noise.

“Count me out of that one,” Rae says as they tap-tap along the footpath.

“Don’t worry there’ll be better offers than that.”

“I’d hope so.”

Nola leads the way through the crowd of noisy, drunken young men and women. She takes Rae’s arm and pulls her past two hulking security guards in the front of The Empress of Heaven pub.

The heat and the smell of bodies is worse than the sale yards at Dubbo on a hot day. Except cattle don’t made as much noise. The drinkers are crammed together like penguins in a rookery. Thigh to thigh, hip to hip, belly too decibelly. The thumping music shakes the brain in Rae’s skull, and the sight of scores of young leggy women sends her heart plummeting a couple of storeys. Nearly everyone is in their twenties or early thirties. And the women are skinny as broomsticks. She scans the crowd; half afraid Dargie might be there.

Hold your ground, you're just as good. Different. More mature, a voice in her head says, but it is almost unheard in the cacophony. It's not her scene.

"What do you want?" Nola yells in her ear.

"Beer!"

"Beer?"

"Vodka and orange then!"

Nola disappears into the mass of bodies laying siege to the bar. Rae finds a few square centimetres of free space, struggles into it and stands with her back to the wall. The top of Nola's head is just visible at the bar, dark hair and long beautiful neck. She doesn't look anywhere near forty-one. Rae examines her own arms. Podgy. Or nearly podgy. A creeping layer of early middle age fat is laying itself down, molecule by molecule. She isn't going to think of it. Rae pastes on a smile and looks around the room. That's better, the voice tells her. A flight of stairs runs down to another bar. What to Christ must it be like down there? Nola is on her way back with the drinks. Her eyes are wide, the whites gleam and her pupils are dilated black buttons. She laughs across the bar at Rae, teeth gleaming in some kind of ecstasy.

"Hurry up Nola," Rae mutters to herself. Her eyes swivel over the crowd. She becomes aware of someone close by speaking, to her, a guy wearing a red cotton shirt open to his waist. He must be sixty. At least. There's a gold chain around his neck, gold around his wrist and fingers, black oiled hair, and a drink in one hand. The top of his balding head comes up to her shoulder.

I don't believe it, the voice in her head says.

She half smiles and looks over him. He is offering to buy her a drink.

What the hell's happened to Nola? Rae sees her on the outer ring of the bar scrum, two young men chatting her up. Nola grins and motions her over. Rae smiles no thanks, to the ageing lethargic and fights her way to Nola's side.

"This is Jason 'n' Wayne."

Jason! Wayne! That would make them all of twenty-four.

Rae yells, "Hello."

They are red-faced country boys.

They yell back and exchange grins among themselves. How can anyone chat with this din? They move away from the bar. Wayne is standing so close to Nola that Rae thinks they're co-joined at the belly. Nola is talking non-stop. It's easy for her. Jason's saying something unintelligible. Rae nods her head and tries to think of something to say. All that comes to mind is, do you come here often? She moans to herself with frustration.

“Hot, isn’t it?” she finally gets out.

“What?” Jason leans over simultaneously drawing her towards him. It’s a nice sensation, the hand on her back. She feels a surge of blood.

“I said... Oh never mind.”

You’ll have to do better than that, even for Jason, the voice prompts.

Jason grins inanely from a plain, round, eyebrow-less face. They stand side-by-side, each gazing into the middle distance as though looking for someone. Then each looks at the other and smiles. Rae realises he’s as awkward, and inexperienced as she is.

Who did you want, Leonardo DiCaprio? the voice asks.

Yes, he would be a nice thank you.

She feels a bit better now. But Jesus, you can’t have fling with a twenty-four-year-old.

Why not?

Suddenly, the other guy, Wayne, is thrusting another drink into her hand. She takes it. Gulps a double vodka and orange. She mouths, “Cheers!” in his direction. Nola hasn’t stopped talking. She never does. Rae starts on the second drink and her head begins to float away from her body.

Jason swallows his beer and heads for the bar. Before Rae has a chance to catch Nola’s eye he is back with another round. Rae stands, a double vodka and orange, and what else? in each hand, like a gunfighter in a western. She empties one glass and Jason takes it from her and plonks it on an already full table. A glass falls off and smashes on the floor. Rae takes a sip of the new drink, looks desperately at Nola but Nola has been shuffled around by the crowd until she has her back to her. Jason’s standing up against her, their bodies squashed together.

She smiles, see what happens.

Her head keeps floating away, coming back for a few moments, then drifting off again. She can’t hang on to it. Nola tugs her sleeve and motions they’re leaving. Rae and Jason follow Nola and Wayne as they walk arm-in-arm through the door.

Oh sweet fresh air. Jason encircles Rae’s hips with one arm and pulls her towards him. It’s rough but it’s nice. She discovers she’s right, he is from the country, Bathurst, and he’s been in the city six weeks.

She turns away from him, takes out her phone and taps out a number: “How’s it going Kate? ... Where are you? ... Good. ... I sound what?” Rae laughs. “No, I’m fine. Say hello to Pam and Mrs Palmer for me. ... Take Care. Love you too.”

She hooks up with Jason again.

“Who was that?”

Rae is about to tell him then checks herself, “My husband?”

“Oh!” Jason laughs.

Nola and Wayne are kissing passionately on the footpath. Everyone’s jostling everyone else and the ground’s rolling beneath Rae’s feet like a crazy house in a fun fair. She clings tightly to Jason and he clings even tighter to her. Nola and Wayne disappear into another pub. They dive after them into a turbulent sea of noise and heat and breast stroke in the direction of the bar. Everyone is treading water and shouting and laughing. Another drink is in Rae’s hand and she holds it high to stop it being swamped. It tastes bitter. Rae looks for somewhere to put it down, can’t find a flat surface, holds it by her side a moment then drops the glass. It sinks.

Tread water, the voice says.

Rae gulps.

Then they are in the street again and the tide of people is ebbing. Nola and Wayne are ahead Nola looks around waves and hugs Wayne and they all keep walking along the rolling bucking street walking and walking suddenly Nola is gone and so are the crowds.

Rae’s leaning against an iron fence with Jason standing in front of her, his face no longer fleshy and boyish but hard and sweaty, as he pulls on her hips and thrusts into her. The fence rattles around her like metal surf.

“Come on. Come on!” she hears his urgent voice somewhere.

He pushes even harder and holds her tight. Tight. Tighter. Tighter. Tighter.

Pushing.

Tight.

Pushing.

Tight.

Pushing.

Tight.

Pushing.

“I’m drowning!” she cries

“Come on!” Jason moans.

“Come on! Come on! Come on.”

Then he is limp and heavy as a drowned man.

Rae is under the surf like when she was a little girl, going round and round, over and over. Her mouth fills with stinging, burning water. She coughs and chokes.

“Help-me!” she gurgles, arms thrashing against the weight of the waves. The metal surf crashes over her again and she goes down under a dumper. Down and round in water and sand.

Jason’s voice shouts far away on the surface and she sinks dizzily into the darkness.

Grace is ensconced among her flowers in the pale shade of a polytarp spread above her head. Her weathered skin is bathed in a sea-blue light of filtered sun. Grace’s behind overflows a cushioned milk crate, her legs are far apart, and her sagging skirt falls into a black valley between them. Although she has not had the stall very long outside Royal Prince Alfred Hospital it is immensely popular. People buy her blossoms and bear them into the hospital, petalled, pistilled and stamened to celebrate life or fend off death.

The flowers and the satisfaction they give are balm in her troubled life. She blames herself for not only Sam’s death but Tansy’s disappearance and the anguish it is causing the family.

Gone.

Without a goodbye.

Who can blame her. How could a young girl live in the same house as an obsessed old woman? Everyone waits for a phone call from Tansy. But it never comes.

They ring her, over and over, but she doesn’t answer.

All these months and no one knows where she is.

How she is.

The police say don’t worry. She is not a missing person.

She is just missing.

Grace tries to concentrate on the flowers and the people buying them. Her blooms are the cheapest and the best in this sprawling sun-drenched city of Sydney. And she’s proud of it. People consult her on what they should buy. They discuss the beauty and lifespan of various flowers and no matter how poor, they never go away empty handed. She’s the Robin Hood of flowers, but she needs to turn a profit, not for her but for Sam. She is waiting his word and who knows what it will cost when the time comes.

Grace sprays the flowers, then herself, with a fine mist and sits back on the milk crate, hands on her thighs. She thinks back to that day when she took the bunch of red roses from the grave and hid them between her legs. Unconsciously she dabs her thighs with her skirt as though the thorns have just pierced her skin. Before that day all her money had been spent on flowers for Sam, and

Johnnie's money, what he didn't spend at the pub, and Rose's, and Jack's too, when she could get hold of it.

Grace's flower garden has expanded to meet the demand of Sam's grave and the stall. She has taken over Johnnie's vegetable plot, a metre at a time. He resisted the invasion, retreating spade by spade, until vanquished, he withdrew to the pub. Grace dug up the one metre by ten metre area of lawn and shrubs that made up the front garden and planted more flowers. Next the strip of grass alongside the road was dug and planted and bloomed. Eventually every bit of soil sprouted flowers.

Her flower garden has become so grand that people drive to the house to look. They walk along the lane at the back, climb the fence to peer over. They lift their children so they too can look. Jack and Malvin constantly replaces boards that people have pulled off in their eagerness to get a glimpse of the extraordinary display. If they are lucky and Grace is working in the garden she lets them take selfies with her.

Grace breaks out of her reverie and looks admiringly at her prize for the day, a bunch of roses that earlier adorned a grave in Rookwood Cemetery. They've been placed in the deepest shade of the polytarp, yet at the same time given the greatest prominence. They're the most expensive flowers on her stall, partly because they're the most beautiful, partly because she wants to have them near her as long as she can.

A young man in a business suit stops and looks at them. He's tall, flabby with trim red hair. His sombre suit sits stylishly on his body and his tie is splashed with deep, dark red and a flash of moonlight. He puts down his briefcase and looks at the roses. Grace smiles acknowledgment, lifts them gently out of the water and raises them in front of him like a baby. The man sniffs. He puts his hand inside his jacket and withdraws his wallet. Grace wraps the flowers, ties them with a ribbon and says goodbye.

The young man, briefcase in one hand and the flowers held high in the other, hurries into the hospital. He steps out of the lift, then like an Olympian bearing the torch, speeds along the corridor and into a room.

The wrinkled face of his first son peeps out at him from beneath a sheet, like an apricot in tissue paper. His wife, drained, wan, and preened, smiles up at him. She takes the roses, sniffs, lays them on her chest. She closes her eyes and puts her arms around his neck. The late-afternoon stubble of his chin scratches her cheek and he smells her favourite perfume. His son's tiny flat nose twitches. He will be imbued with a love of roses, ingested with milk on those first vigorous, seeking and sucking following his father's gift.

In later life he will have a passion for red roses. He will woo with them and never wonder why.

The train rolls past backyards, shopping centres, warehouses, factories and council swimming pools where early morning lappers cut vees through smooth blue water. The suburbs yawn and stretch and crawl out of bed into a new day. Nola looks on, looks at her watch and curses the warm bed and a warm body for holding her in comfort and dreams far too long. Zac will be complaining, bubbling angry at having to give Michelle and Katrina breakfast, having to dress them, having to keep them entertained. Her mouth's dry and her stomach's empty. She gets up and walks down the aisle between the few comatose passengers sprawling in their seats or reading the Sunday papers through bleary eyes. The tawny paddocks of the city's south western outskirts roll by. Nola has a drink of icy water from the bubbler then goes into the toilet. She lights a cigarette, sits on the seat and wonders what the hell happened to Rae. They still haven't found the body of a woman who disappeared after a night out twelve years ago. Someone has written in texta on the back of the door, 'Has anyone seen Peter Porter? I love him and want him back. Ring Fiona on xxxx xxxx'. Nola shakes her head in disbelief. Stupid woman. It was also stupid to take Rae along. Better to hunt alone, then if something goes wrong it's just you.

She keeps hearing Jason's words "She's all right. She's a grown woman." She's also got a grown up daughter, a grown up ex-husband and a grown up lover, Nola reminds herself. But some people grow up and understand; others grow up and never understand. About life. About men. About themselves, what they need, what they want, what they can do without, what they can't do without and how to get it. Rae doesn't understand herself, so there is no way in the world she can understand men. She doesn't know whether she wants a one night stand, a lover, or someone to rescue her from Dargie

God I hope she's all right, Nola thinks. The toilet door's rattled impatiently for the third time. She walks out in a cloud of smoke.

"Christ!" the woman waiting to go in waves her hand in front of her nose. "You wanna give the rest of us cancer too?"

Nola ignores her. She walks the length of the train and back in one final search for Rae.

One hour later Rae makes the same journey feeling in even worse shape than Nola. She gets out of the train at Ashtown. walks slowly along the platform. Each jolting step threatens her body with disintegration. She winces at the sunlight and scowls at the dozen or so early travellers.

Rae crosses the bridge, goes down the quiet street and pushes the gate open. This house, and Nola's, are the only ones in the street that haven't been gentrified. She decides it is too early to ring Kate or Nola. All she wants is a shower and bed. She strips, peeling off her pants with revulsion, dumps all her clothes in the washing machine before stepping into the shower. Warm relaxing water pours over her as she soaps and rinses, soaps and rinses, scrubbing hard with a rough loofah. The previous night washes away like an old skin and disappears down the drain. She wraps herself in a big white towel and pats and rubs until she glows and tingles. With her hair still wet she drops onto her bed and is instantly asleep.

Rae sleeps deeply until awoken by a nightmare. She's running frantically over the Harbour Bridge in pouring rain pursued by a man. Below, the water has been replaced by rusty sheets of corrugated iron that crash and grind together as they role out to sea. No matter how hard she tries her legs barely move. She can feel the heat of the man's body as he reaches out to grab her.

She wakes screaming and tangled in the sheets. Her bladder is bursting and the sun is streaming through the window.

Rae showers again, cleans her teeth, then checks the phone.

There are ten messages. The first six are Dargie, "Where the hell are ya?"

The seventh is a man's voice she doesn't recognise. He asks if there is a Kate's mum. He gives his name and says if there is would she ring him. Rae has never heard of him. It's not Pam Palmer's father where Kate stayed all weekend. Panic leaps in her belly like a cat in a sack.

She rings the number without listening to the remaining messages.

The man isn't there but there's a mobile number to ring. She miss-keys three times before getting it right.

She can tell by the hollow hum in the background that the man's in a car hurtling along a road.

"Mrs McCarthy, you don't know me but I know you and your daughter from school. I have a daughter there too."

"Yes! What's happened?"

The man's voice fades as though he's going through a tunnel. Then drops out altogether.

Rae screams into the phone, then slams it down.

She dials again and once more hears the man.

He says he runs a small import-export business and gives a city address.

He hopes she doesn't mind him ringing but is she aware of the graffiti about her daughter near the school.

"What graffiti? What does it say?"

He hesitates. “‘If you want a fuck ring Kate McCarthy, xxxx xxxx’.” It’s their landline number.

Rae moans into the phone.

“And, ‘If you want drugs ring Kate McCarthy, xxxx xxxx’. Sorry Mrs McCarthy but I thought if...”

“It’s not true. None of it!”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

Rae sobs, and hangs up.

It’s not true. Not Kate! Not her. Some jealous, vindictive classmate’s done it.

Settle down, the voice says. Talk to Kate.

Rae rings the Palmers, gets Kate and tells her.

“Fucking bitches! I know who’s done it.” Kate yells.

Rae shouts back and tells her not to use such language.

“Everybody does, in the movies, on TV, on the radio everywhere!” Kate shouts and they are into an argument about language before Rae brings it back to the graffiti and tells her they have to clean it off.

“I can’t,” Kate wails. “Not in front of everybody. Mum, please? What we gonna do?”

Rae waits for a break in the string of passing kids going to school, then she crosses the road, whips out a broad brush from a plastic bag and with half a dozen quick strokes obliterates Kate’s name and the phone number.

She hears a whispered, “It’s her mum,” as she hurries away past a group of giggling teenage boys and girls.

That night Rae gets a phone call, a slurred voice, “I want fuckin’ Kate...nah, ah mean, not fucking Kate, drugs Kate. It’s mi mate who wants fuckin’ Kate”.

The caller laughs and snorts.

Rae hangs up, then rings Nola.

“What happened Saturday? You just disappeared,” Nola asks.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I’ve been worried sick. You shoulda rung me.”

“I’m ringing ya now.”

“Did you have a good night?”

“Yeah, fine. You?”

“Yeah. You sure you’re OK, you sound funny.”

“Everything’s real good. We’ll talk later.”

Jack sits under the sagging grapevine trellis, Rose by his side. He’s watching his mother-in-law as she trudges towards him along the uneven brick path of the garden. A plane thunders overhead.

All he can see is a massive bunch of flowers she’s just cut, her head above, arms around, and legs below. She takes the flowers to the chiller compartment in the back of the wagon, comes back and sits at the sun-cracked, wooden table and rubs green-stained hands together to clean them before trying to flatten her wild, grey hair. It bounces back immediately. She spreads her knees far apart, reaches for a bottle of water and drinks. Sweat runs down her neck into the hollow of her throat, then overflows and disappears in the deep valley between her breasts.

“Bloody hot!” she complains.

She could be fifty or seventy, a Greek peasant or an earth mother university types.

Another plane roars overhead and disappears beyond the end of the garden in the direction of the airport. Grace pours three mugs of country tea, creek-brown and bitter. She sets one in front of Rose, one in front of Jack and one in front of herself. She puts three slices of fruitcake on three plates. Rose looks at the cake, dark brown, shiny with sultanas and red with glazed cherries. She says it’s too much and she shouldn’t, but she does.

“Ta mum.”

She watches Grace avalanches three large spoonfuls of sugar into the bowl-size mug followed by a waterfall of milk. She sips and sighs.

Puss and Fluff weave in and out of table legs and human legs in a sinuous cake dance. They get pieces from Rose and Jack. A smile lifts the tight folds of Rose’s face. She puts her feet up, on a chair, examines her feet and thongs as though seeing them for the first time, wets the tip of a finger, wipes a spot from her big toe and sighs again.

Grace cuts herself another large wedge of cake and crams it into her mouth. They sit in the cool at the back of the house. The brick path leads under a jasmined trellis on the other side of which are Grace’s flowers. At the front of the house and to one side sits a double garage, once Malvin’s sole domain but now shared uncomplainingly with Grace and her flowers.

Rose looks across at her mother, her faded black cotton dress hangs around her like a collapsed spinnaker. Grace sips her tea. Her mug is twined with cornflowers. The unmatched saucer is a crazy paving into which has seeped a river of tea to feed the flowers around the rim.

The family has had many discussion about Grace's thieving, warning that she'll get caught and fined or go to jail. Maybe both. But she ignores them. None of their business.

Malvin comes through from the back of the house, large, florid and hot from work. He gets a beer from the fridge, snaps it open and drinks before sitting down. He grunts a greeting to no one in particular.

The sound of music approaches from the direction of the front door, then a bellow and a laugh. Johnnie's home from the pub. He slept on the bus and he slept on the train but he didn't miss his stop. A dirty and ancient transistor radio hangs from his hand belting out seventies rock. Gravity is winning a fight with his shorts, dragging them down over his bloated belly and non-existent hips to below the Plimsoll line of his navel. He pulls them up and stands swaying in the doorway, a far away look on his face.

"You made it all by yourself Grandad?" Malvin asks, a hint of derision in his voice.

Johnnie Walker ignores him, mumbles and scowl and hangs on to his radio.

Rose wrinkles her brow above her mug of tea.

Johnnie tugs a washed-out tee-shirt from his body to let in air and sits down in a cane chair. His legs stick out knobbly and scaly as a seagull's. Skin, the colour of tobacco, concertinas in elastic wrinkles around his knees and white blobs dot razor sharp shins and what is left of his calves.

"...One for the money

two for the show

three to get ready

and go man go..."

He wipes his itching nose with the back of his hand and reaches for a piece of cake. The plate is snatched away.

"Wash 'em Dad!" Rose says.

"It's my dirt!" Johnnie complains.

"An' it's my cake. Doesn't need dirt to make it taste better."

"...don't you, step on my blue suede shoes,

you can do anything but step on my blue suede shoes.

Blue, blue, blue suede shoes..."

Johnnie pulls himself to his feet, weaves his way into the bathroom.

“Blue, blue, blue suede shoes,

You can do anything but...”

He shuts the door.

He can be heard singing along with the radio behind the sound of the water.

He comes back ten minutes later hair flat to his head, skin shiny red and wearing a clean tee-shirt and shorts.

He sits down and gets his cake and a mug of tea.

“It’s a good job you scrub up well or you’d be a bad advertisement for old age,” Grace says

“I’m not old goddamn it... The best. The best,” he tells Malvin, remembering the music. “Elvis, Little Richard, Fats Domino:

“I’m gonna walk you home,

“Let me walk you home...” a gravelly voice with the remains of something much softer.

“Sonny Boy Williams, Josh White, Howlin Wolf...”

Malvin takes over the list wearily, “Memphis Slim, Bo Diddley, Son House.”

Johnnie Walker sings again: “Wanna be a Baptist preacher, so I don’t have to work.

“Wannabe a Baptist preacher, so...”

“The greats,” he mumbles.

Grace looks at her husband. Once she’d thought him the most handsome man in the world. He pushes escaping crumbs back into the corner of his mouth, licks his lips and rises unsteadily to his feet.

“Hang on a bit, get a feed inside yah before you take off, you’re like a bloody skeleton as it is.” She knows he won’t hang on, and watches as he wobbles off. She can hear the music from his room: “Wanna be a Baptist preacher, so I don’t have to work.”

Grace knows he’s lying on his bed and will soon be asleep.

It’s Saturday night at the Black and White coffee shop; Tansy wipes down the top of a little round table with a flourish and rearranges four shining steel chairs neatly around it. She turns on her heels to go to the kitchen but before she’s taken a couple of paces four people — two men and two women are sitting down.

Tansy whisks out her order pad, turns on her, ‘aren’t I sweet’ smile, and asks, “How are we today?”

The two suits are around thirty, one big across the shoulders and deep in the chest with a shaved head, the other, thin and pale with sideburns that look as though they are drawn on his jaws with black texta. He sports a tufty little beard under his lower lip. The women are skinny as peeled twigs. One shaven headed like her partner. The other a shorn, sleek blonde. All four are dressed in black.

Tansy reckons the suits will order focaccia with ham, capsicum, tomato and rocket while the two women will choose garden salads with sun dried tomatoes, shaved parmesan cheese, olives, a bread roll, and “Some water please”.

The men will each hand over a bottle of Chardonnay in a brown paper bag like they’re passing a football, then say “An’ open this will you?”

Each does as she predicts, more or less.

Tansy smiles, takes the wine and brings it back opened, and smiles again.

Blokes always think you’re trying to crack on to ‘em when you smile, an’ if you don’t smile the manager wants to know what the hell’s the matter with you.

Can’t bloodywell win. At the end of this shift she’ll be no better off than she was at the beginning because of the bastard who robbed her.

The crowd surges up and down King Street and cars slide along, stop lights pulsing, cool dude stereos thumping out base as heavy as the night.

An elderly guy, who sits writing each evening at the same table, indicates that he wants another cup of black coffee. He always wears a tee-shirt, shorts and is barefoot, even in winter. It’s his third cup. He insists the empty cups and saucers are left on the table, piled one on top of the other. When the third cup’s added to the pile he closes his notepad and leaves. He’s usually there three hours. Tansy takes the coffees to him, “There you are sir.” She smiles at the top of his head as she reads the copperplate handwriting on his A4 pad.

Marge, the boss, says he’s been coming for two years and that’s all he does, write. Never talks to anyone, just writes. “Might be the great Australian novel,” she says.

Tansy doesn’t profess to know much about literature but she does know that his is not the great Australian novel. In fact it is no kind of novel. It is gobbledygook: “Gilgamesh sunrise and the dog in the paddock. Rumfa. My mother. The train does not arrive why should it it because of the great pain in the world...” and so on.

Tansy doesn’t want to disillusion her boss so she says nothing — just like the author.

Marge is about forty, has pierced ears and nose, cropped grey hair and works like mad. She pretends to be tough but isn't.

Tansy pours herself a glass of water, gulps it, mops her forehead and rolls her eyes at Melissa, the other waitress, who's thin as a drinking straw and in her last year of an arts degree at Sydney Uni. She's into popular culture, vampire novels and sci-fi. Melissa smiles back her waif smile.

Marge beckons Tansy over. Tells her to take a dozen coffees down the lane out the back. She'll find a film crew shooting, either in a yard or in a house.

They're in the house. Tansy uses her bottom to shove open a gate that is supported more by its contact with the ground than its hinges. She makes her way up the cracked concrete path of the yard. A brilliant light is positioned outside an open window, shining in. She hears voices:

"If you want me to strip say so."

"So!" A man says,

"No," the woman replies.

"Bitch."

Tansy peers through the window.

The owners of the voices are standing by a bed about a metre apart. The woman, a few years older than Tansy, has pale brown skin, a mane of black curly hair falling to her shoulders and eyes that glow dark and defiant, even at a distance. The dress the man wants her to take off is scarlet and reaches down to her bare feet.

The man is tall, fair haired, good looking in a rough way.

They stand silently looking at each other. He's got a small gift box in his hand from which the woman takes a dangling red earring and attaches it to her ear. She's reaching for the second when the man drops the box

"Fuck," he groans and the woman starts to laugh.

"Cut!" an exasperated voice calls and Tansy is for the first time aware of other people in the room.

She pulls back from the window as the light is turned off and she goes hesitantly into the house, feeling like she's intruding on two lovers. The woman in the red dress sees her, calls out "Aha! Coffee!" and waves Tansy into the room.

Hands belonging to people she hadn't even noticed reach out, and the two long blacks, four cappuccino, one flat white and the five cafe lattes, disappear.

Everyone's talking but Tansy's can't pick up on what they're saying. She stands with the cardboard tray in her hands. Someone pays her and she remains, the money clutched in her fist.

She's now aware of a camera, more lights, a clapperboard. Then her eyes are drawn to the dark woman in the red dress who's talking to a large, flabby man with thin hair. Compared with her, everything else in the room is grey.

The man listens intently, both hands across his lips, as though holding back words.

The woman in the red dress glances up, sees Tansy still framed in the doorway and after some moments walks towards her.

"You been paid?" she asks.

Tansy grins, embarrassed.

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry. I was just sorta looking. What's the film?"

"A love story," the woman says.

"I thought it might have been from the bit I saw," she laughs. "I was watching through the window," Tansy says guiltily. "I felt like a peeping Tom but I couldn't help it."

"You were a peeping Tom."

Tansy blushes.

"So are movie makers. They peep for everybody." The woman smiles.

The fat man, the director, calls everyone together and Tansy backs out of the room, reluctantly, the cardboard coffee tray and the money still in her hand.

The light flares into life behind her, as she walks back down the garden to the gate. She stops, retraces her steps along the path until she's outside the window again, absorbed in watching how a story is created.

They start to film and this time he takes both earrings out of the box without stuffing it up.

He stands dangling them in front of the woman's face, smiling. They kiss.

"You taste of caramel gelato," he tells her.

"Bullshit! Whisky," she replies and they both laugh.

He holds her gently and rubs her nose with his.

"Does that turn Maoris on?" he asks.

"Depends on who's doing it to what Maori."

He holds her tighter.

"You'll crush my dress."

He unzips it. The red dress drops to the floor. She steps out of it and they roll backward onto the bed, land with a thwack and burst out laughing.

They kiss, gently at first.

“You’re right. It is whisky. Whisky gelato,” the man says, looking down on her. She hits him playfully.

Their kisses become passionate.

Suddenly the woman struggles free.

“No!” she shouts and rolls off the bed.

She backs against the wall panting.

The man grabs the dress from the floor and flings it in her face.

“Fuck you!” he yells.

“What the hell you doing?” a woman’s angry voice says from behind Tansy .

Tansy’s heart jumps.

She turns.

It’s Marge.

“Oh shit!”

“You’ve been gone over half a bloody hour. We thought you’d been mugged or raped or something. You’re delivering coffee not replacing Margaret bloody Pomeranz for the Movie Show. We’re rushed off our fucking feet.”

“I’m sorry. Didn’t realise...”

“Shutup out there!” a voice screams from the house.

Marge has already left, walking furiously down the path and out the gate. Tansy hurries after her.

The Black and White cafe is packed with impatient patrons. Marge and Melissa are running around trying to make them happy, while in the kitchen Jay the cook’s clattering pans and plates. He thinks all great chefs are temperamental and he aims to be a great chef.

“What happened?” Melissa hisses at Tansy.

“Sorry, got carried away.”

Tansy picks up four focaccia from the hatch, smiling at Jay who ignores her.

At ten-thirty when things have quietened down Marge gives Tansy an envelope, tells her to go home.

“Fuck you an’ your job,” Tansy says and leaves. Marge is tougher than she thought.

She walks a block down the street, her insides bubbling with anger. Just another waitressing job but it held body and soul together — well body anyway. She turns into a cafe, sits down on a bench at the open window, takes the money out of the envelope and counts the notes. Bugger it. Tansy gets a juice. She stabs the straw into the bottom of the glass until it is too crumpled to drink through.

A young, agitated man, with long dark hair in a pony tail, is passing the café. He stops suddenly, turns around, comes inside and stands next to Tansy. She looks up.

“Oh Malvin!” Tansy clamps a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“What happened? I went to meet you in the Black and White.”

“I lost the job.”

“Shit! What for?” Malvin sits down.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Well, I took too long to deliver some coffee.”

“Yeah, well that’s a sort of nothing for some people. What you gonna do?”

“Get another job I suppose. But they are hard to come by.”

Malvin buys himself a cup of black coffee and comes back to the table. He plonks his beefy body down next to Tansy, flicks his hair from the back of his neck, hands her a new straw. He blows on his coffee. Sips.

“Gran the same?” Tansy asks. “Mum an’ dad OK?”

“Yeah, more or less. It’s time you rang ‘em? Come home. It’s not fair on them or Gran and Grandad.”

“Don’t start. I’m not ready yet. They must know I’m alright.

“Why would they? What if you don’t turn up to meet me one day? I wouldn’t know what’d happened and where you were.”

“That won’t happen. I’m not ready to face ‘em. I need to sort myself out more before I can handle Gran.”

“Nobody can handle Gran. Least of all Grandad.”

“Yeah, well. What sorta shape’s she in?”

“Getting better.”

“An’ you?”

“Great.”

“Bullshit.”

“I will be.”

“When?”

“Same time as you probably.”

Malvin looks past Tansy into the street and the passing parade of women, all shapes, all sizes, all races.

“I’ll buy you one for Christmas,” Tansy tells him. “Still without?”

Malvin forces a smile. “I keep trying. Just never happens. I take someone out a coupla times then they disappear.”

“What you talk about when you’re with ‘em, you’re weird family? Your Gran?”

“Ah! Listen to you! When you gonna getta guy?”

“I don’t want one! You do.”

“It’s unnatural. You’ve never been out with anyone but Sam.”

“Sam wasn’t a boyfriend, he was a mate!” Tansy snaps.

“OK. OK.” Malvin lifts both hands in supplication. “You know what I mean. He was like one.”

“I was a kid for Christ’s sake. I didn’t want a boyfriend.”

“OK! But you’re not a kid now. What about some’a the guys at college?”

“They’re bloody hopeless, all into macho Gothic blokey stuff.”

Malvin shrugs. “Mum and Dad will be real pleased when they find out you’re in college.”

“I’m not sure I wanna go on with it.”

“Christ, why? You’ve got real talent.”

“The teachers push abstract all the time as though it’s the only thing in the world. It’s not my scene. And I can’t stand the gallery shit that goes with it.”

“You sure that’s not just an excuse ‘cause you can’t get your head round anything.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Tansy sighs.

They sit in silence.

“Before I lost my job I was watching some people making a movie. In fact that’s why I lost my job.” She shakes her head. “But it was amazing. The colour. The lighting. The actress had on this beautiful red dress. It was almost luminous, like one of those ancient illuminated manuscripts, or an Arabian court painting. It made me think about what I’m doing in my art. I’d like it to tell stories the way films do, with colour, light, people. But I can’t seem to get it.”

Malvin looks at her blankly.

Tansy smiles. “OK, enough. Back to home. I do feel bad about running away, abandoning Gran and the rest’a you, not telling mum and dad where I am. Everything.”

Malvin leans over and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Everybody’s found their own way of handling it. Grandad’s disappeared too in a way, an’ I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“How?”

“He’s pissed most of the time. Mum an’ dad don’t think of you as a missing person but they spend a time looking for you, which maybe isn’t as bad as it sounds. It gets ‘em away from Gran.”

Tansy smiles wryly. Malvin grins back and shakes his head.

“That business with the flowers keeps her going. But she’ll come a cropper.” Malvin shakes his head again, abruptly drains his coffee and stands. “I’ve gotta go. Meeting some mates in Petersham. Wanna come, listen to some music? Nice guys.”

Tansy, smiles. “No ta.”

“You OK for money?”

“Yeah, for the time being. Save it for your wedding.”

“Get lost.” Malvin taps her on the top of the head. “See you soon. Hope you get a job.”

“So do I. See you . An’ Malvin, get rid’a your pony tail. You’re a mechanic not a trendy lawyer. Makes you look a dickhead.”

He laughs as he walks out the door and waves to her from the street, then disappears into the crowd.

Tansy leaves a few minutes later. She wanders along King Street in the thinning crowd. Everybody is with someone, going to and coming from. She doesn’t want to go home. There will either be no one there, or Lizzie will be partying and playing her shitty music with the place full of people who are off their face with one thing or another.

Tansy stops outside a shop window dominated by a huge TV screen. It shows an orchestral concert, all formal dinner suits and long dresses. Musicians bow their strings passionately and silently while the brass section sit behind, instruments in hand, as though waiting an invitation to play at the party.

The TV camera returns repeatedly to a harpist, a side-on view, and Tansy becomes transfixed by the woman’s hands. She is wearing a dress with black sleeves and against a black background the detached white hands float back and forth. They flutter against the strings like birds in a cage, withdraw, then come back to hover and pluck. The hands stop in flight, fingers extended, palms open as they still the strings, then retreat, rest and return, to flutter once more against the cage, birds in slow motion flight, pinioned fingers releasing sound stillborn in the bright light of the silent shop window.

Tansy turns away and walks towards home. She passes on the opposite side of the road to the Black and White cafe where Marge and Melissa are stacking the tables and mopping the floor. A lone figure sits at a corner table, sipping a coffee and gazing into the street, Marge’s girlfriend.

Tansy re-runs the evenings events in her head. Something she’d said keeps coming back; “I’d like my painting to tell stories the way films do.”

Maybe this is the answer she's been looking for in college; story telling; writing, writing not painting. A film. A novel. Why not a novel? Put down everything that has happened. Get it out of her system. Free herself.

Stuff abstract art .

Stuff the gallery scene.

Maybe it's time to talk more with Malvin about the family. Time to talk with Gran.

An earlier thunderstorm has scoured the air. There's a smell of rain on bitumen. Gardens sparkle under the streetlights and outside the double garages and wide-as-motorway drives sleeping Mercs, BMWs and Toyota Land Cruisers are beaded in raindrops. Wallace is walking along happily, breathing in the damp air and singing to himself. Ahead of him the steel mass of the Harbour Bridge begins its arch across the water to the city. He's been in a north shore pub, listened to passable music, met a handsome woman who took him home to a pleasant north shore flat with a bedroom overlooking a Moreton Bay tree in which fruit bats climbed and screeched. She shared with him a body warmed and browned by the sun. Now he's heading home, tired and content.

A police car slides around the corner, jerks to a halt in front of him and two big cops climb out.

"Eh mate, we'd like a word with you !"

Wallace stops. "Sure."

They walk over.

Wallace's is aware of their guns, truncheons, handcuffs, big black boots and the fact that there is no else around.

The cops stand close, each slightly offside of him, a sergeant and a constable.

"A flat's been broken into. You fit the description of the bloke who's done it," the sergeant says.

"Not me mate. Don't know what you're on about!" Wallace protests.

"Empty your pockets," the sergeant tells him.

"I haven't done..."

"Didn't say you had, just empty 'em," the sergeant orders.

Wallace looks at him, then the constable, young and intense, ready, and hoping for anything. He takes out his wallet, hands it over to the constable, then his keys.

"You live at this address Wallace?" the constable asks, looking at the driving licence.

“Yeah.”

“What you doing round here?” He hands the wallet and keys back.

“No reason why I shouldn’t be.”

“What you doing round here? I asked.”

“Been with a woman all night.”

“She’ll vouch for you will she?”

“Probably not, she’s married.”

“I’m gonna ask you some more questions. You don’t have to say anything but whatever you do say may be used in evidence. Understand?” the sergeant says.

“Yeah, course I do, but you’re wasting your time.”

“What’s the name of the woman?”

“She called herself Kylie.”

“Kylie?” says the sergeant.

“Kylie,” Wallace repeats.

“Her second name?” the sergeant asks.

“Didn’t ask.”

“Wasn’t Kylie Minogue was it, the one we all know an’ love?” the constable smirks.

“Nah. Not that one officer,” Wallace replies in a resigned voice.

“Where’s she live?” the sergeant wants to know.

“Don’t know, up the road somewhere.”

“Where’s the stuff?”

“Told you, don’t know what yer on about,” Wallace looks from one to the other.

“You’d better come with us, have a bit of a talk.” The sergeant gives Wallace a push in the back towards the car.

“This is bloody stupid, a bloke has a night out an’ he’s accused of being a thief.”

The constable grabs Wallace by the back of his belt and helps him into the police car. The sergeant climbs in besides him and Wallace is conscious of his bulk, the heat of his body and the smell of beer.

The constable radios in to say they’ve got a suspect and he’s told a second person fitting the description has been seen near the water.

“See, told you it wasn’t me.” Wallace says indignantly.

“A dozen people might be pulled in before the nights out, so don’t get cocky,” the sergeant tells him.

The constable drives down the hill to the Harbour foreshore. They turn a spotlight on the grass sloping down towards the water but uncover nothing more than two entwined and embarrassed lovers before the car moves further along the road and level with Luna Park and its great, gaping mouth across the entrance. All is locked. Silent and dark except for dim security lights. The big dipper towers and twists like a gigantic cobra skeleton.

The constable takes his flashlight and tries unsuccessfully to find a way in.

“I know where there’s a gate. A mate used to do security. We’d come in the middle of the night, have a go on the slide, climb the big dipper an’ things.”

The sergeant looks at him questioningly. “Right oh, show us. But first...” he climbs out of the car, pulls Wallace with him and handcuffs him to his wrist. “Now, where?”

Wallace leads them to a small door at the rear, pulls out his keys and unlocks it. “Hope you’re not gonna hold this against me sergeant, I’m doing it to help yah.”

The sergeant pushes him in, bends double and struggles behind him through the narrow entrance. The constable follows.

They search among the rides and stalls, probing the dark corners with their flashlights.

“Did y’ever come here as a kid?” Wallace asks.

“Course I did.”

“Me too,” the constable adds.

“When’d you last have a go on the big dipper. Or the slippery dip?” Wallace asks.

“Wasn’t last fucking week, that’s for sure,” the sergeant says.

“It’s as much fun when you’re old as when you’re young. More,” Wallace tells him. “Walking the big dipper’s best.”

“Bullshit,” the constable replies.

“Nah. Great view. You should try it.”

“You’re a regular nutter.” The sergeant laughs.

“Nah, just fun.”

“You for bloody real?” he asks.

“Course. The up-and-down-rides are great too. But you can’t have music of course, gotta make it in your head, or just go around in silence and feel the wind in your face. It’s good without masses’a people. Like your own private fun park. You can go on things you’d be too embarrassed to go on if other people were here.”

The sergeant nods or grunts or laughs at each comment. “OK then, set things up.”

Wallace sorts out the power and the sergeant handcuffs him to a stanchion while he squeezes into a dodgem car and orders the constable into another. They race round and round until they get bored with running into each other.

They try out the carousel. Each climbs onto a horse. Up and down, round and round they go. They wave their guns in the air and yell, "Yippee!"

Wallace stands watching and laughing to himself and wondering how he can get away.

When they tire of the roundabout he tells them they should try walking over the big dipper.

The sergeant unlocks Wallace from the stanchion and fastens the cuffs to his wrist again.

"OK, I feel adventurous."

Wallace takes them to the big dipper and climbs under the barrier, pulling the sergeant behind him. The three walk up the first rise, the constable on one side of the track and Wallace on the other side with the sergeant in tow.

"You gonna have to unlock me, it's dangerous like this," Wallace pleads.

"No bloody way. We're going back," the sergeant wheezes breathlessly. "My asthma."

"Oh, come on. Sarge!" the constable pleads.

The sergeant unlocks Wallace. Righto constable, he's your responsibility. He slowly retraces his steps and Wallace and the constable keep climbing. The fun fair falls away below and the nearby Bridge looks like the bigger brother of the big dipper. Small boats scud like luminous insects across the dark surface of the Harbour. Beyond, rise the sparkling cliffs and dark canyons of the city.

On the big dipper all is silent except for the music of wind on steel. Wallace feels like a bird.

"Stop! Stop."

Wallace turns. The constable's crouched on the track, clinging to the rails. "Stop," he says feebly, "it's too high, we're going back".

Wallace laughs, waves and keeps going. He looks over the side. The sergeant is whizzing down the slippery dip clinging to a mat, his cap jammed onto his head. He becomes airborne at the crest of a bump, lands on his back with his feet in the air and reaches the foot of the slide in a tangled blue ball.

Wallace starts the descent. A dip. Then a crest. Then another dip. He stops. He stands upright at the edge and pauses, ready to jump.

Nola follows Wayne up the concrete echoing steps of the flats and into a cave with a fridge, a sound system and a bed that isn't big enough for both of them. They drink cold wine, peel off hot clothes and roll onto the bed. She lies on her back looking up at his body, arching above her, shining

brown, lean and muscular. His legs stretch out straight behind him, his arms extend, his chest and belly curve towards her like a drawn bow.

“You’re beautiful,” she says, running her fingernails between his shoulder-blades.

He dips his head like a young animal drinking at a pool, then lowers himself slowly until his mouth reaches her breast. He touches the nipple gently with the tip of his tongue.

“You’re beautiful too.”

Rae wipes her face and coughs and cries. Bile and tears bitter in her mouth. She leans wearily against the rusting, rattling iron fence where Jason had propped her before disappearing down the lane. She tries to work out where she is and how she got there. Slowly, in blurred pictures, she remembers the pubs and Nola and the drinking and the crowds that disappeared. She feels as stupid and angry as a fifteen year old who hasn’t heeded her mother’s advice and has for the first time got drunk and has for the first time been with a boy and can’t remember what it was like and is full of disgust at messing it all up because it wasn’t wonderful like she’d planned.

She checks her bag. Everything’s there, money, a return ticket. She looks at her watch. Two a.m. The last train’s long gone. Where the hell’s Nola? Tucked up in some bed with the other guy, whatever his name. Bitch, leaving her like that. But then Nola might be dead. Raped and murdered. Or murdered and raped.

Rubbish! her other voice tells her. Nola’s survived many an encounter. It’s yourself you have to worry about.

She’s cold and a mess. She fumbles in her bag, finds a tissue and tries to wipe the stains from her pants. She digs out a brush and attacks her hair with savage strokes but soon wearies and thrusts it back inside the bag.

Rae begins a weaving walk down the lane in the direction of the street lights, trying to adjust to the movement under her feet. A gang of young men walk along the road across the end, drunk and shoving each other like schoolboys in a mock fight. She leans against a wall until the sound of their shouting and swearing is swallowed by the buildings. She goes into the main street and turns in the opposite direction to which the yobbos have gone, her feet on the ground, head anywhere and everywhere, knowing only that she’s got hours to kill, but unwilling to find a cafe because she’s such a mess but she needs something to take the foul taste out of her mouth.

Go on, get a coffee, the voice advises.

In this mess? she replies. Fresh air’ll have to do. She wanders in and out of people and streets and lanes, dark places and light places, until there’s no people left, only buildings and streets and

steep wearying steps. She realises she is heading in the direction of the Harbour Bridge, the lights curving over the dark glistening water like a bleached rainbow.

She's got memories of the Bridge and a wind blowing over it and through her hair. There'd been boats on the Harbour and a big ship had sailed underneath with coloured boxes stacked on deck. She was walking; with her mother, who'd worn a black shiny raincoat that was cold and hard when she leaned her cheeks against it. Her dad was on the other side of her and the three of them were holding hands and laughing in the rain. The footpath was straight and went on for ever and ever and she thought they would never reach the other side. They went to Luna park. She'd ridden on a red and white horse which smiled all the time. She went round and round and kept passing her mum and dad, their wet face looking up at her. She'd had a toffee apple that stuck to her teeth. She'd never been so happy.

Rae stops walking and looks over the side of the Bridge into the shiny, windy darkness. Water splashes her cheeks and hangs in her hair as it blow from the Harbour into the sky.

She finds her wandering way to Luna Park. The great head is sleeping, a gate across its gobbling mouth entrance, but the laughing manic eyes are wide open. Rae can hear the giggles and laughter as it dreams. She can smell the hot dog and candy floss sweetness of its breath. She wants the shiny horse that smiled at her as a child. She wanders the perimeter, finds a door her mother and father have left open, and goes in. The horse is waiting on the carousel. She mounts the steps, puts her arms around its neck. Rae fumbles with her foot in a stirrup and swings astride its back. The saddle is hard and cold between her thighs. She grasps the reins, digs in her heels and begins to laugh.

Wallace needn't have risked the jump. By the time the constable reached the bottom of the big dipper the sergeant has received a message saying the culprit for the break-in has been arrested in possession of the stolen goods.

But Wallace doesn't know this as he drops through space. There is a rush of air and a terrifying surge in his stomach. The red and white canopy below hurtles towards him and he hopes to god it holds. Moments later he lands with a thwack that knocks the air out of his body. He skids down a few metres then stops. He lies looking up at the raining sky. He moves body and limbs, a bit at a time. Everything is working. Then he lowers himself over the edge.

An angel is standing before Rae looking on with compassion. It came from nowhere. A modern day angel without wings, appearing just like an ordinary man so as not to frighten her. A beautiful, young man-angel, with long hair. There is just one tell-tale sign that he, or it, is an angel, a Celtic cross, dangling from an ear. He stands before her, arms down by his side. She waits for him to say

something. Maybe her mother and father sent him to be with her in this place where she'd been so happy. The angel still doesn't speak. He just stands looking at her with a strange angel look. She hadn't thought death would be like this, sitting on a carousel in the early hours of a Sunday morning having past away suddenly or been raped and murdered. Maybe she needs to identify herself. She struggles down from the horse and walks shakily over to the angel.

"I'm Rae McCarthy"

"I'm Wallace William."

The angel steps forward and is about to shake hands with Rae when she suddenly turns her face away and vomits. The acid bitter bile of a thousand vodkas and orange sears her throat and nose.

She isn't dead after all. This man, Wallace William stands looking at her as she sits on the steps of the carousel wiping her mouth and crying. She gets up, walks over to a flaky paint dodgem car and gets in. She bumps her knee. It hurts and she rubs it, but at least she's stopped crying. She feels stupid.

"I'm too drunk to drive."

Wallace climbs into the dodgem car next to hers.

"You all right?"

"Course not. I thought I was dead."

"What was it like?"

"Better than being sick and pissed."

"Want to go for a ride in my car?" He grips the steering 224

.

She shakes her head. "Not unless you take me home."

He laughs. "I'll take you for a coffee and you can tell me what happened. If you want."

He swings the steering wheel back and forth in his hands as though cruising the city. "Where too? Darlington? The Cross? Paddo?"

"I'm a mess. Look at me. Look at my clothes, my hair," Rae states the obvious.

"Yah. You're a bit ruffled."

She pulls a hairbrush out of her bag and attacks the tangle. It is like a blackberry bush.

Wallace climbs out of his dodgem car and holds out his hand. Rae passes the brush to him and he gets in next to her.

"Turn round."

Wallace begins to brush, slowly and clumsily until he gets the hang of it.

"This is stupid," Rae says. "I want to go home."

“It is, but you can’t. Not yet anyway.”

Nola is woken by the steady drumming of rain in the street below. It is cool and steely, dropping directly from a grey sky. She pulls the sheet up around herself and the slumbering body of Wayne and listens to the sound of water. She stretches and lies for some moments in the pool of warmth, then lifts the sheet into a tent and peers inside at Wayne; the white cheeks of his un-sunned buttocks rise like twin moons above the brown valley of his back. She kisses him between the shoulder blades. “Thanks.”

Wayne murmurs and rolls over to face her. For a moment there is a blank look in his eyes, then he smiles, unsure. He touches her and she squeezes his hand, quickly, then let's go.

“I’m going.”

“Nah! Stay a bit.”

“I can’t.”

She clutches her clothes to her from off the floor, swings her legs out of bed and picks up her silver-tipped boots.

“I’ll wake Rae.”

“Can I ring ya?”

“Nah.”

“Why not?”

She walks out of the bedroom, showers quickly, gets dressed, and then taps on the other bedroom door. Someone moans sleepily from inside. She taps again, and pushes the door open. The room stinks of sleep and unwashed clothes. Jason’s stretched out on a rumpled bed, his head buried under a pillow. Nola shakes him hard.

“Where’s Rae?”

Jason mutters and struggles to comprehend.

“Did she get the last train?”

“D’know.” he mumbles.

“What did you do to her?”

“It’s what she did to me. She spewed on my new shirt!”

“So you left her!”

Jason doesn’t answer

“You shit!” She drags her phone from her bag, rings Rae and gets her voicemail.

“Christ she’s a grown woman, She’ll be all right. ” Jason tells her in a cigarette and beer-furred voice. “I din hurt her.”

“Sorry! It was great. Goodbye,” she says to Wayne who is standing in the bedroom door with a sheet around him. Then she’s gone, running down the steps and into the wet street.

“You might not be a real angel but you’re the next best thing.”

Rae is sitting with Wallace in a Kings Cross café, sipping coffee and nibbling toast that oozes warm butter. She sniffs. Smiles. The butter shines on her lips. Outside its raining.

Wallace had never been called an angel before. Lots of other things, but never an angel.

He looks at her over the rim of his steaming cup. She’s nice looking. Old, but not bad. Bit overweight. Her smile is gentle. Desperate though.

“What were you doing on top of the carousel?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Go on,” she cajoles

He tells her.

When he’s finished she bites another piece out of the toast. Sips her coffee.

“You’re right, I don’t. What were you really doing? I believe a bit of it. That you were hiding from the cops. Don’t believe you jumped though.” Rae’s had enough of blokes who are involved with cops and robbers. “What you hiding from?”

Wallace shrugs, tucks his hair behind his ear.

“Nobody believes half the things I say. Even when it’s true. But what about you? What were you doing sitting on a carousel in the middle of the night talking to yourself?”

He waits. She tells him, what she can remember.

He believes her.

“You’re too old to be young.”

“Oh thanks.”

“I didn’t mean old,” he draws out the last word. “I mean too old, to be young and innocent. Young and foolish.”

“I wanted it. I just didn’t want it the way he did it. I didn’t want us both to be drunk.”

“How do you want it?”

“I don’t any more.”

“You sure?”

“You’ll laugh at me if I tell ya.”

“Nah. I’m a sensitive new age guy. Don’t tell me y’hadn’t noticed”

“I wanted it to be the start of something.

“You’re looking for a full-time man.”

“I’ve gotta full-time man.”

“Ya want another as well as that one?”

“Christ no. Instead of that one. You got a girl?”

“I’ve met someone I like. But she’s not my girl. You’ve got a man but not a husband?”

“That’s right. My husband pissed off. Wasn’t even with some young thing. Just pissed off. I think that made it worse. That’s what seems to happen. Then I met Dargie.”

“Who’s he?”

“The one I have now. We have a relationship. He’s a sort of businessman. What the papers call a colourful Kings Cross identity.”

Wallace nods.

“I was working in a restaurant and he’d come in often with other guys. Handsome, in a tough-looking way. A generous tipper. One night a customer was waiting outside for me when we closed. He was fortyish, wouldn’t take no for an answer. You’ve got to be careful when they’re regulars, try to get rid without offending ‘em. But he wouldn’t go. ‘Just let me take you for a drink,’” she says, mimicking the man. “It was getting awkward. He’d got me bailed up on the footpath and it was late and nobody was around. Anyway, Dargie came out of the restaurant and told him to piss off. Then he offered me a lift home. I was glad to get away. He was fine. Just dropped me at home and said goodnight.

“The next week the bloke with the beard was there again. There was the same performance. Dargie came along and this time he sorted the bloke out. It wasn’t very nice. That shoulda been a warning to me. He took me home again. My daughter was away staying with a friend and this time I invited him in for a drink. That was the beginning.

“He made me feel wanted again. Gave me security. I didn’t realise how secure until I…” She stops. “It doesn’t matter.”

She shrugs, picks up her empty coffee cup and puts it down again.

“Want another?” Wallace asks.

“You don’t have to hang around on my behalf. You’ve been kind. I’ll just sit and wait till the train comes.”

Wallace looks at her quizzically.

“OK then, black, please.”

Tansy organises to meet Malvin in the beer garden of Tom's pub. She gets there first as usual, buys a schooner of beer and sits at a chipped metal table between a dripping water cooler and a roller door that leads into the lane. She takes a discarded cigarette packet from the foot of a sparsely-leafed rubber tree struggling to survive in a forty-gallon drum, folds it a couple of times and pushes it under a leg to stop the table wobbling. The trees roots have split the rusty sides of the drum and it looks ready to do a to runner.

Tansy sips her beer and thinks of a Four Corners video that Malvin has lent her. A journalist interviewed a number of people in the street where Sam was shot; a mother who was feeding her baby; two brothers whose bedroom looked out to where the car had crashed into the fence. By the time Malvin comes wandering in she's almost finished her drink.

"OK if we go somewhere else?" she asks.

"Wherever you want, it's your patch."

They turn off King Street Tansy into Camperdown Memorial Park and find a quiet spot and sit with their backs to the warm stone wall.

"It was so hard seeing footage of Gran an' you. An' those people who shoulda' been witnesses. It's unbelievable the cops could get away with that. Those people lived just across the road from where the car ended up and saw everything that happened once it'd crashed. The journalist had no problems finding witnesses, the cops didn't want to," Tansy says.

"The witness's evidence would've raised a lotta questions and caused the cops big problems.

"If Sam never got outa the car like the cops claimed, why was there a big pool a' blood in the middle of the road that the people talk about in the video? Why was his leg broken? An' why were those shorts that Sam had bought a day before when I was with him, ripped through in the backside like he'd been dragged along the road? Seeing him wearing 'em and thinking of 'em in the cupboard an' Gran taking them into her room every night ..." Tansy shudders.

"If the prosecution had asked a few obvious questions, an' the judge hadn't been biased, the whole thing would have ended up different."

Dargie O'Doherty strains, grunts, grimaces, grits his teeth. His face turns red. Once, twice, three times, four times, five times, six time he pushes the dumbbells towards the sky, then drops them with a clang and gets up from the bench. He's recently changed his training routine from a high number of repetitions with relatively light weights, to a low number of repetitions with weights that he can only just handle at a maximum of six repetitions. He has read in a men's fitness magazine that this is the absolutely sure-fire way to build muscle mass and strength. His already broad shoulders have become even broader.

He wipes his saturated stubble head of greying hair with a towel and paces up and down for thirty seconds before completing his third and final set: one, two, three, four, five, six hard straining reps.

He gets up again, wipes his head and neck and stands in front of the full length mirror checking himself out, first full on, then sideways. His big arms hang by his side, squeezing out of a black sweat-wet tee-shirt. Dargie likes what he sees, except for the wrinkles. Not bad for a bloke who's getting on a bit, lots of young guys in the gym would kill for a body like his. And the muscles aren't just for show. He uses them. The face scowling at him from the mirror is set in a craggy head, which is still handsome but can be frightening, very frightening. He flexes his biceps. Big. But at his age more than muscle power is needed to secure an economic future.

A young guy wanders over to talk footie. He's built like the proverbial brick shit house. Dargie loves sharing his training knowledge. He enjoys talking to people, telling them stories, showing off, bragging about his exploits. Although this guy's less than half Dargie's age Dargie knows that he's scared of him, or would be if push came to shove. Dargie's stronger than almost anybody in the gym. There's not many can bench press three hundred pounds. Women are impressed with a man who takes care of himself and can take care of them. You gotta let 'em know you're strong, not just muscles, but as a man. His latest bit of on the side gym chick is twenty-one. She's not working-out today but when she is guys can't take their eyes off her — when they think Dargie's not looking. She's got the roundest, tightest arse Dargie's ever seen. One cheek in each hand, bewdiful! OK, he's not a five times a night man any more, but he gives quality. Women like to be seen with him because of his reputation. They get a thrill out of it. And he's good company, a bit of fun.

Dargie showers, soaps himself until he's like a snowman, then stands under the stream of water, letting the heat ease the ache in his muscles.

He towels himself dry; rolls deodorant under his arms and in his groin then gets dressed, black tee-shirt, black slacks, black socks, shiny black shoes.

The noise at the Paddo pub is deafening. Dargie sticks a finger in his ear and shouts down his phone. Every time someone walks by he is jostled. Nobody has any manners any more. They need teaching some.

His sunnies sit on top of his shaved head like a knight's raised visor. His his summer gear of black is like his winter gear of black except for the tight tee-shirt to show his muscles rather than a tight sweater to show his muscles. Neither can conceal the fact that at fifty three he has the beginnings of a paunch.

"I said where the fuck you bin?" he yells again.

"Bullshit you was. I was ringing all weekend. Why didn't cha answer then?"

He can't understand half of what Rae is saying and yells at her to speak up. It's almost impossible to hear above the noise of drinkers leaning against the wall in the passageway between the bottle shop and the bar.

"Anyway, get yourself inta town and meet me here at the Paddo...I know it's late...Right... Good...I've got something for ya. Nah, a surprise."

Out in Ashtown Rae writes a note to Kate telling her she'll be home late, not to worry about the graffiti any more and lotsa love, Mum.

She's apprehensive. She grabs her coat and bag and hurries across the road to the station just in time to catch a train. The carriages are almost empty. She sits at the back in a corner, slides some lipstick on and combs her hair. She'll just tell Dargie about the graffiti and that she's been having problems with Kate all weekend and hope to god that he believes her. If he knew what had happened Saturday night she'd be dead meat.

Rae gets a cab from Central Station. Oxford Street is crowded. There's a big gay party on somewhere and the streets are full of men in leather and latex. Leather chaps, with bums hanging out, leather vests revealing muscular arms, leather caps atop bleached, blond cropped hair; tiny shiny shorts, flesh and pierced bodies; showing and seeing.

The lean African driver of the cab is indifferent to the scene. He drops her at the pub and his eyes are cloudy and preoccupied as he gives her the change.

The doors to the packed bar are open wide and drinkers are continually being pushed onto the pavement as more go in. She squeezes through the heat. You don't have to do this, the voice says in her head.

It's all right for you to talk, Rae tells it. Come up with an alternative, don't just criticise.

She sees Dargie. He's standing at the bar with two other guys. Somebody must have told a funny story because they're all laughing like kookaburras. He sees her, nods and smiles. He has a charming smile, pity about the other things.

As she reaches them the barmaid produces a huge bunch of flowers from under the bar with a flourish and hands them to Dargie. He beams and with another flourish he hands them to Rae.

For some moments she stands, looking at the flowers, then at Dargie, then back again, waiting for something to happen, some explanation.

"You like flowers don't you?" He looks to his mates and the barmaid for approval and they grin.

Rae leans forward and kisses him on the cheek.

"They're lovely."

Dargie introduces her to the two men. One is called Frank. He is dark and thick-set, with a face so beer bloated he looks like he's going to burst. He's about fifty, although it's hard to tell with that face. He spends half his life at the Paddo and the other at the Dockside Hotel in Balmain.

The other guy is somewhere between forty and fifty, tall, lean and hard looking, but handsome with fair, neatly cut hair. She doesn't catch his real name, but the others call him Stretch. He insists on buying her a drink and expresses mock dismay when she only wants a mineral water.

"Have Bloody Mary," he suggests.

Rae shudders at the thought, "Mineral water," she insists.

He eyes her off when he hands over the drink.

After a few minutes small talk Dargie takes her aside and puts his arm around her.

"You staying the night?"

"Can't. Had a bugger of a time with Kate all weekend."

She tells him about the graffiti and he's unusually sympathetic, but persistent.

"She's a big girl now. Gotta learn how to look after herself. Come on. I'll take you out t' dinner."

Rae weakens. She doesn't fancy the late ride home on the train and there's Buckley's chance of Dargie driving her.

"I'll ring Kate."

Kate's not home so she leaves a message.

Dargie takes Rae to a seafood restaurant at Bondi and they sit outside in the warm night air looking at the sea and the sliver of a new moon sliding in and out of the clouds.

Dargie can be real nice at times.

Rae sips a glass of cold white wine and looks across at him. He's watching the parade of beautiful, brown, half naked young. Rae wonders if she tried really hard could she lose enough weight to wear a bikini again.

Some of the women give Dargie the eye — at least he thinks they do. He's feeling generous and buys a second bottle of wine but Rae can't handle any more so he drinks it himself.

He leaves the car where it is over-parked at a meter and they walk slowly along Campbell Parade towards his flat on the top floor of a 1930s sculpted red brick building. Rae's still clutching the flowers.

"I've got a surprise for you," he tells her, slurring his words and wobbling as he walks.

Knew you was up to something, Rae thinks. "What is it?"

"Tomorrow. Tell ya tomorrow."

At the flat he flops onto the bed and flicks his shoes off.

"Hurry up," he calls as he struggles to get his pants off. Rae lingers over a shower and Dargie's asleep and snoring by the time she goes into the bedroom.

She puts on a cotton dressing gown, goes to the window, leans out and listens to the sea.

Next morning Rae is woken by a blinding sun shining through the windows. The sea shimmers silver and board riders bob on a slight swell like seals as they wait for a wave.

Rae makes Dargie breakfast, toast and jam and fruit juice. Remembering the reed-slim brown bodies of the night before, she has only a glass of water and coffee.

"What's the surprise?" she asks. "You said you'd tell me this morning."

"It still is this morning," he teases. He's worse for wear but making an effort to be nice. He puts on new shorts and tee-shirt and tells her they're going for a walk. They set off along the cliff top path in the direction of Bronte Beach, dodging the glistening bronze joggers. Dargie breaths the ozone-packed air like it's a health food supplement and his muscles stand out like rocks. He tells Rae that a woman in the gym told him he had the body of a thirty year old and didn't believe him when he said he was fifty three. He doesn't mention the fact that she is his one on the side woman.

Oh yeah, Rae thinks, but she has to admit he looks good. She's still trying to guess what all this is about, but it's nice anyway. They keep going, past Bronte beach and up the hill on the other side until they reach Waverley cemetery. Dargie leans on a stone angel and grins.

"What you think eh?"

Rae looks at the ancient gravestones with their cliff-top view of the sea, then back to Dargie, hoping to find some clue to what he's on about. Maybe he's bought the whole lot and is going to develop it.

“You can nearly see New Zealand. But seems a waste of a view to me,” she says.

“I didn’t bring you here for that. I brought you to make a business proposition.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. You need something to keep you occupied, keep you outa mischief.”

Rae wonders for a sickening moment if he’s found out about the weekend. But no, his reaction wouldn’t have been as mild as this. She’d probably have been tossed her off the cliff.

“You like flowers!” Dargie says, and continues without giving her a chance to reply. “Everybody likes flowers. Look at ‘em on the graves. Admitted there’s not many because it’s an old cemetery, so not many funerals. Right? But some cemeteries have lotsa funerals and lotsa flowers, which are all wasted.”

Rae looks at him perplexed.

“We could make a nice living out of re-cycling flowers, get a team going.”

“You mean stealing ‘em?” Rae asks in disbelief.

“Nah. It’s not stealing, it’s extending their life. They just die left where they are,” Dargie counters.

“Where on earth did you get that idea?”

“Thought it up. I was looking for a new business, something a bit quieter than what I’m doing. I’m not gonna be young forever. Frank heard of someone doing it, some old woman, an’ I thought, bingo! That’ll do. Far as I know there’s just her. If she’s the only competition we’ll see her off. I’d set you up as boss, get you a van, some premises somewhere. Find the retail outlets. What you think?”

“That’s awful. It’s stealing from the dead,” Rae replies.

“Ah, come on! It’s the sort of thing the greenies would support if they’d thought of it first. People recycle bottles, wood, plastic, all sorts of things, why not flowers?”

“Still doesn’t seem right.”

“You could keep the van for your own use outside work time. Save you travelling on that train late at night an’ being mugged or something. The money’d give you independence.”

Rae looks at one of the stone angels on a grave, did it wink, or did she imagine it?

“How about I take you to Botany Cemetery, you’ll get more idea of the potential.”

“I don’t like cemeteries. I don’t wanna be reminded of death all the time,” Rae protests.

Dargie won’t take no for an answer. He sweet-talks her all the way back to the flat, then in the car all the way to Botany cemetery.

Dargie parks on the shoulder of the road across from a jungle of lantana and pampas grass on waste land. He leads Rae through the gate of the cemetery and along a concrete path dotted with struggling paperbark trees.

“You’ll never look at a cemetery in the same way again once you start the job,” Dargie tells Rae.

“It gives me the creeps, all this sacred heart of Jesus stuff, crosses and angels,” she says.

“Forget that. It’s the flowers we’re interested in.”

He takes her by the arm and guides her along the path.

“Like ‘em?” he asks, pointing to a section free of headstones and angels but with row upon row of brightly coloured flowers.

“They look beautiful,” Rae says as they set off towards them across the grass.

As they get closer, something about their colour and freshness doesn’t seem right. She squats when they reach the first row and gently touches the pink petals of a fuchsia.

“They’re artificial!” she says, and starts to laugh.

“Oh! Er...yeah, they use them a lot these days. Not much good for us a’course. The odd bunch is all right but it’s the fresh ones we’re gonna need. Frank said he’d heard the Itie mausoleums are good for fresh flowers.”

They keep walking and Dargie keeps talking, explaining how good it will be once they get the business going. The road gradually takes them up to the top of a ridge.

“See how the bloody Protestants have the best places. They’re all up here with good views and us Mick’s are down there where they can’t see a damn thing”

“They’re all dead as each other.”

“That’s not the point. Them on the ridge think they’re closer to God.”

“Didn’t know you was religious.”

“I’m not, it’s just that Protestants feel so bloody superior.”

Rae wishes she did.

They continue their sweep of the cemetery, checking out each section, including family vaults. Just like Dargie’s mate, Frank said, they have lots of fresh flowers.

“Botany’s not much, to be honest with you, it’s old, not many new graves. But there’s forty six cemeteries in Sydney. I checked it. Think of all the flowers, must be hundreds of thousands of fresh flowers every day. And with a fleet of vans, you could cover all of ‘em. What dya think?”

“What about a station wagon instead of a van?”

“We’ll see,” says Dargie.

In her garden Grace is looking at the drops of water glistening on the leaves in the morning sun. She has a bucket of chicken feed in one hand. The other hand is tucked into the folds of her skirt. Her feet in her rubber thongs are wet, muddy and cold. But standing like this gives her a feeling of deep pleasure, which begins somewhere in the centre of her belly and spreads outwards. It's almost sexual in its intensity. It hovers, low, and warm. She closes her eyes. A dove coos. From one of the neighbouring houses a child sings out. Grace goes into the chook house and feeds the birds as they frantically fall over her feet and each other.

The sounds and smells take her back to her Queensland and her black-haired, broad-beamed, fierce tempered mother. Chooks and incense, a strange combination.

Grace's mother, Dario, was a young widow living in Cairns, Tropical North Queensland, when she met an itinerant worker, Jock McKenzie, the man who was to become Grace's father. They were second generation immigrants who, despite their vastly different backgrounds, fell in love and married.

Her mother kept a white and blue figure of the Virgin Mary on top of a china cabinet. Jesus was nailed to a cross on the wall behind, his eyes rolling skywards. The two objects of veneration were permeated with the smell of incense and an oil lamp. Grace has ever since associated the smells with death and grief.

Each month her mother visited the grave of her late husband Aleksy and took along young Grace who watched as she replaced the dead flowers then knelt and kissed a faded glassed-in photo of a man with a neat black moustache and solemn face. The photo had yellowed at the edges where the tropical rains had seeped in. Grace would carefully lift a slippery glass bottle of oil that was kept behind the headstone and refill a lamp.

Her mother took her to a Greek Orthodox church, a place of drifting incense, and behind the smoke, the terrifying figure of the enormous priest with a black beard down to his big belly.

Her father didn't seem to mind any of it.

One day he returned after working away for two months when he had said he would be gone for two weeks. Not a dollar had he sent. Not a letter. He walked into the yard as though he had only been gone since morning, yelled out a greeting to little Grace and swept her up in his arms as she ran to him. He moved to hug Daria who was sitting on a box cleaning the last but one of their

stringy chooks she had just killed to make a soup. She stood, and when he was within arms length she swung the dead bird and brought it down on top of his head with such force that its guts burst. Daria advanced on her retreating, entreating, fickle husband battering him with the dead bird until he fled, feathers and blood and intestines draping his head and shoulders.

They made up again like they always did after battles.

Grace's relationship with chooks was like that, times of pleasurable sounds and smells, and blood and shit.

The very first chickens were bought for her by her father when she was about three. She had her favourite, Peep, which she would pursue around the garden in an effort to carry her. One Sunday when Grace was dressed in her best for church she couldn't be found. Her mother discovered her in the shed. Chook shit and blood matted her newly curled hair and beautiful, just-washed-and-ironed, dress. In her arms Grace clutched a very wet and very dead Peep. She had tried to make the bird drink from the water trough.

Grace shakes smiles and shakes her head at the memory. She finishes feeding the chooks, fishes a pair of secateurs from a bum bag and begins to cut flowers for Sam.

Tansy yawns her way into the kitchen; the warmth of the sun comes through the open door along with the sound of doves in the jacaranda tree. Her mouth tastes like an ashtray, her head aches and there's no food anywhere. She rescues a crust of bread from its wrapper in the bin, toasts it, and sits on the doorstep nibbling. Landlord the tabby cat, so named because regardless who moves in and out of the share house, he is always there, is curled up in a cool nest among the ferns. She calls him; he half opens his eyes then closes them. Tansy reluctantly decides she needs to shop. She rakes some money together from various corners of her room and steps into the street.

On the way to the store she sees something that jerks her out of her lethargy, a man with long dark hair and a Celtic cross earring. He turns into a Job Start office. She follows. He has disappeared into a booth by the time she gets inside, but it has to be him. She stands, unsure what to do next.

"Can I help?" a woman asks.

"Er, no, no thanks," Tansy turns and walks out.

She waits and watches. She's gonna scream "Cops"! "Thief!" "Rape!" Grab him by hair. Scratch his eyes out. Stick the Celtic cross up his nose.

Half an later he comes out. It is him. Tansy follows him around the corner into King Street, keeping a few paces behind. They walk twenty meters. Thirty meters. Fifty meters. All the time Tansy's gorge is rising. A hundred meters. Two hundred meters. Wham! She belts him hard between the shoulder blades. Muscle and bone under his shirt. His head nearly flies off as he pitches forward.

"Arsehole!"

He stumbles, regains his footing and turns, screaming, ready to fight or die.

"Get fucked you ma...!"

He recognises her.

"Bloodystinkingthief!" Tansy screams.

Wallace retreats a couple of paces and faces her.

"I didn't keep the keys," is the first thing he can think of.

"You shit! What about my rent money?"

"I'll get it back."

"No you won't, the cops will!"

"They're busy with rising crime."

"You think that's a joke?"

"Ah come on." He grins.

"Why don't you steal from the rich?"

"What sort of morality's that?"

"Better than yours."

"I was gonna get it back to you, honest."

"Bull — shit!"

"Truly."

They stand face-to-face in the middle of the footpath.

He smiles.

"I can't believe this."

"It's no use standing here arguing," he says.

"I'm gonna get the cops."

"Cops never come when you need 'em. You'd wait all day."

Tansy wants to scream.

“I’ll shout you a beer,” he says.

“With my money.”

“That went ages ago. I’m really sorry, honest. I was desperate.”

“You were desperate! What d’ you think it made me?”

“Desperate?”

He smiles again, self effacing.

“What if I’d been evicted? And what about Liz’s CDs?”

“They’re still at home. She’s got lousy taste.”

“I know.”

“I’ll bring them back.”

“No. Don’t.”

“Come on let’s talk about it,” Wallace pleads, smiling again.

“With the cops.”

“I can explain. I’ll sort it.”

Tansy follows Wallace into the beer garden at Tom’s. The dying rubber tree in the forty-gallon drum has been replaced by two feathery palms in ceramic pots. The tin tables and chairs have gone. In their place are round wooden tables and benches. There’s a smorgasbord area with a bistro menu and signs of major reconstruction in the bar.

Wallace gets two beers and sets them down on the table. They look at each other.

Wallace offers Tansy a cigarette.

She shakes her head.

“I’ve quit.”

He lights one for himself.

“Just one then.” Wallace hands her a cigarette.

“Who was the young guy in the picture? A brother?” Wallace asks.

“Christ you’ve gotta hide. Mind your own business.”

Tansy turns away from him, looks in the direction of the palm trees and blows smoke.

“Well?”

“You gotta family?” Wallace asks.

“What’s that got to do with you?”

“Just wondered. Mine’s in Melbourne an’ Perth.”

Tansy draws on her cigarette. “You gonna offer that as a psychological reason for your behaviour?”

“Nah. What do ya do?” he asks her.

“I know what you do,” she answers sharply.

“I do other things. Mostly other things. I’m a house painter. But there’s not much work around. An’ I’ve lost my driving license, so I can’t drive my van, so I can’t do any job that needs ladders.”

“So basically you’re stuffed.”

“Something like that.”

He takes another sip of beer.

They sit in silence.

“I’m in art college, first year.” Tansy tells him.

“Sounds interesting.”

“It’s not.”

“Why? What ya working on?”

“Not much. Art’s full’a wanker teachers.”

“Why’d you do it then?”

“I liked it to start with. Suppose I still like some of it. But it’s a waste ‘a’ time. I clean houses, work in cafes to support myself ‘till I sort out what next.”

“Got any ideas?”

“One or two. Well, one.”

“What?”

“Something I’m still thinking about. You?”

“You gonna tell me.”

“Nah.”

They both sip their beers in silence. “You heard the story of the dolphins?” he asks.

“Which one?”

“Which story or which dolphin?”

“Just tell me.”

“The US navy captures a school of dolphins. They put them in this big pool in Florida and encouraged them to swim to one end. Then they encouraged them to swim to the other end and touch the wall with their bodies. Those that do get a reward. Then they have to swim to the end and touch it with their nose. Then to swim to the end and touch it with their nose and make a sound. And so on. The smart ones complete the tests and get loads of US dolphin goodies. The dumb ones are released.”

Wallace drinks.

“So?” Tansy says.

“They’re training the dolphins to swim up to enemy vessels, Iranian or Chinese or whoever the current bad guys are, real friendly like, the way dolphins do. Except these dolphins will have explosives fastened to their bodies.”

“Ah! Horrible.”

“I’m one of the dumb ones.”

Tansy ponders him. Finishes her beer.

“Thanks for the drink — and the story.” She stands.

“You going? Already?”

“Looks like it.”

“See you again?”

“Nah. Who wants a friend who steals from you? I thought you were going to give me my money back.”

She walks out of the pub and into the busy street and heads for the supermarket. Wallace watches her go, wondering how to start again.

Tansy threads her way along King Street, pushing upstream past pink hair, pierced bodies and gloomy Goths, her head racing like a disengaged engine, not so much because of Wallace but because he’s set her thinking again about the idea that’s been gnawing away at the back of her mind.

At home she lies in bed unable to sleep, one hand on Landlord’s calming, purring body stretched out besides her. She lifts the other arm and depresses a button on her wristwatch. It illuminates the face of Mickey Mouse and through the scratched glass she can see that it is two-thirty. She lifts the watch into the darkness above her and pushes the button, on and off. It blinks at her like a buoy in the Harbour at night. On-off. On-off. A regular, pulsating green glow of light. Her fingers play along the cold steel of the wrist band. Slowly tears well in her eyes and trickle down her cheeks.

Tansy gets up before daylight after a night of sporadic sleep and vaguely remembered dreams of painted canvases that come alive. Ignoring Landlord smooching around her legs she clicks on the light, opens the bottom drawer of a small chest squeezed into the corner of the room and takes out a large padded envelope from beneath a heap of clothes. Kneeling on the floor she removes sheets of newspaper and opens each, smoothing the folds with the palm of her hands.

A large front page picture shows an out of focus cross in the foreground. Beyond that a teenage Malvin is restraining a distraught woman dressed in black, Gran. Her head is flung back, thin neck extended, muscles and veins tight, her silent screams caught by the camera. She is in the centre of a maelstrom of people. Grandad’s hands are reaching out to her. Tansy’s dad is turning towards

something out of frame. Her mother looks confused among a crush of people she does not recognise. The caption reads: ‘Mrs Grace Parkes, mother of the seventeen-year-old youth, Sam Parkes, tried to fling herself onto his coffin at the funeral yesterday.’

A second picture covers half a page. The body of Sam is lying in the gutter close to a white car, the driver’s door swinging open. The headline reads ‘Teenager dead in stolen car police chase’.

The body in the gutter is grotesquely positioned. The head is twisted to one side, the nose flattened and the thin legs that extending below bloodstained shorts are broken. His feet are clad in a pair of runners. His shirt is ripped almost in half, exposing his chest and belly.

Tansy lifts the newspaper to her lips and kisses the broken body. She replaces the cuttings in the drawer slowly and carefully. She opens the French doors and steps onto the bleached grey boards of the balcony. The sky’s pale blue above the Newtown roofs and the first light of the sun is catching the tips of the giant paperbark tree growing in the street below.

Tansy goes back inside, picks up her phone and dials. After a moment her mother’s sleepy, anxious voice says, “Hello”.

Tansy tries to speak but can’t.

Jack and Rose are walking the streets of Newtown. They are sure they know who made the early morning call a few days before .

They are searching, but they don’t admit they’re searching. They call it exercise, combating ageing, stiff muscles, thickening waists, less sex and more sleep. But that’s not really why they are walking. They’re looking for Tansy. A, ‘just maybe’ way of doing things. A guilty Malvin has reduced the family’s angst over Tansy by confessing that he meets her and she is OK, more or less. Other people have seen her in the area. So, just maybe they’ll see her too.

Rose steers Jack into a coffee shop and they find a seat at a small table where the windows are opened wide onto King Street.

“Cappuccino?”

Rose nods and Jack crosses to the counter and orders. He comes back and sits with her and their eyes wander the café, checking it out.

“Nice place,” Jack says.

“Lovely. Where did people meet before they had coffee shops?”

“Pubs.”

“Yeah.”

The waiter brings coffee and two friends.

Jack takes a small bite, then another and it's gone.

“They taste nice but there's not much to 'em,” he says, swallowing the last bit.

“Mmm,” Rose agrees, her eyes looking beyond him into the street.

“A lotta young people,” Jack observes.

“Must be a good place to live. I'd wanna live here if I was young.”

“Better than living in a mad house,” Jack replies. Rose spoons the froth from her cappuccino, picks at her friend.

“Sorry, didn't mean that. But it feels like it sometimes doesn't it?”

They watch the passing throng for a while until Jack gets restless and they leave, pausing on the pavement outside and looking around. A light rain is falling and the glossy black street reflects a myriad colours. Rose links her arm through Jack's and they move off. They walk for a while, slowly, looking in other coffee shops.

A passenger plane flies low above, landing lights flash mechanically in the dark sky, wings trailing a veil of mist. The roar of engines drowns out all other sounds. Rose's grip on Jack's arm tightens without her realising. The jet passes above their heads, almost within touching and disappears behind the houses to the south quickly losing altitude as it prepares to land.

Jack looks up at the night sky. “When I was a kid of about twelve or fourteen I used to hear geese in autumn, flying over the city in the dark, above all those black chimneys and smoke. They were from the Arctic, looking for somewhere warmer to feed. It was the most beautiful, wildest sound. I can still feel it in my guts.”

“You wouldn't have heard above all the noise.”

“I did. I tried to imagine what it was like looking down, wondering if those yellow lights along the main roads were rivers. Then the first time I flew at night, across Europe, I saw those masses of twinkling lights which were the cities, and between them the dark gaps that were country.”

They stop as the traffic lights change to red and stand on the kerb as cars swish past on the wet road. Another plane roars overhead and Jack stops talking until it is gone.

“I realised how hard it musta been in the dark.”

“They knew where they were going.” Rose likes the idea of being able to keep direction even when you can't see the way.

“They know things we don't,” Jack says.

They're silent for a while as they walk. Jack takes hold of Rose's arm and lifts it so her umbrella doesn't poke him in the eye. "I've never heard of them getting lost."

Rose laughs. "Would they have told you?"

Jack smiles. The conversation could go on all night, neither of them knowing anything about the subject. Jack leads Rose in through the door of a pub and they find a table. As he waits at the bar Jack can see Rose, her neck extended as she searches the room with her eyes. She's still good looking. Her hair is dark, with a few white strands, cut short. Her skin's olive, neither as dark as her mother, nor pale as her father. When she's naked the near perfect proportions of her body are revealed. Her breasts are still firm and full. She doesn't smile much any more but when she does it is as though a light has been turned on.

Rose has given up her search of the pub and her eyes find his as he comes towards her with a beer and a wine. He sits. He places a hand momentarily on her shoulder. They drink.

Grace bends and snips and picks. She works her way slowly among the still wet plants. The water is cool on her arms. Rich, damp loam clings to her thongs and between her toes. Despite the soothing routine Grace is distressed. Last night Sam visited her, but not in the usual way.

It was a winter morning, cold and grey. The wipers of the station wagon clacked back and forth across the windscreen. Rain hammered the roof. Through the condensation-veiled windows she could see the cemetery. All the headstones and crosses were heaped together like bleached bones and every flower from every grave was rotting in a heap.

Grace struggled out of the car in the driving rain and picked her way through the water running between the plots, a bunch of roses in her hands. Her long black skirt trailed in the mud and puddles.

The tubs on Sam's grave were overflowing and yesterday's flowers hung battered and limp. The gravel on top of the grave had been washed away and deposited in a line along the path. As she stepped forward to place the flowers, the sodden earth began to subside, revealing a coffin. The lid was glass and as the deluge washed it clean of soil and mud she could see Sam, his young boy's body naked. He was trying to claw his way out. His broken finger nails left parallel tracks of blood along the glass.

Sam pushed his face towards her. She could hear his suffocated screams and see his breath fog the glass.

Grace dropped on all fours in the mud that was closing over the coffin and dug like a dog with her hands but the more she dug the further the coffin sank until it was gone and she was left screaming.

Grace tries to forget the nightmare and think of the flowers she's picking. Despite her bulk she moves between the plants without damaging a stem or a blossom. The leaves part to let her through. She can feel the flowers bending towards her, offering themselves for Sam. The secateurs cut. Her green-stained fingers move deftly and gently. But no matter how hard she concentrates on her work she can't shut out the images of the night. The message of the dream is clear. He wants her to free him. He is reminding her of her promise to bring Constable Sean Farrell to justice. Maybe he's not going to show her the way, she'll have to come up with a plan herself.

Grace carries the flowers in from the garden; past the chook shed and carefully lays them on the long wooden table beneath the vine. She works through each stem, quickly removing any broken or discoloured leaves, then ties them into bunches.

The station wagon is in the garage; the street doors are closed and locked behind it. Grace goes in from the garden, opens the tailgate and drags out an ancient and stained doona. She lifts the lid of the cooler box made by Malvin, cleans out the compartment with a brush and pan, making sure there are no leaves or rotting petals, then she washes the whole area. From a freezer along the back wall of the garage she removes frozen wine cask bladders which are filled with brine, and loads them into the box. She arranges them evenly and spreads a thick blanket on top. Careful as a mother with a newborn baby she carries the flowers from the bench and places them in the compartment, sprays them with mist, closes the lid, then, for extra insulation spreads the old doona on top. She's ready for work — after she's been to Sam's grave.

It's hard to say no to Dargie — for a number of reasons. But since her disastrous Saturday night in the city, a seed of independence has germinated in Rae. Saying 'yes' can be the right thing for her, as well as for Dargie. She has weighed up the good and the bad of his offer.

She's already used to the idea of taking flowers — Dargie's right, they don't last long left on a grave. So having removed one of the bad things, a feeling of guilt, she considers some of the good

things, like money. It will give her financial independence; the chance to save and one day get out. A vehicle will give her mobility, she'll be able to spend more evenings with Kate, and she'll be outside in the open air, not working cooped up at night in the restaurant .

She still has a few bad things to sort out, like fear of being caught. But even that brings a tingle of excitement. There's one thing; she doesn't want to work alone

"I'll take the job if I can have a station wagon instead of a van, and if Nola can work with me," she tells Dargie.

"Ya can't have a wagon, but ya can have Nola,"

Nola's not so sure. She still has a bit of a religious thing about her and tells Rae she's worried at the thought of stealing from the dead. Rae uses Dargie's argument that it's not stealing but recycling. Environmentally friendly Dargie gets Rae to bring Nola to the city and takes them both to lunch in Balmain. They sit in the shade of an umbrella at a pavement cafe eating focaccia, smoked salmon, cottage cheese, rocket salad, and drinking cappuccino, while he points out the advantages of working for him; "Tax free for starters — just like big business."

"Just think of unlimited income, no tax," Rae adds. She's not sure how unlimited it will be but wants Nola with her.

"There'll be no supermarket boss breathing down your neck day and night," Dargie adds.

Rae keeps quiet on that too, knowing how much breathing down necks Dargie can do.

But she does point out how well it would fit in for the twins.

"All the work will be done in the morning and you'll be back home by early afternoon at the latest.

"You can either have a baby sitter; drop them off at Zac's place every morning; get him to come over to your place, or put them in day care," Rae says.

"Zac's not coming over. I don't want him in the house," Nola tells her.

"OK. But whatever, we can get a good thing going eh?"

"OK."

Dargie rents a small factory space in Camperdown for the start up, not much more than a four-car garage really. He has trestle tables, binding for doing up the bunches of flowers, a huge roll of crinkly transparent paper mounted on a bench top dispenser, another of thin, cling plastic and lots of plastic buckets. He is enjoying this new entrepreneurial role. flowers everywhere, and two beautiful women. It's better than any of his other jobs, enforcing, running a brothel, being a bouncer.

"Working with flowers might bring out the feminine side of Dargie," Rae says to Nola as they set off in the new van to call on the small greengrocers of the inner west and drum up business.

“What!?” says Nola in disbelief.

“Joking.” Rae burst into laughter.

The two pleasing, fortyish women chat up the shopkeepers of the eastern suburbs, offering to deliver fresh flowers each day, releasing them from the dawn buying burden at the markets. They have plenty of takers.

They do a practice run to the Northern Suburbs Cemetery. Dargie has told them there’ll be a better class of flowers there. They check out the chapels first, north, south and west.

“It’s like a movie complex. Cinema one, Dead Ringer. Cinema two; Dead Man Walking. Cinema three; Terminator Two,” Nola says.

Rae laughs. “We could put ads on the coffins: Say it with flowers — Goodbye! ...and good buys at Doubtful Dargie’s Bountiful Blossoms.”

Nola wrinkles her nose dismissively at the joke. She finds a map showing the different sections of the cemetery and reads out the names and they discuss the floral potential of religious and ethnic division: Catholic lawn, general lawn, Jewish, Anglican, Catholic monumental, general monumental, Chinese, Presbyterian, baby lawn, Armenian, Baptists, Congregational.

“Lets try the Chinese,” Rae suggests and they set off between the rows of graves in the heat. They discover that the Chinese give fruit to the dead to help them on the journey. “Hungry?” Nola asks, as the two women appraise the potential of bananas, mandarins and apples.

Rae grimaces at the thought. She puts her hand palm-down on one of the massive polished marble gravestones and strokes it. “It’s like Chinese silk.”

Nola does the same, and the two women stand in the middle of the cemetery, eyes closed, stroking the stone. But thoughts of Dargie intrude and remind Rae that they are in the cemetery for business, not a sensuous experience. They try Catholic, and various Protestant sections. There’s not much difference between them and they make a mental note of the graves to return to, then head back to where they’re parked. Rae’s not happy with the panel van Dargie has chosen it. It sits in the shade of a tree, black, with tinted windows and mag wheels.

“I feel like a western suburbs rev-head in that bloody thing,” she tells Nola.

“We should put a mattress in.”

“Maybe we could earn more money on our backs than our feet. We could drive around construction sites, ringing a little bell like they do with coffee and sandwich vans,” Rae suggests.

“Here we are boys, what would you like today, one lump or two?” Nola adds.

“Two old tarts and coffee.”

“Old! Speak for yourself Rae.”

They giggle again, nervous before the action. Then they drive around the cemetery to the areas they've already spotted, picking up a wreath here, a bunch of flowers there until they're too nervous to continue. They are sweating, their hearts are beating madly and they're too tense to talk. They shut the rear doors of the van on the last bouquet with relief and Rae drives slowly towards the exit, right elbow hanging out the window, wrap-around sunnies shielding her eyes.

They laugh with relief as they turn on to the main road.

Dargie's waiting for them at the factory. Grinning. He closes the roller doors before opening the back of the van.

His grin vanishes.

"What the hell ya done? Yah been bonking in the back?"

Rae and Nola look inside. The once wonderful blooms are a wilted mess.

Dargie gets a mate to install an extra powerful air conditioner in the van — at great expense. It has ducts down each side and is guaranteed to take fresh, cool air to every corner. It is going at full chilly bore the next time the two women head for the Northern Suburbs Cemetery to carry out their first real morning raid since the trial run.

"This aircon would make an alternative profession more comfortable if we decide to take it up," Nola jokes.

"Don't mention that to Dargie, even in fun. He might change his mind and think it's a better idea than flowers. Then he'd take his cut both ways."

They cruise the cemetery to see who is being disposed of and what the quality of flowers is, then they put the van in the car park and wait in the shade to allow mourners to say hello to each other and goodbye to the dead.

Rae's brought a flask of coffee and they sit and sip and contemplate the crime they are about to commit.

"You nervous?" Rae asks.

"No. Yes. Shit scared. You?"

"Same."

They look over the rows of graves and the hunched-slow mourners.

"What's the name for stealing things from a cemetery," Nola asks.

"Is there one?"

"Necro something or other I suppose."

They sit in silence.

"I can't help wonder what Kate would think about it."

“Kids are more understanding these days. They know you’ve gotta do what you can,” Nola tells her.

“Oh yeah. Imagine what the kids at school would be like if they found out. They’re already little bitches.”

“Don’t worry, Dargie’ll protect us,” Nola says sarcastically.

“Who’ll protect us from the protector?” Rae asks.

They laugh.

Nola sips her coffee. “Do you like sex?”

“Jesus, what made you think of sex?”

“Talking about Dargie.”

“No.”

“I love it,” Nola says.

“I know, but that’s probably because you only get it once a month.”

“If I got it every day I’d still love it. Going into the city every month is the simplest way to do it. No complications. You pick up a guy and it’s over and done with. No wasting time getting used to someone who turns out to be just another prick — so to speak. I do it that way, you have Dargie. It’s simple,” Nola explains.

“Nothing’s simple. Anything could happen. You don’t know who you’re picking up. It’s dangerous.”

“More dangerous than being with Dargie?”

“He’s never killed anybody.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t.”

“Let’s face it, our choices are pretty limited. We’re too old to compete with the bright young things in business, skipping all over the place. Flowers is us kid, come on, let’s get going before we change our minds.” Nola drains the last of her coffee.

The first new grave has an abundance of gladioli, green flowered grevillea and others that neither woman can name. Nola fills her arms and at the next grave a few metres away they pick up a similar mix and walk away, like two grieving women on their way to mourn a lost friend. They take the flowers to the van, trying not to run the last few metres, and put them in the back, hoping no one has seen them. They are frightened but not as frightened as on the trial run. They repeat the process, each time becoming more confident, more selective.

They move the van to a different location, park under a palm tree then stroll nonchalantly among the graves and discover they are in the Jewish section.

“This is worse than the Chinese, it’s all stone,” Rae complains, in surprise.

“I thought there might be more here, you know, bigger wreaths because they have more money. How stupid can we be?”

They wander in the sun, feigning a casual air, lifting flowers from here, lifting flowers from there, hoping that no one is taking notice of them. When their arms are full again they go back to the van and carefully unload. Rae closes the back door and leans against it, her heart pounding. Nola cups her hands, and making a moon of her face, peers inside. “Can’t see a thing.”

“Good,” says Rae and does the same.

They climb into the van and shut the doors, disappearing behind the tinted windows. The van sets off slowly and sedately along the drive in the direction of the exit.

As they go out the gate they looked at each other and grin.

“Nothing to it eh!” Rae says.

“Nothing to it,” Nola echoes. “We’re on our way.”

Before they have reached the first set of traffic lights the air conditioning has kicked in and a chilly blast sweeps through the van. The flowers haven’t felt so good since before they were picked the day before. Even the gladioli spikes are sprightly.

Dargie is waiting for them in the factory. He has rigged up a horizontal bar on one of the beams and while he was waiting did chin-ups to develop his latissimus dorsi muscles. This gives him the wedge-shaped back he hopes will offset the effect of a thickening waist.

Dargie hauls on the chain to open the shutter door when Rae blasts the horn. He lets her in then quickly drops the shutter.

The two women get out of the van shivering with cold. Rae opens the back door and frigid air slides out. Dargie touches the leaves of the nearest flowers. They’re crisp as a fresh garden salad.

He turns and grins. “That’s one problem solved.”

Rae sneezes.

Dargie hurries them into unloading and separating the big wreaths into smaller bunches. Fragile flowers like lilies have their long stems wrapped in thin, cling plastic to hold them together in mutual protection.

In less than an hour the two women have everything bunched, wrapped, tied and back in the van, with Dargie standing by giving instructions. They jump in, Dargie opens the roller door, and Rae and Nola are on the road.

They head for the first customers a few kilometres away in Balmain, where Dargie reckons people will pay twice as much for anything.

“The Greek shop’s just past the lights, the nice bloke,” says Rae.

“He’s Lebanese.”

“Whatever. He’s a nice bloke.” Rae sneezes.

The nice bloke Lebanese buys a quarter of their stock and immediately has one of his sons display the flowers in a row of identical black plastic buckets out the front.

He’s pleased with the freshness, and the price.

They deliver to other shops and a roadside barrow opposite a bank, then work their way back through Rozelle and into Glebe before returning to the factory. Dargie’s out attending to some of his other unspecified business activities and they make a quick mug of tea from an electric jug set up on a small table in the corner.

Rae has developed a sore throat and both are chilled to the marrow after the short drive.

“He’s turned it into a meat freezer,” Rae complains, sniffing.

They carefully load the rest of the flowers and set off again. Two hours later they’re back. Dargie’s waiting.

The first full run is completed. Everything has been sold. Rae and Nola smile with relief and satisfaction.

Dargie checks the money. “Bewdiful! A good start. Looks like we’re onto something good girls.” He puts his arms around each of them. Nola gets an extra hard squeeze.

While Rae and Nola are on their first flower run, Grace is in Rookwood Cemetery. The vast area spreads before her as she drives through the gateway. Although it’s still early a number of burials have already taken place, the flowers are in place and the mourners have departed. Grace automatically makes a mental note of what looks likely to yield good blooms.

She parks the wagon in the deep shade of a brush box tree, and drags herself out from behind the wheel. She takes a crimson bandanna from her shoulder, wipes her perspiring face, neck and

chest, removes her water spray from the back of the car, points it into the air and pumps the trigger; then she stands beneath the mist to let it fall on her upturned face. Water settles on her thatch of wild, uncombed grey hair like dew. She tugs her blouse and voluminous skirt about until they are arranged according to her liking, then opens the cool box.

Grace lifts out a bunch of red roses, cradles them in her arms and threads her way between the gravestones until she comes to the white wooden cross with the name Sam Parkes painted in black letters. The name seems much older than the boy who bore it at his death.

Grace slowly goes down on her knees and opens the glass box containing Sam's faded photo. She picks it up, kisses it and gazes into the face of the seventeen with boy with long curly hair and a cheeky grin. It is the same as the photograph that looks down from the wall in her bedroom, Sam in his soccer jersey. Except that in this picture only his head and the top of the shirt are visible. Grace knows that no matter which way she moves the eternally youthful eyes will follow her.

She cleans the photo with a tissue then polishes the glass. She fills the small lamp with oil and replaces two candles that have melted and bent.

From a distance she appears like any one of the Mediterranean mammas who whisper prayers, and peck around the cemetery like crows, discarding dead flowers, pulling out weeds, lighting incense sticks and oil lamps, polishing photos. She does all of these. But instead of a prayer there is the pledge to Sam that one day she will avenge his death, no matter how long it takes. She puts her hands to the ground and pushes herself to her feet, knees creaking and cracking in protest. Grace takes the drooping flowers from a white plastic drum on the grave and dumps them in a skip, already overflowing with rotting vegetation, soggy wrappings and ribbons. She goes back, and pulls out weeds, lights incense sticks and the oil lamp.

Grace doesn't care that for someone who now hates the church and God, her ritual is close to the religious ceremonies of her mother. She does it for Sam and herself not for some made up god, a Jesus, a Buddha, Allah or any of them. This is her ritual and if it's like some of theirs, then tough luck.

She hadn't wanted Sam cremated and his ashes stuck in a little hole in a wall with a plaque bearing his name. Grief needs space. It needs the earth, the sky, heat and cold, wind and rain. It needs the darkness of night, the brightness of the sun, the flicker of candles. It needs a picture of her boy looking out at the world. It needs a headstone. Her grief needs flowers and room in which to grow them, to spread them and if needs be, to steal them.

Grace leaves Sam's grave and drives to another part of the cemetery. She parks the wagon, climbs out, looks around, and without haste, walks to a pyramid of flowers. By the time she reaches

them she has already selected what she wants, one bunch of bird of paradise and one of tiger lilies. She picks them up, quickly checks the quality and within minutes is back at the wagon and placing them gently into the cool box and covering it. She repeats the procedure at two more new graves, then drives off in the direction of the main exit.

She is almost there when a big young Pacific Islander security man steps out from the side of the driveway and flags her down. Grace's heart leaps. She pretends not to see him and keeps driving. In her rear view mirror she sees him jump into his car and come gravel-spitting behind her flashing his headlights.

Grace maintains the same speed. He nudges up close, less than a metre away. He blasts his horn. She ignores him. He sticks his head and shoulders out of the window and waves her over. Grace waves back and keeps going. She goes along Necropolis Drive, around Necropolis Circuit, Barnett Avenue, Memorial Avenue, then along Necropolis Drive again to see what he'll do. He stays with her, blasting his horn every fifty metres and waving at her.

Eventually Grace stops near Sam's grave. She sits waiting. Elbow out the open window. The security man gets out of the car and walks towards her like an American highway patrol cop. He watches too much TV.

"Why didn't you stop?" he asks.

"Why should I?"

"Cause I told you too. If your eyes are that bad you shouldn't be driving."

"Didn't say I hadn't seen you," she replies.

These islander blokes are so big. They come all the way to Australia to pick on old women. He's all dressed in black with high laced boots and baseball cap, like he's gonna take on a mob of protesters. Grace opens the door and half gets out.

"You gonna tell your wife you bin terrorising old women?"

"Aint got one. I stopped you because..."

"Help me outa here," she commands, extending an arm in his direction. He sighs in exasperation, takes her by the wrist and pulls. He can't move her. He takes both arms and puts his back into. Grace struggles to a standing position and wipes her face with the red bandanna.

"Well, now you've apprehended me what do you want? You like big women?"

The security man shuffles his feet in embarrassment and Grace realises he's not so much a security man as a security boy.

"You come here a lot don't you?" he asks.

"Every day. That a problem?"

“Nah, but you might be able to help me.”

“What? You offering me a job? I think I’m big enough.”

“Nah. Nah,” he tries to suppress a laugh.

“Somebody’s stealing flowers from the graves. I wonder if you’ve seen anything.”

Grace’s mouth goes dry.

“Nah. Seen people bringing flowers in but nobody taking ‘em out. Why’d anybody do a low thing like that?”

“Selling ‘em.” Grace shakes her head in mock disbelief. “It’s awful what people do these days. Stealing from the dead. Awful.”

“If you see anything suspicious let us know eh.”

Grace promises she will and the security boy thanks her and swaggers back to his car.

Grace eases herself into the wagon, her heart pounding.

On the drive to her hospital stall she ponders what’s just happened. Over the last few weeks she’s taken almost nothing from this cemetery. Yet for the first time she’s been questioned. Why now?

She sits the rest of the day sweating in the heat under the blue polytarp, mopping her breast and her face. The flowers wilt and few people buy. She wonders about the events of the morning, and about the things that happen in life, some because of conscious decisions, others because you just happen to go along putting one foot in front of the other. Most of the time you keep walking, but then one day the ground opens and you drop into a deep hole. She had been walking along one minute, then the next minute she was far below in a pit, with barely a glimmer of light above.

When her father died, and a short time after, her mother, Grace moved from Cairns to Melbourne looking for work. A couple of years later, when she was twenty-two, she gave birth to Rosa Alexandra. When Rose, as she was called by everyone, grew up, her mother told her it had been love at first sight between her and her father, which it had — on her part. Grace had met Tony, an Italian seaman, at a dance in Port Melbourne. On her visits to his bunk on the ship, when their passion had been spent and she lay still as he slept, Grace had gazed at two photos on the wall, close-ups of a man and a woman. She thought at first they were her lover’s parents. He told her one was the German revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg, and the other was the Bolshevik leader, Lenin.

Grace told Rose that her father had been killed in a shipboard accident before they had chance to marry. The truth was his ship had sailed and she never heard of him again. She was left with a belly full of arms and legs. The baby was named Rosa in memory of her father’s politics and as a reminder that a communist is just as likely to abandon his woman and child as any other man.

Grace moved to Sydney when Rose was a young woman and worked in various shops and factories. She met Johnnie Parkes, another wanderer, born to a poor sharecropping family in America. He'd left home at fourteen and many years later found himself in Australia. He stayed. He was a builder's labourer and a unionist. Grace could never fathom why the two loves of her life were political men. Between fighting the employers and internal union feuding, he found time to father a child, Sam. She thinks of the connections, big and small, that have led to her sitting under the tarp, watching the flowers she'd stolen a few hours earlier wilting in the heat.

Since Tansy's earlier exhumation of her collection of press cuttings she hasn't looked at them again. They remain in their padded envelope as though further examination will reveal too much. She's taken one step, but cannot bring herself to take the next, the idea she had when watching the film shoot, to purge the memory of Sam's brutal death by telling the story. Fear holds her back; hope of self-liberation, pushes her forward. She sits on the verandah under the shade of the paperbark tree growing in the street below. On her lap is a large notepad, and in her hand a drawing pencil. But she's not drawing, she's writing.

Screwed up paper lies on the boards beside her feet. Others have been scattered about the verandah by the breeze. A voice calling from the street eventually penetrates Tansy's head. Clutching the notepad to her chest, she peers over the iron rail. Wallace.

"G'day," he calls up, grinning.

"Oh, hi."

"Ya studying?"

"Nah."

"What ya doing?"

"Nothing."

"Can I come up?"

"Em...Oh. Yeah."

Its Wallace turn to hesitate. "Maybe, I'm interrupting. You got somebody..."

"Nah. Just me. My room's the first..." Tansy remembers he already knows.

Wallace appears five minutes later, hands Tansy a cup of takeaway coffee, then sits on his heels on the threshold of the French doors, lifts back the lid of his cup and takes a cautious sip. He

indicates the scattered crumpled paper, “That the great Australian novel or just a love letter that’s not working out?”

“Could be either.”

“Not writing to me by any chance?” he jokes.

“Nah. Not you Wallace. Just writing.”

“Gonna tell me?”

“A novel. Can’t get behind the first few lines,” Tansy says with exasperation. “It’s all in a tangle, like a great mass of string with no beginning or end. When I try to find the beginning it wraps around me until I can’t move or think.” She gets to her feet, gathers the discarded sheets of paper, steps over Wallace and goes inside.

Wallace swivels around to watch. “I keep meeting people who should be in stories. There’s this woman I met in Luna Park in the middle of the night who thought she was dead an’ I was an angel.”

“An angel? I hope she becomes a writer with an imagination like that.”

“Yeah.” Wallace laughs.

“Was she drunk or mad?”

“Probably both.”

“What were ya doing there in the middle of the night?”

“That is a story. I’ll tell ya one day.”

Wallace follows her inside. Landlord jumps off the bed and lopes down stairs

“It’s a great room you’ve got,” Wallace sits on the bed and tests the springs with his hand.

“Forget it,” Tansy puts the papers in a cardboard box.

Wallace stands with an exaggerated sigh of resignation.

“Don’t you have a computer?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“If you’re gonna be a writer you need one.”

Tansy shakes her head, “No. I don’t.”

“No one uses pencils any more for god’s sake.”

Tansy shrugs her shoulders.

“Wanna go for a beer?” Wallace asks.

Tansy hesitates. “Nah.”

“Coffee?”

“Nah.”

“Why not?” Wallace moves to her side. He puts his hand gently on the back of her neck. Prickles run down her spine. Her stomach flutters. She moves away.

“Just don’t want.”

“Indian then?”

“Can’t, gotta work. There’s a couple of houses I clean, today’s the day. Don’t know anyone who needs their house cleaning do you? Somebody dropped out last week.” Tansy picks up her old army bag.

Wallace laughs. “The people I know aren’t particularly into clean houses.”

Two days later Tansy is woken by someone hammering on the door. She stumps down the stairs, bleary eyed and hung over. Wallace is embracing a computer. He grins.

Tansy automatically moves aside as he steps through, like a groom carrying a bride across the threshold. He runs up the steps two-at-a-time into Tansy’s room and sets the computer on the bed.

Tansy, suddenly awake runs after him, yelling “What the hell ya doing?”

“It’s for you. You can’t write a story with a pencil and paper.”

“Yes you can I don’t want one.”

“You need one.”

“Don’t tell me what I need. Take the bloody thing away.”

“Think of how quick it’ll be. You can cut and paste. Write. Re-write. There’s a novel format...”

“It’s nicked, get it outa here.”

“It’s not. A mate lent it to me.”

“No!”

“When you’ve got enough money you can buy one and I’ll give this back.”

He connects the computer and it chimes into life. Wallace kneels on the floor and taps the keys and writes:

‘No,’ she says

‘Yes.’

Then, with Tansy looking over his shoulder he taps out with two fingers:

WALLACE

Please! Take it.

TANSY

I don’t want it.

Wallace turns to her with an anguished look on his face.

WALLACE

But your whole future is at stake.

TANSY

I don't care about my future. I care only about the truth.

(Wallace takes her hand in his.)

WALLACE

Care about me too. For the truth is I love you. Take this as a gift to show my love.

Tansy turns her head to hide the tears. She dabs her eyes with the corner of a lace handkerchief.

TANSY

Oh, alright then, leave the bloody thing. If you say its not nicked, you must be telling the truth. You're a fair dinkum bonzer bloke that life has wronged.

Wallace stops typing. "See, it practically writes the story for you. You just switch it on."

Tansy smiles.

"There's a user manual; there's my phone number if you have any problem. I'll leave it for a trial run. If you're not totally satisfied your money will be returned madam. I'll see you in one week and look forward to the first scenes or chapters or whatever."

Wallace walks out the door and Tansy can hear the rapid pat-pat of his shoes as he runs down the stairs.

He is going to work, a job with a painting contractor. He did get the computer from a mate, but he bought it. Call it guilt. Call it a gift. Call it by an old fashioned name, wooing.

One week after Wallace had given Tansy the computer he comes into Tom's pub where she is drinking with Lizzie.

Lizzie leaves. She is not as forgiving as Tansy .

"You're right," Tansy tells him, "It's easier. Once you've got the hang of it. But you sure it's a mate's?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die." Wallace goes through the motions.

"Will you show me what you've written?"

"There's nothing to show."

"Really?"

"Well, not much. I don't know where to begin, what to put in, what to leave out."

"Begin at the beginning."

"There is no beginning, only an ending."

Grace parks the station wagon in the usual place under the shade of a brush box tree at Rookwood Cemetery. She opens the door and sits looking out over gravestones, grass and trees. Today she doesn't want to do the usual things, she wants to not worry about stealing flowers and selling flowers, about caution, about keeping flowers fresh, even to thinking about Sam. She just wants to feel the warmth of the sun. She wants to melt. She closes her eyes and folds her hands across her belly. She sleeps a while without dreaming. When she wakes she's hot and her mouth is sour and dry. She opens the back of the wagon, lifts the lid to the storage compartment and takes a bottle of cold water from among the frozen brine-filled wine bladders. She drinks and rubs the bottle across her forehead.

Grace locks the car and begins walking in the direction of the Victorian section of the cemetery, along the overgrown avenues, by waterways, past the leaning, russet-lichened graves of the early residents of the city.

Some of them left their names behind in the history of the country, and some took everything into the ground with them, the un-remembered, those whose names time has erased from the stone it was written on.

She maintains her slow, heavy walk, pausing to touch and smell roses growing on bushes that are so old their names have also been forgotten; roses from China and England, roses smelling of lime or honey, fragrances so subtle she is not sure whether she is imagining them. Grace walks to where a few isolated gravestones sit like charred and overgrown stumps, and where wattle and eucalypts grow over unmarked pauper's graves. She stops. As far as she can see there is a covering of calliopsis, millions of yellow, daisy-like flowers. She lowers herself slowly to the ground, where a wattle casts shade, and stretches her legs in front of her. She's indistinguishable from the time-blackened headstones.

Viewed from this level, each flower seems to touch the one next to it in an endless carpet. If Grace were in Tangier she would be able to pick the calliopsis and sell them in the markets. Here they please the eye but not the pocket. She stretches out her hand, pulls off a brittle seed head, the size and colour of a gum nut. She opens it and spreads the seeds on the palm of her hand with a stubby finger. She purses her lips and gently blows away the dried-out, tobacco-like petals, leaving hundreds of seeds, black and shiny as tadpoles, nestling side by side.

Grace breaks a twig off the wattle above her and uses it to separate the seeds and counts them. One hundred and fifty. She collects all the seed cups within a square metre.

Then she spreads her legs wide and in the skirt between them she counts the number of seed cups. Fifty.

So, fifty seed heads, multiplied by one hundred and fifty, is...seven thousand five hundred. A square metre has seven thousand five hundred seeds. She double checks and gets the same result. How many seeds are there in the cemetery? She looks at the hundreds of thousands of nodding yellow heads in front of her. How many square metres in a hectares? She can't remember. How many hectare in the cemetery? Hundreds? Thousands? She gives up.

Grace knows the story of the calliopsis and the reason for its abundance. Once, when the cemetery was as much a classical Victorian garden as a place to bury the dead people would promenade there on a weekend and listen to music. A young woman met and fell in love with a young man. She, of course, was beautiful, he was handsome and dashing, an officer, and no doubt, a gentleman.

Like other fashionable couples they would stroll each Sunday through the gardens admiring the trees and flowers that had been brought from all parts of Australia and beyond. They walked by the lily ponds. They picnicked. They rested in the gazebos from summer heat or held each other as they sheltered from winter's cold.

Then history intervened and the soldier went off to fight in South Africa vowing the day he returned they would marry and he would build a house for her with huge grounds and as many types of trees and flowers as there were in the cemetery.

But he didn't return. Instead he was buried in the stony South African veldt.

Heartbroken, the woman shunned society.

She was to be seen late in the evening, in that golden time just after the sun has slipped below the horizon, walking through the cemetery, always in the same place and in the same direction, towards the paupers' section.

There are still claims of sightings of a woman in Victorian dress walking among the trees on late summer evenings.

In an attempt to assuage her grief, the woman took to collecting the little black seeds of the then rare calliopsis plant and scattering them from the windows of the train which ran from the Morgue Station in the Sydney suburb of Redfern, to the cemetery.

Always in black, she would join mourners and coffin on the journey from the city. She scattered seeds on one side going out, and the other side coming back, never varying her routine.

She believed, so the story goes, that when in spring the embankments of the railway became an unbroken stretch of yellow calliopsis flowers from the city to the cemetery, then her lover would return.

She collected seeds from the flowers that bloomed and ripened alongside the railway and each year the line of yellow spread further.

She was last seen as an old woman sowing seeds from the train that carried the dead. She died on the eve of World War II and was herself taken on that last journey on the train, past the flowers she had sown.

That spring the patches of calliopsis finally joined together and became one long ribbon of yellow along each side of the track connecting the city of the living with the Necropolis.

The long-closed rail line to the cemetery once passed through the neglected area that Grace looks over from her position under the wattle. The field of yellow dances before her eyes. She wonders why people shun things that are common, deny beauty because it is in abundance, preferring that which is rare but not necessarily more beautiful. She's heard of a plant in South America which blooms only once every twenty years, and only under a full moon. As the sun rises on its first day, so the flower dies. Men go to great lengths to see and photograph the flower. They mount expeditions at vast expense to search the high valleys of the Andes, from Colombia to the frigid southern tip of Chile. They forsake wives and children, drawn to the plant as though to some beautiful and exotic lover. Men squander family fortunes in the search, become lost and die of thirst. Others are murdered. Before or after they photographed the flower no one knows.

Each time she moves Grace is dusted with a fresh layer of pollen from the calliopsis. She picks a long-stemmed flower and taps it on the palm of her hand. Minute specks of yellow appear, like particles of the sun.

She plucks more. Then more.

She puts them in a bunch by her side.

Grace gets down on her hands and knees and begins to pick methodically. Each time she has a bundle she puts it on the ground by her side and keeps picking. Still kneeling, she extends her skirt on the ground in front of her and lays the bundles on it. She then takes the hem in each hand, stands, and carries the great pouch of flowers to the road where she lays them in the shade and returns for more.

When she has collected them all she brings the wagon and loads it to the roof.

At Sam's grave she trims the stem of every flower to a few centimetres long. Then she kneels and places each one on the grave, packing them together.

When she has finished, a rug of golden yellow flowers covers the grave, each so close to the next that there's not a leaf visible, no space to put even a little finger between them.

She stands, and covered in pollen from her hair to her feet, gets into the car and drives off.

She's still dusted in pollen when she sets up her stall outside Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, like a bumble bee that has just backed out of a flower. It is in her hair, on her eyebrows and face and covers her black blouse and big-as-a-sail skirt. She makes up tiny bundles of calliopsis and sets them in water in ice cream containers.

But she doesn't call them calliopsis, she calls them, baby suns, and only children are allowed to buy them — for few cents a bunch.

The kids come and nudge the adults and point to the yellow-dusted old woman and giggle, and they buy the baby suns and carry them proudly off to the hospital.

Grace thinks about the story of the woman and the calliopsis. Can hope and fidelity and flowers restore that which has been taken away?

A glass of whisky is slowly evaporating on the bar in front of Johnnie Walker. For two hours he has sat looking at it without drinking. He'd love to pick it up, put it to his mouth and feel the fire spread throughout his body and head. Quinlan keeps asking him what's the matter and offering him something different to drink, "On the house Johnnie".

Johnnie shakes his head. "Nah."

It's the first time for over a year or more that he's been in the Dockside Hotel and remained sober. Quinlan can't get him to say anything beyond, "Nothing," when he asks, "What's the matter Johnnie?"

Neither can anyone else.

Johnnie picks up the glass from time-to-time, raises it to his lips then puts it down again without drinking. The smell makes him want to vomit.

He'd thought that if he just kept on drinking more he'd fall off the perch one night and be found dead at the bottom of the cage. But it hasn't worked out like that. Instead he's become sick. Very sick. He can no longer work. He hates the sight of himself, hates the pain in his guts. Hates his weakness.

He looks at the television. Each fleeting image of the news is replaced by the another before he's able to understand the first. He looks around the bar and tries to focus his attention on someone, something.

Johnnie climbs down from the stool and goes to the toilet. He stands at the trough and tries to piss but can't. The stink of stale urine nearly makes him sick. Whisky, piss, the same thing in the long run. He zips up his fly and turns round. On the way out he sees himself in a mirror and stops. He assumes it's him. He's looking into the mirror and a figure's looking out. So it must be him. One and the same. The man in the mirror is ancient and decrepit, balding, moth-eaten beard, narrow stooping shoulders, skinny arms with no muscles and a protruding belly. He stares. The figure stares back.

Jack's told him that when he, Jack, looks in the mirror he sees a figure he hardly recognises, because the image looks years older than he feels. He said it's a shock that this outside figure is so different to his self-image.

Johnnie's response is different. He feels even worse than the figure looking back at him, old and ugly as it is. Unlike Jack's surprise at the exterior, Johnnie's revulsion is for the interior. The swollen belly leads his mind's eye inward to rotting liver and rotting kidneys, stinking bowels and bladder. Decrepitude. Necrosis. Pain. He doesn't like what he sees. Doesn't like what he feels. He's knackered: knackered guts, knackered knees, knackered back, knackered knackers. Knackered brain.

He wishes he could turn back the clock. Wishes he'd been able to help Grace more. Wishes he'd been able to understand. Wishes he'd coped rather than collapsed. Wishes for Sam. Wishes to do things with a son who is gone. To walk with, sing songs. To talk politics. To share his concerns. To go into the future sorting things out with this new generation.

Maybe they'd been spared things, him, Grace, and Sam. Maybe Sam woulda been hooked on heroin or some other drug that started off as a joke, an experiment, being cool, being of the crowd, being wild, carefree, hedonistic, then thieving from your parents to find money for the little pushers who slide around the streets like sewage, gathering the money for those who import and grow and sell — businessmen and women, legitimate as any other business, making a buck, or millions of bucks.

Sam wouldn't have fallen for that, Johnnie tells himself. He wasn't an angel but he thought too much of other people to be destructive. He'd a loving family. But so too did lotsa kids who were so fucked they didn't know up from down, their arse from their elbow. Some were poor. Some were rich. Some had good parents. Some had bad parents. Some had no parents. It didn't seem to make

sense. But then it did make sense. If the world is fucked why wouldn't the kids fucked? If the leaders of every country are only interested in making money for themselves and their mates, why wouldn't the kids of the world be interested only in making money, or spending it?

He is circling his thoughts like a mangy old dog with a sack, hoping if he picks it up and shakes it something will fall out that will sustain him.

Some people can cope, others can't, or they cope the only way they can without topping themselves. OK! With him it's whisky. Was whisky. Maybe if Grace hadn't gone off her head when she did they woulda been able to see it through together. But she did and it was too bloody hard alone.

He feels angry with himself, a man who though he was strong, discovering he's weak.

The door to the toilet opens and he turns away from the mirror and goes out past a group of young men who burst in, filling the place with energy and noise.

Johnnie edges his way past the pool players to his stool at the edge of the bar. He sits down, picks up his lukewarm whisky and sips. He grimaces.

"Got some ice Quinny?"

The publican ladles some into a glass and plonks it on the bar in front of Johnnie. From his stool at the bar Johnnie sees Grace come through the door. Half the drinkers stop to look at the enormous old woman in black. Others make way as she crosses to Johnnie. She stands next to him without speaking.

"Well?" she eventually asks.

"Tell you when we get home."

Johnnie eases himself off the stool and goes over to the jukebox. He's back on his seat before the music comes on, Fats Domino, Blueberry Hill:

'Ah found my thri-ill,  
on Bluewberry Hi-ill,  
on Bluewberry Hi-ill  
when I found you.

The moon stood sti-ill,  
on Bluewberry Hi-ill  
and linger unti-il  
my dream came true.

The wind in the willows  
played lurves sweet melowdee,

but all of the vows we made...

"Let's go home eh?" Grace says.

Johnnie nods and they walk out the pub leaving Fats inside singing. Dead but still singing.

They walk silently up the street, side-by-side, an enormous woman, and a long, stooped, emaciated man; Sancho and Don Quixote, Don Quixote and Sancho.

"What did the doctor say?" she asks.

"Stop drinking or die. Put another way, I die in a few months if I don't stop, maybe I'll live a few years if I do."

It's the best and the worst news for Grace.

She takes Johnnie's bony arm and draws him to her as they walk.

"What you gonna do?"

"Don't wanna die. Thought I did but I've changed my mind."

"What about a transplant?" Grace asks.

Johnnie snorts at the very idea, "Too bloody old. Not enough spare parts around to waste on me," he says without self pity.

If he can keep off the whiskey Grace will have a sober husband for as long as he lives. That's the best of the news. The worst is that it may not be long.

Johnnie doesn't want to tell the rest of the family what the prognosis is. He just announces he's "seen the light and given the grog away".

But looking at him is enough. Rose takes Grace aside in the kitchen and asks. Grace tells her.

"I don't know what to say to him. You can't tell him to cheer up he's gonna get better. Grin and bear it. She'll be right. No worries. But I've gotta do something. Be around more for him. I haven't been much help in the past year or so have I? Too concerned with my problems, what I wanna do."

"Can he work with you?"

"With the flowers?"

"Give him something to think about."

"Like what? I can't see him with bunches of flowers in his hands, can you?"

Rose has to admit neither can she.

They go back outside to where Johnnie's sitting at the table with Jack and Malvin who are guiltily drinking beers while Johnnie sips a mineral water.

"Do you fancy helping me with the flowers?" Grace asks.

"Jesus, me in a cemetery. I'd frighten the goddamn life out of everybody. They'd think I'd climbed out of a grave,"

“We’d make a great pair wouldn’t we?” Grace admits.

“I’d look like I was giving the flowers back to those who’d brought them to my funeral,” Johnnie says.

Jack smiles ruefully and has another sip of his beer but he can’t enjoy it with Johnnie around.

Johnnie agrees that he has to do something to take his mind off drinking. Fear of dying helps. So does thinking of the past. He remembers a little boy in the early morning cold of Tennessee farmhouse, using both hands as he struggled to lift a huge skillet onto the wood stove to cook breakfast for himself and a younger brother. That little boy became a big boy and then a man, wandering America, Canada, Mexico, looking for work and adventure. The madness of the US Army. Vietnam and killing. He remembers turning up for manoeuvres in response to a simulated nuclear attack on a US base — drunk. What else could you do? He argued. He remembers cargo ships, an’ drinking from Baltimore to Broome. Sydney and meeting Grace. But memories hold him for no more than a few moments. He skips over them like a stone thrown across a farm dam.

He plays his old tapes, downloads tracks, buys new CDs of old music; protest songs, folk, rhythm and blues, rock. But he can’t sit and relax. Pain gnaws his inside like a rat. He paces the floor. He lies down. He sits, restlessly moving from one position to another, one part of the house to another. He wanders Grace’s flower garden and stakes the blooms. He helps with the watering. He helps Malvin maintain Grace’s car. He sits with the cats in the shade of the vine and tries to read. But he’s unable to concentrate on anything for long. He drinks copious quantities of water.

Grace wants him to move back into her room but he refuses. He doesn’t want to sleep in flickering light from an altar, be looked on by the photograph of a young man smiling contemptuously at a father who can’t hack it.

Johnnie’s nights are usually sleepless, long periods lying on the bed looking at the darkness of the ceiling or standing at the window watching clouds, pale as Broome pearls, as they pass over the city, or listening to currawongs calling in false dawns.

He’s left it too late. The rat gnaws.

Grace draws the station wagon up under the shade of a tree. The sun shines out of a sky without clouds after a week of cool and drizzle. It is only mid morning but already hot, an indication of what's coming. She sits with the door open, one leg hanging out the side, absorbing the warmth into her arthritic knees. Doves coo and currawongs call from tree tops. She feels at peace. Her eyes are closed and nothing intrudes but the sound of birds. She's weary. Weary with worrying, weary with working. Weary with everything. What's the point?

She opens her eyes and sits for some moments then pulls herself out and leans against the door. It's a month since she's been here in the Northern Suburbs Cemetery. She likes to think of such absences as a fallow time, allowing the ground to rest. In reality it's keeping a low profile. She doesn't have the excuse here of visiting Sam's grave, so she doesn't want to be noticed by cemetery staff or security. She has driven all the way out on a hot morning, crawling along in traffic because there's been a prang on Gladesville Bridge. But now she's here she doesn't want to be bothered with flowers.

A family arrives for a burial. They're one of two reasons she's here, picked from the list of funeral arrangements in the Herald. The cars draw up slowly and their passengers climb silently out. The weepy, the solemn. Kids in their best clothes and on their best behaviour. There is gentle, compassionate hugging and slow movement in the direction of the open grave, which has been covered with a green polytarp. There's a number of interstate rego plates among the parked cars and half a dozen big four wheel drives, a lot of people, and a stacks of wreaths. Her instincts were right. Three old women and a man sit in folding chairs along the edge of the grave as though waiting their turn to die. One little push...

Grace locks the car and slowly walks away from the funeral in the direction of the children's section while the mourners go through the routine. It's a place of sentimentality and sadness. She wanders the rows and reads the small plaques erected to stillborn babies. Babies that: Never saw the light of day but touched us just the same; the, Angel beautiful, Angel bright, always with us day and night; the ones that came and went in one day.

Little match-box cars adorn graves. Soft toys, dolls, bought for when a child would be big enough to play with them but never did.

Bright coloured plastic windmills spin in the breeze. A sports trophy adorns a plaque, more a memorial to the aspirations of a father than to a child who was never big enough to kick a ball or to run. Laminated photos are pinned to paperbark trees and bunches of tiny rosebuds with blackened tips hang in cellophane bags in which condensation gathers like milky opals. Grace lowers herself onto the grass in the shade of a tree, leans back against the coarse bark and closes her eyes.

How does a mother feel, carrying a child for those long months then losing it at birth, never having a chance to know it. Is it worse than losing your child at seventeen? Who knows? Maybe she should be grateful for having Sam all that time and being able to absorb the love that he radiated. That was something special, something not many mothers have. Maybe it was already decided when he was born that he'd live only a short time and all the love that would normally be spread over a lifetime was concentrated into those few years. That's why it was so intense, as though he knew, not just about that final night, but long before then, that he must make the most of the time he had with family and friends.

Don't be stupid. Nothing is determined in advance, she tells herself. Things happen because of what people do. Sam's dead because a copper shot him. Constable Sean Farrell will have to keep telling his wife and his own children lies because no one who's a decent person could do anything but loath the killing and the killer. He'll have to keep making excuses and tell the same lies to new friends. Every time he goes into a pub, a club or a restaurant, when someone looks in his direction then whispers to a friend, he will think they are talking about him, even if they're not, and when heads turn he'll think they're looking at him, even if they're not. Each time he'll be reminded of pulling the trigger of the Glock pistol.

Grace gets to her feet. The funeral party's gone. It's harvest time.

On a bright morning with high wispy clouds flying like banners in a brilliant blue sky, Grace arrives at Sam's grave with a bunch of golden grevillea so big she can barely see over it. She is shocked to discover the big white drum is empty. The bird of paradise flowers, with stamens blue as a lizard's tongue, that were put there the day before, are gone. She searches the rows in each direction to see if anyone's moved them to another grave but there's no sign. Not a petal. Not a bud. Not a leaf.

The Pacific Islander security man was right. There is a thief, and they're stealing her flowers.

Anger rises in her belly like floodwater. She kneels on the ground to still her racing heart. She looks at Sam's photo as though he might tell her something. He is mocking her with his eyes and his grin. She realises why. The irony of it — being angry because someone's stolen her flowers. She explains the difference for Sam's benefit.

"When I do it I take from new graves after a funeral, when there's lotsa flowers. An' I never take all of 'em. Never ever," she says emphatically. "And I never take from poor graves, or even the rich graves if there are only a few flowers."

Sam grins back. He always did have a wicked sense of humour.

“You bugger. You’re enjoying this,” Grace says.

She gets creakily to her feet; looks down at him for a moment then places the flowers in the bucket.

“It’d better not happen again,” she says. She brushes her skirt, turns on her heels and sets off back to the car.

But it does happen again, three weeks later. One day she places two great big bunches of white-cupped calla lilies on the grave. Next day there’s only a magpie dipping for water from its perch on the edge of a drum. It flaps onto the ground when she arrives and swaggers off, looking over its shoulder at her.

“You could tell me what’s going on!” Grace shouts after the bird. “And what about you?” She says to Sam. “Give me a clue eh!”

Sam grins back. For the first time since his death she is angry with him. She remembers what the security guard had told her. Thieves! There’s thieves in the cemetery, poachers on her patch.

She contemplates the development while driving home. Being a thief and catching a thief require similar thinking, which, apart from the opportunity to bully, is one of the reasons why people become coppers. Grace assumes that whoever is in competition with her must operate in more or less the same manner. They must be mobile, must have premises, must have an outlet. But with so many cemeteries to harvest the chances of accidentally coming across whoever’s involved are slight. She could go on forever one step ahead of the thief, one step behind, one step to either side. She’s got to find a way to stop him or her.

The competition’s will reduce the amount of flowers available, lead to increased surveillance and with it the chance of being caught. But her biggest concern is the incompetence of the thief, or thieves, they are stealing all the flowers from individual graves, not just some of the flowers.

That night Grace kneels in the flickering light of Sam’s bedroom shrine and appeals for help. “You knew all the kids in the area, who was doing what, who was stealing who was dealing. An’ you knew the police. Which is why you had trouble eh? All that’s something you can’t tell me. But you know everything I do is for you. When I take flowers it’s for you. The ones I sell are for you, so we can have revenge, so you can have the headstone you deserve. I’m not stealing for profit.”

The grinning photograph of Sam looks down on her.

“Sam you’ve gotta help me. Give me a signed, some clues. Please. An’ let me know what you want me to do with Constable Farrell. This waiting’s hard on an old woman.”

Sam doesn’t reply.

Grace pulls herself to her feet. She sits on the side of the bed, then swings her legs up and rolls in. She lies on her back in the dark looking at the glow of the stuck-on stars and watching light from the street playing shadows on the ceiling. She waits for Sam and sleep. But sleep won't come. Instead of dreams of Sam and talking, she has memories of Sam. He wanders in and out of her head, first as a wrinkled and pink baby, then as a boy riding his bike in the street with his mates, playing soccer, coming home from school one day with dried blood, dark in the crease where nose meets upper lip, hands hidden behind his back so she can't see the shiny pink flesh where the skin of his knuckles had gone in a fight.

He'd been in a 'wog' scuffle. Someone had abused him because of his dark looks and told him to get back where he came from. He came from, her. And she came from someone else, who came from somewhere else. There was a fight at school for which police took him to court. A twelve year old in court for fighting! She should have recognised the warning signs and moved. The police case was thrown out and the copper suspended for three months. The copper was constable Sean Farrell. He vowed he'd get his own back.

Eventually Sam leaves her and she sleeps.

Next morning as she's sitting with a pile of toast and a pot of tea while going through the obituaries she re-thinks the night before and decides that maybe it was Sam's way of pointing her towards Constable Farrell but she'd not understood. She had been waiting for his instructions through a dream, maybe the instructions were in the dream and she had missed them. Maybe Sam was reminding her to get back to the main game, not flowers, not the headstone, but Farrell, but retribution. She had allowed herself to become distracted. That afternoon she closes her flower stall early, drives into Newtown. She parks where she can see the police station and waits. Eventually Constable Farrell appears. She follows his car, nearly losing him a couple of times in the Friday afternoon snarl. She follows him west over Anzac Bridge. He turns into Balmain and parks outside a pub called the Hole in the Wall. Grace drives around the block to give him time to go in, then parks in a place where she can watch. She's nearly asleep when he comes out two hours later and gets into his car. Grace leaves after five minutes and heads for home. A plan is taking shape.

As she drives into the cul-de-sac where she lives, something happens which seems like a bad omen. A car swings in ahead of her, tyres screaming above the thump of base from the sound system. Fluff, who almost never leaves the safety of the house, runs across the street for the first time in her life. The car hits her.

Grace picks Fluff up and carries her inside, the soft neck hanging limp, and swinging at each step, the winter night star shine of her eyes already dulling.

A tiny bead of blood hangs from the black nose.

Rose sits snuffling as Grace cradles fluff on her lap, stroking the grit of the road from its coat. The young men in the car, who had hooned into the cull-de-sack, are now roaring obliviously away across town.

“Tansy would be heartbroken if she knew,” Grace says.

“The poor little bugger.” Jack puts his arm around Rose.

Grace digs a grave among her flowers and erects a wooden cross.

“Thought you were an atheist,” Jack says.

“I am. But I’m giving Fluff the benefit of the doubt an’ I don’t want nobody digging there.”

Tansy and Lizzie push through the doors of City Road Hotel, squeeze their way in and slowly make their way across the packed floor in the direction of the bar. They are there to farewell Malvin, who is escaping to the Philippines for a holiday, and to hear Charlie Fourmile, an Aboriginal singer and didgeridoo player, and his group, Jambuwal, a kind of mix of Yothu Yindi and Midnight Oil. Wallace arrives minutes later, scans the crowd, sees Tansy, smiles and pushes his way towards her, Celtic cross earring dancing. Tansy’s not sure how just much she likes him. He’s got charm to spare, but how would you go with a guy who ripped you off the first time you met? But he could have done worse, and he did get her a computer.

He’s persistent, and despite part of her saying, get shut, another part is saying something different. Tonight she decides to let the two sides fight it out. Lizzie nods to him when he joins them. He’s made his peace with her, more or less, and returned her CDs.

Charlie Fourmile moves onto the table-top stage as Malvin arrives. He’s hyped to the gills at the thought of two weeks of nothing to do but wander around the Philippines, get a girl or two, or three, or four an’ have a beer or two or three or four. He eventually sees Tansy waving a long pale arm in the air at him. He works his way slowly towards her trying not to spill his beer.

“Hello Boofhead,” Tansy shouts, and smiles her big smile.

“Get stuffed,” Malvin mouths back good-naturedly. Tansy introduces him to Wallace. As they shake hands Wallace is reminded that every time he has asked about her family she clammed up. Now he knows that at least there is a brother.

Tansy introduces Lizzie, “My brother Malvin I keep talking about.”

Lizzie says “G’day,” then turns her attention back to Jambuwal.

Malvin raises his hands palms up, to Tansy, and shrugs in a gesture that suggests, ‘See what I mean with women. They ignore me.’ He pulls a mock mournful face.

Tansy beckons him towards her and with exaggerated concern shouts in his ear, “Never mind big brother, tomorrow you’ll have women hanging off you like leaves from a tree.”

Malvin grins at the thought.

Malvin is hung over but excited and his spirit lifts with the aircraft as it takes him from Mascot Airport on his first overseas flight. He looks out the window at the sparkling Harbour and blue backyard pools. The suburbs drop behind as the Boeing 747 crosses the Blue Mountains and the deep green of the bush gives way to wide brown paddocks. He finally turns away from the view, closes his eyes and is lulled by the reassuring sounds of the engines. He rubs one hand along the shorn hair on the back of his neck where his pony tail grew and smiles in anticipation of pleasures to come.

In the business section of the plane, Charlie Fourmile’s eyes are closed too. He’s weary after the previous night’s gig. His seat’s in the recline position, he’s kicked off his cowboy boots and is listening to the disembodied music coming through his earphones. He’s humming and drinking orange juice.

Charlie’s not had a drink of alcohol since a brawl five years before when someone tried to throttle him and damaged his vocal cords so badly that he couldn’t speak for a month and thought he’d never sing again.

His mates told him that Charlie had started the fight by punching the bloke, a big bloke, for buying the girl he was with a cocktail.

Charlie could remember neither the girl nor the bloke and decided it was time to stop drinking.

He remembers a lot of girls since then.

He drifts into dreams as the plane flies over the dot painting landscapes of northern Australia towards the Philippines, six thousand five hundred kilometres away, and the first gig of his tour, in the town of Angeles.

Narita Castro Canonizado is perched on a stool at the Peace and Love bar, pondering her future. It is early night, cooling after a hot day in Angeles, and she should have her mind on her job but she’s thinking instead of what she’s going to be doing in ten years time. She’s recently returned from the village of Panindigan after visiting her Mother, Juana Villanueva Canonizado and her two

sisters and three brothers. Each month Narita sends her mother money — far too much to have come from her supposed job as a housemaid, but that is something not discussed.

Narita becomes aware of a man who has just walked in, stood next to her, smiled and ordered an orange juice. He is the most beautiful man she has ever seen.

“You have gorgeous hair. Like a big, shiny bush,” she tells him.

The man laughs. The sound is like music.

“Thanks.” He turns to her.

“What country you from?” she asks, looking into his face.

“Australia.”

“Oh kangaroos.”

He laughs again. “Yeah. You bin there?”

“Oh no. One day maybe I go. You from Sydney?”

“Nah! Top End.”

“Is that in the desert?”

“Nah. It’s the top an’ the end,” he teases. “The nearest to your country, the Philippines. There’s a town called Darwin. Ah live there, when I’m home. It’s the first place in Australia, so, not the end but the beginning. You go south from here a few thousand kay, an’ you’re there.

“That’s nice.”

Charlie offer to buy Narita a beer, she wants bourbon and coke.

“Can I touch your hair?” she asks.

Charlie leans obligingly in her direction and she runs her fingers through the long, black hair. It’s the same colour as her own but hers hangs straight as a black waterfall down her back, north to south. His points in all directions of the compass.

Using her finger she combs the curls, straightens them to their full length, then let’s go and watches as they spring back into coils. She had never touched hair like this before. Beneath the hair Charlie is humming a tune.

“You never heard of Darwin?” Charlie asks.

“No. Sydney. I heard of Sydney. It’s a beautiful city, Sydney. I have friend there, Maria, she sends pictures. I would like go one day.” Narita smiles at Charlie Fourmile.

“Dump of a place. All go go. Too cold Too many whitefellas. Too much noise. Too much stink. Come and see me in Darwin,” Charlie says, looking at her, his eyes twinkling.

“True?”

“Yeah. The best place in the world. At night everybody goes to the beach to watch the sun set. In the rest of Australia people go to the TV to watch the news. That’s why they are so depressed. Watching the sun go down is more fun. Mindil Beach night markets the best place. Great music. You can get Filipino stuff.”

Narita understands only half of what he’s saying but she smiles and nods.

“Just ask for me, Charlie Fourmile. Everybody knows me.”

“Everybody? What you do?”

“I sing. Got a group, Jambuwal. Haven’t ya heard of us?”

Narita’s normally smiling face smiles even more. “Yes I’ve seen poster! Here. Now. You really Jambuwal? You marvellous.”

Charlie thinks so too.

“We’re on tour. All over the Philippines.”

“You travel all the time?” Narita would give anything, everything, to spend her life travelling

“All over the world, London, Berlin. France. New York, Asia.”

“You’re so lucky. One day I’m gonna travel too. Everywhere.”

“We’re staying at the hotel next door. Wanna come to my concert tomorrow?”

“Me? Oh yes.”

Charlie produces a handful of tickets from the pocket of his cowboy shirt and gives her one.

Narita clutches it. Charlie buys her another bourbon and coke.

She gets the following night off and dressed in her best she goes to the concert and sits in the front row. Charlie smiles at her a lot — a man who is famous and travels everywhere smiles at her.

She meets him after the concert, he holds her in his arms and tells her of his travels.

Jack is lucky enough to find a narrow space to park just off King Street and he edges the car in, then out, then in again. He has five goes before he succeeds. Rose is better at it than him but she’s at home waiting “just in case”. Someone needs to be home just in case Tansy comes back, she says. Jack knows she’ll be sitting, her phone in her hand, the TV volume turned low, the phone volume turned high. Just in case.

If Jack and Rose keep roaming the packed streets they may eventually see her. Jack wanders into a pub, stands in a corner, beer in hand and scans the sweating bodies. If he accidentally on

purpose meets Tansy they can have a beer, a chat. He can maybe pursued her to come home, or at least meet again.

It's a big if. If she really does live here. If she visits this pub. If she comes in tonight. If he sees her. If she'll speak to him. If you strung all the ifs together they'd go once around the world.

Jack doesn't find her her in any of the places he wanders in and out of. He walks the street for a while, both sides, from the station to Missenden Road and back, then towards St Peters. The area has been tarted up a lot since he was last there; Japanese restaurants and lights instead of dingy closed shop fronts. A blue neon cross high on the top of the Greek church glows pale in the dark, drawing the eye of the believers up away from street level to God. He goes into a pub where he once listened to music, but the rickety stage on which three or four musicians use to crowd is gone and banks of pokies are in its place. People sit on high stools, prodding the machines into life, backs hunched, blank faces glowing yellow.

The manager, a young bloke with a blond pony tail and smooth cheeks, tells him the whole place was falling apart. The floor was rotten, "Place hadn't been touched in fifty years. The patrons only drank water, to go with their speed. It's different now. Different customers. Changing demographics," he says knowingly.

Jack nods and smiles.

He moves on after one beer, back up the busy end of the street.

He looks at every young woman he passes.

He checks out cafes, shops and a blindingly lit convenience store. Nothing.

He decides he'll see more if he sits down and lets the crowd pass him rather than wandering along as of it. He goes into the Black and White coffee shop, finds a gap on a window bench and sits looking out. Tansy works in cafes sometimes. He'll ask the waitress if she knows her.

What can he say?

"I've lost my daughter. You seen her? She's tall, slim with sorta golden hair down to her waist?"

It was golden and it was down to her waist. Maybe it's short and purple now. Or blonde, or orange, or none at all. Bald as.

He looks at the waitress' nose stud as she smiles at him, white, even teeth, a small face and slender body. He fancies her, then laughs at himself. She's younger than Tansy. The stud looks like a silver wart. Would Oliver Cromwell have approved? Jack adds to his mental list of possible changes in Tansy that she might have her head and body pierced with rings and studs. He asks the waitress for a cappuccino and sits looking, first at the people in the cafe — then at those going by. A man at

the next table holds a chip between his fore finger and thumb and waves it in the air like a conductor's baton as he keeps time to music on the sound system. His girlfriend's reading a book.

At the back of the cafe a bloke with a beard is scribbling into a notepad. Two empty cups perch precariously one on top of the other next to him. Jack wonders why they aren't taken away. He also wonders what to do next. Go home!

He sets off down the street in the direction of the car, past an un-churchy looking church, stops and retraces his steps. He goes through the open doors into a vestibule separated from the body of the church by a glass-panelled wall. Two thin and time-worn young Aboriginal woman sit hunched in chairs, one of them next to an Aboriginal man about the same age. He's small and wiry with a shaven head and a face that's either been through a car windscreen or met the wrong end of a broken bottle.

Jack looks into the church through the glass wall. At first he can't make out what's happening. Three people are lying on their backs on the floor; a big man, belly to the sky and bare footed; a skinny girl in her late teens or early twenties, who even when lying down with a woman stroking her limbs, is scrunched up with inner agonies. The foot of another is visible, protruding beyond the line of chairs. He, or is it she? could be dead. There are young people, old people, street desperate and the lonely in old hats and older bodies. Even through a glass wall Jack can feel their vulnerability. He realises he is looking for Tansy among them. This could never be her scene, he assures himself. But then, who knows?

A slender, handsome Indian-looking man is exhorting the congregation, walking back and forth, facing the forty or so people, gesticulating and punching the air. Another, equally handsome, but much taller Indian-looking man, moves among the congregation, facing the talking preacher. Their suits are as well cut as their hair.

Music begins and for the first time Jack notices on a stage a group of blank-faced young guitarists. People stand and sing. Jack makes out the words "Amazing grace, how sweet a sound..." A fortyish man in a flannie shirt raises his arms in the air in a surrender position and begins to wave from side-to-side. Others follow.

The small preacher is sweeping back and forth on the stage speaking with great energy and what looks like conviction. He is the focus of attention for all but the big bellied man, who is still lying unmoving on the floor and the skinny girl who is half kneeling, half collapsed against a woman. It's a disturbing yet mesmerising scene.

The small preacher sees Jack looking through the glass. He fixes him with his eyes and points to him. Jack can't hear what he says but everyone turns and looks.

Jack picks up what sounds like “Unrepentant sinner...” The preacher doesn’t take his eyes off Jack as he speaks. He beckons Jack to enter the hall and the kingdom of God. Jack just keeps looking. The preacher talks more, points again, indicates the way in for Jack. For a moment Jack is tempted. Just from curiosity. But he shakes his head instead.

The preacher abandons Jack to the devil and sweeps the congregation with his gaze, back and forth, like the beam from a lighthouse. The bloke with the flannie shirt’s still swaying, arms in the air to the music. They must ache by now. The man on the floor is still belly up to God.

Jack turns and leaves.

He wanders King Street looking but not finding. He’s almost back at the parked car when through the glass doors of a pub he glimpses a stage show with three cavorting drag queens. Jack walks in, men, mostly middle aged, mostly bald, mostly in black tee-shirts and black leather pants, a few women.

The blonde-wigged queens are pushing each other around the stage in mock camp aggression.

Jack stands uneasily with his back to the wall. Gays en-mass bother him. He knows they shouldn’t but they do. Maybe it’s something to do with the fact that their uninhibited caressing is a reminder of how they get their sexual pleasures.

He leaves without buying a beer and rings Rose. “Anything?” she asks.

“No. Anything?” he asks in return.

Rae puts on her wrap-around sunnies with one hand, closes the windows of the van with the other and reverses from shade into glaring sunlight. Nola dons her sunnies, takes a swig from a bottle of water and passes it to Rae. They’ve got the best from Rookwood this morning, such as it is, two big funerals, and the pickings from a couple of smaller ones. The day before they were at Botany cemetery and Randwick, hoping to make the most of people’s weekend visits. They’d been disappointed. Their profit from the shop deliveries in the eastern suburbs has fallen. Today’s not going to be any better they both think as they pull out of the gate for a quick dash over to the Northern Suburbs cemetery.

There haven’t been many burials and someone has already skimmed off the best. No points for guessing who. It doesn’t take them long to remove the few remaining fresh blooms and pack them away in the icy confines of the van. The coldness they cursed in the winter they now welcome, even if they have to wear sweaters.

Dargie is waiting for them, fretting, and sweating after doing chin-ups on the horizontal bar. Business is bad. The old woman gets too many. She is too experienced for them. His plan to create a team of collectors has been put on hold.

He rubs the biceps on each arm as he walks up and down. So, what to do? Find a way to get more flowers. The most obvious tactic is to decrease the competition, increase the catchment, employ more people. But increasing the catchment brings its own problems. If his team has to travel too far they can't get the flowers back to the shops in time. There is only one answer; concentrate on the competition. It's time to get rid of Johnnie's old woman.

"What's the best way to wipe out competition?" he asks Nola and Rae when they've bundled the flowers.

"Get all the best stuff before she does. It's simple," Nola says.

"For sure, but she'll retaliate and you'll be running around the cemeteries till you disappear up your own arse, then you'll get caught," Dargie says. "We've got to persuade her to give it up. What do you think eh?"

"How?" Rae and Nola ask together.

"I thought you might tell me, you're the ones on the ground."

"Buy her out?" Rae suggests.

This has never occurred to Dargie. In the lines of business he's been in such options don't even come up.

"Too expensive. We need a really creative approach to the problem. Think as a team. Brainstorm, like a corporate enterprise looking for ways to downsize or launch a take-over bid."

Rae and Nola look at each other. No inspirational thoughts come. Dargie tells them they'd better make their deliveries while the flowers are still fresh.

They meet later in a Glebe cafe where Dargie buys them brunch. Rae doesn't like Glebe Point Road. It's full of young people. Makes her feel ancient.

"What did you come up with?" he wants to know.

"Nothing," Rae confesses.

"Amalgamate, you know, buy her in rather than buy her out," Nola suggests.

Dargie keeps eating his bacon and eggs, Rae spoons fruit salad and yoghurt into her mouth and Nola waits for an answer.

"Nah. Nah," Dargie finally says through a mouthful. He puts his knife and fork down, carefully wipes his mouth. "It's gotta be something that doesn't cost money."

"We've got to work smarter," Rae suggests.

“Yeah, but how. Give me an idea. How do we get rid? Work on it and we’ll have another meeting in a week. OK?”

OK.

Dargie isn’t optimistic that the girls will come up with anything. They haven’t his business experience. He thinks he’ll probably have to resort to tried and tested methods.

A week after Charlie Fourmile and his group fly out of the Philippines Malvin arrives in Angeles looking for fun, anything that will take his mind off family.

He books in at a hotel he can’t remember the name of and wanders into the street. He recognises the music coming from one of the bars, Jambuwal, what a coincidence. They’re bigger than he thought. He goes in and orders a San Miguel beer. A girl wanders over and climbs onto a stool. She smiles. Big white teeth and a soft brown face.

“Hello, my name is Narita, what’s yours?”

“Malvin.”

“Where you from?”

“Australia.”

“Oh kangaroos.”

“Yeah. You been?”

“Oh no. One day maybe I go. You from Sydney?”

“Yeah.”

“I heard of Sydney. You are lucky. I have friend there, Maria, she sends pictures. It’s a beautiful city, Sydney. I would like to go there.” She smiles her most beguiling smile.

“A great place, lotsa things going on all the time. The most beautiful city in the world.”

“Everyone say that. It must be so nice to live in the most beautiful city in the world.”

Malvin agrees. He hears a didgeridoo and the voice of Charlie Fourmile from the sound system.

“I’ve just seen them in Sydney,” he tells her excitedly.

“You like them? I do. They’ve been here. Everybody thinks they’re very good. They left us CD. I have a great time.”

“They still here?”

“Gone now. Lotsa local bands are good.”

“How about you take me to hear some.”

Narita hesitates a moment, for Malvin’s benefit, then says, “If you pay my barfine.”

“You in trouble?”

Narita’s hand goes to her mouth and she laughs. “No, no. But if I leave the bar for the evening you have to pay the bar, then I get it back.”

“Oh, yeah, I see, no worries.”

Narita takes him to some of the local bands. They are in fact not good. But they have a great time anyway, drinking and talking and dancing. Malvin likes Narita’s sense of humour, Narita thinks Malvin’s kind and considerate. He doesn’t make unpleasant demands.

The following evening he turns up at the bar early. She sits with him. He buys a bourbon and coke and a San Miguels.

“I’m here another week, wanna spend it with me?” Malvin asks.

“You’ll pay the barfine, all week?”

Malvin hesitates, “No worries.”

They catch a mini bus to Barrio Baretto on the coast.

That night at a popular tourist cafe they have fish, grilled until it falls off the bone when you touch the brittle, charred skin. They drink cold beer. Later, they lie naked on a bed beneath a mosquito net, listening to the night sounds and watching the smoke from mosquito coils drift through the room. Malvin reaches over and touches Narita’s nipple. He wets his fingertip with his tongue and gently rolls the finger around the areola. Narita imitates the sound of a cat purring. He laughs.

Her fingers walk across his belly, down to his groin and tug his pubic hairs, hard.

“Ouch!” he says, trying to stifle the sound.

She giggles and caresses the soft skin on the inside of his thighs, then takes hold of his penis, squeezes, and let's go. Malvin squirms with pleasure.

“Quick. Quick,” he says and pulls her over to sit astride him.

Malvin cups her small breasts in his hands.

He looks up at her, his face contorted in pleasure

She slides up and down as he holds her hips and she braces herself with her hands flat on his belly. She moves faster and faster and begins to scream. A frightening, disorienting, deafening sound. Malvin tries to thrusts her away but she collapses onto his chest and clings so tightly he can’t break her hold.

She’s dying. A death agony from a terrible tropical disease is gripping her?

She's been knifed in the back?

Malvin tries to cover her mouth with his hand. She bites.

Her screams reach a crescendo then stop. She moans, goes limp, rolls off and lays with one hand on his belly, one leg hooked between his thighs.

“Ohhh, beautiful. Beautiful,” she says, smiling. Her eyes closed in blissful repose.

Malvin is very pleased with himself and stops searching for a knife in her back.

Grace hates hot weather. The cold makes her joints ache but it has advantages. Flowers last longer. People don't. The old go down with colds, flu, pneumonia, and they die. Hot weather has no advantages at all. It makes her sweat rivers. It makes flowers wilt. It's hot now. The air con is going full bore as she drives west along Parramatta Road, bumper to gritty bumper in a brown, shimmering haze. Ahead is the last vehicle in a line of funeral cars. No hurry. She stays with them past the rocket ship towers of Auburn Gallipoli Mosque, then on to Rookwood cemetery. Mourners in the funeral car look ahead through tearstained eyes as though somewhere on the other side of the windscreen there is relief from their grief. Many of the women, and men, are flamboyantly dressed and theatrical looking. It's one of two funerals Grace has marked for the day, an old costumier who was described in her obituary as being remembered for running a shop that supplied everything from eyelashes to feather boas, masks to make-up and glitter, shoes to shimmy dresses. Grace turns off for Sam's grave and the cortege keeps going to journey's end.

She parks in her usual spot, takes a bunch of tulips out of the cooler box and walks to the grave. She removes yesterday's flowers from a vase, shuffles over to the skip and dumps them on top of rotting blossoms and soggy paper.

She smiles at a young woman. The woman's been there every day for the last month. A child of three or four, with the same blond hair as the woman, trails behind her like he always does, listless and sullen. The woman's husband was killed in a car crash. Grace read the story in the papers. She got to the cemetery shortly after the burial and removed some lovely wreaths. Now she feels guilty every time she sees the woman. She wants to talk to her and the child but can't bring herself to do it. Grace knows that before long this woman will stop coming every day. The needs of daily life will reassert themselves, the kid will go to school, she'll get a job, another partner, sooner or later, hopefully sooner, and maybe another child to bind the relationship. The visits to her late husband's grave will become weekly, then only the first Sunday in the month, then maybe on birthday's or public holidays.

Grace can't make out why this particular woman is getting to her, but she is and it's annoying. The little boy picks some white marble chips from his father's grave and throws them awkwardly in the direction of an angel perched on a gravestone as though it has just flown down. His mother chastises him and he begins to grizzle.

Grace turns her back, kneels at Sam's grave and puts the tulips in fresh water. The wooden cross at the head of the grave is tilting and she straightens it. By the time Grace has replaced the flowers and tidied the grave the woman and child have gone. She's relieved. She wishes they'd change their routine, come later in the day so she didn't have to see them. Sometimes they are leaving as she arrives; sometimes they are arriving as she leaves. Always the woman looks depressed. Always the child is miserable. Grace tries to put them out of her mind and concentrate on flowers.

After the funeral of the costumier the only other worthwhile one is of a former Dam Busters navigator in World War II. She read in his obit that he'd started his working life as a clerk with Lloyd's of London. A boring job for an unadventurous man maybe. Then the war came and with it; action, courage, and a DFC for bravery. Both funerals should have enough old and young friends and admirers with a bit of money for good wreaths.

Grace starts with the Dam Buster. She wants to allow a decent time for the mourners to depart before she makes her selection. But in this heat she can't wait long.

She moves the car closer, but still within a discrete distance as the last of the mourners drives off. She climbs out and stands in the shade for a moment, wiping the sweat from her face and throat, her mop of hair shading her eyes and neck.

Grace walks slowly over to the war hero's grave. The flowers lie in the full sun, waiting to be rescued. But even from a distance she can see something is wrong. Instead of the an unbroken canopy of blossoms, there's large gaps — the best have been taken, virtually before her eyes. A feeling of unease stirs in Grace's belly. She takes a bottle of water from a pocket in the depth of her skirt and has a swig.

Grace begins a slow, perspiring walk to the grave of the costumier. The same thing. It looks as though the dam buster has blown it apart. Grace is furious. She takes nothing.

In the distance under the shade of a row of trees she sees two women lowering the back door of a black van with tinted windows. They climb in and drive off.

Grace sets up her poly tarp outside the hospital and spreads out the morning's flowers beneath its pale blue shade. The earlier intrusions at the cemetery worry her. Sometimes relatives and friends remove wreaths after the funeral but she knows what she saw today was crude, amateur theft, with no thought of the consequences or for the mourners. It's a threat to her. The city's

cemeteries can't handle more than one long-term operation, particularly when one of them is so amateurish.

She's sure the two women getting into the van have something to do with it. But how to stop 'em? She doesn't know. The theft from Sam's grave wasn't a one-off job like she thought. The security guard hadn't been on to her; he'd been on to whoever was systematically plundering and pillaging.

When the afternoon hospital lull comes, instead of staying until evening, Grace packs up the few remaining flowers, the tarp and gear and goes home.

Dargie decides it's time to visit the Dockside Hotel in Balmain to look up his old mate Johnnie Parkes. It is early evening and the place is quiet, a dozen guys scattered around the room, a couple of women playing pool, an old man sitting at the bar, a dog sleeping under a table. Dargie takes a stool, sits, legs extended, and orders a schooner. He takes a mouthful of beer, sharp and bitter and turns for another look around. Soundless footie is on a TV bracketed high up on the wall and a juke box glows and plays old country and western.

Dargie asks the landlord, if he knows anybody called Johnnie Parkes. The landlord turns and nods his head in the direction of the old man sitting further along the bar.

Dargie looks at him. The man returns his gaze with a slight, sardonic smile.

Dargie nods, the sort of acknowledgment one man gives another in a pub.

The landlord must have misheard him. It can't be Johnnie, this emaciated man with a bloated belly, sipping mineral water alone in a pub. But there's a set to his face and the way he holds his head and looks Dargie in the eye that's familiar.

Dargie turns away uneasily, has another pull on his beer then looks back. The old man's still watching him.

Dargie gives him a half smile but all he gets back is the same look.

For a moment the old man is obscured behind a couple ordering drinks but when they've gone back to their tables he's still there looking.

It has to be him.

Dargie picks up his glass and walks over.

"How's the revolution going Johnnie?" he asks.

"How's the whores Dargie? Still bouncing at brothels? Or you got some other business going now?" the old man replies in a rasping whisper.

"I wasn't sure it was you, you've..." Dargie doesn't know what to say. He extends a hand.

“Changed,” Johnnie takes it in a bird claw hand. They shake. Johnnie’s forearm and hand are one long line of bone covered with thin, dry skin.

Dargie is shocked. The eyes that were once blue and bright as the sky are cloudy, like a fish too long on the slab. The head’s not much more than a skull with skin stretched over it, and the once magnificent hair and beard are threadbare as an old mat.

He feels sorry for him. “Can I get ya a drink?”

Johnnie shakes his head.

“You look crook.”

“Ya could say that. What do you want?”

“Just heard about you and thought I’d see how you was going.”

Johnnie sips his mineral water. “Well, you’ve seen.”

Dargie shuffles his feet.

“Can’t they do anything?” he asks.

“Too old for a liver transplant. Unless there’s a direct donor.” Johnnie pauses for breath. “You got one to spare?”

“I think I need mine. I’m an active man,” Dargie touches his belly where he thinks his liver is.

Johnnie nods.

“You still pimping?”

“It wasn’t pimping. It was protecting. Don’t be so smug Johnnie. It’s a tough world out there. Some real bloody animals.”

“That right?”

“It was a symbiotic relationship I had with my girls.”

“Symbiotic! Who taught you that word?”

“One of ‘em was a university student. A real beauty. Blonde hair so long that she could sit on it. Putting herself through uni and paying ex or something. She said we depended on each other. I like her. A lot.”

“Did you screw her?” Johnnie asks.

Dargie ignores the question. “Problem is, she didn’t have her mind on the job. Didn’t turn up for work sometimes. She was more the intellectual type, you know. Thinking all the time.”

“That right? I used to find university types were just as good as the others, sometimes better, trying to show they weren’t hung up middle class or something.” Johnnie takes a sip from his mineral water. “But then my relationships weren’t symbiotic, only relationships,” he says.

“The university one didn’t last all that long. Just disappeared. I missed her, I reckon she couldn’t handle the study. But that’s years ago. Had other businesses since, importing, exporting, personal trainer, bodyguard, that kinda thing. I’m in flowers now.”

Johnnies lifts his head.

“A nursery?” Johnnie asks in disbelief.

Dargie laughs. “Nah. Nah.” He orders himself a whisky. “Want another of whatever you’re drinking?”

Johnnie shakes his head.

“It’s a recycling business, greenie stuff. Environmental control. I take flowers that are gonna be dumped and put ‘em on the market. Except I short circuit things a bit. Start the process before some people would normally start it. Know what I mean?”

Dargie takes a swig of his whisky. “It’s a good earner. A very good earner. Or could be. Got a team working for me. All good girls. I need to expand though. But there’s an obstacle.”

“Can’t see why, girls, flowers, day work. No wonder you’re looking so healthy.”

“That old woman of yours collects flowers too doesn’t she?”

“Who told you that?”

Dargie orders another whisky. “She’s a big girl.”

“I like ‘em big.”

“Not that big! Nobody could like ‘em that big. Anyway it’s dangerous being as big as that. You know what it’s like when people get old, they fall and break their hips an’ necks an’ things. They get brittle bones, particularly when they don’t exercise.”

“What do you want?”

Dargie has a swig of his whiskey, “Her to piss off. A good union man like you should be in favour of retirement at sixty five or thereabouts, give people a bit of rest before they croak it. Make space for the up-and-coming. It’s better to be up-and-coming than up-and-come, isn’t it Johnnie?” Dargie smiles at his own joke.

“The work’s therapeutic,” Johnnie tells him.

Dargie leans an elbow and looks sideways at Johnnie, “Because of the boy?”

“Because of the boy.”

“I heard about it. A bad business that. Coppers are bastards. They should be locked up, let honest people get on with their lives. But getting back to your old lady, she’s in my way Johnnie. Tell her to retire.”

“You tell her.”

Johnnie drains his glass. He climbs painfully from his stool and says goodnight to Quinlan behind the bar.

“I’m serious Johnnie,” Dargie whispers as Johnnie walks slowly past and into the street without looking back.

Rose screams when she sees Johnnie stagger down the hallway. Each nostril is sprouting a red flower of blood. His shirt’s splattered and ripped and his knees are red raw.

“What happened?” she cries as she lays him on his bed.

“Coupla blokes. Didn’t know ‘em,” he whispers.

Rose yells for Jack, grabs a towel from the linen cupboard.

Jack is too horrified to speak as they ease off Johnnie’s clothes and wash his face and gravel-ripped knees with warm water and disinfectant.

Johnnie winces but the smell of the disinfectant soothes. He closes his eyes.

“How’d it happen? Anyone see?” Rose wants to know.

Johnnie shakes his head, grunts with pain as he tries to ease his position.

“They rob you?”

Johnnie shakes his head.

“Bastards! An’ you never seen ‘em before,” Jack says.

Johnnie grunts again.

“Get the doctor an’ the cops,” Rose tells Jack.

“Nah. Nah. Don’t” Johnnie insists in a voice they can barely hear.

He lies in the bed looking more dead than alive. He keeps bringing up blood.

“Just the doctor then,” Rose pleads.

Johnnie shakes his head and grimaces in pain. Rose takes hold of his hand. She remains with him until he falls asleep, then she joins Jack in the kitchen.

“I don’t believe him,” Jack says. “Why would anyone bash someone in his condition? They coulda killed him.”

Grace cries when she returns from her hospital stall and sees Johnnie, black eyes closed and face raw and swollen. She kneels by the side of the bed and gently pushes the strands of damp hair from his forehead.

“Why’d they do it?”

“Don’t know, he wasn’t robbed,” Jack says.

Johnnie sleeps on and off through the night, a restless and painful sleep in which he mutters and curses a name that neither Grace nor anyone else as heard of before, “Dargie.”

Before dawn, he becomes quiet and still and sleeps deeply, his breathing hardly noticeable.

When he awakes he looks at Grace through swollen and blackened eyes, a blurred silhouette at the window, watching him.

“What happened?” she asks. “The truth this time. Why?”

“I’ve said!”

“Don’t lie to me.”

Johnnie sighs “Look, just be careful with the flower business eh.”

“Why?”

“Maybe it’s time to quit.”

“What’s that got to do with you being bashed?”

“Nothing.”

“Good. I’ll keep on working then.”

Malvin’s head is in the clouds. Ever since his plane left Manila for Sydney he’s been thinking of Narita; her oval face, her dark eyes, the way she smiles, the softness of her belly, how her breasts rise like two small hills when she lies on her back, the way she makes love, her screams and her moans. As he catches glimpses of the sea shining far below he wonders if he’ll ever see her again. He has to see her again.

He writes an email:

“My Darling Naritaa, I can’t stop thinking about you and the fantastic time we had. It was the best holiday ever. I’m glad I went to Angeles, glad I heard them playing Jambuwal in the bar. The week in Barrio Baretto was the best time of my life. You and me together in bed was fantastic. I’d like to do it everyday for the rest of my life. You are the best person I have ever made love to.”

Having written that last sentence he stops, decides it’s not a good thing to say, and crosses it out.

“But it’s hard with me here and you there, in fact it is impossible. Which is a silly thing to say, but you know what I mean. It is going to be awful in Sydney without you, boring and lonely. You said you would like to visit Sydney one day. Will you? I can save up the money and send you a ticket and you can stay with me and the rest of the family. Some of the family are a bit unusual, but I will explain that when you come and I am sure you will get on with them and they will love you as much as I do. Nearly. Please tell me you are going to come. I’m including my phone number so you can ring me reverse charges.

Lots of love and kisses.

Malvin xxxxxxxx

Jack and Rose are waiting for him at the airport. Rose hugs him. Jack takes his bags.

“What you looking so bloody pleased about?” Jack asks.

“Nothing,” Malvin replies and grins.

Two big surprises wait Malvin when he gets home; Johnnie’s bashed face — as bruised and blotched as old fruit, and finding that his grandfather’s quit drinking. He quizzes the old man and the rest of the family about the bashing but his grandfather is sticking to his story. Everyone is sure he’s lying.

Malvin has little presents for each of them, but for Grace, something special, a video camera. He hopes it’ll help take her mind off things. She picks it up and squints through the viewfinder.

“God! It’s like a technicolour movie, but what am I gonna do with it?”

“You’ll find something,” Malvin tells her.

She will, although she has not realised this yet.

When they’ve finished drinking to Malvin’s return and they have their belly’s full of Rose’s cooking, Malvin tells them about his holiday.

“I met a girl,” he says a little bashfully.

“Only one?” Jack teases.

“Only one that counts,” Malvin tells him.

“An’?” Grace prompts.

“I want her to come to Sydney.”

Rose’s glass of wine stops short of her mouth, “To get married?”

“Don’t know yet,” Malvin says.

Rose puts her glass back on the table without drinking. “What’s her name? What’s she like?”

Malvin grins. “Bewdiful. Faaaantastic. Dark eyes. An’ you should see her smile...”

“Apart from that,” Rose interrupts.

Malvin picks up his iPhone, shows them happy photos.

“Her names Narita Castro Canonizado.”

“That’s a mouthful,” Grace says.

“She’s generous, lots of fun to be with,” Malvin tells the circle of faces.

“She got a family?” Rose wants to know.

“Two sisters, brothers.”

“Did you meet ‘em,” Grace asks.

“Nah! She told me.”

“Where you gonna live?” is Grace’s next question.

“Here, till we get a place.”

“What about a visa? She in a job where she can get a temporary work permit?” Jack wants to know.

“Probably not.”

“Give the boy a break,” Johnnie croaks, he’s had enough of third degrees

“What’s she do?” Rose asks.

“Er, a beautician.”

“Not exactly a shortage of beauticians in this country is there?” Jack leans over and grabs one of Malvin’s hands. “She do your nails for you?”

Malvin pulls away.

“Stop it Jack!” Grace tells him.

“That where you met her, a beauty parlour?” Jack chides.

“No, a concert of the Australian group Jambuwal,” Malvin lies.

“Well, suppose you know what you’re doing. When she coming?” Rose asks.

“I haven’t asked her yet.”

“Don’t you think that’d be a good idea?” Jack asks.

“Oh! How do you know she wants to come?” Rose says.

“She’ll come. I know. We’ll get a visa sorted and when I’ve got the money,” he pauses. “I spent up on the trip. I was wondering if one of you could, well, lend me the cash.” He looks at Grace.

Grace thinks of the money she’s putting away for the headstone and the Constable Sean Farrell Fund. “OK, I’ll see what I can do.”

Malvin grins.

Rose and Jack look at each other across the table.

The following night Malvin drives Johnnie to the Dockside Hotel, buys a beer for himself and mineral water for Johnnie. They sit on their stools side-on looking at each other.

“Well, what’s the real story about the bashing?”

“Why does no one believe me?” Johnnie says.

“You scared of somebody?”

“Course I’m not scared, goddamn it. It was probably a coupla heavies sent by the distillery because they’d heard I’d given up the booze, a threat to their profit margins.”

Malvin smiles, shakes his head, “Yeah, sure Grandad.”

Frank and a number of other regulars come up to Johnnie to see how he’s going.

While they’re talking Malvin catches the eye of Quinlan.

“Did ya see anything unusual Quinnie?” he asks quietly.

“Nah. Far as I know he was by himself, just sitting in his usual place talkin’ to anybody who’d listen. But you know what it’s like around here these days; the place is fulla young blokes all coked up. Not like the old days when people just drank beer. Coulda been anybody,” Quinlan goes back to serving.

After another drink Malvin helps Johnnie into the car and takes him home.

“I’m gonna find out, whether you like it or not,” he tells him.

The figure in the passenger seat of Grace’s station wagon looks like a corpse she’s picked up with the flowers. It’s Johnnie, helping, an extra pair of eyes, looking not for flowers but for two women.

Grace has talked him into accompanying her. It is an arrangement that suits both of them. Grace feels she’s keeping him occupied, Johnnie feels he’s protecting her, although protecting’s probably not the right word. He’s not sure what he can do other than look out for the competition. Then what? It’s a free country, more or less.

He feels very crook, sitting there, the door of the wagon open for air, his eyes scanning the cemetery. At least that of him’s working.

Grace is in the distance, one of the cemetery’s black ‘widows,’ tending graves of parents, husbands, daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, even grandchildren. There’s a never ending supply for them to mourn. Widows come with the cemetery.

Johnnie refuses to go to Sam’s grave with her. At the anniversary of the killing he visits alone, the same on Sam’s birthday. He prefers to be without Grace’s rituals, without being reminded of her madness and his neglect, what he shoulda done, what he shouldn’t have done with their son. When he does go he stands facing the photograph in the glass box, looking at that grin, the eyes, a photograph taken in a moment, which he thought at the time, without really thinking, would be one of many hundreds more. But it turned out to be the last. A boy going off to soccer, or was he coming back? — you’d think you’d remember something like that. He’d kicked his last ball; scored his last goal on the day the picture was taken, the day before the night he was shot.

Johnnie gets out of the station wagon and leans against the side. This is why he hates coming to the cemetery. All the memories, all those ‘what ifs’. Grace is like she is because she comes every goddam day. The memories never have a chance to fade, to allow a patina of time to settle on them and blur the pictures. It’s like topping up with poison every day, or constantly whipping yourself, leather on flesh, so the blood never stops flowing.

But he's a fine one to talk, he reminds himself. A man who every night dived to the bottom of a bottle and floated to the top each morning. Johnnie climbs back into the car. He puts a CD on, leans back and closes his eyes. It is Irish fiddler, Martin Hayes, music that's sad and lonely. The bow sweeps and angles, slides over the strings. The fingers step and stop and start again in an endless dance along the neck. The notes hang in the air momentarily, to be replaced by the next and the next. There are times to nurse sadness with sadness and times when it has to be driven away like some beast that has come to feed on you. Johnnie allows himself to succumb to the former, to take out old images and thoughts, look at them, then put 'em back.

He sits with his eyes closed listening to the music, letting his thoughts wander. The sound of feet on gravel and the rhythm of someone's breathing identify Grace grace approaching.

"I thought you were a lookout for me," she says gently.

"I am," Johnnie replies without opening his eyes. "I'm focusing my mind."

"They've bin again. They must be taking the flowers off the graves before the mourners leave. Might even be taking 'em off the bloody hearse itself."

Johnnie opens his eyes and sits up. "Get in, let's have a little drive and see what we can see."

They travel the outer circuit and along every roadway in the old and the new sections. All they see is a group of visitors on a guided history tour of the cemetery. There's nothing to indicate who or where the thieves are.

On the way out they pass the security boy and he waves to Grace then looks again, then again, at her driver whose skeletal face is half hidden behind sunglasses.

Two days later Grace and Johnnie are approaching the Northern Suburbs Cemetery after scoring badly at Rookwood. As they turn to enter, a black panel van with mag wheels and tinted windows comes speeding out from the opposite direction.

Both cars brake and skid towards each other on the gravel. They stop centimetres apart, face-to-face.

The driver of the panel van lowers the window. It's a woman. She looks like she is going to yell, but she says, "Sorry."

Grace and Johnnie can see another woman in the passenger seat. Despite the heat both are wearing woollen sweaters which reach to their chins.

The driver slips it into reverse, skids back a short distance then shoots forward around Grace and Johnnie and disappears down the road. It's the van Grace has seen before. They park and walk to where there's been a burial. The pile of flowers on top of the recently replaced raw earth has gaps in it.

They go to a second grave and find the same. And a third.

They walk slowly back to the car. “Well?” Johnnie says.

“Well?” echoes Grace. “That’s them. What we gonna do?”

Jack stands against the wall looking around the crowded Newtown pub. He’s already checked out the second floor bar. Although he’s only been in the place ten minutes his head aches with the noise. He’s had enough. He puts his half-drunk beer down, walks out and collides with a young woman — Tansy. Her hair’s no longer golden but short and orange.

“Dad!”

“Well. What do you know?” Now he’s found her he doesn’t know what to say. He struggles to find the right words while resisting an urge to fling his arms around her. Take it easy, he tells himself as a feeling of warmth rushes through his body.

Tansy takes a deep breath. What she had been considering for weeks has happened, unplanned. She feels guilt for shutting the family out all this time and relief at seeing her father again. The door has opened.

Jack becomes aware of a guy next to her who has unfashionably long curly hair. Tansy introduces him but the name goes over Jack’s head. He has always thought when they finally met again they would weep with joy or happily look at each other, father and daughter reunited.

Instead they stand awkwardly on the side of the narrow jostling footpath.

“What ya doing here?” Tansy asks, even though she knows the answer.

The whole thing has caught Jack off balance. He feels like all the blood in his body has rushed to his head and he can’t think. “Been having a beer with a coupla mates from work,” he blurts out.

“Oh,” Tansy is as confused as he is. “I, we...” she half indicates Wallace...

A silence opens.

“You’re looking well,” Jack says. “Didn’t know what you’d be like when I saw you again. You know, pink hair or bald or what.” He laughs.

“I’ve just had it cut.”

“I like it.”

Tansy can tell he’s lying. At least he has the grace to do that and not say, “It was better the way it was.” He’d always had an unspoken pride in his Yorkshire bluntness. To others it often sounded like rudeness.

“How’s Mum?”

“Good.”

“An’ Grandma and Grandad? Malvin?”

“Fine.” Jack resists the impulse to say, “If you rang us you’d know,” but Malvin must have kept her in the picture.

They stand for an uncomfortable moment longer, then Tansy half raises a bag of takeaway in her hand, “We’d better...”

“Yeah. It’ll go cold. Ring us? Will you do that? Ring us?”

Jack takes her by the shoulders and kisses her lightly on the cheek. Hugs her. She kisses him back.

“I will. Promise.”

“Soon? I’ll tell your mother soon?” Is he pushing her too much?

“Yeah. Tomorrow.”

“Good. Ta-rah then love. See ya. Soon.” Jack sets off quickly down the street.

Tansy watches until he disappears among the crowd. He has the beginnings of a stoop and is going grey.

“What’s all that about? Family?” Wallace ask. “Come on...tell me.”

Jack finds the relative quiet of a shop doorway and phones Rose. His heart is beating like a forge hammer, “Guess What!”

He can hear her half laughing half crying when he tells her.

He threads his way back through the stream of people to his car without noticing anyone. He was bloody pathetic. “You’re looking well.” That was the best he could say after all those months She must have thought he couldn’t give a bugger. He almost turns round and runs after her.

Two days later Tansy rings. Her mother answers.

“I’m so glad Tansy! So glad. You don’t know how worried we’ve all been. How are you? Your dad said you looked good. Got your hair cut.”

“Yeah, weeks ago. I’m fine. I was gonna ring, soon. Anyway, I’m here an’...”

Her mother waits for her to finish.

“... an’ I thought I’d come round,” Tansy says.

“That’d be lovely. Saturday?”

“Saturday. Great.”

“Oh, it’s so lovely to hear your voice again. So lovely.” She’s glad Tansy can’t see her.

“Me too.”

Rose can hear her sniffing.

The jogger in the baseball cap and silver-framed sunnies does another lap of Rookwood Cemetery's main circuit. His new white running shoes flash in the sun. His equally new singlet hangs wet over his muscular body and a vee of sweat stains the back of his shorts from the waist to his buttocks. He wears a bum bag with a bottle of water in it. This is the third consecutive morning he's been there this week, the second week in a row. Dargie's doing it tough, even for a man who loves exercise.

He takes off along one of the many avenues that lead into different parts of the cemetery. You never know where the cunning old bitch might be. Dargie slows to a walk. The muscles of his legs aren't used to this sort of thing. He's an upper body man, more used to working out showy shoulders than covered up calves. He stops under a tree and stretches his achilles tendons. They hurt. If he doesn't find Grace soon he's going to need treatment. But he knows a gorgeous physio who goes to the gym and he'd love her to get her hands on him.

Dargie straightens and is about to start jogging again when he sees what he's been looking for, the station wagon with his old mate Johnnie Walker driving and his great lump of lard wife sitting next to him. They disappear down one of the avenues and Dargie jogs slowly after them, his sore tendon forgotten. He stops some distance away and does more stretches.

Grace and Johnnie struggle out of the car. She opens the back and takes out a bunch of flowers and sets off between the graves. Johnnie goes off in the opposite direction in a slow and painful shuffle. Dargie almost feels sorry for him. What a wreck. Shoulda taken care of himself.

When they're both out of sight Dargie jogs up to the car and squats on the kerbside by the front wheel. He takes a large, strong-bladed clasp knife from his bum bag, puts the point against the tyre and pushes hard. His hand hurts. He keeps pushing and working the blade until he hears a satisfying hiss as the tyre gasps and deflates. He does the same with the rear nearside tyre. He picks up a vase from one of the graves and flings it through the windscreen, then he sets off at a slow jog. He turns and looks back. The old station wagon is leaning wearily to one side. Dargie smiles, kids stuff really and well below his normal work, but such is life.

Grace and Johnnie try to conceal news of the attack from the rest of the family but Malvin notices the two new tyres and windscreen. The secret's out.

Malvin, Jack and Rose sit the two of them down at the table in the yard and beg them to stop what they're doing.

"Mum, give it away please," Rose begs.

“No way.”

Grace doesn't know what's going on either but she suspects it's something to do with Johnnie's bashing, her flower business, and the two women in the darkened panel van.

Johnnie says nothing but vows to himself that he will go with Grace every day to protect her. Then he laughs at the thought. Him protecting anyone, particularly from Dargie, is ludicrous. She's more likely to do the protecting.

Two of the people Tansy cleaned house for have moved. She's down to two houses a week, hardly enough to live on, even with the dole. She puts out the word among her friends that she's looking for work. She keeps her eyes on local restaurants. After a week nothing's come in and she sets off from the city end of King Street, checking out the cafes and restaurants. She's in and out of a hundred glass doors as far as St Peters, a kilometre or so down the road, then back on the opposite side.

She wonders how many times she'd been in one of the cafes or pubs when her mother and father walked by. Hiding from them all those months was cruel. It wasn't their fault, what had happened to Sam, and that she couldn't handle Gran. They'd suffered and she'd made them suffer more. But she'd have gone mad too if she hadn't got out of that house. Not that you can get away from the stuff in your head by moving. Thoughts filled every brain cell, night and day. But at least cutting off contact removed the daily reminder, Gran. She'd abandoned her too. But there was nothing she could have done to help. Time has to fix what was fixable.

She's almost reached the place where she began when she sees a Lebanese restaurant with a card in the window saying 'Waitress wanted urgently. Must be experienced'. A woman in her twenties, dark, beautiful, and sulky looking, calls out to someone in the back of the shop and a man comes through. Tansy assumes it's her father.

He smiles pleasantly. He's handsome, dressed in black trousers, shoes and socks and a white shirt. A thin gold chain encircles his neck.

“Do you have experience?” he asks.

She lists some of the cafes where she's worked, leaving out the Black and White.

“Very good. But I'd like to see what you can do first. Not that I don't believe you but you know how it is with some people.”

“Not a problem. When do you want me to come in?” Tansy asks.

“Tuesday night. Six-thirty. You realise I can't pay you until I know you're OK.”

“You mean not for the first night? Is that what you're saying?”

“Yes. If you can do the work, then no problems after that. Cash in hand.”

“But I can do it!” Tansy can hear the edge to her voice.

“Like I say, then no problems. The job’s yours. You can see my point of view? Yes?”

Tansy wants to say, ‘No. Stuff it you old bastard.’

But instead she says “If I do the job all right why not pay me for what I’ve done?”

He smiles again, shrugs.

“It’s not possible. You’ll get a meal. For free.”

Tansy looks at him. She’s aware of the woman in the background. She thinks of working a whole evening for nothing. Then she thinks of the one hundred and thirty dollars left in her bank account.

“OK. Six-thirty. Tuesday. Three nights a week,” she says reluctantly.

There’s always a chance that something might turn up before then and she’ll have the satisfaction of ringing five minutes before her shift and telling him to stick it.

Tansy walks down the familiar hallway calling as she goes. Wallace is a few metres behind, treading tentatively in new territory. Her mother hurries forward and hugs Tansy, nearly knocking the beer bottles out of her arms. She hellos Wallace, shakes him by the hand, and gives him a once over, all in a couple of seconds.

She leads the way through the house and out the back. The big wooden table is under the grapevine like it has been there forever.

Her father comes forward, hugs her and pinches her on the backside with the barbecue tongs.

“Hello love, how’d you be?”

“Fine dad. You’re OK by the look’a things.”

“Introduce me to your boyfriend,” Grace demands.

“He’s not my boyfriend, he’s a friend, Wallace, who happens to be a man. Don’t get up Grandma,” Tansy says, as she advances on Grace, Wallace by her side. Grace has no intention of getting up. Tansy leans over and kisses her. Wallace shakes her hand.

“How are you girl? It’s lovely to see you, and your young man,” Grace says.

Although Tansy’s been warned about Grandad, she’s shocked by what she sees. The blonde giant who used to throw her into the air as a child is no longer. In his place is a bloated skeleton. Fighting her revulsion she crosses to where he’s propped up in a chair and holds him, one arm on each thin shoulder, gently, afraid he will disintegrate. His arms hang by his side like cling-wrapped bones, as though the big muscles have melted. His legs protrude from a pair of shorts like sun-

bleached and weathered sticks. The belly's enormous; he's like a stick insect that's swallowed an egg. The blonde curls are gone, the beard she wrapped her fingers in as a child has been reduced to tufts of hair. But worst of all is Grandad's face — it's a skull with skin stretched over it. The once flashing eyes have withdrawn deep into their sockets from where they peer like hermit crabs.

“How you going Grandad, winning?” Tansy asks, then wishes she could bite her tongue off.

“Handsdawn. Handsdawn,” he croaks, giving her a cadaverous grin and patting her arm with icy hands.

Wallace is introduced and shakes hands. Tansy wonders what's going through his head. She smiles and retreats.

Malvin hands beers to Tansy and Wallace. He tops up everyone else, except Johnnie's. They all say cheers and clink glasses. Tansy sits down at the table and makes a space for Wallace.

Chops curl on the barbecue and the smell of juices on burning coals mingles with that of mosquito coils shedding their skin of ash under the table. The thin spiral of smoke drifts around chair legs and human legs in the still warm air. Candle shadows dance on the table top and above them the leaves of the grapevine hang motionless.

One of Rose's huge Greek salads sits in a glass bowl in the middle next to a slab of Turkish bread on a board, and a dish of boiled potatoes. As the food is passed around Tansy realises how much she's missed all this.

She tells them about the new job and her father is furious that the first night's work for free. She changes the subject.

“We'll come over and see you. Leave a big tip eh?” Jack suggests.

Tansy says all right — if they have to.

“Where's Puss?” she wants to know, looking around the garden and calling.

Puss appears from out of the house and rubs against her legs. Tansy picks him up, lays the great tiger-like tom over her shoulders and strokes him.

“Beautiful boy. Miss your sister? Bet you do.” She puts him down and Puss slides off into the shadows of the garden.

Rose gets to her feet. “Before you get into the tucker I've got something to tell yah. A few months ago I entered Mum's garden into a competition run by the local council.”

“You did what?” Grace says in surprise.

“Today I got a letter saying that the best garden in the municipality belongs to ...Grace Parkes!”

Everyone claps and cheers Grace, for once can't think of anything to say.

“That’s not all,” Rose continues. “There’s another council award, for the most entrepreneurial senior citizen. She’s won that too — for setting up her hospital flower stall. The local rag’s going to interview her.”

“Better do your hair and get new thongs Gran,” Malvin shouts.

“An’ get out while you can Mum,” Rose warns.

There is much laughter and shaking of heads, except from Wallace, who doesn’t know where most of the flowers from the stall come from.

“I’ll tell you later, you’ll really appreciate it,” Tansy whispers.

They toast Grace’s double success and start on the food.

Jack sits back and lets the chatter wash over him. There’s talk of ‘remember when?’ old childhood fights between Tansy and Malvin and the intrigues of adolescence revealed for the first time.

“Dad, tell Wallace the story of how you met Mum,” Malvin says.

“He doesn’t want to hear that, an’ we’ve told you pair loads ‘a’ times” Rose says.”

“I’d like ta hear,” Wallace says, thirsty for more about this weird family.

“I’ve never heard the full story,” Tansy says.

“Course you have,” Malvin yells, and laughs.

“I never, not all of it,” she says.

“Talking about the past makes me feel old,” Jack says.

“You are,” Rose reminds him.

“Come on dad, tell it again for your prodigal daughter, and friend,” Malvin demands.

Jack re-fills Roses glass, then his own. He loves the story.

“I was eighteen and I had a mate called Sue and I went to a party at her place one Saturday night,” Rose says.

Jack puts down his beer. “I was working in a timber yard then and I got to know another Pom, a bloke named Jimmy Bonser...”

“Was he a bonser blo...?”

“Ah shut up, Buffhead,” Tansy tells Malvin.

Jack continues: “Jim was a merchant seaman who’d jumped ship because he’d met this girl. And one weekend he invited me to a party. It was fancy dress. I don’t remember wearing anything fancy, but I went.

“I knocked on the door and this girl opened it. She was wearing a gym-slip, black stockings and suspenders, a straw school hat and had a long cigarette holder in her hand. It was Rose. An’ that was it. I was gone — I could never resit black stockings and suspenders,”

“Mum you never told me you smoked!” Tansy teases.

“I didn’t an’ I never had long stocking and suspenders. I was dressed like one of the Belles of St Trinian’s.”

“Yes you did. I can see you now,” Jack insists.

“The Belles of St Trinian’s were cartoon characters at a girl’s school. Young buggers they were. Dressed like scarecrows and always in trouble. A film was made as well,” Rose continues.

“Then you went back to England dad,” Malvin prompts.

“Yeah, I was all set to go back when I met your mum, Australia was the pits in the early sixties, the most boring place in the world. I’d already booked my passage. My two years as a ten pound Pom were nearly up and I couldn’t wait to get out.”

“I went with him on the ship as far as New Zealand and I stayed there a year with Aunt Mary before I joined him in England, and we got married after a few months.”

“He took her away from me for six years, he did. But Sam came along to look after me. So it was a blessing in disguise,” Grace adds.

“Why’d you come back?” Wallace asks.

“These two,” Jack, indicates Tansy and Malvin.

“Malvin was born in Bradford and Tansy was born in Liverpool, a Scouser, and she still behaves like one — not to be messed with,” Rose says.

“Muuuum,” Tansy replies.

“We came back to show the kids to Grandma and Grandad, an assisted passage for the lot of us. We were gonna stay a year, repay the money, then go back to Liverpool. We’re still here.”

“Ever wish you’d gone back?” Wallace asks.

“Nah. We’d have spent nearly twenty-years living under that monster Thatcher,” Jack says.

Tansy suddenly starts laughing and points to the wall behind them where a vine snakes its way up to next door’s roof.

“They’re still here.”

Everyone turns to look. Half a dozen big, brown, shiny cockroaches are scurrying stop-start up the wall in single file.

“Do you remember when we’d have people for dinner and Dad and Mum used to sit them with their backs to the wall so they couldn’t see the cockroaches on the motorway,” Tansy says.

“An’ we’d be here watching them, nearly pissing ourselves,” Malvin adds.

“Yeah, then one’d fly off the wall and into the food,” Rose adds.

They all laugh.

They sit and talk and tease and the warm night wraps around them. More mosquito coils are lit. A homemade carrot and walnut cake appears, covered in soft butter-cream, in the same dish carrot and walnut cakes have been made for twenty years. There’s coffee and tea and more beer and wine. They’re talking so much they forget to put on another CD. There’s more laughing, more remembering; camping holidays, tricks played, quarrels, fights, friends, pets.

Sam’s absence is like a great gaping hole that they all step around, afraid that if they look down they will fall in.

At one stage in the evening there is a lull in the conversations.

“I’ve missed you all so much,” Tansy says after some moments, looking around the circle of faces.

“You didn’t have to...”

“Jack!” Rose shuts him up. “We’ve all missed you too. And you’ve done well Tansy, enrolled in art school, survived independently. We’re proud of ya.”

“Thanks Mum. I know what you mean Dad, but I did have to go. Sam was dead, and he was so much of my life. More than I can say.”

“We know love.”

“No, you don’t Mum.”

The silence that follows is broken only by the rumble of thunder in the north west. Lightening flickers.

“It was all so hard. The cops, my friends — and you Gran.” Tansy puts an arm around her grandmother, hugs her and leans on her shoulder.

“Stop it girl, you’ll have me blubbering,” Grace says, patting Tansy’s hand.

“I gave you a hard time. I gave everybody a hard time, I know. An’ I’m sorry for it.”

“You still give us a hard time,” Jack says.

Everybody laughs.

“The whole thing made me grow up quickly. With Sam gone, and being away from you lot, I was by myself for the first time. I know I still had you all, but I had some sorting out to do that I could only do by myself.”

“An’ did you?” Her mother asks.

“Yeah, more or less. Sometimes more, sometimes less. But I’m getting there.”

“We never stopped thinking about you. We knew where you were but ...”

“Gran, you’re saying too much,” Malvin tells her.

“Oh, all right.” Grace says, and pulls herself out of her chair.

“I know, Gran,” Tansy smiles up at her.

“I got something to show you girl,” Grace says, and shuffles off into the garage.

They can hear her wheezing with the exertion, then the sound of the freezer door being shut.

She comes back, walking slowly carrying a plastic garbage bag. They all stop talking and watch expectantly.

“Make some room,” she demands.

Hands clear a space on the table.

Grace puts the bundle down and drags off the plastic bag.

Inside is a box with a sheet of cling wrap stretched over the top. Grace taps it to shake off the ice crystals.

“There!”

Tansy leans forward, peers in. She screams, jumps back and knocks over her chair. Glasses tumble to the floor and smash.

Jack stands. Looks.

“Jesus, Grace!”

Inside the box a frozen Fluff gazes up at them.

“Thought you’d want to say goodbye to her Tansy.”

A journalist from the local newspaper arrives at Grace’s flower stall outside Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. She is young, blonde, enthusiastic, with a winning and determined smile. Grace is prepared. She has some of the finest wreathes that had earlier been displayed in Rookwood Cemetery. They have been stored in the cool and dark of the station wagon and are now spread in their glorious colours beneath the pale blue of the polly tarp.

“How long have you loved flowers?” the journalists asks.

“All my life.”

“When did you set up your stall?”

“After my son Sam was shot dead by a policeman.”

The journalist has done her homework, she knows the story.

“It must have been a terrible for you and your family.”

Grace nods. "No words can describe it."

"Do flowers provide you with solace?"

"Yes." Grace thinks of the hundreds of dollars that are going into the special Constable Sean Farrell account and the headstone fund. "Flowers do help me cope."

"What are your favourites?"

"Roses," Grace says without hesitation.

"Who are your favourite customers, or shouldn't I ask?"

"Kids. I make up little poses of calliopsis and other small flowers for them, the looks on their faces when they carry them away."

"She's such a lovely old lady," a nurse says as she passes.

"I believe you grow all the flowers yourself, and you recently won a prize from the local council for your garden."

"For my garden, yes. And I do supply everything for the stall myself," which is the truth but not the whole truth.

"That's wonderful."

"I like to think so."

"You're selling them outside a hospital to people who are visiting those who are ill, do you feel you're helping the sick get better?"

"Flowers are about love and peace. I think I'm sharing love and peace. But flowers are of sadness and death too. We also take them to cemeteries to remember loved ones. It's a way of keeping in touch."

"How long are you going to keep on running your stall?"

"As long as necessary, it's so rewarding for me."

A few days later the story appears in the local paper. A large photo shows a smiling Grace surrounded by flowers with the heading: "The healing hand of Our Lady of the Flowers."

Tansy has been working a couple of weeks when the family turns up one night at the restaurant. Jack comes in first, then Rose.

"Pretend you don't know us," he whispers as Tansy holds the door open.

Grace is next, turning sideways to fit through. She behaves like she doesn't even see Tansy. After Grace, comes Malvin.

The smiling owner shows them to their booked table, paying particular attention to Grace. He swiftly draws up another table when he realises everyone's not going to fit.

Malvin plonks a carton of beer on the floor and helps everyone get seated.

Tansy goes back to folding red paper napkins at the counter. Malvin winks at her and she suppresses a smile. She wonders what's going on and hopes the boss will send his daughter to serve them.

He doesn't, he tells her to do it and she skips obediently across the room clutching her order pad. Her father is playing the man about town. He spreads his palms wide on the table, looks around for approval and grins. Her mum smiles back.

Malvin pops the top off a beer can, hands it to Jack and does the same for himself. Tansy removes a bottle of red wine out of a paper bag, uncorks it, pours a glass for her mother. Grace puts her hand over her wineglass. "Just water love."

"Certainly." Tansy pours a glass.

"What you all gonna have? My shout," Jack says.

"Where's Grandpa?" Tansy whispers.

"He's not too good. Ses to say hello," Grace tells her.

"What you gonna have? Everybody order whatever they want, I'm paying," Jack says again.

"We know, that's why we're here," Malvin tells him.

"Where's the waitress?" Jack wants to know.

"In front of you, Dad," Malvin says.

"Ohh!" Jack laughs and turns to Tansy. "What's good love?"

"Everything. Sir."

"Then we'll have everything."

"When did she start calling people, 'Sir?'" Grace wants to know.

Malvin tells her to "Shhh!"

He wonders what's his father up to. Not gonna to do a runner, not with Grace in tow.

Tansy brings a blackboard menu and balances it on a chair close to the table.

"Haven't got my glasses. Can you read it for me please love?" Jack asks.

Tansy tells him the name of every dish on the menu, then goes back to the beginning as Jack starts to ask questions about each one.

The owner comes over with two plates of humus, Lebanese bread and a big smile. They help themselves to the Leb bread and dip into creamy humus and golden olive oil.

"Is everything to your satisfaction," he asks.

“Yes, the waitress is looking after us like royalty,” Jack tells him, munching the bread and licking a thumb. “I just wasn’t sure of the difference between kofta and kebab. I forgot. But she told me.”

The manager says if they need further help to call him.

“Nice man,” Jack says.

“Beaut,” Malvin adds.

“Lovely. But just get on with ordering then I can look after some other customers,” Tansy whispers.

“Behave or you won’t get a tip.”

Grace tells Jack if he doesn’t hurry and order she’ll tell the owner that Tansy’s her granddaughter.

“Dad, order a selection and share?” Malvin suggests.

Jack orders felafel, kofta, kebab, tabouli, ladies fingers, beans in tomatoes, grilled chicken, potatoes, and more Leb bread and humus.

“We’ll never get through all that,” Rose protests.

Jack laughs dismissively. Tansy brings on the food with the help of the beaming owner and his daughter, Angelina, who Tansy has got to like and would love to introduce to the family.

Malvin smiles up at Angelina. She smiles back.

Rose is right, they can’t eat it all. But Jack insists on ordering sticky baklava, birds nests, Turkish delight and black coffee. He is in good spirits after the food, wine and beer.

He calls for the bill and a take-away boxes. They wrap the food and stash it into Rose and Grace’s bags and Grace pushes back her chair ready to leave.

“That was a wonderful meal, ask the owner to come over here and let me tell him myself, please waitress.”

“Dad! Do you have to?” Tansy pleads.

“My word.”

Malvin pops another can of beer and sits back to watch.

Tansy brings the boss.

“That was a great feed. We all thoroughly enjoyed it. Didn’t we?”

Everyone nods and smiles. Grace stops half way through pulling herself to her feet by the edge of the table and settles down onto the chair again.

Malvin looks at Rose in anticipation, Rose looks at Malvin with apprehension.

The owner looks at Jack and beams in appreciation.

“Just to show you how good we think it is, we’ll come back tomorrow night,” Jack says

“I’m pleased you’re pleased.” The owner beams even more.

“And tomorrow night we’ll pay for what we eat.”

Rose helps Grace to her feet.

“Tomorrow night? What about tonight?” the owner asks.

“Ah, tonight? Oh yeah. Tonight was just to see how good it was. Now we know it’s good, we’ll come back.”

He and Malvin follow Rose and Grace through the door and onto the crowded footpath.

“Ring the police!” the owner shouts to Tansy as he hurries after Jack and the rests of the family.

Tansy stands rigid. She looks at Angelina. She looks at the phone. She looks at the argument going in the street outside. She drags off her apron, throws it at the counter and runs through the kitchen into the laneway at the back. She doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Bloody family!”

She laughs.

Although John Albert Parkes, aka Johnnie Walker, took the advice of his GP and stopped drinking, it was, in those well known words of Western wisdom, too little too late.

Grace has done her crying.

She’s standing in the middle of an expensive florist shop in Balmain surrounded by the most beautiful flowers in the world. The shop smells like she thinks the Garden of Eden would have smelled. She’s envious of the owners. But she’s not here to admire flowers, she’s here to buy, the first for a long time.

Flowers are displayed from floor to ceiling, a valley of colour, from dark green leaves to the brilliant waxy reds of flame flowers, grown in the tropical rainforests of Queensland, or flown in from the island of Mauritius. They remind her of a painting she once saw of a jungle with tigers. It makes her think of steamy heat, the hum of millions of insects and the call of unseen birds high in the tree tops. It’s hard to believe that these are flowers the way a plain, simple white daisy is a flower. The stems of the birds of paradise have been snipped and cut until they look like creatures from a sci-fi movie. They are fleshy and beautiful beyond words and beyond the world that Johnnie Walker lived in. But Grace knows what she’s getting Johnnie. Roses.

She knows what type. She even knows where she’d find them in a dozen cemeteries. But there’ll be no stolen flowers. Business is business. Family’s family. It wouldn’t be right, stealing from a grave to give to Johnnie. Grace’s expert eyes have seen what she wants. A woman smiles her

way over and asks if she can help. Grace points to a tall, square glass vase filled with long stemmed roses. Each bud is the texture of velvet, the colour of blood plums and hung with beads of moisture. Grace says she wants two dozens of those, fresh, tomorrow. She hands over the money, gives the woman directions for delivery and steps into the noise of the street.

Johnnie had a good innings. Grace thinks anyone who gets beyond seventeen years has done well. In a lot of ways it's a relief it's all over. Johnnie didn't complain once about the pain but just looking at him was hell for everybody. He'd been like death itself, all he'd needed was a scythe on his shoulder.

After buying the flowers Grace decides to indulge herself. She squeezes onto a seat outside a coffee shop and orders a pot of tea and a sandwich, even though she's not sure what she's getting in the sandwich.

Grace looks at the passing parade, beautiful women as slender and supple as young grass. She reflects that at the core of her vast bulk there is something similar — a sapling in the centre of a knotty old tree. Why can't people just get old and not old and ugly? she wonders.

Muscular men in tee-shirts, all seemingly cast from the same mould complement the women. There are men in suits, men in shorts, mothers with wide-eyed babies, sweaty, hi-vis vested building workers on an endless round of renovations and construction that is taking place in the suburb.

Inside the same cafe Dargie is having a meeting with his girls over lunch. He too is distracted by the cavalcade in the street. He reckons it is second only to Bondi for its quality of women. He sips his freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee — black, no sugar — and fiddles with the expanding gold bracelet of his watch, tugging it painfully free from the tangle of black hair on his wrist. But he's here to discuss business not admire the women. He focuses his mind. He thinks the time's come to tell Rae and Nola how he sees the future. But first things first.

"I'm gonna a funeral tomorrow, that bloke that Frank got the idea about the flower business from, he's dead. He was a mate 'a' mine years ago, and he was the husband of that fat old bag who's nicking all the flowers."

"The guy who looked like a corpse?" Nola says.

"Yeah. Now he is a corpse."

"You were mates with him?" Rae adds.

"Don't interrupt me. Listen. We were mates, years ago.

"We was both union delegate on a building site in Melbourne. He was a good bloke in them days. Good organiser. Could hold his grog. He pulled women in like a magnet pulled iron filings. Any bloke around him couldn't miss out there was so much spare around him. We was both laid off

when there was a building bust. He went on the dole and I came up her an' got work as a bouncer up the cross. I went on from there. I heard of him from time to time but, I didn't see him again until recently. It's a sad thing when an old mate dies. I'm gonna pay my respects tomorrow and I want yah to come with me Rae. I hate going to those sortsa things on my own, they're depressing."

Rae opens her mouth to object but Dargie glares her down.

"Maybe with him gone she might retire," Nola says.

"With him out of the way she will retire," Dargie says.

The day of Johnnie's funeral is as hot as the hell the god-botherers warned him he would end up in. Rose and Malvin have helped Grace organise the service. No vicar. Johnnie described himself as a charismatic atheist without charisma. He left instructions that he wanted no medieval religious gobbledygook when he was gone. The family has declined the offer from the chaplain of the hospital of kind final words about a man of whom he knew nothing. Family, friends from the old days, former workmates and drinkers from the Dockside Hotel, stand under the trees outside the Northern Suburbs Crematorium, quiet, dark little groups seeking protection from the beating sun. Late arrivals crunch across the gravel, attach themselves to others, gather around Grace and Rose, Jack and Malvin, or stand self-consciously alone.

Tansy appears, her hair copper against the mourner's black. She embraces Grace and her mother and father and Malvin. Tansy sniffs and wipes her eyes. She hugs Rose again and wishes she'd made the journey back sooner. Johnnie's coffin is smothered in flowers. At the very top is a huge bunch of velvet red roses. Close to that is a massive wreath dominated by red waxen flame flowers from the island of Mauritius. A card attached to it reads, 'The early days were the best days, Dargie'.

The mourners make their way into the chapel. Standing room only. Grace takes her position at the front, big, black and in command. The whispering stops. An expectant silence. A cough. A shuffling of feet.

The speakers hum static and the deep voice of Paul Robeson fills the chapel:

You and me we sweat and strain  
 body all aching and racked with pain  
 tote that barg, lift that bale  
 you show little grit and you land in jail.  
 But I keeps laffin  
 Instead of cryin

I must keep fightin,  
 Until I'm dyin,  
 And Ol' Man River,  
 He'll just keep rollin' along!

“That was one of Johnnie’s favourites,” Grace says.

“Both the singer and the song tell us a lot about Johnnie. He worked all his life and some of you here go back to his days in the building industry, others are more recent and worked with him on the ferry wharves.

“You who only knew Johnnie over the last year or so would have seen a man who was a bit of a mess. But I fell in love with him because he looked like that Greek god Zeus. The old mates, an’ I see faces here that go back a long way, know of those days.

“Johnnie Parkes grew up in the United States. He was the son of a share farmer and worked alongside his father. His mother taught him to cook when he was seven so she didn’t have to get out of bed to make breakfast for him and his younger brother — something I’ll always be thankful for.”

Everyone laughs.

“He left home at fourteen after he’d peppered his brother’s bum with buckshot during an argument. He wandered around the States, Canada and Mexico, where he discovered booze, girls and guitars. He’d a lovely voice and played and wrote songs.

“He kept travelling and eventually found himself in Alaska. He was broke and hungry, so he signed up with the marines. It wasn’t a happy association, although it gave him the opportunity to organise other people, something he always loved. During a mock nuclear attack he turned up at the unit’s rendezvous point with a bottle of whisky, drunk. Which seems a sensible thing to do if someone is dropping nuclear bombs on you.”

More laughter.

“He became a seaman, arrived in Australia, sailed up and down the west coast from Perth to Broome, to Darwin,” Grace’s hand goes to a pearl at her throat and her mind to the words of a song Johnnie sang:

There's a pearl shell from Broome and a tall Darwin tale,  
 Coral and clam and the jaws of a whale,  
 our kitchen is full of the smell of the sea,  
 And the leaping green fishes my love brings to me.

(Dorothy Hewitt)

She falters, brings herself back to where she is, “Then one day he found himself berthed here in Sydney at Woolloomooloo. He stayed, and worked in the building industry. There was a lot going on at the time, strikes and struggles and green bans. He was a trade unionist who fought not only the bosses, but those leaders who saw unions as a cushy job for themselves, or a step up the ladder into a safe Labor seat, or on an industrial commission. Johnnie despised them.

“Some of you’ll remember him as the bloke who shared a big old house in Wharf Road, not far from the Dockside Hotel. No kid who needed help was ever turned away, there was always a meal — and a bed, or a space on the floor. There’s many a kid lived there while they got their life in order.”

Tansy smiles to herself.

“I met him in the Dockside. He took me back to Wharf Road for a coffee — it was strong one, and sweet.”

More laughter.

“The place was fulla people, mostly young ones — I thought all the kids were his.”

Everybody laughs again.

“I didn’t go home for a month.”

There is more laughter.

“Johnnie was a socialist who thought the world should be a good place for everybody, not just the rich, and he once believed it would be achieved in his life time. He was bitterly disappointed when for most people in the world life’s got worse, not better.

“We had Rose. Then, years later, we had Sam. The best son a mother ever had.”

Grace stops speaking. The seconds tick away. The mourners hold their breath. The silence becomes a pain in the body.

Grace starts again, her voice low, then she picks up and people begin to breath once more.

“When Sam was killed. We both reacted differently. I set myself a goal which I’ve still to fulfil, an’ I know I lost control of things for a while, Johnnie blamed himself. He drank more and more. The best times were towards the end when he’d stopped drinking. But life isn’t just the good bits, it’s all the bits, an’ we’re here to commemorate the man, and celebrate his life — the good times and the not so good times.”

Grace smiles, and goes back to her seat.

Quinlan, the landlord of the Dockside Hotel, who at one stage probably saw as much of Johnnie as anybody, gets to his feet and regales the mourners with stories of Johnnie Walker’s wild escapades.

“A great bloke.”

Not to mention a great customer. The irony escapes him. Eventually the escapades were less wild, then non-existent, and all Johnnie wanted was to sit by himself on his stool at the end of the bar.

Some of his old drinking mates, Frank, and others, follow Quinlan with more stories in remembering the life of John Albert Parkes, aka Johnnie Walker.

Rae appears in the back of the chapel, finds Dargie and squeezes in next to him

“Where the hell you disappear to?” he whispers angrily. “Ya supposed to be keeping me company.”

Rae smiles. While everyone was occupied with the service she indulged her professional interest in the floral tributes.

She listens as the stories go on and on. She’s not so sure that living with Johnnie Walker would have been anywhere near as good as everyone makes out. Boozing. A lotta boozing. At least he wasn’t a bully like Dargie. She can’t remember Dargie ever doing anyone a good turn, his idea of helping someone is to not actually harm them. Not that anyone could intimidate that mountain of flesh who was Johnnie Walker’s wife.

Old thoughts go round and round her head as she stands watching the bereaved family which has hung together one way or another. She thinks of her mother. She thinks of her father. She thinks of Kate, soon to go her own way in the world. She thinks of what she can do.

Settle down, the voice says, think of flowers. She does, and smiles again.

The ceremony ends.

Dargie crosses himself as the coffin rolls through the curtain into oblivion. He thinks of the flames of the crematorium and he thinks of hell. Dargie shudders. He walks out as quickly as he can.

Rae stays where she is while the chapel empties. She watches the slowly retreating heads. Among them is one man with long hair and a Celtic cross dangling from an ear. Her Luna Park angel. She shrinks into her seat. Why is he here? Why is she here?

Wallace is also unsure about being involved in farewelling someone he has only met once. But Tansy asked. Now he knows a lot more about her.

Outside the chapel Rae tries to hide among the mourners behind her sunnies and a scarf, wrapped around hijab-style. She looks for Dargie and hears a familiar, unpleasant sound, like the grunting when he is exercising. She turns, and can’t believe what she sees. Neither can anyone else. A young man and Dargie are fighting ferociously. The man is frenziedly punching Dargie’s

bloodied face and Dargie is belting him back. Dargie goes down, scrambles to his feet again before his opponent can land another blow and swings a haymaker that floors him.

“Gentlemen this is not appropriate behaviour,” a sepulchre hearse drivers implores, walking hesitantly towards them.

The young man leaps is to his feet again, his fists swinging like a windmill in a gale, repeatedly smashing Dargie in the face. They grapple, slip, and fall, Dargie underneath, wedged between two parked cars. The young man sits astride him, punching, punching, punching until he can punch no more.

He levers himself up and stands, quivering.

“Now piss off!” he screams.

Dargie struggles to his feet. Staggeres. Bends forwards and spits blood. He heads for the car park, mopping his face with a blood soaked handkerchief, the tail of his shirt flapping behind him.

Mourners watch his retreat, not knowing what to say or do, or they pretend it hasn't happened.

Dargie slams the door of his car and roars off, almost running over Rae and narrowly missing a hearse that is moving slowly towards the crematorium.

Rae watches as Grace Parkes walks over to the young man who has just defeated Dargie. His raw knuckles are being attended to by a young woman with hennaed hair.

Instead of berating him, Rae is amazed to hear Grace Parkes say “Thank you very, very much Malvin.” She hugs him. “Thanks for finding out and thanks for sorting it out.” She pauses and shakes her head. “I didn't think you had it in ya.””

Rae discovers that Malvin is the old woman's grandson and the hennaed haired woman is his sister, Tansy. She walks hesitantly up to Malvin and asks what it was all about. She feels some pity for Dargie, but not much.

“He was the mongrel who bashed my grandad, Johnnie. Then has the hide to turn up or his funeral!”

Rae realises that Dargie's beating of Johnnie Walker was his idea of clearing out the opposition. If he did that with a dying man, what's he going to do with the old woman? Rae feels sick. She turns and walks away, then changes her mind.

“Any chance of a ride back to town?” she asks Grace.

“Jump in.”

Rae squeezes in the back next to her. Malvin grips the wheel with hands wrapped in crimson handkerchiefs.

“I'm Rae McCarthy”.

“I’m Grace Parkes.”

They shake hands.

“We’ve sort of met before, briefly, in passing,” Rae says.

Grace looks at her quizzically. “Don’t remember.”

“We covered the same ground, you, me, Johnnie, my girlfriend Nola, and Dargie. A panel van, tinted windows, mag wheels!”

Grace looks at Rae again.

“Ahh. Now I recognise you. The sunnies. That Dargie, is he your friend!?” she says in disbelief.

Rae hesitates. “He was. I worked for him. I didn’t know anything about that stuff with your husband. I’m sorry. But I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Grace sees a tear creep from behind the sunnies. She’s unsure whether to stop the car and throw Rae out or try to find out more about Dargie’s business.

“When did you stop working for him?”

“About ten minutes ago.”

“What you gonna do now?”

“Don’t know.”

“Where d’you want dropping off?” Malvin asks angrily.

“Anywhere near the city.”

They sit in silence for the next fifteen minutes until they are close to Grace’s.

“This do you ?” Malvin calls out.

“Yeah. Thank you.”

He swerves into the kerb. Rae’s about to get out when Grace asks, “Wanna come back to the house? There’s drinks on.”

“Jesus, Gran?” Malvin thinks the old woman has lost her mind again.

“It’s alright Malvin.”

Rae hesitates, “Why not.”

The house is packed. People spill over into the garden and stand around a big table covered in food and drinks. The mourners who didn’t get a chance to speak to Grace earlier now offer their condolences. The story of what Dargie had done to Johnnie has got around and some of the men shake Malvin’s hand and congratulate him.

Rae finds a corner in the garden and sits on an old railway sleeper under the vine. She sips a glass of wine. It is hard to see in the deep shade when you’re wearing sunnies and it’s hot under the scarf, but she is going to keep her cover. She hopes the Luna Park angel doesn’t recognise her. The

memory fills her with shame. She wonders what the hell she's doing here and wishes Nola was with her.

Grace seeks her out. "What are your plans?"

"If Dargie knew about this I'd be in for it."

"You got kids?"

"A daughter, Kate. Sixteen. Going on forty."

Grace smiles. "Did Dargie tell you my story?"

"More Johnnie's side."

"I had a son. A copper shot him. I buried my life when I buried my boy. It was never the same between Johnnie and me again. Instead of holding on to each other, we wrapped ourselves in our own misery and anger. Neither had room for the other. Those last months, when he was dying on his feet, were the best of that time strange as that sounds. But I'm glad he's gone. He suffered too much." Grace sighs. They sit without speaking. The sound of Johnnie's music and voices from the house blankets them.

"Killers usually pay when they're caught but the man who killed our son got off because he's a copper."

Rae thinks what it would be like if the same thing happened to Kate. She tries to find words that will bridge the gap but none come.

"One day he'll pay. People think I'm mad. I'm not."

Grace gets to her feet and walks away. She turns around and comes back. Sits. She looks directly at Rae.

"Sometimes I wish I'd never been born. I used to believe in God. Then when Sam was killed I said 'Why'd you give life to me and I gave life to this boy and then you took him?' God didn't give a bugger about Sam or me.

"Dreams keep me going, knowing that one day I'll be able to do the thing Sam wants.

"Sometimes I get up in the morning and I feel almost happy because I had Sam with me. He says, 'I love you Mum.' I wake up, I can still feel his presence and I wanna keep that feeling. I don't want to speak to anyone all day. But sometimes the dreams are sad, so painful that I wake and I..."

Rae leans across and touches Grace on the arm, the sun-spotted skin is as cracked as a dried out dam. Grace tries to smile. She looks up, and beyond Rae. Rae half turns. The Luna Park angel is standing outside the house talking to the young woman with hennaed hair. Grace beckons her. Rae shrinks further behind her sunnies and scarf,

"This is my grand-daughter Tansy, and her friend Wallace, this is Rae McCarthy."

Wallace shakes Rae's hand. "Hello." He winks.

"I was telling Rae here about Sam. Boring her."

"No," Rae says.

"Gran come back inside, people want to talk to you."

"In a minute."

Tansy and Wallace walk back to the house and the noise.

"What's your plans?" Grace asks Rae.

"Don't know? Get away from Dargie. Find a place for Kate and me." But she knows Dargie will find her. Grace's voice breaks into her thoughts.

"You can stay here till you get yourself sorted out." She struggles to her feet. "If you want."

"He'll pay for it. Soon.

"The bastard king hit mi when I wasn't looking, at a funeral! Outside the chapel. What sort of a man is he?"

Dargie's face is cut, bruised and swollen. He's in the factory, sitting in a chair, head back, eyes flashing, seething with rage and humiliation, beaten by a nobody with grease under his fingernails. If this gets out his reputation's shot. Nola dabs his skin gently with a wet cloth and makes sounds of concern.

"Ya don't expect to be attacked at a bloody funeral do ya? I mean, in the street or a pub you're always ready for it, but at a mate's funeral, for fucks sake what's the world coming to? But I'll get him."

Nola tut tuts.

"If I hadn't been trapped between the cars I would'a creamed the young piece'a shit."

But her outside calm isn't matched by her inside worry. Dargie's told her what happened, but not why it happened. Nola's sure there's a good reason. A flicker of fear's beginning to burn. Was it connected with flowers?

As Nola's cool fingers touch Dargie's scalp and move with the care of a mother over his face, Dargie's anger begins to ebb. He closes his eyes, his muscles relax, his breathing slows. No one has touched him like this in years.

He is aware of Nola's closeness, the sound of her clothes as she moves. Her smell. The heat from her body. When he opens his eyes Nola's breasts are almost touching his face. They bob and sway beneath her tee-shirt, the nipples look at him. The burning pain in his face lessens and he feels

another burning. On the inside of Nola's arms the skin is soft. Pale brown. The elbow bones are little mounds. He glimpses the hair under her arms and catches the sharp whiff of sweat.

Dargie closes his eyes and breathes deeply and regularly.

"Don't worry I'll soon be done," Nola tells him.

Dargie opens his eyes. Nola's belly's in front of him and he glimpses her navel through a gap in the shirt. It winks. The flesh around it smiles and folds and wrinkles and unfolds. The navel winks again. Dargie blows gently on it through pursed lips.

Nola stops her dabbing and touching.

Dargie's eyes are closed, the lids and the corners are wrinkled. Nola thinks he's in pain and trying to control his breathing.

She leans over to check his scalp and thinks again, as his tongue finds its way into her navel.

She jumps back. Dargie's eyes are closed and his head rests backwards on the chair.

She picks up a tube of antiseptic jelly and begins to spread it with finger tip care over the cuts and abrasions created by Malvin's knuckles. Under the eyes. On the nose — probably broken. The forehead. The cheekbones. Dargie's florid face becomes hybrid. A pink and white flower of unknown origin.

Nola tries not to laugh.

She dabs the raw skin on the end of each ear. Anoints his chin.

Dargie reaches out and grabs her buttocks, one in each hand, and pulls her to him. Her hand closes in shock on the tube and the jelly shoots into Dargie's lap.

He burries his head in her breasts, then tears at the buttons with his teeth.

"No!" Nola yells, pushing and wriggling. The more she struggles the tighter he holds her, the pain in his face is forgotten. Nola struggles harder and her elbow catches him on the bridge of his nose. Dargie roars with pain. He lets go and drops back onto the chair then jack-knives forward, hands over his face.

Nola retreats and stands glaring.

Dargie's nose is dripping blood through his fingers. He grabs a wad of tissues. He opens his eyes, looks at Nola.

She stands with her back to him breathing hard, like steam from a volcano.

Dargie climbs out of the chair holding his nose and walks to his car. Humiliation is being piled on humiliation, pain added to pain. He struggles to withdraw the keys from his pocket without getting more blood on his trousers. He hits the switch. The car beeps, the lights flash and Dargie opens the boot.

“Whatefuckinghell these doing here?” he shouts through a face full of tissues.

In the boot is a magnificent bunch of red waxen flowers wrapped in shiny cellophane paper. They look familiar. He turns the attached card and reads, ‘The early days were the best days. Dargie.’

“How the Christ they get here? Look at ‘em!” he yells. “I just bought ‘em!”

Under the streaks of ointment his face has turned crimson.

He glares at Nola as though she might know how they got there. She looks blankly back.

“Fuck it! I’m glad they’re here! I’m glad the old bastard didn’t get ‘em. Serves him right. He shoulda drunk himself to death years ago! That stinking rotten family of his. That great, fat, ugly, thieving twat of a wife and their overblown, deadhead, deadshit, degenerate, delinquent son. Here!” Dargie thrusts the flowers at Nola.

She drops them on the trestle table.

Dargie changes into a clean black tee-shirt, black track pants and runners. He flings his blood-stained clothes into the boot.

“I’ll bet that stupid bitch Rae’s put ‘em there. And not a bloody phone call from her to see how I am. Not a word.”

Dargie pulls out his mobile, stabs out a number and puts it to his ear.

“I’m gonna visit her,” Dargie snaps and jumps into the car.

He leans out of the window, “Sell those flowers!” he yells. “Getta good price, they costa bomb.” Then he’s gone.

Rae leaves the wake somewhere between the singing stage and the maudlin stage. She has persuaded Malvin to lend her his car. Kate is waiting at home.

“We’re moving, I have to get away from Dargie. We’ll stay with a woman called Grace Parkes and her family until I get a new place.”

“Who’s she?”

“A new friend. I’ll explain.”

“I’m not going. My friends are here.”

“Kate, we can’t stay. Dargie’ll come for me. You know what he’s like.”

“He’s not running my life. I can’t move in with some family I don’t know.”

“They’re really nice people, you’ll love them.”

“I don’t care how nice they are. No!”

“I’m ending the lease, you can’t live in the wheely bin.

“I’ll stay with Pam till you get a new place.”

“You can’t just move in with them like that.”

“That’s what you’re doing. I spend half my time at Pam’s place anyway.”

“I work. Somebody’s gotta pay the bills.”

“I know. You. Mrs Palmer wouldn’t mind. She’s said if I ever need anywhere.”

Rae is dragging clothes out of her wardrobe and stuffing them into garbage bags.

She throws empty bags to Kate, “Come on! Basics only. Hurry!”

Kate runs into her room and starts grabbing clothes. “I’m going but not to Mrs Parker or whatever her name is!”

“Ya have ta.”

“I don’t. I’m sixteen.”

“It’ll look like I’m abandoning ya.”

“No it won’t.”

“If you don’t come with me that’s what I’m doing.”

“We can talk every day.”

“It’s not the same. Come. Please.”

“No.”

Rae drags her bulging bags of clothes to the door, leans on the wall. “Go on then, phone Mrs Palmer.”

Kate rings. Rae can hear the shriek of delight from Pam at the other end.

“Let me talk to her mother.” Rae holds her hand out for the phone.

“Don’t worry.” Kate switches off. “Let’s go.”

Rae clutches bags to her, then puts them down again. “Wait! there’s something I have to ask. Remember that graffiti near the school?”

Kate nods. “That shit!”

“Do you do either of those things? Truthfully?”

“Both. Sex and drugs. But not much of either. Don’t worry Mum. I’m careful. It’ll be OK. Come on!”

Rae’s phone cheeps. It’s Dargie.

She panics at the sound of his voice. She can hear him screaming as she slams the door and runs.

“You got all your school books?”

“Course, first thing I put in,” Kate gives her mother a sarcastic look, then a hug. “Isn’t it exciting.”

“Grow up Kate, it’s killing me.”

They throw the bags into the back of Malvin’s car. They hurl along the road, windows open, the wind tearing at their hair. Rae puts an arm around her daughter and hugs her. “It’ll get a place. Soon. I’ll sort everything out this time. I promise.”

Kate hugs her in return. “Good.”

Mrs Palmer’s waiting with the door open.

“No need to,” she tells Rae as she starts to explain and apologise.

Malvin makes one last sweep across the bonnet of his car with the polishing cloth then jumps in and slips the gears into reverse. He swings from the garage into the cul-de-culsac and takes off as fast as he can. He puts his tie on at the first set of red lights and takes it off at the second set, rubbing the sweat from his neck with it. The dashboard clock shows ten-ten. The plane’s due at ten-thirty. He reaches the airport car park at ten-forty, collides with an abandoned luggage trolley that puts a ding in his front offside bumper and is in the terminal at ten-fifty.

The plane’s an hour late.

Malvin curses. He goes up to the lounge and orders a beer, objects to the price but pays anyway, and sits down at a table and self-consciously puts a bunch of flowers down in front of him and wishes he was going somewhere. He takes a mouthful of beer so cold it freezes the back of his throat.

He’s glad Narita’s coming. But he’s anxious too. It’s months since he’s seen her. He dawdles over the beer, rotating the bottom of the glass round and round a wet patch on the table as he watches the comings and goings. He finishes, wanders across the lounge and down the escalator to the bustling arrivals area. He stands watching the doors to the no-man’s-land of the customs hall, trying to glimpse Narita. Knots of young, bronzed back packers unravel, leaving their weariness behind with the customs officers.

He waits. Maybe Narita has changed her mind, but why would she? He glimpses a vaguely familiar head but it’s hard to be sure. He decides it is her, but she’s different. Smaller than he remembers, almost hidden by the crowd, and not as pretty. Just another skinny Asian woman. But then last time he’d seen her she wasn’t surrounded by a load of big blonde Aussie women back packers and gym junkie guys with so many muscles they could be in the grand parade at the Easter Show.

The woman smiles and waves in his direction and moves forward through the press of people, pushing a trolley packed high with luggage.

“Welcome to Sydney,” he calls.

A Filipino woman suddenly steps between them and flings her arms around the person he thinks is Narita.. The two squeal with delight and hug each other. They stand at arms length, then hug again.

Malvin decides he’s made a mistake, it’s not Narita.

The two women disengage and walk towards Malvin laughing, the second woman pushing the trolley.

“Malvin!” the woman off the plane throws her arms around Malvin’s neck. It is Narita. “I’m so happy to be in Sydney. An’ this is my friend Maria from Angeles. I told you about her.”

“Glad you made it,” Malvin says, hesitantly. He hands her the bunch of flowers and kisses her fleetingly on the cheek. She’s soft and smells nice. She kisses him back, on the lips. She kisses him again. He smiles. His initial apprehension is evaporating. He takes over the trolley from Maria and manoeuvres it between a crocodile of Japanese tourists following their leader’s flag out of the terminal.

“Marie and me have been friends for a long, long time.”

“Good.”

“I’ve lived here two years,” Maria tells him.

“Good. How was the trip?” he asks as they walk in the bright sun towards the car park.

“Mm. I slept nearly all the way. So tired. Then I woke up just up there,” Narita points towards the sky. “And I looked out the window — it’s beautiful, Sydney.” She smiles up at him.

Malvin heaves the luggage into the boot. He wonders whether Maria expects to come with them. It’s not quite what he’d planned. But Maria throws her arms around Narita once more in a farewell hug. “See you soon.”

“Soon.” Narita replies.

Malvin and Narita climb into the car, Maria heading towards a van where a small, thin-bearded man is waiting by the open door. “What happened to your nose” Narita asks, touching the scar left by Dargie.

“I had an accident at work,” Malvin tells her.

“You must be careful now,” Narita says.

“I’m always careful,” Malvin is unaware at the moment of the significance of “now”.

He keeps glancing at Narita as they pull out of the car park and cross the Cooks River. She smiles back at him. As they stop at traffic lights before turning into Princes Highway she says “I want to tell you something.”

“What?”

She doesn't reply immediately.

“I'm having a baby.”

Malvin opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Narita smiles nervously at him. The lights turn green. Malvin doesn't move. The car behind blasts its horn. Malvin remains motionless. A cacophony of enraged car horns starts up as the lights turn back to red.

Malvin makes another effort to speak. “A baby?”

“A baby.”

He sits in silence. The lights turn green again and he moves off.

“You can't be; you couldn't have past the medical in Manila.”

“My sister Flora went instead of me.”

“Jesus! If they find out you'll be on the next plane home.”

“Why? there's lotsa room here.”

Malvin turns off the highway in the direction of Marrickville. He pulls over to the side of the road and switches off the ignition. He sits looking ahead through the windscreen. “Whose?” he finally manages to say.

“Whose what?” Narita asks.

“The baby. Whose is it?”

“Yours!” Narita says angrily.

“I bloodywell took precautions. It can't be!”

“Sometimes those things don't work.”

“Whydintcha tell me?”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Oh, you did.”

“You happy?”

“That's not the word I'd go for.”

He looks down at her still slender belly out of the corner of his eye.

“Don't worry. Everything will be good,” Narita tells him.

Rose is lying in bed in the darkened room, a murmuring fan sweeping gently back and forth; 'cool gales shall fan thy glade, trees where you sit shall crowd into a shade,' she silently sings a song from schooldays.

She is slowly slipping into sleep. Next to her, Jack is already snoring softly, the back of his head on the pillow, his arms outside on the sheet, palms facing upward like a carved saint on a tomb.

A terrible scream tears through the house and beyond into the garden and beyond that to neighbouring flats and houses where people lie awake in the heat. Sweat flows down Rose's neck and pools in the hollow above her breast. She shakes Jack. He mutters, turns onto his side and keeps on sleeping.

Rose swings bare white legs over the edge of the bed, stands up, pat-pats across the floor, cautiously goes out of the bedroom into the hall. Grace is already outside Malvin and Narita's room, listening. They stand looking at each other.

"He's killing her! Something must have gone wrong," Grace whispers. She moves hesitantly towards the door but stops as a new sound comes from behind it, a low, soft, moaning. The last breath of air from the lungs of a dying woman?

Grace hesitates, one hand poised above the doorknob, Rose close behind. They hear the moan again. This time they recognise the sound. It's the sound of death. It comes from the core of the body where the very deepest pleasure is born. The moan becomes a soft sigh of satisfaction, like an ebbing breeze among trees. It's the sound of total fulfilment, now recognisably feminine. Malvin joins in the murmur and the two moan and whisper together until the sounds disappears like a breeze in a field of wheat.

Grace lowers her hovering hand and stands, drained and limp, like she has given forth the screams, sighs moans and whispers.

She turns to her daughter, "Is that how the women from there do it?" she says in awe.

Inside the bedroom a limp and sleepy Narita has turned to face Malvin and is gently stroking his nose.

"Mmmm," she murmurs. "Beautiful."

"Me too," Malvin whispers.

He strokes her belly. Gently entwines his fingers in her pubic hair. Maybe being a father could be alright.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" he asks.

"A boy or a girl," Narita replies to the dark.

"Wouldn't a boy and a girl be better?"

Narita begins to giggle. She can't stop.

“Shhh, you'll waken everybody.”

Back in bed Rose tries to sleep. By her side, Jack is now curled up like a child. He has kicked off the sheets. He lies naked, long bones and stringy muscles. A roll of fat hangs along his lower like folds in a curtain. He, who usually wakes at the sound of a cat walking across the wooden floor, or the first breath of wind from a southerly buster, has slept through the noise of the erupting Mount Venus. He snuffles and calls out. Rose knows he is on a bizarre nocturnal trips. Sometimes he tells her about them in the morning while he can still remember. He used to write the wildest of them down, but not any more.

She lies thinking of Tansy in the inner city and Narita in the room across the hall, thousands of kilometres from her family.

Jack calls out again. He is journeying. He is on a long and wonderful trip to his native north of England. He's a young man again in the scullery of a house in the industrial West Riding of Yorkshire, the kind of dark, back-to-back, soot-black place his paternal grandmother lived. Inside are hundreds of people, far more than it could possibly hold, all talking and drinking beer. Suddenly one of them says, “Look!” and they turn, but instead of faded wallpaper or a view through the only window to a dark terrace and steep cobbled streets, there is a valley and on the far side of the valley, the massive bulk of high fells in the Lake District. Cars crawl along a sinuous road towards the snow-dusted peak. Clouds roll down and the scene vanishes.

Suddenly Jack is awake, sitting bolt upright and shouting, tears streaming down his face

The fan sweeps back across the bedroom, ruffling his hair.

“Shhhh. Shhhh.” Rose whispers, placing a stilling hand on his shoulder.

By the time Dargie arrives at Rae's house she and Kate are kilometres away. He peers through a window into a room strewn with clothes. The door's locked. Dargie kicks the glass panel through, unlocks it from the inside and steps in. Apart from the clothes that have been dragged from wardrobes everything else has been left. She'll be back, he thinks. He searches each room seeking a hint of where she might have gone. Until he gets her back he's got some re-organising to do. Someone's gotta collect flowers; someone's gotta wrap 'em; someone's got to deliver 'em.

He's angry with himself for trying to screw Nola. He mighta lost her too. If he could only learn to take things easy and stop trying to get his rocks off all the time he mightn't have this trouble with women.

Dargie climbs back into his car. He slumps into the seat, adjusts the mirror and looks at his face. It's horrible. Both eyes are black, his nose is red and his chin is blue. It's not one of Dargie's best moments.

He rings Nola. "I'm sorry," he tells her. "Really sorry."

It's the sort of thing he hates doing. But desperate times require desperate measures.

"What can I do to make it up?"

The first words that come to Nola's mind are, 'drop dead'. But she doesn't say that. She thinks instead of the twins.

"Rae's pissed off. You'll be OK to keep going?" Dargie asks

"Twice the work, twice the money," Nola suggests.

"Not possible! You can't do twice as much. But," Dargie adds quickly, "say, fifty percent more, till I find someone to help you?"

"Seventy!"

"Fifty-five."

Nola pauses, "Sixty! That's it."

Dargie accepts, reluctantly.

Next night Rae rings Nola from Grace's and tells her the full story of the funeral, but she doesn't say where she's staying.

Nola tells her some of what happened when Dargie got back. But not everything.

Rae is given Johnnie's old room and Grace tells her to do what she likes with it. The room hasn't been touched since he died. It's strange moving into a dead person's place. She begins clearing piles of CDs and books from the floor, putting them back on the shelves, but she gives up because of the heat. She sits instead by the open window trying to catch a breeze before going to bed and lying on top of the sheets. It hardly rained all winter, and spring brought unseasonable hot dry winds from the north west. Beyond the suburbs, rivers shrink, creeks flow gravel, dry dams sit on the land like sunspots on old skin.

Rae eventually slides into a restless sleep. An hour or so later she is suddenly awake. She gets up and walks carefully to the window. Beyond is the blank wall of the house next door, and above that, a glimpse of a rectangle of sky pricked by stars. She listens intently but hears only the creaking and sighing of the house and the distant hum of the city. She goes back to bed and lies sleepless. There is no threat here, but it is a long time before she slides back into sleep.

Next morning she is up soon after dawn. Grace is sitting at the old table in the garden, a newspaper spread before her, Puss is on her lap. She is sipping tea from a mug and eating toast from a heaped plate. "Sleep all right?"

Rae nods. "Like a log. I'm worried about Kate though. Feel I've abandoned her."

"Will Dargie be a problem?"

"Nah. He's got no idea where she is."

Grace reaches for a highlighter pen and circles a number of funerals. "Might be something worthwhile today, so long as I get to 'em before the sun does." She struggles to her feet.

"How about I do some work in the garden, watering and weeding," Rae offers.

"If you want. Ta," the old woman says.

After Grace has gone Rae rings Kate. Her daughter's having a great time, missing her mother, but not as much as her mother's missing her.

Before the heat of the day comes on Rae begins work in the garden, starting in the shade on the strip outside the front of the house. She waters and weeds and picks off leaves that have withered and died.

As she works she thinks of Nola. Nola might be enough to keep Dargie off her back. Rae knows how he operates, she also knows Nola's able to look after herself. It will be a relief no longer having to creep around cemeteries stealing flowers.

That night she finishes tidying Johnnie's room, she showers, and crawls exhausted into bed early.

Rae is not sure how long she's been asleep when something wakens her. She sits up nervously and listens. It is the sound of feet moving softly along the hall in the direction of her door. Dargie? She fights the urge to scream. Only the fact that Malvin and Jack, Grace and Rose, are in the house, helps her control her fear.

The footsteps pass her door and stop a few metres along the hall. Rae holds her breath. A door clicks open, then shuts. Whoever is there retraces their steps along the hall. A soft glow of light spreads momentarily under Rae's door then disappears. There is no further sound from the hall. She gets cautiously out of bed, opens the door and peeps out. A pale light shines from beneath Grace door. Rae walks slowly towards it. As she gets closer she hears a low voice. The light from under the door flickers. She can smell candles.

Rae puts her ear to the door and listens. The voice continues. Grace is talking, tender and cajoling, the way you would speak to a child or a lover. It's impossible to make out what she's saying, or to whom. At times it's a monotone, almost an incantation, then conversational.

Rae tiptoes along the corridor, out the backdoor and along the side of the house to Grace's window. She peers through. A row of candles and a lamp sit in a corner in front of photographs of a boy, Sam. Grace is kneeling before it wearing a white nightgown. Her mass of hair has been brushed and stands out as though she's had an electric shock. Her right hand is stroking something on her lap. Her head is inclined downward as though talking to it. Rae thinks it's a cat. She remains looking through the open window aware of her own shallow breathing, too afraid to move in case Grace hears. The ritual continues for some time until Grace reverently gathers up the object and rises to her feet. She crosses the room and puts a small bundle of clothes, not a cat, on the pillow and climbs into the double bed. She turns on her side with her back to the window and places a hand on the clothes.

Rae waits for signs of sleep. But each time she thinks Grace has dropped off, the old woman moves or speaks.

Rae's legs ache. When she can longer bear the discomfort she backs slowly away from the window, a few centimetres at a time then turns and tip-toes to her room.

She lies on her bed unable to sleep. Grace was talking to Sam, maybe even hearing him reply.

In her bed, Grace runs her hands over Sam's shirt and shorts, lingering on the hard patches of dried blood.

With three months to go before Narita gives birth, Malvin has organised the wedding. He has booked a Thai restaurant not far away. They are married by a Filipino wedding celebrant in a ceremony that takes a few minutes. Narita looks beautiful and very pregnant in a full length gown of white satin. A compere sings *Love is in the Air* in Filipino and English. Narita's Mother, Juana, who's been brought to Sydney for the occasion, weeps with joy, a tiny, bent figure with white hair, she mops her eyes with a bunched up handkerchief and smiles at Malvin and her daughter through the tears. Malvin has lost weight and looks handsome in a pale blue suit, despite the scar on his nose. He beams at his mother-in-law to be and Narita, and thinks of their first baby. Juana knows a lot about babies, she has delivered four hundred and ninety nine, including nineteen of her own grandchildren — eleven boys and eight girls — and eleven great grandchildren — seven boys and four girls. Babies have worn her out, her back aches at the thought of them, but not for the one that Narita will soon give birth to.

Grace sits in a commanding position, panning the room with the video camera gift from Malvin, feeling the joy, and capturing it. Through the lens she follows a boisterous group of kids whose eyes are big and black as baby seals, as they run from one group of grown ups to another. By now she

knows them, the children of Maria, Narita's friend from Angeles, and other Filipino brides. Grace videos the women as they laugh and joke and shout and sing the words of romantic love, forgetting for a moment their introverted Australian husbands sitting at the tables, hands pressed between their knees, tongue-tied, wanting to be anywhere but here with all these people. Maria's husband, Thomas, the small, thin man with the wispy beard who was at the airport when Narita arrived, gives the camera a self-conscious half smile as Grace momentarily focuses on him.

She videos the diminutive Juana, sitting happy but bewildered. Each frame in the viewfinder is already the past, a record for their shared grandchild. Grace and Juana sit together for a moment, smile at each other and try to talk as Malvin adds them to the footage.

Grace puts on a good face. Jokes. Drinks. And in between videoing, eating. She tries to be happy for Malvin and Narita, and for Rose and Jack. Unconsciously Grace looks through the lens for Sam, half expecting him to appear.

Tansy thrusts her face in front.

"How you going Gran?"

"Fine," Grace steps back to re-focus on Tansy's face.

Malvin comes up holding Narita by the hand.

"My little sister's turn next," he says.

Tansy snorts. "No way Boofhead."

"Doesn't she look lovely," he says, hugging Narita.

"Don't squeeze it out of her, it's not toothpaste," Tansy tells him. Narita laughs and holds her round belly with both hands. She looks beautiful and happy. Grace centres her in the view finder, a film of the baby before it isits born. One day it can look at its about-to-be self.

Grace reaches out and hugs her, then Malvin. "I'm sure you're both going to be blissful."

Half-a-dozen kids run up to be included in the group and Grace puts them in front of Malvin and Narita.

Towards Christmas what was a prolonged hot dry spell becomes a drought. Grace is forced to range further afield in search of flowers, those that exist are few, small, and they droop in the heat of shadeless cemeteries. Suburban lawns turn tawny and brittle. The government bans watering and car washing. Gardens wilt, trees shed their leaves and birds perch gasping in the shade, beaks open, wings outspread. A distressed Puss miaows in protest to Grace as though she can help. Grace is as much in the grip of the weather as any other being. She changes her routine, visiting Sam's grave in

late afternoon when she's finished with the stall. In the mornings she goes to cemeteries she's never visited before, travelling to the outer west, driving down the tollway against the morning flow of city-bound commuters who clog the road like refugees.

She has discarded all unnecessary clothing and wears only a voluminous black dress which she lifts by the hem and shakes and shifts to encourage any touch of air against her skin.

She erects a huge beach umbrella under the blue polytarp where she sits drinking water and wiping herself with a wet cloth. She wears a straw hat as big as a car wheel and her hair sticks out from beneath like a bush.

Her flowers are few and poor, but so are everyone's.

Nola has other thoughts on her mind as well as the drought. Half the satisfaction of working with Rae was the fun between them. The other half was the money. One without the other is not up to much. She pulls out of Randwick cemetery after a not too successful visit. She hasn't glimpsed Grace since before the funeral. But she knows where she's been. A few months before she wouldn't have noticed, but when Grace has been there first there's seldom anything decent left, even if she doesn't take much.

Dargie rails against the old woman to Nola, who tries not to listen. When Rae was there Dargie didn't matter too much. He was a pain, particularly in matters relating to his dick, but the two women could grin and bare it, or grin and not bare it. Now it's just work.

Nola drives through the shimmering heat of the morning, the windows closed, the air conditioner going and her sweater up to her chin. She arrives back at the factory with a reasonable load given the conditions. Dargie's waiting, he even has cold drinks for her in the fridge. He's installed a shower for her. Because of health and safety regulations, he says. She knows it's for his benefit, not hers. He didn't build a proper room, just a skimpy shower curtain across a corner of the building so he can catch glimpses. A wet body. Dressing. Undressing.

Dargie wants to know if she's seen Rae. Whether Grace is still working the cemeteries. Whether she sees her, speaks to her, speaks to Rae, knows where she's living or working.

It's a regular interrogation and like a stoic prisoner of war, Nola reveals nothing.

She loads the van and sets out on the delivery.

When she's gone Dargie takes off his shirt and stands under the horizontal chinning bar, raises his hands to chest level and prepares to jump up and grab the bar. But he doesn't. He lowers his arms and sits on the trestle table.

He's reluctant to admit to himself that he misses Rae. He misses her cheerfulness and humour. He thinks of her curly blonde hair. He misses the measure of her back when he had his arms around her, and the feel of her skin. There's other backs and other bums but they don't feel the same. It's like putting somebody else's shoes on.

He misses her eyes an' her fingers too. They earned him a lot of money. She could see the best wreaths half a cemetery away. Her hands could sort and tie fast as a flicker of lightening. Nola's good but not as good as Rae. Nola's also a stuck up bitch.

And he was right of course, she can't work twice as fast as Rae. She can't work sixty percent as fast, which is the extra he's paying her. So he's losing money all ends up.

Malvin, a man who is afraid of water and hates the beach, is swimming in a Harbour of blue sky and saltwater. The whole family is with him, Tansy, Narita, his mother and father, Grace, a pod of people, playing, laughing splashing and diving far out from the shoreline. The wedding has been and gone. The baby has arrived, a girl. She is lying on her back in Malvin's hands. He lifts her out of the water and high into the air, then plunges her below the surface, then up and out again.

She is gurgling and kicking her arms and legs.

"Belly of a whale,

bell of a clam,

clang of a buoy,

belly of a mother,

belly of a baby," Malvin sings.

From amniotic fluid to salt sea, seaweed and shards of sunlight.

Malvin sinks below the surface holding the baby above him in a halo of light.

She slips out of his hands and sinks.

Down.

Down.

Down into the dark depth of the Harbour.

Malvin plunges frantically after her, blind in the blackness, hands groping, legs kicking, lungs bursting, diving and groping after the invisible.

His fingers touch baby flesh, slippery as a jellyfish. He scoops and holds and loses then holds again and kicks for the surface almost unconscious. He moves out of darkness into light, from light into sunlight and surfaces by the side of Narita.

Malvin holds the baby high in the air with straight arms to show everyone he is only playing a game. He laughs wildly.

He wakes in panic and jerks into a sitting position. He blinks at the blinding rectangle of blue sky outside the bedroom window and lets out a long, deep breath. Besides him the comforting figure of Narita is lying on her side, praying-hands together under her cheek on a spittle-damp pillow, knees drawn up to her round belly. Malvin lies down again, closes his eyes and tries to go back to sleep.

The baby will be born, not in water but in fire.

Driven by ferocious winds infernos rage in the mountains, along the coast, and the outer suburbs of the city. For days a huge pall of grey smoke obscures the sun. In the stillness of night, white ash drifts from the sky and sprinkles the earth. Each morning before the return of the hot winds, Narita coughs, opens stinging eyes and wakens to the smell of burning forest.

“What’s happening? Everything’s on fire,” she cries.

“It’s the bush. We’re safe here in the city,” Malvin assures her.

She wonders what is this country in which she now lives. No one told her of fires in which people died; homes were destroyed and sheep and cattle were incinerated in the fields in which they had once contentedly grazed. Juana Villanueva Canonizado wants her daughter to return with her to Philippines immediately and have the baby there before they are all burned alive and the baby is cooked in Narita’s belly.

Malvin takes Narita to Balmoral Beach so she can walk with him in the shallows of the cool Harbour waters. But the charred gum leaves that hang in the green waves and rim the edge of the sea make her even more nervous. She glances at the surrounding bush as it thrashes around in a hot wind. She pleads with Malvin to take her back to the house.

In a few days it will be Christmas and they have been invited to dinner with her friend Maria and her husband Thomas, at Picton, an hour or so drive away.

“It’ll take your mind off things,” Malvin tells her.

“But won’t the fires...?”

“The wind’s changed direction. They’re under control,” Malvin assures her.

Thick brown smoke darkens the horizon as far as they can see as Malvin drives Narita and Juana south west along the deserted motorway. An occasional fire engine heads in the opposite direction towards the city.

“It’s frightening,” Narita says.

“Spooky, but don’t worry, they’ll close off the road if it gets dangerous,” Malvin assures her. “Tell your mother it’s OK.”

Narita does, but in the back seat Juana sits hunched, eyes wide.

“We should decide now, what we’re gonna call the kid. No more, ‘let’s wait and see,’ It’s gonna be a boy. So, how about Sam, and whatever other names you want to call him, eh,” Malvin says.

“No! No. It’s a girl. I can tell by the way she moves.” Narita rubs her belly. She tells her mother Malvin’s suggestion and her mother shakes her head and smiles.

“I’ve decided. She’ll be Sampaguita Canonizado Maria Marsden,” Narita tells him. Juana nods her head in agreement.

“Sampaguita! I like it. Does it mean anything?” Malvin asks.

“It’s our flower. The Filipino flower. Like jasmine, sweet smelling.”

“Know what the kids at school’ll call her? Gippa. Kippa. Sampan. Pagi or something like.”

“They’ll call her the same name I call her.” Narita insists.

“You-don’t-know-Australia.” Malvin laughs.

They arrive at the party and join people sitting in the shade of a tree, Narita’s back is against the trunk, her legs in front of her, her hands on her belly and her mother never far away. Maria teases her friend about how big she has become and predicts there will be twins. Thomas, her husband, the thin, wispy-bearded man who met her at the airport, hovers behind her, trying to show an interest in the soon-to-be-born baby.

To the west, a huge, bruise-coloured cumulous cloud of smoke towers hundreds of metres into the sky. Everyone goes into the street to watch as it spreads along the horizon. A hot wind batters the trees and withered leaves fall onto the food in the garden.

Somewhere between the steamed fish main course and the sweet, sticky rice desert, Narita’s contractions begin. Malvin hustles her and Juana into the car and they speed off towards the city.

Along the motorway, burning ash drops onto the road. The horizon on one side is an angry cloud of smoke that obscures the sun. Spot-fires break out in the dry paddocks and along the central nature strip of the road, ignited by burning embers dropping from the sky. Fire engines race by, lights flashing and klaxons shrieking.

There are no other cars.

Narita sinks lower in the seat, moaning softly. Her mother holds her hands and talks gently.

“How ya going?” Malvin asks, anxiously.

“Hurts!” She tells him. “Hurry! Please hurry!”

Malvin is forced to slow down because of the smoke.

“Hurry!”

“I can’t.” He looks in the rear view mirror at Narita’s contorted face.

A cop car overtakes, flags them over, stops. Malvin scrambles out and meets the cop halfway as they run towards each other. After a moment he’s back in his car following the cop’s flashing lights and siren through the thickening, choking smoke.

They turn off the motorway and bump across a paddock where fire spots are merging into a front.

The patrol car skids to a halt in a cloud of dust, Malvin close behind, and the driver comes running.

“She’s having it!” Malvin yells.

“Shit! Just what we bloody need,” the cop says as he looks at the great ball low in Narita’s belly. “Don’t worry dear you’ll be right.”

“Her mother’s a midwife!” Malvin yells at the retreating figure.

Through the thick smoke they can make out yellow-clad firefighters, and beyond them, a house surrounded by a hedge. Malvin pulls off his shirt and thrusts it towards Narita.

“Cover your face!”

She alternatively moans and coughs in the darkness of the shirt as the car lurching slowly forward and her mother talks to her gently in Filipino.

Malvin is directed over the blackened grass of a back-burn, through a gate and along a short, rough drive that leads to a tiny fibro cottage with a lean-to garage.

He brakes, jumps out, runs round to Narita and opens the door.

“Get her in the house,” a woman’s voice behind him yells.

Malvin takes Narita by the elbow and eases her from the car.

She gets both feet out, then falls to the ground on all fours.

Malvin lifts the shirt off her head. She looks up at him, her face streaming with sweat and tears.

“It’s coming. It’s coming!”

Juana Villanueva Canonizado delivers her five-hundredth baby, her granddaughter, Sampaguita Canonizado Maria Marsden, in New South Wales, on a patch of parched grass by the side of a car, with smoke swirling around her. Narita smiles up at Malvin kneeling beside her, “See. I told you, a girl!”

As she leaves in an ambulance a couple of hours later Narita looks back. The only greenery in a charcoal-black landscape is a rectangle of lawn surrounding the cottage.

Sampaguita is dark-skinned with broad nostrils, feet like a frog, a mop of raven black hair, and one ear bent down like the corner of a page, like a place to return to.

Jack and Rose are the first to arrive at the hospital. Juana is sitting on the edge of the bed, feet dangling, looking into the eyes of her twentieth grandchild. She hands the swaddled baby reluctantly over. In four weeks she will return to the Philippines.

“You’ve got a beautiful Aussie daughter,” Rose tells Narita.

“Not like her dad,” Jack grins. “The only thing that looks like Malvin is the big feet.”

“The rest of me will show up later,” Malvin tells them proudly.

“Hold her,” Narita passed the baby to Jack. He sits on the edge of the bed, engrossed in the tiny, wrinkled face before him. He touches her cheeks and her ears. He looks up and grins at everyone.

Grace arrives with Tansy. She peers at the bundle, smiles, touches her on the chin.

“Aaah, she-is-so-beautiful.” Tansy kisses the baby’s forehead, “An’ so dark!”

“She’s smoked,” Narita giggles.

Grace presents Narita with a bunch of her favourite roses, deep, dark, red. She lays them on the bed and hugs Narita. She looks at her great grand-daughter and is flooded with love — and fear for her future. She embraces the diminutive Juana, carefully, and congratulates her on the delivery. Narita translates and her Mother, smiles her thanks.

Malvin fully understands for the first time his gran’s devotion to Sam and her agony at his death; your own flesh, someone you were going to nourish and care for and worry for the rest of your life.

Grace hopes that Malvin and Narita and Juana experience none of the pain she has. She produces her video camera, focuses on Narita and the baby then begins a sweep of the room — it gives her an idea, that is as far from this scene of celebration as possible. Sam will be delighted. She’ll put it to him. Things are falling into place.

In her desperation to find decent flowers Grace drives over thirty kilometres to Pinegrove Memorial Park lawn cemetery alongside the Great Western Highway. Such establishments are not the best for fresh flowers, but under different conditions she’d normally pick up enough bunches of gerberas and various lilies to make it worth her while. Not in this heat. Dispirited, she turns around and heads for home early with not enough flowers to make it worth while opening the stall.

On the way she goes to Rookwood to talk to Sam about the video camera. Close to his grave there has been a burial and the flowers are still fresh. Grace stops and heaves herself out into the heat. She selects a couple of bunches of tiger lilies and one bunch of bird of paradise and takes them

over to the station wagon parked under a tree. She lays them carefully on the dry shrivelled grass, unlocks the back of the wagon and removes the lid of the cooler box. A draft of cold air hits her. How nice it'd be to sit in there. She stoops, takes hold of the flowers and is about to straighten when a shiny black shoe descends hard on her right hand, pinning it to the ground. Above the shoe is a black trouser leg and beyond that a muscular arm descends from a black tee-shirt. The hand at the end of the arm holds a gun with a silencer. Grace moans with pain and fear. She tries to stand. She can't. She sinks to her knees. and looks up into the face of Dargie. She thinks of what Malvin did to him at the funeral and knows she's gonna pay.

Dargie puts a finger to his lips.

"Shhhh. Don't make a noise, this is a holy place," he says in an exaggerated whisper. He smiles. His face is ugly and bony under a shaved head. "Ya can stand if you promise not ta run away." Dargie laughs at his joke.

Grace moans, "Yeahhh".

"Didn't hear you Granny," Dargie says in her ear.

"Yeah. Yeah!" Grace gasps and struggles to her feet.

"What you want?" she asks in a hoarse voice.

"You know," he croons. "Get into that box in the back. It smells like heaven and is as close as you'll ever get to that place."

"I can't fit in there," Grace protests.

The sight of her stirs angry memories of the funeral. It's payback time. "Yooou can," Dargie insists, prodding her hard in the breast with the gun.

"What you gonna do with me?"

"Take you for a ride."

"I don't want..."

"Gerin!" Dargie hisses. "I'm not asking I'm telling."

Grace struggles into the back then tries to lower herself into the cooler box, crushing the flowers beneath. A fragrant mist of icy air arises around her.

Dargie digs her with the gun again.

"Further!"

"I can't! Truly I can't." She looks up at him. There is no pity in his face.

"Ya can, an' ya will."

Grace turns onto her side. Her hips protrude above the rim of the box like a fleshy black Uluru.

Dargie pushes her hard. "Further."

Grace squeezes more of her one-hundred-and-forty kilograms into the compartment. She can feel the icy cold of the brine-filled wine casks beneath her. One burst and the water seeps into her dress.

“You gonna kill me?” she asks in fear.

“Too right I am. You an’ your lot are fuckin with my business. You’re fuckin with my life. An’ I owe that gutless son of yours something eh! Why wouldn’t I kill you?”

“Then what?”

“Then I’ll have your business as well as mine, it’s a corporate take-over.”

Grace fights panic.

“I mean after you’ve killed me. What you gonna do with my body?”

“Burn it. In the crematorium. No flowers on request.” He laughs. “No flowers. No funeral. No burial.”

“How you gonna get me there? When you’ve killed me? You gonna move me all by yourself? You ever tried moving a body my size?”

“I’m strong.”

“I’ve never met a man who could roll me over let alone lift me, and I’ve known some strong men.” Grace sits up.

“Down!” Dargie shouts.

Grace half lies down.

“You’ll need a front-end loader. You got one lined up?”

Dargie hesitates.

“Have you thought it through? You won’t be able to hide me. They’ll get you.”

“Shut up!”

“You can’t do it.”

“Shut up!”

He points the gun at her head.

Grace chokes on her words but keeps talking. She sees a way to save her life.

“You can have the business. All the flowers, in all the cemeteries in Sydney, the hospital stall and good will. There’ll be no more competition. I’ll retire. Everything yours, for free

“I’m getting if for free, that’s why I’m here and you’re there, stupid old cow.”

“But you wouldn’t get way with killing me, I’d be a big problem. Very big.

“An’ I’ll give you a lot of money to do a job for me.” She looks up over the rim of the cooler box at him. She sees hope at the mention of money.

“How?”

“Kill someone.”

“That’s what I’m gonna do now, you idiot!”

“No not me.” She takes hold of the sides of the cooler box, pulls herself into a sitting position. “I’ll give you the details of where the target works, where he hangs out. You only need do it. An hours work. That’s all.”

“If it’s that easy why don’t you?”

“I couldn’t. It takes courage.”

“Who is it?”

“A copper, constable Sean Farrell.”

“You gotta be joking. Some of my best mates are coppers.”

“So are some of your worst mates.”

“Too many hassles. Ya can get away with killing ordinary people but not coppers.”

Grace becomes more confident. “They’d never find you. Think of all the suspects there’d be. A policeman! Everybody in New South Wales hates them for one reason or another. You’d be a hero. Another Ned Kelly. Another famous Irishman.

“An’ think of the money.”

“Why d’ya want him killed?”

“He murdered my son, Sam.”

“Ah! Yeah. That was a bastard thing to do, I admit, your kid. Terrible.” He thinks it over. “It’d be dangerous.”

Grace moves to climb out of the cooler box.

“Naaaah! Not so fast.” Dargie threatens her with the gun.

Grace stays put.

“How much?” Dargie asks.

“Ten thousand.”

Dargie stands looking down at Grace, pretending to consider the offer. Ten thousand! Shit! She doesn’t have a clue how low the going rate for contract killing is. The business is full of amateurs these days.

“It’s a good offer,” she says.

To bloody right it is, Dargie thinks, but he doesn’t say so.

“Ten grand! I’d be risking my life. That’s worth a lotta money.”

Grace is tempted to tell him most people wouldn't agree, but she resists. Dargie makes a further show of pondering the offer. He'll get everything he wants without the trouble and the danger of knocking her off, plus a shitload of money.

Grace waits. "You'll have me out of the way, a lucrative business, an instant tax free cash bonus."

"I don't pay tax."

"You'd be safe, people never get caught for murder. The cops wouldn't know where to look."

Dargie can't believe it's happening. He came here to kill for no money, and now he's being offered all this. Life moves in mysterious ways indeed. He can get that gutless son of hers later, give himself something to look forward to.

"Five thousand deposit, the balance when you've done the job."

She waits.

"The first five now!"

"OK!"

Dargie hesitates a moment longer, "I'll do it."

Grace clammers out of the box, her wet skirt clinging to legs that are blue with cold. Her fear lifts.

Dargie follows her bumper-to-bumper as she drives to a bank and withdraws five thousand dollars.

She swallows her fury as she hands over the money. Dargie sniffs the newly minted notes. "Bewdiful." He smiles. "Leave everything with me. Watch TV news. "

But Grace is not prepared to see the fruits of all her hard work go to a low-life. He no longer has a gun at her head. She has bought time. She'll call him off. Revenge against Constable Farrell will be in her hands, not the hands of a petty crim with no principles.

Tansy has a different plan for fighting injustice and freeing herself. Unaware of what has transpired a few hours earlier, she visits Grace and finds her working in the garden, her dress hitched around her hips, sweat dripping off her face.

"I'd give yah a hug but I don't want to cover you in gunk," Grace tells her. She downs tools, disappears into the kitchen and returns with a jug of cold water in which bob slices of lemon and chunks of clinking ice. She fills two glasses and they sit under the vine within sound of the scratching and clucking chooks. Grace slips off her thongs and rubs her dirt-stained feet together.

She takes a long drink of water. “What you wanna see me about girl? You didn’t come over here to tell me I was bewdiful.”

Tansy hesitates, “I want to write a novel about Sam, and you, after he was killed. I know it’ll be painful. I’d like us to sit and talk about the whole thing, first, going way back.”

“Why?”

“To help you.”

“Me? Sure you don’t mean you?”

Tansy is silent.

“OK then, me. I’ve gotta confront what happened to Sam an’ what’s happened to me. But I think it’ll help you, as well, an’ the rest of the family.”

“To help us forget Sam?” Grace says testily.

“No! To remember him, by sharing the story. By telling the truth to everybody. Don’t forget I know things that happened to Sam as well. I know things you don’t.”

“What sorta things girl?”

“Just things. But the most important is it’ll be your story. Your fight. People will know about the copper and the cover up. It’ll be the justice you couldn’t get in court.”

Grace looks at her grand-daughter and her face hardens. “I’ll get justice, my way.”

“I know Gran, but telling everybody what happened’ll make it harder for it to happen again.”

Grace smiles at such youthful belief in truth and justice. “I know the truth. An’ I know about justice an’ how it works against truth if it doesn’t suit those at the top. There’s no justice for people like us. I fought for justice through the system and got none. What would a book do for Sam, or me? How would it change anything?”

“It won’t change what’s happened. It won’t remove the pain everybody’s suffered. But it can make the future less painful. Telling stories helps us cope. Knowing the whole story’s out there being told to other people, will ease your mind.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my mind, despite what you all think.”

“I know. Please Gran, help me.”

Grace sits. She thinks of yesterday, of the foot on her hand and the gun at her head. And her deal with Dargie. She looks at the imploring face of this young woman, her grand-daughter who thinks that telling stories can change the world.

She puts her hand onto Tansy’s. “OK, I’ll do it, while I still can. Ring me tomorrow or the day after, there’s something urgent I’ve gotta to sort out.”

That night Grace kneels in front of the shrine in the dark and breaths in the smell of the oil lamp. She tells Sam, "I want to know what you think about my video idea. I've bin waitin' an' waitin' for you. Why don't you come to me the way you used to?"

She watches the light dancing on the photographs. Beyond is a blur of darkness. Grace eventually struggles to her feet and crosses to her bed. She gets in and lies under the sheet with the shirt and shorts on the pillow by her head, looking at Sam on the opposite wall. Sam smiles and moves in the flickering candle light.

She lies a long time thinking about him. Thinking about Tansy. About Constable Farrell. About Dargie. If Johnnie was alive would he agree with her? What about the rest of the family, how will they feel? Not hard to guess. Think of Tansy, Jack and Rose, Malvin and Narita, and Sampaguita Canonizado Maria. What'd it be like going to see your gran or great-gran in prison? Any worse than seeing her bald and slobbering in an old folks home?

She switches her attention, and concentrates on a photo of Sam as she's done during hundreds of sleepless nights. He smiles, like he always does but gives no indication of whether he will come to her tonight. But this is the way it always is. She never knows.

Grace drifts off to sleep. Sam does visit.

"Mum, do it Tansy's way. Then maybe the three of us will be able to rest."

"You've been talking to her. The pair of you was always thick as thieves. Rest? How can I rest," Grace says in exasperation.

"If Tansy writes about it everybody'll know what happened. Farrell will pay in living, not in dying."

Grace wakens and lies for a long time after Sam is gone. Finally she gets out of bed, picks up the blood-stained trousers and shorts and places them carefully in their plastic bag, but instead of padding back down the hall and returning them to their usual place in the cupboard she opens a chest of drawers, lays them in and closes it.

Grace goes over to the shrine. She kneels.

Sam grins down on her.

Grace's plan is much more complicated than Dargie's. It is not work for a thug with no imagination or motivation other than money. Grace intends something creative. Artistic even. She just needs to work on the details.

But Dargie is not a man to hang about when money is involved, he wants the balance ASAP.

The morning after handing over the five thousand dollars Grace returns to the cemetery at dawn with a bunch of dark red roses for Sam. They've been bought, not stolen. She refills and lights the lamp, then leans over and kisses the glass that covers the sun-bleached picture of Sam.

“Are you at peace now? I'm not.”

She returns to the station wagon and drives off without looking back.

She's almost at the gate when a figure steps from behind a car and waves her down. It's the islander security boy. She stops. He grins.

He thrusts something at her, “Will you autograph it for me?”

It's a newspaper cutting with the heading: ‘Our Lady of the Flowers healing hands’ and the photo of Grace outside her stall at the hospital, her bushy grey hair standing out from her head, a smile on her face.

“Put my name on will yah? Nigel.”

“Nigel?”

“Yeah.”

She writes above the picture, ‘From Grace to Nigel, the best security guard at Rookwood Cemetery. No one has ever escaped.’

He laughs, “My mother'll like that. Thanks.”

As he drives off he leans out of the window still smiling.

“Take care. Have a good day. An' good pickins'.”

Grace sits, amazed, watching him disappear. He knows!

When she drives home she is thinking of one thing only. She knocks repeatedly on Rae's bedroom door until a tousled head appears.

“Sorry, I need Dargie's phone number, urgent,” Grace says, wheezing from the exertion.

“Dargie! Why?”

“It's complicated.

“Can't it wait?”

“No.”

Rae is jolted into wakefulness. “But why do you ...?”

“I can't tell you. Ever. But it's real urgent.”

“I don't understand.”

“I know. Please! It's a matter of life an' death. I'd explain if I could.”

The mention of Dargie's name is not a good start to Rae's day, but she trusts Grace. She gives her the number. Grace turns her back and huddles into the phone as she shuffles out into the garden, thumbs tapping.

Dargie's voice responds, "Leave a message. I'll ring you back."

"This is Grace. The job's off! Cancelled! No deal. DON'T do it. Ring me."

But Grace has underestimated the speed of events. Within minutes of pocketing the five thousand dollars Dargie was on the phone calling in old favours. Within hours he had photographs of Constable Farrell, his wife and their two kids — Lexie twelve and Michael eleven, bewdiful children. He also had photos of their nice house in a nice suburb, nice lawns, nice shrubs and nice flowers, a climbing frame and trampoline for the kids. Farrell's wife Nicole is fit, slim, blonde spiky hair, and lovely long brown legs. It's a great set up Dargie's gotta admit. He envies Farrell. A peaceful home. A wife in bed every night. What more could a man want?

Dargie wants to get it over and done with. He's nervous, one mistake and everything will be reversed, he'll be the hunted not the hunter. He's considered different ways: a car bomb? But this is Sydney, not Belfast or the Middle-East. Apart from that, bombs have a habit of going off at the wrong time an' they're difficult to make. That means you've gotta hire an expert, which costs money and brings someone else in on the deal. Increases the risk. A knife is messy and can be noisy if the victim starts screaming. So it'll be his gun, small gun, silencer. Small noise!

Having decide how, the next question is, where?

Dargie's informants have told him that Constable Farrell's meets his workmates in the Hole in the Wall pub, tucked away in a part of Balmain the trendies haven't discovered. Dargie knew it when it was a watering hole for crims not coppers. The biggest danger is being seen. Some coppers have photographic minds. They don't so much look at people as take a pictures. Click! Every person they see. The have shutters not eyelids. They could develop thoughts into photos.

The second alternative is to get Farrell at home. But the wife and kids would be around and could become collateral damage, as the American military say. The Leb amateurs and bikies keep stuffing up hits; drive-by shootings that go wrong, knocking on a door and when it opens, bam! "Oh, sorry gran, wasn't you I was after."

Dargie decides the first option is the best. He'll hit Farrell after he's had a few beers with the boys. He'll be at his most relaxed, his guard down. He'll die happy.

Grace has put her phone on maximum volume and vibrate, and slipped it into a pocket of her skirt while she is in the garden. She expects a call. She works her way among the flowers in the morning sun, selecting blossoms for the stall. Puss slides slowly along behind her. On the roof,

doves flutter in the sun. Grace snips and picks and places the bunches on the dry ground, taking care to ensure that each head doesn't contact the soil.

Grace gathers the flowers and takes them to the garage. Puss jumps onto the bench, struts along and rubs against her.

Today is her final day at the stall. She'll keep that part of her deal, Dargie can have the cemetery run. She has enough money to buy flowers for Sam. Enough for the headstone. She doesn't need to steal.

She'll miss the stall, the kids, the people who came to her for something to ease sadness, or welcome a newborn baby, or celebrate recovery from a serious illness. She puts the flowers into the cooler box and closes the tailgate. She rings Dargie again and his voice repeats, "Leave a message. I'll ring you back."

"This is Grace. The job's off! DON'T do it. Ring me. NOW!"

Where is the idiot? The knot of anxiety tightens.

She sits under the shade of the blue polytarp outside the hospital for the last time and tries to concentrate. As people buy she tells them they are her last customers. She'll miss it, not just because of the money, but because of the people she met as she squatted on her milk crate, rain and shine, selling expensive roses to adults, or inexpensive little bouquets of calliopsis to children. It calmed her soul.

By noon all the flowers are sold. Before Grace packs up and goes home she rings Dargie's again, "Leave a message I'll ring you back."

Grace fumes.

Dargie too has risen early. He needs to be alone and focused. He has left his phone in the flat and avoids all his contacts. He jogs along Bondi Beach then swims in the Icebergs Pool. He works out for an hour at the gym, has a sauna and a shower, then eats a light seafood lunch at the bar where he drinks only mineral water. He doesn't even notice the girls.

In mid afternoon he goes home to his flat, closes the window blinds. He sets the alarm on his watch and sleeps for a couple of hours. He awakens refreshed but nervous. He showers. He dresses. He drinks a glass of orange juice. He collects his phone, his gun and silencer. He catches a cab into the city.

A short time later Dargie drives over Anzac Bridge in a Toyota Landcruiser he's borrowed from an underground car park in the CBD. He turns right into Balmain then right again into the street that leads to the Hole in the Wall pub. He does a U-turn outside a new block of units that overlooks White Bay and the city skyline. He drives slowly back along the narrow street to where he's seen

Constable Farrell's car parked opposite the pub and pulls into a space a short distance behind. It's an ideal spot. On one side there's a car workshop and decrepit looking warehouses, all closed for the night, on the other, the pub. Two sets of double doors lead into a small bar with a TAB and TVs. A gate leads to a beer garden roofed with corrugated PVC. Constable Farrell usually drinks in the bar with the other cops, but he avoids the heavy sessions.

Dargie's guts are fist-tight as he thinks of the bunch coppers only metres away, one of whom is about to die.

His plan is to let Farrell get into his car then shoot him through the window. Dargie will then drive the Landcruiser back over Anzac Bridge the few kilometres into the CBD and catch a cab to Bondi for an evening's quiet drinking.

The gun nestles hard and warm in his trouser pocket and he touches it. The adrenalin is flowing. Tension like this is the nearest thing to flying without leaving the ground. He rolls the window up, leaving a gap at the top. He doesn't quite close the door, so he can get out with the minimum of sound. He has turned off the automatic light. He looks at his watch.

Inside the Hole in the Wall, Constable Sean Farrell is drinking his last beer and talking cricket with his mates from the station. Like them, he has one eye on the Sky sports channel. Pakistan and Australia are playing a day-night match. Australia is on top at the moment.

Dargie perches on the edge of the driver's seat, head turned slightly to the right so no one goes in or out of the pub without him seeing. He's virtually invisible in the dark interior with his black tee-shirt, black pants, back socks and black shoes. Only his shiny shaven head and his face glow faintly in the weak street light.

Dargie wonders how Mrs Constable Farrell's will react when she hears her husband's been killed. She'll no doubt weep at the funeral, dabbing her eyes with a little hanky balled up in her clenched fist, the kid's by her side, rigid with controlled grief as befits copper's kids. He wonders if they've got uncles an' aunts to help them through the trauma. It's cruel, but business is business. Business is cruel. The police commissioner will say that Constable Farrell was a fine upstanding officer, a credit to the force and a loving family man, and a great mate who always has a smile for everyone.

Dargie had uncles an' aunts when he was a kid in Belfast. They were always there, like the church at the end of the street or the sweet shop a few doors away. They comforted him when his dad got shot. The bullets went into his head. He was a big man, his dad. He'd dropped like a discarded rag doll, legs bent under him on the doorstep, body inside the front room. Blood pumped

out of ragged holes. Flowed across the lino. Lots of it. He died as poor as when he was born. All just for a cause.

Dargie gets a grip on his thoughts and the gun.

Inside the Hole in Wall, Farrell is disentangling himself from his mates. Tomorrow is his son Michael's twelve birthday and Farrell has a special present to pick up, it's a big secret.

Another year and Michael will be a teenager. They grow up so quickly these days. You've no sooner stopped strapping them into the kiddy seat of the car than they're into drugs, alcohol and sex. Farrell skols his beer and heads for the door.

"What's the hurry? You been promised a night in?" somebody shouts above the noise and there's a roar of laughter as Farrell walks to the door. He pauses on the step.

Dargie has one hand on the car door ready to open it the moment Farrell is in the driver's seat.

His phone rings. Jeeeesus, how could he forget to switch off? He tries to ignore it, but the noise can be heard half way across the street.

"Fuckin hell!"

Dargie grabs it. "Ringmeback" he hisses.

Twenty metres away Constable Farrell is crossing the road, beeping open the car door.

A voice yells from Dargie's phone, "Where the hell ya been? This is Grace don't do it!"

"Don't what? Grace who?"

"Grace the flower woman! The jobs off."

"What!"

"It's OFF! Have you heard me? Off! O...F...F!"

"I've got the gun in my hand," Dargie hisses.

"It's OFF! DON'T...DO...IT! Have you understood?"

"Jeeeesus! Yeah!"

"Keep the money, but I want the gun."

"Jeeeesus!" Dargie collapses into the seat.

Constable Farrell buckles his seat belt, pulls away from the kerb and heads off to collect the present.

"Hello! Yah still there?" Grace shouts.

"Where the Christ did you think I'd be?"

"Good. We'll meet. Bring it."

Without realising it Dargie has provided answers to two questions Grace keeps asking herself: one, where to get Farrell? Two, how get Farrell? A third question has now to be decided, when to get Farrell?

Grace goes to Tansy's place to talk about the story. If that's what her grand-daughter wants to do, fine. There are more roads than one to a destination. She sits holding a folded newspaper against the window of the bus to protect her face from the heat. The driver's radio warns of severe thunderstorms later in the day with the arrival of a tropical low sweeping down from the north. Heat is bad for business, Grace thinks, then reminds herself that it doesn't matter any more. The stall, stealing, selling, are things of the past.

It's the first time she's been to Tansy's share house. It is cool and shady after the gritty heat of the streets. Grace sits on the bed, back against the wall, feet up, supported by a pile of cushions.

"Do we need that thing?" She indicates the cassette recorder.

"Forget it's there, just talk, OK?"

Grace nods.

"Go back to the beginning."

"But you know it all."

"I want to hear it again. I want to be reminded of things I've forgotten an' told of the things I don't know." Tansy clips a microphone onto Grace's dress. "Pretend it's a brooch."

"It's beautiful," Grace jokes, tucking in her chins to look down at the microphone. She fills the room. Tansy sits on a cane chair by the side of the bed. Landlord is on the verandah looking through the open door at his occupied territory.

"It's hard to know where to start." Grace closes her eyes for a moment.

"In your own words, take your time Gran."

"The cops were always hassling the kids, even when they were young, especially Sam. They'd get onto them if they were walking down the street. They'd swear and accuse them of things, shove 'em around. Then when the kids denied they'd done anything and started swearing back they'd get arrested for using obscene language and resisting arrest.

"Sam was always in trouble because he used to stick up for himself and his mates. He set off camping once up the Central Coast and came back half-an-hour later in tears. He'd lost his wallet, so I had to give him more money. The cops came round that night wanting him. I said he'd go to the station as soon as he got back. He did. His wallet'd been found in a car yard and they accused him of trying to break into the office. He told them he'd been away but they wouldn't believe him.

When he wouldn't confess they beat the shit outta him, you know, put a book over his guts and belted it. Somebody'd must have found his wallet, taken the money and tossed the wallet into the car yard."

"They took him to court and the magistrate threw the case out. The cops really had it in for him after that. You probably remember it all."

"Some of it, go on."

"Another time we went to Melbourne for a holiday at Auntie Zoe's. You probably remember that too. We was away three weeks, the whole family. When we got back the cops pulled Sam off the street and accused him of doing about twenty break-ins when he wasn't even there. They held him the whole day and bashed him. When they realised they couldn't prove anything they tried to get him to dob his mates in for other things. He wouldn't, so they flogged him again."

"The night he was killed he was really scared. Before he went out he gave me a big hug and said I was the best mother in the world and no matter what happened he would always love me. I said, what'd you mean? What could happen? I thought it was boys' talk — till it was too late.

"That's all I can tell you from my side. The rest comes from what his mates told me, that an' the court transcripts. He gave that Mickey Mouse watch you're wearing to a friend, Debbie, just a few hours before he was shot and said if he got killed, then to give it to you. We'd bought it for his tenth birthday"

Tansy's hand goes involuntarily to the watch on her wrist.

"He knew something was up. It seems that about two in the morning Miffy turned up at the flat where Sam was with three girls, Leanne, Debbie and Kelly. Leanne had run away from home and Sam and the other two girls were trying to get her to go back. Miffy was in a stolen car with three other boys. Sam was stupid, he got into the car with them. The girls said that he'd argued first, and called them idiots for stealing it and that they should dump it. They didn't. Instead they broke into the toy shop. Then Sam went off with Miffy in the stolen car with a coupla hundred bucks worth of toys in the boot. Toys, of all things! I didn't think he'd be that stupid. There was model cars, that sort of stuff, even dolls and girly things, for presents maybe. They were kids not crims. Stupid, but not crims."

"Do you think Sam with 'em when they robbed the shop?" Tansy asks.

"Don't know. Miffy said in court that he was, but who knows, Miffy's such liar.."

Grace fills a glass with water, sips.

"What happened next was either just bad luck for Sam, or something more sinister. The cops got onto them. Sam noticed the paddy wagon when they were a few ks from home. Miffy said in court

that Sam kept the speedo on sixty and they cruised along, the cops behind. Even the cops never said they was speeding. They stopped at traffic lights at Parramatta Road and the cops were so close that the boys could see the driver and his mate looking down on them. Miffy said they recognised Constable Sean Farrell, the driver, and Constable John Cummins. Fatty Farrell and Cummins the Cunt, as the kids called them. They'd both bashed Sam a couple of times.

“Cummins was talking into the radio, doing a stolen vehicle check. It wasn't reported stolen at that stage. There was no pursuit. They followed a car which they didn't know was stolen, with two kids in it they knew. And which wasn't speeding. Why?”

“Sam drove under the railway bridge. The paddy wagon followed. Why? Ahead was a truck loaded with timber. Sam must'a panicked. Maybe he was thinking of the toys in the boot. He saw a chance to get away and swung out to overtake the truck at a T-junction. But he couldn't get around in time and hit the kerb on the other side of the road. The truck stopped a few metres behind with its headlights on the car.

Sam fumbled the gear as he tried to reverse and the car rolled back.

The cops was out of their car.

Cummins ran down the passenger side.

Farrell down the other.

Cummins tried to grab Miffy through the open window but he ducked.

Farrell had his gun out. Bang!

“God!”

Grace falters. Tansy moves to switch off the tape but Grace motions her to leave it.

“The driver of the truck way high up there in his cab saw everything. He saw the car rolling back. Heard the crack of the gun. Saw the flash. Heard the screaming.

“Sam reversed into the centre of the road then tried to drive in the direction he'd been travelling. He was wandering all over the road. He was screaming and Miffy was crying and trying to hide under the seat. It's all in the court transcripts. Sam musta been in agony every time he moved. He called out to me. Me, not far away at home, worrying and wondering and able to do nothing.

“The engine stalled an' the car rolled into a fence and stopped. Miffy was out even before it stopped, gone, running into the night.

Sam tried to get out too — there was blood all over the door handle. On the seat. On the floor. It was sprayed across the inside of the windscreen.

“Farrell and Cummins dragged Sam out an' propped him against the car, his face on the roof, his arms an' legs spreadeagled. He slid onto the road. He probably died then. Farrell and Cummins took

an arm each an' dragged Sam clear of the car. That's when his new shorts and singlets were ripped and the flesh of his bum worn through on the gravel.

The truckie wasn't the only witness, people from the houses opposite watched everything, Cummins radioed headquarters. Constable Farrell spewed in the gutter.

"Me and his dad was told by police that Sam had been killed in a car accident. When we went to the morgue we learned the truth. We weren't allowed to touch Sam, or see any but his face. We didn't know there was a hole in his neck as big as your fist, hidden by a shroud.

"Constable Farrell was charged with manslaughter. You know what happened then. The judge told the jury to disregard the evidence of the truck driver because he got mixed up on distances and couldn't tell the difference between yards and metres. Neither could the judge. Neither can half the people in Australia because there is hardly any difference.

"The judge backed Constable Farrell's claim that he'd been in fear of his life because the car'd reversed at him and he shot in self-defence — even though Farrell changed his story twice.

The first time he said he shot in self defence because Sam had tried to run him over. That woulda been hard for a jury to believe because he nearly blew Sam's head off with the first shot, then he fired again. Sam was half dead when he tried to drive away. The second time, Farrell said he didn't fire the gun, that it had just, 'sort of gone off.'"

"Cummins told the court that he hadn't seen anything because he'd had his head inside the car when he was trying to get Miffy. That saved him from perjury, or telling the truth.

"The truck driver repeated time and again that Constable Farrell was never behind the car and it'd rolled a couple'a metres backwards, not accelerated. The truck driver was in a better position to see than the judge. Better than anybody. He was there, up in his cab, his headlights shining on the whole thing."

Grace mops her brow with the end of her skirt.

"Wanna break?" Tansy asks. Grace shakes her head.

"After the trial was over a copper turned up at the front door with Sam's shorts and shirt and runners in a plastic bag, covered in blood. He said they wouldn't be needed as evidence any more now Constable Farrell'd been found not guilty.

"Not guilty? Not guilty! How can someone shoot an unarmed boy sitting in a car and not be guilty? I went mad. But you know that. There was all those interviews with me in the papers and radio, TV shows, documentaries. After you left I had death threats on the phone. It was Constable Farrell and his mates. Johnnie was fined for fifty-seven so-called traffic offences in less than a year," Grace says wearily.

“An’ before I ran away, I was kerb crawled in the dark by guys in cars wearing sunglasses an’ black woollen beanies. I stopped going out. No school, no nothing,” Tansy adds.

“The local kids were interviewed by some media. Their stories were heard for a change. They told about a Sam who helped the other kids. Got ‘em to go back home when they ran away. Sam, who thought stealing cars was stupid. But was in a stolen car. Sam, who stuck up for his rights. Sam, who defended his mates.

“That was my son, not the person they lied about in court and the newspapers.”

“Gran, what if...?”

“What if what?”

Tansy hesitates. She knows what she wants to say, but can’t do it.

“Never mind, keep going.”

“They wouldn’t have a Royal Commission, or a new inquest. No wonder I lost it, taking the flowers an’ selling ‘em an’ all that sorta thing. That kept me from killing myself. That’s more or less it. You can fill in the gaps, or your mum and dad can.”

“Why did the judge do what he did? An’ why was a Royal Commission knocked back?”

“The judge is one of them, not one of us, isn’t he?”

“An’ there was a lot going on at the time around Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. If there’d been a Royal Commission into Sam’s killing people woulda tied it up with black deaths as well, all police killings.”

“What about Constable Farrell? You’ve got neither justice nor revenge.”

“That’ll get sorted.”

“In what way?”

“My way.”

“Which is what?”

“Don’t go thinking about it. Concentrate on your story.”

Tansy switches off the tape, unclips the mike. She puts her arms around her grandmother and cries.

As Grace heads for the bus, thunder rumbles in the distance and lightning flickers. The first drops of rain fall, big, fat and warm. They splat onto the hot road, evaporate and the air is thick with the smell of water on hot bitumen. By the time the bus arrives the sun has disappeared behind heavy black clouds and a deluge has turned gutters into rivers. Grace’s clothes cling to her as she flops onto a seat. The rain roars and hammers on the roof of the bus, drowning out every other noise.

All the flower in the garden have been flattened and the chooks sit bedraggled and forlorn in their shed. Grace stands, head tilted towards the sky, water streaming down her face and neck and running in a river between her breasts. Her wiry grey hair hangs down her back like kelp. The garden is a quagmire. Grace stands, bare feet in the mud.

Tansy sits in her room with Wallace watching the Four Corners video and news clips of the shooting given to her by Malvin after she'd fled home.

The journalist interviews people in the street where Sam was shot: a mother who was feeding her baby; two brothers whose bedroom looked out to where the car had crashed into the fence. The mother was a nurse. She had run out and was with Sam at the death rattle, trying to stop his life flowing from the wound in his neck with a cotton blanket still warm from the baby.

The journalist, addressing the camera, says that the police interviewed none of them, they didn't appear in court as witnesses. Not one was asked, 'What did you see?'

What they saw, was a pool of blood in the middle of the road the size of a newspaper when police said in court that Sam was dead in the driver's seat when they got to him. If he was dead in the driver's seat there would have been no pool of blood in the road. What they saw was police move the body twice before it was photographed.

"My Sam," Tansy whispers.

"Wallace draws her to him and kisses her gently on the forehead.

Tansy leans into him, shaking. She holds him tight. His body is warm through his shirt and she can feel the beating of his heart. Wallace strokes her hair.

Tansy gets up suddenly and goes onto the balcony.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be like this, it's just that..."

She stands at the French doors looking in at Wallace.

"Had enough for the night?" he asks.

Tansy shakes her head and sits on the opposite end of the bed.

"There's an article in Gran's box, written a few days after the shooting. The journalist said Sam had been charged a number of times by the cops. He didn't say that the only conviction he'd had was for fighting, when he'd whacked some boy who'd called him a wog. The police musta fed the journo that stuff to make Sam look like a little crim. The journo claimed he'd interviewed shopkeepers who said Sam was the leader of a gang. None of the so-called shopkeepers quoted was named. He produced no evidence for the claims. All this was outside of court, before the trial."

“A double assassination; first in person, then in character. The cops rid the world of a little hoon,” Wallace says with irony.

“There’s one thing,” Tansy hesitates.

“Go on.”

“Gran doesn’t know everything.”

“Like?”

“We did drugs. An’ Sam dealt, just a bit. The cops had the drug scene stitched up. Some of the kids were into thieving, house breaking, petty stuff, to pay for their shit.”

“Sam too?” Wallace asks.

“Nah. Bit of shop-lifting, nothing else. But the kids that got picked up, including Sam, were let off if they’d deal for the cops an’ keep ‘em informed of what was going on. Sam did the dealing for a bit, mainly so we could get some. But he wouldn’t come at the informing. When he stopped the cops had it in for him.”

“Because he knew too much?”

“Because he knew too much.”

“So they killed him!”

Tansy gets off the bed, shakes her head, sighs. “Who knows. Not sure whether the shooting was set up, maybe even with Miffy’s help; whether the cops just happened along at the right time, or wrong time; or whether it was the cops stuffing up then trying to wriggle out of it.”

"Are you putting all this into your story?"

Tansy smiles ruefully, "I will. I will."

Later Tansy runs and re-runs the tape of her interview with Grace then goes to see her, is there more to the story? Should she tell her gran everything now? Grace drags cardboard boxes from the linen cupboard in the hall. They sit at the table in the garden and look at everything Grace has collected: transcripts of the inquest and the trial, Dozens of videos of TV news, the Four Corners TV investigation; newspaper and magazine articles. There is the same front page that Tansy has among her cuttings, the photo of Sam’s broken body lying on his back in the road. Bloody handprints are on the car’s windows, Sam’s hands? Police hands? The doors are smeared with blood. The two women sit looking at the stark black and white image, like a picture of a war victim in some far off country. No matter how many times Tansy sees the photo it makes her feel sick. Grace takes it from her and lays it face down on the pile. She produces the picture of Sam’s funeral when she is being restrained by Jack and Rose. Pain floods Tansy’s body like a tsunami. In the

background, almost lost in the crush is a figure she had avoided looking at when she had shown Wallace; herself, a lone girl with long golden hair, face frozen, looking directly ahead.

The height of her grief.

Malvin, in a black suit, has his arm around her shoulders.

The wraith-like figure of Gran is captured at the moment of trying to fling herself on the coffin as it goes into the grave, Tansy's mother Rose, hanging on to one arm and her father Jack, the other, three links in a broken chain. In the background, hundreds of teenagers fill the cemetery.

Does she need to relive it all? The agony. The future that wasn't? Will words on paper free her? Will they be any kind of justice?"

"Take everything with you. I don't need it now," Grace says.

Dargie is in his flower factory, whistling and polishing a car, not the Landcruiser he borrowed from the city a few days ago for the hit job but his own black BMW convertible. The deal is done and dusted with the mad woman, and Dargie has come out of it very well indeed. He didn't have to kill anyone, he got a record price for the shooter and a bit of information, he kept the deposit for a killing he didn't have to do. Now he's in the flower factory whistling and squinting along the car bonnet to make sure there are no specs of dirt. He might buy a Landcruiser too if things go as well as the new business promises.

He's given up looking for Rae. Forget her. There's other fish in the sea. It hasn't occurred to him that Rae is living with the mad woman herself, and the man who attacked him at the funeral? Why would it

Nola's finished cleaning out the van and the factory after the Saturday run and all she wants is to get home then into the city. She knows nothing about Grace's earlier narrow escape from Dargie, nor Constable Farrell's brush with death. She wonders what has put Dargie in such a good humour as she squeezes behind the shower curtain and undresses.

Dargie flicks off the last dust speck on the car, walks critically around it, angling his head this way and that like a currawong looking for worms. He's satisfied and straightens up. He can hear Nola in the shower and imagines her body shiny with running water, droplets on her nipples, hair slicked back, white soapy bubbles in her pubic hair, eyes half closed. He resists the desire to peep through the gap or draw the curtain aside He doesn't want her buggering off on him too.

"You're doing a great job," he calls out.

"Yeah!"

The shower stops and Dargie can hear Nola drying herself. He gets the whiff of talcum powder; watches the curtain moving as she dresses.

“Ya deserve a bonus.”

“How much?”

“Double? Next week.”

Nola appears, clean and fresh enough to eat. She nods. “Great.”

He'd love to take her clothes off, with his teeth, piece by little piece, the panties last of all. He'd pull them down over the curve of her arse until they dropped to the floor, then hold the two cheeks and tug at her pubic hair with his teeth, nuzzle the coarse curls, slide his tongue in, her hands on the back of his head.

“I thought I'd take you out to dinner tomorrow. Go to Bondi, sit in one of those fish cafes on Campbell Parade. Have a nice bottle of white wine, fresh fruit, a good brandy, listen to some music later. Go...”

“...Back to your place?”

“Yeah! We're both singing from the same song sheet eh!”

“No!”

“Why?”

“Because I don't wanna. I've told you a dozen times.”

Dargie walks over, places the fingertips of each hand on her shoulders.

“It'd be nice.”

Nola looks at the strong neck and hard face, the muscles of his shoulders and arms coming down from the tight short sleeves of his black tee-shirt. He grins down at her, a wicked grin.

“It wouldn't because it won't.”

Dargie runs his hands down her bare arms, along her hips, to her buttocks.

He grasps.

She twists.

Nola is half way to the door before he grabs her by the arm.

“Come on,” he urges.

“Let go!”

She tries to wrench herself free. He pulls her hard into him. She realises for the first time that he once had a face lift.

“No!”

He holds her tight, grinning.

“Pleeeeeease, no,” she begs.

“Pleeeese, yes,” Dargie mimics and tries to kiss her. She twists her face away.

“Stop playing hard to get.”

“I am hard to get. NO!”

“Your not. Ya wan’ it all the time. No husband. No boyfriend. I’ve heard of what ya get up to.”

He begins drawing her by the arms towards the car. Nola digs her heels in but her feet slide along the smooth concrete floor.

“Stop it!” she screams.

“Nobody’ll hear you.”

“NO!”

Nola keeps struggling. Within reach of the car, she slips onto the floor.

Dargie stops. He looks at her with disdain, then relaxes his hold. Pulls her to her feet. “You’re a fucking prick teaser,” he sneers.

Nola backs away. She doesn’t take her eyes off him as she straightens her blouse, fumbles to fasten a button that’s no longer there.

“I thought you had a sense’a fun.” Dargie’s grinning now.

“Fun!” Nola spits out.

Dargie steps towards her, hands raised in supplication “OK. I’m sorry. Forgive me?”

Nola’s breathing too hard to say more. She nods. She gets into the van locks the doors, never taking her eyes off him.

Dargie rolls up the shutter door.

Nola drives through and into the lane without looking back.

At the first red light she looks in the mirror, her wet hair is standing on end, her face is flushed. Instead of the smell of soap and deodorant there’s the smell of sweat and fear.

Two weeks after almost being shot dead the unsuspecting Constable Farrell is getting into his car outside the Hole in the Wall following an end of week drink with the boys. He’s had a harrowing day. As he buckles his seatbelt the back of his head meets the point of something hard — a gun.

“G’day Sean. It’s the ‘demented bitch.’ Remember me? Remember my boy Sam?”

Grace Parkes rises from the darkness of the backseat. Dargie’s aborted ambush provided her with not just a gun, but also the know how and know where with which to catch Farrell, here. She is

taking up where Dargie left off. His decision to shoot Farrell outside the pub was sound, if unimaginative. Her plan is imaginative, innovative.

Constable Farrell stiffens. “Put that bloody thing down you stupid bitch and get outa my fucking car before I break ya neck.”

“Isn’t your daughter Lexie’s a lovely kid?”

“You must be real proud of her.

“I picked her up after school today.”

“Hurt her and you’re fucking dead meat!” he screams.

“Shhhhh. You’ll disturb the neighbours. She’s somewhere no one will ever find her.” Grace pushes the gun harder into Farrell’s skull. “Now fasten your wrists to the wheel.” Grace drops two pairs of handcuffs onto his lap. “One wrong move an’ you won’t see your lovely daughter again.”

Constable Farrell does as he’s told. He is breathing in and out through his nose, short, sharp gasp of suppressed rage.

Grace seals his mouth with gaffer tape then winds more tape tightly around his chest and attaches it to the barrel of the gun. Last, she tapes the gun to her hand with her index finger on the trigger.

“Come on we’re going to Springwood. You know the way.”

Constable Farrell looks desperately towards the pub in the hope of salvation. None appears. He pulls slowly out from the kerb and drives off down the dimly lit street.

Grace can hear his rasping breath behind the tape.

“Nice white shirt you’re wearing Sean.”

Dargie’s business is blooming. The competition’s gone. The cemeteries are full of flowers after the rain. Gloria, the wife of his drinking mate stretch an’ her friend Di, are being trained by Nola in flower collecting, wrapping and delivery. Nola seems to have forgiven his recent over-enthusiasm. Dargie’s sure that women have short memories for things like that. He’s still paying her the sixty percent more despite the fact that she now has additional help, a bonus for training the others, Dargie’s told her.

Gloria and Di have gone for the day and Nola’s doing the last bit of tidying up before meeting the twins and taking them to a concert in Darling Harbour. She’s keen to see an Aboriginal group called Jambuwal who’ve hit the big time recently. It’ll be hard work taking the twins, but it’s the only chance she’s gonna get to see the group live and spend time with the kids.

Dargie pretends to be helping but most of the time he's just watching her; the way she walks, her hips, her waist, her breasts pushing up from within her blouse, the way her hair falls over her face.

Nola can feel his eyes boring in to her.

"You can do all sorts'a things with daisies, lovely little flowers," he says.

"What?" Nola isn't really listening.

"It's amazing."

"What's amazing?" she asks, emptying the last bucket of water.

"Daisies. I read about it in a book, the things a man and a woman can do with daisies. Lady something or other."

"Lady Chatterley's Lover?" Nola wrinkles her brow. Where's...all...this...coming...from...and where's it leading?

"Yeah, that's the one."

"You've read Lady Chatterley's Lover?"

"Yeah. Well bits of it. Years ago. In my teens."

"They used forget-me-nots."

"You've read it too! Daisies, forget-me-nots, what's the difference? Sounds good whatever you use."

Nola looks at him, quizzically. "You'd like someone to do it to you?"

"Yeah! Sounds good."

"Me?"

"Yeah." Dargie's not sure if it's an offer or not.

"Didn't think you were so romantic. You usually favour the more direct approach. Would roses do instead of forget-me-nots?"

Maybe she's not stringing him on. He grins in anticipation. "Yeah."

Nola takes a long-stemmed rose from a bunch and puts it between her teeth. Then she twirls it around her fingers and advances.

Dargie is grinning. "I knew we'd see eye to eye eventually."

She moves closer and croons softly. "Come on Dargie, take it out. Don't be shy."

She pouts her lips in an exaggerated soft "Oooh" of pain as she touches one of the thorns with the tip of a finger.

Dargie's hand hovers at his zip. He hesitates. Is this real?

Nola moves up to him. She puts the rose back between her teeth, unzips his fly and takes out his hard penis, holding it between first finger and thumb. She has to admit to herself that it's not bad.

Dargie gasps and goes weak at the knees. He leans back on the bench for support. Nola unbuckles his belt and his black trousers drop around his black socks and black shoes. Nola lifts up his black tee-shirt, rubs the velvet head of the rose down the black hair of his chest to his groin and flicks him gently with the thorny stem on the soft head of his penis. Dargie flinches, but rolls his head back and smiles.

He grips the edge of the table tightly and his triceps bulge. The quadriceps muscles on his thighs stand out like ships hawsers and his abdominals tighten into a six pack.

Nola again rakes the rose stem ever so gently across his body, first his chest then lower, and lower, across his belly to where it tangles in his black curly pubes. She flicks the rose lower and over, to land on his straining thighs, and rakes him again, ever so gently.

Dargie stretches his hands out for her but Nola raps him across the penis with the thorny stem and he falls back gasping among the fancy paper, cling wrap and rolls of string.

Nola goes down on her knees before him, takes his penis in one hand. Dargie's breathing so fast he feels his body's about to explode. Nola begins to wrap the long-stemmed thorny rose around Dargie's member. At first gently, then with increasing firmness. Then tightly.

Tighter.

Tighter.

Tighter.

Dargie's moans of pleasure begin to take on a sharper edge.

He yelps.

Nola croons to him.

"Think of DH's forget-me-nots," she whispers. "And pubic hair. And the soft yielding flesh of Lady Chatterly. Think of the words they used."

He's almost reached his moment of ecstasy, "The greatest fucking feeling in the world," as he once described it to Rae. But the greatest feeling in the world is receding in direct ratio to the increase of pain in his penis.

Nola has wrapped another thorny stem around his pride and joy, the only muscle he does not have to work on in the gym.

It hurts. But he doesn't want to appear a wimp.

Nola has now woven other stems around his thighs and is wrapping everything in thin, cling wrap, the roses, his John Thomas, his private member, his pride and joy, his tool, his prick, his cannon, his willy, his wagtail.

Nola wraps him from waist to ankles and back again, tighter and tighter. The thorns of the rose dig into Dargie's flesh. There are spots of blood.

"Enough!" Dargie bellows. He puts his hand to his groin to rip away the plastic and the roses but his hands too disappear under the imprisoning membrane.

Dargie's greatest feeling in the world does not arrive. Instead he finds himself immobilised in layer upon layer of cling wrap, with his pants around his ankles and the woman he'd meant to fuck standing fully clothed in front of him, laughing.

"There Dargie, how's that? All ready for delivery. A rose is a rose is a rose, or is it? You'll look very attractive in a Balmain flower shop."

Nola walks away.

Dargie tries to hop after her, shouting, "Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!"

"No one will hear you." Nola turns off the lights, slips out of the door and disappears.

Grace and Constable Farrell join the stream of cars heading west over the Blue Mountains.

"Bring back fond memories Sean?"

Constable Farrell glares ahead at the path the car headlights cut in the darkness of the bush. He seethes with impotent fury and fear for his daughter.

"Rememba driving my boy an' a mate up here late one night and making them dig their own graves?"

Constable Farrell doesn't speak. Grace prods him with the handgun.

"Rememba?"

Constable Farrell nods.

"Then you left them standing there and drove off laughing. Thought it was very funny didn't you?" Her voice rises. "Didn't you?"

Constable Farrell nods.

"A change from giving them a thrashing at the station eh. A different way of making 'em show a bit of respect. Toe the line boy, or else. Rememba?"

Constable Farrell nods again.

Grace continues looking at the back of his head, the gun firmly taped to her hand, finger on the trigger.

“Makes this ride nostalgic, doesn’t it Sean? When he got home that night I could tell he’d been crying, although he tried to hide it. I wanted to report you. Sam told me not to be stupid. He’d never talked to me like that before. Keep outa their way then, I told him. I didn’t know how hard it was for a teenage boy to keep outa a copper’s way did I? If I’d known then what I know now I’d a packed him off to Queensland or Perth or the moon or anywhere. Then my Sam would still a’been alive. He’d have married in a few years, become a dad, just like you. Lovely little daughter maybe, just like Lexie.

“Know what I’ve been thinking. An eye for an eye. My son, your daughter. That’d be the best way to make you suffer what I suffered. They might even meet in heaven, if you believe in that kinda thing. What a coincidence that would be eh.

“I know whatcha thinking: ‘It’s not her fault!’. An’ you’re right. It’s not. An’ it’s a pity she’s gotta go, because of what you did. But I can’t think of a way to hurt you more.”

Grace’s voice goes up an octave as a truck coming in the opposite blasts its horn.

“Sean, you’re wandering over the line, concentrate or you’ll get us both killed.”

She lapses into silence. The headlights of the station wagon pick out the shape of gum trees and once, the bloated carcass of a wombat by the side of the road, legs sticking into the air, a whiff of its rotting flesh sucked into the car. They pass through the lower Blue Mountain towns; Glenbrook, Blaxland, Warrimoo. At each one Grace becomes more alert, pressing the pistol hard into Constable Farrell’s as a warning not to anything stupid.

Constable Farrell tries to focus on his driving while formulating a plan to escape. He struggles to suck saliva into his parched mouth from the tape that seals his lips.

Baby Sampa sits on Malvin’s shoulders high above the crowd in front of the music shell in Darling Harbour. Her brown eyes sparkle in the lights from the stage as she twists and turns and wiggles her arms. Narita smiles up at her daughter and touches her. She hooks her fingers into Malvin’s belt as he pushes forward. A short distance away Rae is weaving her way between the packed bodies towards the stage, pulling a reluctant Kate behind her, determined to enjoy whatever music the night provides in the mother —daughter experience she has organised. She looks up at a giant TV screen — and sees herself. She shrieks, and waves to herself waving.

“Look! Look!”

“Muuuum! Do you have to?” Kate turns away in embarrassment.

“Muuuum,” Rae, mocks, and waves again with both hands. Kate shakes her head but begins to laugh.

Then the camera finds, and holds, Sampa, clinging to Malvin's head. Narita tugs Malvin's sleeve and points up at the screen.

Nola is struggling through the crowd with the twins, Michelle and Katrina, about to give in and go home when Rae appears on the big screen, the first time she's seen her since before the funeral. She realises they are only a few metres from each other. It is her turn to be excited. She scans the crowd, sees her friend and heads towards her.

Rae is slightly drunk, giggling and arm-in-arm with a thin, tall young woman who has Chinese characters tattooed on her shoulder and who Nola realises must be Kate. Nola and Rae throw their arms around each other.

"You're looking fantastic," Rae yells.

"You too. Working?"

Rae shakes her head. "Still with Dargie?"

Nola laughs, "Nah. Left. Today. He was too wrapped up in his work." She bursts into uncontrollable laughter. "I'll tell you about it later."

"Tell me now," Rae urges.

"Not in public." Nola explodes into laughter again. Michelle and Katrina tug at her arms and she moves on to free them from the press of bodies. "We'll get together next week! I'll ring you!" she shouts as she disappears in the crowd.

"Can't wait to find what that's about," Rae says to Kate.

"She's wacky," Kate replies.

"Yeah, just like the rest of us!"

At the back of the crowd Tansy is standing with Wallace, she too has seen Rae on the screen, and Sampa, Malvin and Narita.

In the mountains Grace and Constable Farrell have turned off the highway. They follow ever narrower dirt roads which eventually become fire trails.

"Keep driving," Grace instructs Constable Farrell as they lurch over ruts and boulders that threaten to rip the sump out. The bush crowds in on each side until finally the track ends in a turning circle at the end of a spur.

"Switch the lights off. An' the engine."

Constable Farrell does as he's told. The only sound is his struggled breathing through his nose, the clicking of the cooling engine, and a mopoke owl calling from the valley far bellow the escarpment.

Constable Farrell sits motionless, except for the violent rise and fall of his chest. Grace is leaning forward on the seat behind him, the gun an extension of her arm.

“What you thinking of Sean?” she asks.

“Life?”

“Death?”

“Your little girl?”

“Your son?”

“Your wife?”

“Mistakes you’ve made?”

“Regrets?”

“You cheat on her once in a while I’ll bet.”

“That night you killed Sam was a torment for me. I was sick with fear, wondering why my boy hadn’t come home, why he hadn’t rung me. Every time a car slowed down near the house I thought it was him and I’d hurry to the door, feeling silly for being so worried. But none of the cars stopped. Then, well after daylight a couple of your mates drove up in a police car.”

Grace sits in silence for some minutes.

“Every mother worries about their son each time they step out the door. My worst fears came true that night. I never thought that he woulda been killed by a copper. But he was, and here’s the copper that did it, sitting in front of me, Constable Sean Farrell. Aren’t I the lucky one.” Grace stabs the barrel of the gun hard into Farrell’s . He winces. “But its not a question of luck is it constable? Should I call you constable? or Mr Farrell? Or Sean? You’d rather I didn’t call you anything wouldn’t ya? Prefer never to hear or see me again. Know what the kids on your beat call you? I’ll bet you do, cops know everything? I’ll tell you anyway, Fatty Farrell. Not a nice name is it? Particularly when your wife is so slim. Bit of a burden for her, so to speak. I won’t repeat the name they have given your mate, it’s a word I don’t use.

“But I’m getting off the subject, I’m tired after the drive.

“The subject is justice. How best it should be applied, who by? and who too? So, what should I do?”

Malvin and Narita are in the thick of the Jambuwal fans in front of the stage, with Sampa. Malvin smiles at Narita. He smiles at everyone around him. He smiles at the baby cradled in his arms. Who would have thought such happiness could have come from a holiday in the Philippines. Narita slips an arm momentarily around his waist and squeezes. He smiles even more. The image of the three of them appears on the big screens again, and the crowd cheers. Tansy looks at her giant brother and his giant wife and giant child, laughing and happy, waiting for the band, surfing a wave of pleasure.

“Come on, let’s find ‘em,” Wallace says, moving down the steps towards the stage. He eases his way between the swaying bodies, then turns towards Tansy — just in time to see her disappear.

Tansy walks over the curve of Anzac Bridge, where light dances off the water below and the sounds of the concert and the crowds of Darling Harbour are like the sound of distant surf. The crowds on the footpath thin out and she turns past the old Balmain power station and onto the ridge of land above White Bay container terminal.

Tansy steps over the gate that has collapsed at the side of the old house where she had hidden to escape the madness that had descended when Sam was killed. She picks her way along the path, over rusting remains of guttering and through a thicket of sticky weed. The backyard is a jungle. Morning glory smothers everything, from the outside dunny with its one-hinged door, to the clothes hoist rising in the middle. A couple of spiky palms have taken root from seeds dropped by birds. The yards of the houses on either side are equally overgrown and silent. Tansy carefully opens what is left of the screen door. The inner door yields reluctantly and she steps through. The need to exorcise her ghost wins over the urge to flee. Carefully testing the crumbling stairs she climbs to the room where she had hidden.

Someone has been here since, lived, and gone. Blankets lay crumpled on top of the mattress. Candle stubs sit on the floor next to curled and yellowed women’s magazines, a heap of wire coat hangers, and a brittle plastic bag with balls of wool and what look like miniature knitted black and yellow striped beanies with pom poms on the top. She recognises them, egg cosies, the ones Grandad used to buy from an old woman who sold them, and wire coat hangers, in the pubs to sympathetic drinkers. A home-made billycan with a twisted wire handle sits beside a fireplace filled with old ash and charcoal. The bottom of the billy is rusty where water long ago evaporated. Next to it long-dead flowers stand brittle in a glass jar.

Each step takes her further back. She can see Sam’s grinning face, hear his laughter, remember the things they did and were going to do.

He’s my uncle, she used to tell herself, lying in bed at night alone.

He's my best friend.

I'm his best friend.

My best uncle.

His best niece.

That's all we can be.

Their love was their secret.

Tansy fights back tears.

If she'd been with him that night he'd still be alive. He wouldn't have gone with Miffy. She should have been with him. But she'd been forbidden to go out late.

Minding other people's business got Sam into trouble. Like seeing Miffy's dad and older brothers selling stolen gear to the cops. Sam said he was clean and wanted his mates to be. She believed him. He would never lie to her.

Fears and regrets bob like flotsam and jetsam on a flood tide. Fleeing from the madness of her gran and the memories of Sam. Hours sitting in a lonely bedroom of the shared house in Newtown. Nights of shouted drunken conversations in crowded pubs listening to skull-cracking music. Of a vomiting head stuck in stinking lavatory bowls or nailed to the pillow with pain in the mornings.

The faded wallpaper with its pattern of looping, entwined roses still hangs in tattered strips. The room smells of damp, decay and desolation. Outside, the balcony boards have rotted away or been ripped up for firewood, leaving jutting joists pointing like fingers towards the city. Sections of the rails hang, a cast iron cobweb. Down the road, where the heron stalked in the little wetland, town houses and flats have been built. Tansy can see people in lighted rooms, like fish in a tank, young couples in designer decorated homes, where the pictures on the walls match the carpet and the carpet matches the lounge suite. A group on a balcony are chatting in the coolness of the night. A woman in a long white dress re-fills champagne flutes and returns the bottle to an ice bucket. Cigarettes glow in the dusk like planets. Tansy goes back into the room and walks slowly around, running her fingers over the wallpaper. She sits again in the corner, and closes her eyes.

When she opens them again Wallace is standing in the doorway, lit by the pale glow of street lights. "I followed you. I was worried."

"There's no need. I can look after myself."

"I know."

Tansy edges over on the mattress and Wallace sits next to her. He puts his arm around her and draws her in.

"Why here?"

“It’s a long story.”

“Sam?”

Tansy nods.

She thinks of times she was here with Sam. The excitement. The fear. Everything slowly slipping away, yet still clinging, yielding reluctantly. She wants to keep but she wants to be released. She is walking a long road and forever turning round, looking at where she has been, rather than where she is going. The figure behind her becomes smaller and smaller.

She cries for the blurring of the past but longs for the future.

Wallace ponders the girl by his side, her grief, how to reach and comfort her, how to replace that which can’t be replaced. “Do you want to go home?”

“No.”

“Back to the concert?”

She shakes her head, “No.”

“It’s not a good idea to hang around here by yourself.”

“Stay.”

Grace’s mouth is close to Constable Farrell’s ear. She whispers to him from the darkness of the back seat. “You’ve never shown any remorse. Never said you were sorry that a boy died. Never tried to understand what I went through. All you wanted was to get off the hook, save your job. Well, the hook’s in your mouth, you’re gonna be reeled in.

“Gutted.

“Skinned.

“Cooked.

“You’ll spend the whole of tonight worrying what has happened to your daughter, the way I spent the night worrying what had happened to my son. It’s gonna be the longest night of your life.

“You’ll know in the morning.”

Constable Farrell’s eyes bulge. He heaves on his lacerated handcuffed wrists and the car shakes. Blood runs onto his hands.

“A bad feeling isn’t it Constable Farrell?”

Grace waits for him to subside. She un-tapes the gun from his neck. She pulls a video camera from her bag, turns on the light, points it in the direction of Constable Farrell, and videos him in close-up, taped, slobbering mouth and bulging, tormented eyes.

“This was a present from my son-in-law. My video won’t be professional quality like those shots of Sam on TV. But it’ll be good enough. Did you watch all that TV footage? Bet you did. You, Constable Cummins, you boss at the station, and the police union lawyer. I can image. How are we gonna explain the body in the middle of the road? How we gonna explain the bloody handprints on the outside of the car when we said the kid was dead inside? How we gonna explain the changed your story? First ya said ya shot in self defence because Sam tried to run you over. Then ya said the gun had sort of gone off. I bet the boys had a laugh about that once it was all over , ‘gone off’ ? after all the firearms training you musta had. An’ how was constable Cummins gonna explain that he saw nothing?

“But ya needn’t have worried. The judge was on your side eh.

“Do you know what I’m gonna do now Constable Farrell? I’m gonna sit an’ watch you all night as you go through hell worrying about your daughter.

“But wanna know something? Sam doesn't want me to kill you. Such a forgiving boy, Strange isn't it? I wait all this time for his directions, then don't agree with him. It proves what I always said, Sam was a beautiful boy, always concerned about others. Too good for the world. He's lost contact with it now. An' I've lost contact with him. He's gone. I hope he'll understand what I do though.”

Grace adjusts the rear view mirror so she can see Constable Farrell’s face, then settles her huge bulk.

The moon rises and bathes the inside of the car. Constable Farrell’s skin is grey. He stinks. His eyes shine. Grace isn’t sure whether or not he’s crying. If he is, she wonders whether it’s for his daughter or himself.

Or Sam? No. Not Sam.

She almost feels sorry for him.

Beyond Constable Farrell and the car bonnet, she can see the edge of the escarpment. Far below a forest of eucalypts shine in the moonlight.

Grace awakens at first light. Constable Farrell is slumped over the steering wheel but his eyes are open.

She struggles out of the car, relieves herself behind a tree, then stands and views the new day. The gorge below is full of birdsong and the first light of the sun is casting curlicue shadows on the millions of years of eroded orange sandstone of the western escarpment. She massages her numb legs until they tingle back to life.

She can see Constable Farrell's face behind the windscreen. His eyes are looking straight ahead through the insect-splattered glass. What were once the whites of his eyes are blood red and the rims look sore and raw. His skin is a dirty grey.

"Sleep well Sean?" She calls to him. "Or was it a long night? I musta dropped off. Pity. Why didn't you waken me? I coulda kept you company eh. Shot more video. Talked about the past."

Constable Farrell remains immobile.

"Know what Sean. I'm not gonna kill your girl, even though that'd be the best way to make you suffer the way I suffered."

Farrell sobs from behind the tape.

"Killing her'd be selfish. It'd be thinking of my pain, not the loss of Sam. Taking another young life wouldn't bring Sam back would it? It'd give me satisfaction making you spend the rest of your life as a bereaved father, but it'd punish a little girl for something she'd no control over. It's not her fault she's got a killer for a dad is it? Anyway, I don't even have her. Never did. She's probably having a sleep-out at a mate's place and doesn't even know her dad's missing.

"So, she'll live. Isn't that good?"

"But you won't.

"I was gonna let you go after this, then I thought, what would happen? I'd finish up in jail the rest of my life for kidnapping a copper. So you and your lot would win again.

"A no brainer really, you have to go. I might put one shot in your neck, or two, or maybe three, through the side window like you did. Then I'm gonna drag your body out lay it by the car, video it and send the video to television stations. Everyone'll see you on the news, lying dead in the gutter, blood on that white shirt. The TV news people will love that, white shirt, red blood. The story'll go around the world Sean. You'll be famous again. So will I.

"Lexie'll suffer because she'll lose her father, an' I'm sorry for that, really, but she'll cope. So will your little boy, Michael, isn't it?. But everybody loses their father one day. Your wife will suffer. But I won't feel sorry for her. 'The hoon got what he deserved.' I heard her say that about Sam in the Golden Dragon, Chinese restaurant. Now the real hoon is gonna get what he deserves."

Grace takes the video-cam out of the bag, and places it on a tripod. She bends before the viewfinder, frames Constable Farrell slumped over the wheel and sets it in motion. She picks up the gun from the backseat, takes one pace back, turns, extends both arms in front of her, points the gun at Constable Farrell's head.

Constable Farrell flings himself against his chains like a farm-gate dog and roars in fear and fury from behind saliva-soaked tape.

He kicks frantically at the dashboard and the car rocks.

Grace cannot line up his jerking head. She lowers the gun.

Constable Farrell stills. His previously grey face is now crimson. Sweat runs down his neck. His chin drops onto his heaving chest and with each breath he snuffles like a pig in mud.

Grace raises her shaking arms again. The gun wavers from side to side as she struggles to control herself.

Constable Farrell once more throws himself about in a frenzy. His head strikes the windscreen. Flecks of blood appear on the glass.

Grace screams, "Keep still! Keep still bastard! Still! Still!"

Her voice echoes back across the valley from the escarpment:

"Still!

"Still!"

"Still!"

She lowers her aching arms once more, panting. Bile fills her mouth. She retches, bends forwards. Vomits.

She wipes her mouth on her sleeve, straightens.

Constable Farrell is rocking slowly backwards and forwards and moaning like a child.

Grace lifts her arms. She steadies the gun. Points at his head.

The soulful sound of a didgeridoo drifts through the night air as Charlie Fourmile, prepares to come on stage. A drummer walks on. Other musicians follow. Then Charlie Fourmile is up there strutting the deck, his hair hanging down his shoulder curly and shiny as seaweed. Narita's belly leaps. Charlie is as beautiful as ever.

"This time we get to see him together!" Malvin shouts, hugging Sampa to him. Narita nods holding his arm.

Charlie Fourmile's voice and the sound of a didgeridoo rise above the roaring crowd. He sings and plays and everyone goes mad, swaying and dancing. He is stripped to the waist, glistening with sweat, black and yellow beads dances around his neck as he pads bare-footed up and down the boards.

Narita holds out her hands for Sampa, and Malvin hands her over. Narita stands directly in front of Charlie Fourmile, Sampa's black hair blowing in the warm wind as she is lifted high into the air.

Narita is thrilled to know someone so famous, someone who has people shouting out his name and who can make them dance and laugh and be happy and who travels the world. She's only a few metres from Charlie and can see the sweat beading his face and neck, his chest and belly. She remembers the way he looked at her from the stage at the Angeles concert, their evening together and the stories of his travels.

Charlie's eyes sweep the crowd, over the baby, then back. His eyes lock on the bobbing dark head. He plays for Sampa, his youngest fan. Then his eyes travel down to the face of the mother.

She grins up at him. He doesn't recognise her. She mouths the word "N-a-r-i-t-a". Then, "A-n-g-e-l-e-s".

Charlie Fourmile's brow creases in a frown of concentration. Then he grins.

He's recognised her.

Narita holds Sampa at arms length towards Charlie and mouths something. The words to Charlie look suspiciously like, "Yours."

There is a thrrrrruuump in Charlie's didgeridoo he didn't mean to put there.

Malvin wonders what's going on. He can't see Narita's face, and her silent message. But he is aware of vibes that weren't in the air a few moments before.

Charlie swings away down the stage, walking the edge, working the crowd, his pale-soled bare feet slapping the boards. Then he comes back to where Narita is. She lifts Sampa high in the air again and Sampa does a jerky puppet-on-a-string dance. Again Narita mouths, "Yours," and Charlie starts to laugh. He throws back his head, sticks his chest out and roars.

The crowd roars a response. The rest of the band tries to catch up with his improvisation. Going with the flow, they roar in unison. The crowd roars. Narita laughs. Malvin grins. He doesn't know what's going on, but it's great.

Charlie lays the didgeridoo aside and stretches out his hands towards Sampa. Narita hands her over. The huge image appears on the giant screens. The crowd cheers.

Charlie struts the stage with Sampa sitting on the top of his head, black hair blowing in a wind from off the Harbour.

Sampa twines her fingers in Charlie's curls.

The crowd goes wild.

Then a strange sound rises above the music. Sampaguita Canonizado Maria Marsden is humming. Charlie has never heard anything like it, strange, high-pitched, like the drone of a didge that carries far beyond the crowd.

Charlie hums back. He and baby Sampa hum in harmony. The audience takes up the rhythm; thousands of people hum.

Charlie stretches his hand into the audience for Narita. He pulls her onto the stage. They embrace and everyone cheers.

Narita lifts Sampa from Charlie and dances with her. Sampa is still humming. Narita reaches out to Malvin and he climbs up beside them.

The crowd roars. The music throbs. Malvin, Sampa, Narita and Charlie dance.

Fireworks explode and light up the night above the city. Sampa lifts her face skyward and her eyes glisten.

She hums, and the sound can be heard throughout the glittering glass and steel of Darling Harbour and the towers of the city beyond.

Tansy awakens in the old terrace house. Wallace is asleep on the mattress next to her. She quietly rolls clear, stands and pads softly across the floorboards and looks out through the grimy window. The sun is coming up bright and new in a blue sky behind the tall buildings of the city. A magpie warbles somewhere out of sight and a currawong calls from a high rooftop. Tansy turns back to the room. She picks up a piece of charcoal from the fireplace, holds it in her fingers for a moment, then begins to write across the still-looping, entwined roses that curl across the tattered wallpaper as they did the day she fled when Sam was killed:

It is almost morning, two boys sit blinded and motionless in the front seat of a stationary car like kangaroos in a shooter's spotlight. They have stopped laughing and chiaccking. It isn't fun any more. Their guts churn, their mouths are too dry to swallow the fear that is choking them. The driver, his dark curly hair a halo of light, takes his foot off the brake and the car rolls slowly backwards as he fumbles the gears. A bullet shatters the window and blows a hole in his neck. Flesh and blood splatter the windscreen.

End