Before you began your travels you were told how essential it was to define your intended role. Were you going to be a tourist, or an explorer, or an infiltrator? Those are choices that confront anyone arriving at a new place. Each bears its special risks.

Robert Silverberg (*Trips*)

Special Risks

by

Tony Bugeja

For hundreds of years the Mediterranean Sea was a half-forgotten lake. There were Naval skirmishes on its waters every few decades. These encounters are recorded in history as battles and have grand sounding names. Some may have influenced the balance of power in Europe, but most were a waste of gunpowder. During these centuries sea trade was conducted by extended families with little interference and no documentation. Then everything changed.

The Book of Beginnings.

We returned from Malta in 1947. London was cold and foggy, and everybody seemed weary. I went to a school that had been half demolished by a flying bomb four years previously and the building was still unrepaired. Returning soldiers searched for family homes and found vacant lots. People travelled to work on buses and trains that were so under-maintained that they could no longer keep to time-tables. Broken window panes were replaced with cardboard, and paint was allowed to peel. *England's green and pleasant land* was brown and dirty.

Our home was a room that led out into a back alley; but in that street there was colour and action, and the rebirth of glamour. The lane fronted the stage entrance to a theatre. Because of the bomb damage, theatres were in short supply in London; sometimes there were three drama or ballet companies working in the same building. Rehearsals would spill out into the alley.

Shakespearean performers clashed fake swords while ducking and diving over the pavement. Ballet dancers limbered against a high brick wall. I became a pet of the backstage, and ate sticky buns with actors and stagehands. I once shared an orange with Margot Fonteyn. By the time I was eight I knew the plots of ballets and plays as well as other children knew characters from the comics.

I built up a sort of business, washing tea mugs for the theatre people and getting tuppence a week off each of them. Actors and dancers were always arriving and

leaving, sometimes to work in the provinces, sometimes to join other companies in London, but often they just disappeared at the end of a run. I asked the doorman the big question about it when returning a washed cup.

'Do actors have a home?'

'The big names, like Miss Fonteyn, do, but most just live in a suitcase.'

I walked home trying to imagine living in a suitcase.

John was a patriarch and the last of his kind. He owned many boats. John traded along the African coast between Algiers and Alexandria. The big change happened during his lifetime.

The Book of Beginnings.

We got a house and went to live in a shiny new suburb. All of the houses in our street were semi-detached and they all had green front-doors and window frames. I suppose the colour was the Council's idea of making England green and pleasant.

I didn't like my new home, I wanted to live in a suitcase. We had only returned from Malta a year previously but already it was spoken of as a place that wasn't quite real. This was pure fakery, the time overseas and the period of homelessness afterwards, had altered the family forever.

At the time I saw it in terms of the family but it was really much bigger. Before we went to live in the house the world was divided up into empires. Nearly half the world's population lived in some sort of colony and were ruled by people who lived in the other half. My father, Joe, said this was the natural order of things like a father going to work and a mother looking after the house.

It was an unfortunate simile because shortly afterwards my mother, Elizabeth, went out and got a job. When I was told at school about India becoming an independent nation I wondered if Mum had something to do with it.

Joe was angry when Elizabeth told him she was going to work in a factory. He forbade it. Nothing happened for a week, but then one day I came home from school and the house was full of shiny new furniture. By some smooth talking Mum had obtained the lot on Hire Purchase. Joe had no choice but to accept that Elizabeth was part of the workforce. The alternative would be the shame of a row of furniture vans outside to repossess the tables and beds.

Everyone in the street was poor, but there were degrees of respectability. The respectable poor lived in fear of public shaming. The major causes of humiliation were things like father going to jail, school-age daughter getting pregnant, or having your furniture repossessed.

The un-respectable poor regarded such things as a normal part of life's adventure. To me they seemed to have a much better time of it.

Elizabeth's view of respectability was centred around food. When there was cake on the table we knew Mum had baked it. Shop cake was denounced as rubbish and was purchased by people who knew no better. Elizabeth was a good cook although she had that English talent for doing terrible things to vegetables.

Joe had been undermined. I knew it was to do with our time in Malta although I did not understand why. When I spoke to him in Maltese he did not reply and I lost the language.

This was a problem because I had a stammer when speaking English which I didn't have when conversing in Maltese. I was able to make myself understandable by speaking slowly but this created an impression of a dull mind in the ear of a listener. My speech defect coupled with left-handedness worried Joe – at the time sinistralism was treated in medical books as evidence of retardation.

'Cack-handedness is nothing to worry about,' said Elizabeth. 'Five hundred years ago Larry would have been thought a witch. It was probably based on expert advice at the time.'

Now that we had a proper house and garden Joe started acquiring pet animals. We got a succession of guinea pigs and rabbits. They were supposedly for us children; but we had acquired a Maltese attitude to animals, unless they are cats or dogs, you either work them or eat them. Joe housed and fed and conversed with

these furry moppets. He was always immensely pleased when they gave him some recognition.

I told the blokes at school and they said their dads were the same except that it was usually with pigeons and greyhounds. I suppose it was to do with stages of life. The time in Malta had confirmed in Joe's mind that he was now English whereas I, who was born in England, had become a foreigner.

I went to a variety of schools over the succeeding years. I played Soccer and was a reasonable long distance runner. These skills helped me to survive school life without too much trouble. My inability to understand or play Cricket was regarded as an eccentricity.

It was not rare for strange women to walk up to me in the street and ask me how I was. I may have appealed because I was small and polite and foreign looking. An alternative explanation is that the women of England were suffering from a kind of war guilt.

I have no childhood memory of experiencing prejudice on the grounds of racial origin. At first glance our suburb was English to the core, but closer inspection showed us to be a pretty mixed bunch. Our doctor was Indian; the couple who ran the fish and chip shop were Polish; and many families in our street were from Ireland. Older people did refer to a past when everybody was 'English,' but that was probably selective recall.

As Tacitus wrote sardonically of the British in the First Century A.D. :

> *Who the first inhabitants of Britain were, whether natives or immigrants, remains obscure; one must remember we are dealing with barbarians.*

There was a residual anti-Semitism which had probably existed in Britain for hundreds of years. I don't think Jewish children suffered baiting in the school yard,

the teachers would have stamped on it, but I remember a skipping chant that was sung by the kids in the street.

Get a bit of pork, and stick it on a fork,
And give it to a Jew boy. Jew!

The prohibition against eating pork was the only thing these children knew about Judaism. Paul, my grandfather, had explained to me that the Jews were book people.

Many of the men and women in our street had served in WW II to fight the Nazis in Europe; others had been sent to the Middle East to fight the Jews in Palestine. Our local shoe repairer had been a soldier in the Holy Land.

'A real balls-up,' he said. 'We were holding this line of barbed wire and trenches between East and West Jerusalem. The Jews were shooting us from one side and the Arabs were firing at us from the other.

'It was only at night-time; during the day everybody walked around doing their shopping and praying, but when the sun went down the balloon went up. Funnily enough I never believed I'd get killed. I always thought it would be the bloke standing next to me, and it always was.'

I felt sorry for the bloke standing next to the shoe repairer. I imagined him as a kind of Jesus figure. Each night, when the balloon was up, he would get shot. Then he would resurrect next day and be ready for his dismal duty next to our cobbler. Paul had told me that Arabs were also book people. They had a different book to the Jews.

English children of my age were called Blitz Babies; German ones were called Bunkerkinder. These were the resentful titles given to us by our elders; we were the generation who were going to enjoy the fruits of their sacrifices. We were never going to ever have to fight a war or miss a meal.

Sometimes small clusters of people, wearing ill-fitting coats and carrying cardboard suitcases, would walk through our street. They spoke in alien tongues, and one of their number was always holding a piece of paper that the others consulted and argued over.

My sister, Rosita, called them nomads because she had learned about nomads at school and thought them exciting. No one bothered to tell us they were refugees. The problem of displaced people was considered a temporary one that would be solved in the new post-war era.

The newly formed United Nations Organisation was going to foster Peace throughout the World. New technologies were going to guarantee prosperity. Legislation would enforce a fair distribution of wealth.

There is a drawing by Picasso of a dove with an olive branch in its beak; the bird is alighting on a heap of broken swords and spears. Various versions of the picture were reproduced by the million on greeting cards. I am still not sure if it was all a lie, or if we just let the dream slip through our fingers like fairy gold.

In 1869 the French completed the Suez Canal and the British bought a share. The Mediterranean became an artery to the Empires of Asia. It had to be defended with warships and garrisons. With the change came a new way of doing business involving bills-of-lading and Excise and steam ships. Sail was just as fast as Steam, but steam ships could keep to time-tables. Time-tables were important in the new era. It was the end of small traders.

The Book of Beginnings.

My main memory of the time between the ages of eight and thirteen is of being intensely bored. Luckily there was a decent public library, but sometimes the books would only aggravate my discontent.

I remember reading about the lives of the early jazz legends. They all had childhood experiences like playing the piano in New Orleans bordellos at ten years old. Not that I knew what a bordello was but it seemed to be a necessary part of becoming a legend.

I used to read a lot of adventure rubbish in which the hero was always British and a defender of the Empire. The *Biggles* and *Bulldog Drummond* stories are the only ones I remember.

There was a recurring villain in these stories: the western educated Leventine or Creole. This character lacked both the naive virtues of a Noble Savage and the stoic morality of a White Man.

This bad sort was always intelligent, but had an olive complexion and a cruel sensuous mouth. At the time it never occurred to me that the authors were writing about people such as myself. Nowadays I sometimes check the mirror to see how my lips are coming along.

The decade after the war was an era of living by proxy. A lot of people dreamed of journeys. Most of the population didn't travel much but they read books about the adventures of others. I think it was a way of coping with the memory of war. The

British were suffering from post-traumatic stress but the disorder hadn't been invented yet.

An account of crossing the Pacific by raft was a best seller and ran to many editions. The climbing of Mount Everest in 1953 produced two successful books and a movie. There were numerous chatty volumes published on visits to Greek ruins that included accounts of what the authors had for breakfast. I would pore over atlases for hours.

It could be said that the canal was progress, and had to be adapted to. This may be true, but it is a fact that most of John's children retreated into madness. I know a little of the ancestral traits of the family: there is some sickle cell anaemia and occasional dwarfism, and an almost universal tendency to male baldness. But I know of no congenital insanity. My only theory is that their world was out of balance and the madness was an attempt to adapt to this.

The Book of Beginnings.

By the time I was thirteen I was missing school and hitchhiking around the English counties. On one occasion, during one of these forays, I was in a truck chugging through the Chilterns. We passed a Gypsy camp. The driver grunted disapproval.

'Bloody thieves and tricksters! We had this old gyppo, last year, who was selling a dog – nice one too – at different pubs in the area. Someone would buy the dog, then the bugger would escape and return to the gyppo – it was trained see. He did this at four or five pubs.

'Me brother fixed that game. He bought the dog, took it outside, and shot it. Then we all drove out to their camp with pick handles and cleared them out. This is a different bunch, we might drive these off too.'

'Do they have a home anywhere?'

'Naw. Some people reckon they're Egyptians, that's why they're called Gypsies, but I think that's bullshit. They don't belong anywhere. All you can do is move `em on. The Police turn a blind eye, it saves them a job.'

This episode shaped me more than parents or schools. I have lived consistently by the lessons it taught me. There are people who travel and those who stay. Between them there is often war. The reason they fight is because they do not understand each other's history and do not want to.

John had seven sons. When he died John bequeathed them each a trading boat and a house. It was the customary and legal thing to do. The consequences were disastrous. It scattered the capital of generations into fragments. My great-grandfather did not understand the significance of the change.

The Book of Beginnings.

There was one relative who did visit four or five times in ten years. If cousin Victor's ship happened to be berthed in the London Docks he would arrive on the door step. The young Maltese sailor would stay for a meal and then leave. Months or years later Victor would reappear as though he had been just out to check the weather.

My mother said that he once walked out with an incomplete sentence and returned two years later with the remaining words. I considered this unfair, after all Victor was a world traveller and an adventurer.

Victor just travelled around the planet wearing a knife and a brightly coloured shirt. I admired Victor although he had deficiencies as a storyteller. He would mention some daring escapade in two sentences and then change the subject. I thought at first that Victor was modest, but came to realise that he was merely inarticulate.

Cousin Victor knocked on our door after an absence. He had been deported from The United States.

'They caught me through taxation,' said Victor across the dinner table.

Rosita whispered into my ear, 'They probably have enough people over there with brightly coloured shirts and knives.'

Victor ate his meal in silence and then, over the coffee, said that he had met Nina.

' Nina wants me to work in her business.'

'What sort of work?' I asked.

'What sort of business?' asked Elizabeth.

Victor shrugged and was silent.

Afterwards I asked my mother about Nina and why she left Malta in a hurry.

'Was she in trouble with Police?'

'Hell no, half of them were in her pay. No, it was something local and absurd. Your grandmother knows about it.'

'How did Nina get her gold bangles?'

'During the war. Black-marketeering. Mainly cigarettes. Boat loads of them. She was paid in gold. Nina never trusted banks.'

'Isn't that just trade?'

'No. If someone swaps half-a-dozen eggs for a bag of apples: that's trade. If you go with a loaf of bread into a place where people are starving, and you swap it for, let's say, a rare antique: that is looting.'

'But doesn't it just happen?'

'Yes. British and American soldiers did it in Germany, and Germans probably did it somewhere else. In olden-days people used to follow armies around Europe, and after a battle they would go onto the field and rob the corpses. We think that's terrible, but black-marketeers do the same thing to entire countries. I know you liked Nina, and so did I, but what she did was not trade.'

'You liked Nina?'

'Yes, very much. Surprising really, I don't like the type of people who grab for things, but Nina was all right. She loved flaunting her shiny bangles under the noses of the village puritans, and I would have done the same in her sandals.'

One-by-one the brothers lost everything by misadventure or stupidity, all except the eldest. His name was Paul. He was prepared break laws of sea and land to keep his schooner. The boat was called *Calypso*. It was hated by every Customs Officer from Gibraltar to the Black Sea.

The Book of Beginnings.

The workshop was four floors up. There were no lifts even though it was one of the tallest buildings in Soho. On the opposite side of the road was the Rank building. Starlets used to sunbathe on the roof. I could see the dome of St Paul's Cathedral from the window. London was then a city of low structures and on a fogless day you could see for miles.

I was starting to get an understanding of the metropolis; the chaos made sense if I looked on London as a medieval town that had been buried under other cities. Clerkenwell once had a well; Bishopsgate, Ludgate, and Cripplegate had been entrances through the wall; they sold hay at Haymarket.

Street names were sometimes a guide to the buried London but were more likely to change. For example, the northern boundary of Soho is Oxford Street. It was originally called Tiborn Road because it led to the gallows that were popularly called Tyborne Tree. When public executions ceased the street was given its present name.

Down below was Berwick Street, with clothing shops on the opposite side. The market was further along and out of sight from the window. The street had its own madman who used to wander around all day shouting religious nonsense and harassing the street-girls with offers of salvation. Prostitutes detest do-gooders, especially male ones. He was called Alf.

Michael said every London street had its own madman, and they all answered to the name of Alf. Some afternoons Alf would put on his World War I service medals and sing about a New Jerusalem in Berwick Street Market, The stall holders would throw coins and curses to make him shut up and go away.

Looking down from the window I could see men's hats. Michael said you could tell a lot from men's hats. Working class men wore brown hats, middle class men wore grey ones.

Michael was good at those sorts of things. He knew the rules of dress. Michael was seventeen. He was two years older than me and a decade more sophisticated. Though he worked with me in the printery, once he stepped out of the building, Michael was spotless and dressed in style. I looked like what I was, a grubby trainee printer.

We were different in other ways. I would be transfixed by the flash of a woman's thigh in the street. Michael would merely make a sardonic comment.

Berwick Street was safe compared to other parts of Soho. There could be crime but not secret crime. Day or night there would always be a witness. Whether the witness would talk or not was another matter. Michael took the danger seriously. He never worked late. It surprised me because he seemed so confident in other ways. I didn't mind, it meant more overtime for me.

When I worked late I could see the prostitutes progressing along the street from doorway to doorway. In the afternoon they plied their trade around Piccadilly. At night they drifted through the dark streets of Soho towards the night-clubs and bars of the West End. Sometimes, when I finished work, there would be a woman standing in the street doorway of the building.

They always seemed to have a presence was associated with their profession. As we passed in the doorway, the woman would say a cheery, 'Goodnight Ducks.' I would mumble some reply and hurry down the street to the railway station.

The two floors beneath the workshop were dedicated to the rag-trade. Seamstresses of many nationalities toiled under the strict control of a fat man. One day I encountered one of these women on the stairs. I paused to let her pass. She stepped aside and jokingly said, 'I am being a gentleman.'

At fifteen I found this statement so enigmatic that I could not reply. Was it due to a problem with the language? Did she mean, 'I am being a lady?' Or was it a play on words, in the sense of being a gentle man? Was the woman saying something odd to make me notice her?

One of the seven, Tomas, lost his boat in a card game. Tomas went to work in the dockyards. There he witnessed a brother being crushed to death under wine barrels. Tomas went mad and eventually hung himself. Five of the seven were dead before they were fifty. Tomas was married to Carmen. She became a famous lace-maker and lived to great age.

The Book of Beginnings.

I was sixteen when one of the menswear shops closed down and was replaced by a dry-cleaners. Because it was convenient, I took some clothes in. I was served by a grumpy man who seemed to think it beneath him to assist me. I left, vowing not to return, but, of course, if you've taken two pairs of slacks into a place, you have to go back.

When I returned three days later the grouch had gone and there was Jane. She was about my age, fair haired, with big bangle earrings. I handed over the docket and the money. I couldn't think of anything to say.

'Been here long?' I asked stupidly.

She took the docket and retrieved my clean trousers from the rack.

'Not long,' she replied.

Jane removed the slacks from the hangers and gave them a little stroke while folding them on the counter.

'I'm Larry,' I said. 'I work across the road.'

She put the trousers into a bag and gave me my change.

'I'll seeyathen,' she said.

Jane was right. After a few weeks I think I had the cleanest clothes in London.

After meeting Jane I told Michael. I asked him what I should say to her.

'Don't talk about yourself, Larry, and don't talk about the weather.' Then he changed the subject. 'Alf's not been in the street all day.'

'Maybe he's found a better street to be mad in,' I said. My mind was on what I could say if I didn't talk about myself or the weather.

As it turned out, conversation was easier than I expected. Jane wanted to see more of Soho and we went on lunchtime explorations through the back streets. There were little workshops everywhere with people labouring over silks and furs and velvets. Jane entered these places boldly and asked if she could touch the fabrics, and the workers let her.

At one place a man stormed out of his office yelling at Jane for handling his stock. She smiled and spoke admiringly of the material. He calmed down and offered her a job. Jane gave a polite, 'No thanks.'

'Aren't you interested in working in the Rag Trade?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said, 'but not as a slave.'

'Is it worse than being in a dry cleaners?'

'Look at me and what do you see?' said Jane. 'A face, a pair of hands and legs. The rest is clothes. That's what everybody sees. I could be a Nun or a street tart. Who I am is how I look. Clothing is magic!'

We parted in the street with a 'seeyathen,' and got back to our jobs. One of the printers tossed a copy of the *News Chronicle* at me as I walked in the door. It was folded to show the fourth page. Alf had been found in another street: with his head hammered in. His name really was Alf.

Michael discovered a new magic. He saw Bill Hailey and the Comets at the London Palladium and danced in the aisles.

From then on Michael haunted the *Two Ils Café*, two streets away. He sat there for hours while scurvy youths belted out the new music. Michael, being Michael, did not buy a guitar. He acquired an American accent.

There was a lot of American slipping into Soho patois. The square mile had its own language, but once you thought you understood it the lingo changed. The accent was London but the vocabulary was more than cockney.

I didn't encounter much of the rhyming slang that is traditionally associated with London speech; it may have been more common in the East End. When I came to Australia I found rhyming slang used widely in Sydney, but even there it was said to be on the fade.

The lingo I remember was the back-slang of the market. It allowed the barrow boys to pass on information without the customers knowing what was going on. Most of it was just word reversal, but it was spoken rapidly and interspersed with Yiddish and Romany, and hip-talk from Black America. Newly arrived words from India and Pakistan were waiting in the wings for future use.

If I'd suggested they weren't speaking English they would have been indignant. But it was true that a large slice of Soho speech was intended to be indecipherable to those outside the square mile.

In Soho I lost my stammer. I didn't have it at all when speaking the Lingo and it faded after that when conversing in Standard English. I recommend learning a second language for anyone with a speech impediment.

I call Soho the square mile because that's what everyone did. The real square mile was the original city of London about four miles to the east. Soho wasn't square in shape nor quite a mile. I remember as a kid seeing maps of Poland over a period of two hundred years. In each map Poland was a different size and shape. At one stage it disappeared altogether and then it reappeared fifty years later. Soho has been like that over its history.

The Yiddish had been brought in by Jews from Central Europe. These were not the London Jewry who have been an established part of British life since the seventeenth century. Soho had a community of ones who had arrived after the war. They worked in tailoring and jewellery and antiques.

Soho Jews were always very kind to Jane and me. It was not unusual to be invited for coffee by shopkeepers. Jane and I would drink from tiny cups while the proprietor, and his wife, smiled and looked at our faces. With the callowness of youth we thought nothing of it and took this attention as our right.

It was only years later that I realised that people of our generation were completely missing from their own population.

The first group of foreigners to make their mark on Soho were French refugees in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The French brought restaurants and tailoring. They were collectively called Huguenots. These immigrants numbered only a few hundred but they built seven churches in the square mile; I suppose each place of worship preached a different version of Protestantism.

When Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* he placed the French refugee family, Manette, in Soho; Dickens knew his London.

Paul had a son named Joe. A decade later another child, Nina, was born on the outskirts of the village. Nina was rumoured to be Paul's daughter but that may only be because she grew up to be notorious.

The Book of Beginnings

One day the boss sent me on an errand to the Charing Cross Road end of Soho. I was walking down Greek Street when I noticed a café. It was set back, squeezed between a strip club and a wine merchants. The sign said *La Morte*.

I imagined it as having tombstones for table tops, and customers drinking their cappuccinos out of human skulls. It seemed familiar, not the café but the fact that it was there, set back from the street. I was convinced I had been there before as a child. I had no memory of the interior of the building, but I remembered being inside it. The café was closed. It kept late hours, 2pm to 2am.

I returned to *La Morte* after work. My excuse was that I just wanted to check it out. It could be a good place to take Jane after a show. Once inside I was disappointed. The place was dark but not macabre. I ordered a black coffee and asked about the history of the place. The youth at the espresso machine said he didn't know, which is the standard Soho answer to any question involving the past, present or future. The strip club wasn't open yet. The person at the wine merchant's knew nothing.

'Are you an orphan or something?' asked Jane, when I told her about it next day.

'No I have family, but we moved around so much that all I have are stories. There is nothing to touch. Everything before 1948 is like a fairy story, there are no photos or anything. If I took both my parents to the *La Morte Café* they would deny I have any connection with it. But I know I have been in that building before.'

'We'll go to the local pubs and ask questions.'

'I'm not even seventeen yet.'

'Not a problem. Get one of those new Italian hair styles. Go and see Solomon next door – tell him I sent you – and borrow a charcoal suit with narrow bottoms. Get some pointy shoes, and a white silk scarf. You'll look smashing, and twenty. We'll go in a couple of days so I have time for a perm.'

'Seeyathen,' I said.

On the night Jane also looked smashing. She wore a peasant blouse and a pair of slacks that were not slack. Her head was covered in bubbles of golden curls and the bangle earrings were as big as bracelets.

She may not have looked over the legal drinking age, but nobody cared. The first pub was a businessmen's bar so we just had a drink and left. I heard a collective male sigh as Jane walked out.

The next hotel was full of men and women in turtleneck sweaters and duffel coats. One of them was declaiming to the crowd. The listeners turned to hush us as we strolled to the bar.

'Poets,' whispered Jane, as though describing an exotic species. 'No point in staying 'ere, they don't talk.'

'Where next?' I asked, as we stood on the pavement.

'There's an actors pub near Shaftsbury Avenue,' said Jane. 'It's worth a try.'

'Actors would be no good, they are always moving around.'

'Yes, but they return like pigeons to London. People who go away and come back remember changes.'

The pub was packed. As we pushed through the crowd to the bar I heard what actors converse about when they aren't saying their lines. It was mainly about

money, in the form of small debts and large offers. Someone near the bar shouted, 'Hail Damien!' A young man gave a grin as he stood in the entrance. It was Michael. I stared. Jane touched my arm.

'Mingle, Larry. If he's called Damien it's nothing to do with you.'

'It's odd, that's all.'

'There's nothing odd about it. What he's called and what he does is his own business.'

'What do we do now?'

'Mingle. Apart, but not too far apart. Some of the men here are of the dirty old variety.'

I tried to engage a woman in conversation on Soho, but she insisted on discussing her difficulties with the audiences in Leeds. About five people away I could see Jane's curly head. Michael left the bar with a man in a check jacket.

The Leeds woman had bought me a drink and was calling me 'dahling' when I felt Jane's hand on my sleeve.

'Come here, Larry, and leave your grandmother alone. I've found a bloke who knows something.'

She led me through the press towards a seated man. I was sure I had seen his face before in a whisky advertisement. He gave a smile, when I said I recognised him, and introduced himself as Lionel.

'Do you remember Soho ten years ago?' I asked.

'Oh yes. There was the sex trade of course. The rest was mainly restaurants. I had played the romantic lead in a film called *Sonata in Spring*. I dined a great deal in Soho restaurants with my agent and film bigwigs. Do you remember *Sonata in Spring*?'

Jane and I both shook our heads.

'There is a restaurant in Greek Street,' I said, 'set back a bit from the road. It's just off Twine Lane, next to a wine merchant. I want to know what it was used for ten years ago. I remember being there.'

'I know it. It was a shop in the late forties. You couldn't get decent food in those days. Everything was rationed. Most food was imitation you know: strawberry jam made with carrots and saccharine, and that sort of thing. At that shop you could get real food. I bought my first piece of camembert there in seven years. No ration books, just pay the right price.'

'The authorities didn't close it up?'

'No. I think some very important people bought there. That sort of thing happened a lot. I bet Winston Churchill didn't eat spam and powdered egg. The shop owner had clients in high places.'

'Who was he?'

'A woman. Looked like an Italian with a touch of Arab. Fine figure but not someone to cross. Wore a lot of gold.'

'Do you know her name?'

'No idea. Some of the customers called her Maria, but women of that sort are always called Maria. I nearly made a film in which I was a British soldier in Naples looking for a girl called Maria. It was a comedy.'

'It would be,' commented Jane dryly.

'I suppose the shop closed when rationing ended,' I said.

'No, there was some sort of scandal. Look I must be off.'

'Well,' said Jane as we watched his departing back,' are you any the wiser?'

'Sort of. 'Maria' may have been Nina who was an old friend. I'd like to know what the scandal was but I don't think we are going to find out here. I certainly didn't meet Nina in that house. I would have remembered.'

The bar crowd was becoming bickering drunk. Someone spilt beer on Solomon's charcoal suit. Without a word we slipped out the door.

'Don't touch my perm,' whispered Jane in the darkness.

We were gasping between kisses when a policeman's torch flashed in our faces.

'What are you two doing here?' asked the voice of authority.

'What do you think?' retorted Jane.

'It's dangerous around here. Move on! Go home!'

With arms around each other we walked through gas-lit lanes towards the dry cleaning shop.

Jane did not did not turn on the light in the shop, but the street lamp outside gave a shadowy twilight to the interior. I felt surrounded by an army of watching phantoms.

'All these clothes,' I said as we walked between the racks. "It's as though the shop is full of people.'

'It is,' said Jane. 'The commissionaire of the Apollo Theatre is over there in full uniform. On your left, suspended in a spiv-suit, is the worst crook in Soho, but he's the only one in the shop who deserves hanging. Next to him is a club singer in an evening gown. Further on is the curate of St Martin's. Most of them are just like you and me.'

'Like peas in a pod.'

'Not any more. Two hundred years ago, you and I would have been peasants living on turnips and sewing ourselves into smocks for the winter; now we can be anything because we can wear anything.'

'Do you try stuff on?'

'Oh yea. I can't resist a tuxedo if it's the right size. Here, try on this TV announcer.'

I, a shadow among shadows, took off Solomon's suit. I touched Jane. She was wearing nothing at all.

Joe did not share Paul's love of Sail and Crime. Joe went to sea on British steamers. He worked in the engine rooms of ocean-going freighters and sailed three times round the world.

In 1927 Joe jumped ship in Sydney. While in Australia Joe picked fruit and helped to build a dam. His old union card shows him as Smith. He stayed in Australia for two years before catching a freighter bound for Canton; I am sure there is no record of Joe's arrival or departure. The freighter sank a ferry in fog at the mouth of the Yangtse River. Two hundred ferry passengers drowned but there was no Enquiry because they were Chinese. The tragedy affected Joe; he never ventured East of Suez again.

Joe admired the English and shared their distrust of the French. He settled in the London suburbs. Joe was a Marxist with a contradictory affection for the British Empire. He fought the Fascist gangs in the London streets. Joe did it to defend the English way of life. He abandoned the Maltese language and married Elizabeth, an English woman. Joe liked the small things of life: a garden, domesticity, tidy streets, pet animals.

There was a part of the Australian experience that remained with Joe for the rest of his life. He had an industrial accident in Melbourne. A band-saw cut his wrist to the bone.

Joe was rushed to hospital and the doctor wanted to amputate. My father knew that if he lost a hand he would never work as a sailor again. Joe put up a fight so they sewed up his hand and kept him in bed in case it turned to gangrene.

A nurse took a special interest in this stubborn little foreigner. She lent Joe a copy of *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo. I think it was the only novel that Joe ever read.

Joe's hand healed although it never became fully functioning. Two fingers wouldn't straighten and remained curved towards the palm of his hand. When Joe waved to someone it looked like he was giving them a V-sign.

The Book of Beginnings

Within a year Jane and Michael and me scattered like seeds in a breeze.

Jane went to a college to study fashion design.

'Four years, then watch out Christian Dior.' She laughed at her own audacity.

Michael had accepted the invitation of an Uncle in New York to work in his business. 'Thermometers,' he said with a grimace. 'But once I'm there...'

I worked in a London factory for two years; my main memory of it is drinking rum with West Indians behind the packing cases. They were all going to be engineers; I didn't care what I was going to be. The central thing to me was movement, and I saw it all around me.

People from the Hungarian and Polish uprisings fled West. Rosita married a refugee from the Hungarian rebellion. American artists and musicians headed East to avoid McCarthyism. This diaspora converged on London and Paris. In both cities there was the ever present awareness of the collapse of Empire.

Away from the capitals, people were less conscious of the debacle. When hitch-hiking through Dorset, I spent the night in a village. Not a lot happens in a Dorset village, but, on this particular evening, there was a slide show in the church hall. I went along and saw England as it no longer was.

The villagers were sitting in rows. The vicar was working the projector. The Squire sat at the back while his son, in Naval officer's uniform, gave a talk on his tour of duty East of Suez. Britain and France didn't control Suez, or much east of it, any more but no mention was made of this.

In Dorset I met an old man who was something of a local historian. He told me about a local writer named Thomas Hardy. I later learned that Hardy had been dead thirty years, but this sage spoke as though the author was still walking the villages of the county.

He also proudly informed me that the Tollpuddle Martyrs were local men. I didn't know who they were, but did not want to show my ignorance by asking.

I got a closer view of the French colonial malaise some time later. I was making

good money at the factory, and in dangerous risk of promotion, when Jane phoned me.

'I've got a flat in Paris for two months, do you want to go over?'

'When! How did you get a flat?'

'A friend at college owns it, or at least her Daddy does. Her name's Alison. Daddy is something big in London.'

'I suppose Mummy rides to the Hunt.'

'You've got the idea, but Alison does speak French. She's told her parents we're engaged. We'll be keeping her out of trouble.'

Alison's French turned out to be a disappointment, but, apart from that, she was no trouble at all. Alison moved in with a French Army deserter in a Paris slum, and we only met her once a day for morning coffee.

One day, when we were sitting at a pavement café, an American tourist took a couple of photos of Alison and then said 'thank you' and walked away. 'Capturing the beauties of Paris,' said Jane. Alison just shrugged and continued stirring her coffee.

'Alison is someone who attracts camera lenses,' said Jane afterwards. 'I went to a party with her a month ago. There was a fool there clicking away with a camera. Afterwards I saw the photos and she was in most of them.'

It was the first time I had been in a city comparable to London. Paris has wide avenues and the architecture is on a similar grand plan. London has modern buildings in medieval streets; the same sort of thing can be said about British society. The French Revolution, and later the Paris Commune, wiped Paris clean for a new start, street names, everything. I think it was the first time that I became aware that architecture is a statement that a community makes about itself.

Paris was also a mixture of music and anxiety. A lot of American musicians went over there in the early fifties and stayed. Jazz clubs were everywhere. The streets of Paris were involved in the unfinished business of Empire.

Left-wing cafés were being bombed. I only avoided becoming involved in a mishap myself because I turned up late for coffee. Transport workers seemed to be permanently on strike. Police patrolled the streets in pairs with automatic weapons at the ready. Political posters covered everything that didn't move.

It was all in preparation for a referendum on the ending of French rule in Algeria. I found the number of factions and national fronts impossible to follow. Alison had been a witness to café politics, through her lover, and was our expert on the subject.

'It's simple,' said Alison. 'De Gaulle will wind-up France to the edge of civil war, and then he will save the Republic by repressing it. The French will be so grateful that they won't notice the empire has gone.'

'That doesn't explain why a country that has suffered so much from Fascism should have so many extreme right-wing parties.'

'Forget about the ideologies and remember the names. The politics here comes down to individuals. Take the case of the paratrooper, Jean-Marie le Pen, he has belonged to about five parties in as many years. In Britain that would be regarded as political suicide; in France it is a way of establishing a public profile. At some future time there will be an issue that le Pen can run-with to achieve power, and he will create his own party to achieve this end.'

'Primitive politics!'

'No Larry, the politics seems primitive because France is trapped in a different social time warp to the English. The fascination that the French have with Jazz is evidence of it. English youth are captured by Rock and Roll, but the French prefer

Jazz. France is trapped in the last year of the Second World War. They admire De Gaulle because he was a war leader. The British sent Churchill packing as soon as the guns stopped firing.'

'In what time are the British trapped?'

'It depends on which tribe of English you are talking about. The middle class still believe in Empire and the importance of having a white skin. The working class kids admire everything American.'

'What about your lot?'

'My lot understand power and we don't need to have a time frame.'

Jane took no interest in the French politics. She looked over the fashion scene expecting to find paradise, and was disappointed.

'It's almost as bad as England. The rich two percent are in fashion and the rest wear boring rubbish. A few young people try to dress with style, but they have no influence.'

'It doesn't seem to worry Frenchmen.'

'Style has nothing to do with impressing men.'

It was in Paris that we realised we had known each other too casually and too long. We still went to places together but frequently left separately. When Jane and I left Paris neither of us expected to meet again. Jane and Alison caught the train for Dieppe and I hitched a ride on a truck for the Champagne.

My journey across the French plain to the Vosges Mountains started like a dream and ended miserably. The weather was warm for Autumn. I just camped by the

road each night with a sleeping bag. I think I tried the wine at every village, and at the end of each day slept like the dead.

On one particularly beautiful Autumn evening I was leaving the last village for the day to find a place to camp. A couple of villagers called me back, I just waved to them and walked on into the dimming light. I travelled quite a way before finding a suitable site near the road. Then I unrolled my bag and slept till dawn.

When I awoke I was surrounded by little white crosses. I wandered dazed among the tomb stones. I have no memory of names or rank or nationality marked on them. They were all dated 1916. I was stunned by the immensity of the war cemetery. This was no mere burial of ten thousand souls. The crosses extended across the plain and over low hills to the horizon.

I left this city of the dead behind me and continued walking east along the road between miles of vineyards. There was a town of substance some fifteen kilometres away and I had every intention of spending the next night there. I approached a small house by the road, a woman was standing outside feeding poultry. She looked at me and then pointed in the direction of the cemetery, I nodded. The woman took off her shoes at the doorway and indicated that I should come inside. The rural French are not given to inviting foreign strangers into their homes, but I don't remember thinking it odd.

I entered the kitchen and the woman pointed to a chair. I sat down and then she went to a dresser and poured me a glass of brandy.

After I had drank the woman indicated that she was busy and that I should leave. During the whole encounter we did not exchange one word. I walked on down the road. The vineyards gave way to forest.

I stopped at a village about five kilometres further on and bought some bread and sausage. The sky was darkening but I pushed on towards the town. It started to rain about an hour later. By late afternoon I was hobbling through a downpour in zero visibility while thunder crashed overhead.

In a flash of lightning I saw a glistening white figure with sword raised. My nerve snapped and I became Alf. I was in an army that was amok with panic. I saw horses dragging an overturned gun carriage over fleeing men. Soldiers stumbled against each other and turned screaming into the forest. The road had turned to mud. Alf was running, running back to the village. The rain sheeted down, and in exhaustion he found a barn and collapsed.

Next morning the sun was shining and I was alone among bales of hay. I returned to the road and retraced my steps towards the town. In the forest I found my white figure; it was a statue of Joan of Arc. I was cursing my stupidity when a car stopped beside me. In it were a couple of German students who were on their way to Switzerland. I accepted a lift and was in Basle at 4 pm sharp.

I know less about my Mother's ancestral history for a variety of reasons. Elizabeth hated her family, and made the heroic journey from the Northumbrian Coast to London, at the age of eighteen, to escape from it. She chose to speak as little of her family as possible; I did not even learn the christian-names of my grandparents. It is difficult to follow a female line into the historical past. Women lost their family names in marriage. Given-names were less varied in those days; in my mother's childhood-street there were probably ten or twenty Elizabeths.

In contrast, in my father's family, people had not only family names but also patronymics. I was Larry son-of-Joe, My father was Joe son-of-Paul, My grandfather was Paul son-of-John. It was a bit like the beginning of *St Matthew's Gospel* that gives a list of begats from Abraham to Jesus. My Maltese family was very begatted and it gave them a kind of glamour.

Such a custom had died out in England two hundred years before my birth. It continued among the Irish a little longer. According to tradition, when Ned Kelly bailed up the bank at Jerilderee, he strolled to the counter and said: 'My name is Ned, son-of-Red Kelly.' The manager immediately handed over the keys of the safe. What else could you do when faced with a magic name like that?

The Book of Beginnings.

During my week in Switzerland I gained two kilos and met Peru. On my last day in Basle I entered a courtyard near the banks of the Rhine. I found myself in the middle of a large gathering of international delegates. It was a Convention for World Peace and Development, or some such thing. The crowd there seemed to contain every nationality on the planet. A woman nearby started conversing with me in English. She had 'Peru' on a card pinned to her shirt.

The main thing that Peru had to say was that she was tired and bored and her feet hurt. I commiserated and told her of a café around the corner where we could sit down and have a coffee.

We found a table under a lime tree and the waiter took our order. Peru unclipped the card from her shirt and tore it in two.

'Are you from Peru?'

'I am an Armenian born in Jerusalem with an American passport. I went to the conference to meet the Swedish delegate. I needed to display a suitable nationality. It was easy. That is all nationality is: a card with a safety pin.'

'Was the Swedish delegate really Swedish?'

'Yes and very helpful. Where are you from?'

'England.'

'And?'

'Sort of Maltese.'

'What do you want to be?'

'I don't know.'

'Good.'

'No it's not. Everyone I know seems sure of their nationality. I would like to be like that.'

'Then you will never be happy my lamb. You will only find contentment when you realise that nationality is a trick. What people regard as protection is really a cage.'

That was the end of the discussion. Peru gave no indication of her occupation nor why she wanted to meet the Swedish delegate. I watched her walk away and finished my coffee. I felt that I had joined an invisible fraternity. A group of men at another table were playing cards. The markings on the cards were unfamiliar and I could not follow the rules of the game.

That evening I caught a train across France to the Channel. It was packed with English schoolgirls of the *St Trinians* variety. They were returning from the Rome Olympic Games. Some French soldiers boarded the train at an unscheduled stop. They sat in the aisles on their kit-bags, and the train started again. The soldiers

looked at the girls. The girls looked at the soldiers. Teachers patrolled the carriages all night with an eagle eye. I dozed.

My mother's family were coal miners, navvies, and domestic servants. Away from the workplace, the men drank and the women coped. Elizabeth spoke vaguely of a distant past when they farmed. At the time she told me this I didn't realise that Elizabeth was talking of a change that was as sudden and wrenching as the effect of the Suez Canal on my Maltese family. It happened about eighty years before the Canal and was a necessary precursor to it.

I was at first unimpressed by Elizabeth's family history — it was her intention that I should be. Later at school there was a brief mention of the enclosure of the common lands. It was taught as though the legislation was just a bureaucratic adjustment that made farming more efficient. I did connect the school history with my mother's story, but had no idea of its significance. It was a decade before I learnt that it destroyed an entire social strata and led to the colonisation of Australia.

The Book of Beginnings.

When I returned from France my street seemed smaller. Many of the people of my age were either pushing prams or paying maintenance. The contraceptive pill had just got onto the market. It widened everyone's sexual horizons but no one had worked out how to use it yet. A neighbour had painted his front door purple, and my father thought no good would come of it.

I decided to go to Australia because it was a long way away from both Malta and England. Before saying my goodbyes I took one last tour around the counties.

One day I was walking through a morning fog in the Cotswolds. Gradually the mist cleared and I entered a village bathed in golden light. Everything was there, the church, the pub, the school. People in the street bade me 'good morning' as I passed.

I put down my bag and entered the shop. The young woman behind the counter had a pretty face and babies in her eyes. *Could I become part of a place like this? Could I marry and work and be accepted? Could I live and die, and be a part of*

things like the stone in the church wall. I stepped outside the shop and a dog was pissing on my rucksack. You can always trust a dog to bring you back to reality.

When I was back in London I ran into Michael. He looked fit and affluent.

'I didn't think you'd ever return,' I said. 'Britain was too old and tired for you.'

'I'm looking for talent. Britain is where it's going to happen in a couple of years.'

'I'm going to Australia next week.'

He replied as though I'd said I was going to Antarctica. 'Well I hope you make it home all right.'

I was late in deciding at which Australian city to disembark. The ship was going to Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. I was free to take my pick. I reluctantly asked Joe: at least he had experience of the country even if it was thirty years out of date.

'Don't go to Perth, there's nothing there,' said Joe. 'Adelaide's almost as bad. Go to Melbourne, I like Melbourne. Stay away from Sydney it's a dreadful place.'

I decided to go to Sydney.

Joe returned, with his English family, to Malta immediately after the Second World War. He found that he was a stranger. The language had changed. The Maltese felt that they had proved their worth by withstanding one of the most terrible sieges of the War. They did not welcome back someone who had spent the conflict in the comparative safety of Britain. There was also something else; something for which Joe was not forgiven. In contrast: I was treated warmly.

The Book of Beginnings.

The *Orontes* was on its last voyage before being sold for scrap. It had been used as a troopship and was torpedoed twice in the Second World War. At an earlier time the liner may have carried District Officers and Memsahibs to the Orient. The ship was past the officer and gentleman stage in its career by the time I joined the passenger list.

There were about a thousand migrants on the *Orontes* including what seemed to be the entire population of a Scottish mining village. It was an uneventful voyage. I learnt to play chess, very poorly, while crossing the Indian Ocean.

There was a library on board and I thought I should read an Australian novel to get a taste of Australian life. I had read *Voss* in England but was looking for something set in contemporary Australia. I borrowed *Wake in Fright.* I read the thing and wondered what sort of country I was getting involved in.

I also borrowed a Penguin edition of William Blake's poetry. My only previous exposure to Blake's poems had been *The Tyger,* at primary school, and Mad Alf singing about a *New Jerusalem* in Berwick Street Market. I found the longer poems impossible to understand; it was as though Blake was trying to write a kind of Bible. The *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* were more accessible although sitting on a ship's deck while crossing an azure sea under blue skies was not the right place to read them.

When we passed through the Suez Canal I was disappointed. I had expected something more visually dramatic for a waterway that had influenced so many millions of lives.

I stepped ashore at Aden about two hours before dawn. There was a delicious smell of freshly cooked bread. Aden had once been administratively part of British India even though it was firmly in the Arab world at the mouth of the Red Sea. Aden had been the only garrison between Suez and the Raj. The soldiers were still there to defend a memory of power. I suppose they kept themselves busy with the local Nationalists. That was my last sight of the British Empire.

I was five. In Malta I discovered relatives that I hadn't known existed. There were numerous cousins, but my grandmother and Paul and Carmen were the only survivors of a generation. My grandmother was sharp witted but a little mad. She spent a lot of time praying for death.

When I first met Paul I wasn't sure if I liked him. He looked me up and down and said: 'Ah! The English Boy is here. I expect you spread grease on your bread like they do.'

I met Carmen in her workshop. She immediately spoke to me as though I was an adult. 'I will teach you a few Maltese words tomorrow,' Carmen said, 'then you will start to understand the way we think.'

I was not introduced to Nina, but she approached me one day in the street. Nina was then in her prime. She ruffled my hair and asked jokingly,' Are you Joe's boy or Paul's boy?'

My mother was at first completely isolated in the village.

The Book of Beginnings

The Orontes sailed into Sydney Harbour, and on under the Bridge, on a June morning. The Bridge captured me then and never let go. There were to be times when I would hate Australia and all its inhabitants, but I have always loved the Bridge. The postcard photos of the Bridge show its most boring aspect as a big coat hanger. Viewed from either end it is a crouched animal. Walk along the Bridge and it is a pathway through space; the road appears to be curved, but I am told that this is an illusion. Travelling under it on a ferry at night, the Bridge becomes a fearsome winged sculpture.

Sydney has built an icon comparable to the Statue of Liberty, but, when it was in creation, Sydneysiders seemed to have a fairly sceptical view of the project.

When I was in Tasmania I met the son of the official photographer for the bridge while it was under construction. He told me the builders started from both ends. As the steel spans spread over the water people laid bets that they wouldn't meet in the

middle. The two ends met to within a quarter of an inch. Now Sydney people are proud of the Bridge. I am glad they didn't name it after a politician.

Once ashore I carried my suitcase and rucksack to the customs barrier. The official nodded at the luggage and asked if I had anything to declare.

'Just clothes and tools.'

He made chalk marks on the bags and waved me through. It all seemed very trusting. I touched the strange banknotes in my wallet and stepped out. I saw someone get into a cab - the passenger got in the front beside the driver. I did the same with the next taxi.

I told the driver to find a decent boarding house. He dropped me off at a place where I discovered the spaghetti sandwich and the Sydney flea. I stayed a week and then moved on to another boarding house. I repeated these moves four more times until I found a flat behind a house that suited me. During this period of chaos I gained a reasonable knowledge of Sydney streets.

Australians made no allowance's for a foreigner's understandable ignorance of the city. To not know the way to somewhere was seen as evidence of stupidity. This has changed over the decades because of the development of tourism.

Using Sydney as my first footfall was a good choice; Sydney Town was Australia's first European settlement and in some ways the problems of these settlers reflected my own. The main streets of the city run more or less parallel from the Harbour to the south; even on early maps it is so. Yet landscape illustrators, at the time of settlement, show Sydney Town as widely separated clusters of buildings with meandering paths in between.

It may demonstrate the problem the first garrison had in coping with the immensity of Australia; these pioneers didn't know whether to spread themselves out or huddle together. This is still an issue in Australia, and not only for migrants.

It was in Sydney that I discovered that I had a Mediterranean appearance. This sounds ridiculous, but it is true. No one, during my childhood and youth in England, had commented on the fact. In Australia my dark complexion and curly hair influenced strongly the way I was treated by the Australians.

The most irritating aspect of this was an assumption that I knew no English and was deaf. Counter assistants in Government offices would shout at me in baby-talk, in conjunction with wild gestures, when they wanted to know what I wanted. Then there was the vilification. It could happen anywhere: in the street, at a bar, at work. I sometimes think it would have been better if I had been ignorant of the language.

One morning I was walking down George Street past the entrance to Wynyard Station. It was about 8.30 and the rush hour was in full spate, and I became Joe.

Joe stood, paralysed with fear. He stared at thousands of commuters pouring out of a tunnel and fanning out on to the pavements like a composite animal. It was motion without meaning. It wasn't just the numbers of people it was because their purpose was incomprehensible.

Joe stood while shop assistants and clerks eddied past him. *They do not look at me. They do not look at each other. They do not look at anything. How can you look at nothing? I must do something. These people must think I'm a fool. Walk. Walk into the tunnel. I can only understand these people if I walk among them.*

I came to myself in the booking hall of the station. There was a paperback and newspaper stall, and a coffee lounge. I bought a book about the legend of the Wandering Jew and had a coffee.

I worried about the panic attack for weeks afterwards. It was similar to the one I had suffered in France six months before. I had no need to be be anxious; I haven't had one since. Possibly something was resolved in my sub-conscious.

Many migrants had come to Australia after traumatic experiences in wartime and post-war Europe, and were prone to flashbacks. I became aware of this when only newly arrived in Sydney.

I sat down in a cafe in Castlereagh Street; it was bright and clean with floral tablecloths. I was served coffee by the cafe owner, a woman of about fifty. Suddenly she started talking about life in a concentration camp.

The proprietor spoke as if she was still there and I was with her. It went on for a couple of minutes and then she stopped. There was a silence. Then I told a little about myself and how I was newly arrived in Australia. We chatted as if nothing had happened. I finished my coffee and left.

I don't know if my appearance had reminded her of someone she had known, and it triggered off the episode. It was not the last time I was to be in that sort of situation. It became less frequent after the sixties. Possibly by then these souls had resolved their grief or died. Strangely they usually spoke to me in English; part of the brain must have been aware that they were in Australia.

Many Australians of that generation suffered terribly as prisoners of war in Burma and Malaya, but when I met ex-POWs they never spoke about the experience.

It took a few weeks to find work. I had to husband my cash carefully to make sure that I always had the rent. I ran into a bloke called Kevin that I had met on the ship. He was an Australian who had returned from a couple of years in London.

Kevin said he was broke but was expecting to pick up some winnings from an SP bookie at a hotel in North Sydney that evening. We went to the pub on the agreement that I would pay until the bookie turned up.

The pub was crowded. We drank. Some friends of Kevin arrived. We all drank, and I paid. Kevin kept disappearing in search of the phantom bookie. I was drunk and had ceased to care. When the pub closed I staggered home.

Next morning I awoke in my room with a hangover, cursing Kevin and my stupidity, and wondering how I was going to explain the lack of rent to the landlord. I got up to make a coffee. When I felt in my pockets, for some matches to light the gas ring, I found my back pocket was stuffed with bank notes.

I never met Kevin again. It was my first encounter with the Australian sense of humour. At its best it is about being a bastard without being a bastard, and being generous without showing your generosity. At its worst it is just being a bastard.

Sydney pubs in the sixties had a grim tiled appearance but they were largely friendly places. You could go into them alone and chat with anyone. I was later to find that pub culture in Melbourne and Hobart was similar, but in Adelaide the customers arrived and left in groups. There is a fear of the unknown in that city.

The Opera House was, as yet, just a platform of concrete extending into the water. Sydney people had mixed feelings about the idea of a cultural centre. 'No one'll go to it, they prefer the beach,' said a cove on Sydney Cove – I bet he bought tickets for the Opera House Lottery every month.

I got a letter, a week later, from Jane. She was also exploring the world beyond Europe.

I walk through Notting Hill almost every day. The people from the Caribbean have a lot of style. The men are peacocks. I am trying to incorporate the bold

colours and flares into my designs. They look smashing on people with slender bodies and dark complexions, but I am not so sure the clothes can be worn by the pale and lumpy Brits.

With the letter was a picture cut-out from a newspaper. It showed a politician doing a meet-the-people walk through a shopping arcade. Jane had drawn a circle around one of the bystanders. It was Alison. The rest of the crowd looked like they didn't know what to do with their arms and faces, but she had the perfect stance for an elegant shopper in an arcade. I remembered what Jane had said about Alison attracting camera lenses.

I wrote back about the Bridge. Neither of us said we missed each other. The distance between us was now so immense.

I got a job at *Kellogs*, the breakfast cereal company, and made oodles of cash working day and night among the cornflakes.

I discovered a jazz club at the Ironworkers Hall in George Street. There appeared to be some link between Jazz and Trade Unionism in Australia. Saturday sessions at the jazz club led to parties on the north side of the Harbour, and long walks back over the Bridge at 4 am. These events filled up my weekends and I worked sixteen hours a day on weekdays. In four months I had saved enough to move on.

Before leaving Sydney I took a few strolls through Kings Cross. It has some similarities to Soho but both places are unique. It is easy to see how the sex trade developed from the Cross's proximity to the Docks at Woolloomooloo and Garden Island. There were a lot of transvestites in the streets and bars. I am not sure what cross-dressing says about the Australian soul. The sexes in Australia, in the early sixties, appeared to live very separate lives.

'Do you read the Bible?' asked a voice beside me in Darlinghurst Street. The speaker bore a resemblance to mad Alf; England must have exported the species.

'No,' I replied.

'You should, my son. When you have hope you can read the Gospels. When you have no hope you should read *Revelations*.'

'I expect you read *Revelations*,' I said.

'Scoffer,' intoned the bibliophile as he wobbled off.

I was told that the Cross once had a strong artist community, but the poets and painters had dispersed because of high rents. An important factor in this diaspora must be the motor car. Wherever you go in the Cross at night there is the roar of cars driven by suburban youths in search of ... something. I don't think these knights-errant actually know what they are looking for because they never seem to stop.

Kings Cross is special. It seems that every city has another buried underneath it. With London it is the Medieval town which only gives hints to its existence in the form of place names and narrow streets. The city buried under Sydney is the settlement during its first fifty years. The old town leaks to the surface at the Cross.

I intended to move on again soon, and thought I had better learn a few survival skills in case I had need to leave the roads. I became a member of the Sydney Bush Walking Club and made two or three weekend trips into the Blue Mountains.

On one occasion I was given a lift to Katoomba by a civil engineer only a year out of University. Ken had a job with the Sydney Water Board; he talked about the hidden city under Sydney.

'It's a mystery. There's no map of Sydney's sewerage system. We keep finding parts we didn't know existed. In the old days people just dug around until they found

what they thought was a sewer and attached their plumbing to it. It's surprising that half the town didn't die of typhoid.

'There are drains down there lined with bricks that have the convict mark on them. Last week we found a chamber, the size of a cottage, chipped out of the sandstone. The inlet was about three feet wide and the outlet pipe was only a foot across. It made no sense whatsoever.'

The Blue Mountains are actually the edge of a tilted plateau. From the Sydney side, they look like an impenetrable wall of escarpments; Once there, the mountains display themselves to be a labyrinth of mesas and ravines covered in dense forest; from the west, the mountains are invisible because you are standing on the plateau that extends on into the interior of New South Wales.

During the walks I learned the importance of carrying water even in a comparatively wet area like the coast of New South Wales. I found out that everything that crawls or flies also bites, and that beautiful swards of native grass have leaves as sharp as razors.

'It's a very fragile environment,' said a fellow walker.

'Fragile' was not the adjective that came to my mind at the time.

I left Sydney just after Christmas and headed south. I travelled through the Snowy Mountains and the Australian Alps. Cooma, the administrative centre for the Snowy Mountains Scheme, was a boom town in the wilderness. Deep in the forest was this place of car show rooms and night clubs, and all the benefits and junk of civilisation.

I picked up a lift to Canberra in a mail truck. We passed a long lake with fences descending into the water and windmills projecting from the surface.

'That's Lake George, the disappearing lake,' said the driver. 'There was a lake there for decades; then it dried and became farming land for soldier settlers, then the water came back.'

It was said as though the ways of nature were beyond understanding and the best we could do was accept it. I came to see that this is how Australians have learnt to survive and prosper in this erratic country. The four seasons that dominate the European psyche do not apply to most of Australia. If Shakespeare had been an Australian he would not have written *Now is the Winter of our discontent made glorious Summer by this son of York*, but would have used drought and rain for metaphors.

I stayed in Canberra for a day. It was odd to walk through a metropolis that had no past. Rows of newly planted trees lined the streets. At one end of the city a large lake was being dug out. A bridge already spanned the dry hole. I hitch-hiked through the Australian Alps to Bairnsdale and caught a train to Melbourne.

Melbourne reminded me, at first glance, of Birmingham. The similarity in architecture is probably because both places became very rich in the 1860s. Melbourne was the port of entry to the Victorian gold rush and remained Australia's dominant city for the next fifty years.

Strangely enough I met a Birmingham girl there. Sandy had been in Australia for three years and was returning to England.

'Its a fine country,' she said, 'and I love the beaches, but there's no appreciation of female beauty in Australia. Australian men treat women like cattle, and migrant men learn to behave the same way.'

A week later I flew to Tasmania, and Sandy sailed to beachless Birmingham.

My mother scratched a finger in the kitchen. Within a few days Elizabeth's entire hand became red and swollen, and so painful that she could not sleep. The local doctor explained that Penicillin was unobtainable and prescribed various poultices that did nothing. Elizabeth mentally prepared herself for the loss of a limb. One day Nina knocked on Elizabeth's door with a jar of antibiotics.

So began a very unlikely friendship. It was superficially because Nina had a talent for obtaining unobtainable things, but Elizabeth was also struck by the glamour of the woman.

The Book of Beginnings.

Tasmania is a picturesque State, but a bit of a cocoon. It was in some ways like the Dorset village. I celebrated my twenty-first birthday there. I stayed for two years. Events from the outside world came to me in news flashes. I heard my first Beatles record there. I learnt of President Kennedy's death while in Tasmania.

I voted for the first time while in Tasmania. I was allowed to vote in Australia after six months residence because I was a British Subject. It was also my first because I had been too young in England. A man with a face like an ageing matinée idol, named Robert Menzies, was Prime Minister and Liberal Leader. There was not a lot of publicity about policies by either the Liberal or Labour Party.

'Menzies is a bastard,' said the man at my corner shop. 'He never offers anything. Just before each election Menzies talks a lot about the threat of Communism, and all the women like my mother-in-law vote for him.'

'You're a Labor voter are you?'

'Oh no. The local Liberal member was my commanding officer in the Navy during the War./I real good bloke. Vote for him Larry and you'll be all right.'

I went to the booth on the day to make my mark on the politics of the nation. I found the Australian electoral system so confusing that I probably voted for the company that printed the ballot paper.

I saw Queen Elizabeth when I was in Tasmania. My girl friend of the time was a Royalist; on a grey morning we stood in a crowd and watched the Monarch disembark from the *Britannia*. It wasn't a large crowd, but, then, Hobart isn't a large city. Australians of the time would criticise the British and praise the Queen in the same sentence. As I watched the small woman descend the gangplank, I thought this loyalty to a distant ruler couldn't possibly last. As it turned out I was wrong.

Hobart is a city where evidence of its convict origins is still visible. It was necessary to tread carefully when mentioning penal colonies in Australia. This varied with where I was and who I was talking to. Sydney people boasted of having convict ancestry. One Sydneysider spoke with shame of being descended from a Clergyman on the First Fleet. New South Wales convict songs tend to be jollier than Tasmanian ones, and it is a recognisably cockney humour.

> *Now all my dookies and duchesses,*
> *Take warning from what I've to say.*
> *Mind all you own as you touchesses,*
> *Or you'll end up in Botany Bay.*

South Australians were proud of their State never being a penal colony. Melbourne people just did not talk about it. Western Australians tell a tale that is so complicated that the eyes of the listener glaze over. Tasmanians speak with embarrassment as though it was a form of original sin. I found it better to say nothing on the subject, and let the Australians do the talking.

Years later I did come back to the history of convict settlement. People talk with certainty on the subject, but, like a lot of things to do with Australia's past, once you look for facts the story becomes as unreliable as a pub yarn. Opinions differ on how many convicts came to Australia although it was probably in the region of a hundred thousand.

There are even differing figures on the number of felons who arrived on the First Fleet. The numbers vary from seven hundred to eight fifty. Manning Clark hedges his bets and says about seven fifty. Women convicts were counted very carefully, and all historians agree there were one hundred and ninety-one of them, but the males were too unimportant or evasive to tally.

I liked Tasmania. I liked the forests. I liked the mountains. I liked the compactness of Hobart and its harbour. I even liked the climate. I decided to leave for a number of reasons none of which were significant but they added up. I discovered the city that was hidden under Hobart and it was horrifying.

The Aboriginal people appeared absent and I gave them little thought until I saw the skull of Truganini on display in a Hobart insurance office window. Apparently it was on loan from the museum. I still don't know why this was done. Was the skull considered to be some kind of war trophy like an old field gun in the park? Was this nineteenth century skull being displayed as an ancient fossil? Was it intended to be a, 'Barnum & Bailey Roll-Up! Roll-Up! and see the amazing last Tasmanian woman,' side-show?

When I asked around I was told that the Aboriginal people just died out. I don't know if they thought they were telling the truth. It was years before the story was changed.

I got a job in a textile printing factory and worked on a machine with a team of six others. They were all Austrian or German and I had to learn a couple of hundred German words to be a part of the team.

The shift leader was a muscular little fellow with three fingers missing. During a break on night shift he told me about his hand.

'I lost my fingers because I was two inches too short. I wanted to be a member of Hitler's bodyguard. To qualify you had to be Austrian, with a perfect physique, and the right height. I missed out because I was too short. I became a gunner instead and was sent to the siege of Stalingrad. I was lucky to lose only a few fingers and toes in the Russian Winter.

'I settled down, and married, in Vienna after the war, but life was no good. It was my luck to be in the Russian Sector. There was never enough food; we got a piece of meat the size of a matchbox once a week. We came to Australia ten years ago, and I eat steak whenever I want to. We own our house, and my son will go to university when he finishes school. Australia is a good country Larry.'

The Tasmanians were friendly, but there was a line and if you crossed it they froze and became hostile. Through a colleague at work I became involved in the Miss Tasmania Quest. We tried to set up cabaret style events to raise charity money from the migrant communities. They were intended to be occasions where people could wear evening dress, and eat and drink, and dance until the early hours. There was a remarkable amount of hostility to this by some sections of Hobart's citizenry.

It was felt we were introducing something foreign and wicked into society. There were threatening phone calls, but we went ahead. The cabarets were initially very successful, but then we got raided by the Police. A law had been resurrected forbidding drinking and dancing on the same premises. Both these activities were allowed but not at the same event. After that the enterprise collapsed. The migrants stayed at home and kept their charity money.

One of the Scottish workers at the factory had done military service in Hong Kong and came to Australia with a Chinese bride. Hobart had a tiny Chinese community that seemed to be centred around one grocery and vegetable shop. There was a lot

of debate about the White Australia Policy at the time and it seemed to follow generational lines, with younger people wanting change.

I asked the Scot if he had any problem coming to Australia with Christine by his side.

'Not really, although she had a special interview. It was interesting. The fact that Christine was from Northern China and had a fairer skin was considered a plus.'

I was later to learn that this bias towards lighter pigmentation also applied to European migrants who wished to enter Australia. It literally was a White Australia Policy.

And yet there was another side to Tasmania. Just beyond the xenophobia there was beauty and romance. One evening I was having a chat with my landlady, and she started talking about her family history. She told of a great-grandfather who came to Tasmania and built a timber castle on Bruny Island. He married a convict woman who smoked a pipe. The landlady never spoke on the subject again.

I was briefly involved with a local bush-walking club and spent an Easter weekend on Bruny Island. The island is separated from the Tasmanian mainland by the D'Entrecasteaux Channel. We all stayed in cottages near the lighthouse at the southern tip of the island. That is, all except Alfred who slept in a wheelbarrow near the cliffs.

Alfred must have been in his seventies, although it was hard to tell because he had a face like a child. He was a practitioner of a rigorous branch of yoga and seemed impervious to any form of discomfort.

One evening Alfred and I were sitting beside his wheelbarrow, watching the waves roll up from Antarctica, and he told me a little about himself. Alfred had been a District Officer in the British Raj.

'I was sent to India to civilise the dark heathen and instead they educated me. 'Going native,' it was called. Very improper behaviour! I was returned to London in disgrace.

'When the War broke out the authorities found they had a need for eccentrics, and I spent a couple of years behind Japanese lines in Burma. After the show was over people like me didn't fit in anywhere, we were not welcome in Asia and had become too foreign for England. I came here about seven years ago.'

Alfred smiled at me as though it was my turn to speak, and I told him everything about my short past.

'Ah! Soho!' he said, as though he had found the key to a mystery, 'William Blake's old stamping ground. Do you read Blake?'

'No.'

'You should. Blake believed in the French Revolution until it turned rotten. This island is named after a Frenchman. The British settled Australia to keep the French out and they were still considered a threat afterwards. If Napoleon had wanted to take a slice of Australia he would have had a fair chance; the loyalty of the convicts to Britain could not be guaranteed; some had been supporters of the French and American Revolutions, and there were Irish rebels among them. What are you going to do next Larry?'

'I don't know. I expect I could save and buy a block of land.'

'Oh no you won't. Tasmania is not for you. At the end of this weekend you will begin your next trip.'

When I was back in Hobart I bought, on a whim, a copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald.* It reminded me of the life I was missing. On the following day I bought a plane ticket for Sydney.

I sometimes went with Paul down to the beach. He talked all the time. One day we were watching a line of warships sailing in line towards the Straits of Messina.

'Why do things float?' I asked.

'Because they are lighter than water.'

'Iron is heavy, but ships float.'

'There was a time when ships were made of wood, and men were made of iron. Now the reverse is true. In the end they all sink. All except *Calypso*, she floated on rum.'

The Book of Beginnings

The second Sydney arrival was less confusing than the first; I knew my way around. In response to an advertisement, I left my bags at Mrs Zodin's rooming house in North Sydney. I wandered through the city and, finding myself at the north end of George Street, stepped into the Newcastle Hotel. There was Alison.

She was accompanied by a handsome American who was wearing a surfeit of jewellery. We said the predictable, 'You look great! Do you remember Paris?' – how could I forget. Alison did look good, in a striking outfit of bright colours.

'It's Jain Style. You better like it because you're going to see a lot of this stuff in Sydney. I'm a partner and I am doing the Pacific promotion.'

'Jane,' I said. 'Is she in business?'

'Jane is now J-A-I-N. Jain is business. Where have you been?'

'Tasmania.'

'Bill,' said Alison, as she turned to her gilded male. 'Are we going to Tasmania?' Bill shook his head while looking at the painting of a nude on the bar wall.

'Is Michael still in Britain?'

'Michael is nowhere. Michael is dead.'

'Dead!'

'Damien is born. Damien is everywhere. No singer sings, no band plays, without Damien.'

Then an entourage of business people arrived. They approached diffidently, smiling. I was reminded of an audience with the Pope.

'They're going to kiss your ring,' I said.

'I wouldn't be surprised,' replied Alison.

I wanted to get out of the crush of Jain admirers. I scribbled the address of the rooming house on the back of a beer mat and handed it to Allison. She passed it to Bill while talking to a fashion writer.

I stepped onto the pavement and heard the rattling of gold chains from behind.

'Hey Man! Here's a number. Phone later but not too late. We have to be in Auckland by Tuesday.'

My meeting with Allison encapsulated that mixture of sex and the occult that characterised the new industries of the sixties.

Carmen took me to church on Sunday. My mother did not go; she had a dread of Catholicism that is sometimes found among the Northern English. Joe did not practice public worship; he had a personal god who was a cross between Karl Marx and Winston Churchill.

'I am not sure what I believe in sometimes,' said Carmen, 'but you wont understand us if you don't go to Mass.'

There is a customary gathering of people after a Maltese church service. People in Sunday clothes stand in front of the building and appear to be merely loitering. This is pure deception, a great deal is going on. Boats and goats and bunches of herbs are traded on a nod. There is also the mutual inspection of prospective lovers. It is all done in the shadow of the church in a glow of sanctity.

It was just after a Sunday Mass when I told Carmen that Paul had said his boat floated on rum.

'That was a particular voyage. It was a horror. It was during the war before last. He took a fine piece of my lace to sell overseas and, when Paul returned, he said he'd given it away.'

'Were you angry?'

'No. I had woven all my bitterness into it and was glad to be rid of the thing.'

The Book of Beginnings

In Sydney I was shown the future: it was grey and shaped like a suitcase. I had worked as a labourer at an engineering firm for six months when they purchased a small computer. The purpose of the machine was to control industrial processes in the factory. This was a radical and innovative thing to attempt in the mid sixties.

The boss had seen me losing chess to a Hungarian factory-hand during lunch breaks and decided I had potential. Within a short time I found myself, quite by accident, an operative in a new technology.

Very few people imagined a future in which there would be a computer in every house. Children's toys and household appliances with digital circuitry were strictly

the stuff of fantasy. Most computers were made by IBM and were large and expensive.

All over the world young people were working in garages making small cheap computers. My boss believed that these eccentrics were the key to the future. He called them Crazy Freddies. A few of these Crazy Freddies were to become very rich.

There were no courses available for this infant industry but I did attend three years of part-time studies in Science at the Institute of Technology. I listened to the Apollo landing on the Moon during a Physics lecture. I was a mediocre student but it gave me credibility in job applications.

For about a year I lived with Moira the artist / waitress. Moira said she liked me because I was so uncreative. It wasn't quite how I saw myself, but,if that was what Moira liked, it was fine by me.

It was true that, up until the time I met her, my knowledge of painting was limited to strolls through public galleries. Moira explained the Surrealists and Cubists and Dadaists. I was introduced to the Australian Modernist painting that made such a mark in the fifties.

Moira was very useful in her incarnation as waitress. She used to return from work late in the evening with a big bag of coins from tips. We were never short of change.

One night Moira came in and dropped her stash of cash on to the kitchen table.

'Spangles is dead,' Moira said.

Spangles was the lead guitar of a well known American rock band. I was sorry he was dead, but the group was famous for its lifestyle. My mind ran through the possibilities of car accidents, plane crashes, attempts to fly with raffia wings from

penthouse windows, high dives into empty swimming pools, and eating the food from a famous chain of hamburger restaurants. I gave Moira a hug and put the kettle on.

'He overdosed in a Hamburg hotel,' she continued, as though reading my thoughts. 'Those managers and agents are leeches; they keep the musicians supplied with stuff and get rich.' Moira arranged the newly minted decimal coins into stacks.

'Spangles could have got the stuff anywhere,' I said.

My mind was elsewhere; I had been invited to an interview the next day for a vaguely defined job with a large Australian company.

The interview was the strangest I have ever attended. It was explained to me that this company had a contract with the Australian Government, The Australian government had an agreement with the American Government, The American Government had a contract with a large American company, this large American company supplied services to the American military. It obviously transcended nationality, how could I refuse?

There was a war in Vietnam, but I don't think it was mentioned once. They were looking for someone without loyalties and I was their man. I got a letter of offer but had to wait a couple of months for a security clearance.

Moira started wearing Nazi regalia at the breakfast table. I pretended indifference, but I couldn't ignore an envelope leaning on my coffee cup one morning.

'It's a 'Dear John,' said Moira. 'I know it's usual to send one after the soldier leaves, but I thought this would save on postage.'

'What about you?'

'Me? I'm glad you asked. I decided on going O.S. I'll be in Paris in six weeks. I believe the tourists are good tippers.'

'I hope you wont be disappointed. I'm sorry.'

'Don't be sorry.'

One of the top bands in the world arrived in Sydney for three shows; they were put on by Damien Productions. I sent a letter to Michael at their hotel; back came an envelope with two tickets and an invitation to a one a.m. gathering after the show.

'How did you get the tickets?' asked Moira.

'I know the guy, Damien, who is managing the tour. We worked together in Soho when I was fifteen.'

'Soho. A bit sleazy.'

'It's a wicked place, but people were very kind to me there. The only rule of conduct was don't make moral judgements.'

'They probably couldn't.'

'Don't be acid about it. A lot of things, that are part of the swinging sixties, really started in Soho in the fifties. Working class kids with ideas. You have a Jain shirt hanging in your cupboard. Jane and I pub crawled together. 00 Damien was Michael then. He was a printer and probably a male prostitute. Michael saw the future of Rock and Roll when others in England thought it was a joke.'

'Choice friends!'

'They were choice friends.'

Moira didn't wear the Jain shirt at the Rock Concert. After the Show we found ourselves crammed in a large room at the back of the stadium with about a hundred guests and thirty security guards. The Group wasn't there but their record was

playing at high volume; all conversation was at a yell. We were told the boys were unwinding and would be ready to meet us in an hour. Michael came over and shook my hand. He seemed very speeded up.

'Larry! What are you doing now?'

'I'm in computers; I am on my way to the States in a week.'

He laughed and said, 'I think we've had this conversation before.' Then Damien headed off to see how his boys in the band were getting on.

'High as a kite and as Camp as a ship of sailors,' muttered Moira to his retreating back.

'Larry the Tasmanian Devil!' shouted a voice behind me.

'Alison! Are you still selling Jain Style?'

'No Larry, I'm promoting a line of French Perfume. I got picked for the job because I get on so well with Australians.'

'What's your secret?'

'It's easy. I walk up to an Australian and insult them. Then they insult me back. Then we both laugh and we are friends.'

'Does it always work?'

'Almost always. I did it once to a man and he burst into tears. I was later told that he came from Melbourne, so that doesn't count.'

'How's Jane?'

'Jane is sick of the rag trade and has discovered she's thirty. The new style that's all the rage is called: No Style. Exquisite fashion models are walking around in ex-Army greatcoats and labourers boots. Jane is taking it badly. Everything's changing. A lot of the clothing manufacture is moving to Asia. Jane complains about new designers who never touch cloth.'

'I can understand how she feels. Jane was a war kid, and remembers people in army greatcoats and boots.' *And then came a decade of drabness.* 'Does she have any plans?'

'Well there's a Baronet who's made a marriage proposal, but I don't see anything coming of it. A pity really, if they had a baby it would be the first Rattlinghope to be born with a chin for nine generations.

'I suggested Jain Style moves further up-market but she's not interested. The dreamers, like Jane and Damien, are the first to be rolled after a revolution. You and I will survive because we don't give a shit. Excuse me Larry there's Damien, I want his boys in an ad, for cologne.'

'Another Soho friend?' asked Moira.

'Not quite. Alison is a member of the gentry.'

'Can we go?'

'Don't you want to meet the Boys?'

'Boys noise. Let's go.'

We went to the Cross and ate supper at *The Piccolo*, and afterwards browsed through an all-night bookshop. I bought Moira a copy of *The Hobbit*, and she gave me the collected poems of William Blake.

We had a problem with rats in an outhouse. Carmen explained to me how to get rid of them.

'You write them a note saying '*Dear King Rat, Bringer of Plague, the food is better in the priest's house up the road. Signed: a well-wisher.'* You place it in the darkest corner of the shed, and the rats will go away.'

Carmen wrote the message on a scrap of paper and I copied it. She explained, they could only understand Maltese. That evening I placed the note, with *His Majesty Rat* on the envelope, in the darkest corner of the outhouse. Next morning the rats were gone and they never came back. For weeks afterwards I avoided the priest in the street because I thought I had brought a calamity upon him.

The Book of Beginnings.

While zigzagging across the Pacific I had papers giving me a U.S. military rank. Sometimes, while in America, I was officially an Australian government employee. At other times my I.D. showed me as a member of the staff of any one of three reputable companies. A side effect of the job was that my identity as well as my nationality became an abstraction.

I watched a man in an airport lounge. He threw down a magazine and then got up from his chair and started walking the floor in large circles. On he went, past the rows of seats, past the ticket counters, past the Coke machines. The wanderer stopped in front of a pair of glass doors. Then he relaxed and went back to his seat. I wondered if I was crazier, for taking an interest in this soul, or whether he was for needing to check that he still had a reflection.

Shortly afterwards I began to write *The Book of Beginnings*. It was supposed to be jottings about my family. It was also a way of reminding myself that there was a real world where people cooked food and went to bed, and didn't doubt their own existence.

I wanted to find a point where I could say: 'this is where the story starts.' The trouble with Malta is that it has more history than any reasonable country could ever want. I had no intention of going back five thousand years. I picked the building of the Suez Canal because it changed my family and Australia. I had no idea that the Book was to grow into the monster that it became.

'Only women make lace don't they?' I asked Carmen.

'Yes. Men go to sea and it would be hard to do in a rocking boat. It would be funny to watch. A woman can make lace while keeping an eye on the children or waiting for the dough to rise. It is also a thing that we do together.'

'Do you like doing it?'

'Now it is my life, but when I was a little girl I hated it. My mother gave me lace bobbins to play with as a baby, and as a girl she kept me at the lace. She said: 'If you don't learn you will always be dependant on a man to feed you.' I learnt to make lace without thinking, my fingers would move like machines, I would daydream as I worked.

'Then I discovered that my dreams showed in the lace. I told people but they laughed at me. You do not laugh Lori?'

'No Carmen.'

'You are a special little boy.'

The Book of Beginnings.

I was standing near a book shop in San Francisco watching a crowd of anti-Vietnam demonstrators. They had encircled a busload of army recruits. A man was shouting `Murderers!' as he hammered his fist on the bus door.

The police arrived to free the bus. The troopers advanced in line with batons raised. Most of the crowd retreated to the other side of the street. A group of about fifty demonstrators climbed onto and under the bus.

The police broke formation to tear them from the vehicle. Then the people on the roadside surged back to the bus chanting. The cops lost their cool and started willy-nilly belabouring the crowd with batons.

I was caught in a melee between police and protesters when I heard a voice beside me. 'C'mon it's time to get out of here Lamb.'

A woman I vaguely recognised, wearing a Jain shirt, pointed to the shop entrance. We ran inside. The shopkeeper locked and bolted the door after us.

'Well !' said my rescuer, 'You've come a long way from Basle.'

My mind groped back for memories of Switzerland. Then I recalled the girl with the 'Peru' label on her shirt. 'I am surprised you recognised me,' I said.

She leaned against a book rack and laughed. 'It's easy to recognise a lamb among wolves.'

I said, 'I'm Larry,' in the hope that she would volunteer her name. The woman gave a nod and a smile.

'Are you ever called Lawrence?'

'No. My Maltese relatives call me Loretto or Lori.'

'I'll stick to Lamb.'

We stepped out into a deserted street. The roadway was littered with pamphlets and torn placards. The anonymous woman and I descended the hill and walked together through Chinatown. She stopped at a shop selling bric-a-brac and bought a small bronze object.

'What is it?' I asked.

'It's an incense burner.'

'I would never have known.'

'If something is small and Oriental, you call it an incense burner.'

'Even if I don't know what it is?'

'Especially then. When you are exploring unknown territory you name everything you see. It is a way of making the unfamiliar familiar. '

'Then I name you Peru.'

'I like it. Let's find a bar, and drink to Terra Incognita and my new name.'

It turned out we both had planes to catch next day. Peru said she was a foreign correspondent for a journal that I'd never heard of. For no particular reason I told her of the *Book of Beginnings*.

As the morning mist rolled over San Francisco Bay I drank my coffee while Peru read through the notebook.

'If it's just something you enjoy doing, it's O.K.' she said. 'But if you want me, or someone else, to read it you'll have say something about the people.

'I want to know why Paul was so notorious. Was he just a crook or was he political?

'You say Carmen was a famous lace maker. Is that like being a famous cake maker or does it mean something more?

'You seem to find Nina a fascinating woman. Was that because she flirted with you or did she do anything that changed things?'

'I just want to jot down how these people influenced me.'

'You've done that all right. You were spoilt by women as a child, and you have been ever since. But-but-but, I want to know about the people. They are responding to change around them. I want to know how and if they were successful. I want to know why Paul and Carmen survived and others didn't.'

' There doesn't have to be a reason. You can line up ten bottles along a shore line. When a wave strikes it may leave two standing. There may be no reason why those particular ones didn't fall.'

'If you believed that Paul and Carmen were bottles you would not be writing about them. Keep going with the jottings, but write longer stories about the people and send them to me. I'll give you a mail box number in San Francisco.'

'What side are you on?' I asked to change the subject.

'What do you mean?'

'You know. You are an American of sorts. The Vietnam War.'

'Larry the Lamb I think you need a survival guide. San Francisco is not America. We are in a vast continent called Pacific. It extends from the western foothills of the Rockies to Singapore and from Christchurch to Yokohama. America controls everything in this watery continent but it does not control itself.

'You can't change this Lamb, but, if you are smart, you can swim between the archipelagos of power and have a good time. What is more: you can take a percentage. Give it thought. And keep writing.'

Nina was someone that people were silent about. Nina had gold bangles on her arms and ran the local tavern. I did not find this strange, women seemed to be running Europe at the time. History is silent about that too.

I used to stop at her bar on the way home from school. Nina would run a hand over my hair, which I didn't like. She would then laugh and give me a pastiti, which I liked immensely. Then, in a conspiratorial whisper, Nina would tell me to finish it before I got home.

One day I went to the bar and it was closed, Nina had gone. Bill the Painter was gone as well. There was a silence for days, as though the village was gathering its breath. Then everyone started talking and talking and talking. I listened, but it was years before I could make sense of it.

Most of what was said about Nina was quite irrelevant to her career.

The Book of Beginnings.

Peru and I parted at the airport and I caught a flight for L.A. When I sat down I found myself next to a Crazy Freddy. He was typical of the type: wide-eyed and chatty. The only food he ate was ice cream and hamburgers. Crazy Freddy had played tennis for his college. He was going to California to work for IBM.

Crazy Freddy's knowledge of the past was based on cartoons like *The Flintstones* and a list of Presidents' names learnt at school. This was not a problem for him because he spoke almost entirely in the future tense.

'The next phase of development is going to be software that anyone will be able use,' said Crazy Freddy.

'User-friendly software wastes too much memory,' I replied in an attempt to dampen his enthusiasm.

'Soon memory will be cheap.'

His whole career flashed before my eyes. IBM would nurture and protect Crazy Freddy from the corrupting influence of reality. Kindly blue-suited IBM executives

would listen to his crazy ideas and run with them to the patent office. He would meet an IBM lady at a tennis game. She would seduce him and they would marry.

If Crazy Freddy was lucky enough to have an emotional crisis, he would run away from IBM and design user-friendly software in a garage and become a billionaire. Crazy Freddy would change his wife but probably not his diet. IBM would try to sue him for millions. It would supposedly be over breach of a patent, but would really be for being an ungrateful bastard. His IBM lady would sue him for the same reason. Everyone would live wealthily ever after.

I was sitting there, with eyes half closed, thinking I had Crazy Freddy's life mapped out. Then I realised he was talking to me in the present tense. His face was glowing like a cathode.

'You say you work with computers and yet you don't seem excited by it.'

'No,' I said, 'I think it's really boring. I am grateful for computers. If it wasn't for them I would be working as a labourer in a Sydney factory. Because of computers I am flying in comfort over your beautiful country.'

Crazy Freddy looked at me as though he had just discovered there was Evil in the world, and it was sitting next to him. Luckily the plane was touching down. I watched him walk across the airport lounge to the nearest ice-cream parlour. I could understand why so many intelligent young Americans took drugs.

He was right of course. Within a few years the computer system that put the men on the Moon would seem primitive. And the amount of memory they had available would seem minuscule. Blessed were the Crazy Freddies for they were right. It is a pity they had no understanding of the past.

I had no great love for Los Angeles, but generally Angelinos are O.K. They are a very chatty people; they seem to have this impulse to tell their life stories to any

stranger. It must have something to do with the film industry. No one in L.A. knew much about Australia in the early seventies.

San Francisco is a slightly different kettle of fish. There was a strong maritime link between Sydney and San Francisco for about a hundred years. To travel by rail from the Atlantic coast to California was an alternative route for travellers from Europe to Asia and Australia. American miners, who came to work the Australian goldfields, arrived via San Francisco.

Frank Gardiner, the Australian bushranger, retired from his plundering ways to run a bar in San Francisco. Jack London, author, sailor, oyster pirate, San Franciscan, set some of his stories in Sydney. The sea trade has diminished but I still met old longshoremen who talked of George Street and the Cross.

The main thing younger Californians knew about Australia was that it had some dangerous tennis players. Everyone had heard of Evonne Goolagong.

San Francisco has a lot of bookshops. Books were about half the price of ones in Australia, and of great variety. In my travels I always had a paperback in my pocket and a couple more in my hand-luggage. I didn't bring Moira's gift of Blake's poems with me; it stayed in storage in Sydney.

I knew Nina's mother, Assunta the goat-woman, when she was old. Assunta was small and brown and weathered like a dried twig. Assunta would collect people's goats every morning and take them grazing along the rocky coast of the island. In return she got a share of the milk, some of which she sold to my mother. Assunta spoke an older kind of Maltese and when I first met her I assumed she talked in 'Goat.' After Nina had left the island Assunta told me about her little girl.

The Book of Beginnings.

I got up late. I had a three day break from the military industrial complex. The porter was watching the TV News in the motel foyer. The police had dug up a body in a San Bernardino orange grove. I walked out of the motel past the Cadillac car yard to the diner. There was something odd about Los Angeles today. I glanced at the horizon and looked at the street, and then back at the distant view.

'Here comes the Australian,' said a copper finishing his breakfast. 'You're late.'

I gave a nod. 'I'm not working today or tomorrow. I notice there's a range of mountains out there.'

It was in California that I started to call myself an Australian. People wanted to know where I came from and it was easier to give a simple answer. Americans are all shapes and colours and they are all American. They assumed Australia was the same. If I'd called myself an Australian in Australia I would have been ridiculed.

I ordered scrambled eggs, bacon and hash browns, from a woman with a face like a Latin Madonna. I regard the American breakfast as one of that nation's major contribution to Western civilisation, along with rocketry and Jazz.

'They weren't there yesterday,' I said to the copper.

No answer.

'I've been here three weeks. During the entire time there were no mountains.'

No answer.

'Today there are mountains out there.'

'Smog's cleared,' said the Madonna coolly.

'Thank you. America: land of mystery. As usual you need an immigrant if you want an answer to anything.' The copper laughed.

In Los Angeles almost everyone seemed to come from somewhere else. The Media and Aerospace industries attracted people from all States of the Union and beyond. The service jobs were done by people running from tough times in tougher places. California is the home of a fine migrant story: Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

'They found another body in the orange grove,' said the Madonna.

'That makes it three,' said the copper. 'Not my job. I'm going home to bed.'

'They are still digging,' said the Madonna.

'What are you going to do in your free time Australian?' asked the copper as he was leaving.

I had no idea until then. 'I'll go to Monterey,' I blurted. 'I once read about a place called Cannery Row. I'll give it a visit.'

'If you are going by bus keep your money hidden. Take it easy.'

'Take it easy.'

'I hate long bus journeys,' said the Madonna. 'They are so boring.'

'I will spend it writing a story about a lady called Nina for a lady called Peru.'

'Peru is a funny name.'

'It was a funny way I met her.'

I bought a new exercise book in the bus depot kiosk. Once I was on the bus I wrote across the cover *Book of Beginnings, Volume 2*. When the Greyhound started moving I began writing the Goat Woman's version of Nina's Story.

Nina was born in 1917. Mother and daughter lived outside of the village. Nina went to a parish school for three years. This was half the normal duration for a village child's education, but Nina got into trouble.

The little girl captured some bats that lived in caves along the coast. Nina took the sleeping mammals to school and placed them in the Mother Superior's privy. Toilets had no lights in those days and when the door was closed the bats became active. The school gave no credit to Nina's planning ability and sent her home.

When Nina was fifteen she turned her talents to commerce. She built up a small business making cheeses and selling them door-to-door. Nina rejected the overtures of the boys in the village but spent a lot of time with an artist called Bill the Painter. He lived in a beached yawl about a mile from the village. Bill taught Nina English – gossips said he taught her other things as well.

There was not a lot of growth in the cheese business because half the people in the village made their own cheese and sold it to the other half. At eighteen Nina gave up groceries and took up tourism. Nina approached English-speaking visitors who disembarked from the Malta Ferry and offered her services as a guide.

Rumours were that Nina had gone a-whoring. The fact was that most of her customers were women with sketchbooks who wanted to be shown ancient megaliths. Some of these clients spoke very knowledgeably about the ruins. Nina would listen attentively and pass on this information in a learned manner to succeeding visitors. Assunta told me that this was the pattern to Nina's life. Nina always attracted rumours; and the more gossip there was, the more she prospered.

Tourism did not have a future in 1938, but Nina had met too many interesting people to want to spend her life in a hovel surrounded by goats. She went to Bill the Painter for advice.

'What do you want to do? asked Bill.'

'I want work all the year round. I want to meet people. I want to learn things.'

Bill made a suggestion and Nina raised her eyebrows. 'The whole village will talk about me,' said Nina.

'Don't worry about that, they already do.'

Next day Nina rented a room facing the street. She obtained two barrels and placed a plank between them. Then Bill the Painter came round and painted a sign that said: *Nina's Tavern.*

No woman had ever run a bar in the village before. The problem with gossip is that eventually someone has to check it out. The women could not go to the tavern so they had to send their men. The men were away for a while and then they hurried back to their respective houses.

'What is it like?' asked the women.

'It has no chairs or tables,' said the men as they grabbed spare furniture.

The men left, and were gone for a long time.

Apart from tourists only males went to the bar. Nina gained not only a reputation as a stealer of men but also as a women who had entered the world of males. The men said they went to the bar to talk business. The women thought 'funny business' was more likely.

A man came to the bar every evening and he became Nina's suitor. His mother was hostile to him marrying the goat-woman's daughter. The sailor said he would go on a voyage to make some money and be back in a year. He was gone for a decade. When the man returned he was married to an Englishwoman. That youth was my father.

Rumours grew that smugglers went to the tavern to trade contraband. Most people just shrugged their shoulders, irregular trade was not unknown in the region. The police had to act on such information, so they started drinking there. Soldiers and sailors on leave found the place a solace from war. The uniforms of many nationalities mingled with the shirt sleeves of the villagers.

Nina's Tavern became a success and a legend within a few years, and it acquired a proper bar. Bill the Painter created a mural on one of the walls; it was of Calypso welcoming Odysseus to her island. Nina became a woman of wealth and developed a taste for gold jewellery. Then she left the island.

The Book of Beginnings.

The bus slowed down as we approached the pool of light in front of a roadhouse. I put down my pen and stretched my legs. I got out of the bus with all the weary souls and joined a queue for coffee. A long haired youth of high school age was working furiously behind the counter. I ordered a cup of black.

'You talk like in the movies,' he said. I wondered what movies the boy watched.

A stack of early edition newspapers lay nearby. The headline was 'Seven Bodies Found.' Near it was a photo of President Nixon. It looked as though a mischievous layout worker was trying to link the two items.

Half a dozen people joined the bus at the roadhouse. A man sat beside me. He was carrying a newspaper.

'Bad business,' I said while pointing at the headline.

'Yea, it's out of date, they found eight.'

I got off the bus in bright morning sunshine. A pearly fog still hung over the Pacific. It was weird entering a town that I only knew from a work of fiction. There was the railway track. I crossed it and descended into Cannery Row. I hadn't realised, in my reading, the importance of the track as a divider between the respectable and the poorer part of town.

The Row was narrower than I expected, jammed between the railway line and the coast. The buildings were made of corrugated iron. They leaned against each other for support. It should have just looked sordid, but the way that everything was askew made it seem like a giant sculpture. There was no one in sight although signs on doors indicated some of the buildings were being used as workshops and studios.

I reversed my steps and walked along the beach until I came to a dead seal. I was contemplating the corpse when I felt a dog sniffing at my ankles.

'It's a sin,' said a voice behind me.

'I suppose it is,' I said to the old man holding the dog by a string. I hoped he wasn't another Alf.

'Christians wash their sins away. They don't realise the tide brings the sin back onto the beach.'

'Nice dog,' I said, and wondered why I had such an attraction for mad people.

'Are you from England?'

'Australia.'

'Just visiting?'

'Yes. I'm working in L.A. Thought I'd come to Monterey for a day. There are more than dead seals in Los Angeles.'

'Happens all the time. Illegal migrants, Mexicans, fruit pickers. The boss shoots 'em instead of paying wages at the end of the season. Happened to hundreds of men and women over the years. No one misses them. This time someone's been caught.'

'Eight found.'

'Twelve,' he said, as though proud that his tally was higher than mine.

The dog and the old man walked on in search of things more interesting than Australians and dead seals. I sat alone for a while. Then I declared war on the United States of America. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

'I had a little boy once you know,' said Carmen. 'He was a very impulsive child. Not mad like his father, just impulsive. He worked on the fishing boats, but wanted to sail away on the big ships. My son was eighteen when he said Joe was planning to go to Marseilles to get work on the ships. He wanted to go too. What could I do? My boy was a man. I thought Joe would look after my son. Joe, even then, was old for his years. Your father has never been a child. My son got into trouble with the law in Marseilles. Joe did not look after him. My son was sent to Devils Island. He may be alive or dead.'

'What is his name?' I asked.

'His name is not important. He lost his name when he killed someone.'

The Book of Beginnings.

Future generations will probably wonder why so many people in so many countries made so much fuss about the war in Vietnam. I think it was because the world had only recently been made smaller by jet planes and television.

In travelling time, Sydney was as close to the war as London was to the Battle of Hastings. To the cities of the Pacific rim, Vietnam was a place just over the horizon. And, to varying degrees, all of these great cities were financially involved in the military machine.

It seems impossible that anyone could manufacture Napalm or missile warheads and sleep at night, but they did because these tasks were complex and divided among many hands.

In Hawaii I was invited to a celebration of the Fourth of July. The centrepiece was a pig roasted in a pit in the Polynesian manner. About thirty families of military and contract personnel were guests. A physicist, who I shall call Dr Smith, was there. Smith was a leading researcher in multi-warhead technology. I remember him as a mild and cultured person. I never heard Smith once raise his voice in anger.

The physicist noticed that a boy was poking the coals of the fire with a stick. He immediately went over to the child and said, 'You mustn't play with fire. It's

dangerous. You must never play with fire.' I am sure that at no time did Smith consider this advice applicable to himself.

My own vague memories of post-war Europe are associated with austerity/small luxuries, like real coffee or extra sugar, could only be purchased by the rich and criminal. People did cry over spilt milk in those days.

In contrast: the Vietnam War, at least on the American side, was surrounded by opulence. The Pacific was awash with greenbacks. There was the enormous military expenditure, the payrolls of almost a million G.I.s, and the heroin traffic with its numerous go-betweens and bribe-takers. Companies, such as IBM, maintained thousands of well-paid staff in exotic locations to service contracts that were worth more than Australia's national debt.

People of modest origins found themselves suddenly able to spend money on their personal obsessions or desires, but, because they had no experience of wealth, many just bought banal things in large quantities.

A contractor I knew was a keen amateur photographer. In the tropics there is always the problem of keeping film at the right temperature. This man bought a big new refrigerator wherever he went. In two years of travelling around South East Asia the contractor acquired and abandoned several dozen of these shiny machines. The local people thought we were mad, and they were right.

I remember being in a multi-floor car park in Honolulu. There were rows of new American cars covered in dust. People just bought an automobile while in Hawaii and then dumped it before flying away.

One of the effects of surrounding ourselves with mechanical junk was that we rarely recognised the sophistication of the cultures around us. There was an event in American Samoa that demonstrated this to me on my first trip out. An Australian

sailor, on-leave from his frigate, got drunk, hired a car, and ran over and killed an elderly Samoan.

The sailor was arrested and held for trial under American law, but the local people took the matter in hand. The islanders, including the victim's family, held a wake and then a debate that went on for days. The whole thing took about a week because there were a lot of interruptions for meals. What followed was a clash between customary law and the American legal system.

The Samoans enacted a ceremony of forgiveness; they then went to the Governor demanding the sailor's release on the grounds that the matter was closed.

When I continued my journey the issue was still being argued, but I am sure American law prevailed and the sailor served his term.

I remember the parties during the war. Contractors, or members of the military, rented entire floors of Hilton Hotels and kept the thing going for all comers for days. There was a party in Manila that was effectively permanent throughout the Vietnam War; different people just took it over. I went to it several times over two years and I don't remember seeing the same people twice, but there were the inevitable stories of fresh young engineers and flight attendants going to the party and disappearing forever into its vortex. Possibly it spat them out into the harsh light of April 8 1975.

Everyone knew the war wasn't going to last. Sooner or later the Viet Cong, or the American taxpayer or the relatives of dead young men, would decide it had to end. But time was different in the Pacific in those days, while you were there, the rest of the world appeared impermanent and unreal.

Occasionally, bases were visited by troupes of Congressmen accompanied by elegant young secretaries. We used to stare at these wonders as though in fear that if we blinked they would melt away in the shimmer of the sun.

I was on a base near Saigon when we were all told the Under Secretary of State of the United States was going to pass through in a couple of days. Everything from saucepans to bombs were polished in preparation for the visit. As a civilian contractor it didn't really effect me and I intended to stay out of sight.

The GIs were more interested in what the VIP's assistant would look like. There was a widespread belief that the breasts got larger as you worked your way up the chain of command. Bets were laid in the cookhouse on the secretary's bra size. Kitchen hands are like that; they'll bet on anything.

The circus came to town in a special jet with secret service agents and the VIP, and the secretary, and I stayed in the computer room.

I was checking some ephemeral data when a shadow passed between me and the teletype. I looked around and there was a two metre tall cowboy standing close by. The man was about fifty and the grey of his hair matched the complexion. The fellow's hand was extended for a shake. His tie was one of those shoe-lace ones, with a fancy stud, that John Wayne used to wear. The Western image and tallness were enhanced by high-heeled boots.

I realised that this must be the VIP, and stood up and shook his paw. He had an experienced handshake, but I had the distinct impression there was nobody home. This guy was zonked out on pills or jet-lag. I am sure he didn't know who I was, and I suspect he didn't know what country he was in.

The assistant, in a pale blue trouser suit, and two security guards in fatigues and dark glasses, hurried over. They steered the VIP out of the computer room as though I was a source of contamination.

The assistant came back and said, 'I'm sorry he's not quite himself at the moment.'

I desperately didn't want this dream girl to leave, and tried to keep the conversation going. 'Your boss does look ill,' I said with feigned concern.

'Yes. There is a clinic and nurse on the plane. He will be all right. I hope you won't talk about this. He went to the washroom and must have left by another door. We haven't lost him before.'

'If he is so sick, why is he here?'

'Just a hand-shaking visit. He will rest in Hawaii for a week and return to Washington. It will be a time for looking fit and healthy. Only the strong and the bold survive in the Capital.'

What a game! The VIP arrives back, supposedly from a two week tour in a tropical war zone. He is rattling with pills, and looking as fit as a rooster, with a pretty woman carrying his briefcase.

'You do it all, don't you?' I said.

'What do you mean?'

'You order planes. You plan his day. You lead him in and out of conference rooms. You give him speeches to read. You note the responses to his speeches and write reports on them. You are running it all.'

'Not quite. No one is running it all.'

'To the north there are burning villages. Why don't you give your boss a speech that says the war has been a terrible misunderstanding and all troops will be out in three months? I'll write it for you if you like.'

'You don't understand,' the dream girl said. 'The job of assistants is to help men compete with each other. The war is just a theatre. I'm sorry about the villages. It's all very sad. I must go.'

I thought it was sad too and went to the canteen for a coffee.

'I met the VIP,' I told the kitchen hand at the counter.

'Fuck the VIP,' said the kitchen hand – kitchen hands only use short words. 'What does the dame look like?'

I could tell there was money hanging on my reply. I moved back a pace in case he had a cleaver under the counter. 'Fine,' I said. 'But her head's still in Washington.'

Paul and I stood on the beach and watched a Dhow sail past.

'Unusual,' said Paul. 'You don't get many Arab boats this way. You see a lot of them in the Red Sea or around the Nile Delta. When I was a boy I sailed on one owned by an Egyptian. He was a friend of John, my father.'

'What's an Egyptian?'

'They're Arabs. Arabs are all along the African coast, north to Turkey, and east to the Persian Gulf. They are all a bit different to each other but they all have the same book. They are good people, but book people can be difficult to deal with sometimes because what they do mustn't be against the book. Jews are the same but they have a different one. Having a book can be good if it helps to make a people strong.'

'Do the Maltese have a book?'

The Maltese have got nothing. We don't have a pot to piss in. We share the Bible with the English and the Pope. What good is that?'

The Book of Beginnings.

When money was illicitly obtained it had to be hidden. Dealers became buyers of small precious items such as Burmese sapphires, Australian Opals, Khmer carvings, Netsuke, bark paintings, sacred objects. Then these treasures had to be sent discretely to America. It was impossible, if you were a frequent traveller across the Pacific, not to become part of this trade.

When it involved me in no inconvenience I didn't charge for these deliveries but did them on the promise of some future favour. I became someone who was owed a lot of favours. Wherever I went there was always an apartment or beach house available with a fridge full of liquor.

In June 1972 I connected with one dealer in a noisy pub in Christchurch. He bought me a drink and led me to a quiet table. Most of the profession look as though they never see sunlight, but this one was a bright pink; it would have been easy to imagine him mowing a suburban lawn on Sunday afternoons or taking his children to the beach.

The man told me he was involved in frequent travel between New Zealand and The Solomon Islands, and had a sideline in artefacts and other collectibles. He wanted to send a rare tropical butterfly to a client in Los Angeles.

I neither believed nor disbelieved the story, but it was plausible. You meet New Zealanders trading around the islands. They sell generators and outboard motors to the locals, and buy the occasional piece of Pacificana. The butterfly was dead and didn't have an opinion.

I said that I was happy to oblige. He told me that he had a retreat on North Island near a lake full of trout. I said I would bear it in mind. If I'd known the kind of man the butterfly collector was I would have told the dealer to jump and join the fishes.

'What's that black boat over there?' I asked.

'It's an English submarine,' said Paul. 'It's just been refitted at Valletta. In a week's time it will sail for the Black Sea to do a bit of spying on the Russians.

'Just before the First World War an Austrian submarine used to snoop around the strait to keep an eye on the English fleet. I sold wine to them. I used to sail out at night near Comino Island. The submarine would surface near me. I pushed a barrel of wine overboard and they floated some money to me.' He chuckled. 'I don't think they were much good at spying. They were drunk all the time.'

'Do the English spy on the Austrian fleet?'

'The Austrians don't have a fleet now. They are now a little country with no ports. In those days Austria was a big Empire with Naval Docks in Trieste, and I suppose the English used to spy on them. Empires don't last; the British will go soon.'

'Dad says the British Empire brings civilisation.'

Paul laughed.

The Book of Beginnings

I delivered the insect to the California address three days later. A tall man in T-shirt and Chinos invited me in. He pushed aside a couple of electronics manuals and placed the packet on a coffee table. I watched him tremble as he tenderly removed the butterfly from its packing.

The collector took me on a tour through air-conditioned rooms lined with mahogany cases of specimens. He did it in a reverent manner as though he was baring his soul to me, which I suppose he was. I tried not to show it, but I found the exercise profoundly tedious and a little disquieting. Nothing is as sad and useless as a dead butterfly.

I told him I had to go, and walked aimlessly for an hour through Azusa. The offices of companies involved in the aerospace industry stood grey against the darkness. I stopped at a Mexican diner for a snack and then caught a cab to my apartment. I phoned San Francisco on the off-chance that Peru was there. Her

trade was information and she would not think me a fool. Peru answered and said she was entertaining and would call me back tomorrow. It couldn't have worked out because she phoned half an hour later.

'Why does this guy worry you?' asked Peru.

'He is like a child. It was as though he was trying to establish trust because I was needed for a scheme. There was something very intense about him. I felt he was aiming to do something criminal and it is because of his butterfly collection.'

'What? Like murder?'

'No. Not murder.'

'Good. At least he isn't planning to stick a pin through your head and put you in a glass case. Lamb you interrupted a date to tell me that you met a weirdo. What is the problem?'

'He was nervous about something. I had the impression I was being vetted.'

'Collectors are like that. Monsieur Butterfly has a collection; it is his wife, and his nationality, he doesn't want it stolen. Mad people are the majority in L.A.; just ask anyone in San Francisco. Do you know what he does for a living?'

'Something in electronics. The SpaceJet laboratory is within a mile of the apartment.'

'Give me his name and address, and call me if he contacts you again.'

Monsieur Butterfly phoned next day, I didn't ask how he knew my number. He said he remembered not paying me. I replied that I did it as a favour to someone. He offered to take me out to lunch. I accepted. I phoned Peru but she was not at home.

We sat in the Chinese restaurant. It was one of the older ones that look totally Anglo-American apart from a few token paper lanterns hanging near the cash

register. We ordered. Monsieur Butterfly smiled. In search of wisdom I cracked open a fortune cookie but didn't find it.

'I was told you are someone I can trust Larry.'

I grunted and waited for him to drop the other shoe.

'My brief meeting with you last night confirmed that in my mind. I have an errand for you that will be to your profit. A woman in Taiwan has inherited the most complete collection of Chinese butterflies in the world and wishes to sell it. I don't expect you to realise what a treasure that is. I want you to buy it for me and bring the collection back.'

'I don't go to Taiwan and I don't carry large amounts of cash when travelling. I am sure there is a good agent in Taipei who can handle your purchase through an American bank and freight the collection on to you.'

'I am not buying with money. It is a trade. The collection will be exchanged for documents, mainly circuit diagrams.' The face of Monsieur Butterfly flushed with the audacity of his plan: as well it might. 'The transaction can be done anywhere that is not under U.S. control. You will, of course, deliver the butterflies to me and be rewarded.' He named a figure that was probably his life savings.

I knew that I was looking into a very weird mind. It was that 'perfect plan' sort of madness. The sort of thinking that got us into the Vietnam War. A plan that couldn't go wrong provided everyone does what you expect them to do and no one is telling lies.

I imagined myself in a Federal Prison, in the same cell as Monsieur Butterfly. He would be happy collecting moths as they dived suicidedly for the light bulb. For all I knew this maniac could be already under suspicion at SpaceJet.

'I suppose there are a lot of butterflies in the collection,' I said tentatively.

'Cases of them,' came the enthusiastic reply.

'This is not like carrying a few gems in my pocket,' I explained as to a child who plays with matches. 'They will have to go through Customs. There will be all sorts of health laws regarding bringing dead animals into the United States. Forms will have to be filled and the name on the form will have to match with the name on my passport. I'm not interested.'

I didn't mention that the insects may not exist and I would be dead meat once I handed the diagrams over; I felt the need to keep it simple.

He gave me the same look that Crazy Freddy gave when I said that computers were boring. 'You are making a joke of it. You don't realise how important this is.'

'Not for me it isn't,' I said as I arose. 'Why don't you do it? Excuse me while I make a phone call about my next flight.'

I didn't reach the phone booth. A Chinese waiter holding a gun told me to sit down and keep both hands on the table. Two men from a well known Federal Agency were standing on either side of my dining companion. He was silently opening and closing his mouth: more like a fish than a butterfly.

They took Monsieur Butterfly away to wherever they take mad people who plan to sell circuit diagrams to foreign powers. I was driven by the waiter to a Holiday Inn near the San Bernardino Freeway.

I was led into an upstairs room. My escort stepped outside and closed the door. There was Peru, and a man I had never seen before. He was about ten years older than me, broad head, broad shoulders, slightly less than average height, intelligent eyes. The man nodded towards a chair.

Since the disappearance of Nina, the only tavern in the village was owned by Johnny of Cheese. He was called Johnny of Cheese because his father, also called Johnny, had tried to set up a business as a cheese merchant. The business failed and the father turned the shop into a tavern. The name stuck for father and son.

One day Paul led me into the tavern. He took me to a table. Paul saw that my head wasn't much higher than the table top so he found me a stool. He got himself a chair and ordered two glasses of wine.

I had never drunk wine before; my mother did not allow wine in the house because her father had been an alcoholic. I sipped and pulled a face at its bitterness. A woman, who I supposed was Mrs Cheese, looked with disdain at Paul as though he represented all male stupidity. She came from behind the bar with a teaspoon of syrup and stirred it into my drink. I took another taste and liked it. The men in the bar were all smiling at me. Paul scowled at them and they turned away quickly.

'Good,' said Paul. 'You are now a man and I have things to tell you. I want you to remember what I say even though you will not understand yet. I have asked Carmen to make my lace. I know that soon I will be dead and it is important that I speak.

Joe is a good man but he has no feelings for family or the human race. He thinks the Empire has all the answers. Empires come and go, they can be Roman or Spanish or British, they don't matter. You will do bad things and good things in your life, it doesn't matter. Sometimes you will believe in God and sometimes you won't, it doesn't matter. What matters are love and a glass of wine. Do you understand?'

I shook my head.

'That's all right. As long as you remember.'

The Book of Beginnings

Peru gave me a wink but said nothing. 'My name's Bragg,' said the man in an Australian accent. 'And you Larry are a piece of flotsam. The only thing useful about you is that you seem to be on first name terms with half the villains in the Pacific. What's more: they foolishly trust you. I don't, but it would be a waste to put you in jail. From now on you work for me until the War's over. I have made arrangements with your employer.'

'I'm not going to be trusted after today,' I said. I felt it unnecessary to say that I was a dead man once the word got back to the networks.

'Today never happened. You never went to a Chinese restaurant. Our American cousins arrested that man at work for suspected espionage. Records will show you flew out of L.A. at eight this morning. You have gone to San Francisco to visit an old flame and,' nodding towards Peru, ' she isn't here either. I am at the moment attending a Police Officer's conference in San Diego. Is that perfectly clear?'

I nodded.

'Soon you will return to your old duties and your old crimes. Whenever you take some valuables to America you will pass on this information to your friend on my right. She will let the Federal Agency know, and they will track this wealth as they see fit. Peru, as you insist in calling her, will be working as a journalist in the Pacific area and your paths will cross frequently.

'If you get into bother with the law we may help you, but if you fall foul of the drug lords I suggest you get on your knees and pray. You are both booked for a flight to San Francisco in an hour. I hope you have a pleasant trip.'

That night Peru and I watched the sky darken over the bay from her attic window. To exorcise the day's events I talked of Paul.

'Just just write down what you know and file it away Larry or it will drive you mad.'

'Why?'

'Incomplete stories are like that, I have a filing cabinet full of them. Gather the pieces together and put red and black ribbons round them. Then take the bundle and put it in a drawer.'

'Why red and black?'

'Because those kinds of story are always about sex and death.'

'And possibly a baby.'

'Babies tend to crop up in that sort of story Larry.'

Next day I wrote the story of Paul but didn't mention Nina.

The Story of Paul.

When I knew Paul I was a very small boy and he was an old man. We were both at the age of a profound understanding of simple things. From him I learnt that the best time to pick prickly pear was early in the morning and that boats have souls. When I talked of Paul to others their responses seemed puzzling and contradictory.

The men in the tavern likened him to Odysseus. The priest compared him to one of the thieves at the crucifixion. My mother said Paul was really just a rogue and a liar. These were the sort of non-answers that were given to a child. I had already learnt that adults do not always tell the truth. I knew that, on the night of the Epiphany, the Three Kings were not the ones who placed marzipan and nuts at the foot of my bed.

Paul was a rogue, but his criminality pales before the iniquity of the time. Paul, in partnership with his two-masted schooner *Calypso*, was a trader. Men have carried out sea trade from Malta since before the time of Christ, but Paul's trade was highly irregular.

'Irregular trade' could be anything from contraband to stolen goods; sometimes it involved human cargo and there was always a demand for guns in the Balkans. Paul was not entirely without merit, he was a fine sailor and a good storyteller. But these were the mundane skills expected of a male. It was really his criminality and World War One that made him into Odysseus.

In 1915 the Mediterranean seemed awash with warships. *Calypso* was inspected in every harbour by nosy men in uniform. To make matters worse, Paul's younger brother, Tomas, went insane and eventually killed himself.

Paul accepted the obligations of an older brother and visited his sister-in-law to offer help. She affronted Paul's sense of propriety by refusing assistance.

'Carmen, how do you expect to live?`

'I will make lace,' she said. 'I have some ready for sale.'

'Don't you know there is a war on? No one is going to come to the village to buy your lace.'

'You will take it with you on your next voyage and sell it where you can.'

'I don't sell lace,' he grunted.

'It will only be a package, it won't take up much room. It will be the first legal cargo you have carried in ten years.' Then she slammed the door in his face.

Paul scowled at two women slowly sweeping in front of their houses and strode to Johnny's tavern.

'A man is looking for you,' said Johnny as he poured Paul's wine.

'Did he say what he wanted?'

'I think he has something to sell.'

'The second person today, I am not interested. What is it anyway?'

'Ten barrels of Navy rum disappeared from the docks last night.'

Paul looked across the square at a cat stalking a lizard. *The rum will be cheap because the thieves have to get it off their hands. A large army is congregating in Egypt, thirsty men.* The idea of rum stolen from the British being sold back to the British made Paul smile. He gave Johnny a wink.

Paul provided for his family in case the voyage proved to be a long one, and then prepared to sail. He was loading water onto *Calypso* when Carmen appeared out of the dusk with a package under her arm. She unfurled the cloth in front of him.

'It is very large,' Paul said. 'I do not recognise the design, it is not traditional.'

'It is six months work,' Carmen said. 'It is the design a woman makes when she is living with a madman.'

Paul sighed and took the cloth below to the cabin. When he returned Carmen was gone. *Calypso* slipped out of harbour in darkness for a meeting with ten barrels of rum.

Paul noticed the funnel and smoke on the horizon on the first day out, it was still there on the third morning. He had a hatred of steam boats, especially ones owned by Customs and Excise. Paul had intended to run south once east of Crete, instead he put *Calypso* on a northerly tack. The Greek islands seemed the only hope of throwing off pursuit.

Paul was navigating the Cyclades when *Calypso* was boarded by the crew of a German gunboat.

'What language do you speak?' Asked the officer in French.

'A little English, a little Italian, a little Arabic, a little French. I am Maltese.'

'You carry a valuable cargo, and you have no documents. I think we have caught a queer fish.'

'I am just a poor man engaged in trade; I am only in the Cyclades to avoid the British.'

'You are technically British, and I could have you shot as a spy. I will merely take your cargo and sink you.'

A sailor emerged from the cabin and produced the lace.

'Is this part of your trade Maltese?' Asked the officer.

'Not normally; my sister-in-law makes lace, she is a widow and hopes that I can sell it.'

'The women in my village also make lace,' said the officer as he spread the cloth on the deck. 'This is a strange design, but very clever. I think there will be many widows making lace in Europe. We will just take a barrel of rum. Go on your way Maltese.'

That night *Calypso* lay at sea-anchor north of Andros, and Paul slept on the deck with his knife beside him. His dreams included the sound of creaking cables and English voices. When Paul awoke the voices continued, he was surrounded by a fleet of warships. On the southern horizon were smoke and a forest of funnels and masts.

Paul was preparing to slip away when he saw a cutter approaching. A petty-officer stood on the prow with a pistol in his hand and two of the sailors had rifles raised. *This is a lot fuss for a bit of rum*, thought Paul. The petty-officer jumped aboard and shouted in English.

'We have commandeered your craft, and you are going to the Dardanelles. His Majesty needs shallow draught vessels for the landing of troops.'

'To Hell with His Majesty! What if I don't want to go?'

'We can lock you up or shoot you. You can complain to the Admiralty after the war.'

Paul thought of the nine barrels of Navy rum in the hold and grunted consent.

An hour later three sailors arrived on board with provisions and a red ensign. Paul watched them as they stowed their gear below; he observed their look of wonder as they re-emerged on deck.

Paul gave them a wink. 'If you keep quiet, you can drink all the way to the Dardanelles; if you tell the Navy, the Admiral will drink it all.'

The sailors understood and laughed.

Calypso crossed the wide Aegean Sea and Paul watched his profits slipping down men's throats. A sailor called 'Taffy' took an interest in the lace.

'I had an aunt who used to do tatting you know; she always did the same design, it was always daffy-dillies. That lace you have is very strange, it has little white crosses in rows getting smaller and smaller towards a horizon.'

'Good,' said Paul, 'I am glad you can see a pattern in it.'

They listened to the thump of shellfire along the peninsular as the fleet waited for rendezvous with the troop ships.

'Very noisy,' said Paul.

'They say if you hear the bang that means it hasn't hit you,' said Taffy.

'Are you going ashore?'

'No I will be staying with the boat. The troops should be all right, they say the Turks aren't much as soldiers.'

'There could be a lot of them up there, I don't fancy going close inshore.'

'It's a long coast line, they say the Turks won't know where we will land.'

'Never listen to what people say Taffy, especially 'they.' 'They' are the biggest liars of them all.'

Taffy laughed nervously and drank his rum.

Calypso sank lower in the water as a stream of troops clambered onto the deck. Paul cursed His Majesty, cursed the Turks, and muttered a special curse for the soldiers with gold braid on their shoulders. Boats of all kinds were moving towards the dark shore. Shore guns started firing like flowers of light in the darkness. At last *Calypso* was cast off from the troopship. Paul looked at the soldiers. *They are eager, the fools are eager.* Taffy was working the tiller; his face was without expression.

Calypso struck the shore. As troops scrambled into the water the craft gained buoyancy and started to turn as if hungering for the open sea. Paul sighed with relief as Taffy steered the boat back towards the fleet, neither saw the flowers of light aimed at *Calypso*. The first shell splintered the bow, the second strafed shrapnel across the deck. Paul remembered nothing more.

When Paul awoke his hair was caked with blood, and water was lapping over the deck. Taffy lay near the shattered tiller with half his face missing. The sky was black with smoke, in the sea dozens of dead men floated past. *I am in Hell or we are still*

afloat, it is the rum keeping Calypso above water. Paul sank back into unconsciousness. *Calypso* drifted on like a grieving god among the slain.

Paul waded onto the Greek island amidst the bleating of goats, *Calypso* lay beached and askew on a sand bar. An elfin girl stared in horror at this hideous man walking towards her and ran away. She returned with a priest and a gaggle of villagers. The priest smiled and pointed towards the Dardanelles, Paul nodded and they led him the village. I think it was at this point that Paul became Odysseus.

A story was expected of him, but he could not tell of the madness he had witnessed. They wanted the story of a hero in a glorious battle, not a tale of a man engaged in irregular trade. It started modestly enough, the mere telling of how he had outwitted a German battleship among the Cyclades. As repairs on *Calypso* progressed he was forced to tell of how he volunteered for the dangerous task of sailing inshore to deliver the troops. The listeners wanted more, Paul then told the most Homeric tale of all. He told of how in the heat of battle, when *Calypso* was sinking fast, he used barrels of rum to keep the craft afloat.

The whole village was there when Paul was ready to rejoin the repaired *Calypso.* Paul knew that he had an obligation to give something. He offered a barrel of rum and they refused it. Paul offered the only other thing he had, the sea stained lace. They accepted it and the priest gave Paul a blessing.

When Paul returned home he did a deal with Johnny who sold the rum piecemeal to Saturday night sailors. Some of the money went to Carmen for the lace. He retold the stories to avid listeners and wove into these tales the fable of the lace with the mysterious pattern.

The lace took on a prophetic significance and Carmen's work became much in demand for altar cloths.

Paul did not do so well, his enterprises had become common knowledge to the authorities. Paul beached *Calypso* and took the humiliation of working as a deck hand on a Red Sea steamer. In 1918 he heard there was money to be made smuggling Russian refugees from Odessa to Athens. Paul refitted *Calypso* and headed once more for The Dardanelles.

He was gone for three months and returned with a cargo of ghosts.

The Book of Beginnings

I did not meet Bragg again for two years. He was a clever man; Peru and I were foolish to believe that he lacked the imagination to realise that we would try to deceive him. Yes we kept up a flow of information of the movement of baubles to America, but our partnership allowed Peru to gather other intelligence and sell it.

We didn't do it for money and any we made we spent as fast as we could, it was a way of establishing our identity as creatures beyond the ties of national allegiance.

Imagine us flitting from place to place, dressed in the absurd fashion of the time, foolishly believing that we would never be pinned down. We were not Romeo and Juliet but neither were we Lord and Lady Macbeth. When we weren't together we weren't anything. Take the example of Samoa in 1973.

The C141 transport hit the black gravel of Pago-Pago at precisely 03.22 Zulu. I unclipped my seat-belt and wondered who I was. This was an unscheduled stop in the wrong hemisphere; I had a new identity waiting for me in Hawaii, a landing in Pago-Pago smelled of betrayal. Dozens of grumbling G.I.s poured out of the plane ahead of me; they didn't know why they were there either, but at least they knew who they were.

As I walked to the customs barrier I noticed a civilian DC-8 parked on the adjacent runway. It had an unusual antennae above the nose cone. Three men in MIT T-shirts were carrying black boxes onto the aircraft.

A young officer standing near the barrier waved to me and indicated towards a staff car nearby. He had that look of innocence: the loose limbs, the fair hair, the wide blue eyes. He reminded me of Crazy Freddy. I wondered if he played tennis. As we drove away from the airfield he handed me an ID.

`You've made me an Armenian,' I said. `Why an Armenian? I can't speak Armenian.'

Why am I complaining? I mustn't overreact. I am almost certainly under surveillance. This turkey could just be the sort character sent to take note of my reactions.

He laughed. 'You look just like an Armenian I knew in Hannibal Missouri; you won't meet many Armenians in Pago-Pago. You're only going to be here for five hours.'

'Doing what?'

Why did I ask that? I do whatever the giver of my identity requires, that is my job. This man may not be a fool.

`Calm down, be nice, headquarters has diverted a plane and sixty-three G.I.s to get you here. People pay money to vacation on this island you know.'

The man is a fool. 'Do you want gratitude?' *Another stupid question. Gratitude is like truth and honour, it is not in the vocabulary of War.*

He smiled patiently. `We want you to recognise someone who will give us information, someone in your occupation. H.Q. says this guy is on the island. Our belief is that he arrived on a tourist ship that is leaving the island tonight. We have a list of crew and passengers waiting for you at the security office.'

`What about local people?'

`Ignore the islanders,' he said, 'we are looking for a traveller.'

`Islanders are often great voyagers, they cross the time-zones.'

He laughed. ' We have enough trouble getting them to work, never mind crossing time-zones.'

'What about the people on the DC-8?'

'You haven't seen that plane.'

I didn't say another word until Laughing Boy dropped me off at the security building. I waved my Armenian ID at the guard, he looked at it and pointed to the intelligence office.

Very nice. I must try being an Armenian more often. There was a Master Sergeant at the desk. He didn't look innocent; Master Sergeants never look innocent. He gave me a contact number, and asked if I had any questions.

'Are there any civilians on base?'

'Three Samoan gardeners, seven Aerojet technicians, and you.'

'Did the Aerojet people arrive on the DC-8?'

'This a military establishment, and there are no civilian aircraft on this base.'

'I can assume there are no suspect civilians on this base, not even ones that that arrived by non-existent aircraft.'

'I couldn't have put it better myself.'

'Why does the captain think this guy is on the cruise ship?'

'Don't worry about what the captain thinks.'

'Why not?'

'Never worry about any officer under the rank of major.'

'Have you any ideas?'

'I don't have ideas, I'm a Sergeant. The only thing I know is that this guy is Charlie.'

'North Vietnamese?'

'No probably American or European, but working for the North.'

'I'll go for a walk and find Charlie.'

'You do that, if you put a bullet in him I won't notice. At this base we get the C-141s

carrying the body bags on-route to Hawaii. There are people on this base who would like to do terrible things to Charlie.'

The guard gave me directions to the base gate. As I crossed the parade ground I noticed the G.I.s I had arrived with. They were sitting under a group of trees, settling in nicely for a little steady drinking. *There are thousands of men like these, trapped in transit, crossing and re-crossing the Pacific from one obscure base to another. Some of them are sober, some are dead drunk, and some are dead.*

The officer-in-charge at the gate accepted my Armenian ID and warned me of a cyclone that was expected in a few hours. I thanked him and refused his offer of a car. My target wanted to be found but not discovered, Charlie would be very close to the base.

I passed a few crowded places of entertainment but then I found a quiet little bar with just one rental car parked outside. The Samoan barman was wiping the counter while watching the Vietnam War on the news. Seated at the counter was Peru. Our eyes met in the mirror. Peru mouthed a silent `hello' and ordered a brandy for me. I expected to find a Harvey Wallbanger in front of her and it was there. Peru had acquired a taste for the silly cocktail about six months before. We were repositories of each other's habits. If identity is memory we were both incomplete without each other.

We traded. I told about the spook aircraft and the antenna. Peru gave me the name and description of a man on the cruise ship. Somewhere in some country Peru would sell the information about the spy plane. Somewhere my man would be detained for questioning. Would he be guilty? Sure he would, well, he would be guilty of something.

Peru always got her facts right, her marketability depended on her credibility. Peru was that 'usually reliable source' that intelligence agencies talk about.

'I was told you'd find the right guy,' said the officer as he drove me to the airfield.

'Am I going to be travelling with fifty drunken G.I.s?'

'No, sixty-three.'

'Maybe the last few hours makes sense to them,' I said.

He made the unbelievable reply: 'Everything makes sense further up the chain of command.'

'No it doesn't, it's madness all the way,' I said. 'Don't worry the war will end and you will be safely out of uniform one day.'

The officer looked distressed, I thought he was going to cry. I suddenly realised that if he was out of uniform he would lose his identity. I handed him the Armenian ID and walked to the plane.

When Paul died local people seemed as ambiguous about him in death as they were during his life. Paul had wanted to be buried at sea but my grandmother insisted he was laid in church ground.

'She knows he's a good swimmer,' said Carmen.

Paul would have laughed at the funeral. Very few people from the village were there, but some thirty mourners, from foreign parts, paid respect. A man in the uniform of a Royal Navy Commander came for the burial. The stranger did not speak to anyone, and he neither attended the service nor stayed for the wine. I remember him with his cap off, and white hair blowing, as the priest read the last rites. I doubt very much if the officer knew that he was standing next to a delegate from the Corsican Mafia.

Carmen didn't go to the funeral. When I saw her next day she was busy with her bobbins.

'I am finishing Paul's lace,' she said. 'It will take a few more weeks.'

The Book of Beginnings

There were times when we got on each other's nerves. Peru developed a fascination with the *Book of Beginnings* as though it explained everything about me. This was not true and was never the intention of the Book.

Peru and I were stuck in L.A. airport. A connecting flight to San Francisco had been cancelled. It was the fourth of July holiday, and half of America seemed to be waiting for a plane. I knew that there would be a commuter aircraft in an hour, and it was fully booked. I knew they always kept a couple of seats aside for emergencies and return-flight crew. I had a conversation with a woman at the counter and she obtained two tickets for me.

I returned to the coffee lounge with the news. I thought that Peru would be pleased. She turned on me, white with rage.

'You've done it again! It's the village! Why don't you just forget about the village?'

I was stunned. I had saved Peru a six hour wait. The village was the last thing on my mind. But I was not going to have the village attacked.

'The village made me!'

'No it didn't, the village spoilt you.'

'Nonsense.'

'You were a cute little boy in a village run by women.'

'Maybe.'

'Children from Naples to Warsaw were eating out of garbage cans. Did you ever miss a meal?'

'That doesn't mean I was spoilt.'

'No, but it does mean you learnt to press buttons. Press the Nina button you got something. Press the Carmen button you got something. For the rest of your life you have just pressed buttons. They didn't know it, but they trained you on how to manipulate women. By the time you left Malta you were an expert.'

'You make me sound evil.'

'No you are not evil. You are worse than evil. To be evil you have to have values.'

'I don't manipulate you.'

'No. That is a something you learnt later. As you grew older you learnt that it didn't work on some women. That's cool as far as you're concerned, there are plenty of others.'

'Women like me. What is the harm?'

'The harm is that you see the whole world as your nipple. Give it a tweak and you get what you want. You are a taker Larry. I love you. I understand you. I know that you thought you were doing something for me. Please take the tickets back.'

The village seemed empty with Nina and Paul gone. Joe was running out of money. My father had worked long hours during the war and had saved hundreds of pounds. Then, when the war was over, we came to Malta.

'It was stupid,' said my mother. 'It wasn't his money: it was our money. We could have bought a house. Instead he comes to Malta. Joe should have known he wouldn't fit in. No one really wanted him back. Now we return to England with nothing.'

My mother had never spoken to me like this before. I felt I should make a manly answer. 'Not a pot to piss in,' I said.

'Where did you pick that up? It's disgusting.'

'I don't remember,' I mumbled.

'I can guess. I think its better if you don't remember a lot of things Paul taught you. I know he was your friend but we are going to England and you will make friends of your own age. The people here have no concept of childhood. Malta is best forgotten. You learnt nothing useful here; sauntering around the village all day has turned you into a ragamuffin.'

The Book of Beginnings

Although allied army involvement in Vietnam was almost over by 1973, airborne and covert support remained to the bitter end. There was a feeling of urgency about turning U.S. Dollars into something else.

The greenback was falling in value and there was a rush among dealers to get into Swiss Francs and Deutsch Marks. The idea seemed to be that this money would find its way back to America via Europe and be turned back into greenbacks at a profit. The U.S. dollar was expected to appreciate after the war.

The years of broken sleep were taking their toll. I had a recurring dream. It wasn't based on anything I had experienced. I assume that the nightmare came from some forgotten story.

I was flying above an industrial town in a down-at-heel tropical country; beneath me was a blighted zone of sheds and ramshackle houses on the edge of the sea,

the brownness of the land was relieved by occasional clumps of flaccid looking palm trees and spiky bamboo. As I descended, I saw the grime and I heard the cawing of scavenging birds. A child's corpse lay in an open drain; it's swollen belly had burst and a skeletal dog was tugging at the child's gut; at each tug the body twitched and jerked as though it was returning to life. I heard the sound of approaching soldiers and ran into a large shed; there amid the darkness and buzzing flies were bodies hanging on hooks.

Let the disciples of Messrs Freud and Jung make of it what they will; I put it down to exhaustion.

I was in a bar on more or less legitimate business when I made the mistake of looking at myself in a bar mirror. I saw the face of an old young man. I had taken on a hawkish look. I still weighed the same as when I was eighteen but my hair was thinner. The Gypsies say that if you stay in one place too long you grow old. If this was true I was doomed to haggard eternal youth.

It was then that I first noticed a man. He was standing about three metres behind me nursing a bourbon glass. It was the standard distance of a shadow, too far for conversation but close enough to not lose me in a crowd.

He had that peculiar hairstyle favoured by American ex-servicemen: a short haircut combined with long sideburns and thin drooping moustache. It was as though they vowed to change their appearance once they left the service, but on leaving the Forces they could not bring themselves to wear long hair – I think it stemmed from a fear of being thought homosexual. The dress code of your average ex-GI was the same as what servicemen wear when on-leave: zip jacket, jeans, check shirt, elastic sided boots. I suspect that is their uniform until they die.

I wouldn't have worried but we had been on the same C-141 transport a week earlier. He could only travel on a military aircraft if he was working under government or military orders. It was reasonable to assume the man was working for a Federal agency. Time would tell if he was tailing me.

On the way to the DC-8 I bought a writing pad and envelopes. In the plane I wrote a note to Peru telling her I was being followed by a Yankee. My shadow sat four seats behind.

A week later Peru phoned me from heaven-knows-where.

'Are you still being followed?' she asked.

'I certainly am. Yesterday I was in a café glancing through one of those old magazines they leave around. When I left I looked back and he was leafing through the journal to see what I had been reading. The only consolation is that he seems to be improving his taste in clothing. I went into a shop and bought a jacket; he followed me and bought the same coat. I think I'll get a pair of lace-up shoes tomorrow.'

'Be serious Larry. Where is he now?'

'Leaning against a bar about six metres away. His attention is diverted by the glances of a young lady who is admiring the new jacket. As Jane used to say, 'cloving is magic."

'From what you've told me about Jane, she seems to be very like Nina.'

'Yes, and your personality is similar to that of my mother.'

'That's weird and insulting.'

'Nonsense. Most men are attracted to women like their mothers. I had three women influencing my early childhood. It gives me a wider range of lovers.'

'I am not going to pursue this arrogant male-psychology bullshit. This is my last phone call. Don't contact me until you've lost your shadow. You are on your own.'

'I don't see it ending.'

'You would just be picked up if they had anything on you. You've been profiled. It's a sort of witch-hunt. Such investigations are based partly on whatever psychological theories are fashionable, but the major component is prejudice. Just relax, but be aware of your rights. It has happened to me on several occasions. Remember it is costing them more than it is you. Tracking an individual through the trivia of daily life is a time consuming and expensive business.'

'If he keeps following me into clothing shops, my shadow is going to end up looking like me. Apart from the sideburns and moustache.'

'Don't worry about it. I expect the whole thing will fade out, and your shadow will be called home for exceeding his budget. Until then you are on your own.'

I left a message among the dealer network to let them know I was being targeted. They sent me one back to tell me I was on my own. That seemed to be the prevailing opinion from all quarters.

Carmen and I walked down to the beach. I had never seen the old woman away from the village before but she negotiated the rocks like a young goat. On Carmen's instructions I carried the lace.

'Why have you sewn pennies into each corner?' I asked.

'Maybe to make it sink or maybe to pay the ferryman. You can make your choice.' Carmen walked to a rock ledge at one end of the beach and I followed.

'Now,' said Carmen, while taking the lace, 'take the other end. We will swing it back then forward and throw.'

In spite of its penny-weights, the lace caught the air turbulence that is always above waves. It glided before disappearing into the sea.

'What now?' I asked.

'Nothing now. It's all done. The last lace has been made. There is nothing more to say. The dead cannot speak, and the living cannot hear. No more questions. Go home to your mother. Come and see me before you leave for England.'

She walked ahead of me and I could not see her face.

The Book of Beginnings.

My shadow and I flew from country to country. He shaved his upper lip. We crossed and re-crossed the International Date Line. He bought a couple of *Pierre Cardin* shirts. Then it ended suddenly.

I got off the plane at Sydney on a sunny winter's morning. It was the sort of day when delightful chances happen in that city. I passed through an arcade of shops on my way to the bus bay.

One of the shops was in the process of being refitted. It was decked with vacant shelves and clothes racks. Sitting on a high stool was a young woman drinking a glass of champagne. I stepped inside to say hello and she poured me a glass. We were talking of this-and-that when burly men arrived with trolleys and packing cases.

'What's in those?' I asked.

'The shop, ' replied the girl, and she went immediately into a sales pitch.

'A complete new line of travel gear for the young adventurer: backpacks, parkas, sleeping bags, socks, shirts, jeans, footwear. Everything bright, everything lightweight, everything washable. Everything,' she said conspiratorially, 'with hidden pockets for that special little something that you don't want the Police to find in Singapore. It all goes under the *Travellin Jain* label.'

'Well,' I said. 'If I ever decide to travel I'll buy some.' Obviously Jane was back on the track.

The champagne girl went into work mode on the cases, but, before I left, she gave me the address of a party that was on that evening.

When I stepped outside my shadow was ahead of me and he was frantic. I stood in the doorway of a camera shop, and watched him run to the bus bay and then back to the lounge. Then the fool decided I must be already on the bus and ran out of the terminal, and onto the road. I saw the white blur of an accelerating car. I saw my shadow bounce off the vehicle with an almost graceful trajectory. I turned away at the sound of his skull cracking against the kerb.

The car slowed and then revved out of the car park and disappeared into the traffic chaos of Botany Road. It was a white Jaguar Coupé, an XK120, circa 1950, a very quick machine. Most of them were exported to America. You had to have connections to obtain an XK in Britain at the time. They doubled in value once they left the showroom. Only the elite of the Soho underworld drove them. I had never seen one in Australia before.

The victim was as dead as a rag doll. His face had been scraped away on the concrete, but I would know those sideburns anywhere. He was wearing the same jacket, pants and shoes, as me.

There were some thirty other witnesses to the murder, but none were able to identify the make of the car. I also pleaded ignorance. Even the colour of the vehicle became lost in the shock of the event. The witnesses prevaricated between ivory and pale blue. Everyone agreed the car was fast.

I booked into a hotel near Sydney Town Hall. I did not go to the party — something that I still regret. I had a spare week in Sydney. I would normally have celebrated this, but the attempt on my life had shaken me. It could have been any one of my employers deciding I was a bad risk. It could have been any Federal Agency coming to the same decision. I felt a sense of loss for my dead shadow. We had been companions of sorts. I spent an entire day in my hotel room. During that time I placed classified advertisements in two newspapers and a motoring journal. The ad' expressed an interest in buying a Jaguar coupé, 1948-54.

There was a Bible in the hotel room. I filled in my time by reading *The Book of Revelation*. It has a lot of gore and a preoccupation with the number seven. The book seemed to be a source from which authors got their titles. I read the text related to the *Grapes of Wrath*.

> *The grapes were trodden outside the city, and out of the winepress flowed blood for two hundred miles in a stream as high as the horses bridles.*

That night I slept dreamlessly for sixteen hours.

On the third day I was phoned by Bragg. He did not give any reason for wishing to see me and I did not ask. We arranged to meet one evening in a hotel near Darling Harbour. I wrote a letter to Peru itemising the events of the previous few days.

I didn't see Carmen again. Next day my parents started packing. The following morning we were on the ferry to Valletta. By that evening we were on a Union-Castle steamer bound for England. I was seven and was not really aware of the total nature of my separation from the past year.

It was only when the ship was in the Atlantic, and sailing along the coast of Portugal, that I realised the Mediterranean world was behind me. I remember crossing the invisible line that every Iberian mariner knows. I was standing at the rail with my father. The temperature dropped suddenly as though we had stepped out of a warm room into a winter's garden. The northern horizon disappeared in mist.

'We will be in the English Channel in two days,' said Joe, 'if its not too stormy in the Bay of Biscay.'

The Book of Beginnings.

It is not a long walk from Sydney Town Hall to Darling Harbour, but the streets are badly lit and the alleys are black.

Sound travels differently over the sea at night. The straining of hawsers and the rubbing of cables against ships at anchor can be heard over long distances. Sometimes you will hear a voice that sounds as if it is spoken into your ear but it really comes from a ship that is a mile out to sea. As I walked near the wharves my ears strained for following footsteps. The alleys merely echoed back the click of my own heels.

The pub was at least well lit. There was no Jag parked outside. I walked into a large tiled space with a long bar. It is always unwelcoming to enter a room that has obviously been designed to be hosed out easily. Some half a dozen wharfies leaned along the rail like piglets at the teat. I could hear the click of cue against ball in an adjoining room.

I ordered beer from a woman with a snake tattoo. The wharfies glanced at me in the mirror and returned to their drinks. Dark men in jeans and sweaters are common enough in the docklands to be regarded as uninteresting.

Bragg stepped out of the pool room. He had put on a little weight but still had a physique that must have evolved from generations of potato picking and brawling with bailiffs. Bragg gave me an honest smile that aroused immediate distrust.

'I hear you are in the market for a car Larry.' Bragg waved a hand expansively towards the pool room. 'Come, this will do as an office.'

I entered the room. It smelled of old tobacco and pine disinfectant. The pool table was in good condition, but the two tubular steel chairs looked as though they had been used in battle. The lino floor had had all discernible pattern scuffed from its surface. Along the wall was a cue rack and some framed photos of Rugby League teams. The overall effect was of run-down masculinity. Bragg followed me inside carrying his glass and my own.

'I never saw you as a connoisseur of fine cars Larry.'

'No, and you are not selling me one. What do you want?'

'I want you to forget about the car and the man you have repeatedly bumped into for the last few months.'

'Who killed him?'

'You don't expect me to answer that.'

'Who put him on my tail?'

'Ditto. It's all been a comedy of errors. Forget about it. I am sorry if it caused distress.'

I waited for the warning that would follow the apology, and it came.

'The key word is forget. It is time for a new start. Marry Larry. Become an Australian Citizen. The war is nearly over and everyone wants to forget it.

'Disappear Larry. You are a reminder of past crimes. You arouse feelings of guilt that can easily turn to hate. People will want kill you as a means of erasing their own memory.'

That was the end of the interview. A car came to pick up Bragg. I walked to the bar and bought another beer.

'Did you buy the motor Mate?' asked a wharfie, without looking in my direction.

'No. I didn't like the salesman.'

I was not to meet Nina for another twenty-five years. It was just after the Vietnam War.

I had maintained a Post Office box in North Sydney. I suppose it was a sort of proxy home, a place with a door and a key. Inside was a note from cousin Victor, and a letter from Peru.

Victor's note was as terse as his speech. 'Lori come and have a meal. Victor.' A phone number was scribbled at the bottom of the page as though it was an after-thought.

I met Victor in a wine bar near Wynyard Station. He was wearing a suit and had put on weight. We both had less hair. The food was superb and it was wonderful to eat in a public place without needing to look over my shoulder.

'Where are you staying?' he asked as he stirred his coffee.

'A motel in North Sydney until I can find a place.'

'How you paying?'

'Credit card. I have some money coming but it will take a few weeks.' He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a wallet and a ring of keys. Victor threw the keys onto the table and handed me a fold of banknotes.

'It is decent flat, stay as long as you like. Your family were good to me. I am working for Nina, she is in Sydney and wants to see you.'

The Book of Beginnings.

The stopover in Christchurch was only supposed to be for twelve hours. I spent a night in a hotel near the cathedral. At seven a.m. on a bitter winter morning I went to the airport. When I got there I was told the aircraft had a fault and it would be waiting on a part for three days.

Breakdowns tended to happen in Christchurch, even newly serviced planes developed faults. I was annoyed at being put behind schedule while the pilot improved his sex life.

The rest of the guys were shivering in their zip jackets as they discussed this unexpected R & R. I said I'd see them later and caught a cab to the hotel. The hotel

clerk handed me back my keys with a knowing smile. I wondered if this was some sort of tourist trade conspiracy.

I turned towards the coffee lounge but she called me back to hand me a folded slip of paper. I went to my room, phoned Peru, and asked the obvious question.

'How did you know I was here?'

'Elementary my dear Larry. I'm in Wellington. Half of New Zealand's manhood is up here to watch a football game. So I surmised that the rest of the cities are full of lonely women. You told me you would be spending last night in Christchurch. So knowing Christchurch's reputation, and putting two and two together...'

'I don't believe a word of it. And don't call it football, you could get bashed by a rugger-bugger. Why don't you fly down?'

'I hear it's cold down there. Why don't you fly up?'

I handed the keys back to the clerk with a knowing smile and caught a cab to the airport.

Peru met me at the airline terminus. The streets of Wellington were deserted. The only indication of life was a roar coming from a giant stadium at one end of the city.

Peru and I walked silently through quiet streets until we came upon a café that was open. There was no one in the establishment apart from an ornament to the counter who was reading the Turf Guide. Assuming he played some role in the business I asked for two coffees. The man shouted over his shoulder towards the kitchen. A brisk woman appeared and took our order.

'This is the most relaxed national capital I've ever been in,' I said.

Peru did not reply. She looked down into the vapours of coffee before speaking. 'It's all over. The war will be over six months. Get out, and get out soon. We have

two days together. Then it's bye-bye Lamb, it's been good to know you. I will retreat for a year to nice neutral country. What do you plan for yourself?'

'I suppose I will become an Australian Citizen.'

'Nonsense!'

'Why?'

'You don't know what citizenship is. Can I give you some advice?'

'Sure.'

'Throw away *The Book of Beginnings.* All the book shows is that you are the product of an Empire that no longer exists. There are millions like you all over the world; some of you speak French and others English, but you are all the same. You all have dark complexions, bright minds, and no idea who you are.'

'Who am I?'

'I don't know, but the answer doesn't lie in nationality. One day there may be a world citizenship and the problem will disappear. Until then you will always be on the outer. Get used to it and enjoy yourself; your foreigness gives you an enigmatic charm that some women find attractive. But throw the book away.'

I didn't throw the book away. It was true that the Maltese story was pretty well exhausted, but I thought about Elizabeth and all the other anonymous Elizabeths. The Land Enclosure Act was just as important a part of my past as the opening of the Suez Canal. I could not tell a family story because I knew nothing of them. I didn't want to write a history of England. I remembered something scribbled on the cover of a text book at school. *Geography is about maps, and History is about chaps*. Some memories are totally unhelpful.

Nina's address was in a part of Sydney that was unfamiliar to me. It was that area of boutiques and moored yachts to the east of the Cross. The dwellings were palatial. They all had bars on the windows and were surrounded by high walls. Nina's mansion was like all the others.

I rang the doorbell. It was answered by a woman who bore a resemblance to Nina when young.

'You're Lawrence, I'm Kate,' she said before I could speak. We both smiled because it sounded like 'you Tarzan me Jane.' She touched my arm and pointed down the hall to a pair of French windows. 'Nina is in the garden.'

Kate went into the kitchen and I walked through the house to the garden. The furniture didn't look borrowed. Nina was sitting in a cane armchair under a vine. I had expected the robustness of someone not quite sixty. She had the wasted look of fatal illness. Nina's wrinkled face was dappled by the shade of vine leaves, and gold bangles hung on withered arms. I sat on a bench nearby. I gave a smile. Nina nodded and spoke as if we had only been parted for a few months.

The Book of Beginnings.

As always there were some party guests who could not take a hint and go home, but we all departed one way or the other. I took Peru's advice and was back in Australia by 1974. Bragg left late. I heard he was found mutilated and drowned on a Luzon beach but later discovered that this was untrue. Eventually, after some brawling, a few groups in the drug network amalgamated and formed a consortium. The new organisation washed its collective hands, erased a few reminders of its past, and went legitimate by buying into the emerging Asian business boom.

I got out with my skin, well just a little bit more than my skin. I stepped onto the wet tarmac of Sydney Airport with a four day growth of beard and wearing a crumpled, and absurdly expensive, suit. In my pocket was a bent passport and the small change of three different currencies. When asked by the customs officer if I

had anything to declare I told him the party was over. He looked at my appearance and waved me through.

There was a letter from Peru in my Sydney Post Office box. It had the letterhead of a Singapore hotel.

Hi Lamb!!

Been here a week. Plumbing superb, drink mixers first class. Bar full of angry Americans and smug Europeans. The Singaporeans are busy being busy. I sit on the terrace reading Frankenstein and thinking of you. How's that for a complement!

It's been good to sleep every night at the same time and wake up seven hours later. I have crossed too many time-zones for too many years. Ain't gonna go to war no more.

I met a bag man from the Manila house. He told me that the next event will be in the Horn of Africa. I was completely uninterested.

See you when I see you.

Peru

P.S. Throw away the *Book of Beginnings.*

'I hear your grandmother is dead Lori.'

'She is dead Nina.'

'God rot her crazy soul. All the time I knew her she was as skinny as a piece of string and as a mad as a wonky wheel, but your grandmother outlived her generation. Did you know she was the reason I left the island?'

'No.'

'In the afternoon, when the bar was empty, I used to clean-up the place to be ready for the evening trade. I would shoo all the flies out of the building with a tea towel. One day I had a real swarm of them. I flicked them out of the door and they flew across the street and on into your grandmother's house.'

I laughed.

'Well, trade started to fall off after that. Then I noticed people were making the sign of the cross when they passed my door. I felt it was time to leave. I didn't need the village any more.'

The Book of Beginnings.

I found a flat on my first day back. It would have had a view of Darling Harbour but a new block of home units was in the last stages of construction outside my window.

I collected my old possessions out of storage and unpacked the suitcases in the bedroom. It was like looking into the life of another person. The old clothes were out of fashion and had been decayed by Sydney mould. There were maps of NSW and Tasmania with scribbled lines of old journeys.

I found a notebook with records of income and expenditure – this fellow was a penny-pinching young man. I threw the lot away, apart from the rucksack that contained books, and went out to buy some groceries and a bottle of red.

When I got back I cooked for the first time in three years and took delight in still being able to scramble eggs and grill bacon. I hadn't washed-up for three years either but felt no wish to rush into that novel experience. Similarly job hunting could

wait for Saturday's *Sydney Morning Herald.* In the evening I undid the buckles on the rucksack and let the books tumble onto the floor.

Most of them were the sort of novels you promise yourself to read but never do. There were some Steinbecks and Graham Greenes that I'd read until they were near disintegration. I reached into the rucksack and found Moira's gift of William Blake's poetry. It was still in its shop-wrapping.

I drank and read for the rest of the evening. I still found Blake an extremely irritating writer. His way of treating a vague wish as the basis of an argument reminded me of Sydney boarding-house schizophrenics I had known.

Christ never walked in England's green and pleasant land. Blake was never within fifty miles of a dark satanic mill. His knowledge of the charms of rural England was limited to the market-gardens and dairy farms around London. Child labour, and child abuse, were, if anything, worse on farms than in factories.

And yet, his is the only voice we have of the eighteenth century dispossessed. The thing that kept me reading was that somewhere my mother's ancestors were mixed in this turmoil.

Blake was not mad. I imagined him listening to the garbled accounts of the destitute walking through Soho streets. Stories of Gog and Magog were mixed up with accounts of the French Revolution, and the second coming of Christ.

'Carmen is gone also.'

'Yes.'

'Still her lace lives, and that is good. I am not long for this world.'

The litany of mortality was interrupted when Kate entered the room with a tray of cups. She poured the coffee as though enacting a sacred rite. As Kate placed the cup beside me her wrist brushed the hairs on my forearm without touching the skin.

Nina gave Kate a smile as she accepted her cup. They were definitely a pair. I recalled a Picasso painting of a young woman looking in a mirror and seeing her face reflected as an ancient – Picasso was often cruel to women in his paintings. These two seemed aware that they were reflections of each other and were quite unfazed by it.

'You met Victor, what did you think of him?'

'He looked well. He looked respectable. Not a knife in sight.'

'No one wears knives any more. It was a democratic weapon. Victor has grown fat, like a puppy. Some men stay puppies all their lives, and as they age they look like them. I hear that you are now the rogue in the family Loretto. The one they are silent about.'

'I have been abroad but have nothing to show for it.'

'That happens. Paul ventured many times and made a pittance. I have lost many times.'

I glanced at the acre of lawn and beyond to the view of Sydney Harbour. Nina's losses looked recouped.

The Book of Beginnings.

I only stayed in Sydney for a few months. I took a job working as an operative on a tracking station in Woomera. The history of Woomera is a story of the decline of empire. It is relic of the decade after the Second World War when European powers such as Britain and France were trying to travel first-class on a second-class ticket.

Woomera was established when the British had a belief that they were going to be among the first in space. A decade later it became a base camp for the British nuclear testing program.

Then there was the Blue Streak project, Britain's own ICBM, one of the best forgotten episodes of rocketry. It was followed by the ELDO project in which various European nations tried to attach smaller missiles on the nose of the discredited Blue Streak to make a multi-stage rocket. Some of the technology was very advanced for the time, but none of the countries trusted each other and Britain had no more money to spend.

This was decades before Woomera acquired an internment camp to house refugees. The history of the town followed the classic pattern of Empire. It began with discovery and ended up as a prison.

I was in Woomera when the British launched a satellite from an American Redstone rocket. Everyone expected it to fail because British rocketry had such a bad reputation. There was an Army Corporal who had the job of pressing the button that would destroy the missile when it went awry. The launch and trajectory were perfect. The satellite slipped into correct orbit. Everyone except the Corporal was in a state of shock. He just went to a bar and stayed drunk for three days.

There was still something of the British Garrison about Woomera's social structure. I don't know if the Sergeant's wife had less status than the Captain's, but I suspect she did. Drinking places were segregated according to rank or professional status.

The major line of social demarcation was between the families, that were housed, and single men, who lived in barracks. Unattached men were considered a threat and I suppose we were. Alcohol, at subsidised prices, was lavished on us. By some twist of logic that was unique to Woomera, single men were considered less of a menace to social stability if they were drunk.

I think I was regarded as more threatening than most because I spent my stay there under a barrage of ethnic vilification. I remember visiting Melbourne, while on leave, and thinking it odd that no one had yelled 'dago' into my face for twenty-four hours.

It was hard to get angry about name-calling because the Australians were always doing it to each other. Everyone had a nickname. Anyone named Fowler would be called Chook, and Caine would be called Sugar. There was a sailor who had been posted to this inland outpost by some bureaucratic mistake, and he was Sea-Dog. An aircraftman, who had finished off the glasses at a party, years before, was Dregs. A fellow named Rat was proud enough of his title to have it printed on T-shirts and engraved on a cigarette case.

The story of Woomera wasn't a complete waste; many Australians gained a lot of technical expertise from working on these projects. Australia actually launched a satellite before Britain. They did it at little cost by scrounging bits and pieces from the British and the Americans.

For a brief period Australian scientists and engineers were among the leaders in telecommunications and rocketry, but Federal Governments of both hues failed to capitalise on this. It is a problem in this country. Australia produces fine scientists, but is rarely willing to offer them continuity of employment.

'I saw you in London, but you never saw me. You were a lovely looking boy.'

'Where was that?'

'I bought a house in Soho. I let the top floor to a couple of girls and turned the downstairs into a shop. Most of the stuff was under the counter. I had friends in London Docks. Restaurants came to my door begging. An old woman wept in front of me when I sold her a litre of olive oil.'

'Elizabeth always said you could get anything.'

'It was illegal, it was a secret, but everyone knew about it. Soho is like that.'

'I know.'

'Your father, Joe, heard about this mysterious house in Greek Street that sold real food. He wanted to be such an Englishman but he couldn't stay away. One day, it was a Sunday, he came into the shop with you. I saw you from the back room, but I knew Joe would skip like a rabbit if he knew it was my shop. Anyway, he bought some Pasta from my assistant and you both walked out.'

'I remember. The spaghetti was as long as me.'

'That's how it was in those days.'

'I worked in Soho for a couple of years. I know the house. It was changed into a café called *La Morte*.'

'How do you know?'

'I met a man who remembered a woman with gold bangles.'

'Ha! But do you know what the gold bangles mean?'

'Vanity?'

'No-no-no. There were many women with gold bangles. They were like bankers. Money was worth nothing in Southern Europe just after the war. If a black-marketeer had coffee he sold it to the woman with bangles. Then she sold it to someone else.'

'Why did you leave the shop?'

'One of the girls was stabbed by her ponce. Prostitution is always a risky game. First the Police came, then Customs and Excise, and then strange little men from Government Departments. They wanted to deport me, but they couldn't because I was British. My business was finished. I knew I would never be left in peace if I stayed in England.

'Bill the Painter and I ran a boarding house in New York for a few years. We mainly had Haitians as tenants. They were good people but illegal. Katherine was born there.

'We decided to settle in Australia. They wouldn't take us at first because Bill had a shadow on the lung. The Haitians said they could fix it. They sent Bill to an old woman who gave him a lot of herbs. Stank the house out for six weeks but it cleared his lung.

'Bill and I came to Sydney. He died two years ago. He was a real friend. My only real friend. I own a couple of wine bars, one in the Cross, one in Darlinghurst. Victor keeps an eye on things. Australia has been good to me but I am finished.'

'Did you ever go back?'

'Where?'

'To Malta.'

'No Lori. You can never go back. Joe should never have gone back. Too much unfinished business. Too many unforgiven things. Never go back.'

'What was Joe's unfinished business?'

'You want a list?'

'While I was travelling I wrote about the village. I called it The *Book of Beginnings*. A friend of mine read it and said I was spoiled by women. There is nothing about Joe in the village. It was as though you and Carmen and Paul took me over. For years I thought it was because you all hated my mother, but you didn't did you?'

'No. I thought I would not like your mother, but we got on very well. Elizabeth was someone who did not live life to the full, but the English are like that. That was why Joe got on so well with them. I liked Elizabeth.'

'It was Joe you all hated. Why? Is it because he left the village?'

Carmen sighed. 'Joe was a good man, but he did damage to people and walked away. And he did it in a way to make himself appear good. Paul was a bad man who did good. Do you understand the difference?'

'What sort of damage?'

'Joe took Carmen's son away. Joe should have looked after him. Joe let Carmen's son get into trouble and then just walked away.'

'So Carmen was trying to take me from Joe?'

'No. We just wanted to show you there was another way of doing things. We didn't want you to grow up like Joe. When I first saw you I thought you were such a pretty little boy. It was impossible to keep my hands off you. We couldn't let you become like Joe.'

'I think you are hard on Joe. He did remarkable things.'

'We all do remarkable things. We do it to survive. What are your plans Lori?'

'Depends on where I find work. I plan to become an Australian citizen.'

'Why not? You live here. It doesn't mean a thing to the Aussies but it is a good thing to do. Why don't you work for me? Katherine will show you the ropes. You can run things. I have a few little sidelines that involve a bit of travel but not too much.'

It was tempting. The cunning old bird had it mapped out. There was even the appeal of the beautiful Katherine although she could be some sort of cousin.

'No thank you Nina. I am sure that Victor can run things. I am sick of travel. It would be a kind of going back.'

When I left I knew I would never see Nina alive again. I did not look back; I knew she wouldn't want me to.

The Book of Beginnings.

Another thing happened, in Woomera, that came back to bite me a decade later. Elizabeth wrote me a letter and in it she asked for money. I had never considered that my parents were desperately short of cash. I started sending a regular sum every month and kept it up until I married. I always named Elizabeth as the payee on the money orders because my mother was the one who had asked for help.

It reminded me of how little I knew about my mother's past. She had told me of childhood hardship. It was said as though she had been robbed of a birth-right. My mother's politics was based on this feeling of deprivation. Beneath it all was a vague legend of people being robbed of their land and being forced into bondage. It deserved a place in the *Book of Beginnings,* but there were no dates or names to go on. I started with Blake because he wrote about the same sort of thing. The trouble

with using Blake is that my account became mixed up with Soho, the French Revolution, funny little religions, and Australia.

William Blake was Soho's greatest child. He was born over his parents' hosiery and glove shop in Broad Street (now Broadwick Street). When Blake was a lad, Broad Street extended from the mansions near Golden Square to Pest Close – which was an old plague pit with a workhouse and orphanage built on top of it. The inmates used to weave silk.

In Blake's day Soho must have stank to high heaven. It wasn't just the shallow graves near Pest Close and the cattle slaughter houses in Carnaby Street and the open sewerage, but also the tide of unwashed humanity pouring into the square mile in search of work. The enclosure of the common lands had forced the rural poor into the cities.

The common lands were part of every village. The landless used them to subsist between harvests by grazing livestock, hunting, and gathering firewood and herbs. It is said that these common lands contained sacred places; it is impossible to tell the truth of this because the land went under the plough after the Enclosure Act. What is known is that when these acreages were taken by landowners the social fabric of what used to be the English village changed.

The Book of Beginnings.

I was sitting in the Woomera Senior Mess bar on December 1974 when someone announced that Darwin had blown away. I don't think anyone stopped drinking because of it, but Ted, the barman, had the presence of mind to turn up the volume on the radio.

One of the antediluvian engineers started rambling about a bombed Post Office and imminent Japanese invasion, but even he shut-up when the news of Cyclone Tracy came through.

For days we watched the refugees drive past Woomera towards Adelaide. Sometimes they stopped to obtain the simple necessities such as food, water, petrol, a change of clothing, soap and a place to wash away the red dust.

There was no Television reception in Woomera at the time so these people represented Darwin. They spoke like us; they looked like us; they drank beer; we treated them warmly and helped in any way we could.

Darwin was rebuilt into a finer newer city, but I look upon this disaster as the beginning of a reversion in the Australian psyche. Australians were reminded of how fragile their hold was on this country.

People started looking at maps, which is always a dangerous thing to do in Australia. It was noticed that without Darwin the third of Australia north of the Tropic of Capricorn appears vacant. Australians remembered fears of northern invasion by barbarian foreigners that they learnt in the cradle.

I met a Canadian in Woomera. He was over for a couple of weeks on some joint project. I asked this technician what he thought of Australia.

"Nice place,' came the reply, 'but it's rushing headlong into the nineteenth century.'

His statement was an exaggeration. Australia wasn't rushing at all. It took another twenty years before we were in the nineteenth century.

I used to work fifteen days straight at the tracking station and have five days off. Five days free time in Woomera is like a year in purgatory, and so I would fly to Adelaide. It was costing me a fortune in motel bills, and because of this I got a mortgage and bought a cottage in the city. That's how I became an Adeladean. I drifted into it.

What followed were a series of small rebellions that are only recorded in folk songs and the bare reports of County Assizes. Nocturnal battles were fought between armed gangs of gamekeepers and poachers. The corn ricks and barns of landowners were torched by masked riders. Mythical leaders, such as Captain Swing, captured popular imagination.

The government responded by increasing the number of offences punishable by hanging from thirty-six to over a hundred and fifty. By an anomaly of Elizabethan Poor Law a destitute person was outside the law once they left their home parish, but it was legal to be destitute provided you kept to the road. Villagers took to the highways and gravitated towards the larger centres where a blind eye was turned to their illegality.

It is said that the immigration of hungry people into the cities was a necessary prerequisite for the Industrial Revolution. It also made Britain unique among European nations in that it was the first to destroy its peasant class. I doubt if anyone at the time understood the significance of the change.

The Book of Beginnings.

Adelaide is a city of wide straight streets arranged in a grid pattern and surrounded by parks. It is a square mile. It has five city squares giving the map the appearance of a five of diamonds playing card. I took to strolling through the streets and the surrounding parks. There was something strange about the place, not threatening, just strange. I read about the person who designed Adelaide, Colonel Light, veteran, of the Napoleonic War.

The habits, acquired during my travels, melted away easily. My alcohol consumption dropped, permanently and without fuss, to almost zero in three months. My speech was more of a problem, I had acquired a kind of mid-Pacific accent and used a lot of American military jargon, it took about two years to rectify. A few things remain with me, I still have the coffee intake of someone with a permanent hangover.

My values had changed. I had been raised as a good Catholic boy with respect for authority. I lost that in the war, and it never came back. It wasn't just that I witnessed important people doing stupid things, but the nature of my work showed that being a VIP is merely role playing. To me the Pope is just some guy wearing a Pope ID.

I found out that my period overseas was euphemistically called Australian Government Service, and classed as residence in Australia. The late lamented Bragg had kept his word. I was eligible to apply for citizenship. The interview I had at the Immigration Department office was the most skilled I have experienced before or since. I went away thoroughly impressed with the process.

My feelings about the actual citizenship ceremony are more mixed. I believe that nowadays there is greater flexibility on these occasions. I attended the ceremony at Adelaide Town Hall. As I went into the foyer a child in a European national costume handed me a pink carnation. I found this intensely moving.

I entered a hall with about fifteen other migrants. There were three generations of an Italian Family, a young Irish pair, an elderly Czech couple, a Chinese woman, and myself. At one end of the room was a raised stage with a lectern. The Lord Mayor, in robes, made a speech about nothing in particular. A Member of Parliament made a speech on the history of the Immigration Program. Someone, we weren't sure who he was, made a speech on our rights and duties.

After the ceremony I felt that I had a great deal in common with my fellow initiates into citizenship, but absolutely nothing with the Australians who had conducted the event.

The problem was partly because they spoke to us from a raised position, which is how many Australians saw themselves in relation to migrants. It was also because,

collectively, we, standing in a huddle on the floor, had been witness to some of the most traumatic events of the Twentieth Century. We had made the journey. Compared to us the people on the stage were innocents. I should be grateful to these officials for giving their time, and I am; but a ceremony of this type should foster a feeling of kinship with Australians and it didn't. Half the people on the floor were women and there should have been a woman speaker.

As we filed out of the hall, with the certificates in our hands, the Italian granddad gave me a wink and said: 'What a bunch of wankers.'

As I said before, I believe citizenship ceremonies have changed in the succeeding decades. But, at the end of it all, I was now officially an Australian and that was the object of the exercise. We were all smiling when we left the Town Hall.

It is hard to give a title to these landless people as a group; they were no longer peasants but were not yet proletariat; they came from many parts of Britain, and in many cases could not understand each other's speech. The closest term I can find to describe them is: illegal immigrants in their own country.

There was something else that made them unusual. When these people left their villages they broke their links with the Anglican religion. It is an irony that, by supporting land enclosure, the Church of England lost most of its own congregation. I can only assume that the established church was so enmeshed in the State that it no longer thought it needed the common people.

Their numbers were added to by craftspeople pauperised by the new machines. These were folk of the same social class as William Blake. They could read and write; most were Bible folk, but they were also capable of writing seditious little pamphlets. They were aware of the Revolutionary ideas in America and France.

These two groups were initially quite distinct and remained so for a long time. I remember the words of an old compositor at the Soho printery.

'When I was a lad' – a phrase he used with frequency – 'machine operators came to work in cloth caps and compositors wore silk hats.'

The difference between those who operated the machines and those that set the type was that compositors had to be able to read and spell.

The thing that united these two classes in the 18th Century was their lack of hope. Their grandchildren were to enjoy the benefits of industrialisation. The people who crowded the streets of Soho in search of work, or charity, or something to steal, were detribalised and defeated.

The Book of Beginnings.

Adelaide is a metropolis of deception. Beyond the orderliness of the post-Napoleonic street plan is a deep anxiety. I have been told this is a characteristic of cities on the edge of deserts. At the time I favoured the romantic view that there was still a fear of the Paris mob.

This underlying dread of a threat from-without manifests itself in gossip and rumour mongering. I first encountered this within a few months of settling in.

I took a job as a computing assistant in the seismology section of a scientific organisation. Australia is one of the most seismologically inert land masses on the planet. There had been an earthquake, strong enough to do structural damage, in Adelaide in 1954, but generally nothing beyond the rattling of teacups had happened since. It seemed like an ideal job for someone recovering from the dislocation of travel.

My work mainly involved locating the epicentres of small tremors that were only discernible on sensitive instruments. One Spring morning I received a phone call at my desk.

'Hello. Do you work with earthquakes?'

'I plot them,' I said, hoping this didn't make my job sound too glamorous.

'Is Adelaide going to be destroyed by an earthquake and tidal wave in February?'

'It sounds very unlikely.' It seemed like a good time for a coffee break. 'There is no way of predicting earthquakes, but in South Australia you are more likely to be shaken by a quarry blast than an earthquake. As for tidal waves, its not my department but coasts usually have a history of them or none at all.'

'Is it going to happen?'

'Just forget it.'

'Your saying it won't happen.'

'I am saying forget it. It's nonsense.'

'You would say that wouldn't you?'

'If you don't believe what I say, why are you asking me?'

The doubter rang off. It was the first of hundreds of phone calls over the next three months. Some of the calls were merely sad. I remember the phone ringing

when the sunlight was dappling my desk and magpies were calling from outside the office window.

'I'm phoning about the earthquake and tidal wave.'

'Forget it. It is just a rumour put about by silly people.'

'My grandmother is frightened. She was in the Athens earthquake.'

The rumour spread at the right time of the year. It was started by a house painter who prophesied that Adelaide would be visited by an earthquake and then engulfed by a tidal wave. It seems that this was the punishment of God brought upon Adelaide for its permissive ways. The Seer's disciples pamphleted the streets of Adelaide with the news.

The story of the tidal wave grew among school children during November and was dispersed through the community at the end of the school year. If you ever want to spread a rumour in Adelaide: start it in November.

A major factor was that the Media didn't want the rumour to die. Not a lot happens in Adelaide from December to February that is newsworthy; Parliament is adjourned, schools and universities are in recess, many factories are closed; the department stores reduce their prices to get rid of the previous year's fashions; the weather is Hot, and even the criminals are making sand castles on the beach. There is an increase in the theft of cars and bicycles, but it is probably the work of bored youth.

Most people have their holidays during this time, and they have the leisure to read newspapers and watch television. The problem is that usually the media has little to report.

A TV news magazine program, called *This Day Tonight,* sent a team of stylish people over to my workplace to interview the head of department. I was there while my boss was questioned standing next to a seismograph.

The interviewer was handsome, fashionably dressed in a designer suit, and his hair was coiffured. Doc, my boss, who had interrupted his holidays, was attired in baggy shorts and open shirt. Doc explained at length how unlikely such an event as a tidal wave would be. The young questioner appeared sympathetic to this point of view.

When the interview appeared on the *This Day Tonight* program it had been horribly cut up. The interviewer appeared knowledgeable and probing. Doc, who was a Reader in Physics and a respected seismologist, was made to look like a simpleton. I was reminded, while watching Doc, how easy it is to edit-out honesty. The phrase 'tidal wave,' was repeated continuously through the program.

The interstate press, who were equally starved of news, picked up the story. I suppose from a media point of view it was a success. Articles were written with accompanying illustrations showing how far the wave would travel inland 'if' it occurred.

There were even the beginnings of international interest. Shortly before the prophesied date the BBC phoned Don Dunstan, State Premier, and asked if it was true that all the snails had left Adelaide. Dunstan replied to the negative and said his garden was infested with them.

Finally the day came and thousands of Adeladeans took to the hills. It is hard to come up with a figure of the number of workers who thought it was a good day for a sickie and a drive. People who remember the event talk of about ten percent but it is impossible to tell because many of the absentees may have taken the day for other reasons. Dunstan played Canute and drank champagne on Glenelg jetty. As the Premier was later to write in his memoirs, *Felicia:*

> *As the hour approached I went to Glenelg where a large and uproarious crowd had gathered – some of them selling*

'survival kits' (snorkel and surfboard) and some with placards advocating repentance before engulfment.

Added to the mixture was Soho's second wave of French immigrants. Who these people were depended on the level of paranoia. They were: Liberals escaping the Revolution, dispossessed landowners, criminals, Jacobins, Agent provocateurs, spies, spies-spying-on-spies, foreign.

The future French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat did lodge at 31 Romilly Street in 1776. It is not known if others of his kind stayed in the square mile because they had that foreign talent for all looking alike.

There were even unbelievable claims that the French lowered the moral tone of the square mile. Until the mid-twentieth century, Soho prostitutes were called Fifis; that was regardless of whether they came from Cairo or Glasgow.

At first glance England seemed ripe for revolution, and Soho should have been its Montmarte. The district is less than two miles from the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Palace.

The Book of Beginnings.

On the day I sat at my desk and pondered on the sanity of the human race. After work I went for a stroll around the city as if seeking an answer for this folly in the streetscape. There was a little less traffic than usual, but, apart from that, nothing was amiss; the weather was balmy, all the traffic lights worked, and there was a church on every street corner.

I reached the western Parklands, and considered them an ideal location for a battery of field guns that could raze any part of Adelaide at will. The Port is miles from the city. It would be an easy city to starve into submission. A relatively small force could enter Adelaide and establish bases in any of the five squares, and take the city piecemeal. It seemed a very trusting city. I turned around and walked back into town.

Then I knew what was wrong: Adelaide didn't have a buried city. The first Surveyor General just picked a piece of flat land near a river, and that-was-that. London has layers that go back to the first cluster of mud huts. Paris has reminders

of the Revolution in its street names. Sydney was once a town of rum, buggery, and lash. Hobart has a past that contains terrors. Adelaide was built in 1837 on nothing, but nothing is built on nothing.

I found myself in Colonel Light Square and beside it was the Colonel Light Hotel. It was time for a beer. The bar was empty. There wasn't even a bartender in sight. The key to understanding Adelaide may be all those churches.

'I'm just switching kegs,' shouted a voice from the ether, 'and I won't be long.'

I assumed it wasn't the voice of God and replied, 'no worries Mate.'

I pondered on why we suppose a disembodied voice has a non-religious explanation nowadays. If Joan of Arc had heard a voice saying 'I'm just switching kegs and I won't be long,' she would have leapt onto a horse and laid waste to half of France. The Maid of Orleans would now be classed as a borderline schizophrenic, and would be given pills that made her grin and skip-skip-skip around the room.

I wondered if I was making too much fuss about buried cities. The founders of Adelaide were just a bunch of Anglos who wanted a nice place to live.

We'll build a new Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

The bartender appeared from below like a music hall Mestopheles. 'I just have to clear the pipes and I'll be ready in a jif',' he said. I nodded and hoped it was short jif'.

Blake's Jerusalem had an old Jerusalem on which to base the idea. When Blake was seeing angels in Soho streets the Church of England ruled the villages.

O let us love our occupations,
Bless the squire and his relations;
Live upon our daily rations,
And always know our proper stations!

'There's a lot of air in the pipes,' said the bartender as he wrestled with jugs of foam.

That may have been good enough for a Dorset village, but the Methodists and Presbyterians were taking another ethic to the industrial towns.

In works of labour or of skill
I would be busy too:
For Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.

I bet the bosses loved that kind of humbug.

'It's got a bit too much head,' said the barman as he placed a beer in front of me. 'I'll top it up in a minute.' I nodded and took a sip. My head was elsewhere.

The Church of England was in retreat in Britain when Adelaide was founded. The Nonconformist religions were competing for a lion's share of the vacated territory. Baptists and Presbyterians were expanding but Methodists were the ones taking the major slice. Catholicism was barely on the map, and would remain minuscule, in England, until the immigration of Irish workers during the potato famine of the 1840s.

'That should do it,' said the barman as he poured some more beer in my glass. My head was in the nineteenth century and I wished he'd go away.

There were the tiny religions: Muggletonians, Millenaries, Adamists, Thraskites, Brownists, et al. Some were surviving remnants of the Ranters and Levellers who were crushed by Cromwell's army a hundred and twenty years before; other sects were reacting to the machines that killed the old crafts, and the land enclosure that destroyed communities.

'It's always quiet at this time,' said the bartender. 'Gets busier later.' I nodded and passed the empty glass to him.

All of the members of these sects believed in some kind of new Jerusalem. To some it represented spiritual community; to others it was a new kind of nation. This ideal city would have social justice for all and include a degree of sexual liberation. There were rumours about the sects; stories of nudity during religious services, and

shared marriage partners. That may have been a Methodist slander; The Methodists hated the little sects.

'You get some strange people in sometimes,' said the bartender as he passed my second beer. 'The ones in sun-glasses at night-time worry me. I hate serving them; you never know what they're about to do next.' I nodded and drank.

It is hard to tell their precise theology because each cult had its own jargon. Some of the obscure phrases in Blake's poetry may be traceable to these secret tongues. They believed the Bible was still being written and prophets walked the streets. Mad Alf would probably be a revered figure if he'd been born two hundred years earlier.

'Time drags when there's no one here,' he said while topping up my glass. 'I prefer to be busy.'

Blake's mother was a Muggletonian, and his father was a Baptist with an interest in Swedenborg. There was a New Jerusalem Church based on the writings of Swedenborg. Baby-boy Blake was baptised an Anglican.

'The trouble is the day-staff know it and leave the place in a mess. I have to work like a tiger before the evening starts.'

Tyger, tyger, my mistake,
I thought you were William Blake.

Forget about Blake. Blake was a dead and half forgotten engraver when Colonel Light was waving his theodolite around town. The people who built Adelaide were the new breed who believed in the Ten Commandments, but also worshipped Newton and Bentham. There were a lot of people running around with ideas about a new society at about that time: John Wesley, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Bentham, Paine.

Old Uncle Tom Cobbley and all,
Old Uncle Tom Cobbley and all.

The bar tender was frightened of me leaving. He kept filling my glass, and talking when I obviously just wanted time to think. Was it fear of being alone or of night-people in dark glasses? Was it the Great Adelaide Tidal wave? Did I care?

The future was going to be better in the new colony of South Australia, if not splendid, and it was going to be middle class. But what about the little people who came as immigrants in the first five years: stone masons, carpenters, printers, domestic servants, blacksmiths, farm labourers? Free passages were offered to such people because there was to be no convict labour.

Did any of these artisans have hidden beliefs based on the old dissenters? Did they have gatherings in houses? Did they think of Adelaide as a New Jerusalem? Were they waiting for a prophet or a sign? Do they still exist?

'Do you know anything about unusual sects in Adelaide?' I asked the bartender. It was his turn to become silent. He retreated a little further along the bar.

I was reaching the stage of intoxication where everything seems clearer. It was a good time to continue drinking, and achieve perfect transparency. I signalled for another beer.

That's how Adelaide started and how it remained. Half a mile away in the University there are scientists studying cosmic rays, and further down the road there are prophets mouthing nightmares from *The Book of Revelation*. This is not just difference in social class and education; there are two cosmologies. Adelaide was and is two cities.

The bartender brought the beer and then retreated to do something with towels. I was getting a little sick of his behaviour but didn't care enough to challenge him on the subject.

It didn't have to be biblical, some dissenters incorporated bits of Druidism and cabbalistic heresy into their Christian practices; it would now pass as New Age. There was a strong belief in fate. Everything was predetermined including the coming of the New Jerusalem.

I finished my drink and rose carefully from the bar stool. 'Are you going?' asked the bar tender.

'Like a flea in a flue,' I replied.

'Funny about this tidal wave business,' he said.

'Yes. What do you think caused it?'

'Well I reckon it was brought on by Cyclone Tracy. It frightened people.'

'Sounds good.' *Very good, but why Adelaide?* 'I wonder if anyone predicted Tracy.'

"I bet a few say they did.'

As I left about half a dozen young people entered the bar and none of them were wearing sun glasses. Next morning I awoke with a hangover and no interest in the New Jerusalem.

About a month later I saw someone wearing a T-shirt that bore the words: 'I Survived The Great Adelaide Tidal Wave.' I had trouble remembering what the message was about. It was as though the whole thing had never happened. The ability to laugh at real or imagined danger is an Australian characteristic, but it is followed by a kind of amnesia that makes the person unable to learn from the experience.

I liked the bar tender's explanation for the Great Adelaide Tidal Wave and I repeated it to Jasmine Tse, a researcher in earthquake prediction at the seismology lab.

'Maybe, said Jasmine, but I think it's about fear of immigrants. Movements of migrants are always referred to as 'waves.' It saves having to think about them as individuals. A lot of Australians are worried at the moment about 'waves' of Vietnamese arriving in boats.'

'Yes, but why Adelaide?'

'Maybe people all over Australia are having nightmares about waves, but the media ignored them elsewhere.'

It seemed plausible, but I felt there was something intrinsic to Adelaide that created the panic. Peru was someone interested in the curiosities of human behaviour, and so I wrote to her giving a brief account of the panic. I had no forwarding address and so I sent it to the Singapore hotel where Peru had stayed two years previously. I imagined the letter following her from one country to another until it disintegrated.

The Revolution didn't happen. A factor in this lack of political action was the Evangelical Revival. Another reason was the transportation of thousands of malcontents to Botany Bay and Van Dieman's Land where their agricultural muscles were in demand and their voices could not be heard. At a time when opposition to the African Slave Trade was growing, the British were transporting their own population into bondage.

Oh; when we were landed, upon that fatal shore,
The planters they came flocking round, full twenty score or more;
They ranked us up like horses, and sold us out of hand,
They yoked us to the plough, my boys, to plough Van Diemen's Land.

The turning to worshipful ways among the poor is associated with John Wesley and Methodism, but for everyone of Wesley's kind there were hundreds of little prophets and tiny religions. Most of these sects showed the influence of John Bunyan, but many were not above including Stonehenge and table-rapping in their theology. In all of them there was the millennial idea of the New Jerusalem.

The Book of Beginnings.

I met Dorothy and we followed the yellow brick road to marriage in Oz. I met her in a pub and she gave me a lift home. I believe that we told each other truthfully about the baggage we were carrying but neither was listening to each other. The imperative was to marry and we did.

There is an unspoken belief that marriage is a necessary part of the assimilation process for a migrant. It produced a reverse effect on me. I learnt how foreign I was when faced by the Australian family, and this feeling of alienation has remained with me since.

The first hint of hostility was immediately after the honeymoon. The mother sat opposite me across the kitchen table. She told me that she hated all migrants and South Europeans in particular. It was said with a smile, I thought she was joking.

I mentioned it to Dorothy. Dorothy smiled as though it was a minor eccentricity in

her mother. A mere aberration that I should tolerate. I was in-love, I tolerated.

The first inkling that I was dealing with a widely held view came at family gatherings. I would be sitting at the table amidst all these uncles and aunts, and the subject would turn to foreigners. They would talk in a vehement manner about the terrible behaviour of Mediterranean people. As though I wasn't there!

Then they would talk about dogs as though they weren't there. The dogs were nearby, but it didn't matter because they couldn't understand. They weren't human.

At about this time the Vietnamese and Chinese boat-people started to arrive on Australia's shores. The media made much of it as though nothing like it had happened before.

Within the context of modern history, Chinese have been coming to Australia, and the rest of the Western World, since the eighteen fifties. Chinatown in San Francisco, Lime House Reach in East London, and Dixon Street in Sydney, all originated at about the same time. That particular diaspora may have been encouraged by ease of transport, created by railway and steamship, along the trade routes of European powers. In the case of Australia and California, gold was as much a lure to Chinese as it was to Europeans.

Much of the new movement was triggered by the trail of disruption created by the Vietnam War; Many may have had similar motives to myself in coming to Australia.

South Europeans became less of a target in the streets and the focus of vilification switched to Asians. I came to the conclusion that prejudice is like the drought; it is always present somewhere in Australia and merely changes focus.

It could be possible to have prejudice forecasts every day after the Evening News. There would be a smiling person standing next to a map discussing vilification fronts and longer term trends.

I became aware of the fluctuating but permanent nature of prejudice when I made encounter with Dorothy's relatives. The antediluvian ones worried about Irish Catholics and Jews; the merely old had an anxiety about Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians; The middle-aged thought South Europeans were a threat; and the younger-set mumbled into their cappuccinos about Saigon bar girls.

The phrase, New Jerusalem, is from *The Book of Revelation,* but it is now linked forever with William Blake. From what is known of Blake he seems to have been an unassuming fellow with a love of domesticity and a reluctance to travel.

William Blake met Catherine, the daughter of a market gardener, during a visit to the village of Battersea, some five miles from Soho. When William and Catherine married they set up house next door to his parents' Broad Street shop. Then, a few years later, the young couple became really adventurous and moved around the corner to Poland Street. When describing urban despair, in *Jerusalem,* Blake wrote:

The corner of Broad Street weeps, Poland Street languishes;

He wrote about America and Europe, and a rejuvenated England; but Blake saw very little of England, and nothing of America and Europe. For nearly half of his life the poet lived within a twenty minutes walk of where he was born. Much of his engraving and poetry was produced in Soho. There he found Heaven and Hell, Innocence and Experience, and, no doubt, heard many a *youthful harlot's curse.*

Then, in 1790, the Blakes emigrated a full three miles across the River Thames to Lambeth. There is no doubt that they left at the right time. Soho was entering a period of degeneration and decay that was to last a hundred years. By the mid nineteenth century the square mile was the most notorious quarter in London for poverty, vice, and disease.

The Book of Beginnings.

The rhythms of our marriage became established. Weekly visits to Adelaide Central Market gave me the feeling that cultural diversity was a normal part of Australian life, and my meetings with the in-laws reminded me that it wasn't. Strangely enough the eventual ending of our marriage involved both of these opposite poles.

The mother and father in-laws were fourth generation Australians and I was initially interested in the possibility of any of them having dissenter ancestry. The father came from a Presbyterian background but had no knowledge of or interest in religion. The mother didn't seem to know anything on the matter except that her

family were Protestant. Apart from a distrust of Popery the family had the same foggy Agnosticism as most people in the Western World. The only thing of interest was that on the mother's side there was an interest in Spiritualism.

Dorothy had been a medium when she was a child. I had little interest in table rapping and considered it more to do with a difficulty in coping with death than religiosity. When I was in Tasmania I had an interesting experience with a young woman and a Ouija board, but spirituality had nothing to do with it.

I had been married about three years when I got a 2 a.m. phone call to tell me that Elizabeth was dead. At the time it didn't sink in; I suppose I was in shock. I actually got back into bed, told Dorothy, and went straight to sleep.

For the next few weeks Elizabeth was continuously in my mind. It is not accurate to call it grieving; you can't grieve for someone you haven't seen for more than twenty years. Elizabeth and I must have conversed several times a day for nearly two decades and yet I at first couldn't remember anything she said.

Then I recalled I had written a conversation with Elizabeth in *The Book of Beginnings.* I went to the bundle of old exercise books and reread them, and realised that almost everyone in it was dead. I felt totally alone. I was trapped between a book about dead people and a family who regarded migrants as sub-human. It could be time to write about the people around me, and their origins.

I came to think that, in spite of the in-laws being Australian, they were products of seventeenth century Ulster. This reinforced my view of Australians; I could interpret their behaviour in terms of the aspirations and fears of their ancestors in Europe.

Australian society is made up of people in time bubbles. They are going about their daily business in Australia while at the same time fighting the Battle of the Boyne or sailing a slave ship to Jamaica. The really big event, the enclosure of the

common lands, is never mentioned. It is as though the settlers came to Australia determined to forget it and they did.

There was a cholera epidemic in 1854 that killed hundreds of people in the Berwick and Broad Street area of Soho. The pestilence was ended by a defining act of municipal sanitation and preventative medicine. Most Londoners pumped their water from local wells. A Dr John Snow, of Frith Street, ascertained that his patients were drinking water from a well near a cesspool and he removed the handle from the Broad Street pump.

It now seems an obvious thing to do, but at the time it was a masterstroke of detection and decisiveness. There is some doubt as to whether John Snow had a clear understanding of bacterial infection, although Louis Pasteur was researching the subject in France at about that time. Cholera was not to be identified microscopically for another twenty years. The separation of drinking water and sewerage became the norm in western cities.

During this period of desperation Soho was a refuge for political émigrés, and for government spies to keep an eye on them. Karl Marx gave lectures on political economy at the Red Lion pub in Great Windmill Street. The Marx family changed their addresses frequently, due to rent problems, but stayed in the district.

Karl's domestic life ranged from the unconventional to the chaotic. While Marx's wife, Jenny, was away for a few weeks, he started an affair with Lechen, the housemaid. Marx ended up having to share a two roomed attic with four children and two angry pregnant women.

All of these events added to Soho's reputation as a place of infection. From the square mile came Cholera, Pox, Socialism, Crime, poets and foreigners. It was unashamed and hence un-British. The Chinese would have built a wall around it; the French would have established a cordon sanitaire; the English pretended Soho didn't exist. For a hundred years the district was absent from London maps and travel guides.

The Book of Beginnings.

Elizabeth had been dead for about two years when Joe came over from England for a two week visit. It brought back all sorts of memories. Our retriever didn't like him. I remembered how the dogs in our street used to bark at Joe. My mother would

joke about it. Our dog, who was a well mannered fellow, didn't bark or growl, but did stay in corners while Joe was in the house.

'His posture's all wrong,' said Dorothy. 'Joe looks angry even when he thinks he's being pleasant. His aura fills up the house.'

Dorothy's parents invited us over for tea to meet Joe. I wasn't sure how a meeting between a Maltese and a couple of xenophobes would work out. It was better than I expected. Joe and my father-in-law immediately went into old-man-talk and got on famously. They chatted about Australian prize fighters, Melbourne fish cafés and sly grog shops, of the twenties. It was a side of Joe I'd never seen before. My mother-in-law spoke to Joe in baby-talk; he didn't seem to notice.

That evening Dorothy asked me, 'Why is he here? You two obviously don't get on. Why would he come all this way ?'

'I don't know; maybe he likes Australia. Joe's just a person who always returns. He returned to Malta.'

'Poor Malta. No, there's something unresolved. I bet it's about your Mother. I feel I can't move; there's no room for me and his aura.'

'Forget about auras; he's only a little old man. There's a lot of unfinished things about Joe's life, but most of it happened fifty years ago and the people involved are dead.'

'Mmm.'

The problem between Dorothy and Joe was partly over food. Dorothy had planned an elaborate menu for Joe's two week stay; my father preferred wedges of cheese smothered in salt. I was living with two people who didn't know the meaning of compromise.

Then there was my father's idea of child discipline. Joe told our son, Adam, who was about three, that if he was bad he would go to Borstal. My son had no idea what this meant and ran around for days chanting, 'go to dorstal, go to dorstal.'

It was pretty close to the end of Joe's visit when he mentioned Elizabeth. It seems he considered me at fault for sending my mother some pocket money while in Woomera.

'She never needed that money you sent her. She only wasted it on Italian chocolate.'

After I returned, from dropping Joe off at Adelaide Airport, Dorothy said: 'That was what the visit was about. He couldn't cope with the idea of you sending your mother a bit of money. It threatened his fragile masculinity. What a bastard! What a mean man! What an aura!' The dog wagged its tail in agreement.

I don't know why South Australia has a fear of some encroaching wave. Possibly it is related to the anxieties of the English in the 1830s.

The England that settled South Australia 1836 was quite different to the one which colonised New South Wales in 1788. Napoleon was defeated. Britain was experiencing a period of peace that was to last until 1914. There was a ripple of gunfire in France when one King replaced another in 1830, but Britain was unthreatened by it. God was in his heaven etc... Humbug!

In 1830 Britain had what has been called its last Peasants Revolt. It started with the smashing of a threshing machine in Kent and spread through the counties with strikes and rick burnings.

I am not sure that they really were peasants; the farm labourers were fighting against loss of wages in the same way that industrial workers were at the time. The uprising was crushed and many of the participants became reluctant Australians.

The Book of Beginnings.

The friction between myself and Dorothy's relatives came to a head one Christmas Day. It was yet another Summer's day with fleecy clouds in a blue sky. It was not a traditional Christmas lunch, instead we all contributed something suited to the Summer season. There we were in the dining room, looking over the patio. Dorothy had gone to the kitchen for a ladle or something. Mother and father in-law sat opposite me, they were smiling.

I had prepared a large cold pie with veal and ham in a wine and aspic jelly. Nothing complicated, but it required work over several days. They loved it. They both leaned forward benevolently and the mother-in-law spoke.

'You know I have come to realise that migrants are human.'

They were trying to incorporate me into their history. I had no particular objection to that but I obviously wasn't coming in as an equal.

I remembered seeing a nineteenth century painting of Abraham Lincoln freeing the slaves. Lincoln was standing on a grassy knoll with a what-a-good-boy-am-I look

on his face. A lot of black people were standing further down the slope. They were holding their broken chains and looking up gratefully.

The in-laws were playing Honest Abe to perfection. I was damned if I was going to act as the beholden ex-slave. I glared at them as they stuffed food – food I had cooked – into their mouths.

How dare they think my humanity negotiable! How dare they think the humanity of any person negotiable!

I know why Jewish surgeons were so surprised when they were herded off to Dachau. They could not believe that any country would be so stupid. I was speechless.

I could have taken the plates from the in-laws but it seemed inadequate. I profoundly regret not feeding the in-laws to a pack of dogs, but I didn't possess a plurality of hounds. If I had been a gun freak I could have rat-tat-tatted them with a Chicago typewriter, but I possessed not even a pea shooter. The table knives were blunt and the crockery was fragile. I was frozen, impotent, silent.

The children were sitting near me at the table, and I could not look in their faces. I felt shame although there was no reason for me to feel ashamed. It was the shame of being faced by stupidity of a cosmic scale and being unable to reply to it. The marriage didn't have long to go after that.

In 1832 the franchise was extended to the middle classes in the Reform Bill of that year. It effectively isolated the landless poor into a special category of unled and unrepresented humanity.

The undermining of the transportation system began with six farm labourers in a Dorset village – of all places. In December 1833 they were at a meeting of the Tollpuddle Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers.

The Friendly Societies of the time were for mutual aid; they had the characteristics of a trade union, a lodge, and a chapel. Every member contributed a small sum each month to help others in dire need.

There were no written contracts, but instead a binding oath of fraternity was made on the Bible. This method was understandable in a community that was probably fifty percent illiterate and a hundred percent Christian.

In February 1834 all six were arrested for making an illegal oath. The wish was probably to prosecute them for unlawful assembly, but the purpose of the meeting was so obviously innocent that the Crown resurrected an eighteenth century Act against unlawful oaths. The six villagers were unaware of this law.

They were each sentenced to seven years transportation. Five were shipped to New South Wales and one to Tasmania. They became popularly known as the Tollpuddle Martyrs

The Book of Beginnings.

When I separated from Dorothy I had a craving for transparency. It was mainly manifested in the kitchen. It started innocently enough with buying clear plastic food containers. The next phase was a little more serious, I threw away all my china crockery and purchased glass cups and plates. When I found myself admiring a glass topped table in a furniture store I knew that this was irrational.

When you are emotionally disorientated you become a focus for weird events. I was walking through *John Martins* department store when I heard a continuous scream coming from nearby. The source of the noise was a ragged man crouching on the floor of the cosmetics department; the normally immaculate sales staff were

looking a little disarrayed as they clutched their perfume sprayers. In front of the screamer was a card with the words: 'go away, I'm busy.'

A security guard pushed through the crowd and grabbed the man by the arm.

'Take it easy' I said to him, 'it could be part of the Arts Festival.'

The guard turned, as if about to tell me to mind my own business, when the screamer picked up his card and stood up. The crowd parted like the Red Sea as he walked out of the store.

An hour later, in the Mall, I saw the ragged man sitting at an outer table of a cafe. The waiter was chatting as she served the guy a coffee. He saw me and gave a royal wave.

'My name's Larry, what's yours?' I said while sitting at the table.

'Call me Bandicoot.'

'What do you do, apart from screaming?'

'A bit of busking, some street theatre, a bit of this, a bit of that. But mainly screaming. I do it at the boundaries of things; where the sea meets the dunes, that sort of thing. I thought the perfume counter would be a good one, but it was too crowded.'

'Why?'

'I am trying to make everything one. I am waging war on the Sons of Albion. I want revolution.'

'In Adelaide! Good luck! I'll see you.'

'You will.'

I went away thinking that Bandicoot had the self -confidence that is only found among the truly mad. The phrase 'Sons of Albion' struck a chord of memory but I couldn't place it.

Fourteen petitions were sent to Parliament in support of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. Enormous meetings were held throughout the nation in support of the prisoners. After two years the men were pardoned, after another two they were returned to England.

The episode led to an awareness in Britain of conditions for prisoners in the Australian Colonies. Convicts could be bought and sold. Slavery had been made illegal in the British Empire in 1833. Transportation of convicts came to be seen by many as a surviving form of slave trade.

The transportation system continued in Australia for another twenty years, but there were to be no convicts in the new colony of South Australia.

The Book of Beginnings.

A week after meeting Bandicoot I got a phone call. The woman spoke softly with just a trace of London in the accent. I would have known her if she had spoken in the Lingo. She did not recognise my voice [illegible]; thirty-years in Australia had changed my speech forever.

'Did you ever spend any time in Soho?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Did you have any friends there?'

'Jane?'

'Hello Larry. I had to check. I got your number from the International Exchange. There were three Larry's with your surname.'

We didn't ask how we were. I didn't want to be told that she had grey hair or rheumatism, and I suppose Jane felt the same way about me.

'Where are you phoning from?' I asked.

'England.'

'I am old.'

'So am I. I've just been to Soho for the first time in twenty-five years. It's all changed.'

'I suppose all the workshops have gone.'

'It's worse than that. Soho is cluttered with fancy ironwork and pot plants. It's a trendy place to live. It's full of people called Jason or Samantha; they sit in French restaurants discussing the merits of the escargot and clutching their mobile phones.'

'There have always been French restaurants in Soho.'

'These aren't the throw the bomb and insult the tourists, French. They are a new breed who have no politics. Something has to be done Larry. There aren't any decent whores there any more; they are all skinny kids on the needle. There are no worthwhile madmen in the streets.'

'It's wonderful to hear your voice, but I don't see what I can do about Soho. It's life. When we were in the district people were complaining: *fings ain't what they used to be*. Remember how everyone over thirty was upset by stiletto heels and pointed toes?'

'I am not against change Larry. It's not just that businesses have disappeared; most of the people we knew are dead. I want to write a history of that year or no one will know what Soho was like. I don't want to publish it, I just want to leave it for future people.'

'Are you planning to leave it in an attic?'

'Yes, like the diary of a mad woman. I want you to write and tell me everything you remember of Soho.'

I didn't feel too keen about the idea, but we agreed to first send each other brief biographies so that we would not be strangers. I asked about Michael.

'He disappeared from the scene about ten years ago. The last time we met was in the sixties. It was in the Marquee Club – after it had moved to Wardour Street. The man I was with was loudmouthing about the Soho underworld, as though I knew nothing.

Michael tapped me on the shoulder and invited us over to his table. My smartarse partner, who didn't know Michael from a bar of soap, confided to us that a lot of celebrities came to the Marquee for drugs. Michael and I just sat as though surprised by such information.

Then Jimi Hendrix strolled over and started chatting to Michael about scoring some dope. Boyfriend: exit-left, in confusion. It's one of those things that's funny afterwards but embarrassing at the time.'

'I met Michael and Alison briefly in Sydney in 1971.'

'That's how it was in the seventies; everybody was meeting briefly. Alison's settled down. She's married and living with thousands of sheep in Queensland.'

'Clancy's gone a drovin
And we don't know where he are.' I said.

'What's that?'

'An old Australian poem.'

'I can't imagine Australians writing poems.'

'We do it incessantly. The country is covered in bits of paper with poems on them.'

'I didn't notice when I was there.'

'That's because the sheep eat them.'

'Seeyathen.'

I wrote about my life from when Jane and I parted. When I read my handiwork it seemed as if I had lived a very untidy inconclusive sort of existence. I considered tidying it up a bit, but instead posted it as it was.

Many world-changing events of the 1830s were considered to be minor at the time. For example the voyage of Charles Darwin, on HMS *Beagle* from 1830 to 1836, led to a complete reappraisal of humanity's place in the cosmos, but I doubt if many of the citizenry knew or cared about it.

On the other hand, the steam engine was altering concepts of speed and distance. One of the first railway fatalities is buried in the suburb where I spent my childhood. The man stepped off a train when it was rocketing along at twenty-five miles an hour. Rail was important enough by 1839 for the publication of Bradshaw's first book of timetables.

Judging from the number of papers published on Atomic Theory, Chemistry was the emerging science of the decade. The engineering feats of the era were based on Physics discovered by Hooke and Newton a hundred and fifty years before.

The Book of Beginnings

I suppose I was as taken aback by social change as Jane was. It is hard to describe the revolution created by computerisation in the eighties. There was no taking to the streets, no coup d'état , most of the population was unaware of its significance and many did not realise that anything was happening. Yet incredible changes occurred. Within businesses an entire layer of management disappeared. A new breed of financier prospered. Their main activity was buying companies; they then stripped the assets of the organisation and used the wealth to acquire more companies.

Grandiose office towers were built. This was pure ego because the new technology did not require large offices or armies of typists and filing clerks. I imagine that most of the rooms remained empty apart from the occasional rubber plant.

The building boom was of course financed by credit; as the demand for money rose so did interest rates and eventually the phase collapsed. Companies, fighting to survive, unloaded staff and workers. The nature of work changed but most people hung on to their little jobs. What was apparent in the society at large was a growing

disorientation. I felt sympathy for these confused souls, but thought that undergoing an equivalent to the migrant experience was probably good for them.

This was the visible Adelaide: the one of straight streets and wine tastings. I opened a second-hand bookshop and the population of the hidden city walked in through my doors. Some asked for *Wealth of Nations,* and others for *Mein Kampf.* There was a keen interest in the ravings of Alistair Crowley and the riddles of Nostrodamis. The majority leaned towards star signs and tea leaf reading.

The man who called himself Bandicoot started popping in once or twice a week.

'Got any works of Blake?' he asked one day.

'I've got the collected poems at home that I never read. You can buy it if you're prepared to wait a couple of days.'

'No you need that one,' he said.

I felt that he thought me indifferent to his beloved poet. I said, 'I used to work within a couple hundred yards of where Blake was born and where he lived for thirty years. My size tens have probably stepped on his old footprints.'

'Oh!' said Bandicoot in a tone approaching awe. 'And did those feet in ancient times? How did it feel?'

'Pretty ordinary. Quite a few famous people have lived in Soho like Marx and Casanova. Blake is unusual in being born there. Generally Soho is a place of conception rather than birth.'

'Didn't you get any vibes.'

'Sorry. At the time I was more interested in other things.'

'What a waste. Marx too. Did he live nearby?'

'He lived in lots of places. Young Karl had a lot of trouble with the rent.'

'I bet he's turning in his grave now.'

There was a leaning towards republicanism among the educated classes in the 1830s. This declined after Queen Victoria took to the throne in 1838 and turned the royal household into a model middle class family.

There was an increasing view that the purpose of Painting was to promote sentiment. Musical composition was considered to be something best left to the Germans. Dickens, the Bronte Sisters, the Brownings, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, were writing as fast as their pens would allow.

The spectrum of religious belief was almost as wide then as now, but was taken more seriously. The Oxford Movement was launched in 1833. The Anglican Church was pronounced Divine – whatever that means. Some Anglican clerics shifted to Roman Catholicism. Nowadays such behaviour would barely arouse interest, but at the time it seemed to threaten the Constitution.

What I've just written is about the people who matter. Writing about people of no consequence is much more difficult; you have to rely on scraps of information.

In the counties there was still a belief in talismans and charms. Many curative incantations called upon magical powers in one sentence and the Holy Trinity on the next. It was wise to be on the safe side.

The Book of Beginnings

The fall of the Berlin Wall made my few books on Soviet Russia defunct. The Communist bookshop, a couple of streets away, became a gypsy restaurant.

'How's your revolution coming along?' I asked Bandicoot when he passed by one day.

'Don't joke about it. The Commos believed in equality. It worries me what will follow. There are some funny little groups popping up.'

'Christian Evangelism seems to be all the go. Churches are appearing everywhere.'

'All religions are one. These little organisations are no joke. The Jewish schools are installing security systems. '

On average I got two requests for *Mein Kampf* a month. I suppose some of these people were students of modern history, but most were not. I never had a copy. Surprisingly it was still in print. A publishing house in South Africa, then under the Apartheid regime, supplied a world market.

Bandicoot was more in touch with the mood of the city than I was. As part of his 'a bit of this, a bit of that,' Bandicoot earned commission as a runner for the antique trade. He also bought and sold second-hand goods that were beneath the interest of the antique shops. I bought a desk from him. One day I got a phone call from Bandicoot about a deceased estate on offer.

'Mainly books,' he said

'Mainly' is a problem word with deceased estates. I once got an option to buy an estate, which was mainly books, and found it was a fine collection of Dickens and a hot air balloon, and I turned it down.

'I'll check it out,' I replied, 'if you look after the shop for a couple of hours.'

I paid a visit to the person selling the estate and found it consisted of about six hundred books on occult subjects and some trappings. The odds and ends included a gilt chalice, a dagger, and a cloth marked with candle wax.

The seller was keen to get rid of traces of his late-aunt's activities and I was able to get the lot for a good price.

Shortly afterwards people-in-black started to use the shop as a gathering place. They actually had better manners then my usual customers – although their habit of hissing was a little wearing on the nerves.

The people-in-black always arrived in pairs. If six visited: two would come, then another two a minute later, then the last pair after an interval. When they left the shop it was done in the same way although they paired off with different partners.

The occult books sold well and I gave the ceremonial equipment away to a local psychic research society. The visits ceased immediately after the paraphernalia left my hands.

Among the depressives and borderline schizophrenics who visited the shop were a few otherwise sane people who seemed incapable of thinking empirically. I wrote a quote from Buffon above the cash register: *Let us collect facts in order to have ideas.* I don't think anyone read it; they preferred flying saucers and the prophecies of Nostrodamis.

There were some very successful messianic mad people on the loose in the first half of the nineteenth century. The mother of them all was Joanna Southcott.

Southcott was a domestic servant who became a prophet in mid-life. Her prophecies owed a great deal to The *Book of Revelation.* She identified closely with the woman in *Revelation XII* who was clothed with the sun and had a crown of stars.

At the age of sixty-four Southcott claimed she was about to give birth to Shiloh, the holy child. Southcott died shortly afterwards in 1814, but lived long enough to found a religion that numbered its congregation in the tens of thousands and survived into the late nineteenth century.

At least two men claimed to be the successor, if not the child, of Southcott, and had large followings. One, John Wroe, established a movement called the 'Christian Israelites' which is still referred to on some of the wilder religious websites.

One charlatan stands above the rest in the 1830s. John Toms tried to turn religious fervour into political action, and was killed at the Battle of Bossenden Wood with seven of his party in 1838. It was sad really because Toms told his followers that soldiers bullets could not hurt them.

Toms variously called himself Count Moses Rostopchein Rothschild, Sir William Courtney, King of the Gypsies, Knight of Malta, Saviour. He drew enormous crowds during the five years before his death. Many, no doubt, came to be entertained, but others saw him as the Messiah.

Britain was a nation so severely split that the poor were prepared to follow the mad in the hope of some kind of justice. It was a country divided not only in wealth and degree of political power, but also by a gulf between old and new knowledge.

In 1836 a slice of this society disembarked in South Australia.

The Book of Beginnings.

One day in the shop I apprehended a thief. In the security mirror I saw a girl, of sixteen or so, take *Dairy Farming in Australia 1950.* I watched surprised as the child picked up one of the most unsaleable books in my shop, and place it into her large shoulder bag.

I stopped the girl as she tried to leave the shop. There seemed no point in calling the police for theft of a valueless item, but, just in case, I asked her to turn her bag

out. Spilled onto the floor was: a brass candlestick, a book of anthropology (not mine), a bible (not mine), an assortment of plastic toys, and a hair dyeing kit.

The sheer meaninglessness of her haul amazed me; I told the thief to sit down and made her a coffee. This child was to visit me half a dozen times, to chat and drink coffee, during the four months before she finally disappeared. Her home for the previous two years had been derelict buildings, shelters and institutions; she lived by theft and prostitution. The girl had tried every drug on the market, but was settling down to being an alcoholic.

I suggested that she should write a *Book of Beginnings,* but I don't know if she did because after I made the suggestion I never saw her again.

'I'll keep an eye out if you like,' said Bandicoot. 'Quite a few streeties hang around where I busk at the market.'

'Don't bother, there's nothing I can do for her.'

I felt I had been sucked down into a world where people just drifted into my life. They bought a book on an absurd subject, made a few inane comments, and walked out again.

If this had happened twenty years before I would have packed a bag and caught a plane; I now had children in South Australia and they were like magnets tied to my shoes.

In 1835 William Light, Surveyor, Artist, veteran of the Peninsular War, was sent to South Australia to determine the best site for the first town. The Letter of Instruction included orders to chart fifteen hundred miles of coastline.

The surveyor also had to look for harbour sites, fertile ground, sheep walks, and rivers. In his spare time Light was expected to keep his eyes open for supplies of building materials and coal. He was also to design a layout for the aforesaid town and subdivide the land for purchase by settlers. The task was comparable in difficulty to founding a colony on the moon; It was all to be done in three months.

In spite of the impossibility of the task, Light did most of it on time. When the settlers arrived the subdivisions were not complete. The new arrivals complained because they couldn't start trading in Real Estate until this was done. Secondly, no one thought Adelaide was in a good location. Thirdly, they didn't like the layout of the city.

I don't know if the fact that Light was a Creole was considered a significant reason for disapproval; I suspect it was. I don't know if the fact that Light was openly cohabiting with Maria Gandy was considered scandalous; but it is true that their hut was burnt to the ground.

He died in 1839 as a despised individual. The chaplain of the colony refused to visit Light's deathbed on the grounds that he was unrepentant. (For what?) Once he was dead Light became a hero. From one perspective, William Light was like a corn god who has to be sacrificed for good harvest. He was also Adelaide's first citizen to be destroyed by rumours.

It is now accepted that Light did a very good job. Even people who don't like Creoles, or men who cohabit with women, think he did well. The settlers wanted a place with an amenable climate where there were no rebellious Irish or revolutionary French, and Light gave it to them. They also wanted a colony where no one would become insane or destitute, but some things are beyond the power of your average corn god.

In affect Adelaide had been designed to never have a revolution. The streets were built too wide to barricade easily. There was nothing odd about that, most cities of the early nineteen century were designed in that way, but Light had gone a little further. He had built a city that was designed not to withstand a siege.

The Book of Beginnings

I had to think of the future. There seemed to be a common view that the middle-aged unemployed would just curl up and die, and some of them did, but I was determined to survive out of sheer bloody-mindedness.

I could have upgraded my computer skills to ready myself for the new age of world communication; but Information Technology installations didn't employ people over the age of thirty.

The conventional view during the early nineties was that the unemployed were under-educated. It seemed like a reasonable assumption so I enrolled in a Senior College to get a certificate for entry to University.

I didn't want a vocational type of Degree. I had taken vocational courses all my life and they merely led into a blind alley when the technology changed. An Arts degree in a Humanities subject seemed to be the thing. I intended it to be something to get the neurones working while looking for the right opportunity. I felt that if I needed knowledge of a speciality I could always take some bridging course in the subject.

It only required my absence from the shop for a few hours a day. I left Bandicoot in charge. He was honest and he promised not to scream during working hours.

One day I got back to the shop and Bandicoot was plucking on his guitar with his feet on the counter and a smirk on his face.

'A woman's been asking for you. She called you 'the Tasmanian Devil,' he chuckled

'It can't be who I think it is. What did she look like?'

'About your age. Good looking. She left a note. Nice perfume on the envelope.'

'Gi' me the note.'

Hello Larry

I got Jane's letter. I've run away from home (again.) . I am being hunted by nasty men with little piggy eyes. Be in Charlie's Coffee Caff in the Market Arcade at ten tomorrow.

X Alison.

'What does it mean?' asked Bandicoot.

'Coming from Alison, it probably means nothing at all.'

It is hard to pin down the type of person who freely emigrated to Australia in the nineteenth century. Some were like Mr Macawber in *David Copperfield*. Macawber, forever one step away from debtors prison, takes the opportunity of emigrating in the hope of a second chance in life.

There are hints that to emigrate was not an entirely respectable thing to do. Mrs Stevens, the housekeeper in A.A. Milne's *The Red House Mystery*, says darkly: 'When a gentleman goes to Australia, he has his reasons.'

Some emigrants were children of the gentry, with little to inherit at home, lured by great acreages in Australia.

The Letters of Rachel Henning provide a window into the life of this group of settlers. Rachel Henning and her brother went to New South Wales in the 1850s and made a success of it. But the letters are more interesting for what they don't say. The great gold rush was in progress at this time. It changed Australia permanently, politically and socially. It created the beginnings of industrialisation. It doubled Australia's population in ten years. But Henning does not mention the gold rush. She writes of parties and courtships and acquisitions of land.

The Hennings love Australia but they remain genteel and English for the rest of their lives. The sad thing about it is that the Britain they left was changing as rapidly as Australia. The Hennings established a way of life that was more like that of the Hampshire squirearchy in the 1760s.

The majority of settlers neither wrote nor were written about. The first recorded group of Maltese immigrants arrived in the 1890s. They came to work as indentured labour in the cane fields. These men got into a lot of trouble in Queensland and were looked upon as a threat to western civilisation. A North Queensland newspaper referred to them as 'semi-Europeanised Blacks.' Now most Australians of Maltese ancestry live in Melbourne. I think they wanted to get as far from the cane fields as they could.

The Book of Beginnings

I walked through the market towards the arcade. The stalls were being loaded for the next day's business. I wandered between piles of red and green apples, white garlic, golden onions, bundles of leeks, limes and lemons, broccoli and cauliflower. I

had an odd feeling of coming home. I passed a herb and spice stall with its odour of cloves and cinnamon bark.

In one corner of the market, among crates and vegetable scraps, stood a circle of men. There were about half a dozen of them; they were all very old, probably in their eighties. The men wore very baggy trousers that seemed about four centimetres too long – as though the clothes were from a time before their bodies had withered. They were in various stages of unshaveness as though one razor was shared between them on a roster.

One man spoke in an unknown tongue while the others listened, and then another took his turn speaking. There was a rhythm to it all, and I would not have been surprised if they had started a circling shuffling dance. When these men died the oratory would go with them. Their children and grandchildren would merely chat like everyone else. I walked on to the arcade to meet Alison.

Alison was at a table in the courtyard of Charlies Caff Café. Her hair was blonder and there were a few wrinkles around the eyes but she was still fashion magazine material. I didn't want to be told that I had gone bald.

'You've lost a bit of hair, Larry.'

'Yes. How are you?'

'So-so.'

'Why are you in Adelaide?'

'Why is anyone in Adelaide? Why not Adelaide?'

The waiter came over with coffee. He smiled at Alison when she said 'thank you.'

'You say you want to hide; the waiter will remember you for life. Adelaide is a town where you become famous by farting twice. You have a face that will be photographed. Why not Sydney? Why not L.A.?'

'My dad has become a Socialist in his dotage and developed a mania for collecting William Morris. Adelaide was the largest overseas market for Willam Morris furnishings a hundred years ago. So Dad has given me a bit of money to snoop around for some.'

'That's the silliest explanation I've ever heard.'

'It's all you'll get for a while. How are things anyway?'

'Broke. Lost everything in a marriage. Planning to go to University soon. I get by.'

'You can get-by even better if you help me. I'll pay you for keeping me under cover for a while. C'mon Larry, don't old times mean anything?'

'Do you remember the man you saw at my shop?'

'The ferrety looking fellow?'

'He's not a ferret, he's a bandicoot who quotes Blake. I want you to have a chat with him. He knows a lot about the weirder side of Adelaide society and furniture.'

The image of the lone gold prospector going off into the badlands, with a mule and memories of a girl called Clementine, is an American stereotype, and does not appy to Australian conditions. Until the First World War most mineral discoveries were made within ten miles of a pub. The badlands were harsher here and drier. Prospectors followed the farmers and drovers along the beds of rivers and creeks.

Gold was known to exist in eastern Australia from the early days of settlement, but at first it only appeared in tiny quantities. Flecks of alluvial ore would teasingly show under the plough or the hoof. It was as though a mischievous god had taken the world's greatest gold deposit and spread it grain-by-grain over eight million square miles of wilderness. The ephemeral nature of finds meant that gold fever preceded the discovery of the Victorian fields.

When it happened the effect was electric. Melbourne workers left their desks and benches, and ships were abandoned at anchor. In 1851 almost all government clerks gave in their notice, and their salaries were doubled to make them stay. The Police Force was so denuded of officers that their pay was increased from 6 to 7 shillings a day. It wasn't enough: by Christmas the manpower of the Melbourne force had diminished to eleven.

In a year the English master-and-servant relationship had been undermined. Australia was now a high-wage country where workers came and went as they chose. Although the radical tradition may have started in convict days, it is more easily traceable to the finding of gold.

The gold rushes followed each other around the world like clockwork: California 1848, Ballarat 1851, Otago 1861, Transvaal 1886, Kalgoorli 1893, Klondyke 1897. Engineers and artisans pursued the finds around the globe. Not only were these people migrants, but were often, like myself, migrant sons of migrants. Unlike the fathers who have a yearning for home, the children have nowhere to go back to and no reason to stay in one place.

The Book of Beginnings

I got off the bus and walked onto the University Campus. There I was, almost forty years older than the average new undergraduate, foreign and dark with a bald head and wrinkles around the eyes.

I entered a large open courtyard surrounded by buildings of sixties-modern design. The place seemed very big and crowded. I was reminded of a railway terminus in some large city. I had just enough sense to know I wasn't catching a train or meeting someone, but I did carry a book of timetables with a map in it.

I did what I always did in places of transit; I found a place to have a coffee and a cigarette.

I drank my coffee, scanned a distant row of gum trees, and adjusted my mind to the fact that the timetable was something to do with lectures. I looked at the underlined time for an English lecture and checked the map. I arose and headed towards a group of buildings near the lake. The lake at least gave a feeling of tranquillity.

I joined a stream of students walking towards a white building. I thought the other students were very large and wondered if I was shrinking.

The lecture hall was crowded and noisy. My head was screaming panic. I resisted the impulse to walk out. There were stacks of paper for students to pick up. I picked up lots of sheets of paper.

The lecturer talked about the literary canon. I thought about artillery and then saints. I decided the second meaning was closer to the target. The lecturer said that no one knew what the literary canon was any more. I could see how that would save a lot of bother.

I left the lecture hall with all the other students. I walked down to the lake and sat among the trees. The late summer sunshine filtered through the leaves and dappled the grass. Two ducks waddled up and sat beside me. I was grateful. They were obviously old hands at this sort of thing.

The Press gave a great deal of publicity to a victory by an Independent, Pauline Hanson, in the traditionally Labor seat of Oxley. I didn't give it much thought; the new Member for Oxley expressed right-wing opinions but if that was what her constituency wanted it was their democratic right to elect her.

It was a week before I realised that Hanson was seen as more than a newly elected member in a State that voted for aberrant politicians. Speakers on talk-back radio all over Australia rejoiced that there was now a voice of the people in Parliamant. 'The people' were not Aboriginals or Migrants. I got the impression that 'the people' considered themselves as arbiters of the fate of the non-people. It reminded me of the views of my ex-in-laws and the drunken diatribes of many I had known in Woomera.

I think the reason Joe told me the story about the cousin was because he didn't know how much I already knew. Joe probably thought I had already received a biased version from Carmen, and he felt the need to set the record straight.

'We were both eighteen,' Joe said. 'We had both worked on the fishing boats since we were twelve and felt ready to go on the ocean-going steamers. We went to Marseilles, to pick up a boat. I got a berth on an African coaster. He got involved with a French girl and killed a taxi driver. The French sent him to Devils Island.'

It may have been true but it was a typical Joe story. Joe did the right thing. The cousin was stupid and the girl was strictly background material. There is no logical link between meeting French girls and killing taxi drivers. Frenchmen have the fortunate experience on a regular basis, and most do not go into crime because of it.

The Book of Beginnings.

Alison and Bandicoot got on like a couple of logs on fire. Particularly when she mentioned William Morris furniture.

'It was big here,' said Bandicoot. 'The people who settled Adelaide were going to build a brave new world, and William Morris was part of it. Lady Barr-Smith had half-a- dozen houses furnished with William Morris, and Art and Craft Movement, stuff. A lot of people with money imitated her, but I'll bet you won't find much around now.'

'Not even lining a chicken shed?' asked Alison.

'I doubt it. The local antique merchants are pretty cluey, and Adelaide gets raided by interstate dealers every summer.'

Alison didn't look convinced.

I helped Alison find a flat. She insisted that the lease should be in my name. We house-warmed the place with a meal for two and a bottle.

'You think I'm a butterfly don't you Larry? A bit missing on top.'

'You're fine. It's nothing personal. I just don't like your class.'

'God you're English Larry. Take away the complexion and you are a typical London Yobbo.'

'I found you a flat and I've just cooked you a meal. While I was making it I was thinking that it is what people of my class have been doing for people like you for hundreds of years.'

'I ran away from all that.'

'And you will run back.'

'Have you ever thought of going back?'

'I think I've left it a bit late to check whether I left the tap on,' I said.

I studied Shakespeare's *Tempest* in the first year.

When I was a kid at school I had a teacher who was famous for his groan jokes. Someone asked him in class about his time as a soldier in W.W.II – many school teachers were ex-servicemen, but were usually reluctant to talk about the experience. He told us this story.

'Didn't I tell you about the time I captured a German General? No? Well, it was like this:

I was in my dug-out in the Libyan Desert, waiting for Monty's order to advance, when I saw a German General through my telescope. He appeared very small because I was looking through the wrong end of my spy glass. So I picked him off the eye piece and put him in a matchbox. Now back to work.'

[Class groan]

That is what Shakespeare has done in the *Tempest*. He has taken the sordid business of empire and put it in a matchbox. Am I Caliban?

What are Australians? Are they colonisers or colonised? The pink skin of the ruler still carries status here but their complexions are slowly getting darker.

We also did Swift's *Gulliver's Travels.* If you ignore the satire, it is a classic tale of travel not bringing wisdom.

The satire is only fully understandable with some knowledge of English society 1660-1730; I have a glimmering, although all that High Church versus Low Church stuff is beyond me. Am I Gulliver? He seems more like Joe, especially in the way he gravitated towards the companionship of animals later in life.

A piece of work that really touched a nerve was Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner.* It wasn't the ecologically sound, but absurd, story of the albatross that interested me; it was the urge to confess. Paul had it, and so have I. In fact the Mariner shows a great deal of self control in only choosing to *stoppeth one of three.* My antecedents and I want to tell all to all. We are mariners all.

One advantage of being part of a university is access to a mega-library. The place was as alluring and dangerous as a Homeric siren. I remember enjoyably wasting hours reading a darling book about the history of the Rosary when I should have been researching Wittgenstein.

One day, among the Psychology shelves, I found a volume on the social backgrounds of GIs who committed atrocities during the Vietnam War. In the introduction, the author told an anecdote about meeting a notorious torturer in a Saigon bar. I knew the man and the bar, and remembered the meeting. The author was either a new incarnation of Peru or someone who had known her, and was passing on the episode as their own experience. I sent a note, care-of the publisher, to Michigan.

What object is small and oriental, and found in San Francisco?

A reply came back, scribbled on a torn-off piece of A4.

An incense burner – of course. How are you Lamb?

And so began our correspondence. At first it was via the postal service.

Hi Peru,

What's all this academic stuff? How are you? I am living in a city that suffers from a fear of some unspecified thing that comes in waves. And the inhabitants think I am it. *Larry*

Hi Lamb,

You are it. I'm tempted to come over but I have a wolf to keep from the door. Lure me with details of a lost Lamb surrounded by Adelaide angst.

Yours academically

Peru.

P.S. In your spare time read about The Great Fear (Grand a Peur.)

It infected the French population in the early years of the revolution.

Her letter included an email address. I had never sent or received an email before. I had an address at the university and vowed I'd get the hang of it to talk to Peru.

The story of the cousin who was sent to Devils Island, and may have been in New York eight years later, worries me. On the surface it is just a tale of a relative who went bad. But which one? Joe's family seemed as condemning of his behaviour as they were of the cousin. They were quite unconcerned by Paul's criminality.

Paul, Nina and Carmen all seemed to regard Joe as a foreigner, more foreign than me or my mother. When Joe left his cousin behind he became an Englishman. Joe was the perfect migrant.

The Book of Beginnings.

I also received the promised letter from Jane. I read it on the bus to Uni'.

'Dear Larry

I came out of design-school in 1961 without any prospects. The normal entry into design was to work gratis for a couple of years in a fashion house. I couldn't afford it. I tried making stuff at home but the retailers wouldn't touch it even on consignment.

Then a friend told me something was happening in Carnaby Street. A bloke called John Stephen had opened a shop there selling scarves, and all the young people were flocking to it. I rented a stall nearby selling stuff I made. A lot of others had the same idea, and the district took off.

I had no capital, or idea of controlling costs, or knowledge of record keeping. Alison took me in hand and introduced me to her father. I think he thought I was a joke but my cheek appealed to his sense of humour. The old bugger wrote me a cheque for five hundred and gave me the name of an accountant. Alison's Dad didn't set a time limit to repay the loan, but I cleared it in a year.

I was on a roll, but designing, making, and selling, every day was killing me. Then Michael turned up trumps. He was setting up a band called *The Yorkers* – they later became the *Split Infinities* before nearly killing each other – and asked me to design

costumes for them. He couldn't pay me, or the rock group for that matter, but I did it for old times sake and my name on the credits.

The Yorkers sold a couple of hit records and they were a walking advert' for my stuff all over the world. The *Jain* label was born. Alison came into the business for a while to do the promotions.

The trouble is that when your designs become famous they are pinched and made in low-wage countries. By 1970 the whole thing was turning sour and I sold up. I briefly acquired a husband, and, not so briefly, a daughter. Then I decided it was my turn to do some travelling.

Little Emma and I journeyed through Singapore, Malaysia and India. We visited Australia and stayed with Alison. I wanted to look you up, but by then you were out of the country doing funny business somewhere – your account is very vague. Who was Peru?

One thing I learned was that travellers were poorly served with clothing. When I got back to London I started *Travellin Jain*, fashion for travellers. I wasn't going to be caught out with cheap imitators this time.

When in India I was impressed with the level of education in Kerala. I returned with an ex-employee who could speak Hindi and Sanskrit. I had no idea where or how to set up a business in a foreign country. I received a lot of contradictory local advice. We did a tour of forts and temples while I mulled over the options.

One day we stopped at a village near Trivandum. My guide told me the people were Jainists. It seemed such a coincidence that I wrote an 'X' on the map. Half the village now works for *Travellin Jain.* I run the distribution and publicity from London.

And that's it Larry. All was fine until I took a walk through Soho. I will phone you soon. Jane'

I finished reading Jane's letter about her career and felt there was something very important that I hadn't been told. When I knew Jane in Soho I took it as granted that she was very special and was going to go-places. I assumed this because Jane told me it was so. It went beyond the normal feeling of uniqueness that people have. And Jane did go on and do remarkable things in the fashion industry.

But really, this assumption was based on nothing. Jane could just as easily have remained an assistant in a dry-cleaners until marrying a Jimmy who was a costing clerk in a department store. The pair would have rented a house in suburbia and acquired children and a TV, and a cat, and that would have been the end of the story. The morning trains into London during the fifties were full of Janes and Jimmies, and that was their fate. For all I know, many a suburban marriage may have started in the crowded carriages of the 8.30 to Oxford Street. They could have had youthful dreams of finding lost cities in Peru or painting landscapes in Africa, but we will never know.

Obviously self-belief, as well as talent, carried Jane through, but I wanted to know its beginning. I wrote a letter to Jane asking about the origin of her conviction that she was special. The reply was good enough to include in the *Book of Beginnings*.

Jane's Story

It's something I've often asked myself and the only answer I can come up with is a very cruel one.

It started when I was a kid and I was nine, I lived with my family in Bethnal Green. I was doing badly at school; not just with teachers, but being bullied as well. We were living in a row of houses that had survived the Blitz. A lot of East London had been flattened, and, from my bedroom window, I could see bomb sites extending all the way to the City.

Most people think of bomb sites as grim places, but in that Summer they were beautiful with wildflowers. They say the seeds had come to life after being buried under stone and cement for hundreds of years — Noel Coward wrote a song about it called *London Pride*. Old basements transformed into mossy pools filled with rainwater, and the rooms of roofless houses became mazes in the greenery. Birds we had never seen before chirped and nested on broken walls. These forbidden wild gardens were a magnet to children.

I belonged to a gang, there were only three of us, Jerry, Kevin and me. We saw ourselves as a secret society. I was at that formal age when secrets and rituals are important. We would tell our parents we were going to the kids club, that was run by a local church, and slip away through a drain pipe onto the vacant land to play a game called 'looking for bombs.' I think that bombs represented to us the mysterious world of adults.

Sometimes we would find, among the rubble, a rusting cylinder, and debate as to whether it was a bomb. We had all been babies during the Blitz, and had only a vague idea of what one looked like.

Then we would dare each other with 'kick it, kick it.' Eventually someone would kick the thing. It would give a clang, roll over and reveal the name of a well known brand of water heater. It is strange how so many domestic water heaters survived intact when the houses themselves were blown to pieces.

I had a dose of measles that Summer and didn't go out with the gang for two or three weeks. One day my mates came round asking if I could join them and go to the kids club. Mum didn't let me go in case I was still infectious. I never saw Jerry and Kevin again.

When the boys were not home for tea their parents called the church and then the Police. The bodies of Kevin and Jerry were discovered next day at the bottom of a water-filled basement. They lay beside an unexploded bomb.

A WPC visited and questioned me, but it was from the other side of the room, on account of the measles, and I never let-on about the bomb game. I think by then everybody knew anyway; but no one pressed or nagged me on the subject, not even Mum.

I had a relapse and was in bed for a week with a fever. I missed the funeral. When I got better I knew that I was special. In fact the kids in my class treated me with awe. Even the teachers gave me special attention. I was the last surviving member of a secret society that had found a bomb.

On the day we visited the cemetery Mum cut some roses from our one bush. I watched as she trimmed and bunched them on the kitchen table. It was not what I wanted, but I didn't know how to say it without offending her.

Mum looked at me and said, 'all right, but don't take long, and don't get your clothes dirty.' I ran out of the house and down the road to the bomb site, and picked wildflowers for the graves.

After that I started to do well at school and developed aspirations beyond those of the other children. A week later bulldozers moved onto the bomb sites and made them flat, and barren and bare. Not even the water heaters survived.

I know it's cruel and I sometimes feel guilty about it, but the death of those boys is the only explanation I have for thinking myself special.

Jane

The Book of Beginnings

There were quite a few older people studying at the University. Generally speaking women were better at it than men.

Women predominated among the staff and students in the Humanities and Social Science departments, and there was a definite female culture of communication.

What I found strange about this was that if I made an off-the-cuff statement to one person, someone else would quote it back to me a week later.

It reminded me of John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos*. In this story a group of babies are all born on the same night in an English village. As the offspring grow into children, the villagers become aware that if one child was told something, all the others have the information.

I categorised the whole thing under none-of-my-business. I intended to lead an uncomplicated life.

I read about the French Great Fear. It was a belief that the towns and villages of France where going to be attacked by armed gangs. Who these brigands were rumoured to be was variable; in some cases they were mercenaries of the aristocracy, in others they were the English. Towns were turned into garrisons to defend against an enemy that didn't exist.

As far as I knew the citizens of Adelaide were not polishing their squirrel guns. I thought the Australian anxiety was more a fear of social complexity

I got a phone call from Alison's landlord. She hadn't paid the rent – I was the signatory on the lease – and didn't reply to knocking on the door. I had a spare key and entered the flat that evening. Thanks be to God there was no body on the carpet.

The kitchen was clean, only a washed mug on the draining board, on the table was an envelope addressed to me. I tore off the top, eight fifty dollar notes and a letter fell out.

Farewell Larry-the-Yobbo

I've taken all I want from the flat; give the rest to the Salvo's. I hope the money covers everything. I'll phone you in a couple of weeks.

Alison.

Some clothes were still hanging in the wardrobe. A couple of pairs of shoes and a hash pipe were under the bed – some women leave shoes behind them as though marking their territory with a trail of musk. I put the pipe into my pocket. Apart from the clothes, the bedroom was in good order. I felt no need to contact the Police regarding her disappearance. I paid the landlord the rent plus a hundred and he was decent about not holding me to the lease.

When I showed Bandicoot the hash pipe I thought he was going to cry. I know that dope smokers get emotional about their pipes but I wasn't ready for it.

'She returned it,' he gasped gratefully.

I handed over the letter in the hope that it would have a calming effect.

'What's a yobbo Larry?'

'It's back-slang. 'Yob' is 'boy' backwards; the final 'o' is just for emphasis. When I was a lad it meant a youth who was under-educated, inarticulate, and a bit of a thug. There were a lot of us like that in London at the time.'

'Are you sure she's all right?'

'Alison's been O.K. in places where bandicoots dare not go, and she said she'd phone. The letter contains nothing indicating panic.'

'Does Alison cook?'

'I doubt it,' I answered surprised, 'apart from the odd tossed salad.'

'She ate out then; I'll ask around the cafés near the flat to see if anyone noticed anything unusual.'

I nervously keyed in a message to Peru.

Hi Virtual Peru

This my first attempt on steam-powered email. I am happy to write about Adelaide. How much do you want? Where do you want me to start?

I suppose it comes to sequence. Joe's story made it sound as though he left Marseilles before the cousin committed the murder. In which case Carmen got it completely wrong. Joe caught his ship and the cousin stayed in Marsailles. My father may have heard about the crime years later.

The only explanation for Carmen's anger is that Joe was there. The cousin was in trouble and my father caught a boat and coolly sailed away.

Paul would have known the truth. He would have found out from friends in the Corsican Mafia. Their sphere of influence extended into metropolitan France and beyond. I am not so sure that he would have told Carmen a version of events that would have caused her to blame herself. How did the cousin get away from Devils Island? Or was Joe lying about meeting him in New York?

In any murder the perpetrator, the detective, and the victim, are less interesting than the witnesses and survivors. The victim's story is over quickly; the detective goes on to other crimes once the problem is solved; the perpetrator is silent once found guilty. But the others must speak.

They will have to each make up a story. The story must free them of blame and allow them to cope with the guilt attached to being a survivor.

The villagers would tell of letting the cousin go in what they believed was the care of my father. Joe would tell his children how it wasn't his fault. The French girl, no doubt, entertained her grandchildren with a tale of how, when almost as young as them, she had been an innocent party in a crime.

It would be perfect as long as the survivors did not meet. Joe should never have gone back to Malta.

The Book of Beginnings.

'They've rebuilt the church,' said Jane over the phone.

'What church?'

'St Anne's.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'It was a bombed ruin near Dean Street. We passed it almost every day. You were too busy looking at tarts.'

'William Blake saw angels in the streets of Soho and so did I. What's special about St Anne's?' *What is special about St Anne's?*

'Not much. It is one of those churches built in five different styles at once. Church of England. In the rebuilding they found four thousand skeletons in the old crypt, and they reckon there are twice that many in the graveyard.'

'I'm glad I didn't notice it. Why are we talking about St Anne's?'

I met Michael there. He was sitting in the park that used to be the cemetery. It's higher than the street.'

'Probably because of all the buried bodies. What did Michael have to say? How is he?' *That's it! William Blake was baptised at St Anne's. It seems odd that he was baptised an Anglican. It was probably done because it gave him civil rights. Even Jews baptised their children as Anglicans in those days.*

'Michael is very sick.'

'Are you going to see him again?'

'Yes. We are having lunch on Thursday.'

'Give him my address. Tell him I want to know how he came to believe that he was special.'

'You've got a thing about it haven't you?'

'Yes. You and Michael behaved like stars even when you were nobodies in Soho, and went on to shine for the rest of your lives. I was just a yobbo and have been one ever since.'

'You were special to me, Larry, but you couldn't see it in yourself.'

'No, but I'm in the process now. Just look on me as a late-developer.'

'I'll tell Michael. Seeyathen.'

'Seeyathen.'

A couple of days later I ventured to check my email queue. There were two messages from Peru.

No 1.

Keep the stories short, Cyber Lamb, until you get some experience. I have never been to Adelaide but I had a couple of stopovers in Sydney during Vietnam. It seemed like a working class paradise with lots of beer and sunshine, and weekends during which no one worked except the bartenders.

No 2.

Why no reply? Slow replies are bad manners on this medium. I check my email every day and so should you. tsk. tsk. tsk. Peru.

I replied.

Australia still has grog and sunshine, but things have changed like every where else. We now have a new economic order. Governments have taken to heart what what's-his-name said about there being no free lunch.

We have an everything-has-a-price economy. Things that people took for granted as being free, like the use of a savings account, have a charge. The change hasn't led to starvation in the streets and the social security system is still quite good, but a greater proportion of national wealth has shifted to the already affluent.

Larry

On the 10th of September Pauline Hanson made her maiden speech in Parliament. A first speech by a new Member is usually ignored by the Media but this one was broadcast by the Press all over Australia.

I thought Hanson's opinions were not only racist and uninformed but also mean-spirited and hence un-Australian. For example, Hanson denounced the giving of foreign-aid even though Australia only gives 0.2% of GNP. There was a denial that Aboriginals were disadvantaged and expenditure on them was stated as being a drain on 'the people.'

It is not the custom for a maiden speech to lead to debate in Parliament, and this may excuse the lack of immediate rebuttal by the Liberal Government. But Parliamentarians remained silent even on the errors-of-fact in the speech. The Press loved Hanson; they must have waited on the front door-step with the milk every morning to take-down her utterances on Migrants. The rise of Hanson and the One Nation Party was a creation of the Press.

'Has Alison phoned?' asked Bandicoot a month later..

'No,' I replied.

'I wonder where she is?'

'Knowing Alison, she is probably basking on one of the less-well-known Barrier Reef islands with a Martini on one side and a pretty boy on the other. If Alison wants to call she will. That lady is more resourceful, and richer, than we will ever be. There are too many unknowns, we don't even know on which day she left the flat.'

Bandicoot pulled a notebook out of his pocket and read an entry out-loud.

'Last seen on the 15th by the manager of the Pioneer Deli. A woman of Alison's description purchased a small carton of milk and a packet of Panadol. They discussed hangovers. She went out and caught a cab that went in the direction of the city.'

'That's a very fine and useless bit of research,' I said.

'Only a start. I will be checking the taxi companies next. Alison may have paid by credit card.'

I read Michael's letter while waiting for a talk on Plato to begin. I remember nothing of the lecture.

'Hello Larry,

Jane told me about your request over the lemon sole. I am afraid when you thought I was 'a star' I was really a desperate young man. I did think myself special and it was the reason for my desperation. While in Soho I carried out a terrible act. At the time I told myself it was an accident, but I now see it as an attempt to destroy my past.

I am sure you have read *Crime and Punishment*. In it the hero tries to escape from mediocrity by carrying out an atrocious murder. By the end of the novel he is a prisoner in Siberia slobbering for redemption at the feet of a peasant girl. I never did like that ending.

Unlike the Russian murderer: my crime was not premeditated, and there was certainly no peasant girl, I did not seek redemption, and I was lucky. I ascribe my good fortune to the fact that from an early age I was a chameleon. It is how I became 'special.' '

I decided the story should go into *The Book of Beginnings*.

Michael's Story.

My father was probably an anti-aircraft gunner; I don't know his name, rank or serial -number. My mother was an office cleaner although when Mum met her soldier she was an Air Raid Warden.

I spent my childhood in a sit-up-and-beg terrace house just off the Brompton Road. We lived with one of Mum's sisters. I have not been near the place for thirty-five years; the main thing I remember of the interior is that everything seemed to be in different shades of brown.

To compensate for her erratic youth my mother gave me a moral upbringing. We used to go every Sunday to a tin chapel in Harrow. It was a fading little religion with only about ten remaining members. We would sing *New Jerusalem* and be told that being poor was a noble thing.

I don't know at what age I realised I could be anything I wanted to be. I remember, at eight years old, sitting in front of the bakelite radio mouthing the vowels of the BBC announcer. I understood, even then, that by changing my speech and dress I could be like the posh kids in Kensington High Street.

I was baptised Eustace. There was a comic strip character at the time called *Useless Eustace,* and I knew that name had to go.

My mother and aunt believed every boy should learn a trade, and so I became a printers devil in Soho. I hated the smell of ink, but the district was ideal. In Soho my homosexuality was no more legal than it was in the rest of Britain at the time, but it was accepted. All varieties of sexual behaviour in the district are a matter of trade, and I was a highly marketable young man.

By the time we met, Larry, I was well into my second incarnation as the suave young Michael.

Shortly after I went to work my mother gave up the chapel and took up tea leaf reading, but stayed in touch with the remaining congregation. The little religion did not proselytise – which may explain why there were so few members – but in each generation a prophet was supposed to emerge among them who would preach the Word to the World.

When I first saw Alf in Berwick Street I recognised him, and the role he was playing. Alf had been the baritone in our chapel. He seemed not to recognise me. I

pretended his ravings about the Seven Headed Beast and the Whore of Babylon were as much gibberish to me as they were to fruitsellers in the market.

One evening I was in a side-street near Charing Cross Road. The street was lined with buildings that had been erected as city residences a hundred and fifty years before. They were typically three storey terraces with railed off basements for the servants quarters. The old houses were now let out as offices, and deserted after five. It was dark between street lamps; there was just enough rain to make the pavements slippery.

I was hurrying when I heard the words I dreaded: 'Eustace, Eustace, Eustace!' Alf appeared out of the dark. He grabbed me by my overcoat lapels and started shouting in my face about Sodom and Gomorra, and rivers of blood.

I swear I just wanted him to shut-up and go away. I was eighteen, and, beneath the teenage bravado, I was easily embarrassed. There was no one else in sight, but, as you know, Soho has eyes. He had me pinned against the railings. I tried to push him away, but he moved nearer. We were so close that I could almost taste his last meal.

He jumped back when I spat in his face, but hung-on to my coat. I grabbed his head and rammed it against the railing spikes. I did it again and again. Then he slumped and let go. He rolled to the ground and disappeared. I felt a thump beneath my feet. Alf had fallen into the stair-well of a basement. I fled.

I walked the length of Charing Cross Road with blood on my hands; I washed them clean in the fountain at Trafalgar Square. My coat was torn; I left it on the seat of a train on the Circle Line.

Alf was not in Berwick Street the next day or ever again. A street sweeper found his body in the stair well. The Coroner decided there was a case to answer.

For weeks I lived in a sweat of panic. I thought about the coat and worried if it had blood marks on it. I couldn't even remember if I'd left anything in the pockets. It was likely that the garment had ended up in London Transport Lost Property among all the umbrellas and tigers heads. Alternatively, it may have been picked up by a passenger who had seen it as a way of staying dry on the long walk home.

The Police questioned prostitutes and street vendors: who said they knew nothing except that Alf was a pest. Detectives enquired among their usual bar-room

informers, and were told nothing was known but that it was probably a case of Soho administering its own justice.

A Constable, WPC-28, did make the connection between Alf and the tin chapel. She went to his funeral and surveyed the remnant half dozen of the congregation. The astute young officer concluded that none of these ancients had been near a red-light district for thirty years, and wrote a report saying so.

She checked files for violent deaths of street evangelists in London. There were a surprising number, but none of the crimes conformed to any of the patterns that are so beloved of crime writers and young police officers.

It was about that time that I started to grow my third self: Damien. I saw the name on the cover of a paperback in the window of a Holborn bookshop. I liked the sound of Damien. It conjured an image of a dark angel.

The remaining thing I feared was my mother's enquiring eye. WPC -28 interviewed my mother after the funeral. Mum kept mum about the fact that she had a son who worked in Soho. When she spoke of it to me I felt an urge to confess, but my new persona carried me through. I could do things as Damien that I couldn't achieve as Michael. I attribute my success in the music industry to being Damien.

Time passed and the Law did not knock on my door. I had to leave home if only to escape my mother's eye. I went to New York a year later. There was no 'Uncle in the thermometer business.' The wealthy man I travelled with will no doubt appear in my official biography.

About twelve years ago I had to bail out an entire band that had been arrested for possession. I went to the Magistrates Court in person because my lawyer had been called away. While waiting, I got into conversation with an Inspector in the Drug Squad. We started talking about Soho in the fifties.

The Inspector told me about her first murder case when a Constable, and how it was never solved. Then the lawyer arrived and I handed everything over to him.

I was leaving the waiting-room when the Inspector said, 'the street-girls reckoned he had it coming.'

I said, 'yes,' and continued walking. I can only assume the officer remembered my mother's surname.

I don't know if Jane told you that I am ill. I am still quite spry and may have years in me yet; I am determined to complete three score years and ten – if only to annoy

my biographers. When the end comes, I hope I will face that final change of identity calmly. I have made it clear that I do not want 'Eustace' to appear on my tombstone.

The Book of Beginnings

Things were happening beyond the Uni car park. I was in a supermarket gathering my provisions for the week. A Malay woman with a baby was pushing her trolley ahead of me. A smartly dressed Australian woman of about fifty passed and spat into the younger woman's trolley. Then the spitter strode on and passed out of view.

Devotees of the One Nation Party were targeting minorities in the shops and streets. At no time did Hanson publicly advocate these assaults although I do not know what was said at Party meetings. The Media did not report these assaults. They either did not know about them or considered them un-newsworthy; the victims were not 'the people' even though many were born in Australia.

Peru introduced me to something called Chat-tool on the system which allowed us to have rather clunky conversations via the keyboard.

Hi Lamb! I am considering writing about my experiences in the Pacific. It will have to be in allegorical form to protect the guilty. Can you think of a metaphor to describe what you did during Vietnam?

Ditch digging?

No it doesn't quite capture it my Lamb.

Alice in blunderland?

That's closer but I think its been done before.

I got a call from the Police. Bandicoot had been attacked in an alley near Victoria Square. He was in the Royal Adelaide Hospital. When I saw him in out-patients Bandicoot looked like a car accident.

'Orwell was right,' Bandicoot muttered, 'all that's left are dead men and live gorillas, and nothing in between. I scored three of them.'

'What?'

'Gorillas.'

'Urban ones?'

'G-o-r-i-ll-as.'

'With clubs by the look of it.'

'Boots. Oh yeah, a note was left under the shop door. I put it in the drawer. You've been invited out to dinner.'

'By who?'

'Someone called Bragg.'

'Orwell was right.'

'Mmm?'

'Bragg is dead.'

I naturally got onto Chat-tool to speak to the person who had told me of Bragg's demise.

Hi Peru! Is Bragg dead?

I heard he was. Why?

I got a note with his name at the bottom.

Maybe he's not. What's in the note?

An invitation to dinner.

Do you have a gun?

You're joking.

Yes I'm joking.

Australians have been telling me they are unhappy with migrants for as long as I've been here. I don't know where they got the idea that migrants are supposed to make them happy. Not even the American Declaration of Independence offers happiness, it just says that people have the right to look for it.

The post-war immigration program has created a wealthier and more diverse Australia, and has brought pleasure to statisticians.

The intake has varied from year to year since 1948, but the plan was to increase Australia's nett population from migration by a hundred thousand annually. The statisticians knew, from the experiences of other countries, that a 20% return rate could be expected. Based on this assumption, the intake has usually varied between a hundred and a hundred and forty thousand.

For the first twenty years of the program the pattern held true, but then it changed. In 1977 a Green Paper was published, entitled *Immigration Policies and Australia's Population*. Statistics, that included Australians leaving the country as well as migrants returning, showed a new mobility. If the intake was 50,000 the nett gain was zero; if it was 120,000 the nett gain was 50,000; if the intake was 200,000 the nett gain was 100,000.

These people/not going home but merely moving on. A proportion of the migrants were becoming expatriate along with Australian-born travellers. This was part of a trend all around the world. Many of these people were in professional and technical occupations. They were part of a new middle-class nomadism.

Why?

707, DC-8, DC-9, 747.

The Book of Beginnings

The note from 'Bragg' was printed and gave no indication of its origin – I would not have recognised his writing anyway. There was no reply phone number. The dinner was at a North Adelaide hotel. I called the pub. They had no booking under Bragg, but the person on the other end said that it was not necessary on a Tuesday night. I decided to go.

The hotel was a blue-stone and brick building with geraniums on its balconies and vines growing on the veranda. This predilection for botany continued on into the pub with potted palms and ferns. The place was dimly lit with lots of nooks. It had the mark of a pick-up joint for middle-aged advertising executives who wanted to hide their wrinkles from girls who were barely out of school.

I pushed aside a green frond, and ordered a beer from a long haired youth at the bar. 'I believe there is a restaurant in the forest,' I said.

'Yes sir, in the courtyard with the lemon tree in it, just past the Solandra Nitida and through the glass doors.'

I walked over to the doors. The courtyard appeared empty apart from a couple of diners, and neither of them were Bragg. I had never disbelieved that he had been killed, but I was in another country when it happened. 'Mutilated' was what Peru said, and that was the euphemism we used for the trademark castration-after-execution by the drug consortium. The corpse could have been faceless and it had been in the water.

I saw the reflected face of Alison in the glass and turned.

'A poncey sort of place isn't it,' she said.

Her hair was different. It was shorter and black. The lipstick was the same colour. I remember thinking that the muted lighting made her look twenty years younger.

'Where have you been,' I asked, ' and what do you know about Bragg?'

'You mentioned him in your letter to Jane. Bad taste to use his name I know, but you didn't seem to think his death a loss to the world.'

'More than bad taste. Where have you been? Bandicoot has been playing Sherlock Holmes around town and managed to get himself bashed for the trouble.'

'Melbourne. I know what Ava Gardner said about it, but I had a lot of fun there. We have to talk and that courtyard is an echo chamber. I know a little place up the road where the music is constant and the waiter is deaf.'

I returned my glass to the bar and told the youth to keep the aspidistra flying. He looked puzzled. I was worried about something else; I hadn't mentioned Bragg to Jane.

Alison and I stepped into the brightly-lit foyer.

'Great hairstyle,' I said cautiously.

'And?'

'The lipstick goes well with it.'

'Yes.'

'What have you done to your face? You look different.'

'What a yobbo thing to say. A little trim and tuck. A bit off the nose. Nothing encourages plastic surgery like being hunted by hoods.'

'You're still recognisable.'

'To you I am because we met when I was younger. My style of dress will change to black and flowing. I am going to be gothic. Who ever heard of a middle-aged gothic?'

'I dunno.'

'What happened to Bandicoot?'

'Bashed and kicked. I think he'll be O.K.. It could have been something random or because he was looking for you.'

'Bastards! And I lost his pipe as well.'

'I found the pipe and gave it to him. I didn't know it was his, but Bandicoot was immensely grateful that you returned it. He is resting up wherever bandicoots go after a licking.'

'I must go and see him.'

'The shock could cause a relapse. I'll visit him first, and warn him that you've turned into a vampire.'

'C'mon Yobbo, let's go and eat.'

'How's Uni' going?' asked Alison over the crepes.

'O.K., but there's something odd going on.'

'Tell-tell, Larry. Universities are such festering places of intrigue. Has someone taken all the custard cremes out of the biscuit packet? And has the faculty split into factions over it?'

'We undergraduates never learn about that sort of stuff. No, it seems to be aimed at me. About a week ago I was starting a course on Australian literature – from a lecturer I'd never had before – when she stared down at me and shouted, 'How dare you suggest there is prejudice! You will be disempowered!'

'So the lady was having a bad day.'

'It was more than that. As I rose to leave at the end of the lecture the lecturer glared at me and shouted something about men sexually abusing their daughters.'

'Nothing more?'

'Not really, she turned and went on to do something else.'

'Hit and run stuff. I hate to ask this, but is your relationship with your children, umm, normal?'

'As normal as it can be with a broken marriage. I used to see them about once a week, but Dorothy has moved into the country. They are both in their late teens, and don't seem to miss me. They probably both wish I was an Anglo-Australian, but I didn't pick my parents and neither can they. If the outburst was a serious accusation it is slander.'

'Do you think your ex' is behind it?'

'I suppose Dorothy is a likely suspect although it doesn't seem like her. Anyway, she has seen me often enough since the break-up. If Dorothy considered me guilty of that sort of thing she would have said so in very strong terms.'

'It's probably just a teacher having a bad day. There are fashions in feminism just like there are in architecture. A current one is that ethnic fathers rape their daughters as a general rule.'

'My ancestry is being treated as evidence of villainy. When I arrived in Australia, in the early sixties, some people were described as having 'a touch of the tar brush.' It meant they were not quite right, not quite white.'

'Well there's nothing you can do about it Larry. Sticks-and-stones.'

'I guess so. You've been a good Gothic by listening to me. Do you have anywhere to live?'

'Well I was considering hanging upside down in a belfry tower, but instead I found a share-house in North Adelaide. I suppose Bandicoot hasn't picked up any nice Bill Morris pieces to furnish my bedroom.'

'I doubt it. Is it important?'

'Well I am getting expenses to look for the stuff, but it won't go on forever. I've just spent the inheritance from an Aunt on my face – we are a family of spenders and she would have approved. There's nothing more until Dad dies, and I know he plans

to fund grandsons through the old school and Oxford. The remainder has to split four ways. There will be taxes. The manor house is in a bad state. My brother wants to turn it into bed-and-breakfast. Can you see me in a frilly apron serving eggs and bacon to tourists from Saskatoon?'

'When it happens I want to be there to watch. The people of Saskatoon are very fussy about the quality of their eggs and bacon.'

'Yobbo!'

'I can't imagine your family as poor.'

'We're not, it's just that in the past, every couple of generations, an individual has cropped up in the family who was a buccaneer or a slave trader and filled the coffers. We haven't had one of those for a *long* time and the cash is running a bit low.'

In response to the new globalism there was a new nationalism in the seventies and eighties. People were generally better off but the money was spent on social nostalgia. A lot of Australian movies were made. Many of them were in period costume; others were about horses. New houses were built with traditional verandas. TV commercials sold beer and petrol with scenes from rural Australia. It was as though Australia was trying to create a history it could be comfortable with, and then went to live there.

The Book of Beginnings

Hi Peru! Ever thought of a university campus as a metaphor for the Vietnam War?

It sounds better than trench digging or Alice in blunderland, but it might be hard to draw parallels. How was your meeting with Bragg?

It wasn't. It was Alison with a new face.

Who?

Alison, an old friend. She has reappeared in my life after twenty years.

And she knows about Bragg? Tell me everything about her.

The teaching staff of my department at the University were largely silent on the subject of One Nation.

One lecturer did speak out against Hansonism to her students, but she was a Medievalist and an authority on Chaucer, and was considered marginal to Feminism and Post-Modernism.

I did approach the student association on the subject. I thought this a reasonable thing to do because many of its members were of Asian or Aboriginal origin. I was told they were planning to do something about it soon. The 'something' was going to

be in the form of posters on Campus. It all seemed a bit tepid. I don't know if any posters were displayed. I believe other campuses were more active.

I visited Bandicoot's flat to tell him that Alison was OK. It was a bed sitter with a small kitchen attached. The bed-sitter was crammed with furniture and books. It was a dark room – some people like their rooms dark. In contrast the kitchen was sunlit and without a saucepan or kettle in sight.

'Don't you cook at all?' I asked surprised. For someone to 'not-cook' was a sign of self-neglect in my family, and was viewed as an omen of approaching death.

'No.'

'You're feeling O.K.?'

'I'm fine. A few aches and bruises, but that's all.'

'Not even breakfast?'

'I go down the road and have a coffee and toast.'

I shrugged. I felt it had been impertinent of me to ask, and I changed the subject to Alison and her new appearance.

'A vampire!' he said. 'Does she have fangs?'

'Not so you'd notice.'

'If Alison needs a coffin to sleep in I can get one at a reasonable price.'

'I doubt it. I don't think she wants to live the part. It's just a disguise.'

'How's the shop?'

'The lease expires in a month and I am letting it go. I am too busy and you're in no state to haul books.'

'Could you hold on to it for a couple more months. I might take the lease over. I could sell your books on commission while putting my own stock in.'

'What are you planning to sell?'

'Bric-a-brac mainly. Nineteenth century china and kitchenware.'

'This stuff isn't hot is it?'

'Oh no,' he chuckled. 'It's as cold as a corpse.'

I am starting to see what Australians, of the professional class, regard as the New Jerusalem. It is the nineteenth century with the added benefits of air-conditioning, contraception, PCs, antibiotics, and shopping Malls with nice boutiques in them.

It is an acquire-a-horse-but-keep-the-motor-car ideology. In this comfortable world it is good to live in a rural setting among giant gums, but it mustn't be too far from BiLO. A lot of good Australian wine is consumed even though nineteenth century Australians seemed to have despised the stuff.

In this society everything is stable especially the migrants; migrants are friendly, polite, clean, speak English in an amusing fractured manner, cook delicious little meals, don't mind a bit of jocular ethnic vilification, and do national dancing in civic squares on Australia Day.

Aboriginals don't fit into this Victorian Shangri-La at all because they were being killed at the time.

The Book of Beginnings

Do you know why Alison left Queensland? asked Peru.

No. but it may have been a quite minor complication in her life.

I met a Queenslander in Guam. He called himself a banana bender. I take it they grow bananas there.

No. I also once knew a Queenslander, and he told me they grow the bananas in New South Wales and then truck them to Queensland to be bent. It's an ancient craft.

No wonder Alison left.

There's some funny politics up there.

Tell me about it.

That afternoon I had an appointment in town. I belonged to a housing co-op and had to meet a fellow member, Tina, on co-op business. Tina is as Australian as a gum leaf, but, when she talks, Tina moves her hands with the grace of a Spanish Donna. We were walking down Grenfell Street, with Tina doing most of the talking, when a man of about sixty came out of the crowd and ran up to her.

'Keep your arms still or we'll cut your fucking hands off,' he shouted. The fellow then ran off into the crowd.

I was to learn this was the normal modus operandi for One Nation supporters during the xenophobia epidemic. They would target anyone who didn't conform to their norm and then run off like a rabbit. John Howard may have favoured a 'robust debate,' but debate of any kind was something these people feared.

I led the shocked Tina away to have a coffee.

Alison and Bandicoot, and I, met in the back of the shop one evening. We had a few beers in celebration of Bandicoot being on his feet. He was looking around the room as though planning the store.

'OK, Bandicoot, tell all,' said Alison.

'Well,' he said. 'I was going for a stroll one day when I discovered the oldest dump in the city.'

'You were fossicking around a dump and you found enough antiques to fill a store?'

'Oh no. I was walking in the park one day.'

'In the very merry month of ...?'

'June. It had been raining. I walked past a drain entrance. It was behind the West Terrace Cemetery. At the mouth of the drain I saw a broken bottle. It was unusual and had a hand blown look about it.'

'Mouth blown,' said Alison.

'Whatever. I went into the drain for a look around.'

'As a bandicoot would,' I said.

'Part of the wall had washed away and there were more bottles sticking out of the earth. I grabbed a couple by the neck and they came away intact. I took them home and gave them a wash. That evening I was back in the drain with a torch and a trowel. I found more, but it was hard work, only about one in twenty pieces are unbroken apart from the odd bit of cutlery. There are a lot of oyster shells.'

'Evidence that the early Adeladeans were trying to improve their sex lives,' I replied. 'Are you sure it is a dump and not just landfill.'

It's a dump, and it must have been closed, and covered in turf, about a hundred years ago. I think it goes down about two metres. I've been tunnelling at night. My shed is filling up with stuff, but it's not sorted. There are saucers without cups, teapots without lids, things I don't know what, a lot of bottles, and these.' He produced a broken floor tile.

'That's nice,' said Alison acidly.

'Look at the back,' replied Bandicoot. He pointed to lettering that said *Morris & Co.*

'That's fine ,' said Alison, 'but I don't think it's what Dad had in mind when he said William Morris. He wants furniture or carpets, the odd stained glass panel would be OK, but ...'

'There are a lot more of these. It could be an entire floor of tiles that was ripped up and thrown away.'

'It's not much of a design,' I said. 'The corner of something.'

'I think it's part of a big pattern, maybe a picture made from tiles. It could be the size of a ballroom.'

I thought of buried cities.

We drank. We discussed, in a learned manner, the technicalities of mining for antiques. We considered taping off the site and putting up 'work-in-progress' signs, and stealing a bulldozer. Alison said we should first find out if *Morris & Co* was the real William, and not some Fred Morris who made tiles in Thebarton, before digging up an acre of Parklands. We drank to dumps and secrecy.

'How's your troublesome teacher?' asked Alison.

'It wasn't just a bad day,' I replied.

Bandicoot left. Alison and I knew that something was going to happen now or it would never happen at all.

'Backs of shops are your thing according to Jane,' said Alison.

'It just worked out that way. Dry cleaner shops are a good place to change clothes and clothes are Jane's thing.'

'Well I'm not going to wear a copy of *Paradise Lost*.'

We were both a little drunk and a lot older, but I recommend sex with a vampire.

One of the problems with moving Australia into the nineteenth century is that there is more than one version of this period. It also requires the quiescence of a proportion of the population who have nothing to gain from this exercise in time-travel.

A major flaw is that it assumes the non-Anglos are identifiable and static. Greeks marry Italians; Poles marry Chinese; Maltese marry Malays; Aboriginals marry Austrians. And their children are beautiful. This is not a melting pot; this is internationalisation.

There are an increasing minority who, although not foreign, do not fit into the Victorian Shangri-La.

I think Anglo Australians feel unloved and don't understand why. It would be a waste of time telling them that it is because they have spent the previous fifty years locking us out; they would merely deny it.

The Book of Beginnings.

'How's Uni?' asked Alison.

'A big reading-list this semester: mainly novels in which men are mad or stupid, or rape their daughters, and ethnics are people who exhibit strange behaviour in exotic locations.'

'Your favourite lecturer?'

'Yes. She makes generalisations about villainous men or migrants and then raise an eyebrow in my direction. It's all very stereotyped. What puzzles me is why she's going to all the trouble. If the lecturer doesn't believe Dagos should go to University, she could easily ignore me and mark me down at the end of the year.'

'Maybe she just finds you interesting. Maybe she is planning to write an article entitled *Old Wogs on Campus*. Do you make a big deal out of being born overseas?'

'I have never mentioned that I am a migrant in my assignments or course work before, but I will in the future. I believe the lady thinks of it as my weakness whereas in fact it is the reverse. How are things at the diggings?'

Alison handed me a bronze disc, about ten centimetres in diameter, with some rotted leather attached to it. One side of the object was scraped clean showing the star and crescent.

'Tell me it's a Morris incense burner,' I said.

'No. Bandicoot tells me it's part of a harness. He's very excited about it. Apparently antique camel gear is worth a bit. A lot of Afghans came to South Australia from 1870 onwards except a lot of them weren't Afghans. Some came from Egypt or Pakistan but Australians wanted to keep it simple.'

I felt it was something I didn't need to know. The myriad of churches and chapels were enough without adding Islam to complicate things. I wasn't sure what 'a lot' meant. They would have stood out in the crowd. I remembered the arrival of West Indians and Pakistanis in England in the fifties. If three were seen in the street it was considered to be 'a lot.'

I did wonder about the building of the overland telegraph, in which the Afghans played such an important role. Was it embraced or seen as a threat by Adelaide's population? It integrated South Australia more closely into the Empire. An Empire where most of the people had dark skins.

I decided to be wary of generalising about nineteenth century Australians. Through most of the century, the majority of Australian residents were born overseas. The concept of an Australian was a vague one. Australian Citizenship was not enacted until 1948.

Because of modern communication when a migrant arrives in a country they bring with them a host of links to the rest of the world; this is as true if the person is a refugee as it is if they are an executive for a multinational. Such international connections survive generations and gain complexity with intermarriage.

The problem is one of naming, and we are without a title in Australia. There are American multi-ethnics who walk around with the slogan *Hybrid is Hip;* others prefer the 'in-ya-face' *Mongrel.* Tiger Woods, the American golfer, has an Afro-American father and a mother from Thailand; he prefers to be called *Mixed.*

I favour *Creole* in spite of its lack of precise meaning because it captures the ambiguous status of the minority. The term grew out of the racial confusion of the Latin American empires. There is some disagreement as to whether the word is of French, Spanish, or Portuguese origin. It is generally accepted that *Creole* stems distantly from the Latin: *creare,* which means create. Creoles are folk created by Colonialism, and that fits me to a Tee. We are also a pretty creative bunch of people.

The Book of Beginnings.

Peru was getting interested in Australian Politics.

How is One Nation getting on?

There was a State election in Queensland on 13th June , and One Nation harvested 23% percent of the vote and 11 seats in an 89 seat parliament. I think it's a turning-point. Both major parties and the Press must realise that this is serious. They obviously don't give a stuff about migrants but they must now realise that One Nation could hold the balance of power after the next Federal Election.

When is the Federal Election?

About six months. If Hanson does well she can thank the media.

If they made her they will destroy her. The law of gravity applies to political publicity in the U.S., and I expect it is the same in Australia – the build-up is automatically followed by the tear-down.

Things were getting quite theatrical in the streets. I was walking along Kensington Road when a Jaguar MK2 stopped nearby. A youth of about eighteen got out of the car and strode up to me. He was wearing a kind of uniform; it was that sharp-cut style favoured by neo-Nazi organisations, complete with shiny riding boots.

He spat at me, but the saliva missed and blew with the breeze back onto his trousers. Then he hurried back to the Jag with an awkward strut as the phlegm flowed into his boot.

The attacks in the street were mainly carried out by older people who couldn't cope with living in the last decade of the twentieth century. Usually I could brush off the antagonism with a shrug, but once I felt like weeping when a person I had known for years crossed the road to avoid me. I tried laughing when insulted. One Nation supporters seem to find the sight of a happy ethnic genuinely distressing.

I remember reading that being middle-aged is like being half way through a cross-country race and discovering that all the route-signs have been switched. This does not worry me – I've always ignored the signs anyway. To some it must feel as though a chasm has opened beneath their feet.

Until the Citizenship Act,1948, nationality in Australia was dictated more by custom than legislation. Second generation Australians of German ancestry were interned during the First World War. This injustice was not a uniquely Australian act. Both Canada and the United Kingdom interned citizens on the basis of their ancestry. Ancestry is still a prerequisite for citizenship in many countries; Australians have been conscripted into European armies on the basis of their parentage. Historically, in England, the right religion was more important than the right parents to qualify as citizens.

It is easy to belittle citizenship because it is so variously defined, but it is impossible to have democracy without accepted views of the rights and obligations of a citizen.

John Stuart Mill in *Representative Government*, refers to a 'community of memory.' He places this ahead of identity of religion and ancestry. I suppose in Australia's case the community of memory would include such things as Gallipoli, Test Cricket, the exploits of Ned Kelly, and an anxiety about Asia. I respect Mill's argument but it contains a few holes when applied to the contemporary world.

The Book of Beginnings

Do you think Alison really has an interest in William Morris furniture?

I doubt it, but it's hard to tell. I think Alison was told there was a lot of Morris stuff here in the nineteenth century and she thought it could be worth a snoop.

South Australia is the end of the rainbow?

It is, but the pot of gold is empty.

Is Alison political?

No, although she once gave me a very informed talk on La Pen. Alison is just a Picara and I fully expect her to disappear from my life again as she has before.

Never mention me to her.

OK.

The next day was Thursday and I went to the supermarket to buy some cheese. The place was crowded. It was dole day; The day when social security recipients , from Broome to Bruny Island, are paid a small sum of money from the public purse. This endowment serves the double function of providing revenue to supermarkets and keeping the poor passive so that they will not attack the politicians and parade their heads on spikes down the nation's shopping malls. No doubt many of these people will vote for One Nation.

I was staring at the packets of cheese and realised what it was all about. My mother probably never entered a supermarket in her life. When she wanted cheese, Elizabeth went to the cheese counter of a grocery shop. She would be served by an adult, probably someone of a similar age to herself.

This person would know about cheese, the assistant was someone who had spent years learning about the product in all its varieties, and Mum and this person would talk cheese. The purchase would be selected, and cut, and packed, and paid for. The cheese-counter assistant was probably not highly paid, but he, or she, had a certain dignity that stemmed from knowing cheese.

That's how it was. The shop assistant was an expert. Everyone was an expert at something – something real: like understanding cheese or shaping metal or steering boats or knowing how to deliver babies.

If I picked up a packet of cheese, out of the shiny refrigerated cabinet, to ask if it was any good; I would be told, by someone who wasn't much more than a school

child, that it was all right because its date hadn't expired. If I pointed out that this didn't answer my fucking question, they would probably call a security guard.

No doubt there are experts on cheese somewhere in the supermarket hierarchy, but they do not come in contact with customers. That is what the appeal of One Nation is about. The working class have lost their expertise, and the dignity that came from it. They have a choice: social security or checking expiry dates on plastic packets. And they know that their children and grandchildren can expect no better. They feel someone must be to blame for this.

Migrants and Aboriginals were picked on because they were recognisable, but the tidal wave was really about the destruction of working class dignity.

The joke is that we did it to ourselves. In exchange for plastic bags and plastic hamburgers we have allowed ourselves to be turned into robots. We have done to ourselves what Stalin failed to do to the Russians. It is funnier than that; robots have a purpose; robots do things. We are useless. Migrants must be to blame.

I started laughing and people turned around. I walked out of the supermarket humming a variation of the *Marseilles*.

'Dorothy is involved,' I said.

'How do you know? asked Alison.

'One of the novels mentions a company I worked for in Sydney thirty years ago. It's too much of a coincidence. Only my ex' would have that information. I must assume that the Lecturer knows everything about me that Dorothy knows.'

'Does it worry you?'

'No. It means I can assume that the Lecturer doesn't know what Dorothy doesn't know about my past. Why are you in Adelaide?'

'Ask no questions Larry.'

'Is Bragg still alive?'

'Bragg is no more.'

'Of course not! Michael is Damien, and Jane is Jain, and Alison wears black. Is Bragg still alive?'

'Does it matter?'

'Why was the overland telegraph so important?' I asked Bandicoot in the shop.

'It established South Australia as a world supplier of raw materials. Y'see, before the telegraph, if someone was mining copper in Moonta, and the price for copper fell in London, it could be months before the miner found out. The miner would have been working at a loss all that time without knowing it. It was the same for wheat and wool.'

'It's good to know that it wasn't just to allow the Barr-Smiths to order a Morris writing desk at short notice.'

'It wasn't unconnected. The telegraph allowed The Barr-Smiths and the Elders to become immensely rich by buying from producers, and selling to London when the price was right. It's always the same; the workers who built the telegraph made bugger all, and the people who made the Morris furniture did little better.'

I sang in my best maudlin cockney baritone

It's the same the whole world over.
It's the poor what gets the blame.
It's the rich what does the damage.
Isn't it a fucking shame.

Bandicoot told me to piss-off, and I did.

As I walked down the street I wondered where my loyalties had gone. Six months before I had identified with the working-class and Australians. Now the same people were trashing me in the street and were going to vote One Nation. All allegiances were gone. So be it.

The scenario on campus out-Kafkad Kafka. Not only was the accused unaware of what crime he had committed; the prosecutor didn't seem to know either. The only things the lecturer was sure of was that I was male and a migrant, so she concentrated on that.

The idea seemed to be that if I was insulted enough, I would incriminate myself in some way. The question was: what was I supposed to have done? And why didn't they just call me into an office and ask me if I'd done it? Her method was to make an acid comment about my past life, and then intersperse it with simulated compassion as though forgiving me for being a migrant.

She, they, did not believe in the normal rules of evidence. To the lecturer evidence was posture, tone of voice, ethnicity, direction of gaze, a word in an essay. It was the rationale of the paranoiac. It was logic beyond the bounds of common sense. After all, if they wanted to know something, why didn't they just ask? I gradually lost curiosity on the matter and my feelings changed to contempt.

'South Australians talk about being different to the rest of the country,' I said to Bandicoot. 'Why?'

'It's because there were no convicts and no land was to be given away. The profits of land sale were to be used to give free passage to workers. When a person bought land they were effectively buying labour. When a labourer arrived he, or she,

could not acquire land until they had saved a sufficient sum by labouring for hire; the eventual purchase would facilitate the arrival of more labourers. It was like pyramid selling.'

'Fair enough.'

'It wasn't fair enough. It assumed that farming would be profitable to the landowners and they would employ and pay workers. By the eighteen forties South Australia was sending wheat to the other Australian Colonies and exporting the grain as far a Mauritius, but such broad acre farming only required labour for part of the year. Adelaide started to fill up with paupers.'

'That's how it was done in Britain at the time. A pool of labour to keep the wages down, and a squadron of dragoons if they got troublesome. '

'There were no dragoons. 1842 there was sufficient disorder in the streets to warrant a Governor' s letter to London. The instruction in reply from the Colonial Secretary was transport the labourers to Sydney.

'Governor Grey found this unacceptable. He disobeyed the order and called upon the municipal council of Adelaide to take on the financial burden of employing these people.

'Adelaide owes a lot of its beautiful landscaping to relief work by pauperised farm labourers in the 1840s. It was something that South Australia couldn't afford to do, but the Colony could not afford to lose so many people to New South Wales.

'Ways were found. Loans were turned into gifts. Copper ore was discovered. It established a peculiarly South Australian way of solving social problems by taking economic risks.

'Because of this South Australia has tended to punch above its economic weight. It also has meant that the State has had a problem with Banks, but that's another story.'

I was sitting in a café, one of those pavement ones near Central Market. I was half way through a black coffee when this damaged human being walked up to the table. Everything about him seemed to be in a partial state of repair. Two buttons were missing on the shirt and a third one was the wrong colour. His glasses were askew and the spectacle frames had masking tape along one side. The man may have looked a chaplinesque clown but he took himself and me very seriously.

The fellow shouted: 'Perverted Dagos like you will be put behind barbed wire after the election.' Then, with a look of triumph on his face, this wreckage of the street scuttled off. It was probably the high point of his week.

I glanced at the occupants of the other tables. They looked the other way. Adelaideans embarrass easily.

Hark, hark!
The Dogs do bark.
The Fascists are coming to town.
Some wear rags
And some drive Jags.
And some wear Graduate Gowns.

The Central Market area is a cosmopolitan part of the city. About half a dozen people in the café could have qualified as 'Dagos,' perverted or otherwise, I didn't see what would make me stand out. I didn't know then that all sorts of stories were circulating about me in Adelaide.

I saw the ragged man again , a few days later, in near-tragic circumstances. I was walking with Alison near the corner of Currie and King William Streets. He was haranguing a group of Japanese tourists at the traffic lights.

'That's the bastard who had a go at me near the Market,' I said.

Then the accident happened. It only took seconds, although it seemed to last a full minute. One of the tourists raised a camera – I think it was to take a shot of the Town Hall. My man must have thought he was about to be photographed and he stepped backwards off the kerb with his hands across his face. A bus caught the fellow on the shoulder and he spun onto the road and landed in a heap.

Alison rushed over with about four other pedestrians telling the victim to lie still and that help was coming. The bus driver stepped out of the bus with a dazed look on his face. I went up to the him and explained that I had seen that it was not his fault. He asked me to wait around until the police arrived.

The next span of events may have taken forty minutes, but it seemed to only last for five. The police came, and shortly afterwards the ambulance took away its sad load.

I gave my name and address to a patrol officer and explained what I had seen.

I didn't notice the woman with the shopping trolley until she spoke to Alison.

'Someone'll have to feed Kevin's cats,' she said in a flat voice. 'They're probably locked inside his place.'

The woman was not much bigger than her trolley. It was one of those racy two wheelers covered in tartan canvas. She looked up at us with pale blue eyes and blank face. It was the face of someone who had pushed a lot of shopping trolleys and seen a lot of traffic accidents, and had stopped asking why.

'Cats?' I said. 'Kevin?'

The trolley women nodded. 'Kevin's cats. The bloke who got hit, he's got seven at least.'

'Kevin should have stayed at home with them instead of attacking people in the street,' I said.

'He feels he is doing something for the election.'

'Any particular Party?' I asked as though in doubt.

She shrugged her shoulders and walked away pushing the trolley. I watched as Alison ran after her. The two stood and talked for a few minutes and then Alison came back with a piece of paper in her hand. She grabbed me by the arm and steered me into Currie Street.

'Where are we going?'

'Kevin's cats. It's not far. Are you any good at break-and-enter?'

'So-so, but I left my jemmy at home. I never thought of you as a social worker.'

'Humans no. Animals yes. Two legs bad; four legs good. It's just past Colonel Light Square. Down a lane.'

'I might have guessed Colonel Light would be involved in this.'

Kevin's cottage would have been called 'a restorer's dream' if it had been in Parkside or North Adelaide, but in the west side of the city it merely looked derelict. Being jammed between a body-repair shop and a leather goods factory didn't help.

We walked along the side of the dwelling and into the backyard. I tested the kitchen door and found it unlocked.

The kitchen was bare apart from some sweet wrappers on the bench – I seemed to be surrounded by people who didn't cook. There were no cats in sight. Alison touched the fridge and three tabbies appeared, and when she opened its door the

rest of them emerged. Seven had been a conservative estimate, and they were a roguish looking crew.

'I'll feed them in the yard,' I said. There was no answer; Alison had gone into the bathroom. I found the cat food in the fridge behind a stack of fruity bars and distributed it into a row of saucers near the back-door.

Alison came back into the kitchen with two handfuls of jars and packets. 'Some of these must be his medication. I will deliver the lot to the hospital and let them sort it out. Now to have a snoop. Kevin's probably fairly harmless – when he takes his tablets. It's the ones who are using him that interest me.'

'Is that why you are in Adelaide?' I asked.

'I'll tell you later.'

Alison was in the lounge room, looking through a notebook, when the front doorbell rang. We froze, and the bell rang again. Then there was a period of silence followed by the sound of boots on the pavement. I looked out through the front window. A man in check shirt and jeans was hurrying across the road to someone else in a parked car. Alison scribbled down the registration number.

The driver emerged from the car, and both men walked back to the cottage. The second fellow peered through the front window. He was a kind of reverse of Kevin. The man was in suit and tie, spotless to the cuticles of his fingernails. He was as pink and clean as a scrubbed pig.

I edged into the shadow of a stack of books. I pushed too far and a dozen volumes crashed to the floor. He stared through the window in response to the noise. A one-eared black tom leapt onto the window sill. Man and cat eye balled each other through the glass. The man blinked first and said something to the check shirt;

they both returned to the car and drove off. Tom jumped to the floor and walked off with a swaying head as though bemoaning the low quality of opponents nowadays.

On the walk home I said, 'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Why did you come to Adelaide?'

'I'll tell you in a couple of days. After we've visited Kevin.'

'Are you chewing on a fruity bar?'

'Do you want a bite?'

'Orrite,' I said. 'Strange about Kevin stepping backwards off the kerb isn't it? That's typical of One Nation supporters. They act as though they are proud of what they're doing, and when you confront them they behave surprised or ashamed.'

'Maybe it's how they are trained to behave.'

'Do you think they do courses in street abuse?'

'Could be. After all, if the intention of the game is to cause distress without getting themselves hit or arrested, that would be the way to play it.'

'I wonder if my lecturer has done the course.'

'Forget about your lecturer.'

Two days later we walked down the long corridors of the Royal Adelaide Hospital, and Alison lectured me on being pleasant. I said I would smile.

Kevin was trussed like a chicken. His spectacles were repaired and he was growing a beard; it was an improvement. Alison told him his cats were being looked after, and he was full of gratitude. Kevin made a little speech about how wonderful it was that a few people still remained that had a sense of community and caring. I felt like walking out in disgust but Alison gave me a look.

'You see,' said Alison in the Currie Street Café, 'Kevin is just an innocent. And I expect that many of the fools who say rude things to you in the streets are the same.'

'OK ,' I said, 'let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was an organisation called The Anglo-German Society or something.'

'Or something?'

'Yes, I've forgotten its full name and it's not important. The society existed in Britain in the nineteen-thirties. The was no obvious link with Nazism. It was to do with diplomacy and international trade, and the elites of Britain and Germany dining together.'

'That's not much of a story.'

'Wait. I once came upon a photograph of one of the fabulous dinners. The men were in dinner suits and the women wore evening gowns. The glittering radiance from crystal chandeliers refracted off wine glasses on tables and jewellery on bosoms. Everyone looked proud and happy and beautiful. There was no reason, at first glance, to connect these resplendent people with slave-camps or torture or genocide.'

'Come to the point, Larry.'

'I looked closely at the photo and saw that each napkin-ring had a swastika on it. It made me wonder about the same people ten years further on. They would hope that all copies of the photograph had been destroyed. Pride was followed by shame or, at least, fear of exposure. And I think that is a good thing.'

'They were largely innocent, and I am sure many fought bravely in the War against Hitler.'

'I am not even sure if I am innocent and I was born in the London Blitz. Camus used a plague as a metaphor for the rise of Fascism, and Ionesco compared it to a

proliferation of rhino. These writers -- possibly inadvertently – promoted the idea of Fascism being a mindless agency acting on innocent people. I don't accept that racist attacks in the street can be attributed to innocence.

' Kevin is not the issue. I want the opinion makers and communicators who don't care if someone with a darker complexion to themselves gets bashed because of opinions they promote. I want them to experience fear; otherwise it will just keep happening again and again.'

'You haven't got a hope,' said Alison, 'but, as a consolation prize, I'll tell you about Bragg and the real reason I'm in Adelaide.'

'I'll go along with that if you buy me another coffee.'

'You're not cheap. I married Bob about fifteen years ago and we lived on the family property near Cunnamulla. Do you know Cunnamulla?'

'No, I've never been to Queensland, but I eat bananas.'

'Be serious. It's sheep. It's near the New South Wales border. I thought the marriage would work out because his family were very much like mine, but without the pretensions. They had been in the district a long time and were rich in land but poor in money. There was a constant debt but it was part of managing a business and a lifestyle –I told you they were like my family.

'Bob inherited the place at a time when wool was low and interest rates were high. He became involved in a scheme of borrowing overseas where the rates were lower. The debt was in Swiss Francs but was paid back in dollars. Then the value of the Australian Dollar fell against the Franc. We found ourselves up to our necks with banks whose names Bob couldn't even pronounce.

'We hung-on. Hanging-on is a management strategy in Cunnamulla. Bob didn't complain: he became silent. Have you ever lived in the middle of nowhere with someone who doesn't talk for weeks on fucking end?

'Then the newsletters and pamphlets starting arriving. They were all about Jews and foreign banks and Asian immigrants. Bob latched on to them like a lamb on a teat. He began talking again. It was a relief – even if it was just parroting the stuff in the pamphlets.

'We started to have visitors. Some of them were almost respectable and others were just weird. For a couple of months Bob was involved with the League of Rights, but he dropped them for another group. They popped around at weekends; I used to call them the Volk, but I stopped saying it to their faces when I realised they weren't insulted.

'Then they started bringing guns and I left for Brisbane. I went to the Police but was told that war games on private property were OK. I had a chat with a Federal Member and he said he couldn't do anything, but, as I was leaving, the MP gave me a scrap of paper with a Sydney phone number. That's how I met Bragg.'

'Shit. So he faked his death.'

'No. In the chaos at the end of the war there was a rumour that he'd been killed in the Philippines. Bragg just let it grow and slipped back to Australia. There might have been someone killed. I don't know, and Bragg isn't talking.'

'Is he still in the service?'

'Not exactly. Bragg says he doesn't operate within the Act – whatever the Act is. He runs a private agency – although there must be some Government money in there somewhere. He keeps tabs on funny little organisations in Australia: everything from witchcraft to world conquest.'

'You met Bragg in Sydney.'

'I did. We had tea and little cakes in a Castlereagh Street café. I think Bragg picked it because he was expecting to meet a country wife. He's a sweet old ducky.'

'Spare me. He was probably wearing a revolver.'

'Anyway. Bragg knew about the Volk and asked lots of questions. On talking, in general, about extremist organisations I mentioned Paris during the Algerian Crisis. Then your name cropped up.'

'I bet it did.'

'He knew about your shop, and your marriage and everything. It was all on a database in his office.'

'What a thorough little ducky – always keeps tabs on the old operatives. Were the people outside Kevin's cottage members of your Volk?'

'It's hard to tell. None of the papers on Kevin's table were from them. Bragg has a belief that when One Nation fails there will be a lot of distressed ex-Hansonists looking for another home, and the Volk will be keen to take them as members.'

It is a truism that what couples do in bed is never as peculiar as what they say in that place. It usually starts with a question. Alison made her enquiry as the post-coital glow was gently fading and my guard was down.

'Ever thought of changing your name, Larry?'

One way of diverting any enquiry is to use the rabbinical approach of answering a question with a question. 'Ever thought of changing yours?'

'No, Alison is me. It's a gin-and-tonic, English rose sort of name.'

I felt obliged to give some sort of answer. 'I think Larry's OK. It has a Maltese aspect in 'Lori,' and Larry has a London feel about it.'

'Larry's OK,' she replied sleepily, 'but it's a yobbo name. Yobbos don't talk about metaphors and Camus and Ionesco. The university has changed you, and you aren't Maltese or English any more.'

It irritates me when people say what I'm not instead of what I am. I felt that Alison would drop the matter if I changed the subject. 'The university has changed me into a more angry person.'

'That's another reason for changing your name. 'Angry Larry' doesn't have a ring to it.'

'Paul is my second name. It was the first name of my father's father. You can use that if you don't like Larry.'

This patriarchal lineage stuff didn't wash at all with a modern gin-and-tonic English rose. 'Paul-Paul-Paul. Paul is OK, but it's become a bit poncey since your grandfather's time. Having a poncey name is OK if you are poncey, but otherwise it's not much cop.'

'I've always thought it a bit dishonest for a person to change their name,' I said. 'I never quite approved of Jane and Michael doing it. Is there a particular name that you prefer for me?'

'No-no-no. It's up to you. Just thinking.'

In desperation I said. 'I tell you what: I'll change my name to Sydney Harbour if you change yours to Alice Springs.'

'That's typical,' said Alison. 'Try and have a serious conversation and you turn it into a joke. Goodnight!'

I thought the matter was over, but next morning Alison returned to the subject over the breakfast table. 'Y'know, naming yourself after a place could be a good idea.'

I felt an overwhelming urge to talk about Peru but suppressed it.

'I once had a boss whose first name was Guildford,' I replied.

I looked across at her. There was no furrowing of the brow or paling of her cheeks. But she was buttering the centre of her toast with force sufficient to bore a hole in it.

'I am an Australian, Alison. I have a right to recognition of the fact regardless of name.'

'If you want recognition you have to be recognisable. You are not being attacked because of what you are, but because people don't know what you are. My appearance is exotic, I look like a vampire, but no one bothers me, and I get excellent service at restaurants from young waiters who call themselves Igor. It is because I am unambiguously a vampire.'

'What more can Australians want? I have travelled the country; I have worked for the Australian Military; I have worked for Australian companies; I am an Australian Citizen; I married an Australian; I have Australian children. What do these bastards want? I am sick of pandering to the fears of Australians. I am sick of making all the moves.'

You don't need to make all the moves, but you do have to be recognisably something. Only you can do it. Jane and Michael did.'

'I probably can, but I am not going to do it to pander to xenophobes.'

Alison is upset about my name. I think she wants me to manufacture a new identity to be acceptable to Australians.

Are you doing Philosophy at University?

Yes.

Lamb, Alison's thinking is Aristotelian. We owe a lot of xenophobia to Aristotle.

(1) The law of identity: 'Whatever is, is.'

(2) The law of contradiction: 'Nothing can be and not be.'

(3) The law of excluded middle: 'Everything must be or not be.'

You, and I, Lamb, cannot conform to this in matters of national or cultural allegiance. Quantum Theory also appears to violate the rules, but I don't think that is much help in your present circumstances.

The Federal Election was four months later. The Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard, campaigned astutely. Gradually he gathered prodigal One Nation voters to the fold of respectable conservatism with kind words and no preferences. It was a wonder to watch. Two cheers for John Howard; it is a pity he didn't act earlier.

Hanson's party was forced to present policies for the election and did it badly. The Media was quick to point out the flaws; it is a pity they couldn't have done so two years earlier.

One Nation did badly at the poll and I hope the supporters were deeply distressed by the result. It certainly silenced them; the street vilification ended as though a switch had been turned off. As far as I know, they did not turn to the Volk.

I visited my children just before Christmas, and Dorothy gave me an unusually warm reception. I was even asked about my studies.

'Are you still planning to do Honours?'

'I won't be doing Honours. I've been given a rough time at Uni. I doubt if I'll reach the mark threshold. I am being attacked by a lecturer. I don't understand it.'

Dorothy smiled. Then, for no apparent reason, Dorothy said: 'You are sane.' I had no reply to that. I assumed that it meant that I was no longer considered a child abuser.

There was a meal, prepared by my daughter, and then the exchanging of gifts. Dorothy gave me a lift back to Stirling. During the drive she turned to me as if speaking on impulse.

'You're not going to write about me are you?'

I could think of nothing to say. It had not occurred to me. I felt like asking if she was planning to do something interesting. I said nothing. Dorothy had violated my privacy; why should I respect hers? The ex' turned her eyes back to the road and we

continued the journey in silence.

On the bus I mused on the way that both Dorothy and the lecturer objected to the fact that I wrote. I wondered if other migrant writers had to put up with this nonsense. It may be a fear of being witnessed. To write about hegemony is to question it.

Are Australian women attracted to migrant men because they think we are mute? When a migrant speaks is that considered to be 'not playing the game?' Is the strong female component in One Nation because of a sexual fantasy? The questions are unanswerable. This is like the Great Adelaide Tidal Wave: it does not respond to rational analysis.

Peru, how did things get into such a bad way? When I was a kid there was a spirit of internationalism. What happened to it? There were plenty of anti-Hanson people around during the election campaign but they defended migrants as though we are merely useful economic units.

Take consolation Larry: you are on the winning side. When you were a child most people married and died in their town of birth. Now such people are the minority in the western world.

When future historians write about the second half of the twentieth century they will try and pick its outstanding characteristic. The rise of feminism, the collapse of the empires, instant communication, nuclear weapons, and revolutions, are candidates. But I would pick the movement of people around the globe.

'There are a lot of churches in Adelaide once you start including the ones that have been converted into offices and night clubs,' I said to Bandicoot.

'Yea, I think it's because the settlers built in stone. There may have been just as many churches in Brisbane or Hobart but the timber rotted away.'

'So you don't think people were more devout here?'

'Maybe. They claimed to have worshipful origins in the eighteen-eighties, but some of that may have been the community re-writing the past. Parallels were drawn with the colonisation of America. If New South Wales was pioneered by the equivalent of the buccaneers who settled Virginia, then South Australians could be like the Pilgrim Fathers of Massachusetts.

'In fact, the settlement was a carefully thought out business operation that was a bit like pyramid selling.'

'So you don't think it was going to be a New Jerusalem?'

'In a way it was, but there are many entrances to the city. The settlers were going in through the rational gate. Adelaide was going to be a place without the social evils of England. And, because of this, there were going to be no insanity or destitution or even much crime. It didn't work, but no one got round to building a proper prison or lunatic asylum until about fifteen years after settlement.'

'It must have been a let-down.'

'Yea. At first they blamed the encroachment of wicked people from the other colonies.'

'Wouldn't happen now would it?'

'No,no,no. Y'know my grandmother worried about the Irish, and I am sure it was because the words Irish and convicts were linked by stories she was told as a little girl.'

It is part of the nature of New Year that you expect the future to be different from the past. Because of the conversation with Dorothy, at Christmas, I considered the episode to be over if not entirely resolved.

I had the same lecturer again and she was my tutor as well. I expected her to be a little more conciliatory. I wasn't expecting an apology, but I did think she would tone the generalisations down a little. The lecturer was as chirpy as ever. Migrants, migrants, migrants!

It was all done with an eye cast in my direction. I think the lecturer had the word permanently rattling in her head; whenever I walked into the room it would rush to her lips. What had started as her perfect plan had degenerated into a fishing expedition. This could not be allowed to continue and it was only going to end if I ended it.

I have always been the migrant who smiles back politely when Australians walk up and boast about their hatred of foreigners. This was not cowardice. I did it because I thought that xenophobia was a temporary state of mind. I believed that in a year, or in ten years, prejudice would end Australia, and it would eventually be remembered as part of a primitive past like poisoning water holes.

I now believe that things will never improve and they never have. Something, some nagging fear that is associated with the early days of white settlement, has ossified.

Prejudice, as practised in Australia, is opportunistic. The practitioners may have all sorts of emotional or theoretical excuses for targeting minorities, but the only reason they do it is because they can. When I was newly arrived in Australia, I used to agonise over ways to make myself acceptable to people who were prejudiced against migrants. I never found a way because there is no reason.

There may be fundamental motives, to do with money or power or sex, but it is a waste of time fathoming the thought processes. As an Armenian friend said, 'they are like dogs that bark from behind fences.' It was my turn to rattle the wire mesh.

I could hardly leave an anti-rat message in the English Office. But I did have to speak, if only because that is the one thing they didn't want. I felt there must be some sane people out there. A word would do it, but it had to be the right word.

This involved some kitchen contemplation. I thought that 'Slander or Libel ' were too specific. 'Obloquy' was vague enough to be meaningless. 'Calumny' was accurate but archaic. It is interesting that we have so many words for lies. A university education makes you fussy about such distinctions.

I did consider using 'Truth,' but thought its meaning may have been too obscure; irony is wasted on some people. The right word came to me during a sip of cooking wine.

'Defamation,' slipped into my mind as the taste of tannin reached my tongue. The word seemed at first inadequate, it did not describe the malice, but a more precise one could miss the mark. I wrote 'DEFAMATION' on my student bag, in large letters.

Next day and for a week afterwards I walked through the campus, and the city, with my decorated bag. I knew that I was at risk of being considered a complete idiot, but idiocy or crime seemed the only career options available to a migrant in Adelaide at the time; I went for the former. It worked! It may not have been a bullseye but it reached the inner circles of the target.

The demonising stopped. It only took about a week. My lecturer normalised. I do not know if a similar exorcism happened in any other university, and I do not care. The lecturer actually made a sort of apology: but not for defamation or

unprofessional behaviour. I am sure it was done in this manner because of sound legal advice.

I did not press the matter and threw the bag into a bin.

You are a smart little Lamb.

Not so smart. The lecturer was able to apologise and walk away laughing.

That's the state of things Larry. You got the best outcome possible.

I wish I was the Count of Monte Christo. I would wreak vengeance on the half dozen people involved.

That requires finding some buried treasure.

So it does.

I've decided not to write the novel about Vietnam. There is no metaphor for war. I have a new job in international relations.

Where?

New York. The World Trade Center. I'll stay in touch. Take it easy.

Take it easy.

'How is the pit?' I asked Bandicoot.

'It's coming to its end. There's more but it leads under the West Terrace Cemetery. If Alison wants more tiles she can tuck up her skirt and dig for them. All the ones I've found are broken. Whoever dumped the tiles smashed them first. I've found enough bottles and crocks to keep me going.'

'I'd like to see it.'

'Come over tonight.'

'I'll bring Alison.'

Alison and I walked along the concrete-lined drain and followed Bandicoot into an earth-tunnel on the right.

'How far does this go,' asked Alison.

'Not far, wait and see,' replied Bandicoot.

We entered a cavern about four metres in diameter and two metres high at the centre. There was some buttressing with timber taken from roadworks. Bandicoot pointed his dolphin-light at the floor to show it was covered with fragments of Morris & Co. tiles.

'Great,' I said. 'What are you going to do with the hole? Are you planning to fill it in?'

'Thought I'd just close the entrance. If it caves-in let the council puzzle over it.'

'When I first arrived in Sydney I met a guy who worked for the Water Board. He said they found all manner of tunnels and drains under Sydney that have no explanation. I sometimes wonder if they weren't bolt-holes dug by the convicts. Maybe for some kind of uprising or waiting for the French to come.'

'You wanna use the hole?' asked Bandicoot.

'Mmm, we could line it with timber. Maybe get some lighting in. A table and a few chairs too. A phone line would be good, and a PC.'

'What for?' asked Alison.

'The next wave of xenophobia could be worse than the last. Look upon it as insurance.'

Alison looked at me as though I was mad. 'Do you know what you said? You said: 'wave.'

'Well?'

'You have a fear of an approaching wave. You have become an Adelaidean.'

'God! There is no cure except to leave.'

'Actually Bragg told me he has an idea. It involves a bit of travel, but...

'No,no,no.'

ERRATA for *Special Risks*

The Misplaced Page 130. Fortunately it is true of only one volume. The pages in the three copies being presented to the Graduate Centre are in the right order.

Page	Misspelling	Correction
8	Leventine	Levantine
21	Shafstbury	Shaftesbury
56	Allison	Alison
81	effect	affect
101	on route	en route
105	Deutsch Marks	Deutschmarks
119	Complement	Compliment
146	Van Dieman' s	Van Diemen' s
164 & 167	Nostradamis	Nostradamus
170	affect	effect
173	Macawber	Micawber
179	Parliamant	Parliament
191	Marsailles	Marseilles
197	Gomorra	Gomorrah
202	Kafkad	Kafka-ed

Typing and grammatical errors corrected on page.

Page	Error	Correction
24	wha / t	what
49	A	I
62	ad'	ad.
62	Lorna	Moira
105	And	and
112	Jag'	Jag.
148	'T' after ;	lower case t
152	comma	deleted

Judgement

Page 78. I underestimated the travelling time between Athens and the Gallipolli Landing. 'Less than' is inserted on page.

Page 82. (Capital: Capitol?) I assume that the question mark leaves me some judgement in the matter. I meant 'Capital' to denote Washington. 'Capitol,' the House of Congress, is more specific than I intend.

Page 114. I am advised that 'A wharfie is unlikely to use the word 'motor." It has been altered to 'car' on the page. I picked the phrase 'motor mate' to reflect the alliteration common in Sydney speech.

Page 159: 'the misuse of 'either.' 'Either' is redundant and I have deleted it.

Page 202. 'Were' has been inserted.

Page 345. An unidentified ship. *Special Risks* is only 244 pages long, but I did a search and found a reference to Larry's immigrant ship on page 44. It is just referred to as 'the ship' because it is the only ship in Larry's adult life. The vessel is described and named on pages 38-40.