

**Twigs from a Hedge in Winter:  
An Australian Gothic Novel**

**Henry Ashley-Brown**

## Contents

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	28
Chapter Three	48
Chapter Four	78
Chapter Five	105
Chapter Six	127
Chapter Seven	146
Chapter Eight	167
Chapter Nine	185

## **Chapter One**

### **Adelaide, 2005**

When Lucas first sees the shadows out of the corner of his eye at the supermarket, he doesn't want to think about them. They inhabit two worlds and stretch out, straddling the place between sunshine and dream. He glimpses them first at the end of the aisle near the refrigerators, dark slivers with bright crescents of light, and he will remember the precise moment they appear. He's been trying to read the expiry date on a box of eggs. He had known something was going to happen. Then something flicks over his skin like the cold dimpling of rain across the still water of a pond. Not that you would notice anything odd about Lucas if you'd seen him in the supermarket, tallish, slim and grey-haired, deciding which of the specials was the best value, or which checkout the fastest.

Then, when the crows surround him, Lucas realises something is very wrong. First he feels the pressure of the air pulsing on his face. Then he hears the flapping of their black, shiny wings and sees the blurred edges of beaks stopping. He recoils from the harsh noises that burst from the pink lesions of their gaping throats. He blocks them out. Strange, to be so superstitious when all about him life is crammed with the modern, the marvels of science and technology. 'Fey' is what his Scots ancestors called this other sort of knowing. He doesn't know what the word for 'fey' is in Kentish – but one of his Kentish ancestors was also said to have had the gift. He had never wanted it. When he is quiet and out of the hustle and bustle, their shadows are still there in his mind, the glint of their bird-eyes watching. Soon there will be words shaping amongst their voices, to tell him things he most probably wouldn't want to know.

Beyond the chill of the supermarket, a heat wave shimmers in the car park, distorting the air. Nevertheless, he hunches against the cold that lingers between the edge of the light and the dark stain made by the shadows. The cold comes from the inside of that in-between place, the way it used to on camping trips with his brother, when the early winter nights stepped towards the beginnings of frost, an edge where, beyond the camp-fire's circle, it stopped being warm and upon entering it he had become an outsider, an onlooker, almost there but not there – and behind him he felt the presence of the forest. That was the place where the shadows came from and they'd re-emerged to follow him, attaching to his soul like Velcro. Now he seems to be watching himself from a distance again, waiting, as if it has all happened before.

oOo

Lucas's dream was about a wall. But to be woken by a chainsaw! Chr, **chr**, chr, **Chrrr**, cherrr **cha-aarh!** On a Saturday morning!

Anne opens her eyes. 'At this hour!' she grumbles, leaving their bed to look.

Lucas follows her to the kitchen. Silhouetted against the sky, next door, there is a man high up, wielding oiled, fiercely blurred teeth of hardened steel. He slices branches away, flensing the flesh of a tree back to a knobbed gesture. She points. 'It's my red gum!' Anne has made herself a guardian of the local trees.

Lucas sees the tree-feller cradled in a harness, his chainsaw spurting sawdust, the vibrations strafing through the whole house. The neighbours must have finally wrested permission from the council to fell it, the tree that leans. What a shame, he thinks. But it's a red gum, a widow maker as they called them in the old days because a heavy branch could drop without warning and kill the unwary.

'They want to live here because of the trees, then they cut them down to make mulch for geraniums.' It's Anne's tree speech. She glares at the suspended tree-feller. 'He'll probably use the money to buy a Hans Heysen print of gum trees.'

'Or sell it to be made into cereal boxes,' Lucas says. 'Do you know there's more nourishment in the cardboard box than the cornflakes?' He holds a cup of tea.

'Try to be serious, Lucas. Do you want to live on a denuded, paved, overpopulated planet?' Anne goes to the bathroom. She calls above the noise, 'People and rats have a great deal in common, don't they? They're sneaky, destructive, they fight one another, can live just about anywhere, they carry diseases and eat almost anything, even their own kind.'

He hates rats.

The chainsaw makes a different sound as it rips into the trunk closer to ground level then there is silence. Within moments, a meaningful creaking, cracking, snapping, groaning of tendons and ligaments begins as the tree at last lets go. Lucas listens to the whoosh and thrash of branches smashing themselves as they hit the ground. The death of a tree. A large rat appears at the top of the fence and darts into their garden. Lucas shudders and feels his hands go clammy against the cool of the stainless steel sink.

'What was that?' Anne emerges from the shower, tousled. She's surprised by the sudden avalanche of noise. 'Are you alright?' She sees him bending over the sink looking distressed. 'Oh, no!' she says, struggling with getting a towel around her wet hair as well as trying to see what has happened to make him so pale. She puts an arm around him. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' he says. Once the tree was in the middle of bushland and would have lingered. Weakened by white ants, it would have let go of branches, leaving hollows for nesting parrots and rosellas or wild bees and possums.

She watches Lucas's lips begin to move. He's talking to what's left of it. 'You used to talk to a tree when you were little, didn't you?' She laughs.

'Mm, sometimes. I told it stories. Trees make good friends,' he says, when you can't have any. 'They're reliable, tough too, and bounce back, even after bushfires. I guess it was dangerous,' Lucas concedes after a while, 'they're not a backyard tree.'

'That tree was there before there were backyards.' There is a look of hurt on Anne's face. 'Let's go out for breakfast,' she suggests. She knows there will be the sounds of the brawling between wood and steel as the smitten tree is sliced into smaller pieces, then more disturbances from the woodchipper and the grinding of the stump muncher. A couple of hundred years of tree will be only a light sprinkling of sawdust on next door's lawn by the time they come back.

Lucas is still fixed to the sink. 'It's what we get used to, isn't it? Even if you don't like it. There's always something that nibbles away, like silverfish or rats, then one day there's the uncomfortable feeling that something's missing. Then you start saying that's where such and such used to be as if it's still there and if you want to do something about it you can't because it's gone and there's only a hole left. And whoever did it says it was someone else and they've scuttled off and by then you've got used to the void.'

'Oh,' Anne says. 'You in one of your moods? Shut the window.'

oOo

Sunday morning. The tree has gone. Lucas waits. Something is going to happen. He and Anne sit on the back veranda in the sunshine.

'Twelve letters, down,' Anne mutters, concentrating on the newspaper. 'Mm.' The soft morning light finds a luminescent glint of gold in her auburn hair.

Looking up, she finally asks, 'What's a word with twelve letters that means ...? I miss that tree,' she states eventually. She shuts the crossword dictionary. Her eyes

return to the paper. 'People don't think about skyscapes.' Anne squints at a view paved all the way to the horizon by roof-tiles. 'Or birds,' she adds. 'I want to look at the sky through leaves. I'm going to plant another tree in the middle of our lawn to replace the one they cut down next door.'

'What about all the other vacancies caused by neighbours who have botanically cleansed the neighbourhood?'

'Good point,' says Anne. The shine in her eyes betrays humour at work. 'I'll make sure I plant a few extras so you won't have to mow the lawn.'

Lucas raises an eyebrow and smiles. 'Is there enough room?'

The staccato of the phone interrupts them.

Lucas shifts in his chair but does not get up. 'We should have gone for a walk.'

Neither Lucas nor Anne makes a move to answer. The ringing continues.

Anne sighs. 'At this hour it's probably your mother. I spoke to her last time. It's your turn. You answer,' she says, returning her attention to the crossword.

Lucas leans back and raises both eyebrows now. 'No, it's your turn.'

'She's your mother. I've already spoken to her six or seven times this week.'

'You're the favourite at the moment. She says she doesn't know how you put up with me.'

The phone stops ringing.

'Now I feel guilty,' Lucas tells her. The air seems to tighten about him. 'It's going to ring again.'

'Mm,' laughs Anne, eyes still on the crossword. 'I gather that liking me is a policy reversal that destabilised Hedda and Hugh enormously. My virtues are suddenly being discovered and extolled for the first time ever, just to annoy them. I didn't know I had so many. I'm not sure why she's abandoned her twenty-five-year, awful-Anne policy. I

wonder why Hedda and Hugh have fallen out of favour? Or have I been included in her in-crowd that makes you the cause of all evil?’

‘I don’t know,’ Lucas shrugs. ‘I’ve given up.’

The phone rings again.

‘Have you got that list of things to talk about?’ he asks.

‘It’s near the phone. You could tell her about the tree.’

When Lucas answers, it’s not his mother. He hears the sound of his brother Hugh gathering his breath. He makes his announcement word by word, carefully and without preamble: ‘Mother’s had a-a-an-another fall and, and, broken her hip. She’s, she’s in the house, house. I mean hos ... I mean in the hospital.’

‘That’s pretty serious at her age. Do they think she’s going to be alright? How did it happen?’ Lucas wonders why there’s no sense of urgency in Hugh’s voice, so he waits, expecting he has something else to say. Silence. ‘When did it happen?’ he asks, wondering if Hugh’s still there.

‘Friday,’ Hugh says carefully and slowly, the way he’s been taught in speech therapy. In the background he hears another voice, a prompt? Hedda’s? Then, more loudly, Hugh adds, ‘Yes, it wasn’t my f-fault. It w-was an accident.’

‘Does it mean a hip replacement? I don’t think she’d survive a major operation. I’d better come up.’

‘Please yourself.’ Hugh hangs up.

‘Hugh?’

‘What is it?’ Anne wants to know. ‘Something wrong?’

‘Hugh’s being his usual helpful self!’ Lucas tells her, tight-lipped. ‘Mother had a fall and broke her hip. It happened two days ago!’

'Two days ago? You mean he waited until Telstra's special two cent Sunday telephone deal to tell you that Camilla's in hospital? She's ninety-five. She won't survive a second broken hip. If she does she'll have to move out of that house.'

'He seemed to be stressing that it wasn't his fault. I wonder what really happened?' Lucas sighs. 'He's probably in shock.'

Anne waits.

'He said it was an accident.' He props his chin on the palm of a hand, elbow on the table but with a grid of fingers over his mouth. 'The way Hugh said it, in his less than helpful manner, means something's going to be my fault,' he concludes.

Anne's expression changes. 'Well, whatever's been amiss for the last thirty five years has usually been my fault, I gather, presumably because you married me instead of staying home with her, so now it seems it's your turn to be the scapegoat, unless they volunteer for a huge amount of self-honesty. Sorry, Lucas, I shouldn't have said that.' She looks so contrite Lucas laughs.

'That's alright,' Lucas tells her.

Anne takes advantage of the moment. 'I'll forgive you for having a mad family in exchange for another of your irresistibly special coffees! Then shall we work out what you'd like to do?'

'What? Is it only my coffee that's irresistible?' Lucas asks. 'Am I being manipulated?'

'Of course not,' Anne smiles.

The next afternoon Lucas flies from Adelaide to Sydney and then to Newcastle. He enjoys becoming the anonymous passenger before assuming the role of elder son. It is night when the plane settles with a rumble of wheels on the wet runway. Now he has misgivings about going to his mother's house. He fears the net of family beliefs about

him may be waiting to fall and tighten. The contrast of having felt anonymous for a while sharpens this apprehension.

Hugh's curt *Please yourself*, niggles and dances at the back of his mind. He thinks he should have stayed somewhere else, close to the hospital in Newcastle instead of making the long drive to his mother's home. Now, tired by the long journey, he regrets the decision. He rationalises: there will be mail there to collect, the paper to cancel, somebody has to feed the cat. He hopes it wasn't locked in the house.

As he drives, the distance and the night close in on him. His thoughts keep returning to his brother. Reaching out to Hugh has never brought any rewards. Why has he persisted for so many years? Anne has a theory that Lucas suffers from survivor's guilt; that he feels he should have been able to protect Hugh from Christian. 'For better or worse, Hugh's not a nice person; you were a child; it's not your fault he turned out the way he did.'

The old road is narrow and its white line unwinds beneath the headlights, past flickering trunks and beneath tunnels of random interlacing branches dragged at by the wind. Eventually he is in a raw earth-gouged place that is filled with huge road works machinery and then a large detour sign blocks his way. He detours, knocks on the door of a house that shows a few lights to ask for directions. A dark silhouette looms in the doorway along with an angry dog that throws itself, barking fiercely, against the security door.

'Up there!' the man shouts above the din, jerking his thumb backwards over his shoulder. Above the house Lucas sees the dark shape of a wall of rubble and stones, like the emotional one he had built against his father. It fills the skyline. There is a loud, 'No worries mate,' from the silhouette behind the mesh. Lucas follows the instruction and finds a ramp that circles up onto a new expressway.

His mother had only visited Adelaide three times in the thirty years since Lucas and Anne had settled there, although she frequently said she wanted to. 'I like Adelaide,' she'd say, 'but of course I could never live there.' She meant, when she raised her eyebrows so significantly, that she didn't like Anne. 'Of course,' she'd also told Hugh, 'I like Sydney, but the traffic is nerve-wracking!' The Blue Mountains were on her list of possibilities but not Katoomba because the main street was so windy in winter. 'I could live there, if it weren't for that, or Manly.' She had a friend who lived in Manly and there was a ferry she could catch to Circular Quay. But Manly was so expensive.

She had all the magazines: *Home Beautiful*, *House and Garden*, *Burke's Backyard* and even dreamed about houses. She attended the local open inspections. Favourite real estate agents had come in hope and gone in despair, defeated. Eventually they only sent new recruits who didn't know any better.

Hugh had once suggested she could build on some land he had bought.

'That would be Hedda's idea,' Mother told Lucas. 'She's after my money. I didn't come down in yesterday's shower. Anything I built on their land would be theirs.' It was a game. She enjoyed manipulating and it gave her something to talk about.

Such a long trip. Squalls of rain blur the windshield. Lucas puts the wipers full on, finds the hill above the township. The rain relents as he descends and trees begin to give way to new holiday houses and retirement villages. The once small fishing settlement has been engulfed.

On the flats between the hills and ocean, where thick clusters of Christmas Bells once flowered along the broad stretch edging the wetlands, Lucas sees a supermarket sitting on top of a rain-wet expanse of bitumen. Scattered trolleys, some lame and drooping, stand in the wind-blown drizzle.

The once thickly-interlaced forest of mangroves along the edges of the estuary is now a thin remnant restrained by lawn-contoured embankments, floating marinas and an imposition of hard-edged canals. He sees a sprouting of yacht masts. The dark, bubbling, crab-crawling ooze was never aesthetic but it had a strange, soggy mystery that had always intrigued Lucas. Gothic, he thinks, the trees with their spiky, long-fingered roots spearing through the mud, wheezing with the coming and going of the tides as if, somewhere, they had sick lungs. They have been culled. Restrained by progress and ecological compromises, and perhaps a dodgy council.

When she could no longer drive Mother was trapped in the place she'd always said she'd wanted to leave. So she sat on the veranda and hoped to see people go by. Or she would phone friends to come over for a cup of tea and tell them she was thinking of moving. She had a séance once and offended to the extent that the minister had felt the need to visit. Then there was her 'Art-by-the-Seaside' entry: a torso of a female mannequin with tasselled nipples and pubic hair made from seaweed, which she'd named after the most religious member of the congregation who had complained about the séance. It was rejected as being inappropriate and Hugh had to retrieve it, but the notoriety brought her brief fame.

'Have you seen it? Did you know?' she asked when next Lucas visited. 'Gave them something to think about,' Mother chuckled. Her art work polarised. Her Virgin Mary, about to give birth, was grossly offensive, they said.

For a while she had regular company but her continuing provocations and decreasing mobility brought increasing isolation. She had to give up driving and sell the car because of her age and arthritis. Then the last of her visitors stopped coming, winter arrived and it was too cold for her to sit on the veranda, so she became a prisoner inside her house, going from room to room, unable to climb the stairs and with only the cat for

company, apart from the helpers who called as part of maintaining the elderly in their own homes.

There was the doctor, the district nurse, Meals on Wheels, the cleaning lady and the gardener. By then her memory had deteriorated and she couldn't recall their visits even though some of them called daily.

As he drives, Lucas imagines he hears his mother's voice saying, 'When are you coming to visit me?' He stops the car at the end of the deserted main street of the township where a new bridge over the swollen estuary replaces the car punt, leaving the old road ending beneath the black water. He gets out and breathes in the cold, windy night air. Not far to go.

And then one day his mother had phoned to say she'd disowned him. He was no longer her son. He could only go to see her, she eventually conceded, without Anne and the children because they, unlike Hugh's family, were too much work and not welcome. From then on she never asked Lucas about his family. There would be comments though. 'Is your conservative jumper Anne's choice?' she'd wanted to know. 'You need to brighten yourself up a bit.'

It's nearly nine o'clock when Lucas sees the multiple stone chimneys silhouetted above the trees. He pulls up just inside the gate and gets out of the car, body aching from the journey. He will have to find the spare key his mother hides in a jam bottle in the garden. There's the smell of wood smoke, then the shape of a car as he approaches the dark end of the driveway. The wind drops; a veranda light turns on, printing the static moment like a photograph. He's surprised. Who could it be? Hugh? He climbs the leaf-strewn steps onto the veranda. The light intensifies the disarray. The place needs a good tidy up. Whenever he'd relented and visited without his own family, he'd done many odd jobs: replaced light bulbs, cleaned her car, clipped back shrubs, tidied the garden and

removed leaves from the roof gutters so she would say how wonderful he was. Lucas knew, guiltily, that by helping out he'd obtained respite from her complaining. Hugh got other things for being good.

He walks the length of the veranda, across the tessellated tiles, hunching his shoulders to relieve the ache in them. The snap of tendons and the cracking sound of a neck bone tell him he doesn't want to be here. Past the potted palms a light shines through the stained glass of the front door. A cat comes out of the shadows, runs to him and curls around his legs, purring. 'Basil!' He pauses, bends and pats him. 'You've been waiting? You always seem to know, don't you?'

When he knocks on the door Hugh opens it and his shadow falls onto the veranda. Basil uses the moment to push past, running into the house before Hugh's foot can stop him. Lucas can't see properly with the light in his eyes but senses there's no smile from Hugh, no movement of welcome. As he reaches out to hug him, Hugh steps out of reach and Hedda suddenly, surprisingly interposes herself. Startled, Lucas greets her instead then turns again towards Hugh who moves, still unsmiling, further out of reach.

'Lucas, you must have been travelling all day!' Hedda gestures and enthuses animatedly. 'Come in!' Her skin, without any makeup, reveals the translucent pallor of exhaustion. In the unfriendly light it's no longer pink and smooth but care-worn, weathered and stretched. Her blond hair is greying; perhaps she's given up tinting it. What had happened to make her look so changed? She looks as if she's had a hard and demanding life. Was it Hugh's stroke? Lucas wonders. 'Did it rain all the way?' She seems a little afraid – 'Nice to see you!' Something in her voice tightens, otherwise it is the same. He likes her voice. She surprises him by gesturing to indicate he should go through to the sitting room. 'It's been a while, hasn't it?'

'How are you?' he says, entering, somewhat amused that it's hard to get a word in and that she makes him welcome as if he is her guest by showing him through to the sitting room in the family house where he grew up.

Hugh, now seated, says nothing but is watchful. Usually when there was something important to talk about he made nervous conversation about the weather first. He wasn't one to take much of an interest in others unless what they said related to some experience he'd had.

Hedda sits next to Hugh. Hugh's lost his animation and the chatter and the gesturing that went with it. Hedda seems to make up for his loss with a desperate animation of her own.

She's not entirely comfortable, as if the room is too big for her. She makes atypical gestures: an arm spins to her forehead uncertainly; has he eaten? How was the trip? There's a Meals on Wheels shepherd's pie she has found in the freezer; she's checked the expiry date. So much in the deep freeze needs to be thrown out but this one is fresh. She can heat it up in the microwave if Lucas is hungry. Is he hungry? Tea?

'Thanks. That would be nice.' Lucas sits, glad not to be driving, hoping she will become still. 'But what about you? Have you and Hugh eaten?'

'Yes.' Hedda wrinkles her nose. 'I'm a vegetarian now. It's bad karma to promote animal holocaust by eating meat. We had fish.'

Lucas, annoyed, wants to say that he didn't know that Meals on Wheels were a vehicle for the extermination of animals. He decides not to be provocative and does not ask about whether eating fish promotes a fish holocaust or whether she also avoids leather goods such as shoes, belts and handbags.

They all sit. Lucas thinks mischievously of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel and how God gave the vote, not to the fruit and veg as the best offering but to the scorched meat

sacrifice. There's a silence. 'I suppose if there were more vegetarians it would mean that less livestock would be producing methane and causing global warming?'

'Exactly!' She likes that idea and smiles.

The main room is as Lucas remembers it – dominated by a huge mirror over the fireplace, dark furniture, and crowded with the possessions that their mother inherited from her parents. Lucas notices the line up of family portraits is still there, starting with the first Christian Wilson.

Hedda and Hugh do not ask after Anne or his children, so he says, 'Anne and the children are well.'

The grandfather clock ticks into the silence. His mother had always fussed about keeping it wound up, believing that stopped clocks were omens of an imminent death.

They still do not enquire about his family. To do so might realign them as acceptable. Mother only asks about Lucas's health and well-being when she makes her enquiries and they seem to have followed her example, even though Lucas and Anne have sent gifts to their daughters, Melda and Bethany, for their eighteenth and twenty-first birthdays and also for Melda's wedding.

'Bethany will be driving up in the morning,' Hedda tells him, in a burst, the little quiver in her voice nearly gone. She does not give Lucas time to respond but plummets on. 'Did you know Melda's pregnant? She's being careful and won't be driving up but she says to say "Hello" to you. Bethany does too.'

'Melda, expecting? You're soon to be grandparents then! Congratulations! When is the baby due? You must let Anne and me know when it arrives. We'd like to send something!' Lucas pictures Melda, pale as parchment, seated on a couch. He tries to remember if he has ever seen her standing or walking. It's a puzzle. He associates her

with paintings of young women in dresses made of voluminous white muslin who recline on a chaise longue, one arm extended, waiting for things to be brought to them.

'How are they both?' Lucas asks.

Hedda's hands fuss at the hair above her forehead and a lucky charm on her bracelet tangles with it. She twists it away and a small silver preying mantis falls onto the coffee table along with several strands of attached hair.

She does not reply. Instead there is another leap in conversation. 'You can bring your bags in. I've made up a bed for you here, in the main house. I've tidied up as best I can but I only arrived this morning. We're sleeping in the studio,' she smiles.

Lucas is surprised. Has he been promoted? Usually when he visits, Hedda and Hugh manage to arrive well before him with their family and take up residence in the main house. Has he belatedly been granted the status of the elder son? Lucas leans forward. He will try again: 'How are you Hugh?'

The impediment makes Hugh's mouth struggle as he works at shaping an elusive vowel. 'I,' he says several times.

Lucas regrets that he's asked.

'He's doing well,' Hedda calls from the kitchen.

He does not look it. He huddles, dressed in a colourless, baggy fleece jacket, shivering from time to time even though it's warm in the house.

'She, she ... fell,' he manages.

'She and Hugh had just come back from coffee,' Hedda calls from the kitchen again. Her voice trails. 'We think it was a stroke.'

'I w-was, was, in the kitchen,' Hugh says, unexpectedly. His fingers tap on the arm of the chair and then roam the contours of its carvings. 'It was an, an, a, accident.'

'She'll be in a wheelchair if she survives the broken hip and she certainly won't be able to come back here to live, will she?' Hedda reappears, looking only at Hugh, who turns his head towards her.

They look so alike in profile, Lucas thinks. He'd never really noticed before and wonders if this happens when people have been living together for a long time. His imagination, he decides.

'I put the tel-tele-vision on for her,' Hugh adds. He stops. 'But, but, she'd walked to her room – and felling, I mean falling – fell over. Terrible. The screaming, screaming, she wouldn't stop. Not stopping and we'd j-just come back from coffee.'

'She fell because she had a stroke?' Lucas asks.

'Just a minute.' Hedda says through the ringing of the timer on the microwave. 'Back and forth and back and forth to the hospital on the same day, when he's just started to drive again. Hugh's had a terrible time.'

Lucas notices the collection of small bronzes still on the Jacobean cabinet and sees that Hugh has added one of his own, a half-kneeling, naked female, knees spread widely apart, torso thrown back and arms behind the head, so that the spine arches and the breasts jut forward.

'I m-made it a long time ago,' says Hugh, noticing Lucas' gaze. 'It's bronze.'

The posture looks quite uncomfortable, Lucas thinks. Anne would probably hate it and say: 'Another woman depicted as a sexual object with enlarged glands for males to stare at?' She'd probably want to know why males weren't forced into contortions that made their glands prominent.

Hugh has made a feature of the rough finish that comes from using gritty art-school clay for his original mould. The patina is a uniform dull brown. The rough surfaces compensate however, by catching the light and giving some variation. Hugh takes after

the artistic Campbells on their mother's side of the family rather than the Wilsons on their father's side – as their mother is fond of repeating.

Hedda looks through the doorway and says, 'Wonderful, isn't it? He was going to make some more, until he had his stroke.'

'It's not for sale,' says Hugh. 'Mother insists it has to stay in the family.'

His mother's favourite bronze is the naked shepherdess on the coffee table. Hugh's fingernail stops tapping on the arm of his chair. Lucas looks up.

'That's worth seventeen thousand dollars,' Hugh says. His eyes have stiffened; the pupils grown quite small. It's the first time since Lucas has arrived that Hugh has made eye contact with him. Hugh leans forward possessively, picks up the bronze and puts it on top of the cabinet.

Hearing the sudden rattle of Hedda's charm bracelet as she returns with the shepherd's pie, Lucas looks up and registers that she's seen what Hugh did. When Basil jumps onto Lucas's lap, to investigate the shepherd's pie, Hedda uses the moment to divert attention to the cat. 'Oh, you're in favour, Lucas, he likes you. He's very choosy about approaching people. You're usually quite aloof, aren't you, Basil?'

'Was it the ancient Egyptians who believed that cats keep the light of the sun safe and alive in their eyes through the night until morning?' Lucas asks.

'I've no idea,' says Hedda.

There is something else on the cabinet. 'Ah, is that another of Mother's creations?' he asks, pointing.

Hedda looks relieved. 'Yes, she calls it "The Ballerina". It's a piece of driftwood that someone found after a storm. She saw the shape of a dancer in it.'

One of his mother's acts of artistic metamorphosis, thinks Lucas. The contorted piece of silvery grey, salt-bleached driftwood looks as if it dances. Trouble was his

mother was good at overlaying everything with additional meanings. That's what artists do, make meaning slippery. Yes, she had a gift for twisting things into something else. She invested people with her imaginings too and somehow converted what she imagined into undeniable fact.

'Mother's face flopped down on one side when ... It was twi-twisted. Her words. Her face.' Hugh shudders. 'She didn't die.'

'What happened?' Lucas asks. 'I don't understand.'

'The cleaning lady said. She said, she thought. She thought. She said Mother looked as if she'd ha-had a stroke and I should call the doctor. She looked at her. I called the do-ctor. She said it looked like a stroke. She said I should call an ambulance straight away. So I called the am – am – bulance and they took M-Mother and I followed in my, my. In mine.'

'So you took her out to coffee and later she went to hospital with a suspected stroke but they sent her home. Then, when she came inside you turned on the television for her but she went to her room, fell over and broke her hip?'

'They told him he could take her back home,' Hedda interrupts. 'She got out of the car, didn't she, Hugh? When you came home? She held onto the lattice on the veranda to walk along sideways and got herself to the front door?' Hedda's voice has a careful kindergarten teacher tone, the words ending in an upturn of voice that gives the questions and invites answers that are revision. She teaches deaf children. 'And she fell over in the bedroom, didn't she?' She nods.

'She must have been exhausted when she came home,' Lucas says.

'Yes, I hear, heard screaming and, and think ...but thought, the screaming, it was in – on, the television. So, I, I didn't – look. She'd gone to her bedroom and – and fall, fallen over and broken her hip. So she s–said my name and I phoned the a–ambulance again.'

'Yes,' Hedda adds, 'and they'll have to give her one or two days to stabilise in hospital before they'll be able to operate without endangering her life. Would you like another cup of tea?'

Lucas nods, feeling guilty about leaving his family home so long ago. He wasn't supposed to and doesn't miss it until he returns, but still feels estranged whenever he is back. And glad to go again. He never quite knows why. It's as if his feet are being squeezed into some shoes left over from his childhood.

'We leave her door shut and the window open because of the smell,' Hedda explains.

Lucas had gradually registered the reek but didn't want to know, yet now needs to ask, 'what is that smell?' He looks puzzled but his voice is hopeful. 'Not the cat?'

Hedda smiles. 'She's been incontinent for some time now.'

'Whiffy,' Hugh says.

'Oh,' says Lucas. 'No one told me.' He's shocked. He's been in touch with them often enough by phone. 'Incontinent?'

'She probably told you that I was the one who said the house was smelly?' Hedda asks him watchfully.

'Yes, she did. But she's been complaining about smells for as long as I can remember: cooking, jonquils that gave her headaches, rooms that are stuffy. She was forever opening and shutting windows.'

Incontinent? Why hadn't he been told? Probably overlooked because of Hugh's stroke? His mother would certainly never have told him about being incontinent. It would have been too personal to mention and she would have been too proud.

Hedda looks at Hugh. For a moment Lucas catches an expression that wavers. It scuds in small bursts of hurt as she turns her head aside and looks down at the floor.

Hugh stops tapping. 'She was...' he begins.

Hedda looks up as if concentrating on reading his lips.

When Hugh was a child and before he had the use of words, it was Lucas who used to interpret for him. That was why Hugh was a late talker, his mother used to say. What Hugh tries to say begins to form in Lucas's mind.

There's a 'K' sound.

'Cat? The cat needs to go out?' Hedda asks as she looks towards the door.

'In ...,' he says.

'Incontinent?' Hedda asks.

'Ak ....'

The syllables become jointed at last and scramble out. 'She ... was accidents waiting to happen.' He sounds angry. 'Mmmm ... It was ...'

'No,' says Hedda, 'there's no need to ... better not to ... there's no need to explain anything.'

Hugh makes a huge effort and tells Lucas clearly, 'It wasn't. It wasn't Hedda who said it – I w-was the one who told Mother she was whiffy, nnnnnnot Hedda.'

Lucas looks surprised by this admission.

Some of the strain drops from Hedda's face and warmth begins to take its place. A door seems to be opening between them and she looks, for a moment, as if she's going to reach out and put her hand on Hugh's, where it rests on the complications of a knot of carving on the arm of the chair.

Accidents? Whiffy? Does he mean her lack of bladder control? Lucas finds that the duplicate of the breath he's been holding while his lips shaped syllables in empathy with Hugh's stuttering wants to escape as a strange laugh.

'He's tired. It's worse when he's tired,' Hedda explains, frowning. Then she adds, 'I've found lots of her soiled underwear, hidden, and I've put it through the washing machine.'

'Speaking of tired, I'm off to bed now,' Lucas says quickly, scrubbing at his face. 'It's been a long day of travel. Thanks for waiting up for me and for the shepherd's pie.'

'We could, n-not c-could, we could do less.' Hugh pinches the words out, smiling a little at last.

Did he want to do less? Lucas wonders as he stands up and straightaway becomes a little dizzy. He sees his image swim onto the surface of the mirror above the fireplace. The ornately carved gilt frame holds his face, darkly blurred by fatigue for a moment. The family portraits each side of the mirror stare back at him. This room seems always to have been the scene for tensions and uncertainty.

'We k-keep her door shut.' It sounds like an instruction the way Hugh calls after him.

'We'll have to rip out the carpet and buy a new double bed,' Hedda adds.

For whom? Lucas suddenly wonders. He pauses in the doorway and asks, 'Why double? Single would be better; so much easier for an old person to make. I don't know how she managed to change the sheets and remake the one she had. Anyway, if she's not coming back, why buy a new bed at all?'

There's a silence. Hedda smiles brightly, appearing not to have heard. 'Are you sure you don't want another cup of tea? It's no trouble.'

Lucas comprehends. The splinter of meaning digs in. They have plans for the house. His accommodation upgrade is due to the smell, he realises. They don't want to be near it. 'No thanks. We'll visit her in the hospital tomorrow then?' he asks. 'I can get myself there if you need a break.'

‘You can come with us, but no need to get up early. And leave the dishes, Lucas, I’ll take care of them.’

‘Thanks, no need, Hedda. You’ve done enough. It’s late and the kitchen’s on the way. See you in the morning. Thanks again. Goodnight Hugh.’

Lucas puts his dish in the washer and is joined by Basil, wanting to be fed. ‘Well, Basil, it seems I have been administered a few bruises without feeling all the blows.’ He feeds the cat and looks around. There are changes to the kitchen. The large dresser once there is now at the entrance to the servant’s quarters, at the end of the hallway. It covers the access to the cellar. ‘How do you get down to the cellar?’ he calls.

‘Oh,’ says Hedda, ‘we don’t. That yawning space down to the cellar always worried me. The banisters were very rickety so we removed them and put in a trapdoor. We didn’t want Camilla falling down there. The stairs are still there but under the dresser. Camilla said we could have that dresser for our new kitchen but it’s so heavy we decided to take it out the shortest way.’

‘Anything still down there?’

‘Oh, this and that, Wilson family things she didn’t like, paintings of hers that didn’t work out, and her old cabin trunk with some of her favourite dresses – ones she wore before she got married – the old gramophone.’

Basil curls up next to him on his bed, his luminous eyes, half-closed, regarding him. He purrs. ‘Make the sun shine tomorrow Basil,’ Lucas says. There was something odd, he thinks, as he drifts into sleep. It was an accident, he had heard Hugh say, more than once. Had his voice been defensive?

oOo

During the night, Lucas wakes to the sound of more rain and the noise of it squalls across the window in noisy instalments. It’s close to dawn. The sharp, sour smell locked

behind Mother's bedroom door has crept underneath, blown by the wind, and made its way down the hall. Lucas falls asleep again and dreams he paces about the house and hears Mother and the portraits talking, critical, sarcastic: 'You should have stayed. Yes, we were concerned.' The portraits look down. 'You were right to be concerned, we were concerned. You must not be concerned, not about our concern; it is too late; you must not be concerned about us. You are not to be concerned. Our concern is not about your concern.' The smell creeps under the door. 'You must do what you think is best. Of course you must; if you insist on being concerned. Concern brought you here. If it had not, we wouldn't need to be concerned. It does not concern us that you might have concern. We do not want your concern; it is not necessary; you do not belong.' The eyes of the portraits follow him, the words entwine, the curlicues reach out. 'Your concern is unwelcome. You do not fit.' At the end of the world where the sea falls over the edge, monsters rear up, writhe, waiting to drag Mother and Hugh into the abyss. He must save them.

Lucas wakes in a sweat. He gets up, goes to the cold kitchen and makes tea. He turns the light on in the drawing room, twists the dimmer up until the lights won't go any brighter and switches on the heaters. 'There you are,' he says to the portraits, 'returned to your frames and reduced to your proper size.'

In the morning Lucas unpacks. He finds some of Mother's odorous, wet underwear hidden in the chest of drawers next to his bed. Had she hidden them all over the house? Secreting things away was one of his mother's long-lived characteristics: broken crockery pushed to the back of a shelf or put at the rear of a drawer in the kitchen, ice cream papers and sticks, chocolate wrappings under her car seats, cakes hidden inside a saucepan or the frypan.

The wet underwear in the drawer has stained some photographs of Lucas's wife and children. 'Ugh! They'll all have to be thrown out,' he tells Basil. An envelope contains a few black and white photographs that are still dry. He remembers them. They are of his mother, behind the wheel of the two seater straight eight Buick she drove before she married Christian. But there is one he has not seen before with a man standing on the running board, smiling, leaning forward and waving a tennis racquet. The inscription on the back reads: *Jack pretending to catch butterflies for me*. Lucas laughs. There's something very alive and happy in the moment. It is the way he remembers his mother during the war years when his father was away, happy, until he came back.

There is another photo of the Man, his father, in the envelope. Lucas can't quite remember when he stopped calling his father the Man. Had he grown too old to be hit or had they reached some sort of equilibrium based on a respect born of endurance? In the captions on the photos he's called *Christian*. There's a picture of him driving a car and on the back the inscription reads, *Christian in his Bugatti*. Then there is another of the same car but the inscription on this one, dated later, says it's of *Norton in Christian's Bugatti*. The handwriting on both is Mother's. He puts them aside. The photos, along with the shopping lists and newspaper cuttings and receipts, will have to be thrown out. The waste-bin in the corner of the room is already full and there is something else that is damp, hidden amongst the contents.

The smell reminds him. When the Man had come home on leave, Lucas began to wet the bed. 'He has to be trained,' the Man told Mother. 'He's spoiled. You're too soft. He has to learn not to wet himself.' He turned to Lucas. 'Look at me,' said the Man, pulling Lucas's head back by the hair. The Man rubbed the wet sheets over Lucas's face. They were cold and wet and smelly. 'Now kneel,' said the Man, 'and wash your

sheets.' The baby bath-tub, full of cold water, was on the wooden floor of the back veranda. Lucas washed the sheets. It was a grey, windy day and the water was so cold.

Now Lucas gets headaches on cold, grey, windy days.

'Would you like a little brother or sister to play with?' Mother asked one day.

'No,' Lucas had said.

'And why not?' Mother asked, looking worried.

'Because you told me playing with other children makes me over-excited and that's why I get asthma and Gran says if I laugh in the morning I will cry in the evening. Playing with the other children makes me laugh. The Man might come home in the evening and he will hit me if I cry.'

She gave Lucas one of the sweets she'd hidden. 'He's gone away to kill more Japanese but I'll save you from the Man when he comes back, if you promise to be good,' said Mother.

Lucas goes to the laundry and when he opens the door finds Hedda with the washing machine on. 'Good morning,' he says.

She's standing on a small stepladder and trying to fix something to the light-fitting.

'What's that?'

'Crystal wind chimes to dispel all the negativity,' she says and then notices what Lucas brings. 'You've found more of her things? I've already done one load this morning. They'll have to go in after this lot, with her sheets and blankets. I haven't had a moment to myself since I've been here.' She speaks as though she expects Lucas is about to complain. 'Hugh's driving us to the hospital after breakfast. The doctor said he's allowed to drive again,' she adds. 'It will help to restore his confidence, to drive again.' She stops what she is doing and looks at him. 'You've been in her room then, have you?'

'No, they were in my room, in the drawer of the bedside table and there were more in the waste-bin. I could smell them.'

'Oh dear,' her body slumps. 'It didn't occur to me she'd hide them as well.'

'She should have been in a home, shouldn't she? Anne and I offered quite a few times to find her somewhere in Adelaide to live and to help her make the move. We said we'd come up here and organise everything and travel down with her but she changed her mind each time.' Lucas doesn't want this to sound defensive. Anne would have said 'Why do you have to assume you're the sole cause of everything that goes wrong, the one who's culpable and needs to be punished. She's spent a lifetime thinking she might move.'

'You invited her to live in Adelaide?' Hedda looks completely taken aback. 'Well, what she told us was that she suggested moving to Adelaide and the idea had gone down with you and Anne like a lead balloon and you had made it quite clear that she wasn't wanted.'

'She told us exactly the same thing, and in the same words, about you and Hugh,' Lucas says, shaking his head and scrubbing his chin, the sour air in the laundry now embellished with tension and the tinkle of crystals.

'Really?'

'She's good at divide and rule.' Bethany stands in the doorway.

Hedda looks relieved. 'Oh there you are! You must have left Sydney very early?'

'Crack of dawn,' says Bethany with a wheezy laugh. She comes in and turns the tap off. 'The only way to avoid the traffic. Hello, Uncle Lucas. How are you?' She hugs him. 'Any food?' she asks.

'I can't think about food right now,' says Hedda, wrinkling her nose.

'How about it if I become the breakfast chef?' Lucas volunteers.

'You're such a good cook, Uncle Lucas,' Bethany says. 'How could I say no?'

They've always got along well together. Bethany had even come down to Adelaide for a holiday once, but Hugh had made it clear he wasn't pleased she'd had such a good time.

'Your mother pressures everyone to take sides,' Anne told Lucas, when Bethany wasn't allowed to visit again. 'I suppose I'm in Camilla's bad books and have to guess why. Hugh goes along with whatever she tells him so I wouldn't expect little Bethany to stand up to that sort of pressure.'

## Chapter Two

Hugh is talkative and lists the landmarks as he drives. 'This is h-how you get to the hospital,' he explains to Lucas. The traffic is heavy. Rain specks the windshield. They are long, slow drops. 'Left at the highway, over the H-Hexham Bridge,' he intones, 'then ... then.' He points out each marker. The car's engine whirs when the gears slip on an automatic change. 'The-the that sound. That's not right,' he says. 'I'll h-hhh-ave to get that f-fixed straight away.'

Lucas doubts whether, after his stroke, Hugh should be driving. Is he talking to the lane markers, the engine, to himself or Lucas?

But Hugh continues to recite. 'N-Not in the left lane. We moo-m-move to the right lane.' He adjusts the windscreen wipers to beat more quickly. There is heavier rain. Hugh increases the wiper speed until they smack and flicker agitatedly. A semi-trailer in front sends up a mist of water and sludge from the road. The windshield smears and streaks. The rain stops. Hugh leaves the windscreen wipers clattering at high speed. Whack and smack, whack and smack. The wheels rumble over the corrugations of raw earth. The car judders. The windscreen wipers spread grime and sludge that sticks in two multi-layered semi-circles like raised, muddy eyebrows displeased by the smeared view.

'Then there's that garage. Don't change lanes. You keep the cemetery on your right. We turn right here ... no left and again here and left up the hill and ...' The gears whir again. 'The gear selector isn't working properly,' Hugh says. 'Not working. I'll have it fi-fixed tomorrow ... And we, we turn right now.'

Hedda interrupts Hugh. 'All you have to do is follow the hospital signs, if you're driving, Lucas, it's easier.'

'There's the roundabout,' says Hugh.

Lucas frees his attention from the drone of Hugh's incantations. There are large traffic signs that say 'Hospital' and arrow the way.

'M-Mother's been c-complaining for the l-last ten y-y-years that your children call her Zizi. She h-hates that name.'

Lucas knows the tone of voice. 'First I've been told about it,' he says, annoyed. 'If Mother had told us she didn't like the name we could have changed it to whatever she wanted.'

Hugh smiles and licks his lips. It's the same look he had as a child when he ate Ladyfinger grapes. Hugh is pleased with himself and the smile settles into the sweet aftertaste of having delivered hurt.

Bethany wheezes in the back of the car and Lucas wonders whether it's private laughing or if she needs more Ventolin.

Hedda's voice cuts in. 'Hugh, it was your mother's idea. She was the one who insisted that everyone should call her Zizi. She invented the name because she objected strongly to being called Gran. She said "Gran" made her sound old.'

Hugh stops smiling.

Lucas frowns. 'She's like that. If she has a complaint about someone or something she doesn't let the person know; her way is to tell someone else. If the lamb chops weren't tender she'd complain to the greengrocer.'

Hedda makes a snorting noise. A sound of recognition? Does it come from anger?

He catches sight of his own face in the mirror on the back of the sun visor. Lines of tension spread from the corners of his eyes.

A small silence.

'She says you never phone her,' Hugh tries again.

Lucas does not answer. He remembers the phone calls. He'd made sure she could use automatic dial to contact him. 'Hello, what's the news?' she would ask. Lucas kept a summary of the news near the phone, as well as the list of conversation topics. 'What else?' she would say when he described something. He would tell her what else. When he reached the end of the list he would wait. 'Any more news?' she would ask.

'No more news,' he would say.

'I'm thinking of moving,' she would tell him. 'Melbourne.'

Then he would enquire about her cat, Basil, or something from the past engraved in her memory – how she had been bitten by a snake whilst picking blackberries or how his grandmother had escaped from an overturned coach.

Then his mother would say, 'I think I'll have a cup of tea now.'

'I'll make one down here too,' Lucas would respond, 'so we'll both be having a cup of tea at the same time.'

Then they would say goodbye.

The phone would ring a few minutes later. 'Hello, it's Mother here. What's the news?' Then she would say, 'I'm so lonely, I'm thinking of moving.'

One week Lucas counted them. She'd phoned him sixty-eight times.

'I'll do the phone calls this week,' Anne would volunteer. This worked for a while. 'Let's go away for the weekend,' Anne said one day. 'Every time I pick up the phone it's her. She's wearing us out. You look haunted. She won't move. We can't live up there. I think we need a break. I'll listen to the answering machine for you when we get back and do the deleting.'

He'd hesitated.

'I can see what it's doing to you,' Anne said. 'She'll never move. She's frightened because she's left it too late but she'll hang on till she drops dead or has an accident and has to be hospitalised. You have to decide whether you want to live your life or hers. She doesn't care about your writing or my job. You're supposed to leave me and go up there and look after her. I love my work. I don't want to resign and live up there. We'll all end up like parrots, repeating the same conversations, hearing the same complaints that we've been hearing over the telephone for the last thirty years.'

Rain and road works again. The thrum of the tyres joins the sound of the windscreen wipers.

Lucas is surprised that he'd flared when Hugh said how long Mother had been complaining about being called Zizi. He doesn't like the dynamics he feels pulling him into their nasty currents. Thank God I'll only be here for a couple of weeks, he thinks.

It stops raining. Hugh allows the windscreen wipers to continue their noisy, rapid flapping – like fowls beating their wings, throwing themselves against wire netting. Hedda sighs and reaching across from the back seat manages to turn the windscreen wipers off.

'A dead kangaroo,' Hugh says.

There is something swollen at the side of the road. Crows sit on it. They scuffle heavily and hop, half flying, away from the burst gash in its side.

'Tell me about your naturopathy course, Bethany,' Lucas invites.

'She's doing well,' says Hedda.

'This is your final year, isn't it?' Lucas asks.

'Yes,' says Hedda.

'Are you enjoying it?'

'She loves it,' says Hedda.

'Is iridology part of your course, Bethany?' Lucas asks, hoping she might answer for herself.

'We haven't got to that part yet,' Bethany finally replies.

'Here's the other roundabout,' Hugh announces. He has to locate a free parking place for the handicapped.

'It's near the front door, Hugh,' Hedda reminds him. She turns to Lucas: 'We haven't had any problems parking since Hugh's become handicapped. That's one of the good things about it, isn't it?'

'It's free,' Hugh tells everyone.

The automatic doors slide open. Hedda says she needs to pause to put a protective mental shield around herself before she'll go in. 'I hate hospitals,' she explains, 'so I'm surrounding myself with a white light.'

They stand aside for a young man in a wheelchair who smiles at them as he's pushed out. The voice of the woman behind the chair is bright and positive; her face, though, is wet with tears. She scrubs them away with one hand. When Lucas stands aside for her their eyes meet for a moment and she nods as she passes.

'I'll have to meditate later to restore my psychic energy,' Hedda tells Bethany as they enter and the doors shut behind them. 'I should have prepared myself mentally before we left.' She turns to Lucas. 'Bethany is on a cleansing diet for her allergies so her aura is cleansed. She doesn't need to meditate.'

Lucas buys flowers from the foyer florist.

Bethany looks in her purse and buys a smaller bunch.

'They can be from all of us,' Hugh says.

Towards the end of the last corridor Lucas recognises a loud voice.

'That's Mother,' Hugh says, turning pale.

'Nobody loves me,' the voice wails. Mother's voice is deeper, throatier, sonorous than he recalls. 'I'm all alone!'

'No, you're not,' the female nurse tells her. 'I'm here. My name's Gloria and this is Todd.'

'Nobody loves me.'

There are two nurses in the white room with her. 'We like you,' the male nurse says.

'I'm all alone.'

'You have visitors,' says Gloria.

The male nurse turns to them. 'Ah, come in,' he says.

Mother's head is engulfed by pillows. Her hair is still red but cropped and curlier. Intense blue eyes dart Lucas's way. 'Ah, Lucas,' Mother says, 'you look just like your father.'

'H-h-he doesn't look an-anything like him,' Hugh corrects.

Lucas chuckles. He agrees. He looks nothing like his father. She's always told him that he takes after her. Her story's changed again. He turns to Hugh who stands behind him. 'Poor thing, she's confused us.'

'What d-do you expect? She's an old woman,' Hugh says.

Sarcastic bastard, Lucas thinks. 'Hello Mother,' he stoops to kiss her, thinking he must not upset her by asking her how she is. 'You seem to have lots of nice people looking after you today.'

'They're not very nice at all,' says Mother.

There's only one chair for visitors but no one sits in it. Hugh goes to the foot of the bed and checks the information on the clipboard.

'Would you like your pillow a little higher so you can see your visitors better?' Gloria asks.

'Will it hurt?'

'We'll both lift you up very gently.'

'Who's that man?'

'That's Todd. He's your other nurse,' Lucas says.

'You have two of us!' Todd grins. 'Aren't you lucky?'

'You're not a nurse.'

'Don't you remember me?' Todd speaks cheerily. 'You're my favourite patient.'

'No,' says Mother, 'I don't remember you and you're too young. I don't want you here. I want another doctor to operate on me.'

'I'm not a doctor. I'm a nurse,' says Todd. 'Would you like me to put your teeth back in, Mrs Wilson?' He takes the teeth out of a glass. 'Open your mouth Mrs Wilson.' She does as she is told and he slides them into place.

'Now I'm beautiful again,' says Mother.

Lucas moves to the side of the bed where she can see him more easily.

'Just ring if you need us,' Gloria says.

'We're never far away, are we, love?' Todd says to Mother.

'I'm not Love or Dear. I'm Mrs Wilson and you can go now. She turns her head, 'Oh, Lucas,' she says, looking surprised. 'You're still here! Show him out.'

'We brought you some flowers,' Bethany says, 'I'll put them in a vase.'

'They're from me, too,' says Hugh.

'I suppose you're hoping they'll last long enough to put on my coffin?' Mother says.

Bethany suppresses the beginning of a giggle.

Mother turns her head back to the other side of the bed. 'Lucas, you look just like your father!' she says again, this time smiling.

'He was a psy-psychopath,' says Hugh.

'Hugh takes after the Wilsons,' she tells Lucas. 'He's artistic.'

Hugh plants his feet apart, authoritatively, bounces taller several times from his toes and reads from the chart. 'You're d-doing very well Mother,' he announces.

'Don't be such a fool, Hugh. Anyone can see I'm dying.'

'Blood pressure g-good; heart good, and, and – we *need* you.' He falters for a moment. 'We ... d-don't want you to die.'

She says, 'I want to die.'

Hugh's hands look old, Lucas thinks – pale and damp. The skin is loose too. They've somehow become larger, the veins distended and blue. His fingers are blunt-ended and have square fingernails just like Mother's. They smear a damp patch on the back of the chart where he holds it. He fidgets. He's afraid, Lucas thinks. He doesn't want to be here.

Mother's blue eyes dart about. 'Dying is so lonely. Nobody loves me. Don't grow old.'

Hedda comes up close and looks into her eyes. 'Hello,' she says coaxingly.

Bethany does the same, cooing the sound: 'Hello. Hello!'

Mother's eyes come to rest on them, seem to perch, quivering, as if to fly off again. Hedda and Bethany repeat their close-up greetings. Mother thinks it's funny and smiles. Then she laughs. She seems to have taken control of their attention, like a bird in a room, exhausted but still hitting against the invisible glass barrier that keeps it from the sky.

Bethany rummages in her handbag. She finds her Ventolin and breathes in a double puff.

'Where's my bag?' Mother asks. 'My cheque book's in it.'

'You won't be needing to do any shopping in this place, Mother,' Hugh says.

Camilla laughs.

Lucas turns away from them all. The sound of her amusement, for that brief moment, resonated with the way Mother once was. He recalls how she used to sing the laughing song and play the piano with her voice lilting when Christian was away. He was fascinated by the way she could read the music, sing the words and not need to look where her fingers were on the keyboard, all at the same time. He would have liked to have been allowed to do that. When the Man came home from the war the music stopped. Christian did not approve.

Sunday school. Lucas had to go to Sunday school. 'You choose,' the Man said. 'Sunday school first and then the strap and then the dose of castor oil, or the strap first and then Sunday school and the castor oil when you come home?'

Lucas would have the strap first to get it the worst part of every Sunday over with.

Bethany puts water into a vase she's found and arranges the flowers they brought. They are gold and blue and orange.

'Look!' Lucas points to them but Mother doesn't look. He aches for all that might have been. 'Look,' he repeats. This time she does look and he wonders why it is still so important to him that she should approve and why he was ready to plunge into despair if she didn't?

'I like bright.' She looks around. 'I'm in hospital?' Her eyes register that she is. 'I want to go home.' She sees Lucas. 'Ah, Lucas. You're here.'

Their eyes meet. Her lists of hurts are, for a moment, abandoned. She does not announce any grievance. The mother Lucas remembers when he was very young is there again, without any barriers or demands, or unresolved complaints, just for that moment, there.

Lucas smiles.

Mother turns her gaze upon Hugh. 'The staff here is being abominably rude to me, Hugh. They say terrible things,' she tells him. 'They're unbelievably rude and nasty. You speak to them, Hugh. You know how to be sarcastic. Tell them I don't want to be called, Love, Dearie, Darling, Old thing, Flossie, or Blossom.' There's something different about the way she says Hugh's name. It implies he has some sort of authority.

'I have to go to the t-toilet,' Hugh says and leaves.

'Do you know where it is?' Hedda calls after him.

Bethany knows. She points.

'Hugh cried and cried in hospital when he had his stroke,' Hedda tells Lucas as soon as Hugh has gone. 'He doesn't like hospitals and he won't talk about it.'

'He said / caused his stroke!' says Mother.

The doctor comes in with a nurse. 'The patient has requested no cardiopulmonary resuscitation. I thought I'd better check with the family to make sure you're aware of this and that you're in agreement.' He holds a file.

Lucas is startled. No CPR? Up till now Mother had avoided this sort of topic, never attended funerals and if she grieved for friends had never shown it. 'When was this?'

'This morning,' says the doctor.

'Is that what you want, Mother?' Lucas's breath tightens.

'I want to die,' she says. Her gaze moves through the window where a cloud uncurls.

Hedda clutches Lucas's arm. She lowers her voice. 'Hugh mustn't know. Don't tell him.'

Lucas is surprised. 'I'll have to leave that to you and Hugh, Hedda. It's Mother who says she wants this. Do you and Bethany agree that there should be no CPR?'

They nod.

'And how about Melda?'

'We've talked about it,' Hedda says.

'I'd better phone Anne,' Lucas says. 'Back in a moment.' He slips into the corridor.

'Does Hugh know?' Anne asks.

'Not yet. He's not here at the moment.'

'You mean he's disappeared at decision time, as usual? You should all wait till he comes back. How would you feel if you were left out of a decision like that?'

Lucas goes back into Mother's room.

Hedda looks at him, 'Better not tell Hugh. He's ...he's ... not good at deciding.

Hugh decides by not deciding, thinks Lucas. He likes the three-way bet of collusion, of later being able to claim credit, point the finger of blame or insinuate.

'Would you like me to come back later?' the doctor asks.

Lucas turns to the doctor, 'No, if that's what she wants we agree.'

'I'll confirm it on the file then,' the doctor says.

'Yes, I want to die,' says Mother.

They stand in silence while the doctor writes. Lucas puts his tie in his pocket. He would like to be outside where there's plenty of air. It begins to rain and on the other side of the double-glazed window a eucalyptus, heavy with its new growth of bright red leaves, mops, swipes and scrapes at the glass with cold friction. The treed horizon gulps sky, and sunshine spangles the rain. So beautiful.

Mother calls out suddenly, 'Jack's not in the coffee shop. He's not there!' Her hand reaches out, pointing, her finger joints knotted with arthritis. She weeps with palpable hurt, pressing back into the pillows. 'Christian mustn't come in and see me. I don't want him in here. I saw his face, Matron. I saw the look on it! He doesn't love me any more. He's leaving.' Her hand travels across the room to the door, following someone, her finger pointing. 'Daddy didn't want me to marry him. What will I do, Peggy?'

Lucas holds her hand. It's hot and damp.

'Jack,' she says.

'Who's Jack?' he asks.

Mother looks around the room and at the faces that are all about her.

'Where's Matron? Where's Doctor Connolly?' Her gaze rests on the flowers. 'I'd love to go swimming, Peggy,' Mother says. 'We could go to Newport in the Buick!'

Hugh returns and stands in the doorway.

'I don't want Christian in here. I want Jack.'

She grips Lucas's hand. 'I've had enough Jack, I want to die.'

'His name's Lucas, not Jack,' Hugh says.

There are tears in Lucas's eyes. 'I know, Mother. If anything goes wrong you don't want to be revived.'

The hole of her mouth contorts into the ache and the whisper of, 'I've had enough. Yes.'

'We all promise,' Lucas says.

'P-P-Promise what?' Hugh is suspicious. 'Promise w-what *exactly*?' He turns on Hedda.

Hedda's necklace breaks under her hand and a cascade of beads rattles across the floor.

When Lucas stoops to retrieve them, he discovers beneath the bed, the clear plastic tubes draining liquids from his mother.

'Y-Y-You think I'm st-stupid because I've h-had a strike, str-stroke don't you?' Hugh's voice accuses from above. 'Y-You w-want her dead d-don't you Lucas?'

'Mother's the one who requested no CPR, Hugh.'

Mother groans. The sound quivers as if some memory has caught on the stitches of an old wound and pulled it open. Lucas looks up to see the pulse in her neck flickering rapidly.

'Don't grow old.' Her eyes wander to the window and back, again and again, as if she wants to escape through the glass.

Like a sparrow trapped in the house, Lucas thinks, beating its wings, trying to get out. He guesses. 'You're afraid you're going mad?'

She cries. 'Yes,' she says, her feelings rippling across her face like light playing through haze. There are more tears. 'Everything's mixed up. Don't go away. Don't go away. Yes, yes, I'm going mad. I don't want to go mad.'

Lucas squeezes her hand. 'I'm holding your hand. You can feel my hand, can't you?'

She nods.

'So you know you're here. You know I'm here and even if you're in a different place, you know who you are on the inside.'

'Yes,' she nods. 'You're Jack,' she says.

'She's mixing you up with the doctor, I think,' Bethany says.

'That's Lucas,' Hugh tells Mother, pointing at him. Then he says to Lucas, 'She doesn't know who you are. You know who I am though, don't you Mother?'

'You're Hugh.'

'Yes.' He points at Lucas again, 'And who's that?'

Mother doesn't answer.

'It's L-L-L- Lucas,' says Hugh, emphasizing the name.

'Would you like to go to sleep now, Mother?' Lucas asks.

'Good, I want to sleep. I want to die, to sleep forever,' she says, shutting her eyes.

'Your father's not here. Is he alright?'

'Yes,' says Lucas. 'Don't worry. He's alright.'

'I've told you, he's dead,' says Hugh.

'You look just like him,' she repeats, her eyes opening, looking at Lucas steadily.

'Father's dead, Mother,' Hugh says. 'He died years ago.'

'Dead?' She looks puzzled.

'Yes, dead,' Hugh tells her.

'No, he isn't. He's there, Hugh. I can see him. Look,' she points, crying.

One of the nurses comes in. 'She's hallucinating; it's the morphine. There's also a problem because her carotid arteries have narrowed and she's not getting enough blood flow to the brain.'

'I can see him through the window now,' Mother says, pointing at the tree.

'There?' Hugh asks. 'What do you mean?'

'Yes, Christian's out there, in the Bugatti. Your father, look Hugh! He doesn't love me any more. No one loves me any more. I'm all alone.' She shuts her eyes. 'I want to die.'

Hugh looks at Hedda. 'It was an accident,' he says.

'Of course it was.' Hedda takes his arm. 'It wasn't your fault.'

Hugh pulls his arm away.

The light is on Hedda's worn face. She has left it without make-up again and the hurt shows. She picks at a bit of lint on the sleeve of the same colourless clothes she wore the day before, now even more crumpled. 'You did the right thing moving to Adelaide,' she tells Lucas.

'I'll stay here while you sleep, Mother,' says Lucas.

'Good,' Mother says. 'Don't go away. Am I at home?'

'No, you're in hospital, Mother,' Hugh tells her. 'You've broken the other hip.'

The old pain in Lucas's side is back. The claws of the same cramp that he used to have in his gut in childhood when there was stress in the family. He thought he'd dealt with the past but something begins to tear, separating from himself, setting itself to work so he won't feel the other, deeper pain. He has to escape the shadow that comes through the doorway and hurts. He will watch from a distance, feeling safe.

Below him there's the plain room that smells like hospital with its off-white walls; a window with the tree outside; the grey, tiled vinyl floor and down there he sees himself, standing next to Mother's bed with the fluorescent light shining on his head and onto the blue and gold of the flowers he brought her. What are they? He must remember. There are blue iris and the orange flowers – are they calendulas or marigolds? They didn't smell like marigolds. He is too far away to smell them now. Lilies? Not white arum lilies though. Mother says lilies are cemetery flowers. She doesn't like them. There's a bed, a bedside table; in the corner there's a sink. A television floats from a wall fixture. There is a movie on it but no sound. Lucas cannot hear any voices from where he is. Mother's red hair stands out against the white pillow. He does not want to look at her because she is not Mother any more. He drifts higher above the room, the old terror of the shadow upon him but he feels safer. The further away he goes the less he feels but he fears something could be his fault if he is not there and he knows he has to return. He tumbles into the tree outside, the mopping, rocking, the whipping; the feel of the sickle-shaped leaves. Whip, whip, whip, whip. Bethany stares at him. She cannot see the Man hitting or the cuts on Lucas's legs and the blood running down. Nobody knows when he goes away.

China jingles. Metal rattles into the room. A trolley scrapes against the side of the doorway, adding to the scars in the paintwork. 'Lunch, dear?' the woman pushing the trolley smiles. Metallic lids cover plastic dishes suitable for use in a microwave.

'I'm not hungry,' says Mother, eyes shut.

'I'll leave it here for a while in case you're tempted, dear.' She moves the flowers to one side, puts a tray on the table and pushes it within reach.

'I'm not to be called Dear, an Old dear, or Darling. It's not appropriate. My name is Mrs Wilson,' says Mother, 'and I'm trying to sleep.'

'Of course. Silly me,' the woman laughs. 'I forgot. It won't happen again, Mrs Wilson.'

'She has been told before,' Mother says to Hugh, as the woman departs. 'I don't know her; we've never been introduced and I haven't invited whatever-her-name is to address me by my first name. We're not on familiar terms. We might have to let her go. Make sure she leaves through the servant's entrance.'

Hugh snorts. 'Since when have you had any servants apart from us, Mother?'

'She likes potato,' Lucas hears himself say.

Bethany spoons potato into her grandmother's mouth. Mother likes it that someone is looking after her. She eats a little. 'That's enough,' says Mother. Then to the nurse who has re-entered, she says, 'The doctor flirted with me the other day and do you know what?' There is a pause while everyone waits. 'I loved it!'

'Oh,' says the nurse, 'and who was it saying just a moment ago, Mrs Wilson, that nobody loved you?'

Mother smiles.

'She has a lovely smile with her teeth in,' says the nurse.

'Apparently it's alright for a bourgeois doctor to be on familiar first name terms with your mother but not a working class nurse,' Hedda mutters to Hugh.

'Mum's a socialist now as well as a Buddhist,' Bethany explains to Lucas. 'She believes in equality and wealth sharing and helping the disadvantaged. That's why she teaches deaf children.'

'And the ca-car's - in -in- included in her pa-package,' Hugh adds.

'We have to go back to Sydney tomorrow,' Hedda tells Lucas, 'for the opening of an art exhibition.'

'I'm an artist,' says Mother.

'She used to be quite good,' Hedda tells the nurse. 'It was the way they were brought up back then. She was sent to finishing school and had to know about drawing, painting, singing and dancing and horse riding and making conversation. All her lessons were in French.' Hedda looks at Lucas. 'One of us will probably come back next week.'

'I'm g-going to art school,' says Hugh.

'You're a good boy,' says Mother.

'You won't be here for the operation then?' Lucas asks.

Hedda shakes her head. 'No, I'll be working and I'm also running a workshop on the Monday.'

'A workshop?'

'Yes, it's called, "Positive Assertion, Listening Skills and Win/Win methods of Conflict Negotiation for Women in the Workforce".'

'I have work experience with a naturopath tomorrow,' Bethany puts in, 'so I can't be here. It's at Healing Hands. Work experience is a compulsory part of my course.'

Gloria interrupts. 'We're going to wash your mother's hair now,' she tells them.

'She needs to sleep,' Lucas says.

'Yes, go away,' says Mother. 'And my name's Mrs Wilson.'

'Sorry, Mrs Wilson.'

'We're going now, Mother,' Hugh says.

'No more potato,' says Mother, turning her head away from the spoon that Bethany holds hovering near her mouth. There are fragments of it on her lips. 'I want to sleep. I don't want to die from exhaustion and an overdose of potato!'

'I need lunch,' Hedda tells Hugh, 'but not here. Hospital vibes aren't good for my chakras.'

'Has your father had lunch?' Mother asks Hugh.

Hugh takes a breath. 'It would be w-wasted on him. He's dead.'

'That's good,' says Mother. 'When I put my wedding ring on his coffin, I said, "that's the end of our contract!" That's what I said; that's the way I said goodbye.' She holds up her left hand. 'I told the funeral director I didn't want it back.' She looks down. 'You have long fingers Lucas, like your father. Mine are so short and stubby. I hate them.'

'G-good old Lucas. You g-get a n-nother Brownie point,' Hugh sneers, putting his hands behind his back.

Lucas does not respond to Hugh's sarcasm but does remember the embarrassing firmness and finality of the sound of Mother's wedding ring when it clacked onto the wood of the coffin lid and his own huge disbelief when he'd heard the remark. He'd hoped no one else had heard but then his shock and embarrassment changed to astonishment. Why had Mother remained in a relationship that had generated such loathing? He'd been even more astounded that her act said clearly and powerfully what had never been put into words – everything he'd known deep down and chosen to overlook, all that had driven him to live in distant Adelaide. How Hugh must hate him! Like Mother, he had stayed and suffered and blamed. Lucas's visit had puffed life into all their grievances and something ominous was working its way towards a reckoning. 'Thank God I moved to Adelaide,' he mutters then notices that Hedda's quite close, but

she appears not to have heard. Well, did it matter if she had heard? She'd already said he'd done the right thing.

Mother's attendants relent and leave her to sleep.

Hugh says he knows a place on the waterfront, a wharf, in Newcastle and that's where he wants to eat outside if it's sunny, but under an umbrella because he doesn't want his nose to get burnt again.

Lucas looks back into Mother's room as he leaves and sees only a wisp of red hair deep in the pillow. Her body, such a small lump under the bedclothes, makes the bed and the room look enormous.

Outside, the air sweeps away the last of the rain, leaving droplets of sunshine-filled crystals hanging from the trees. Lucas, away from the place of corridors, reception areas, lifts and levels, stairs, stretchers and wheelchairs – away from the faces in the rooms he's passed – feels his body tremble.

Hugh wants to drive again and Lucas sitting at a slight angle wonders why he's so intrigued by Hugh's nose. He sees it in silhouette, large and red and greasy, with large pitted pores. Of course! It's the same as those in the line-up of family portraits. Perhaps theirs had looked less weathered and much more patrician in the northern hemisphere.

They reach the place where Hugh wants to have lunch. Scudding rain returns to shadow the choppy surface of the ocean with trailing threads. Hugh makes for a table with an umbrella. He'll have the usual, he tells Hedda, pausing to buy an ice-cream for himself at an outside counter. Meals have to be ordered inside, so Hedda, Bethany and Lucas join the queue while Hugh waits outside.

'He gets so very tired,' Hedda explains to Lucas, 'and cold.'

'But he's sitting out there in the cold wind, eating ice-cream,' says Lucas.

'It makes him feel better,' says Hedda.

Lucas remembers how Hugh, as a child, liked being rewarded with ice-cream.

'He has to take warfarin to keep his blood thin but it makes him sensitive to the cold. That's why he loves his fleece jacket,' Hedda adds. 'Without the warfarin his blood might clot and then he'd have another stroke. Camilla has a bad heart, remember. He got it from her.'

Lucas remembers that warfarin is used as rat poison.

'I'm surprised he doesn't rattle, he's so full of tablets,' Hedda says, turning frequently to watch over Hugh from the queue inside the eatery.

'I'll have my lunch in here,' says Bethany. 'It's too cold out there. I'll sit near the window and wave to you.'

They have become observers of Hugh. Gulls descend on the table near him and tear the air with harsh, cold cries, fighting over a discovery of rain-soaked chips on an uncleared table. They hover, scuffle and gorge, while beneath them, pigeons scramble for a share of the dislodged leftovers.

'It's so good that Hugh can use his mother's home for holidays. He does most of his art work in her studio there and it gives me a break from him. I've started running communication workshops because I'm going to need something when I retire from teaching. Quite frankly, I'm not sure how long our marriage would last if we were stuck at home in Sydney together all day, every day! I'm so glad he's up to driving again. He needed a lot of encouraging.'

After ordering, Hedda and Lucas go outside. At the windy end of the wharf, where Hugh sits, the cold, sharp smell of the sea and the odours of the rotting seaweed thickly strewn along the shore, gust about them. Bethany waves from behind the window, in the warmth.

## Chapter Three

### Sydney, 1941

Jack will be sure to look for me at the Coffee Palace, Camilla reassured herself. I'll wear the red hat that he gave me. He'll see it straight away. Then she added, and gloves of course, but which, the short or the elbow length? And what colour? The ivory, the beige or the cream? Perhaps the beige. No, no, the cream, to go with my handbag and shoes. And which dress? The floral, silky, with loose pleats – because of my tummy? Or a skirt perhaps, but with a floral blouse with reds or pinks in it that would go with the hat? I have to wear the hat! He will recognise it. She hesitated. No, no, not the floral dress. Definitely not, it will be too matronly.

Perhaps she shouldn't. No, she'd tell him. She *would* tell him and watch his face. His face was so expressive – the dance of his warm, brown eyes not like Christian's slate-grey, cold sky-on-water gaze. She nodded into the mirror. 'Yes,' she said.

Definitely a skirt, but she'd wear it with the broad, loose belt in the same fabric so as not to draw attention to her stomach. She felt better too, knowing she still had some silk stockings left, even though there was a war on. At least Daddy had connections.

oOo

**'Paper, Paperr, Pyaaar.'** The voice of the paper boy resonated irritatingly over and over, between the city buildings, rose above the noise of the traffic, adding to Camilla's agitation as she pushed hard against the door of the Coffee Palace to get away from the

way it grated upon the beauty of the day. **'Brii - itish withdraw from Ma-layayaaa,'** it pulsed loudly, until the door closed behind her.

When Camilla entered in her red hat, people had looked up because of the clacking sound of her expensive high heels but then they looked longer, a little too long, attracted by her appearance. So she became uncertain, vulnerable, although she had presence and the appearance of confidence. She had faltered, perhaps because she had come in alone or perhaps because she'd felt uncomfortable under scrutiny. Whatever it was, some sort of emotion had burst through the doorway with her. Was it because she hadn't been there for a while, Camilla wondered, or was it because of the news about the Japanese invasion of Malaya? She stood for a moment looking worried, self-conscious, so the people turned their eyes away. Jack wasn't there.

She chose a table near the window and, as she sat, wrinkled her nose as if something offended. Usually she liked the smell of fresh baking, especially the aroma of fresh bread and scones. These were the main smells that suffused but there was also something else, an undertone, strangely sweet, that was quite unpleasant at that hour of the morning. Was it the odour of the coffee substitute or the sweetness of condensed milk mixed with coffee and chicory that drifted? Chicory! That's what it was! Thank God the man who smoked cigars wasn't there as well, she thought. The combination would have been nauseating.

'I don't care,' she said aloud, meaning about fleeing from her trip to Tasmania. It had cost her father a fortune and she'd returned without talking it over with her parents, leaving only a note – something about dashing off on an impulse because a friend who was nervous about flying in a DC3 needed company. But it was really because she had to tell Jack. Yes, Jack would arrive any moment. He'd be really surprised to find she was back.

She could do much worse than Christian, her parents had said. So she had to see Jack before they resumed nagging, before her father offered them a house again, before he grew desperate and offered them anything, anything they wanted.

What she wanted was to say 'yes' to Jack's proposal. She pictured him on his way, striding along jauntily, looking slim and muscular, one hand casually in a coat pocket. The door would open and he'd be there – she could picture him, his coat never buttoned. He wasn't strapped into protocol. She loved the way his hat tilted above his dark eyebrows and the glow of his shiny brown eyes. Jack would look in and see her and stop, with an uncertain grin forming as he made sure. Yes, it would be a disbelieving grin because he'd wonder if it really, really was her and *then* a smile would light up in his eyes and the grin would unfold into certainty. He'd rush in and embrace her.

What a horror the holiday by ship to Tasmania had been, supervised all the way there by her parents and she'd fled, knowing she would be supervised all the way back too, *supervised, supervised, always supervised* – another of father's plots to stop her from seeing Jack, keeping her away from him.

They would be married before her father returned and she hoped her father would relent and be pleased. Pleased eventually, she'd hoped, because she would have to endure his displeasure for some time and his reminders of what had been on offer if she had married Christian. He *would*, Jack *must* be – pleased when the baby was born.

The new waitress greeted her with a smile. They were taught to do that though. She looked familiar. Why? And it was really a worried smile. Why did she look concerned as she came across? Didn't she know it was far too soon to take her order?

'Not now, not now,' Camilla said, putting on a smile, waving her away. 'No need for me to bother you now. I'll order in a little while. I'm waiting for a friend.'

'Oh!' The waitress paused, looking startled. 'Your friend will be here? Of course, Miss. I'll come back later,' she said, suddenly smiling properly.

She's so independent, thought Camilla, and confident and quiet, as if she's brought something special from another place, something separate that is self-contained, like a courtyard, one that's away from the traffic and noise, and when you step out of it, it stays with you, whatever it is. Camilla wanted to feel like that. But the something that she knew would be good for her, the something that she needed to know, always scuttled away from her, disappeared from sight like an intriguing shell glimpsed briefly in the surf. She hated that whatever it was she wanted always frothed over before she could grab it, hold it and keep it. Sometimes it was even worse, like the sample dab of perfume she'd put on her wrist in David Jones, the one that was so wonderful on Peggy Gower. On Camilla it always changed its fragrance into something ugly. Why couldn't she grab the things she wanted? Men chased after things and grabbed them, even knocking each other out of the way in the process, as if they were playing football. It was alright for them to do ugly things.

The agitated cry of the paper boy burst upon her again. '**PYAAAR, pyar! PYAAAAR!**' Camilla couldn't think. The noise, the noise! He was too close, even outside on the corner. The sound was worse than cicadas. Camilla had seen the skins of cicadas clinging onto the trunks of trees. Empty, empty! They had shucked off their hard swaddling, tight as mother's corsets, and flown off, pulsing, beautiful, fragile, free to sing, leaving behind what had encased them. And then, and then – after all that cacophony, all that wild rejoicing, like the noises at a party, even if nobody heard properly; and then at the end, especially at the end, energy spent, when there were only a few voices left saying goodbye, they fell back silently into the earth. After such short lives! Leaving emptiness – nothing, nothing. Nothing but skins the colour of brown paper hanging from

the tree trunks. Empty. And yet cicadas didn't think about it. Death. Why did she think about what might happen one day? To her? She tried not to. She didn't want to think about it. She would paint something to stop the thinking, scribble across the uncertainty, scribble around and around, filling the page with something in glossy India ink, probably grow it into the whirling shape of a woman, one with a big belly who hung calmly, limply, without any problems, from a tree. Maybe it would be impasto, the paint so thick it might catch flies – and the lines she made scratched right back to the canvas as if by fingernails, like a Van Gogh or madly sectioned – Cubist with everything overlapping, with eyes and expressions hiding things the way Picasso did. Her mother and father didn't mind if she painted or played the piano passionately, loudly, when they weren't there. She would bury herself in a diversion and they would say, 'How clever! How clever to draw someone in loops made like string,' but there could not, would never be, a discussion with them that turned into anything meaningful. She would bury herself in diversions for as long as it took.

The newsboy at the corner in George Street had not let up: '**British withdrawaaw from Malayan Peninsulaar,**' he bellowed with huge urgency in his voice. The shock rippled down the street, took up the space between buildings, like waves tumbling over one another, strident. She did not want to know. Where's Jack? She wanted to see Jack walking through the door, surprise turning to pleasure, smiling, his mouth saying her name. 'Camilla,' he'd say, kissing her lips, sitting down, taking her hands in his. She'd know how to tell him.

A tram stopped opposite. Was the tall man with the leisurely pace Jack? No. So many in uniform! Why couldn't things stay the same? A few more people straggled off. Surely that one was him, the slim shadow behind the woman, slow to descend, the woman who was expecting? No, it was the conductor, making the woman wait so he

could get out first and he'd put his hand out to help her down, carefully and she'd taken so long. No one else disembarked.

He'd arrive soon.

Her father had said that she was a Campbell and the Campbells didn't marry people like him. Not enough money. They'd hoped she'd forget about Jack Cooper. But when she'd left he'd been there on the wharf, standing in the rain, waving – and so she'd thrown a brilliant red streamer to him and he'd caught it and pressed it to his lips and the red dye came out so she'd done the same so they'd both have red lips. How they'd laughed!

'Stupid,' her father had said.

As the ship moved from the wharf, the streamer stretched and stretched, the ship hooting its farewells while the band on the wharf played the *Maori Farewell Song* and the crowd sang the words but the passengers on the ship sang *Auld Lang Syne*. So mixed up! Then the streamers snapped one by one until theirs was the last one left, then it too broke and sagged into the water.

Soon. He'd be here soon.

Another tram rattled to a halt. Perhaps he'd decided to walk. That's it. He would be on the other side of the road and she wouldn't see him because the trams would be in the way.

Camilla's mother had insisted on the trip to Singapore. Camilla knew why on the first night at sea when she went to dinner. There was Christian Wilson at the table, standing up to greet her, debonair in a stripy blazer, looking so pleased with himself. It was a plot. 'Surprise!' said her father. 'Look who's here!' Her mother sat, hands folded, smiling primly, saying nothing.

When Christian saw the look on her face he'd put his hand over his heart and sung:

*Your face is so long*

*But you-ou-’ve got it wrong*

*I’ll put it right, baby, ba-aby.*

*I’ll put it right, baby!*

The other passengers laughed, so she’d had to laugh, *made* herself laugh, but she hadn’t got it wrong and that night, when a white mist slipped over the ship, she’d walked into it, leant on a life boat, wanting the ship to sink, and cried. Later she had coffee, with extra cake, sent to her cabin. Rainbow cake, it was called. She always made wishes when she saw a rainbow but she couldn’t eat the cake and hid it at the back of her locker – in a corner, in the dark of her cupboard, so her parents wouldn’t know. She’d become good at hiding things.

‘Would you like to order now miss, or will you wait for your friend a little while longer?’

‘In a little while,’ said Camilla. ‘I’ll wait, just a little longer.’

‘Of course Miss. It’s so nice to see you back.’ Her voice had such a cheerful lilt to it.

Camilla did not answer. It was not proper to converse with a waitress for longer than was necessary.

Going to Singapore had offered lots more delicious freedom from being chaperoned than the recent trip to Tasmania. But so the weather was so hot! They’d all stayed at the Raffles. Her father had businesses there and matters had to be attended to because there were rumours that the Japanese would invade, so he couldn’t watch over her as much as he would have liked to. Not that the Japanese could defeat the British, everyone said, because the Japs couldn’t see to aim their rifles properly because of their slant-eyes and they were too bandy to march very far. Everyone knew that, so it was all a bit of a lark really.

The young men, who came to the Raffles on Curry Tiffin Saturdays, weren't worried by anything. They said so and they paid her a great deal of attention. They had nervous energy. Was it because they were excited and also afraid, uncertain about the war? Or was it because of her? She encouraged them and it made Christian jealous. He watched while they congregated about her and made suggestions about what she should have from the chafing dishes. Several always hung about wanting to carry her plate. Oh, it was such fun!

They made her gasp by telling her about the tiger that had been shot in the bar. Then there was the dancing, under the languid swirl of the ceiling fans, to the snappy beat of the palm court orchestra in the gallery. She'd waltzed, danced the polka and even the old-fashioned Charleston. The young men vied with one another, almost queued, to have her put their names on her dance card! And she went into the countryside with them to look at their rubber plantations, leaving Christian behind. She made him so jealous.

Why couldn't it have all stayed the same?

Another rattle of a tram! Jack would be sure to see her red hat. He would look in and there she'd be, waiting. Then they would order and she would tell him, after the tea arrived. Her eyes hunted for his shape. Not him. Not him either, or the next. Not any of them. The tram whirred into start-up; wheels shivered with an abrasive metallic hiss along the rails, cracked in succession across the joins in the track. Camilla felt a headache coming on. Why did there have to be a war? She could admit it. Yes, in way she did like Christian Wilson because she knew how to make his eyes flick. 'He's got eyes like a serpent,' she told her mother.

'You do exaggerate,' her mother had said. 'There's nothing wrong with his eyes. / *like them.*'

'Well, *I don't*,' Camilla said. 'Christian *enjoys* being defied.'

'Don't be so stupid,' her mother said. 'How could you possibly know?'

But Camilla remembered how, when they were in Singapore, she'd gone very close to him and prodded her fingers against his chest making a point in conversation, and how she had made her voice lift flirtatiously in pretended outrage about something trivial. He was such a flirt, so handsome, tall and well-built and challenging.

'Camilla, you're spoilt. He likes you. What *more* do you want?' her mother demanded.

'He only likes me for my money,' she'd told her mother.

'He's got plenty of his own,' Mother said. 'So there's no need for you to assume he can be tamed through wanting yours.'

'And I'm not going to be tamed by you just because you think it would be nice for us to have his money as well!'

Camilla had always known she needed to be wanted for herself. She knew Christian wanted her, not as she was, but to make her into someone different. He wanted her as a trophy and for her money. And yet, and yet, she liked him because he was fun and not at all obsequious, but no, she never liked him enough to want to marry him! His dark side made her tremble. Or was it the wicked dark side that he stirred in her that she liked? Peggy Gower said they fluttered about a nasty flame in one another because they found the pain both cruel and delicious, always half-wanting to be singed to death, like moths.

'Admit it, Camilla, you're not good together,' her friend Peggy had said. 'He even drives his car as if he's in love with death.'

Camilla hadn't answered. She knew she liked that feeling. It scared her.

'It's true isn't it?' Peggy had said. 'Remember the time you looked at the water pounding over Niagara Falls. The roar and rush of spray and mist made you want to jump in, didn't it?'

Camilla remembered. 'Daddy had to drag me back.'

Yes, Peggy was right. It was the same feeling when she was with Christian. She had known that if Christian got his arms around her she might do anything out of desperation and be sorry afterwards, because what she really wanted was to be in Jack's arms and she'd be pretending Christian was Jack. Christian was such a dangerous animal but there was something about Jack's smell. He was a safer, kinder animal than Christian.

'You go all trembly about both of them,' Peggy had concluded.

'I know that. I go all trembly – turn into jelly.'

'Turn into your favourite, *Aeroplane Jelly*?' Peggy Gower had asked, giggling. 'You think Christian might like a little taste of *Aeroplane Jelly*!'

'No, no,' Camilla had said. 'I would never want to hurt Jack.' But behind Christian's eyes Camilla had found something disconcerting, something clawed. Or was the attraction simply because she liked men?

'Oh, I'm so mixed up,' she'd confessed.

'Not about flirting! You *like* flirting, that's what you like.' Hand under chin, Peggy then changed tack. 'Are you enjoying your new and, I must say, very glamorous, pair of high heels?' She'd raised her eyebrows a little. 'Are they very very, painful, darling?'

'Oh!' said Camilla, quite surprised by this unexpected turn in the conversation and falling into the trap. She'd put a foot out from under the table, for inspection. 'Are they very painful?' she'd repeated. 'Yes, v-ery! But I *do* so like them, and they're worth the agony as long as I don't go too far – and oh, such blissful relief when I take them off.'

Head tilting, eyes direct, Peggy sprung her trap. She giggled and said, 'Well then, perhaps you should be thinking about your involvement with Christian in the same way as you do your shoes?' She was such good fun.

Camilla had sometimes visited the mirror to look into her own eyes because she'd thought she might discover something of Christian in herself. That was partly why hurting Christian was fun. She had that power over him. She felt she could prod something else out of him, make him angry so something important would happen. Jack wasn't like that with her. She wasn't like that with Jack. But with Christian, whatever special thing it was that emerged might also be what she looked for in herself. He wanted to squeeze emotions out of her too, the way she hoped to force feelings out of him by being so destructive. She suspected it was because he allowed so few emotions in himself; he wanted to scare others in the hope that their reaction would leave him with sensations that would let him know what it was inside himself that he was missing – if there was anything else that lurked. Camilla knew she could help him.

The words came to her: *I really don't want to be hurt!* He might hold on with his teeth, like some animal, his mouth sharp and wet. Is that what Christian would do to her? She'd hate it. He would probably make love feel like being stabbed. He'd lie in wait like the edge of a cliff, still and dark. She could step right over the edge and he would let her, perhaps push her and she'd fall. He would step back, watch and smile and she'd plunge all the way onto jagged rocks, the way it happens in dreams.

The claustrophobic lift shaft in the Queen Victoria Building, not far away, was exactly like the one where she fell in one of those bad dreams. The lift well had a peculiar, sour stink too. The unpleasant smell of spilled wine lingered there in the stones of the basement, rising out of long ago. Or was it more of a musty staleness like her father's old books about the family? It was earthy and horrible, yes, like Christian's armpits when

he sweated. Some things would never go away. They left stains in rings like the ones she'd seen in the stumps of felled trees.

She waited. The footpath emptied into doorways; the shoppers had not yet arrived. Jack must be late for work. Had he walked past and she'd missed seeing him? Had he perhaps missed seeing her? Her heart thumped with the shock of the thought. Why, why, hadn't she phoned him? *I hate myself. I'm so, so ... stupid*, she decided.

Her father had been so unrelenting about marrying her off to Christian. She *had* to be defiant. She had a right.

'Why don't you marry him yourself then, Daddy, if you like him so much?' she'd shouted and run from the room. But she'd had to come back and listen because she wanted her allowance.

Making love had to be with someone she cared about first. She deserved that. Not that Christian was obviously disgusting. His real smell had an extra overlay that was expensive, fresh and sharp like citrus. It mixed with his body odour when they played tennis. But he was disgusting underneath. She knew. Why hadn't she always noticed aromas as keenly, except his, until recently? Smells had become so intense, so definite that they either pleased or displeased. She would vomit if Christian's smell were near her now. He would reek. She should have said no to both of them because it would always have ended up the same way. With Christian she would have to be the unhappy, trapped, pretty, chirping, child-bearing socialite in the gilded cage. With Jack she would just be the trapped, but happy, child-bearing housewife. Trapped both ways. Jack wouldn't be coming now. She felt the heaviness of certainty.

**'Pyarr. British withdraa-aw. PYAAAR!'** She held her head against the sound willing it to stop.

'Are you alright Miss?' It was the waitress.

'Yes, yes,' said Camilla.

No, she didn't imagine it. She'd stopped enjoying Christian's company a long time ago. So sarcastic. She'd heard the way he spoke to the Chinese and Malays in Singapore. And with others too, when he was in a bad mood. He turned words to poison. But she'd known how to whirl her skirts and dance out of his reach, tossing her long red hair, teasing him. She tinkled with laughter to show she didn't care. She'd liked stirring him up and making him jealous, turning her head away at the last second from the invited kiss. It was like giving an invitation on her personal, perfumed paper and then snatching it away ever so quickly so that it cut into his fingers before he knew what she'd planned.

Kisses that bite, he must have thought. A filly that showed the whites of her eyes, one that came right at him with its lips back, he probably thought. He was the sort of rider who liked to use spurs to leave long, bloody cuts on a horse's flanks, wasn't he? If he had any power over her he might hurt her nastily too. He would think he had a right to tame her. He knew she was as bad as he was. They both knew that. He would have hit her before now but he was scared of her father. Her father who had a temper and used his fists to get what he wanted. If Christian were honest he would have acknowledged that he made others pay for what he hated in himself. She should have ended the relationship, she thought, before her enjoyment in hurting him turned into a habit. She will marry Jack. Although, inclining her head in the Coffee Palace, looking at herself in the window, with red hair, red hat, she wondered about being domestic, her breasts swollen and a baby crying, biting her nipples and spilling milk out of its mouth.

Jack was different. She felt safe with him. The way he said things made her laugh. When she looked into his eyes she felt warm. She liked his warm brown eyes.

'Miss?' Camilla jumped. The waitress was back. Camilla noticed then that the street had grown quieter. Rush hour was over. 'Will it be the usual, Miss?'

'Yes,' she'd said, pretending enthusiasm, but with strain around her eyes, supposing she must order something because she realised that she'd been there so long that anyone who was coming would have arrived by then. 'Yes, the usual please,' she smiled. She must smile, she thought, to look confident.

She'd been jolted by the question though. Had she really been there such a long time? She felt as if she had only been there for a few seconds but the waitress had appeared again, this time really wanting her to place an order.

'The usual for two, or just for one today?' The waitress looked uncertain, a little worried and glanced towards the door because Camilla had looked in that direction and almost said something else.

Camilla had stayed with him overnight and watched in the morning as he shaved. She remembered the sound of his hands slapping his face dry. She'd so much liked the touch of his hands.

'Miss? For two or one?'

'Oh yes,' Camilla said to the waitress, who had not gone away. 'Yes, the usual, just for one.'

'And would you like some of our complimentary home-made rainbow cake to go with it, Miss?'

'Rainbow cake? Yes, of course.' Camilla thought she could hide it in her purse if she didn't like it. 'Who made it?'

'My mother and I, for the troops.'

Then Camilla saw Peggy. She waved. 'Oh, no, no, for two,' she said. What a relief to see someone she knew – Peggy Gower! So she wouldn't be by herself any longer,

feeling paralysed about what to do and so conspicuously alone, wanting to cry. She could tell Peggy Gower. Peggy had been dropped off at the Coffee Palace by her father's chauffeur. Camilla waved again. Yes, Peggy saw her and lit up, gave one of her fluttery waves, holding a handkerchief and calling, 'Yoo-hoo!'

'Could you make it a *pot* of tea, please?' Camilla said, feeling so much better now.

'What a surprise, *darling!*' said Peggy in a rush, pouting the shape of a mid-air kiss and waving it through the air to Camilla before rustling into a chair.

Why did she have to wear that horrible fox fur with the paws hanging down and its glass eyes staring at my belly? Camilla wondered. She was sure she could see its teeth snarling. It smelled of mothballs.

Peggy hadn't noticed Camilla wrinkle her nose. 'I had no idea you were back!' Reaching across the table she'd seized Camilla's hand. 'You have something to tell me, I know. I can tell!' She made a pencilled eyebrow extend her question while she laughed. 'I can tell! You have, haven't you, you wicked thing?'

Tears burst from Camilla's eyes. Peggy told her later that they were like an awful rupture. Camilla said they had a way of knowing things about each other and that by talking they could resist feeling powerless.

'We are attractive to males because it is required,' Peggy said and yet, so far, they had refused to be married off and therefore were being rattled away to interminable engagements by their parents and being kept polished by manicurists and hairdressers. They had to endure eating vegetables they detested and fruits too and also having slices of them, as well as their juices, applied to their faces to enhance the radiance of their skin and make it ageless.

Camilla told her why she was in the Coffee Palace.

'You poor, poor thing,' said Peggy. 'You *poor, poor* thing; you *must* have it taken away!'

Camilla shuddered. 'I couldn't *kill* it, even if I had to marry Christian! No, I want to marry Jack. He's asked me countless times.'

Peggy stopped her, held up a hand that said, wait, wait, *wait!* 'I'm supposed to be at a French lesson, as we speak. I hardly ever go, darling, so I have time to take you to someone I know, a doctor, and we could arrange something. I know it's illegal but be realistic, darling, if Jack doesn't marry you, what then? Christian? Could you really marry him? He makes you so vicious it would be the end of you. You'd turn into a ghastly, sharp-beaked, vicious old crow. You'd be in safe hands with the doctor I know and you could stay with me for a few days, darling, feeling horrid, till you felt better. No one would ever know. Better that than a lifetime with Christian. You *must* think about it.'

Camilla shook her head. 'Jack will look after me.'

'Will you tell him?'

Camilla lowered her head.

'Good.' Peggy's circling teaspoon hesitated in her tea. 'Good.'

Outside, the noise of the paper boy had ceased. There came another noise instead; it was a cawing sound. Camilla looked up, sensing the heavy, leisurely, almost arrogant and definitely ominous downstroke of black wings, wondering at this unusual intrusion of birds into a city street. They tore and pulled at something she could not see in the gutter. Their feathers looked so clean and lustrous; their eyes shone with such a piercing blue she found them attractive.

The pot of tea, the hot water, the milk and the cups and the rainbow cake arrived. Why had Peggy said 'good' in such a strange way? Camilla wondered.

'Are you *sure*, Camilla?'

'Yes.'

'Really sure? Good. Well, I suppose,' Peggy said in a way that meant she knew Camilla wasn't the least bit sure. 'We must marry before, one day, when we look in the mirror, we find out that we're old, sagging, dull – commodities without much value any more and that's why no one bothers us. Oh dear!' Peggy looked again at Camilla's midriff, tears now suddenly in her eyes too. 'I hate the, the – *ugly* choices we have to make of either being left on the shelf or ending up looking like a, a ...' Her eyes fastened on Camilla's stomach. 'Well, I might as well be frank, a hillock!'

'I *don't* look like a *hillock*! Do I? I don't do I? Not yet?' But Camilla knew she had that very morning stood naked in the bathroom, wishing there could be more to life than looking like a mound that needed to be disguised each day. She had drawn with a finger around the blurred image of her face in the steam upon the mirror. She'd been shocked to see how small it was. 'Such a tiny little space we occupy in the world!' she'd murmured. 'Is that all we do? Grow up, become misshapen, sag and die? No wonder we are tempted to drive men mad.'

Peggy topped up the tea pot with the hot water from the metal jug. Then she said she'd been thinking of a career or perhaps volunteering to work in a factory for the war effort. She rustled forward again and put both her elbows on the table, head propped in hands. Her mouth was brightly lip-sticked. 'It would be a shame to live as long as the women in our families, especially when the men die so much younger – and when they are even more likely to do so in wartime – and for us to be left with only a dog or cat to keep us company.' Peggy nodded her turban, adding sentences until Camilla stopped listening. She'd remained discomforted by the memory of the mirror and knew she'd not heard everything Peggy said, when the words, 'So many men work themselves to an early grave keeping their women polished,' attracted her attention.

'Or *subdued*,' Peggy had concluded.

'Subdued?'

'By kitchens and laundries and propriety and interminable babies,' Peggy explained. 'I've been subdued by being kept helpless and pretty. My feet have been bound and crippled in prosperous little gold shoes, like the ones I saw in Hong Kong.'

She didn't look subdued, Camilla thought.

'What are *you* going to *do*, Camilla?'

'What *am I* going to *do*?'

There must have been a look of confusion on Camilla's face because Peggy Gower giggled. That was a mistake.

Camilla at first responded by joining in the laughter but the question had registered at a deeper level.

Peggy persisted. 'Yes, *what?*' and giggled, a little more anxiously, her eyebrows remaining persistently raised, the question demanding an answer.

Camilla looked at the rainbow cake on her plate and wanted to put it out of sight, hide it in her purse but couldn't because Peggy was there and those horrible black birds were still wrenching at something disgusting outside in the gutter where the world went remorselessly by. They were within inches of death themselves because of the traffic but still they managed to squabble about a bit of carrion. She saw another tram stop and finally knew that Jack wasn't going to arrive at all. So she looked at the cake and thought how unlike Jack's capable mother both she and Peggy were. The irrepressibly strong emotion that had been set to work by Peggy's chatter struggled with her desire for it not to escape. Neither of us, she thought, knows how to cook, clean, wash, iron or sew. The feeling of helplessness transformed suddenly into a rage that broke to the surface as tears and they wouldn't be stopped. Her face twisted and her body slumped and began

to shake. She fossicked clumsily and blindly in her handbag to find a handkerchief that she put to a face that wouldn't obey her wish to be composed, to be in control and remain attractive. 'I'm going to marry him. I'm going to marry Jack.' She twisted at the wet handkerchief until it was useless and Peggy offered one of her own.

'Oh dear,' Peggy held out her hand to hold Camilla's, enclosing it, disgusting wet handkerchief and all.

'I know, I *know!*' Camilla shook her head. 'It's all so unseemly of me. I'm sorry Peggy. I shouldn't be like this.'

'No, we have to look cheerful at all times and feel guilty if we fail, isn't that so? Be defiant, like Mrs Pankhurst, Camilla, but cry all you want.'

'Well, we know what happened to her. She's dead!' She had to take her hand away from Peggy's to use her handkerchief again. Peggy's handkerchief smelt of ...? 'What is it?' Camilla asked, recognizing a distraction and fixing on it until she was able to crush the emotion that caused the situation and at last, force a smile.

'*You* should know darling, you *naughty* thing!' Peggy looked determined to be as cheerful as one could be in the circumstances, in spite of how she'd giggled and what she'd said.

Camilla leant back, not liking the way Peggy had used the word 'naughty'. She'd said the wrong thing again. The scene must not be allowed to develop. She would use the distraction of the perfume.

'It's called *Jezebel* and it's more than violets, can't you smell the straw? Doesn't it just make you want to romp in it? I feel quite Bette Davis when I wear it. But so far I've kept it confined to my handkerchief in case it's too dangerous to be spread further. Just look at all those handsome soldiers out there.' A tram had stopped. 'I dread to think what

might happen to them or to us, if they come in here! Thank God there's no straw here! Oh dear, I've done it again! But there! I've made you laugh at last!

And so Camilla began to look as if she felt a little safer because, although Peggy had made things worse, somehow because of the laughing they'd become better. 'Thank goodness that boy has stopped shouting the news,' Camilla sniffed, eyes bloodshot, pretending she'd been completely cheered up whilst now beginning to feel, although a little better, that she was really quite alone. Quite alone – and holding a piece of rainbow cake.

'He stopped because,' Penny jingled co-operatively, 'before I came in, I told Daddy's chauffer to buy every one of the poor little waif's papers to shut him up. He had the most disgustingly runny nose as well as a nasty voice.'

Camilla wondered about her own nose.

'We should drive up to Newport for the weekend,' Peggy suggested, with sudden understanding, now that Camilla had stopped weeping, 'and leave the men to show off to one another with their enlisting, competing and killing.' She lowered her voice. 'We could talk.' She meant she wanted to make sure Camilla was properly cheerful again. Peggy said she'd told *all* her friends that Camilla was such fun when she was in a good mood and also she wanted to tell Camilla about Edward Upton's proposal and how his eyes never left her while they played tennis. How could she, she said, even begin to tell her about it when Camilla was so soggy? And quite frankly she had in mind volunteering to work in a factory for the war effort because it would delay the wedding because she wasn't sure if he might come back, although of course he was wealthy.

'Newport! In the Buick!' Camilla lightened, her storm having shifted a little. 'We'll go in my Buick with the hood down and the air rushing by and the sun shining. Yes, let's!'

'Yes, let's!' Peggy echoed. 'I just love the feel of the wind in my hair. But I must run.' Peggy could say this now that Camilla was coping, so she looked at her little gold and enamelled watch. 'My French lesson is well and truly over, so I don't want Daddy ringing up the tutor to make enquiries as to my whereabouts.' She gave Camilla a swift hug.

'I will stay here just a moment longer,' Camilla nodded, hoping Peggy thought she was intending to wait for Jack. 'Just a little longer,' she repeated, though it was well past the time he would have appeared and she knew he would not. She looked at her unfinished cake with the little semi-circle of emptiness in the shape of the bite she had taken out of it, which revealed that in her distress she had forgotten to use her cake fork. Peggy noticed and looked as if she were going to say something but didn't. Would it have been about the futility of Camilla's hopes? She gathered herself up instead and whirled away.

Camilla grew paler as soon as she'd been abandoned and would have felt even more alone, except that the waitress unexpectedly reappeared almost straight away, forcing Camilla to rally. 'Excuse me Miss, but I have a letter for you, from Jack. He said to give this to you if he wasn't here to meet you. When you came in I thought you were waiting for him and that I didn't need to give it to you after all. But your friend arrived and I didn't like to give it to you then, especially when you seemed so upset.

'A *letter*? From Jack?'

'Yes, I'm so sorry, Miss. He gave it to me yesterday, Miss, just before he left. He enlisted for a bet, Miss, and didn't tell anyone till the last minute. Mother was in a terrible rage with him for doing it. I suppose he would have been called up anyway.'

'Your *mother*? Jack's your *brother*?'

'Yes, Miss, I'm Emily Cooper, Jack's my brother. That's why we made the rainbow cake for them, for good luck, because they were leaving. We toasted them with cups of

tea, Miss. Some of the lads added whiskey to theirs. We didn't say anything about that though! I had a bit too,' she laughed. 'They looked so handsome in their uniforms. It was a wonderful send-off but it was so sad, Miss.'

'Oh!' The room slipped; Camilla's arm jerked across the table, taking a plate with it and her handbag, to the floor. The bag opened when it hit and everything spilled out but nothing broke, not even her little mirror. The plate hummed in little circles and eventually lay still.

'Are you alright, Miss? Can I bring you something? The waitress got down to the floor, scooping up the contents of Camilla's bag, 'You stay there; I'll do it Miss. Lucky your little mirror didn't break. If it had, that would have meant seven year's bad luck!'

'Jack's gone?' Camilla fell into pale silence, holding the letter. 'Gone? Jack's gone? Gone where? Do you know where?' She felt quite empty even though her belly was tight.

The waitress, who had passed Camilla's things up to her, stood up, looking incredulous. 'I didn't know he was the friend you were waiting for. They sailed this morning. We're not supposed to know, Miss, but it could be to Singapore.

'I've just come back from Tasmania,' said Camilla.

'He came in everyday this week, looking for you, Miss.'

'Jack's your brother? I had no idea.' Camilla shook her head. 'Why didn't he say?' she began and she stopped. 'Why didn't *you* tell me?

'He's a bit of a prankster. He was planning to ...'

'Why do you work here as a ...?'

'Waitress? Hands, Heart and Head, Miss Camilla.'

'I don't understand.'

'It's what Great Grandfather Jack and Great Grandmother Emily used to say, that we were in a new country and that we must use our hands the way He did when he chose to

be born as a carpenter and we should act from kindness towards all others as He did and value learning because He was also a rabbi. So, I'm working here while I'm studying to be a teacher, Miss. The money helps my family as well as my studies. Let me bring you some water and more tea. I won't be long.'

'Some water. No, no, not water, not tea. Lemonade, if you have any.' She would open the letter later. Not now, not now.

'It can happen suddenly like that, Miss, early on, when you're expecting.'

'What? You can *tell*?' Camilla, taken aback by the personal remark, was shaken that her secret, her *condition*, was observable. This was another shock, especially coming from a waitress. Even if she was Jack's sister, she should have been mindful of her place.

'Can you really tell?' she heard herself ask again, folding her hands in her lap, putting aside social differences and her anger at the intrusion and the astonishment that someone else could know about the baby. Then, moving a hand across her stomach, she said, 'Does it really show?'

'When you're expecting it shows a little all over, Miss, the top too. My mother's had several and so have two of my sisters, Miss. That's how I know. I hope you don't mind my saying so, Miss. Does Jack know? You must be pleased.'

Camilla bit on her bottom lip and lowered her head to stop herself from saying the 'no' that had begun to form. She compressed, instead, Peggy's perfumed handkerchief that was still in her hand. *If the waitress knows. Who else will see?* She looked down at the bulge and saw her own crumpled handkerchief on the floor.

'Our family will help ...'

'That won't be necessary.' Camilla interrupted quickly, coldly, flatly. 'Could I have the bill, please?'

'Your friend paid, Miss, and please don't worry about the lemonade.'

Wanting to go, wanting, wanting to stay, because she felt weak, Camilla looked around. There were people but even so the room felt unreal and empty. Or was it she that was empty, emptied of feelings? Wanting to stay; wanting to go but there was no point now. If only Peggy had remained a little longer. Emily came in the way of the light. Camilla looked up.

Yes, she was so like Jack. Why hadn't she noticed? Camilla wondered.

'Goodbye, Miss.'

Camilla stood up thinking that in a few days Christian would inevitably turn up at her parents' place in his Bugatti and he'd propose again and she'd have to say yes. She imagined the quick blink of his lidded eyes and the flick of pink tongue over his lips before he spoke. But what sort of father would he make? She remembered the scrape of her chair as she stood, then how the world drained away and she fell, knowing that the sound that followed and the faraway pain was because of her head hitting the tiled floor.

oOo

Camilla heard them talking about her as if she weren't there.

'Is that so? Her contractions have stopped?' asked Doctor Connolly.

'Yes,' said Matron.

'Posh,' muttered Camilla, eyes shut, face pale from exertion.

'What did Mrs Wilson say?' Matron had asked the nurse.

'I think she said "Posh,"' the nurse giggled.

'That's stands for Port Out, Starboard Home, I think,' offered Doctor Connolly.

'Something's not quite right,' said Matron. 'Not right.'

Camilla could see the ship because she knew Jack was there. It wasn't her ship to Tasmania and he wasn't in Singapore but it was hot and humid and he was below deck.

It felt the way it did when she went to Singapore. 'Posh,' she said more loudly. Then she said, as if to herself, 'Cooler. It would be cooler for Jack on the port side, wouldn't it, if they were heading north?'

'She's said "Singapore" a few times too, Matron,' the nurse added.

'No, no. He's a prisoner,' Camilla groaned.

'There's something wrong,' said Matron.

Doctor Connolly took the stethoscope from his ears. 'The baby's heartbeat is regular, it's in the right position and Mrs Wilson's pulse and blood pressure are within normal.'

'She's distressed,' said Matron.

'Jack's too hot,' Camilla cried. 'He can scarcely breathe.' Her voice rose. 'There's no air. He's locked up somewhere and it's dark and it stinks.' She twisted at the sheets. 'And he's hungry.' She pointed: 'Look, there's only a bit of light coming through those bars. They're all in the *hold*. They're trapped, *trapped!* Something's going to happen. Get him out, get him out!' Her red hair, so wet that it had darkened to chestnut, clung to her head, letting her scalp show through.

'There, there,' Matron said, holding her arms down.

'No!' shouted Camilla.

'I'll give her something to keep her comfortable,' said Doctor Connolly. 'That's all we can do.'

Matron didn't answer.

Nurse nodded but looked at Matron for permission. 'Yes, Doctor Connolly.'

Camilla began beating her head from side to side on the pillow.

'Steady there, Mrs Wilson,' said Matron. 'Breathe! Nurse, keep her face cool with a wet flannel!'

Camilla opened her eyes. 'Jack's going to drown,' she said again and again, feverishly.

Matron did her best to reassure her. 'There, there, Doctor Connolly's here. Nothing to worry about.'

Camilla opened her eyes again.

'How are we?' Doctor Connolly's face looked down into hers.

Another wave of pain gathered in Camilla's belly and grew tighter. 'I want to go home. He can't get out,' she screamed.

'Yes he can. Push,' said Dr Connolly. 'You have to *push*. Take a deep, deep breath and push. Take a ...'

Matron interrupted, patting Camilla. 'She's not a football team in need of a pep talk, Doctor Connolly. She needs calming. She doesn't know what's going on. She's probably been told that babies are found under the leaves in a cabbage patch. Then she ends up in here terrified by a lot of strange men fiddling about between her legs. Babies were being born long before you men decided you were the only ones qualified to bring them into the world. I would have thought it was sufficient when you men took over the delivery of souls into Heaven.'

Dr Connolly blushed. 'It could be a long labour. Perhaps her husband could come in for a little while? It might calm her. After all, it's his baby too.'

Camilla tried to say no.

'It's not recommended.' Matron's attention jerked into disapproval. 'He'll only be in the way.'

Doctor Connolly was new and young and had other ideas.

'Not a good idea,' Matron repeated, not lowering her eyes.

Doctor Connolly didn't lower his.

Camilla turned her head away. 'I don't want him.' The pain ebbed, ready to gather. 'Go away,' she said. She felt the judder of the ship as a torpedo struck. The pain that followed was blinding and she screamed.

'Your husband's here now to hold your hand,' said Doctor Connolly.

'But she's gone back into labour, doctor!' Matron protested.

Camilla felt her face grow wet as water poured into the hold of Jack's ship. 'They'll all *drown! Why won't anyone listen?*'

'Remember to *push*. Keep breathing. Good *girl!*' encouraged Doctor Connolly.

'It would be better if you waited outside, Mr Wilson.' Matron pointed to the door.

'In a while, in a while,' said Doctor.

Camilla felt Christian take her hand, clamping his around hers like a cage. She struggled to free it.

Japanese voices shouting. Another explosion. 'No!' Camilla screamed. The ship lurched, tilted. Water pounded in through the torn hull, rising higher and higher. Jack struggled to keep himself at its surface.

Camilla made sobbing sounds as she tried to heave air into her lungs. She could feel them all about her. Prisoners fighting against the water pouring in from above as the ship subsided, listing, tilting, slipping downwards, the men inside trying to reach the hatches, kicking at the hands of those beneath who grabbed at their legs. Jack, clawed his way up the sloping walls, grabbed the bars of the hatch, trying to keep his face above the flood of water, dragged at the metal, shook them, got an arm through one of the spaces, his fingers clawing for a release catch. She felt Jack's nails tear; he gulped water; his eyes distended. She reached out and found his hand. The surging water had covered his face, filled his nose, his throat and he was squeezed hard against the bars

by the bodies of those rising and flailing for escape beneath him. Their weight crushed the last of the air out of his lungs.

Camilla screamed and struggled.

'Look, she thinks she's swimming,' Nurse exclaimed.

Matron's voice was impatient. 'Don't be silly girl, give me that flannel and Mr Wilson, please hold her other hand to stop her from hurting herself on the side of the bed!'

'Hold her down,' Camilla heard Doctor Connolly say. 'Chloroform please, Matron.'

She felt the mask cover her face and fought against the sting of it in her eyes. Jack smothered beneath the weight of the ocean as the white of the hospital lights rippled above her and all she could see was him and the dark shadow of the ship sinking.

'Jack, Jack,' Camilla shouted, holding on to Jack's hand, wanting to drown with him. 'Jack!'

Christian pulled his wet and slippery hand from hers. 'Well, well,' he said, standing up and backing towards the door.

Camilla, released, drifted upwards. There was white light above, so she swam towards it leaving Jack, his eyes open, his bubbling mouth open, his white hand stretched out towards hers in the dark.

Was it morning? Camilla could hear someone sobbing. She opened her eyes. Doctor Connolly's face was a blur with the light behind him. 'Someone's crying,' she said.

'That's you, dear,' Matron's voice came from somewhere.

The crying stopped.

Then, the cheerful voice Doctor Connolly used on his rounds, 'Congratulations, Mrs Wilson, you have a son. You'll be feeling a bit fuzzy for a little while because of the chloroform. What will you be calling him?'

'Light, light ... Lucas,' whispered Camilla.

'Light, Lucas?' asked Doctor Connolly. 'Ah, yes, Lucas means light, doesn't it? Good, good.' He turned to Matron. 'That went well after all, thanks to me, didn't it, eh?'

oOo

Lucas stood up by holding onto the wooden rails of his cot. He was too small to get out. It was a spring morning and the sun kissed the calico curtains floating in the window and there was Daddy and he didn't lift Lucas out of his cot. Instead, his hands went smack, smack, smack, **smack** on Lucas's legs. The middles of Daddy's eyes were tiny and his big hands were so hard they made red marks on Lucas's legs. So hard and surprising. Oh what a burning and all the dollies his Gran sent him stared from the mantelpiece and did nothing to help. What a scream he made. The curtains fell flat and he knew he couldn't love the man called Daddy. He would not let him be Daddy anymore. He would not call him Daddy any more. He was the Man who used to be Daddy and Lucas knew he would be back the following morning to hit him because he wanted to make Lucas cry again. But Lucas wasn't going to cry next time. He would not give the Man what he wanted.

'Mister Wilson, what are you doing to him?' Nanny stood in the doorway, her voice high and urgent.

'Spare the rod and spoil the child,' the Man told Nanny with a smile. He pushed her away. Then Mummy came in. Then she cried too and they all went away.

Lucas sat and waited. The wee in his nappy turned cold and then a long time later, Mummy came back and she lifted him out of his cot.

The room filled again with dancing light. Lucas waited. He knew the Man would soon be coming. A warm wind made the curtains turn into angel's wings and Lucas remembered he'd decided not to cry. He'd fly away and watch himself standing down

there in his cot, waiting, waiting and Lucas wouldn't be surprised or afraid when the Man came through the doorway, because Lucas wouldn't really be there.

When the Man came in the smacking began and at first he did not feel it; the rhythm of it on his bare skin or the sting of it. So the Man hit harder and harder until the pain reached upwards and found where Lucas was, high up, watching from the ceiling. It was easy not to cry out from up there but the pain found him and broke into his body until it overflowed into his throat and he heard the sound of his own scream pitching out high, like the thin whistle his rabbit made when the gardener lit the incinerator and the grass in the backyard caught fire and the rabbit was trapped in its cage and it was burnt alive. He heard his own scream as if it had been made by somebody else.

Lucas knew he would have to go even further away next time so he would feel nothing. Lucas watched the Man. The Man was surprised; his eyes showed something like the splash of a stone into water. There was a little ripple in them where it hit. Lucas knew he could do this to the Man again and he would never be the Man's friend. So that's how he made the Man look away from Lucas. There would always be a big stone he could throw now, to make ripples in The Man's eyes. He would do it again and again and throw them and throw them. The he would find lots more stones and build a big wall out of them to keep the Man out. When Lucas grew up he would run away. Goodbye Daddy, goodbye!

## Chapter Four

Where's Hugh?' Lucas asks Hedda the next day when she comes into the house for breakfast. She wears the same clothes and continues to look fatigued.

'He wasn't feeling well. He went back to Sydney. Bethany too.'

'Bethany too? You've been up for a while then?'

'Yes, they left early to miss the traffic.'

'Hugh's going to the launch of your friend's art show?'

'Yes, he'll be alright for that.'

Lucas nods, waiting.

'We assumed you'd be staying on here for a while to look after the place. You could ring to tell us about her operation. It'll be tomorrow, won't it? We'll probably be at home. I'm not sure. I'll leave the answering machine on. Maybe Hugh could come up again later next week, when he's feeling better.'

Lucas nods. 'I'll go into the hospital today and see how she is, and between visits there's plenty of tidying up I can do here to keep myself busy.'

Hedda looks worried. 'No need to,' she says.

'I'll need to do something in between visits, other than watch television.' He thinks of the cupboards he has opened where tea cups cohabit with tissues and tablets and a fry-pan and some light-bulbs.

Hedda doesn't answer. She stands up and blinks.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Lucas offers, watching her expression. 'Or can I make you some breakfast?'

She smiles, looking surprised, pleased. 'Thanks,' she says. 'That would be nice. Then I'll get under way.'

After breakfast, Lucas waits by the gate to farewell her. She starts the engine but as he turns to go back to the house, she stops, opens the door and runs back and hugs him. 'Goodbye,' she says. 'I'm glad you'll be here. Hugh's no good at decisions. He always leaves them to me.' She pauses. 'You did the right thing moving to Adelaide, Lucas.'

Back in the house, Lucas begins to notice the smaller details. Just inside the front door he gathers a spilled heap of library books. Most of them are overdue. There are more on the coffee table. One lies open as if Mother might return any moment to look at it, then he finds more in her sunroom and more in the studio. Lucas decides to take them back and, at the same time, get away from the smell of urine. No one will say it, but Mother had been sitting in the house by herself day after day, waiting for death, leafing through books and magazines, forgetting, watching television, forgetting. Lucas can tell from the phone bills that she'd been using automatic dial, over and over, to phone people she'd already spoken to on the same day.

He will tidy one room at a time between hospital visits, the kitchen first. Perhaps he'll fit in a walk across the bridge to the other side of the estuary later and wander along the shore where the air breathes across the water from the bushland opposite, air that will be refreshed after the morning rain. It would be a relief to get away from tidying Mother's house. He would have lunch somewhere and then spend the afternoon and evening at the hospital.

The kitchen drawers, apart from cutlery, hold a jumble of things. He sorts out and washes the knives and forks and the spoons, separating them from the boxes of matches, rubber bands and dishcloths. And then he finds more light-bulbs. They're in the

fruit bowl on the kitchen bench, in the drawers, the pantry, in the linen cupboard and he notices, in passing, that there are more in the sun room and he hasn't got to the studio yet.

The phone rings and it is the surgeon to say he has to change the date for Mother's operation because her blood tests reveal high levels of medications prescribed by two or three other doctors. 'Not a good idea to add to the cocktail,' he says, 'so we'll wait until the readings are normal. I'll let you know when she's ready.' Lucas, greeted again by the recorded voice on Hedda and Hugh's answering machine, passes on the message and then updates Anne before setting out on his visit to the hospital.

Later in the week, just as Lucas backs his car out of the driveway, Hugh pulls up in front of the house. He ignores Lucas' cheery call of 'How are you?' So Lucas turns his vehicle around to put both cars closer and, pleased with the manoeuvre, calls across the reduced space between the vehicles, 'Where have you been? Everything okay? I've been phoning nearly every day.'

No answer.

'I'm going for a walk before I visit Mother. Want to stretch your legs and come with me?'

'I – I've ... already v-visit-visited Mother.'

'Interested in a quick coffee then?' Lucas asks, still welcoming and aiming his voice at the small space Hugh has left open at the top of his car window. 'I need a break from cleaning up.'

Hugh says nothing.

'Why don't you come with me?' Lucas calls more loudly. 'Hop in.'

'I h-haven't eaten,' Hugh's muffled voice responds at last from within the shell of his car. 'I had to h-have the c-car fixed b-before it got worse.' He's abrupt, hastens through

the ritual of greeting. He has the pallor of illness, wears a thick jacket on a warm day yet shivers. He's trying to tell Lucas something.

Lucas can barely hear him and has to move his car, park it and get out. He puts his ear to the gap in the window of Hugh's car. 'What were you saying?'

'I've v - visited Mother,' Hugh says, looking exhausted. 'You sh-should have visited M-Mother more often.'

'I have visited her.'

'Be-fore,' says Hugh. 'You should have vis-visited Mother b-b-before.'

'Before when Hugh? She's had hundreds of visits from me, until I got married and plenty more after that. She decided she didn't like Anne and then she phoned after the children were born to let me know she didn't like little children either. She either forgot their birthdays or complained that there was nothing she could buy locally and said that the post office lost things anyway. She told me that my family was too much work and we weren't to come up any more. Then I was disowned for not visiting her.'

'You sh-shouldn't have taken any notice. I ne-ne-never do.'

'She made it quite clear that we weren't welcome, Hugh. She's had over twenty-five years to let us know if she had a change of mind. Anyway, she could have visited us; we invited her many times.'

Suddenly Hugh slaps the steering wheel with his fist. 'Y - you're no-not to g-go into M-Mother's room or t-touch any of Mmmm-Mother's things! Br-Br-Hedda says y-you're tidying up. A-Anne w - would be ashamed ... of you.'

'What do you expect me to do between hospital visits, Hugh? The place is squalid and it's not going to clean itself. It smells like the mouse cage in a pet shop. She wouldn't have wanted people to know she was reduced to living like that. Restoring her dignity would have been important to her and that's what I'm doing.'

Hugh doesn't respond from inside the enclosure of his car. He looks into the distance.

'I'm going for lunch, then a walk to get a bit of fresh air.'

Hugh shrugs.

The stroke has done strange things to his brother. Has he reverted to childhood? Lucas remembers that Hugh likes "freebies." 'Why don't you have a coffee or lunch with me? I'll pay. There's food in the house, though, if you'd prefer to have something here. I've done the shopping.'

'You'll p-pay?'

'Yes.'

'In, in m-my car?' says Hugh, unsmiling. 'To the new pl-p-place on the other side of the estuary on the w-wharf?'

'You've driven a long way, Hugh, it's no trouble. I'll take you in my car.'

Hugh turns his head and doesn't answer.

'Alright then, lunch on me and we'll go in your car.'

Lucas gets in, hoping that Hugh won't have another heart attack or stroke on the way. He notices that Hugh doesn't list the landmarks on the way this time. It seems there's something on his mind.

The local restaurant sits on the corner of a small wharf, its woodwork scoured and bleached, licked colourless by salty winds. A separate entrance, on its other corner, leads into a place where fishing tackle and bait can be bought and boats hired. Its door shivers with rustling and flapping, brightly coloured, wind-blown strips of plastic, to keep the flies out.

Hugh seems to have a penchant for places with draughts. Two men, with an Esky and fishing rods, chat nearby; they point at one of the small craft bobbing in the anchorage. Snatches of voice make arrangements to hire a small dinghy.

'I'm sitting inside,' Lucas pre-empts, 'out of the wind.'

Hugh looks annoyed.

With the school vacation population gone, the locals seem to have fallen into neutral. Children that only the day before meandered randomly, now disgorge from a school bus in the distance and, disciplined patiently by their teachers, reluctantly form into a double queue. Inside the restaurant, Lucas enjoys the surprise of fittings that are modern and new. The waiter shows them to a table with a good view and Lucas relaxes for the first time since his arrival from Adelaide. The sky sits on the water. Pelicans swim through clouds. The reflections of boats stretch and float languidly away from themselves.

Then Hugh tells him, again, that he has called in to see Mother on the way. When he says the word, *Mother*, Hugh lifts himself higher and pronounces the word with equal emphasis on both syllables, accompanying each one with a double movement of his head. Lucas, intrigued, guesses that the change in pronunciation means some sort of announcement about her health.

Hugh reads the menu carefully, using his finger to follow the words.

The waiter takes their order. 'It's a beautiful day, isn't it?' he says. 'The water in the estuary is much higher than usual because there's been so much rain in the mountains. I don't know what we'll do if there's a king tide as well.'

'Put on life-jackets,' says the chef, flipping a steak over to seal the other side.

Hugh sits quietly.

Lucas, happy not to bother him, wants to sink into the warmth of the day. The oppression of the dark house, its disorder and embedded smells, begins to lift. Today

there is horizon, sunshine and light. From beneath the wharf comes the sound of lapping water. The open spaces between the slatted floorboards of the restaurant give Lucas glimpses of the bands of light that wrinkle over the slow, darkly-faceted drift of the estuary. An occasional school of small fish flurries to scavenge crumbs fallen from the tables above. The slow, pulsing strips of water slap restlessly, sometimes breaking into concentric circles when the fish return to swarm about something else edible. The movement tricks Lucas's senses into believing that the wharf moves from the land and drifts away. He looks up quickly, a little giddy, feeling as if, after having being freed from the motionless, compressing weight of the house, he has become suddenly exaggerated, about to fly away like a balloon and feels the need to be steadied, reassured, brought back and tied to something. And yet there is a desire not to be there. In the distance, the view is more as it should be, limpid and still. Pelicans perch on the remains of a beached wooden hulk lying in the mangroves on the opposite shore. Reflections of clouds swim across the water towards him and from the distance the sound of traffic across the bridge arrives muffled. Lucas floats in the shimmer of the day, for a moment disembodied.

The food arrives. Without consulting Lucas, Hugh says he'll have a glass of wine too, and chooses something expensive.

Lucas observes wryly that it's the Hunter Valley wine of the week and that its characteristics seem to be more pleasant than Hugh's. The label describes it as being full of dark cherries, aromatic spices, juicy ripe blackberries and a hint of liquorice that leaves a smooth, round, warm aftertaste.

'Pepper?' a voice asks suddenly behind Lucas. He starts. The waiter holds an oversized wooden pepper grinder is positioned, hovering, above his plate. 'Say "when".'

Its little engine whirs, sneezing a steady cloud of pepper. 'It's electric,' the waiter tells him.

'When,' says Lucas. He finds it amusing.

Hugh's not amused.

Lucas waits. Something in Hugh begins to writhe. His eyes dart about. Is something about to crack its way out and give itself words? Lucas remembers to wait. Don't rush in to help him, Hedda had said.

Hugh has already finished the glass of wine. 'I'm v-very angry,' his voice grates through the chewing of the pan-fried ocean trout on a remoulade of cabbage. He seems to crouch.

A chef at the charcoal grill presses raw flesh against the hotplate. Lucas hears it spit and hiss.

'I want an apology for the last thirty years and for you to say sorry and I want an apology from Anne and your children as well.' The curve of his fork enters Hugh's mouth again. 'And you have to go to see Mother in the hospital right now and apologise to her.' He orders another wine by holding up the empty glass for the waiter to see.

Lucas hopes to hear the reason but Hugh continues to eat.

'An apology? What for?'

Hugh sips the wine and doesn't answer.

Lucas is incredulous. 'Sorry for what?' he repeats.

'Right now,' Hugh repeats. 'You have to go to the hospital to see *Mother* right now!'

'You know how far that is? Drive to the hospital, right now? Before we've finished lunch? How will I get there? We came in your car, remember! And you want me to say sorry for what, exactly?'

'Yes,' says Hugh, munching. 'You have to go now!'

'If I take your car, how will you get back to the house?'

'N-not listening,' says Hugh, still chewing, voice chopping at the syllables.

It's ironic that Hedda decided to become a teacher of the deaf, Lucas thinks. She can probably thank Hugh for her career.

Hugh drains his glass and holds it up to get the waiter's attention. He points to the wine of the week card in its holder on the table. More words struggle through his aphasia, harsher, louder. Lucas isn't sure what he's saying.

There's another view of the estuary over Hugh's shoulder. Between the top of the chef's grill and the fume hood, the flames from the charcoal make the world behind Hugh appear to burn on the water. The pupils of his brother's eyes are small, sharp, angry pinpoints.

Lucas folds his arms, then becoming aware that he's done this, decides he doesn't want to look threatened, even if Hugh's positioned him as evil ogre and set him up for accusations about things he has or hasn't done. He unfolds his arms but still feels vulnerable. Hugh reminds him of the Man.

He moves his chair back a little, not sure why, then remembers when Hugh was at school he used to stab Lucas's legs with his compass. Another of his tricks was to invert a cigarette lighter till the cover was red hot and then drop it into someone's hand. That's the look Hugh has now. Just like their father and as bitter as their mother. He begins to feel disconnected.

Silence.

In the distance, beyond the background of the flames dancing about Hugh, the school children from the bus march in a double line towards the edge of the water then disperse along the shore.

A motor boat surges past the restaurant and the bow wave slaps against the wharf timbers.

Hugh says something else and some of the diners turn their heads because of the edge in his raised voice. 'And I've t-told them not t-to, to-talk to you,' he concludes.

'Who isn't to talk to me?'

'Bethany and Melda.'

'Why?' Lucas feels the anaesthetic of detachment numbing his body. The heat of the day generates vapour from the surface of the estuary and combines with a view of the bridge through the hot air, flames and smoke rising from the chef's grill. For several moments the traffic seems to arc across the water without support and writhe through the emptiness without the bridge appearing to be there at all. Then the bridge reappears and its reflection makes the shape of an eye with an iris full of chaotic distortions. Should he get up and walk out?

Hugh's grating continues: 'I'm v-very angry w-with you.' The voice is thick with rage and he enunciates slowly and carefully. His hand chisels the air. He shifts his body restlessly on the chair so that one of its legs lifts and splinters into one of the spaces between the floor boards as if it too, like his tongue, cannot move without further impairment. The working of his mouth shows that more words are to be bitten out. His big loose-skinned hands, with the distended veins of an older man, put down the knife and fork and lean on the edge of the table, turning it into a barrier between them.

'Keep your wrists down,' the Man would shout, 'and don't speak while you're chewing. Chew with your mouth shut.'

The tension in Hugh's body is at odds with the slack and rumpled clothes he wears. He looks like the Man. The fabric of his wind cheater, slack and rumpled, is pilled and

dotted about with specks of fluff and fallen hair. Beneath the covering of clothes something struggles in his chest like snakes in a bag.

'You're a th-thief,' says Hugh.

Lucas wonders if what is happening is because he's there and his presence has made it convenient for Hugh to save the cost of a phone call. Had Hedda been present she may have restrained or diverted him. He's had a lifetime to raise any issues, thinks Lucas. Why has he left them accumulating for so long? Has he, like their mother, been parading his complaints to others for years, rather than raising them with him? Resolution of personal issues has never been Hugh's forte, Lucas knows. Mending leaking taps, organizing his holidays, fixing the car – all the hands-on things received prompt attention.

'What have I stolen?' asks Lucas.

'How did you come by the gold coffee cups? They're worth seven thousand dollars. Did you just help yourself?'

'Is all this about coffee cups? Mother posted them to me over a decade ago and didn't say why. I didn't ask for them. I don't use them. I don't want them. You can have them, if you want them.'

Hugh's chin drops. He releases his fork and uses the freed hand to scrape several times at the back of his neck.

Lucas sighs. 'They're just sitting in the cupboard, Hugh, and I don't drink Turkish coffee. You can have them if you want them.'

No answer.

'Do you want them? I'll never use them.' Lucas insists on holding the moment. 'You're welcome to them.' Lucas waits. 'Well, do you want them or don't you?' he asks

eventually. No answer. Lucas guesses what might have happened. 'She knew how much you liked them didn't she?'

Hugh drops his knife onto the plate with a clatter. A flash of recognition twitches in his eyes as he leans back suddenly, turning his head away, hand rubbing over his mouth and he stares into the distance.

'So,' says Lucas, 'that's why I got them. She sent them to me to punish you and make victims of both of us.'

He's good at reading his little brother. Doesn't he know, he wonders, that I care about him; that I came up here to be supportive?

Hugh crosses his legs, turns sideways and then folds his arms across his chest.

'She sent them to me to get even with you for something you did, didn't she Hugh? Is that what happened? You two had another argument, didn't you?'

Not showing he wanted any of her treasures had been Lucas's way of avoiding manipulation by his mother. Mother's gifts could have devious intentions, strings attached. He never trusted them. He had never coveted the tiny gold coffee cups. If he'd used them he would have been censured for putting them at risk of being broken but he'd never been asked if he'd used them. If he said he hadn't used them it would have been put to him that he didn't like them. Somehow everything that was given remained under her supervision. He and Anne had decided they would tell Mother they had put the cups in their special display cabinet because they were so precious. But she'd never asked.

Hugh looks up. A flinch flickers; his face twitches. He blushes.

'Ah,' says Lucas. All his reaching out to Hugh over the years had been for nothing, Lucas realises: letters, emails, phone calls, presents for the girls. The wedding presents he and Anne sent. All the while their mother had been fostering rivalry.

Hugh, dark and glowering, seems almost ready to spring. Lucas had forgotten how the family dining table, with the Man, had been a venue for tension where unspoken grievances gathered and ruined the meals. It is as if he were here again. Their father's hand could flash out unexpectedly and slap a face. Mother would weep.

Hugh mouths words but Lucas hears them as if from afar. There are more issues. 'You have to th-th-thank me for looking after Mother, for v-visiting her so often.' He orders another glass of wine.

The lunch is free. On me, Lucas thinks, so Hugh's going to make the most of it. It's part of the assault. 'You've said you're angry because you've had to travel up here so often. If the travel has been such an unpleasant burden, why do you come up here for your holidays; why is there so much of your art work in the house and why did you buy five hectares of land here as well?'

'N-Not listening,' says Hugh.

All the while he's eating, Hugh has that devious look on his face, Lucas observes. 'Did Mother help you buy that land?'

Hugh nods and his lips move, as if about to say yes. 'N-No,' he says instead, eyes travelling quickly to the window in search of the view.

Memory. Light into dark. There's some sort of cold vestibule, Lucas thinks, a shadowy hallway and beneath it a cellar full of junk and old dreams, pungent now with mildew. Outside, the facade of this house is warm in the sunlight and it looks proper, affluent and is so becoming for a well-to-do and respected family.

Hugh asks about one of Mother's paintings as he moves the salt shaker about, fidgets with the table number and the toothpicks and the butter and then lines them up.

Lucas hears the Man's voice: *Do not play with the cruets!*

'Have you t-taken it?' Hugh asks.

'Taken what?'

'I've looked all over the house for it. It's a particularly fine landscape in oils. It measures thirty by thirty centimetres. I should have taken it before.' There's a cunning look in his eyes when he raises them. His mouth tightens. 'Have you taken it? It's not there.'

Lucas doesn't want a struggle. It will be enough to see their mother through the operation. Then arrangements will have to be made for her rehabilitation and, eventually, placement in a home. 'You ask if I took a painting? You're saying you've looked all over the house for a painting that *you* want to take. You just said you'd searched for it *before* I arrived so how could I have taken it if it wasn't here and if I wasn't here either? And why would it have been alright for you to take it when it wouldn't be alright for me to take it? The only one I have is much larger than the one you describe and I paid the full gallery price for it many years ago at her first exhibition, so there'd be a red "sold" sticker on at least one of them.'

Hugh doesn't answer.

Lucas looks at him. He decides to insist. 'Did you hear what I said? You arrived here a week before I did, didn't you? You're saying the painting wasn't here then. If I wasn't here either, how could I have taken it?'

Hugh draws a finger along an eyelid and looks elsewhere.

'Everything alright?' The chef stands alongside gazing worriedly at Hugh then Lucas.

'I'll have that one,' Hugh says, pointing at the dessert menu.

'The burnt-butter cakes with plum semifreddo?'

'Yes,' says Hugh, 'and another glass of wine.'

'Nothing for me,' Lucas shakes his head.

The school children have come closer, following the sandy paths between the knee-high, ravelled scurf of seaweed that holds a speckled cargo of sea-worn plastic bottles, small cartons, mismatched flip flop sandals, orange-peel skin like curled, stretched text, the internal shells of cuttlefish and fish corpses without eyes. They gather with their teacher around some rocks where the tide has sucked out leaving vulnerable, micro-worlds of the larger ocean to be prodded.

Hugh turns his head, following Lucas's gaze.

'And your children have to apologise.'

'So you've said.' Lucas leans forward. 'Hugh, thirty years ago my children were aged one, three and five and we were all living in New Zealand so I don't know how they could have offended you. You're their uncle and you've never showed any interest in them. Perhaps you and Hedda are the ones who owe the apology.'

Hugh looks surprised.

'My children are adults now and if you want to contact them you know how to. I'm not going to ring them to pass on your demands. Whatever it is you wanted an apology for, from three small children, couldn't have been very urgent if you've left it for over thirty years. You're a big boy now. Do it yourself.'

'Not listening,' says Hugh.

'Anything else?' Lucas asks.

'No.'

The two men with the Esky anchor on the other side of the estuary, drop their kellick and begin fishing not far from the ribs of the wooden hulk and its colony of gulping pelicans. Lucas sees a rod bend. There's the silver flash of a fish struggling against a hook in the mouth. It slices across the water like a bright knife and plunges out of sight.

The fisherman bends forwards and backwards rhythmically. Each time, the rod arches into a dragging U shape.

After a while Hugh accuses him again: 'You t-took furniture from G-Grandmother's estate.'

It crosses Lucas's mind to say 'Not listening.' Instead he answers. 'You said there was nothing else. What are you on about now, Hugh? Grandmother died well over forty years ago. I think *Mother* would have noticed if a vanload of furniture, vases, paintings and crockery had disappeared overnight. As I said before, we were living in New Zealand. We were there for four years. It was Mother who sent us all the things she didn't want, *after* we'd come back to Australia. Don't you remember? It was Hedda who didn't want any of the dark furniture. That's how we got it. Mother sent us those tables and the chairs because she didn't want them either. You chose other things. Remember? Hedda said she wanted modern, not old-fashioned, uncomfortable black chairs.'

'Did you pay for them?'

'For God's sake, Hugh, we may have paid a nominal sum for the furniture. I don't remember. It was a long time ago. I do know that we paid for the freight and the insurance to Adelaide because we were just moving into our house and we used the same company so that the van could collect our other things, out of storage, on the way and there was an insurance claim for a broken chair. Is there anything else?'

Hugh flinches. 'No.' Then, looking pleased, puffs up.

Lucas knows the look. Hugh had something from Mother that Lucas didn't. 'You didn't pay anything did you, Hugh? Mother paid the insurance and removal costs for what you had sent to you, didn't she?'

Hugh's mouth looks as if it sucks on something sweet. He doesn't answer.

‘So it was alright for you not to pay anything but it wouldn’t have been alright for me not to have paid? So now you’re feeling pleased.’

The school bus parks outside the restaurant door to meet up with the children. They gather bringing discordant voices and plastic bags containing damp samples from the foreshore and dead things from rock pools.

‘And what happens if all the mangroves are removed?’ a teacher asks.

‘The sea could eat up the shore,’ says the little girl with plaits.

‘It’s not good to be greedy,’ says a boy.

‘And the pelicans would be sad,’ says another, ‘because fish breed in the mangroves and pelicans eat fish.’

‘Can we sing it, can we sing it? Can we sing the pelican song?’ asks the girl with the plaits.

‘Yes, the teacher says, ‘Alright, you can *all* sing it.’

*A wonderful bird is the pelican*

*His bill will hold more than his belican.*

*He can take in his beak*

*Food enough for a week,*

*But I’m damned if I see how the helican.*

Hugh’s voice rides through the din outside. He breaks the last bread roll and begins inserting the pieces in his mouth. ‘I s-spoke with *Mother* for two hours this morning and she s-says that on no account are you to have the grandfather c-clock.’

‘What? She could have a major operation any day now and you imposed like that? She’s a tired old lady, Hugh! You could have saved yourself a long trip and a lengthy conversation. I wasn’t aware that I wanted the grandfather clock. I don’t need the imperial chimes of Big Ben reminding me on the quarter and half hour and each bloody

hour of the eternal presence of Westminster and her late Majesty, Queen Victoria, as well as the might and protection of the late British Empire.' Lucas gets up and goes to pay the bill and Hugh follows and takes some free mints from the bowl on the counter.

It's clear to Lucas now that for Hugh, their mother's illness signals a declaration of war. Hugh wants the estate. He's reverted to childhood, Lucas thinks, amazed, and as he leaves he feels, for the second time, the return of the claws of cramp in his gut. He thought he'd dealt with the past. Again he finds himself somewhere else, looking down. That's me walking with Hugh towards the car, he thinks. I don't want to be like this again; I thought I had dealt with all that crap.

'You've been ratting and ferreting through *Mother's* things, looking for her will.' Hugh must be shouting. The voice sounds like the Man's voice, even though Lucas remains high up and far away in the place where, disconnected, he watches himself standing in front of Hugh.

'I w-want you out of the pl-pl-place,' Hugh shouts. 'Get out! And *thank* you,' Hugh breathes sarcasm lengthily into the words, 'for sw-swapping ...swipping, sw-sw-sweeping the drive.' The vowels stretch and the consonants catch. 'And tha-thank you so m-much for cleaning the windows. Have I *the-enked* you enough? H-have I *th-th-thenked* you enough? W-would you like some more *thuh-henks*? *Thank you, thank you!* And I don't w-want you here. You're a thief. You wan-want everything. And don't throw out my ice cream. I paid for it with mm- mm, my own money.' Then the voice of the Man comes out of the rise and fall of the rhythm even more loudly. 'Get out! I want you *out* now! Get *out!* *Out!* You're taking M-Mother's things. You want everything. You've only, only, c-come up now because the house is so valuable!'

Lucas struggles back against the drag of the far away. He turns on Hugh. 'You're ordering me from a house that isn't yours now, are you?'

'N-Not listening, not listening,' cries Hugh, cringing behind tightly folded arms, tears running down his face.

Lucas is appalled. Pity and understanding give way to the slow, hot fuse of anger that ignites in his chest. The cramp in his gut twists. 'God Almighty!' he says, moving up close to Hugh. 'I have a demented mother and a mad brother as well! I'll walk back. You're the one who wants everything. It suited you to leave her lonely, demented and incontinent to rattle about in a smelly house that was far too big for her. And for you not to tell me about it, to hide it, because if she'd been moved into care the house would have had to be sold to pay the bills and then you two wouldn't get what you've coveted for so long.'

Hugh winces and retreats, surprise and then fear on his face.

'Thought so!' Lucas looks at Hugh change of expression and thinks of hysterical dogs that only yap from behind their fences when they think their gate is shut, but then finding it wide open come suddenly face to face with the object of their wrath, cower and run away.

Hugh backs towards the seat of his car awkwardly then lowers himself, using his right hand to hold onto the top of the roof. Then he lifts his impaired leg up and into the car. Above him and looking out from the bus are the faces of the school children, some with heads leaning out of their windows, watching. The engine of the bus grinds into life jolting the children as it moves forward.

'Tantrum, tantrum! *Thank* you, *thank* you,' some of them intone then laugh.

'Shoosh!' Their teacher makes them sit.

Air brakes hiss; they wave enthusiastically, jerkily. Their eyes now turn upon Lucas. It's his turn. They capture Hugh's tone of voice, 'Thief! You're a thief! Get out, get out!

You're taking MmmmMother's things!' There's more laughter. 'Boo hoo! Mummy! MmmmMummy, he's taking my th-things!'

Lucas is left shaking in the silence that remains in the parking lot after the departure of the bus. He groans. He'd come to visit his mother and to be of assistance to Hugh. He'd added the gesture of tidying the house to restore her dignity. She would have wanted that and he wants to make it his gift. She is proud and quite mad but she deserves some dignity, he decides. It would make him feel he had done something for her with the uncomplicated love he had for her when he was a small child. If he had to become like Hugh in order to battle for a share in the estate there would be no happiness in it for him. What Hugh was doing to him was a sort of slow killing. Lucas, held by the stare of the bridge's dark eye, where the men have rowed to drag their hooks, suddenly knows: I refuse to be like Hugh!

He takes his time on the walk back through the township and up the steep path that leads to the bridge. But once on it, he puts the adrenalin from his encounter with Hugh into a fast walk up its curve, pausing only to catch his breath when he reaches its apex. The waters of the estuary swirl beneath; across the dunes in front, there is green ocean, backed by dark rain-grey clouds and behind him, when he turns, he sees the mountains of The Great Dividing Range making a wall of blue. In between, torn up by land clearing for new housing, there are slices of forest and mangroves. By the time he reaches the house the wind has risen and rain begins to spit.

More branches and twigs litter the driveway but Hugh hasn't bothered to move them. Lucas begins to gather them but reminded of Hugh's voice shouting *th-thank you, thank y-you*, throws them instead into a gap in the hedge, out of the way. Recurring winds and rain make the windows streaked, dirty and looking blank again almost as soon as he's cleaned them. He will have to tidy up, clean the windows and sweep the paths and

verandas all over again – so much to be done. Maybe Hugh was right in saying that he was trying to earn Brownie points.

‘I tried to vacuum once,’ Hugh had said, ‘but she went berserk and told me off.’ Lucas remembers how she used to say, ‘Hugh never does anything properly but luckily I can rely on you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.’

Hugh’s not at the house but there are signs that he’s been there because the door of the house and the studio are open; so too are several windows. ‘Thank God he’s not here,’ says Lucas to Basil as the cat runs through the front door ahead of him. The room’s cold again so he shuts doors inside, pulls the curtains further back to let in the light and puts on the heater. There’s nowhere to be comfortable except the couch where some fur coats lie, smelling of camphor. Has Hedda just been here trying them on? Hedda’s anti-fur though. Melda or Bethany? Surely not Hugh?

He hangs the furs on the stand near the front door. Lucas doesn’t want to see any of them; the Man used to drag the skins off the rabbits he’d shot and he remembers the smell and the line-up of bodies that looked like small pink babies. He phones Hedda’s number to ask if she’s heard from Hugh, half-expecting to hear the answering machine, but this time it’s Hedda’s voice he hears. How to explain?

‘I’m a bit worried about Hugh. We had lunch together and I decided to walk back but he wasn’t here when I returned. He’d had a few wines and ...’

‘If he’s not there it’s because you brought back the past with you and upset him.’ Her tone is hard and trickles with hostility.

‘So long as you know he’s not here.’

‘Well, he’s not here either, thanks to you.’ She hangs up.

Too late to go to the hospital now. Lucas turns a cushion sideways to make a pillow on the couch, takes his shoes off and lies down. The glow of the afternoon sun, through

the leadlight, works its way across the portraits and reaching the statue of the unhappy shepherdess, gives flesh tones to the bronze. Basil nestles next to him and he feels purring against his ribcage.

Strands of his mother's red hair, touched by the light, shine on the cushions. He picks them off idly and makes a little heap of them on the coffee table. Then he dozes, from time to time opening his eyes. The light and shadows from the overgrown trees in the driveway litter the wall with patterns, show up the dust on the furniture and play upon the family portraits. They seem to blink. He will have to clean this room too.

Thunder, the rush of the wind and the rattling of Mother's bedroom door, wake him. So far, he's avoided her room, left it till last, hoping that Hugh and Hedda might complete what they started. When he opens the door a gust of air, filled with the reek of urine, assails him from the gloom inside. He presses her light switch but it doesn't work, so he has to go and find a torch and switching it on sees that her bedroom windows are wide open, the curtains billowing and the rain beating in. The room is a mess. Someone has stripped her bed back to the misshapen mattress circled with yellow stains. His shoes crunch on something on the floor and when he looks down he discovers kitty litter underfoot and a container of it smelling badly. He sweeps it up, takes it outside and then goes to the laundry where he finds two full packets of carpet deodorizer and cleaner and he sprinkles the contents of both packets over the carpet and the mattress. Then, feeling ill, he shuts the door on it all and goes to the bathroom and washes his hands thoroughly.

Basil follows him, curls around his legs, mewing. 'Do you need more to eat, cat?' Lucas checks his dish in the kitchen. 'Empty! Thought you looked a bit scrawny. Still hungry?' He feels his ribs beneath the fur. 'Haven't they been feeding you?' When Basil jumps onto the kitchen bench, he puts him back on the floor. 'Not for cats up here, Basil.'

Lucas cleans the fragments of kitty litter from the bench top, disinfects it, cleans the floor and puts down a sheet of newspaper, scrubs the cat's dishes then puts food in one and water in the other. Basil, desperately hungry, gets in the way, curling about his ankles, alternating between meowing and purring. 'You can read the news while you eat,' he tells him. He washes his hands again, makes a cup of tea, turns on the television, takes his shoes off and sprawls on the couch. 'Sorry Mother,' he says aloud. 'I know sitting on the couch like this isn't allowed but I'm worn out.'

He's there only a few minutes when the phone rings. Hedda, he thinks, to let him know that Hugh is alright, but it's the surgeon, his voice business-like. 'Your mother's stable enough for the hip replacement tomorrow morning. We'll be taking her to theatre about eleven and the operation will take about four hours.'

Lucas, hearing the words, registers absurdly that the four hours is well in excess of most theatrical performances. Recognition of his own fatigue makes him wonder about the stamina and concentration demanded of the surgeon. 'I'll come in early,' he says, 'so I can be with her.'

'Good. One of her nurses told me you know how to calm her down.'

'Much practice,' Lucas laughs, suddenly aware from the tightness in his chest that calming her down is a role he's resumed.

He phones Hugh and Hedda to let them know but there's no answer so he leaves a message on their answering machine. Then he phones Anne.

'Come home as soon as it's over and she's settled down; you can always go back when she's transferred to the rehabilitation unit,' she says. 'It's too toxic for you up there.'

'Don't worry. I think I'll survive for a few more days.'

'You shouldn't be driving those long distances as well as having the extra strain of Hugh's attacks. Why don't you move to a motel or somewhere closer to the hospital? You don't sound well.'

'Hugh seems to have gone, so I might as well stay and do a bit of cleaning up, and there's the cat to look after.'

'His behaviour's appalling, Lucas. You don't deserve to be treated like that. What do you mean when you say you're cleaning up?'

'The place is a mess.'

'A mess?' says Anne. 'That beautiful house a mess? How ironic. The poor old thing! It seems only the other day that Camilla said we were the messy ones and too much work and not welcome any more. It wasn't about tidiness at all Lucas,' she says. 'It was because you put me first, unlike your brother, and she couldn't stand that. Hugh always put Camilla before Hedda. Poor Hedda. I refused to listen to Camilla's complaints about her, or her complaints about you, or about Hugh or anyone for that matter. Helping her wasn't the issue. Whenever I did the dishes she insisted we were on holidays and made me stop. If we bought takeaways to save work, she needed to be reassured that it wasn't because we didn't like her cooking. We weren't to do anything otherwise it wouldn't be a holiday. There was a limit to how many times I was prepared to offer. I wouldn't play the game of guessing what she wanted and insist on helping only to receive a condescending and gracious pat of acceptance and then overhear her telling Hugh and Hedda how laughably unhelpful my help was.'

'I know, I know. That was the year I moved the piano for her, wasn't it?'

'And cleaned the gutters and whenever you helped she'd be telling Hugh that 'poor Lucas and Hedda had to step in because Anne is so lazy.' Anne drops her voice in imitation: 'Poor Lucas has to do everything. Anne sits around on her big fat behind and

does nothing. Remember all those dramatic sotto voce comments she'd put on for Hugh and Hedda? They were *meant* to be overheard!

'You cleaned the bathrooms.'

'Mm. Having nine or ten people to stay was far too much for her. Why she always invited Hugh and his family as extras at the last minute I'll never know. Well, I think I do actually. It was probably so that they could act the Greek Chorus to her week of tragic martyrdom. And, admit it, even you got sick of hearing the same endless loop of complaints. You said so. As soon as they turned their backs she bad mouthed them. And it's still happening.'

'Divide and rule,' said Lucas. 'No one's allowed to relate except through her.'

'And in accordance with the roles she created for them.'

'You ruined her games by being open and frank, didn't you? How about we swap mothers? Yours is so considerate and careful not to impose.'

'Spare us all! Anything but that!'

Lucas imagines Anne's eyes widening in exaggerated horror.

After the call, Lucas sees the empty chair for head of family and pictures Hugh in it again, hunched up and shivering, fingers tap-tapping on its arms, following the carvings. There is more to it than that. Hugh had clung to it like a man drowning. It's the only warm room in the house. Amongst the library books on the coffee table is a journal that contains Hugh's last research publication, written several years before his heart fibrillated and caused his stroke. He flicks through the article. So clear, rational and precise. There is a dedication in it, to Mother. In the silence Lucas hears the ticking of the grandfather clock and remembers what Hugh had said. On no account must he have the grandfather clock. Tick-tock, the wind-up heart of the house, the hearth, Lucas muses, in the room with the plumped up breasts of cushions and the statues of

uncomfortably posed women, even the contorted piece of driftwood – an arthritic ballerina.

‘Would you like a little brother or sister?’ Mother had smiled and nodded long ago, wanting Lucas to say yes.

He’d said no. Gran was there. She’d said, ‘Of course you do!’

When the time came to collect a little brother or sister, he had to point.

‘Which one, which little brother do you want?’ Mother had asked.

‘I want a sister, not a brother.’

‘You don’t. Anyway, there aren’t any left,’ said Gran. ‘What you want is a nice brother so you can play together.’

‘Pick me up. I want to see.’

‘Don’t be so difficult.’

Lucas looked at Mother, who revolved a crushed handkerchief around in her hands.

‘For heaven’s sake, Camilla!’ Gran had snapped. ‘Put that handkerchief in your purse. You don’t need it.’

Lucas knew that sisters were girls. They had pink rugs but the bassinets were too high for him to see if there were any.

‘Point,’ said Gran. The room was full of cane bassinets. He didn’t want to point.

‘You have to,’ Gran had insisted.

‘You can have any one you want,’ Mother smiled.

‘Hurry up,’ said Gran.

‘That one,’ he’d pointed, reluctantly.

‘Oh,’ said Gran. ‘He chose the right one!’

That’s how Lucas knew there’d never been a choice. He’d been tricked.

The house is silent, except for the ticking of the clock. Nothing moves in the room apart from the swinging of the pendulum and the occasional breathing of a curtain moved by draughts.

Tick tock. Tick tock. Opposite the chair stands the grandfather clock, pendulum swinging, tick-tocking, tick-tocking. A regular heart beat? Is this why his brother wants it so badly?

## Chapter Five

In the morning Lucas gathers an assortment of his mother's favourite leaves and flowers from the garden to take with him to the hospital. He puts them into the car, starts the engine and then hesitates. He's forgotten to leave a light on and it will be dark when he returns. No matter, he thinks. He definitely won't use the free hospital parking ticket Hedda gave him. Hugh had made it clear he thought of Lucas as a taker and a thief. He'd be surprised when he saw he'd left it on the table, unused.

As he is about to drive off he hears a 'Yoo-hoo.' In the rear vision mirror he sees someone hobbling up the street waving and wanting to speak to him before he drives away. An old woman with a walking frame. Lucas gets out of the car, advances a little but she puts up her hand to stop him. He's uncertain about how to close the distance between them without offending her, so he waits.

She arrives. 'You're Lucas. I can tell. Can I say that, now that Christian's dead?' She pauses to catch breath. 'My daughter, Valerie, told me that my dear friend Camilla was in hospital and that you've been tidying up the old place.'

Who is she? She wears a tartan beret, a matching tartan shawl dominated by red and fastened at the throat by an interesting cairngorm and stylish red boots.

'Valerie, saw you cleaning the windows the other day. What a wonderful lad you are! Camilla would have liked that. I didn't dare say anything to her about the state of the place.'

Lucas, quite taken aback, doesn't reply.

'I'm Peggy Gower. I went to the same school as your mother, last century,' she laughs. 'I'm on the home run too, so to speak – an old bird. Do old birds engage in home runs? Let's leave the cricket terminology out and just say that I'm hoping to flit the twig in my sleep, although it would be nice to be dressed properly for the occasion! Oh dear,' she adds, 'I suppose being dressed properly for the occasion goes more with cricket than birds doesn't it? But you know what I mean, don't you?' She laughs and puts her hand on Lucas's arm and gazes into his face. 'You're going to see her today? I knew your father too, of course. You're so like him. A lovely, lovely man. So sad, so sad.'

'Really?' says Lucas, astonished. 'Like my father? Hugh's the one who looks like my father.'

Peggy puts her hand to her mouth. 'Oh! Oh! Well, it's a long story, my dear. No time to tell it now; enough to say your mother and I went to school together. How is your mother; how is the old thing?'

'Not good,' says Lucas. 'She hasn't got long to go, I suspect, and they're insisting on operating. Seems there's no other way.'

'When?' asks Peggy.

'It's today. I'm on my way to the hospital now.'

'How awful for her. She hates hospitals. And for you, too! What a shame. She's endured so many calamities. But, young man, you always knew when Camilla was in a room. She was such a head turner. I have something of hers to give you, letters and photographs,' says Peggy, words galloping. 'That's why I intercepted your departure – to give you a bit of rubbish from the past. They're very special to her and she said you must have them. It seems only the other day your mother and I were dancing all night or running around the tennis court,' she says, her free hand spinning little circles in the air. 'Then there was the dashing off to Newport for weekends in summer to do a bit of

swimming. Hardly a house in sight then! You must have her hatbox. She decorated it herself. Well, almost. I helped a bit. It was therapeutic. So long ago and yet it seems only a few minutes away.'

'Wonderful! I'd like very much to have it, of course. Thank you.' Lucas says.

'Perhaps you can offer me a lift back home, dear and handsome boy. It's not far and not out of your way. Then you must be off to the hospital and please give her my love.'

'Of course,' Lucas says.

'I told Valerie that I wasn't going far. Not very far has become the sort of far that is too far these days!' She laughs. 'But as I said to Valerie it's a case of use it or lose it even if I do shuffle. Leave the window down, dear boy, so I can have the breeze in my hair for a moment or two.'

As Lucas helps her into his car, she says, 'Your mother and I used to get around in a Buick you know. What fun it was whirling along! Not many people had cars in those days. We had miles of road to ourselves, not like today's stop and start traffic. Christian had a Bugatti before he lost his money, did you know? It clawed the road and snarled like a panther. Your mother found it so deliciously frightening.'

Frightening! Lucas remembers being frightened because of the throaty sound of a car but for the moment can't recall why.

'Here we are. You'll have to help me disembark. Thank you. Now wait,' she says, 'I'll bring it out.'

'Her red hat,' says Peggy. The hatbox is embossed with a decorative "C", in faded gold. Lucas puts it in the boot.

'Oh look, here comes my daughter, Valerie! She looks like Christmas rushing upon one too soon in the season in that outfit, doesn't she? Such a talker and sticky beak too! Just like me, I suppose, but I'm more discreet! You'd better be on your way. I've held you

up already without having my dear Valerie inflict a conversation upon you as well. She has a mobile phone that attracts a more than adequate number of conversations.

'Hello! What are you up to Mother?' Valerie is brisk and bright in her green coat and red scarf. Her red, bouncing earrings look like miniature cherries and match her lipstick. 'I can tell by that look of yours that you're up to something,' she laughs.

'Valerie, this charming young man is Lucas Wilson. He's on his way to see his mother in hospital and we're not going to hold him up. Depart young man,' she gestures, her bracelets tinkling. Then, she lowers her voice and says to him, 'Do descend upon me another time and I'll tell you a little more about the contents of that hatbox, if I may.'

'Hello and goodbye then,' smiles Valerie.

'I'll look forward to catching up with both of you again another day!'

Peggy lowers her voice. 'The man in the photographs is Jack. His sister is still alive.'

'What was that, Mother?' Valerie asks.

'My darling Valerie, I just love your outfit! The colours are so cheerful. Do you remember the costume I made for you when you were chosen to be the Christmas tree in the school play?'

'Mother! Really!' Lucas hears her say as he drives off. There's a snatch of Peggy's perfume lingering in his car, elusive, a little like fresh straw and violets.

Why had he never heard of Peggy Gower before? Was this Jack the young man in the photograph he'd found in the bedside table, the lad pretending to catch butterflies? The thoughts hum on and off through the corridors of his mind, twisting in and out of past events like the broken purring of the cat, the maze of vines carved onto the arms of the chairs.

In the morning, when he'd paused in front of the family portraits, he'd seen himself in the mirror, interposed in the family line-up. He'd picked up Basil and stood closer to the

mirror. 'Take a look,' he'd said to himself in the place where he wasn't. 'I don't fit in do I? It's Hugh's face that completes the Wilson array, not mine. Even Hedda looks more like them than I do. Someone must have noticed. No-one's ever said anything. Did the Man notice? He was away during the war. Maybe I'm the reason their relationship collapsed when he returned?' There's a memory and a feeling that spins away in the wind twisting the trees outside.

oOo

As Lucas parks in the hospital car park someone toots; an arm waves from an old, bright yellow Volkswagen that has a surf board attached to its roof rack and *Break Free* emblazoned on its side. **Wa** Wah, **Wa** Wah music bursts from its open windows. The driver going past is a young male with long fair hair, blue eyes, clear skin and a big grin. Lucas almost, but doesn't quite know, who it is and waves automatically. Thank God for a young, friendly, smiley, healthy face, he thinks.

When the self-opening double-glass entrance doors of the hospital open, a gust of leaves accompanies Lucas into the foyer. He half expects he'll hear Mother calling out from the depths of her insulated world as he approaches her ward and that the nurses will tell him she's had another restless night. But all is quiet. "You're so like him", that's what Peggy had said. During the night, just before he'd woken, he'd heard Mother's voice calling, 'You look just like your father.'

Mother is asleep when he looks in. Without any teeth she seems to be folding in upon herself, her open mouth a funnel that she and her world seem to tumble into with every suck of breath. It is a sound that gasps then dwindles away; the noise like the last swirl of water that complains down a plug-hole. She groans. Lucas feels ripped by grief. So much unhappiness lies struggling in the pulse of her neck. So much has been unsaid. So much nastiness never explained. She'd wanted too much from him and he'd never

known exactly what it was. Perhaps she hadn't either. He'd had to run. Was he supposed to have stayed to cheer her up? Was he supposed to make her feel better? Was he supposed never to have left home as compensation for some huge unspoken loss?

Lucas feels the touch of a hand on his shoulder.

'You okay mate?'

He looks up, puzzled.

'I'm the guy who tooted,' the nurse prompts.

'Ah, Todd. You waved from the Volkswagen with the roof rack and the surf board?'

Lucas feels recognition snap into place.

'That's me,' the nurse says.

Lucas also remembers that it spilled over with very loud music.

'You might like to grab a coffee while she's asleep. There's time for one before she goes to theatre. It's going to be a long day for you. The best coffee's in the downstairs canteen.' Todd shows the direction with his thumb.

Lucas's sudden sense of relaxation at the young man's unexpected kindness tells him how much tension he's stored. He feels as if he's jolted down a step that isn't there and fallen. It leaves him pale. The tight lines about his eyes loosen and a sudden dizziness pricks at his eyes with spots of light.

'Steady mate. Take it easy. Keep breathing! We're not looking for another patient!'

Lucas laughs, feeling ill, feeling hot and sweaty, wondering why. He drags a hand through his hair.

'Come on,' says Todd, 'I'll steer you in the right direction.'

Later, when Lucas returns from his coffee, he hears Mother's voice, sonorous and loud, coming from the end of the corridor. There's no mistaking the sound.

'I'm all alone,' she declaims. 'Nobody loves me.'

'No you're not, Mrs Wilson. There are more people in this hospital than you could fit in Sydney Showground,' Todd's telling her.

'Nobody loves me.'

'That's not what I've heard,' Gloria says.

He hears his mother's laugh.

'Hello Mother.'

She knows who he is and her eyes shine. But when Lucas sees that her red hair has been washed and lost its light and colour, it seems to him that her spirit has been snuffed out too, leaving her whitish-grey and hollow. She smiles and there are no teeth. Gloria, busy at the sink, grips them in her bright pink rubber gloves, scrubbing vigorously at something.

'Ah, Lucas!' says Mother. 'When are you coming to visit me? Gran tried to take you away from me, but I wouldn't let her.'

'I'm still here,' he says, sitting with his back to the sink so he can't see what Gloria's doing to the teeth. 'Nobody took me away.'

'Good,' she smiles again, all gums. 'They wanted to.'

Every time I see her, Lucas thinks, there is less and less of her.

Lucas is not sure whether the smile was for him or because she likes the programme on her television. She watches an old black and white, slapstick comedy of Laurel and Hardy hitting one another.

He gives her the flowers he'd gathered. There are sprigs of wattle puffed with yellow blossom, intense with pollened scent, and twigs of gum with a fresh new growth of vivid red-tipped leaves. They smell strongly of eucalyptus and have upon them the cold, wet, immediate world that is locked outside her double glazed windows. Gathering bush

flowers was something they used to do together when Lucas was quite young. What he puts into her hands is the memory of this. He would like to say he loves her but his fear is locked in from childhood. Her smothering need of him and her possessiveness, the way she could hurt or restrain him with dire predictions of misfortune, might surface to suffocate him again.

It had flared whenever he sought to be more independent. Do not play contact sports: you will get hurt; you will get asthma. Keep away from strangers: you might be abducted. His father was a Wilson; they were a bad lot. Keep away from them. Mother demanded compliance as proof of their bond. After he left home, frequent visits without his family was the other requirement.

It's all coming to an end, he thinks. He wants to be free of it but it's been part of his life for so long he's afraid he'll miss it.

'They're nice,' says Gloria.

Lucas watches as Mother brings the rain-dampened flowers and leaves to her face and breathes in the aromas. She smiles and inspects them one by one and her personality seems to grow a little more in presence. He looks for signs of approval. Strange, he thinks, now completely aware of how he's always looked for approval. He feels as if he's sitting for an examination, as if her happiness depends on having gotten the bouquet right. At the same time there's the weariness of never being certain that he ever got anything right and therefore that no matter what he does it will never be good enough. And now, even though she's dying and has to have the trauma of an operation, he grieves about how she must feel, knowing that they're unable to talk properly and that he is forever ready to run from her. There will be more pain, more demands, he thinks, and she'll die feeling abandoned and he'll be left feeling the same. There have been so

many medical crises for her too. He shudders at the thought of an artificial joint being hammered into a hip weakened by osteoporosis.

He rallies. 'Peggy Gower sends her love and wishes you all the best. She's given me an old hatbox of yours she found. She says there are some things in there for me to look at.'

Mother begins to cry. 'My red hat,' she says over and over. 'I could hear Jack hammering on the hull. It was an American submarine that torpedoed their ship. They drowned. All of them. They drowned! He couldn't get out. He couldn't get out and he didn't see me waiting for him in my red hat. Christian tricked him. Christian didn't drown. Why didn't Christian drown? Why do you have to look like *him*?'

'She's about to have her pre-op sedation,' says Gloria. 'She'll be fine,' she adds, perhaps wondering at the fierceness of Lucas's concentration while he listens to his mother. 'Rest of the family not here today?'

Lucas shakes his head. He can't speak. He doesn't want to look like Christian.

'I'll put her teeth in so she can talk better but they'll have to come out again before she goes to theatre.'

'Don't leave me,' Mother begs Lucas.

'I won't. And you don't have to talk,' Lucas says, trying to make his voice sound normal. 'I'll be going with you as far as the operating theatre when it's time. I'll be there when you wake up. I'll stay until you settle down for the night.'

'Hold my hand.' She looks at him intently. 'Hugh wanted me to sign an enduring power of attorney and I wouldn't. Hedda's after my money. I wasn't born yesterday. She wears the pants and Hugh's the fool who does what he's told. I refused and threw the pen to the other side of the room.' Her eyes are upon him, bright, blue and direct. 'I refused.'

On the television screen, Stanley talks on the telephone, his back to the low sill of an open window many storeys above the pavement.

Lucas bites his lip. 'Yes, you told Anne about that.' He hates the confiding. He waits for a while until his voice won't shake. He's heard the story many times.

'They're not here are they?' Mother says. 'They've gone to an art show, haven't they? They don't care.' Her eyes move. Stan Laurel has his back to the window and moves closer to it as he talks. 'I like this bit,' says Mother.

'They'll be here to see you later on, I'm sure.'

'He's going to fall,' says Mother, watching Stanley, still talking and now much closer to the open window.

Lucas turns to Gloria. 'I assume my mother's signed the consent forms to have the operation? Or did another member of the family?'

'No, she signed them herself.'

'Do you have everything you need on file: contact names, addresses and telephone numbers for next of kin?'

The nurse checks. 'No,' she says, puzzled. 'That's strange, you're not there.'

Lucas gives her the details. 'There's the note on the file about no CPR though?'

'Yes, that's there. I was here when that happened.'

Mother laughs. Stanley has fallen out the window and, hanging onto the phone cord, dangles above the pavement far below.

'Those movies are cruel, aren't they?' Gloria says.

Oliver Hardy rushes downstairs and parks his car beneath the window so it will break Stanley's fall and save him from injury.

'Yes, my wife won't watch them,' Lucas agrees.

'I *like* Laurel and Hardy,' says Mother, suddenly paying attention.

'She comes and goes,' says Gloria.

'With a bit of luck I'll soon be gone for good,' Mother says. 'Hugh and Hedda would like that.'

Lucas lowers his voice and asks Gloria, 'Does the file mention if anyone has power of attorney in case any medical decisions have to be made and Mother isn't capable of making them?'

'No, but the doctors have a certain amount of discretion.'

'Mother, have you given anyone power of attorney?'

Stan, crying and with a weakening grip, holds desperately onto the telephone cord above the car then falls.

'Have you given anyone power of attorney?'

Mother laughs. Oliver's car has backfired and jumped out of position. Stan lands on the concrete.

'Mother?'

She shakes her head.

'I'm afraid I'll have to give her the pre-op in a few minutes,' the nurse interrupts.

'God Almighty,' Lucas mutters. He goes into the corridor and uses his mobile to phone Hugh and Hedda. They do not answer, so he leaves a message. He should have thought about power of attorney before. Perhaps Hugh is ill again? Why doesn't he answer the phone? Hedda had said that on some days he wouldn't answer the phone. A sick mother and a sick brother and the rest not answering! What should he do? Hugh's obsessions and suspicions about furniture and ornaments and coffee cups and paintings would be cause for yet another list of accusations if Mother signed a document granting him power of attorney. It would be even worse if she'd already signed one in Hugh's favour and couldn't remember doing it.

The nurse comes out into the corridor. 'She'll be going to theatre in half an hour. It's time for her pre-op sedation,' she tells him. He goes back into the room and holds Mother's hand while the nurse injects the solution into the catheter in his mother's bruised arm.

Lucas sweats as he recalls the required family proprieties: it is beneath the Wilson's dignity to talk, even amongst themselves and especially not with others, about legal documents, money, income, possessions, how much things cost. The list is endless. Lucas feels them begin to crowd in: sex, pregnancy, birth, age, the handicapped, mental disease, death, funerals or wills. Lucas hears the list gather into one of Christian's tirades. It is not proper to eat in the street or to wear a hat or cap inside, unless you are a woman. And an unwelcome woman understands she is not welcome when she is not invited to take her hat off. Nor is it proper to eat cake without a cake fork or eat fish without a fish knife or to ask for more or to come to dinner without dressing properly. One must have topics of conversation prepared. The television is not to be in the same room as the dining table; phone calls are not to be taken or made when a meal is in progress, nor is it proper to load one's fork with food and it is not the done thing to lower one's mouth to the food on one's fork. Elbows have to be kept in, as well as off the table and the cutlery pointing downwards and not towards the ceiling. The knife and fork must not be gripped like pens or pencils. Cutlery is to be placed neatly together on the plate when the meal is finished. One must not leave the table without permission from Father or Mother or rise from a chair by pushing or scraping it backwards and heaving oneself up with one's arms, unless one is crippled in some way. Roman Catholics were not to be invited into the house. Stop, he says to himself. You'll end up like her.

'Well, Mother, if you haven't given anyone power of attorney you could sign one to cover the next few months while you're in hospital, one that would let me pay any

medical bills that aren't covered by your insurance,' Lucas suggests. 'If that's what you'd like.'

She looks pleased. He's surprised when she agrees so readily.

'Do you have a Justice of the Peace on the staff?' Lucas asks the nurse.

'You need a J P?' asks the nurse. 'Leave it to me. We have one in the office. I'll get her.'

'Thanks,' Lucas says. 'Do you think the pre-op sedation will affect her judgement?'

'Well, that's something for a doctor to decide.'

Lucas drafts the document. 'This is what I've written Mother.' He reads it to her several times while Todd and Gloria and the Justice of the Peace are present. 'Do you understand it? Is this what you want?'

'Yes.'

He feels uneasy. He's not sure what she understands. 'Are you comfortable with what it says?'

'Yes.'

'There's a J P here to witness your signature, Mother. She'll listen while I read it to you again to make sure that you understand it and that you agree.'

'I understand,' says Mother.

'We'll read it to you again anyway, Dear, before you sign, just to make sure,' the J P tells her.

Mother signs. She doesn't object to being called 'Dear' this time.

'I like you,' she tells the J P 'Will you come to visit me?'

'Of course,' says the Justice. 'I like you too, Dear. My office is quite close, so I'll be able to look in on you after the operation.'

'Do,' says Mother. 'I'd like that.'

Lucas, surprised by her continuing amiability and still uneasy about her cooperation, wonders what will result when he tells Hugh about the power of attorney, especially if she's given one to him, too. But she could die under the anaesthetic, he thinks, he had to do something.

'You wanted to die when you were little, didn't you?' Mother's eyes focus on him with difficulty.

Lucas cannot answer. He nods. He does remember praying to die. What a short trip it has been from childhood to now, he thinks. Years of her illnesses and unhappiness and all her demands have culminated in this moment and nothing he did had ever helped.

'I could die under the anaesthetic,' Mother says, 'I want to die. I don't want to be revived if my heart stops. Last time they revived me twice. When the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses visited to save my soul, I told them that I'd died on the operating table twice and that there wasn't anything after death because if there had been anything I would have known.'

He takes her hand. Did she really know what she had signed or was she past caring. And yet her look, as she did so, had been one almost of pleasure and full of awareness.

He wants to ask her about Jack. Is this how it ends, Lucas thinks, crying at last.

'Oh dear,' says Mother. She calls out to Gloria, 'I'm afraid I've upset him most dreadfully. Can you look after him? I'm so sorry, Lucas.'

Lucas pulls himself together. He hates it that he's caused her to become a caring parent and to apologise profusely, leaving him with the burden of having upset her. It's all too much. I give up. I give up, he thinks.

She extends her other hand like a child. He takes it. 'He was good-looking, your father, like you.'

'Like me? Why does she keep saying that?' Christian had certainly been good-looking, but Lucas was not at all like him. He was more like Camilla, people said. You've been so hard to love, Lucas thinks, looking at her, and I love you so much. He remembers the times when they went blackberry picking together. Their relationship was like that: he would have the choice of reaching deep into the thorns for the juicy, ripe blackberries and getting scratched and caught at by thorns, or of settling for those that the previous pickers had ignored – the red and the half-ripe, bitter fruits that were closer. The rewards of delving deeper were painful and skimpy but encouraging enough to keep him trying, ever aware from seeing the scratches on his arms and coming across the shed skins of snakes, how careful he had to be. Why didn't she save him from the Man?

Todd is in the doorway. He beckons. 'Would you like to come with us as far as the operating theatre, mate? She'd like that and she stays nice and calm while you're around ... comparatively,' he adds.

So Lucas walks with them choked and again barely able to speak. He's holding hands with Mother again even though the Man had said he wasn't allowed to. But now her hands are old and worn and knotted and afraid. Lucas walks with her all the way to the line that separates them by marking off the space in front of the entrance to the operating theatre and the doors that open into bright white light. 'I'll be waiting,' he says to Mother, as she's wheeled in. 'I'll be waiting here for you when you come out; when your operation's over. When should I come back?' he asks the surgeon.

'Come back in about four or five hours,' he says. 'She'll be in the recovery room down the hall by then.'

Lucas goes outside where an agitation in the overcast air sends shivers through the gums, dislodging gum nuts and dead leaves and peeling bark off trunks. When he reaches his car he gets in trembling, closes the door against the wind and shuts his

eyes. But the rattle of nuts and twigs falling onto the roof and the rasping of the wind only unsettle him further. Trying to relax turns into an effort. His agitation needs to wear itself out by walking. He has to walk.

On the far side of the valley overlooked by the hospital is the place where the family once went for picnics or sometimes to camp. Mother's operation won't be over for several hours. He has time to get there and back.

There's not much to see when he arrives: a neglected car park, a grass slope, concrete steps. The new highway has left the area abandoned, overlooked except by lovers and youths who want to drink and smash bottles. Empty cartons lie about gaping and with ants busily feasting on the greasy inner wrappings and their adhesions of deep-fried food. The music on Lucas's car radio splashes out a Schumann that surges with the shake of the wind. He's not ready for silence yet and holds onto the music to keep out the swirling grey pressure seeking to buffet him into despair. He lets the car engine run for a while, wondering whether he should park somewhere else. Then he sees he's chosen the only clear space amongst the broken bottles and decides to stay where he is. He turns off the engine and the radio and listens to the wind, the stridency of birds and the occasional collisions of bark falling from trees into the undergrowth. Something nags at an old hurt but evades memory, something elusive, like a lost word on the tip of the tongue but much larger than a word because it prickles on his skin. He looks over the bonnet of the car at the exposed flesh of a tree whose old bark lies at its base like a heap of discarded clothes. Its new skin is burred by a dark, oozing script chewed by insects.

Beyond the picnic area is a sad broken edging of gaunt roses, all that are left from a long-forgotten community project. A scribble of regenerating trees presses its way up through the crumbling bitumen of the old road. It gnaws at the borders of the car park.

The encroaching glint of suburban roofs is several ridges away, poised to descend and claim the valleys. In the centre of that cluster of freshly-tiled suburban escarpments stands the new hospital where Mother lies unconscious, being sliced by a scalpel and then having the head of her femur sawn off and replaced. There are nerves and blood vessels to be avoided.

Lucas takes the hatbox out of the boot, locks the car and walks head down, against the wind, past the jetsam of stained toilet paper, old condoms, weathered food packaging and broken glass. Just a little beyond the car park's guard rail he finds the foot track that he and his family once walked, long before the new road had been substituted by an expressway and then expanded into a multi-lane freeway.

The track is still there in faint outline and Lucas wanders gingerly down the side of the mountain through the scrub, holding the box as if Mother were somehow with him. The wind stirs the smell of eucalypt and the spicy scent of bracken and wet bark. There are small plants: white flowered, prickly, pungent when he treads on them – and thickets of banksias, patches of flannel flowers and clusters of native blue bells. The flick of a tiny lizard scrambling for cover catches at the edge of his vision.

He hears the clear pinging sound of a bell bird beneath the rush of the wind and glimpses a moving patch of blue, a wren, flitting through the undergrowth. There is a noise of struggle behind and Lucas turns to see a cat crouching on the sketchy path with the small puff of blue twitching in its mouth. Startled, it glares at him and quickly scrambles away.

He skids occasionally where small rocks and gravel have washed down the slope and gathered into the whorled patterns of giant fingerprints. Here and there, frayed ribbons of sand are all that is left of the track. He detours through prickly stands of bacon-and-egg flower bushes and forces apart small thickets of sally wattle saplings to

squeeze through. There are no prints of shoes anywhere to show that anyone else has been here. Wherever the bark of trees has unwrapped and fallen in tangled loops across his way, or where there is concealing grass, Lucas stamps his feet to frighten away any hidden snakes.

He follows the faded path as if there is a question or an answer that waits, fallen apart and rusting, somewhere in the shadows and waiting to revive a memory; something for him to know. Perhaps below the ridge further down where they used to camp, where the air was cool even in summer, where on windy days the roar of the wind high above was reduced to a strange silence below, the tension of it increasing the further they descended. As children, they would look up and see wind-herded clouds being dragged into strands or hurled across the top of the valley in turbulent masses. Down here, nothing has changed, he thinks. It's probably much the same as it was before the arrival of the settlers. When he's below the thrumming twist of the air, the temperature becomes cooler and bird calls bounce off the rocks, sounding louder, closer and sharper. Long ago there was a camp fire in the dark, he remembers, and he was between it and the shadows of the forest.

Towards the bottom of the slope the rattle of water sloshes over rocks and a few steps later the moisture of the creek slips into his shoes from beneath the bracken. Then, to his surprise, upon turning a corner, he comes face to face with a large brown owl sitting on a stump at the side of the track, dappled with the same muted grey as the weathered wood beneath its nails. Its yellow eyes stare his way, blinking, but unseeing because of the shaft of bright light upon it. He skirts around it and hurries on. Ants begin to swarm about his feet. He climbs the fallen trunks of trees lying across the path. A stirring in the leaves, a breath of damp foretells the imminence of rain. Then he finds the picnic shelter at last, just as it begins to rain. Its rusty, corrugated iron roof, leans

lopsided on frayed, ant-eaten posts that have weathered to silvery-grey. He sits on the remains of a table.

Lucas opens the box and sees a red hat, as good as new. He lifts it out and holds it up. It has a wide brim, gently curved. About its crown there is a broad, pleated ribbon, more deeply coloured, and from beneath this a short veil falls to what he guesses would have been just a little below eye-level. He imagines Mother's blue eyes shining behind it. A young hat. So lively and happy.

Something glistens: the corner of a tarnished silver frame catches the light and in the frame is a sepia photo of himself as a young man, except he knows instantly when he looks at the clothes that it's not him at all. This man is his father. He turns the photo over and finds an inscription: "Jack at Newport, 1938".

He turns it over again and again for a long time, as if hoping that the writing might somehow extend, wanting it to say more, to explain magically. He removes the letters and photos from the hatbox one by one and arranges them by dates, into a sequence and begins to read. Some of the letters are tied with ribbon and there is a photo of Mother, leaning on the rail of a ship, holding a streamer. The last of the letters from Jack has an inky fingerprint on it. It reads,

*My Darling Camilla,*

*I've asked my sister Emily to give you this letter. It's to say goodbye and wish you all the best in the life you choose, even though you have not chosen me and to tell you that there's no one else I'll love and I'll be thinking of you all the time I'm away and hoping when I come back you'll not be married and will marry me.*

*I'll come marching back with lots of medals to impress you and you'll be waiting for me in your red hat. But if you're not the one for me, as you have said so often before, then never be saddened because there is no need. You must do what is right for you and no hard feelings. At least you will not have all my*

*pestering you to marry me to put up with. You will not have Christian pestering you either because he will also be enlisted by now. He bet me he would be first to join the army, but I won, so the two of us will be away and neither of us will be sent white feathers for being cowards. Do you still think you might become a nurse? I would get injured on purpose if I knew you might look after me!*

*Much love to my forever beautiful girl in the red hat, who will always be the girl of my dreams. I carry your photograph with me, over my heart of course!*

*I love you,*

×××      *Jack*

When he has finished reading he thinks what a flat, angry cul-de-sac his Mother's life had become, under the staring remonstrance of the Wilson portraits, in a house full of possessions that she felt had never been hers. Then she had found out that Jack would never return. Lucas holds the yellowed clipping:

***Montevideo Maru torpedoed off Luzon 1<sup>st</sup>  
July, 1942 by the American submarine USS  
Sturgeon.***

*It transpires that of the 845 Australians captured when the Japanese invaded New Britain in 1942, none has survived. Over a 1000 captured men, including 136 civilians and 20 missionaries, were transferred to Rabaul where they were used as labourers on the wharves until 22<sup>nd</sup> June, when they were marched onto the 10,000 ton Montevideo Maru for transfer to Japan.*

*The Montevideo Maru sailed without escort and was torpedoed by the American submarine USS Sturgeon shortly before dawn, approximately 7 miles off Bojeador lighthouse, near Luzon. The submarine launched four torpedoes, two of which struck. It is believed the vessel sank within minutes and that there was no hope of escape for any of the prisoners as they were beneath locked hatches.*

He sits for several moments. 'I look exactly like you,' he says to the photo of Jack. You were on that ship weren't you?' 'Explained at last,' he says. Now I can send the Man away forever.' He knows that when the Man goes there will be a huge space inside to fill and he fears that he'll miss what was there before and perhaps be too frightened to lose it and that what he wants to throw away will want to come back.

And then the full force of the darkening rain comes. Above him the sheets of rusty iron clatter and flap against the nails that hold them to the crumbling, ant-eaten posts. The rain lashes so noisily that the rattling rhythm and hiss of its pounding sounds like waves and these are the only noises he hears for a while. Then the black shapes appear and add their voices to the clamour against the tin above him, battering him, enclosing him, surrounding and engulfing him, blotting out any view beyond the flailing limbs of the trees. He hears the Man shouting, Mother shouting, 'You tricked him. You tricked Jack into enlisting! You killed him! And now you've got me! You've got *me!*'

'And his bastard!' Christian's voice hit back.

Above him, through the din, quite close, the harsh, sad wail of crows, **aark**, ark-rk, quark, **aaark**. Their dark shapes descend, wings flapping heavily with rasping feathers. Whirring elusively about the periphery of his vision, they disappear into the rain-smoked blackness of the trees. Vegetation lifts in the wind, scrapes and rattles, flies into his face beating as it did long ago in his childhood, pushing open a lost door to a memory, letting him stumble down its corridor. Mother holds a photograph of a man and weeps. Memory, as immediate as a hand touching his shoulder, returns. He has found this photograph. Jack's eyes are kind. But in Hugh's eyes there was always that same look that Christian had – the hook of the owl's beak: cruel, greedy and blind to wisdom. He sees that Hugh is an enemy. Does he know that Lucas is not a Wilson?

He puts the hat back in its box, grabs at the papers and photos and gets them back too. Then, when the rain eases, he makes his way back to the car, hunching over his newly found history to protect it from the water shrugged off when the retreating wind shakes the trees higher up the slope.

Lucas is appalled. He remembers being in his cot and how he'd seen Christian knock Mother to the floor. He'd raped her and she hated him. They hated one another and their children. Christian hated him because he was Jack's son and despised Hugh because he lumbered around in leg-irons. Every day Mother had seen Lucas grow more and more like Jack, loving and hating the reminder, and every day she had watched Hugh become more and more like Christian. Had she been tortured by self-hate as well, for not marrying Jack and marrying Christian instead, or had she locked this away with her red hat, hoping one day that Jack would walk back into her life, not knowing he was dead?

## Chapter Six

It's dusk when Lucas returns to the hospital, the light recumbent in a haze of purple and orange, the distance streaked by receding bands of rain. He waits in the corridor outside the recovery room knowing it's Mother's loud calling and groaning he hears.

She's wheeled out, not quite conscious, tossing her head from side to side in pain.

'Where's my purse? My cheque book's in it.'

Lucas had never found the missing cheque book, even when he'd looked very thoroughly the next day amongst the garden ferns where he'd found her purse.

'I'm here,' he tells Mother as the orderly wheels her bed along the corridor. Lucas takes her hand.

'Don't go! Don't go!' she begs. 'When's the operation?'

'You've had the operation, Mother. It's all over. You're okay.'

'Is it over? I'm still here?' Her face crinkles up; her toothless mouth rounds into the agony of a howl. 'I wanted to die. I want to die. Don't let go.' Her head jerks from side to side on the pillow. 'It hurts; it hurts. Why couldn't I be a dog and be shot? Why am I being kept alive?'

'I'm here, I'm here. I'm holding your hand,' Lucas says as the words hit at him. The child in him does not like it that she had intended to go, had wanted to die and had not thought, or worse, had not wanted to say goodbye. He's outraged that she'd not said goodbye, not said anything meaningful to him; had intended not to be there and there had not been anything, not even a note like, 'Back in five Minutes' or 'Gone to supermarket, Love, Mother'.

'Don't go!'

'I'm squeezing your hand. Can you feel it now?'

'Where are you?'

'I'm here.'

'Don't let go. Don't go away. Don't let Christian in. Where am I?'

'We're pushing you back to your room, Love,' says one of the orderlies.

'I don't want to be pushed. Don't let him push me! Don't go.'

'I'm still here, Mother.' Lucas walks alongside, accompanies her in the lift, walks with her along another corridor and sits down next to her in her room, holding her hand. She squirms and twists in pain. 'Where are you, Lucas? Where are you?'

'I'm still here, Mother.'

'Don't go! You mustn't leave me,' she says again and again.

Lucas watches, reassuring her frequently while the nurse inserts a catheter that will bring pain relief. There's another catheter for her bladder and a tube to drain fluids from the hip incision.

'Don't go.'

'I'm here. I'm holding your hand.'

'My hip hurts,' she calls out.

Lucas sits next to her, holding her hand, constantly reassuring. Suddenly she falls asleep. Outside, the light softens into dusk and finally night. From time to time Mother moans and opens her eyes briefly. 'Ah, good, you're still here,' she tells him.

The night duty nurse comes and raises the rails on the sides of her bed.

'Can't you give her more pain relief?' Lucas asks.

'We have to go slowly,' he explains. 'She's already on such a high dose of morphine any more would be dangerous.'

Mother abruptly opens her eyes. 'Why didn't I die? I wanted to die.' She writhes as she speaks, beating with her arms against the rails, leaving purple bruises. 'It hurts,' she cries. 'I'm hurting. I'm going mad!'

Lucas holds both of her hands to stop her thrashing about and the nurse tucks Mother's arms under the blankets.

Eventually she settles but opens her eyes from time to time to make sure Lucas is still there. 'I'm so thirsty,' she calls.

Lucas puts the drink cup to her mouth. Her lips are dry and flaking. She chokes. He takes the cup away and wets a cloth and squeezes drops of water onto her lips then uses it to cool her face.

'Ah,' she says, 'thank you. That feels so nice.'

A trolley rattles against the door and a meal is brought in. 'Here we are,' a voice announces. 'Enjoy, God bless.'

Mother does not want to eat.

'I'm here,' he repeats over and over, dizzy with fatigue.

'Where's my purse?' she calls. 'I dropped it when I fell. My cheque book's in it.'

'I'll find it for you, Mother. Don't worry.'

'He pushed me.'

'Who?'

'Christian pushed me.'

His father? The black outside presses against the window. Lucas puts away his suspicion, the hammering awareness that wants to break in. He eats some of the food, now cold, that was left for Mother, wondering what it is. There is a bookmark under the plate. Lucas picks it up and sees, under the picture of Jesus carrying a sheep,

***Shepherd feed thy Flock.*** The night nurse comes in and lowers the blind and takes the food tray away.

Eventually the morphine stops the pain and Mother grows still. A nurse checks her pulse, makes a note then departs. Lucas waits, listening. Mother takes a deep breath. She sighs, her body makes a little jolt and she sleeps.

oOo

Lucas begins to feel so unwell on the drive back to the house he has to stop several times. Eventually the lights of the township fall into place below the top of the last hill and finally he sees the new estates of angular 'Tuscans' prefaced by lawns mowed short and featuring geometrically accurate paths and contrasting patterns of gravel pricked out by solar garden lights. The added urns and shorn cultivars make their gardens look like circuit boards. At last he reaches the driveway to Mother's house. Rain-heavy shrubs lean into it and narrow the entrance, turning it into a dark tunnel. Lucas feels his Mother's world beginning to close in on him as he edges the car through the gate in the front hedge. The house is hidden by the rain-heavy shrubs and branches of the overgrown trees that have sagged into the driveway.

'I should have left a light on,' Lucas says aloud as he noses the car beneath the rasping foliage.

When he opens the door of the car, Basil rushes from the veranda, yowling, and leaps in. Lucas, distracted, drops the house keys into the darkness.

'What are you doing to me, cat?'

Basil yowls inside the vehicle, looking for Mother and his shadow darts across the front seats and into the back of the car, surreally. It is a noise of lamentation.

'Yes, Mother's in a great deal of pain. You know, don't you, cat? She's not in the car, she's in hospital. Come here, my little friend,' he says, leaning in and catching hold of

him. 'Where did those keys go?' He runs his hand over the seats and the floor of the car then feels about on the wet ground, rain plashing onto him from the shrubs above as the wind stirs. 'Damn!' He shuts the car door to quieten the noise of the cat and then begins to prod carefully with his fingertips into the soggy leaf litter on the driveway. Basil's muffled yowl continues. 'No luck, cat. We'll have to use the spare keys.'

He finds the bottle, without its lid and empty. Then he remembers that Hedda took them, unless the bottle tipped over and spilled the keys somewhere nearby. He puts his hand into the ferns and his fingers meet soft fabric. Mother's purse! No keys inside it. Nothing. He stretches further between the ferns, hands prickled by broken stems and finds her tablets then her glasses, as well as a small pack of tissues. But Hugh and Hedda said she'd fallen over in her bedroom. Perhaps she'd dropped her purse as she made her way along the veranda. Lucas tries to work out what must have happened. She had gone from Hugh's car, along the driveway to the veranda, up the stairs and then to the front door of the house by holding onto the lattice. Why hadn't she had her walking frame? She would have been close to the edge of the veranda. All this by herself? Why hadn't Hugh helped her? If her purse was in the ferns near the driveway, then she must have fallen from the veranda because whenever she went anywhere, she kept her purse on her arm. Mother's words come back: 'He pushed me.' There must have been an argument. Or had she remembered the time Christian had knocked her down?

He runs his hands over the ferns still hearing the lamenting cat and finds more broken stems and crushed fronds. He feels his skin shiver and his insides begin to contract. The shape in the ferns tells him that someone must have fallen. Now he is sure of it. He registers the shock as his belly squeezes on a feeling of huge, roiling emptiness and then he doubles up panting and vomits till there's nothing left. Hugh had pushed her.

The cat continues its desperate cries. Lucas gets unsteadily to his feet and lets it out of the car. 'You sound just like Mother, Basil. She's in agony. You're in agony? Is that what you're telling me? Or that Hugh pushed her?'

He stands sodden in the wind and rain, the purse in one hand and using the other to pin the yowling cat against his chest. 'Locked out! Damn! I've got to think. I can't think with your bloody wailing. Pushed! I must think. Focus, Lucas! What to do?'

He puts Basil on the veranda, then goes out to the roadside and retrieves the garbage bin, still heavy with the mess he'd cleaned from the house. He drags it to the bathroom window and clammers on top of it but finds that the window is locked. He gets down, takes a rock from the garden and uses it to smash the glass muttering, 'How humiliating, having to break into your family home by standing on a bin full of crap!'

He retrieves the front door mat and puts it over the window sill so he won't cut himself on the shards of glass that protrude like shark's teeth from the edge of the window frame and climbs through. Broken glass litters the floor and he hears it crunch into the soles of his shoes. He takes them off before stepping onto the carpet in the hallway and then has to push hard to shut the door behind him and curb the wind. Lucas turns the heater on, feeds Basil and falls to the couch. 'I'll have another door key cut and organise window repairs tomorrow,' he says and suddenly he's asleep.

He wakes, disturbed by the loud thrum of rain on the roof, hitting, hitting. The Man had knocked Mother to the floor. The Man's eyes are close up, glinting, the large nose, then the big hands making the cane handle of the feather duster arc down upon his legs. It's not Christian holding the cane but Hugh. He remembers the windscreen wipers on Hugh's car beating backwards and forwards across the drying mud, the colour of smeared shit on the glass and he sits up, feeling ill.

Yes, the ferns where he'd found the purse were flat and broken!

Basil's eyes glint in the half dark of dawn. Lucas's back aches from lying on the couch. 'Where's the sunny day?' he asks Basil. 'You'd fail your performance review, cat. According to the ancient Egyptians, your eyes are supposed to release the sunlight that you take care of overnight.' Basil shuts his eyes and yawns and Lucas sees only sharp teeth. He goes to the kitchen, followed by the cat, and in passing sees his shadowy duplicate in the mirror. 'Jesus,' he says to himself, 'you look as terrible as you feel.' He makes tea and sits down.

In front of him, the light bulbs he meant to put away keep company with some decaying, black avocados in the fruit bowl. He will throw the avocados out and check the pantry and the cupboards and the deep freeze for anything else that's past its use-by date. Then he'll go to the hospital to see how Mother is. His eyes return to the light bulbs. Why so many? He's found them all over the house. Mother would have, perhaps, turned on a light somewhere and nothing had happened so she could have kept writing down on her shopping list that she needed a light bulb. Had she fallen over because she couldn't see properly and only imagines she was pushed?

No, *Christian pushed me!* That's what she'd said. And there was her worry about the cheque book.

Out in the cold of the morning Lucas hunts again and finds a few more things from Mother's purse lying in the undergrowth, but there's no cheque book.

It was an accident, they'd said. Hugh and Hedda had repeated this several times – perhaps a little too often?

Lucas remembers how Mother fell, long ago when he was too small to get out of his cot. He saw Christian hit and push and hit and push her. He could still hear the sound of the punch Christian gave Mother. It knocked her backwards onto the floor and she hit her head.

Mother stayed on the floor after the Man bent over and hit her again. Her eyes were open but she couldn't see properly.

'Missing Jack, are we?' he asked her. 'We can't have that, can we?' He got on top of her. When she struggled he held her arms out sideways like the man on the cross on the wall.

'No, Christian, don't,' Mother had called out. 'Don't!'

The Man put his hand over Mother's mouth.

'You wouldn't want me to hurt your little darling instead, would you?'

When he got off her there was blood on her nightie.

'Well, well,' the Man had said, doing up his trousers and looking into the cot before he hit Lucas again. 'Look what you've done to your mother. Why don't you look after her? Don't you love her?'

Lucas goes back inside and holds his breath against the sour smell in Mother's room. He replaces the light bulb and presses the switch. The sharp light shifts the darkness abruptly into the familiar shapes of her furniture, exposing the desolation. Lucas must tidy up. He has to look after Mother, but his stomach turns. Not this room yet. He will tidy her kitchen cupboards instead and remove the broken cups and chipped glasses she'd always kept for some reason, their ragged edges waiting to bring blood to mouths and words. He sighs and begins. He wants to phone Anne, but it's too early.

More broken pieces! Whenever Mother had broken something she'd say 'no use crying over spilt milk' and put the pieces away. The shards of the last of her crystal jugs, broken long ago when he was a child and while the Man was away at the war, are still there. Lucas remembers how she'd put the jug out on the veranda for the milkman to fill and how it had slipped from her hands next morning and shattered on the tiles. Milk plumed into the air, sunshine flaring from the pieces of crystal. Then the contents rolled

in shiny curling waves of white across the static geometrics of the yellow, ochre and russet, imported tiles. Mother cried and Lucas had said, 'No use crying over spilt milk,' and she had laughed. He knew how to make Mother laugh. That was before the Man came back from the war and knocked Mummy to the floor. That was before Hugh was born.

Lucas finds unopened mail amongst the china. One of the envelopes is from Mother's old school and contains a magazine featuring a bright-eyed picture of the beloved former headmistress: **Ms Emily Cooper, M.A., Celebrates her Ninetieth Birthday**. Ms Cooper had surprised the student interviewers by confessing to having a convict ancestor who was transported to Australia for life for taking twigs from a hedge to keep warm in winter. A wealthy judge had seized the common land belonging to several families and enclosed it, leaving them to fend for themselves. Her ancestor refused to leave, so he was arrested and charged with the theft of the wood he had gathered. Lucas shakes his head and puts the magazine aside for Peggy Gower. He wants to see her and thank her for the hatbox, so he'll give her the magazine along with some flowers.

Amongst the mail there's a bank statement showing that several surprisingly large amounts have been withdrawn from Mother's account. What could this be about? The money was paid to builders in Sydney. Lucas rubs his eyes and forehead, conscious that his head begins to ache. He will take the remaining mail with him and check through it in the car when Mother has her rest.

The phone rings and it is Anne, up early. 'What happened? Is Camilla alright? Why didn't you phone last night? I've been so worried.'

He tries to tell her, but his words seem to belong to someone else. Anne interrupts.

'What's wrong Lucas?' she asks. 'Is there something you're not telling me?'

Lucas feels cold and begins to shake. 'I met an old lady, someone who went to school with Mother. Peggy Gower. She's been a friend of hers for years and none of us knew. She's up here visiting her daughter, Valerie... and she gave ...gave me, an old hatbox of ... of Mother's, full of her letters and photographs. She'd been entrusted by Mother to give them to me.' He hesitates, then says, 'I think Mother wanted to marry someone else because she was pregnant and he was killed in the war, so that's –that's how she ... she ended up marrying him, Christian.'

Lucas hears the gasp at the end of the line. 'So you're ... You mean you think Christian wasn't your father? No wonder Camilla's been so unhappy and bitter. How awful to become pregnant and have to marry someone else and then find out you don't like them. Divorce wasn't the done thing in those days either, was it?'

'Being a single mother wasn't acceptable either,' he says quietly, with a tremble in his voice. 'Or abortion.'

'Oh, Lucas! Camilla should have Christian. Why didn't she? Surely it would have been possible after she became so wealthy.'

'I think I know who my real father was. Could you – could you – maybe you ...?' His hand wanders across the pain of his swollen face. He rallies. 'Could you find out where the headmistress of Mother's old school lives? She featured in their magazine recently so she's still alive. Would you mind? Her name's Emily Cooper and she could be my aunt. Peggy Gower says that Emily knew Mother.'

oOo

When Lucas phones the hospital the nurse tells him his mother is comfortable and dozing and it would be better if he visited later. So he makes more tea and eats another slice of toast and feels a little better. He remembers that the Man would not hit him if he kept out of the way and did useful things and Mother would smile and approve because

she didn't like housework or gardening. Afterwards Lucas would slip away and read books about other places and other people or hide high up in the branches of the camphor laurel tree, reading to it and not answering Mother or the Man if they called for him.

By lunch time, Lucas realises he doesn't need to do this any more; he'd been ambushed by the past and is now late for the drive to the hospital. He hasn't found the missing keys either and resolves to use the servant's entry at the side of the house until he can have a spare front door key cut. And there's the pane of glass to replace in the bathroom window. He makes a list.

Hugh doesn't return to the house that day or the next and there's no reply when Lucas phones him, nor from Hedda, so he leaves updates about Mother's progress on their answering machine. Mid-week he discovers Bethany's mobile number in Mother's phone book and tries that. Bethany says her parents are too busy dealing with builders and plumbers who are coming and going. They're replacing guttering, updating the bathroom, re-doing the kitchen and installing a sun-deck.

One evening when Lucas returns from the hospital he finds Hugh inside, watching television and eating ice-cream. Hugh's been good. Hugh's got an ice-cream.

Hugh doesn't respond to Lucas's greeting, but the look is there and he can almost hear the voice that goes with it: you're in trouble. I've got an ice-cream. I've got an ice-cream. I've been good. I've got an ice-cream. I've been good. You're in trouble. I've been good! Haven't I Mummy?

The flick and shine of his eyes in the half light shows Lucas that Hugh has registered his presence. Hugh licks his ice cream. Lucas pulls an armchair up and sits near him, hoping they can talk.

'Hugh?'

No answer.

Lucas wants to confess to the lost key.

In a portrait above Hugh an ancestor's thumb hooks confidently in a sash about his waist while his other hand holds the reins taut with the curbed bit keeping down the head of a horse showing the whites of his eyes. Christian's in the line up too. The Man, his body elongated El Greco style, is painted in a heavy impasto. He sits in the same chair, his fingers outlined with the palette knife in scratches that go through the paint to the surface of the canvas. Rhythms of stiff curves seem to grow into liana-like curlicues and vines, firming their grip on the carved arms of the chair in the exact place where Hugh's fingers now wander. The carvings incorporate creatures that look like those on ancient maps, strange animal-things that inhabit the dangerous edges at the end of the world, perhaps there to warn the adventurous about the perils of sailing in unconventional directions. Lucas feels glad he was not named Christian.

Hugh continues to watch television until there's an advertisement. Without acknowledging Lucas, he goes to the kitchen and returns with more ice-cream.

Lucas uses the moment to explain about the key. 'Hugh, I lost the front door key in the dark a few nights ago and had to break the bathroom window to get in. I'll fix the window and get another key cut before I leave.'

No response. One of Hugh's hands taps the edge of the arm of the chair before beginning a circuit around the carvings. From time to time the hand stops and Lucas hears the click of Hugh's nails marking time on the wood. 'I w-want to ....' His voice seizes. He clears his throat.

Images, advertisements tumble across the screen, accompanied by an increase in volume; patterns and colours flicker over Hugh's face. The furniture in the room shimmies in the jumping light. The shadows of the bronzes dance against the walls. The

stern portraits jump in and out of focus so that their faces, usually so stiffly posed, appear to move in the trembling light. Hugh renews his struggle for words.

'We – We Ww-want to ...' he says, still without looking at Lucas, 'w-want to ...'

Lucas knows what he's about to say.

'...The house, to b-buy.' He starts again. 'I ... out. Out. Buy you out.' Then the blunt sentence emerges: 'I'm ... I want to b-buy you out.'

Hugh holds up a hand to stop Lucas responding.

Lucas leans back.

Hugh holds his hand up again. 'You, you could c-come here for a holiday.' There's a pause. 'F-f-free of charge,' he adds, his eyes still on the television.

Lucas knows he'll never want to come here for a holiday. 'Where did Mother fall over?'

'Not listening,' says Hugh.

'How did Mother fall over? Did you push her?'

'Not t-talking.'

'Then I'd like to say something.'

'Not listening. Not t-talking,' Hugh cries, looking terrified and leaps from his chair. Clutching the bowl of ice-cream to his chest, he runs from the room.

Lucas hears the front door fling open and bang shut. He follows Hugh part of the way and, from the veranda, sees him run down the path to the studio, his shadow flickering. For a moment his agitated silhouette is caught by the light from the studio doorway. He looks back as if fearing pursuit, dropping his bowl as he fumbles with the door. He finds it locked, gets his keys out, drops them, picks them up, manages to get the key in the lock, hurls the door open, enters and slams it after himself.

'Mad,' Lucas says as he goes inside. There's no point in trying to talk with Hugh, he decides. He turns off the television, switches on the lights and looks about. 'Hugh always wanting things; wanting, wanting,' he addresses the portraits aloud. 'Little brother wants you and everything else. But if he has you, will he be satisfied or will there be something more? I suppose there will always be something else. What he really wanted was to be a little child who was loved by a loving family and he never got that.' Reaching out to Hugh is like taking hold of a knife blade. He looks around. There is the rare green Chinese vase with the crackle glaze; the Buddha in ebony inlaid with silver; the Japanese lacquer ware; the art deco table; the Clarice Cliff vase; the bronze elephants whose ears are lined with gold leaf; the cabinet full of crystal; the ornately carved furniture. He sighs. If only they didn't reek of so much greed and unhappiness.

Later, Lucas goes to the studio door and asks, 'Do you want to come to the hospital with me in the morning?'

'N-No.'

'Will you be having dinner by yourself tonight, Hugh, or do you want to have it with me up in the house?'

'With you in the h-house,' says the broken voice from behind the locked door. It is the voice of the Hugh who was sent to his room to wait for Christian to beat him.

oOo

Hugh's car is gone again in the morning, so Lucas buys fresh flowers from the local florist and stops for breakfast on the way to the hospital. Will Mother like them? 'Remember the flowers?' she used to say, 'and when you hid behind the couch?' He never liked that story.

Lilies, he remembers. He doesn't like lilies any more either. 'Hide,' she'd said, 'hide behind the couch.' Mother wanted Lucas to watch what happened; she liked sharing

secrets. Lucas had been her special friend all that day. The room smelled of Easter lilies because someone had given her lots of them: large, white, generous blooms with yellow stamens.

'Hide,' Mother had said to little Lucas. Lucas knew why; she'd heard the Man walking down the hall and Mother didn't like it when his feet made that happy sound.

Lucas crouched behind the couch. There would be a surprise.

Mother stood in front of the flowers and pretended to arrange them. 'You must be very, very quiet,' she'd said without turning her head. 'Don't let the Man see you.'

How did she know he called him the Man?

The Man came in smiling. Today was a happy day. 'Who gave you the flowers?' he asked Mother.

'An old friend.' She smiled too. It was a smile that wasn't in the eyes, a pretend smile that lasted a little too long, like one that you make for someone who's taking a photograph.

'An old friend? Old? How old?' The Man seemed amused and then he noticed the card and read it out loud, turning it into a question by raising his eyebrows as he did so. 'Love from Norton.' He scratched the top of his head.

'We used to play tennis together. You've met him,' Mother had said, adjusting one of the blooms she'd moved once or twice before. 'Norton's such a gentleman and so good looking. I do so like him.'

'What a charmer,' said the Man, the happy look gone.

'Yes Christian, he took me to lunch in his Bugatti – the one you used to own before you lost everything. Lost everything except me, that is,' Mother continued, a little vaguely. Her attention was on the flowers but Lucas knew that all the time she looked through the flowers at the Man, ready for his expression to change, waiting, waiting, like

a hawk holding onto a tiny breeze, balanced on air, waiting, waiting, floating ever so gently, but ready to pounce, drop suddenly with claws extended so she could hook anything cheerful out of the Man's heart, tear it out. 'It's been *so long* since I've had such *fun*,' she'd added. 'And it was so nice of him to take your Hugh out for a ride too, wasn't it?'

There was a silence; the words 'Your Hugh' had registered. The Man turned and walked towards the door.

'I explained to Norton how Daddy managed to get most of your assets transferred into my name before you were declared bankrupt,' Mother smiled, 'and he said nobody would need to know how you got out of paying what you owed the shareholders. He was sure his friends would continue to accept you, out of courtesy to me, because they respect my social status.'

'The ever-convivial Camilla,' said the Man. His tongue flicked over his lips and the smile had altogether gone from his eyes.

Lucas kept very still.

Mother dusted some pollen off the cedar tabletop with her feather duster. 'Pollen stains if it gets on your clothes,' Mother said lightly, 'and we wouldn't want any stains on our wonderful family, would we?' Her laugh skittered lightly across the wide space of the room as a stone might if it were flicked in fun across water. Mother held a lily to her nose as she spoke and snipped the stalk smaller. 'That's better! We can't have a limp lily pretending to be a tall poppy, can we?' she chirruped.

The Man folded his arms. Lucas saw a small muscle quiver in the hinge of his jaw.

'Oh, has Camilla upset her bunnykins? There, there!' She patted him, the snipped stalk of her flower oozing sap onto the arm of his shirt.

The Man unfolded his arms from the hug he'd put around his chest, the fingers of his right hand curling up tightly into a trembling fist. Mother moved away from him.

Lucas couldn't see them anymore because the couch was in the way. He'd wanted to run from the tension but couldn't do so without being seen. His heart hammered and his chest strained to suck and pant in air but he resisted till his ribcage hurt, knowing that he'd be hit instead of Mother if the Man discovered him.

'Daddy agrees with Norton,' Mother added, stirring, prodding and poking the way you did if you wanted to enrage a nest of bull ants and make them hop out with mandibles snapping.

The Man stood near the couch and Lucas's face wasn't far from the curled fist.

'Norton wants what is best for Hugh and for Lucas too, of course,' said Mother. 'He said he'd pay their school fees if you felt you couldn't.'

That's when Lucas heard the throaty sound of Norton's motor car coming up the driveway bringing Hugh home and the squeak of its brakes as it stopped near the veranda and then the clomping of Hugh running down the hall over the polished floorboards, running because he was happy, *Bang, bang*. He thumped as he ran because he'd been born with bent legs and wore heavy leg irons to straighten them.

'Mother?' he called. 'Mother?'

Lucas wanted to call out: *Don't come in! Don't come in! The Man will hit you!*

Hugh opened the door.

'Well, well,' said the Man, shaking his head at little Hugh. 'Don't we know about knocking? Haven't Mother's socially superior, old-money family and her socially superior, old-money friends, taught you how to knock?'

'I've been for a ride in Mister Norton's Bugatti, Daddy, and he said I could go to a private school, because he and Granpa will recommend me. Norton said I need a good education and if I work hard I'll be rich one day like you were and have my own Bugatti.'

The Man pointed to the door. 'You're late, Hugh. Being late has to be punished. That's what you call discipline. People who want to be rich and to own Bugattis have to be disciplined and learn how to be punctual. You need to learn how to tell the time. Go to your room. I'll be there in a while to teach you what happens if you don't.' He pulled the feather duster from Mother's hand.

Hugh began to back away. 'But I need to go to the bathroom,' he wailed.

'Let him go, Christian,' Mother pleaded.

The Man pointed. 'Walk through the doorway, Hugh.'

'But Christian,' Mother remonstrated, wringing her hands, 'he doesn't know how to tell the time yet.'

'That's why he needs a good reason to learn then, doesn't he? Spare the rod and spoil the child,' said Christian, flexing the bamboo handle. 'Or would it be better if I hit you?'

Mother snatched the feather duster back.

'Go to your room,' shouted the Man at Hugh.

Hugh tried to run through the doorway, hoping to escape the swing of the Man's open hand. His leg irons were too heavy and Lucas saw the blow that caught him hard behind the back of the head before he could get past, so that he staggered, sprawling into the next room where he lay on the floor crying and wet himself.

'Go to your room,' the Man shouted again, 'and take this with you.' He pulled the feather duster out of Mother's hands and threw it after Hugh. 'Now, Lucas,' the Man

turned his attention to the couch, 'you can come out. Did you see what Mummy made me do? Do I need to teach you a lesson about punctuality and discipline too?'

Lucas shook his head.

'Well, you'll have to tell me whenever Hugh or Mummy do anything wrong, otherwise Daddy will have to punish you. Proper gentlemen shouldn't have to hit ladies, should they, Camilla?'

## Chapter Seven

'Hello there, how are you, mate?' Lucas hears the voice, the blare of a car radio and the chug of a Volkswagen. It's Todd in his yellow Volkswagen accompanied by the huge **WAAWAA WEE WAAH** beat, tumbling out through his window.

Lucas's eyes travel to the laden roof-rack. 'Hello, Todd. How are you?'

'Helping my Mum with the moving,' he shouts. 'Lovely lady. She doesn't want me to worry about her when I go overseas. So, she's moving into an eco village.' The back seat of the Volkswagen is full of household items.

Lucas sags, 'Really? So you won't worry? You're a lucky man!'

'Speaking of mothers, yours has had lots of visitors this afternoon. She's a character isn't she? Take care.'

**WAA WAA !** He grins and revs off.

*Take care!* He stops walking. Out of the corner of his eyes he registers something that moves – a crow. The shadow is back, bringing with it the fluttering of a memory and the words of a song about a dragon that Mother used to sing, especially when Christian was angry:

*Beware, take care*

*Of the Green-eyed dragon...*

He stops the thought. 'Coffee,' he says aloud. 'Time to have a coffee after the long drive here. I need one and then I'll sit with Mother.' He reasons that her admirers will have gone by then and so he changes direction and goes to the hospital canteen. But

when he nears her room, afterwards, he hears voices. *More visitors? She'll be exhausted!* One of the voices is Hugh's. The other belongs to Mother.

'What a good idea!' Mother sounds happy.

Lucas enters. 'Hello! Thought it might be time to replace your flowers,' he says, putting them on her bedside table, huge orange zinnias and gazanias with sprays of deepest blue cornflowers. 'You said you like blue and orange together.'

'You'll miss me when I'm dead,' says Mother.

Lucas sees her smiling through them, the way she had smiled through the lilies at Christian.

'Careful,' says Mother, 'I don't want pollen on me.'

'I've brought Mother some ice-cream for being good,' says Hugh, but she doesn't want it'.

'You're the one who gets ice-cream for being good. Do what I told you.'

Hugh stops eating the ice-cream and pats his coat pockets.

'Looking for a biro?' Lucas asks, puzzled, and finds him one.

Hugh smiles and takes the biro. Lucas sees his other hand take a cheque book out of his pocket and put it on the bedside table. With the biro poised he looks Lucas in the eye, licks his lips and then smiles at Mother who nods. Lucas knows the look. It's one of conspiracy, the look that goes with Mother's requirement that he must say 'thank you,' for a special gift and he will be expected to say 'yes, I really like it.' He will have to be grateful for what he is about to receive, even if he doesn't like it; even if she reads 'no' in his expression. It's to be a gift with a burden, something cruel.

She smiles at Lucas. 'Hugh found my purse with the cheque book in it. He's a good boy! That's why I gave him power of attorney.'

Lucas feels the brush of something cold run over his skin. Turning his face to the window, he looks out. He won't let them read him but he sees Mother and Hugh reflected in the glass. Mother's smiling.

'Where *is* the purse you found, Hugh?' Lucas asks.

Hugh's face begins working, 'Mmmm – Mmmother. I f-found it and she's *in-in-instructed* me to *pay* you for your visit.' Hugh says it again, managing to speak with disconcerting clarity, without stuttering, without faltering but with that strange, important double puff of air when he uses the word 'Mother.' It's as if he's been appointed her special agent.

'You found Mother's purse?' Lucas turns from the window and, holding out Mother's purse, says, 'This is the purse you told Mother you found. It was in the garden where she fell and you have the cheque book because you took it out after pushing her. Hugh pushed you, didn't he, Mother?'

Hugh looks slapped and he turns towards Mother.

'Nobody loves me, I'm all alone,' says Mother.

Hugh looks towards the door but Lucas blocks his way.

'M-M-other has *in-in-structed* me to *p-pay* ... to-to pay you, pay you, for y-your visit,' he says, drawing himself up and puffing out the words.

Lucas laughs. 'Come on, let's be real, there's nothing much left in the account, Hugh. Take a look at the bank statement that came in the mail this morning. You've been using her money to pay for your house renovations.'

Hugh swallows, eyes darting towards the door. 'The-there's plenty m-more in h-her investment f-fund,' he says, eyes slipping towards the door.

'Hello! Everything alright?' a nurse stands in the doorway looking from Hugh to Lucas and then to Mother.

'Not really,' says Lucas.

Mother, voice rising, tells Lucas, 'Hugh found my purse. *He's* a good boy. He's very busy but *he* visits me – *more* than you do. He tells me what you've been up to!'

'How do you manage to do that, Hugh, if you haven't been to Adelaide for over a decade?'

'I h-have to g-g-go to the bathroom,' Hugh says, thrusting the cheque book into his coat pocket as he pushes past the nurse.

Looking disconcerted, she turns to Lucas. 'Doctor Andrews will be here in a moment to talk with you about moving your mother into post-operative rehabilitation facilities in a week or so,' the nurse says. 'If you wouldn't mind waiting, we'll need a signature.'

'I need to talk with my brother first but I'll be quick,' Lucas answers. He hurries down the corridor, scanning, watching for Hugh's shape, the way he moves, expecting to glimpse him. His focus tightens because of his rage. Hugh's not in the corridor or the washrooms or the cafeteria, so Lucas checks the foyer then goes through the hiss of the sliding doors into the damp half-warmth and busy movement of the day but there's no sign of Hugh or his car in the handicapped parking area. Then he catches sight of Hugh in the distance, hobbling and hopping, looking over his shoulder from time to time. Hugh takes short cuts over lawns and gardens, ignoring the spit and mist of the hospital's garden sprinklers, all unaccountably fully on even after so much rain. He even tramples through the bright gashes of colour of the beds of flesh pink and blood red poppies.

Gripped by the heat of his anger, Lucas follows, heart pumping as if it might distend until it weeps blood. Then, suddenly, shockingly, behind him in the car park he hears the

approaching scrunch of skateboarders and rollerbladers. They whirr about him, ducking, weaving; some leap into the air like brightly coloured tropical fish, falling back with a clatter of hard, thwacking noise as they reconnect with the drizzled, wet bitumen, shouting, laughing. The moment of fracture fades, leaving a silence and in it the mad revving of Hugh's car, the white of its reverse lights and the red jab of its brake lights strobing on and off as he bounces across the traffic humps and exits the car park.

The thrum of his heart and the singing of the blood in his ears leave Lucas shaking and feeling powerless, wanting to hurt like something clawed and angry. As Hugh's car disappears, Lucas's fury collapses in on itself. The ache of it turns into the hard, bright, sharp facets of a pulsing headache.

He finds his own car and sits in it, head resting on the steering wheel, the only sounds about him, the distant hissings of the sprinklers and their mechanical juddering and stuttering and tut-tut-tutting, their noise dwindled by the shut windows of his car.

Hugh's mad, he realises, and had, most probably, pushed Mother. And Mother, although demented, was still capable of hurt. Hugh's words spin in his head: *Mother has in-in...instructed me to pay you for your visit.* Hugh was helping himself to her estate. He's sure Hedda must be aware of it and now he's the one being treated badly because they'd dumped their motivations onto him. Lucas the villain, the thief, probably a house renovator too and a liar! What had he actually done, or not done, he wonders, to deserve this treatment? Being hit by Christian had been easier because he'd always known not to expect to be given reasons, only to understand that Christian had learned to hit him and Hugh instead of Mother because that hurt everyone. But at least Christian's hurt had a beginning, middle and an end. **Smack**, smack, smack! Now after accusation or hurt there was emptiness waiting to be filled by the beating that never followed.

Their tennis had been like that – **Smack**, smack, the hit of the ball and Christian running to the right, Mother running up to the net, **whack**, whack, the volleys seemed endless, running to the left, running to the right. Left, right, back; the tennis ball speeding from Mother’s forehand to Christian’s forehand. He’d whack the ball to her left and she, ambidextrous, would flip the racquet to her left hand and lick the ball gently into a soft, low curve that would lob it just over the other side of the net so that Christian, registering the deception too late, would rush forward, the head of his racquet scooping across the grass. If he tripped or crashed into the net, Mother’s laugh would fill with strident satisfaction.

Lucas remembers, ‘**Fault!** **Whack, Smack, ‘Ace!**’ Christian’s serve had knocked a paling off the back fence. Mother shouted that he’d aimed right at her face. Next, a return by Christian to Mother’s left. She moved the racquet to her left hand and ran to the net, belting the ball so hard the noise sounded like a shot.

‘Well done, Camilla,’ called her admirers. The winner got the applause.

After these matches there would be several weeks of concord between them, the Man and Mother. The bedroom door would be shut, frequently, and after the time of absurd happiness the beatings of Lucas or Hugh would resume.

*He’s a good boy. He’s very busy; he visits me – more than you do.*

Lucas must be punished. He thumps his head against the steering wheel to the rhythm of the racquet strokes. The smash of the ball against the racquet strings has the rhythm of the feather duster’s cane handle. **Whack**, smack, he hits his head against the steering wheel. Hugh’s been the good boy and he will get ice cream. He lets the pain cut into his face until he tastes blood in his mouth. He will feel better after he’s punished himself.

Again, the rattle and hiss of skateboarders and rollerbladers crossing the gravel and bitumen and the flash of colour as they plummet through the car park. Here one moment, gone the next.

If he accuses Hugh there will be nothing tangible. If he fights Hugh for a fair share of the estate, a legal challenge will only prolong and intensify the enmity and leave a huge bill to pay lawyers, irrespective of who wins or loses. He'll need to be as mean-spirited as Hugh to succeed and if Hugh inherits he'll give Lucas nothing and if Lucas inherits and gives him half, he won't be thanked. Nothing will change. Most likely, Hugh had already spent as much as he could to prevent Lucas from having anything. Reaching out has achieved nothing; putting up with Hugh has achieved nothing; being patient has achieved nothing, probably empowered him and when he tries to talk with him, Hugh won't listen. Time to go back to Adelaide?

Someone knocks on the window of his car. It's Todd, the nurse. Lucas winds down the window.

'Hello,' says Todd, 'Doctor Andrews couldn't wait until you came back. He left your mother's papers in Reception for you to read and sign. You could ... My God! What's happened to your head, mate?'

'Banged it on the steering wheel.'

'Silly bugger! Come on. I'll take you to Outpatients. They'll glue you together.'

Lucas looks uncertain.

'Do you have to head back now, before they close the road?'

'Close the road?'

'Rain, mate! Lots of water and more on the way. You might have to stay in town for a while if you can't get through.'

'There's a back road,' says Lucas.

'Then let's get you repaired. I'll walk with you to make sure you don't keel over on the way.'

When Lucas, puffy-faced, emerges from Outpatients, he checks for Hugh's car in the space reserved for the handicapped and, not finding it, trudges across the soggy lawns and around the flower beds with their broken and wounded flowers all the way down to the lower car park. Disappointed again, he returns to the hospital and has another coffee.

As he returns to Mother's room he becomes aware that the corridor seems unusually quiet. He doesn't hear her calling out that she's all alone and that no one loves her and he begins to wonder if there's been an undertow of music that until now he's taken for granted and the silence is because it's been turned off. Perhaps it's the hiss of the air conditioning that's missing? Or is it because his anger is still at work? He's not sure until he begins to shiver. Surprised, he realises his hands are cold and the warm hospital tells him his skin is quite damp. The drizzle from the garden sprinklers and his agitation must have worked their way into his clothes and the clamminess lingers. By now he's nearly at the end of the corridor and still can't hear Mother's voice.

Something waits; he becomes aware of it as he walks, its shadowy presence, poised, sleepless and patiently attentive. It surrounds Lucas and grows beyond him until it takes on the hiss of a turbulence that won't be locked outside. It is something old that batters its way through the nothing, the invisible. He puts his hand out to steady himself against the wall but cannot stop himself from falling. He sees Mother swimming down, down through the light, towards the dark shadow of a ship, her red hat dancing about her.

He is not sure how long he lies there. He knows Mother is dead. When his vision clears he realises that someone has taken him by the arm and helps him to stand up. It's Todd. 'I'll be alright,' he tells him. Doctor Andrews, holding a stethoscope, looks up as Lucas enters, still a little dizzy and helped by Todd. Gloria comes across to Lucas and puts her arm around him.

Mother's mouth hangs open and her bright blue, wide open eyes no longer quiver towards the light but look emptily his way, hazing over even as he watches. He peers at her more closely, holding his breath as if the noise of it might disturb her and, seeing there's no longer any pulse beating erratically in her neck, sits down. He had watched the small, struggling beat of it whenever he'd visited, the weakening of it, like the wings of an exhausted bird that has tried too long to get through the glass of a window. Mother has escaped.

And Hedda sits on the other side of the bed her blue eyes dented by shock, holding Mother's hand, her face close to Mother's. She looks at Lucas, who notices that today she has used bright lipstick. 'Where have you been?' he asks. 'I've phoned so many times.'

'Where have *I* been? Where have *you* been?' the incongruous scarlet lips in the pale, blotched face, demand. 'Where were you when you were needed? You look as if you've been in a brawl. Where is Hugh? What have you done to him? Hugh's told me what you've been up to!'

Lucas does not answer.

Doctor Andrews takes his stethoscope from Mother's chest. 'We paged you over the intercom... tried to find you ...' Bending closer, he shines a torch into Mother's eyes. 'Yes, I'm afraid – she's gone; it was quite sudden. Quite sudden.' He seems surprised,

as if the event should have been listed on his schedule. Then, turning to Lucas, he says, 'So sorry.'

Lucas leans across and shuts Mother's eyes.

Hedda, hunched, looks down at Mother. 'She asked for a cup of tea, just before,' she says still holding her hand. 'She died as it arrived.'

The cup of tea that was supposed to make things better, Lucas thinks. 'I want to sit with Mother for a while, Hedda.'

She does not get up.

'I want to sit with Mother,' Lucas insists, 'by myself.'

'You've left it a bit late, haven't you?' she replies, continuing to hold Mother's hand.

'You can come back later, Mrs Wilson, if you wouldn't mind,' Doctor Andrews says.

Hedda stands, reluctantly. Upon reaching the door, she turns upon Lucas, prising an energy out of herself that accumulates into a contortion that animates her face and cuts through her tear-filled eyes. Her pupils contract to small dark points and her expression is vicious with joy. 'It was Hugh she wanted at the end,' she flings at him, her voice full of venom. 'She asked for *Hugh*.'

oOo

Anne answers the phone almost as soon as it rings. 'Lucas? I'm so glad you phoned. I had a feeling something had happened. Are you alright? Where are you now?' Anne wants to know. 'She'd just asked for a cup of tea? So like her, poor thing.'

'Is it raining in Adelaide?

'No. Dry as usual,' says Anne, 'and warmer than it should be. Why?'

'Clear sky?'

'Yes.'

'Thank God for that!'

'Why?'

'I'm glad we moved to Adelaide.'

'Are you still at the hospital?' Anne asks.

'I'm at the hospital but I'm coming back to Adelaide. There's nothing I can do up here. The situation's impossible.'

'You're getting out? Good,' says Anne. 'Poor Camilla, she wanted to die, didn't she? Such an unhappy person and for so long! But Lucas, you mightn't be able to leave. I've been watching the news and the weather reports say you're likely to be cut off by flooding. There's been a huge run-off from the rains and it's going to meet up with a king tide. Why don't you drive down to Sydney and I'll come up and meet you? You could do with a break before the funeral.'

Whilst waiting for the reckoning, he thinks.

'I have to go back to the house for my things so it'll have to be tomorrow.'

'Lucas, sometimes it's hard to leave what you're used to, even if you've never liked it, so promise you won't stay a moment longer than you need to.'

He feels the pang when he says, 'I tried to do the right thing, didn't I?'

'Again and again, Lucas. I'm not sure you should be driving all that way to your mother's place after what you've been through. Can't you stay somewhere nearby?'

'Yes, I'll go back tomorrow and I want to see Peggy Gower before I leave.'

'What's wrong, Lucas? You're sounding a bit strange.'

'I'm exhausted,' he says. 'And Hugh ran off after I asked him about how he came to have Mother's cheque book.'

'Lucas. You shouldn't be driving! Make sure you stay somewhere local. There must be a motel somewhere near such a large hospital. I'll come up to Sydney tomorrow and book us into a hotel and I'll phone to let you know where to meet me. I want you to promise not to drive all the way back there tonight.'

'Promise.'

The echo of Hedda's voice won't leave Lucas: 'You'll be getting what she thought you were worth, Lucas, and that wasn't much!'

She'd shaken her fist at him as he'd left the hospital. 'You went and lived in Adelaide and kept your health and sanity. I'm the one who had to endure her. Hugh always put the spiteful, manipulative, lying old harridan before me and now that you're back he's become just like her. His health is a mess because of the two of you. I *deserve* a few home renovations after all that I've put up with!'

The memory of her contorted face accompanies him as he drives back to Mother's house to collect his belongings. Hedda had slumped to the floor in the foyer, sobbing so hard it shook her. 'We deserved ... we deserved.' Her body doubled up as she put her hands over her face, rocking, rocking, forwards and backwards.

'Come along Mrs Wilson,' Doctor Andrews had intervened and helped her up. 'Come along. Sit here ...'

oOo

Overnight, enough water has accumulated to cover the flats where the Christmas Bells used to grow and it spills over the raised edges of the road. The trolleys in the supermarket car park stand wheel deep in water and the houses on their new islands where the mangroves once thrived now look like floating houseboats. Several centimetres of water cover the wooden decking of the wharf restaurant and the hire

boats have been pulled from the water and lie, dragged high up, on the embankment. The restaurant's furniture is stacked nearby, legs of tables and chairs showing from beneath a huge tarpaulin.

Peggy Gower, dressed in orange, opens the door and laughs when she sees Lucas looking so dishevelled. 'Hello, young man. You didn't get stuck?'

'Hello. Sorry I'm late,' he apologises.

'You used the back road?'

'No, I managed to get through just before they closed the bridge. I had to pick up another front door key in the village.'

'There's something ...'

'You have been busy! And look, the sun's come out! You've brought a ray of sunshine! So glad you rang. You're forgiven for being the possessor of a mobile telephone. They appear to have their uses after all! How lovely to have you visit. The locals will wonder what brings you knocking at the door of an old and faded lady like me.'

Lucas forces a smile. He wants to tell her that Mother has died.

'Should I ignore your facial injuries? Or should I assume you've been duelling with a pirate for the privilege of having a cup of tea with me?'

'Duelling with a pirate,' says Lucas. 'A cup of tea will help revive me.' He wonders how to let her know about Mother. 'There's something ...'

Peggy plunges into the space left by his hesitation. 'I'd come to the conclusion that the only pirates available for duelling around this coastline were the marauding tradesmen whose customers are the victims who lose the traditional arm or leg. You'll drive back to Sydney on the old road?'

'Yes, that's how I'm ...'

'Good! Good! Old wisdom, old wisdom! If Valerie hadn't listened to me she would have bought land near the new shopping centre where it floods regularly, and will probably do so even more frequently now that the swamp's been filled in. Her house would have sailed with the tide. The state-of-the-art planning for this isolated and recently discovered hamlet is just so dicky! No one bothered to study the reality of the topography. Speaking of which, what do you think of my kaftan? It disguises so much of my topography there's almost enough room under it for my walking frame! And poor Valerie ... she's missed out on seeing you again. She had so much she wanted to ask you last time.' Again the laugh.

'I don't know how to tell you this,' Lucas begins.

Peggy stops talking. 'I know. I knew as soon as I saw you. You looked, you look ... so dreadful. So exhausted. Camilla ...? Has she ...? I didn't want to know ... so sad.' Peggy's eyes well with tears. She takes a handkerchief from her sleeve and cries, 'The last of my old friends.'

Lucas puts his arm around her.

'She loved my perfume so much but it never worked on her. So much didn't work for her! I tried so hard to help her,' she sobs. Then suddenly angry, she says, 'Her stupid, stupid parents are to blame, not wanting her to marry Jack!' She grows quiet then takes Lucas's hand. 'She was expecting *you*. But if she'd listened to me you wouldn't have been born because I offered to help her to have an illegal abortion. Thank God she didn't.' She clasps her hands and puts them under her chin. 'Make me talk about other things for a while, Lucas. I have to calm down. You didn't have to use the back road, you said?'

'I'm going back that way,' says Lucas.

'Clever man. That's the one the bullockies used to get the timber out in the old days. All that lovely cedar. Christian's father made a fortune out of it, of course. Money, money. That's all they ever thought about. There used to be photos of the bullockies and their teams on the walls of your mother's parlour. The logs were so huge the wagons could only carry one. How wonderful those forests must have been. No enormous floods back then; the trees soaked up so much water. Ask me something,' she instructs, eyes streaming, nose running.

'Jack was my father, wasn't he?'

'Yes, yes, lovely man. Talk about something else for a little bit longer.' She quivers between being brave and allowing her grief to show again. 'Keep talking,' she says.

'I look like him, don't I? I must have been a constant reminder of all that she'd missed out on. And Hugh looks so like Christian she hated him.'

'Yes,' Peggy cries, more openly at last.

'There must have been so much more she hid away, things that came from her side of the family and things she hid from Christian.'

'I believe so. I don't know what Camilla did with all her other photos and bits and pieces. All those photos. She probably put them down in the cellar with everything else she didn't like or didn't want to think about.'

'Except for the line-up of those Wilson portraits?'

'Oh well, Christian insisted on having his way with those of course, damn him.' She screws up her handkerchief. 'They were poison to each other, Camilla and Christian. Never should have married. But you've come about what you found in that hatbox, haven't you? Which reminds me; you missed seeing your sister-in-law. She called in yesterday. Did you know? Valerie or Camilla must have told her I'd given you something

and Hedda said she'd just popped in to say hello but then she started making enquiries about what it was.' She dabs her eyes and nose with another handkerchief. 'There ... Do I look a mess? I'm afraid I engineered several outstanding geriatric shifts in the conversation that left her entirely confused and told her nothing,' she laughs through her handkerchief and tears.

Lucas frowns. 'Hedda here? She was at the hospital late yesterday when Mother died.'

'You won't be here if she comes back today? You'll both be travelling in opposite directions!'

'Opposite directions? Yes.'

'She told me she was here to collect the cat. She's found it a new home.'

'Basil?' Lucas feels a pang. 'Hedda's taken away my little friend Basil? I was going to take him back to Adelaide with me. Bloody Hell.' Suddenly he begins to weep.

'Oh dear! Yes, Hedda told me she couldn't look after another cat because they've already got one. I'll make that cup of tea, dear boy.'

'My little friend,' says Lucas, scrubbing at his eyes and looking smitten.

Peggy mops at her eyes anew now. 'Life has a habit of asking even more of you when you've had enough crises to deal with, doesn't it? Mm,' she sighs. 'I've always thought that people are the givers of the worst scratches in life, not cats. Poor Lucas. Your drink might need a bit of something extra in it then, dear boy? You'll have more questions about that hatbox, too? Poor Camilla, what style! She loved dramatic moments. She died dramatically, I suppose? So much she put away though, pretending things were other than what they were. So now you know, don't you? But what a wonderful artist that made her because that's where so much of her angst and

impossible daydreams went. And what a sense of fashion; she probably still managed to turn heads even in a hospital nightie! You must be kind dear boy, and forgive her. She was her own worst enemy. Oh, I'm glad, so glad we've met before it's my turn to flit the twig, Lucas. How do you manage to live with all the sadness?'

'Let *me* make *you* that cup of tea,' says Lucas. 'Nothing like a good cup of tea – and finding out that I'm definitely not a Wilson makes me feel much better!'

Peggy laughs. 'The kitchen's that way,' she points. 'I'm so glad you called in to tell me about Camilla yourself, Lucas, and that I wasn't alone when I found out. So nice to be looked after. It's always a shock when someone dies, even when you expect it, and I mustn't be like Camilla and make cheery, stiff-upper-lip conversation as if nothing's happened. Times have changed.' She dabs her eyes with another tissue. 'Oh dear! I'll have to throw out my old address book now.' Her tears start again.

Lucas makes the tea and puts it on the table next to her.

'Will Valerie be coming home to keep you company this evening?' he enquires. 'I don't want to leave you by yourself feeling the way you do. I'll phone her in a while if you don't mind.'

'Thank you. She works for our local solicitor just around the corner, in the old shopping centre – not far away. He drew up Camilla's will not so long ago. She put it off again and again but she must have known it was time.' She looks intently at Lucas. 'You must not be sad for long, Lucas, for Camilla or for all that might have been.'

Lucas hugs his arms across his chest. 'One day I knew that there was nothing I could do about her unhappiness. Sometimes I dream that I've renovated the house, knocked holes in the walls and let the light fill all the dark spaces. But when I return, all the darkness has crept back.' For a moment his eyes fill with somewhere else. After a while he looks up. 'I'm thinking I might change my name to Jack.'

'You certainly look like Jack,' says Peggy, 'and your voice is the same as his, but Lucas is a nice name too. Let's talk a little about the hatbox. I think the story will offer you consolation. By the way, you must visit Emily Cooper. She's the former headmistress who featured in the school magazine you gave me.'

They do their talking and then Lucas insists on phoning Valerie so that Peggy will not be on her own when he leaves. When Valerie arrives she gathers Peggy up instantly for nurturing.

oOo

Late afternoon brings gathering clouds and high wind. Mother's house is in darkness when Lucas returns and he misses having Basil there to welcome him when he steps out of the warm car into the cold. He reaches the veranda feeling the suck and squelch of muddy water about his shoes and is glad not to have to negotiate the wet shrubs that line the path to the servant's entrance. The veranda light won't turn on and he joggles the new key into position by touch. The inside lights don't work either, so he returns to the car hugging himself against the cold and gets his torch. Through the spit of receding rain a rising moon, hooked at by treetops, rides on a wind-torn sky. Lucas sees street lights shining here and there and the glimmer of house lights from the new estate beyond the rain-drenched trees. Taking the torch and turning back to the house he pushes through the bushes to the fuse box and, finding the circuits for the lights turned off, restores them.

Once inside, he packs hurriedly, resisting the desire to warm the house and to sleep. He remembers to hang the replacement for the lost key on its hook then draws breath, checking before he shuts the door whether he might have forgotten anything. A strong draught pushes past him from inside the house bringing the smell of urine. Surely Mother's windows aren't open again?

A distant door bangs. Lucas sighs and propping the front door open with his suitcase goes from room to room checking, turning lights on and off. The contents of each one shock in and out of focus – things of Mother's he once thought he wanted lingering as after images then puckering, dissolving. There are the portraits, eyes ominous and the grandfather clock, he notices, has stopped, locked upon the past, pendulum immobile, while the naked bronze shepherdess continues to look for her lost sheep. Near her, the light picks out the soft glint of gold from the little heap of Mother's red hair he'd plucked from the cushions where she'd rested. Lucas gathers them up carefully and puts them in his pocket.

All the windows in Mother's room are open and so too is her wardrobe and a large suitcase, half-packed with her best dresses lies on the bed. There are more of Mother's best clothes nearby; things she'd worn long ago: a mink coat, sequined dresses, beautiful blouses, shoes and gloves.

As Lucas shuts the windows he glimpses the desperate white gyrations of her wet underwear and nighties struggling against the pegs that Hedda used to clamp them to the rotary clothesline. Mother, going around in circles, never departing, forever fastened to the place she'd always talked about leaving.

On her dressing table there's a bowl with a spoon and the melted remains of ice cream. The bowl is cold to the touch.

Hugh's here?

A door bangs again. The servant's entrance? Lucas doesn't bother to turn on any more lights but uses his torch to follow the sound down the hallway. The kitchen dresser, pushed back from the wall, blocks his way, leaving a black patch exposed on the floor where he would have walked if he'd come in the usual way. Beyond it the servant's door slaps against the wall. Lucas shines the torch into the darkness at his feet and his skin

prickles when he sees the smashed wooden steps floating four metres below in the cellar. Books, boxes, ornaments, furniture and an open cabin trunk trailing a beaded dress, bob about, along with Christian's creatures preserved under glass domes: stuffed birds with feet glued to their perches, a ferret killing a cringing rat. Wilson things bounce about under the cascade of muddy water that pours through the cellar's vents.

A dark shape moves in the open servant's entrance. 'Who's there? Basil? Have you come back?' He shines the torch. The shape, no longer there, had been larger. 'Hugh?' Lucas feels a ripple of fear well up so tightly he can't find the light switch. 'Is that you?' Knees buckle into panic and he runs. Straightway he sees himself separate, running and watching himself running, then outside, as if waiting for himself to arrive at the front door, wanting to arrive but running in such slow motion he feels as if he never will. He hears himself use the voice of the Man. '**Go to your room!**' he shouts. His voice becomes hoarse with terror. '**Go to your room Hugh and wait for me there!**' Running: '**Wait in your room, I'll teach you how to behave!**' The voice of the Man builds in authority: '**Take the feather duster with you!**' he hears himself shout.

Then he's at the door and seizing his suitcase and plashing through the wind and the remnants of the rain that smack cold against his face, running through water more than ankle deep flowing across the driveway and filling his shoes. His car's headlights show the gush and ripple of mud-brown water, thick with gum leaves and detritus. As he backs the car out of the driveway he turns and sees the sudden shine of the light flicking on in Hugh's Room.

Hugh, taking Mother's things; sarcastic Hugh; accusing Hugh; Hugh the dobber. And unhappy Mother, incessantly complaining Mother. Mother, year after year, wanting to move, wanting to be free.

Lucas brakes his car and ignoring the wind and water, runs back down the driveway to the house and goes to Mother's room. He flings open the windows letting the curtains bulge like spinnakers and hurriedly shoves her clothes into the suitcase, drags it to his vehicle and loads it into the boot. Then he goes to the clothesline and rips Mother's washing from its pegs and takes that with him, too.

He parks on a rise of the old road not far from the approach to the estuary bridge and, taking the suitcase out of the boot, crams Mother's wet washing into it. Hunching against the wind and rain, he hauls it through the bush and down the slope. Then he wades, clench-jawed, through the knee-deep water, climbs up the embankment and onto the approach to the bridge. Taking no notice of the signs that tell him it is closed, he takes Mother's suitcase to the top of the bridge's curve. Under its lights, still strangely on, he launches her clothes into the wind storm.

Dresses, skirts and blouses fill with air and fly into the dark sky. Shoes and handbags spin away. Her nightdresses, ghostly-white, climb with arms flying like wings. Then there's only the suitcase left and, unexpectedly, a small, cold touch that brings sudden recognition of something left behind in it, a locket that he slips into his pocket. Then he lifts the empty case to the bridge rail and lets it revolve into the darkness below, where the king tide and the flood waters meet and struggle.

## Chapter Eight

At the crematorium near Sydney, spring is vivid with flowers; verdant with rampant grasses. Rain-stained mops of roses sag, their canes stretching out across the soggy pathways between the rows of memorial plaques and tombstones that radiate from the chapel. Their closeness brings a sharply perfumed reminder, in the sudden catch of breath at jagged flesh, that only a small space divides a life from its death.

Lucas and his wife, Anne, arrive by taxi. Lucas feels the depressed presence of his brother even before he sees him. Some things don't change, Lucas thinks. Lucas left home over forty years ago, more like fifty, come to think of it and he wonders if it's the power of Hugh's grief for his mother or his hatred of him that draws his eyes to where Hugh sits, shadowed, under a tree near the chapel. It's as if Hugh is without sight, making no effort to greet Lucas or Anne. Hedda, Bethany and Melda, don't approach either but dart about at the far edge of the group of mourners, fixing their eyes on Anne and Lucas anxiously from time to time.

Not even Bethany, Lucas thinks. At least they're not pretending that nothing has come between us. He and Anne move about greeting his cousins, but Hugh remains immobile while his wife and daughters flutter about uncertainly. Lucas doesn't go across and say anything; he's done enough accommodating, reaching out. Let the tree fall, he thinks. Anne's eyes widen. Has he said it out aloud? The mourners, sensing the discomfort between the two brothers, congregate between them.

The yesterdays come to life, cohabit with the now and begin to flicker in Lucas's mind. They blur. Nobody else knows. As far as they're concerned he's right there in front

of them when he says, 'Good, thanks, and how are *you*?' He wonders if the habit or condition of being in the past or somewhere else, or of knowing something unpleasant is about to loom, happens to everybody. Is the response there in the same way that people say automatically that they're 'fine', even if they're not fine? Or is there something wrong with him?

'Lucas looks so much younger than Hugh!' Anne hears one of the cousins exclaim. It's true, she thinks. Something incipient seems to wait in Hugh's stillness and for a moment she thinks his lips move but she then decides it's the play of light across his mouth. Hugh's several years younger. He's the only one wearing a traditional black suit and tie. The way he slumps on the stone bench makes him appear ruffed up and brooding. The suit looks new. His very white, haggard face doesn't benefit from the contrast. He seems swallowed by the shady recess of the tree's wet, overarching mouth.

Lucas sees the pair of twisted double trunks holding the canopy above his brother. A breeze throws gobs of water down from it and the movement of its branches makes the light sputter so it jumps about on his pale skin, licking it with a watery green colour. Is he really there, Lucas wonders, or somehow drowning in himself? Hugh swallowed in the dripping maw of a tree. Is he clinging close to the fire at the edge of that long-ago forest, or lost somewhere in the cold?

It is only when Anne takes him by the arm and he relaxes that Lucas knows how tight his muscles have grown.

'I know,' Anne says. She seems to sense he will tell her again. She knows his nieces must abandon him. Their principles have stalled. 'They have to take Hugh's side, Lucas. He's a sick man. And they know how much he dislikes you.'

He will try not to say it again: Hedda is a Buddhist who talks of compassion. Bethany, a social worker, is trained to empathise and doesn't. Melda is a naturopath,

skilled in healing, who hasn't reached out. Lucas stops himself from thinking about them by disengaging his attention. High above, there are cheery, scudding clouds in a clear blue sky. It doesn't work: 'Convenient to have a single cause for all that offends about himself and the universe. I'm not going to reach out any more,' he tells Anne. 'They're weekend philosophers, like those Pittwater sailors who get about in pretend naval uniforms and avoid the open sea. In Sydney it's all about money and appearances.'

Lucas feels her nudge. She will distract him. 'They did organise the funeral though, Lucas.' She steers him towards the arrival of his cousins. 'Oh dear,' she says, 'poor Hedda. Did you see? She looks so pale and tired – her skin's so raddled.'

When her mother-in-law died it was supposed to be a relief. For everyone. But now, Anne thinks, Hedda looks worse than before and shows the weight of the day, yet she's chosen to speak at the service, even though she knows her mother-in-law bad-mouthed her for years. For the sake of appearances? Or out of Buddhist compassion after all? Will she really be speaking for herself though or for Hugh who can't speak properly after his stroke? Or both?

'It's the ritual,' Anne decides in a whisper. 'She wants to feel implemental, to make sure her mother-in-law departs, to amplify any positives and try to believe in them.'

Hedda's head turns towards Anne and her stare crosses the distance as if she senses what Anne thinks.

Lucas notices this and guesses that Anne will want to tell him more about Hedda later. 'And,' she'll add, 'there's always something missing about Hedda's clothes. The textures don't go. The fit is wrong. They look as if they belong to someone else. Somehow they look tired. Yes, they really need to be ironed.' But she doesn't wait. She turns to Lucas: 'Hedda's clothes are so colourless and she's not wearing any make-up,

blotting herself out. She used to look so pretty. And have you noticed how Hedda and Hugh keep well apart? I wonder why?’

Lucas thinks the women could have been good friends if it weren’t for him, weren’t for Hugh.

‘Husbands!’ Anne says. ‘Hedda is straightforward and calls a spade a spade. I like that.’

Lucas nods. ‘There’s a kindness about Hedda, too, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘No, not at all,’ says Anne. ‘There’s always built-in antagonism against me. Surely you noticed? She doesn’t like people like me who went to private school. And if there were kindness towards you before your mother died, it didn’t last a moment beyond her death.’

‘Really? But she liked Mother and Mother went to a private school. What were you supposed to do, Anne? Go mining in the backblocks of the Pilbara, work hard and become successful, then self-destruct in the interests of not offending the proud working classes or do you have to change your social class by deed poll? Prime Minister Whitlam and Premier Dunstan of South Australia were Labor politicians who went to private schools for God’s sake!’

‘Now, now!’ Anne says. She turns him towards the chapel. His cousins protectively accompany them on the way but her attempt to help Lucas avoid Hugh achieves the opposite when the narrowing of the crematorium porch squeezes them, faltering, face to face in the doorway to the chapel.

Looking at Hugh’s face so close up, the big nose so red and greasy with its large pores, disconcerts Lucas. He tries not to look again but fails and Hugh notices. It’s a Lucien Freud of a nose in its colourings. Their father, Christian, had described Hugh’s nose as patrician – a true Wilson nose. Mother would snort and mutter under her breath,

'Clogs to clogs in three generations', but the Wilsons went back much further than that. Lucas is shocked that the real thing, close-up, no longer matches Christian's propaganda. Hugh has also grown his once blond hair much longer, shoulder-length. Mother had insisted it would suit him but the Man, their father, had never approved of long hair and Lucas isn't sure about thinned, grey long hair on older men either. It seems to say, 'The Beatles, circa 1964,' and is not attractive. Black patches of fatigue and distress swell under Hugh's eyes.

Lucas shoves the order of service into his pocket and keeps his hand there to avoid shaking hands with Hugh and discovers the sharp edges of a plastic name tag from some other occasion.

It would have been better, he thinks, if we had not been brothers, or at least had parents who wanted us to be friends. No, he decides, we would never have been friends either. Too dissimilar. But if there had been some love in the family Hugh wouldn't have become his enemy. Lucas, suddenly feeling huge sorrow, half reaches out, but Hugh turns away, stumbles and Melda has to grab his arm to steady him.

As Lucas walks down the aisle, the cousins begin to distribute themselves uncertainly on both sides of the chapel. Wishing to be positive about Hugh, Lucas makes himself think, as he has done in the past, that there's nothing wrong with him as a person. He's a gifted artist and scientist. Before his stroke he was so gregarious, so popular, he tells himself. It's just that they are so different. No, it would have been better if they hadn't been brothers, he repeats. The thoughts tumble. All these years he's succumbed to believing that he had to behave towards Hugh in certain ways because there was a name tag on him that said 'brother'. He certainly didn't see him as one. He should have stood up to him years ago. He should have asserted himself with all of them, not tried so hard. He should never have reached out or deferred, because of the

word 'brother'. Or did he reach out because of a sense of guilt – survivor's guilt – because he'd escaped the family and Hugh had remained and ended up like that? In any case, he'd let the word impose pressures on him that neither of them wanted. He'd turned him into his enemy. He'd helped him invent a version of himself that never existed. He'd walked into his ambush. Lucas feels the sting as the sharp corner of the name tag in his pocket cuts into his finger.

Inside the quiet of the chapel the coffin rests in the dimmed light of its alcove, its lid overflowing with a large and inappropriately gentle wreath of soft pink and white lilies. The choice of flowers is so unlike Mother, he thinks, or had he got that wrong too? Her photo, full-sized, red hair vivid, blue eyes, aquiline nose, strong chin, seemingly focuses on him and contrasts defiantly against the washy pale pink of the flowers. She smiles his way. She looks what? Triumphant? Yes. The caption is confident: 'Camilla Wilson'. Has she had the last word after all? If only she hadn't wanted so much from him. He imagines her inside the box of veneered chipboard with its burnable plastic handles, wizened, almost ninety-six. Her father would have had her enclosed in mahogany, lined with padded satin and the handles would have been gilded bronze even if she was to be cremated. Why had Hugh and Hedda chosen something so obviously cheap?

'She was bright orange and yellow, not pink and white lilies,' Anne whispers, looking at the flowers.

Yes, Lucas thought, Mother liked dressing in bright colours: red, yellow, green, blue. She was short, energetic, red-haired, charismatic, intriguing, inconsiderate. She disguised her bent fingers by wearing chunky rings and gripped her walking frame with gnarled determination. If only she could have been still sometimes and fully present in the moment, 'in the now,' as Anne put it, without baggage, instead of bemoaning so many yesterdays and precluding the possibility of a perfect tomorrow, forever intuiting

some calamity. Her mind was always somewhere else. Mostly in the past, cataloguing lists of grievances.

When she was young she was like a flock of squawking white leghorn chickens bursting from the hen-house, breaking eggs, flying into the wind, losing feathers all over the place. Lucas, when a child, would shut his eyes when she invaded the runs, plunged her hands under the hens to seize eggs as chickens flew past his face and ricocheted about him, wings beating against the wire netting. He feels the wings of the past begin to strike his face and the feathers smother him. He wants to run away before he suffocates amongst their airborne shreds.

‘But she liked bush flowers, poor woman.’ Valerie Upton’s voice comes from the back of the chapel and hovers disembodied. She says she knew her from art classes and had taken her for walks and out to coffee until Camilla had dropped her. ‘Camilla would have liked a garland of bush flowers. They’re more her. Prickly though – and some of them smell like cats if you know what I mean.’ She has to add, ‘She was incontinent towards the end, as you know – and more than a bit dotty, I’d say – and Hugh could be so sarcastic with her. Whiffy ... He told her that her house was whiffy. She was very upset. My mother wanted to come to the funeral today but I wouldn’t let her. It would have been far too much for her.’

An undertaker coughs.

Lucas hears a noise from across the aisle. Hugh has dropped his walking stick.

Hushed, recorded music tells of sheep safely grazing.

Lucas knows his brother shivers because of the medication that keeps his blood thin.

One of the undertakers goes to the front of the chapel. There is a rustle of programmes because her appearance seems to signal that the service is about to begin,

but instead she apologises to everybody for having a cold. Her voice echoes huskily, then she lowers it to have a discussion with Melda, who's pregnant. She whispers, asking Melda to confirm that she will be the one to read the Robert Frost poem about autumn on behalf of her father. It's a poem her grandmother liked, Melda says. Another cough breaks the hush that arrives when there are others who want to overhear what is being said. The suspending acoustic of the chapel floats their whispering in the air, leaving it becalmed, audible. Melda looks up and, finding all eyes upon her, blushes.

It was Lucas who'd found out that the cousins hadn't been told about the funeral. He'd asked them anyway, inviting them to say a few words if they wished. Hedda had reluctantly inserted the cousins into the programme at the last minute but had assumed her speech would be first. Lucas wonders whether Hedda and Hugh had accepted his mother's dislike for the cousins, as well as for everyone else on his father's side of the family. She had complained about them all incessantly. Was it because Aunty Nin had dropped the Shelley tea set, a wedding present sixty to seventy years before, china so fine you could see the light through it, or because Mother had been to a private school and learnt Latin and French and dancing and horse riding and singing and acting and wore French shoes, and had her own car – a Buick straight eight – and owned a horse. And her father had a weekender at Newport and their own tennis court. And there was a house maid and a gardener and a servant's entrance where his father's side of the family, where the Wilsons, once they'd become bankrupt and socially demoted, might have been expected to knock – if they had ever been invited to visit.

Valerie Upton's voice whispers into the silence preceding the beginning of the ceremony. 'Nearly ninety-six, same age as my mother. Camilla and my mother went to school together, you know.'

Nobody knew.

'My mother was a Gower before she married,' Lucas hears her say, 'Peggy Gower. The Gowers live forever.' This time she puts her remark to the smartly dressed elderly woman who sits beside her.

'Indeed they do!'

'You *knew* them?'

'Met them and I still recognise one. I met your mother a number of times on parent evenings when she came in to check on your progress, Valerie! You were in one of my classes at the school where I became the Headmistress. Do give her my regards! And may I say that you're just as lively as I remember you.'

'Miss Cooper? It is! You're the same Miss Cooper who taught me!'

Lucas feels a ripple of shock grab his breath.

'Not quite the very same, Valerie, however, I think I can say that *you've* hardly changed at all!' Emily chuckles.

'You knew Camilla too?'

'Briefly, long ago, when I worked as a waitress in a coffee shop. But tell me, the poor man with the walking stick – he looks so much like Christian Wilson. He must be Camilla's son?'

'Yes, yes, that's Hugh, her second son.'

'Second son? Then that good-looking man who got out of the taxi with his partner, who is he?'

'That's Lucas Wilson and his wife.'

'Oh!'

'Are you alright, Miss Cooper? Have I said something to upset you?'

'No, no, Valerie. At my age funerals are a reminder that I've reached the short list for a promotion too. A bit challenging, but I wanted to be here for Camilla.'

Lucas wants to find them to say something but feels he cannot. He sees Hugh look up uncomfortably. The colours that shift through the leadlight, because of the stammer of the wind swaying the branches of the tree outside, fall across his face. His skin appears to stir as if something larval wriggles beneath it, trying to get out. The glass makes his hair the same red colour as Mother's used to be. Hugh turns his gaze upon Lucas.

Lucas feels another prickling shock and falters as if he's sinking through the luminous, cloying, milk-white light that swims in the chapel. It's the way Hugh's face transforms, one side of it stiff and without any warmth, without any crinkle of kindness about the eyes, and the way it fills with Mother's look, and how he fastens his attention so fixedly upon Lucas. It's the same expression as the one on Mother's face in the photograph that smiles from the lid of the coffin.

Lucas, unable to breathe, lets his black hymnal slip from his hand and hears it clatter, registering that he seems to be dropping into the pulsing chambers of his own heartbeat, dreading that he is about to fall after it, to the floor. The corpse that lies in the coffin has buried itself inside his brother and has set about resurrecting itself and is about to break through Hugh's skin, out of the body it has eaten.

He shakes his head to dislodge the emptiness that begins to take him, and leans down; such a long way it feels, his ears now singing, falling into the smothering white, trying at the same time to pick up the black hymnal as he panics thinking that he will not even be able to stand up and sing, let alone make his way to the lectern to speak. It will be enough to struggle back into himself from far away and he grips the back of the pew in front of him, using his breathing like the rungs on a ladder to force his return. When the time comes for him to speak he must have the words but now he feels empty and the words are not there. He will find them if only he can struggle back into himself in time. So he focuses. He wants to do the reading and then perhaps he will feel released.

The service begins.

Gradually, he makes his strength return, glad now that Hedda, his cousins and Melda will speak before him and give him time to recuperate. He locates some sort of centre in his body and waits, letting his heart push the chill out of his arms and legs, enduring the painful pins and needles. He wipes his mouth, wondering if his jaw has been hanging slack. His mother's gloating smile, the look in her blue eyes, is now alive in his brother's face, watchful and looking out at him.

Anne puts her hand on his and finds it slippery wet. She scans his white face. 'Lucas, are you alright?'

He licks his lips quickly and nods.

'You sure?' It's Anne's quiet voice, the one she uses when there's danger.

Lucas doesn't answer. It's almost his turn to read. Hedda and his cousins have spoken and now his niece reads the Robert Frost poem on behalf of her father. Lucas, sufficiently recovered from the smothering fall into himself and freed from Valerie Upton's intrusions, feels ready to read. Outside the chapel it is spring and that helps. Outside, between and beyond the tombstones, there is life. On the way, he and Anne had gone past parks bright with flowers and noisy with children.

Even outside, as soon as he's there, even amongst the tombstones that hem in everything with death, Lucas thinks, there will be perfumed roses and insects and birds and more of the spring air that he feels putting its warm tongue through the door into the chapel.

'She is gone from mortal haunts.' He hears the funeral director's words dragged out of the context of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and hates it. Then it's his turn to speak. When Lucas looks up from the lectern he sees the faces, the expressions and ages lined up and then he looks only at his brother and does not see the coffin or anyone else.

*Death leaves a space where something lives –  
it's empty to the eye,  
but where you are not, your presence is –  
by some strange alchemy.*

He hears his own voice as if through a sort of fearful drunkenness. It's not like the kind of distorting euphoria he might sense when he's outside afterwards, he thinks, after he's seen the coffin slide away and the curtains close; when he's outside and escaped from the intensity and able to feel the sky, the way it was when he came out of the hospital after visiting her. Or, like the feeling of escaping from her home, so full of possessions, when leaving it was like running from a museum – away from the glass eyes shining from behind cabinets – those silent rows of taxidermy and the strange mixed smells of linseed oil and camphor. Or was it naphthalene?

*And had I touch to reach you by  
I would extend my hand  
to grasp your atoms formless there  
and into semblance blend*

Lucas looks up, hesitates. He sees Anne. She has told him that his poem is from the heart, one of his best. He had to read it. He said he wasn't quite sure what it was about. She told him he would understand when he was ready, the way you do when you think about elusive dreams and you suddenly know their meaning when the thinking stops.

Now she nods encouragement when she sees his hesitation and Lucas finishes, reciting it by heart:

*some focus for the blank I feel –  
still pressing with such weight  
it leaves enormous dint of pain  
and love that's almost hate.*

*And though I know what darkness is –  
a time, foreknowing light,  
I must walk through it alone,  
no blind man's cane for sight.*

When the service is over the mourners stand and wait so that close family can leave. Hedda and Hugh do not notice, then look up and appear completely disconcerted when they see Lucas and Anne begin to walk down the aisle. Hedda urges Hugh to hurry but he drops his walking stick a second time and has to be helped to retrieve it.

'Oh!' Hedda exclaims, a note of exasperation in her voice when the delay prevents them from leaving first.

Lucas, moving away from the subdued penumbral light of the chapel, towards the bright arch of sunshine that fills the doorway, hears Anne whispering for him to slow down a little so that Hugh and his family can be allowed to save face and catch up. But the cousins and other mourners have already moved into the aisle and Hedda and Hugh are hemmed in by the drift and carried along by it into the world outside.

And then, when everyone's outside, what a breath Lucas takes from the rush of air between the spaces left by the branches of the trees, rejoicing at being able to look up into the sky and be in the warmth of the sunshine after the coffin has gone away with its final small gestures of posies, when it has sauntered almost, with a small bump and the humming of an electric motor, into oblivion.

'One body every half hour,' one of the cousins says, in Lucas's hearing. 'Or is it more?' I suppose that's why the speeches have to be short?'

'Don't worry, it'll be a long time before you flit the twig,' the other cousin intuits.

'But her coffin trundled off like one of those bags on a carousel at the airport,' the other replies. 'Such a long miserable life and then it's all over, so quickly.'

'She had her art. Such a good artist,' says the first.

Lucas moves away. 'Look,' he nudges Anne, 'over there. Bethany and her boyfriend are loading all the flowers into the boot of Hugh's car, even the wreath that was on the coffin!'

'Oh dear,' says Anne. 'I was hoping you wouldn't notice. They could be donating the flowers to a hospital, Lucas. Remember the Salvation Army funeral service we went to in Adelaide? They asked if the flowers could go to hospitals for patients who had no visitors.'

'I don't think I'd want a wreath if I were in hospital, would you?' Lucas has a glint in his eye. 'Hugh's probably going to sell them.'

Anne tries to ignore this but laughs.

'Maybe you'd better go ahead and stand guard over the sandwiches,' Lucas suggests.

'You mean because they know we're paying for them? What a terrible thing to say! Sometimes I wonder about you, Lucas. They don't know we intend to pay, do they?'

'Well, when Hedda rang to tell us about the funeral arrangements I suggested it would be easier to have the refreshments here. Going to their place would have been a strain given Hugh's accusations. Anyway, on the phone Hedda sounded as exhausted as she looks.'

'So you were really being kind, after all? Or was it out of self-interest?'

'Self-interest.' says Lucas.

'That's a change. Come along, I'll help get the cousins moving.'

oOo

Over their tea and coffee and sandwiches Lucas hears the guests reassure one another that no one has aged; no one has changed a bit. Then Valerie Upton, who has somehow invited herself and clings to other people's conversations like grass seeds to socks, traverses the space that separates Luke and Hugh, unrelentingly holding her cup of tea, without losing a drop, as she moves alongside, twittering. The thumb of her other hand clips a curried egg sandwich to a slippery paper plate. She manages to gesture with her eyebrows. 'My mother sends her sympathy,' she says. 'You remember my mother, Peggy. You gave her a lift home. We met briefly. You were on your way to visit Camilla in hospital. My mother gave you something. I saw you put it in the boot of your car. What was it? Was it for Camilla?'

'Of course I remember your mother. A lovely person.' Lucas moves back, not at all comfortable with the dwindling space between them and he avoids answering her question. 'Oh, yes, your mother was a friend of my mother's. They went to school together. We talked about it. How is she?'

'Good, good ... She sends ...'

Anne interrupts. 'Hello, I'm Anne, Lucas's wife. So sorry to disturb you two, but one of the cousins has to leave soon and she wants to see Lucas before she goes.'

Valerie discards her cup of tea and sandwich and extends her hand. 'So pleased to meet you,' she says and holds on to Anne's, not letting go.

'Do give your mother my regards,' Lucas says.

'Were you surprised by your mother's will, Lucas?' Valerie Upton asks, moving closer yet again, lowering her voice, persisting in staying, persisting in holding her grip on Anne's hand, locked on by using as her excuse the protocols of introduction and the giving of sympathy. She has a question and looks as if she doesn't intend to let go until she has an answer. Her eyes attempt to dock with Lucas's to prevent him from leaving but his gaze fixes in the direction of his cousins and he begins to move away.

'They went to school together, Camilla and Peggy?' Anne asks.

Lucas notices how Anne smiles and drags her trapped hand out of its enclosure pretending she needs to adjust the collar of her blouse. Then she steps back. 'Sorry to have to leave you, mid-conversation Valerie. Do have another cup of tea.' She keeps her escaped hand out of reach and deploys it to pull Lucas by the sleeve.

'Yes, they did and Miss Cooper, who used to be the Headmistress of the school Camilla attended, sat next to me during the service. So flattering that she remembered me! She was my favourite teacher. I never got into trouble for talking too much in her class. She was so interesting!'

Lucas stops. 'Emily Cooper? I didn't see her. She left after the service?'

'Yes. She said she remembered your mother.'

'Really? I thought Mother would have left school a good few years before Miss Cooper became the headmistress.'

'Oh, yes, she did. Miss Cooper didn't become a teacher there until several years after your mother had left. She was going to talk to you but changed her mind because she thought it wouldn't be the right moment. She turned quite pale when she saw you.'

Anne says. 'Thank you so much for telling us,' Anne says.

'I have her phone number,' Valerie says, prolonging the moment by not offering it.

'You're so kind,' Anne becomes facilitative. 'I could do with another cup of tea Valerie. How about you? Lucas, why don't you catch up with your cousins while I get Emily's phone number from Valerie?'

Lucas watches as they drift to the other side of the room.

When the guests begin their goodbyes Lucas looks at Anne and sighs. 'It's over. Thank God!'

'Not quite,' says Anne. 'I've accepted an invitation from Hedda to go back with them to their place. Hope you don't mind. I didn't know how to get out of it.'

'Oh, no! Why? Why on earth did you do that? That's the last thing I wanted. I've had enough of Hugh and I've arranged a lift with one of my cousins to Chatswood Railway Station.' Lucas feels kicked. 'I'm going with the cousins.'

'They've already left. I told them we're going with Hugh and Hedda. It wouldn't have looked right if we didn't.'

'Damn! If they've gone they won't know if we catch a cab instead of going with Hugh and Hedda then, will they?'

'Well, I've already agreed to go with them. We're family.'

'You realise you've confirmed their opinion that I'm a bastard and you are the innocent and virtuous heroine who is to be both admired and pitied because you put up with me?'

'Don't be silly!'

He's too exhausted to address the issue. He'd thought they'd get away neatly, cleanly and that would be the end of it. At least the funeral was over.

The silence in Hedda's car is lengthy and awkward.

Anne breaks it with a cheery compliment. 'I was so moved by your eulogy, Hedda, and the way Melda read the Robert Frost poem.'

'Thank you,' Hedda says. 'I'm so glad we can catch up with you at our place.'

In case Camilla's will makes co-operation necessary after all? Lucas thinks.

Hugh startles everyone with a hoarse, throat clearing cough. 'Y-y ... your p-poem, or ...w- whatever y-you called it, w...wasn't w-worth a p-pinch of shit and y-you're a thief and a liar. Y-you shouldn't have come to the f-funeral.'

'Oh,' Anne says, 'Oh!'

'Could you drop us off here, Hedda?' Lucas says.

'Chatswood Railway Station?'

'Yes.'

'Thanks so much for your invitation Hedda,' Anne says, 'but it's been such a big day, a big day for *all* of us and I don't think, in the circumstances, now is the right moment to visit.'

Hedda sags. 'Perhaps you're right.'

Lucas and Anne get out.

Hedda puts her hand to her forehead. Her pose reminds Lucas of the stooped bronze shepherdess that Hugh had moved out of his reach on the evening he'd arrived at Mother's house.

Anne says goodbye to Hedda and seeing Hugh still slumped in the passenger seat, reaches into the car and takes his hand in commiseration. Looking up, Hugh returns the grip fervently. At the same time he fixes his eyes on Lucas with a triumphant expression that says, *See, Anne's letting me know she agrees with Mother and me and Hedda. We all know what you're like. Anne's ashamed of you. We don't know how she puts up with you.*

## Chapter Nine

Back at the hotel, Lucas stands at the window looking down into the gathering dark of Hyde Park, watching the lights turning on and people criss-crossing on their way home. 'Did you manage to get Emily Cooper's phone number from Valerie? I'll talk to her while you're having your shower.' His voice is tight with anger.

Anne looks at him, startled. 'Yes,' she says, 'of course I did. And I'm sorry that I made you angry by accepting the lift from Hedda and Hugh. But you were angry long before that. What really happened when you went to your mother's?'

He doesn't answer. After the funeral Lucas fears the accumulation of emotions that might be released, so it's soothing and safer for him to look into the dusk. Anne leaves him still staring down into the shadows of Hyde Park and goes to have her shower. He is still at the window when she returns.

'Thinking?' Anne asks Lucas. 'Or enjoying the view?'

'The view,' he says, 'and not thinking,' he adds, putting his face back into the darkness of the park and the glittering patterns of light shaped by the perforations of hundreds of windows pricked into the masonry that surrounds it. He still feels the tension from the drive in Hedda's car and recalls the lengthy silence that made the thud of the tyres and the click of the indicators loudly audible.

'It's been a strain on me, too, you know,' she says trying to push back the growing energy of the fractious in her voice and defuse the storm that gathers between them.

Lucas turns to look at her but Hugh's face reappears. Lucas hadn't wanted that sort of surreal farewell – being dropped off at Chatswood Railway Station, aware that Hugh

watched them climbing the enormous flight of stairs to get to their platform. Lucas remembers that pleased look on his face. He doubted if he'd ever see Hugh or his family again.

'I'm hungry,' Anne says.

Lucas wants the anaesthetic of sleep but knows she'll grow cranky if she doesn't eat and he doesn't want an emotional collision fuelled by hunger and his own exhausted turmoil. He rallies. 'There are some good Spanish restaurants in Dickson Street, not too far away from here.'

'Somewhere warm would be really nice,' Anne says, meaning after the cold ordeal of the funeral.

The lines about Lucas's eyes tighten. He remains where he is, looking out of the window not wanting her to see his face in case it reads of Mother, the way Hugh's had in the chapel.

'Soon,' Anne adds, when he doesn't move. 'But we definitely don't need a late night,' she concedes. 'Not after today.' It's a statement, not a question.

He wants to be wrapped about by the warmth of people. To be with others where the only thing demanded of him will be to pay for the drinks and food he has in mind, in a place where no one will know him. 'Perhaps a drink first at the bar downstairs, on the way?' he says, voice flat. This, too, is more of a statement. 'And there will be people all around,' he adds, leaving Anne to interpret. He wants to be in a space where he will not have to feel or think what he does not want to feel or think and the staff will be friendly and attentive because they're paid to be and it will be a place where he hopes to feel finite and grounded, rather than an infinitesimal dot floating in the universe, after the ordeal with Hugh and the finality of Mother's funeral.

Anne too, is tired. 'Downstairs, where it's the latest young and yuppie place to be?'

He sees her reflected in the window appearing to look amused but a frown accompanies a tight smile.

Lucas, tapping against the window, feeling the cold black space on the other side that sucks on his fingertips shrugs and says, 'I don't know what I mean.'

'You mean a non-chapel, non-Hugh, non-Hedda, non-shivering, warmer kind of place? Perhaps without me there, either?' There's a note of exasperation in her voice.

'As you said, warmer, yes, that's it.'

'Let's go and enjoy a stopover then in a place with the ambience of the young and the warm and the friendly and the buzz of the latest place to be.' Anne pulls the recipe together with a mixture of the sharp and brittle in the rise of her voice.

Lucas at last turns and looks at her. He knows to be wary when she's tired and hungry and also to be wary of his own moods when he's feeling the same. He turns back to the window, touching the edge of the dark, escaping for a moment. He knows, he knows – all this has affected her too. Lucas knows that he has to behave when it's someone's birthday or other special event or family gathering and although they're all dead now they still watch, expecting him to behave like a gentleman, so he does, in compliance with the long-ago picture squeezed from his memory – of Mother and Grandmother and the Great-Aunts and Great-Grandmother telling tired little Lucas to sit up straight and behave.

Anne comes across and stands with him. 'Your way of being silent is very powerful,' she says. 'It's like a wall. I don't want to go out to dinner with someone who's on the other side of it.'

He knows, but he's surprised. Is he like Hugh after all, not talking, not listening?

Then she points across the dark rectangle of Hyde Park, surrounded by its tall buildings, and says, 'We could try some of the restaurants over that way.'

Lucas looks down into the park and it seems to him to be darkening into a deep and ominous grave with the War Memorial as its headstone. In the gusty twilight, the occasional pedestrian seems far away. They are like tiny stories, Lucas thinks, passing so very briefly beneath the lights and blinking out of them into shadow.

Anne sighs and tells him she remembers an experiment she'd read about with baby monkeys who had a choice between clinging sadly to a lifeless but realistic surrogate mother made of woven wire or to an unconvincing lump of warm flannel. Either way, the baby monkeys were cheated. She tells him how the monkeys grieved when their inadequate wire mother was taken away. She remembers how intensely he recited his poem at the funeral, the whole time looking, not at the coffin but at his brother whose head seemed to be on fire because of the light shining through the window. Then she pulls him away from the dark window, puts her arm through his. 'Let's go. I'm ready,' she says, sensing that touch will be better, less dangerous, than words.

Outside in the city dark, after their drinks, Lucas, released by the alcohol, looks up through a burst of spring rain that's almost as fine as mist. High above it are towers, strapped about by transmitters and receivers and twinkling lights. There are some things I will never understand, he thinks. Pockets of warm air nuzzle about them, travelling with the play of the rain.

'Magical,' says Anne.

Higher up, the light tumbles from the windows in the masonry, swirling down slowly in misty sprays of red, emerald-green, tungsten-yellow, deep glassy-blue and intense tinsel-white. They're translucent particles, shining confetti. There's hope, he thinks, letting the soft dazzle of the wet night settle and shine on his upturned face.

'See over there?' he points, striding out, 'That's Saint James' Church, designed by a convict architect called Francis Greenway, and there,' he points again, 'are the convict

barracks and further down, if you keep walking, are the Botanical Gardens where the Tank Stream emerges from underneath the city.' He gestures as if he can see them.

'Where?' Anne asks, puzzled, fatigue showing through far more than enthusiasm. 'It's too dark for me to see anything. Maybe tomorrow? Then, after dinner with the cousins at Clontarf we could catch the ferry back from Manly and you could show me some more of the sights?'

'The Harbour views are wonderful from the ferry at night,' Lucas agrees, pressing on.

'Good.' Anne takes it that he means yes.

Lucas walks faster and she hurries to keep up with him. 'What's going on?' she says, not knowing that the cold sweat of a presentiment trickles in his armpits. Valerie Upton had asked if he knew about Mother's will. He walks faster because he's aware of a sound, a sombre fluttering of wings amongst the leaves where something dark pulls at the threads of the branches. It's not a sound made from the mutter of traffic or starlings chattering as they huddle together for the night, nor is it the torn metal cries of departing gulls high up, but something else that fidgets. A shape silhouettes against the brightness of the lights shining through the drizzle as it unfurls its wings and breaks away from the dark pit of the park.

'Why are you walking so fast, Lucas?'

His mind has rushed ahead. He sees himself walking through Hyde Park, past the Convict Barracks, pausing to register the presence of Saint James' Church and then, by instinct, knowing when to turn to the right and angle down Hunter Street, follow George Street, turn right then left and right again, down the slope of the city streets to The Rocks. There will be the meeting with Emily Cooper under the huge blue breath of the sky, and the salty odour of Harbour will be on his tongue even before he sees the facets

of water tilting, dancing, blue-black beneath the Harbour Bridge. He hears it now, splashing about the pylons of Circular Quay; knows its fresh slop and nudge, the way it seeks the land, how it punches against the rocks supporting the Opera House and leans its weight against the walls of the Botanical Gardens, forever hunting the long-ago beach now buried behind the sandstone seawalls. It resents the concrete promenade that thwarts it, protests against it with chopping plosions. It wants to unfold, stretch, fling itself, slap over the lost oyster-covered rocks, expand with a rushing sigh, to foam and hiss across its lost pristine sandy shore, skittering shells up to where soft sand and grass make an edge. Lucas hears a convict boat scrape ashore. Voices call, and although the sun is in his eyes in the beginning morning light of this new world, Lucas knows the man who steps out, who straightens up and looks at him.

'Stop!' Anne protests. 'I can't keep up!'

He stops. 'We're meeting Emily Cooper tomorrow. Could we do the ferry trip another night?' His voice has lifted.

'You've spoken with Emily? Lucas! Why didn't you tell me?'

'So much has happened,' he says. 'This is where we can eat,' he points to the restaurant. 'What do you think?'

'If it means no more walking, perfect!' says Anne. 'Let's go in! You can tell me about Emily over dinner.'

oOo

A guitarist begins to play. Anne stops eating and taps her fingers on the table. After a while she looks up and says, 'You were a complete mess when you came back from your mother's place, Lucas. I was really worried about you when Reception phoned to say that there was a man to see me, and they weren't sure if he was a genuine visitor.' She'd gone down to find it as Lucas, muddy, dishevelled, exhausted and unshaven.

'You kept rubbing at your face. I had to pull your hand away.'

'I couldn't see properly. Everything was so blurry.'

'You looked as if you'd been hit.'

He remembers his skin tight against the bones of his face and he'd wondered if it was really his own face or whether he'd come to look like Hugh, whether Mother was about to break through his skin. Anne had taken him up to their room, made him shower, then she'd put him to bed and then – nothing. He'd slept and slept, calling out anxiously from time to time for her to leave the light on and waking if there was any unusual sound.

'Why did you insist on having the lights left on?'

He scratches his head. 'So I wouldn't fall into the cellar. So I could see, if I heard anything that woke me up, I suppose,' he says.

'What sort of things? Fall into what cellar? What do you mean?'

'Shadows and noises, crows,' he says, thinking about Hugh and the glitter of eyes that came with a rustling of black wings when the hotel room was dark. 'Bad dreams.'

The smudge of the day rests beneath Anne's eyes. He'd seen his own eyes in the uncompromising white light of the hotel mirror and wondered if the lines that had gathered about them would ever leave. He changes the subject and tells Anne more about the phone call to Emily Cooper.

'You're sure she's the same Emily?' she asks, using her fork to capture her favourite pieces of seafood in the paella.

'Yes, Valerie Upton was quite right about that. Emily has quite a sense of humour. When I asked her how she was, she told me she was alive and well, more or less and variably, depending on the day and the weather. She wanted to know if we'd like to visit her tomorrow and perhaps go to the Botanical Gardens Kiosk near the Tank Stream for lunch. She told me that if she's unpleasantly subdued by arthritis, we could have a cup of

tea with her instead, as long as we made it ourselves. She said she'd give instructions from a distance about where to find things so she wouldn't have to be winched onto her feet.'

'What a character! So much has happened.'

'You've been ... well ... exhausted. I looked through what was in that red hatbox Lucas, so I understand. No wonder you've been so ... so ... '

'Edgy?'

'Yes, quite frankly, and bad tempered too ... '

'You mean there's more? I've been somewhere else, haven't I?'

'Yes, much more than usual! Does Emily know why you want to see her?'

'Yes, I think so, because as soon as I mentioned Mother she just said, "Ah, yes, Camilla", almost as if she'd been waiting.'

'Oh, Lucas, what else did she say? You might find you have a whole lot of new relatives!'

His fingers wander the arms of the chair and begin to trace the ghostly design they remember from Christian's. Suddenly he lifts his hands away from the sensation that he can feel vines doubling and twining and curling about themselves, encircling his wrists and he makes his hands drop from these familiar edges and fall into the invisible unknown.

Anne notices how he makes his hands detach and reaches across, taking them in hers before they might be tempted to return to the past. 'No more getting caught up in those horrible hooks and curlicues on that Wilson chair! No more going around and around, trapped, in that horrible pattern of never-ending circles! Promise?'

'How did you know about the chair?'

'You, Christian and Hugh, even Camilla, you all did that when you sat in that ghastly chair. We should celebrate your escape.'

Lucas raises his eyebrows

'Yes,' Anne says. 'We *should* celebrate! I suspect you might enjoy a bit of distracting. How about we hire a sports car? Maybe tomorrow? We could dash about with the hood down and the breeze in our hair!'

'Breeze in my hair? What do you mean? I might lose what's left of it!'

'Don't be silly. There's plenty of it left! Let's hire one.'

He tells Anne he's too tired to drive anywhere and he's never driven a sports car.

'What do you mean?' she asks, disconcerted. 'Neither have I. Why don't we? What colour? Do you think it should be red?'

Lucas remembers Todd's Volkswagen. 'Yellow!' he says. He's sure about this. 'Yellow for cheeriness, sunshine and adventure. Yes, alright, let's do it!'

oOo

In the bright flicker of mid-morning traffic, Anne and Lucas plummet down the slopes of Sydney streets in a yellow sports car; scoot between brick, sandstone, steel and glass; angle through streets pushed crooked long ago because of the drunken wanderings of the soldiers and convicts of the Rum Rebellion. They travel streets where trams once clanged, past a place that was once a Coffee Palace, until, closer to the Harbour and The Rocks, the heady light-filled dance of the water, the smell of it, the impossibly clear blue sky above and the wonder of the arching Harbour Bridge, burst upon them.

For some reason Lucas thinks of Hedda, pale and lined, relentlessly positive, putting protective auras about herself, forever seeking the benefits of health food, diets, Buddhism, green politics and socialism. 'And here we are,' he says.

'I just love these old sandstone houses. They look as if they've grown out of the earth don't they? You've brought Camilla's hatbox?'

'Ah, yes,' says Lucas.

A dog barks when they ring the bell. The door opens and Emily, a silhouette in sepia, hastens into the light. 'Yes,' she says, excitedly hugging Lucas, 'you couldn't possibly be anyone else! He couldn't, Anne, could he? Come in, come in,' she calls, beckoning them inside. The room she takes them into is lined with books that hug alcoves inhabited by pot plants, comfortable chairs and a tall, ancient clock.

On the small table near her, there's a silver-framed photo. 'He's pretending to catch butterflies with his tennis racquet. What a darling Jack was, unstoppably cheery and so much fun.' She'd had the photo enlarged. 'Larger than life! You're so like him!' She hugs Lucas, tears in her eyes. 'Do sit down,' she tells Anne.

'The photo's the same,' says Lucas. 'It's the same as the one in the hatbox only larger! I see what you mean about the likeness. So disconcerting to see a version of myself from long ago, looking so much younger than I am and ...' his voice chokes.

Emily puts her hand on his arm. 'You would have been good mates, Lucas.'

'Let me help you with the tea,' Anne suggests. 'Do I smell cooking?'

'Yes, I've made rainbow cake, to celebrate!'

'Really? I've never heard of rainbow cake.'

'Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue,' Emily sings. 'Come and have a look, Anne. It's in the kitchen.'

'How kind,' Anne exclaims. 'You shouldn't have.' There's a pause in the conversation while she goes into the kitchen with Emily to admire it.

'And is that wisteria I can smell?'

'Yes, it's in my courtyard and reaches all the way up to the veranda upstairs. It's over two hundred years old. Its roots have well and truly buried themselves in the sandstone. I'm comforted that it's so much more gnarled than I am!' At her feet stands an Australian terrier. 'I forgot to introduce you. Meet Toby,' Emily says. 'I'll put the kettle on and while we have a cup of tea, you and Lucas can tell me your story.'

'So was it you who returned the letters Camilla wrote to Jack?' Anne asks Emily later.

'Yes dear. I was a waitress at the Coffee Palace. I remember the day Camilla waited and waited for Jack. I could tell she was pregnant and I thought she'd come to tell him. He'd told me the day before that he was embarking for overseas service so when I saw her I decided there must have been a delay and that he would turn up. But it was Peggy Gower who arrived.' Emily touches Camilla's red hat. 'I remember this hat so clearly. Jack gave it to her. Apparently she always wore it when they met. I overheard her friend Peggy Gower warn her against marrying Christian Wilson. Camilla fainted when she found Jack out had gone, so she must have married Christian Wilson to give you a father. Strange how the Wilsons have haunted our family history! It was a Judge Christian Wilson who sentenced the original Jack Cooper to transportation almost two hundred years ago for stealing twigs from a hedge to keep warm in winter! Really! Anyway that actually turned out to be a gift instead of a punishment because there was no shortage of twigs out here! It was, would you believe! Would you like to look through those family things on the table while I make some more tea?'

Anne looks at Emily wide-eyed, 'You mean your ancestors were convicts?'

Emily laughs. 'Oh yes, Lucas, like me, is the descendant of convicts – sent to this stolen land for stealing, Jack as I said, for taking twigs from a hedge, and another for a handkerchief. But ironically, Judge Wilson eventually had to send his own son, Christian,

out here to avoid a family scandal. He was sent into exile as a gentleman, before his habits could turn him into a convict!

'And you've all kept the same names?'

'Ah, yes. There's always been a Jack and an Emily. But now we have a Lucas!'

Emily's window lets in the bass rumble of a ship hooting arrival or departure. She turns and pauses briefly in the doorway. In outline, against the brightness from the kitchen window, her upper back looks a little curved. 'Ah,' she says, 'that sound, that sound!'

Lucas thinks she may have smiled but he can't be sure. He feels at home, her touch lingering on his arm.

'What a beautiful view,' says Anne, looking out the window at blue sky and water.

'Nice looking yellow car sports car down there in the street too!' Lucas adds.

oOo

On the way back to their hotel Anne looks at Lucas. She hears something unexpected above the thrum of the engine. 'Is that you humming?'

'Yes, the very same person,' he grins.

'The very same?'

'Well, no, not quite the same,' he admits. 'I'll never be the very same again and I'll never really understand. There'll be plenty of splinters to pull out.'

She hasn't told him that Valerie Upton had seen Mother's file at the solicitor's office. She won't tell him he's been disinherited, Anne decides. She can't, not now, not when he's so happy.

'She couldn't help it, you know. Hugh couldn't either,' Lucas says. 'I've been disinherited, haven't I?'

'Oh, how long have you known?'

'Valerie Upton seemed desperate to tell you something after Mother's funeral and I guessed. But I feel as if I've always known. It would have been a burden to take on responsibility for the perpetuation of the Wilson pedigree.'

Anne's voice lifts. 'No hard feelings then? You can forgive her?'

'Yes, and as for Hugh, if I'd let myself want what he so badly wanted, I would have ended up being just like him.'

'And I would have left you!'

'What! And missed out on a ride in a snappy yellow sports car and a ferry trip to see the Harbour lights at night?'

After a while he puts his hand on his chest, conscious of the gold locket he'd almost discarded whilst throwing Mother's clothes into the storm from the top of the bridge. He'd put some of her red hair in it. He grows quiet.

'Lucas?'

'Poor Mother,' he says, aware of the weight. 'She needs so much looking after.'